

# What is Good Writing?

**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.

# Good Writing

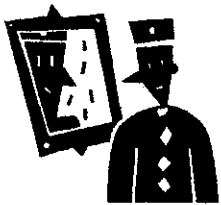
Has all of these qualities...



Interesting **IDEAS** readers want to know about.



**ORGANIZATION** readers can follow easily.



My own personal **VOICE** that sounds just like me.



**WORD CHOICE** that says what I mean.



**SENTENCE FLUENCY** that makes it fun to read out loud.



Correct **CONVENTIONS** everyone can read.

# Read Like a Writer

**There's another way to read?** Normally, when we read, we focus on *what* the writer is trying to say. When we read like a writer, however, we focus on *how* the writer is saying it. Because we are writers ourselves, we pay close attention to the techniques a writer is using and how those techniques contribute to the meaning of the piece and improve its quality. We may even borrow the techniques we learn for our own writing. I call this "reading like a writer." When we read like this, there are six things we pay attention to:

**Ideas.** Ideas are the heart of the piece — what the writer is writing about and the information her or she chooses to reveal about it. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: How does the writer reveal the main idea? What types of details does the writer use? How does the writer achieve his or her purpose? How does the writer's choice of ideas affect the reader?

**Organization.** Organization refers to the order of ideas and the way the writer moves from one idea to the next. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: What kinds of leads does the writer use and how do they pull us in and make us want to read more? What kinds of endings does the writer use and how do they work to make the writing feel finished and to give us something important to think about? How does the writer handle transitions? What techniques does the writer use for sequencing? How does the writer control pacing?

**Voice.** Voice is how the writing feels to someone when they read it, it's the expression of the writer's individual personality through words. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: How does the writer demonstrate passion for the topic? How does the writer reveal emotions? How does the writer put personality into the piece?

**Word Choice.** Word Choice refers to writer's selection of particular words and phrases to express ideas. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: What techniques (simile, metaphor, strong verbs, etc.) does the writer use to make the word choice more specific, more memorable, and more effective?

**Sentence Fluency.** Sentence Fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language as we read it, it's how the writing sounds when read aloud. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: What kinds of sentence constructions does the writer use? How does the writer vary the length and construction of his or her sentences? How does the writer use "sound" effects like alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm?

**Conventions.** Conventions are the ways we agree to use punctuation, spelling, grammar, and other things that make writing consistent and easy to read. When we read like a writer, we try to answer questions like these: How does the writer use conventions to make the writing easy to read and more meaningful? Does the author use conventions in unusual ways that are successful?

# Read Like a Reader

**What's going on here?** Personally, I find teaching reading to be rather intimidating because I can never really know for sure how students are doing it. I can look out across a classroom and see a group of kids with their faces buried in between the pages of their books, but I have no way of knowing what's really going on. For all I can tell, they could be sitting quietly, thinking about nothing, and turning pages just to make me feel good.

There's no way to know for sure what goes on in a reader's head. And every reader probably reads a little differently. But here's a list of six things I think all readers do, things that make them more successful, and make reading more fun. I call this "reading like a reader":

**Question.** Readers ask good questions about the things they read. What kinds of questions do they ask? Just about anything that comes to mind: why something is happening or not happening, why a character feels or acts a certain way, things we wonder about or are confused by, words we may not know the meanings of, and so on. Questions help readers clarify their understanding.

**Predict.** Readers make guesses about what is coming up next. No reader, it seems, can resist thinking about what a writer is going to say next. It's just part of human nature to anticipate things. Predicting helps readers sort out important information from unimportant information, it helps them organize their thinking as they encounter new material.

**Infer.** Readers figure out things about what they read that aren't actually written in the text. There's almost always more to a story than just the words on the page. Often, writers leave "clues" that good readers can use to discover important information.

**Connect.** Readers think about what their reading reminds them of. We can't help but be reminded of our own lives as we read. We're also reminded of similar things we've read in other texts and other parts of the same text we're reading at the time.

**Feel.** Readers have feelings while they read, they express emotions. Sometimes, it seems like we have a direct connection to what we're reading: sad parts make us feel sad, happy parts make us feel happy, scary parts scare us, and so on. But often, the feelings we have are more subtle, we may feel them only slightly, for example, when we read with more expression. Much of the meaning we get from a piece of writing comes from the emotions we feel when read it.

**Evaluate.** Readers make judgments while they read. Is this good? If so, what's good about it? Do I like it? Why? Should I keep reading or should I put this down and get something else? Readers are finicky, impatient, judgmental. The evaluations they make help them decide whether or not what they are reading is valuable and, if so, how they might use it.

What was the \_\_\_\_\_ (choose one: funniest . . . most surprising . . . most predictable . . . dullest) thing that happened to you today?

If you were writing a newspaper article about your day, what would the headline be?

You are going to be alone on a deserted island for a year and you get to take one book/DVD/CD. What would you take and tell us why?

If you could invent something that would make life easier, what would it do?

Lots of people eat "weird" things. What is the one kind of food that you know you will never even try once?

Some day, I'm going to be the first person in the world to ...

What is something you want to learn how to do and why?

What was your favorite family vacation and what made it your favorite?

Do you learn more when you win or when you lose? Tell us more.

What's the best or worst thing about being your age?

My dream job/career is... Why?

Describe your perfect day. Where would you be, who would you be with, and what would you be doing?

Something I wish my family would do more of is...