



# THE 39 CLUES DECODING WRITING WITH THE 39 CLUES

FEATURING RUTH CULHAM  
AND THE TRAITS OF WRITING

For Grades 3–6

## Teach Ruth Culham's Traits of Writing with The 39 Clues

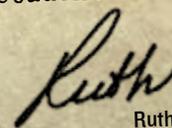
Ideas • Organization • Voice • Word Choice • Sentence Fluency • Conventions • Presentation

- ✓ **Learn** about the Traits of Writing
- ✓ **Identify** the traits of good writing within writing passages
- ✓ **Motivate** your students with thrilling excerpts from The 39 Clues
- ✓ **Discover** essential strategies for developing skills in each trait

Dear Educator,

The 39 Clues is one of those special series that has captured the attention of millions of kids across the country. For students learning to write, what could be more exciting than using The 39 Clues for inspiration? And for teachers, what could be better than exploring this marvelous series through the lens of the Traits of Writing (ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation)?

We read widely, for many purposes. One benefit of reading is to understand writing from the inside out—through the eyes of the author. We learn from the masters a new technique, a new way to say something, or express an idea. Each time we are inspired by reading and apply what we learn to our own writing, we grow. And grow. And who knows where that will take us—and our students?



Ruth Culham

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## The Traits of Writing

Whether it is a report on the history of the katana, or a fast-paced fictional hunt for ancient clues in modern Tokyo, certain characteristics make a piece of writing work. These characteristics, or traits of writing, are qualities that all writers ought to consider when crafting fiction or nonfiction. A powerful tool for assessment and instruction, the traits provide teacher and student with a common vocabulary for building a shared vision of the qualities of good writing and for developing specific, targeted skills. Developed by Ruth Culham, the Trait Model is a concise, meaningful, and practical approach to teaching the traits to students—one that empowers young writers with the necessary tools to measure and compound their own success.

## Using This Guide

Within this guide you will find some tools to help you begin introducing the traits to your classroom in combination with mentor texts—model passages that illustrate what the traits look like in the hands of expert authors. Carefully chosen from The 39 Clues series, the passages referenced on the following pages exemplify the traits in bold, exciting ways. They will help you to show students just how exhilarating writing can be, at the same time demonstrating the kinds of things they need to do to make their own writing strong. Companion writing activities allow your students to interact with both the traits and The 39 Clues, providing you and your class with new avenues and inspiration to explore writing instruction and begin to achieve exciting goals.

# Introducing the Traits

Here you will find a brief overview of each of the traits, as well as essential tactics for getting started in each area.

<b>IDEAS make up the main message.</b>	
1) Select a fresh, original idea. 2) Narrow the focus.	3) Develop the idea. 4) Support with interesting details.
<b>ORGANIZATION is the glue that holds ideas together.</b>	
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.
<b>VOICE is the writer's personal stamp.</b>	
1) Establish a tone. 2) Convey the purpose.	3) Understand the audience. 4) Take risks to energize the writing.
<b>WORD CHOICE is the use of rich, enlightening vocabulary.</b>	
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.
<b>SENTENCE FLUENCY is the music created by the words.</b>	
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.
<b>CONVENTIONS guide readers through the text.</b>	
1) Check spelling. 2) Punctuate and paragraph accurately.	3) Capitalize correctly. 4) Apply standard grammar and usage.
<b>PRESENTATION is the physical appearance of the piece.</b>	
1) Apply handwriting skills. 2) Use word processing effectively.	3) Make good use of white space. 4) Refine text features.

## About the Author

Formerly the assessment program unit manager at Education Northwest (formerly Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory), Ruth Culham, EdD, is a pioneering researcher of the Trait Model. She was also English Teacher of the Year in Montana, a highlight of her 19-year teaching career. Now president of Culham Writing Company, Ruth, a.k.a. "Trait Lady," spends time with teachers across the country, offering workshops and gathering ideas and materials to improve student writing. Her newest project is Traits Writing, a classroom writing program for grades K–8.

For more information on Traits Writing, go to [www.scholastic.com/traitswriting](http://www.scholastic.com/traitswriting).

[www.scholastic.com/decodingwriting](http://www.scholastic.com/decodingwriting)



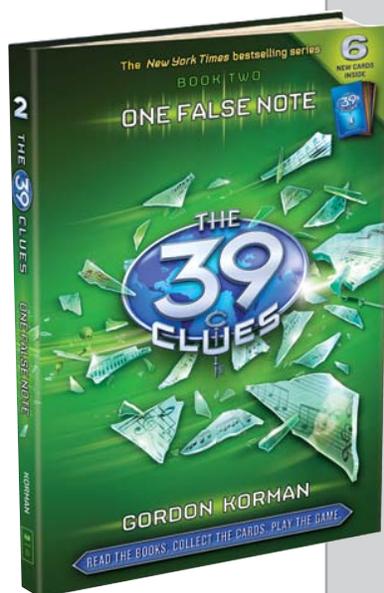
## IDEAS

### Introduce

Share with students that **ideas** are the heart of any piece of writing. No matter the final goal—an international adventure or 5 Steps to Perfect Lemonade—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. This activity will focus on identifying the main idea and its supporting details in a mentor text passage.

### Read and Discuss

- Read the excerpt aloud. (If students are new to The 39 Clues, this excerpt will provide them with a brief synopsis.)
- Have students discuss what they think the main idea of the excerpt is, giving evidence for their conclusion. 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 something bigger?*



### From 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.

### Write!

- Group students. Have them list all of the details they find in the passage and circle the ones they think are closest to the main idea they chose ("Benjamin Franklin" with the main idea "the Cahill family," for instance). For additional support, suggest they group details by Who, What, When, Where, and Why.
- Then have them use a graphic organizer to chart what they think the main idea is and which of the details of the passage support it. Encourage them to use pencil so they can move items around. Ask groups to share their results and any differences in their conclusions.

#### Teacher Model

For sample graphic organizers, go to [www.scholastic.com/decodingwriting](http://www.scholastic.com/decodingwriting).

Now that they see how it works, students can use a similar web to chart **ideas** for their next writing assignment.

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# ORGANIZATION

## Introduce

Share with students that **organization** is all about the order of information: how the writer gets the reader into the main idea; walks the reader through the body using sequencing, transitions, and pacing; and ends in a way that keeps the reader thinking. In suspenseful mysteries 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!* This activity will focus on writing just such a catching lead.



## Read and Discuss

- Read the opening line of Book 3, *The Sword Thief*, by Peter Lerangis.

They were toast.

Ask students 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.

- Read aloud the three leads below. Discuss similarities and differences. Outline the techniques used (1. **statement of fact**, 2. **dialogue**, 3. **single word or phrase**). Then have students ask themselves what information is given (or implied) and what is left out (hinted at)?

<b>Book 5: <i>The Black Circle</i>, by Patrick Carman</b>	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.
<b>Book 9: <i>Storm Warning</i>, by Linda Sue Park</b>	“Bahamas.” “Jamaica.” “Bahamas.” “Jamaica.”
<b>Book 10: <i>Into the Gauntlet</i>, by Margaret Peterson Haddix</b>	Amy and Dan Cahill forgot to look for bugs in London.

## Write!

- Challenge students to write several original opening lines that leave the reader itching for more. They can model on one of the four example techniques, or on another of *The 39 Clues* titles, or think of their own strategies.

**Teacher Model**  
A piece on swimming might use a **start the action** technique: *It was now or never. I closed my eyes and jumped.*

- Ask volunteers to share their new leads with the class. Analyze their different approaches.

Seeing **organization** work well in the hands of experts will inspire students to develop similar skills in their own writing.

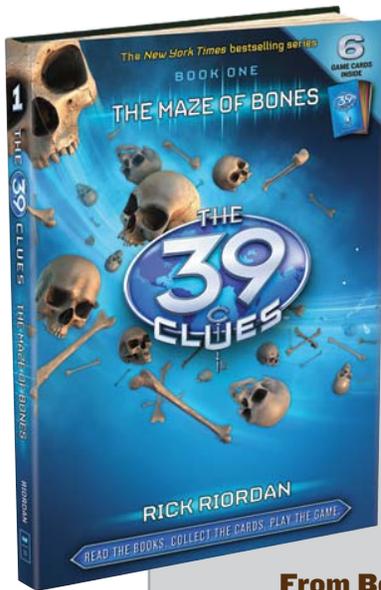
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## VOICE

### Introduce

Share with students that **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. Tone is especially important when developing such distinct characters as Dan and Amy Cahill. This activity will focus on using tone for a specific purpose.



### Read and Discuss

- Brainstorm with students different types of tones (playful, tense, comical, pompous). Explain that *The 39 Clues* story is narrated from several different characters' points of view. Dan and Amy, for instance, have very distinct personalities that tone helps to convey.
- Read the first excerpt, Dan's point of view, and together brainstorm words to describe Dan's tone. Do the same for Amy's. Then discuss how the writer creates Dan's nonchalance (slang, sarcasm, irreverence) and Amy's anxiousness (short, earnest sentences; pauses).

#### From 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 Book 1: *The Maze of Bones*, by Rick Riordan, pp. 14 and 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.

### Write!

- Challenge students to add a few sentences to both of the passages using the tone they identified for each.

#### Teacher Model

(Dan – nonchalant and energetic) Yep. There was no denying the fact that it had been a good ride—which was Dan's signature style....

(Amy – nervous) Amy clenched and unclenched her fists. She started to see spots and tried to slow her breathing. It wasn't working. If she didn't get hold of herself, it would all be over.

- Have volunteers share their work.

Now that they've seen **voice** in action, students will feel more confident applying it to their work.

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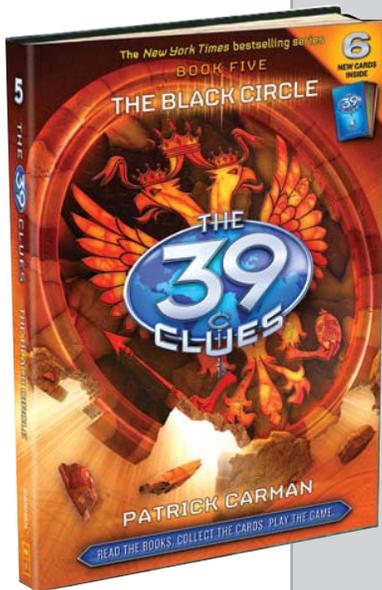
## WORD CHOICE

### Introduce

Share with students that 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. Whether racing through a pitch-black crypt, inching up a craggy cliff, or dashing to the finish line, strong verbs and descriptive phrases carry the story along—and the reader with it. This activity will focus on using vivid verbs.

### Read and Discuss

- Ask students to pay close attention to the vocabulary in the excerpt as you read it aloud and jot down interesting verbs/verb phrases that they hear. (Let them know that “Tiny Tim” is the name of the vehicle Amy is driving.)
- Discuss the words students recorded. Have them consider what the passage would sound like if a few of those verbs were more general—“the tailpipe let out some smoke,” for instance (sentence 3).



### From 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.

### Write!

- Provide students with copies of the excerpt and have them circle all of the specific, active verbs they find. Then have them rewrite the passage, replacing several of the circled verbs with more general, less active ones.

#### Teacher Model

The engine made a loud noise as if it wanted to move fast through traffic....Tiny Tim moved along the side of the road very slowly until Amy got used to it and went faster.

- Ask students to share some of their revisions and discuss the impact they have on the reading experience. Which version would they rather read? Why?
- Encourage students to keep a list of interesting words and phrases to reference when they write. Tell them to pay particular attention to verbs that will energize their sentences.

Seeing how powerful **word choice** can be, students will be inspired to dig deeper for just the right words as they revise their own writing.

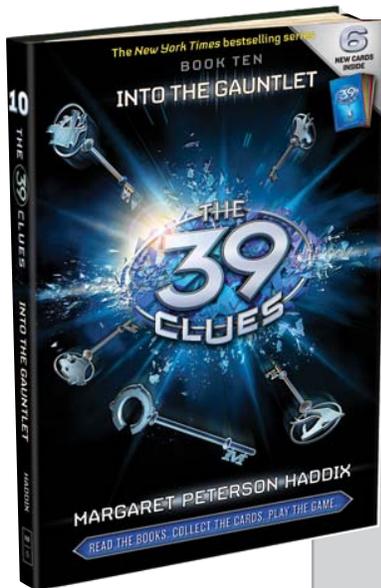
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# SENTENCE FLUENCY

## Introduce

Share with students 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. Good writers use sentence structures to do just that, providing a long line to pull readers along, or a short one to make them feel the change of tempo. This activity will focus on using sentence length to create meaning.



## Read and Discuss

- Read the excerpt aloud with an animated voice. Include pauses as indicated by dashes or line breaks. Discuss how students think the writing sounded—how effective were the pauses? the short sentences? the longer ones?
- Have students break into groups. Provide each group with a copy of the excerpt and have them fill a 4-column chart on a separate sheet with information from the excerpt.

### Teacher Model

Sentence	Number of Words	First Word	Type of Sentence
1	3	AHHHHH!	simple

- Have students discuss why the author might 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.) Ask students if they feel the passage is fluent. Have them name several things the author did to make it flow smoothly while still supporting the action of the story.

### From 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? AHHHHH!"

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.

## Write!

- Have students pair up and apply what they've learned about the Traits and The 39 Clues to write and design a poster advertising the movie version of The 39 Clues. Remind them to think about the details, opening line, and tone they want to use, and to choose vivid words and vary their sentences to capture their excitement about the series.
- Have students share their posters with the class.

Hang posters in the classroom for students to refer to as they continue reading **The 39 Clues** and studying the **Traits of Writing**.

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## CONVENTIONS AND PRESENTATION

Share with students that **Conventions** and **Presentation** are the editing traits—where writers get to clean up their work and make it ready for a reader. When students have finished editing for Conventions and apply Presentation in their final copies, they will be ready to go public with their work.

### Conventions

Though “rules” can sometimes be broken for specific purposes, they should always be taken seriously. Readers depend on recognizable use of conventions to guide them through the writing. Students should edit their final copy for **spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar and usage**.

For examples, direct students to these pages of Book 7: *The Viper’s Nest*, by Peter Lerangis:

- standard dialogue and book titles, pp. 34–35
- paragraphing, p. 43
- block quotes, pp. 48–49
- spelling of difficult words, pp. 42–44
- italics for internal thoughts, pp. 68–69
- all caps for emphasis, pp. 179–181

### Presentation

Wherever readers are involved, presentation matters. It is the welcome mat that invites the reader into a piece. To add visual appeal, students should fine-tune **text legibility, use of space, and text features**, such as the ones found in The 39 Clues examples below.

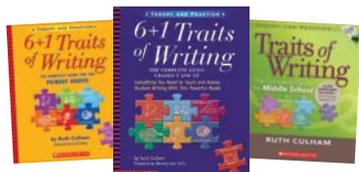
Have students scan their favorite 39 Clues title, or turn to these pages in Book 4: *Beyond the Grave*, by Jude Watson, and Book 9: *Storm Warning*, by Linda Sue Park to consider the purpose and impact of the following:

- chapter headings/section separators
- footers/page numbers
- spacing of letters, words, lines, and paragraphs
- embedded illustrations (Book 4: pp. 82–83, p. 118; Book 9: p. 26, p. 94)
- different fonts (Book 4: p. 42, p. 96, p. 168)
- small caps, underlined, boxed/circled words (Book 4: p. 9; Book 9: p. 84)
- bulleted, numbered, or freeform lists (Book 9: p. 66, p. 116)
- letters, emails, and numbered lists, (Book 9: inside back cover)

For additional Decoding Writing with The 39 Clues classroom resources, including a **reproducible student checklist** and a **video interview** with The 39 Clues authors **Jude Watson, Peter Lerangis, Gordon Korman, and Linda Sue Park**, please visit:

[www.scholastic.com/decodingwriting](http://www.scholastic.com/decodingwriting)

For more information on the Traits of Writing and for additional classroom resources, please go to: [www.scholastic.com/traitswriting](http://www.scholastic.com/traitswriting).



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