

PERCEPTIONS ON WHAT INFLUENCES WRITING IN AGRICULTURAL
JOURNALISM

A Thesis

by

MISTY BROOKE WILBURN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

December 2009

Major Subject: Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications

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ABSTRACT

Perceptions on What Influences Writing in Agricultural Journalism. (December 2009)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Douglas Perret Starr

Over the years, multiple studies have been conducted to determine what influences writing. Through the studies, few concrete conclusions have been reached on why individuals write the way they do. Research on children has shown that reading does influence writing; however, there has been little research done on adults. Some research has been conducted on how emotions influence writing, but no solid consensus has been reached. This study asked a select group of agricultural journalism and communications student writers what they perceived influenced their writing. The results of this study have implications for the way agricultural journalism and communications students learn and are taught. The study may serve as a model for further research.

The purposive sample was agricultural journalism and communications students who were selected by the lead instructor at their school. The instructors served as gatekeepers. Each U.S. university with an agricultural journalism and communications program was asked to participate.

The study showed that respondents believe many things influence their writing, and the factor mentioned most was surroundings. Respondents also mentioned the things they read and the things they had written in the past as influencers of their writing.

The following recommendations were made based on the findings and conclusions of this study. Researchers should continue to look at what writers believe influences their writing as a way to develop better writers. Instructors should focus on teaching students in various surroundings. Students should not be allowed to write only in the surrounding in which they feel the most comfortable. Research should be conducted to determine if what respondents perceive influences their writing truly does.

DEDICATION

To my family— who have not always understood my crazy, often insane, dreams, but have loved and supported me through it all. They have taught me that anything is possible with faith, prayer, God, and those you love. Thank you all for being not just my family, but also my friends. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For each person listed here, a simple thank you will never be enough. You have all had such a huge impact in my life. I will never be able to thank you for all that you have done and all that you will continue to do.

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Good Lord for the abilities and opportunities he has given me. I know without him I would be nothing.

Thank you to my graduate committee. The support, pushing, prodding, threatening, and guidance you have all given have made this whole process even more satisfying. Dr. Starr, you will never know what you mean to me. Your constant support has been undeniable throughout this whole process. Thank you for all you have done through the years. Dr. Dooley, thank you for taking a chance on a thesis that you were not sure about. I am honored to have your name on my thesis and for your help developing my methodology. Dr. Balester, thank you for taking a chance on a graduate student that you did not even know. It has been a pleasure and honor working with you.

Everyone in the Agricultural Education, Leadership, and Communications Department has helped me get to this place. From a scared freshman more than six years ago to this point; you have all been there to offer suggestions, support and friendship. Dr. Deb, you have been more than an advisor, you have been a mentor, a friend and someone to look up to. Thank you for not just teaching me academically, but for teaching me the lessons that do not come easy. You will never know how much I respect and love you. Dr. Rutherford, thank you for being that voice of reason when it seemed that everything was going wrong. Dr. Wingenbach, you were the first person I met when

starting my undergraduate degree all those years ago. Thank you for having faith in that freshman and helping me begin my education at TAMU.

To all my friends that have stood beside me this whole time—thank you. Tuck, for being “that” friend and one who has been there through it all. Bethany, when I first met you, I had no idea how quickly you would become one of my best friends, thank you for all the laughs we have shared and tears you have dried and cried with me. Jodi, we have come a long way since August 2007 and I thank you for standing beside me through every last second and for always being the one left standing (even when playing Let’s Find Kenny!). Tricia and Holly, you both walked into my life when I needed you the most. Thank you both for all the days you have been there, through the good and the bad. You two will remain in my heart forever. All of you, along with so many others that I could never complete the list, have become the adopted hodge-podge family I needed. Thank you for being there for me.

To my family—I cannot tell you how much you all mean to me. Every single one of you. Without y’all, I would have never made it this far. A special thanks goes to my mom and dad. You two are absolutely the best parents a kid could ever have. Thank you both for your love, support, and guidance...no matter what. I love you guys.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

Over the years, multiple studies have been conducted to determine what influences writing. Through the studies, few concrete conclusions have been reached on why people write the way they do. Research on children shows that reading influences writing, but too little research on adults has been conducted to reach a consensus. This study looked at what a select group of agricultural journalism and communications student writers perceived influenced their writing.

The probability of a relationship between emotions and reading and writing are very strong; however, no concrete evidence has been found to confirm these relationships. These potential links could have a profound impact on the educational techniques used in teaching developing writers. These connections could lead to “smarter” teaching where learning from one area is valuable in other areas of educational development.

Agriculture journalism and communications majors were chosen as participants because they can illuminate our view into the world of adult writing. Today, the world is full of complex terminology and concepts, such as genetically modified food, irradiated food, variant crops and cloning. This era of science requires journalists who can present the complex ideas and theories to the public in a way they can understand. Agricultural

This thesis follows the style of the *Journal of Applied Communications Research*.

journalism and communications students are normally trained in fields such as writing, broadcasting, photography, public relations, and design work, along with many diverse fields in the agriculture industry.

Statement of the Problem

Little is known about the intricate relationship between writing and what influences writing. Understanding this relationship could lead to teaching that aids in the development of more proficient writers. The results of this study will provide data that could be used to develop a theoretical framework that could lead to empirical studies on this phenomenon.

Purpose and Objective

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of adult writers on what influences their writing. In this study, participants were asked to answer questions related to their thoughts on what influences their writing.

Research Questions

Based on the purpose and literature review, researcher questions were:

1. How do adult writers believe what they read influences their writing?
2. How do adult writers believe their surroundings influence their writing?
3. How do adult writers believe their emotions influence their writing?

Methods

Ten of the 18 universities asked to participate responded. A lead instructor in each university's agricultural journalism and communications program selected the top

five junior and/or senior student writers as participants in the study and provided contact information for each. The instructors were used as gatekeepers. A gatekeeper is “someone with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site” (Neuman, 2000, p. 352). Not all universities submitted five students and one school submitted seven students. In total, 43 surveys were sent out and 39 students responded. The respondents were kept anonymous and are referred to as “R” and a number (i.e., R1)

The lack of face-to-face contact with participants is recognized as a limitation. Richer, more in-depth data could possibly have been gathered if interaction between the researcher and participants had taken place.

The researcher is used to gather information and analyze data in qualitative analysis (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) wrote that the researcher’s personal biases can interfere with the study outcome. Johnson (1997) wrote, “Researcher bias tends to result from selective observation and selective recording of information, and also from allowing one’s personal views and perspectives to affect how data are interpreted and how the research is conducted” (p. 284). Johnson (1997) wrote that the key to understanding bias is reflexivity, which requires that the researchers critically analyze their potential biases and predispositions.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is relevant to gather information about what writers perceive influences their writing. This literature review focused on understanding the relationships that had been found on reading and writing in children, how emotions influence writing, and how beliefs and perceptions influence writing.

It is believed that teaching would be more effective if educators would look at the whole picture of reading and writing and correlate teaching of those critical thinking skills that are shared between the two processes (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000).

Reading and Writing

The link between reading and writing is a complex connection that has been studied by researchers over the years (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Guthrie & Seifert, 1977; Parodi, 2006; Rothkopf & Thurner, 1970; Shanahan, 1984; Shanahan & Lomax, 1986). Researchers have looked at reading and writing separately, as psychological occurrences, as active and passive activities, and as a cause-and-effect situation. Research has identified general connections between reading and writing, but very few specific connections have been noted. However, researchers agree that reading and writing are closely correlated in the human development processes (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Parodi, 2006; Shanahan & Lomax, 1986).

Even though there has been interest in this area over the past twenty years, and multiple studies done, the largest quantity of this research focused on children and how reading and writing are related at an early developmental stage (Fitzgerald & Shanahan,

2000; Guthrie & Seifert, 1977; Parodi, 2006; Shanahan, 1984; Shanahan & Lomax, 1986). There have been a few studies on the link between reading and writing in which adults were the main focus (Perin, 1998; Smith 1996). Research on the adolescent aspect of the link between reading and writing has continued to increase since the 1980s and 1990s (Parodi, 2006), but there has still been little new work done on the adult aspect of that link (Perin, 1998).

Shanahan (1984) said that because reading and writing use similar cognitive structures and processes, learning that occurs from reading should be valuable in writing development. Several studies indicated that children and adults who have problems reading also have more syntactic errors, spelling errors, mechanical errors, and low productivity in their writing (Perin, 1998).

Emotions and Writing

The vast majority of research concerning emotions and writing involves the influence of writing on emotions; very little research has been done on the influence of emotions on writing. Most of the research on emotions and writing are focused on how writing can affect emotional well being and on the cathartic process of writing. Brand (1985) said that emotions do not influence only what and how writers write, but also the writing process. She said, “Emotions influence not only what we write and how we write, but how we view the process and how it shapes our thinking” (Brand, 1985, p. 6).

Emotions should have an impact on writing because of their effect on what writers know and how they interpret the information they receive (Widdowfield, 2000).

There have been some studies over the years that argue that writing is a process that is not influenced by what the writer is feeling. These studies describe writing as an act that can be planned, tracked, analyzed, and predicted (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Gregg & Steinberg, 1980). Brand (1985) said that over the years, writing has been “viewed as a mental process that functions with sequential, deliberate, machine-link objectivity” (p. 6).

Settings and Writing

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) found that some writers, particularly novice writers, are very dependent on the environment around them. They need a specific environment to complete their work, or the quality of that work suffers. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) wrote that there were some genres that seemed to require more environmental dependence than others, such as personal experience narrative.

Gryskiewicz (1999) wrote that some organizational structures allow for more creative thinking.

Beliefs, Attitudes, and Perceptions and Writing

In this research, a survey was administered to gather information about what writers perceive influences their writing. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) said that attitudes develop from the beliefs that people hold. People gather information about their behavior from the outcomes they experience from that behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Ajzen said that behaviors that have positive outcomes are repeated, and behaviors that have negative outcomes are avoided (1991). Asking participants about their beliefs and attitudes on what changes their writing is important because as Ajzen (1991) found, if a belief

develops about an action, it changes the way that action is viewed. Therefore, what writers perceive influences their writing should matter to writing instructors. If it is perceived that reading has a negative influence on writing, a course that makes students read could have poor results. The same goes for emotions. If writers perceive before writing that their emotions influence their writing negatively, they will not write their best when emotional.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research provides rich detail (Sofaer, 1999). These details can enhance peripheral vision and identify patterns and configurations among variables (Sofaer, 1999). Sofaer (1999) wrote, “Qualitative research not only serves the desire to describe; it also helps move inquiry toward more meaningful explanations” (p. 1102).

Basic or generic qualitative study is a method to “discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). In basic qualitative studies, data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis and data are analyzed by looking at reoccurring patterns.

The population and sample, instrument, collection of data and data analysis used in this research are in this chapter.

The intent of this study was to improve education in agricultural journalism and communications. To gather rich detail about this subject, a qualitative study was conducted.

Purposive Sample

Purposive, or purposeful, sampling “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61).

Eighteen universities were selected because they had an agricultural journalism and communications program. An instructor at each of these universities was contacted

via e-mail and was informed of the selection criteria—juniors and/or seniors, agricultural journalism and communications majors, and among the top five writers in the major.

After the initial e-mail was distributed to instructors, a second e-mail was sent seven days later to instructors who had not responded. A third and final e-mail was sent seven days after the second request.

The most dominant finding when looking at how to improve response rates is that multiple contact attempts are necessary (Dillman, 2000). Dillman (2000) wrote, “Designing a quality survey begins with two fundamental assumptions: (1) responding to a self-administered questionnaire involves not only cognition, but also motivation (Jenkins & Dillman, 1995, 1997), and (2) multiple attempts are essential to achieving satisfactory response rates to self-administered surveys regardless of whether administered by e-mail, the web, or postal delivery (Scott, 1961; Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978; Dillman, 1991)” (p. 13). The instructor e-mail is in Appendix B.

Once participant contact information was obtained from the instructors, each participant was sent a personalized e-mail with a link to the survey. Using the Internet as a way to survey research participants is becoming more common (Couper, 2000). The e-mail explained the purpose of the survey and provided researcher contact information if the participant needed assistance. Schaefer and Dillman (1998) found that providing participants with a notice e-mail, or one that was sent out before the survey, increased response rates. After the initial e-mail, a second e-mail was sent to non-respondents seven days after the first, and a third e-mail was sent to non-respondents seven days after the second. The e-mail sent to the participants is in Appendix C.

Of the 18 universities that were requested to provide contact information, 11 responded. One of the 11 had disbanded its agricultural journalism and communications program and was removed from the study. Three of the ten remaining universities sent fewer than five participants, and one sent seven. All of the participants were asked to respond. Of the 43 participants, 39 responded. Table 1 lists only the participants who responded to the survey. One respondent did not complete the survey, leaving blank the final question. There were seven males and 32 female respondents. This sample is reflective of the gender breakdown in the majority of agricultural journalism and communications programs surveyed. The list of universities who provided participants and respondent demographic information is in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

| | | |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----|
| Gender | Female | 32 |
| | Male | 7 |
| Classification | Junior | 10 |
| | Senior | 29 |
| Number of responding participants by school | Kansas State University, Manhattan | 5 |
| | Ohio State University, Columbus | 5 |
| | South Dakota State University, Brookings | 4 |
| | Texas A&M University, College Station | 4 |
| | Texas Tech University, Lubbock | 5 |
| | University of Arkansas, Fayetteville | 4 |
| | University of Florida, Gainesville | 5 |
| | University of Nebraska, Lincoln | 5 |
| | University of Wyoming, Seattle | 1 |
| | Washington State University, Pullman | 1 |

All of the respondents were junior or senior agricultural journalism and communications majors. There were ten junior respondents and 29 seniors. Response

rate was calculated by dividing the number of responses (39) by the entire population (43), which equaled 91 percent.

Lindner, Murphy, and Briers (2001) listed three methods that were appropriate for dealing with non-responders: (1) comparing early to late respondents, (2) using “days to respond” as a regression variable, and (3) comparing respondents to non-respondents. No differences were found in the responses of early and late responders.

Lindner, Murphy, and Briers (2001), quoting Richardson (2000), said that it is up to the researcher to determine if the outcome would have been the same if 100 percent of the sample had responded. The number of participants necessary in qualitative analysis normally will become obvious as new categories, themes or explanations stop emerging because of what is known as “data saturation” (Marshall, 1996). Data saturation is defined by Guest, Bunch, and Johnson (2006) as “the point which no new information or themes are observed in the data” (p. 59). It was determined that after 39 responses, no new themes or categories were emerging in this research, and that data saturation had been reached.

Instrumentation

The instrument was researcher-developed. After a request for demographic information—name, school, classification, and gender—the following four questions completed the survey:

1. What do you read on a regular basis (print newspapers, online newspapers, novels, textbooks, magazines, etc.)? Please list titles and authors if possible.

2. What type of writing have you done while in college (press releases, feature stories, etc.)?
3. What influences your writing? For example, does the room you are in matter? Do the things you have written in the past influence your writing? What about the things you read? How do you feel when you are writing? Describe this in as much detail as possible.
4. Think back to the best piece of writing you have ever done. Describe the process you followed in writing it. Where did you go? The library? Your room? How did you get started? What was going through your mind?

Data Analysis

The collected data were reviewed by the researcher and divided into categories using open coding. Strauss and Corbin (1990) said that open coding is “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (p. 61). Strauss and Corbin (1994) said that the open-coding process is interpretive, and researchers using this method should be sure to “include the perspectives and voices of the people” they study (p. 274).

After analyzing the data once to gain a familiarity with the raw data, the data were reanalyzed and broken into categories based on what respondents said. A peer debriefing was conducted to gather feedback that helped tighten and/or redirect the research (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993).

Erlandson et al., (1993) wrote, “Trustworthiness is established in naturalistic inquiry by the use of techniques that provide truth value through credibility, applicability through transferability, consistency through dependability, and neutrality through confirmability” (p. 132).

This research used five techniques of trustworthiness: peer debriefing, audit trails, referential adequacy, thick description, and purposive sampling.

All data collected from respondents was grouped into categories in Tables 1 through 5, which serve as an audit trail. Rogers and Cowles (1993) described an audit trail as consisting of “a variety of researcher-generated data that must be consistently and conscientiously recorded and skillfully organized throughout the researcher process” (p. 219).

Referential adequacy materials are materials that support credibility by providing context-rich, holistic information that provides a background that supports data, analysis, interpretations, and audit (Erlandson et al., 1993). Since respondents typed their own answers, those data served as referential adequacy, and a member check was not necessary.

Thick description is described by Denzin (1989) as “deep, dense, detailed accounts” (p. 83). Creswell and Miller (2000) wrote that with thick description, researchers show readers how the study is credible. It allows readers, they wrote, to make their own decisions about applying the findings to other similar contexts.

Merriam (1998) said that purposive sampling is used because the sample is based on what the researcher wants to discover, understand, and gain insight from; therefore, the sample that the most information gleaned from is chosen.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of adult participants on what influences their writing. In this study, participants were asked to answer questions related to their thoughts on what influenced their writing.

The objective addressed in this study was to determine what participants perceive influences their writing.

Results

There were 32 female and seven male respondents. All 39 respondents were agricultural journalism and communications majors. Based upon classification at the time the instrument was administered, 10 respondents were juniors and 29 were seniors. Demographic characteristics are in Table 1 (p. 11).

Findings Related to Research Question One

Research question one asked respondents what they read on a regular basis. They were asked to list anything they read—print and/or online newspapers, novels, textbooks, magazines, blogs, etc. They were asked to provide titles and authors if possible. Respondents were not limited to what they read the most; they were to state what they read on a regular basis. Some respondents listed one or two things; others listed seven or eight.

All 39 respondents answered this question in some form. The results indicated that 31 respondents read newspapers regularly, 31 read novels (fiction and nonfiction),

23 read magazines, 18 read Web sites, 11 read textbooks, five read newsletters, three read blogs, two read scientific journals, one read other students' papers, and one did not read anything regularly. Many respondents listed the authors and the titles of the books they read.

Of the newspapers read regularly, 17 were regional, seven were college-based, and four were national.

The majority of the respondents were female, so it was not surprising that many of the novel writing authors listed were women writers. Multiple best sellers and classics were on the list. Primarily, the novels listed were fiction.

Most of the magazines were reflective of a majority of female respondents with an agricultural background. If this study were to be done with a group of respondents who were primarily male or non-agricultural based, the responses would probably be different.

Table 2. What Respondents Read

| Newspapers | Respondent |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>The Alligator</i> , University of Florida, Gainesville | R20, R38 |
| <i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i> , Little Rock, AR | R10, R32 |
| <i>Battalion</i> , Texas A&M University, College Station | R3, R21, R34 |
| <i>Bryan College Station Eagle</i> , Bryan, TX | R21 |
| <i>Cherokeean Herald</i> , Rusk, TX | R21 |
| <i>Columbus Dispatch</i> , Columbus, OH | R35 |
| <i>Daily Nebraskan</i> , University of Nebraska at Lincoln | R33 |
| <i>Daily Toreador</i> , Texas Tech University, Lubbock | R4 |
| <i>Independent Florida Alligator</i> , University of Florida, Gainesville | R20 |
| <i>Kitsap Sun</i> , Bremerton, WA | R7 |
| <i>Lamesa Press-Reporter</i> , Lamesa, TX | R12 |
| <i>Land & Livestock Post</i> , Bryan, TX | R21 |
| <i>The Lantern</i> , The Ohio State University, Columbus | R17, R18, R35 |
| <i>Lincoln Journal Star</i> , Lincoln, NE | R16, R23, R33, R39 |

Table 2. Continued

| Newspapers | Respondent |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Lubbock Avalanche Journal</i> , Lubbock, TX | R12 |
| <i>Midwest Messenger</i> , NE, WY, CO, IA | R39 |
| <i>Mitchell Daily Republic</i> , Mitchell, SD | R29 |
| <i>New York Times</i> , New York, NY | R7, R13, R16, R33, R35, R39 |
| <i>Omaha World Herald</i> , Omaha, NE | R1, R39 |
| <i>Orlando Sentinel</i> , Orlando, FL | R19 |
| <i>Sioux Falls Argus Leader</i> , Sioux Falls, SD | R29 |
| <i>The Traveler</i> , University of Arkansas, Fayetteville | R26 |
| <i>Tri-State Livestock News</i> , MT, WY, SD | R29 |
| <i>Urbana Daily Citizen</i> , Urbana, OH | R17 |
| <i>USA Today</i> , McLean, VA | R8, R13, R20, R23, R35 |
| <i>Wall Street Journal</i> , New York, NY | R32 |
| <i>Washington Post</i> , Arlington, VA | R16, R39 |
| <i>Wyoming Livestock Roundup</i> , Casper | R 24 |
| Novels | Respondent |
| <i>The Bible</i> | R4, R8, R12, R24, R34 |
| Alexie, Sherman— <i>The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven</i> | R14 |
| Alten, Steve— <i>The Loch</i> | R1 |
| Austin, Jane | R41 |
| Behrendt, Greg— <i>He's Just Not that into You</i> | R23 |
| Brown, Dan— <i>Angels & Demons</i> | R3, R23 |
| Brown, Dan— <i>The DaVinci Code</i> | R23 |
| Buchholz, Todd G.— <i>New Ideas from Dead Economists</i> | R23 |
| Bushnell, Candace— <i>One Fifth Avenue</i> | R35 |
| Carey, Jacqueline— <i>The Kushiel Series</i> | R13 |
| Carnegie, Dale— <i>How to Stop Worrying and Stop Living</i> | R29 |
| Cast, P.C. & Kristin— <i>House of Night Series</i> | R11 |
| Clark, Mary Higgins | R11 |
| Diamant, Anita— <i>The Red Tent</i> | R41 |
| Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan— <i>The Complete Sherlock Holmes</i> | R4 |
| Ellingsen, Mark— <i>When Did Jesus Become Republican?: Rescuing Our Country and Our Values from the Right—Strategies for a Post-Bush America</i> | R2 |
| Fernea, Elizabeth Warnock— <i>Guests of the Sheik</i> | R3 |

Table 2. Continued

| Novels | Respondent |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Gabaldon, Diana— <i>The Outlander Series</i> | R41 |
| Gilbert, Elizabeth— <i>Eat, Pray, Love</i> | R41 |
| Grann, David— <i>The Lost City of Z</i> | R32 |
| Grisham, John | R11, R20 |
| Gruen, Sara— <i>Water for Elephants</i> | R37 |
| Hamilton, Edith— <i>Mythology</i> | R4 |
| Harris, Charlaine— <i>Living Dead in Dallas</i> | R3 |
| Freed-Jennings, Kayce— <i>Peter Jennings: A Reporter's Life</i> | R23 |
| Kerouac, Jack | R10 |
| King, Stephen | R11 |
| Kinsella, Sophie | R20, R31 |
| Kleypas, Lisa | R33 |
| Krakauer, Jon— <i>Into the Wild</i> | R36 |
| Laurens, Stephanie | R33 |
| Lee, Harper— <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> | R13 |
| Lewis, C.S.— <i>The Problem of Pain</i> | R4 |
| Lewis, C.S.— <i>The Screwtape Letters</i> | R4 |
| Maguire, Gregory— <i>A Lion Among Men</i> | R35 |
| Martin, Paul S.— <i>Twilight of the Mammoths</i> | R7 |
| McCurry, David— <i>Just Us Folks</i> | R7 |
| Meyer, Stephanie— <i>Twilight Series</i> | R10, R11, R41, R39, R29 |
| Nafisi, Azar— <i>Reading Lolita in Tehran</i> | R16 |
| Oke, Janette | R11 |
| Paolini, Christopher— <i>The Inheritance Cycle</i> | R11 |
| Patterson, James | R31 |
| Picoult, Jodi | R18 |
| Pogacnik, Marko | R7 |
| Roberts, Nora / Robb, J.D. | R33 |
| Rosenberg, Joel | R34 |
| Rowling, J.K.— <i>Harry Potter Series</i> | R11 |
| Shakespeare, William | R17 |
| Tan, Amy— <i>The Bonesetter's Daughter</i> | R14 |
| Tolkien, J.R.R.— <i>Lord of the Rings Series</i> | R12, R13 |
| Magazines | Respondent |
| <i>All You</i> | R14 |
| <i>American Quarter Horse Journal</i> | R6 |
| <i>American's Horse</i> | R6 |
| <i>Barrel Horse News</i> | R6 |

Table 2. Continued

| Magazines | Respondent |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>BEEF</i> | R29 |
| <i>Better Homes and Gardens</i> | R29 |
| <i>Cosmo</i> | R9, R18, R21, R33, R42 |
| <i>Family Circle</i> | R14, R35 |
| <i>Farm Journal</i> | R17 |
| <i>Fast Company</i> | R34 |
| <i>Fire Gardening</i> | R7 |
| <i>First</i> | R14 |
| <i>Fitness</i> | R24 |
| <i>Garden Design News</i> | R7 |
| <i>Glamour</i> | R9, R42 |
| <i>Horticulture</i> | R7 |
| <i>HOW</i> | R14 |
| <i>Martha Stewart</i> | R35 |
| <i>Money</i> | R35 |
| <i>National Geographic</i> | R7, R23 |
| <i>Nebraska Farmer</i> | R39 |
| <i>Newsweek</i> | R35 |
| <i>The Ohio County Journal</i> | R35 |
| <i>Ohio Farming</i> | R17 |
| <i>People</i> | R12, R18 |
| <i>Real Simple</i> | R24, R35 |
| <i>Relevant</i> | R34 |
| <i>Rolling Stone</i> | R36 |
| <i>Scientific American Earth 3.0</i> | R7 |
| <i>Self</i> | R2 |
| <i>Seventeen</i> | R12 |
| <i>Shape</i> | R34 |
| <i>Sports Illustrated</i> | R12, R26, R34 |
| <i>Successful Farming</i> | R17 |
| <i>Taste of Home</i> | R23 |
| <i>Time</i> | R8 |
| <i>Vegetable Grower</i> | R39 |
| <i>Women's Day</i> | R14 |
| <i>World</i> | R8 |
| Web sites | Respondents |
| Cattlenetwork.com | R6 |
| CDC.gov | R7 |
| CNN.com | R31, R37, R43 |

Table 2. Continued

| Web sites | Respondent |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Drudgereport.com | R8 |
| Economist.com | R16 |
| ESPN.go.com | R34 |
| Foxnews.com | R6, R23, R31, R32 |
| Google.com | R7 |
| TheHorse.com | R5, R6 |
| Landolakesinc.com | R21 |
| Money.MSN.com | R29 |
| Msnbc.com | R5 |
| News.Google.com | R2 |
| Sciencedaily.com | R7 |
| USDA.gov | R7 |
| Wikipedia.org | R7 |
| Yahoo.com | R19, R21, R23 |
| Textbooks | Respondents |
| Animal Anatomy | R5 |
| Associated Press Stylebook | R35 |
| Communications Law | R35 |
| Digital Media | R5 |
| Microbiology | R5 |
| Newsletters | Respondents |
| Farm Bureau on Farm Markets | R32 |
| Feedstuffs Foodlink | R24 |
| Front Porch by Farm Bureau | R32 |
| Loos Lips | R24 |
| National Cattlemen's Publication | R32 |
| Blogs | Respondents |
| AgWired | R24, R29 |
| BEEF—Amanda Nolz (author) | R37 |
| The Pioneer Woman—Ree Drummond (author) | R29, R37 |
| World Dairy | R29 |

Table 2. Continued

| Scientific Journals | Respondents |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Conservation Biology</i> | R7 |
| <i>Science Daily</i> | R7 |

Findings Related to Research Question Two

Research question two asked respondents to list the types of writing they had done while in college. Writing could have been for any purpose—class, freelance work, organizations, etc. The type of writing these students were doing was important because it gives researchers a way to see if these students are consistent in their work. What writers are asked to write can influence what they think influences that writing. It is helpful to know what students are writing when asking them what influences their writing. Mortensen and Svendsen (1980) found that journalism was basically creative work since it is not prearranged or set and cannot be prescribed. However, this creative work takes place in the confines of a controlled environment—the newspaper. Editors and newspaper owners set political and economic guidelines that must be met. Journalists are expected to write accurate and objective stories, regardless of the confines put forth by management. Mortensen and Svendsen (1980) wrote that a controlled environment can spoil creativity. It is important to know what writers are writing in the respect that more creative pieces, such as features and novels, may need more creative environments. The environmental control exerted over writers could have an impact on the quality of the writing based on the creative restrictions set forth by the instructors. Instructors who adhere to strict journalist principles may not want students to use any creative licensing when writing journalistic pieces.

All 39 respondents answered this question. Answers were fairly similar for all respondents. Twenty-three categories of what respondents identified as something they wrote while in college were developed from the responses. The most common were feature stories, press releases, and hard news stories. Thirty-five respondents wrote that they wrote feature stories; 33, press releases; and 31, hard news stories.

Table 3. What Respondents Are Writing

| Media type | Respondent | Respondent total |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Advertisements and PR campaigns | R4, R10, R17, R24, R33 | 5 |
| Announcements—births and obituaries | R12, R23, R39 | 3 |
| Blogs | R14, R21, R29 | 3 |
| Broadcast | R2, R3, R4, R12, R16, R23, R24, R37, R40 | 9 |
| Columns | R3, R21, R29, R34 | 4 |
| Creative/short stories/fiction | R6, R8, R10, R12, R14, R16, R17, R27, R41 | 9 |
| Descriptive | R35 | 1 |
| Essays | R8, R11, R12, R17, R24, R37, R38 | 7 |
| Feature stories | R1, R2, R3, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11, R13, R14, R15, R16, R17, R18, R19, R20, R21, R23, R24, R26, R27, R29, R31, R32, R33, R34, R35, R36, R37, R38, R39, R41, R43 | 35 |

Table 3. Continued

| Media type | Respondent | Respondent total |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Hard news stories | R1, R4, R6, R8, R9, R11, R12, R13, R14, R15, R16, R17, R18, R19, R20, R21, R24, R26, R27, R29, R31, R32, R34, R36, R37, R38, R39, R40, R41, R42, R43 | 31 |
| Investigative pieces | R4 | 1 |
| Journal entries | R4, R24 | 2 |
| Legal/contracts/briefs/grants/ proposals | R4, R11, R18, R32 | 4 |
| Magazine writing | R1, R3, R4, R8, R12, R19, R20, R35 | 8 |
| Narrative journalism | R16 | 1 |
| Newsletter stories | R2, R9, R21, R24 | 4 |
| Opinion editorials | R14, R18, R20, R34 | 4 |
| Press releases | R2, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11, R13, R15, R16, R17, R18, R19, R20, R21, R23, R24, R26, R27, R29, R32, R33, R34, R35, R36, R37, R38, R39, R40, R41, R43 | 33 |
| Professional correspondence (letters, memos, etc) | R18, R19, R24, R27, R40 | 5 |
| Profiles | R4, R5, R8, R13, R16, R35 | 6 |
| Speeches | R27, R37, R40 | 3 |

Table 3. Continued

| Media type | Respondent | Respondent total |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Technical/research | R1, R4, R6, R7, R10, R11, R17, R18, R23, R24, R26, R27, R35, R36, R37, R42 | 16 |
| Web page | R4, R9, R17 | 3 |

Findings Related to Research Question Three

Research question three asked respondents what they believed influenced their writing and to describe in as much detail as possible what they thought influenced their writing. Respondents were asked if the room mattered, if the things they had written in the past matter, if things read influence writing, if feelings influence writing. All 39 respondents answered this question.

After the data were collected and analyzed by the researcher, and categories were developed from the responses, nine categories emerged. The data suggest that writers believe that surroundings, reading, mood, past writing, type of assignment, enjoyment of the assigned type, experiences/others, pressure/time limit, outline, and religion influence their writing.

Table 4. What Influences Writing

| Influencer | Respondent | Respondent total |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Surroundings | R1, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R9, R10, R13, R14, R16, R17, R20, R21, R23, R24, R27, R29, R32, R34, R36, R39, R40, R41, R43 | 25 |
| Experiences/others | R1, R4, R15, R16, R24, R31, R32, R35, R37 | 9 |

Table 4. Continued

| Influencer | Respondent | Respondent total |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Mood | R1, R2, R3, R4, R7, R13, R14, R20, R23, R24, R27, R29, R35, R36, R38, R39, R41, R42, R43 | 19 |
| Past writing | R3, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11, R14, R16, R19, R23, R24, R26, R33, R36, R40 | 16 |
| Pressure/time limit | R19, R21, R23, R24, R38 | 5 |
| Outline | R17 | 1 |
| Reading | R1, R3, R4, R6, R8, R9, R10, R12, R14, R15, R16, R18, R19, R23, R24, R27, R29, R33, R34, R37, R38, R41, R43 | 23 |
| Religion | R8 | 1 |
| Type of assignment/enjoyment of type | R2, R5, R6, R10, R12, R13, R14, R17, R18, R21, R24, R26, R27, R33, R42 | 15 |

Surroundings

Surroundings, or the place they were in or what was going on around them, influenced 25 of the respondents. Seven respondents wrote that they needed silence to write because background noises completely stopped the writing process. Respondent 14 wrote, “The environment always influences my writing because if it is too loud I cannot focus and my mind wanders often. I tend to ramble a lot more and get distracted.”

Six respondents wrote they needed background noise to write. Respondent 24 wrote, “I have to have *soft* music in the background, and my seat has to be comfortable. It distracts me when people are talking or music is too loud.” Eleven respondents wrote that where they are and how comfortable they are influences their writing. Respondent

36 wrote, “I have to be in a quiet place, preferable with a window, but not surrounded by too many distractions. I like a lot of desk space to work with.”

Respondent 41 needed to be comfortable; respondent 11 needed to be at home. Two respondents wrote that the time of day mattered. These two responses were placed in the surroundings category. Respondent 4 wrote that she writes deeper material at night; respondent 16 wrote that his most creative writing occurs at night, that it is a struggle to write in the morning.

Reading

Twenty-three respondents wrote that what they read influences their writing. Respondent 4 wrote that the things she read influenced her writing, particularly when journaling. Twenty respondents wrote that they tried to use words, techniques, and elements of the things they read in their own writing. Respondent 38 wrote:

The news and stories that I read definitely influence my writing in the sense that I read the stories critically—looking for things I like or don’t like. I like to make note of things that I’d like to use in my own stories, for example, certain phrases or techniques I’m not familiar with. I also see a lot of things that I absolutely despise in the articles that I read—those are the ones that make me check my work and make sure I have no mistakes! As far as the content of the stories I read, I’d say they don’t influence my future pieces (if they were to be on a related subject) but they of course might influence my general opinion on a topic, especially if I know the facts back up the statements. Also, the article I read might sometimes open up my mind a little more and allow me to go back and really dig deep to make sure my pieces aren’t one-sided.

Some respondents used reading as a way to determine what they did not like about another author’s writing. Respondent 14 wrote:

Things I read greatly influence my writing. I pay great attention to how others write and how others word things. Sometimes I may take away ideas from other writers on how to improve my own writing, and yet, from other writers, I may see how I should not ever do things.

Mood

Mood, or the emotional state the writer was in, influenced nineteen of the respondents' writing. Eight respondents wrote that their mood was reflected in their writing, and some tried to put themselves in the mood that the story or article demanded.

Respondent 7 wrote:

If I'm writing an informal article (say for the local magazine), I usually feel happy and in a light-hearted state of mind. When I'm writing academic work, I'm usually trying to keep track mentally of all the research/references along with the key messages and transitions between sections. Academic writing feels more like 'work' than fun, and writing for magazines is more 'fun.'

Respondent 24 wrote, "I have to put myself in the mood I want to portray in the story. There are times when I just can't focus, and I have to stop and come back to it after I've thought through the lead in my head."

Respondent 35 and 27 wrote that mood influenced their writing more than anything else. Respondent 35 wrote:

I think my mood influences my writing the most. If I sit down and try to force myself to write something, it is not nearly as inspired or unique as if something was to pop into my head and me just go from there. I think once I know I need to write about a specific topic, I will toss it around in my head for a while and scribble phrases and words down until I find just the right spark that pulls everything together.

Respondent 27 had to sit down and have plenty of time to focus and "be motivated and inspired to write."

Past writing

Sixteen respondents wrote that they thought their past writing influenced their writing. Ten respondents wrote that they used critiques from past papers to help improve the writing they were working on. Respondent 16 referred to past papers to see critiques.

Respondent 23 wrote, “My writing style is influence a bit from my past writing, but it is more heavily influenced by the criticism that I received from past written work. I like to keep the criticism in the back of my mind, so that I can take it into account while I am writing a new piece.”

Respondent 26 thought past writing gave a better idea of how to approach writing and to ask better questions to improve on that writing. Respondent 26 wrote:

Past writing definitely influences my writing, particularly by giving me an inside angle on the subject, which allows me to ask better questions during interviews and/or explore various aspects that those without my more extensive knowledge of the issue have thought of.

Type of assignment and enjoyment of the assigned type

Fifteen respondents wrote that the type of assignment and the enjoyment they got from writing a given type influenced their writing. Respondent 2 wrote:

My writing really depends on how it is assigned to me. If I am given a specific topic for a specific publication, then I feel like I have to use a template for my writing. This writing is easier, yet I feel it less rewarding. Writing that lets me choose a topic or angle is much more challenging for me, but in the end I can take more pride in it. I use a lot of the pieces that I’ve written previously as a guide.

Respondent 5 wrote that the way she feels about the topic influences the way she writes. Respondent 10 wrote that when writing, she “tries to give the story a voice while telling the facts. Giving a voice to something you do not care about is a challenge.”

Respondent 26 wrote, “Mostly my writing is influenced by my passion for the subjects I write about.” Respondent 33 wrote:

If the subject that I am writing about is interesting and something I care about, I love writing about it. However, if it is something that is not all that interesting or [not] something I care about, I don’t always put my best into the piece.

Experiences/others

Nine respondents wrote that experiences they have lived through and others around them influence their writing. Respondent 4 wrote that all she has learned in the past now influences what she is writing. She believed that her writing has progressively improved throughout college and it is because of what has been learned. Respondent 16 wrote that television shows influence writing and word choice. He believes that he is more like to use a work he did not know when he sees it used well. Respondent 35 strongly believed that others influenced her writing. She wrote:

Sometimes things I see on TV or read or even hear people say end up being the spark. The other day, I heard a coworker of mine say something incredibly silly, and it gave me just the right angle for something I was trying to write. So, I would say I am influenced by outside forces in my writing, but not necessarily because I agree with what those forces are saying (generally I am trying to contradict some stereotype about agriculture I have heard) but because they help me find where I need to do some more exploring of my own ideas.

Pressure/time limit

Five respondents wrote that pressure/time limit influenced their writing. Respondent 19 wrote, "When I am writing, I like to feel pressured, like I am on a deadline. If I am too relaxed, I won't focus as much and won't produce my best work." Another respondent wrote that she wrote better when she did not have as much time as possible to write.

This category could have been grouped into the mood category; however, pressure/time limit seemed to be the driving factor for these five respondents, not the mood it put them in.

Respondent 39 wrote:

[M]ost of my research and the actual writing of the piece gets done in the week of the deadline. I have to feel like I have no choice in the matter but to write it at this very moment...usually at the department computer lab with 7 [to] 15 other students in there with me. I don't necessarily like that there are other students in there because I'm distracted easily, but again, it's last minute so I have no choice.

Outline

Respondent 17 wrote that using an outline influenced her writing:

I used to not use an outline and I saw that very often I would get away from my main points, but now I try to tie everything back into my main themes by following an outline. Usually, I feel a little overwhelmed when beginning a paper; however, after I have prepared an outline, I get going and the pieces just seem to fall together.

Religion

Respondent 8 wrote that religion influenced his writing the most: "Jesus Christ influences my writing many times (not in an 'I will only write about spiritual things,' attitude, but rather He affects everything I do)."

Findings Related to Research Question Four

Research question four asked respondents to describe the process they used when they produced their best writing. Respondents were asked to describe the setting, mood, and process as thoroughly as possible. Thirty-eight of the 39 respondents answered this question.

Almost all of the respondents discussed the process they used to write. Most of the respondents wrote that they thought about the process before sitting down.

Respondent 29 wrote, "I usually spend all day thinking about the event [I am writing

about], compiling my thoughts and organizing my article mentally. Once I sit down to write, I usually let the words flow, and then I go back and fix mistakes.”

Respondent 12 had similar thoughts: “For about a week, I had thought about what I wanted to write. So, when I sat down to begin the piece, I simply started typing. The words came naturally. I feel that typing my papers allows me to make edits quickly and easily.”

Some respondents, like respondent 23, prefer to start with an outline. Respondent 23 wrote, “My first step was to create an outline. After that, I just filled in the points that I wanted to talk about. The process was very simple. I wrote down in simple terms what I wanted to say, and then I came back and edited the piece section by section to make it sound good.”

Some respondents prefer to sit down and just write. Respondent 18 wrote, “I don’t really think about my writing when I’m writing, but instead, put myself in the place of the reader and just keep reading what I am writing over and over, so I know how it sounds.”

Three respondents prefer to put more pressure on themselves and wait until the due date to begin writing. Respondent 38 wrote:

I waited until two days before the deadline to interview my contact. Recorded our conversation. Went home and listened to it once. I did nothing again until the day the piece was due, and I went to the computer lab and sat down and wrote the article in about 45 minutes. That is pretty much my process for every piece, and I’ve done very well on them.

Respondent 33 wrote, “I used some time to think it over and had people look at it. I then used their suggestions to edit and change the copy. I took breaks from the piece to give myself some time away from it.”

Respondent 27 wrote that organization was often a problem, but putting the story down and coming back to it at a later date helped her find and fix the organizational errors. Respondent 3 needed several days to work on a piece, to make sure she had time for “revising and adding and deleting, until it seems ‘just right.’”

Thirty respondents mentioned the place they went to complete the writing. Respondent 1 wrote, “I made certain that I cleared out my schedule of everything else that could make my mind wander. I made certain I was comfortable and had a glass of cola. I went into my room and sat on my bed with my computer. I made sure the door and window were shut so there were no distracting sounds and turned my phone on silent.”

Respondent 3 wrote that her best writing has always been done at her house. Respondent 14 wrote, “I went to my room, because that is the only place I can go to get anything done.”

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Gathering information about what writers perceive influences their writing is important. Understanding these influences could lead to more effective teaching, which could lead to more proficient writers.

The complex link between reading and writing has been studied at length over the years (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Guthrie & Seifert, 1977; Parodi, 2006; Rothkopf & Thurner, 1970; Shanahan, 1984; Shanahan & Lomax, 1986). Although the research has identified general connections between reading and writing, very few specific connections have been noted. However, researchers agree that reading and writing are closely related (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Parodi, 2006; Shanahan & Lomax, 1986). Few studies have focused on the reading and writing link in adults (Perin, 1998; Smith 1996). Shanahan (1984) said that because reading and writing use similar cognitive structures and processes, learning that occurs from reading should be valuable in writing development.

Very little research has been conducted on how emotions influence writing. Brand (1985) concluded that “emotions influence not only what we write and how we write, but how we view the process and how it shapes our thinking” (Brand, 1985, p. 6).

Attitudes often develop from a belief that people hold (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Information is gathered from the outcomes of behaviors. Ajzen said that behaviors that have positive outcomes are repeated, and behaviors that have negative outcomes are

avoided (1991). Knowing what participants believe influences their writing is important because as Ajzen (1991) found, if a belief develops about an action, it changes how that action is viewed. Therefore, what writers perceive influences their writing should matter to instructors trying to teach them writing.

Mortensen and Svendsen (1980) said journalism is basically creative work since it is not prearranged or set and cannot be prescribed. However, this creative work takes place in the confines of a controlled environment—the newspaper—and editors and owners set political and economic guidelines that must be met by writers. Journalists are expected to write accurate and objective stories, regardless of the confines put forth by management. Mortensen and Svendsen (1980) said that a controlled environment can spoil creativity. It is important to know what writers are writing because more creative pieces, such as features and novels, may require that writers work in environments that are less structured. The environmental control exerted over writers could have an impact on the quality of the writing based on the creative restrictions set by the instructors. Also, instructors who adhere to strict journalistic principles may not want students to use creative license when writing journalistic pieces. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) said research has shown that some writers, particularly novice writers, are very dependent upon the environment. They need a specific environment to complete their work, or the quality of that work suffers. Knowing what surroundings writers need to produce their best work and teaching writers to overcome that need could help in teaching more-proficient writers.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of adult participants on what influences their writing. The intent was to improve education in agricultural journalism and communications. Participants were asked to complete an online, open-ended survey related to their thoughts on what influenced their writing.

The purposive sample for this study was junior and senior agricultural journalism and communications majors across the county. Eighteen universities were selected because they had an agricultural journalism and communications program. An instructor at each of these universities was contacted via e-mail and was informed of the selection criteria—juniors and/or seniors, agricultural journalism and communications majors, and among the top five writers in the major. Once participant contact information was obtained, each participant was sent a personalized e-mail with a link to the survey.

This study used an online survey to gather information. The instrument was researcher-developed to identify what agricultural journalism and communications majors perceived influenced their writing. The survey included demographic information and open-ended questions. Participants were asked to list what they were writing and what they believed influenced their writing and to describe in rich detail the best piece they had written.

Summary of Findings and Discussion

This study found that respondents believed that many things influence their writing. Many respondents wrote that they thought their surroundings, their mood, things they had read, things they had written, and people around them influenced their writing.

Conclusions Related to Research Question One

Q1. What do you read on a regular basis (print newspapers, online newspapers, novels, textbooks, magazines, etc.)? Please list titles and authors if possible.

The majority of respondents, 38 of the 39, said they read something on a regular basis. Thirty-one respondents read newspapers, 31 read novels (fiction and nonfiction), 23 read magazines, 18 read Web sites, 11 read textbooks, five read newsletters, three read blogs, two read scientific journals, one read other students' papers, and one did not read anything regularly.

When comparing respondents who read the same things (i.e., newspapers and novels), nothing significant was found.

Table 5. A Comparison of What Respondents Read

| Media type | Number of respondents |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Newspapers, novels | 6 |
| Newspapers, novels, magazines | 4 |
| Newspapers, novels, magazines, Web sites | 3 |
| Newspapers, magazines | 2 |
| Novels | 2 |
| Novels, magazines | 2 |
| Magazines | 2 |
| Web sites | 1 |
| Magazines, Web sites | 1 |
| Web sites, textbooks | 1 |
| Newspapers, novels magazines, Web sites, scientific journals | 1 |
| Newspapers, Web sites | 1 |
| Newspapers, magazines, Web sites | 1 |
| Newspapers, novels, Web sites | 1 |
| Newspapers, novels, magazines, blogs | 1 |
| Newspapers, novels, magazines, Web sites, blogs | 1 |
| Newspapers, novels, Web sites, newsletters | 1 |
| Newspapers, novels, magazines, textbooks | 1 |
| Novels, magazines, Web sites | 1 |
| Novels, Web sites | 1 |
| Novels, Web sites, blogs | 1 |

Reading and writing have a complex link and have been studied for years (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Guthrie & Seifert, 1977; Parodi, 2006; Rothkopf & Thurner, 1970; Shanahan, 1984; Shanahan & Lomax, 1986). Knowing what writers are reading and how they think reading influences their writing could help educators develop better writers. If reading influences writing, as many of the participants said they believe it does, what they are reading could give educators an insight into why a writer is writing in a particular manner.

For example, respondent 38 wrote:

The news and stories that I read definitely influence my writing in the sense that I read the stories critically—looking for things I like or don't like. I like to make note of things that I'd like to use in my own stories, for example, certain phrases or techniques I'm not familiar with.

According to the research, writers base their writing on what they see other writers do. Most of the respondents were readers, who were, as indicated by their own responses, influenced by what they read.

Conclusions Related to Research Question Two

Q2. What type of writing have you done while in college (press releases, feature stories, etc.)?

All of the respondents said they were writing on a regular basis. The most common responses were feature stories, press releases, and hard news stories. A breakdown of the responses is in Table 3 (p. 23).

It is helpful to know what students are writing because, as Mortensen and Svendsen (1980) said, journalism is basically creative work since it is not prearranged or set and cannot be prescribed. They said that this creative work takes place in the

confines of a controlled environment—the newspaper—and editors and owners set political and economic guidelines that must be met by writers. Journalists are expected to write accurate and objective stories, regardless of the confines put forth by management. Mortensen and Svendsen (1980) said that a controlled environment can spoil creativity. It is important to know what writers are writing because more creative pieces, such as features and novels, may require that writers work in surroundings that are less structured. The environmental control exerted over writers could have an impact on the quality of the writing based on the creative restrictions set forth by the instructors. Also, instructors who adhere to strict journalistic principals may not want students to use any creative license when writing journalistic pieces.

Conclusions Related to Research Question Three

Q3. What influences your writing? For example, does the room you are in matter? Do the things you have written in the past influence your writing? What about the things you read? How do you feel when you are writing? Describe this in as much detail as possible.

Nine categories were developed from respondents' answers—surroundings, reading, mood, past writing, type of assignment, enjoyment of the assigned type, experiences/others, pressure/time limit, outline, and religion.

Twenty-five of the 39 respondents said that their surroundings influenced their writing. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) said research has shown that some writers, particularly novice writers, are very dependent on the environment. They need a specific environment to complete their work, or the quality of that work suffers.

Twenty-three respondents said that what they read influenced their writing, from word choice to sentence structure. Shanahan (1984) said that because reading and writing use similar cognitive structures and processes, learning that occurs from reading should be valuable in writing development. If writers are learning how to write from what they read, instructors could use that information to develop better writers.

Nineteen respondents said that their mood or emotion influenced their writing. Respondent 24 wrote, "I have to put myself in the mood I want to portray in the story."

Brand (1985) said that emotions do not influence only what and how writers write, but also the writing process. Understanding that some writers believe that emotions influence their writing could help instructors teach writers how to pinpoint those emotions and utilized them in their writing.

For example, respondent 35 wrote that her mood influences their writing the most. If she tried to force the writing, it was not unique or inspired.

What writers believe influences their writing should be important to instructors. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) said that attitudes develop from the beliefs that people hold. People gather information about their behavior from the outcomes they experience from that behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Ajzen said that behaviors that have positive outcomes are repeated, and behaviors that have negative outcomes are avoided (1991).

Conclusions Related to Research Question Four

Q4. Think back to the best piece of writing you have ever done. Describe the process you followed in writing it. Where did you go? The library? Your room? How did you get started? What was going through your mind?

Thirty of the respondents wrote about the process they had when writing. Nineteen respondents wrote that they thought about the topic for several days, compiled information, researched, and then sat down to write. Twenty-nine respondents wrote that the place they were in contributed to their best writing. Three said they needed a hard deadline to be successful in their writing. This question served to enhance the detail given in research question three.

Conclusions Based on Findings

Understanding what writers believe produced their best writing could be linked to what they believe they need to make their writing as good or better than previous writing. Writer beliefs should be important to instructors because it could lead to an understanding of why writers believe they need certain surroundings, emotional states, deadlines, etc. to do their best work.

According to the research, junior and senior agricultural journalism and communications majors believed that the surroundings, or the place they are in, and reading influence their writing the most. Designing a writing studio would be difficult as each respondent felt they needed something slightly different. For example, one respondent needed total silence, another needed music playing, another needed a desk to sit at, and another needed a couch. Responses indicated that the ideal surroundings are very different from writer to writer. Even though the differences pose a problem, instructors could make the surroundings more individualized by allowing students that need noise to bring headphones to class and listen to the music of their choice. This

option would ensure that the students who need noise could have it and the students who need silence would not be disturbed.

Other things instructors could do include:

1. Provide ample time between giving an assignment and the due date to ensure that students have time to research and think on the topic before beginning the writing process. Ensure that students are not forced to write to an unreal or too-rigid deadline.
2. Provide clear and concise assignment requirements and expectations.
3. Work to develop writers who do not depend on their surroundings to learn by having students write in surroundings that might not be normal or comfortable. For example, one assignment could be done in a lab setting, one in a home setting, one in a noisy room, one in a silent room, and one outside.
4. Ask students to bring a book written by an author whose writing style they admire. Have them refer to the book while doing their own writing.

Recommendations for Future Study

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations for further study were proposed:

1. This study should be replicated with more universities and respondents to gain a better understanding of what writers perceive influences their writing.
2. This study should be replicated, but respondents should be interviewed face-to-face to gather more in-depth, rich detail on what they perceive influences their writing.

3. Research should be conducted in a controlled environment to determine if what respondents perceive influences their writing actually does. It is suggested that a pre-analysis, using a survey similar to the one used in this research, be administered. Writing samples should be gathered from each participant and judged by a group of researchers. Once data are analyzed, respondents should be placed under circumstances in which they do not believe they can write. A second writing sample should be collected and judged by the same group of researchers to ensure impartiality.

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APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
DIVISION OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE STUDIES - OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

1186 TAMU, General Services Complex
College Station, TX 77843-1186
750 Agronomy Road, #3500

979.458.1467
FAX 979.862.3176
<http://researchcompliance.tamu.edu>

Human Subjects Protection Program

Institutional Review Board

DATE: 03-Apr-2009

MEMORANDUM

TO: WILBURN, MISTY BROOKE
77843-3578

FROM: Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

SUBJECT: Initial Review

Protocol Number: 2009-0230

Title: A Writer's Perceptive on What Influences Writing

Review Category: Exempt from IRB Review

It has been determined that the referenced protocol application meets the criteria for exemption and no further review is required. However, any amendment or modification to the protocol must be reported to the IRB and reviewed before being implemented to ensure the protocol still meets the criteria for exemption.

This determination was based on the following Code of Federal Regulations:
(<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm>)

45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior, unless: (a) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (b) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Provisions:

This electronic document provides notification of the review results by the Institutional Review Board.

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO INSTRUCTORS

Hello Dr. [insert name here],

I am a second year Master's student conducting thesis research in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University.

My research, titled *Perceptions on what influences writing in agricultural journalism*, looks at what writers perceive influences their writing.

I have asked universities across the United States with agricultural journalism/communications programs to participate in my research. Participants will be asked to complete a short online survey though Survey Monkey that asks what they think about their own writing. All information will be kept confidential.

I am asking that each school have what they believe to be their top **five** writers participate. Students must be **juniors or seniors** and be **agricultural journalism/communications majors**.

If you would like your school to participate in this research, please submit student information no later than **May 8, 2009, at 5 p.m.**

If you are unable to participate, please let me know so I can remove your school from my list. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (936) 591-2588 or mwilburn@tfs.tamu.edu.

Thanks and Gig 'em,
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APPENDIX C
LETTER TO STUDENTS

Howdy [student name]!

You may have heard from your advisor, Dr. [advisor name], that I would be contacting you about participating in a brief survey concerning writers' perceptions on what influences writing. This research will be used in a Master's thesis in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University.

[University name] was chosen to participate in this study because of its agricultural journalism/communications major. You were chosen to participate because your advisor selected you as one of the top five writers in your major.

Please help me evaluate what writers perceive influence writing by completing the following survey.

The survey is at:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=iGfF9I3HU4OC10ZOB7zHaQ_3d_3d

All information will be confidential. Thank you for your participation and congratulations on being selected to participate!

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