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Peer reviewed

Student Characteristics and Essay Test Writing Performance

Sarah Warshauer Freedman, University of California, Berkeley

Abstract College freshmen at more selective schools perform best on holistically scored writing tasks. Regardless of school, those who claim to write better or worse than their peers do so. Although individual topics affect students' scores, the students' sense of the ease or interest level of a topic is not the source of the effect. Surveys revealed that students assess topics containing quoted material beyond newspaper reading level as duller and more difficult than topics that ask students to argue their opinion on a current controversial issue, but students feel that they usually write on difficult, interesting topics. Students at more selective schools found writing more pleasurable and more interesting than their counterparts and were more confident in their writing abilities. Freshmen enjoyed writing more and were more confident in their abilities than older students. Students' interest in writing varied significantly depending on their teachers.

In her now classic book, *Errors and Expectations* (1977), Mina Shaughnessy discusses three sources of problems in student writing: a lack in *knowledge*, difficulties encountered during the composing *process*, and negative *attitudes* toward writing. Shaughnessy's discussion draws on a careful analysis of student texts written under testing conditions, an analysis which permits inferences based on patterns of errors in student texts. Each source, Shaughnessy reminds us, suggests a different pedagogy, a different remedy. According to Shaughnessy, teachers often assume that writing problems stem only from a student's lack of knowledge, but they must remain alert to the other two sources of problems as well as employ the pedagogy appropriate to the problem.

Since the publication of *Errors and Expectations*, the relationship of problems in the composing process to problems in the students' products has been the focus of several studies (e.g., Graves, 1978; Perl, 1979; Bridwell, 1980; Sommers, 1980; Daiute, 1981; Matsuhashi, 1981). However, the effect of student attitudes on writing has received less attention. General research on attitudes and learning supports Shaughnessy's conclusions that attitudes toward writing affect writing quality. It has been found that students who feel that they control their own destiny perform differently

The author wishes to thank Professors Robert Calfee and Steve Witte for their critical reading of drafts of this article and for their helpful suggestions for revision.

from those who feel that their fate is in the hands of others (Rotter, 1966; Lefcourt, 1976; Weiner, 1979). In addition, studies of writing anxiety (e.g., Daly, 1978; Daly & Shamo, 1978; Bloom, 1979; Bloom, 1980) and of writer's block (Rose, 1980; 1981) suggest that students' attitudes affect their written products.

Such studies focus on one complex of student attitudes having to do with general self-esteem and its relationship to writing. Other types of attitudes also may be related to student performance in writing. In a theoretical piece on growth in writing, Miller (1982) asks an important question about student writers that underlies another complex of attitudes: "What do writers think of the quality of their writing?" (p. 177). Miller contends that "the subjective variable of self-evaluation, investigated more extensively, may lead to new theory and applications that connect our students with questions of quality—of being good at writing—that we too often allow to be begged" (p. 182).

Besides attitudes that reveal one's general self-esteem and one's confidence as a writer, some researchers have hypothesized that attitudes toward particular topics can affect the way students perform. Freedman (1981) and Baker & Quellmalz (1981) found that students perform better on some topics than others. Although this differential performance remains unexplained, Keech's (1982) research suggests one possibility. She discovered that apparently similar topics make different cognitive demands on students and that the same topic may be interpreted differently by different students. Another explanation may revolve around students' attitudes toward their topics. If a student finds a topic too difficult or boring, the student may not write as well as if the student is fascinated by the topic.

The present study explores whether student attitudes towards writing topics affect writing performance. Questionnaire data are used to create a portrait of attitudes that a fairly representative group of college freshmen have toward writing tasks and topics. Then the writing of these freshmen is assessed on a series of typical test writing tasks. These data—the attitudinal data from the questionnaires and the written products—are used to investigate how students' attitudes relate to their performance on typical test writing tasks.

Phase 1

Questionnaires

Method and Materials

Subjects. Students enrolled in required freshman level writing classes at

each of four colleges or universities in the San Francisco Bay Area participated in this study. The schools, described in Freedman (1977 & 1981), were selected to provide a heterogeneous group of students. At each school, the English department chair was asked to supply two "typical" writing classes, each taught by a different teacher. In all, the initial participants consisted of 162 students, almost evenly distributed among the eight classes (two classes at each of the four schools).

Topics. Twelve topics were developed to serve as the prompts to assess student attitudes toward topics and to serve as the topics for the writing assessment. The topics were designed to be typical of those topics found on proficiency and placement tests which call for expository/argumentative essays. Half of the topics asked students to compare and contrast two quotations; and half asked them to argue their opinion on a current controversial issue. A sample of each topic type follows:

1. Current bumper sticker: "America—Love It or Leave It."

18th century politician: "To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely."

Compare and contrast the philosophies expressed by these two statements. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of both positions. To what extent might one hold both points of view?*

2. A Stanford law professor, Anthony Amsterdam, recently argued against capital punishment, the death penalty, before the Supreme Court. Do you think capital punishment, should or should not be allowed in the United States? Give your reasons for your opinions.

Questionnaires. For the topic attitude survey, two questionnaires about the topics were developed. The first asked students to assess the interest level of each topic by placing a "+" beside the most interesting four topics and a "-" beside the four least interesting. The second topic questionnaire was parallel to the first but asked students to assess the difficulty level rather than the interest level.

For the general attitude survey, a third questionnaire was developed. Besides eliciting information about the students (birthdate, sex, year in school, SAT scores, parents' occupations), it assessed their attitudes toward in-class or test-type writing (whether they found writing pleasurable or painful, easy or difficult, interesting or dull and whether they were confident in their writing). For these attitude questions, a four point Likert scale was used so that the even number of points would prevent neutral choice of a middle category.

* This topic was first developed by the California State Universities and College System for their Freshman English Equivalency Examination

Procedure

During a single class session, the teacher distributed all three questionnaires, the ones for assessing the interest and difficulty levels of the twelve topics first and the one for gathering the general information second.

For the topic assessments, the twelve topics were placed in two different random orders. Each random order was used with both the difficulty level and interest level directions. In each class, one quarter of the students were randomly selected to assess difficulty level with topics in random order 1 (RO 1) first, a second quarter assessed difficulty with topics in random order 2 (RO 2) first, a third quarter assessed interest level with RO 1 first, and the last quarter assessed interest level with RO 2. After students completed their first assessments, be they for interest or difficulty level, the students completed the second assessment, with the topics in the other random order. These procedures prevented either topic order or task order from influencing the results. Students in all classes completed the topic assessments within two weeks of one another.

Results

Topic Attitudes. Tabulations were made of how frequently each topic had been labeled interesting or difficult. Students thought that the quotation topics, with one exception, were difficult and dull. Students' opinions were divided on one of the opinion topics: but they labeled the rest, along with the one quotation topic, interesting and easy. The quoted material in the quotation topic judged interesting and easy came from a Dear Abby column. The quotation topics labeled dull were labeled such by an average of 38 more students than labeled them interesting, and the same topics were labeled difficult by an average of 53 more students than labeled them interesting. On the other hand, those remaining topics that were labeled interesting were labeled such by an average of 34 more students than labeled them dull, and the same topics were labeled easy by an average of 31 more students than labeled them difficult. Responses were consistent across all eight classes in the study.

General Attitudes. The general attitude questions revealed that 62% of the students believed that they performed well on tasks that 61% found difficult and that 73% found interesting. Over half of the students, 55%, found writing pleasurable while the remaining 45% found it painful. Of the women, 67% found writing difficult (compared to 55% of the men), and 77% found it interesting (compared to 70% of the men). Equal numbers of males and females found writing pleasurable and were confident in their abilities. Of the eighteen-year-old freshmen, 58% found writing pleasurable (compared to 48% of the "others" who were nonfreshmen or

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freshmen over age 18); and 67% of this younger group thought they wrote better than their peers (compared to 46% of the "others"). Equal numbers of freshmen and "others" found writing difficult and interesting. At the two more selective schools, 64 and 62% of the students found writing pleasurable (compared to 45 and 46% at the less selective) and 77 and 79% found writing interesting (compared to 65 and 66% at the less selective schools). Also, 69 and 68% of the students at the more selective schools exhibited confidence about their in-class writing performance (compared to 53 and 49% at the less selective). Equal percentages at each school found writing difficult.

The general attitude questions revealed a sample that believed they performed well on difficult writing tasks that they found interesting. Women found writing both more difficult and more interesting than men. Younger freshmen found writing more pleasurable than "others," and unlike "others" thought they wrote better than their peers. Students at the two more selective schools found writing pleasurable and interesting, unlike their counterparts at the two less selective schools. Also, students at the more selective schools exhibited more confidence about their in-class writing performance.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) tested whether the subgroups of students responded differently to each of the four attitude questions (Table 1). In the ANOVA, the students were placed in four types of subgroups to form the sources of variance—school attended, class within school, age, and sex. The interaction between age and sex was also examined. Students in different classes varied significantly in how interesting they claimed to find writing. The histogram in Figure 1 depicts this variation.

Table 1
Analysis of Variance for Writer Attitudes: Contributions of Writer Traits

Source	df	Pleasure		Interest		Ease		Confidence	
		MS	F	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F
School	3	.61	1.50	.37	.58	.04	.09	.80	1.52
Class (Sch)	4	.95	1.63	2.26	3.53**	.57	1.22	.78	1.48
Age	1	.14	.24	1.33	2.10	.73	1.58	1.69	2.22
Sex	1	.32	.55	.85	1.34	.33	.72	.10	.18
Age X Sex	1	2.47	4.32*	.88	1.40	.13	.29	.01	.03
Residual	150	.57		.63		.46		.53	

*p < .05 1.150df F = 3.84

**p < .01 4.150df F = 3.32

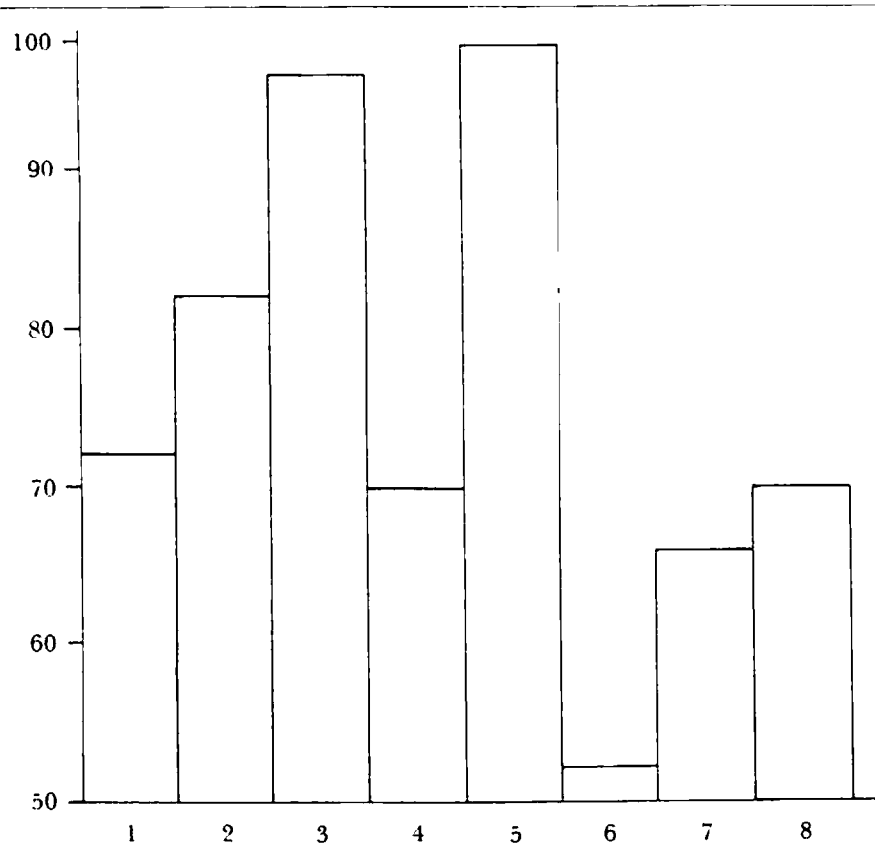


Figure 1. Interest in writing in different classes.

The only other significant variation was an interaction between age and sex with respect to how pleasurable students found writing. The male freshmen found writing more pleasurable than the male "others." On the other hand, the female "others" found writing more pleasurable than the female freshmen (Table 2). The females reversed the general trend in which freshmen found writing more pleasurable than "others."

The amount of pleasure and difficulty, pleasure and interest, and difficulty and confidence were correlated more highly than the other combinations (Table 3). Pleasure and interest were positively correlated, but difficulty and interest were negatively correlated. The more pleasurable students found writing, the less difficult they found it. The confidence variable was stated negatively ("worse" on Table 3) so that the more difficult students found the task, the less confidence they felt.

Phase II

Rating Essays

Method and M

Writers. Although eight topics, o essays in all. B variables, for t related variables measured again of writers in ca ables and acco the different s year old fresh

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Table 2
Amount of Pain in Writing—Age by Sex Interaction

	Male	Female
Freshmen	\bar{x} 2.38 SD (.72)	2.50 (.65)
Others	2.80 (.87)	2.41 (.97)

(4 = highest amount of pain; 1 = lowest amount of pain)

Table 3
Attitude Correlations

	Pleasure	Difficulty	Interest	Worse
Pleasure	1.00	-.36**	.37**	-.11
Difficulty		1.00	-.13	.30**
Interest			1.00	-.14
Worse than Most				1.00

** $p < .001$

Phase II

Rating Essays

Method and Materials

Writers. Although each student in each class wrote an essay on one of the eight topics, only eight essays from each class actually were scored, 64 essays in all. Because of the pattern of correlation between the attitude variables, for the next phase of the research, only the least highly correlated variables, pleasure and degree of confidence, were included and measured against the evaluators' holistic ratings of the essays. Subgroups of writers in each class were formed according to these two attitude variables and according to their age. Because of the distinctive age trends at the different schools, two age related subgroups were formed: eighteen year old freshmen and "others."

Table 4 contains the balanced design for assigning topics to the different types of writers. The orthogonal design assures as nearly as possible that four of the writers from each class were eighteen-year-old

Table 4

Writer	Freshmen				Others			
	HH	HL	LH	LL	HH	HL	LH	LL
School								
CH 2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
SJ 1	2	3	1	5	6	4	8	7
CH 1	3	1	4	7	8	5	6	2
SU 2	4	6	7	3	1	8	2	5
SC 2	5	8	2	6	7	3	1	4
SU 1	6	4	8	1	2	7	5	3
SJ 2	7	5	6	8	3	2	4	1
SC 1	8	7	5	2	4	1	3	6

Topics are the within cell Latin factor. Abbreviations for schools are CH, California State University at Hayward; SJ, San Jose City College; SU, Stanford University; SC, Santa Clara University. For the HL combinations, the first H or L stands for the student's response about the pain or pleasure of writing on the questionnaire, H being painful and L being pleasurable. The second H or L stands for the student's response about his or her writing ability, H being high self confidence and L being low self-confidence.

freshmen: four were over age eighteen or were not freshmen. The four freshmen and the four "others" fit into the following four categories—one per category: (a) found writing pleasurable and was confident in ability, (b) found writing pleasurable and lacked confidence in ability, (c) found writing painful and was confident in ability, (d) found writing painful and lacked confidence in ability. In all, half of the 64 writers were eighteen-year-old freshmen, half were older; half found writing pleasurable, half found it painful; half exhibited confidence in their ability, half lacked confidence. From each class, one paper was scored on each topic, and each essay was written by each type of student. Across the classes, every type of student wrote on every topic.

Raters. The most qualified raters available judged the essays. All expected to complete their doctorates in English literature at Stanford within the year. All had taught writing requirement classes for at least three years. All had had previous experience with holistic evaluation, and their superiors in the English department at Stanford recommended them as excellent teachers and as able evaluators of student prose.

Procedures

For the test writing task and subsequent holistic scoring, the students wrote only on those eight topics about which they felt most strongly. The two quotation and two opinion topics least frequently identified as among the most or least interesting and difficult were eliminated. This procedure

made it possible to examine the relationship between how the students felt about the topics and their ability to write essays on them.

Of the six quotation topics, the topic chosen 153 times and the one chosen 137 times provoked the least strong feelings. The number of choices for the remaining quotation topics ranged from 171 to 212. For the opinion topics, the topic chosen least, 113 times, was eliminated. Then, since three other topics were chosen about the same number of times, one of them was selected randomly to be eliminated. The number of choices for the remaining opinion topics ranged from 145 to 164. Half of the students wrote on a quotation topic and half wrote on an opinion topic. But since one of the selected quotation topics was considered interesting and easy, only $\frac{3}{8}$ th's of the students wrote on a topic most found dull and difficult and $\frac{5}{8}$ th's wrote on a topic that most found interesting and easy.

Writing. During one class meeting, the teachers distributed the essay topics to the appropriate students according to the design in Table 4. The other students in the class received a randomly selected topic. The students did not know that only eight of the essays from their class would be scored. The students wrote in class on their assigned topic during a 45-minute period.

Rating. The plan for collecting the holistic ratings is identical to that described in Freedman (1977 & 1981) and Freedman & Calfee (1983). In the end, four raters gave each essay a holistic score on a 1 to 4 point holistic scale. According to Cronbach's (1970) alpha, the evaluators rated reliably. The alpha for the differences between papers was appropriately high at .84 and the consistency of differences between readers was appropriately low with an alpha of .20 (see Freedman, 1977 & 1981 for complete reliability statistics).

Results

Because of the orthogonal design, an analysis of variance was performed to uncover how the different writer attributes and attitudes—student's school, age, amount of pleasure derived from writing, and amount of confidence in in-class writing performance—contributed to the variance between the raters' holistic scores (Table 5). School was the strongest predictor of how students' writing was judged ($p < .001$). The more selective the admissions standards of the school, the higher the judgments of the students' writing samples. But regardless of where the students went to school, self-assessments of writing also related to the judgment of writing quality ($p < .05$). If students claimed to perform better than their peers, they did; if they claimed to do worse, they did. The pleasure students associated with writing did not account for ratings of their writing, nor did age.

Table 5
Analysis of Variance for Holistic Scores: Contributions of Writer
Attributes

Source	df	MS	F
Pain/pleasure	1	2.057	.333
Confidence/lack	1	30.548	4.939*
Class (Sch)	4	13.251	2.142
School	3	54.142	8.802***
Age	1	.128	.021
Residual	53	6.18	

*p < .05 1.53df F = 4.02
***p < .001 3.53df F = 5.82

Although individual topics have been found to affect students' scores (Baker & Quellmalz, 1981; Freedman, 1981), the students' attitudes toward the topics seem not to be the source of the effect. If one sums the scores on the four-point holistic scale across all four raters for all eight of the essays on each topic (maximum=128), the average for the interesting, easy topics was 74 and for the dull, difficult topics was 67, not a statistically significant difference. The fact that one interesting, easy topic received a combined score of 90, significantly higher than any other topic, accounts for the difference in the average scores. An interesting, easy topic and a dull, difficult topic tied to receive the lowest combined score of 63.

Discussion

The student portrait revealed by the questionnaire depicts writing students who see themselves performing well on difficult yet interesting writing tasks. Interestingly, when this same group of students assesses the interest and difficulty level of sets of topics, the combination of difficult and interesting never emerges. It seems ironic that students see themselves performing well on difficult, interesting tasks, but when they assess actual topics, they do not find them both difficult and interesting. Rather those that are difficult are dull, and those that are interesting are easy.

By way of explanation, perhaps the 12 topics in this study did not simulate the type of test topic the students imagined when they were completing the general questionnaire, or perhaps the students found all writing difficult and interesting; but when the students were forced by the directions on the topic questionnaires to choose whether one topic was easier or less interesting than another, the results were skewed. Still the fact that the difficult, interesting combination did not emerge remains unex-

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plained. Students may perceive topics one way when they first encounter them and another way after they write essays on them. These questionnaire results suggest the hypothesis that topics that appear easy on first glance turn out, in fact, to be difficult. Likewise, topics that appear dull become interesting as writers explore their depths.

According to the general questionnaire, equal numbers of students find their tasks pleasurable and not pleasurable. Those who find the most pleasure are freshmen—the students for whom most “freshman” writing courses are designed—and students from the more selective schools, for whom writing probably comes most easily. Most of the texts for freshman writing are geared for a young, freshman population, as are many of the writing assignments. Given that about half of the students in the eight classes in this study, and an even higher percentage at less selective schools, are not first time freshmen or eighteen-year-olds, teachers must remember to adapt their curricula for the many “others” in the freshman class and to be alert to ways of helping these “others” find writing more pleasurable. This finding about the older students emphasizes the importance of teachers’ remaining sensitive to the special needs of their populations.

That students in different classes varied significantly in their interest in writing attests to the power of motivation that the individual teacher possesses. Figure 1 shows that the variation between the classes was particularly great at two of the schools. The sample is not adequate enough to allow speculation about why the variation occurs where it does. But further examination of how teachers affect student attitudes toward writing could prove interesting. Weinstein (1982) has shown that at the elementary school level, students’ concepts of themselves as learners are affected by their teachers and that students perform better when their self-concept is strong. Although the effect of interest level on performance was not tested in this study, in something as ego-involving as writing, the consequences on performance of those attitudes that are associated with different teachers should be examined. It must be remembered, though, that the one attitude variable that is associated with performance—self-confidence—was not associated with different teachers.

The interaction between sex and age with respect to interest in writing is puzzling. Writing interest is typically associated with females, yet male freshmen proved most interested in writing followed by older females. Perhaps younger career-oriented men and returning or older women are the two most serious groups of college students who, thus, are aware of their need for writing and who, therefore, are most interested in it.

Perhaps most interesting is the finding that freshmen at all schools and all students at the more prestigious schools were more confident in their abilities than their counterparts. Confident students, it turned out, accurately judged how their performance would be evaluated. One never

knows whether confidence breeds success or follows from it. Although instilling confidence in students certainly will not guarantee success, it may help. It is conceivable that the older students may lack confidence for reasons other than their writing skills and that their lack of confidence per se may hinder their performance. Such students may feel unprepared for academic pursuits. In general, though, students who lack confidence and skills must acquire those skills that will make their self-confidence warranted.

It is important to remember that these findings can only be generalized to testing situations. It would be interesting to discover how students feel about the writing they do as part of their writing classes and to examine how their attitudes relate to their performance as writers in situations other than the writing test. This study has shown, as Shaughnessy suggested, that student attitudes about writing are related to at least one type of writing performance.

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NTNW Conference

The National Testing Network in Writing, the Florida State University, and the City University of New York announce the Second Annual Conference on Writing Assessment on March 7, 8, and 9, 1984, at the Florida State Conference Center in Tallahassee, Florida. The conference is for educators, administrators, writers, and assessment personnel and will be devoted to critical issues in assessing writing in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary settings. Dr. Alan Purves of the University of Illinois will deliver the keynote address.

Discussion topics will include interdisciplinary perspectives on writing assessment, the politics of testing, computer applications in writing assessment, the impact of testing on minorities, research on writing assessment, and the effects of testing on curriculum and teaching.

For information and registration materials, please write Susan Lampman, Center for Professional Development and Public Service, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida 32306.
