
The Effects of Perceptions of Gender and Personality Type on Writer's Block

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Abstract

Prior to 1979 much of the research into writing apprehension focused on writer's block, the inability to choose words. Current research has focused on such affective factors as attitudes and self-concept. Recent research conducted at the University of Florida's College of Agriculture has indicated a relationship between gender, personality types and writer's block. This study used 93 students participating in a writing/composition course at the University of Florida to determine if a student's perceptions of whether or not they block when they write varied by either their personality type or their gender.

This study used (1) the Myers-Briggs personality test, (2) a test designed to separate students who were blockers and non-blockers when they composed and (3) the Mass Communications Writing Anxiety (MCWAM) Test.

The first objective of this research was to determine if there was a significant difference in whether or not individuals of either gender blocked when they write. Ninety-three students responded to a 22-item questionnaire that measured whether they perceived themselves as blockers or non-blockers. Males (n=52) and females (n=41) who had taken the blocking test were analyzed using a T-test (.05). The results indicated that males and females were not significantly different in their perceptions of themselves as blockers. The second objective was to determine if there was a significant difference in whether or not individuals of either gender of dissimilar personality subgroups blocked when they compose. Results showed that sensing types were significantly more likely to rank themselves as high blockers than intuitives (Chi-square, .05). The third objective was to determine the relationship between personality dimensions and writing apprehension. There were significant positive relationships between writing apprehension and the Sensing, Feeling, Perceiving, and Judging type personalities. There were significant negative relationships between writing apprehension and Extroversion,

Sensing, Intuition, Perceiving, and Judging type personalities.

Page 497 in *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Analysis* is blank except for the title "The Unsuccessful Self-Treatment of a Case of 'Writer's Block'" (Upper, 1974). It is a wry admission that those who study the effects of anxiety on writers have not been completely successful in determining the complete range of causes and effects of this problem.

Traditionally, college writing instruction has centered on such *cognitive* or knowledge factors as spelling and the so-called rules for writing, including grammar and punctuation. Then, research into the attitudes of college students determined that many have problems because they suffer extreme apprehension at *different* stages and at different levels of anxiety when they tried to compose (Rose, 1980). One study found that students who were **better** writers indicated they suffered *higher* levels of anxiety, and that students who found writing *hardest* at the **start** were more likely to agree that writing *got easier* as they went along (Nehiley, 1993).

Several studies reported in the NACTA journal have found that differences in the attitudes and abilities of agricultural students can be attributed to differences in personality type as measured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Sorenson and Hartung, 1987; and Johnson, Zimmerman, Mokma and Brooker, 1993).

Research into the effects of personality type on writers has found that students suffer *different* levels of apprehension because of variation in their attitudes about the writing process and differences in their temperaments (Jensen and DiTiberio, 1984).

In a study conducted at the University of Florida's College of Agriculture, 216 students participating in a writing course were tested with a blocker versus non-blocker questionnaire and the Myers-Briggs personality test to determine if there was a relationship between personality type and writer's block (Nehiley, 1993). The Blocker/Non-blocker test used 22 dichotomous-choice questions drawn from statements made by students participating in studies about their writing. For instance, they would indicate either yes or no on questions like "I don't start writing until my outline covers everything" or "When I am stuck, I just start writing, I'll write what I can." The Myers-Briggs test identifies students who are extraverted or introverted, intuitive or sensing, and judging or perceiving; basic temperaments that can be traced through the work of Maslow, Freud, Jung, Adler and even back to

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Hippocrates. According to research, extroverts enjoy communicating with others, introverts do not. In addition, it is known that intuitive types enjoy tackling new problems, sensing types do not, and that perceives avoid beginning because they desire additional time for analysis, while judging types suffer anxiety if they do not begin writing immediately.

Considering the descriptions of the various personality types, it could be assumed that extroverts, intuitives and judging type personalities should tend to be non-blockers, while introverts, sensing types and perceptive personalities should block when they compose. This did not prove to be the case.

Results showed that 59% of those testing as extroverts also indicated they were blockers, while 41% of the extroverts perceived themselves as non-blockers. This compares to 54% who were introverts and reported they were blockers as opposed to 46% who were introverted non-blockers.

Because the originators of the Myers-Briggs test described Judging-types as people who just dive into their work, it was predicted that a majority of them would be non-blockers and a majority of Perceiving-types would test as blockers. Again, this was not the case. Sixty percent of the J-types were blockers, compared to 43% for the P-types. However, when the students were also segregated to account for sensing (S-type) versus the intuitive (N-type), the roles were reversed. As a result, 55% of SJ-types were blockers as opposed to 66% of the NP-types. Overall, 56% were blockers and 44% were non-blockers. Results from this study indicated that students respond to writing situations not as individual personality types, but as compound personality types operating in conjunction with other self-perceptions.

Of the 216 students participating in this study, 111 were in a separate class and had also been asked to indicate additional information including their gender. As the number of female agricultural students increases, it becomes increasingly important to take this factor into account when students are analyzed. Nehiley (1993) found that student's perceptions of themselves as extroverts or introverts differed by gender. Fifty-four percent of the respondents in the general population tested as extraverted. However, when they were separated according to gender, 66% of the males tested as extraverted as opposed to 44% among the females. This sample was also analyzed to determine if differences in gender would show differences in how individuals report whether or not they block when they write. Of the 111 students in this part of the study, 98 tested as either blockers or non-blockers. 13 failed to complete the Blocker/Non-blocker test. Of these, 45% of the males indicated they were non-blockers, while 36% of the females indicated that they were non-blockers.

Do students participating in composition exercises perceive themselves as being dissimilar as writers if they are of different genders? Do these differences in perception affect the way students approach their writing? Research recently conducted at the University of Florida explored more completely the way males and females of varying personality types view themselves when it comes writing anxiety and the effects of writer's blocks on their writing.

Objectives

This research had three objectives:

- 1) to determine if there was a significant difference in whether or not individuals of either gender blocked then they write,
- 2) to determine if there was a significant difference in whether or not individuals of either gender of dissimilar personality subgroups blocked then they compose,
- 3) to determine if there was a significant difference in the degree of apprehension suffered by individuals of different genders of dissimilar personality subgroups when they compose.

Materials and Methods

In the fall of 1992, 93 students participating in a writing course in the University of Florida's College of Agriculture were analyzed with three instruments: (1) the Myers-Briggs Personality Test (MBTI), (2) a dichotomous-choice, 22-question blocker versus non-blocker test, and (3) the Mass Communication Writing Anxiety Measure (MCWAM).

For the purposes of this research, **blocking** was measured with the 22-question test, and **anxiety** was measured using the MCWAM.

The second test, the blocking test, was a true or false questionnaire developed specifically to determine whether students, based on their own perceived writing habits, were blockers or non-blockers when they tried to compose. Blockers were identified by answering in the affirmative to such statements as "A good essay always grabs a reader's attention immediately." Non-blockers were considered to be those that answered in the affirmative to such statements as "Grammar and punctuation are not as important as the subject." The questions were derived from statements students made about their writing strategies during composition studies (Rose, 1980).

The anxiety test, the MCWAM, is a likert-style test derived from apprehension tests as used in public speaking or rhetoric courses (Riffe & Stack, 1988). This test asked students to indicate the degree to which they agreed to questions about their attitudes concerning their writing strategies. Student responses were marked according to a six-part scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (0). Questions ranged from "I avoid writing if I can" to "I spend too much time staring at a piece of paper when I try to write." To test internal structure of the MCWAM instrument, we computed Cronbach's alpha for each of the instruments sub-scales among 224 students in the College of Agriculture and the College of Journalism and Mass Communications. All were above .75 and considered satisfactory for further analysis.

For the purposes of this study, the results from the MCWAM were into three categories: (1) General Affect (the writer's feelings or attitudes towards writing); (2) Blank Page Paralysis; and (3) Mechanical Skill or Competence (the writer's attitudes about these traits in their own writing). Questions in the original MCWAM that related to two other categories (dis-

Low scores indicate HIGHER relationships

Dimension	Mean Blocking Score
Males	10.74
Females	10.62
Extroversion	10.78
Male Extroverts	10.72
Female Extroverts	10.85
Introversion	10.40
Male Introverts	10.83
Female Introverts	10.11
Sensing	10.23*
Male Sensing	10.09
Female Sensing	10.39
Intuition	11.46*
Male Intuitives	11.85
Female Intuitives	11.00
Thinking	10.72
Male Thinking	10.77
Female Thinking	10.60
Feeling	10.66
Male Feeling	10.69
Female Thinking	10.63
Judging	10.52
Male Judging	10.67
Female Judging	10.36
Perceiving	11.42
Male Perceiving	11.00
Female Perceiving	12.25

*The average blocking score for Sensing types was significantly less than the average blocking score for Intuitives (F=3.29, p=.075).

positional attitudes and situational attitudes) were not used. Those participating included all students who completed all three tests, (52 males and 41 females). Participants included Freshmen and Sophomores, but 75% of the students were juniors and seniors.

Students who completed all three tests were then categorized according to (1) personality types, (2) gender and (3) responses to questions concerning their approach to planning, writing and editing.

Results

The first objective was to determine if there was a significant difference in whether or not individuals of either gender blocked when they write. Ninety-three students responded to a 22-item questionnaire that measured whether they perceived themselves as blockers or non-blockers. Students that chose the non-blocking answer more than half the time (11 times), were considered non-blockers. Males (n=52) and females (n=41) who had taken the blocking test were analyzed using a T-test (.05). *The results indicated that males and fe-*

males were not significantly different in their perceptions of themselves as blockers (males averaged 10.92 and females averaged 10.76).

The second objective was to determine if there was a significant difference in whether or not individuals of either gender of dissimilar personality subgroups blocked when they compose. *Results showed that sensing types were significantly more likely to rank themselves as high blockers than intuitives (Chi-square, .05).*

To determine the effects of gender and personality, we conducted analysis of variance on blocking scores by personality and gender. These results, reported below, showed extroversion-introversion, thinking-feeling, judging-perceiving had no effect on blocking and did not interact with gender. There were, however, significant differences (p<.10) for sensing and intuition. There was no interaction between sensing-intuition and gender.

We also compared specific items from the blocking instrument to examine differences between Sensing and Intuitives using a Chi square analysis. Sensing types were more likely to agree with the following items than Intuitives. In other words, these are symptoms that cause blocking among sensing types.

	Percent Agreeing			
	S	N	phi.	phi
If sentences aren't grammatically correct, they aren't useful. (True = block)	45%	13%	.321	p<.05
A good essay always grabs a reader's attention immediately. (True = block)	70%	48%	.212	p<.05
I can use as many thesis ideas in my lead paragraph as I want. (False = block)	95%	82%	.208	p<.10
When I'm stuck, I just start writing, I'll write what I can. (False = block)	70%	52%	.181	p<.10

The following items discriminated Intuitives from Sensing types for blocking. In other words, these statements were what contributed more to Intuitives blocking and less to Sensing types.

	Percent Agreeing			
	S	N	phi.	phi
If my original idea won't work, then I proceed to rethink the subject matter. (False = block)	16%	3%	.228	p<.05
The ending is more important than the beginning. (True = False)	32%	15%	.201	p<.10

These results suggest Sensing types have difficulty writing because of their desire to have everything correct when they start. They want a lead to grab the reader's attention. At the same time, they believe they must have a single thesis idea in their lead paragraph. And, they believe each sentence must be grammatically correct. This concern for the

“front-end” focus is amplified by their response to “The ending is more important than the beginning.” Eighty-five percent of the Sensing types, compared to 68% Intuitives, believe this was not true. Since the beginning is as, if not more, important than the ending, we can see why Sensing types have difficulty starting. The most important part of their writing comes first. If one cannot have the correct beginning, one cannot have good writing. This concern precludes a person beginning their writing and restructuring as the focus becomes more clear. Sensing types cannot start without focus.

Intuitives who block do so for different reasons than Sensing types. Intuitives tend to block because (1) they do not want to give up on their original idea and block until they can figure out a way to make their idea work and (2) because they want an ending that will be strong. This means they must have confidence in their focus giving them a strong ending. When one is not sure how the writing will end, they have difficulty beginning. In this light,

Intuitives block because they do not know how their writing will end while Sensing types block because they do not know how their writing will begin.

The third objective was to determine the relationship between personality dimensions and writing apprehension. There were significant positive relationships between writing apprehension and the Sensing, Feeling, Perceiving, and Judging. There were significant negative relationships between writing apprehension and Extroversion, Sensing, Intuition, Perceiving, and Judging.

Extroversion-Introversion Relationships

Extroversion was negatively related to task avoidance. Individuals whose primary focus is external, rather than internal, tended to avoid the task of writing, preferring to delay. Intuition was not related to any of the writing apprehension McWAM measures.

Sensing-Intuition Relationships

Sensing was positively related to blank page paralysis ($r=.338, p=.002$) and preference for dealing with facts rather than ideas ($r=.417, p=.000$). Conversely, Intuition was negatively related to blank page paralysis ($r=-.303, p=.006$) and facts versus ideas ($r=-.305, p=.005$). These relationships validated each other. Theory would suggest Sensing types would score the opposite of Intuitives. Similarly, the direction of the relationships were in an expected direction. Intuitives, who prefer working with ideas and concepts as opposed to facts and reality, were less likely to suffer blank page paralysis because they tend not to be short of ideas and they preferred ideas rather than facts. The same, in reverse, was true for Sensing types.

As expected, Sensing was negatively related ($r=-.1901, p=.087$) to affect, the degree of positive affect toward writing (expressing ideas). Considering Sensing types preference for facts and reality, it was not surprising Sensing types had an aversion to writing. They tend to prefer doing, acting than dealing with the expression of ideas.

Thinking-Feeling Relationships

There were no significant relationships between Thinking and the writing apprehension measures. Feeling, however, was related to blank page paralysis ($r = .239, p = .031$). Feeling types were more likely to have a difficult time starting writing. Their preference for empathizing with others explains this. Without a sense of audience or relationship with an audience, Feeling types would have a difficult time determining how to start, in which direction to go. They rely on others for that direction. Without it, they have a difficult time starting to write. Feeling was also significantly related to evaluation apprehension ($r=.188, p=.090$). Given Feeling types aversion to conflict and evaluation of others in the sake of empathy, these results were not surprising.

Judging-Perceiving Relationships

Perceiving was related to six of the McWAM apprehension measures. Perceiving was negatively related to general affect toward writing ($r = -.190, p = .088$) and mechanical skill competence ($r = -.319, p=.004$). Judging was positively related to mechanical skills competence ($r = .2889, p = .009$). This relationship validates the dimensions because theory would suggest individuals would score in opposite directions. The results suggested Judging persons were more likely to believe they did not have strong mechanical skills. These are conscientious individuals who have a strong need to comply with rules. This need would suggest the likelihood for a Judging type to over-compensate and believe they did not have the necessary skill level. This is especially convincing when compared to the Perceiving types whose perceiving preferences makes them over-estimate their own abilities. They would have little trouble believing they had strong mechanical skill abilities.

Perceiving was related to evaluation apprehension ($r = .310, p = .005$) and task avoidance ($r = .310, p = .005$). Conversely, Judging was negatively related to evaluation apprehension ($r = -.181, p = .105$) and task avoidance ($r = -.280, p = .011$). These relationships also validated each other. Perceiving types were expected to fear evaluation and task avoidance. These are less conscientious individuals who have a strong sense of alternatives and little preference for closure. Judging types are very conscientious and have a strong preference for closure. The correlations were in the expected directions.

Conclusions

According to legend, the Gordian Knot, a knot tied to a cart tongue in ancient Greece, was so intricate that it couldn't be untied. In many ways, writing is like that knot. Writing is a complex web of cognitive factors such as the rules for grammar and punctuation, but it is also a series of affective elements like how we feel about ourselves as writer's and how we feel about style and technique. In addition, it is also a sequence of judgmental decisions, as in semantics and syntax. Together, these elements form a milieu so elaborate that it can stymie or neutralize a writer's ability to compose.

How can individuals who teach composition deal with this complex web? They can do what Alexander the Great did when he was confronted with the Gordian knot. He drew his sword and solved the problem by slicing it into pieces. Conceivably, when teachers are burdened with the problem of matching complex and highly dissimilar students with an intricate, interrelated process like writing, they can use tests that slice out a part of those to be trained to work on specifically.

Should they decide to do that, research indicates that the 37% of the students who are sensing judgmental types might be the most important to reach initially. Of the many causes of writing disabilities, the tendency to suffer some form of writer's block is one of the most frequently referred to by students as a cause of their writing problems. According to this research, sensing-types are most likely to suffer writing blocks because of their tendency to suffer highest apprehension.

By using instruments like the Meyers-Briggs personality test and the MCWAM writing anxiety test, agricultural teachers in general and agricultural writing teachers specifically can begin to split and divide their classes into groups with clearly defined temperaments that result in writing problems that are unique to their own particular situation. Then, teachers can custom-design writing assignments that will focus on the problems unique to that group of students. In this way, writing teachers can help their students to deal with the complexity of writing and, at the same time, teach them to avoid the frustration that Dennis Upper suffered in his unsuccessful attempt to resolve writer's block in *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Analysis*.

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