

COMPARING the COLLINS WRITING PROGRAM and SIX TRAITS

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One question we are occasionally asked at Collins Education Associates is, “We are considering professional development around the Collins Writing Program **or** Six Traits* and would like to get your perspective before deciding. What do you think?” This paper will provide—as objectively as the author of one program can be about another program—an answer.

The Short Answer: From our perspective, the question should not be **either** the Collins Writing Program (CWP) **or** Six Traits. However, an either/or decision almost always has to be made because of limited professional development days and budgets; therefore we answer: begin with Collins and follow with Six Traits. While both emphasize assessment strategies, the Collins Writing Program is about writing to learn **and** learning to write. Six Traits is about assessing writing.

Some Shared Beliefs of Collins and Six Traits

- *Importance of a school-wide, common vocabulary about writing*
- *Clear criteria for evaluation*
- *Emphasis on self evaluation/peer review*
- *Encourages modeling*
- *Oral reading as revision/editing tool*

Expanding on the Short Answer: The first consideration when selecting Collins Writing Program or Six Traits is a question of school needs. The Six Traits program as described in Vicki Spandel’s *Creating Writers Through 6-Trait Writing Assessment and Instruction* and *6+1 Traits of Writing* by Ruth Culham focuses on defining the qualities of good writing as six traits: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Schools that need a common approach to assess students’ formal writing should look to the Six Traits rubric as a source to guide them.

If, on the other hand, a school is looking for a school-wide writing and thinking across the curriculum program, the Collins Writing Program is the best place to begin. While we take great pride in the instructional strategies we teach to improve student writing skills, we also emphasize the critical role writing plays in learning, understanding, and retaining content. For example, some of our clients call because they feel their students are not asked to write enough. “We’re just not seeing much writing beyond note taking” is a common comment. Other clients call because of their students’ poor performance on open response questions, especially in state assessments.

The Five Types of Writing

- Type One: Capture Ideas*
- Type Two: Respond Correctly*
- Type Three: Edit for Focus*
Correction Areas
- Type Four: Peer Edit for Focus*
Correction Areas
- Type Five: Publish*

*Both the Collins Writing Program and Six Traits are described in book-length texts. The purpose of this article is to briefly feature some of the distinguishing features. For in-depth information on Collins Writing Program and Six Traits, see References at the end of this article.

In these two cases—not enough writing and poor writing on open response questions—the Collins Writing Program provides direct strategies with Type One writing to build fluency and Type Two writing to respond with correct content. Six Traits authors would agree with the need for these types of informal writing assignments, but in the Collins Writing Program they are a point of strong emphasis. In the Collins Writing Program we ask students to access prior knowledge, explain what they know, and analyze or evaluate information in writing frequently. We believe well designed, open-response questions do more than test, they teach. The Collins Writing Program provides a process to assign and evaluate these types of assignments in all content areas. Six Traits does not.

CWP and Six Traits begin to converge with what we define as Types Three and Four writing assignments. Type Three writing is completed in one draft, is written to meet the criteria set by focus correction areas (FCAs), and is read out loud by the author as an editing or revision strategy. Type Four writing begins with Type Three and adds the requirements of peer review and, usually, a second draft.

Sample Focus Correction Areas

For Content or Ideas:

- *Two to three reasons with support*
- *Four to five events from story in order*
- *Eight to ten facts*

For Organization:

- *Clear introduction establishing purpose*
- *Two to three transitions*
- *Short conclusions (no more than 10% of paper)*

For Conventions:

- *Correct commas*
- *Subject/verb agreement*
- *Correctly punctuated dialogue*

For Style:

- *Attention-getting beginning*
- *Vary sentence types*
- *One simile or metaphor*

Examples of Type One Prompts

- *In eight lines or more, write the things you know or questions you have about _____.*
- *On the topic we discussed yesterday, fill ten lines or more about the ideas you understood best. Least.*
- *What are two ways you would go about solving this problem?*
- *In five lines, describe what might have caused the scene you see in this picture.*

Examples of Type Two Prompts

- *List five facts about _____.*
- *What two strategies that we have talked about might you use to (solve, connect, figure out, repair, etc.) the following?*
- *Describe two ways that _____ and _____ are different and two ways they are similar.*
- *Summarize the three most important points from our class yesterday.*

Both Types Three and Four assignments require three focus correction areas that are more specific than the Six Traits. For example, if a student were writing a persuasive essay in the CWP, the essay would be evaluated on three specific FCAs that may include: 1) a clearly stated thesis; 2) two to three reasons developed with details; and 3) correct capitals, end marks, commas. These three FCAs would probably be included in the traits of *ideas* (thesis and reasons), *organization* (the clarity of the order of the thesis and reasons), and *conventions* (capitals, end marks, and commas) but are more clearly specified in the Collins Writing Program. It is the specificity of the FCAs that helps students focus on and master selective aspects of their writing that distinguishes the CWP from Six Traits. It is important to note that proponents of Six Traits suggest the traits be taught individually and that student work not be evaluated for all six or seven traits on every paper, but there still is a difference of degree—FCAs tend to be more specific and the

traits tend to be broader.

It is with the CWP Type Five assignments that the approaches become quite similar. Type Five writing is defined as writing that can go outside the classroom without explanation or qualification. Type Five embodies all of the traits and should be evaluated using a broad rubric, with the six trait rubric being an outstanding example.

In addition to the emphasis on writing to learn and the specificity of focus correction areas,

another distinguishing feature of the Collins Writing Program is the use of elaborated seven element assignments to help students completely understand what they are being asked to do. The major goal of Collins staff development is helping teachers design clear, authentic, and substantive writing assignments. In fact, in recent publications, we have begun to advocate the use of four specific assignments, especially for grades six to twelve. Based on research in *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High School* and *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, we stress assignments that ask students to

summarize, compare and contrast, develop and use vocabulary, and persuade. In the *Collins Writing Program: Improving Student Performance Through Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum*, we describe these four assignments as essential. Six Traits does not have such a specific assignment focus.

Another, not-so-obvious, advantage of the Collins Writing Program is our implementation process. We use three different folders (the *Cumulative Writing Folder*, the *Primary Cumulative Writing Folder* or the *Teacher's Implementation Folder*) to address the greatest problem in school improvement — the lack of implementation of proven programs. With these folders, a school or district has a simple way to determine how the Collins Writing Program is being used in the classroom. Schools can select a folder system which best suits their needs and design a process to look at student work in professional learning communities, grade-level teams, or departments. With more than twenty-five years experience doing implementation training, we can help schools improve student achievement by fine-tuning program implementation.

Should we use the Collins Writing Program or Six Traits? The answer is both. Use Collins Writing, a comprehensive program, to increase the frequency of writing in general and content writing in particular and use focus correction areas to teach specific skills. Then, for summative assessment, complement CWP with the evaluation rubrics in Six Traits.

Why Collins?

- *Emphasis on writing about subject area content*
- *Focuses on strategies to help teachers manage the paper load and process papers efficiently and fairly*
- *K to 12 involvement – a program that can be used by all teachers in all grades*
- *Provides essential assignments that have been proven to improve academic achievement*
- *Easy-to-use implementation process to get and keep the program going*

REFERENCES

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