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Teaching Using the Traits of Good Writing

The first step in implementing the Traits of Good Writing in your classroom (after you have explored them yourself) is to teach these traits to your students. If, for example, you simply return assignments with a list of traits and 1–5 scores, your students will have little idea how these numbers relate to their writing and will miss out on important opportunities to interact with writing using these traits. In order to use the traits in peer revision while drafting their own writing, in discussing examples, to comprehend your lessons, and while revising their own work, students will need to have a clear picture of what exactly each of these traits represents and also what the traits look like in real writing (Spandel, 2004).

Introductory Trait Lessons

Pages 101–108 include examples of short lessons to help students learn the Traits of Good Writing. In each, the trait to be taught is conspicuously lacking in the example. After using the included description to discuss the trait, you will instruct your class to collaborate to revise the excerpt with the trait in mind. You could either have them first work independently or do it as a whole-class exercise. As they get stuck, prompt them using the suggestions on pages 109–112. After revising each example, your students could write a short description of the trait in their writing notebooks. After teaching a trait, make sure to use trait vocabulary whenever possible to reinforce its use.

In addition to these lessons, you can reinforce the traits by finding your own examples and revising them with the help of your class. By drawing your revision excerpts from published materials, you will also help students see the Traits of Good Writing as a real-world tool, as opposed to an exercise applicable only to the classroom. The following are good sources of revision materials:

- Picture books (especially for Voice, Word Choice, and Presentation) (Culham, 2004)
- Newspapers (especially for Organization, Sentence Fluency, and Ideas)
- Websites (especially for Conventions and Presentation)
- Historic primary source documents, such as Civil War letters from <http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem> (good for all traits)
- Textbooks (especially for Presentation, Organization, and Ideas)
- Literature (especially for Sentence Fluency, Word Choice, and Voice)

