

6-Traits Writing Rubric: Things That Make Us Smart Can Also Make Us Dumb

*The author
conceptualizes the 6-
traits writing rubric as
a cognitive artifacts.*

Introduction

Anyone who has attempted to write a term paper, business proposal, or even a break-up letter understands the struggle of writing a good piece of text. For many people, the process of composing, drafting, and revising can seem mysterious and overwhelming. In schools, the writing sections of state tests or standardized exams may have serious consequences for students, teachers, and schools. In life, a well-written resume and cover letter can make the difference between being hired or rejected by a company. However, writing is a complex activity that can't be reduced to discrete, measurable skills like handwriting, grammar, or vocabulary. It includes more nebulous traits such as interesting and creative ideas, effective organization, and smooth flow of sentences.

To help teachers teach writing more effectively and students revise with more focus, Spandel (2005) and associates designed a 6-Traits Writing Rubric to provide consistent language and assessment about writing. However, this has created a paradox, as Norman (1993) states, "Things that make us smart can also make us dumb" (p. 3). For novice writers and teachers of writing, the rubric can help focus revision and provide techniques for improvement, however, this also can be restrictive and stifle creativity. In this article, I explore how the 6-Traits Writing Assessment Rubric, as a cognitive artifact, has had both positive and negative effects on the way writing is discussed and assessed in schools.

What is the 6-Traits Writing Assessment Rubric?

Six-Traits Writing Assessment is based on Diederick's (1974) research, which asked 50 professionals to categorize a group of student essays into effective, somewhat effective, and problematic essays, then record their reasons for sorting them into each group. Diederick categorized their reasons into traits. Later, in 1984, the Analytical Writing Assessment Committee replicated the study, but arranged the description into a five-point rubric with six traits. The 6-Traits are Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions (Spandel, 2005). The five-point scale has descriptors at three of the five performance levels, which indicate proficiency at a beginning, developing or strong level with the second and fourth level being compromise scores.

In order for students and teachers to agree on the meaning of the traits and levels and be able to use the rubric together, intensive training must occur. Anchor papers are provided for scorers to practice scoring with suggested scores. Scorers then discuss why they selected the ratings they did and strive for consensus. Spandel's (2005) instructions state, "If your personal scores differ markedly and repeatedly from those of others . . . it is quite possible you are either (1) not sufficiently familiar with the scoring guide to use it consistently or (2) influenced by elements other than the traits of writing" (p. 54). This is the

foundation of writing instruction that is based on 6-Traits Assessment.

As state-wide standardized tests are moving toward using assessment rubrics akin to the 6-Traits rubrics, more schools are adopting similar writing instruction programs which focus on traits or characteristics of good writing. Often teachers provide model writings and ask students to score the pieces using the rubric to generate consistency between scorers and agreement on good writing. Teachers may use focused mini-lessons to target specific techniques to increase the proficiency of the traits and students peer-revise using the trait rubrics.

What is a cognitive artifact?

Used as a tool for revising or assessment, the 6-Trait writing rubric is a cognitive artifact, which according to Norman (1991) are "those artificial devices that maintain, display, or operate upon information in order to serve a representational function and that affect human cognitive performance" (p. 17). In general, cognitive artifacts enhance human ability, sometimes through amplification, but in this case, it is through changing the nature of the task. This can be seen through both the systems view and the personal view of how the artifact affects the task to be performed. In the systems view of a cognitive artifact, the entire system is composed of the person, the artifact (rubric), and the task (either revision or assessment).

By having a rubric, the user will better remember what to look for in the writing, therefore the rubric is a memory enhancer. However, in the personal view of a cognitive artifact, the person must use the artifact to complete a task, which then changes the task. In this case, rather than just revising or assessing writing, the user must create the rubric (or be instructed on how to use it), remember to use the rubric, and be able to read and interpret the rubric. According to Norman (1991), all cognitive artifacts have both a system and personal view and "artifacts change the way a task gets done... [by] distributing the actions across time, distributing the actions across people, chang[ing] the actions required of the individuals doing the activity" (p. 22). The 6-Traits rubric can be used throughout the writing process by both the writer and the reader and it significantly changes the way a person

approaches the task of revising or assessing a piece of writing.

How does the 6-Trait Writing Assessment Rubric change the way students and teachers think about writing?

Consistent Language

The original intent of this rubric was to create consistent language when discussing writing. The rubric accomplishes this and supports Norman's (1993) belief that "our cognitive abilities are . . . manipulated by the tools cognition has helped to create" (p. 4). Ruth Culham (2006), one of the original designers of the rubric, states that "Using the same terminology from year to year is crucial for building deep understanding. Just as math teachers continue to use the terms *addition* and *subtraction* – instead of inventing new ones at different grade level, like *plussing* and *minusing* – so should teachers of writing consistently use the same terms" (p. 56). Many of the traits assessed are those easily identified or measured traits, such as organization, sentence structure, conventions, and word choice. Plus, by naming only 6-Traits, as opposed to many more, teachers and students are more able to focus on specific areas of instruction and improvement. In addition, the authors of the rubric claim that "all writers (not just K through 12) need strong clear ideas, good organization, and compelling voice to make writing successful" (Spandel, 2005, p. 11). Jim Burke (2003), a high school English teacher in California, states:

One reason I like the Six Traits of Effective Writing Model is that it is manageable, succinct; no doubt one could come up with the twelve or twenty traits of effective writing, but I can't juggle that many balls. If I can concentrate on knowing these terms, all of which I can use in the classroom and teach to my students, my job seems possible, my task more realistic. Moreover, to condense the traits of effective writing into six domains helps to demystify writing and makes it seem more accessible to my students. (p. 175)

Studies have shown that a clear focus and intense instruction on the 6-Traits does help students improve their writing, as assessed by

the 6-Traits (Arter, Spandel, Culham, & Pollard, 1994; Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006; Jarmer, D., Kozol, Nelson & Salsberry, 2000). This is part of the reason many school districts have designed their writing programs around the rubric.

However, the rubric “artificially elevates some aspects of life [writing] and ignores others” (Norman, 1993, p. 15). The narrow focus gives specific direction in writing instruction, but it ignores some other important parts of writing such as creativity or risk taking. Tom Thompson (2009), a college professor says, “But I think that this particular rubric is a bit like the five-paragraph theme format -- what is intended to be a “means” can too easily become an “end.” Just as students can come to believe that all “good” writing uses the five-paragraph format, so, too, must all “good” writing score well on the six traits” (n.p.). Timothy Shea (2009) highlights the limitation of using the traits when he says, “There have been times when I have read student written work and, by using a rubric, they should receive a high mark. However, in my English teacher gut, their paper does not feel like an A paper. I think RISK TAKING is in large measure what is often lacking in these cases, that and creativity. I find these traits difficult to teach, much less assess”(n.p.).

Assessment

A second goal of the 6-Traits Writing Rubric is consistent assessment. The 5-point/6-Traits rubric sets a standardized view of writing proficiency for use in assessment, but this also can be a disadvantage of the artifact. Like many tools, “how they [cognitive artifacts] interact with the mind and what results they deliver depend upon how they are used” (Norman, 1993, p. 47).

In general, rubrics help students “understand why they got the grade and how they can improve their standing in the future” (Burke, 2003, p. 298). With the 6-Traits rubric, the categories and proficiency levels are clear indicators of performance. If classrooms follow Spandel's guidelines, students practice scoring example and anchor papers to understand how to use the rubric. However, this process is more about socialization in which “good writing becomes what a group of experienced readers agree is good” (Applebee, 1981, p. 461). The intent, as Donald Graves (1994) states, is to “show children how to read their own writing

[so] their work will improve” (p. xvi). Using the rubric this way, students practice being critical readers of their own and others' work. In addition, teachers find that using the rubric is a time saver, as traditional forms of assessment are more about editing the work and writing comments in the margin, which can take eight to ten minutes per essay. By using the rubric, the assessment is more focused on the criteria students are familiar with and decreases the assessment time on each paper to about two minutes (Spandel, 2005).

Although writing rubrics are designed to serve as an assessment guideline, they can become “arbiters of quality and agents of control” (Mabry, 1999, p. 679). Despite the fact that the practice of assessing the traits can be informative instruction, it may reduce the time available for other forms of writing instruction. Norman (1993) states, “in performing a task, the person has a focus and a goal. All attention should be concentrated upon the task itself, not upon the tool. When the tool calls attention to itself, that creates a breakdown in the work flow” (p. 34). If good writing is the goal, then coming to consensus on the traits or levels shouldn't be what writers concentrate on, but rather, the improvement of the writing. When a 6-Traits rubric is used for final assessment, especially within high-stakes testing, the goal is no longer the *improvement* of writing, but rather the *grading* of writing. Matthews (2000) writes about a teacher who found a “student who realized that without providing a shred of meaningful content she could meet all the requirements of a state writing rubric he posted in his classroom.” A potential risk of focusing solely on the defined 6-Traits is creating a standardized form of writing that is acceptable for high-stakes testing, but is non-transferable to the real world.

Finally, Broad (2003) contests the idea that writing can be boiled down to just a few traits. He spent a year listening to the discussions of first year writing instructors at a university and identified 89 different criteria that the instructors valued, and a third of them had nothing to do with the specific text being assessed. The instructors factored in attributes like growth of the writer, difficulty of the task, and potential within the writing. Part of the assessment process was articulating what the instructors actually valued and shared amongst

themselves. To indiscriminately adopt a writing model, like the 6-Traits, diminishes the potential and value of these conversations.

Conclusion

The 6-Traits Writing Rubric can be a valuable tool for school and classrooms to help create a common language about writing and constancy in assessment. However, Norman's (1993) paradox of "things that make us smart can also make us dumb" (p. 3) must be addressed. As a part of a larger writing program, which includes numerous opportunities to read and write in assorted genres, for a variety of audiences, using multiple assessments, the 6-Traits rubric can provide a starting point for teachers to initiate conversations about writing with their students. However, when the 6-Traits rubric is used as the *only* support for teaching and talking about writing, then the curriculum becomes too narrowed and the writing can become formulaic.

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