

2000

Self-Selection vs. Writing Prompts: A Study to Examine the Effects Topics Have on Elementary Students' Writing

Julie Ann Hall

This research is a product of the graduate program in [Early Childhood, Elementary, and Middle Level Education](#) at Eastern Illinois University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

Recommended Citation

Hall, Julie Ann, "Self-Selection vs. Writing Prompts: A Study to Examine the Effects Topics Have on Elementary Students' Writing" (2000). *Masters Theses*. 1618.
<https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/1618>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

THESIS REPRODUCTION CERTIFICATE

TO: Graduate Degree Candidates (who have written formal theses)

SUBJECT: Permission to Reproduce Theses

The University Library is receiving a number of request from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow these to be copied.

PLEASE SIGN ONE OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS:

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university or the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution's library or research holdings.

4/24/00
Date

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University **NOT** allow my thesis to be reproduced because:

Author's Signature

Date

Self-Selection vs. Writing Prompts: A Study to

Examine the Effects Topics have on Elementary

Students' Writing

(TITLE)

BY

Julie Ann Hall

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master's of Science in Education

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2000

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

April 25, 2000
DATE

April 25, 2000
DATE

VITA

Julie Ann Hall was born in Champaign, Illinois on November 5, 1974. She attended elementary school in Broadlands, Illinois. In 1985, she and her parents and younger sister moved to Farmer City. In 1986 the family moved to Bloomington-Normal. In 1987 the family once again moved to Peotone – this time they stayed put. In 1992 she graduated from Peotone High School. She earned the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1996 from Governors State University, University Park, Illinois. After graduating college, she and her parents moved back to Broadlands, Illinois where she worked as an Advertising Representative for *The Sidell News* for one year. She later took a job as a Customer Service Representative for an insurance company. In 1998, she returned to school in pursuit of her Master's Degree and Teacher Certification. During the fall of 1999, she completed her student teaching experience in Villa Grove, Illinois. She taught third grade. She currently works as a graduate assistant at Eastern Illinois University and as a substitute teacher in nearby schools.

ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study were: 1) to evaluate the quality of writing in first, second, and third graders who were given a writing prompt, 2) to evaluate the quality of writing in first, second, and third graders who self-selected their own writing topic, and 3) to determine if there were any differences in the quality of writing between the two groups.

The researcher was the instructor for all the students who participated in the study. Included in the study were first, second, and third grade students who were present on the day the researcher visited. Approximately half of the students wrote on a given prompt, while the remaining students wrote on a self-selected topic. Prior to writing, students and teachers were asked to complete a brief survey about writing.

The writing samples were rated on four different criteria: paper's focus, grammar, sentence structure, and capitalization and punctuation. Three raters individually rated each piece of writing and the results were compiled. Raters received instruction from the researcher prior to reading the samples.

The following conclusions were based on the findings of the study:

1. There is a difference in the quality of writing samples, in the area of the paper's focus, between giving a student a writing prompt and allowing a student to self-select a topic.
2. There is no significant difference in the quality of writing samples, in the area of grammar, between giving a student a writing prompt and allowing a student to self-select a topic.

3. There is no significant difference in the quality of writing samples, in the area of sentence structure, between giving a student a writing prompt and allowing a student to self-select a topic.
4. There is a difference in the quality of writing samples, in the area of capitalization and punctuation, between giving a student a writing prompt and allowing a student to self-select a topic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would not have been possible without the help of a great many people. For her guidance, support, and encouragement, I am grateful to Dr. Mary Ellen Varble, my Committee Chairperson and mentor. For their cooperation and most helpful suggestions, Dr. Noelle Greathouse and Dr. Mary Greenlaw, Committee Members. And, for being the first person to truly encourage me to tackle this project, Dr. Richard "Bud" White.

I would be remiss at this point if I did not thank my parents, Allen and Rebecca Hall, for being such wonderful role models and inspiring me to be the best I can be.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix.
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Hypothesis.....	1
Definition of Terms	1
Assumptions.....	2
Limitations.....	3
Delimitations.....	3
2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	4
Literature on Why Writing is Important.....	4
Literature on How to Encourage Students to Write.....	5
Literature on Why Students Should be Given Choices.....	7
3. PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY.....	12
Sources of Data.....	12
The population.....	12
Assignment of subject to groups.....	12
Design for instruction.....	13
Instrumentation.....	16

Chapter	Page
Collecting the Data.....	16
The writer variable.....	16
The assignment variable.....	16
The classroom teacher.....	17
The researcher.....	17
Preparation of papers.....	17
Criteria for evaluation.....	18
Instructions for Rating.....	18
Selection of Raters.....	21
Summary of Procedures.....	21
4. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA.....	23
Performing Tests for Significance.....	23
Interpreting the Results.....	28
Summary of the Analysis.....	29
5. SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	30
Summary of the Study.....	30
Discussion of the Study.....	31
Conclusions from the Study.....	33
Recommendations for Further Research.....	34
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	40

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Student Survey.....	14
2. Teacher Survey.....	15
3. Evaluators' Rubric.....	19
4. Evaluators' Instructions.....	20
5. Results of First Student Survey Question.....	35
6. Results of Third Student Survey Question.....	37
7. Results of Fourth Student Survey Question.....	38
8. Results of Fifth Student Survey Question.....	39

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Results of Statistical Test for Paper's Focus.....	25
2. Results of Statistical Test for Grammar.....	26
3. Results of Statistical Test for Sentence Structure.....	27
4. Results of Statistical Test for Punctuation and Capitalization.....	28

Chapter One

Introduction

Importance of Study

Many people are entering today's ever-growing global work force lacking acceptable communication skills, such as the ability to write well. As a result, form letters are becoming more and more common. This could be the result of current teaching practices that require students to write on teacher directed prompts. Allowing children the opportunity to select their own topics is an alternative to writing prompts. Self-selection of topics allows students to participate more completely in the writing process. This in turn, increases student motivation thereby leading to higher quality writing. Since it is the goal of public schools to ensure that graduates are competent writers, further study is necessary to determine the effects of self-selection as a means of producing higher quality writing.

Statement of the Problem

Does self-selection of writing topics lead to higher quality writing samples?

Hypothesis

Elementary students who select their own writing topic will produce papers of a higher standard than students who are assigned a writing prompt.

Definition of Terms

Closed Question: A question that has one single correct answer (Roberts).

Open Question: A question that has no single correct answer (Roberts).

Rubric: A scoring guide used by the raters to assess student-writing samples.

Self-contained Classroom: A classroom in which students remain for all core subjects (Language, Math, Science, and Social Studies).

Self-selection: When a student selects his/her own topic on which to write.

Writing Prompt: An introductory or starter sentence intended to give students a topic on which to write.

Writing Process: A process which includes five stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and sharing (Roberts, 279).

Assumptions

The following assumptions will underline this study:

1. Assessing the effects of self-selection vs. writing prompts is worthy of research.
2. Writing is a necessary skill and is worthy of study.
3. Students who participate in the study will be in a self-contained classroom.
4. The students in this study will truly represent first, second, and third grade students.
5. The students in this study will be randomly assigned to use a writing prompt or to self-select a writing topic.
6. A survey, developed by the researcher, will be used to evaluate students' perceptions of writing.
7. Students will complete a questionnaire with the understanding that their classroom teacher will not view the responses.
8. The researcher will administer the questionnaire.
9. Classroom teachers will not assist students, in any means, with their writing samples, with the exception of spelling words.
10. Students in this survey will actively participate.
11. A rubric, developed by the researcher, will be used to evaluate student-writing samples.
12. Three individual raters will evaluate each writing sample.

Limitations

The limitations of this study will be as follows:

1. The use of first, second, and third grade students will limit the generalizability of the results to other grade levels.
2. The use of a small rural school will limit the generalizability of the results to urban school populations.
3. The focus on writing will prevent the generalizability to other subject areas, such as mathematics.

Delimitations

The delimitations of this study will be as follows:

1. The study will be limited to one hour during a normal school day.
2. The study will be limited to two first grade classrooms, two-second grade classrooms, and two third grade classrooms.
3. The study will be limited to a rural school system.
4. The study will be conducted in two separate school buildings within the same school district.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter will review literature related to children's writing. The literature review will consist of three categories: why writing is important; how to encourage students to write; why students should be given choices.

Literature on Why Writing is Important

Research, current and past, substantiates the importance of writing at a young age. Graves (1978a) states, "We have known for years that the child's first urge is to write, not read, and we haven't taken advantage of this fact". He emphasizes the importance of writing by citing that in addition to contributing to intelligence, writing also develops both initiative and courage. Graves states, "...writing, more than any other subject, can be the means to personal breakthrough in learning" (31).

Calkins (1994) agrees with Graves, pointing out that writing can help create conditions necessary for learning to occur. She states that "Learning requires an act of initiative on [the learner's] part " (484). Calkins also cites that "Writing gives [an] awareness and control of my thoughts" (485).

Brewer and Harp (1991) state that "The act of composing reinforces concepts important to reading comprehension" (56). Furthermore, because writing and reading are so closely related, practicing and perfecting one strengthens the other. Writing can facilitate word recognition and improve retention. Writing also strengthens concepts such as sentence, main idea, and sequence. Chew (1985) agrees with Brewer and Harp citing that because

reading and writing are complementary processes, improving one naturally improves the other.

Literature on How to Encourage Students to Write

Roberts (1996) offers several ways to encourage students to write. Her suggestions range from having students draw, talk, and read, to having them interview interested parties and/or role-play their story idea. However, Roberts' main point is that children need to be given ample preparation time before they begin to write. "Prewriting...is as crucial to writers as a warm-up is to athletes" (281).

Mokhtari, Norris, and Reichard (1997) performed a study of 119 rural third grade students. 60 students were asked to draw prior to writing; 59 students did not draw prior to writing. The results indicated that, for students who drew first, the "... overall writing performance was higher than the students who wrote without drawing" (13). Moreover, the students who drew first exhibited a higher level of enthusiasm while writing as compared to students who wrote without drawing first.

Brewer and Harp (1991) encourage teachers to create an atmosphere that is conducive to writing. This includes writing centers, allowing students the opportunity to write during reading time, and keeping an abundance of scrap paper on hand. Morrow (1993) describes an effective writing center as being "...assessable, attractive, and inviting" (251). In addition to this, Brewer and Harp (1991) state that it is important to provide examples and models of different

forms of writing in order to help motivate students. Brewer and Harp also state that teachers should “Watch for especially beautiful or apt phrases and help children notice and appreciate those finds” (71). Promoting oral communication can also encourage beginning writers.

Spandel and Stiggins (1997) as well as Morrow (1993) explain that in order to promote writing, the teacher must first model writing. This entails sharing personal work and filling the classroom with a variety of writing samples. In addition to this, Spandel and Stiggins (1997) list several attributes of quality writing programs. These attributes include: the opportunity for students to engage in a wide range of diverse and challenging writing tasks; encouragement of independence; opportunity to self-select topics.

Calkins (1986) argues that when writing is “...treated as little more than a place to display...” a student’s knowledge base, often it is viewed as an undesirable task (13). In order for writing to matter, says Calkins, it must be personal. Therefore, teachers must listen to and pay attention to their students’ likes and dislikes. Students also need a “...predictable and simple...” environment in which to write (183). Simplicity leads directly into organization – another necessity for students to become effective writers. Like Spandel and Stiggins (1997), Calkins (1994) also feels that time is an important aspect of writing. Chew (1985) concurs. Students need adequate time to write; adequate time allows them the opportunity to plan. Planning leads to better end products.

Bottomley, Henk and Melnick (1998) examined the importance that the affective domain has on a student’s writing. These researchers discovered that

“...a child’s self-perception of writing ability will affect his/her subsequent writing growth” (287). Based on their findings, Bottomley, Henk and Melnick do not place as much importance on creating a safe atmosphere as other researchers. Instead, they believe that a child’s motivation to write should and does come from within. Teachers, therefore, should strive to boost both self-perception and self-confidence in their students.

Reed (1995) agrees with Bottomley, Henk, and Melnick that confidence is necessary when writing. And, like Calkins, Reed reiterates that through writing, students are able to express their individuality. However, Reed feels that writing is a personal act “...no matter what the subject...” and hence, students do not have to write about themselves (108). They can, in fact, write meaningful text on assigned topics. Doing so, Reed suggests, helps students learn to accept other points of view and opens them up to “...a new awareness of others and themselves” (108).

Literature on Why Students Should be Given Choices

Research has confirmed that allowing students the opportunity to make their own decisions reaps many benefits. Therefore, in order for students to become competent writers capable of self-selecting a worthwhile topic, they must be allowed to practice self-selection. As Kamii (1991) stated, “Children can learn to make choices only by making their own decisions and evaluating the results of their decision” (387).

D'Amico (1980) encourages teachers to provide students with ample opportunities to make their own decisions. In addition to preparing students for a time when they will be solely responsible for the decisions concerning their lives, making choices early on "...fosters self-confidence..." (45).

Morrow (1993) reiterates that children do not need writing prompts – that in fact they are self-motivated and teachers should capitalize on that fact. "Through personally motivated and personally directed trial and error..." children try out various aspects of the writing process (232). Morrow insists that children need minimal instruction [prompts] to write. Instead, they need good models and practice.

S. Lenski (personal communication, March 20, 2000) states that "Even young children have lots to say. When they are able to write about topics of their own choosing, they are generally more motivated writers." Lenski does contend that learning to write on a given prompt is a skill young writers need to learn. However, she also believes that "...the use of prompts in schools is given way too much credence."

Kohn (1993) questioned the importance of allowing students to make their own decisions concerning their own education. His findings suggest, though, that "...it is desirable for people [children] to experience a sense of control over their lives" (95). This in turn leads to feelings of higher self-esteem and more enthusiasm about assignments. Kohn also stressed the benefits of creative writing assignments noting that such assignments offer students the opportunity

to make their own decisions. In short, Kohn believes that “The way a child learns how to make decisions is by making decisions, not by following directions” (96).

Graves (1996) explained that children who enjoy writing often share several traits: an understanding of what writing is for and initiative. In order to perpetuate these traits and encourage all students, teachers must create an atmosphere conducive to writing. Among other things, this includes “...expect[ing] children to choose their own topics...” (27). Doing so alleviates the problem of having a child write about a subject that he/she is unfamiliar and uncomfortable with.

Grace (1991) interviewed young writers to determine what subjects they prefer to write about. She found that 70% of students preferred to self-select writing topics as opposed to being told what to write about. Students stated that when they self-selected their writing topics they had a feeling of relaxation, their interest level was higher, and they found it easier to express their ideas.

Lewis (1983) studied the effects of students' interest on their writing. She found that there was a “...strong lack of interest in writing a research report” (18). However, interest was much higher when writing about “...familiar, personal subjects” (18). Lewis also discovered that effective instruction was most likely to occur when the teacher capitalized on students' interests.

Roberts (1996) explained that “Choosing a topic for writing can be a stumbling block for students who have become dependent on teachers to supply topics” (281). Hence, her suggestion is to allow and insist that young writers select their own writing topics. Roberts does state that in some instances it might

be helpful for teachers to brainstorm with students about possible topics; nonetheless, the final decision about what to write should be the student's.

Garton and Pratt (1989) argue that only "...through frequent participation in the process of writing...[will] children learn more about the written word and become increasingly adept at writing" (179). Participation refers to more than just feeding students a writing topic; it means allowing students to self-select what they want to write about. According to Garton and Pratt, there are large differences between children. There are differences in ability and differences in prior knowledge. It is, therefore, up to the classroom teacher to accommodate these many variations. Allowing students the opportunity to self-select their writing topics makes this possible.

Spandel and Stiggins (1997) state that it is vital to "Encourage students to discover and select their own topics" (105). Although Spandel and Stiggins acknowledge that sometimes in life topics are assigned, they contend that if the overall goal is to help students find their voice, then students must be allowed to practice self-selection of writing topics.

Calkins (1978) believes that allowing children to self-select their writing topics encourages them write. She states that once students realize they have something to write about, "...they will want to write it as well as possible" (804). This alleviates the problem of having to motivate students to correct and/or edit their own writing. Furthermore, Calkins argues that children learn to write well through practice – not by "...following the rules of grammar..." (804). Years of observation have led Calkins to the conclusion that when students write using

their own language, they find meaning and eventually do learn the necessary skills of writing.

Atwell (1990) explains that in her philosophy of writing, prompts are sometimes useful. However, in order for a prompt to be judged successful, it needs to be open-ended and avoid "...right or wrong answers..." (167). Good prompts also need to involve the student, force children to "...discover their own opinions..." and draw on the child's prior experiences" (167).

Chapter 3

PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

The primary purpose of this study was: 1) to evaluate the quality of writing in first, second, and third graders who were given a writing prompt, 2) to evaluate the quality of writing in first, second, and third graders who self-selected their own writing topic, and 3) to determine if there were any differences in the quality of writing between the two groups.

The initial procedure for conducting this research was to identify children in first, second, and third grade.

Sources of Data

The population: The sample population used in this study was first, second, and third grade students in selected elementary schools (located in Broadlands and Homer) in Champaign County in the state of Illinois. Students who participated in the study were members of self-contained classrooms. The total number of students participating in the study was 119. This included 42 first graders, 46 second graders, and 31 third graders. Of these students, 52 were given a writing prompt and 67 were allowed to self-select their writing topic.

Assignment of subject to groups: Due to the fact that the participants of this study were housed in two separate school buildings, the decision was made to give students in the Broadlands building a writing prompt while students in the Homer building would be allowed to self-select a writing topic. Teachers in both buildings indicated that they had previously used writing prompts. Furthermore, all participating teachers indicated that at some point students were given the

opportunity to self-select writing topics. Hence, the decision as to which classes would be given a writing prompt and which would be asked to self-select was made arbitrarily by the researcher. None of the participating teachers were notified in advance as to whether their students would be assigned a writing prompt or asked to self-select a topic.

Design for instruction: All students in the study participated in a one-hour session which included approximately 15 minutes for completion of the survey, and 45 minutes for writing. All sessions were held on May 5, 1999. The researcher was the instructor for all students participating in the study. The classroom teacher's role was limited to assisting students with the spelling of words. Teachers were instructed by the researcher not to encourage or assist the students in any other way. All students in the Broadlands building were given the same writing prompt. The prompt used was, "This summer I want to ...". All students in the Homer building were given the same instructions: to write about anything they wanted.

All participating students completed a survey during the first 15 minutes of the hour. (See Figure 1 for survey.) The researcher dictated the items to all students to ensure that all items were understood. The researcher also made clear that at no time would the students' regular classroom teacher see the results of their survey. All classroom teachers completed a survey as well. (See Figure 2 for survey.)

Figure 1

Student Survey

Do you like to write? Yes No Sometimes

What kinds of things do you like
to write about? _____

Do you like to write more when
you pick the topic or when your
teacher picks the topic? I pick Teacher picks

Which is more important: writing
about a topic that you choose, or
writing about a topic that your
teacher chooses? Mine Teacher's

Would you write more if you could
always choose the topic? Yes No

Figure 2

Teacher Survey

What types of things do your students like to write about?

With regards to writing assignments,
how often do you allow
your students to select their own topic?

Always	Often
Sometimes	
Rarely	Never

If you do allow your students to
select their topics, please explain why.

If you do not allow your students to
select their topics, please explain why not.

Do you ever allow children to select a topic
from a list of topics that you provide?

Yes	No
-----	----

(if applicable) Do you believe there is
a difference in the quality of work when
children are allowed to choose their own
topic as compared to when they are not?

Yes	No
-----	----

In your opinion, what (if any) are the potential
hazards of allowing students to select their
own topics for writing assignments?

Instrumentation

The researcher developed two survey instruments. Before distribution, college professors reviewed the surveys for scope and sequence of content. This process addressed the validity of the surveys as perceived by fellow researchers. The result was a student survey that included one open question and four closed questions. The second survey, for teachers, included four open questions, two closed questions, and one likert-type question.

Collecting the Data

Samples of writing were collected on May 5, 1999. In order to establish a maximum amount of objectivity, an attempt was made to control certain variables. Those significant to this research were: the writer, the assignment, the classroom teacher, the researcher, and the criteria for evaluation. The techniques employed follow:

The writer variable: Each subject wrote once on the day the researcher visited his/her classroom.

The assignment variable: Each subject in the Broadlands school wrote on the same writing prompt, "This summer I want to..." , and each subject in the Homer school self-selected his/her own writing topic. Each student had approximately 45 minutes to complete his/her writing sample. None of the subjects were informed ahead of time what they would be asked to do when the researcher arrived – only that there would be a visitor to the class. No other instructions, with regards to length or content, were given to the participants.

The classroom teacher: Each of the six classroom teachers was given specific instructions not to assist the students in any way. Furthermore, the classroom teachers were instructed not to encourage the students in any way. The only exception to this was with regards to spelling. Classroom teachers were allowed to spell words for students during the writing activity.

The researcher: The researcher administered the directions to each group of students in the same fashion. Students were instructed not to write their name on any of their papers. Instead students were to write their grade level and either Broadlands or Homer at the top of their paper. The researcher then dictated the survey questions to all students making sure to clarify any questions. Next, the researcher either 1) wrote the writing prompt on the board and then read it aloud to the students, or 2) instructed the students to write about a topic of their choice. No other instructions were given except to say that the length of the writing sample was of no consequence.

Preparation of papers: Each paper was assigned a number (1-6) followed by a letter (A-Z). This allowed the researcher the ability to track samples from a particular classroom. For instance, the samples from first graders in Broadlands were assigned the number 1 followed by a letter. The samples from second graders in Broadlands were assigned the number 2. The samples from third graders in Broadlands were assigned the number 3. The samples from first graders at Homer were assigned the number 4. The samples from second graders at Homer were assigned the number 5. The samples from third graders at Homer were assigned the number 6. After each paper was assigned a

number to identify which classroom it originated from, a letter of the alphabet was also assigned so that the researcher could easily count the number of participants from a particular classroom. For instance, the first grade class in Broadlands had 17 students; therefore, the first paper in the group was 1-A, and the last paper in the group was 1-Q. This same technique was used with all the writing samples.

Three raters read each paper; all of the raters had some familiarity with elementary students' capabilities. The raters included a Kindergarten teacher, a second grade teacher, and a third grade teacher. The raters were given one week to complete their evaluation in an effort to control the fatigue factor but also to allow enough time so that each paper could be read more than once if the rater so desired.

Criteria for evaluation: One rubric, designed by the researcher, was typed on a single page and given to each rater. (See Figure 3 for rubric.)

Instructions for Rating

Instructions for rating students' writing samples were given individually to each of the three evaluators. The instructions were presented orally and any questions the raters had were answered at that time by the researcher. (See Figure 4 for instructions.)

Figure 3

Evaluators' Rubric

Paper's Focus

- 4 – Excellent. All sentences relate to the topic.
- 3 – Good. Most sentences relate to the topic.
- 2 – Fair. Some sentences relate to the topic.
- 1 – Poor. No sentences relate to the topic.

Grammar

- 4 – Excellent. No grammatical mistakes.
- 3 – Good. Paper contains only a few grammatical mistakes.
- 2 – Fair. Paper contains many grammatical mistakes.
- 1 – Poor. Grammatical mistakes consistent throughout. paper.

Sentence Structure

- 4 – Excellent. No run-ons or fragments.
- 3 – Good. Paper contains only a few run-ons or fragments.
- 2 – Fair. Paper contains many run-ons or fragments.
- 1 – Poor. Unable to write a complete sentence.

Punctuation and Capitalization

- 4 – Excellent. All punctuation and capitalization is correct.
- 3 – Good. Most punctuation and capitalization is correct.
- 2 – Fair. Some punctuation and capitalization is correct.
- 1 – Poor. No punctuation or capitalization is correct.

Figure 4

Evaluators' Instructions

1. The researcher reviewed the rubric with each rater.
2. The rater was then asked to read each writing sample and to complete a rubric for each writing sample.
3. If the rater came across a writing sample that he/she did not feel met minimal requirements for one of the four components, then the rater could opt not to score that particular component. (Note: There were 476 individual components that could be scored; only 20 individual components were not scored.)
4. Raters were given one week in which to complete their evaluation of the writing samples. The 119 writing samples did not have to be read on the same day.

Selection of the Raters

In consultation with her chairperson, the researcher selected three elementary teachers from rural central Illinois schools. The raters were selected based on their years of experience and grades taught. Each rater had at least 20 years, or more, of elementary teaching experience. The raters included a Kindergarten teacher, a second grade teacher, and a third grade teacher. Each rater also had at least 10 years, or more, experience teaching in rural central Illinois schools.

Summary of Procedures

Students from Heritage School District participated in this study. Participating students were in first, second, and third grade. There were 119 students who participated.

The students were either given a writing prompt (“This summer I want to...”) or asked to self-select a writing topic. The students’ assignment was predetermined based on the location of their school building. Therefore, students who attended school at Broadlands were given the writing prompt and students who attended school at Homer were asked to self-select a topic.

In May 1999, instructions were given by the researcher to all six classrooms involved. Writing samples were produced and collected from all students who were present on the day the researcher instructed the class.

Three evaluators separately scored each writing sample, assigning scores to them based on four components: paper's focus, grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation and capitalization.

After collecting the raters' evaluations, the researcher then transferred the results to scantron sheets so that an analysis could be performed. Due to the fact that three separate raters evaluated each writing sample, three individual scantron sheets were filled out for each sample. Therefore, a total of 357 scantron sheets were analyzed. ($3 \times 119 = 357$)

The findings from this study are reported in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

The findings of this study resulted from a statistical treatment of the data through a measurement process discussed in the previous chapter.

Performing Tests for Significance

A written sample of every student participant was evaluated based on four different criteria. An analysis of each measure was then performed to test the basic hypothesis of this study: Will students who self-select a writing topic produce writing samples of higher quality than those students who are given a writing prompt?

Students were placed in groups based on their school's location. At the first location, Broadlands, students in grades first, second, and third were given the writing prompt "This summer I want to...". At the second location, Homer, students in grades first, second, and third were given no writing prompt.

Students were instructed to write on a self-selected topic. The criteria were analyzed separately. Due to the fact that each of the 119 papers was read three times, there will be a total of 357 individual scores. ($3 \times 119 = 357$)

The first of the four scoring components was Paper's Focus. The questions considered were:

- How many sentences actually pertained to the paper's main topic?
- Was the writer's purpose clear?

The second of the four scoring components was Grammar. The points considered were:

- grammatical errors, such as misuse of a word.

The third of the four scoring components was Sentence Structure. The question considered was:

- Was the writer able to write in complete sentences or did the paper contain run-on sentences and/or sentence fragments?

The fourth of the four scoring components was Punctuation and Capitalization. The questions considered were:

- Did the writer use correct punctuation?
- Did the writer use correct capitalization?

The results of the statistical test for Paper's Focus revealed that on a four point scale (with four being the highest score possible) students who were allowed to self-select their writing topic scored – on average – 3.4 whereas students who were given a writing prompt scored – on average – 3.1. Therefore, the hypothesis, students who self-select a writing topic will produce writing samples of higher quality than those students who are given a writing prompt, was accepted.

For a breakdown of the scores for Broadlands and Homer, see Table 1.

Table 1

Results of Statistical Test for Paper's Focus

Broadlands: Writing Prompt

Score of	1	2	3	4	Omissions
Students' Scores	7	32	59	56	2

Homer: Self-Selected Writing Topic

Score of	1	2	3	4	Omissions
Students' Scores	26	36	44	93	2

The results of the statistical test for Grammar revealed no significant difference between the evaluators' rating of students who self-selected writing topics versus students who were assigned a writing prompt. On a four point scale (with four being the highest score possible) students who were allowed to self-select their writing topic scored – on average – 3.2 whereas students who were given a writing prompt scored – on average – 3.3. Therefore, the hypothesis, students who self-select a writing topic will produce writing samples of higher quality than those students who are given a writing prompt, was rejected.

For a breakdown of the scores for Broadlands and Homer, see Table 2.

Table 2

Results of Statistical Test for Grammar

Broadlands: Writing Prompt

Score of	1	2	3	4	Omissions
Students' Scores	2	20	66	66	2

Homer: Self-Selected Writing Topic

Score of	1	2	3	4	Omissions
Students' Scores	7	14	106	71	3

The results of the statistical test for Sentence Structure revealed no significant difference between the evaluators' rating of students who self-selected writing topics versus students who were assigned a writing prompt. On a four point scale (with four being the highest score possible) students who were allowed to self-select their writing topic scored – on average – 2.7 whereas students who were given a writing prompt scored – on average – 2.8. Therefore, the hypothesis, students who self-select a writing topic will produce writing samples of higher quality than those students who are given a writing prompt, was rejected.

For a breakdown of the scores for Broadlands and Homer, see table 3.

Table 3

Results of Statistical Test for Sentence Structure

Broadlands: Writing Prompt

Score of	1	2	3	4	Omissions
Students' Scores	20	42	43	48	3

Homer: Self-Selected Writing Topic

Score of	1	2	3	4	Omissions
Students' Scores	22	65	62	50	2

The results of the statistical test for Punctuation and Capitalization revealed a difference between the evaluators' rating of students who self-selected writing topics versus students who were assigned a writing prompt. On a four point scale (with four being the highest score possible) students who were allowed to self-select their writing topic scored – on average – 2.9 whereas students who were given a writing prompt scored – on average – 3.1. Therefore, the hypothesis, students who self-select a writing topic will produce writing samples of higher quality than those students who are given a writing prompt, was rejected.

For a breakdown of the scores for Broadlands and Homer, see Table 4.

Table 4

Results of Statistical Test for Punctuation and Capitalization

Broadlands: Writing Prompt

Score of	1	2	3	4	Omissions
Students' Scores	2	42	57	52	3

Homer: Self-Selected Writing Topic

Score of	1	2	3	4	Omissions
Students' Scores	14	54	85	45	3

Interpreting the Results

Statistical data from each of the four components analyzed revealed that students who self-selected their writing topic had more focus throughout their writing sample.

For the other three components, there was no significant difference.

Summary of the Analysis

The primary purpose of this study was: 1) to evaluate the quality of writing in first, second, and third graders who were given a writing prompt, 2) to evaluate the quality of writing in first, second, and third graders who self-selected their own writing topic, and 3) to determine if there were any differences in the quality of writing between the two groups.

The subjective evaluation of written expression was partially controlled in two ways. First, evaluation procedures were carefully explained to each evaluator. Second, the three evaluators had no contact with each other or with the students involved in this study.

A summary, conclusions, and recommendations for further research are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Summary of the Study

A study to determine whether students who self-selected writing topics would produce papers of a higher quality than students who were given a writing prompt was performed with students from Heritage School District, grades first, second, and third. A survey was given to teachers and students in grades first, second and third, to determine what students enjoy writing about.

A review of literature on why writing is important, how to encourage writing, and why children should be given choices was included.

On May 5, 1999, the researcher administered the survey and collected writing samples from students in first, second, and third grade. Approximately half the students were given the writing prompt "This summer I want to..." while the remaining participants were instructed to write on a self-selected topic. Each group of students was given 1 hour in which to complete a writing sample and brief survey. Classroom teachers were also given a survey. Classroom teachers were asked not to assist or encourage students in any way – with the exception of spelling words. The writing samples were then given to three individual raters to be scored. Each rater was trained by the researcher and given a rubric to use for scoring purposes.

Writing samples were scored based on four separate components: paper's focus, grammar, sentence structure, capitalization and punctuation. The Office of Academic Testing, at Eastern Illinois University, computed average scores.

Results indicated that students who self-selected a writing topic had more focus throughout their papers than students who were given a writing prompt. There was no discernable difference in the remaining three categories.

Discussion of the Study

The study tested the hypothesis that if students were allowed to self-select a writing topic, they would produce papers of a higher quality than students who were assigned a writing prompt. Four areas of writing were examined and two showed significance.

Significance was found in the paper's focus and in the areas of capitalization and punctuation. Based on personal observation – done at the time the writing samples were collected – the researcher is confident that the classroom teachers did not assist students in any way, with the exception of spelling. An informal survey, completed by the teachers, confirms that three of the six teachers often allowed students the opportunity to self-select writing topics. Two of the six teachers indicated they sometimes allowed students to self-select writing topics. One teacher indicated she rarely gave students the opportunity to self-select writing topics. However, all six teachers stated that throughout the school year, their students were given writing prompts.

Between the two groups, there was no discernable difference in the areas of grammar, sentence structure.

While conducting this study, the researcher made the following observations in the classrooms included in the study:

1. A majority of the students wrote willingly on the given writing prompt or a self-selected topic.
2. In one classroom, however, students were uneasy about self-selecting a writing topic. They asked many questions and wanted prior approval before starting. This classroom teacher indicated that she rarely allowed students to self-select writing topics.
3. In five of the six classrooms observed, students' work was prominently displayed. In the classroom mentioned above however, student work was not displayed. The teacher's supplies and materials took up a majority of classroom space. After conferring with several teachers who work closely with this individual, the researcher is confident that the room's appearance, on the day of observation, appeared as it usually does.
4. Students in all six classrooms seemed to like the fact that their papers would not be graded. Some comments made were "Cool", "All right", and "Don't look [teacher's name]".
5. In four of the six classrooms, students' desks were in clusters or pods. In the other two classrooms, students' desks were in rows. (The classroom teacher who indicated that she rarely let students self-select writing topics had the desks arranged in rows.)
6. Students did not appear to care one way or the other as to whether or not their writing samples would be returned.

Conclusions from the Study

The extent of effectiveness of allowing students to self-select writing topics versus providing them with a writing prompt resulted in the formation of several conclusions based on findings of this study:

1. There is a difference in the quality of writing samples, in the area of the paper's focus, between giving a student a writing prompt and allowing a student to self-select a topic.
2. There is no significant difference in the quality of writing samples, in the area of grammar, between giving a student a writing prompt and allowing a student to self-select a topic.
3. There is no significant difference in the quality of writing samples, in the area of sentence structure, between giving a student a writing prompt and allowing a student to self-select a topic.
4. There is a difference in the quality of writing samples, in the area of capitalization and punctuation, between giving a student a writing prompt and allowing a student to self-select a topic.
5. One class of students, who were asked to self-select a writing topic, seemed to panic. The regular classroom teacher remained in the classroom while students wrote. This may have affected the students' willingness to self-select a topic since, apparently they were rarely allowed to do so.

6. Based on the informal survey students completed, most students liked to write. (See figure 5.)
7. Based on the informal survey students completed, students in first, second, and third grade most often like to write about animals and/or family and friends.
8. Based on the informal survey students completed, most students like to write more when they select the topic. (See figure 6.)
9. Based on the informal survey students completed, most students would write more if they could always select the writing topic. (See figure 7.)
10. Based on the informal survey students completed, most students felt that their teacher's writing topics were of more importance than their own. (See figure 8.)

Recommendations for Further Research

On the basis of the conclusions derived from the findings of this study, the following possibilities for research are recommended:

1. A replication of the idea of this study over an extended period of time (perhaps as long as 2 years). This might involve looping students and teachers for the duration of the study.
2. A replication of the idea of this study, over an extended period of time, with the instruction of the teachers monitored more closely so that all students will feel comfortable self-selecting a writing topic.

3. A collection of more writing samples, throughout the school year, from each subject to determine why scores in the area of capitalization and punctuation were higher in the papers written by students who were assigned a topic. Was this due to the fact that these students were assigned a writing topic or was it due to the teaching methods of the teachers at Broadlands?
4. A collection of writing surveys from all subjects done at the beginning and end of each school year in first, second, and third grade.

Figure 5

Results of First Student Survey Question

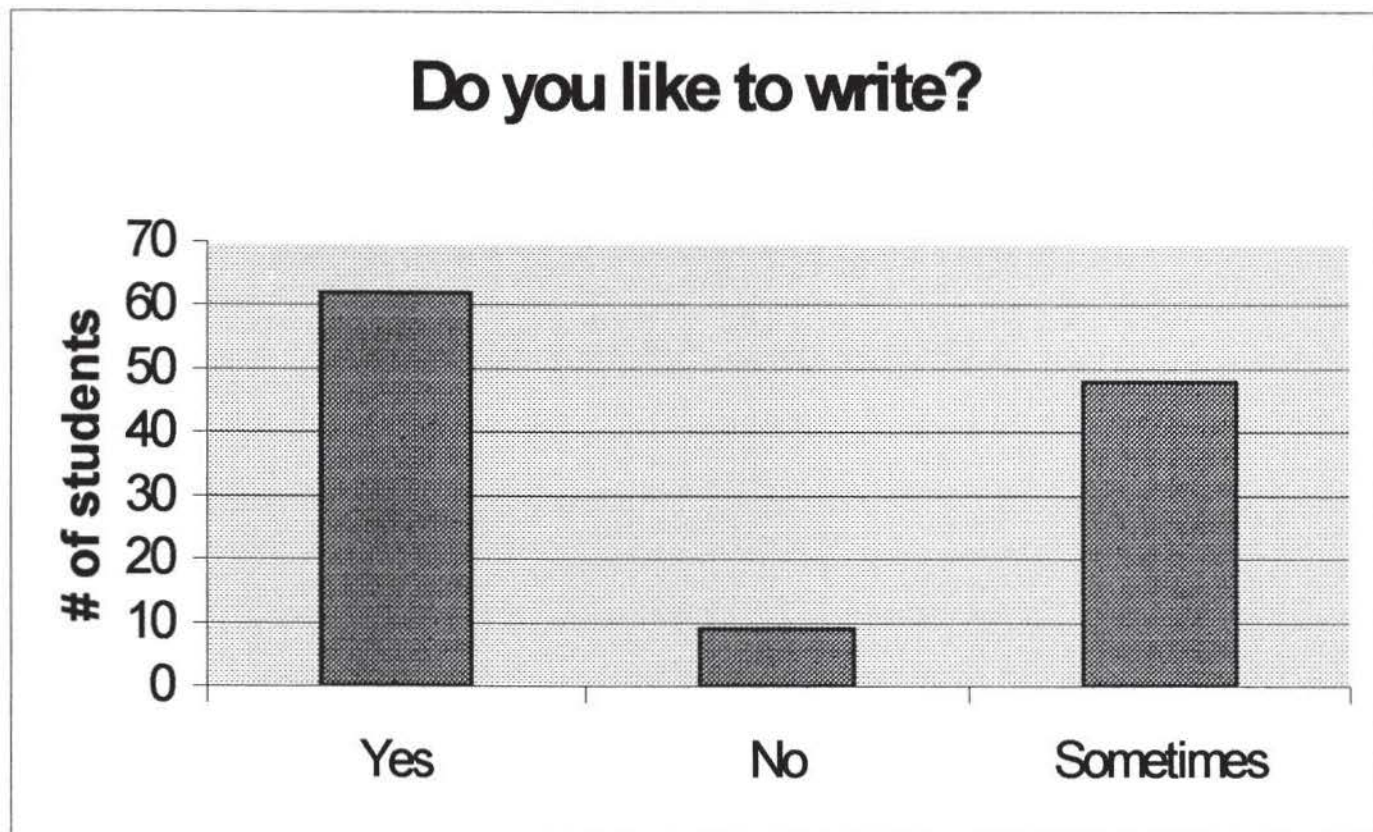


Figure 6

Results of Third Student Survey Question

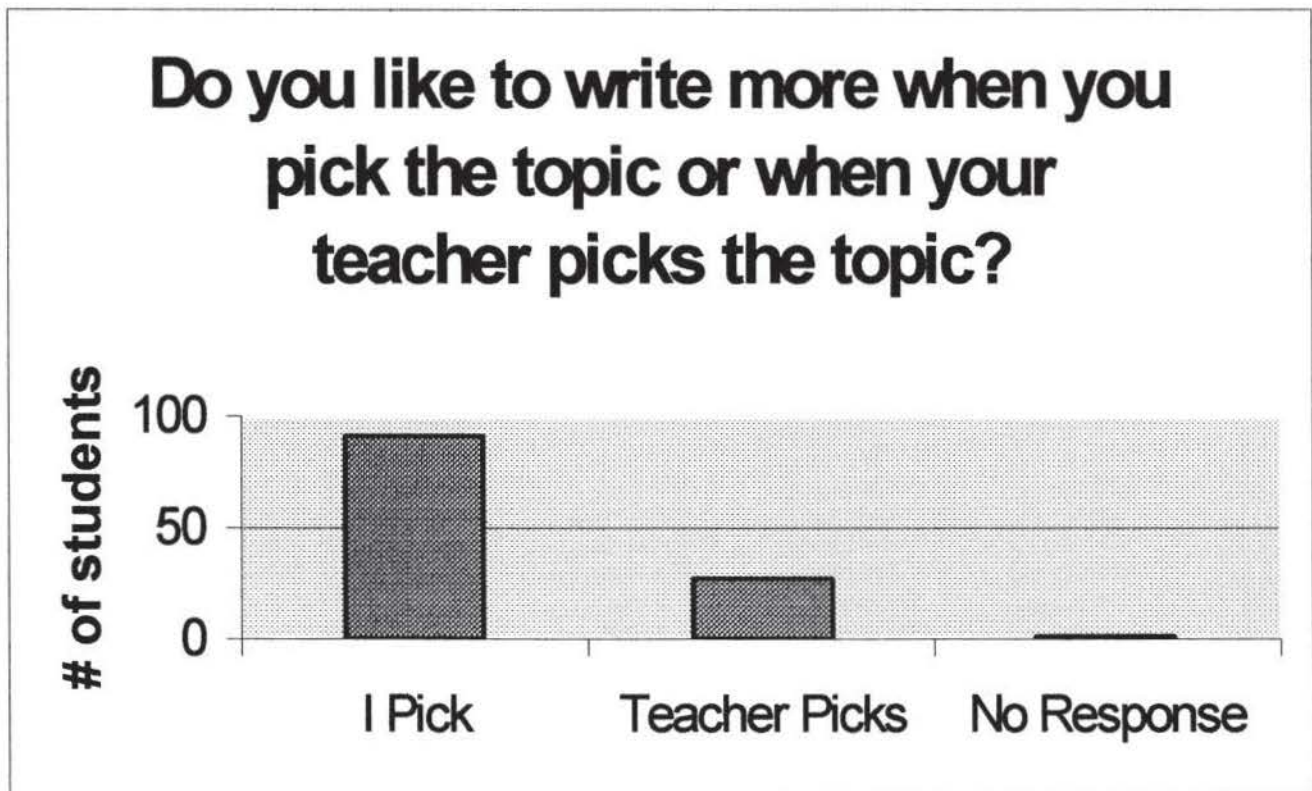


Figure 7

Results of Fourth Student Survey Question

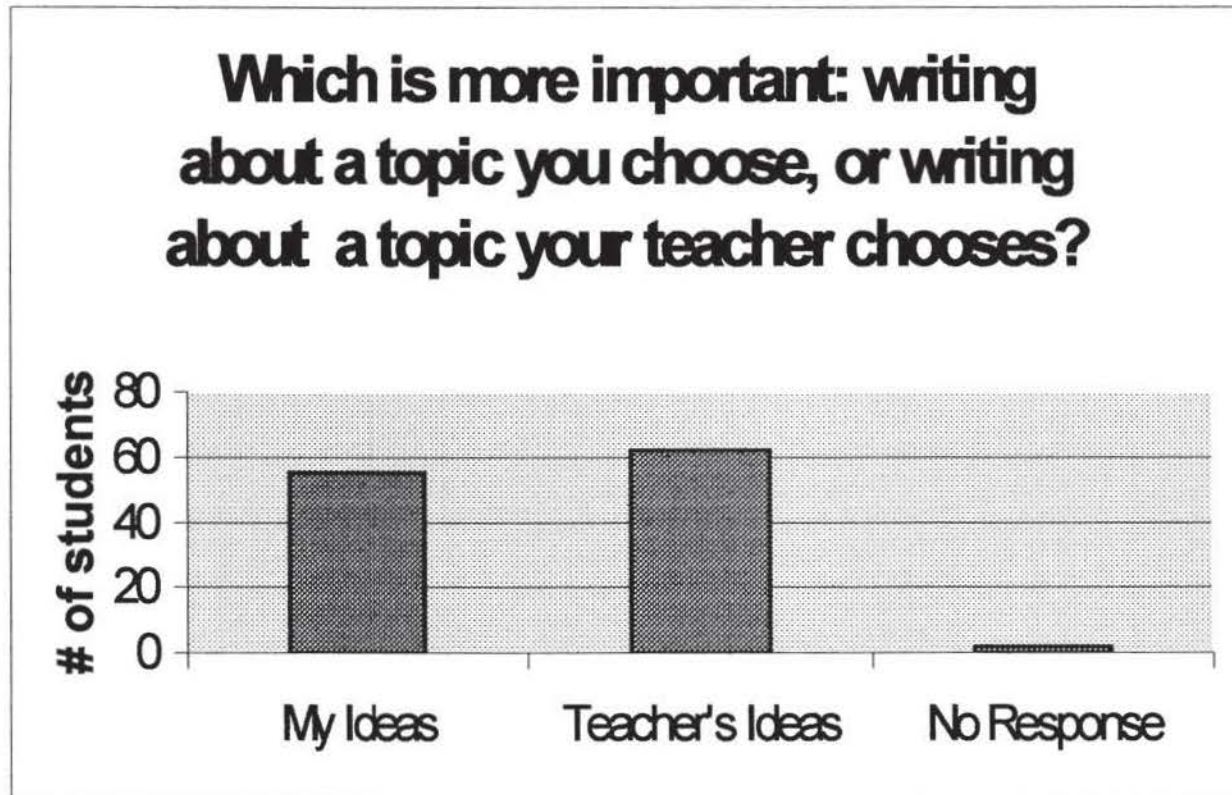
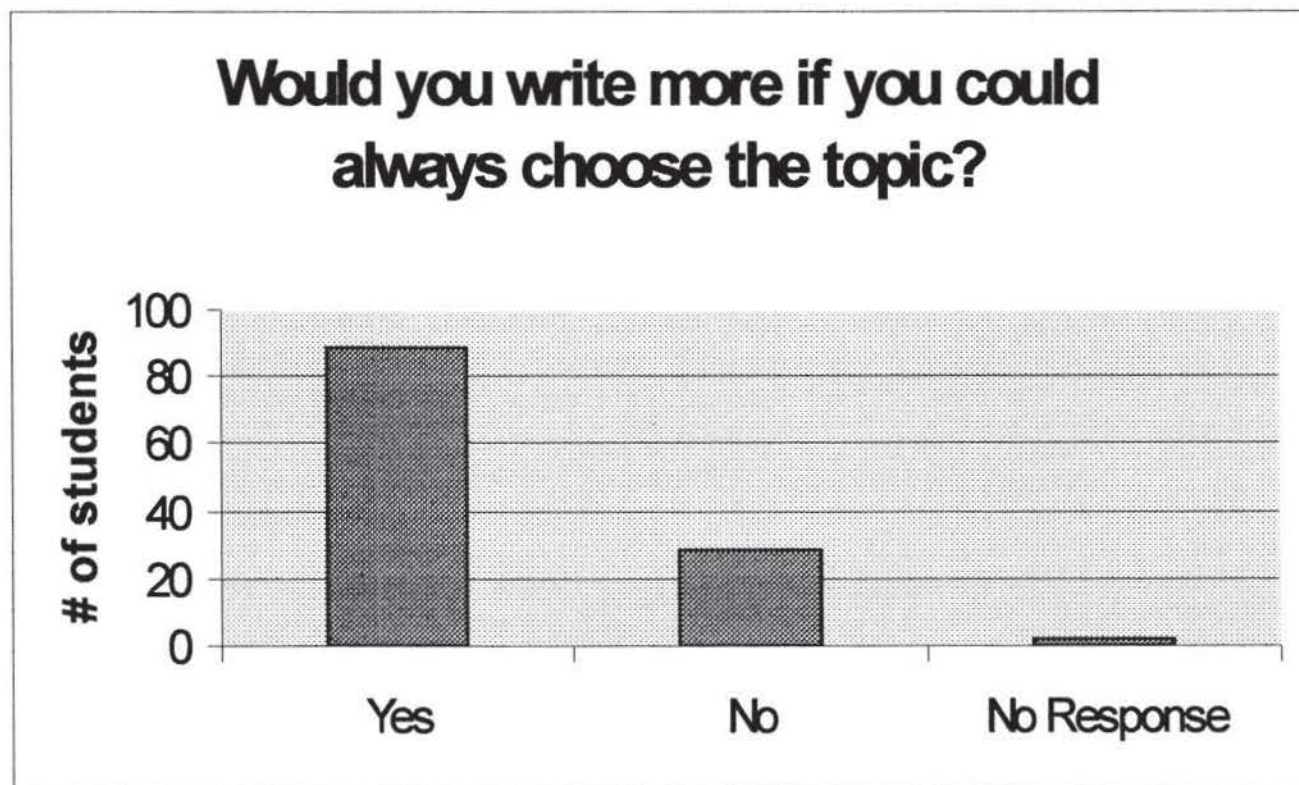


Figure 8

Results of Fifth Student Survey Question



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atwell, N. (Ed.). (1990). *Coming to know: Writing to learn in the intermediate grades*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.

Bottomley, D., Henk, W., & Melnick, S. (1997). *Assessing children's views about themselves as writers using the Writer Self-Perception Scale*. The Reading Teacher, 51 (4), (286-291).

Brewer, J. A. & Harp, B. (1991). Reading and writing: Teaching for the connections. New York: HBJ Inc.

Calkins, L. (1994). The art of teaching writing. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Calkins, L. (1983). Lessons from a child on the teaching and learning of writing. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Calkins, L. (1978). *Children write – And their writing becomes their textbook*. Language Arts, 55 (7), (804-810).

Chew, C. (1985). Instruction can link reading and writing. In J. Hansen, T. Newkirk, & D. Graves (Eds.), *Breaking ground: Teachers relate reading and writing in the elementary school* (pp.) Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.

D'Amico, J.J. (1980) *Reviving student participation*. Educational Leadership, 38 (44-46).

Garton, A. & Pratt, C. (1989). Learning to be literate: The development of spoken & written language. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Graves, D. (1978a). *Balance the basics: Let them write*. Learning, 6 (8), (30-33).

Graves, D. (1978b). *We won't let them write: Research update*. Language Arts, 55 (5), (635-640).

Graves, D. (1983). Writing: Teachers and children at work. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Graves, D. (1981) Donald Graves in Australia – "children want to write...". Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Graves, D. (1994). A fresh look at writing. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Kohn, A. (1993). *Choices for children: why and how to let students decide*. Phi Delta Kappan, 75 (1), (8-16).

Hertz, M. & Heydenberk, W. (1997). *A kindergarten writing workshop: How kindergarten students grow as writers*. Reading Horizon, 37 (3), (203-214).

Lewis, D. (1983). The role of interest in student's writing fluency and the quality of the product. Indiana, U.S.: (ERIC Document Reproductive Service No. ED 258175)

Mokhtari, K., Norris, E., & Reichard, C. (1997). *The influence of drawing on third graders' writing performance*. Reading Horizons, 38 (1), (13-30).

Morrow, L. M., (1993). *Literacy development in the early years*. Needham Heights MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Quintero, E. & Rummel, M.K. (1996). *Something to say: Voice in the classroom*. Childhood Education, 72 (3), (146-151).

Reed, J. (1995). *Making room the self in writing groups*. The Writing Instructor, 14 (3), (101-109).

Roberts, P. (1996). Integrating language arts and social studies for kindergarten and primary children. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Spandel, V. & Stiggins, R. (1997). *Creating writers: Linking writing assessment and instruction* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman Publishers.

Temple, C., Nathan, R., Burris, N., & Temple, F. (1988). *The beginnings of writing*. Newton MA: Allyn & Bacon.