

EFFECTS OF ESSAY TOPIC VARIATION ON STUDENT WRITING

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- Introducer/Recorder:** *Laura Brady*, George Mason University, VA

Gorden Brossell and Jim Hoetker presented the results of a study designed to analyze the ways in which systematic variations in essay topics affected the writing of college students under controlled conditions. To explore the question of whether a change in topic makes a difference in the quality of student response, Brossell and Hoetker chose extremes of topic and student population. The population consisted of remedial students and honors students writing in response to a regular course assignment. The year-long study (May 1987-April 1988) was based on 557 essays collected from four Florida sites: the University of Florida, Miami-Dade Community College, Valencia Community College, and Tallahassee Community College.

The general essay topic for this project, "The most harmful educational experience," was written according to procedures developed by Brossell and Hoetker in their previous research on content-fair essay examination topics for large scale writing assessments (CCC, October 1986). Brossell and Hoetker then varied this topic in two ways: (1) they controlled the degree of rhetorical specification and (2) they changed the wording to invite subjective and objective responses. These variations yielded four versions of the topic:

- Minimal rhetorical specification requesting an impersonal discussion
- Minimal rhetorical specification requesting a report of personal experience
- Full rhetorical specification requesting an impersonal account
- Full rhetorical specification requesting a report of personal experience

The essays written in response to these topic variations were scored holistically on a 7-point scale by experienced graders; the scale included operational descriptions for four levels of quality (1,3,5,7) and left the other three variables

(2,4,6) unspecified in order to give the raters greater flexibility. The essays were also scored analytically according to ten items in three categories: (1) development, (2) voice/speaker/persona, and (2) readability.

Although the original plan had been gather samples from extreme student populations (high- and low-ability), differences between institutions in the average quality of student writing were noticeable: many "low-ability" students wrote as well as or better than students ranked as "high-ability." As a result, the sample fell into a bell-curve distribution. The research concluded that there is no evidence from either the holistic-scale scores or the analytic-scale scores that even gross variations in phrasing affect either the quality of student responses or the nature of student-topic interaction. Other conclusions: the appearance of first-person voice is significantly higher in essays written in response to topics calling for accounts of personal experience, but it is unaffected by the degree of rhetorical specification.

In a discussion following the presentation of the research, Brossell and Hoetker mentioned plans for future work that include a study to evaluate the effect of content variation in essay topics when wording and rhetorical specification are held constant. They also plan to develop their analytic score further, based on additional essays written at greater leisure and revised, and representing average and high-ability students as well as low-ability students. With revision and development to make the scale reliable and "transportable," the analytic scale might, according to Brossell and Hoetker, have the potential to become an alternative to the single-digit holistic score.