

As we head toward the Long Camp, I thought this was the right-provoker
JDC

What Makes Writing Good? An Essential Question for Teachers

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Teachers should question and critique "expert" views of what makes writing good, especially when teaching elementary students.

What makes writing good? The answer to this can seem hard to pin down, especially for teachers who don't perceive themselves as writers. Memories of college composition classes and lists of complicated rules haunt many of us. Is it acceptable to end a sentence with a preposition? How many sentences are required for a paragraph? How do you write with voice? Are essays supposed to have five paragraphs or not? And what is a split infinitive?

The question of what makes writing good may sound esoteric, but it touches on the most important areas of classroom writing instruction. Without a clear idea of what constitutes good writing, teachers feel uncertain about assessing and grading student work, deciding what to teach in minilessons, and responding to students in writing conferences. If a teacher's responses are confusing or discouraging to young writers, their sense of self-efficacy and motivation to write may suffer (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2010), which will affect the quality of their writing. Everyone agrees students should be able to produce good writing. But what is good writing?

Today's writing experts (e.g., Atwell, 1998, 2002; Burke, 2003; Calkins, 1994, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Culham, 2003, 2008; Spandel, 2008, 2009a, 2009b) provide definitions, stated or implied, of what constitutes good writing. The 6 + 1 Traits model offers a research-tested definition of it (Arter, Spandel, Culham, & Pollard, 1994; Culham, 2008; Education Northwest,

n.d.; Spandel, 2009b). Often, classroom teachers, especially those who lack confidence as writers themselves, eagerly embrace experts' definitions without question. However, adopting these definitions uncritically is not necessarily in the best interest of young writers, especially those who struggle.

Our purpose in this article is twofold:

1. To discuss contemporary views of what makes writing good
2. To report a research study comparing different perspectives on what constitutes good writing

We begin with an important point that undergirds our discussion and reflects the theoretical framework for our research: When teachers assess student writing, subjectivity is unavoidable.

Reader Response in Writing Assessment

Literacy teachers have long understood that reading comprehension relies on the reader's construction of meaning. To make meaning of text, readers connect what they read to their unique prior knowledge and experiences. Reader-response theorist Louise Rosenblatt, whose transactional theory extended schema theory (Tracey & Morrow, 2006) to reading, famously defined reading as "a transaction between the reader and what he senses the words as pointing to" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 21). This is why different readers' understandings of the same text vary: The meaning of a text is not inherent in it but constructed by readers as they apply their unique background knowledge to make meaning of it.

If meaning is not inherent in text, then goodness, or value, is not either. Whether someone thinks a book is good or not depends on that person's prior

knowledge, experiences, and a variety of other subjective factors. This same dynamic operates when teachers assess student writing. Teachers' evaluations of student writing will vary, because they are responding to it from their differing perspectives.

However, prominent writing educators often refer to the elements of good writing as though they are inherent in text. This is especially true of the 6 + 1 Traits model of assessment, commonly used in schools today (Burke, 2003; Culham, 2003, 2008; Spandel, 2009b). In this model, the key qualities that define strong writing are ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation (see www.thetraits.org for complete definitions; Education Northwest, n.d.). In the 6 + 1 Traits book *Creating Young Writers*, Vicki Spandel (2008) explained, "It is not the traits themselves that are new but the rubrics that describe them. It's a little like sketching a new map reflecting geographic features that have been around for ages" (p. 3).

Spandel's (2008) metaphor suggests that these particular traits of good writing are not only inherent in text but also universal and eternal. This type of language obscures the inevitable role of subjectivity in writing assessment. In fact, what one person thinks is good writing is not necessarily what another person does.

Questioning a Standardized Writing Style

When expert definitions of good writing are accepted uncritically, particular styles of writing can start to become "standardized." Most prominent writing educators today (e.g., Lucy Calkins, Nancie Atwell, Jim Burke) define good writing in terms of a particular prose style: one that is concise, with few adjectives and adverbs, "lively" verbs, and plain language. This is a 20th-century style (prose styles in previous centuries were quite different) popularized by William Strunk and E.B. White's influential book, *The Elements of Style*. Strunk began writing this book for his Cornell University students in 1918. E.B. White

PAUSE AND PONDER

- What do you think makes writing good? Compare your views with those of your colleagues.
- What are some effective ways to make your writing expectations clear to your students?
- What are some disadvantages of training an entire school faculty to use a set of writing rubrics to evaluate student writing in the same way?

(author of *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*) rediscovered Strunk's book in 1957 and revised it for publication in 1959 (Elledge, 1984; Strunk & White, 2000).

Among the instructions for writing well in Strunk and White (2000) is "write with nouns and verbs.... In general...it is nouns and verbs, not their assistants, that give good writing its toughness and color" (pp. 71–72). These aspects of style, adopted by educators such as Nancie Atwell and Lucy Calkins, also appear as criteria in the 6 + 1 Traits rubrics. To achieve a high score in word choice, for example, a student needs to have not too many adjectives.

However, teachers can rightly question whether it's a good idea to dissuade young writers from using entire categories of words. Strunk and White (2000) wrote their book for college students and adults. Is it applicable to elementary students? Using words is the best way for children to learn and remember vocabulary, which is especially important for nonnative and nonstandard English speakers. Furthermore, teachers often encourage children to "paint a picture" with their writing. It's easy to imagine the confusion of a sixth grader who is told to help the reader visualize but to not use too many adjectives.

William Zinsser provided a quote (cited in Spandel, 2009b) that helps us understand the intent behind the warning against too many adjectives:

Most adjectives are...sprinkled into sentences by writers who don't stop to think that the concept is already in the noun. This kind of prose is littered with precipitous cliffs and lacy spider webs...yellow daffodils and brownish dirt. If you want to make a value judgment about daffodils, choose an adjective like "garish."
(p. 190)

As funny as the phrase *brownish dirt* is, Zinsser's other examples raise the question again of the reader's subjectivity. *Daffodils* may contain the concept of yellowness, but readers who don't know that (e.g., 12-year-old readers who live in the inner city) may compliment the writer for including *yellow* to paint a vivid picture. To them, the adjective makes the writing better. Similarly, adding *lacy* to *spider web* may help developing readers better visualize it—and it

might strike them as original and insightful. What is a third grader to think when the teacher says this adjective is weak after half the class thought it was strong? Is it weak or strong? It depends on the reader.

Questioning Standardized Responses to Student Writing

Advocates of 6 + 1 Traits encourage school faculties to adopt the model so teachers and students can share a common vision and language for what makes writing good (Culham, 2003, 2008; Spandel, 2009b). Faculties are to be trained in the use of the rubrics to become more consistent and reliable in their results (Spandel, 2009b). This way, we can feel we're all "on the same page."

But in the real world, readers are not all on the same page. They respond differently to the same text. Many variables play a role in how readers respond to a text, including prior knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and psychology. To further investigate differing views of what makes writing good, we conducted a research study of classroom teachers, preservice teachers, and professional writers.

The Q Study

For this study, we used Q methodology, which seeks to capture "the experience of subjectivity" (Brown, 1993, p. 194). This approach is different from that used by the original traits researchers (Diederich, French, & Carlton, 1961), whose work was used as a basis for the 6 + 1 Traits model. Diederich and colleagues' research method was designed to find commonality among participants' opinions of what constitutes good writing. Using Q methodology, we were able to identify different, distinct perspectives on this issue.

Q Methodology

Q methodology uses factor analysis to examine data (Brown, 1993). However, unlike traditional factor analysis, in which *items* load on factors, Q methodology seeks to determine "relationships among people who rank-order specified variables in similar ways" (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman, & Cook, 2003). Combining the strengths of qualitative and quantitative research traditions, this methodology is not intended to make generalizations to large populations,

but to investigate the subjective experiences of smaller numbers of participants selected for certain characteristics to test and generate theories (Kerlinger, 1986).

In a Q study, participants are given a question (in this case, "What do you think makes writing good?") and are asked to read through a set of statements expressing opinions about that question (e.g., "Good writing is concise." "Writers shouldn't try to write about too big of a topic."). Each statement is printed on a separate small card. The participants then physically sort the statements, placing them on a continuum from "most agree" to "most disagree." Participants also explain the thinking behind their rankings. The sets of rankings are then analyzed statistically to identify groups of participants who sorted the cards in a similar way, thus revealing different perspectives or viewpoints on a given topic.

Procedures and Participants

Our set of statements included 31 items (see Figure 1). These statements were obtained from the written reflections of 75 classroom teachers from the Chicago area (kindergarten through high school) as well as six professional (published) writers. These teachers and writers were asked to write for about 5 minutes on the question "In your opinion, what makes writing good?" We analyzed the responses for common themes or categories using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). All statements were color-coded based on similarities or lack thereof and reviewed several times to identify common themes. Statements representing each major theme were reproduced on cards. Additional statements were also derived from popular textbooks on writing instruction.

After developing our set of statements, we invited 60 participants to perform the card sort. Twelve professional/published writers, 26 current classroom teachers, and 22 preservice teachers were included. All the professional/published writers were also current or former teachers (full time or adjunct) of college-level writing or education classes. This group included 6 creative writers, who published primarily fiction, creative nonfiction, or poetry; 5 academic writers, who had published primarily in their academic field (education or literature); and 1 newspaper journalist.

Figure 1
Q Statements

1. A good paper has a strong, logical overall organization that is clear to the reader, so the reader knows what to expect.
2. I personally like when a writer adds something to their writing which shows some personality (humor, wit, ideals, values). I guess it depends on the piece, but I have read various types of writing that include some of the author's voice.
3. Good writing is clear and easy to understand. Readers don't have to struggle to get what the author is saying.
4. A lot of students write exactly how they talk and it doesn't make any sense—writers need to be able to use appropriate verb tenses and other proper grammar.
5. Good writing shows a sense of audience. To effectively communicate your message, you need to know who you're writing for.
6. A lot of juicy verbs help make writing good.
7. Good writing stays focused on the main idea/topic throughout.
8. Good writing is concise, using an economy of words. It avoids repetition and redundancy.
9. Good writing has a strong introduction that states the topic and a strong conclusion that sums up or reiterates the important points.
10. The paper should have a flow. If the paper jumps from one idea to another, it makes it hard to read, just like a piece of music that doesn't transition well and then loses the melody.
11. Good writers avoid clichés.
12. Writers shouldn't try to write about too big of a topic—they need to choose little moments to describe or specific topics to write about.
13. A variety of sentence types engages the reader (simple, complex, dependent clauses)—you want to avoid too many short choppy sentences.
14. Adjectives tend to clutter up a text—good writers use very few adjectives.
15. Some kids' writing is too chatty for formal reports and research papers—voice in writing has to be appropriate to the purpose for writing.
16. Writing that is too structured (like a five-paragraph essay) tends to be boring.
17. Writing needs to be free of errors in conventions or mechanics—punctuation, grammar, and spelling affect the piece overall.
18. A good writer surprises the reader with unexpected moves. This can be accomplished by using metaphors/similes, unusual vocabulary, mixing different modes of discourse (from the vernacular to the academic), varying sentence structures, employing humor.
19. Really, it all depends on the type of writing—every type of writing requires different things to be good.
20. Good writing contains details, elaboration, support, whether narrative or expository, enough elaboration to help the reader paint a picture in their mind or (for expository) provide sufficient support to explain ideas.
21. I think writing needs to have complete sentences to be considered good.
22. Writing is good when you can see critical thinking on the part of the writer.
23. Good writing is like good thinking—fresh, clear, and honest. It artfully invites the reader into an idea or image with a quiet authority that cannot be resisted.
24. You need to have a point! Don't write just to fill up a page.
25. You don't see a lot of adverbs in good writing—adverbs are a sign the verbs are weak.
26. Good writing must conform to a genre, be that fiction or nonfiction; be it a memoir, historical fiction, an e-mail, an essay, a poem, an article, and so on.
27. Good writing shows instead of tells.
28. Good writing is descriptive, with figurative language, and compels the reader to make vivid mental images.
29. Good writing gives you the impression that time was spent crafting the piece.
30. It's good when the writer is obviously knowledgeable about the subject.
31. Accurate word choice is key—the words have to be chosen precisely to convey the author's meaning.

now convenient for the researchers!

The current elementary school teachers were enrolled in a master's level course on how to teach writing. The card sort activity was completed during the first class, before instruction began. Sixteen teachers taught in high-needs public schools in Chicago, with mostly minority, low-income children. The other 10 teachers worked in suburban schools, with mixed-income students of various ethnicities. The 22 pre-service teachers were enrolled in an undergraduate education course. Like the current teachers, these participants were students at Northeastern Illinois University, a state university in Chicago.

Each participant received her or his own deck of cards and was asked to rank the statements from "most agree" to "most disagree." Participants recorded statement numbers on a ranking response sheet and wrote explanations for why they chose their five most-agreed and five most-disagreed statements. Data were also collected on participants' teaching experience, attitudes toward writing and teaching writing, and level of writing education and expertise.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The card sort data were analyzed using PQMethod 2.11, a statistical software program. In the three-factor solution, 50% of variance was explained. Fifty-four of the 60 participants loaded on one of the three factors (i.e., were identified as belonging to one of the three groups). The different factors, or groups, emerged because the group members sorted the card statements in a similar way. Thus, each group had a different perspective on the question of what makes writing good. Interestingly, each group contained two to four professional/published writers. The different perspectives expressed by the three groups are analyzed in the following sections.

Perspective 1: Good Writing = Good Thinking and Communicating

The 24 participants in the first group emphasized the connection between writing and thinking (see Table 1). They most strongly agreed with the

Table 1
Perspective 1 Distinguishing Statements

+2 (Most agree)	+1 (Agree)	0 (Neutral)	-1 (Disagree)	-2 (Most disagree)
23. Good writing is like good thinking—fresh, clear, and honest.	19. It all depends on the type of writing.	24. You need to have a point!	9. Good writing has a strong introduction, stating the topic, and a strong conclusion,	4. Writers need to be able to use appropriate verb tenses and other proper grammar.
2. I like when a writer adds something to their writing which shows some personality.	30. It's good when the writer is obviously knowledgeable about the subject.	7. Good writing stays focused.	summing up or reiterating the important points.	17. Writing needs to be free of errors in conventions or mechanics.
5. Good writing shows a sense of audience.	10. The paper should have a flow.	16. Writing that is too structured (like a five-paragraph essay) tends to be boring.		21. Writing needs to have complete sentences to be considered good.
18. A good writer surprises the reader.	1. A good paper has a strong, logical overall organization.	6. A lot of juicy verbs help make writing good.		

Note. Statements are abbreviated. Participants rank-ordered each item in comparison to all other items.

statements “Good writing is like good thinking,” “I... like when a writer adds something to their writing which shows some personality (humor, wit, ideals, values),” “Good writing shows a sense of audience,” and “A good writer surprises the reader with unexpected moves.” This group most strongly disagreed with the need for correct conventions and complete sentences.

In the participants’ explanations for their rankings, they emphasized writing as interpersonal—as an act of communication between writer and reader; thus, sense of audience was considered extremely important. In this view, good writing is more about communicating thoughts and ideas to particular readers than mastering a particular set of traits. This group valued surprise in writing, appreciating authors who challenged reader expectations. Because this group valued imagination and creative uses of

language, they resisted statements that sounded like rules or prescriptions that would limit creativity.

Four professional writers were in this group, including 3 creative writers and the journalist. In addition, 7 teachers in high-needs schools, all 10 teachers in the suburban schools, and 3 preservice teachers held this perspective of what makes writing good. All teachers of affluent or middle class, mostly white children were in this group, as were most teachers of mostly white or Latino children.

Perspective 2: Good Writing = Structure and Clarity

The 21 participants in the second group emphasized organization and ease of understanding (see Table 2). They most strongly agreed with the statements “A good paper has a strong, logical overall organization that is clear to the reader, so the reader knows what

Table 2
Perspective 2 Distinguishing Statements

+2 (Most agree)	+1 (Agree)	0 (Neutral)	-1 (Disagree)	-2 (Most disagree)
1. A good paper has a strong, logical overall organization.	17. Writing needs to be free of errors in conventions or mechanics.	5. Good writing shows a sense of audience.	18. A good writer surprises the reader.	27. Good writing shows instead of tells.
9. Good writing has a strong introduction, stating the topic, and a strong conclusion, summing up or reiterating the important points.	7. Good writing stays focused.	28. Good writing is descriptive.		6. A lot of juicy verbs help make writing good.
3. Good writing is clear and easy to understand.	22. You can see critical thinking on the part of the writer.	4. Writers need to be able to use appropriate verb tenses and other proper grammar.		
30. It's good when the writer is obviously knowledgeable about the subject.	24. You need to have a point!	2. I like when a writer adds something to their writing which shows some personality.		
	19. It all depends on the type of writing.			

Note. Statements are abbreviated. Participants rank-ordered each item in comparison to all other items.

to expect," "Good writing has a strong introduction, stating the topic, and a strong conclusion, summing up or reiterating the important points," and "Good writing is clear and easy to understand." This group disagreed strongly with the statements "Good writing *shows* instead of *tells*" and "A lot of juicy verbs help make writing good."

In this perspective, clarity and ease of understanding most characterize good writing, and a predictable structure helps the writer achieve that clarity. Focus, purpose, having a point, and having knowledge of the topic are also seen as keys to clarity. In their explanations for their rankings, members of this group often expressed concern over loss of focus, which could result in "babbling," as one participant phrased it. The need for a strong introduction to set readers' expectations was important, in this view, because readers need to know what to expect. Flow, cohesiveness, and logic in the order of the writing are also hallmarks of good writing in this perspective.

Interestingly, this group did not think that knowing your audience was all that important. To them, good writing would be good enough—clear enough—to any reader. In addition, participants with

this perspective did not want reader expectations to be disrupted by surprises in the text, feeling that surprises may cause confusion.

This group consisted of 4 professional writers—3 academic and 1 creative—as well as 5 teachers in high-needs schools and 12 preservice teachers. More teachers of mostly African American children were in this group than in either of the other groups.

Perspective 3: Good Writing = Purpose, Voice, and Correctness

The nine participants in the third group valued clear purpose, voice, and correct writing mechanics (see Table 3). They most strongly agreed with the statements "Good writing contains details, elaboration, support, whether narrative or expository..." "You need to have a point! Don't write just to fill up a page," and "Writing needs to be free of errors in conventions or mechanics—punctuation, grammar, and spelling affect the piece overall." They agreed with two statements that group 1 had strongly agreed with: "A good

Table 3
Perspective 3 Distinguishing Statements

+2 (Most agree)	+1 (Agree)	0 (Neutral)	-1 (Disagree)	-2 (Most disagree)
20. Good writing contains details, elaboration, support, whether narrative or expository.	4. Writers need to be able to use appropriate verb tenses and other proper grammar.	15. Voice in writing has to be appropriate to the purpose for writing.	7. Good writing stays focused.	9. Good writing has a strong introduction, stating the topic, and a strong conclusion, summing up or reiterating the important points.
24. You need to have a point!	18. A good writer surprises the reader.	1. A good paper has a strong, logical overall organization.	19. It all depends on the type of writing.	6. A lot of juicy verbs help make writing good.
17. Writing needs to be free of errors in conventions or mechanics.	2. I like when a writer adds something to their writing which shows some personality.	30. It's good when the writer is obviously knowledgeable about the subject.		
		5. Good writing shows a sense of audience.		

Note. Statements are abbreviated. Participants rank-ordered each item in comparison to all other items.

writer surprises the reader with unexpected moves” and “I...like when a writer adds something to their writing which shows some personality (humor, wit, ideals, values).” This group most strongly disagreed with the statement ranked at the top by group 2: “Good writing has a strong introduction, stating the topic, and a strong conclusion, summing up or reiterating the important points.”

In their explanations for their rankings, members of group 3, like group 2, discussed the importance of clarity in writing. However, group 3 didn't view organization as the necessary path to clarity, nor did group 3 think surprise was a threat to it. Group 3 also stressed the importance of details, which group 2 worried might degenerate into a loss of focus (and “babbling”). Like group 1, group 3 valued voice in writing. However, unlike group 1, group 3 felt correct conventions were an essential ingredient for good writing.

Group 3 included two professional writers (both creative), two teachers in high-needs schools, and five preservice teachers. Participants' attitudes toward their own writing or teaching writing (i.e., the degree to which they enjoyed these activities) did not predict their loading on this or any of the other factors.

Most Controversial and Least Controversial Statements

The statements that generated the most disagreement among our participants (see Table 4) centered on the need for predictable organization, the value of surprise, and the necessity of correct conventions. It's important to remember that each group included successful, publishing authors—so, it would be difficult to argue that one perspective is right and the others wrong. One perspective does not necessarily represent greater efficacy in writing. Thus, teachers who de-emphasize conventions and reward creativity are not *wrong*, per se, nor are the teachers who advocate careful organization in writing, such as the five-paragraph essay. Within each perspective, however, teachers do need to consider the purpose for a particular piece of writing. For example, a creative personal narrative about a new stepmother does not need to adhere to the five-paragraph structure, nor should an essay written for a standardized test get “creative” with punctuation.

Table 4
Statements Generating the Most Disagreement Among Participants

1. A good paper has a strong, logical overall organization so the reader knows what to expect.
4. Writers need to be able to use appropriate verb tenses and other proper grammar.
9. Good writing has a strong introduction, stating the topic, and a strong conclusion, summing up or reiterating the important points.
18. A good writer surprises the reader with unexpected moves.
16. Writing that is too structured (like a five-paragraph essay) tends to be boring.
17. Writing needs to be free of errors in conventions or mechanics.
21. Writing needs to have complete sentences to be considered good.
27. Good writing *shows* instead of *tells*.

Note. Statements are abbreviated.

Table 5
Statements With Which All Participants Disagreed

8. Good writing is concise, using an economy of words.
11. Good writers avoid clichés.
12. Writers shouldn't try to write about too big of a topic.
14. Adjectives tend to clutter up a text.
15. Some kids' writing is too chatty for formal reports and research papers—voice in writing has to be appropriate to the purpose for writing.
25. You don't see a lot of adverbs in good writing—adverbs are a sign the verbs are weak.
26. Good writing must conform to a genre.

Note. Statements are abbreviated.

Equally interesting are the items that virtually all our participants disagreed with (see Table 5). Everyone in our study disagreed with the warning against too many adjectives and adverbs. The opinion that a good prose style requires an economic use of words is perhaps not as universal or eternal as some writing educators tend to believe.

Implications for the Classroom

Our results should not be taken to mean that these three perspectives on good writing are the only ones that exist. Rather, these findings spotlight the existence of different, authentic perspectives, which has important implications for how we assess and respond to children's writing.

For example, even when we use well-crafted rubrics, the effects of differing authentic perspectives are visible. In one 6 + 1 Traits rubric for organization, a criterion for achieving the highest score is an "enlightening, satisfying conclusion" (Spandel, 2008, p. 286). The teacher whose viewpoint is similar to perspective 1 would probably be very satisfied with a surprise ending that challenges readers' expectations. However, a teacher closer to the second viewpoint would not be. This second teacher would instead be satisfied with a carefully planned, easily anticipated conclusion, which the first teacher would likely find dull.

Writing rubrics also commonly stipulate a "sufficient" amount of detail, examples, or support in student papers. But teachers more inclined toward the third perspective identified in our study may want far more detail than teachers inclined toward the second view, which considers too much detail a harbinger of loss of focus. How much detail is the right amount? It depends partly on who is reading the paper.

In addition, all writing rubrics include a section on correct conventions. Teachers leaning more toward perspective 3 would be very alert to errors in conventions and would be sure to tally them up carefully. To these teachers, the presence of errors in conventions—even when they don't interfere with comprehension—would signal writing that is not good. Teachers more inclined toward perspective 1 would be less focused on such errors, perhaps even considering such a focus to be too picky, and record a better score on conventions than their colleagues inclined toward perspective 3. Teachers with a view similar to perspective 1 may, in fact, be delighted when students challenge the rules of conventions in their writing—after all, e.e. cummings did!

It's easy to think that our own perspective is right, or at least more valid than others'. But understanding and respecting other viewpoints may, in the long run, be a far more valuable way to help children become writers than attempting to train entire faculties to respond to and assess student writing in a uniform

manner. As educators, we talk about the importance of valuing diversity—in ethnicity, culture, and learning styles—yet we seem increasingly intolerant of diversity in professional viewpoints and judgment, instead insisting we all be on that same page.

Of course, students *do* get frustrated by having to figure out what different teachers want from student writing. Some teachers deduct points if a paper is one line over a prescribed page limit, whereas others tell students a paper should be "as long as it needs to be." Some teachers forbid sentence fragments in any genre of writing, while others accept fragments in informal writing. The solution to this frustration, however, is not to make all teachers agree to respond in the same way, but to teach students that different people are going to respond differently to a piece of writing. That's why it's so important to understand your audience and purpose for writing.

In *Writing Essentials*, Regie Routman (2005) detailed "Five Things I Do to Ensure Students Become Excellent Writers" and led with "Demonstrate I am a writer *who always writes with a reader in mind* (sometimes that reader is myself)" (p. 8). When students begin with a new teacher, they need to know their audience *literally*—that is, they need to be able to ask specific questions about the teacher's expectations of their writing, even when they are given rubrics. By openly discussing the different views of different teachers, we reinforce the need to consider audience and purpose before writing. Of course, teachers must make their expectations clear in advance of writing and acknowledge, without disparaging, that other teachers' expectations are different. If we openly accept the role of subjectivity in assessment and response to writing, our students also will learn to do so.

Emphasizing audience and purpose in writing instruction does not undermine students' performance on standardized writing tests. In fact, it can improve students' test performance, because the purpose and audience for this type of writing are so clearly understood: The purpose is for students to achieve a high score on this test, so they will have more opportunities for themselves in the future. The audience is a group of evaluators using a specified rubric, which provides some guidance as to what will be valued in students' essays.

Making it clear to students that test writing is its own genre of writing, with a unique purpose and audience, is far more beneficial to students' growth as

writers than giving the impression that all writing is like test writing. To do well in the world outside of school, students need to learn to write in many different genres, for different audiences and purposes.

Given the existence of different, authentic views of what constitutes good writing, teachers should feel free to question and critique expert views of what makes writing good. Many of the common assumptions about good style today, especially limiting the use of adjectives and adverbs, may not make sense for writing instruction at the elementary level, especially for English learners and students who don't speak standard English at home. Allowing students the freedom to use and play with as many words as possible is probably far more beneficial overall than making students conform to a particular writing style for a test. Teachers have both a right and a responsibility to determine and discuss their own views of what makes writing good.

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Take ACTION!

Remind your students that when the whole class reads the same book, story, or article, everyone responds a little differently. Some students like the story, while others don't. Some students think the article is interesting, while others don't. Explain that differences like these also occur when teachers and peers read students' papers.

Just as people like different kinds of food, they also like different aspects of writing. That's why it's important for writers to have a clear understanding of who they are writing for and why they are writing. Explain that, because different teachers value different things in students' writing, students have to understand what their teachers are looking for. For example, some teachers prefer that students organize their papers in a particular way—into five paragraphs—whereas other teachers prefer students do not. Let students know they

don't need to get frustrated or upset by this—they just need to make sure they're clear about a teacher's expectations.

The next time you and your class respond to a student's paper, be sure everyone owns his or her opinion. For instance, if you're confused by the ending of a student's paper, rather than saying, "The end is confusing," say, "I was confused by the ending," and ask the class, "Was anyone else confused by the end?" This opens a rich discussion in which everyone thinks about his or her response to the text. It also directs students back to the text, to see if making changes will help.

Professional development sessions can provide an opportunity for you and your colleagues to discuss your own views of what makes writing good. Talk to your school literacy coach or administrators about devoting a PD session to this topic. Start by

taking about five minutes to write individual responses to the question "What do you think makes writing good?" Then, as a whole group, discuss differing views and show respect for others' viewpoints—the teacher who stresses correct conventions over creativity is not wrong, nor is the teacher who values creativity over conventions.

Given that subjectivity is inevitable, discuss how to reduce students' frustration with teachers' differences in assessment. Create your own rubrics that reflect your views of what makes writing good.

Finally, do your own writing. When you grow as a writer yourself, your understanding of your students' struggles and questions increases. When you experience feedback on your own writing from peers, you will better understand the importance of being encouraging and open-minded when responding to students' work.

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IRA Books

- *Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching Beginning Writing, K-3* by Lori Jamison Rog
- *Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching Intermediate Writing, Grades 4-6* by Lori Jamison Rog
- *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing*, a joint publication of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English
- *Using Rubrics to Improve Student Writing*, a six-title series of books spanning kindergarten to grade 5, by Sally Hampton, Sandra Murphy, and Margaret Lowry

IRA Journal Articles

- "An Effective Framework for Primary-Grade Guided Writing Instruction" by Sharan A. Gibson, *The Reading Teacher*, December 2008
- "We Learn What We Do: Developing a Repertoire of Writing Practices in an Instant Messaging World" by Gloria E. Jacobs, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, November 2008

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