

## EVALUATING FOR THE TRAITS

In order to improve your writing, you have to be able to identify and revise for each of the traits in your own work. Although this can be difficult for a beginner, all it takes is some practice and a rubric. Below I have summarized the good writing traits that I elaborated on in the “Traits of Scientific Writing” document. I keep this summary handy when I am evaluating student work. I recommend taking the following steps to help train yourself in looking for the individual traits (this is exactly how I grade papers).

1. Read the paper through in its entirety without making comments and get a sense of the paper.
2. Review the summary below to remind myself what each of the traits includes. I have a hard time actually keeping all the traits distinct in mind at any one time, so it really helps to keep this short version of the traits handy as reference.
3. Re-read the paper looking for specific aspects of each trait. This may take a couple of times through looking for one or two traits each time.
4. Notate in the margins where a trait stands out as being effective (or simply obvious) or weak using “+ *trait*” or “- *trait*”. Then in a few sentences at the end of the paper, describe obvious problems or strengths. Be brief—remember, part of the learning process is that you review your own writing to figure out what other people don’t get.

As far as assigning grades, I use the following descriptive rankings for each trait, which then get translated to a point value and the total number of points summed for the final grade.

<i>Points</i>	<i>Characteristic</i>
5	<b>Mastery:</b> shows control and skill in the trait; many strengths present.
4	<b>Effective:</b> on balance, strengths outweigh weaknesses; a small amount of revision is needed.
3	<b>Developing:</b> strengths and need for revision are about equal
2	<b>Emerging:</b> need for revision outweighs strengths: isolated moments hint at what the writer has in mind.
1	<b>Not Present:</b> a bare beginning; writer not showing any control in this trait.

### *Summary of the Traits*

***Focus:* Are the main topics of the paper easily identified and well defined and supported?**

If someone asked you specifically what a paper was about, could you give them a detailed summary of it? Focus is the main message in the paper, but it also includes the details that enrich and develop that message. The enrichment of a theme will often involve sub-themes, and when sub-themes strongly support the focus, there is a clearly stated connection between them and the overall theme. Sub-themes can often be facts or data. It is often the case that you will use numbers or refer the reader to tables and graphs when using details to support your focus. A strongly supported focus makes unmistakable connections between data and the overall theme.

***Organization:* Is the evidence (that supports the focus) presented on an “as needed” basis and within the appropriate sections of the paper?**

Good organization makes the paper flow smoothly between ideas that develop the overall focus. For a paper to be well organized, it is necessary to present information in a logical progression, pausing along the way to point out the connection to the overall focus. When the organization is strong, the paper grabs your attention and reveals information smoothly based on conceptual relationships. You sort of get the feeling that you know what they are going to say before they say it. Organization is weak when information is arbitrarily presented without it having some purpose or supporting a central idea.

Voice:        **Is the paper written fluently so it doesn't feel tedious to read?**

Voice is your style of writing. A strong voice uses a variety of sentence structures to develop a fluent style that is free of awkward word patterns that slow the reader's progress. Sentences vary in length and style, and are so well crafted that the writer moves through the piece with ease. The real test to fluent writing is how it sounds when read aloud. A strong Voice uses concise, declarative sentences. Strong Voice also depends on word choice to clarify and expand ideas with precise language. A strong Voice avoids excessive use of the passive voice.

Convention:    **Are the terms and ideas presented appropriately in a way that is easily understood and free of distracting grammar and spelling errors?**

Convention addresses two main issues—the application of concepts and the physical presentation (i.e. mechanics) of your work. The proper use of concepts obviously impacts the correctness of what you are trying to say. You may have begun to notice that scientific words and concepts require precision, and thus allow you to define exactly the ideas being conveyed. Convention also includes the physical way that you are presenting information. This means that data tables must be formatted, labeled, and applied appropriately. Weak convention is easy to spot if you find large amounts of data buried in the text or verbal descriptions that are more easily illustrated via pictures.

There is also the issue of writing mechanics. These are the writing details that have been drummed into you since grade school—spelling, grammar and usage, paragraphing, use of capitals, and punctuation. It is also the physical way that you present your work. Remember that scientists are human and as humans, we tend to pay attention to the visually appealing packaging. Therefore, even if our ideas, words, and sentences are vivid, precise, and well constructed, the piece will not be inviting to read unless it is presented well.