

Qualities of Good Writing

by De

To help anyone to do almost anything that's complicated, the helper has to assist the protégé, first, to identify the target, and, then, to hit it. In the case of writing, teachers can help students to hit the target by using the process approach to teaching writing. However, before they can use the writing process really well, students have to identify their target. In other words, they have to know the qualities of good writing.

A tight definition of good writing has to be both accurate and comprehensive. If it is accurate, it will list only qualities that are shared by all good writing, not just some good writing. If it is comprehensive, it will offer a complete account of good writing. In other words, if a piece of writing is missing any of the qualities listed, it will not be a first-rate piece of prose or poetry.

For purposes of college writing in all disciplines, it's especially important to find an accurate list of qualities of all good writing. Otherwise, though the list may be helpful for identifying good composition in one subject area, it will be misleading in others. For example, descriptive and narrative writing, and sometimes expository and persuasive writing, depend heavily on vivid, specific sense imagery. However, an expository essay explaining the solution of math problem does not need to include lots of sense data. In truth, an attempt to introduce sense imagery into such an essay will probably make the piece worse rather than better.

A One-Trait System

Have you ever seen a picture of the relationship of the writer and her reader? Did the picture show a wall, with the writer, working very hard at a desk, on one side; and the reader, relaxing with a book, on the other? This traditional representation of writing suggests a simple, but useful, one-trait description of good writing. Good writing, the picture says, crosses the always-difficult barrier between writer and reader with its clarity. In other words, good writing is understandable.

This way of describing good writing has its virtues. First, it's surely simple and elegant, stressing clarity, a quality of good writing that is absolutely central. In addition, it identifies a very challenging trait, one that authors and editors working on a lot, and one that most of our conventions of writing, such as punctuation and spelling, are designed to facilitate.

But this approach has its disadvantages, too, at least for purposes of teaching and learning. First, it seems to ignore the importance of good content. "The chicken looks like its siblings," by this standard, seems to be as good as, or better than, a report on bird DNA in the journal *Nature*. In addition, a one-trait delineation of good writing doesn't break the nature of effective prose and poetry into a series of topics that students can address. For purposes of teaching and learning, this approach may be a bit too plain and simple.

The Traditional Triad of Rhetoric

Another familiar list of the traits of good writing dates from 1886, when Alexander Bain, a Scottish philosopher and educationist, introduced what the rhetorical triad of unity, coherence, and emphasis. The term unity referred to the presence of a clear topic and the adherence to that

topic. Coherence meant the clear connectedness of ideas. Emphasis meant that the stress was where it belonged—important topics got more emphasis and trivial ones got less.

This set of traits, like the single-trait approach, has the advantage of elegance. There are only three qualities, and they are easy to define and understand. Certainly, the three traits listed by Bain are keys to good writing, though some might argue that emphasis is less central than the other two. And Bain's system has stood the test of time. It's not going to go away any time soon—it's firmly grounded in "funded knowledge."

However, this approach shares an important disadvantage with the one-trait system—it ignores good content as a quality of good writing. In addition, the traditional rhetorical triad may place insufficient stress on clarity.

A Seven-Trait Approach

Since the 1980's, under the pressures of standardized testing, a seven-trait (sometimes counted "as six-plus-one") system has gained widespread acceptance. These traits are based on a systematic analysis of writing that scores well on various measures. According to this approach the seven qualities of good writing are ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. This approach has very strong support in contemporary funded knowledge, and it does include the importance of good content (ideas).

However, the seven-trait system has its drawbacks, too. Perhaps the most obvious of these is that it lacks the elegance of the other approaches. Seven traits, some with tricky definitions, is a sizeable learning load—so much so that even advocates of the system, such as the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (<http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/about.php?odelay=1&d=1>), concede that many teachers trim the system to four traits of their own choosing. Of course, such teachers lose the comprehensiveness of the system—they are providing students with only some of the qualities needed for good writing.

To a degree, this system's lack of elegance results from its exclusion of clarity from its list of traits. Instead, the six-plus-one system offers two traits, word choice and conventions, that are really tools for achieving clarity.

In addition, some of the seven traits are, arguably, not present at all in a great deal of effective writing. Voice, for instance, is defined as "...the heart and soul of a piece, the magic, the wit. It is the writer's unique and personal expression emerging through words. Voice is the presence of the writer on the page. When the writer's passion for the topic and concern for the audience are strong, the text dances with life and energy, and the reader feels a strong and intimate connection to both the writing and the writer."

(http://www.psesd.org/technology/writeprocess/sixtrait/voice_new)

Is this sort of voice really an essential quality of good lab reports or explanations of mathematical reasoning? Many would reply in the negative.

Organization, as defined in this system, is similarly problematic. "Writing that exhibits strong organization begins with a purposeful, engaging lead and wraps up with a satisfying and thought-provoking conclusion," according to the seven-trait system.

(http://www.psesd.org/technology/writeprocess/sixtrait/organiz_new.html) However, it's clear that a great deal of excellent writing, ranging from poetry to scientific journal articles, does not use anything that we would normally call an "engaging lead" and does not include a "clincher" at the end.

Presentation, which involves the physical appearance of text on a page, can get a little dicey, too, if we think of it as an essential quality of good writing. In discussing this trait, the Northwest

Regional Educational Laboratory’s website asks, “ Which signs and billboards attract your attention? Why do you reach for one CD over another? All great writers are aware of the necessity of presentation, particularly technical writers who must include graphs, maps, and visual instructions along with their text.”

Many writers might reply with their own questions. “What about Shakespeare and Dickinson and Toni Morrison? Is their work really inferior to the text on Beyonce’s latest opus?”

A Five-Trait System

A fourth approach, the one that we’ll use in our course, combines the most useful elements of the other three. According to this system, the qualities of all good writing are unity, coherence, emphasis, development (good content), and clarity. Our five-trait system is accurate and comprehensive, though it may be a bit inconsistent in the types of characteristics that it employs.

The rubric that we’ll use appears below, with sample scores for an essay that total a respectable eighty percent.

Scoring Rubric Writing Assignment			
Standard	Possible	Earned	
Unity		20	16
Coherence		20	16
Emphasis		20	16
Development		20	16
Clarity		20	16
Lateness Penalty			
Total		100	80