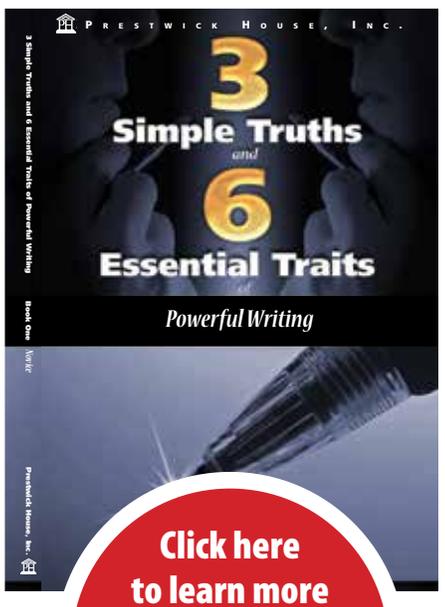




3 Simple Truths and
6 Essential Traits™

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NOVICE

3

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Essential Traits

of

Powerful Writing



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Table of Contents

Introduction

The Essential Traits of Powerful Writing	6
---	---

Applying the First Truth

Powerful writing really says something.

Trait One: **Development and Elaboration**

Make Yours Better	11
Development and Elaboration Rubric	12
Using Modes of Development to Develop Ideas	16
Brainstorming Details by Association / Clustering	20
Writing Opportunity	27

Applying the Second Truth

Powerful writing is understandable to others.

Trait Two: **Organization**

Make Yours Better	33
Organization Rubric	35
The Basic Five-Paragraph Essay	36
Examining the Basic Principles of Organization	38
Types of Organization	39
Writing and Using an Outline	41
Using Your Outline to Diagnose Problems Before You Write Your Essay	43
Writing Opportunity	46

Trait Three: **Sentence Structure and Variety**

Make Yours Better	51
Sentence Structure Rubric	54
Examining How Sentences Work	55
What Makes a Sentence Complete	55
Modifiers and Objects	58
Prepositional Phrases	59
Writing Opportunity	71

Trait Four: **Conventions of Written English**

Make Yours Better	76
Conventions Rubric	78
Basic Punctuation	79
Commas	81
Dashes	85
Subject-Verb Agreement	88
Pronoun-Antecedent Clarity	97
Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement	100
Writing Opportunity	107

Continued on next page

1
Book

Applying *the Third Truth*

Powerful writing is painless to read.

Trait Five: **Word Choice**

Make Yours Better	113
Word Choice Rubric	114
How (<i>really</i>) to Use a Thesaurus	115
Using Vivid, Specific, Concrete Words	121
Abstract and Concrete Terms.....	123
General and Specific Terms.....	126
Writing Opportunity	129

Trait Six: **Voice**

Make Yours Better	137
Voice Rubric.....	138
Examining Samples of a Variety of Narrative Voices	139
Examining Those Factors That Help to Determine Voice	141
Writing Opportunity.....	150

A P P E N D I X

Appendix One: Trait-by-Trait Scoring Guide for the Novice Level	154
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1st Truth

Powerful writing really says something.

ESSENTIAL TRAIT:

- 1 **Development and Elaboration:** Generalizations and ideas are central to powerful writing and they must be well developed.

2nd Truth

Powerful writing is understandable to others.

ESSENTIAL TRAITS:

- 2 **Organization:** Ideas and supporting details must be presented clearly, coherently, and concisely.
- 3 **Sentence Structure and Variety:** Sentences are structured for maximum effect and are marked by variety and clarity.
- 4 **Conventions of Written English:** The conventions of English (punctuation, capitalization, margins) exist to make it easier for the reader to understand the writer's point. When conventions are ignored, readers lose patience trying to follow the writer's thoughts.

3rd Truth

Powerful writing is painless to read.

ESSENTIAL TRAITS:

- 5 **Word Choice:** Words are chosen carefully in order to perform special functions; clichés, trite expressions, and ambiguities are avoided.
- 6 **Voice:** Voice characterizes the speaker behind the words. Voice conveys a message subtly, but powerfully.

TRAIT ONE:

DEVELOPMENT AND ELABORATION

POWERFUL ESSAYS are not just mass collections of words and sentences. They have a point. Although this is most clear in persuasive essays in which the writer clearly wants to “win” an argument, it is also true for informative and personal writing as well. As a writer, think *why* your reader needs to know the information you are sharing. Being clear about the point of your essay will make it much easier for you to decide what information you need to present.

Powerful essays offer the reader information or insight he or she didn’t know before. In order for the reader to appreciate your point *fully*, you want to make certain you provide enough details, explanations, definitions, and so on. By the same token, you don’t want to clutter your essay—and your reader’s mind—with trivial and irrelevant information that doesn’t contribute anything but length to your writing.

Make Yours Better!

Note that the main problem with the following essay is it lacks Development and Elaboration.

The Great Chicago Fire

Not much is known about the cause of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. However, given the weather conditions that summer and the way the city had been built and managed, the most popular story might indeed be true.

Chicago firefighters were used to fighting more than one fire a day. They probably would have been able to control the Great Fire, but human error combined with unpredictable Nature to cause this historic disaster.

Thousands of people fled, but the fire chased them. Later that night several homes were completely destroyed, and still later damage to the pumping station made it impossible to even try to fight the fire. Elsewhere in the city, luxurious new hotels and office buildings were destroyed. Ironically, throughout the summer and fall, newspaper editors had pleaded to improve the city’s fire protection in order to avoid exactly this type of disaster. Chicago has always been famous for cutting-edge, hard-hitting newspaper reporting. On Monday, one of the divided branches of the fire reached the city limit. Tuesday morning it began to rain, and the flames finally died out, leaving Chicago a burned-out ruin.

- Too brief. Vague. What is the main point?
- Lacks development, or elaboration. What errors? What about Nature?
- Do fleeing people and destroyed homes advance the main point?
- This statement about newspapers is irrelevant.
- Using days without dates doesn’t clarify the sequence of events.
- No conclusion or clear main idea.

Essay Critique

The introduction mentions human error and Nature as contributing to the fire's severity. There is also mention of the possibility of the "most popular story's" being true regarding the cause of the fire, yet there is no further mention of what this story is. There are no specific facts—not even dates—to explain or illustrate what is only vaguely mentioned.

This essay receives a score of **1** on the:

Development and Elaboration Rubric

5 = The main idea of the essay is clear, but the overall discussion is weakened by inconsistent development and elaboration. Some supporting points tend to be underdeveloped (too few details, examples, anecdotes, supporting facts, etc.). Some minor irrelevancies likewise weaken the essay.

4 = DEVELOPING

The main idea of the essay is suggested. There are supporting details with some elaboration, but supporting points are underdeveloped. Some of the points or development may be tangential or irrelevant to the topic, purpose, and audience.

3 = The main idea of the essay is suggested. There are supporting points without elaboration, or some of the elaboration is irrelevant to the topic, purpose, or audience.

2 = The main idea of the essay is suggested. There may be supporting points, but they are not elaborated upon. Some of the details may be irrelevant to the topic, purpose, or audience.

1 = NOVICE

The main idea of the essay is implicit but not clear. There tend to be too few or no supporting points and the details presented tend not to be elaborated upon. Some of the details or elaboration may be irrelevant to the topic, purpose, or audience.

Exercise 1: Opinions and Ideas



Give your opinion of the following questions; state your answer as a possible main idea of an essay.

1. Should the school day be lengthened? Shortened?

Example: The school day should be shortened because it is too tiring for young people.

2. Is athletic ability learned or inherited?

3. Is artistic talent learned or inherited?

4. How well does your school handle discipline?

5. What would you like to see as the next big technological breakthrough?

6. What book, movie, or play should your school add to the curriculum?

7. What book, movie, or play should your school *drop* from its curriculum?

8. Who in your school deserves to be honored as “Student of the Month”?

9. What invention or innovation has contributed most to the quality of your life?

10. What invention or innovation has actually made your life more *difficult*?

While everyone can, and does, have opinions, those held in highest regard are those for which supporting details are provided.

Exercise 2: Elaborating on Your Idea with Supporting Details



Choose the idea from **Exercise 1** in which you have the most interest and the clearest understanding. Then, elaborate on that idea by considering the “5 W’s and 1 H.” First, consider all of the variations to each question your topic might involve, and then answer each variation.

Who:

- Example:*
- Who** would benefit from shortening the school day?
 - Who** might be inconvenienced?
 - Who** has the authority to make such a change?
 - Who** would be the most effective advocate of this change?
 - Who** would be the most powerful opponent of this change?

What:

- Example:*
- What** benefits are there to shortening the school day?
 - What** might be some of the disadvantages?
 - What** other impacts would this change have?
 - on the remainder of the school day?
 - on people’s schedules?

Where:

- Example:*
- Where** would students go after school?

When:

- Example:*
- When** would a change like this take place?
 - When** would school dismiss on a shortened day?

Why:

- Example:*
- Why** would this be a good change?
 - Why** are the listed benefits benefits?
 - Why** are the listed disadvantages disadvantages?
 - Why** would supporters support this change?
 - Why** would opponents oppose it?

How:

Example: **How** would you go about instituting this change?

How would this change affect:

- test scores, graduation requirements, acceptance to college?
- after-school jobs or participation in non-school activities?

Note: Some of the questions seem to repeat information you’ve already collected, and some indicate information you probably will not use in your final essay. This is fine. At this stage, your purpose is to get as much information as you can, and to examine that information from many different points of view. There will be time to eliminate duplicated and irrelevant information later. Right now, do not exclude anything you think of as “useless.” Just jot it down and keep brainstorming.

Exercise 3: Developing Ideas from other Content Areas



Consider what you are currently studying in your other academic classes and do the following:

Note an idea or concept you’ve studied this week with which you agree.

Note an idea or concept you’ve studied this week with which you disagree.

Note an idea or concept you’ve studied this week which you find especially interesting.

Note an idea or concept you’ve studied this week that you do not fully understand.

For the idea or concept with which you agree, answer the following questions:

How much do you know about this subject?

6. **Definition** is also similar to description but deals with non-physical attributes as well as physical details. For example, whereas your description of a particular chair would most likely include color, size, material, etc., your definition of “a chair” would need to include its *purpose*.

Definition is useful when you need to

- inform your reader of a new term or object or clarify your particular use of a term
- persuade your reader of the presence (or absence) of some trait (e.g., there is no justice in the court system) by carefully defining what you mean by that trait
- express your feelings about some abstract concept (love, honor, etc.).

Exercise 4: Exploring Modes of Development



Consider the opinion questions that you answered in Exercise 1. For each, list the mode(s) of development you would need to use to discuss your response to that question. Also list some of the details you would include for each mode of development:

1. Should the school day be lengthened? Shortened?

Example:

Description of overworked student:

Narration: step-by-step description of a typical school day, emphasizing how long and tiring it is

Classification: symptoms of overwork, description of problems associated with overwork

Illustration: examples of schools or districts with shorter school days; case studies of students with problems due to length of school day

2. Is athletic ability learned or inherited?
3. Is artistic talent learned or inherited?
4. How well does your school handle discipline?

Step 4: Of course, while you're generating ideas and supporting details for your well-developed and elaborated essay, you'll realize that your step three sub-points can be developed still further. For example, the statement that athletes visit schools to teach fitness and nutrition through F3 *demands* a few details about which athletes and which schools. And if you *really* want to write powerfully, you'll also explain how those athletes teach their message and how and why they choose the schools they visit.

Does this mean that you can divide a sub-point into details and sub-details *ad infinitum*? Actually, it does. The only factors you need to take into consideration in determining how deeply you will delve into your topic are how much time you have to write the essay or paper, and the page limit you've been assigned.

Since you should develop even a one-page essay as fully as possible, these factors have much more impact on your selection of topic. This will be discussed later.

Exercise 5: Brainstorming Ideas



Choose one of the topics you created in Exercise 1, and brainstorm as many sub-points and developing details as you can. Represent the relationships between your ideas in a web.

Exercise 6: Brainstorming Ideas



Choose another one of the topics you created in Exercise 1, and brainstorm as many sub-points and developing details as you can. This time, experiment with your own outline or graphic organizer form to represent the relationships between these ideas.

If you answer the “what about it” in a single sentence, you probably will have generated a main idea and the beginning of your thesis. Thinking about your topic in these terms really lets you take control of the topic and lets you focus on everything you *do* know.

Also, since you will probably not be able to discuss *everything* about your topic in the time and space allowed (usually an hour or so and a page or two), your main idea allows you to narrow your topic down to those aspects you best understand.



Time Clue: In a typical exam setting, you will have in the area of 2 hours for the entire exam. That means you might have one hour or less to write your essay. Assuming you have an hour for this essay, you should spend no more than 5 minutes thinking of a topic and main idea. Remember, you do want to show your teacher how much you know, so the main idea will probably come from the course content.

Step 3: *Brainstorm and generate ideas and supporting details*
Answer the 5 W’s and 1 H. Think about aspects of your topic with which you agree and those with which you disagree. List facts or ideas. Think about the sensory details that might help you elaborate on your topic. Create a graphic organizer to help you generate new ideas and begin to organize them.



Time Clue: If you have one hour to work on your essay, allow yourself 10 – 15 minutes for Step 3.

Step 4: *Freewrite your first draft*

Make it as good as you can. This is a freewrite. You have already generated your details, so this is organizing them and explaining them to your reader. Depending on how much time you have for your essay, this might be your only draft—so make it good.



Time Clue: Give yourself 20 – 30 minutes for this step. If you did a good enough job in Step 3, writing the essay will be a breeze.