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The Effects of Freewriting
on High School Students' Attitudes
Toward Writing

by
Dana L. Thomas

A thesis submitted to the Department of
Curriculum and Instruction in partial
fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Education
in Curriculum and Instruction

University of North Florida
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Abstract

This paper investigates the hypothesis that freewriting, when used as part of the writing process, will lead to more positive attitudes toward writing in a sample of advanced tenth grade students. An additional issue focuses on the level of positive attitudes of males when compared to females. Two intact classrooms taught by one teacher wrote weekly papers. The experimental group wrote freely, while the control group was restricted in topic choice, length and form of their writing. The experimental group received positive comments on the content of their writing, but the control group received standard error corrections on their writing. The subjects responded to an attitude instrument as pretest and posttest measures. The experimental group showed no significant increase in positive attitudes toward writing. Girls in both the experimental and comparison groups showed no more positive attitudes toward writing than did boys at pretesting or at posttesting.

The Effects of Freewriting
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Chapter One

Most students entering high school today have a preconceived idea about writing: it's unpleasant (Gilbert, Kastra & Tollefson, 1987). The thought of taking pen in hand and putting words down on paper, whether it be in the writing classroom or in the privacy of their homes, is so unpleasant that students contemplate transfer, truancy or total rejection of writing assignments. Evidence suggests that many attitudes taken by students are simply ones that reveal they just do not care (Gorrell, 1986). Interestingly enough, even those who possess the ability to write well may often experience the same negative feelings toward the act as those who lack good, solid writing skills (Brand & Powell, 1986). The advantages of a person's ability to write need not be outlined in detail. Research has overwhelmingly proven that writing can enrich

human lives. So it is not surprising that countless numbers of instructional methods and techniques have been produced to aid in developing writing skills. One of these techniques--freewriting--is quite often used under the belief that better writing will occur. Using this method to improve attitude toward writing rather than writing ability, however, gives the concept an interesting twist.

Research demonstrates that attitudes have the capacity to initiate, stop, stall or continue the flow of human activity. Generally, boredom is slowing, anxiety is crippling and enjoyment is energizing. Anger is both stimulating and stifling. Since emotions and attitudes are implicated in almost all human behavior, the assumption that they play a central role in the writing process can also be made (Brand, 1980).

The purpose of this project is to employ the technique of freewriting to determine its effects on attitudes associated with writing. The initial question thus stands: Will high school students attain more positive attitudes toward writing when

they engage in freewriting activities than do students who engage in no freewriting activities?

Although the primary goal of this study is to determine whether or not freewriting can significantly modify student attitudes, one related issue may prove both challenging and helpful in terms of the conclusions drawn. If freewriting produces changes in writing attitudes, will there be a difference between any changes in female writers when compared to the changes in male writers?

A common belief holds that females tend to excel in areas such as literature, drama, writing. Males, on the other hand, excel in math and science. If true, one might argue that females enjoy writing more than males, and therefore may possess more positive attitudes toward the activity. If males indeed require extra prompting and if freewriting offers a unique and creative solution to the enhancement of attitude, then the teacher of a predominantly male-oriented class, for example, may find more use for the technique.

At this point, a reclarification of the purpose of this study is appropriate. This project is looking for evidence of freewriting's ability to change attitudes of student writers in a positive direction toward their task.

Definition of Terms

Freewriting: A writing process, not a finished product, freewriting is aimed at self-discovery or exploration of topic. In freewriting, writing is not normally corrected or given a grade, and experimentation is encouraged as there is no right or wrong. Predominant features of the technique are concentration on content, unlimited choice of form, and rapid, uninterrupted writing. In pure freewriting, topics are not prescribed; in focused freewriting the instructor assigns the students unique topics about which to write.

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Chapter Two

Admittedly, research of an historical nature would be appropriate in order to discover how and why certain student attitudes about writing evolved. However, rather than use the historical approach, this project will direct attention to more current research, in order first, to reveal what attitudes do exist; second, to discover some of the present causes of those attitudes surrounding the writing process; and third, to examine the effects of freewriting in regards to those attitudes.

Dailey (1988) defines attitude as a "learned predisposition to respond to people, objects or situations in a positive or negative way" (p. 35). He offers three classic dimensions of attitude: the affective dimension, the cognitive dimension and the behavioral dimension. The affective component is what one feels, likes or dislikes, about the object of an attitude. The cognitive component is what one thinks or believes about the object. The behavioral component is how one reacts toward the object. Applying this idea of

attitude levels to writing, one might conclude that when writing becomes the attitudinal object, clearly all three components are encountered, be they positive or negative.

Gilbert, Kastrá and Tollefson (1987) confirm the abundance of negative attitudes surrounding the act of writing. While such may be the case, the causes for these attitudes may be more important than their mere existence if teachers are to understand how to intervene to alter them in positive directions.

According to Heaton and Pray (1985), the most frequent factor influencing students' attitudes toward writing is the writing assignment itself. Cahir (1984) says that students who are not allowed to choose their own topics are many times left writing about things which do not interest them. They feel restricted, invest less in the effort and understandably do not try as hard. Assignments that are unrelated to real life and only slightly related to classroom events are

unimportant to the lives of students and thus produce poor attitudes toward the task at hand--writing. Yet, those teachers who offer no topic on which students should focus may often have numerous complaints of writer's block. This disruption of process also contributes to a poor attitude for the students who can never think of anything about which to write (Brand, 1986).

In freewriting, ideas emerge and invention takes place. Baxter (1987) suggests that students freewrite about "frivolous topics, like their toes" (p. 5) to lessen some of the stress of formal assignments. Students should know that writing can be fun. And freewriting offers this possibility. Many of the thoughts generated may be discarded, but if students get some ideas down on paper, they can choose the best ones suited to their purpose and ultimately experience some enjoyment in the process.

Another cause for poor attitudes toward writing may be the absence of writing skills. Students who make numerous errors often have a low self-esteem concerning their ability to write. A

poor self-image is often the beginning of the development of a poor attitude. Evidence also suggests that basic writers are "error prone" (Gorrell, 1986, p. 14). According to Shaughnessy (1977), 10-30 errors occur in every 300 words written by students. Lunsford (1985) has documented one error in every eight words.

Jacobs (1985) says freewriting "turns off the voice inside students' heads telling them that their writing is not good enough" (p. 285). Only when self-criticism ceases do positive attitudes have a chance to develop. Krashen (1984) praises the technique and notes that "the most remarkable discovery of this approach has been that in freewriting, persons who think they have no skills frequently find themselves exploring major strategies of writing" (p. 29). It follows that those low-skilled writers who sometimes encounter negative attitudes may actually begin writing with improvement using this strategy.

One promoter of freewriting (Reynolds, 1982) used the technique throughout an entire term to maintain the original enthusiasm and willingness

he found in his high school students. Actual student freewriting became sources for examples of composition elements taught in class. Students scanned previous freewriting samples for positive and negative examples of sentence variety, jargon, word choice and grammar. Because the students worked on their own writing rather than impersonal textbook examples, Reynolds reported that they responded better to the exercises and were eager to share their writing.

A third cause for poor writing attitude is teacher response to writing. Heaton and Pray (1985) noted what one twelfth grade boy pinpointed:

English class is a good class, but when you are never complimented on your work and always put down on what you do, which happens a lot, you start to feel that you are no good and neither is your work. So my attitude toward writing is poor (p. 4).

According to Haynes (1978), students from the early grades through high school write compositions knowing that error correction will

follow. Any enthusiasm is eventually replaced by worry over form, mechanics, spelling and word choice. Heaton and Pray (1985) say that "excessive insistence on immediate mechanical correctness can inhibit writing" (p. 7). Responding to the mistakes rather than to the ideas expressed in a writing assignment makes students believe that a teacher is interested only in the grammar and mechanics.

Bruce (1982) claims that when writers try to consider content and form simultaneously, the result is often slow, painful, uninspired writing; or worse, writer's block sets in and nothing comes out. This situation hinders the true function of writing, which is to convey ideas. Therefore, offering positive reinforcement instead of many red markings may lead to an improvement in attitude.

Probably the most convincing ideas on teacher response come from Josten (1982) who states that:

writing is not the ability to form marks
on a page. . . nor is writing the ability
to use commas and question marks in

accordance with the rules. Too often, the teaching of writing is reduced to the teaching of spelling, capitalization and mechanics. . . programs that stress basics and never move beyond the technicalities. A student can learn to spell, to punctuate, and to capitalize and still not be able to write (p. 18).

Since freewriting is not graded, one could conclude that it liberates students to use their competencies without fear of being corrected for faulty form. Some method of evaluation, however, is often necessary so that students do not begin to feel as if they are writing for nothing. One alternative to grading is to allow volunteers to read their writing aloud while other students respond. Reynolds (1982) reflects what many sources have supported: that a teacher may also give motivational encouragement by showing interest in what students write or by making suggestions for the next paper instead of highlighting mistakes.

The amount of writing practice can affect writing attitude. This idea is linked with writing apprehension or anxiety. Basically, highly anxious writing students write significantly fewer words than those with low anxiety (Heaton & Pray, 1985). This severely limits the possibilities for high anxiety students to practice and improve their writing. Additionally, Cahir (1984) states that only three percent of high school lesson time is spent on writing assignments of paragraph length or longer. The positive implications of practice are clearly illustrated in the 1984 assessment of the writing achievement of American school children. Results showed that students who wrote three or more reports and essays during a 6-week period had higher achievement levels in writing than students who did not write during that time period (Applebee, 1986). Without the opportunity to improve through steady practice, students cannot develop the confidence necessary and sometimes responsible for positive attitudes in writing.

Those students who develop negative attitudes due to lack of practice perhaps can be aided by freewriting. Used as a daily timed writing to warm up students before instruction, freewriting can give vital practice. Clark and Walker (1980) agree that this daily use of freewriting also develops the students' ability to write under the pressure of time.

Novice writers who sometimes become discouraged may benefit from freewriting, too. Writing consists of many steps, and sometimes students look at the whole picture, oblivious to the many processes involved before a final draft is completed. Scardanalia (1981) suggests using freewriting to ease the cognitive load by making it one of the first steps in writing.

Although freewriting serves many needs of the student, it is only fair to report the findings which give limitations to freewriting. Jacobs (1985) found that many students call freewriting "ugly writes" because of the sloppy handwriting, poor grammar and irrelevant ideas that the technique often produces. An apparent cure he

described is to make certain that students know the benefits of the process and to assure them that they will not be graded.

Another obvious limitation is that students cannot write about something they do not know. For example, if a student must prepare a research paper, freewriting cannot take the place of reading on the subject. But the experience can generate ideas on which direction to take the topic. Reynolds (1982) says those opposed to freewriting claim it produces only personal, self-centered and introspective writing which severely limits academic or real-life writing. Fox and Suhory (1986) say freewriting may be extremely useful to some kinds of writers but harmful to others. Those who write slowly, producing short essays, tend to over-scan, and freewriting may be beneficial to them. However, those who are already fluid writers might need not freewriting but some type of controlled slow writing.

Obviously, there are many other causes for positive and negative attitudes toward writing to

arise. The literature covered in this review has unmasked four major causes of attitude: (1) writing assignments, (2) writing skills, (3) teacher response to writing, and (4) writing practice and related apprehension. Many educators would argue that there are surely more solutions to the poor attitudes than there are causes. This review has, however, focused on the technique of freewriting to determine whether it may be of help in the reduction of poor attitudes toward writing.

Chapter Three

In order to determine if the use of freewriting can change student attitudes toward writing, research of an experimental nature was conducted over a period of six weeks. The experimental design was a pretest-posttest control group design. The independent variables were: (1) the type of treatment. i.e., one group which engaged in freewriting (experimental), and one group which engaged in no freewriting (control); and (2) gender. This experimental design is diagrammed below:

	Intact		Experimental	
	Classes	Pretest	Variable	Posttest
G1	Class 1	01	Approach (x)	02
G2	Class 2	03	Traditional (-)	04

The dependent variable was the performance on an attitude scale used a both a pretest and posttest measure.

Each student was tested at the beginning and end of the experiment using the Emig-King Writing Attitude Scale for Students (WASS), designed specifically for use with junior and senior high

students (See Appendix A). This 40-item questionnaire is divided into three clusters: preference for writing, perception of writing and process of writing. A five-point Likert Scale ranging from "almost never" to "almost always" is used for student responses. The WASS, developed for the 1977-1978 New Jersey Writing Project, has internal consistency reliability coefficients in the .60 to .72 range (Emig & King, 1979).

As the objective of the freewriting treatment in this study was to change attitude, a measure of writing quality was not used as an outcome measure.

For a six-week period, during the fourth nine weeks of the school year, fifty high school sophomores from an urban high school participated in the experiment. The experiment itself was implemented by one tenth grade instructor who teaches two classes of advanced English composition. Equivalence of the classes' ability levels was confirmed through comparison of Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. Analysis in the particular areas of English, Total Reading and

Total Language revealed that the scores of each class averaged in the middle to upper 80th percentile.

This model allowed for one experimental and one control class. Treatment consisted of up to fifty minutes of freewriting each Friday for six consecutive weeks. The control class spent up to fifty minutes each Friday on regular graded compositions. Otherwise, instruction remained as much the same as possible. Writing instruction continued to take place, along with weekly writing production, as required by the Jack Gordon Writing Program mandated by the state of Florida.

Prior to the treatment, an outside researcher administered the attitude instrument to students in both groups. At the close of the six weeks, the attitude inventory was readministered. Both the inventories and the treatment were conducted in the students' familiar classroom environment.

Data was analyzed using analysis of covariance procedures. Independent variables were (a) sex of the student (two levels) and (b) treatment conditions (two levels). Because this

project was examining a method not directly associated with the teacher's instructional style, the teacher was not included as an independent variable. Research confirms that freewriting is directed mostly by the student; the teacher merely provides positive comments on the content of the writing.

During the intervention period the instructor's motivational style of teaching remained the same as it had been before the treatment was introduced. One difference did occur in the checking of the writing assignments, where positive comments on content replaced error correction. If a student previously disliked the instructor's approach to the teaching of writing or disliked the teacher for other reasons (thus creating a dislike for the subject), freewriting was not expected to change students' attitudes toward the teacher. Rather freewriting was expected to lessen the dislike of the subject by changing those things mentioned in the review of literature.

Data analysis provided information showing comparison of the pretest and posttest means and standard deviations of the groups. This relationship is shown in Table 1.

At this point, further analysis, a t test, was conducted on the two means to discover whether there was a significant difference in the attitudes of the experimental group and the control group. This relationship is shown in the results (Chapter Four).

Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviations of Control Group and
Experimental Group for Pretest and Posttest Scores

Group		Pretest	Posttest
Control			
Male	M	63.67	62.58
	SD	9.80	12.31
Female	M	62.22	69.44
	SD	8.53	13.12
Total	M	63.05	65.52
	SD	9.08	12.82
Experimental			
Male	M	67.13	77.38
	SD	10.05	16.84
Female	M	72.63	81.25
	SD	8.52	13.60
Total	M	69.88	79.31
	SD	9.44	14.93

Chapter Four

Analysis of covariance was computed with the pretest attitude scores used as the covariate. The main effects used were group (experimental and control) and gender (male and female). An F of 2.57 was computed on the main effects of group and was not significant at the .05 level.

The analysis for the Writing Attitude Scale for Students showed no significant difference in change of attitude between the experimental and control group, by group or by gender.

Although there was a gain from a mean of 79.31 from 69.88 for the experimental group as compared to 63.05 to 65.52. this difference was not statistically significant. The adjusted mean for the experimental group was 75.76 as compared to 68.23 for the control.

Regarding the main effects of gender on attitude, an F of 3.70 was computed and was not significant at the .05 level. Nor was there a significant interaction between gender and group.

Although there was a significant gain within the experimental group, it was not significantly

different from that of the control group. This outcome is probably due to the variability of the scores of the two groups (the control group had lower scores initially).

Chapter Five

The results of this study do not support the hypothesis that freewriting can be instrumental in improving high school students' attitudes toward writing. The experimental group showed no more significantly positive attitudes toward writing than the control group. Therefore, freewriting may not be as useful a technique, as hypothesized, for redirecting poor writing attitudes. In addition, the results did not support the related issue of different attitudes among gender: no significant difference between male and female attitudes existed before or after the experimental treatment. Thus, freewriting may not be any more or less useful in changing attitudes in males than in females.

The non-success of the freewriting process in changing attitudes was probably a function of three predominant factors: (a) the short intervention period (six weeks), (b) the time of year in which the experimental treatment was administered (the six weeks before summer break), and (c) the level of students used as subjects

(advanced). Studies conducted over longer periods of time would be necessary to determine whether freewriting could significantly change attitudes and to discover whether continued use of the process could lead to even greater changes in attitude toward writing.

This study was conducted using students with well above average achievement scores. Therefore, the results are best generalized to a similar classroom population. Additional research may be worthwhile in order to discover if attitude change exists when students of other ability levels (i.e., below average, average) are introduced to freewriting. Such an awareness of the method's effects on alternative class levels would eliminate the guesswork for instructors who may be considering the application of freewriting for attitude adjustment.

This project does not suggest that freewriting is the only useful method when experimenting with attitude improvement among high school students. One should be aware that freewriting is only one of a multitude of writing

techniques available. Using a number of methods is often more helpful than merely relying on one method. A particular student in a given situation may choose one or several from among many possible techniques.

Although the hypothesis proposed in this research was rejected, this project continues to suggest that positive attitudes toward writing can lead to possible improvement in the quality of writing. And if writing instructors are in the least concerned with issues of student motivation and achievement, then closer examination and more experimental applications of other methods for positive attitude adjustment are necessary.

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Appendix A

Emig-King Attitude Scale for Students

Sex: M_____ or F_____

Directions:

Mark A if your response is Almost Always.

Mark B if your response is Often.

Mark C if your response is Sometimes.

Mark D if your response is Seldom.

Mark E if your response is Almost Never.

1. I write letters to my family and friends.
2. On my own, I write stories, plays or poems.
3. I voluntarily reread and revise what I've written.
4. When I have free time, I prefer writing to being with friends.
5. I prefer topics I choose myself to ones the teacher gives.
6. On the whole, I like school.
7. I use writing to help me study and learn new subjects.
8. Girls enjoy writing more than boys do.
9. I like what I write.

10. Writing is a very important way for me to express my feelings.
11. Doing workbook exercises helps me improve my writing.
12. A student who writes well gets better grades in many subjects than someone who doesn't write well.
13. When I have free time, I prefer writing to reading.
14. I do school writing assignments as fast as I can.
15. I get better grades on topics I choose myself than on those the teachers assign.
16. I write for the school newspaper, literary magazine or yearbook.
17. I voluntarily keep notes for school courses.
18. When I have free time, I prefer writing to sports, games or hobbies.
19. I leave notes for my family and friends.
20. The teacher is the most important audience for what I write in school.
21. Students need to plan in writing for school themes.

22. When I have free time, I prefer writing to watching television.
23. I write better than I speak.
24. Good writers spend more time revising than poor writers.
25. I accept positions in groups that involve writing.
26. I write better than I read.
27. I spend more time on a piece of writing I do outside school than one I do as an assignment.
28. Studying grammar helps me improve my writing.
29. I'd rather write than study literature.
30. I share what I write for school with family and friends.
31. I write public figures like my Congressman or Mayor.
32. I write graffiti.
33. In class, I share what I write with other members of the class.
34. When I have free time, I prefer writing to listening to music.
35. Teachers give poor grades to papers that have misspellings.

36. Writing for others is more important than expressing myself.
37. I can put off doing assigned writing until the last minute and still get a good grade.
38. I must learn to write a good paragraph before I can write an entire theme.
39. I keep a journal or diary.
40. I prefer writing to dramatics in English class.