

## The Trend of the Pen: A Study of the Writing Attitudes and Habits of ISU Freshmen

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This article explores a freshman's transition from high school writing to college writing. Jiracek reports on a survey she conducted of ISU freshmen writers. The results reveal threads of similarity among freshmen composers/writers. The information gained by conducting this survey, along with Jiracek's reflections on her own process of writing the survey, reveal how freshman can work with their attitudes towards writing to help the transition go smoothly.

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Picture this! It's four o'clock on a Friday afternoon. A group of college freshmen arrive to their last class of the day: English 101. While patiently waiting for the class to start, they notice the professor carrying a large stack of papers. "Could it be another writing assignment?" they wonder. Everyone sits on the edge of his or her seat with anticipation. The professor smiles at their obvious excitement and asks, "Who's ready to write a paper?!" The class unanimously cheers about the new writing assignment! Everyone high-fives each other as the rubrics get passed around the room. Some students, so eager to start the assignment, scribble down their ideas on the first sheet of paper they see. In no time, the class is over and the students are free, but all the students are so focused on their writing that they continue to work throughout the night and weekend!

If you are thinking that this would never happen, then you are probably right. Perhaps the situation described would be accurate if everyone loved to complete writing for the classroom, but we all know that everyone has his or her own attitudes towards writing in this situation. We often see students easily draft up emails, create Facebook statuses, and send daily text messages; many students wouldn't think twice before writing in these particular situations. But

when it comes time to write for a school paper, these same students get tripped up! Granted, there are students who enjoy the process, but for the average college freshman, writing in a classroom setting can be stressful. Think about how you feel when you are faced with a writing assignment: Does this type of writing come naturally to you? Can you easily transfer your ideas into written sentences? Do you panic over requirements or struggle with writer's block before you even begin? Maybe you are somewhere in the middle, or maybe you think that it just depends on the nature of the writing assignment and how comfortable you feel about it.

When I was enrolled in English 101 at Illinois State University, I was exposed to a variety of writing assignments, ranging from a natural disaster report to a restaurant review. I was suddenly being asked to express myself through text in ways that I had not been asked to before by exploring new styles of writing. I found that the assignments I was completing were much different than the ones I had written in high school. My experience also allowed me to think of the writing process in a different way. My English 101 course stressed that each piece of writing could be considered its own "genre." I learned that every type of writing has its own unique elements and that it is necessary to shape my writing to match the specific genre.

Some students may find the concept of genre difficult to grasp; they may also have trouble writing in a new genre or style because they have been influenced throughout high school to write in a standard five-paragraph essay format. This structured writing limits the creativity of students and does not allow much room for development. Being exposed to new styles of writing in college can allow people to grow into more experienced writers, but we all know that this transition from high school to college writing is easier said than done. After completing my freshman year, I wondered, what—if anything—could help ease this transition for future freshmen?

## **My Hypothesis**

I was really interested in finding out what elements could affect a person's writing process, and specifically, their transition from high school writing to college writing. Although it may seem trivial, I believe that one's attitude and writing habits will directly affect how smooth the writing process will go. I feel that the first step in the transition involves awareness of these attitudes and habits. If students are aware of their attitudes towards writing and personal writing habits, then they can target their problem areas, enhance their skills, and experience a successful transition into college writing. Ultimately this will reduce the stress that students feel about writing in general and make one's college writing experiences more enjoyable. Before going out to research my topic, I developed three research questions:

1. What beliefs and habits do college freshmen have about writing?
2. How can these beliefs and habits affect their writing processes?
3. Based on prior writing beliefs and habits, what are some effective ways to improve writing skills?

In order to research the answers for myself, I conducted a survey based on these questions. The survey would serve two purposes: to gain a better understanding of how the students at Illinois State feel about their writing processes and to push myself to try a new genre of writing that I had never tackled before. Because this was my first attempt at creating a survey, I knew that the experience would create an opportunity for me to write in an unfamiliar genre.

## Creating the Survey

When creating my survey, the first thing I considered was the audience. Who would the questions be geared towards, and how would I reach them? I decided that my audience would be Illinois State students enrolled in English 101. I knew that this class would be made up of freshmen and that their responses would be the most relatable for future students in the same course. I decided to create an online survey through Survey Monkey because it would be the easiest and fastest way to reach college students. I figured that more participants would prefer this method because many students are familiar with social media and online resources. The next thing I pondered was how many questions I would ask and how they would be written. The survey was ultimately composed of ten questions, some multiple choice and some open-ended. I preferred the open-ended questions because then students would be able to respond in a more personal way; this would allow me to see the differences between individual students as opposed to broad generalizations. However, I kept the multiple-choice questions because I wanted to have precise responses and results as well. After creating the survey, I asked three English 101 classes to participate in the survey, and over a two-week period, I received 28 responses. After the survey responses were collected, I reviewed the students' answers and then thought about how I would respond to the questions myself. In the following section I have reported the actual survey questions, the results, and some thoughts regarding how my experience with writing in the survey genre relates to each response.

## Survey Questions and Results

### *Question One*

*Generally speaking, how interested are you in writing?*

The majority of respondents said that they have some interest in writing, depending on the assignment and/or reason for writing. This means that a lot of students like the writing process when they enjoy *what* they are writing about. When students find interest in writing, no matter what the genre or style is, this leads to a positive attitude and will make assignments seem easier and more enjoyable.

#### *My Experience*

As I mentioned before, this was my first time writing a survey. Although I didn't initially know much about the conventions of the genre, I thought that it would be an interesting way to reveal the information I was seeking. The overall process of conducting my survey took a while, but I realized that I enjoyed it. However, not everything about writing is going to be interesting. I realized that there are going to be genres that you prefer more than others, and that's okay! Thus, a person's interest in their topic and genre can have an impact on their writing process.

#### *Question Two*

*Which statement is a better statement of your attitude towards the writing process?*

- *I feel hopeful and confident that my writing process will go smoothly (81%)*
- *I feel discouraged and nervous about the process (19%)*

The overwhelming majority agreed that they feel confident that their writing process will go smoothly, which demonstrates a positive attitude. Based on the survey results, it seems that the writing process begins with positivity. Since many students begin with confidence, one should beware of losing confidence when coming across obstacles or writer's block.

#### *My Experience*

When I started this survey genre project, I had a positive attitude. I thought that I would be able to create a simple survey that would reveal what factors influence a college freshman's writing process. However, my attitude was challenged when I started writing the results of the survey—this article. I came across problems with interpreting the results without sounding too much like an expert writer myself. When my attitude was challenged, I found it difficult to move on and started to question the quality of my work. When I feel discouraged or nervous about the writing process, I try to pinpoint what is causing my angst. For some people, having a negative attitude in the beginning of the process stems from their own past writing struggles. I have found that being in tune with your attitude towards writing can affect your writing performance during any part of the writing process.

### ***Question Three***

*What is the hardest part about writing?*

Students' responses to this open-ended question were that starting out and picking a topic were the hardest parts about writing. One student said, "I think that the hardest part about writing is starting off the papers and getting all the different ideas I have in my head to translate well on paper." Another student said, "Finding creative things to write about, and extending your ideas to make papers and assignments longer in length is the hardest part about writing."

#### *My Experience*

When writing in the survey genre, I also encountered idea generation and translation issues. Although I knew what aspects of the writing process I wanted to research, I was not sure what questions would be the most effective to identify my participants' writing attitudes and habits. When I find it difficult to come up with good ideas, I like to talk it out with my peers, family, or a professor. In this situation, my father and my advisor from the English department helped me brainstorm, and they reassured me that my topic choice was a good one. It was interesting to see how my obstacles during this project matched other students' troubles during the writing process.

### ***Question Four***

*Describe your strengths as a writer.*

This question studies students' habits. Some people agreed that creativity and overall flow were their strengths. One student wrote, "When I have an idea in my head and I start writing, I just keep typing and do not stop," while another student said, "I don't know what I would consider my strength as a writer; I feel like it depends on the assignment." Overall, it seemed that some students were able to identify their strengths, while others had trouble identifying their strengths.

#### *My Experience*

At the beginning of this project, I thought that my strength in writing in the survey genre would be formatting clear and concise questions. Although my first draft of questions ended up being a little wordy for the survey genre, I was able to successfully edit them to be more precise. In addition to discovering my strengths, I also found that I had some areas to work on, specifically my tendency to fall into the role of "expert advisor." I learned that while understanding my strengths and utilizing them in my writing is helpful, discovering bad habits through review and feedback can help me learn and improve my writing skills as well.

### ***Question Five***

*Do you prefer open-ended writing assignments with minimal guidelines, or highly structured ones with many guidelines? Please explain your answer.*

When asked, the majority of students preferred highly structured assignments. Most students said something similar to this response, provided by one student: “I prefer highly structured writing assignments because they are to the point about what is expected which makes the writing process easier.” Only a few students made comments like this response: “I prefer open-ended with minimal guidelines. This allows the writer to express their feelings freely with whatever comes to mind first which tends to be more honest, rather than having to modify what you think to fit the criteria.” I created this question to study students’ attitudes to determine if they are open-minded. The majority of freshmen enjoy a structured assignment because it tells them exactly what they need to do. Sometimes students just want to know what guidelines to meet in order to get a good grade. High school usually emphasizes the importance of these structured assignments, so it makes sense that the students prefer this option.

### ***My Experience***

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I found that after high school, guidelines and requirements began to dwindle. So, I found it beneficial to have an open mind when writing with minimal guidelines. Once students are open to writing in different genres, they can do the research necessary to find credible resources. The genre samples they research can help them pinpoint key features to include in their genre, which ultimately synthesizes into their own style. While writing in the survey genre, I kept an open mind and used resources that included on-line surveys written by credible researchers. I took notes and identified key components to use in this survey.

### ***Question Six***

*When writing in an unfamiliar genre and/or writing situation, I feel \_\_\_\_\_. Explain.*

In this measure of attitude, most students felt stressed and overwhelmed when asked to write in an unfamiliar genre. One student said, “Overwhelmed. Most people have their niche in writing and their preferred genre. Getting pulled out of that comfort zone can be difficult if there isn’t enough explanation for what is expected in the new genre.” This response is similar to preferring familiar and structured assignments. It’s understandable that the majority of participants felt anxious, but some students viewed the ambiguity as a challenge. One student said, “I feel challenged. Even though it may be hard to adapt to the different conventions, learning new genres is always interesting.”

*My Experience*

I believe that viewing new genres as a challenge is the better approach. If students are unfamiliar with a style of writing, they shouldn't be afraid to ask for help. A student can always turn to a teacher for assignment clarification or seek help from a librarian to find books on the particular style. But, the best way to overcome unfamiliar genres is to become familiar with them. As previously mentioned, by doing research on the survey genre, I was able to gain a better understanding of the genre's components, which put me at ease while writing this survey.

**Question Seven**

*Describe your ideal writing environment (e.g. a crowded coffee shop, the maximum-quiet floor of the library, etc.).*

One student responded, "Somewhere quiet and comfortable with no one around and no distractions." A student with opposite feeling said, "Anywhere that does not make me feel like I am isolated in the world. I prefer a coffee shop with a crowd or a floor in the library where my peers that I am acquainted with are around me." This question got students to think about their writing habits. I found that everyone has a specific writing place where they can be comfortable and efficient. The majority of respondents preferred to be by themselves in a quiet area. Usually they like to be somewhere relaxing, like a bed. Other students mentioned having music playing softly.

*My Experience*

Throughout the survey writing process, I always removed any distractions and made sure I had a clear head before I started to write. I know I am most efficient in a quiet and secluded workspace. It is important for students to know their ideal environment. Your environment lets you express your ideas more freely. Being in the wrong environment can cause added stress or procrastination.

**Question Eight**

*How do you usually manage your time while writing?*

- *I tend to divide the assignment and/or writing situation into smaller tasks, working on it over a period of time. (1%)*
- *I tend to procrastinate and work on everything close to the due date. (38.1%)*
- *It depends upon the assignment and/or writing situation. (42.9%)*
- *It depends upon other responsibilities I have at the time. (14.3%)*

The data on time management habits were not surprising. Procrastination among college students is a common stereotype, especially for freshman, who are busy adjusting to their new environment. It's easy to push writing assignments aside when they are trying to balance other classwork and free time.

#### *My Experience*

My strategy of planning early really aided in creating my survey. Writing the survey and interpreting the results took me a whole semester. However, I found that this assignment seemed less intimidating when I broke it down into manageable steps. This also allowed me ample time to revise survey questions. My first draft of questions would have been too broad and confusing to the audience. As I reviewed each subsequent draft, my questions became clearer and more concise. If students start an assignment the night before it's due, it can cause unnecessary stress and may not leave room for improvement. Students may not be able to reach their full writing potential if the assignment they are turning in is basically a rough draft.

#### *Question Nine*

*How often do you use prewriting techniques such as mind maps or outlines to organize your ideas?*

- *Never (10%)*
- *Rarely (50%)*
- *Sometimes (35%)*
- *Always (5%)*

According to the survey results, the majority of English 101 students never or rarely use prewriting techniques. Some students commented that they only create outlines or multiple drafts when the teacher requires them to, perhaps because most college students simply want to complete the assignment. This leads writers to attempt to write the entire genre during their first attempt, rather than consciously thinking or writing before beginning a draft.

#### *My Experience*

Although outlines are not for everyone, I found that outlining helped me structure and organize my thoughts when creating my survey. When looking back on my project notes for creating the survey, I could see how my thoughts and ideas built upon each other. My first brainstorming sheet started out with general ideas and questions I wanted to ask for my research. In the survey genre, every researcher has a hypothesis that they aim to prove or disprove. I needed to make sure that each question related back to my hypothesis. My outlines and notes were useful in referring back to my initial survey goals.



Students may find the hardest part of writing to be translating their ideas into words. When they can refer back to an outline, it can usually help them with that difficult transition. Also if a student feels stuck from the beginning of the assignment, brainstorming or mind mapping can at least help to generate some ideas.

### ***Question Ten***

*Is writing important? Why or why not?*

This last survey question measures participants' attitudes again. When asked this question, every student indicated that they thought that writing is important in one way or another. One student responded, "Writing is extremely important. Writing is what gets thoughts from your brain to other people. Speaking does that too, but writing is more permanent. There's a record of it somewhere, and you can refer back to it. Writing is an excellent form of expression that more people should take advantage of."

### ***My Experience***

If there is one thing I have learned through my transition from high school to college writing, it is that writing is important, and reflecting on each genre's unique features is crucial. When writing in the survey genre, I learned that it is important to consider the target audience, the types of questions, distribution methods, and data interpretation. Embracing writing in a variety of genres has helped me expand my writing capabilities. Keeping a positive outlook on writing will be beneficial in my future, also, because I can never know what I will be asked to compose. Whether it is a project report or quick email to my boss, my writing needs to be effective and formatted accurately.

## **Final Thoughts**

Looking back on this endeavor, I can see how creating a survey helped identify the trend of the pen. The results showed common beliefs and habits that Illinois State freshmen have about writing. My initial intention in researching was to find ways to ease future students' transitions into college writing and to practice the skill of writing in an unfamiliar genre. I realize now, though, that by writing my own survey, I was demonstrating how attitudes and habits could affect a person's writing process, especially when taking on an unfamiliar genre. The transition into college writing *can* be achieved when students reflect on their own writing attitudes and habits. Being aware of one's beliefs and habits and understanding how to utilize and adjust them can reduce the stress of writing, make writing more pleasurable, and help all writers recognize their full writing potential!



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