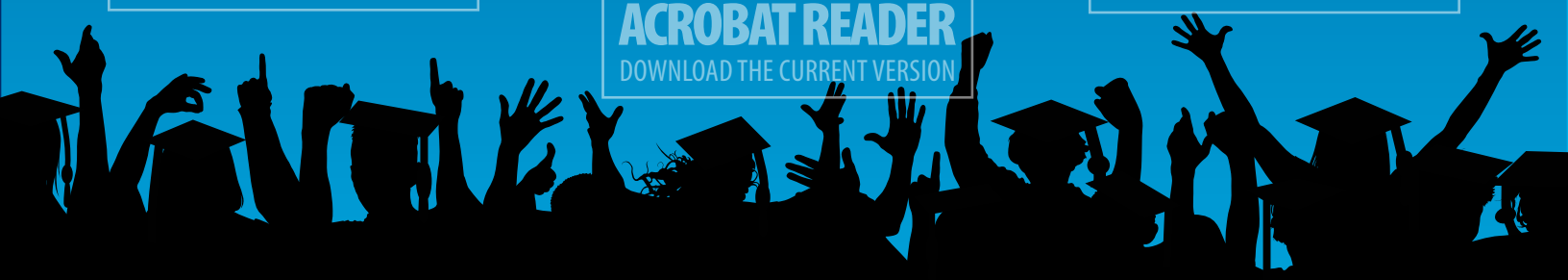
What is Good Writing?

Developing a Shared Language of Quality That Everyone Can Understand

by
Steve Peha



TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

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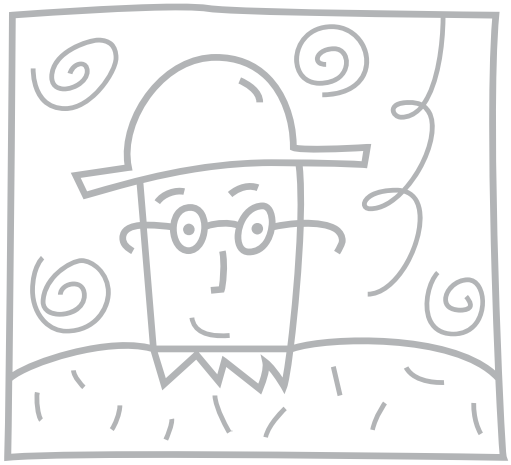
What Is Good Writing?



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by Steve Peha

The best way to teach
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You know it when you see it. It isn't that hard to tell whether a piece of writing is good or bad. You just have to read it. But things get more challenging if you have to explain why. Even harder than that is analyzing the good things a writer is doing so you can learn to use his or her techniques in your own work.

Having simple phrases to describe the good things writers do makes learning about those things easier. Good writing has:

- **Ideas that are interesting and important.** Ideas are the heart of your piece — what you're writing about and the information you choose to write about it.
- **Organization that is logical and effective.** Organization refers to the order of your ideas and the way you move from one idea to the next.
- **Voice that is individual and appropriate.** Voice is how your writing feels to someone when they read it. Is it formal or casual? Is it friendly and inviting or reserved and standoffish? Voice is the expression of your individual personality through words.
- **Word Choice that is specific and memorable.** Good writing uses just the right words to say just the right things.
- **Sentence Fluency that is smooth and expressive.** Fluent sentences are easy to understand and fun to read with expression.
- **Conventions that are correct and communicative.** Conventions are the ways we all agree to use punctuation, spelling, grammar, and other things that make writing consistent and easy to read.

Really great writing has all of these things in it. By studying the writing of others, you can learn how to get them into your own.

One Pretty Good Piece of Writing

What does a good piece of writing look like? It's hard to make something if you don't know what it looks like. That's why it's so valuable to look at models of good writing produced by other writers just like you. On this page, you'll find one short piece of writing. When I'm trying to learn about good writing, I like to work with short pieces, instead of big long novels, because it's easier to see how all the different parts work together.

CHORES!

Chores! Chores! Chores! Chores are boring! Scrubbing toilets, cleaning sinks, and washing bathtubs take up a lot of my time and are not fun at all.

Toilets! When you're scrubbing toilets make sure they are not stinky. I've scrubbed one before and I was lucky it didn't stink. I think toilets are one of the hardest things to scrub in the bathroom because it is hard to get up around the rim.

Sinks are one of the easiest things to clean in the bathroom because they have no rims and they are small. I have cleaned one before and it was pretty easy.

Bathtubs, ever washed one? They are big, they are deep, and it is hard to get up around the sides. The bathtub is the hardest, I think, to wash in the bathroom.

All chores are boring, especially making my bed. Cleaning my room is OK because I have to organize, and I like organizing. Dusting is the worst: dust, set down, pick up, dust, set down. There are so many things to dust, and it's no fun.

Chores aren't the worst but they're definitely not the best!

Well, what do you think? Not too bad, eh? I'll admit that this isn't the best piece of writing I've ever seen. But I think it's pretty good. It was written by a third grader and I think she did a solid job of getting her point across about her struggles with the challenges of household chores. It made sense to me and I could relate to it. Some parts were even kind of funny.

Interesting and Important Ideas

Ideas are what it's all about. Ideas are really the most important part of a piece of writing. After all, ideas are the reason writers write. If we didn't have any ideas, we wouldn't need any words to express them. And if we didn't need any words — well, you get the idea. Without ideas there wouldn't be any writing. But how do you know if the ideas in a piece of writing are any good? What do you look for?

An important main idea. Imagine taking an entire piece and scrunching it down into a single sentence that still said more or less the same thing. That's kind of what a main idea is. Most pieces, especially short ones like *Chores,* are built on a single thought. That thought is the main idea and everything else in the piece is there to help the audience understand it. So what's the main idea in *Chores?* I think it might be right there in the beginning: "Chores are boring!" A different reader might pick a different sentence. That's OK as long as he or she can show that the rest of the piece supports it. For example, another reader might think the main idea of *Chores* is the last line of the piece: "Chores aren't the worst but they're definitely not the best!" Yet another reader might feel that the main idea isn't actually written in the piece at all but that we can tell what it is because of all the details. A reader taking this approach might say that the main idea was something like, "Most chores are extremely frustrating but some aren't all that bad."

The simplest way for me to think about the main idea of a piece is to think of it as the one most important thing the writer wants me to know. If the writer had to write just one sentence to represent everything he or she wanted to say, that would be the main idea.

There are three criteria every main idea must meet: **(1)** The main idea has to be a complete sentence. You couldn't, for example, say that the main idea of *Chores* is "chores." That's not the main idea, that's the topic. You couldn't even say that the main idea is "About chores" or "Doing chores" or "Why the writer hates chores." All of these statements are related to the piece but they're not complete thoughts, so they don't qualify as the main idea. **(2)** The main idea has to be something that is important to the author. If the main idea isn't important to the author, then the author shouldn't waste time writing the piece. We should always write about things that are important to us because that's how we become better writers. In this case, I think the main idea is very important to this author. She clearly takes her chores seriously; she makes her points with strong statements that are packed with strong feelings. **(3)** The main idea has to be something that is important to the audience. The entire piece is about the main idea. If the audience doesn't care about it, they aren't going to care about the piece. In *Chores,* the author is writing for other third graders in her class. Most of them have chores of their own to do and they don't like them much either. So I think we could say that the main idea met this last criteria, too.

In my opinion, the main idea is the single most important part of every piece. It's hard to have a good piece without a good main idea.

Ideas and Details

Interesting details that help readers understand the main idea. While a main idea is absolutely essential, it's not the whole piece. For one thing, it's hard for readers to understand what you mean if they only have a single sentence to go on. And that's why good writing includes lots of interesting details. So how does *Chores* do in the detail department? Does the author tell us interesting things that help us understand her opinions about chores? I think so. She tells us about several different chores she has to do. And in each case, she tells us important things about them such as: "When you're scrubbing toilets make sure they are not stinky. I've scrubbed one before and I was lucky it didn't stink." and "Bathtubs, ever washed one? They are big, they are deep, and it is hard to get up around the sides." These details give us a good sense of the chores she has to do and why she doesn't like them very much.

"Showing" details that help readers make pictures in their mind. My favorite part of this piece just happens to be an example of a "showing" detail: "Dusting is the worst: dust, set down, pick up, dust, set down." I love that because I can actually see it happening. She could have just told us about dusting by saying something like, 'Dusting is boring because you have to keep picking things up and putting them back down." But instead of just telling us, she shows us what it's like for her. Readers love "showing" details because they help them see pictures instead of just words. In general, the more "showing" you have, the better your piece will be.

A clear and meaningful purpose. Whenever we look into the purpose of a piece of writing, we have to ask ourselves questions like "Why did the writer write this?" and "What does the writer want us to think about or do?" As with main idea, different readers may come up with different purposes. But that's OK as long as we can find tangible evidence in the piece that answers our questions clearly. I think the writer of *Chores* did a good job with purpose. It's clear to me that she wrote this to tell us how boring chores are. And when we're done reading, she wants us to think that while chores are certainly an unpleasant part of life, they're really not all that bad.

The purpose of a piece can usually be found in the ending and *Chores* is no exception. But is it meaningful? Does it have any significance, any strong feeling, for the writer or the reader? I think it does. The writer obviously cares a lot about doing chores. And since most of her readers probably have to do them, it's reasonable to assume that they will find the ending meaningful, too.

Something surprising or unusual that really works. Sometimes writers surprise us by successfully introducing and developing a unique idea in a piece. While most of *Chores* seems like normal everyday stuff, the parts about cleaning the toilet and dusting caught my attention and made the piece seem more original to me. I hadn't heard anyone talk about cleaning in exactly this way and I found it both surprising and entertaining.

Logical and Effective Organization

Organization is driven by ideas. Ideas don't make much sense if they aren't arranged in some way. Something has to come first, something has to go last, and several things usually end up in the middle, one after another, in a logical sequence. To determine that sequence, think of a piece as being divided into parts, one for each group of ideas the writer is working with. To come up with a beginning, think about the best way to introduce these groups of ideas so that readers will be interested in them and want to find out more. Then, arrange the groups so that each one leads naturally into the next in a way that is interesting, entertaining, and consistent with the reader's expectations. Finally, come up with an ending that feels finished and gives the reader something to think about.

A beginning that catches your attention and makes you want to read more. How do you catch a reader's attention? What makes readers want to read more of something they just started? That probably differs from reader to reader and piece to piece. Some beginnings are clearly better than others. Common beginnings, the ones we hear all the time, or those that lack emotion, discourage readers from continuing. More original and unusual beginnings, especially those with strong feelings, make readers take notice and prepare them for the ideas to come. How well does the beginning of *Chores* work? It's certainly full of strong feelings: "Chores! Chores! Chores! Chores are boring!" Repeating three exclamations, followed by a clear and simple sentence, leaves no doubt that this writer is fired up about her topic. The topic itself is interesting, too. I haven't read many pieces written by 8-year-olds about the distasteful nature of housework. That's usually something adults complain about. I'm interested already; I want to know more about what this writer has to say.

An ending that feels finished and makes you think. To make a piece feel truly finished, you have to sum things up in a way that satisfies your readers and gives them a little something to think about when they're done. Even though it's only a single sentence in length, the ending to *Chores* seems basically satisfying, at least to me. The writer has chosen one big idea ("Chores aren't the worst but they're definitely not the best.") which sums up her general opinion of chores. But does it make us think about anything? The first time I read this piece, I thought about my own opinion of chores at this point. I tend to agree with this writer that chores are not the most terrible thing I've ever had to deal with but they're certainly not any fun. So I guess the ending worked for me. Other readers who might have different opinions about doing chores might have different opinions about the success of this ending. My overall judgment is that, while the piece ends in a way that makes sense, the ending is fine but not nearly as good as the rest of the piece. For one thing, it's just too short. It probably should have been at least a paragraph long, like the beginning. Single sentence endings usually feel too abrupt, as though the piece ended before the reader was ready. That's the way I feel here. The piece definitely has an ending, and that ending makes sense, but it doesn't quite match my expectations based on what has come before.

Sequencing, Pacing, and Transitions

Parts are arranged in the best order. Every piece can be separated into parts where each part contains a group of ideas that go together. The trick is to put the parts in the best order so the reader will be entertained and will easily be able to understand how each part relates to the next and how all parts relate to the piece as a whole. To figure this out, it's helpful to name the different parts of a piece. In *Chores,* we could name the parts like this: **(1)** Introduction, **(2)** Toilets, **(3)** Sinks, **(4)** Bathtubs, **(5)** Boring Chores, **(6)** Conclusion. In this short piece, each part is a paragraph. (This usually isn't the case in longer pieces but here it works out nicely.) I have given each part a name based on what I think it's about. So, are the parts arranged in the best possible order? The "Introduction" obviously has to come first, the "Conclusion" last. The "Toilets," "Sinks," and "Bathtubs" parts all start out the same way: by naming the thing the author has to clean. It makes sense for them to go together in order just as they do although it probably doesn't matter much which part comes first, second, or third, they seem interchangeable. The "Boring Chores" part starts out with "All chores are boring,..." It's different from the previous three parts. That means it could either go second, right after the "Introduction," or second to last, right before the "Conclusion," where it is now. Personally, I like it right where it is. If it came right after the "Introduction," I'm not sure it would feel right because the phrase "All chores are boring" sounds like some kind of conclusion the author is drawing from previously stated information.

Spends the right amount of time spent on each part. How much time does it take to read each part? Do some parts take more or less time than others? Does the writer spend more time on more important parts and less time on less important parts? These are the questions we ask when we talk about the "pace" of a piece of writing. Pacing is the art of controlling how much time readers spend on each group of ideas. In general, the more important something is in a piece, the more time the writer should spend on it. In the case of *Chores,* each part is just about the same length, and no one part seems much more important than any other, so the pacing seems to work pretty well. The only problem is the ending. It's too short, so the pacing is too fast. It's over before we know it. And that doesn't feel quite right given what we've come to expect from the lengths of all the other parts.

Easy to follow from part to part. When we talk about how writers move from part to part in a piece, we usually talk about transitional phrases. These are single words or small groups of words like "First," "Next," "Then," "Finally," "After a while," "Later that day," and so on, that serve to introduce the next part in the sequence. But *Chores* doesn't use any of these transitions. And yet it seems very easy to follow. How does the writer do it? In this piece, the writer doesn't need transitional phrases because it's so well organized that each part follows logically from the one before it. Instead of using phrases for her transitions, she's using logic instead, each new part follows so naturally from the previous part that transitional words are not needed. This is the ideal way to move from part to part. Don't use transition words unless you need them.

Individual and Appropriate Voice

Voice is choice. Writing is different from other school subjects. In math, reading, social studies, and science, every student is supposed to study the same things and come up with the same answers. But in writing, if everyone writes exactly the same thing, that's no good, it's copying, not writing. Your writing needs to be different from everyone else's. And the only way that happens is if you make different choices when you write, choices about the topics you pick, the words you use, the details you include, different beginning and ending strategies, and so on. The set of all the different choices an author makes determines what is often called the "voice" in a piece of writing. Voice, sometimes referred to as "tone" or "mood," tells the reader about the writer's personality in the piece. Because each of us has a unique personality, each of us has a unique voice in writing, and that is what makes our writing unique. The trick is in letting that voice come through. And the only way that happens is if we make different choices in our writing than other writers make in there's — choices that match who we are inside, our original thoughts and personal feelings, our particular way of seeing things, interpreting them, and writing it all down.

The writer cares about the topic. The first choice every writer has to make is what he or she will write about. In order to write well, you have to care about your topic. If you're not interested in it, your audience probably won't be interested either. But how can you tell if a writer cares about the topic? Does the writer of *Chores* care about her topic? I think she does. First of all, she has chosen a topic from her life, something that she has to deal with on a regular basis. Most of us care about what happens to us in our own lives and that's why writing about one's life is probably the most common type of topic writer's choose. The second thing I notice is a very strong opinion. There's no doubt about how this writer feels about doing chores. And the third thing that tells me this writer cares about her topic is all the detail she includes to support her opinion. If she didn't care about doing chores, she probably wouldn't have very much to say about it, and what she did say probably wouldn't be very detailed. But throughout this piece, over and over, this writer is telling us how chores affect her life and how she feels about that.

Strong feelings, honest statements. Expressing our individual personalities has a lot to do with expressing our feelings. Think about it: if everyone felt the same way about everything, we'd all tend to do and say and think the same things; there wouldn't be much difference between one person and another and our writing wouldn't be very different either. Our feelings about things are what tend to make us unique. So if we want our writing to be unique, we have to communicate strong feelings. The writer of *Chores* certainly has no problem communicating her strong feelings. The piece is packed with emotion in almost every sentence. But are those feelings honest? Does the piece sound genuine, as though the writer really believes what she's saying? Of course, there's no way to tell for sure. She could have made the whole thing up. So because we can't question the writer, we have to question the writing. Is the writing consistent? Are there any contradictions? Does each statement make sense in light of all the others? I think she is being honest here and that that's one of the best things about this piece.

Individuality and Appropriateness

Individual, authentic, and original. When I read something by one of my favorite writers, I often have the feeling that no one else could have written it. In most good writing, the individuality of the writer comes through. When we sense this individuality, we're picking up on the writer's voice. In *Chores,* I sense the writer's individuality very clearly. Though I know that many kids her age complain about having to do chores, the way she's complaining about it strikes me as unique. She has such well-defined and detailed opinions that I can't imagine another kid expressing these exact feelings in exactly the same way. I think *Chores* shows a lot of individuality and that's another important reason why it's such a successful piece.

Another important quality to look for in a writer's voice is authenticity. Does the writing sound real? Does it sound as though it was written by a real person, or does it sound phony, stilted, awkward? Like honesty, authenticity can be hard to judge. For example, writers often experiment with styles that are not their own, and this can be very successful if it's done well. Once again, I look for consistency. Does each part of the piece sound like it was written by the same person? And do you get a sense throughout the piece of who that person is? To me, *Chores* seems very authentic. It sounds like it was written by a frustrated 9-year-old who doesn't like to do her chores; the writer's voice matches my expectation of how I think this person should sound.

Finally, we can judge a writer's voice by how original the writing seems. To say that something is original is simply to say that we haven't seen it before. *Chores* feels very original to me. I've never seen a piece on this topic that sounds quite the same. Of course, to someone who had read 20 other pieces just like it, it wouldn't seem that way.

Displays a definite and well developed personality. Whenever I read something that has a lot of voice, I get the feeling that I'm getting to know the person who wrote it just as if we were hanging out as friends. That isn't true, of course. I'm not getting to know the person, I'm getting to know the personality that person is presenting through his or her voice. In *Chores,* I feel like I'm getting to know a frustrated little girl who has a pretty good sense of humor. She doesn't like to do chores but she knows they're a part of life we all just have to get through. To me, her personality in this piece seems well defined and successfully developed.

Appropriate tone for purpose and audience. If you wrote a letter to your grandma thanking her for a birthday present, you probably wouldn't want to sound like an angry, frustrated person. If you wrote an article for your school paper about someone on your high school's football team who had suffered a serious injury, you probably wouldn't want to seem silly, as though you were making a joke out of it. If you wrote a research paper about global warming, you probably wouldn't want to sound as casual as you do when you're talking to your friends. The voice you choose for your writing must match the purpose you are writing for and the people you are writing to. I think the voice the writer uses in *Chores* matches the situation very well.

Specific and Memorable Word Choice

So many words, so little time. If you're writing in English, you get a bonus that can't be found in most other languages: an extra 300,000 words or so. At just over 490,000 words (and still growing strong), the English language is the largest in the world. So, when it comes to deciding which word to use where, you've got plenty of choices.

Strong verbs that tell how an actions are performed. Verbs are words that describe the action in a sentence. Some verbs are said to be stronger than others, and these are the ones that tend to make your writing more effective. Here's how it works: take a verb like "run" and another verb with a similar meaning like "sprint." Now, compare these two sentences: **(1)** "I was running."; **(2)** "I was sprinting." They seem more or less the same, but they're not. In the first sentence, you learn that I was running but in the second sentence you also learn *how* I was running. The word "sprint" means "to run at top speed for a brief moment." So, when I say "sprinting," I get all the meaning of the verb "run," plus the additional meaning that explains *how* I was running. This is like getting an adverb for free; the action and a description of the action are packed into one tiny word. That's what makes it stronger: it's a single word that contains the meaning of an entire group of words! So, how does the author of *Chores* do when it comes to using strong verbs? Not so great. I do see one strong verb: "scrub." When she uses the words "scrubbing" or "scrubbed" instead of "cleaning" or "cleaned," she gets the benefit of a stronger verb. To "scrub" means "to clean something by rubbing hard." Other than that, I don't find any other strong verbs. But at least she got one.

Adjectives and adverbs that make things more specific. Say I'm in one of those huge underground parking lots. You know, the ones with all the floors that look exactly the same. Say I come back from several hours of shopping and I can't remember where I parked. After searching franticly for an hour or so, I'll probably give up and try to find a parking attendant to help me. The first question he's going to ask me is, "What kind of car do you have?" And I'll say "Oh, you know, it's just a car." And then he'll look at me like I'm an even bigger idiot than I already am. Why? Because I'm not being specific enough for him to help me. Writing is like that, too. You have to be specific in order to help your readers understand you. If you write, "The man drove away in his car," that's not nearly as helpful to your readers as, "The anxious, young man drove away nervously in the shiny new car his parents had just bought for him." What's the difference? Adjectives and adverbs. Adjectives and adverbs modify the nouns and verbs they work with to make them more specific. Adjectives modify nouns and answer the question "What kind?" What kind of man? An "anxious" "young" man. What kind of car? A "shiny" "new" car. Adverbs modify verbs and answer the question "How?" How did he drive away? He drove away "nervously." In *Chores,* the writing is not very specific in this regard. We know that toilets are sometimes "stinky," that cleaning a sink is "easy," and that all chores are "boring," but this doesn't do that much for us. The language is generic throughout; the writer uses few effective adjectives and adverbs. We know about bathtubs, sinks, and toilets but we don't know anything very specific about them.

Memorable, Accurate, Appropriate

Words and phrases you remember long after you've finished reading. One way you can tell that you've read a good piece of writing is when you remember some of the words long after you've finished it. After all, if writing is first and foremost the communication of ideas, it would be nice if people actually remembered what you wrote. No one can remember all the words in a piece, but sometimes a few words here and there are so interesting or unusual we can't forget them. As we've already discussed, much of the language in *Chores* is very generic, the writer uses simple everyday words and phrases. However, there is one part that I always remember even though it has been more than four years since I first read it: "Dusting is the worst: dust, set down, pick up, dust, set down." To me, this way of describing the tedious, repetitive nature of dusting seemed so interesting and original that I've never forgotten it.

Words and phrases used accurately and effectively. Good word choice doesn't mean using big, fancy, unusual words. It means using the right words to say the right thing in just the right way. Here's an example I came across recently in the beginning of an essay about a jogging accident: "Having already stretched and run a fourth of my distance, I arrived at my favorite spot and halted." At first glance, the word "halted" seems like a good choice. It's a word we don't use that often and it's very specific, a good strong verb. But it may not be exactly the right word in this situation. To my ear (though you may disagree), the word "halted" suggests that he was caused to stop by someone or some thing. (I hear the old war movie phrase in my head: "Halt! Who goes there?") But nothing caused him to stop. He just stopped all by himself. And that's the word I think he should have used: "stopped." Use simple words to describe simple things. Don't rush off to a thesaurus and sprinkle synonyms all over your piece the way an overzealous chef adds spices to his cooking. (And don't use a word like "overzealous" when a simpler one like "enthusiastic" will do.) Use words that mean exactly what you mean to say, and no others. In *Chores,* the writer uses very simple words. And for me, this works because the writer is expressing simple ideas.

Language that is appropriate to purpose and audience. Let me just say this right up front: there are many words you should probably never use in writing and you know what most of those words are. But there's more to appropriateness than avoiding bad language. Your first and highest priority when considering word choice is to choose words that your audience will understand. I can show off and use a whole bunch of big words. Or, I can say the same thing as simply as possible, using little words that I know just about everyone can understand. Using big words may make me feel smart and superior, but it won't help me be understood. And that's the most important thing. It doesn't matter how large your vocabulary is if knowing all those words means that you consistently choose ones your readers cannot read. Similarly, you can have a relatively small vocabulary and still be an effective writer. There are two things you have to know to be good at word choice: You have to know what words mean and you have to know what your readers think they mean. In *Chores,* the writer is writing to kids her own age; she's using very simple words because those are the kinds of words she and her friends know.

Smooth, Expressive Sentence Fluency

Go with the flow. When we write, we write in sentences. Beginning with a capital letter we wind our way over words and phrases until we've expressed a complete thought, and then we mark the endpoint with a period, question mark, or exclamation mark. Readers read the same way: they follow the shape of each sentence from beginning to end trying to understand the single, complete thought the writer is expressing. In order for readers to do that, your writing needs to flow smoothly from word to word, phrase to phrase, and sentence to sentence. The term "sentence fluency" refers to the way individual words and phrases sound together within a sentence and how groups of sentences sound when read one after the other.

Variety in sentence beginnings. We can't start every sentence the same way. We can't expect people to read our writing if we do. We can't keep using the same words over and over at the beginning. We can't do this because it drives readers crazy! It also makes the writing hard to understand. Why? Because readers start paying more attention to the pattern of repetition than they do to the words themselves. In *Chores,* the writer does a good job of varying the beginnings of her sentences. Almost every sentence begins differently than the one before it.

Variety in sentence length and structure. Just as using sentences with different beginnings helps make your writing easier to read and understand, using sentences of different lengths and different structures helps, too. Take a look at the fourth paragraph of *Chores:* "Bathtubs, ever washed one? They are big, they are deep, and it is hard to get up around the sides. The bathtub is the hardest, I think, to wash in the bathroom." The first sentence is short. It consists of two tiny parts separated by a comma. The second sentence is longer and is made of three parts that add to the meaning one right after another like a list. The last sentence has three parts, too, but it is constructed differently than the previous sentence because the second part interrupts the first and third parts instead of adding to them; to me, it sounds like a one-part sentence with a break in the middle. So, the writer varies the lengths of her sentences by starting with a short one and finishing with two longer ones. And she uses three different sentence constructions. That's good sentence fluency.

You can measure the length of a sentence simply by counting the words. Short sentences tend to have 3-6 words in them. The average sentence has approximately 8-14 words. Long sentences may be as long as 20 words or more. Most of the sentences in *Chores* are of average length, but occasionally we find a long or a short one and this is what makes it work.

You can analyze the structure of a sentence by looking at how many parts it contains and what kinds of parts those are. Most of the sentences in *Chores* have two parts but here and there you'll find a sentence with one part or three. As with sentence length, the writer doesn't vary her sentence structures very much but she does it just enough to be successful.

A Note About Sentence Structure

A difficult subject to talk about. Sentence structure is incredibly important. But it's also incredibly hard to understand and analyze. Most of us don't think about the structure of our sentences when we speak and write; we construct them unconsciously. But if we want to improve our sentence structure and learn from other writers, we have to become conscious of how sentences are put together. Unfortunately, the traditional pedagogy of sentential analysis is fraught with arcane terminology, abstruse constructs, and preternatural techniques. In other words, it's about as easy to understand as that last sentence.

So, to make it possible for everyone to study sentence structure, I came up with an easy way of describing sentences. This is not an "official" approach. As far as I know, I invented it. But I have found that it is simple enough that it works for just about anyone. (It's especially good for people like me who never understood traditional grammar in school and still don't!)

These are the rules of *Mr. Peha's Stunningly Simple Sentence Structure System:* **(1)** Sentences are made of parts. **(2)** Those parts have names. **(3)** We can describe the structure of a sentence by the number and types of parts it contains.

Take a look at this sentence: "On a bitter cold winter morning, Malcolm Maxwell, a young man of simple means but good intentions, left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised, and set off on the bold errand he'd been preparing for all his life."

You can see that it is made up of several different parts. There are four kinds of sentence parts to watch for: **(1)** *Main Parts.* These parts usually contain the main action of the sentence: "Malcolm Maxwell,… left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised,…." **(2)** *Lead-In Parts.* These parts often lead into other parts, especially main parts: "On a bitter cold winter morning,…" **(3)** *In-Between Parts.* As the name implies, these parts go in between other parts. They feel like a slight interruption: "…a young man of simple means but good intentions,…" **(4)** *Add-On Parts.* These are extra parts that convey additional information about any of the other parts: "…and set off on the bold errand he'd been preparing for all his life."

We could describe the structure of this sentence like this:

- Part 1: "On a bitter cold winter morning," *Lead-In Part.*
- Part 2: "Malcolm Maxwell," *Main Part.*
- Part 3: "a young man of simple means but good intentions," *In-Between Part.*
- Part 4: "left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised," *Main Part,* continued.
- Part 5: "and set off on the bold errand he'd been preparing for all his life." *Add-On Part.*

And that's all there is to it! (Well, actually there *is* more to it. But we'll cover that another time.)

Expression, Effects, Understanding

Easy to read expressively; sounds great when read aloud. To understand and enjoy your writing, people need to read it expressively. Expressive reading involves reading a text with the appropriate changes in pitch, rhythm, volume, and tone that we hear in normal speech. Good readers do this because it improves their comprehension. Reading expressively is also fun because it adds to the feelings we have about the text. When writing flows smoothly from word to word, phrase to phrase, and sentence to sentence, we can easily match our expression to the writer's meaning. This is very satisfying because it makes us feel like we're understanding things well.

When I read *Chores,* I find it fairly easy to read expressively. The sentences are relatively smooth and simple, and as I read I feel that I have no problem matching my expression to the writer's feelings which come through loud and clear.

Rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and other "sound" effects. In certain situations, sequences of speech sounds sometimes surprise us. Depending on how you count them, the English language has 43 or 44 sounds, and you can't help noticing sometimes how writers put them together. In the first sentence of this paragraph, I'm using two techniques: **(1)** *Alliteration.* This is when several words in a sentence begin with the same sound. **(2)** *Consonance.* This involves using the same consonant sound in several words, usually at the ends. Used sparingly, these kinds of "sound" effects make writing fun to read. But don't overdo it — like I did in the first sentence — sentences with many similar sounding words are hard to understand.

Chores doesn't really take advantage of any specific sound effects. However, the writer doesn't make any mistakes in this category either. These types of effects are used quite sparingly in most prose writing. They come up more frequently in poetry and song.

Sentences are structured so they're easy to understand. One of the interesting properties of sentences in most languages is that their parts can often be rearranged without their meaning being changed. In most languages, one of the interesting properties of sentences is that they can often be rearranged without changing their meaning. Without changing their meaning, sentences, in most languages, can often be rearranged — an interesting property. I've just said the same thing three times, three different ways; the only difference was the sentence structure. You can tell that the first and second sentences have a fairly simple structure. The third sentence is especially complicated and, therefore, much harder to understand. It's fine to have long, complex sentences. But they must be structured in ways that make them easy for the reader to deal with.

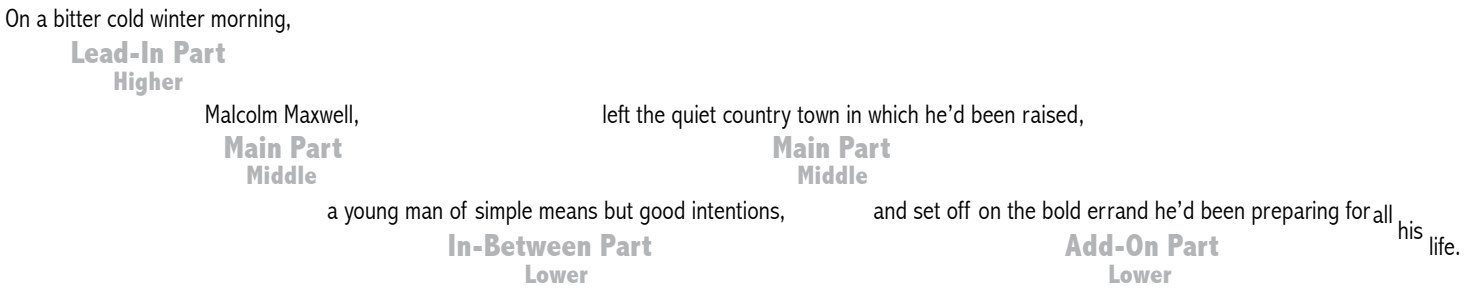
As I've noted before, the sentences in *Chores* are fairly simple and that makes them easy to understand. If this piece were significantly longer, the simple constructions the writer uses might become tiresome. But in a very short essay, they are not a problem.

A Note About Expressive Reading

Something I always knew was important but never quite understood. When I was in school, most of us read like little robots, droning on one word after another. I don't know which was more embarrassing: reading out loud myself or having to listen to everyone else. I knew that expressive reading was what my teachers did when they read to us. But I didn't know how to do it myself because I didn't know the four things good readers do to read expressively: **(1) They** *change pitch.* Expressive readers make their voices go up and down. They go up at the beginning of a sentence and down at the end (up slightly if it ends with a question mark). They also go up and down to differentiate the words of a speaker (often high in pitch) from those of the narrator (usually lower). **(2)** *They change rhythm.* Expressive readers speed up and slow down when they read. They also take appropriate pauses—big ones at the end of a sentence, smaller ones in between, after commas, and also between the logical parts of phrases. **(3)** *They change volume.* Expressive readers say some words louder than others. In general, little words are said softer than more important words. **(4)** *They change tone.* Sometimes readers use a soft, warm voice; sometimes their voice is cold and hard. They do this to communicate different feelings—soft and warm usually means nice, calm, or even sad; hard and cold can mean scary, angry, or excited.

Why is expression so important? With all the effort it takes to read expressively, it's reasonable to wonder why readers bother to do it at all. The reason is that expression is closely related to meaning, and getting meaning from a text is the whole point of reading.

Let's take a look at how pitch level corresponds to meaning and the four types of sentence parts. *Main Parts* are usually read at a middle pitch level. This pitch level cues readers to the fact that this is the main action in a sentence. *Lead-In Parts* are often read at a higher pitch level. *In-Between Parts* are usually read at a level lower than the parts they are in between. And *Add-On Parts* should be spoken at a level lower than the part they follow. Finally, as we near the end of a sentence, our voice drops down to its lowest point as we reach the period. Here's an example to show you exactly how this works:



The different pitch levels help us distinguish between the different sentence parts, and the end of the sentence, which in turn helps us to understand it.

Correct Conventions That Communicate

What exactly are we talkin' about here? "Conventions" is the term we use nowadays to describe punctuation, spelling, and grammar. (Some people even extend the term to handwriting and computer formatting, but we won't be talking about those things here.) We used to call these things "mechanics" but I think "conventions" is a much better term because it more accurately describes what these things are. (To me, writing correctly is hardly a "mechanical" process; it takes a lot of human thought and ingenuity to do it well.) The so-called "rules of writing" are not really rules at all, they're agreements between people in a society as to how written communication should look. These agreements began being hammered out officially in the 19th century and they are still changing slightly even today. Many "rules" change depending on who publishes the final copy. (This is referred to as "publisher's style," the collection of rules a particular publisher uses so that all the writing they produce will be consistent.) With writing of any length or complexity, one could debate endlessly about whether a piece is completely correct. I think I write correctly, but I'm sure many people could find many "mistakes" right here on this page. Whether something is considered right or wrong often depends on who is doing the considering.

Correctness counts. There are two important reasons why it matters that your writing be regarded as correct by your readers: **(1)** When readers encounter what they think of as mistakes, they find it hard to read your writing. They may completely misinterpret something because they become confused, and even if they can figure out what you're saying, the energy and effort they expend in the process takes away much of their enjoyment; it's just not any fun to read writing that has many mistakes in it. **(2)** If your writing has errors, readers may place a negative judgment on you and your ideas. This is not fair but it is common. There's a perception in our society, however inaccurate it may be, that people who do not write correctly are not very smart, and that people who are not very smart are not worth listening to. In my opinion, both of these prejudices are wrong, but they exist nonetheless, and all writers should be aware of them.

Conventional wisdom. Personally, I do not think there is any definitive answer to the question, "How do I know for sure that my writing is correct?" If I worried about figuring that out, I'd never have energy left to write. (Of course, if I didn't write, I wouldn't have to worry about making mistakes. Hmmm...) So I try to handle the situation by doing three things: **(1)** I learn what I can about the "rules" and try to apply them with consistency. **(2)** I work hard to understand and live up to the expectations that my audience has for correctness. **(3)** I do my best to make sure the meaning of my writing is as clear as it can be to the greatest number of potential readers.

Last but not least, I think of my all-time favorite quote about correctness in writing: "The writer should not follow rules, but follow language toward meaning, always seeking to understand what is appearing on the page, to see it clearly, to evaluate it clearly, for clear thinking will produce clear writing." It was written by a man named Donald Murray in a book he wrote called *A Writer Teaches Writing.* It's the best piece of conventional wisdom I've ever heard.

Punctuation, Inside and Outside

"Outside" punctuation that shows where ideas begin and end. Writing is all about communicating ideas; sentences are how we package them. Each sentence contains a complete thought, one chunk of information the writer has written that the reader has to understand. But readers can't understand that chunk if they can't figure out where it begins and where it ends. This is what "outside" punctuation is for. I call it "outside" punctuation because it is used on the outside parts of sentences. (A more technical term for it is "terminal" punctuation.) Outside punctuation includes the initial capital letter that shows the beginning of a sentence and the period, question mark, or exclamation mark that shows the end.

In *Chores,* the writer has done a good job with outside punctuation. To my ear, every sentence reads clearly and correctly; I never find myself confused as to where one idea ends and the next one begins. Interestingly, there are two parts of the piece where the writer is using "sentence fragments," groups of words punctuated as complete ideas even though they are not complete sentences. ("Chores! Chores! Chores!" in the first paragraph; "Toilets!" in the second.) Personally, I like sentence fragments as long as they make sense and are clearly separated by correct outside punctuation from other complete sentences. When we speak we often speak in fragments, and I think they give writing more of the natural rhythm and flow of everyday human speech, which I tend to enjoy. Some people feel that sentence fragments are inappropriate in certain writing situations. As with so many things in writing, this is a matter of purpose and audience and not a hard and fast rule. In order to use sentence fragments effectively, you have to do two things: **(1)** Make sure the fragment has the correct outside punctuation so readers are sure where it begins and ends; and **(2)** Make sure the fragment has a clear and unambiguous meaning that readers will not misunderstand. In *Chores,* when the writer uses fragments, she has taken care to do both of these things well.

"Inside" punctuation that shows where parts of ideas begin and end. When we talked about sentence fluency, we talked about how sentences are often made up of parts. Writers use "inside" punctuation (also called "internal" punctuation) to show where those parts begin and end within a single sentence. The important marks of inside punctuation are the comma, the semicolon, the colon, the dash, the apostrophe, parentheses, and quotation marks.

In *Chores,* the writer doesn't use very much inside punctuation. In the first three paragraphs, her sentences are very simple, they don't need to be split into parts in order to be more easily understood. Later in the piece, her sentence structure becomes a bit more complicated. She uses several commas correctly in the fourth and fifth paragraphs, and she uses a colon correctly in the fifth paragraph as well. Inside punctuation can be very tricky. *Chores* is a good example of how a writer can communicate clearly and effectively with simple sentences that don't require a lot of complicated conventions.

Capitalization and Paragraphs

Capitalization for names, places, and things that are one of a kind. When alphabetic writing was invented there were no lowercase letters. (There weren't any vowels either but that's another story.) Unfortunately, lowercase letters came along in plenty of time to give 21st century writers plenty to think about in the area of capitalization. The basic thing to remember is this: Capital letters indicate that some words are more important than others. Which words are more important? Words in names, places, and things that are one of a kind. (We also capitalize the first word of a sentence, of course, because it marks the beginning of a new idea; that's important, too.) In truth, capitalization is not this simple. At times, it seems like there are dozens of rules we use when capitalizing the titles of stories, the titles of people, newspaper headlines, and abbreviations, not to mention the seemingly random use of capital letters in advertising and the use of ALL CAPS formatting when people want to emphasize something or "shout" in an e-mail.

So how does the writer of *Chores* do with capitalization? She does well. I don't find any errors. But then, the only capitalization rules she needs to know for this piece are the capital for the beginning of a sentence and the capital for the word "I."

Paragraphing that shows groups of related ideas. A sentence is a single idea. A paragraph is a collection of one or more sentences in which the ideas are closely related. Paragraphs are extremely useful to readers because they break the piece into small, manageable chunks, and because they highlight the organizational structure. *Chores* is a perfect example of this. As we noted earlier, each paragraph, excluding the introduction and conclusion, is devoted exclusively to a particular sub-topic in the piece: all the sentences in paragraph two, for example, are about cleaning toilets; the sentences in paragraph three are about cleaning sinks, and so on. Most pieces don't have this kind of one-topic-one-paragraph arrangement. Often, it takes several paragraphs to cover something adequately. Each paragraph, then, holds a small number of sentences that can be grouped together as a separate unit within the topic being covered.

Something I hear from time to time in school is that a paragraph is supposed to have a certain number of sentences. Some people say five, others say four, some say that you have to have at least three. This has even been printed in books. It's simply not true. A paragraph can contain one sentence or a hundred and one (though most have between three and seven). Different types of writing tend to have different lengths of paragraphs. Novels tend to have shorter paragraphs than reference books. Newspaper stories have many paragraphs of only a single sentence. In general, longer paragraphs are harder to understand, they also slow down the pace. But they are perfect for focusing a reader's attention on something important. Shorter paragraphs are easy to understand and when we encounter several in a row, we feel the pace of the piece quicken. Shorter paragraphs are also easier to skim for readers who only want to read selected parts of a document. This is one of the reasons why newspaper stories have so many one sentence paragraphs, they are designed for efficient skimming because many newspaper readers do not like to read entire articles.

Spelling and Grammar

Spelling that makes your writing easy to read. Just a few hundred years ago, English spelling was a mess. Nobody could agree on much of anything and it seemed like everye other worde hade an extra "e" on the ende of it. Then along came Noah Webster in the 19th century and he got it all straightened out — sort of. English spelling is absolutely ridiculous. And yet we all have to toe the line and spell our words just like Mr. Webster thought we should. As difficult as this can be at times, it just makes sense. Spelling is the rare area in writing conventions where there's pretty much a clean cut right or wrong answer for just about every situation. That's why spell checkers in word processing programs are so helpful.

So, how's the spelling in *Chores?* Perfect, I think. (At least Microsoft Word said it was perfect when I ran it through the spell checker; I don't always trust myself to know for sure.) Interestingly enough, the little girl who wrote *Chores* was an abysmal speller, one of the worst I've ever worked with. When I started working with her at the beginning of the school year, her writing had one or two spelling errors *per sentence.* A small percentage of the population (about 1 in 10 people, I think) lack the visual memory capabilities to memorize the correct spellings of the thousands of words most of us have in our vocabularies. This writer was one of these people. So how did she end up with perfect spelling in this piece? She worked at it — hard. She started by circling any words she wasn't sure of. Then, she used a number of different strategies to get them corrected including using word resources on the walls in her classroom and a dictionary. And, what's more, she did most of the correcting with pencil and paper before she used a spell checker. Her teacher and I were incredibly proud of her.

But what about grammar? What for do we gots to study grammar? If we was not speaking the way others spoked this would be a problem, yes? Is why we need rules because peoples can't understanding each other?

Did you get all that? You probably did. But it probably sounded a bit unusual. That's because the grammar I was using was probably different than the grammar you grew up listening to and speaking when you were a baby.

In the United States, at the beginning of the 21st century, the grammar most people in school and in the business world would like you to use when you write is called "Standard English" grammar, or "Common Standard English" (CSE) as it is known more officially. If you grew up speaking this way, this won't be too hard for you. But if you didn't, you will probably need someone to check your writing and help you learn to fix it.

The grammar of *Chores* conforms to the grammar of Common Standard English. The writer did have a couple of grammar errors in the piece initially ("Scrubbing toilets, cleaning sinks, and washing bathtubs take up a lot of my time and *is* not fun at all.") But with help, she fixed them.

What is This Thing Called Conventions?

Why do we need conventions? Writers use conventions to enhance and clarify the meaning of what they write. Conventions allow writers to specify the exact way a word or phrase should be interpreted by the reader. They help the reader understand exactly what the writer had in mind. When you can't be there to read your writing to someone else, conventions can help do the reading for you. Whenever you write something, you hear it in your head first. You know exactly how it should sound, but the reader doesn't. Conventions guide the reader through your writing by telling the reader when to stop, when to go, when to speed up, when to slow down, and so on. They make your writing sound just the way it sounded to you when you wrote it down.

Without conventions, writing would be a mess. If we didn't put a space between each word, everything would run together. Without the convention of correct spelling, writers could never be sure if readers would be able to read the words they had written. And even if we all spelled each word the same way, without the convention of punctuation, writers would still have trouble getting their message across. Without conventions we might be able to communicate very simple ideas and emotions in our writing, but we wouldn't be able to capture the rich rhythms of human speech. Our voices would be muted because we'd never be able to make what we write match the way we talk.

At first, conventions can seem like a big hassle. But the more you work with them, the more you'll be able to make them work for you. Conventions are a powerful part of writing and you can tap into that power with something as simple as a comma or a pair of quotation marks. Your ideas are important. They deserve to be read and to be understood exactly the way you intend.

Think of conventions as tools, not rules. Some people, when they think about conventions, think about rules. But that's not exactly right. Conventions are tools, not rules. They help us hammer out a precise idea, nail down a topic, and chisel away at ambiguity. If all this sounds a bit serious, don't worry, conventions have a lighter side, too.

Cole Porter probably wasn't thinking too much about the importance of conventions when he whipped up a hit song in 1929 called *What is This Thing Called Love?* But that doesn't mean we can't do a little of the thinking for him. One of the most successful song writers of his day, Porter wrote literally dozens of hit songs. Think about how many more he could have written had he used a little "conventional" wisdom.

What? Is this thing called love?
What is *this* thing called, love?
"What is this thing?" called Love.
"What? Is this Thing?" called Love.

What *is* this thing called, love?
What is this *thing* called, love?
"What is this?" Thing called. "Love?"
"What is," this thing called, "love?"

Putting it All Together

So many things to think about. If you go back through the last 20 pages or so, you could count 30 different things about good writing (31 if you count grammar) that need to be present in every piece in order for it be successful. How can anybody concentrate on all that and have any brain power left over to write? In truth, nobody can. That's why the best writers concentrate only on certain things at certain times.

First things first. Where does good writing begin? Long before the pen hits the page, or the computer keys start clacking, a piece starts to percolate in the heart and mind of its creator. It starts with a good topic, something you really care about, and the important things you want to say about it. Good writing begins with the writer's voice. If you're having trouble with a piece, especially in revision, this is the place to start.

A solid foundation. Along with voice, a writer's ideas and organization form the foundation of every successful piece. When you have a good topic, and you know have good things to say about it, getting your ideas down and arranging them effectively is the next order of business. In revision, after making sure that your voice is solid, focus on your ideas and the order you've arranged them in.

Where to from here? If your voice, ideas, and organization are in good shape, you may find that you already have a fairly strong piece in front of you. At this point, you have two choices: You can move ahead and take a closer look at your sentence fluency and word choice, or you can skip those altogether and just go right to editing for conventions.

All qualities are not created equal. Some qualities are more important than others. Voice and ideas, for example, are significantly more important than word choice and sentence fluency. You can use all the wonderful words and smooth sentences you want, but if you don't have anything interesting to say, no one is going to read your writing anyway. Conventions are important to just about everyone, so most writers have to spend a lot of time here. However, conventions are the one part of writing you can always find someone to correct for you. It's relatively easy for someone else to correct any errors you may make in conventions. It's much harder for someone else to fix problems you may have with voice, ideas, and organization.

Working on some things also improves others. There's a very good reason why it makes sense to focus on certain qualities in a certain order: improving some things improves others as well. Improving your voice improves your ideas. Getting clear about your ideas improves your organization. Voice and ideas together often determine your word choice, especially if you're displaying strong feelings and using a lot of "showing" detail. Fixing up your conventions, particularly your "inside" and "outside" punctuation, will have a positive effect on sentence fluency. Focus on things in the best order. You'll get more done in less time and with better results.

Good Writing From the Ground Up

(6) Conventions

(A) Have you used "outside" punctuation to show where ideas begin and end?

(B) Have you used "inside" punctuation to show where parts of sentences begin and end?

(C) Have you capitalized the beginnings of sentences, the word "I", names, places, and things that are one of a kind?

(D) Have you used paragraphs to group related ideas and to highlight the organizational structure of your piece?

(E) Have you spelled words correctly?

(F) Is your grammar appropriate for your purpose and audience?

(5) Sentence Fluency

(A) Do your sentences have different beginnings?

(B) Do your sentences have different lengths and structures?

(C) Is your writing easy to read with expression?

(D) Does your piece sound good when you read it out loud?

(E) Are your sentences constructed so they're easy to understand?

(F) Are you using any "sound" effects? (Not Required)

(4) Word Choice

(A) Are you using strong verbs to show how actions are performed?

(B) Are you using adjectives and adverbs to make your writing more specific?

(C) Have you included any memorable words or phrases?

(D) Are you using words that are correct and accurate?

(E) Is your language appropriate to your purpose and your audience?

(3) Organization

(A) What will catch your audience's attention at the beginning and make them want to read more?

(B) What will make your piece feel finished and give your audience something to think about?

(C) Are the parts of your piece arranged in the best order?

(D) Are you spending the right amount of time on each part?

(E) Is your piece easy to follow from part to part?

(2) Ideas

(A) What's the one most important thing you want your audience to know?

(B) What interesting "key" details have you included to help your audience "unlock" your main idea?

(C) Have you included any "showing" details?

(D) Why did you write this?

(E) Have you included anything surprising or unusual? (Not Required)

(1) Voice

(A) Why do you care about this topic?

(B) Do you know enough about it to have personal opinions?

(C) What are your strongest feelings about it?

(D) What honest statements can you make?

(E) Who is your audience?

(F) What questions do they want you to answer?

Let's work together to make your teaching the best it can be.

Please contact me any time!

Even the best workshops and teaching materials can't meet the needs of every teacher all the time. That's why we need to stay in touch. Send me an e-mail any time you have a question. I'll do my best to get back to you quickly with answers, additional teaching materials, or other resources.

Please send suggestions, questions, and corrections to:
stevepeha@ttms.org

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Learning Patterns

Teach Smarter Not Harder

Imagine a structure 13 years tall, 180 days wide, and five subjects deep. This is a K-12 education. Each cell in this structure represents a single class period in a single subject for a total of 11,700 educational opportunities.

By using *Teaching That Makes Sense® Learning Patterns™* we can reduce this academic load for students, simplify planning and instruction for teachers, and help more kids learn more things in less time and with less teacher effort.

Learning Patterns are cross-curricular tools optimized for successful teaching in any subject or grade. They are designed to be used, re-used, and shared across classrooms without requiring extensive training or preparation.

By analyzing standards documents and the methods of effective teachers, *Teaching That Makes Sense* has identified underlying commonalities in learning targets across the curriculum. These commonalities represent dozens of potential assignments that can be taught and learned through a small set of foundational skills.

Consider exposition. Students consume and create expository information in many ways: they read expository texts, write expository essays, create reports, answer test questions, etc. As varied as expository expression is, it has a simple underlying structure that can be explained by a single *Learning Pattern*.

Some *Learning Patterns* cover skills like narration, exposition, and persuasion. Others help teachers and students with things like assessment, reading comprehension, and memorization. The same patterns can be used across grade levels and subject areas as well, so kids take their learning with them as they grow.

For more information about Learning Patterns click here.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Agile Transformation

Building Collective Capacity for School-Wide Change

We are discovering better ways of improving schools by doing it and by helping others do it. Through this work, we have come to value:

- **People.** *Individuals and interactions* over policy and politics;
- **Achievement.** *Maximum potential* over minimum competence;
- **Courage.** *Fierce collaboration* over comfortable compromise;
- **Agility.** *Responding to change* over following a plan.

The items on the right are important, but we value the items on the left more.

Agile Transformation is grounded in two principles: **(1)** People are more successful when they enjoy their work; and **(2)** Schools are more successful when they support people in developing the autonomy, competence, and relatedness that makes their work more enjoyable. Features of *Agile Transformation* include:

- **Paired Practice.** Nobody works alone. Everyone has a team and a teammate.
- **Rapid Iteration.** Sprint through big problems one small problem at a time.
- **Making Sense.** What do we do? Why do we do it? How do we know it works?
- **"Stand Up" Sessions.** What did you do yesterday? What are you doing today? What do you need to be successful? Agile leaders remove impediments.
- **Successful Failure.** Fail fast, fail smart. No blame games. Apply what you learn as you move closer to your goal with each iteration.
- **Souls and Roles.** Aligning what we do with who we are.
- **"Just in Time" Solutions.** Handle problems as they arise. Respond as needed.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Essential Elements of Agile Schools

The Qualities of Effective Educational Communities

1. **Agile schools work because people choose to make them work.** We believe in freedom of choice, and that making the choice to participate fully in teaching, learning, and leading is the most important choice we can make.
2. **Agile schools love to learn.** We believe that learning is inherently enjoyable and that giving learners a responsible degree of autonomy in their individual pursuit of knowledge and skill makes it even more so. Agile educators are learners, too.
3. **Agile schools take a constructive approach to failure.** We believe failure is a normal part of success. Kids struggle to learn. Teachers struggle to teach. Administrators struggle to lead. We all experience failure on the way to solving new problems. The faster we fail, the more solutions we try. The smarter we fail, the more knowledge we bring to the next iteration. Instead of looking back at problems, Agile schools look forward to solving them.
4. **Agile schools are always getting better.** We believe there's almost always a better way of doing something, and that it's almost always worthwhile trying to figure out what that better way is. Agile schools value progress, and the appropriate measurement thereof, because progress is the true indicator of learning.
5. **Agile schools empower people to empower others.** We believe that individuals—not systems or policies—are the true sources of power in our schools. Our responsibility is to use our power in service of the greater good, and to teach students how to use their power that way, too.
6. **Agile schools achieve extraordinary results.** We believe in transformative learning that goes far beyond incremental improvements in test scores. Adults in Agile schools also strive for extraordinary achievement in their profession as well.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Essential Elements

continued...

7. **Agile schools are based on deeply-held beliefs, clearly-articulated values, and a firmly-rooted sense of commitment.** We believe that the most successful schools are those run by people who know what matters most to them and who possess an unshakable determination to get it.

8. **Agile schools are communities where people make a difference and connect with something greater than themselves.** We believe that the drive to contribute is part of human nature. Our role is to guide people in directing their contribution toward its highest and best use.

9. **Agile schools value ownership, positive attitudes, high expectations, and unwavering optimism.** We believe that making a good life is about making good choices, that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, and that self-mastery is the key to its rightful exercise.

10. **Agile schools embrace the risk inherent in the achievement of great things.** We educate for maximum potential not minimum competence. We believe that all learners have within them extraordinary strengths and untapped resources, and that learning is only limited by our willingness to attempt what has never before been attempted. We welcome change, we innovate, and we seek out challenges that organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.

11. **Agile schools affirm self-knowledge as the most valuable knowledge and self-determination as the most basic right.** We believe that introspection, self-disclosure, and intellectual honesty are essential to personal transformation. We seek to support young people in becoming the adults they want to be.

12. **Agile schools are communities where no one is above the rules, everyone has a voice, freedom is sacred, equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive, and the highest goal of education is contributing to the present and future well-being of individuals who can thrive independently in a modern democracy.** Agile schools value college preparation, career fulfillment, and engaged citizenship, but we value something else even more. Collegiate, career, and civic achievement are important, but they are means to ends, not ends in themselves. Human happiness, meaningful contribution, and sustained well-being of self and community are the ultimate ends to which Agile schools aspire on behalf of the children and families we serve.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

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