

CITIZEN / Gail Konop Baker

Writing taught wrongly

The Madison schools' attempt to quantify good writing is misguided.

I was rereading *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf when my fifth-grade daughter arrived home from school and handed me her six-trait writing assessment results. I had seen a copy of her essay at our teacher conference in early fall. Her teacher made copies for the whole class because he thought it was really good, her ideas were thought-provoking, her voice strong and clear, and some of her language uniquely metaphorical.

Although the grammar and organization were a little weak, he recognized a solid piece of writing, I agreed. My husband, the teacher and I chuckled at the conference because the first sentence was: "Who ever thought of school?" I said, "I wonder if she'll be marked down for controversial content?" I thought I was joking at the time.

But there it was before me. The Writing Assessment Team had given her a three on a five-point scale for voice and ideas and a four for all the rest. I read the essay again and assured her it was really good. Then I looked back down at *To the Lighthouse* and wondered, how would Virginia Woolf be scored on Madison's six-trait writing assessment?

For those of you unfamiliar with the six-trait system, it is the Madison school district's attempt to quantify writing based on six traits, using a five-point rating scale for each trait. The traits are: conventions, organization, fluency, ideas, voice and word choice. I stared at

a passage of Woolf's and read it a couple of times because the entire page was one sentence and it was easy to get lost in it. By the third time the words flowed across the page like silken threads. Still, I wondered if you didn't like Woolf's unique style, if the life experiences or beliefs you brought to the work made it offensive to you, how would you rate her?

Even though she's considered one of the 20th century's greatest writers, she could be marked down. And then I thought about James Joyce's problems with sentence structure. And what about Ernest Hemingway's "word choice"? His crisp, clean style does not rely on "big vocabulary words." And then poor e.e. cummings came to mind. Where are those capitals, e.e.?

As a writer, I was skeptical about the six-trait writing system when first exposed to it four years ago. I remember thinking how difficult it was to try to break something down as complex and magical as writing into six neat little traits. On the bookshelf in my office, I have no fewer than 20 writing books, with titles ranging from *Writing Down the Bones* to *Take Your Characters to Dinner*, each as individual as the writers who wrote them.

But I wanted to give the system the benefit of the doubt. I understood the educators' desire to quantify what they were teaching and what the students were learning. I believed the six-trait model was implemented in good faith.

As I stared at my daughter's essay, I grew skeptical all over again. I wondered what these six traits were actually teaching Madison's emerging student writers. That organization, conventions, fluency, word choice, voice and ideas all hold equal value? Try telling that to any writer or journalist who has ever stared at a blank page.

Think about writing. You have a blank page. Then you have a word and another word. Eventually you fill the page. A page that could bring you to tears or incite you to anger. How does that happen? Which trait recognizes that power? Does the six-trait system have the sensitivity to recognize Woolf's groundbreaking style? Wouldn't it ultimately be more useful to teach our emerging writers how to tap into their writing process, to focus on conception before editing prematurely?

Professional writers know writing and editing are separate skills, the editing part consciously suppressed during process so as not to smother the blazing fire.

What about "voice"? Voice is something seasoned writers discuss and debate endlessly. Is it consistent? Does it speak to the theme of the book or piece? Voice is lot like heart and soul; you can feel when it's missing, but can it be quantified? The only way to teach student writers about voice is let them play with it, to write a story or essay and then change the point of view. Rewrite it again from a less obvious perspective and after all that rewrite it in the original way.

How about "fluency"? That's an interesting one, too. *The Bridges of Madison County* is fluent. It flows from flowery language straight into purple

prose. Yet Grace Paley's jarring conversational language stops me short and pulls me into her world with a big ragged embrace. Is that a problem? What about "word choice"? How do you rate that in light of Hemingway's obvious word deficiencies? And what about "organization"? Well, Virginia could send the Writing Assessment Teams' heads spinning out of control on that one.

What did my daughter learn about "ideas"? My daughter learned good ideas are ideas that don't make the reader uncomfortable. As she said: "If only I'd written a more ordinary essay, this wouldn't have happened." I am not saying my daughter knows all there is to know about writing. She still has much to learn.

What I am saying is, that in trying to break down and categorize writing, in assessing it too early and too rigidly, in not allowing for great leeway in all the categories, in censoring ideas, the six-trait system may end up doing more harm than good.

What young writers need most to become better writers is to think and write and think some more. To develop an ear and eye for exceptional writing by reading great literature and well-crafted essays, to go to art museums and dance performances and theater, to take slow observant walks in the woods, to spend time listening to Thelonious Monk and all of Mozart. And then to think and write and think and think and write some more. To push ideas to the very edge and back again. To make it *To the Lighthouse*. ■

Citizen is a forum for Isthmus readers. Gail Konop Baker is a Madison writer.