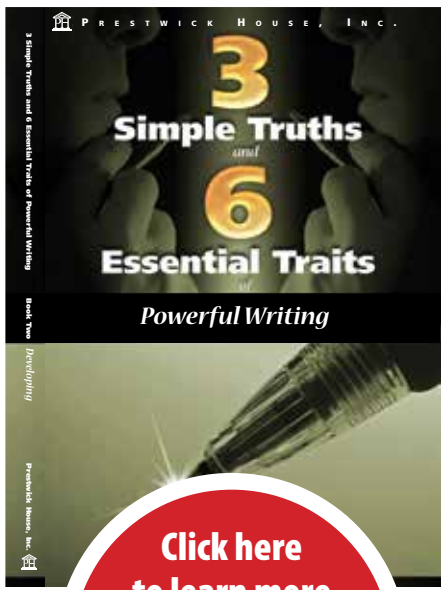




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BOOK TWO

DEVELOPING

3

Simple Truths

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6

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	
Identifying and Narrowing Your Topic	11
Make Yours Better	12
Development and Elaboration Rubric	14
Taking and Organizing Notes	17
Developing Ideas by Showing Rather Than Telling	24
Writing Opportunity	30

Applying the Second Truth

Powerful writing is understandable to others.

Trait Two: Organization	
Review of the Five-Paragraph Essay	35
Make Yours Better	36
Organization Rubric	37
Examining the Principles of Organization	38
Examining the Effect of Purpose and Mode of Development on Organization	42
Writing Opportunity	56
Trait Three: Sentence Structure and Variety	
Composing Powerful Sentences	61
Make Yours Better	61
Sentence Structure Rubric	63
Combining Simple Sentences Using Appositives	64
Combining Simple Sentences Using Compound Subjects, Predicates, and Objects	67
Compound Sentences: Combining Simple Sentences Using Coordinating Conjunctions	70
Complex Sentences: Combining Simple Sentences Using Subordinate Conjunctions	77
Complex Sentences: Combining Simple Sentences Using Relative Pronouns	88
Writing Compound Sentences and Compound-Complex Sentences	95
Writing Opportunity	100
Trait Four: Conventions of Written English	
Making Powerful Language Decisions	105
Make Yours Better	105
Conventions of Written English Rubric	107
Using Colons, Semicolons, and Dashes Confidently	108
Using the Correct Pronoun Case	128
Using Active and Passive Voice Appropriately	136
Using the Subjunctive Mood	142
Writing Opportunity	151

Continued on next page

Book

Applying *the Third Truth*

Powerful writing is painless to read.

Trait Five: Word Choice	
Make Yours Better	159
Word Choice Rubric	161
Working Toward Conciseness.....	166
Fun With Idioms, Slang, and Clichés	170
Avoiding and Correcting Malapropisms	173
Writing Opportunity	177
Trait Six: Voice	
Establishing the Writer-Reader Relationship.....	181
Make Yours Better	184
Voice Rubric.....	186
Examining Samples of a Variety of Tones and Voices	187
Examining Those Factors That Help to Determine Voice	188
Writing Opportunity	194

A P P E N D I X

Appendix One: Trait-by-Trait Scoring Guide for the Developing Level	198
Appendix Two: An Introduction to Logical Fallacies	204
Appendix Three: An Introduction to MLA Documentation	209

TRAIT ONE:
DEVELOPMENT AND ELABORATION

Every successful piece of nonfiction should leave the reader with one provocative thought that he or she didn't have before. Not two thoughts, or five—just one.

Decide what corner of your subject you're going to bite off, and be content to cover it well and stop.

—William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*

Identifying and Narrowing Your Topic

Since elementary school, your teachers probably have admonished you to “narrow down your topic.” You might have understood this to mean that you could not write about the entire elephant, but had to focus on, say, the elephant’s trunk.

What your teachers have been asking you, however, is if you want to write about elephants, what *one point* about elephants do you want to make? The key to offering your reader a “full and complete discussion” necessary for a score of 8 on the Development and Elaboration rubric, is to “bite off no more than you can chew and digest” in the amount of time and space you are allowed.

For example, you might want to establish for your reader:

- elephants make excellent house pets;
- elephants should not be confined in zoos and circuses;
- endangered elephant species need to be protected by international law.

After you identify your one point, you then need to decide how much you want to cover. (This might actually mean how much you can cover in the time and space you are allowed.)

If you find countless reasons why elephants make excellent house pets, you may find you need to focus your essay on:

- how easy elephants are to care for;
- how elephants are good company for the elderly and the shut-in;
- how protective elephants can be of children.

After you've identified the one point you will establish and the extent to which you will establish it, then you can begin to look for the facts and examples you will use to establish your point.

Make Yours Better!

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

■ The introduction gives us three ideas that the essay could be about, but does not clearly identify the main idea.

■ The second paragraph gives us a series of facts which do not develop the ideas in the introduction.

■ The third paragraph wanders away from the topic of the rishis, returning only at the end.

The sacred Hindu literature known as the Vedas are divided into four main parts: Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva. They are considered revealed literature because they are based on what was heard by the rishis, or prophets.

"Revealed literature" is a term for those writings which are considered direct communication from a divine source to a human recorder.

A rishi can be any person who sings a sacred song or is inspired to write poetry. Some rishis were supposed to have heard the divine truth of the Vedas during religious ceremonies. The term is used specifically for the authors of the Rigveda. Famous rishis include Paili, Vaishampayana, and Jaimini. One of the most important rishis, Vyasa, whose name means "Splitter," was supposed to have shown people how to split up the Vedas so that they could be understood.

People who believe in the Vedas religiously believe that they have existed since the beginning of creation, even though they were heard by the rishis at some point in time. The Sanskrit term for revealed literature is *sruti*. This term refers to all of the revealed literature in Hinduism, from the beginning to the present. It literally means "what is heard." In Hinduism, the cosmic truth of the universe is heard by the rishis.

Essay Critique

This passage lacks a clear thesis statement, so it is difficult to determine what the author's main idea is. Although there is an abundance of interesting information here, the author should make sure that all the supporting sentences contribute to the main idea.

This essay receives a score of **4** on the:

Development and Elaboration Rubric

8 = **The main idea of the essay is clear.** There is almost enough information for a full and complete discussion, but the reader is left with a few unanswered questions. Minor irrelevancies, redundancies, and superfluencies weaken the overall impact of the essay.

7 = **ADVANCING**

The main idea of the essay is clear. Every supporting point is supported and details are elaborated upon, but minor irrelevancies, redundancies, and superfluencies weaken the overall impact of the essay.

6 = **The main idea of the essay is clear,** most supporting points are elaborated upon, but some of the information presented is notably irrelevant, redundant, and superfluous.

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.

Exercise 1: Identifying a Main Idea and Drafting a Thesis



Think about a book you have read or a movie you have seen, preferably one that is readily available to you so that you can reread or re-watch portions as necessary.

1. In one sentence, state the theme or meaning of the book or movie.

Example:

The experiences of Alex the Lion in DreamWorks animated film Madagascar illustrate the theme that civilization is merely a thin veneer, and one is never too far from revealing one's brutal nature.

2. In one sentence, evaluate the main character.

Example:

Alex the Lion, one of the main characters in the DreamWorks animated film Madagascar, is a truly decent fellow painfully caught between his desire to be "good" and the increasingly irresistible call of his inner nature.

3. In one sentence, describe how the book or movie is put together (written, filmed, formatted) better than or differently from other books you have read or movies you have seen.

Example:

The 2005 DreamWorks animated film Madagascar takes the science of computer animation to a new level that other studios will find hard to match.

Exercise 2: Brainstorming Illustrative Details and Evidence



After drafting your thesis, it is helpful to brainstorm and list the facts, details, examples, etc., that you suspect you will need in order to discuss your main idea fully. Perhaps you will need to look again at the book or movie you are writing about in order to find enough facts and details for the piece you are writing.

Jot down the facts, details, and other ideas you might use to develop each of the theses you drafted above.

For example:

Thesis: *The experiences of Alex the Lion in DreamWorks animated film Madagascar illustrate the theme that civilization is merely a thin veneer, and one is never too far from revealing one's brutal nature.*

- *Alex is a meat eater (even in New York)*
- *Does not have to hunt in New York*
- *Well-fed, no threat to friends*
- *Well-fed, does not consider friends to be prey*
- *On island, experiences hunger*
- *Is appalled at viewing his friends (Melman) as food*
- *Cannot control his carnivorous urges*
- *Voluntarily separates self from his friends*

Exercise 3: Reading and Taking Notes



The following passage is about Christopher Columbus's four journeys to the North American continent—not terribly exciting, but something about which you already know some things. Have your 3" X 5" cards ready. Before you read the passage, take notes on what you already know—or think you know—about Columbus and his journeys. Remember to write these notes in the color you've selected for information you already know.

Also take notes on any questions you have or any opinions or insights you believe you have that you might want to share in a paper on Christopher Columbus. Write these notes in whatever color you have chosen for your own opinions and insights.

After you have brainstormed and taken notes, read the passage, taking notes in the color you have chosen for information taken directly from a source. If, while you read, you generate some new ideas, form some new opinions, or develop some insights, note them on index cards in the appropriate color.

Ready? Now, take notes as you read the following selection:

All told, Christopher Columbus—who was born in Italy, and whose name was really Cristoforo Colombo—made four voyages to what Europeans called “The New World” between 1492 and 1504. Once celebrated as the “Discoverer” of America and the hero of western history, and later derided as a genocidal mass murderer and the scourge of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Columbus was actually somewhere in between, an intelligent adventurer and shrewd negotiator with perhaps something of a mean streak.

Columbus's first voyage—his famous voyage of “discovery”—began at the port of Palos in southern Spain, on August 3, 1492. Everyone knows the story of Columbus seeking funding from Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, with which he secured and outfitted his three ships: the well-known *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria*.

The first port of call for this expedition was at the Canary Islands, which were, at the time, the westernmost Spanish possessions. Calm winds and the need to repair his vessels caused a four-week delay there. He was finally able to resume his voyage on September 6, 1492, although calm winds still kept him in sight of the westernmost Canary Island for two more days.

Columbus arrived at what is now the Bahama Islands on October 12, the day now celebrated as Columbus Day. He proceeded to Cuba on October 28. While sailing north of Cuba on November 22, the captain of the *Pinta* left the other two ships, without

Developing Ideas by Showing Rather Than Telling

Below is a famous drawing titled “My Wife and My Mother-in-Law,” originally published in 1915 by cartoonist W.E. Hill. You’ll probably recognize it as one of those “trick” drawings that show two different objects, depending on how the viewer sees it. In this case, Mr. Hill’s “wife” is a young woman wearing a fur stole, elegant veil, and ostrich feather. There is a choker-necklace around her neck, and she is turned mostly away from the viewer. The “mother-in-law” is much older. She is also wearing a fur and a plume, but the viewer sees her full profile, and she has a rather large nose and prominent chin.

Most people, when they look at this picture, immediately see either the wife or the mother-in-law. When told that there is another woman also in the picture, most people are able to see it by shifting their focus. There are, however, those people who cannot see the “other woman” without someone actually pointing out the individual features: here is the nose, here is her ear, this is her necklace, etc.



How you present this image to someone else illustrates the difference between “telling” and “showing.”

“Telling” is merely saying what features are there. “Showing” is actually pointing the features out.

Exercise 4: Developing a Main Idea



Each of the following items states a main idea and begins to develop it. The development, however, is vague and lacks details. In other words, it **tells** rather than **shows**. For each example, list some specific facts, details, or examples you could use to **show** your reader the validity of the main idea. (For the purposes of this exercise, it is all right if you need to make up “facts.”)

For example:

Viewing a movie based on a novel cannot be considered a valid replacement for reading the novel. Filmmakers often take liberties with the original story, deleting characters or plot events, changing settings, even changing the focus and theme of the novel.

Details/Examples:

Slaughterhouse-Five: in movie, character of Kilgore Trout is deleted, and Valencia's car accident-death scene is greatly expanded to add comedy. Events in novel are completely as Billy experienced them; movie shows German boy running to burning ruins of apartment house in search of his dead girlfriend, an event Billy had no knowledge of. *The Great Gatsby*: everything in novel is filtered through Nick's viewpoint. The Robert Markowitz television adaptation (2000), however, includes many flashbacks of Daisy and Gatsby's earlier relationship: their meeting, parting, etc.

1. Exercising daily is a healthy habit to establish. People who exercise are generally happier and healthier, and lead much more productive lives than couch potatoes.

Details/Examples:

2. The United States has become largely a nation of complainers. The frivolous lawsuits that daily choke our justice system are proof of this.

Details/Examples:

Exercise 5: 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?

What is the basis of your agreement?

What evidence can you offer to support your opinion?

List the source(s) for this evidence:

What evidence exists to support the opposite opinion?

List the source(s) for this evidence:

How can you refute this evidence?



Writing Opportunity: *The Writing Assessment Essay: Responding to a Quotation*

Because tens of thousands of students take standardized tests, most of the writing questions on tests like the SAT and your state's writing assessment, will be very general, not relying on any specific knowledge. Therefore, many of these writing exams simply ask you to respond to a quotation from a work of literature or a great historical figure.

Depending on the assessment, you might have as little as twenty minutes to write your essay, or as long as an hour or two. The key to success on this type of assessment, then, is getting and developing an idea as fully as you can as quickly as you can. All of the traits of powerful essays are important in a writing assessment, but—while your scorer may be instructed to forgive the occasional spelling or grammatical error—you will be heavily penalized if you have nothing to say. Therefore, Development and Elaboration is probably the most important trait in this setting.

Below, is a writing prompt similar to ones you are likely to encounter on the SAT or state writing assessment.

Remember to apply the techniques you learned in this chapter to develop a main idea and then offer as many specific details in support of that main idea as you can.



Prompt: *Read the following quotation, and then write an essay in which you agree or disagree with Twain's observation about happiness.*

Happiness ain't a thing in itself—it's only a contrast with something that ain't pleasant.... And so, as soon as the novelty is over and the force of the contrast dulled, it ain't happiness any longer, and you have to get something fresh.

—Mark Twain