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# WRITING THROUGH THE SENSES IN THE BASIC WRITING CLASSROOM

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, English Education

By

Danielle M. Schull

August 2020

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# **WRITING THROUGH THE SENSES IN THE BASIC WRITING CLASSROOM**

English

Missouri State University, August 2020

Master of Science

Danielle M. Schull

## **ABSTRACT**

This study attempts to determine the impact and effectiveness of sensory writing strategies in the initial drafting stages of narrative writing when used in the Basic Writing classroom. Inspired originally by my work with English As a Second Language (ESL) students at a middle eastern international school and the works of feminist theorists, such as Hélène Cixous and Gloria Anzaldua, students use sensory experiences as the foundation for the generation of narrative content. This early draft is then quantitatively and qualitatively compared to previous work completed by the student. I found that certain populations of students, based on gender, classroom dynamics, and writing preferences, seemed to be particularly impacted by these strategies. This includes how students were influenced affectively, but also in the style of their writing, and in the perception of their work. Also included is how a student with dyslexia was impacted by these strategies.

**KEYWORDS:** sensory writing, basic writing, narrative, pre-writing, student writing, action research

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A Master's Thesis  
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August 2020

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I would also like to thank my students, who have been incredibly kind and willing to help me and answer all my questions. More than this, they are brave. Many of them have written about very personal moments in their life and I am so proud that they have been willing to be vulnerable in their reflections of both their writing and their experiences. As much as this study has been for them, it would have been impossible without them. They are truly my partners in this project.

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## INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

My third year of teaching, I was working in the middle grades at an international school in Doha, Qatar. It was a start-up school, founded by a company that ran schools all over the Middle East and Asia. I started there the second year the school was open and the first year the school would open up grades 6-9. We were building the curriculum for grades 6-12 from scratch. It wasn't the grades I would have chosen to teach, but I really liked my students. Many of my students were non-native English speakers and many had been through a rather spotty education. Many of these students had been to a couple of different schools that were using different curriculums, in different countries, and often taught in different languages. Skill levels and gaps were all over the place. That year it was not unusual for me to have a 7<sup>th</sup> grade class where reading levels ranged from 1<sup>st</sup> grade to 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

I had originally planned to teach high school and teaching middle school, especially the 6<sup>th</sup> graders who seemed more like children than pre-teens, was a daunting task. I had not anticipated teaching in an environment where one of the main goals was to just teach students "how to school" as our counselor put it to me. One of the other things I realized early on was that my students were simply not at the developmental level or had the language proficiency that I was used to. I adjusted my lessons, adding in more "fun kid stuff" that I had not considered before. A lot of these activities were based on other ways of communicating, like drawing or talking instead of writing, activities that usually disappeared from high school English classrooms.

The thinking behind this lack of concrete learning in the upper grades follows Piaget's theory of cognitive development: as students grow older and develop, they become able to

interact with more complex concepts. Children move from a Preoperational stage, normally taking place in Pre-K to 1st Grade, to a Concrete Operational stage, usually falling between grades 1-6. During this time, much of their learning is based around the physical world and they are taught to learn empirically through what they observe. Therefore, these more “hands on” activities are more common in elementary school classrooms and even more common when working with students with disabilities (Walet). For example, the Orton-Gillingham method uses a multi-sensory approach to teaching reading, writing, and spelling. Because this method is generally only used with students who are learning to read and write, it is rarely used past elementary school courses. Similarly, Cathy Collins Block, et al. detail the use of Comprehension Process Motions (CPMs) that can be used in grades K-3 to assist in reading comprehension.

We expect students to understand these abstract concepts and apply their knowledge through language. The “definition essay”, a common assignment where a student picks an abstract noun, like love, freedom, or friendship, to define in their own terms, is proof of this. The same is true of other common high school writing assignments that many Americans will remember writing in an English (or possibly History) class; essays that centered on questions like “What makes a true hero?” and “Is the American Dream still intact?”. Essays that I have assigned myself in High School classrooms. As they get older, students are more and more likely to be asked to demonstrate knowledge and ideas through writing and language, rather than given other options or strategies to help present their thinking in a more concrete way that makes sense for them.

Educators at the secondary and post-secondary level are occasionally encouraged to include activities or tips to help kinesthetic and tactile learners develop their writing. Students

are told to stretch and take a break periodically when writing, or to use their body position to reinforce the information they are gathering or writing. They might be instructed to write information down in longhand, rather than typing. If they are going to type their work, students are encouraged to use a real keyboard that creates a stronger physical response to their touch, rather than typing on a touch screen. Sometimes students are advised to write their information on notecards or post-it notes, so they can be physically rearranged when drafting or organizing their papers and essays.

In her article “*Writing - Walking, Tinkertoys, and Legos*”, Linda Hecker describes several strategies used in a post-secondary classroom that involve “walking strategies, which call upon kinesthetic intelligence, and building strategies, which capitalize on spatial intelligence” (47). In practice, this looks like students walking around a room, and “changing directions to indicate changes in the logic of the argument or the sequence of events” in order to connect their body to the organization and logic of their paper (47). In another study, Jackie Hatfield, et al notes the use of multi-sensory methods, such as using more visual ways of organizing information, such as using color coding to help students define the structure of a paragraph or paper. These strategies are being used to help a specific population of students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Dyslexia, or other neurodivergent students, but both researchers note that these strategies can still be used in a general classroom to assist students who are aided by kinesthetic activities.

These ideas can be helpful to struggling learners, but do not seek to make student writing authentic or exceptional. They are intended to help students in one of two ways: to logically structure their paper or to help them maintain focus when writing. This is useful but does little to help students improve aspects of their writing like word choice, use of figurative language,

sentence structure, and imagery, but I would argue that the inclusion of these stylistic elements, especially when students are confined to the genre conventions and structure of academic writing, make writing personal. They allow students to showcase their individuality.

In the years I taught middle school, one of my goals for all my students was to help them write a better personal narrative. Just as my students had been to different schools in the past, it was likely they would not stay at our school until they graduated. It was just the nature of the school. Many of the students' parents were military or on 2-4-year contracts and would eventually leave the country. Many others were on a waitlist for one of the more prestigious and established schools in town. We joked that our tagline should be, "Where you go while waiting for the better American school to let you in." It felt like I was constantly writing recommendation letters for my top students and watching them leave. These students wouldn't be waiting till college to write a dreaded admissions essay; they would probably be doing it as 8<sup>th</sup> graders. In order to help them get into the school of their choice, I knew they had to blow this essay out of the water.

That's when I first thought of adapting a sensory text structure, inspired by some of the text structures Gretchen Bernabei described in her book *Reviving the Essay*, to help them. I thought if they started their essay with a memory, something rich and full of detail, it would capture the reader better than a boring introduction. If nothing else, it would sound different than a lot of the other essays they read. I knew a lot of the schools in the area followed or were very inspired by the British curriculum and that many of these teachers were full of acronyms for formats students *had* to follow in their writing. Strategies like using PEAL (Point, Evidence, Analysis, Link) for each body paragraph in an essay. This could help students stand out in a sea of what I saw as mediocre writing.

Ken Macrorie talks about how students become adept at writing “Engfish”, writing that says little to nothing at all in some of the most boring ways imaginable. The writing is inauthentic and sparks no joy in the writer or the reader. Many teachers, like Nicole Baart, know this common phenomenon, noting in her case study of a 9<sup>th</sup> grade poetry unit that “although [her] students had written something akin to poetry, it was stilted and devoid of any emotion” (99). She found that by promoting reflective writing through the senses, students were able to write about common place objects and memories in a new way. Their poetry embodied the often-uttered phrase of creative writing: “show, don’t tell.” These strategies encouraged students to connect with a physical experience and be honest. By being specific and personal, she found that students are less likely to turn to vague descriptions of events.

For my middle school students, I drew on something similar to this way of reflective writing. In Baart’s class, students were able to interact with physical objects that would, hopefully, spark a reaction. In comparison, my students were given a text structure to follow and help them break away from some of the very common “5-paragraph essay” writing they had completed in other assignments and classes. Despite this suggested structure, students were ultimately left with lots of freedom about what and how to communicate their experiences. Students did smaller reflective pieces, often based off a journal prompt, that built into their larger paper and read their papers to other students to get feedback on if their readers could “feel” like they were at the scene of their narrative. If possible, some students tried to re-experience some of the sensory details they were describing in their work by cooking a particular dish or looking at photos to help them remember a setting or person.

I was surprised at how well asking student to connect their writing to their senses worked in my own class, and I built the project into the curriculum for 7<sup>th</sup> grade. For many of my

struggling students, this was the longest paper they wrote all year, not because it had the longest page requirement, but because it was the longest paper they actually turned in. These papers were not always as well structured, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, but they usually contained more details, interesting sentences, and more instances of imagery. Some of the sentences my students wrote during this project were the best they had ever written. One of my students who constantly struggled due to a mixture of ability and distraction wrote the line: *“There used to be many kinds of flowers: some big and some small, but my favorite kinds were the ones that you could blow on and the parts fly in the air.”* It was the most striking detail I had ever seen from him in the nearly two years he had been in my class.

After talking to some students, I hypothesized that part of this had to do with the reflection on sensory experiences. I built more of these elements into my classes and found that students not only enjoyed the assignments more, but produced more interesting, authentic work. I had not used these strategies in my previous classes, so had nothing to compare it to in my own experiences. Despite this, I wondered if it had something to do with my students’ language skills. The majority of my students were not native English speakers and often had trouble communicating, in writing, ideas that they found easier to convey when speaking, in their home language or English. At the same time, I sometimes had trouble breaking my own speech down into simple enough English for them to understand. This is why I believe the focus on the concrete, on their physical bodies and memories, was so helpful. These experiences, and the emotions they illicit, transcend language.

This seems to suggest that these strategies, while they could be useful for all writers, are particularly helpful for students struggling with written language. This could be ESL students like the ones I was working with, who are struggling not necessarily language in general, but

with writing in a language they do not feel comfortable with yet. This is in part because the vocabulary typically taught to people learning second languages begins with the concrete, like tangible objects and feelings. These strategies can also be helpful to Basic Writers and other students who struggle generally with written communication, especially if one follows Alice Horning's position that teaching and learning to write holds many similarities to teaching and learning a second language.

Reflecting on sensory experiences is not just epistemic for young or inexperienced writers. Hélène Cixous acknowledges the important role that the physical senses play in your ability to write. She identifies her writing style as *Écriture féminine* and describes it in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" as a uniquely feminine form of writing in which women write "through their bodies" (1527). Cixous holds that there is knowledge in a woman's body that is not found in the mind and that this knowledge is just as important. In *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, she expands on this idea, claiming that her writing comes from "deep in [her] body, further down, behind thought" and that she must climb down within herself to find it, pushing past the experiences and education that shaped her (118-119). While she does not label it as such, the experiences and educations she refers to pushing past seem to be, at least in part, the socialization she has internalized. She seems to believe that part of this process is a way of seeking knowledge, held within her, that is untouched by these more external factors. She encourages women to access this knowledge and use it in their writing. This writing through the body is a means of self-discovery, an attempt to put into words the 'gut feelings' and sensory information our bodies are trying to communicate to our conscious selves.

This writing becomes an act of reflection that allows her to consider ideas, memories, and assumptions in a new way, ultimately allowing her to communicate to her readers a personal

truth. It is a way to develop her other voices. This is not just a matter of using the body as a tool in writing, but also a way of claiming ownership of the body's, and therefore the writer's, experiences. By acknowledging this in their writing, the author is also validating the experience as something that gives us knowledge. If one believes that the physical is intertwined with the mental and emotional, then it is clear that ignoring this knowledge leads to not only the ignoring of the body, but also the self.

Cixous labels this writing as women's writing, but she emphasizes that this does not mean it is limited to women. Feminine writing embraces tangents and the use of descriptive details which prompts visceral responses from both the writer and the readers. These tangents are important in the presentation of ideas as this theory would hold that, like the body and the self being intertwined, so are the relationships between information. Rather than this knowledge being related in a linear fashion, point A leading to point B and so on, as is typically expressed in traditional ("masculine") writing, it would be more appropriate to understand this knowledge as a web of interconnected ideas. These tangents more accurately describe the relationship between different thoughts and pieces of knowledge. This feminine form of writing also focuses less on persuasion. This is of particular note in academic writing, where it is common for the writer to be asked to disprove the theories of another before laying out their own argument. This form of writing does not rely on the domination of others, but rather on the shared understanding of the content being discussed.

In contrast to feminine styles, plain, unadorned, linear writing has been seen as a more masculine style of writing. Mary Hiatt describes this masculine style as "terse, strong, rational, convincing, formidable, and logical" (222). Hemingway is often upheld for his 'manly' manner of writing that largely eschews the use of adverbs and passive voice, focusing on strong verbs



and simple sentence structure instead. His writing is concise and efficient. More significant than stylistic difference is that writers, because masculine traits have been seen as superior to feminine traits, have historically been less likely to experiment with feminine styles.

Even scholars who want to explore different writing styles and strategies, are tied down by their own sort of “Engfish.” As much as these authors and teachers would like to open these doors, it is still not accepted in many areas of academia. Jane E. Hindman writes about her frustration with her situation. She wants to promote an “embodied professional rhetoric,” but it is difficult for her to do so well, admitting that she often makes “mistakes” that take her outside of the genre conventions she would normally be asked to stay in (112). She points out that well-known authors, such as Helene Cixous, are able to break from these conventions because of the preeminence they hold in their field, a preeminence she does not share and so she must write in a way that is in contrast to her message (101). As I write this, I feel a strong connection to this point, because am I not doing the exact same thing now? I am hoping to promote writing and processes that could break outside the bounds of a traditional format, and yet, I am not doing it myself. It seems hypocritical, but necessary.

Some authors do manage to publish work that is outside the normal conventions of their genre, but to do so requires a disclaimer or roadmap. Reginald Gibbons does this bluntly with the title of his article “*To Write with the use of Cixous*”, immediately letting the reader know that this article will defy the expectations of a literary analysis; he is not so much writing *about* Cixous, but trying to explain what it is like to write *like* Cixous. William P. Banks makes similar rhetorical moves in his essay “*Writing through the Body.*” His first section is titled ‘Disrupting Boundaries’, like Gibbons, letting the reader know immediately that this is not the average academic work. His second section is titled ‘How to Read This Essay’. He is giving his reader

what is essentially a roadmap, a way to understand his, self-professed, fragmented writing that seems to follow “a different (chrono)logical (or no logic at all)” order (23).

Just like these authors, students should not have to limit their writing style to what is prescribed as the “correct” and “formal” format to convey information. While it is important for students to be able to write within the conventions of a genre, like academic writing, there is an equally strong argument for encouraging students to bend or even break the rules to make a point or create a stronger piece. Academics like Thomas J. Farrell may argue that the “male rhetoric” or style is of more use to students and should therefore be the focus of composition courses, but this only applies to a very narrow field of assignments and seems to be influenced by the fact that he “suspects that the female mode can be learned, but cannot be taught” (920). This seems a failure on the part of the teacher, not the content. It also assumes that students will only ever write for academic purposes. Students should use their senses to inform their writing and allow their felt experiences to encourage them to prompt another type of understanding they were previously unable to reach through the use of logic alone. It is this ability to move between these perceived notions of feminine and masculine writing that Cixous is describing, that would allow students to engage in writing that is suited to conventions when necessary. This should be the goal of the educator, to help writers develop a means to communicate not just information, but a personal truth.

Gloria Anzaldua is another writer and theorist who believes that the body is closely tied to language and writing. Like Cixous, Anzaldua also tends to write about her work as being tied to femininity and both use at various points maternal metaphors when writing about the creation of a text. Anzaldua describes in *Borderlands* how she imagines her words flow from her body. She writes “I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feather, black

and red ink drips across the page” (1595). For her, this process is personal; her language, body, and identity are linked together. But while her writing is personal, she also asserts that this is what gives her writing weight and why it persuades the reader. She writes that in order to have “transformative power”, writing “must arise from the human body” (1595). Anzaldua’s writing is not only affected by her body, but has effects on her body. She describes how the act of writing can make her physically ill because it calls to mind past trauma. However, this sickness and trauma is also healed through writing as she uses it to make sense of the images or events that negatively impacted her. It is after this healing that she finds joy in her writing. (1594-95)

The first year I used these activities I focused on narrative writing, but I wondered how they could be used in other genres. I saw an opportunity experiment when we planned the semester final for 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes. Students had spent the past quarter reading a book that contained a “man v wild” conflict. The books might be different based on the student’s reading level, but all students would be talking about the same themes in the story. Their final project was to create a desert survival guide. They conducted research on the topic, but would also have the advantage of a personal experience. We took them camping in the desert surrounding the city by the inland sea. They were able to interview the people who drove us out and worked as guides. They might be on a gorgeous beach, but they were also tasked with asking themselves questions. There was no fresh water. Where would they find it if we had not provided it? How would they find their way around when the only landmarks, the sand dunes, changed with the wind? What types of food might be available and how should the dress?

On this field trip, students could view this as a research gathering assignment, in between the swimming and riding camels. Later, when students were writing their report, they were able to think back on this trip, using their personal experiences as a resource. It also had the dual

effect of allowing the students who had spent lots of time camping with their families, the students who also happened to be the ones who often had behavior issues in the classroom, to shine and show their knowledge to their peers. I took some of the most difficult students in the grade on an overnight field trip and we did not have a single behavioral problem.

This emphasis on place is also supported by Kristie S. Fleckenstein's writing on the somatic mind, pointing out that as our bodies exist within a physical space, they influence each other. The environment around us can become an extension of our selves (287-288). Some of these students had deep cultural ties to this land, others were merely visitors. Despite having the same assignment and, more or less, the same experiences on this trip, students found different information; they had different insights. What the teachers had planned as a scientific exploration to fulfill the research portion of an assignment, full of hard facts, became more similar to ethnographic writing.

This type of multi-curricular writing is the type of project I love to do, and I think it brings out the best work in students. I love going into science classrooms and working with students on how to use their senses to explain concepts or talking to math teachers about how we teach students to communicate mathematical ideas in words. I work to align the concepts students are talking about in their humanities and science classes with the books and pieces we read in class. I think about how we get students writing in classes outside their English classes and how we can support the learning they are doing in our own classrooms. But using these sensory experiences is not always supported by other fields or academia in general.

Academia has a history of distrusting the body as far back as Plato. In particular, post structuralism and postmodernism seem to have created a division between the body and the mind, turning the physical self "into discourse, corporeality into textuality" (Fleckenstein 282).

When there is no true reality, then the information we receive is easily denied. But our senses are good for something other than detecting metaphorical shadows on a wall. They give us valuable insight about the world around us. While these insights might not always be objective, this does not mean that they are not useful. Even subjective insights, especially when they are understood to be subjective, can help us to understand our reactions to our environment. The observations we make about our reality and the knowledge that comes through the body, by conscious and unconscious means, can be channeled into our writing. It is often through another medium, such as writing, that we are able to (re)create/interpret this unconscious knowledge.

This is a distinct difference between much of the scholarship currently being done surrounding kinesthetic and sensory writing strategies. In much of the writing, the body, rather than being a source of knowledge, is the medium through which it is communicated. Writers might combine their message with movements or sound to create a multi-modal composition. For example, Steph Ceraso writes about the importance of sound and sonic experiences, such as resonance or reverberation, and how they can be used rhetorically in multi-modal composition. Janine Butler asks educators to think about how they use gestures to communicate with students and how this can also be part of multi-modal compositions. Similarly, Cheryl Pallant draws on her background in dance to encourage student writing, reflection, and creativity.

This is quite different from the “embodied writing” described by William P. Banks. And yet, the writing he describes is still narrative writing. In fact, it is very personal writing, something that has inherently been associated with the feminine in academia and, with that, also labeled as not terribly academic. Banks makes a strong argument that just because writing is personal, does not mean it is not also critical. While this is important to note, it still does not answer how these strategies can be useful in other genres of writing.

In past classes, I have given students broad directions in order to encourage the use and creation of these strategies, much the same as I might do for other common writing techniques, like outlining. Students are given general instructions, with some ideas about how they might individualize the strategy to best work for them. I might tell students to close their eyes and try to remember sensory details about an experience that had happened to them, or maybe to imagine themselves back in a place they had been before. From there, students can process that information in a way that makes the most sense for them, and are given several suggestions they could try. That could mean freewriting from their memory, making a chart or list of all the sensory experiences that they remembered, or even just talking into a recorder about the things they remembered so they could reference it later.

While this is just an small example of how I have introduced this idea to students in the past, more often during the pre-writing stages of the writing process, there are many other strategies that could fit into this broader umbrella for encouraging sensory writing, and these strategies could be used at other times in the writing process. They can also be used, not in the recollection of experiences, but in the moment. Rather than having students report what they remember experiencing, students could record what they are currently feeling. These strategies could be used to gather data for research purposes or to inspire creative work that students write in the moment. What I have given to students as strategies and resources, can also be seen as general encouragement for students to consider new information and content.

Just as some of these writing strategies have been used in creative writing classrooms for decades, I am sure that there are teachers and researchers using them in various subject areas. Famous stories of Archimedes' theories on buoyancy being discovered in the bath; Newton being struck by a falling apple inspired him to think of gravity in a new way. Even Albert

Einstein is famous for stating the importance of imaginative thinking in scientific discovery. For all of these men, their initial ideas and thoughts were not based on objective logic but a sensory experience. Reflection, empirical journals, and inductive reasoning can be used in a variety of fields, but specialization prevents academia from walking across a campus to see what others are doing. As teachers and learners, we should be exploring these writing strategies. Our bodies are a source of knowledge and we should learn to trust and use them to pursue our learning and creation of knowledge.

## METHODS

This study aims to look at sensory awareness and the writing strategies it inspires as a writing strategy during the brainstorming and initial drafting stages of student writing. While students completed their assignments over the course of two or more drafts, many of the choices individuals made were based on their time, priorities, and the individualized goals created over the course of the semester. These variables impacted if and how they revised these assignments. In order to try and account for these many variables, many of which might have been unknown to me, I will only be considering the first drafts in order to show the most equal comparison available between the two narrative writing assignments, while looking at the following questions:

- What, if any, changes occur in student writing when using these strategies as an initial writing strategy when compared to the students' previous narrative work?
- How will students perceive their writing when comparing narrative drafts after using these initial writing strategies?
- How do different populations of students react to the use of these strategies, either in their writing or perception?

This study also focuses in on the experiences of several students in an attempt to see how they responded to these strategies individually. This will be used to, in some small way, explain the trends and how other students might find these strategies useful.

### **School Context and Participants**

This study was completed at a public state university and IRB approval for the study (IRB-FY2020-84) was received on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Further information on this approval is



listed in the Appendix. The participants were students in two sections of a Basic Writing course, taught by the same instructor. This course is graded on a Pass/Not Pass scale based on a portfolio of student work. In order to submit a portfolio, students had to attend a set number of classes, complete a revised draft of each of the four projects, and participate in a set number of weekly assignments. If these parameters were met, students would then submit a portfolio to a committee of instructors for evaluation. The instructor of the course is not allowed to evaluate their own students' portfolios. According to the guidelines set by the Composition program, the portfolio submitted by the student would contain three pieces of writing and only one piece of writing could be from a narrative genre.

In total, this study looks at 30 of those students. The majority of these students had received a 17 or lower on the English portion of the ACT, and so were required to pass the course before taking the Writing I class needed for general education requirements. A few students had scored in the low to mid 20s and were choosing to take the course to improve their writing skills. Two of these students were non-native English speakers. While several students revealed in conferences that they had an IEP in high school for a variety of reasons, no students had official accommodations at the university. This course was the first attempt at passing the course for all students and the majority of the students were in their first semester of college.

### **Summary of Strategies**

Students were asked to complete a sensory association paper (SAP) as part of the class. This essay is a narrative piece that asks students to write about a person or event that impacted their life in some way. While writing, the students were to focus carefully on their memories, retracing their steps and noting the sensory information they were taking in at the time. This was

the second of four papers students needed to complete in order to submit a portfolio to the committee for evaluation.

Students were first given a mini-lesson intended to review various types of imagery and figurative language. The lesson consisted of a short presentation giving terms, definitions, and examples. Afterwards, students read a short narrative essay about an author's relationship with his father to identify examples of their use and the senses they appealed to. Students then worked in small groups to add sensory detail to the essay. For example, one group revised the line: *"my... arms couldn't get me out of the water."* by adding sensory details related to touch and sight. They changed the line to: *"my ...arms couldn't get a grip on the cold metal lip of the boat to help me get out of the dangerous, murky water."*

Students were given a chance to practice writing these details in their own work and brainstorm a topic for their paper. They were told to pick a photo they found meaningful in some way and describe the person or event pictured using sensory details in approximately 300-600 words. Students could use this writing as a jumping off point for their paper or change their topic later. Most students ultimately chose to keep the same general topic for their paper.

Once students had chosen a topic, they were instructed to start writing their first draft. Students were individually and as a class given different strategies to aid in their focus on sensory details. For some, merely the encouragement to focus on their senses seemed instruction enough, and they were able to take the idea and run with it, perhaps due to past writing instruction. The class was also given a text structure worksheet (Figure 1) that they could choose to use if they wanted help in outlining their paper. Most students chose not to use this resource. For students struggling to add sensory details, a strategy was suggested. Students were told to write down the five senses, then close their eyes and "walk" through whatever event they were

writing about, trying to remember as exactly as they could the details of the event. When they remembered any sort of sensory detail, they were told to write it down next to the senses it

**Sensory Associations Essay-**

Sounds, Smells, Songs, Movies, Foods. All of these things can trigger memories from our lives.

Your task is to write a narrative describing a memory or time in your life that is triggered by one of your 5 senses and why it is important to you. Did a person influence you? Did you learn a lesson or moral? How did this event change you?

Follow the Text Structure below to plan and help you write your essay.

<p><b>When I hear/ smell/taste/see/ feel...</b></p>	
<p><b>It reminds me of...</b>  (A memory, event, or person)</p>	
<p><b>When I think of this, I feel...</b>  (an emotion)</p>	
<p><b>Because...</b>  (Why does this remind you of that memory? Why do you feel that emotion toward it?)</p>	
<p><b>Why is that memory/person important to you?</b></p>	

Figure 1. SAP text structure

corresponded to. Some students completed this strategy on their own, while others completed it with the aid of the instructor or another student who was able to ask them leading questions to help them remember more details.

From there, the students' work on the essay followed the pattern of all projects in the course. Students completed a first draft, met with a peer group to review, then turned in a revised draft to the instructor. The instructor met with each student individually to conference about their work and the students were encouraged to revise the work, before turning in a final draft at the end of the semester.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The collection of data for this study used a mixed methods embedded design approach, as outlined by John W. Creswell, in order to answer a diverse set of questions (2012). Qualitative data collection was used to support and to help interpret the quantitative data from student work and decisions. To quantitatively analyze student work, students were assigned two projects at the beginning of the course which would be compared. Students were first asked to write a Literacy Narrative. This gave a baseline in student ability. No specific strategies were offered for the whole class to use, although the instructor used strategies that would be used in the completion of every project. These included the instructor working individually with each student in a 5-10 minute conference to address self-identified struggles. These informal conferences were held in class as the instructor circled the room, meeting with each student during work time. Students were given time in class to plan their writing individually and with peer feedback. All of these strategies were used in both the writing of the Literacy Narrative and the SAP.

The only strategy used to prepare for the Literacy Narrative and not for the SAP was completing a genre study as a class to identify the text characteristics normally present in this specific genre of narrative writing. Students read examples of narrative essays to prepare for each assignment. Common text characteristics were discussed as a class at this time, but students did not complete a formal genre study as they had when preparing for the Literacy Narrative. Students had discussed in class various narrative essays at this point and, due to the nature of assignment, student writing would cover a wider variety of topics and ideas, making it more difficult to focus on a particular type of narrative essay as we had in the Literacy Narrative. These two assignments were completed back to back, in order to minimize outside variables discussed in class and to limit time between the two drafts. The initial draft of the Literacy Narrative was turned in to the instructor during week three of the semester. The draft of the SAP was turned in during week six.

In order to answer questions about the student writing process and perception of their work, student surveys were collected near the beginning of the course. These were used to determine how individual students typically begin their writing process and their level of comfort in writing narrative works. At mid-term, students completed an interview about their work in the class so far. At this point, students were asked to compare their experiences in writing the two narratives and to determine which piece they felt was stronger. Students also reflected on the class as a whole, including their narrative writing, at the end of the course as part of an introduction to the portfolio. Students were assigned to explain why they had chosen to include the pieces they had in the portfolio and about their progress as a writer.

Also analyzed were the choices students made in submitting their portfolio. Students were only allowed to incorporate one narrative in the portfolio and so had to choose between the

two, the Literacy Narrative and the SAP, completed in the class. The students also had to rank their works, placing what they believed to be their best work first in the portfolio and the others in descending order. This placement, along with a short introduction, submitted with the portfolio, that explained their choices, gave insight into how they viewed their narrative assignments in comparison to each other and the research work they completed.

**Student Survey.** Students were given a survey at the beginning of the course, asking them to identify what they perceived to be their strengths and weaknesses in writing and communication, and to determine their general attitude towards writing. Students were also asked about their writing preferences. This survey was created on Microsoft Forms and students were given a link the second week of class to complete the survey. The survey was not a requirement of the course.

This survey contained several questions that were independent from the study and were used to help the instructor differentiate the course for individual students. The specific questions asked in order to further this study were open-ended questions. In order to prevent respondent fatigue, these questions were designed to help guide the student (Dörnyei). This was done by providing students with common options and having questions broken down into smaller parts to help students. For example, students were not asked to describe the writing process, but rather asked multiple questions about different aspects of their process. Student attitudes and ideas about narrative writing were also addressed in multiple ways to better communicate with respondents. For example, students were asked about writing narratives and about telling stories. While there is certainly overlap, this gave the student a chance to consider how the two might be different. For example, the student might have an aversion to narrative writing that has little to do with the writing aspect and more to do with the idea of sharing personal stories in general.

The questions listed in the survey for this study were as follows:

- Do you enjoy writing? Why or why not? What makes it enjoyable or not?
- What types of writing are you most comfortable with? Think about ALL writing, not just academic work.
- What is the first thing you do when you begin to write a new piece or assignment?
- Do you enjoy coming up with and/or telling stories? If so, what kind?
- Are there any pre-writing strategies you use? And if so, what are they? (outlining, free writing, idea maps, etc.)

These questions were used to gauge how comfortable students were with narrative writing and to determine a baseline for each student's writing process.

**Comparison of Drafts.** When comparing the drafts of student Literacy Narratives and SAPs, initial quantitative data was recorded, looking at the instances of sensory details. Sensory language includes imagery or other words/phrases that relate to the senses. Anytime a student gave a specific detail about a concrete feeling, like something they smelled, tasted, touched, saw, or heard, this counted as an instance of sensory language. In one example, a student wrote "*Each explosion of the fireworks would be just above your head and you could feel the boom in your chest.*" Another student wrote, "*The sky was so black I brought my hand up to my face and could not see it until it was a mere six inches from my face*" Each of these sentences counted as one instance of sensory language. This could also include general descriptive language, rather than the description of real experience. For example, if students used language such as describing what they *thought* something might smell or taste like, this also counted as sensory language even if they had not experienced it themselves in their story.

Sometimes students wrote multiple sentences describing the same feeling, such as one student who wrote, "*Getting off the plane wasn't as easy, I hadn't ever felt such a feeling in my ears before. I felt near deaf, I felt all the vibrations around me, from my feet touching the ground*

*every step to the people retrieving their luggage. Whenever I spoke I could feel the vibrations in my mouth and jaw, it was bizarre. Everytime I yawned my ears would let up on its grip around my sense of hearing. It felt as if someone had their hands on each side of my face and was pressing.”* As all of this writing was used to describe the same physical experience, the pressure he felt in his ears while deplaning, this was counted as one instance of sensory language.

Occasionally, students would string together multiple sensory experiences that occurred at the same time. While these physical experiences might be occurring simultaneously, if students described different senses or experiences, they were counted as multiple instances of sensory language. One student in particular did this several times in her essay, at one point writing *“I taste the perfectly cooked fries with the sweet ketchup. As I was eating by the pool, I could smell the chlorine mixed with salty smell of the ocean. I could smell the strong roast beef that the nurses and doctors brought out for their lunch break. As I was eating, I noticed my wet footprints being taken away by the sun. The water was also forming tiny waves that shift from the north to the south side of the pool. I felt the warm sun.”* For this excerpt, I counted four examples of sensory language. One from her describing the taste of her food, one for the smells she was experiencing, one for noting the waves and footprints from the pool, and one for when she describes the warmth of the sun.

Other measures were also taken, noting draft word count and the number/division of paragraphs. The two pieces were then compared qualitatively using Grounded Theory Approach and the procedures outlined by Todd Migliaccio and Dan Melzer. Two particular elements of student writing appeared to stand out during these comparisons. First, the structure of the drafts was compared. This included how many paragraphs students used, but more importantly whether students chose to use a linear structure in their writing. Since these pieces were both narrative, a



linear structure tended to mean chronological. A student's introduction begin by telling the story, maybe providing some background information. The 'body' paragraphs would contain the story and the conclusion would tell why this was important to them. This analysis would determine whether a student stuck with this very typical, linear structure, or if they broke away from it in some manner. Students could have done this in several ways, such as telling events out of order or including 'flashbacks', including analysis of how these events were important throughout the story (rather than saving this all for the end), or by comparing various events or people in their lives.

The second element compared is the communication of a message or idea. Drafts were compared to see if the student was able to effectively communicate a message, idea, or lesson to the reader. In the Literacy Narrative, students were answering a specific question. Students were asked how their life experiences had shaped their relationship with reading, writing, and/or language in general. For the SAP, students were left with a broader range of topics and given questions as possible guides rather than a single question they were instructed to respond to. Students were asked to "write a narrative describing a memory or time in your life that is triggered by one of your five senses and why it is important to you. Did a person influence you? Did you learn a lesson or moral? How did this event change you?" Students were judged on whether or not they were able to write a narrative that clearly answered the prompt respective to the assignment and if they were able to clearly communicate their answer to the reader.

**Student Interviews.** Students attended three conferences throughout the semester as required for the course. During these conferences, students were given feedback on their work and asked about their writing and revision process. This time was also used to interview the students on how they perceived their work. During the second conference, held shortly after mid-

term, students were asked about the draft of the Literacy Narrative and SAP they had turned in. At this point in the semester, students had turned in a draft of each paper to the instructor and had begun planning for their third project. Students had been given feedback on both narrative essays and given time in class to revise, although students were given the freedom to choose how they divided their time. Students could choose to focus on one paper during revision or work on both.

While interview questions for each student were impacted by their individual answers, all students were asked the following questions:

- What do you believe to be the strongest paper you have written so far for the course? Is this because it was the easiest to write or for another reason?
- Which do you usually feel more comfortable writing? Academic work, like the research paper we are about to write, or Narrative work, like the Literacy Narrative and SAP we wrote at the beginning of the class?

Depending on the individual student concerns and questions, other common topics of discussion were about how the student normally planned their writing and how (or if) they had begun revising their papers.

In total, the goal of this experiment was to not only look at the impact these ideas and strategies surrounding sensory writing had on student writing, but to also give a glimpse into how students viewed their writing. This plays into a much larger question that is constantly under debate: “What is good writing?” However, in this case the question is being asked of Basic Writing students, writers whose opinion on writing would rarely be given much credence. It is also asking them to consider it at a personal level, by evaluating their own writing.

## RESULTS

At the beginning of the semester, students were asked to complete a survey about their writing preferences and processes. This gave a snapshot of each classes' writing habits and insight into how they felt about writing. Twenty-four students completed the survey, although only sixteen chose to identify themselves. While the first question asked that students write their name and class designation (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior) many chose to just write their class designation.

The first question of the survey asked whether or not students enjoyed writing. While it might be assumed by some that a class of Basic Writers would overwhelmingly say they did not enjoy writing, seven students said that they did. Another seven said that they enjoyed certain types of writing, depending on the topic, genre, and/or whether or not they had a choice in what they were writing. Ten students, less than half of respondents, said they did not enjoy writing at all. As I have found to be typical of most students, many responded that having a choice in what they were writing, whether in format or topic, was important to whether or not they enjoyed the assignment.

Students were then asked what types of writing they felt most comfortable with and whether or not they enjoyed telling or making up stories. The purpose of these questions was to gain insight into how comfortable students were with narratives, both in the writing of the genre, but also in general. Both questions were left open-ended and students read these questions various ways. When asked "*What types of writing are you most comfortable with? Think about ALL writing, not just academic work.*", eight students responded that they were most comfortable with narrative writing, although this might not have been a term they used. Many

students, for example, responded that they liked to write about their personal experiences. Other answers included that the student felt equally comfortable (or uncomfortable) with all types of writing, that they preferred academic research, and that they felt most comfortable with casual communication, like texting.

When asked “*Do you enjoy coming up with and/or telling stories?*”, twelve students responded positively and four responded that they sometimes did, with most of these stating that they enjoyed talking or writing about personal experiences. This question was asked in addition to the previous question to determine whether students enjoyed the narrative element, separate from the writing. Genre preference was also addressed in the mid-term interview as students were asked which type of writing they had preferred in class so far that semester. In total, eighteen students reported preferring narrative writing, eight said they preferred more academic genres, like the research paper they were currently working on, and five did not respond to the survey or complete the interview.

Students were also asked about the pre-writing activities they generally used when writing papers. Of the sixteen that identified themselves, eight students reported not using any activities at all, three others said that started freewriting or talking to someone like a friend or family member about the topic. Generally, I would describe these activities as “unstructured.” Even students who report not using pre-writing activities are brainstorming about the topic in some way, whether that means just thinking about what they are going to write or “winging it” as one student put it. Even this “winging it” seems a form of freewriting about a topic. The eight other respondents reported using a more “structured” activity, like writing an outline or creating an idea map. None of the students mentioned pre-writing activities or strategies like those they were encouraged to use in the writing of the SAP that asked them to think about or “re-live” an

experience. It is possible, though, that if students were thinking more about common academic genres like argumentative research or informative writing that would not focus on the student's personal experiences.

These initial impressions revealed a lot about the diversity of the two classes, even without a 100% response rate. Most of the students already felt comfortable writing or telling stories, at least in comparison to other writing, and quite a few of them even said they enjoyed writing under certain circumstances. It also gave insight into how students were used to writing, letting me know that many students did not seem to have a set approach to writing, or at least not one they could articulate. This could mean that they would be more open to trying something new.

### **Quantitative Changes in Student Work**

*What, if any, changes occur in student writing when using these strategies as an initial writing strategy when compared to the students' previous narrative work?*

When looking at student writing, the most obvious change was that students were using more sensory language in the SAP than they did in the Literacy Narrative. All but two students saw an increase in the amount of sensory language used, with the average student using an additional 4.7 instances of sensory language (Figure 2). However, for the students who chose to submit the Literacy Narrative in their portfolio, the average increase was 3.9 instances, while for students who chose to submit the SAP, the average increase was 5.36 instances (Figure 3).

When comparing student drafts, it was obvious that students were including more details in their narrative to describe the events that took place and how they felt. What these drafts often lacked though was a clear and coherent message to the reader. At the end of reading their papers,

Students	Sensory Language in the Literacy Narrative	Sensory Language in the SAP	Difference
1	0	12	12
2	1	11	10
3	0	10	10
4	0	8	8
5**	3	10	7
6	1	6	5
7	0	5	5
8	0	5	5
9	1	6	5
10	0	4	4
11	0	4	4
12**	0	4	4
13	0	4	4
14	2	5	3
15	0	3	3
16*	1	4	3
17	1	1	0
18	1	0	-1
19	2	9	7
20	1	6	5
21	0	4	4
22	0	4	4
23	0	3	3
24	2	4	2
25	1	3	2
26	0	1	1
27	0	8	8
28	0	7	7
29**	0	6	6
30	0	3	3
31	0	3	3
<b>AVG</b>	<b>0.55</b>	<b>5.26</b>	<b>4.71</b>
<i>Students shaded in red chose to submit the SAP in the portfolio</i>			
<i>* This student completed both assignments, but chose to not submit a portfolio at the end of the semester.</i>			
<i>** These students chose to submit both narratives in the portfolio</i>			

Figure 2. Quantitative changes in student use of sensory language

Students who submitted the SAP	Sensory Language in the Literacy Narrative	Sensory Language in the SAP	Difference between drafts	Students who submitted the Literacy Narrative	Sensory Language in the Literacy Narrative	Sensory Language in the SAP	Difference between drafts
1	0	12	12	4	0	8	8
2	1	11	10	9	1	6	5
3	0	10	10	13	0	4	4
6	1	6	5	17	1	1	0
7	0	5	5	18	1	0	-1
8	0	5	5	19	2	9	7
10	0	4	4	22	0	4	4
11	0	4	4	23	0	3	3
14	2	5	3	25	1	3	2
15	0	3	3	26	0	1	1
20	1	6	5	27	0	8	8
21	0	4	4	28	0	7	7
24	2	4	2	31	0	3	3
30	0	3	3				
<b>AVG</b>	0.50	5.86	5.36	<b>AVG</b>	0.46	4.38	3.92

Figure 3. Average use of sensory language in students based on their portfolio submission.

I would stare at the page thinking “what's the point?” Their writing, though often improved at the sentence level and sometimes at the structural level, lacked a message to the reader. Often students were able to tell the story, but did not articulate its impact or importance in their lives. While this was not true of all students, this was a common talking point in revision conferences. However, this lack of message or moral was rarely something students were able to identify themselves. When asked during student interviews at mid-term how they would like to improve their writing, many students said that they wanted to add more detail into their writing. They had become so focused on the goal of using sensory details that they lost the point of the writing in general.

For some students this lack of message seemed an error due to focus. For others, it seemed to stem from their topic choice. When questioned about their message, some students

had a ready answer. They knew what they wanted to say. It just had not come across in their writing. Other students had no answer. They did not choose to tell a story about a time or person that was meaningful to them. Or, if it was meaningful to them, they did not know how it could be meaningful to others. They chose to write about an event that was recent, that they had clear in their mind, or something that they had enjoyed, like a vacation or trip. This served them well when thinking of sensory details to include in their writing, but left them without a message for their audience.

### **Student Perceptions of their Work**

*How will students perceive their writing when comparing narrative drafts after using these initial writing strategies?*

At the end of the semester, thirty students participating in the study submitted a portfolio for evaluation by a committee. Fourteen of those students chose to include their SAP as their narrative work in the portfolio. Thirteen chose to include their Literacy Narrative. Three included both, despite the instruction to only choose one<sup>1</sup>. Students were also asked at midterm, of all the papers they had worked on so far in the semester, which was the strongest. At this point, students should have completed a draft of the Literacy Narrative and the SAP, and were currently working on an informative paper. Many students had a hard time deciding at this point which paper they felt more confident about as both narratives were still in early stages of revision, but most did choose one of the narratives. Only two students named the informative paper they were currently working on as the most promising paper they had written so far.

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<sup>1</sup> These students were not penalized in any way for this added work example. Evaluators simply read the narrative piece they had placed “higher” in the stack, as their better work.



At this point in the semester, it was also a fairly even split with about half of the students claiming that they felt their Literacy Narrative was stronger and the other half saying they felt more confident in the SAP. Students often had a hard time articulating why they felt this way, but there were some trends. Typically, if a student felt their Literacy Narrative was stronger, they linked it to the fact that they had had more time to revise it since turning in the first draft. If students felt their SAP was stronger, they linked it to either the paper being easier for them to write or that they felt it had more detail.

I had hoped to gain insight into the students' choices at the end of the semester, once they had more time to revise and some distance from their initial writing, by reading the introduction to the portfolios students submitted. Students were instructed to reflect on their semester and how they had grown as a writer, in addition to telling the committee about the choices that they made about what to include in their portfolio. However, most students focused on a more general reflection of the semester or on the skills they had learned working on their researched argument paper. Only two students who chose to submit the SAP, mentioned it at all, despite many of them ranking it as their strongest paper in the portfolio.

### **Student Populations**

*How do different populations of students react to the use of these strategies, either in their writing or perception?*

Of the sample of 30 students who submitted their portfolio, 15 of the students were female and 15 were male. From this sample, males were twice as likely to submit the SAP for their portfolio, compared to female students who were more likely to submit the Literacy Narrative. Students for this study were pulled from two classes of ENG 100: sections 002 and

004. Of students who submitted a portfolio, 13 came from section 002 and 17 came from section 004. While section 004 had more students, it was also proportionally more likely that these students would turn in the SAP for the portfolio. When comparing students' genre preferences, the majority of students said they preferred narrative writing. These students were also more likely to submit the SAP, while students who preferred more academic genres, like the research papers they completed in class, were more likely to submit the Literacy Narrative (Figure 4).

	<b>Total # of Students</b>	<b>Students who submitted the SAP</b>	<b>Students who submitted the Literacy Narrative</b>	<b>Students who submitted both</b>
<b>Class 2</b>	13	5 (38.5%)	8 (61.5%)	0 (0%)
<b>Class 4</b>	17	9 (52.9%)	5 (29.4%)	3 (17.6%)
<hr/>				
<b>Male</b>	15	10 (66.7%)	5 (33.3%)	0 (0%)
<b>Female</b>	15	4 (26.7%)	8 (53.3%)	3 (20.0%)
<hr/>				
<b>Narrative</b>	17	10 (58.8%)	5 (29.4%)	2 (11.8%)
<b>Academic</b>	8	3 (37.5%)	5 (62.5%)	0 (0.0%)
<b>No Response</b>	5	1 (20.0%)	3 (60.0%)	1 (20.0%)
<hr/>				
<b>Overall</b>	30	14 (46.67%)	13 (43.33%)	3 (10%)

Figure 4. Student portfolio submission choices by population

Of the sixteen students who identified themselves in the survey at the beginning of the semester, another pattern emerged. While the students reported a number of pre-writing activities, they could be divided into students who used more structured activities like outlines or idea-maps, and those who reported not using any or using un-structured activities, like general “brainstorming.” Students who typically used structured activities were more likely to submit the Literacy Narrative and students who typically used un-structured activities or none at all were more likely to turn in the SAP (Figure 5).

	<b>Submitted the SAP</b>	<b>Submitted the Literacy Narrative</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Students who used structured activities</b>	2 (25%)	6 (75%)	8
<b>Students who used unstructured activities or none at all</b>	6 (75%)	2 (25%)	8

Figure 5. Student portfolio submission by pre-writing preference.

## Conclusion

Overall, the choices made by the students over which assignment to submit to their portfolio surprised me. I thought that possibly a majority of the students would turn in the SAP, because many students I have worked with in the past (especially those who struggled with writing) tend to believe that more detailed writing is better writing and the SAP drafts often contain a great more detail than other narrative assignments. This belief was supported by some students during the mid-term interviews, but was only a small part of the story. If this had not happened, I would have assumed that a majority of students would turn in the Literacy Narrative because the assignment gave more guidelines and would seem more familiar to the students. I also wondered if some students would not like the SAP because they felt that their writing process was already set in middle and high school and would prefer to not try something new.

What was not surprising was that students were consistently able to use more sensory details in their writing, regardless of which or how they applied these strategies. This was what I expected based on past experiences. Sensory language and imagery have simple definitions to explain and most students at the high school and college level can readily pick them out of a text. They normally have some experience using these stylistic elements in their own writing. While I did complete a mini lesson defining sensory language and gave students some time to practice

the skill in class as a group, I doubted that many really *needed* this review. It is always helpful to review topics students have not thought about in a while, but students seemed to have no trouble completing the in-class activities. Students *know* what sensory language is, most likely from past instruction, they just need to be encouraged to use it.

## ANALYSIS

While many students reacted similarly in their writing to the sensory writing emphasis, their perception of their work varied. All but two students saw an increase in the amount of sensory language they used in the SAP from their Literacy Narrative. This suggests that the assignment was successful in one of its goals: helping students to include more details in their narrative writing. While this success can be attributed to several different strategies presented to the students, it shows that students understood conceptually what sensory language referred to and were willing to use it in their writing, with varying degrees of effectiveness.

What was most varied was student response to their work. In fact, the students were split nearly down the middle when choosing which piece of their writing they thought was better. While students who chose to include the SAP in their portfolio tended to use more sensory language than those who did not, almost all students still saw an increase. Students could also have been impacted by other factors, such as gender, individual personality, class environment, and writing preference, which are outlined in the following sections.

### **Gender**

Academia has a long history of characterizing masculine and feminine writing in various ways, as outlined in previous sections. The particular form of writing that the SAP requires of a student often influences their writing style. If masculine writing can be described as “terse...rational...and logical”, the SAP often pushes students in the other direction, focusing instead on the writer’s unapologetically subjective point of view and a emphasis on description (Hiatt). While the importance of detail as emphasized in the SAP has not necessarily been seen

as “feminine”, it is certainly the binary opposite of succinct “masculine” writing. Also true is that narrative writing has historically been seen as less formal and academic (and therefore less masculine) than other types of writing. This is not to say that this “feminization” of student writing is a goal of the SAP, rather, just a common perception. Because of this perception and the possibility that students had been socialized to believe this as well, I would have assumed that my male students would have been less likely to respond favorably with the assignment. This same assumption was corroborated by a peer tutor working in the class, noting that she assumed, when working with students, that this assignment might be better suited to or easier for girls in the class. This was not the case.

Two-thirds of male students chose to submit the SAP for the portfolio, while only about a quarter of female students did. While female statistics are skewed by the students who chose to submit both narrative papers, even if all of these students had chosen to submit the SAP, they still would have submitted the paper at a lower rate than the male students. Even once students who did not turn in a portfolio at all were accounted for, proportionally males still turned in the SAP at a higher rate. It is also worth noting that initial drafts of students’ Literacy Narratives were no more or less likely to contain more instances of sensory details based on their gender, but that male students, on average, used more sensory language than female students in their SAP draft.

My colleague and I were focusing on the writing product when making our informal hypothesis of who this would most benefit, but perhaps we should have been focusing on the process. We assumed that because the assignment asked students to communicate in a way that has historically been seen as feminine, with an emphasis on the writer’s subjective experience, female students would react more positively. We did not think about how asking male students to

focus on the physical, concrete aspects of an experience might play into how males are socialized to communicate with others and the world around them.

While there is certainly much debate in the field of gender studies if/how men and women are similar and different, and why this might be so, Deborah Tannen's work in difference theory does support the idea that men and women communicate differently. Her work focused primarily on verbal communication, rather than written, but it is possible that despite the fact that written language has many patterns not present in oral language, some similarities might carry over. In particular, she writes that when women communicate, they are more likely to share feelings while men are more likely to share information. It might be that men are more likely to focus on concrete, empirical facts than women are when telling a story, making the SAP particularly suited to their point of view.

It is also worth noting that for many students, and Basic Writing students in particular, the academic discourse surrounding writing, including how masculine and feminine writing is defined, is completely foreign to them (Bizzell). It was something that was never discussed in our class over the course of the semester and would probably not have been discussed in their high school courses. It would not be surprising that their perception of various types of writing, including their own, varies greatly from those in academia. Due to this different world view, it is very likely that for these students, it never crossed their mind whether or not their writing would be seen as "masculine" or "feminine", and instead focused on writing that would earn them a better grade.

This socialization, and even direct instruction, on how writing is viewed could potentially have a huge impact on how students perceive writing, including their own. In my experience, this has been exemplified from some of my experiences in the Middle East. When talking to students,

I noticed what seemed to me a large percentage of male students were interested in reading and writing poetry. This seemed in stark contrast to the answers I had been given from male students while teaching in America. I believe this had to do with the cultural socialization of students. While many of my Arab students had grown up in a culture that prized poetry as an art form, my American students had not had the same experience. While much of traditional Arabic Literature is poetry and is therefore given a higher status in these cultures, American and English Literature, especially of what is taught in schools, tends to focus on the novel. Socialization had made a large impact on how students viewed literature. It makes sense that this would also impact their own preferences when it came to writing.

It begs the question that, if historic perception of gendered writing was talked about in class, would this still be the case? Would male students, consciously or sub-consciously hold back from adding sensory details and description? Or would female students add more details because that is what was expected of them? It also seems likely that, as American society becomes less focused on a binary view of gender, gendered expectations will hold less sway over students. It is possible that much of what we previously noticed about gendered patterns of writing is socialized, rather than inherent, and as socialization becomes less rigid, so will student writing practices.

### **Personality and Class Dynamics**

From the results, it also seemed possible that a student's, or even a whole class', personality traits might have an effect on student's performance and perception of the two assignments compared. The first of the two sections included in this experiment was a smaller class and what I described to other Basic Writing teachers as "unusual". Basic Writers have been



described in various ways and this could be due to a number of factors. George H. Jensen, in his study of Basic Writers and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) theory, points out that this could be influenced by the population at particular institutions. One could see how schools that generally draw from certain environments, such as rural vs urban communities, socio-economic classes, or who specialize in certain fields, such as the arts vs sciences, would have Basic Writers that also reflect these demographics. Many instructors at the university in which this study took place found Basic Writing courses to be full of students who like to talk and chat. They more often enjoy group work and sharing ideas. It is also a common assignment in these courses for students to take a MBTI personality test and the majority of students typically score as “E” (extroverted), rather than “I” (introverted).

This rather unusual class seemed the opposite. They were more likely to prefer writing in an academic genre, rather than a narrative one. They preferred to not interact with others and were generally not as interested in class discussion. These students were friendly with others and when I conferenced with them, but they did not seem extroverted in the classroom. I often compared them to an 8:00AM class I had taught a year before, except my unusual class was taught at 11:30AM. The section in this study was larger and more typical of what many of my colleagues reported finding in a Basic Writing course. These students loved to talk to each other and share thoughts and ideas. It was much easier to spark, and maintain momentum in, a whole class discussion.

Perhaps, the biggest example of this is from comparing the peer review workshops that students completed for the first two projects. For the first project, students gave digital feedback. They read their peers’ work on a computer screen and provided comments in the word processor. They had some time at the end of class to talk and give any clarification about their notes, but

this was only a very short part of the activity. For the second project, students were grouped together and read their work aloud while their group followed along. Students were then given time to talk as the author listened to their comments and made notes. The author was then able to ask clarifying questions and ask for specific suggestions or ideas to help them develop their work.

When asked to compare the experiences, overwhelmingly, the first class preferred the first activity that required little interaction with others. They reported that they found it more helpful and more comfortable. They liked not having to record the comments of others themselves and being able to save them directly onto a file. They also liked that this made it easier to “proofread,” catching minor grammatical and spelling mistakes, rather than focusing on higher order concerns. The exact opposite was true of the second class. They loved being able to talk about their work and bounce ideas off the group. They reported that the activity was helpful and that while they might have been nervous at first to read their work aloud, it turned out to be more comfortable than they thought. Some of these groups even stayed late after class to finish their discussions and hear everybody's work. They showed excitement about their classmates' ideas.

More than just being more extroverted in the classroom, this second class seemed to “gel” and form a stronger community. I try to build in time every class for students to talk to each other, sharing their thoughts or a small piece of writing they had just completed. The first class often finished their chat and fell silent. The second had to be told to stop chatting. Students in the first class had peers they preferred to work with, but these relationships did not seem as strong as the ones in the second class. Even thinking back on the friendships I observed

developing in class, the second class had a much larger number of small groups or partnerships that emerged over the course of daily work.

At first, I wondered if this level of extroversion might have had something to do with why students from one class seemed to prefer the SAP project and the work that it produced. Jensen and DiTiberio write about the differences in writing processes between individuals who had scored as introverted and extroverted on MBTI tests. They report that extroverts generally prefer this type of oral feedback and the discussion of their work, both in the generating and revising stages of writing. I wondered if perhaps students more focused on their external world, rather than their internal thoughts, might have found themselves more suited to the assignment.

I quickly abandoned this idea once I looked at the particular students who had chosen to turn the SAP for their portfolio. While some of these students were talkative and active in the class, it seemed just as likely that my quiet students turned in the SAP. Furthermore, this extroversion was only something documented based on my observations in class and during conferences, rather than the scoring completed by students taking a MBTI test or self-reporting their perceived levels of extroversion. Perhaps some of my students who appeared quiet to me were not necessarily introverted, but were quiet in my class and in conferences for other reasons. Perhaps they did not feel comfortable in the classroom in general, or because they were not close to their classmates as they might have been in high school. Perhaps their uncomfortableness stemmed from the subject of the class and their feelings surrounding it.

Rather than looking at student's individual personalities, I went back to looking at the class dynamic. Perhaps the environment created by the class encouraged students to be more receptive to different assignments. The class naturally seemed more willing to share their writing and their thoughts with others and more comfortable around each other in general. Perhaps this,

rather than the personalities of individual students, had more to do with the class' willingness to try something new and write using different strategies than they had reported using in the past.

### **Writing Preference**

Certain students seemed to respond differently to the SAP and Literacy Narrative based on the writing preferences that they discussed in conferences and in the initial class survey. One of the differences between the classes was the students' writing preferences with regard to genre. While, overall, students were more likely to prefer narrative writing, the smaller, quieter class was more likely to prefer academic writing than the larger, more extroverted class. Students who preferred narrative writing were more likely to prefer writing the SAP. I believe this has to do with their level of comfort with using the types of writing that are more common in narrative pieces, such as figurative and sensory language. It seems likely that these students had more experience with this type of writing and so the SAP might have involved some of the strategies that they might already use as a writer, at least when working on narrative pieces.

While the group of students who responded to the survey represented a much smaller sample than those who turned in a portfolio, they still revealed some valuable insights. Students who reported having a structured pre-writing strategy that they preferred to use were more likely to prefer the Literacy Narrative. Students who reported not having a preferred pre-writing strategy or having an un-structured strategy were more likely to prefer the SAP. This could be linked to several variables. Students who already felt they had a set way of pre-writing, might have felt that the focus on sensory details interfered with their normal process. In contrast, students who did not have a set process might have felt that they benefited from the resources

given during the SAP. While students were given assistance in the pre-writing stages of both projects, more explicit instruction was given during the SAP.

These results would seem to suggest that students who had a more rigorous background in academic writing, might not respond as positively to the SAP. These students would have had more practice writing in traditionally academic genres that would include informative and argumentative essays. These students would have also been more likely to be explicitly taught, or have developed, a writing process that tended to follow a commonly taught pre-writing strategy: the outline. The question then becomes what about these experiences makes these students more hesitant to use sensory writing? Is it that they are less interested in trying these strategies in general? Or perhaps they do not have a personal or experienced appreciation for this type of genre, whether through personal preference or experience?

### **Student with Dyslexia: An Embedded Case Study**

Much of the literature already outlined has noted the impact that strategies that engage the body and the senses can have on students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities. This rings true when looking at the work of Mary, one of the students in my second class. While these sensory writing strategies have a different intent than most of the strategies prescribed in other literature, it still seemed to benefit her work. Mary wrote in the introduction to her portfolio that she believed that the SAP was her best paper of the semester, and I am inclined to agree with her. While she performed better overall on the narrative papers, something that Linda Flower noted is common especially among Basic Writing students, Mary's SAP shined far brighter than her Literacy Narrative.

For her Literacy Narrative, Mary wrote about how dyslexia had affected her academic career. It was a fairly short essay, six paragraphs in length. It followed a basic essay structure with an introduction that explained what dyslexia is and how it caused her to mix up letters. It then transitioned to four body paragraphs that outline her initial struggles in early elementary schools, getting tested, and the help she received in middle and high school. She completed the essay with a short conclusion on how she has never let her struggles hold her back in school and that it influenced her decision to pursue a career in special education.

This paper essentially follows the pattern of a slightly elongated five paragraph essay. It is well organized and contains a relatively low number of errors, considering Mary's struggles with dyslexia, but it is also largely devoid of voice and contains almost no "story" elements that would typically accompany a narrative as Mary reports, more than illustrates, what her school life was like. Instead of sharing specific experiences, she uses lines such as: "*Another thing they would do is show me word cards to see if I knew all the words they put up, I also had to do a little bit of writing every time to see how much I improved,*" and, "*The only class I occasionally had trouble in was english but I worked my hardest to get everything done on time and the correct way.*" It is a perfectly fine paper, but it is only that. It is fine, it is functional and met the requirements of the assignment.

However, she could have described how frustrating those word tests could be, or how she might have felt confused when words she did not know appeared. She could have written about how boring it was to be pulled out to take tests and how she was jealous of her friends getting to go to special classes, like music or art, while she was taking a reading test. She could have written about staying up late to finish reading in time for her English classes in high school or

going to her teacher after school to help her proofread her work. Instead, she lost these opportunities to tell a story.

Her next paper was about her relationship with her brother. She started by writing about how she and her younger brother are fans of the Marvel, DC, and Disney franchises and how this bonded them. She then went on to explain she has not always felt this way, and that she initially had a difficult time transitioning from being an only child to being an older sister and that they, like most siblings, bickered throughout adolescence. She concluded the essay by writing about how she did not think that she would miss him when she moved away for college, but as time went on, she realized that she missed the things she thought had annoyed her, like him jumping from hiding spots to scare her.

This paper had some problems; Mary didn't split her paragraphs as well and did not correctly format dialogue. The conclusion could have been stronger, and the theme of their sibling bonding better integrated throughout the text, but Mary showed her voice and used dialogue, something she completely neglected in the Literacy Narrative. She told specific stories and used description to paint a picture in an interesting way. For example, she writes about when her mother was pregnant with her brother, writing:

*“According to my mom I would pull her shirt up just a little bit to expose her belly then I would put face supper close to it and sing whatever I wanted. When I'd sing it would make my brother movie so I would always giggle and say ‘mommy he’s dancing!’ I also thought this really weird though since you could actually almost feel the shape of his feet and see the imprint of where he was kicking...”*

The structure of the paper was less linear. Rather than telling the story of her relationship based purely on chronological order, she did something different. She used the text structure as a guideline, then broke apart from it, telling the story in a way that made sense to explain their arc rather than just in the way it occurred. Her paragraphs were long, perhaps a holdover from a desire to stay in that “five-paragraph essay” format that she was used to, but the content broke

from the structure. Interestingly, more spelling errors appeared in this draft than in her Literacy Narrative. This could be carelessness or not having time to proofread before turning in the first draft. It could also be an indicator of writing speed. In our interview at midterm, she reported that she found the SAP easier to write and these errors could be the result of faster writing and the rush to get her thoughts on paper. While this might be an unfortunate side-effect, spelling mistakes are generally easier to proofread for. Revising a paper to show individuality and tell a story is much more difficult, for both the student and the teacher.

While it is only one example, her experience does seem to corroborate the theory that this focus on the physical and concrete can be particularly useful to students who have difficulties communicating in the written language or with language processing. Because she is the only student who spoke in-depth about her struggles, it is difficult to compare her experiences with other students who had mentioned having accommodations in high school without further information on their background. Despite this, it is an important to note that this shows how these strategies might help certain groups of students.

### **Student Difficulties: Finding a Message**

While I believe that the SAP was successful in prompting students to add detail and create more interesting points at the sentence level, as well as encouraging them to experiment with the structure of their narrative, one major drawback did appear. A little under half of the students who turned in a portfolio had difficulty in communicating a message in the first draft of their SAP, compared to approximately a fifth of the students who struggled in the first draft of their Literacy Narrative. Despite this difficulty, many of the students showed growth in other skill areas. These students all showed an increase in the amount of sensory language they used in



their paper and were still more likely to experiment with different essay structures. For some, this could be the result of their topic choice. While this was something the class discussed in the planning stages of each paper, when students conferenced after completing a first draft, many had difficulty explaining the significance of the events they described in their paper. They often described the events as ‘fun’ or ‘memorable,’ but had difficulty articulating if or how the events were *important* in their life.

This can be a difficult problem to revise for in a paper, and a couple students decided to choose a different topic and start over. Luckily, most students were able to rework and draw a message out of their existing draft. This was typically done so through conferencing with myself or a peer tutor and having the student answer more questions about their experience and what they learned from it. Some common questions I used to help students were:

- How did your life or outlook change after this happened?
- If you were to tell this person how they impacted you, what would you say?
- Why do you think this memory sticks in your mind so well?
- What do you think you would do differently if these events were happening now?

Most students were able to find a strong message, but after revising, this message was often not well integrated into the body of the text. More likely, it was mostly worked into the concluding paragraphs as students were also concerned with revising their other papers.

The freedom given to students in the SAP was detrimental at first to several students who, when we initially brainstormed in class, said that they had no idea what to write about. For some students, like Nathan and Jenny, this proved to be a difficult obstacle to overcome. These students were representative of students who felt that they easily related to the Literacy Narrative prompt, and so had trouble in drafting their SAP. Nathan wrote about growing up in a mixed

language family. Most of his mother's family spoke Farsi, while he did not. He wrote about how this affected his relationship with them and how, as he got older, his culture gave him a sense of pride. Jenny wrote about learning sign language as a child when her younger sister became deaf after falling ill with meningitis as a toddler. She described how it was difficult for her to learn and how it was only when she was leaving for college that she realized how far she had come, writing, "*I had become [so] fluent and used to it that each sign I made happened without even thinking about it beforehand and each sign she made towards me I could just look at her face and use my peripheral vision.*" In both papers, the students' message was clear, and they were able to provide details about specific experiences.

When it came time to pick a topic for the SAP, both of these students had difficulty choosing something that connected to them. Both ended up writing about time on vacation with their families. Despite this initial struggle in choosing a topic, both made significant jumps in the amount of sensory language they used in the SAP. Nathan had zero instances of sensory language and Jenny had used three instances in the Literacy Narrative which increased to ten instances of sensory language in the SAP. Nathan stuck with a fairly linear story structure for his SAP, but Jenny experimented with her structure, focusing largely on a description of her environment and how it made her feel.

When asked during midterm interviews about which paper he felt was stronger, Nathan had a difficult time deciding between the two. He talked about how both were easy for him to write, and he liked both, but he ultimately chose the SAP and chose to revise this piece for his portfolio. Jenny did not complete a midterm interview due to personal complications at the time of the class and was one of the students that chose to turn in both narratives to the portfolio. It is difficult to guess which piece she would have felt was stronger.

Both Jenny and Nathan connected strongly with the Literacy Narrative prompt. It took them very little time to brainstorm a topic and were confident in their choice. I tend to agree as they both had life experiences that lent themselves to the prompt. For them, topic choice was made easier by the content of the assignment. For others, I would hypothesize that what some students found easier about the Literacy Narrative was less the content of question that was being asked in the Literacy Narrative, but that they were being asked a specific question. I find it is a common problem for students to pull a message out of a narrative, especially when they are given the freedom to write about whatever they want. Many students are used to answering a question with a narrative, as they were assigned to do in writing their Literacy Narratives. The level of freedom given to them in the SAP can be frightening for students, their options open wider than ever before.

Travis was another student who struggled with the SAP, but for different reasons. Travis was, in many ways, the type of Basic Writing student I expected to work with. He was not fond of reading or writing and found both boring. He participated in class and had good attendance, but often had trouble keeping up with assignment deadlines. He was talkative in large and small group discussions and found that it was very helpful to talk about what he planned to write, rather than creating an outline or idea web. When introduced to the idea of the SAP, he quickly figured out what he wanted to write about, but was one of nearly half of the students who struggled with articulating why this topic/experience was important to him.

While Travis turned in an incomplete draft of his Literacy Narrative, a draft that was barely a page in length and missing several body paragraphs, he still had a much clearer message, or at least the intent of a message, than he did in his SAP, which was three pages in length. His SAP had great details and sensory language as he described watching his favorite

hockey team win the Stanley Cup. He wrote clever lines like “*Waiting for [the] puck drop felt longer than waiting for your mom to get home when you got sent to the office and you know she got a call*” and “*a punch of cool air greeted your chest. It’s a nice change in pace from the parching, humid June air from outside.*” But he struggled to find a message for his reader. He tried to reiterate how excited all the fans were as the team had never won a championship but could not explain why this was important. He could not explain how these events had created or impacted the sense of community he had with other fans or about how sports brought people together.

Meanwhile, Travis’ incomplete Literacy Narrative had a clear message. He states it outright in the beginning that he would be writing about the only book he ever liked reading that he would recommend to others. It is clear he would be writing about the impact of this book while contrasting it with the fact that he “dreaded” reading, and generally found it “boring.” He had struggled at first to find a topic, but once assured that he could write about what he did not like about reading and writing, he was set.

When planning what to write for the SAP, Travis knew he had experienced an event that was important to him that he would always remember, but without a specific question to answer, did not know how or what about this to express. This left him in a difficult place for the portfolio. He identified his Literacy Narrative as his strongest piece in the midterm interview. He had already done some revision by this point and while it was still not a complete draft, he identified that he had a stronger message in this piece than in the SAP. Despite this, he never finished his revisions on the Literacy Narrative and decided to submit the SAP for the portfolio as he felt it was a more finished work.

Comparing these two pieces leaves me in a difficult position because it exemplifies something that I had noticed from the assignment in other classes. For students who do not like to write, it is often easier for them to get words on a page when completing the SAP. I believe this to be an important step for these students and often makes them feel more accomplished and confident in their writing. But, I also struggle with how important this is if the piece they wrote does not have a main idea or message, especially as this problem is often difficult to revise for.

One of the students, Maya, had some success with this difficulty by applying the example text structure that students were offered to aid them in their planning and initial writing. Rather than just using her text structure as a jumping off point as Mary and several other students did, Maya stuck to the structure outlined in the worksheet and even turned it in as part of her first draft. While all students were given time in class to fill out the text structure and encouraged to use it in their planning, many only used it as a method of brainstorming, rather than a means of drafting and organizing their paper.

For her Literacy Narrative, Maya described her first day of high school and finding her place on the track team. While she included a lot of detail about how she felt transitioning to high school, her paper meandered to find meaning. She struggled to connect any sort of literacy with her topic. She discussed, briefly, having to learn what she calls “track slang” and the technical terms of the sport, but this only takes up two of her nine paragraphs.

At one point in her Literacy Narrative, she lets on to an aspect of her relationship with writing and communication. She writes about her first days in high school:

*“When we arrived to our classes it would always be a warm-up up on the board that we would have to read and then reflect on it, write your reflection down, and then share it with the class. To me the warm-up’s were not all that hard but me being the quiet person I am, I didn’t want to get up and read what I had written down on my paper. Sometimes I would wait until I was the last person to go and by that time it would be time to transition to our next class.”*

However, she never elaborates or connects this shyness to her confidence she gained from finding her place on the track team.

In her SAP, Maya's meaning was much clearer. She wrote about meeting and being recruited by her hero and how this pushed her to work harder and do better. While Maya did not necessarily make a huge jump in the amount of sensory language she used, only jumping from one instance in her Literacy Narrative to three in the SAP, she did add more detail in general, paying close attention to how she feels emotionally impacted by events. She compares herself to her hero, writing in her essay:

*“if you have seen some of her [coach's] videos you see that when she is on the starting line she looks determined, as if she knows she is going to win that race. And with me some people have told me that I look the exact same way. When you are on the line you get this rush of emotions...But when they tell you to get on the line then all of a sudden it all goes away and when the gun goes off all the adrenaline just kicks in and you just go and go and go. And for me when I run I zone out. It's no one but me and the track when I am in a race.”*

This clarity of message seems, in part, due to her use of the text structure and its emphasis on always circling back to what made this person or event meaningful. It suggests that, if students had used this resource as a means of drafting or organization, they would have been more likely to not struggle with losing the message of their essay. This is of particular importance to the teachers attempting to encourage sensory writing strategies. While these strategies might be useful, it seems important to also work to emphasize message and using a text structure might be one way to help struggling students. This can come with the drawback of limiting the structures students might use in their writing, but this does not mean it does not have its place in helping students.

In future classes, the introduction to this assignment was revised to place a greater emphasis on the idea of incorporating a message early in the drafting process. Students spent more time picking out the message of mentor texts in addition to the sensory details used by the

author. An early checkpoint was added that asked students to turn in a tentative thesis or lesson that would be the controlling idea for their narrative. Further scaffolding could be added by asking students to plan further, perhaps giving several examples of specific experiences that illustrated this idea.

Like most projects, the SAP and Literacy Narrative seemed to have pros and cons for students, and, as the results show, students were split evenly on how they reacted to each. What seemed to be most successful to these classes was that each assignment asked the student to consider their writing, both the product and process, in a different way. It gave them both content and techniques to reflect on. How they were influenced by this as a writer is as varied as the students themselves.

## CONCLUSION

### **Limitations and Opportunities for Further Study**

The size of this study was limited to the two classes taught by one instructor. While this was partially done to limit the variable of teacher instruction, it also means that the number of students who participated in the study was quite low. These students also came from a single semester and were, for the most part, at very similar ages and points in their academic career. Broadening the study to wider numbers of students, perhaps to include a generally more diverse range of students, could find new or different information. This diversity could be of particular importance when looking at the impact these techniques have on students with a variety of learning disabilities. While the one student who was candid about her dyslexia, from her own point of view and mine, seemed to benefit from these techniques, she is only one case. It would be important to see if these techniques are as effective with students who have struggled with language in similar ways.

The time frame of this study was also dictated by the length of the class: one semester. While many classes can be shortened or lengthened with relative ease, there are some elements of learning that are difficult to condense during a short time period, such as reflection. These things take time, especially for students who might not be used to articulating this reflection. By extending the length of the study, students could have had more time to practice these sensory writing techniques and reflect on their past writing experiences. By giving students more time to think about their writing and practice communicating these thoughts, students could give a more complete picture of how they were impacted (or not) by the use of these techniques.



While this study focused on the use of these sensory writing techniques in the beginning stages of the writing process, they can be used in other stages. This decision to focus on the pre-writing and first draft stages was done in order to limit the number of variables that influenced student writing. Not accounted for was whether or not students continued to use these methods. At least two students mentioned in their mid-term interview that after using the sensory writing techniques to plan their paper, they had used some of these same methods in the revision of their first paper, adding more detail in the final draft. This practice made it easier to revise previous work that they had felt was already complete. This information is worth further study. Some students might prefer to use these techniques for revision, rather than the generation of a first draft.

Another focus of the study was the genre students were writing in: the personal narrative. There are practical reasons for this; a personal narrative fits neatly into an introduction to composition, or similar, course. However, I believe sensory writing can be used in a variety of non-narrative genres as well. While it does lend itself to narrative and other creative genres, it can also be used for research gathering purposes in scientific fields. Similarly, it could be used in genres such as journalism, or perhaps genres that require particularly descriptive writing, like reviews or critiques. I believe that students should experiment with different genres of writing and sensory writing could be studied as a connecting link between them and how students used these techniques in order to communicate a different message or purpose.

### **Final Thoughts**

The primary question I hope to give possible answers to is why students might have reacted as they did to the sensory writing focus and strategies I presented in class and perhaps

find which students might be positively impacted by the activities. This includes how their writing changed from one narrative to the other, and why they might have perceived their work in the way that they did. Despite this, it is important to remember that our students are individuals with their own thoughts and experiences, and any attempt to group students only shows a small aspect of their character and person. While some of my results suggested that male students were likely to be more impacted by this emphasis on sensory writing, it is also true that students who preferred to use certain types of pre-writing activities did not as positively perceive their work.

It is also important to remember that while students are individuals with their own thoughts and experiences, this does not mean that they will be able to articulate them. It is also possible that we, as teachers, might have trouble understanding them and connect them accurately to the questions we are asking. It is easy for teachers of reading and writing to become used to speaking in the jargon we would use to our peers. In addition to this, we have also had years to develop and think about our writing process. Students, by and large, do not have this experience, especially Basic Writers.

I chose to teach English because I love the subject - another way I feel different from many of the Basic Writing students I work with. Reading and writing came easy to me in school. There seemed little to reflect on. I'm sure that this is true for most content teachers. We are then left with an important question: How do we teach those for whom the subject does not come easily? It is a difficult question to answer as a new teacher. I cannot draw on experiences from school, the strategies I learned to help struggles I never had.

I had intended to use this study as a way to help me in this struggle. I had planned that whichever assignment students responded more positively to would be the one that I chose to

keep in the class as the single narrative assignment in the course the following semester. I did not expect for there to be so even a split in the two classes. Once again, students are multi-faceted, and while some characteristics seem to pre-dispose students to finding these techniques helpful, others do not. To say that certain groups of students might be helped by this assignment only acknowledges a small piece of the picture.

One of the reasons these strategies are so interesting to me is because they are in contrast to my own style of writing. When I write, I tend to create an outline, and build a piece out, section by section. I do not normally write in a linear fashion, but I do have a roadmap of where I am going. I am also unlike many of the students that I worked with in that I do not normally like narrative writing, especially when it came to personal narratives. I certainly did not like it when I was in high school and undergrad. I much preferred a world of academic writing, full of facts and theories. I felt that I could show myself and my thoughts in relation to others, and while that might be true, it never told *my* story. It was always cloaked behind a veil of experts.

It then should not be surprising that in the past I never would have thought that I should include in my writing the type of knowledge that I have outlined, the type of knowledge we find in our physical selves. To me, the knowledge was not useless, but also not as trustworthy as other sources of knowledge. Looking back, this makes sense, because I did not trust myself. I, like many others, doubted myself. So, if I could not have another voice to back up my point, it did not seem that knowledge could be relevant or true. I have never doubted that these types of stories were important, as a reader, writer, or teacher. But it was never something I was comfortable doing. I am much more open to the idea now, but I think that has been a matter of personal growth for me. As I grew older and became more comfortable with myself and trusting of myself, I also became more comfortable with sharing my personal experiences.

I believe this might be something worth considering when looking at the effectiveness of these techniques and is something that can be seen below the surface of the numbers. Some students' writing might be heavily impacted by using these sensory writing techniques. These are the students whose writing saw the biggest jump in the use of sensory language or who decided to use non-linear formats to tell their stories, but this is not the only goal. While I think it is positive that nearly all of the students saw an increase in the amount of sensory language they used between the SAP and Literacy Narrative, I would argue it is more important that approximately half of the students felt more confident about their SAP essay.

So many students I have worked with have a poor view of their writing. I believe this can stem from lots of different experiences, from something they were told by a past teacher to never really seeing their peers' writing. Sometimes students measure their first drafts against the finish work of professional writers or their favorite authors. For whatever the reason, this causes students to have a negative outlook on writing in general, and this is a block that must be worked past before students can move on to really improving their writing. Without this first step, students never write enough to improve.

Some of my research suggests that certain groups of students might find this strategy particularly useful. However, I think it is more appropriate to state that nearly all students met the intended objectives of the assignment. They consciously looked to include stylistic elements they had not normally included in their previous writing. They also stretched themselves in the content of their writing. Rather than writing to answer a predetermined question, students thought deeply about the important moments in their lives and why they were important. For some students this was exciting and freeing. For others, it was uncomfortable and scary. Many

students struggled to articulate the importance of these moments, but most were able to draw out an idea after conferencing.

I believe that giving students a chance to experience this freedom is vital to their growth as writers and learners. Some students seemed to benefit more than others and grew in their confidence as a writer. I would argue that these students were, generally speaking, the students I was most worried about helping. While this is admittedly from a small sample, these were the students that seemed less confident in their writing, who did not seem to understand their writing process, and were less sure of themselves academically. If for no other reason than this, I would encourage the use of sensory writing as something to be explored in the classroom.

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**APPENDIX – IRB APPROVAL**

**To:**

Catherine English

English

Margaret Weaver

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Study #:** IRB-FY2020-84

**Study Title:** Writing through the Senses in the College Composition Classroom

**Decision:** Approved

**Approval Date:** September 9, 2019

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

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This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:

**PI:** Catherine English

**Co-PI:** Margaret Weaver

**Primary Contact:** Danielle Schull