



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.

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 theirs — 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.