
Writing Values Across the Curriculum

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Working in the Reading/Writing Center gives me a unique view of WAC. I see hundreds of students every semester who are writing papers for professors from all across the curriculum. I see students struggling with assignments that ask for widely different things, students sharing drafts and discussing what they are trying to do, and students sharing returned papers with professors' comments suggesting revisions or explaining evaluations. Seeing all this has led me to know that different professors have different values regarding written work. What one professor considers acceptable writing another considers too wordy or fake or inaccurate.

To learn more about the different writing values held by PSC professors, I did a survey (based on an article by Mimi Schwartz in the January 1984 issue of *College English*) in which I asked twenty-seven PSC professors to read four pairs of writing excerpts and from each pair choose the excerpt they preferred and explain why. The content of each pair was basically the same, but the way each was written was very different. The choices professors made and the explanations they gave made clear some of their writing values.

1) *Context*: As a camp director selecting new staff, which counselor's description of a previous job would you prefer?

A. Twelve-year old boys like to fight. Consequently, on several occasions I explained to them the negative aspects of fighting. Other responsibilities included

keeping them dry (when near the creek or at times of rain), seeing that they bathed, attending to any minor wounds they acquired, and controlling their mischievous behavior. Another responsibility was remaining patient with the children.

B. Twelve-year old boys like to fight. Often I had to stop them. And I had to keep them out of the rain, and the creek, and mischief generally. I had to give them Band-Aids and keep my temper.

Sixty-seven percent of faculty surveyed chose A. Most mentioned more description and/or information as a reason for choosing A, and of those, many said they preferred A because he/she gave more explanation of methods used. For example, "A is more descriptive and articulates methodology. You see he or she has a method for dealing with conflict" (Education). A few professors mentioned the positive tone of A: "A phrase like 'remaining patient' is much more positive and constructive sounding than 'keep my temper'" (Political Science). Others found qualities in A's writing that led them to conclude that A would make a better counselor. "A reflects a more mature person via the more complex sentence structure" (Chemistry), and "A talks about responsibility, which I would want in a counselor" (Mathematics).

Twenty-six percent of faculty surveyed chose B. They did not value the quantity of description or information in A, but rather preferred B for being to the point. They said B was less wordy and communicated better. Rather than finding in A indications of thoughtfulness and maturity, many of these professors sensed something fake. They chose B because "B is more direct, uses simpler language, and is less bullshitty" (English). As camp directors selecting staff, they valued the "natural" voice of B over the "educated" voice of A. "As a counselor, B would be better able to relate to kids opposed to A who uses too big a vocabulary and elaborates too much" (Chemistry).

2) *Context:* As a professor, which sociology paper do you prefer?

A. In effect, it was hypothesized, that certain physical data categories including housing types and densities land use characteristics, and ecological location constitute a scalable content area. This could be called a continuum of residential desirability. Likewise, it was hypothesized that several social data categories, describing the same census tracts, and referring generally to the social stratification system of the city, would be scalable. This scale would be called a continuum of socioeconomic status. Thirdly, it was hypothesized that there would be a high positive correlation between the scale types on each continuum.

B. Rich people live in big houses set farther apart than those of poor people. By looking at an aerial photograph of any American City, we can distinguish the richer from the poorer neighborhoods.

Twenty-six percent of faculty surveyed preferred A. They mentioned the preciseness that comes with using the language of a discipline. "B is a lay interpretation of A and while easier to understand probably suffers in being less accurate" (Chemistry). "A defines what will be used to measure the specific urban community it's studying" (Sociology). "'Continuum of socioeconomic status' has greater applicability in a scientific study than 'rich people, poor people' because it is a general term that can be defined and limited in a way that is most useful to the particular study" (Psychology). "A is careful not to draw any conclusions based on supposition" (Education). There is a power in careful, controlled thinking that depends on mastery of a careful, controlled language. These professors want to give their students this power. "As a professor, I would want the student to be learning the language of the field" (Psychology).

Seventy percent of faculty surveyed preferred B. Most of these respondents made negative remarks about student A's attempt to use the language of the field. These ranged from gentle criticisms: "A sounds like someone trying to give the impression of being scientific" (Mathematics) and "A is trapped in jargon" (Psychology), to cutting remarks:

"A is gobbledy-gook" (Political Science), "A to me is a lot of garbage" (English), "A seems to border on BS" (Political Science), "A is loaded with BS" (Computer Science), "A reads like a tax form; it's awful!" (English). These professors said B communicated better. "B makes no pretensions about special methodology, uses no jargon, says what's obvious obviously rather than cloaking what's obvious in obscurantist verbiage" (English). "B is clear and concise; A is just a mess. A gets up to 'thirdly' without first and second. It is hard to follow. A says 'could be called,' 'would be scalable,' 'would be called.' Well, is it or isn't it? And there are commas where they don't belong" (Sociology).

3) *Context*: As a reader of autobiography, which autobiographical account do you prefer?

A. From the start, it was my ambition to have money for the children. I worked late at night to fulfill this goal. But one night my husband came upon the \$100 I had managed to hide from his detection. A quarrel ensued which resulted in my physically attacking him. It was a reflex action, unintentional, and I made the resolution at that time that such an event should never be allowed to occur again.

B. I worked at home making handkerchiefs. Saved every last cent for Senji's birth. I pulld threds from the material, weeving the many colord threds until one o'clock each morning. Secretly, I hide the money so Papa wouldnt' find it, finally, I managed to save \$100. He discovrd my hiding place I went crazy. A big fight happened and I hited him so hard my hart stop beating. I hited his chest and he slumped down into a chair, he just sat their without speaking to which I lookd at him. I hurt him. I felt so badly... but he had gambld all that money I was saving for Senji's birth. I thought to myself it make no matter how angry I become, I should hit never again anyone on the chest.

Fifteen percent of faculty surveyed preferred A, mostly because they disliked reading B. "I like things that go smoothly when I read. B is hard to read because of bad grammar and poor spelling" (Mathematics). One professor said that "B rambles on while A gives me a clearer picture" (Education).

Seventy-eight percent of professors preferred B. About a quarter said they valued the misspellings and grammatical errors because they helped reveal the person who wrote them: "The language is colorful and evokes images. The errors themselves convey information about the author" (Psychology). Another quarter said they preferred B despite the improper English. "B brings you closer to the situation, even though it has all sorts of things you could put red lines through" (Mathematics). Professors preferred B because they found it more emotional, more personal, more realistic, more interesting and fuller in presenting the situation. As one professor put it, "A is boring" (Business). Some mentioned that B had more detail or information. Several mentioned voice: "A lacks voice, is not real. 'A quarrel ensued,' that's garbage. B really sounds like someone having a fight. There is something genuine in B" (English).

Seven percent of professors said they didn't prefer either because although B was more honest and interesting, they wouldn't want to read much of it. "The writing might wear thin" (Computer Science).

4) Context: As a professor, which biology paper do you prefer?

A. In March I bought two white mice from the pet store in Concord. I kept them in different cages in my room. For two months, my roommate fed one mouse only milk while I fed the other only chocolate. I borrowed a little scale and we each kept track of the weight of the mouse we were taking care of. We also each kept a journal of our mouse's activity and appearance.

B. Two white mice were studied for two months. One mouse was fed only milk; the other was fed only

chocolate. Careful measurements of weight were recorded, as were observations of activity and appearance.

Twenty-six percent of faculty preferred A. Most of these professors mentioned the important details in A that are not mentioned in B. "From A one gets a better idea of what occurred. From B one could get the impression that this experiment was done in a lab under controlled conditions. In A you learn that it was done in a college dorm with two different people caring for the animals" (Political Science). Others preferred A because it was written in the active voice. They pointed out that the doers are shown. "B tries to give the impression that the researchers are not involved in the experiment" (English).

Fifty-nine percent of faculty preferred B. Rather than value the additional information in A, they devalued A for having extraneous information. "Though the human perspective in A is interesting, in a research project it doesn't add to the 'science'" (Psychology). "The scientific community is not interested in pet stores, or you and your roommate. Give only the facts necessary in scientific papers" (Political Science). Only one professor who preferred B mentioned the omission of information in A: "A does leave a little out (that there were two experimenters) but I prefer the succinctness of B" (Chemistry). Others also mentioned succinctness as the highest value for this kind of writing. "B is to the point; just the facts and procedure. No fluff" (Biology). Many said B was proper "scientific language" because it was not personal, didn't use "I," seemed more objective, and was more precise and concise.

Fifteen percent of professors had no preference. They were torn between valuing a more accurate account of what was done and valuing conciseness. As one professor put it: "I think it is important to indicate the 'doer' of research. Therefore A is better than B because it indicates the doer. However, some aspects of A are too informal, e.g. 'little scale,' or unnecessary, 'mouse we were taking care of' (it is understood that they would do that)" (Biology).

As you can see, there is not a consensus among faculty about what is acceptable writing. Different faculty members have different values,

not only across the curriculum, but within departments as well. This is healthy; this is life, but this plurality frustrates many developing writers who believe there is such a thing as absolute "well written."

Here at the Reading/Writing Center I am in a position to help students understand that even though one kind of writing is valued in one class, it is not necessarily valued in another. I am in a position that is free of discipline values and demands. I do not grade writing, and so I do not have to set criteria and then reward only those who write the way I want. Instead, when I meet students who are stuck because they think there is such a thing as absolute "good writing," when I meet students who are having troubles because they think that the kind of writing their favorite professor considered good should be considered good by all their professors, I can show them the wide array of reasonable possibilities for preferred writing. What I do, here at the Reading/Writing Center, is encourage students to understand each of their professors' writing values.

Work Cited

Schwartz, Mimi. "Response to Writing: A College-wide Perspective." *College English* Jan. 1984: 55-62.

Appendix

Faculty Response by Discipline:

Set 1:

- Choice A = 67% — Education(3), Psychology(3),
Political Science(2), English(2), Sociology(2), Biology,
Chemistry, Business, History, Mathematics, Computer Science.
Choice B = 26% — English(3), Biology, Chemistry, Business,
History.
No Preference = 7% — Mathematics, Library.

Set 2:

- Choice A = 26% — Education(2), Psychology(2), Chemistry,
Sociology, History.
Choice B = 70% — English(5), Business(2), Mathematics(2),
Political Science(2), Biology(2), Psychology, Chemistry,
Sociology, History, Library, Computer Science.

No Preference = 4% — Education.

Set 3:

Choice A = 15% — Sociology, Education, Mathematics, Chemistry.

Choice B = 78% — English(5), Psychology(3), Education(2),
Political Science(2), Biology(2), Business(2), Sociology,
Mathematics, Chemistry, History, Library.

No Preference = 7% — History, Computer Science.

Set 4:

Choice A = 26% — English(2), Psychology, Computer Science,
History, Political Science, Education.

Choice B = 59% — English(2), Psychology(2), Chemistry(2),
Business(2), Sociology(2), Library, History, Political Science,
Education, Mathematics, Biology.

No Preference = 15% — English, Education, Mathematics, Biology.