5. A Contextualist Research Paradigm: An Illustration

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My M.A. thesis was a cross-cultural learning styles study in which I tested the applicability of field dependence-independence measures as a means of assessing cognitive style among minority groups. I finished the project in the summer of 1993. Traditional in format, my thesis reviewed the literature from researchers who have asserted that African-Americans, for example, have a holistic, field-dependent (in contrast to an analytical, field-independent) learning style based on instruments and theories developed by Herman Witkin in the 1940s and 50s. I, too, gave one of those instruments but introduced at the same time a new instrument that had not yet been used in cross-cultural studies: the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (LSI). Groups in my study showed a statistically significant difference on the old instrument that measures field dependence-independence (FDI) but no differences on the Kolb LSI, illustrating differences between the instruments and their cultural assumptions. I also incorporated interviews in which students upheld the findings of the Kolb LSI and refuted the findings of the older FDI measures.

While writing my thesis, I enrolled in a graduate seminar (Spring 1993) called “Cross-Cultural Studies and Composition” in which we focused on ethnography, especially through Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986). I was
hoping the course would provide some insight on my thesis and on my thinking about cross-cultural issues generally, and it did. But the course also produced some tension: our class discussions often focused on the power of ethnography over more rigid, controlled scientific experiments as a means of revealing or constructing culture. Traditional research was limited, we decided, but there I was: neck-deep in my M.A. thesis in which I was doing “traditional” research. Out of frustration, wrestling with my thesis, and partly out of guilt, I asked my professor if I could write the “flip-side” of my thesis for my seminar paper instead of exploring a whole new project. He thought the idea was fascinating, and I thought I’d have a chance to “remedy” the ills of the rigid tradition appearing in my M.A. thesis, thus redeeming myself by studying culture in the way our class decided was best: through narrative.

For my seminar project, then, I wrote the story about how my thesis was constructed: how I came upon the idea, how I designed the study, the problems I encountered with subjects, the difficulties of statistical analysis—but I drew the same conclusions. The project earned an A for that course, and my thesis was completed a few months later, but my curiosity about what had just happened never diminished. On the one hand, I felt I had creatively constructed two versions of the same study—one centered on “context” and one centered on “science”—two worlds that many composition scholars see as fundamentally opposed to one another. On the other hand, both studies described the same conclusions, but without the quantitative measures in the first study, I could not have written the second text, the narrative.

The two texts, in other words, could not have been written in the reverse: if I had done a purely qualitative study for my M.A. thesis, of course, I could not have recreated a second text that would somehow rely on numerical data I had never gathered. The fact that two texts written by the same researcher ended up being very different was, in part, a matter of a choice in presentation (a matter of understanding a genre and an audience), not a matter of “context-stripping” vs. “context-building.” More importantly, it was a matter of understanding the full context of the research project and the research questions being
explored. That I was able to write a second text describing my thesis in a different way suggested the rich, multiple, and diverse layers of texts that exist in traditional research that relies on numerical data: the “narrative flip-side” that could reveal the context for my thesis was “there” all along. Any well-trained researcher could construct the same text, and any well-trained reader of traditional research could, too.

For example, one sentence that often appears in traditional research interested me in particular: that sentence in which researchers articulate how many subjects participated in the study and how those subjects were recruited. I, too, had such sentences, a few short ones, in my M.A. thesis, in which I stated concisely the number of students in my study and how they volunteered. But in my seminar project for the course on cross-cultural studies, I rambled for more than two pages, explaining how hard it was to get volunteers, that some students who had signed up didn’t show up, and of those who showed up, some didn’t follow directions, so their tests had to be thrown out.

While it felt good to get all of that “off my chest,” I always wondered if it was necessary. After all, don’t all researchers face similar problems? Certainly, specific problems with subjects are unique to each research project, but the general notion that researchers will likely encounter problems is commonly understood. After all, how did I know to give advice to a classmate when she started her dissertation, hoping to have eight case studies: Aim for more than eight, I said. If some don’t show up, don’t cooperate, or change their minds, you might end up with eight after all. Researchers know. And I think that’s why I never showed my thesis advisor the narrative of my study as the seminar professor (praising its creativity) suggested. Trained in research, my advisor would know, too.

UNDERSTANDING CONTEXTS FOR QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH: AN ILLUSTRATION

How could we all be trained to become better readers of research that relies on numerical data or experimental designs, readers who would see and appreciate the context of the study in spite of the numbers? If we asked other researchers who have done such studies to tell the stories behind their research, could they? Could narratives about...
their research assist our understanding of that research so that we can become better producers and consumers of all studies, fully understanding the researchers’ decisions in the contexts of their research questions?

To find another study that would help me illustrate how the story behind traditional-looking research can be reconstructed, I searched for authors in the journal most criticized for publishing that kind of research: *Research in the Teaching of English*. Searching issues from two years\(^1\) (Spring 1995-Spring 1997), I chose Eileen Oliver’s “The Writing Quality of Seventh, Ninth, and Eleventh Graders, and College Freshmen: Does Rhetorical Specification in Writing Prompts Make a Difference?” (December 1995).

Below is a reprint of that study\(^2\), and inserted throughout the reprint, is Dr. Oliver’s commentary on the study—transcribed from my interview of her via email\(^3\)—and, in italics, my own commentary on Dr. Oliver’s interview as I see it relating to her published study and to the Contextualist Research Paradigm. Throughout the interview, Dr. Oliver explained the process of her research, the instinct that often guided the study, and her feelings about the project in general: in short, she revealed how the intersections of rhetorical issues and research issues formed the context in which she made her decisions and explored her research questions—a rich, dynamic context in which processes naturally resulted in a “quantitative” product.

\[\text{The Writing Quality of Seventh, Ninth, and Eleventh Graders, and College Freshmen: Does Rhetorical Specification in Writing Prompts Make a Difference?}\]

\[\text{Eileen I. Oliver}\]
\[\text{Washington State University}\]

\[\text{This study analyzes the influence of rhetorical specification in writing prompts on the writing quality of seventh-, ninth-, and eleventh-grade students, and college freshmen.}\]
Manipulating three composing variables—topic, purpose, and audience—eight assignments were created and administered to college preparatory and college students at four age levels. Trained raters scored 624 essays holistically on a six-point scale. The main and interactive effects of topic, purpose, and audience on writing quality were analyzed using a three-way analysis of variance for all grades together and for each grade separately. Results indicate that students utilized different kinds of rhetorical information at different stages. That is, while seventh graders tended to respond to simpler topic specifications, ninth graders reacted strongly to more elaborated topics. Eleventh graders more frequently utilized rhetorical specification, while college writers less frequently relied on it. Results suggest that specific rhetorical information may be important to students at certain ages for pedagogical reasons as well as for assessment.

As the use of large-scale writing assessments has increased over the last decade (Engelhard, Gordon, & Gabrielson, 1992), researchers have likewise increased their attention to the influence of the assignment on writing quality (Black, 1989; Hoetker & Brossell, 1986, 1989; Huot, 1990; Rafoth, 1989; Redd-Boyd & Slater, 1989; Witte, 1992). Most researchers agree that poorly constructed prompts interfere with writers' rhetorical choices, thereby confounding the problem of fair assessment (Keech, 1982; Murphy & Ruth, 1993; Ruth & Murphy, 1984). But what makes a good assignment? How does an assignment affect a writer's ability to produce good prose in a particular writing episode? And, if rhetorical specification does affect writing quality, when do we implement various specifics in our instruction?

This study explores the effects of assignment variables in order to determine the kind of writing tasks that help students achieve at their highest levels. Further, this study examines these effects for various age groups so that its findings may help us determine the appropriate rhetorical balance for different age groups.
When I asked Eileen Oliver why she chose to conduct such a traditional study relying on numerical data and statistical analysis when qualitative studies are currently more popular, her answer was mixed—partly historical, partly practical, but entirely reasonable. Oliver observed similar research questions and methods being explored by other scholars and colleagues around her, determined a purpose for her own study, and based some of her decisions on her experience and intuition. Here, Oliver answers questions in at least three cells in the Contextualist Research Paradigm Matrix (Researcher x Purpose, Researcher x Question, and Audience x Method).

Oliver: When I collected this data (years ago), qualitative work was just coming in to its own. At the time, the psychometricians were in vogue. This data was collected for my dissertation which I published on only using sample data. The co-chair of my committee (Steve Witte) and many others were doing a lot of quantitative stuff with revision and assessment research so everyone thought this was great. Actually, looking at the results, I did, too.

Years later, when I got a bigger grant and could afford to have the entire data set evaluated, I did. And the findings were pretty significant (at least I and the editor of RTE thought so). So what the heck. I submitted the results to RTE and they accepted it. Thus, we have a quantitative study reported in the literature a little behind the times. However, I’m glad I did it when I did it. A qualitative treatment would have been much easier, especially with my experience and access to students. What this quantitative study did for me was validate what I thought I already knew about students, writing development, and instruction.

I should also say that this quantitative study was based on my tacit understanding of composition pedagogy grounded in at least fifteen years of experience as a writing teacher at several levels. So you might say that I already had a lot of qualitative information and used this quantitative approach for balance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rhetoricians have long recognized the importance of developing proficiency with discourse forms. For example, Quintilian, the ancient practitioner and teacher of oratory,
outlined various types of orations for his students to master (Matsen, Rollinson, & Sousa, 1990). Aside from the requisite good character, “exceptional gifts of speech,” and other qualities, Quintilian identified certain conventions of arrangement and style that must be followed by the narrator. He developed graded compositions as little exercises to prepare students to be adept users of language (Murphy, 1990). These *progymnasmata* were then used to perfect rhetorical technique by others. Such strategies later became the model in the Byzantine East and in schools in Western Europe (Matsen, Rollinson, & Sousa, 1990).

Oliver explained the intuitive drive of this study when she outlined more of her experience as a teacher. Notice that the following passage is based entirely on experience and is composed of general “truths” Oliver believes exist in different age groups. It is through this lens/context of experience that she 1) read the related literature, 2) designed her study, and 3) interpreted her results. Here, Oliver answers questions in at least four cells in the Contextualist Research Paradigm Matrix: Researcher x Question, Audience x Purpose, Evidence x Methods, and Researcher x Methods.

*Oliver:* I have taught ninth and eleventh graders and college freshmen. (No seventh grade.) I therefore have a pretty good idea of what these age levels are capable of. To go into some of the more sophisticated stylistic issues one does with freshmen (if you can call that sophisticated) is simply over the heads of younger students who, albeit very bright, are not developmentally ready to take in certain information. . . . the seventh graders are barely able to generate enough prose (e.g., telling a seventh grader to “vary sentence structure” is less obvious or useful than [telling] a college student).

Revision is another issue. A revision strategy must be very different for 9th graders than for college students in terms of motivation, attention level, and so forth.

Today writing is often judged by one’s ability to respond to any number of discourse tasks, and teachers of composition try to attend to the development of many different skills. Yet, as
the 1992 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Writing Report Card indicates, student’s writing quality is not consistent over different discourse aims. Thus,

by grade 12, the majority of students have some understanding of informative and narrative writing, but continue to have considerable difficulty with persuasive writing. (Applebee, Langer, Mullis, Latham, & Gentile, 1994, p. 3)

Whether or not students have received instruction in composing, the quality of their writing is affected by the kinds and amounts of rhetorical specification they are given in their prompts.

Most studies indicate that assignment effects do exist, but in what ways and to what extent remain to be learned. As several studies suggest, determining the influence of prompts on writing quality is extremely complex, (Greenberg, 1982; Hoetker, 1982; Huot, 1990; Keech, 1982; Mellon, 1976; 1981; Witte, 1992; Witte & Faigley). Yet it is important to do so because

if assignments are composed carefully so as to assist students . . . then their writing should be . . . much easier to evaluate. (Farrell, 1976, p. 224)

According to Huot (1990), the research on rhetorical specification has been “inconclusive” in establishing a relationship between the prompt and writing quality. Nevertheless, some studies suggest the importance of structure. For example, Smith and his colleagues (1985, cited in Huot, 1990) found that advanced writers did significantly better than average and basic writers when writing on open-ended topics. And Hoetker (1982) suggests that well-structured assignments may be more important for students who are “unable to intuit the unvoiced assumptions of the topic or to fill in the gaps as expertly and accurately as the accomplished student can” (p. 387).
Good writers can handle the demands of the rhetorical situation. However, writers who do not clearly understand the rhetorical question, or see only part of it within the assignment, often cannot solve the rhetorical problem. In an attempt to understand the nature of rhetorical choices in good and poor writers, Flower and Hayes (1981) developed a cognitive process theory of writing in which the “task environment” represented one of three major elements. Defined as “all . . . things outside the writer’s skin,” the task environment begins with the rhetorical problem or assignment which includes topic, audience, and “exigency” (goals, purpose). We will examine these in more detail.

Though Oliver presented a traditional literature review here, her interview illustrates that her experience “brought” her to the literature in a certain frame of mind, shaping how she interpreted that literature and, later, added to it via this study. The available literature played a large role in Oliver’s decisions. Below, Oliver answers questions from five cells in the Contextualist Research Paradigm Matrix: Researcher x Purpose, Audience x Purpose, Audience x Methods, Evidence x Methods, and Audience x Publication.

**Oliver:** At the time I conducted this study, there were many discussions regarding both writing prompts and assessment (still are). I agreed with a lot of the literature that talked about how discourse purpose affected student response. I also agreed with many who criticized the variety of discourse topics that were used to assess student writing ability. For example, a national assessment might use a narrative prompt one year, a persuasive prompt the next. The results which were used to evaluate student writing ability were disparate because the instrument (writing prompt) was unreliable.

Further, most of the literature targeted small age and ability groups. There were very few which looked at writers at several levels (albeit expert/novice studies are fairly common). Having had experience with ninth- and eleventh-grade students as well as college freshmen, I believed that a developmental component existed that few had addressed. I therefore decided to combine writing prompt variables with age variables with
the intention of looking at how particular elements in a writing prompt would influence writers at several levels.

**Purpose**

Researchers have long believed that different purposes elicit different levels of writing quality and different syntactic features (Moffett, 1968; Odell, 1981; Prater & Padia, 1983). Purpose affects the relationship between speaker and audience (Herrington, 1979). It can also influence syntax (Maimon & Nodine, 1978). Although subsequent studies have questioned the relationship between writing quality and syntactic maturity (Huot, 1990), several earlier findings show that language patterns are, at least, significantly different when students, especially young writers, write with different aims (Bortz, 1962). San Jose (1972) reported highly significant syntactic differences among rhetorical purposes for fourth-grade writing, citing persuasive pieces as the “most mature.” Perron (1977) found longer T-units in persuasive pieces than in essays exemplifying other discourse aims. Rosen (1969) identified longer T-units and modifications in referential writing than in expressive discourse. In an attempt to determine the effect of audience specification and mode of discourse on the syntactic complexity of sixth- and tenth-grade writers, Crowhurst and Piche (1979) found “clear and unequivocal” evidence that “mode was significant at both grade levels” (P. 107). They recommended argument assignments (as opposed to narratives) as especially applicable for measuring the development of syntactic skills.

**Topic**

Looking at the effects of the information given in the assignment topic, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963) recognized more than thirty years ago that the degree of topic abstraction helps determine the caliber of students’ writing. However, the small corpus of research on topic choice that
does exist has been inconclusive. Interpreting reports of “no effects” from such studies, Hoetker (1982) called them failures by the investigators to utilize methods of analysis sensitive enough to determine statistical and meaningful differences.

In one study to determine effects of information load, Brossell (1983) constructed six topics, each with three levels of “information load:” low, moderate, high. Essays resulting from “high-information-load” topics were much shorter, earned the lowest scores, and proved to be the most difficult for students to begin. Essays produced from “moderate-information load” topics were immediately limited and focused, and received the highest holistic scores. Brossell’s research suggested that too much or too little information weakens writing quality. While positing that information load is more important than the topic itself in producing written discourse, Brossell concluded that full rhetorical specification may hinder rather than help the writer in an examination setting and that wording can also affect writing quality. However, Brossell overlooked the actual administration of such assignments and neglected analysis from a writer’s point of view. The following examples of Brossell’s topics reveal a tremendous difference among the three levels:

**Level One**
Violence in the schools.

**Level Two**
According to recent reports in the news media, there has been a marked increase in incidents of violence in public schools. Why, in your view, does such violence occur?

**Level Three**
You are a member of a local school council made up of teachers and citizens. A recent increase in incidents of violence in the schools has gotten widespread coverage in the local news media. As a teacher, you are aware of the problem, though you have not been personally involved in an incident. At its next meeting, the council elects to take some action. It asks each member to draft a statement setting forth
his or her views on why such violence occurs. The statements will be published in the local newspaper. Write a statement expressing your own personal views on the causes of violence in the schools. (pp. 166-167)

Most experienced composition instructors would predict that students writing in response to Level One would have difficulty because of the scarcity of information, while those tackling Level Three would suffer from the length and extent of instructions, and from the remoteness of the audience (i.e., a local school council). Thus, Brossell created prompts that as instruments for his research would seem to have affected his ability to address the question he proposes to answer. As Keech (1982) stated:

the more text testers add to the writing assignment, the less guarantee they have that students will read and correctly interpret all of the guide lines . . . in the extreme cases, students may either ignore a lengthy set of instructions, or may become so embroiled in working out exactly what the tester wants that they are distracted from their central task of trying to generate meaningful, coherent text. (p. 7)

Discussing “thoroughness” of rhetorical specification for large-scale assessments, Hoetker and Brossell (1986; 1989) argued for the “frame topic” as the most “content fair” prompt. Using “a noun phrase consisting of a class name and two qualifying attributes,” Hoetker and Brossell claimed that the frame topic has several advantages: It allows students to control their topics by “limiting the subject and finding a thesis;” it gives test makers an enormous latitude in creating prompts; and it provides raters with a larger variety of subjects and approaches to read. Such topics look like these: “A character in a book, film, or TV series who is a good role model for young people. A book written since 1900 that has had important effects on society” (p.414).

The researchers concluded that the frame topic—with little rhetorical specification—does not adversely affect poorer writers,
and thus is an effective writing prompt for large-scale assessments.

Writing topics may also affect students in ways which are often difficult to predict or control. For example, ethnic or racial background may influence the writer’s perspective regarding the writing task. However, how writing assessments affect specific groups is not at all clear. For example, White (1985; 1994) found that writing scores for certain ethnic groups were higher using essays than those they received using indirect measures. He thus encouraged the use of essays for all students. On the other hand, Breland and Griswold (1981) found that some members of ethnic minorities “tended to write less well” than an independent measure would predict in a comparison between indirect measures and essays (p. 21). These conflicting findings underscore the need for more investigation of what might be the fairest measures to use for all students.

**Audience**

Much of the research on audience is also inconclusive. Indeed, even its definition is problematic. Do we mean imagined audience? Real audience? Implied audience? Absence of audience? Some studies show significant audience effects relating to the degree of intimacy the writer had with the audience. Crowhurst and Fiche (1979) found that designated audience affected sixth and tenth graders whose writing was more “syntactically complex” when they addressed teachers than when they addressed friends. Similarly, fifth, eighth and twelfth graders, and expert adult writers composed longer clauses the lower their intimacy with their audience, and more subordinations the higher their intimacy with their audience (Rubin & Fiche, 1979). In another study, the degree of intimacy between writers and their audiences altered the syntactic complexity with which they wrote (Fiche, Michlin, Johnson, & Rubin, 1975).

Two other studies show effects relating to the status of the audience. In examining the effect of audience on language
functions (controlling, relational, informing and interpreting, theorizing and projecting) in sixth and eleventh graders writing to two audiences, Craig (1988) found that essays written for “high-status” readers (teachers) were more “objective and impersonal” than were papers intended for best friends. Analyzing the awareness of audience by fifth graders, Frank (1992) examined their success with transactional writing tasks revised for two audiences—third graders and adults. Though writers successfully communicated to both audiences, they did a better job for their younger readers. Frank identified the importance of “the realistic quality of a transactional writing task” as opposed to the “hypothetical . . . ‘pseudo-informative’ or ‘inauthentic’ task’ “ (pp. 286, 278).

Other studies show the effects of specificity. Investigating the effects of two versions of a writing prompt, Leu, Keech, Murphy, and Kinzer (1982) found no significant difference in the performances of tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade students. They did find that prompts with specified audience produced 20 alternate mode papers (e.g., letters, journal entries), while those writing with unspecified audience produced only 7 alternate mode papers. Students in this study also reported that they spent more time on prompt versions with the less specified audience.

Analyzing the quality of college-level persuasive writing, Black (1989) reported that writers of “varying abilities may benefit from having pertinent information about their audience . . .” (p. 248). Rafoth (1989), in evaluating college freshman writing, agreed with Elbow (1987), noting that attention to audience occurs more in the revision stages of drafting than in the beginning writing stage. Roen and Willey (1988), investigating audience awareness in drafting and revising of college freshmen, concluded much the same. Although Redd-Boyd and Slater (1989) did find students writing for a designated audience scoring higher than those without such an audience, their data did not reflect higher scores for real audiences than for imaginary audiences.
Another study shows the effects of the writer’s age on rewriting for a specific audience. Looking at the development of audience-adapted writing skills, Kroll (1985) found that, when given the task of rewriting a linguistically complex story, older writers were better able to simplify text for younger readers than were younger writers. Working with fifth-, seventh-, ninth-, and eleventh-grade students, and with college freshmen, he also identified older writers’ ability to revise meaning more easily, not staying exclusively with “word-oriented” strategies. Examining “receding” procedures for adapting writing to a particular (young) audience, Kroll chose a wide-ranging age group to “chart developmental trends” of writers, and to “sketch out a more adequate ‘map’ of audience-adapted writing skills between the end of elementary school and the beginning of college” (pp. 124-125). In his study, older students tended not only to change wording, but also “to retell parts of the story in language more accessible to young readers. . .” (p. 133).

Cherry (1989) warned against unclear audience cues. Describing a writing situation gone awry, he reported on the effects of a writing prompt when the scenario failed to specify audience, thus “placing students both inside and outside” of the writing task. Apparently, in attempts to frame questions as interesting, challenging, and meaningful prompts, teachers and researchers sometimes create problems for writers.

So far, Oliver has articulated why she asked the research questions she did, how her experience played a role in her decisions, and how other colleagues and literature influenced a part of her work. I did not ask her how she worded her questions (the Evidence x Question cell in the matrix) because her study so clearly stated them, as shown below.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study examined the effects of varying topic, purpose, and audience specification on the writing quality of seventh-, ninth-, and eleventh-grade students, and college freshmen. Specifically, I asked the following questions:
What relationship exists between writing quality and varying degrees of information about the writing prompt with respect to topic, purpose, and audience?

What relationship exists between students’ age level, writing quality, and amount of information in the prompt?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 624 essays were collected from advanced students in seventh grade (127 essays), college preparatory students in ninth grade (196 essays) and eleventh grade (180 essays), and university freshmen (121 essays). Many teachers participating in the study had had previous experience with a National Writing Project affiliate and were already providing strong writing programs for their students. College freshmen were completing the first of two required composition courses at a large university. Thus, all student writers had had some training and experience in composing.

Organizing the 624 essays in this study must have been a formidable task. While Oliver did not detail how she coded her data, she pointed to an important awareness: Know your weaknesses and ask for help when you need it (Researcher x Method cell in the matrix).

Oliver: I coded the data by hand on sheets. It’s tedious but not so bad if you’re listening to the radio anyway or “watching” the news on tv. I had a small grant to pay someone for the “real” data entry. Then, after the “runs,” my friend and I discussed the results. After this “pilot,” and several years later, I secured another university grant and had the whole thing entered by someone else. I was very glad for that because it would have taken forever for me to do the whole set.

Assignment

Assignment variables were based on the example and rationale offered by Freedman and Robinson (1982) in their presentation of successful topic design. These researchers
created an expository or “transactional” topic based on students’ personal experience. To reduce assessment complications while simultaneously increasing reliability, they offered students only one choice. This study adapted the following question from their study. (It was first administered for a writing proficiency test given to juniors at California State University at San Francisco and later used for several other assessments.)

Everyone has a gripe about the community in which he or she lives. Whether that problem be major or minor, a matter of rising neighborhood burglaries or of inadequate parking facilities on campus, most of us feel that some community need is being ignored by local officials. What’s your gripe? How does it affect your everyday life, and how would you suggest correcting it?

Changes were made to make the information less abstract for younger students. In addition, information about audience was added.

Eight combinations were created to include more or less information in the assignment. Assignment #1 (T+P+A+) contains the most specific information about all three variables—topic, purpose and audience—while assignment #8 (T-P-A-) contains the least specific information about all three variables. (See Appendix A.)

Although many researchers agree that a fair test of writing skills demands at least two writing samples for each discourse purpose (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Scheer, 1963; Kincaid, 1970; Odell, 1981), the focus of this study was not to diagnose writing problems of individual students but, rather, to provide a basis for studying the effects of assignment variables on writing quality. Thus, participating students were given one assignment to complete in one class period. Moreover, more teachers were willing to allow their classes to write one essay during one class period than were willing to spend several
sessions collecting multiple writing samples unrelated to regular curricula.

**Procedure**

*Sample and Setting.* The sample for this study consisted of seventh-, ninth-, and eleventh-grade students enrolled in "advanced" English classes in an affluent community in Central Texas. These students were considered "higher-ability" within their age groups. The choice of "higher-ability" students was based on several factors. First, at this level, students had had at least some opportunity to practice their writing skills prior to completing the writing assignment for the present study. Second, we believed that such common problems as anxiety, inability to generate prose, and the creation of mechanical errors were minimal because each of the participating departments' curricula call for positive writing environments. The target schools are located near a large university, and many of the teachers participating in this research have also been part of other projects reflecting recent trends in composition pedagogy. Because the purpose of this study was to look at the effects of rhetorical specification in prompts on writing quality of students at various age levels, every attempt was made to make the population as homogeneous as possible.

Likewise, the college level students in this study attended the flagship campus of the state's university system, having graduated from high schools comparable to that of the high school students in the study. Each of the eight assignments was given to "advanced English" seventh grade classes, "college prep" ninth- and eleventh-grade English classes, and college freshmen. High school students were asked to consider this writing exercise as an example of a large-scale writing assessment which they would experience in the near future. With no prior knowledge of the assignment, students were given forty-five minutes to complete their essays. Test packets included a cover sheet with the assignment at the top and several lined sheets for
writing. Students were allowed to make notes on the first sheet if they wished but were instructed not to write their names anywhere. The tests were coded so that individual teachers could use copies of the tests later for instruction if they wished. For further motivation, instructors told students that their task was adapted from a writing sample used in an actual assessment test and that such practice was important.

Students were assigned to each of the “treatments” by class. That is, each of eight classrooms for each grade received one of the assignment variations. Though random assignment of prompts throughout all eight classes at each grade level was requested, many teachers preferred to give each class a particular question, a process which they perceived would make their task simpler. Because students had already been assigned to their classes randomly, I agreed to this procedure.

Raters. Four high school teachers were selected as raters, none of whom taught in the schools where writing samples were collected. However, each had had experience teaching composition and assessing student writing. These teachers were trained in holistic scoring techniques. The scoring criteria were modeled after general guidelines used by Educational Testing Services (1987). Training sessions began with a description of holistic scoring (see Appendix B), a presentation of Assignment #8 (prompt with least rhetorical information), discussion materials, and the rubric for scoring. The raters completed five sessions lasting about four hours each.

Each essay received two readings using a rating scale of 6 to 1. If an essay received a discrepant score of more than one numerical difference between two raters (e.g., a score of 6 and a score of 4), a third teacher rated the essay. All rater reliabilities were computed using Cronbach’s (1970) alpha coefficient. The inter-rater reliability was .82. The main and interactive effects of topic, purpose, and audience on writing quality were analyzed using a 2X2X2 analysis of variance for all grades together and for each grade separately.
I asked Eileen Oliver if she sought help for her analyses of data. Though she felt she might have been able to handle the data analysis on her own, she sought the help of a friend who is an expert, illustrating her own assessment of her strengths and weaknesses in this project (the Researcher x Method cell in the matrix) and demonstrating how a conceptual knowledge of statistics can help us work with research consultants and statisticians more effectively. Further, Oliver illustrates that although this study does not appear to be collaborative, it had collaborative moments, and, as all researchers, she kept learning more about research through the experience.

Oliver: I worked with someone who helped me run the data. I could have done it myself and would have, but we had a friend who did that kind of work all the time. It was great working with him because, as he did it, he explained it so that I’d be able to do it on my own. He was also very valuable to run things by as I looked at my data to try to figure out what I was getting.

I think a lot of people paid graduate students to help them with analyses of various sorts. It depends on the person whether or not it goes well. In subsequent work I’ve done, I’ve had some people help with various data analysis. However, if they’re not in touch with what you’re doing, they’re just number crunchers and often crunch the wrong numbers. For example, about three years ago I was looking at the difference that certain variables had on different racial groups. The “consultant” who was supposed to assist me in my analysis suggested that, since my “n” for Native Americans was not very large, I should combine it with another racial group. So you see that if you do not understand what you’re looking for, an “analyst” may not be any use to you at all.

Results

Significant main effects and interactions were obtained for seventh-grade essays for topic \([F = 12.46, p>.0006]\) and purpose \([F = 6.49, p>.01]\); for ninth-grade essays for topic \([F = 28.46, p>.000]\); for eleventh-grade essays for purpose \([F = 29.22, p>.0000]\) and the interaction between topic and audience \([F = 4.55, p>.03]\); for college freshman essays for interactions between topic and audience \([F = 13.70, p>.0003]\); and for all grades together with topic \([F = 5.65, p>.021]\),
purpose \( F = 14.02, p > 0.002 \), and the interaction between topic and audience \( F = 9.57, p > 0.002 \) (see Tables 1-5 respectively).

Generally, the statistical results indicate that seventh graders did better with simpler statements of topic and specific direction in purpose. However, a look at Figures 1 and 2 confounds this evidence because Assignment #1 (T+P+A+) has a high mean, as do Assignments #7 and #8 (both with P-). A closer analysis shows that less elaborate topic is

### TABLE 1

Analysis of Variance for Assignment Variable at Grade 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Partial SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Prob &gt; F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>17.55</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>13.14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.14</td>
<td>12.46</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>6.85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.85</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic*Audience</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>128.71</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>146.26</strong></td>
<td><strong>126</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.16</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2

Analysis of Variance for Assignment Variable at Grade 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Partial SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Prob &gt; F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>32.42</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>7.51</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>30.70</td>
<td>28.46</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic*Audience</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>206.01</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>238.43</strong></td>
<td><strong>195</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.22</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
still the major indication of higher scores, while the interaction of T+ and A+, a significant effect at other levels, may account for the higher score of Assignment #1. (A discussion of this interaction between topic and audience follows in the next section.)

On the other hand, there is clear evidence that ninth-grade writers utilized specific information about topic (Table 6 & Figure 2). Specific information about purpose gave eleventh-grade students an advantage in their writing tasks (Table 6 & Figure 3). The interaction between topic and audience for all grades together (Figure 4), for eleventh graders (Figure 5),

| TABLE 3 |
| Analysis of Variance for Assignment Variable at Grade 11 |
| Number of obs = 180  | R-square = 0.1852 |
| Root MSE = 1.11223  | Adj R-square = 0.1665 |
| Source | Partial SS | df | MS | F | Prob > F |
| Model | 49.20 | 4 | 12.30 | 9.94 | 0.00 |
| Topics | 4.35 | 1 | 4.35 | 3.52 | 0.06 |
| Purpose | 36.15 | 1 | 36.15 | 29.22 | 0.00 |
| Audience | 2.19 | 1 | 2.19 | 1.77 | 0.19 |
| Topic*Audience | 5.62 | 1 | 5.62 | 4.55 | 0.03 |
| Residual | 216.49 | 175 | 1.24 |
| Total | 265.68 | 179 | 1.48 |

| TABLE 4 |
| Analysis of Variance for Assignment Variable for College Freshmen |
| Number of obs = 121  | R-square = 0.1305 |
| Root MSE = 0.995986  | Adj R-square = 0.0927 |
| Source | Partial SS | df | MS | F | Prob > F |
| Model | 17.12 | 5 | 3.42 | 3.45 | 0.01 |
| Topics | 0.01 | 1 | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.95 |
| Purpose | 0.98 | 1 | 0.98 | 0.99 | 0.32 |
| Audience | 1.04 | 2 | 0.52 | 0.52 | 0.59 |
| Topic*Audience | 13.59 | 1 | 13.59 | 13.70 | 0.00 |
| Residual | 114.08 | 115 | 0.99 |
| Total | 131.20 | 120 | 1.09 |
and four college freshmen (Figure 6) raises interesting questions regarding the relationship between these two variables.

**Topic and Audience Interaction**

The question of topic and audience interaction is a difficult one. Yet its significance for college freshmen and eleventh graders (and thus for overall significance) makes it worthy of investigation. It appears from these data that assignments which provide complementarity between topic and audience—that is, more specific information about both topic

**TABLE 5**

Analysis of Variance for Assignment Variable for All Grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Partial SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Prob &gt; F</th>
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<td>5</td>
<td>8.14</td>
<td>6.35</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>7.24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.24</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>17.98</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17.98</td>
<td>14.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic*Audience</td>
<td>12.26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.26</td>
<td>9.57</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>792.37</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>833.08</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 6**

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for All Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T+P+A+</td>
<td>T+P+A-</td>
<td>T+P-A+</td>
<td>T+P-A-</td>
<td>T-P+A+</td>
<td>T-P+A-</td>
<td>T-P-A+</td>
<td>T-P-A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
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<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 13</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
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<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and audience (T+A+) or less specific information for both (T-A)—yielded higher scores than those with differing levels of specificity (Figure 5). Statistical significance was also found for eleventh-grade writers (See Figure 6) and for college freshmen (Figure 7). This interaction is difficult to explain because audience itself was not significant at any level. Perhaps in these higher grades, because students have received more instruction and have matured as writers, they attempted to utilize the rhetorical specifications available to them and found conflicting amounts of information confusing (i.e., T+A- or T-A+).

The varied findings regarding audience effect discussed earlier suggest that we must be careful to craft prompts which do, indeed, define audience. These results indicate that students’ perception of audience real, imagined, or contrived—has an effect on their ability to address readers. Perhaps, at the college level, writers do look for and attempt to address the demands of the writing task. Results here indicate that a specific topic with a believable audience, or a very general topic without audience specification, provided students who
have more experience and who pay more attention to rhetorical cues with a less confusing writing task.

The question remains, however, whether or not the audience variables in this study presented prompts with a clear sense of audience or no audience, or whether, as in some earlier work, the question of authenticity confounded the results.
Seventh-grade writers

Seventh graders seemed to do better with less information about topic (Table 6 & Figure 1). Perhaps at this level, students found the task of analyzing a complete prompt cumbersome, even distracting. Similar to
the problem which arises with "high information load topics" (Brossell, 1983), these young writers were not able to make use of so much information. Teachers at this level remarked that though their students had had "lots of writing experience," they were not used to writing in a testing situation such as this one. In fact, some of the teachers said that questions arose from some students regarding their task. I speculate that these questions came from those who were given the more extensive topic assignments. Although assignments with more specific information about purpose were scored significantly higher, Figure 1 shows that only those with more topic and audience information were above the grade level mean (T+P+A+). Although not statistically significant at the .05 level (F=2.95, p .08), this circumstance may be related to the relationship between topic and audience. It may be that at this grade level, students should be given simpler writing tasks for two reasons: they lack exposure to much rhetorical manipulation, and they are not developmentally ready to utilize this information.
These students did not generate long pieces, but their writing was lively and interesting. Results from this study suggest that teachers might want to give students prompts which are more quickly grasped. This may be the level at which the simple “frame topic” (Hoetker & Brossell, 1986; 1989) is useful.

**Ninth Grade Writers**

More specific information about topic made the most difference with ninth graders (Figure 2). This finding is compatible with what Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986) stated about early adolescents’ ability to discuss substantive issues. Also at this age, students have received some formal instruction in writing. They are beginning to organize ideas, elaborate, add, and combine. Operating on a “knowledge-telling” level, they are still able to generate prose from a background awareness that facilitates their work.

Ninth-grade writers were motivated primarily by topic. Unlike the seventh graders, the ninth graders, when given a topic which allowed them to state their complaints, responded emotionally to the topic itself, regardless of other rhetorical components. These characteristics were not only mentioned by their teachers in comments like, “They really loved this topic,” and “They ‘went to town’ on this assignment,” but also by the raters who stopped time and again to mention the humor, ethos, and candor of these “adolescents speaking.” Perhaps at this level, students take advantage of “voice” as they vent about what for them are emotional issues regarding rules and regulations. Essay #1 (see Appendix C), written in response to assignment #4 (T+P-A+) by a ninth grader, reflects his strong feelings about his school’s closed-campus policy.

**Eleventh Grade Writers**

By the eleventh grade, students seemed to make the best use of rhetorical specification (Figure 3). Not only did complementarity of topic and audience affect their results, so
too did specificity of purpose. This evidence makes sense to high school teachers who see their eleventh graders emerging from early adolescence into more serious writers. In these later adolescent years, college prep students are beginning to look more closely at college requirements, they have taken the PSAT, they are starting to research colleges and make applications. As one teacher told me, “By this time, they are beginning to believe what we’ve been telling them. They are starting to see that writing counts. They are listening.” Perhaps that is why so much of a student’s rhetorical training in composition takes place in eleventh grade. At any rate, writers from this population took advantage of complementarity in topic and audience interaction as well as specific purpose.

A look at the writing samples themselves illustrates the importance of rhetorical specification. Essay #2 (see Appendix C), for example, was written from Assignment #1 (T+P+A+) which gives the most complete rhetorical information. The writer states the problem clearly (the need for better physical education classes), contrasts her subject with another grown up, develops her thesis with rich detail, and finishes by suggesting ways to improve existing courses.

Essay #3, on the other hand, is written in response to Assignment #3 (T+P-A-). Not only does this essay reflect the consequences for non-specified features, but essays with specific topic and unspecified audiences combined yielded lower scores according to interaction effects. Receiving lower scores (3 & 3), Essay #3’s deficiencies become evident examining it from a holistic point of view. One could argue that logically as well as syntactically, the first writer is more sophisticated. However, the work of writer #3 is typical of those writing without specified purpose. That is, instead of stating a problem, showing how it affects his life, and suggesting a solution, this writer flounders about and then states several problems with few, if any, suggestions for improving the situations. Also typical of these unfocused papers, it begins with an introductory paragraph which does little to propel the argument. The writer
then launches into a discussion of the price of yearbooks, moving illogically to what the yearbook staff must do with the money. Next he talks about too many clubs, suggesting that admission standards should be raised and the number of members should be limited. He has then, essentially, two topics, not one, a typical modus operandi for eleventh-grade students writing from limited rhetorical specification.

Although Oliver presented her data in a detailed manner, there was more to this study than what we see here. In a part of her interview, Oliver illustrated a researcher’s sensitivity to context, especially when trying to decide about the applicability of research results presented in the final report (cells in the matrix: Audience x Publication, Evidence x Publication, Audience x Purpose, and Evidence x Purpose). Further, she illustrated a distinction that all researchers should be aware of—the difference between statistical significance and practical significance (or importance).

Oliver: [T]he other piece of this study had to do with lexical cohesion which was a much more atomistic analysis than even what you see here. The cohesion part is not very useful (or at least I didn’t think so)—though it yielded significant results, as well. But this part was so esoteric that I didn’t see that it would help the field of composition pedagogy so I didn’t pursue it any further.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated whether or not varying degrees of information about topic, purpose, or audience affect the writing quality of students at four grade levels, and if so, in what ways and at what ages? It appears from this research that specification in writing prompts does indeed affect essay quality at certain levels. Thus we should assure that the assignments we give students are carefully designed to promote students production of their best work. Evidence here reflects the important use high school students make of topic, purpose, and the interaction between topic and audience at certain levels. At least in this research, high school students
who were given clear rhetorical tasks wrote better essays than did students given less clear rhetorical tasks.

Seventh graders, on the other hand, may also need encouragement for writing. These findings suggest that while the purpose of their tasks should be clear, the prompt might well be simpler. Apparently, these students applied classroom instruction directly in their work. For example, many of their essays had “MAP” written at the top. I asked one of the teachers what this symbol meant. Her response was that she and a colleague had taught students to write this label to remind themselves that they should address “message” (M), “audience” (A), and “purpose” (P) each time they wrote.

Although audience was the only element that did not prove significant by itself, its interaction with topic also raises some concerns. At the very least, we should prevent confusion in audience specification, or we will end up with what Cherry (1989) warned will create problems for writers. And while Redd-Boyd and Slater (1989) did not find a significant difference between a real and imaginary audience, still their results tell us that a target audience is better than no audience at all.

“Inauthenticity,” I believe, is the major problem with the variable audience in the present study. That is, those students who were told, “Your essay will be forwarded to a parents’ group interested in the welfare of its students,” had also been “asked to consider this writing exercise as an example.” Thus writers saw from the beginning that their audience was not authentic, a rhetorical element Frank (1992) identified as very important.

Perhaps, too, as Elbow (1987) suggested, utilizing rhetorical information about audience occurs more in the revision stages of writing and would appear in a writing exercise that required more than just one sitting. In any case, the issue of audience relevance has been cloudy and remains so. Continued research in this area should identify real audiences for writers or at least ensure that writers are not encumbered by confusing audience demands.
The importance of providing guidance to writers at certain levels is clarified somewhat in this study. It appears that seventh graders did not utilize information as well as did the more mature writers. They adapted better with simpler topics. These writers (considered high achievers) generated much less prose than did older students. Yet they were still able to come up with lively, interesting pieces. Simple prompts like the frame topic (Hoetker & Brossell, 1986; 1989) might work best. As discussed, however, ninth graders seemed to respond to strong topic cues; their motivation for writing seemed clear in the voices they projected.

Ability of students to write for different purposes is reflected in the results of the NAEP study by Applebee and his colleagues (1994). The most proficient eighth-grade writers in the NAEP study (those judged to be at or above the 90th percentile) responded to narrative and informative tasks. However, while they “seem[ed] to have a growing command of the structural features and rhetorical devices appropriate to narrative and informative writing,” they were less successful in developing persuasive essays (p. 94). Though they showed an awareness of how to proceed, their essays were not as well developed. That research, along with the work of Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986), underscores the findings of the present study-younger students were less able than older students to grasp more difficult purpose cues and utilize them. Because in the NAEP study both eighth- and twelfth-grade students wrote better responses when discussing a school problem, it seems reasonable that topic and audience make a difference in student prose.

These findings argue for continued experience with well-crafted prompts, allowing writers to improve with both good instruction and maturation. Though audience was not statistically significant in this study, its significance when interacting with topic in the later grades was important. This research concurs with previous studies that show more mature writers as better able to accomplish the needs of readers both
in terms of word-oriented strategies as well as their ability to revise meaning (Kroll, 1985), a phenomenon which "seemed to occur in the junior high school years, roughly between grades 7 and 9" (p. 137). Knowledge of audience did improve the work of college-level writers (Black, 1989; Elbow, 1987; Rafoth, 1989).

Certainly an important area for future research is how "degree of intimacy" influences writing quality (Craig, 1988; Crowhurst & Piche, 1979; Piche, Michlin, Johnson, & Rubin, 1975; Rubin & Piche, 1979). Further examination of "audience" in writing prompts for both junior and senior high school students is needed.

Statistical results as well as comments by teachers and raters of ninth-grade essays indicate that these early adolescents respond positively to topics that engage them. Clearly, this group showed the importance of choosing topics that are relevant to their lives. As their teachers pointed out, these writers were sensitive to issues in their environment, and they loved speaking their minds. Pedagogical implications are obvious: more practice writing about relevant topics.

Eleventh-grade writers took advantage of rhetorical cues and produced high quality pieces when given clear purpose. When topic and audience were in complementarity, they wrote without confusion. Results of this study show that high ability high school juniors are able to produce good persuasive discourse. Testimony to the capability of these high school juniors came often from raters' comments. In fact, there were many times that one or the other remarked that these essays were, on the whole, as good as some of the college students' work. From a pedagogical standpoint, eleventh graders may be best able to take advantage of rhetorical specification. This result underscores the importance of composing experiences for students at this age.

According to the NAEP results, the top twelfth-grade writers are more limited when writing persuasively than for either of the other rhetorical categories used in the study:
Their persuasive writing similarly revealed a clear understanding of the basic rhetorical features of persuasion, but continuing difficulty in the use of evidence in support of effective arguments. (p. 98)

Along with the NAEP findings, this study argues for continued practice with sound writing tasks. Finally and happily, we see that college freshmen are affected less by rhetorical specification than are other groups (Table 6 & Figure 6); they can usually “make something out of nothing.” The writers in this study had experience and instruction composing, having just completed one semester of entry-level composition (in addition to other past writing experiences). At this level, students have not only matured as writers, but also, and perhaps more importantly, have benefitted from their experiences composing.

I asked Eileen Oliver how she felt about her findings. Again, she referred to knowledge gained through her experience as a teacher but illustrated an important teacher-researcher connection in this quantitative study. She also shared an interesting anecdote as an “aside.” Though this portion of the interview does not directly relate to any particular cell in the matrix, Oliver expressed her excitement here, a voice she chose to keep out of her report.

Oliver: I was pretty excited [about the results] because it’s always nice to know you’re on the right track. What I found was that writing prompts do make a difference and they make “different differences” depending upon the age group. I sensed that as a teacher, and was encouraged to see this validated as a researcher. I was puzzled by the data that said “audience” (whether there was one stated or not) did not make a significant difference. During my dissertation defense it was none other than James Kinneavy who explained this phenomenon, saying that he, too, had had such an outcome. His explanation was that students don’t really “buy it” when the prompt says, “Pretend you’re writing to . . .” They know they’re still just writing to a teacher. That made sense to me.
This kind of analysis is very informative. No, it doesn’t tell the whole story. But, coming from someone in the humanities (readin’ and writin’ and talking about books), it was very exciting to see that something one has a tacit awareness of as a teacher can really be proved through systematic analysis.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine what kinds of effects (if any) varying degrees of topic, purpose, and audience specifications have on the writing quality of seventh-, ninth-, and eleventh-grade students and college freshmen. The results of this study may have several implications for pedagogy:

Assessment

• Although this study does not specifically look at reading skills, the earlier discussion regarding confusing and poorly written writing prompts necessitates considering this issue. When creating a writing prompt, assessors must distinguish between reading ability and writing skills. If the reading task is confusing or difficult, the writer’s poor performance may be due to poor reading rather than poor writing skills.

• The purpose of the assessment should determine the nature of the prompt. That is, the goal of providing the best writing prompt from which all students can write is different from a goal of “separating the good writers from the poor writers” through prompts designed for that purpose.

• If audience information is provided, it should be realistic; an inauthentic or conflicting audience may create problems for writers.

Instruction

• Experience generating prose is crucial for all writers. As Shaughnessy (1977) still reminds us, basic writers are writers with no experience. Further, young writers need the freedom, practice, and guidance to develop into good
writers. Looking at the writing samples from this study the developmental factor is clear.

• Seventh graders differ from college freshmen in the most obvious ways. They do not write as extensively or as clearly as their older counterparts. They are young adolescents, and their interests and concerns are also egocentric and adolescent. They need short, relevant topics which engage them and make them want to write. For them, not getting to eat lunch on “the bench” like the eighth graders is a great problem. They write passionately about such things. On the other hand, eleventh graders are beginning to make decisions that will affect their future lives. Their writing reflects this change. They write intense essays about “Who Am I?” and “Where Will I Be Next?” They are engaged in writing that requires them to be introspective. The subject matter chosen by these various age levels reflects the developmental interests of adolescents in making choices about what they want to read, and their tastes change as they mature.

• The elaborated topics the ninth graders responded to in this study indicate that at this age we can begin to manipulate topics and provide writers with more information and suggestions.

• As writers enter their later teens, they are better able to write for different, more difficult rhetorical purposes. By this time, they should be comfortable (and have had practice) using many modes of discourse.

• Audience adaptation should increase in level of difficulty as the writer develops. Teachers should encourage students to observe the ways in which their writing changes according to audience specification. Attention to difference in language register, syntax, and vocabulary all figure in the response to changing rhetorical demands. Conversation about audience helps students to watch for and create more realistic writing situations. Junior and senior high school students should be accomplished in revising essays to accommodate audience.
Effective and rigorous composition instruction pays off. As writers mature, they build on their prior experience to produce better quality prose. The findings here indicate that rhetorical specification in writing prompts does make a difference. Good topics and clear purposes assist students in developing higher quality work than when these elements are either not clear or are lacking. We see that complementarity in topic and audience also facilitates good writing. Further, the value of various aspects of writing prompts is different across age levels. However, the issue of audience is still unresolved. Though complementarity of topic and audience was significant, the lack of significance for audience as a main effect calls for more work in this specific area.

The findings in the present study are suggestive only; they provide some evidence that various rhetorical elements could be explicitly introduced to students at certain ages. However, the design and statistical results of this research are far from conclusive. Additional research is needed to learn more about the interaction of topic, purpose, and audience, together with an analysis of samples of successful student writing to find out how these students have used the elements in the assignment prompts.

I asked Oliver how this research had changed her teaching. In her answer, she articulated responses to two cells in the matrix (Audience x Question and Audience x Purpose). She also hints at an interesting look at voice (the Researcher x Publication cell). While Oliver produced a traditional report here, she shares her research in other ways: she applies it herself to her work with her own students and she uses it to train future teachers. Such “publication” in these other forms suggests that the traditional researcher’s voice (often criticized for being impersonal and disinterested) can lead to other kinds of voices when research findings are applied to other contexts.

Oliver: I certainly have used this research (why else do we do it?). And I think it’s very important for people to conduct research that matters.
The best part of all this is that I am an “English teacher educator” and thus have had many classes of students who are going out into the junior and senior high schools, community colleges, and colleges and will teach writing. This information has been really useful to share with them as well. It’s one thing to have anecdotal evidence. It’s much better to support that with “hard data.”

APPENDIX A

Combinations of More and Less Information
About Topic, Purpose, Audience

More Information About Topic (T+): Everyone has a complaint about his or her school. The problem may be, for example, too much homework, not enough dances or sports activities, or too few clubs. In any case, most of us feel that some educational need is being ignored by teachers, administrators and parents.

Less Information About Topic (T- ) Everyone has a complaint about his or her school. Most of us feel that some need is being ignored.

More Information About Purpose (P+) What is your complaint? Write an essay telling how this problem affects your everyday life and how you would suggest correcting it.

Less Information About Purpose (P-) What is your complaint? Discuss.

More Information About Audience (A+) Your essay will be forwarded to a parents’ group interested in the welfare of its students.

Less Information About Audience (A-)

Assignment #1 T+P+A+: Everyone has a complaint about his or her school. The problem may be, for example, too much homework, not enough dances or sports activities, or too few clubs. In any case, most of us feel that some educational need is being ignored by teachers, administrators and parents.

What is your complaint? Write an essay telling how this problem affects your everyday life and how you would suggest
Assignment #2 T+P+T-A+: Everyone has a complaint about his or her school. The problem may be, for example, too much homework, not enough dances or sports activities, or too few clubs. In any case, most of us feel that some educational need is being ignored by teachers, administrators and parents.

What is your complaint? Write an essay telling how this problem affects your everyday life and how you would suggest correcting it.

Assignment #3 T+P-A-: Everyone has a complaint about his or her school. The problem may be, for example, too much homework, not enough dances or sports activities, or too few clubs. In any case, most of us feel that some educational need is being ignored by teachers, administrators and parents.

What is your complaint? Discuss.

Assignment #4 T+P-A+: Everyone has a complaint about his or her school. The problem may be, for example, too much homework, not enough dances or sports activities, or too few clubs. In any case, most of us feel that some educational need is being ignored by teachers, administrators and parents.

What is your complaint? Discuss. Your essay will be forwarded to a parents’ group interested in the welfare of its students.

Assignment #5 T-P+A+: Everyone has a complaint about his or her school. Most of us feel that some need is being ignored.

What is your complaint? Write an essay telling how this problem affects your everyday life and how you would suggest correcting it. Your essay will be forwarded to a parents’ group interested in the welfare of its students.

Assignment #6 T-P+A-: Everyone has a complaint about his or her school. Most of us feel that some need is being ignored.
What is your complaint? Write an essay telling how this problem affects your everyday life and how you would suggest correcting it.

Assignment #7 T-P-A+: Everyone has a complaint about his or her school. Most of us feel that some need is being ignored. What is your complaint? Discuss. Your essay will be forwarded to a parents’ group interested in the welfare of its students.

Assignment #8 T-P-A-: Everyone has a complaint about his or her school. Most of us feel that some need is being ignored. What is your complaint? Discuss.

APPENDIX B

Holistic Scoring Guide

Holistic scoring is defined as any procedure which stops short of enumerating linguistic, rhetorical, or informational features. The ranking procedure used in this study was adapted from that used by the Educational Testing Service (see References). For information regarding that adaptation please contact the author.

APPENDIX C

Examples of Students’ Compositions

Essay #1-Assignment #4 (T+P-A+) Ninth-Grade Writer

Everyone going to school, especially high school, has at least one or two complaints about their school. My main complaint is the present policy of a closed campus at lunch for the freshmen and sophomores.

At the moment, juniors and seniors are permitted to leave campus for lunch; freshmen and sophomores are not. The punishment for breaking this policy is two hours D-hall for the underclassman who left the campus, and four hours D-hall for the upperclassman who took him or her out to lunch.
Presently, this policy is not one hundred percent enforceable. I, myself, and I know many others too, go out to lunch on a regular basis. Some freshmen and sophomores look like a junior or senior, and pass right by the teacher on duty. For both first and second lunch, there is a teacher, standing by the doors, watching for freshmen and sophomores leaving campus. They can’t possibly stop them all, and many walk by casually with no problem at all. This problem came up before the school board, but was presently turned down. They said that there were not enough strong reasons to completely open up the campus. This was a disappointment for students and many teachers. Here at ______________ High School, this is a very popular issue. Many students are hoping for an all-open campus but many feel it’s a lost cause.

Essay #2-Assignment #1 (T+P +A+) Eleventh grade writer

In our era of fitness and well-being for everyone, it surprises and disappoints me to find that ________________ High School has very few true exercise classes for those who need the conditioning but don’t have the time or inclination to join a sports team. Never before has America been so concerned with the physical condition of the business person as well as the athlete, but ________________ High School is slow to reflect these healthy attitudes. We need to glance away from our star athletes long enough to give our less-active students some better P.E. classes.

This is the age in which jogging, swimming, and sit-ups are at the peak of popularity but there are many students who don’t get a chance to exercise simply because they don’t have the time. ________________ High School offers many sports activities which provide a good workout—but only if the participants stay after school or come early each day, sacrifice weekends and evenings, and miss school-sometimes quite often. This schedule becomes a strain when one also has homework to do and other activities, such as music, art, and of course, a social life. There are those who thrive on it, but for
others, the peaceful, easy life is a hundred times better. Or perhaps sports takes a back seat to those other activities. There is also the chance that those who would like to participate don’t have the skills needed and don’t make the team. Without school sports, the only alternative is to join a health spa or work out alone—too expensive, the second not much fun, and both hard to keep up on one’s own. Besides, neither are much help if you don’t have enough time in the first place.

The answer to this problem is simple. There are many slow-moving P.E. classes taken by those who need their 1 fi years of credit. Nothing would be easier, or more fun, than to add or change those classes and provide fun, physically demanding classes ones which require that hour of hard exercise but don’t demand after-school work. There is already one physical conditioning class with running and weight lifting more of these could be added, as well as swimming, aerobic dancing, and others—perhaps even bicycling or walking! The variety would attract more people, and more of our generation could join the healthy crowd live longer, feel better, lose weight, tone muscles—before long we could all look like Jane Fonda or Arnold Schwartzenger! The exercise craze is a good one; so why not expand it to today’s young people? Everyone needs the chance to lead the healthiest life possible from the football team captain to the valedictorian, and everyone in between.

Essay #3-Assignment #3 (T+P-A -) Eleventh-grade Writer

School is an institution that will never die. This institution should be made easier to handle for the student though. It should be made so the student will be able to endure it. There are not many problems in our school though. Our school is one of the best schools that I have attended. Our school’s problems are minor problems compared to most schools. It is nice looking and well kept as well. School should be a fun time of life used in preparation for the entrance into the real world where you have to make your own living and support yourself. School will live on as long as there are students to attend them.
This school’s major problem is the price of yearbooks. I could not see myself laying out twenty-five dollars for something that I might not receive. The books are not worth the price that they are charging for it. The yearbook staff is raking in the money and the journalism teacher probably pockets the profit for his own. I bet they make over five dollars a book which is not that much until you consider them selling about a thousand books. Then they make about five-thousand dollars. What does a journalism class do with five-thousand dollars? They could buy anything they needed and still have money left. Yearbook at this school are a major rip-off.

Another problem at this school that needs to be solved is the problem of having too many clubs. There should be fewer clubs and more membership in the clubs. This would bring about more pride in the clubs that there are. To solve this problem, the requirements to get a grant to have a club need to be stricter. To many clubs come about that have no real purpose but to meet, eat, and drink. What do not just call this a party instead of a club? The requirements to get into the club should be stricter also. Clubs here are too easy to get into. You need to have a C average for one qualification that most clubs have here. Clubs are problems but could be solved using the outlines above. Our problems are not as bad and numerous as the problems in the other schools. Our problems can be solved easily also.

__________ High School already has a good tradition in the two year’s that it has existed. Problem-solving brings about school pride. Here at __________ High School everyone has pride in their school.

SUMMARY

Oliver’s answers to all of these questions articulate the processes and decisions made in the context of both rhetorical and research issues. Further, Dr. Oliver pointed to the usefulness of numerical data in our teaching and how naturally such data grows from questions related to our experience, instinct, and curiosity.
While such researchers are often criticized for “confirming the obvious,” Oliver argued, throughout her interview, for what she instead called “balance” and “validation.” The interplay between the subjective and objective, between rhetoric and dialectic, between narratives and numbers, and between a teacher and a researcher are well-illustrated here—all within the rich context of the desire to know, to confirm, to test one’s beliefs for the purpose of practical application later while enriching the scholarship of our field at the same time.

Upon reviewing Oliver’s interview, I noticed that I asked questions related to all cells in the Contextualist Research Paradigm Matrix but one: the “Researcher x Publication” cell, which asks, “How do I want to be perceived as a researcher in the final presentation? What voice would best enhance what I’m trying to say?” Oliver’s interview, however, gave her an opportunity to construct a second voice—one that did not appear in her actual report. Surely, the amount of complicated data she had, the importance of her literature review, and the length of the study limited the space available for an additional personal voice in the report. The voice that Oliver chose for her study, then, is a most sensible one in the context of her work. In her interview, Oliver demonstrated a clear sense for the role and value of traditional research reports in our field, especially related to her own teaching.

In the context of other studies, however, such a report can be constructed with a personal voice as well. Chapter six will present my own pilot study on the differences in students’ responses to red and blue ink in basic writing classrooms. For my report, I chose several voices, but the context in which I conducted this pilot differs greatly from Oliver’s. My purposes for conducting the study were to examine our lore about red ink in the classroom and to test (or in Oliver’s words, to validate, to provide balance for) that belief in our scholarship. Another purpose for sharing this pilot study along with Oliver’s study is to demonstrate another form for research that relies on numerical data—one that does not refute or reject the form chosen by Oliver, but one that provides an alternative well-suited to some research contexts in which we find ourselves asking and exploring questions.
NOTES

1. When I began to look for a traditional study for this chapter, I decided to review the last two years of RTE. First, RTE has become a symbol of quantitative research in our field and has, at times, been criticized for it. Second, I focused on the last two years in order to find recent works. Therefore, I reviewed nine issues of RTE: May 1995 through May 1997. In those nine issues were forty-four articles (excluding notes from editors and announcements). I first eliminated twenty-two unrelated articles (four studies in teaching literature, five annotated bibliographies, two letters from readers, a memorial to Alan C. Purves, eight essays, and two “Viewpoints”). I then eliminated nine studies that used no numerical data and eight studies that gathered numerical data but did not share full analyses of data or converted the data to a qualitative report. Of the five articles remaining that presented full analyses of data, one was Eileen Oliver’s. Since Eileen Oliver had been one of my undergraduate professors when we were both at St. Cloud State University (and since I had no further criteria for choosing one of the five over the others), I asked her first, simply because I knew her.

When I first contacted Dr. Oliver, I did not reveal to her why I was interviewing her, except to say that I wanted to ask her questions about her study and that my use of her article and interview would be positive. Her answers, then, were not unfairly constructed for the purpose of helping me make my point.


3. Email discussions with Oliver occurred from October 26, 1997 to June 17, 1998. She has approved final printing of this chapter, my use and interpretation of her comments here, and the reprinting of her text. I’d again like to thank Eileen for her generous and patient assistance with this chapter.