

EXTENDING OUR AWARENESS OF THE WRITING PROCESS

GARY A. OLSON

Lately, it has become almost a cliché to speak at professional conferences and in journal articles about the “writing process.” Throughout the last two decades, scholars and educators have become increasingly more sensitive to the fact that composition involves a series of complex, integrated activities and is more than a simple matter of generating a product according to rigid, preestablished strictures. This sensitivity is healthy, especially since it can lead to effective methodologies for teaching composition. However, despite our increased attention to writing as a process, our understanding of how the process works is still incomplete. In our meticulous analyses of T-units and linguistic propositions, in our experimentation with heuristics and pre-writing techniques, in our preoccupation with sentence combining and revision workshops, we have failed to remember perhaps the most important fact about the composing process: all writing originates from *human beings*, each with unique writing habits.

Studying only the *mechanics* of how writers compose tends to make us forget that writers, particularly the student writers with whom we are most concerned, bring to the composing process a bewildering assortment of personal writing habits that are certain to influence that process, often in complex ways. This personal aspect of the composing process became especially clear to me one day when I overheard a notably proficient writer in my class boast to one of her colleagues, “Man, that was the best paper I’ve ever written. I got an ‘A’ on it and I was sky high when I wrote it. I smoked two whole joints.”

Evidently, the marijuana this student smoked while writing

did not prevent her from composing an essay of superior quality. One might argue that she could have written better without the drug, but the fact remains that this student (and many others, as it turns out) introduces elements into the composing process that many of us as educators and scholars might not have considered previously. Certainly, the writer's composing environment is a subject mentioned occasionally in texts and journal articles, (see, for example, the discussion on "The Environment for Composing" in *An Introduction To The Teaching Of Writing* by Stephen and Susan Judy), but no one, to my knowledge, has asked questions beyond those related to "writing atmosphere." We need to ask more penetrating questions if we are to extend our awareness of our students' writing process. For example, is the use of marijuana while writing widespread? What about the use of alcohol? And aren't there other personal writing habits which affect a student's composing process? Television? Radio? The environment in which students write?

To study these questions, I devised a questionnaire to elicit from student writers some precise information about their writing habits. Specifically, I was interested in the *time* students invest in composition, the *environment* in which they write, and the kind and amount of euphorics (if any) students use while composing. The questionnaire consists of one open-ended and 19 multiple-choice questions. Instructors from seven two- and four-year institutions throughout the Southeast distributed the surveys to students in both freshman and advanced composition classes. The instructors assured respondents that although the survey solicited very *personal* information, it would be kept anonymous; students' professors would not have access to the completed questionnaires. In order to allay students' fears of revealing private information to their professors, each instructor selected a student to collect the responses and to seal them in an addressed mailing envelope.

Printed below is the complete questionnaire:

Survey of Students' Writing Habits

Dear Student: We are studying how college students write their papers. Because we are particularly interested in students' "personal habits" during the writing process, these questions are extremely personal; you are not obligated to answer them, but we'd greatly appreciate your help and honesty with this study. Your frankness in answering these

questions will not only help us better understand how students write, but will enable us to serve them better in the future. This questionnaire is completely anonymous; your teacher *will not* have access to your answers. Do not supply your name.

DIRECTIONS: Please provide or circle the answer that *best* describes your writing habits.

- 1) This college English class is my A) first B) second C) third D) fourth E) fifth
- 2) In the English classes I've attended, I've received final grades of: _____
- 3) In my present class I expect to receive a grade of A B C D F
- 4) I would rate my writing ability as A) excellent B) above average C) average D) below average
- 5) I usually spend the following amount of time writing an English paper A) less than 1 hour B) from 1 hour to 3 hours C) from 3 to 5 hours D) more than 5 hours
- 6) I spend *enough* time writing my papers A) always B) most of the time C) sometimes D) never
- 7) I usually write my papers between the hours of A) 7 a.m. & noon B) noon & 6 p.m. C) 6 p.m. & 12 a.m. D) 12 a.m. & 7 a.m.
- 8) When I write papers I play a radio or stereo A) always B) often C) sometimes D) never
- 9) I write papers while the television is on A) always B) often C) sometimes D) never
- 10) I usually write papers A) in my room with no distractions B) in my room with occasional distractions C) in a library or similar "quiet" location D) at a public location such as a cafeteria or lounge
- 11) When I write my papers I am usually A) alone B) in the company of others C) sometimes alone; sometimes not
- 12) When I write I also drink alcoholic beverages A) usually B) often C) sometimes D) never
- 13) If I do drink while writing, it is usually A) beer B) wine C) liquor
- 14) My friends and/or classmates drink alcoholic beverages while writing their papers. A) true B) false C) don't know
- 15) I believe drinking while writing A) can help a writer

compose better papers B) hinders a writer from composing good papers C) does not affect the quality of one's writing

- 16) When I write I also smoke marijuana A) usually B) often C) sometimes D) never
- 17) My friends and/or classmates write papers while high on marijuana A) true B) false C) don't know
- 18) I believe smoking marijuana while writing A) can help a writer compose better papers B) hinders a writer from composing good papers C) does not affect the quality of one's writing
- 19) The last paper I wrote while high on marijuana received a grade of A B C D F NA
- 20) On the back of this sheet, please provide any facts about your writing process which will help us understand how you and other college students write.

One thousand and twenty-one students completed and returned the questionnaires. The relatively large sample population helps increase the reliability of the study's findings. The average respondent was currently enrolled in his or her second college English class and had achieved a "B" average in past English classes. Most respondents expected to receive a "B" or better in their present English class. The majority of respondents (73%) were currently enrolled in their second English class, 16% were in their third class, 9% in their first, and 2% in their fifth.

The information gathered from this survey illustrates a wide range of personal writing habits among student writers. Perhaps the most startling revelation is that 36% of the respondents claimed that they have smoked or do smoke marijuana while composing their papers. A significant number of respondents (17%) "sometimes" smoke marijuana while writing, 13% "often" smoke, 6% "usually" smoke, and 64% "never" do. (Please see Table I.) Of the students who do smoke while writing, 83% are "A" or "B" students, and 92% expected to receive an "A" or "B" in the class they were taking when they completed the questionnaire. In fact, the marijuana smokers on the average rated their writing ability as "above average," and 54% believe that marijuana helps them write *better* quality papers (23% do not know and 23% believe it does *not* help).

In addition, 49% of the respondents stated that their friends

or classmates smoke marijuana while writing English papers; 24% claimed that their friends *do not*; and 27% of the respondents do not know. Clearly, a substantial number of student writers introduce marijuana into their composing process, and we may speculate that perhaps even a higher percentage of students smoke than those who admitted it on the survey since we can expect some respondents to hesitate to admit the fact publicly. (Of course, we also might speculate that some respondents might, for their own amusement, claim they smoke when in fact they do not, but the general fact remains that some of our students do mix writing and marijuana.)

In answer to the open-ended question asking respondents to “provide any facts about your writing process which will help us understand how you and other college students write,” several students commented about their use of marijuana. Four students wrote: “I usually smoke just a little pot before writing to clear my head. It helps me think better,” and “Writing is boring to me and marijuana makes a dull job much more interesting,” and “A joint increases my imagination—helps me think of more things to say,” and “I always smoke before writing a paper. I never got as good grades before I started smoking. In fact, I’m high right now. It makes me sharp.”

Clearly, the message behind these statements is that marijuana users believe that use of the drug while writing should not be considered to be a problem. Perhaps these users are not in the best position to evaluate their own effectiveness while “high,” but the fact remains that marijuana use while writing is not uncommon. While it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate *how* marijuana affects a student’s writing process, the data do suggest that the drug often is a part of some students’ writing processes. Table I illustrates the level of the use of euphorics during the writing process.

TABLE I
Use of Euphorics During the Writing Process

Euphoric	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Never
marijuana	6%	13%	17%	64%
alcohol	10%	12%	27%	51%

While some students may use marijuana while writing their papers, it appears that they are even more likely to indulge in

alcohol. Almost half of the respondents (49%) have drunk or do drink alcoholic beverages while composing papers. Of these respondents, 27% claim to drink "sometimes," 12% "often," and 10% "always"; only 51% "never" use alcohol while writing. In addition, 19% of the students believe that alcohol helps a writer compose better papers; 63% believe it hinders a writer; and 18% believe it does not affect the quality of one's writing. While only 52% of the respondents do not know if their friends and classmates drink alcohol while composing papers, 29% claimed that they do drink, and 19% stated that they do not. Among those students who drink, beer is by far the most popular (69%); wine is the next most frequently used (27%); and liquor is rarely used while writing (4%).

In response to the open-ended question, some students wrote: "I usually write a little intoxicated because it helps me loosen up and get ideas flowing," and "I never get 'drunk' while writing but I do have a few beers to make things better," and "The emphasis on drinking and writing is ridiculous. Often after dinner I may drink wine or smoke pot when revising my paper. I don't think it necessarily hinders one's capability if it's done in moderation, but I always begin my papers with a 'clear head.'" As with the prose responses about the use of marijuana, the purpose of these statements seems to be to diminish the significance of using intoxicants while writing. Incidentally, the student who wrote the final prose response above was enrolled in his or her fourth English class and had received an "A" in each class, but 73% of the students who usually drink and 62% of those who "usually" smoke had earned only a "C" average.

Clearly, alcohol is an integral component of many students' writing processes. Whether or not alcohol and marijuana are harmful to a student's writing ability is a matter of debate, and certainly well known authors such as Coleridge, Poe, and others are known to have written under the influence of various euphorics; however, the knowledge that a significant number of our students compose while intoxicated certainly adds some insight to our understanding of the writing process, and perhaps should be a matter of great concern. What is needed is a comprehensive study of how such euphorics affect students' composing ability and in turn their writing performance.

While a slim majority of students *do not* partake in any intoxicant while writing, an overwhelming majority of students com-

pose in an *environment* which seems less than conducive to quiet, reflective thought. Only 10% of the respondents "never" play a radio or stereo while writing, 39% do so "often," 30% do so "always," and 21% "sometimes." (Please see Table II.) Of those who "always" play music, 89% rate their writing ability as "average" or above, and most expected to receive at least a "B" in their current class. Similarly, a mere 17% of the respondents "never" watch television while composing; 49% do so "often," 27% "sometimes," and 7% "always." While fewer students (7%) "always" watch television than those who "always" listen to music (30%), more students (49%) "often" watch television than those who "often" listen to music (39%).

TABLE II
Students' Writing Environment

Medium	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never
Radio/Stereo	30%	39%	21%	10%
Television	7%	49%	27%	17%

Clearly, the fact that such a high percentage of students compose while operating some type of electronic medium raises many questions. Do these external elements to the writing process adversely affect the writer? Is it possible that they can *contribute* to a writer's composing process? Dr. Darwin Newton, a specialist in study skills and the Director of Counseling and Testing at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, believes that students who are accustomed to studying with background music should not be discouraged from doing so. Background music, despite the type (jazz, classical, disco, etc.), can even help some students concentrate, according to Newton. He claims that this is especially true if the music helps to drown out potentially distracting noises such as occur frequently in most dormitory settings. Newton feels differently, however, about the use of television during writing. The visual aspect of the medium is likely to draw students' attention from their work, causing them to lose concentration. Newton adds, though, that occasionally a student uses television for "companionship"; and in such a case, if it is tuned to a program in which the student has no interest, the use of the television may be acceptable. Other specialists disagree, however. As long ago as 1971, Janet Emig stressed that "all accounts of writers tell us a condition of solitude is requisite for certain kinds of encounters

with words and concepts" (99). Nevertheless, no objective data yet exist about the influence of electronic media on students' study habits in general and writing process in particular.

The questionnaire revealed other interesting information about the environment in which students compose. Most students (79%) compose in their "room with occasional distractions." Few respondents (10%) write "in a library or similar 'quiet' location," while a similar number (11%) study in their "room with no distractions." Not one student writes in a "public location such as a cafeteria or lounge." Thus, 90% of all respondents write in an environment which presents at least some distractions. Furthermore, only 57% of the respondents compose while they are "alone," but 3% compose "in the company of others" and 40% write "sometimes alone; sometimes not." It is perhaps debatable whether occasional or frequent distractions will necessarily hinder a writer's ability to compose effective prose, but certainly such distractions cannot *help* an author.

Finally, the time of day and the amount of time students spend writing a paper provide additional insight into students' composing processes. An overwhelming 82% of the respondents usually write papers between the hours of 6 p.m. and 12 a.m. Only 2% compose between 7 a.m. and noon, 6% between 12 a.m. and 7 a.m., and 10% between noon and 6 p.m. If in fact a distraction-free environment is essential to good writing (as Emig argues), we might speculate that the time period in which most of our students compose is perhaps the least conducive to quiet reflection since it is the peak time of activity in most dormitories as well as the "prime time" period of television programming. Conversely, students rarely write during the time period that might be considered the most distraction free: 7 a.m. to noon.

None of the students admitted to spending less than an hour writing papers, but the highest percentage of respondents (45%) spend from only 1 to 3 hours, 38% spend from 3 to 5 hours, and 17% more than 5 hours. (Please see Table III.) Surely, the amount of time a writer spends composing a paper depends on its type and length; however, a period of 3 to 5 hours seems to be a minimal amount of time in which to lead a project from invention through revision and proofreading. In fact, only 13% of the respondents feel that they "always" spend *enough* time writing their papers. Most students (62%) feel they spend *enough*

time “most of the time,” 17% “sometimes,” and 8% feel that at least occasionally they do not invest a sufficient amount of time into composing a paper.

TABLE III
Time Spent in Writing Process

Less than 1 hr.	1 to 3 hrs.	3 to 5 hrs.	over 5 hrs.
0%	45%	38%	17%

Finally, several students discussed their writing environment in response to the open-ended question. Some students wrote: “I generally sit down with the T.V. or stereo and write my papers, and sometimes I have a beer, but usually toward the end of my paper,” and “I can’t write without music—I’ll just stare at the page for hours without some good tunes on,” and “It’s boring writing without music,” and “I wait until the last possible time when I know it’s either do it or else. That’s when ‘Mr. Pressure’ visits and I do my best work.”

It is clear that the data generated by this study add new insight to our conception of how students compose. Certainly, the writing process is much more than prewriting, arrangement, revision and the other activities and techniques we have been studying for over two decades. Without more in-depth evaluation of how individual writers perform under the influence of external elements such as euphorics and stereos, it is difficult to make value judgments about these personal writing habits. It may even be possible that the factors discussed in this study can *help* individual writers compose more effective prose, as so many respondents suggest, though such an assumption seems doubtful. And perhaps what students need to know most of all is that their writing environment *can* affect their performance and that they must, therefore, choose such an environment carefully.

At the very least, knowledge of students’ personal writing habits better equips us to teach the writing process to our pupils. Perhaps the key to this instruction is better and more comprehensive discussion of study skills in our writing classes. One possible solution is to spend the first few class periods of each semester covering proper study habits. In addition, instructors can arrange to have study skills specialists make presentations to their classes. For example, each semester the Counseling and Testing Center at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington provides a series of

lectures which cover not only proper note and test taking, but also time management and selection of optimum study environments. All students enrolled in freshman English are encouraged to attend, and many instructors cancel one or two regular classes and require attendance at the special presentations. These lectures have generated an overwhelmingly positive response from both students and instructors. Perhaps the most valuable lesson students learn from these sessions is that with proper time management they can budget enough time for academic work and still enjoy an active social life. Such a seemingly obvious fact is not always evident to many students, especially inexperienced freshmen.

If this study reveals anything, it is that our present conception of the writing process is limited. We must not restrict our investigations to academic and procedural elements of the process of writing. It is essential, above all, to remember that composing prose is a *human* activity, done by humans, for humans.

Gary A. Olson is Professor of English at University of South Florida (Tampa) and is Editor of *The Journal of Advanced Composition*.