

EXPLORING YOUR WRITING PREFERENCES

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ACTIVE OR REFLECTIVE?

William: The Active Writer

Ever since he was in elementary school, teachers made William write an outline before he began his essay. He always hated that. How could he know what he was going to write before he wrote it? Since he was a smart and resourceful student, he figured out, very early in life, that he could write his essay first, then outline it. His teachers never caught on!

When he didn't have to outline first, William could write the way that fit him: he could write actively. Instead of staring into space, William could leap into writing with little forethought and write whatever popped into his mind. His first drafts often looked like a map of the realm of chaos, with words and sentences crossed out, ideas added up and down the margins, and arrows connecting one paragraph to another. Sometimes, he even added entire paragraphs on the back and drew an arrow that wrapped around the edge of the paper (almost like the path of a ship sailing over the edge of the earth) to show where the paragraph would be added on the front page. Only William could read those first drafts, but that was okay. This was the way he liked to write. He didn't have to slow down to make his writing pretty or perfect. He could throw ideas down on paper as quickly as he could think of them, which was pretty quickly, and he could rely on his energy to carry him through to the end of the first draft. In this way, he didn't forget any of his ideas. That was the problem with outlines: he would forget half of his ideas while trying to be organized for the outline!

Writing this way worked well for him as long as he saved enough time for a second or third or sometimes even a fourth draft. In later drafts, he could reorganize ideas, cut ideas that didn't belong, and add new ideas so that other people could follow his train of thought.

When he first started college, William found it a little difficult to write in-class essays. This was because he felt that he didn't have enough time to revise; he had to get it right the first time! He soon discovered, however, that it was possible to write two drafts, even when he only had sixty minutes to write the essay. He began to leap into his in-class essays, writing a very quick rough draft (without any details or examples) in about fifteen or twenty minutes. The rough draft helped him to get warmed up; it was almost like he was warming up before he began to exercise. The rough draft also helped him to explore his ideas, for William came up with some of his best ideas while he was in the process of putting words on paper. Once he was warmed up and had some good ideas down on paper, he could then begin to rewrite his essay (adding in the examples and details) and he could then finish the second draft before his sixty minutes were up.

As long as William wrote in his special active process, as long as he leaped into his writing without feeling like he had to write an outline or have everything thought out in advance (often William had a rough idea of what he wanted to write about, but the ideas were really only fragmentary), he found writing relatively easy, or at least easier than it was before. When he did become blocked, he used one of his "block-breakers." Sometimes, he could break a block by simply talking to a friend. (He also likes to talk about ideas before he began to write.) The more he talked to his friend about what he was trying to write, the clearer his ideas became, and the more confident he became in his ideas. If this didn't work, he would talk (rather than write) a first draft into a tape recorder, or he would pretend that he was giving a speech on the topic. At other times, he would find a word processor to write on, for he loved nothing more than writing on a word processor. It was much easier for him to throw his ideas into the computer quickly because the word processor allowed him to erase and start over, add words, move paragraphs, and so on. It was almost as if the word processor were made for his approach to writing.

William often finds that he has to spend more time revising than he did writing the original draft. When he doesn't, his instructors often complain that his work is unorganized or unclear. He particularly has to decide (after the initial draft) what he is trying to prove. Once he has decided that, he can begin over with the thesis statement in mind. Instructors also complain that William's work is too conversational, not sophisticated enough. But they usually sense that he has good ideas, even when he has failed to express those ideas clearly.

ACTIVE OR REFLECTIVE?

Tim: The Reflective Writer

Tim likes to think before he acts, and that is how he likes to write as well. Before he ever puts his first sentence on paper, he likes to spend a great deal of time thinking about what he wants to say and how he wants to say it. He will think about the ideas that he wants to write about, how he wants to organize them, and even how he will phrase his sentences.

He may write down an outline, which is fairly long and detailed, at times, or short and not-so-detailed at other times, or he may jot down a few notes on key ideas or facts, but usually he thinks about his writing assignment in his head. Preferably, he does this thinking when he is alone and uninterrupted.

Once Tim has thought about his ideas long enough, he begins to write down his text. This phase of his writing assignment is often more akin to transcription than composing. In other words, he transcribes onto paper the text that he has already composed in his head. When he has thoroughly thought through his text, he can write very quickly and his first draft may need little revision. When he has not thought it through as completely (which is OK), he may stop more frequently to think about where key sentences are leading him. Indeed, in his texts, he often has a number of sentences that announce where he is going, such as, "At this point, I would like to discuss" (He's been told to try to avoid this kind of awkward phrasing and he usually eliminates it in revision.)

For the most part, this process works well for Tim. Since he has thought about the topic before he writes, he can usually put words on paper without experiencing many writer's blocks, although sometimes he becomes bored with the physical act of writing. When he has thought his topic through too thoroughly, he feels that the physical act of writing is just so much scribal work. He becomes bored with the menial task of transcribing what he has already written mentally. He tends to enjoy writing more when he leaves some of the details or ideas unwritten so that he can experience the thrill of discovering new messages as he puts words on paper. The key to Tim's writing process is knowing how much and how long he should write in his head and knowing when to begin putting words on paper.

When he began college, he found writing in-class essays difficult. He likes to think about a topic for days (even weeks or months) before he begins writing. When he wrote his first in-class essays, he noticed that some of his classmates would begin writing almost immediately. It seemed to him that the time was flying by and all he was doing was sitting there thinking about the topic. With time, he came to realize that it was okay for him to think about the topic longer before he began to write. Sometimes, he will think about his topic for thirty minutes before he begins to put words on paper, but, since he uses this time to thoroughly consider what he wants to say, he can then write a good essay in the remaining thirty minutes.

FACTUAL OR THEORETICAL?

Susan: The Factual Writer

Susan feels that 90% of her writing instructors give her assignments that are needlessly difficult. Their directions are too vague and general. If they would only tell her how long the essay should be and how they want it organized, then she would find it easier to begin the essay. When the instructor tells her what he or she expects, which is unfortunately only 10% of the time, then Susan knows what to do and is able to write better essays.

For example, her first college writing instructor gave her very vague instructions. He said, "I want you to write an essay about the transformation of American culture during the 1960's." What does that mean? Why can't this man speak in English? What planet is he from? When she receives instructions like this, Susan has learned that she needs to ask the instructor some questions so that she clearly understands what the instructor wants. She asks questions like: "What do you mean by 'transformation'? Could you give me an example of what you mean by 'transformation'?" After she asks questions like this, then the assignment is clearer; then she can give the instructor what he or she wants.

When Susan begins to write, she needs to start with the facts. She doesn't see how anyone can get a feel for what they want to say if they don't know the facts. After she works with her facts, then Susan can develop some of her ideas or opinions. She definitely does not trust wild theories. Usually, it is easier for her to accumulate facts and write about them (like in a research paper) than it is for her to express her own idea about something. Unfortunately, in many of her college courses, she is asked to write about ideas she has never really thought about. When this happens, she feels very insecure and wants to do research. She believes that if something is written in a book, then it is real and true. She feels that when she has to have an opinion about something, she has to base that opinion on book facts, not just on her opinion.

Finding the right organizational plan is also important for Susan. When she was in high school, her teachers liked for her to write five paragraph themes. Susan practiced this kind of essay until she perfected it, and then she used it to organize all of her essays. She liked the format because it helped her give her teachers what they wanted. In college, instructors seem to like a different type of writing (this confuses her). In fact, it seems that each assignment has to be written in a different way (Susan would rather write the same type of essay over and over again so that she can prove her mastery of it). Writing a new type of essay every time makes writing more difficult, but Susan has found that if she can find a good model to follow (an essay written by another student that the professor likes), then she can use that basic format as a guide. This makes writing much easier because she has a better idea of what the instructor wants.

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As she is putting words on paper, Susan has a tendency to worry about whether or not the essay is neat enough, whether or not she is using correct grammar, and whether or not she has commas in the right place. She has learned, however, that thinking about grammar and neatness during the first draft can divert her attention from what she is trying to say. She's learned to save her concern for correctness until after she has written a first draft.

Susan has also learned that often her paragraphs are too short and undeveloped. Even though she really likes to work from facts, she somehow finds that the facts don't always find their way into her essays as well as they should. She learned to add these illustrations. But instructors have repeatedly told her that although facts and details and examples are necessary, her paragraphs still need more explanations, more of her own thinking. She has learned that when she revises, she needs to add more ideas, opinions, and explanations of what she's trying to convey. Another problem Susan sometimes faces is that she gets in all the explanations and facts but forgets to include her topic sentences. She gets tired of hearing, "These are great illustrations, Susan, but I'm not sure what they are trying to prove. How do they connect with the thesis?" She has learned to solve this problem by looking at the length of her paragraphs. When they seem long enough, she then looks at the beginning of each paragraph. If there's a topic sentence there she feels that she's probably on the right track.

FACTUAL OR THEORETICAL?

Abbie: The Theoretical Writer

Writing, Abbie believes, is one the greatest technologies of the human race. How could it be otherwise? It is only through writing that we are able to explore complex ideas, and it is through writing that we can connect these ideas and be creative and original.

Being unique is important to Abbie. When an instructor gives her a writing assignment, she begins to think about how her approach can be different, how her essay can be unique. Her instructors usually compliment her for her originality, but sometimes they critique her for not following instructions, for writing about something only loosely related to the original assignment. Abbie has learned that she needs to use her powers of observation to learn about her teachers. If teachers give general or vague instructions, then they usually like her originality and creativity (oftentimes, she finds these instructors in the humanities rather than in the sciences, the social sciences, or business). If instructors give very detailed and specific directions, then she is much better off following the directions closely, even though she does not like to write like this. Moreover, she hates to read and follow instructions.

Ideas seem to come to Abbie from nowhere and everywhere, so she usually has no trouble finding thoughts to put in her essays, but she finds it much more difficult to deal with facts, details, and examples. She also sometimes just gets carried away with her ideas and doesn't really prove the point she was trying to prove. She knows that she could if she tried harder, but often she relies on the instructor's ability to figure it out. After all, the instructor is smarter than she is! But Abbie has learned that generally her teachers want her to be more obvious by making the connections very clear and specific. Further, she's learned that she has to provide some evidence to back up her general ideas. When she revises her rough drafts, she adds facts, examples, or details. She also tries to add sentences that clearly show how the ideas prove the thesis. Doing these things makes her feel that she's being too obvious, but she usually gets higher grades when she does.

Sometimes, Abbie's ideas are too complex so she has to clarify them during revisions. She has found that the best way to clarify her ideas is by "testing them out," by applying them to an example or two. That way, she can think her ideas through in more detail as she thinks about how they apply to a specific situation. When she can't supply illustrations, Abbie has to rethink the ideas, which is often hard to do because she's quite comfortable with a general idea about something. Rethinking is hard work for her because she has to dig beneath the surface: that's what instructors seem to want, she's determined. Abbie's also learned that some instructors care a great deal about her carelessness with punctuation, spelling, grammar, and overall neatness. They've even given her low grades for this carelessness despite the good ideas she has presented.

OBJECTIVE OR PERSONAL?

Robert: The Objective Writer

One of Robert's writing instructor's once said to his class: "Writing is a beautiful experience because it gives you a chance to express your feelings. If you put yourself into your writing, empty your heart onto the page, then you can become close to other people through your writing." Robert disagrees. He believes that there are four qualities to good writing: (1) It is objective, (2) It clearly states its message, (3) It is well-organized, and (4) It is logical. After all, one writes for a purpose (to explain one's ideas, to give the audience some information, or to argue about an issue); writing just to express one's feelings seems self-indulgent to him. This is not to say that Robert does not have feelings or that he thinks that they are unimportant. He simply believes that writing about how one feels is inappropriate.

Robert, therefore, tends to follow a fairly clear and logical writing process. It is very important for Robert to organize his ideas very early in his writing process. He may write a detailed outline, divide his essay into sections or jot down a few key ideas in a logical order. The organization is important for two reasons: (1) he relies on the organizational pattern to help him make decisions as he writes (i.e., what he includes and excludes); and (2) the organizational pattern can help him to develop new ideas and examples.

Once his organizational pattern is developed, Robert begins to write by essentially filling in the pattern. This may sound a little like "painting by the numbers" to some, but Robert does not see it that way. He tends to think of it more as setting boundaries for his thinking. For example, a sonnet has clearly prescribed organization to it. Once you accept that pattern as the structure of your poem, then you are challenged to develop the data or ideas that fit the pattern. What could be more logical?

Robert's teachers almost always find his essays organized and basically clear, but when they do criticize him, he is very open to their criticism. The only time that Robert is bothered by his instructor's comments is when the instructor is too gushy or emotional, or when the instructor sounds angry, or when the person isn't direct enough. Robert prefers feedback that is objective, direct, and to the point. If his essay is weak, he just wants his instructor to tell him so that he can revise and make it stronger. If his essay is good, he just wants his instructor to say, "Good job." Overall, Robert's motto is simple: If you have something to say, just say it; then we can get on with our lives.

Since he's been in college, Robert has realized, through various instructors' feedback, that certain people like his basic approach (being very direct and clear-cut). But even those who like his directness often tell him that he needs to explain his points and to illustrate more. Those who don't like his approach caution him to be less dry, more subtle (he's often accused of being too blunt). Robert is trying to liven up his writing by adding some personal illustrations (this is really hard for him), and he's trying to be less blunt so that he doesn't offend his readers; he is beginning to learn that his audience is made up of people who want more than logical persuasion, more than "just the facts."

OBJECTIVE OR PERSONAL?

Michael: The Personal Writer

Writing for Michael is like creating a tapestry. He begins to express himself and then just follows the threads of the weaving. He finds that his writing often surprises him. Even when he plans an outline, there is still something mysterious about how his feelings take shape. It is like watching a tapestry develop: you don't know how it will turn out, but you know that this particular color or type of thread is what's needed now.

This is how Michael's essays take shape: not by deciding on an organizational format in advance (even though he may begin with a plan) but by letting the organization develop organically. He just sort of knows or feels what should come next. Michael tends to become very involved in what he is writing. For him, writing is communicating with people by touching their feelings and beliefs. He feels that he's successful as a writer only when he does this. Therefore, it's harder for Michael than for most people to write about something he doesn't believe in: he could never be a debater who has to argue either side of the same issue. Michael can only argue for what he believes. If he has no real feeling about something, it is much harder for him to write about it. In this way, he is very much unlike Robert, the objective writer, who seems to be able to take either side of an issue and argue it logically even when he doesn't believe what he is writing!

Michael really enjoys entertaining his readers. He tries to find just the right word to capture their attention, and he spends a lot of time wondering whether or not his readers will understand him and be moved by what he says.

Michael is more sensitive than objective writers are about the kinds of feedback he receives on his essays. After he puts so much of himself into his work, he feels that a criticism of it is a criticism of him as a person. Since he has been in college, he has learned to handle criticism better, but it can still be very painful. He tends to like instructors who respond to him as a person and like him: he prefers that they tell him what they like about his work before they tell him how to change it.

Of course, some assignments are harder than others. Michael has a difficult time criticizing others' ideas (his peers, even writers of articles). Since he doesn't want to hurt people's feelings, he tends to be overly subtle in his critiques. He also has a hard time when he can't think of an interesting way to get the reader involved. Often the introduction is the hardest part for him to write. It's the beginning of his tapestry, after all, the foundation. Sometimes he spends more time on it than on the rest of the essay. It's not that he's trying to come up with a thesis statement. He's trying to lay some kind of foundation that will lead him and his readers into the rest of the essay. Revising is hard too but especially when the instructor is

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concerned about only one section of the essay: how can he only change one section. If the essay is a tapestry, all of its parts are interwoven: changing one part means changing the whole thing!

Instructors usually compliment Michael's essays on their humanness. They say that they can hear him talking and expressing himself. Often they say they can't outline his essays but that the ideas and feelings come through anyway. Sometimes they tell him he is too conversational and should sound more academic. Michael's not sure how to solve this problem yet.

FOCUSED OR INCLUSIVE?

Beth: The Focused Writer

Beth likes to organize her time so that she can get everything done and still have time to relax. Deadlines are important to her. Generally, when she is given a writing assignment, she begins to think about how she can complete it and turn it in on time. She plans to have her research completed by a certain date (she may read two articles a day), the rough draft done by another date, and the revisions made and the final version turned in by another date. She follows the schedule and almost never turns in an assignment late. Usually, when an assignment is due on a Monday, she is working on some other assignment by Sunday because the essay has already been completed.

This process works quite well for her, although she has learned that she can sometimes follow her plan too closely. If she comes across a new idea in her reading that requires additional research, she has to decide whether or not to pursue that research. If her schedule doesn't allow for these unforeseen circumstances and she sticks rigidly to her schedule, she often misses good ideas that would add to the quality of her essays. Sometimes she is even well-aware that she's short changing her essays, but, for Bess, keeping to the schedule comes first. She wants to feel that she is controlling her workload and a schedule helps her do this.

Another problem Bess encounters is that because she wants to finish an essay, she sometimes begins too soon--before she's done enough research, before a pertinent in-class discussion, or before she's thought through all the ideas. This can lead to writing blocks; then she needs to abandon her schedule and do what needs to be done (do more research, spend more time thinking or free writing). A second problem that beginning too early leads to is short rough drafts. Beth wants to complete the essay; therefore, she forces herself to move through the process quickly without sufficient explanation or development of ideas.

FOCUSED OR INCLUSIVE?

Mary: The Inclusive Writer

If she wanted to, Mary could describe her writing process in one word: BIG. She tends to select very broad topics that allow her to research and think about a broad range of ideas, and she sometimes has trouble narrowing the topic, even when her deadline is approaching and the essay is not yet written.

Of course, Mary takes her big topics and researches them in a big way. She works hard on her writing assignments and believes that she should not start to write until she has thoroughly researched the topic. She will check a number of books out of the library. Sometimes it seems like she checks out hundreds. Her friends can tell when she is working on a term paper because her dorm room is cluttered with books, xeroxes of journal articles, notecards, and ideas jotted down on little slips of paper. The more she reads, the more she feels that there is to read. There is always one more article, one more book, one more fact to track down, or one more statistic to locate. Her research just seems to go on and on without her thinking much at all about her deadline.

She usually does not start to write her rough draft until the eleventh hour, which means that she usually writes late into the night. For some reason, she seems to do her best writing at the last minute; indeed, she prides herself on her ability to write under pressure. The only problem with this approach is that she rarely has a chance to revise her essays; her first draft is often her final one. Sometimes, she believes that she could earn higher grades on essays if she began early enough to write two or three drafts.

One of her major difficulties with writing is that she feels like she has to say everything about her topic that she could possibly say. She sometimes struggles to include all of the important facts or all of her great ideas, which can make her rough drafts very long. Her writing also has a tendency to ramble on as she continues to include one more key point or one more key fact.

Once she began to write an essay and had written six pages before she even finished the introduction. She realized that the essay was getting a bit too long and her time was running out, so she wrote another paragraph and turned it in.

Since she has been in college, she has learned to start a little earlier and allow more time for revision, but she has also learned that she needs to cut excess information from her first draft. She has begun to accept that she doesn't need to say everything. There will be other essays to write. She can save some of her ideas for other essays. Besides, she believes that writing is a continuing dialogue. In a sense, a writing assignment is never finished. She may turn it in but she will continue to revise it (if only in her mind as she thinks about how the essay could have been better), for she believes that it is good to keep rethinking your ideas, changing your decisions, and reevaluating your assumptions. It is good to be flexible.

Writing Preferences: Effects on Process

Active Writers (function: idea generation) Reflective Writers

need to write to discover what they want to say
talk to others to find/explore ideas, like group work
1st drafts rambling, disorganized, conversational
can't write strong introductions right away
usually reach a point where everything "clicks" in the essay or conversation/
need to begin the essay when they discover the thesis
if unrevised, essay may reach a conclusion that contradicts stated thesis

Strengths: can access their points easily through free writing, strong voice

Problems: lack of org./focus, language often too informal

need to plan/think beforehand, to decide thesis
prefer to work alone, not groups
1st drafts fairly complete and org.
writing is often transcribing what's in their heads
no problem with introductions, organization
usually don't develop new ideas as they write
often forget important ideas while creating outline

Strengths: organization

Problems: often dry, minimally developed

Factual Writers (function: conceptual focus) Theoretical Writers

concerned with having facts, data base to draw from
prefer to operate inductively but often leave out generalizations or
handle them awkwardly, focus on data
prefer working from a model and repeating a pattern
work sequentially, step by step, often lose overall purpose
can illustrate but usually don't explain significance much
(often can be helped by a series of questions re: a specific paragraph)
prefer concrete instructions (how long? what kind of introduction?)
"revision" to them means adjusting mechanics
focus on WHAT

Strengths: handle factual data well, strong mechanics

Problems: often prove the obvious, have difficulty grasping concepts

more concerned with ideas and theories
more likely to explain ideas w/o any illustration

prefer trying something new, being creative
perceive the overall purpose but omit connecting
explanations (how does B follow A?; assume
readers see the connections because they do
prefer more topic freedom, minimal instructions
revision needs to focus on clarity of ideas, emphasis
focus on WHY

Strengths: conceptualize broadly

Problems: develop minimally, essays seem unfocused

Objective Writers (function: attitudes toward audience) Personal Writers

want to be clear, succinct, organized: convey message to audience
concerned with logical appeals - head appeal
value organization and directness

want to affect the reader emotionally
concerned with emotional appeals, values
value the "flow," the "feeling"

Why do I use this method?

- it gives the student possible explanations for what previously seemed a mystery ("how I write")
- it helps me immediately see what's going wrong in an essay and why (each essay is not idiosyncratic)
- it gives the student and me a common language (also repeated characteristics to discuss)
- it helps me help them get through writing blocks
- it "objectifies" writing problems and helps students feel less blameworthy ("my writing is dry, but that's characteristic of objective writers) but also more responsible ("although 'dryness' is not my 'fault,' I can do something about it by trying to be more personal")
- it explains to me why particular writers can only progress "so far" in a given semester (perhaps even in their writing careers), and why I prefer certain kinds of writing.
- it forces me to vary my teaching style (group vs. ind. work, types of assignments, use of models).
- it gives me an approach that students will be able to hear in feedback (feeling writers need to have the language softened, need more positive reinforcement than objective writers who generally want to hear the problems and how to solve them)

Further Reading:

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- Jensen, G. H. and DiTiberio, J. K. (1989). *Personality and the Teaching of Composition*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.