

# BOOKBAG

## Raising a Writer

By Mary Anne Duggan

A yellow index card with the words “sounds like you” is taped to my computer. Cryptic to those who don’t know the background or the source, these words have pushed me along during 11th-hour writing deadlines when writer’s block wants to take up residence in my brain.

The compliment came by way of my high school composition class and Mr. Stewart, my first real writing teacher. I had been learning to write during the 12 years leading up to that course but Mr. Stewart was the first teacher to help me write anything anyone might actually want to read. This ex-lawyer-turned-teacher-extraordinaire had a gift. He helped me discover my “voice” as a writer and I owe him a debt of gratitude I can never repay.

Teachers across Arizona can now make a Mr. Stewart-like difference because of a growing movement toward use of the Six-Trait Analytic Model for Writing Assessment and Instruction. Embraced by writing teachers worldwide, this approach has been adopted by the Arizona Department of Education as the method for evaluating writing on the AIMS test. The six traits identified as critical to good writing are: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions.

I believe Mr. Stewart would have applauded this effort. The six-trait method is far superior to the traditional approach of assigning an overall grade to a piece of writing. What does a B+ mean anyway? The six-trait method allows teachers to give students very specific feedback about what worked well, and perhaps what did not, in their writing.

With the six traits, students, parents and teachers are given a common language and vocabulary when talking about writing. Students are trained to evaluate their own writing, which is when the most powerful learning occurs. The six-trait method offers both solid teaching strategies and a vehicle for measuring how well students write.

A must-read for all parents who want to encourage young writers is *Dear Parent: A Handbook for Parents of 6-Trait Writing Students*, published by Northwest Regional

Educational Laboratory, a leader in the six-trait movement. This 42-page book includes a comprehensive overview of the six traits and a “Student Friendly Scoring Guide” (Arizona’s scoring method differs slightly). It also answers questions parents commonly ask about the six traits.

We think of picture books as “starter” books for children from birth through age 8 but they also can be effective teaching tools for older children. *Picture Books*, by Ruth Culham, is an annotated bibliography listing picture books that allow children to read, hear and see examples of the traits of good writing. *Picture Books*, also published by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, offers a host of activities teachers and parents can try with their children to reinforce the six traits.

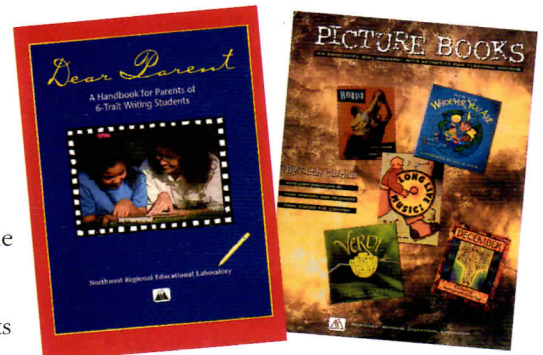
The following is a sampling of picture books that show the six traits in action, with definitions of the traits taken from Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory:

**Ideas.** Clear points, messages, themes or story lines backed by important, carefully chosen details and supportive information. *I Know What You Do When I Go to School* (Ann Edwards Cannon, illustrated by Jennifer Mazzucco); *You Are Special* (Max Lucado, illustrated by Sergio Martinez); *All the Places to Love* (Patricia MacLachlan, illustrated by Mike Wimmer); *Arthur Writes a Story* (Marc Tolon Brown).

**Organization.** How a piece of writing is structured and ordered. *Cookie’s Week* (Cindy Ward, illustrated by Tomie de Paola); *The Day I Swapped My Dad for 2 Goldfish* (Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Dave McKean); *Tuesday* (David Wiesner).

**Voice.** The fingerprints of the writer on the page. The writer’s own special, personal style combined with concern for the informational needs and interests of the audience. *Whoever You Are* (Mem Fox, illustrated by Leslie Staub); *Fly Away Home* (Eve Bunting, illustrated by Ronald Himler); *Life Doesn’t Frighten Me* (Maya Angelou); any Ruth Heller nonfiction book.

**Word choice.** Language, phrasing and the knack for choosing that “just right” word to convey the message. *I Love You the*



*Purplest* (Barbara M. Joose, illustrated by Mary Whyte); *The Old Woman Who Named Things* (Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Kathryn Brown); anything by Roald Dahl.

• **Sentence fluency.** The rhythm and sound of the writing as it is read aloud. *Hip Cat* (Jonathan London, illustrated by Woodleigh Hubbard); *Hoops* (Robert Burleigh, illustrated by Stephen T. Johnson); *The Ghost Dance* (Alice McLerran, illustrated by Paul Morin); anything by Kevin Henkes.

• **Conventions.** Editorial correctness and attention to details a copy editor would review including spelling, grammar and usage, capitalization, paragraph indentation and punctuation. *The Amazing Pop-Up Grammar Book* (Jennie Maizels and Kate Petty); *Yo! Yes!* (Chris Raschka).

As a teacher who has been around long enough to see the pendulum swing back and forth between the back-to-basics push and the progressive platform, I am naturally skeptical about the newest dishes on the educational menu. However, as an educator, I am always pleased when someone or some group finds a way to take what good teachers already are doing and make it more user friendly and effective. The six-traits approach is a natural progression in what the Mr. Stewarts of the world have been doing in their classrooms for years.



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To order *Dear Parent* or *Picture Books*, call 503-275-9519 or visit [www.mwrel.org/sixtraits/sixtraits.html](http://www.mwrel.org/sixtraits/sixtraits.html)