

Dear Book Club Host:

Welcome back to The 39 Clues Book Club! This month's theme is Decoding Writing. Using Ruth Culham's **Traits of Writing**, club members will get a chance to explore The 39 Clues adventures, hone their writing skills, and discover just how fun writing can be!

For more information on the Traits of Writing and to watch the Traits of Writing The 39 Clues Webcast visit scholastic.com/decodingwriting.

Introducing the Traits

Here's a brief overview of five of the Traits, as well as essential tactics for getting club members familiar with each area.

IDEAS make up the main message.

- 1) Select a fresh, original idea.
- 2) Narrow the focus.
- 3) Develop the idea.
- 4) Support with interesting details.

ORGANIZATION is the glue that holds ideas together.

- 1) Create a catching lead.
- 2) Add a structured middle.
- 3) Use sequence and transition words.
- 4) Tie it up with a sense of resolution.

VOICE is the writer's personal stamp.

- 1) Establish a tone.
- 2) Convey the purpose.
- 3) Understand the audience.
- 4) Take risks to energize the writing.

WORD CHOICE is the use of rich, enlightening vocabulary.

- 1) Use verbs that show action.
- 2) Select striking words and phrases.
- 3) Choose specific and accurate words.
- 4) Deepen meaning with the "just right" words.

SENTENCE FLUENCY is the music created by the words.

- 1) Craft well-built sentences.
- 2) Vary sentence lengths and structures.
- 3) Create smooth and rhythmic flow.
- 4) Break the "rules" of grammar on occasion.

Activity 1: The Big Idea

Prepare ahead: 1) Photocopy **The Big Idea (A)** and **(B)** handouts, making enough copies for everyone present. 2) Have pens and pencils, and extra paper available. 3) If possible, you might want to have a copy of *The 39 Clues Book 2: One False Note* by Gordon Korman available for reference.

Ideas are the heart of any piece of writing. No matter the final goal, an author always begins with a focused central idea. All other details of the story (characters, objects, setting, events) are there to explain and support the main idea.

For this activity, club members will focus on identifying the main idea and its supporting details in a *The 39 Clues* passage.

Read the excerpt on **The Big Idea (A)** handout aloud to the group. Have club members discuss what they think the main idea of the excerpt is. You might start them off by asking, “Is the main idea traveling on the train or how they were raised by an au pair? Or is it something bigger?”

After they have identified the main idea of the passage, have club members work individually or in pairs to complete **The Big Idea (B)** graphic organizer handout. When everyone has finished, invite volunteers to share their results with the group.

Activity 2: The Master Plan

Prepare ahead: 1) Photocopy **The Master Plan** handout, making enough copies for every club member. 2) Have pens and pencils available.

Organization is all about the order of information. And attention-getting opening lines play an important role. For this activity, club members will focus on writing a catching lead.

Read the opening line of *The 39 Clues Book 3: The Sword Thief* by Peter Lerangis aloud to the group.

“They were toast.”

Ask club members what effect that line has on them. What information does it provide? What does it leave out—does it make them curious? Explain that this line uses figurative language, a metaphor, which is one tactic for making an opening line memorable.

Now it’s time for club members to try crafting their own opening lines! After they check out the examples of leads detailed on **The Master Plan** handout, let them get to work. For example, a piece on swimming might use a start-the-action technique, such as “It was now or never. I closed my eyes and jumped.”

When everyone has finished, ask volunteers to share their new leads with the group. Analyze their different approaches.

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Activity 3: Find Your Voice

Prepare ahead: 1) Photocopy the **Find Your Voice** handout, making enough copies for every club member. 2) Have pens and pencils available. 3) You might want to have a copy of *The 39 Clues Book 1: The Maze of Bones* by Rick Riordan available for reference.

Voice conveys the writer’s passion for the topic, giving the writing energy and individual style. Writing with voice means considering the tone, purpose, and audience for the piece, while taking risks to make one’s voice ring true. For this activity, club members will focus on using tone for a specific purpose.

Brainstorm with club members different types of tones (playful, tense, comical, pompous). Discuss that since *The 39 Clues* story is narrated from several different characters’ points of view, tone helps convey the many distinct personalities.

Read the two excerpts on the **Find Your Voice** handout aloud to the group. Together, brainstorm words to describe Dan’s tone (in the first excerpt) and Amy’s tone (in the second excerpt). Then discuss how the writer expresses Dan’s nonchalance (slang, sarcasm, irreverence) and Amy’s anxiousness (short, earnest sentences; pauses).

Activity 4: A Way with Words

Prepare ahead: 1) Photocopy the **A Way with Words** handout, making enough copies for everyone present. 2) Have pens and pencils available. 3) Provide extra paper for jotting down words. 4) You might want to have a copy of *The 39 Clues Book 5: The Black Circle* by Patrick Carman available for reference.

Careful **word choice** makes writing vibrant, clear, and meaningful. Verbs power the sentence, striking words and phrases give appeal, and specific, accurate word choice adds depth of meaning. For this activity, we’ll look at vivid verbs and how they are used to move the story forward.

Club members should work individually to complete this activity. Discuss the instructions on the handout and answer any questions they have before they begin. (Let club members know that “Tiny Tim” is the name of the vehicle Amy is driving.)

After they have finished, ask volunteers to share their results and discuss the impact action words have on the reading experience. Have volunteers read example sentences aloud, showcasing how less active verbs affect the passage.

Activity 5: Rhythm and Flow

Prepare ahead: 1) Photocopy the **Rhythm and Flow** handout, making enough copies for everyone present. 2) Have pens, pencils, craft supplies, and posterboard available. 3) You might want to have a copy of *The 39 Clues Book 10: Into the Gauntlet* by Margaret Peterson Haddix available for reference.

Share with club members that **sentence fluency** is all about how a piece of writing sounds when read silently or aloud. Alternating lengths and beginnings of sentences is one way to create a fluent piece of writing—one that draws the reader into the subject or scene with ease. This activity will focus on using sentence length to create meaning.

Read the excerpt on the **Rhythm and Flow** handout aloud with an animated voice. Include pauses as indicated by dashes or line breaks. Discuss how club members think the writing sounded? Have club members name several things the author did to make it flow smoothly while still supporting the action of the story. Then, have them work in pairs to finish completing the handout.

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BONUS ACTIVITY: Story Starter



Photocopy the **Story Starter** handout, making enough copies for everyone present. (Note: This is a take-home activity that club members can use to continue the writing experience after the meeting.)

For this bonus activity, club members will get to put the Traits of Writing skills they just learned to the test! Using the passage from *The 39 Clues: Unstoppable Book 1: Nowhere to Run*, have club members continue the story—and make it their own!

These activities are aligned to the following Common Core State Standards:

	Reading	Writing	Language	Speaking & Listening
Activity 1: The Big Idea (Ideas)	1, 2	3, 5	1, 2	1, 4, 5
Activity 2: The Master Plan (Organization)	4, 5	3, 4	1, 2, 3, 5	1, 3
Activity 3: Find Your Voice (Voice)	4, 5, 6	4, 5	1, 2, 5	1, 3
Activity 4: A Way with Words (Word Choice)	1, 4	3, 4	1, 2, 3, 5	1, 4
Activity 5: Rhythm and Flow (Sentence Fluency)	2, 5, 6	2, 4, 5	1, 2, 3	1, 5

That's it for The 39 Clues Book Club this month. Thanks for all your good work spreading the joy of reading and writing!

—The 39 Clues Book Club

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Decoding Writing

The Big Idea (A)

Ideas make up the main message of a story. Whether you're writing an international adventure like *The 39 Clues* or *5 Steps to Perfect Lemonade*, the main idea is always the starting point. All other details of the story (characters, objects, setting, events) explain and support the main idea.

Read the following excerpt. Can you identify the main idea and its supporting details?

From *The 39 Clues Book 2: One False Note* by Gordon Korman, pp. 1-2

Dan Cahill, Amy's eleven-year-old brother, looked up from the page of sheet music he was examining. "I'm with you, dude. I can't believe we had to take the slowest train in Europe. We've got to get moving! The competition has private jets, and we're wasting time on the Loser Express. Are we going to stop in every Podunk town in France?"

"No," Nellie told him honestly. "Pretty soon it'll stop in every podunk town in Germany. Then every podunk town in Austria. Look, it was cheap, okay? I didn't agree to babysit you guys on this quest—"

"Au pair us on this quest," Dan amended.

"—just to have you drop out halfway through because you blew all your cash on snapper and expensive train tickets," she added.

"We really appreciate your help, Nellie," Amy told her. "We could never do this without you."

Amy was still dizzy from the whirlwind of the past two weeks. *One minute you're an orphan; the next, you're part of the most powerful family the world has ever known!*

An unbelievable twist for two kids who had been palmed off on an uncaring guardian who, in turn, palmed them off on a series of au pairs. Now they knew the truth—they were relatives of Benjamin Franklin, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and more—geniuses, visionaries, and global leaders.

We were nobody. Suddenly we have a chance to shape the world...

All thanks to the contest their grandmother Grace had set up in her will.

Circle all the important details in this passage, and then list the most important ones here:

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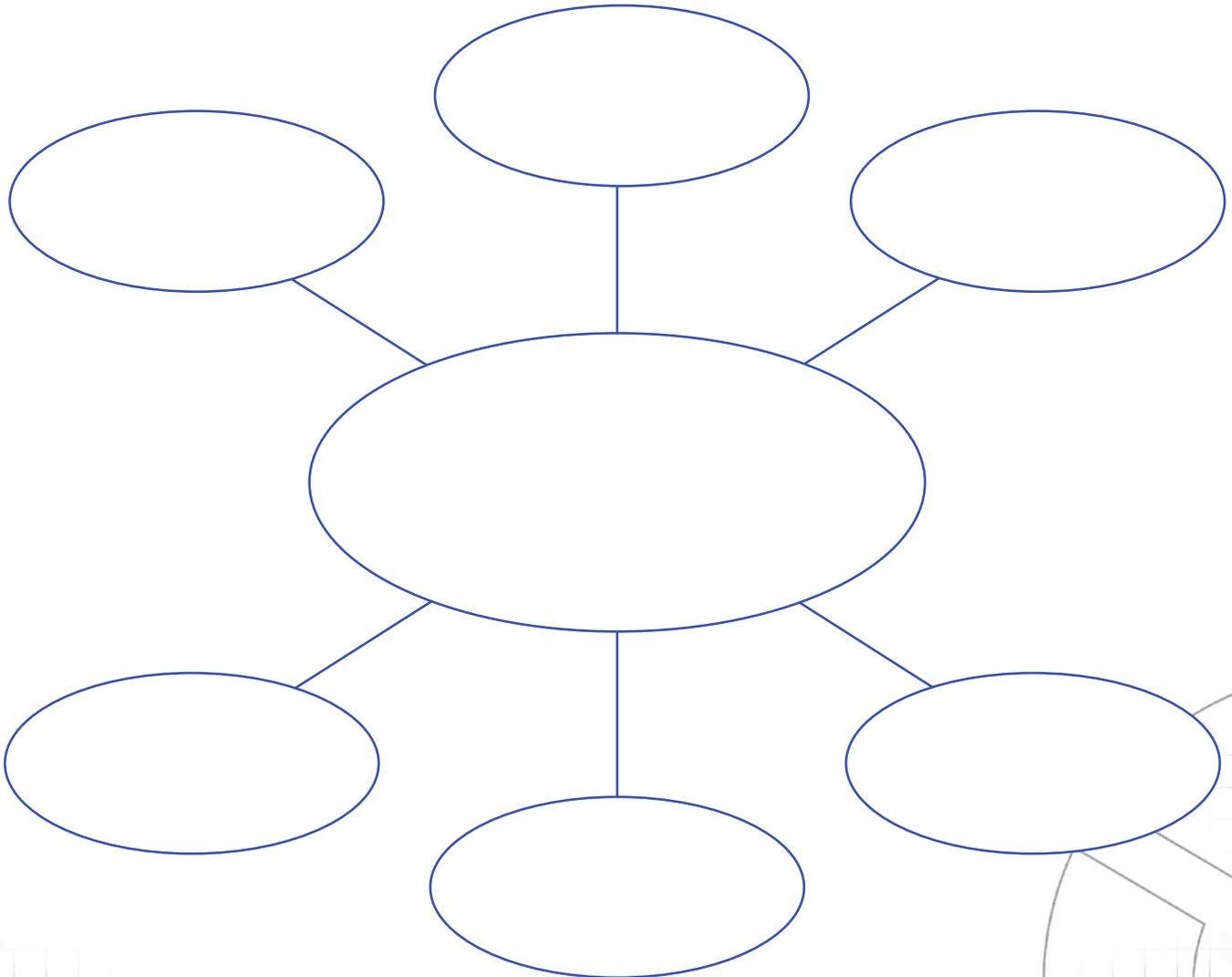
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Decoding Writing

The Big Idea (B)

Use this graphic organizer to chart what you think the main idea of the excerpt from **The Big Idea (A)** handout is and which of the details of the passage support it. Write down the central idea of the story in the center oval, then write specific details in the other ovals. This is how writers begin to organize their stories!





Decoding Writing

The Master Plan

Organization is the glue that holds ideas together. In suspenseful adventures like *The 39 Clues*, organization is one of the most important features the writer considers—Where will the story begin? How does each essential bit of information unfold? What tactics will keep the reader guessing?

Attention-grabbing opening lines play a particularly huge role. Their job is to fill readers with a burning desire to know more...now!

Here are three opening lines from books in *The 39 Clues* series. What effect does each of these openings have on you as a reader? What information is given (or implied) and what is left out (or hinted at)? Does the missing information make you curious?

***The 39 Clues Book 5: The Black Circle* by Patrick Carman**

Amy Cahill liked to be the first one up in the morning. But not if it was because someone was screaming outside her hotel-room door.

***The 39 Clues Book 9: Storm Warning* by Linda Sue Park**

"Bahamas."
"Jamaica."
"Bahamas."
"Jamaica."

***The 39 Clues Book 10: Into the Gauntlet* by Margaret Peterson Haddix**

Amy and Dan Cahill forgot to look for bugs in London.

Now you try it! Use the space below to come up with several original opening lines that will leave your readers itching for more! You can model your lines on any of the examples above, or think of your own strategy. Have fun!

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

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Decoding Writing

Find Your Voice

Voice is the writer's personal stamp. To express the voice, a writer must consider the tone, purpose, and audience. Tone is especially important when developing such distinct characters as Dan and Amy Cahill.

Take a look at the following passages. The first is written from Dan's point of view. What is the tone of this excerpt? The second is written from Amy's perspective. What is the tone of this passage? Add a few more sentences to both of the passages using the tone you identified for each.

From *The 39 Clues Book 1: The Maze of Bones* by Rick Riordan, pp. 6–7

Every couple of weeks, Beatrice fired their au pair and hired a new one. The only good thing was that Aunt Beatrice didn't live with them personally. She lived across town in a building that didn't allow kids, so sometimes it took her a few days to hear about Dan's latest exploits.

Nellie had lasted longer than most. Dan liked her because she made amazing waffles and she usually cranked her iPod up to brain-damage level. She didn't even hear when Dan's bottle rocket collection went off and strafed the building across the alley. Dan would miss Nellie when she got fired.

From *The 39 Clues Book 1: The Maze of Bones* by Rick Riordan, pp. 14–15

Amy's hands started to tremble. This was just like her nightmares...stuck in a pit, a crowd of people laughing at her. But this was real....

Dan looked at Amy desperately. "You gotta do something. Tell them you can figure out the book!"

But the words wouldn't come. Amy felt like she was already being covered in cement. Her brother needed her. She had to say something. But she just stood there, frozen and helpless and hating herself for being so scared.

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Decoding Writing

A Way with Words

Word choice is the use of rich, enlightening vocabulary. Verbs and verb phrases play an important role by giving power to a sentence. Whether racing through a pitch-black crypt or dashing to the finish line, strong verbs carry the story along—and the reader with it.

Now look at the passage below. Pay attention to the words that energize the writing. Circle all of the active, interesting verbs you can find. Then, imagine replacing the active verbs with more general, less active ones. How would your changes affect the story?

From *The 39 Clues Book 5: The Black Circle* by Patrick Carman, p. 83–84

That did it. Amy had had enough. She turned the key and the tailpipe coughed out a plume of smoke. The engine rumbled and popped as if it wanted nothing more than to race through traffic.

“Okay,” said Amy, taking a deep breath and setting her foot on the pedal. “Here goes thirty thousand rubles.”

Tiny Tim lurched along the side of the road doing about three miles an hour until Amy caught the hang of it and sped up to ten. Pretty soon, she was doing twenty.

“You like Tiny Tim, don’t you?” said Dan. “Come on, let me drive it. Please?”

“Eat your heart out, dude,” Amy said. “Just keep the directions coming and don’t distract me.”

Dan grumbled, but he found the dog-eared map of St. Pete in the guidebook. A smile bloomed on Amy’s face. When the speedometer hit 25, she slammed the stick shift down and Tiny Tim lurched forward with a sharp buzzing sound.

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Decoding Writing

Rhythm and Flow

Sentence fluency is the music created by the words. Good writers use sentence structures to draw readers into a subject or scene, providing a long line to pull readers along, or a short one to make them feel the change of tempo.

Look at the following passage. How is sentence length used to create meaning. How effective are the pauses? The short sentences? The longer ones? Why might the author have chosen to repeat words, or use a few much longer sentences between short, punctuated ones. (For instance, to contrast Amy's unawareness with Dan and Nellie's panic.) What did the author do to make it flow smoothly while still supporting the action of the story?

**From *The 39 Clues Book 10: Into the Gauntlet*
by Margaret Peterson Haddix, p. 82.**

"AHHHHH!" Nellie screamed.

"AHHHHH!" Dan screamed from his place beside her in the front seat of the car.

"What is wrong with the two of you?" Amy asked from the backseat. She looked up from the pile of Shakespeare books she'd settled in with as soon as they'd pulled out of that rental-car lot toward Stratford.

"I forgot I'd have to drive on the wrong side of the road again!" Nellie said. "I mean, it's the right side for them—err, the left side, that's where they drive—but—"

"DO YOU SEE THAT CAR?" Dan screamed.

It seemed to be in their lane.

"Swerve right?" Nellie muttered. "No—left. Right? Left? AHHHH!"

At the last minute, she jerked the steering wheel to the left. She pulled off into the grass and sat there, shaking, while cars whizzed by them.

Now you try it! Work with a partner to apply what you've learned about the Traits and The 39 Clues to write and design a poster advertising the movie version of The 39 Clues!

Think about the details, opening line, and tone you want to use, and to choose vivid words and vary your sentences to capture your excitement about the series.

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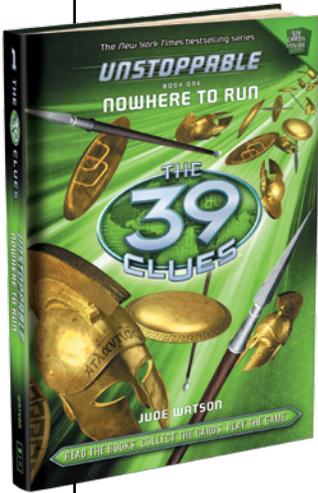
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BONUS ACTIVITY: Story Starter

Take a look at this passage. The story begins with the funeral of the Cahill family attorney, but in this excerpt, Amy and Dan come under attack before they even have a chance to leave the graveyard. It's an enticing start to what could be a very interesting story, but what happens next? Where do you think the story should go from here? Using the Traits you've learned, finish writing the rest of this story, taking it wherever you want it to go!

From *The 39 Clues Unstoppable Book 1: Nowhere to Run* by Jude Watson, pp. 15-16



As she turned away, something hard hit the back of her head. Pain blinded her, and she felt herself shoved into the open grave.

Amy hit the ground on her hands and knees, feeling the shock shudder through her bones. She looked up. The light was blocked out as a heavy object came flying down at her. She moved by instinct rather than thought, rolling herself into a ball against the wall of the grave. Dan landed with a cry. She heard his breath leave his body in a soft uh.

"HELP!" Amy shouted.

In answer, a shovelful of dirt rained down on her upturned face.
