

TRAILS™ Narrative Writing Diagnostic Assessment

Range Performance Level Descriptor (RPLD) Integrated Edition

The Writing Academy®, LLC

Purpose

A low-stakes narrative readiness assessment that identifies not only what students can produce, but the level of thinking they currently demonstrate within each TRAILS™ component. Results are used to adjust instruction, scaffolds, feedback, and opportunities for independence—not to generate a traditional grade.

• Foundational	■ Emergent	▼ Visible	▲ Independent	◆ Reflective
(Beginning)	(Developing)	(Engaging)	(Independent)	(Highly Independent)

TRAILS™ Framework

- T — Topic: establish and maintain a clear narrative topic, situation, or experience.
- R — Relationships: develop relationships among characters and show how those relationships influence the story.
- A — Actions, Thoughts, and Dialogue: use meaningful actions, thoughts, and dialogue to develop characters and move events forward.
- I — Important Moment: slow down and fully develop the most important moment.
- L — Lesson or Lasting Effect: communicate what was learned, realized, changed, or remembered.
- S — Setting: use place, time, atmosphere, and sensory detail intentionally.

Core RPLD Principle

A student should not be assigned one thinking level for all of narrative writing. Score each TRAILS™ strand independently. A student can be Independent in Topic and Setting while remaining Visible in Important Moment and Emergent in Lesson or Lasting Effect.

Teacher Administration Guide

What to say, what to provide, and what not to coach

Materials to Prepare

- One student diagnostic packet per student.
- The short anchor passage, “The Extra Chair,” included in this packet.
- Pencil or approved writing tool; lined paper if additional writing space is needed.
- Teacher RPLD scoring profile and answer key.
- Any routinely provided documented accommodations. Accommodations should provide access without supplying narrative ideas, wording, or structure.

Suggested Administration Sequence

Phase	Suggested time	Purpose
1. Opening	2–3 min	Explain that this is not a grade and that students should show what they can do now.
2. Anchor Passage + Recognition	15–20 min	Read/follow the short passage, then complete recognition items.
3. Guided Narrative Build	15–20 min	Students make their thinking visible through TRAILS™ planning prompts.
4. Independent Narrative	30–40 min	Students plan and write independently. This section carries the strongest evidence for Independent/Reflective levels.
5. Broad Writing Check	5–8 min	Brief revising/editing information only; do not let it drive the narrative RPLD profile.

Opening Script

Teacher says: “Today you are going to show me how you think as a narrative writer. This is not a grade and I do not expect everyone to do the same things yet. Some parts may feel easy and some may feel challenging. That is useful information for me because it tells me what I should teach you next. Do your best work and show me what you already know about telling and developing a story.”

What the Teacher May and May Not Do

MAY DO

- Read directions and the anchor passage aloud if that is part of normal classroom access or an approved accommodation.
- Clarify procedural directions such as where to write or which part to complete next.
- Encourage effort with neutral language such as “Show me what you know.”
- Provide extra paper or time when appropriate.

DO NOT DO DURING THE DIAGNOSTIC

- Do not suggest a plot, important moment, lesson, setting detail, dialogue line, or character relationship.
- Do not tell students that a response is “right,” “strong,” or “needs more detail.”
- Do not remind individual students of a TRAILS™ element they forgot during the independent composition.
- Do not correct spelling, punctuation, or grammar while the student is composing.

Anchor Passage for Part 1

The Extra Chair

Teacher says before reading: *“First, we will read a short story. Follow along as I read it aloud. Afterward, you will read it quietly and answer questions about the choices the writer made. I will not explain the answers while you are working.”*

Rain tapped against the classroom windows while Ms. Alvarez pushed the desks into a circle. It was the first Monday after winter break, and everyone seemed to be talking at once. Everyone except Eli. He sat beside the coat hooks, turning a pencil between his fingers and staring at the empty desk next to him.

That desk belonged to Jonah, Eli's best friend. Jonah had moved away over the break. For three years, the boys had worked together on science projects, traded parts of their lunches, and argued about which superhero was the strongest. Eli had known Jonah was leaving, but the empty chair made it feel real.

Ms. Alvarez clapped twice. “We have a new student joining us today,” she announced. A boy with wet hair stepped into the room and gripped the straps of his backpack. “Class, this is Mateo.”

Eli looked down. Not that chair, he thought. Please don't put him in Jonah's chair.

“Mateo, you can sit right here,” Ms. Alvarez said, pointing to the empty desk.

Mateo walked over slowly. “Is this seat taken?” he whispered.

Eli almost said yes. The word sat behind his teeth. Then he noticed Mateo's hands shaking as he tried to unzip his backpack. Eli remembered his own first day at the school, when Jonah had moved his lunch tray and said, ‘Sit here. You don't have to know anybody yet.’

Eli slid Jonah's old chair back with his foot. “No,” he said. Then he added, “You can sit here. I can show you where everything is.”

Mateo's shoulders relaxed. “Thanks.”

At lunch, Eli carried his tray toward the table where he and Jonah used to sit. For a second, he almost chose another table. Instead, he pulled out the chair beside him. Mateo sat down, and Eli began explaining why the cafeteria pizza looked better than it tasted. Mateo laughed.

The chair was still Jonah's chair in Eli's memory. But by the end of the day, Eli understood that keeping a friendship did not mean keeping an empty seat. Sometimes remembering one person could help you make room for another.

Teacher says after reading: *“Now read the passage quietly one more time. Then answer the passage questions on your own. You may look back at the story as often as you need.”*

Part 1A: Reading the Writer's Narrative Choices

Use "The Extra Chair"

P1. T — Topic

Which statement BEST describes the central narrative situation?

- A. A class prepares for lunch.
- B. Eli struggles with a change after his friend moves and must decide how to respond to a new student.
- C. Jonah moves to another school.
- D. Students return from winter break.

P2. R — Relationships

Which detail BEST shows how Eli's past relationship with Jonah affects his choice with Mateo?

- A. The rain taps on the windows.
- B. Jonah and Eli argued about superheroes.
- C. Eli remembers Jonah making room for him on his first day, so he chooses to make room for Mateo.
- D. Mateo's hair is wet.

P3. A — Actions, Thoughts, and Dialogue

Which line BEST reveals Eli's internal conflict?

- A. "Class, this is Mateo."
- B. Eli looked down.
- C. Not that chair, he thought. Please don't put him in Jonah's chair.
- D. Mateo's shoulders relaxed.

P4. I — Important Moment

Which moment changes the direction of the story most?

- A.** Ms. Alvarez moves the desks.
- B.** Eli sees Jonah's empty chair.
- C.** Eli remembers what Jonah did for him and invites Mateo to sit beside him.
- D.** The class talks after winter break.

P5. L — Lesson or Lasting Effect

What lasting idea does Eli begin to understand?

- A.** Pizza can be disappointing.
- B.** New students should always sit in empty chairs.
- C.** Remembering an old friendship can help a person choose kindness in a new relationship.
- D.** Moving is always difficult.

P6. S — Setting

Which setting detail most helps create the mood at the beginning?

- A.** The classroom has desks.
- B.** Rain taps the windows while the room is noisy, but Eli sits quietly by the coat hooks.
- C.** Lunch takes place in a cafeteria.
- D.** The class has winter break.

Part 1B: Recognizing Strong Narrative Writing

Choose the response that would create the strongest narrative writing.

1. T — Topic

Which opening most clearly establishes a narrative topic or situation?

- A. School is something people attend almost every day.
- B. I like many different things about school and my friends.
- C. The moment I saw my science project lying in pieces on the hallway floor, I knew this would not be an ordinary morning.
- D. Science projects can be made from many different materials.

2. T — Staying Focused

A student is writing about the day she became separated from her family at a crowded festival. Which detail BEST belongs in the narrative?

- A. Festivals have been celebrated for hundreds of years.
- B. I squeezed between two groups of people, searching for my mother's red jacket.
- C. My favorite food at festivals is usually funnel cake.
- D. The festival took place in a city with many stores.

3. R — Relationships

A student is writing about two sisters who must work together to find their lost dog. Which sentence BEST develops the relationship between the sisters?

- A. My sister and I are related because we have the same parents.
- B. "You check the park, and I'll search behind the houses," Maya said, squeezing my hand before we separated.
- C. Dogs are sometimes difficult to find when they run away.
- D. My sister wore blue shoes that afternoon.

4. R — Behavior

Which detail BEST shows that a grandfather and grandson have a close relationship?

- A. Grandpa was seventy years old.
- B. Grandpa lived several miles from our house.
- C. Before every baseball game, Grandpa tapped my glove twice and whispered, "Play brave."
- D. Grandpa had watched baseball for many years.

5. A — Actions

Which sentence BEST uses action to help the reader experience the story?

- A. I was very nervous.
- B. Nervousness is a feeling people sometimes experience.
- C. My fingers tightened around the microphone as I stepped toward the front of the stage.
- D. The stage was in the school cafeteria.

6. A — Thoughts

Which sentence BEST reveals the narrator's thoughts?

- A. The race was beginning soon.
- B. I stared at the finish line and wondered whether all those early morning practices had been enough.
- C. There were eight runners in the race.
- D. Everyone stood near the starting line.

7. A — Dialogue

Which use of dialogue contributes MOST to the narrative?

- A. "Hi," I said.
- B. "Okay," she answered.
- C. "Don't open that door yet," Marcus whispered. "I heard something moving on the other side."
- D. "Yes," I replied.

8. A — Combining Craft

Which passage BEST combines action, thought, and dialogue?

- A. I was scared when I walked into the room.
- B. I walked inside. My teacher was there. She spoke to me.
- C. I pushed open the classroom door and stopped. Every chair faced the front. Did I come on the wrong day? I wondered. "Surprise!" my classmates shouted as they jumped from behind their desks.
- D. The classroom had twenty desks and several posters.

9. I — Important Moment

A student is writing about learning to ride a bicycle. Which moment should receive the MOST development?

- A. Choosing what shirt to wear that morning.
- B. Eating breakfast before going outside.
- C. The moment the student realizes no one is holding the bicycle and is riding independently.
- D. Putting the bicycle back in the garage afterward.

10. I — Slowing Down

Which passage BEST develops an important moment instead of rushing through it?

- A. I went onstage, performed, and then it was over.
- B. I sang my song. Everyone clapped. Then I went home.
- C. The first note came out softer than I intended. I glanced at my teacher, who gave me a small nod. I took another breath and tried again. This time, my voice filled the room.
- D. The performance happened on Thursday night.

11. I — Meaningful Details

Which detail would BEST help develop the moment when a student discovers that a missing pet has returned home?

- A. The house had four windows.
- B. I heard the familiar scratch against the back door and froze before racing across the kitchen.
- C. Pets need food and water every day.
- D. My backpack was lying beside the table.

12. L — Lesson

Which ending BEST communicates a lesson learned from getting lost during a hiking trip?

- A. Then we drove home.
- B. It was an interesting day in the forest.
- C. From that day forward, I understood why Dad always stopped to study the trail map before we started walking.
- D. Hiking trails can be long.

13. L — Lasting Effect

Which ending BEST shows that the events of the story had a lasting effect on the narrator?

- A. The next day was Monday.
- B. I still keep Grandma's handwritten recipe beside my bed, not because I need it to cook, but because her words remind me of the afternoon she taught me much more than how to bake bread.
- C. Grandma liked cooking.
- D. We cleaned the kitchen afterward.

14. S — Setting

Which description BEST establishes a setting that contributes to the narrative?

- A. We were outside.
- B. It was nighttime.
- C. Wind pushed against the cabin windows while rain hammered the metal roof, making it almost impossible to hear anything beyond the room.
- D. Cabins are usually made from wood.

15. S — Mood

A student is writing a suspenseful story. Which setting detail BEST supports the mood?

- A. The hallway had a floor and walls.
- B. The lights flickered as I walked down the empty hallway, and somewhere behind me a door slowly creaked open.
- C. The hallway was inside the school.
- D. Students walk through hallways during the day.

Part 2: Build the Narrative

This section makes student thinking visible through guided construction.

Teacher says: “Now the answer will not be in a list. I want to see how you build the parts of a narrative when I give you a place to think about each one. Use your own ideas. I can explain where to write, but I will not give you story ideas or tell you what to add.”

Narrative Situation

Student Prompt

Imagine that you are expecting an ordinary day when something unexpected happens that changes your relationship with another person. The other person may be a friend, family member, classmate, teacher, teammate, neighbor, or another person you know. The narrative may be real or fictional.

16. T — Topic

In one or two sentences, explain what will happen in your story.

My story will be about:

17. R — Relationships

Who are the two most important people in your story? Describe how their relationship is different at the beginning and the end.

Character 1: _____ Character 2: _____

18. A — Actions, Thoughts, and Dialogue

Write one example of an action, one thought, and one line of dialogue that could appear in your narrative.

Action: _____

Thought: _____

Dialogue: “ _____ ”

19. I — Important Moment

What will be the single most important moment in your story? Why is this moment important?

20. L — Lesson or Lasting Effect

What will the narrator learn, realize, understand, or remember because of this experience?

21. S — Setting

Where and when does the story take place? List two specific setting details that could help create the mood or influence what happens.

Part 3: Independent Narrative Writing

The strongest evidence for Independent and Reflective thinking

Teacher says: *“This is the part where I want to see what you can do as a writer on your own. You may use the planning space, but you do not have to follow a formula. Make choices that help the reader understand and experience your story. I will not remind you which TRAILS parts to add while you are writing. When you think you are finished, reread your story and make any changes you believe will make it stronger.”*

Narrative Writing Prompt

Writing Task

Think about a time when an unexpected event changed the way you thought about another person or changed your relationship with that person. Write a narrative about this experience. Your narrative may be based on a real experience or may be fictional.

Remember TRAILS™

- T — Topic: establish a clear situation and maintain focus on the central experience.
- R — Relationships: develop the relationships among the important characters.
- A — Actions, Thoughts, and Dialogue: show what characters do, think, feel, and say.
- I — Important Moment: slow down and fully develop the most important moment.
- L — Lesson or Lasting Effect: show how the experience affected the narrator, another character, or their relationship.
- S — Setting: create a deliberate setting that helps the reader understand, experience, or feel the story.

Optional Planning Space

Beginning — What is happening before the important moment?

Important Moment — What happens that changes something?

Ending — What is different afterward?

Write Your Narrative

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Part 4: Broad Writing Check

Secondary information only

The primary purpose of this diagnostic is narrative development. Revising and editing results may help teachers plan support, but they should not determine the student's primary TRAILS™ thinking profile.

22. Revising Check

Read the sentence: "I walked into the gym and saw everyone looking at me." Which revision would BEST make this important moment more vivid?

- A. I walked into the gym.
- B. Everyone was there.
- C. The gym was a place where people played sports.
- D. I stepped through the gym doors and stopped. Hundreds of faces turned toward me at once, and my stomach seemed to drop to the floor.

23. Editing Check

Which sentence is written correctly?

- A. "Come back!" shouted Mia as she ran toward the gate.
- B. "Come back"! shouted Mia as she ran toward the gate.
- C. "come back!" shouted Mia as she ran toward the gate.
- D. Come back! "shouted Mia as she ran toward the gate."

Teacher says when students finish: *"Thank you. I am going to use this writing to decide what to teach you next and which parts you are ready to do with more independence. This is information for growth, not a grade."*

Teacher Scoring & RPLD Interpretation Guide

Score the thinking, not just the number correct

● Foundational	■ Emergent	▼ Visible	▲ Independent	◆ Reflective
(Beginning)	(Developing)	(Engaging)	(Independent)	(Highly Independent)

Three Sources of Evidence

Assessment evidence	What it measures best	Highest level it can support by itself	Teacher interpretation
Part 1	Recognition and discrimination among narrative choices	■ Emergent (Developing)	Correct answers show that the student can recognize effective narrative craft. Recognition alone is not evidence that the student can produce the craft independently.
Part 2	Guided construction of individual TRAILS™ elements	▼ Visible (Engaging)	The student's thinking becomes visible because the student must generate the element, but the prompt still tells the student exactly what to create.
Part 3	Independent integration and transfer	◆ Reflective (Highly Independent)	Independent writing is required to justify ▲ Independent or ◆ Reflective. Reflective additionally requires strategic, intentional craft and evidence of evaluation/revision/transfer.
Part 4	Broad revising/editing awareness	Supplemental only	Use to plan conventions support; do not lower a narrative thinking level solely because conventions are weak.

How to Assign a Level to Each TRAILS™ Strand

- Do not average the six TRAILS™ strands into one thinking level. Record each strand separately.
- Use the highest level that is supported by consistent evidence, not by a single lucky response.
- If Part 1 is strong but Part 2/3 are weak, the student likely recognizes the skill but cannot yet construct it independently.
- If Part 2 is strong but Part 3 is weak, the student's thinking is Visible: the skill appears when the task names and structures it, but does not transfer consistently into independent writing.

- If Part 3 shows the skill without prompting, Independent is appropriate. Reflective requires strategic choice, depth, control, and/or revision that improves the reader’s experience.

A useful teacher question

Instead of asking “How many points did the student earn?” ask “What is the highest level of thinking this student can demonstrate consistently in this TRAILS™ strand, and what support would allow the next level to appear?”

TRAILS™ RPLD Student Thinking Profile

One student can—and often will—have six different levels

TRAILS™ strand	Current RPLD level	Evidence from this diagnostic	Next instructional target
T — Topic	_____		
R — Relationships	_____		
A — Actions, Thoughts, and Dialogue	_____		
I — Important Moment	_____		
L — Lesson or Lasting Effect	_____		
S — Setting	_____		

Teacher Growth Conversation Template

Teacher says: “I noticed that your _____ is currently at the _____ level because I saw you _____. That means you already know how to _____. Your next step is to _____. I am going to give you just enough support to practice that next step, and then I will watch for you to do it on your own.”

Example

“Your Setting is Independent because you used the storm and the dark hallway to affect the mood and what your character did. Your Important Moment is Visible because you identified the right moment in planning, but in the story you moved through it in only two sentences. We are going to keep your setting work independent and target only the important moment by stretching those few seconds into several meaningful details.”

Worked Example: Turn the Profile into an Instructional Plan

Sample student profile: T ▲ Independent | R ▼ Visible | A ▼ Visible | I ■ Emergent | L ■ Emergent | S ▲ Independent

Instructional decision	What the teacher does	What the teacher avoids
Preserve strengths	Let Topic and Setting remain independent during new writing. Praise the specific evidence of control, then move on.	Do not assign basic topic-identification or setting-senses worksheets just because the student is weaker elsewhere.
Target first	Teach Important Moment with a camera-zoom rehearsal, then connect the expanded moment to a meaningful Lesson/Lasting Effect.	Do not reteach all six TRAILS™ components at once.
Fade support	After guided practice, give a fresh short narrative task without an Important Moment box and look for transfer.	Do not keep the student on the same organizer after the target appears independently.

Teacher can say: *“You already know how to keep your story focused and make the setting work for you. I am not going to make you start over on those skills. We are going to work on slowing down the moment where everything changes and then showing why that moment mattered. When you can do that without my organizer, we will move the support again.”*

T — Topic

Does the student establish a clear narrative situation and sustain focus on the central experience?

Thinking level	What the student answer/work shows	Teacher move to grow thinking	Evidence that the student is ready to move up
• Foundational (Beginning)	The response is off-topic, extremely broad, or a list of events with no clear central experience. The student may be able to point to a narrative topic when choices are provided but cannot yet establish one in writing.	Use oral rehearsal and a one-sentence story frame: “This is a story about the time when ____ changed because ____.” Sort focused vs. unfocused openings. Ask the student to name the one event the story is really about.	The student can select and state a clear story focus with teacher support and can identify details that belong or do not belong.
■ Emergent (Developing)	The student states a recognizable situation but focus drifts, begins too broadly, or includes unrelated events. Recognition is stronger than production.	Have the student underline the “story promise” in the opening and cross-check each planned event: “Does this help tell that story?” Provide two possible openings and discuss which is more focused.	The student independently writes a focused topic/situation during guided planning and keeps most planned events connected to it.
▼ Visible (Engaging)	The student can create a focused topic when the organizer explicitly asks for it. The idea is clear in planning, but the final narrative may wander or start too far before the important event.	Fade the organizer. Ask for a one-sentence story promise before drafting, then have the student reread after drafting and mark any sentence that does not serve that promise.	The independent narrative establishes the situation efficiently and remains focused without teacher reminders.
▲ Independent (Independent)	The student independently establishes a clear situation and sustains focus across the narrative. Details generally serve the central experience.	Move from focus to intentional framing. Ask: “What should the reader understand or feel from the very first lines?” Compare two possible openings and revise for purpose.	The student deliberately frames the topic, controls what is included/excluded, and can explain why the chosen opening best prepares the reader.
◆ Reflective (Highly Independent)	The student strategically frames the central experience, selects only purposeful details, and may use an opening/ending relationship, motif, or intentional structure to deepen meaning.	Extend rather than remediate. Invite experimentation with alternate openings, time shifts, or framing devices. Ask the student to justify how structure changes the reader’s understanding.	Sustain strategic control in unfamiliar narrative prompts and transfer the same focus decisions to a different genre or audience.

R — Relationships

Does the student show how characters are connected and how events influence that relationship?

Thinking level	What the student answer/work shows	Teacher move to grow thinking	Evidence that the student is ready to move up
• Foundational (Beginning)	Characters may be named, but the relationship is absent, confusing, or stated only as a label such as “my friend.”	Use a two-character relationship map: “At the beginning they ____; after the event they ____.” Rehearse one interaction orally before writing.	The student can identify who matters and describe a simple beginning relationship with support.
■ Emergent (Developing)	The relationship is recognizable but mostly told rather than demonstrated. Interactions may not affect the story.	Ask “What would this person do or say that only makes sense because of this relationship?” Model replacing labels with a small interaction, gesture, memory, or line of dialogue.	The student creates one relevant interaction that reveals the relationship rather than merely naming it.
▼ Visible (Engaging)	The student can describe the relationship and a change in planning, and includes some interaction in the draft, but development may be uneven.	Remove the relationship map and ask the student to show beginning vs. ending through two moments in the story. Conference with: “Where can the reader see the relationship change?”	The independent story includes interactions before/after the important moment that make the relationship understandable without explanation from the teacher.
▲ Independent (Independent)	Relationships are developed through purposeful interaction, and the narrative shows how the event changes, tests, strengthens, or reveals the relationship.	Push toward subtlety and complexity: conflicting feelings, misunderstandings, gestures, or dialogue with subtext. Ask the student to cut any sentence that simply labels the relationship if the story already shows it.	The student deliberately chooses interactions that reveal change and can explain how those choices shape the reader’s view of the characters.
◆ Reflective (Highly Independent)	Relationship development is layered and intentional; changes may be implied through recurring actions, dialogue, contrast, or reflection rather than directly stated.	Invite multiple points of view or scenes where the same interaction means different things to different characters.	The student transfers nuanced relationship craft to new narrative contexts and can analyze how small choices alter character dynamics.

A — Actions, Thoughts, and Dialogue

Does the student use character behavior, internal thinking, and speech to develop character and move events forward?

Thinking level	What the student answer/work shows	Teacher move to grow thinking	Evidence that the student is ready to move up
• Foundational (Beginning)	The writing mainly reports events: “I was scared. We went inside.” Actions, thoughts, and dialogue are missing or unrelated.	Use “Show it three ways”: What did the body do? What did the character think? What could the character say? Orally generate one of each before writing.	The student can recognize and generate a relevant action, thought, or dialogue line with support.
■ Emergent (Developing)	The student uses one craft type, often repeatedly, but may add dialogue or actions that do not change character understanding or events.	Have the student label A/T/D in a short excerpt and ask, “What job does this sentence do?” Keep only lines that reveal character or move the story.	The student can choose among action, thought, and dialogue based on what the moment needs.
▼ Visible (Engaging)	The student can generate all three in the guided section and uses some in the story, but integration may feel inserted or formulaic.	Fade sentence stems. During revision, circle one important paragraph and ask the student to add the one A/T/D move that best deepens it—not all three automatically.	The independent narrative integrates purposeful action, thought, and/or dialogue naturally where they are needed.
▲ Independent (Independent)	The student independently uses A/T/D to reveal character, create tension, and advance events. Choices are generally purposeful rather than decorative.	Teach economy and subtext. Ask whether the dialogue sounds like something the character would truly say and whether internal thoughts add information the reader could not already see.	The student selects craft strategically and can explain why a thought, action, or line of dialogue is more effective than another option.
◆ Reflective (Highly Independent)	A/T/D work together with precision. Dialogue may reveal more than it says directly; actions and thoughts may contrast; craft choices shape pacing and character complexity.	Invite revision for voice, subtext, and contrast between internal and external behavior.	The student transfers strategic character craft across narrators, points of view, and unfamiliar prompts.

I — Important Moment

Can the student identify the moment of greatest change and slow it down using meaningful detail and controlled pacing?

Thinking level	What the student answer/work shows	Teacher move to grow thinking	Evidence that the student is ready to move up
• Foundational (Beginning)	The story may have events, but there is no clear turning point, or the most important moment is skipped or summarized in a single vague sentence.	Use a timeline and place a star on the one moment where something changes. Orally “freeze” the moment and ask: What did you see? hear? do? think? say?	The student can identify the important moment and add at least two relevant details with strong guidance.
■ Emergent (Developing)	The important moment is present but rushed. The student may spend more time on setup than on the event that actually matters.	Use a pacing ratio: quickly summarize what leads up to the moment, then stretch 5–10 seconds into several sentences. Model “camera zoom.”	The student can expand the important moment in guided writing so it receives more development than routine events.
▼ Visible (Engaging)	The student can name the important moment and explain why it matters in planning, but the independent draft may only partially slow it down.	Remove the “why is it important?” prompt and instead have the student highlight the moment in the draft. Ask: “Where does time slow down? If I blink, will I miss the change?”	The independent narrative clearly slows at the turning point and uses meaningful sensory/action/thought detail.
▲ Independent (Independent)	The student controls pacing independently, developing the important moment with enough detail for the reader to experience the change.	Teach intentional pacing choices: sentence length, paragraph breaks, silence, repeated action, or delayed information. Ask what pacing effect the student wants.	The student can revise pacing strategically and explain how a pacing choice changes tension, emotion, or emphasis.
◆ Reflective (Highly Independent)	The important moment is crafted deliberately. The writer manipulates time and detail for emotional or thematic effect and may use contrast, pause, or reflection with control.	Extend through experimentation with compressed vs. expanded versions of the same scene or nonlinear structure.	The student transfers pacing control to unfamiliar stories and chooses the degree of expansion based on purpose rather than a formula.

L — Lesson or Lasting Effect

Does the narrative reveal how the experience matters—what changed, was learned, was realized, or continues to affect the narrator or relationship?

Thinking level	What the student answer/work shows	Teacher move to grow thinking	Evidence that the student is ready to move up
• Foundational (Beginning)	The story simply stops, ends with “then I went home,” or gives no evidence that the event mattered.	Ask orally: “What was different after this happened?” Offer concrete choices: thinking, feeling, behavior, relationship, or future action.	The student can state one clear change or realization when directly prompted.
■ Emergent (Developing)	The student states a lesson in a generic way (“I learned to never give up”) that may not be well connected to the events.	Trace the lesson back to a specific story moment: “What happened that taught that?” Replace generic morals with a sentence that could only belong to this story.	The student writes a lesson or effect that is clearly tied to the event, with some support.
▼ Visible (Engaging)	The guided plan contains a relevant realization or lasting effect, but the final ending may summarize or state it abruptly.	Have the student reread the ending and ask: “Can the reader see the change, not just be told the lesson?” Add a final action, thought, image, or relationship shift that shows the effect.	The independent narrative ends in a way that clearly reveals change and connects naturally to the events.
▲ Independent (Independent)	The student independently communicates a meaningful change or realization connected to the narrative and avoids a generic moral.	Push toward resonance rather than explanation. Ask whether one image, action, or reflection could imply the lesson more powerfully than stating it directly.	The student intentionally chooses between direct reflection and implied meaning and can explain the effect on the reader.
◆ Reflective (Highly Independent)	The lasting effect is woven through the narrative and may be implied, echoed through an image or relationship, or revealed through subtle reflection. The ending deepens the story rather than merely closing it.	Invite thematic connections, motif, circular endings, or understated reflection.	The student creates resonant endings in new contexts and can revise endings for different audiences or purposes.

S — Setting

Does the student use where/when/atmosphere as an active part of the narrative rather than merely naming a place?

Thinking level	What the student answer/work shows	Teacher move to grow thinking	Evidence that the student is ready to move up
• Foundational (Beginning)	Setting is absent or only named: "We were at school." It does not help the reader imagine or understand the event.	Use a setting senses chart: What could the character see, hear, feel, smell, or notice? Choose only details relevant to the story.	The student can add one or two concrete setting details when prompted.
■ Emergent (Developing)	The student includes descriptive details, but they may be random, list-like, or disconnected from mood/events.	Ask: "Why does the reader need this detail?" Sort details into useful vs. decorative. Model how weather, space, noise, or objects can affect what happens.	The student selects setting details that support the mood or action, not just describe the place.
▼ Visible (Engaging)	The student can plan two purposeful details and uses some in the narrative, but setting may disappear after the beginning.	Fade the senses organizer. Ask the student to revisit setting at the important moment: "What changes in the surroundings—or what does the character notice now?"	The independent narrative uses setting more than once and connects it to mood, action, or character experience.
▲ Independent (Independent)	The student independently selects setting details that shape mood, actions, pacing, or meaning. The setting feels integrated rather than added on.	Push toward atmosphere and symbolism. Ask whether a repeated place/object/weather detail could deepen meaning without overdescribing.	The student can revise setting choices for a specific emotional effect and explain how the details influence the reader.
◆ Reflective (Highly Independent)	Setting operates as part of the craft: atmosphere, contrast, recurring imagery, or symbolic details contribute to theme, character, or structural unity.	Invite the student to rewrite the same event in a different setting and analyze how the story's meaning or mood changes.	The student transfers intentional setting craft across prompts and manipulates environment for narrative effect.

How Teachers Move Students from One Thinking Level to the Next

The scaffold should change as the thinking changes

● Foundational → ■ Emergent

Goal: move from not yet demonstrating the skill to recognizing and attempting it.

Teacher move: Teacher provides explicit model, oral rehearsal, choices, sorting, sentence starters, and one small target at a time.

Teacher language: *“Watch how I make this choice. Now tell me which example works better and why. Next, you try one with me.”*

■ Emergent → ▼ Visible

Goal: move from recognition/partial attempts to generating the skill when the task names it.

Teacher move: Teacher removes answer choices, gives a targeted organizer, uses guided questions, then asks the student to generate the element.

Teacher language: *“You already recognize what this looks like. Now I want you to build one. I’ll give you the question, but the idea must come from you.”*

▼ Visible → ▲ Independent

Goal: move from successful guided construction to transfer inside a complete narrative without reminders.

Teacher move: Teacher fades organizers and prompts, asks students to apply the skill in authentic writing, then checks whether it appears spontaneously.

Teacher language: *“You can do this when I point to it. Now I’m going to stop naming it for you. Show me where you decide it belongs in your own story.”*

▲ Independent → ◆ Reflective

Goal: move from competent independent use to strategic, intentional craft and self-evaluation.

Teacher move: Teacher offers choices, asks for justification, invites revision for effect, and increases complexity rather than adding more of the same work.

Teacher language: *“You can already do this on your own. Now decide which version creates the effect you want, revise intentionally, and tell me why your choice is stronger.”*

Do Not Over-Scaffold Strong Strands

Important

If a student is ▲ Independent or ♦ Reflective in a strand, do not require the student to keep completing Foundational or Emergent practice for that same strand simply because another strand is weaker. Preserve independence where it already exists and target the strand that needs growth.

Embedded Progress-Monitoring Tools

A second full diagnostic is not required

Strand	2–5 minute embedded check	What counts as growth
T — Topic	Give two unrelated narrative ideas. Ask the student to choose one and write a focused two-sentence opening that makes the central experience clear.	Student demonstrates the next-level behavior with less prompting and in a new example.
R — Relationships	Provide two characters and one event. Ask the student to write a short interaction that shows their relationship before or after the event without labeling it.	Student demonstrates the next-level behavior with less prompting and in a new example.
A — Actions, Thoughts, Dialogue	Give a plain sentence such as “Mia was worried.” Ask the student to develop the moment using the one craft move that would best reveal the worry.	Student demonstrates the next-level behavior with less prompting and in a new example.
I — Important Moment	Give a three-sentence rushed event. Ask the student to expand only the turning point into 5–7 sentences while leaving routine events compressed.	Student demonstrates the next-level behavior with less prompting and in a new example.
L — Lesson/Lasting Effect	Give a narrative ending that only says “Then I went home.” Ask the student to revise it so the reader understands what changed or why the experience mattered.	Student demonstrates the next-level behavior with less prompting and in a new example.
S — Setting	Give a neutral location and a target mood. Ask the student to add two details that create that mood and affect the character’s experience.	Student demonstrates the next-level behavior with less prompting and in a new example.

Progress-Monitoring Cycle

Instructional Cycle
Narrative Diagnostic → TRAILS™ RPLD Profile → Target One or Two Strands → Provide Level-Matched Support → Short Embedded Writing Check → Reduce or Adjust Support → Look for Independent Transfer → Extend Craft

Quick Teacher Conference Record

Use this record for a brief strand-specific conference. The goal is to document one observable strength and one next thinking move - not to rescore the entire narrative.

Student / Date	Student: _____ Date: _____
Priority Strand / Current Level	Strand: T R A I L S Level: ● Foundational ■ Emergent ▼ Visible ▲ Independent ◆ Reflective
Evidence I Saw	In the student work, I noticed: _____ _____ _____
Next Move / Recheck	Next thinking target: _____ Support I will provide: _____ I will recheck this skill on/through: _____
Conference Language “I can see that you can already _____. Your next thinking move is to _____. I am going to give you _____ support while you practice it. Then I will look for you to do it with less help in a new piece of writing.”	

Teacher Answer Key & Evidence Map

Recognition items support—but do not replace—writing evidence

Item	Answer	Primary evidence
P1	B	T
P2	C	R
P3	C	A
P4	C	I
P5	C	L
P6	B	S
1	C	T
2	B	T
3	B	R
4	C	R
5	C	A
6	B	A
7	C	A
8	C	A
9	C	I
10	C	I
11	B	I
12	C	L
13	B	L

14	C	S
15	B	S
22	D	Revising
23	A	Editing

Scoring Reminder

Do not convert the recognition-item total into the student's RPLD level. A student can answer every recognition item correctly and still be Visible rather than Independent if those same narrative decisions do not appear in the student's own writing.

Flexible Grouping by Strand

Group for the skill, not for a global "ability" label. A student may need one group for Important Moment and a different level of support for Setting.

- Foundational groups: explicit modeling + oral rehearsal + concrete choices.
- Emergent groups: remove choices; use guided generation and comparison.
- Visible groups: fade the organizer; require transfer into a short authentic narrative.
- Independent groups: preserve autonomy; use conferences and strategic revision rather than repetitive worksheets.
- Reflective groups: increase complexity, audience, point of view, structure, subtlety, and self-evaluation.