

# Blending Writing Traits and Brush Strokes for Successful Writers

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## **Keywords**

*trait – based writing, word choice, assessment*

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to see if teaching the trait-based writing program in conjunction with image grammar would improve students’ overall writing abilities and specifically word choice and revision skills. I taught the six writing traits including how to assess pieces of writing. I used mini focus lessons to teach ideas for improving word choice and learning revision skills. Through observation, student writing collections, written assessments, and an exit survey, I found that student writers can effectively learn and use improved word choices and can effectively assess and revise pieces of writing,*

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## Recognizing the Struggle

As I began my language arts teaching career, Nancy Atwell was being hailed as the Guru of the Writing Process. Reading her book, *In the Middle* (1986), inspired me to try her methods in my classroom. I worked hard on Writer's

Workshop sessions, encouraged my very reluctant writers, and met with some success. Despite my success, two problems continued to nag: getting the students started with ideas down on paper and peer editing their writings. Even

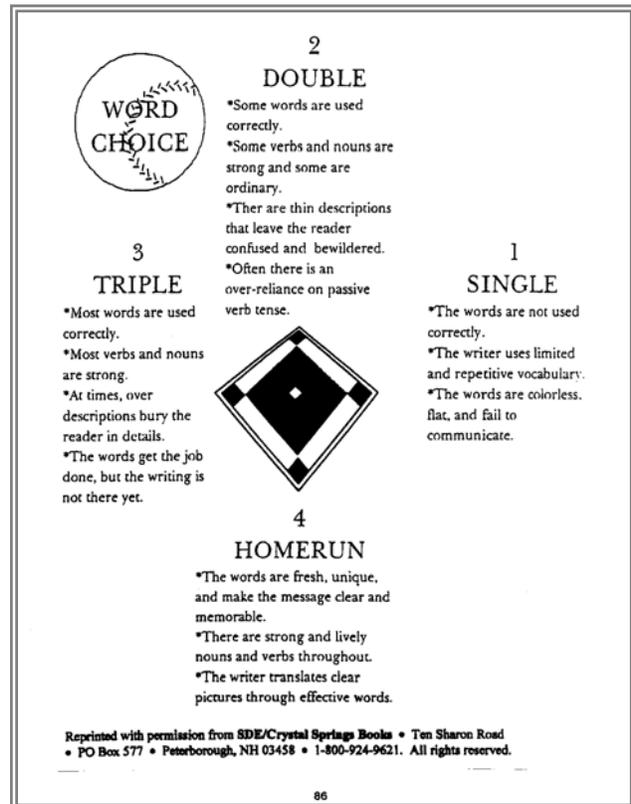
with much encouragement and topic suggestions, many of my students felt they had nothing to write about. They didn't know how to begin. Telling them to "just write about anything" was not helpful.

I am always researching new writing programs and trying new teaching methods in my seventh grade classroom. I have kept Atwell's philosophies and ideas at the core of my teaching. I had read about the Trait Based Writing program *6+1 Traits of Writing*,

(Culham, 2003). In 2004, I attended a session conducted by Char Forsten at the Ohio Conference for Middle School Educators. Ms. Forsten shared her version of the trait based writing program. Using baseball as a metaphor and moving around the bases as a scoring rubric (pg. 2), Forsten



Figure 1. Forsten's baseball diamond as a rubric for student's use



presented a simple, kid friendly approach to the writing traits and learning how to assess. She also shared mini-skill lessons to teach each trait. I was intrigued.

My first problem of getting kids started with ideas down on paper could be addressed by teaching the trait of ideas. The trait based program breaks down the writing process into six focus areas. The six areas are ideas, organization, word choice, voice, sentence fluency, and conventions. I wondered if teaching just the ideas trait would help my students overcome the problem of getting started on a piece of writing.

The second problem with my Writers' Workshop was peer editing. Culham's book aptly defines the difference between editing and revising. During editing, students clean up conventions of spelling, grammar, and usage. When they revise, students develop ideas, add details and voice, and improve flow through sentence fluency. I wanted my students to revise but they were editing. Usually when asked to edit, my students would fix a couple of spelling errors and add an adjective or two, then recopy the piece. For middle school students, revising an entire piece all at once is too daunting a task.

Having students write and teachers assess is not effective. Students must learn both assessment and revision skills to improve their writing skills and experience a real sense of word play and enjoyment of language. Learning the traits gives the student a foundation for making revisions. The biggest challenge in the writing process is being able to recognize weaknesses and the need for improvement. Students know and recognize good writing. "To teach for understanding requires that we attend closely to assessment" (Simmons, 1994, p. 22). Teaching them to be assessors builds on skills they already possess. Teaching them the traits and what defines each trait gives the student writer the words and phrases needed to express that knowledge.

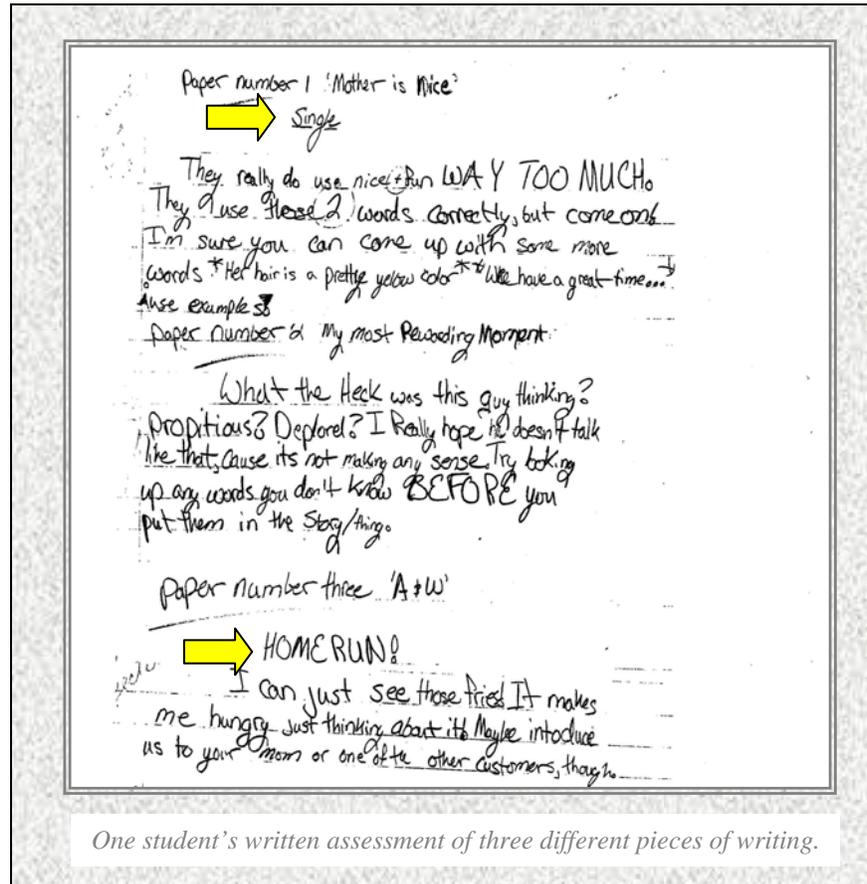
## Developing Assessment Skills

I decided to begin my Writers' Workshop by issuing folders. These folders never leave my classroom. Over time they become a collection of topics, ideas, favorite words, and notes on such things as beginnings, writing conclusions, poetry structures, and quick writes. It is almost impossible to duplicate a folder when lost.

This year one of the first folder items was a packet on the six writing traits. I introduced the writing traits from the packet one at a time. As a class, we read and discussed the elements of a trait. Using the

baseball diamond as a rubric, we compared hitting a homerun or scoring a four as compared to only getting to first base or scoring a one.

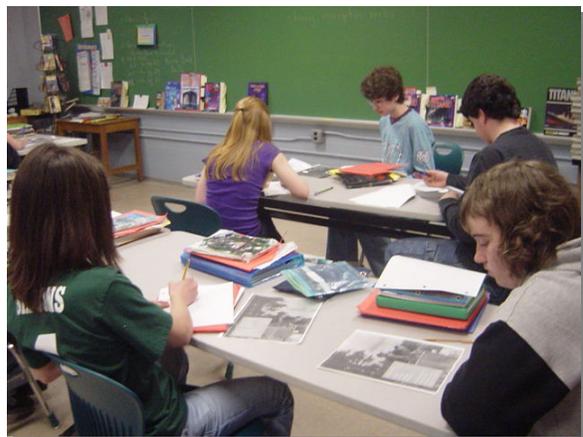
Next, students made scorecards by folding a large index card in half. On one side they wrote "stronger than weak". On the other side they wrote "weaker than strong". I read a piece of writing to the class. I used writing samples from students outside my classroom for this exercise. Students determined whether a piece was stronger or weaker and then they held up their scorecard. Determining whether a piece is stronger or weaker helped students decide which



base the writer was on: first, or second, or homerun. The easy times were when all students reached a consensus. “That’s a no-brainer, it’s a grand slam.” The most learning took place when the class vote was split. Students, using words and phrases from the baseball diamond rubric, explained why they voted “stronger” or “weaker”. If a student assessing word choice felt a piece was stronger than weak and the writer made it to third base, that student was asked a question like “are most verbs and nouns strong?” The student assessor had to look at the piece, specifically at the verbs and nouns, and determine if they were truly strong. If most of the verbs and nouns were ordinary, the students determined that the writer only made it to second base.

Next I had students do written assessments to learn to use the vocabulary of assessment. I gave them a piece of writing that was well written so it was easy for them to make assessment in their own words. I agree with Spandel: “In so doing they will think-they must think-about what makes writing work and you will see the influence of that thinking in their own writing and revising” (1997, p. 118). My writers were working in pairs and as I moved around the room, the conversations were well focused on particular traits and elements of that trait. Having the packet and the baseball diamond in front of them simplified the process of revision. (In previous years, I would have had two students together reading each others’ papers but being clueless as to how to help their friend improve.) Now my writers were focused, excited, and had lots to say about pieces of writing.

When my students practice assessment and revision of each trait as they learned the trait, I found them becoming more successful. They were not being asked to multitask; instead



they focused on one aspect of their writing piece at a time. Teaching assessment and revision empowers the writer to have more control over the final outcome. “Assessment is not something that we tack onto learning; it is an essential ongoing component of instruction that guides the process of learning” (Simmons, 1994, p. 23). Culham calls revision of one or two traits “mini-revisions” or “focused revision” (p. 30). Breaking down the revision task into small chores made it manageable for my middle school writers. They realized how minor changes can make major improvements in their writing. My students were more successful when I became more specific with expectations and assessment tools at the beginning. This is what the trait based writing program offers.

## Brush Strokes

The main focus of this writing program is teaching the six writing traits and incorporating grammatical structure within the traits. The grammatical structures taught are compared to an artist’s brush strokes in Noden’s book, *Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing* (1999). The five structures or brush strokes are participle, absolutes, appositives, adjectives shifted out of order, and action verbs.

These brush strokes are simple to teach in separate mini lessons. The participle is an “ing” form of a verb: *dancing, growling, munching*. The absolute is a noun with an “ing” verb like *hands waving*, or *seagulls soaring*. The absolute adds more visual detail to the imagery. The appositive is a noun that



adds a second image to one already mentioned. Examples are: *the car, a Hummer* or *the tree, an oak*. The fourth brush stroke is using adjectives shifted out of order. Instead of writing: *The old*

*weathered, dilapidated boat was sinking*, the student writes: *The old boat, weathered and dilapidated, was sinking*. This brush stroke contributes to the trait of sentence fluency along with word choice. The fifth stroke addresses painting with action verbs. This stroke calls for active, not passive voice. Instead of writing: *The candy bar was devoured by the hungry boy*, the student writes: *The hungry boy devoured the candy bar*. Teaching students to use these grammatical structures adds vivid images and specific details to their writings.

One recent lesson teaching word choice in my classroom involved a picture book. Culham's book, *Using Picture Books to Teach Writing With the Traits* (2004), annotates 200 picture books to help teach all six traits. *Under the Quilt of Night* by Hopkinson (2001) uses a participle (brush stroke one) as the title of each of the six chapters: *Running, Waiting, Hiding, Watching, Traveling, and Singing*. The story describes runaway slaves in the Underground Railroad.

As a class we reviewed our notes on the brush strokes. I emphasized that we were revisiting the trait of word choice. We would make a word quilt using some of our favorite participles. After reading *Under the Quilt of Night*, we divided into six groups. Each group received a copy of one chapter. They were to reread their chapter and write down any strong, energetic verbs. From their lists of verbs each group selected two verbs to use for their quilt squares. We needed twelve verbs to make our own word quilt.

Groups printed the "ing" form of their verbs in the middle of their quilt squares. They chose words like *clomping, whisking, zigzagging, and glowing* from the story. We joined the squares and displayed the quilts in the classroom to add flavor and interest. The hanging word quilts now remind students to make strong, vivid word choices.

## “Rice Cakes or Salsa”

The book, *Write Now* (2005), is a small easy to use book that presents sixteen different writing exercises to make beginning the process of writing easier, less threatening, and more satisfying. Some of the simple poetry forms are familiar to both teachers and students, e.g., the Acrostic and the Biography Poem. But others in the book were not familiar to me. The first one, the Lune, proved to be an excellent springboard for both generating writing ideas and focusing on word choice.

Similar to the Haiku, the Lune has three lines. But unlike the Haiku that has students counting syllables, the Lune only counts the words. I have used Haiku form in the past because it helps students choose words more wisely and with a specific purpose in mind. The Lune simplifies the process. The three lines require three words, five words, and three words. *Write Now* refers to the Lune as the “chocolate kiss of poetry”(p. 5). Even though it is small, it has a big flavor punch. After introducing the word choice trait, I taught my students to write Lune poetry. As a class we chose a topic for practice and generated nouns, verbs, adjectives, and colors specific to the topic. Next I asked them to generate three or four sentences about the topic. Typical seventh grade sentences were: “I went to Myrtle Beach with my family.” “I like to swim in the ocean.” “Picking up seashells is my favorite thing to do at the beach.”

Now comes the impressive part of this exercise. I asked the students to add adjectives and colors. I also asked them to drop past tense and “I” and reminded them to use Brush Stroke number one, the participle, the “ing” verb. (Remember, eleven words and three lines. This forces the writer to choose words with lots of flavor and imagery.)

As I introduced word choices, we used the metaphor of rice cakes and salsa (Culham, p. 172). Rice cake words are “good,” “nice,” “big,” and “very”. Salsa words are “grand,” “awesome,” and “extremely”.

Warm sandy beaches.  
Cold crystal blue-green water,  
splashing against rocks.

Boats sailing and swaying  
in the winds wicked ways.

huge white waves  
when I was young at  
Atlantic City beach

I'm Dreaming of a place where I can  
always be myself

I dream of a place I can be  
my true self

Dreaming of a place where I can relax  
and be Me

Lune Poetry

The work at the bottom of page shows one student's process.

My students began to look for zesty, salsa words. (This was one of my mini lessons.) Students responded to the shorter mini lessons on writing much better than the more in-depth lessons. Feeding the students quick, successful, and easy to follow lessons allowed everyone to get started writing.

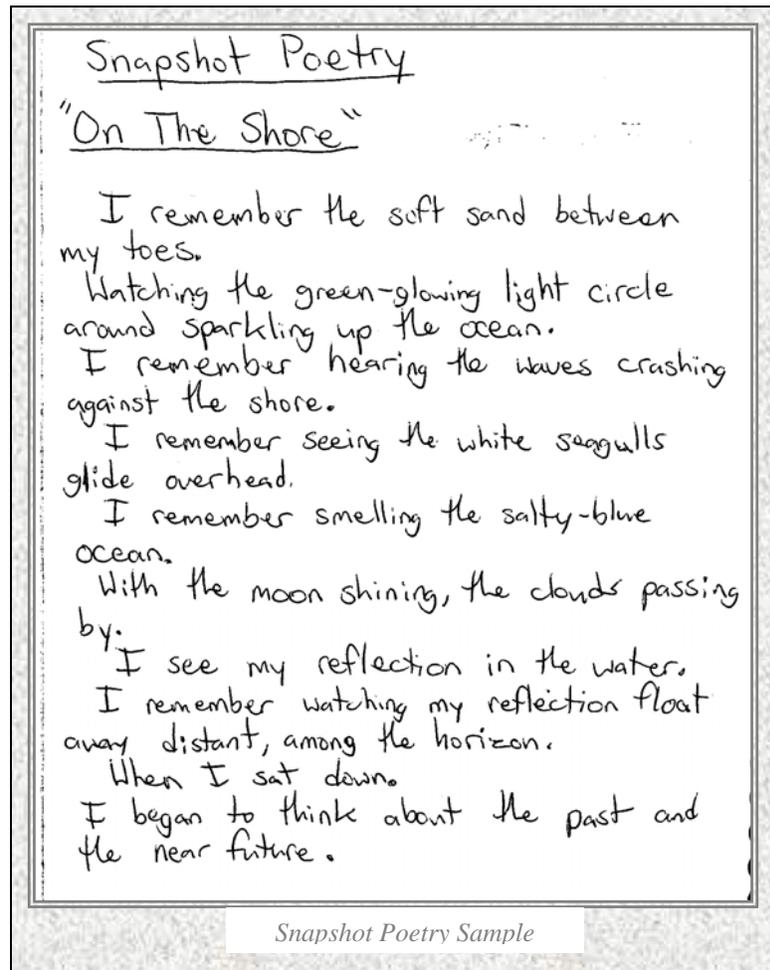
Another poetry form we used from *Write Now* was the snapshot. This form focuses specifically on details in creating imagery. Students were asked to involve the five senses as they wrote. Using a photo or other image, they made a jot list of things they hear, smell, taste, touch, and see. I encouraged them to write quickly and not prejudge or stew about right or wrong ideas.

After the jot list was made, I asked students to arrange their words and

phrases into a paragraph of memories or into a poem. Using a phrase like “I remember” supplied the students with the form or a structure, but allowed them to also be creative and integrate their own word choices.

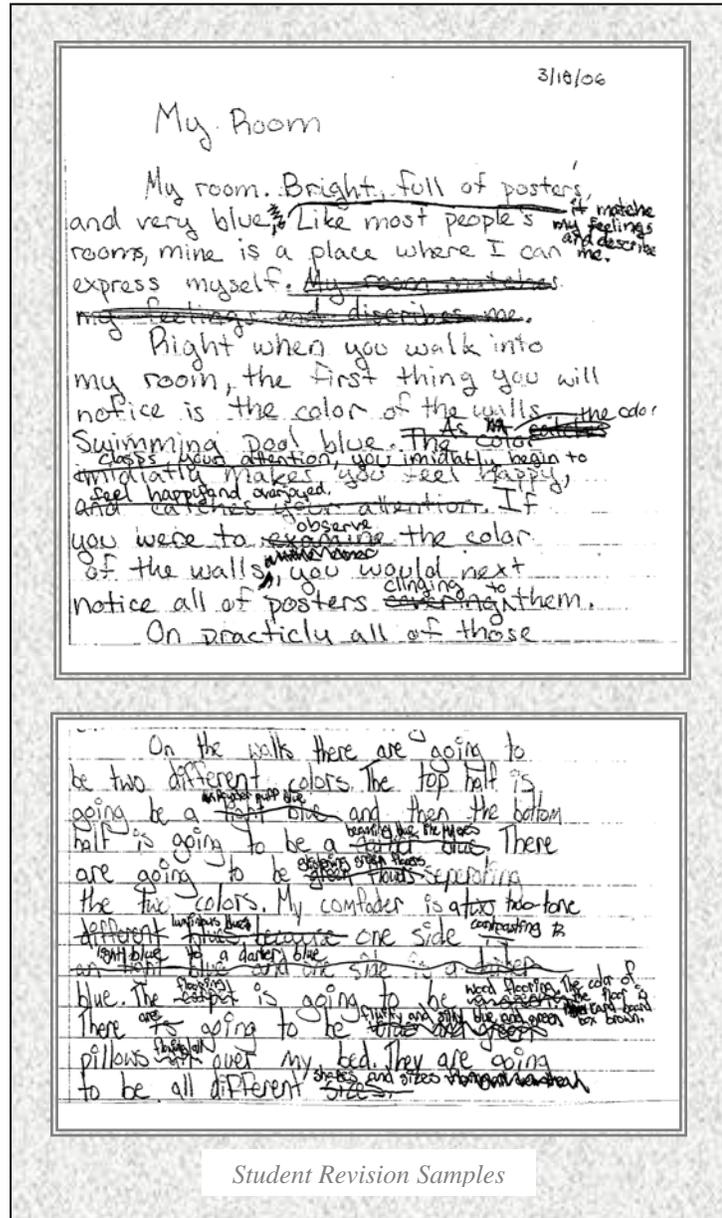
## Findings

I conducted individual writing conferences, compared student-writing samples from September 2005 to March 2006, and administered a written survey with 43 of my students. I wanted to determine if teaching the writing traits in conjunction with Noden’s brush strokes improved overall writing skills and peer revision skills of my seventh grade students. While presenting mini focus lessons and through collecting and comparing student writing samples, I



discovered three positive results. Number one is that teaching assessment skills to my writers resulted in increased class participation in lessons during Writer’s Workshops. The second positive result is that self- revision and peer revision are now manageable for my students. And finally, vocabulary usage and word choice of my students has improved.

Teaching assessment skills to my writers resulted in increased class participation and involvement in the writing lessons and Writer’s Workshop. My students gained enthusiasm for writing. From the very beginning of the assessment lessons, students were interested in the activities. Making baseball scorecards, asking them to listen carefully because they would have to make decisions, and asking for their opinions really brought the class of writers to life. They were on task and excited about what they were learning. They were eager to hear about the next activity and to participate. A question I asked during student interviews was, “Do you enjoy writing more now that you



Student Revision Samples

have new tools (traits) to use?” Students responded, “I love writing stories...I loved almost every

assignment because they were out of the box.” “...I am now a more detailed, experienced writer.” “Yes, I enjoy writing a lot more than I used to because this new way makes it easier now. Also, it makes pieces of writing a lot more interesting so it is more fun to write.”

Self-revision and peer revision became manageable for my students. By focusing on one or two of the traits for revision, students did not get so overwhelmed with the task of improving their pieces of writing. “As students begin to see that they do have the capability for peer-and-self-assessment, they feel a new sense of control over their work” (Simmons, 1994). As my students did self-revision on a piece called “My Room,” they worked diligently to choose better words and apply one or two of the brush strokes. They identified weaknesses in their own writings and asked for suggestions for improvement. Revision greatly improved from our first Writers’ Workshops earlier in the year. Notice the quality on the preceding “My Room” sample.

Students became more aware of their word choices. Vocabulary usage improved in their writing. Through assessment lessons and focus lessons, students became keenly aware of word choice. They enjoyed the poetry lessons and writing their own poems. They liked searching and choosing just the right word for their thoughts. They used the thesaurus on their own. They were willing to see new possibilities for their “rice cake” words. While reading the book, *Under the Quilt of Night*, one of my students asked if it was a poem. We talked briefly about what made him feel like it was a poem. Students recognized that phrasing of words and special words that are chosen cause moods and images in writing. Students responded that the word choices of the author, the sounds, and the patterns made the book read like poetry. My students became much more aware of what they were hearing, saying, and seeing than before I began teaching the trait-based program. It was like an awakening. It was as if their inner spirits had been unlocked1

When asked their opinion of using the word choice trait, students responded: “Yes, they (traits) have helped because now I use better describing words and I never knew (until this year) to use voice in writing.” “They have helped me become a better writer because now my writing is spicier and more zesty.” “Yes, choosing better words has helped me develop an ‘author’s voice’ and I have this urge to write now!”

## Survey Results

Figure 2. Survey Results

<b>Question 1</b>	<b>Please Rate the new writing unit using the traits to improve your writing.</b> (1- very helpful ~ 5- not helpful)				
	1= 7 Students	2= 24 Students	3= 9 Students	4= 3 Students	5= 0 Students
<b>Question 2</b>	<b>Have your skills improved using the six-trait program?</b> (1- Greatly improved ~ 5- no improvement)				
	1=11 Students	2= 19 Students	3= 10 Students	4= 2 Students	5= 1 Student
<b>Question 3</b>	<b>How easy was it to learn the traits?</b> (1- very easy ~ 5- very difficult)				
	1= 7 Students	2= 18 Students	3= 11 Students	4= 6 Students	5= 1 Student
<b>Question 4</b>	<b>Do You try to apply the traits when your write?</b> (1- always ~ 5- never)				
	1= 6 Students	2= 17 Students	3= 13 Students	4= 6 Students	5= 1 Student
<b>Question 5</b>	<b>Do you have a better understanding of revision because of the traits?</b> (1- clearly understand ~ 5- not yet clear)				
	1= 12 Students	2= 11 Students	3= 14 Students	4= 3 Students	5= 3 Students

The survey in Figure 2 demonstrates students’ opinions of the trait based writing program. The most positive aspects are that in question number one, thirty-one students thought the program was helpful; and in question two, thirty students out of forty-three surveyed felt their writing skills had improved. In question number five, twenty-three students felt they had a clearer understanding of revision after being introduced to the program. Students’ positive attitudes are encouraging.

The enthusiasm my students have for writing and the quality of work they are producing in the classroom have convinced me to continue teaching trait-based writing in conjunction with brush strokes to enhance my Writer's Workshop and further the successes of my students.

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