Copyright

by

Laura Catherine Beerits

2011

The Report Committee for Laura Catherine Beerits
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

Writing with Feeling?: Types of Personal Reference in Student Papers

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

Davida Charney

Linda Ferreira-Buckley

Writing with Feeling?: Types of Personal Reference in Student Papers

by

Laura Catherine Beerits, B.A.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin
May 2011

Abstract

Writing with Feeling?: Types of Personal Reference in Student Papers

Laura Catherine Beerits, M.A.
The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Davida Charney

The question of the appropriateness and effectiveness of students' personal writing is a longstanding one in the academy. In composition studies, the ideological fight over personal and academic writing is most often represented by the oft-studied but rarely changed Bartholomae/Elbow debate. In literary studies, reader-response critics in particular have wrestled with the problems and possibilities of subjective interpretation. Yet despite scholastic interest in issues of personal writing, discussions have remained primarily theoretical and have relied mainly on anecdotal evidence. While small-scale case studies valuably illuminate the processes of an individual student or two, the conversation would be profoundly bolstered by empirical data. How common are personal responses, really? Further, while many believe that any presence of first-person pronouns signals personal, subjective writing, anecdotal cases suggest that there are several categories of personal writing, and that these different types of expressivism produce a range of rhetorical effects.

The current study attempts to name and refine these categories—using the distinctions of *General Claim, Writer-Based prose, Personal Experience, and Personal Claim*—to begin to fill in this empirical gap. Is it a mistake to lump all use of personal reference into the category of "personal writing"? Would helping students distinguish between these varying types of personal references inform their stylistic and rhetorical choices? By reviewing a sample of 30 short papers written by college students in a general requirement literature survey course, I will examine how frequently—and in what ways—students reference themselves when responding in writing to a work of literature.

Table of Contents

List of Tables vii

I. Introduction 1

II. Background--Tracing the Personal in Composition & Literary Studies 3

  Literature as Personal: A History of Reader-Response 3

  The Reality: Personal Writing from Our Students 6

  Adopting Conventions of the Academy--Rite of Passage or Burdensome Obstacle? 10

III. Study 17

  Data Source 17

  Methodology 19

  Findings 24

  Self-References: Types and Frequency of Use 26

  Five Case Studies 34

IV. Conclusion 43

V. Implications for the Literature Classroom & Future Research 44

Appendix: Course Reading List 50

References 51

List of Tables

Table 1: Average Number of Personal References Per Paper, by Type 24

Table 2: Average Proportion of Personal References, by Type..........................26

Table 3: Case Studies: Number of Personal References Per Paper, by Type 34

Table 4: Case Studies: Proportion of Personal References, by Type 35

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of the appropriateness and effectiveness of students' personal writing is a longstanding one in the academy. In the field of composition studies, the ideological fight over personal and academic writing—often represented as the Bartholomae/Elbow debate—was formally begun two decades ago at the 1989 and 1991 meetings of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). At these conventions, scholars Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae presented different pedagogical perspectives of how best to serve students in freshman writing courses. Elbow's work argues for the initial privileging of student narrative—even the self-involved. He explains that when students write as authorities, they "discover that they can write words and thoughts and not worry about what good writing is or what the teacher wants, they discover that their heads are full of language and ideas (sometimes language and ideas they had no idea were there), and they discover they can get pleasure from writing" (Bartholomae and Elbow 89). Bartholomae, on the other hand, rejects this "corrupt, if extraordinarily tempting genre" in favor of trying to help students find their academic voices—though acknowledging that at first, those voices may not be theirs at all (71). In using "other people's words," Bartholomae argues, students "work closely with the ways their writing constructs a relationship with tradition, power and authority"—necessary preparation for the rest of their academic careers (86). Sustained interest in these opposing viewpoints prompted *College Composition and Communication* (*CCC*) to publish transcripts of Bartholomae's and Elbow's talks several years later in 1995, along with a new rebuttal from each author and other scholars' responses to the conversation.

Though most scholars agree that the field of composition has sided with Bartholomae (Mlynarczyk 12; Paley 7), interest in the debate endures. At the 2009 CCCC convention, the debate was featured not only as one of six milestones in the session “Sixty Years of CCCC History: Some Pivotal Moments,” but also as a separate panel subject, “Revisiting a Major Wave in Composition: The Bartholomae/Elbow ‘Debate.’” Further, the debate texts are still commonly featured on composition theory course syllabi, and the exchange is even a popular blog topic (“Bartholomae’s Conversation”; “Bumping with Bartholomae”).

Yet despite this sustained academic attention, very little about the debate has actually changed. The terms remain almost purely ideological (with terms like authority, authentic voice, power, empower, tradition, master narrative, authorship, self-involvement, and the academy employed most frequently). Even Elbow’s recent publication on the topic, his 2007 article “Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries,” remains quite true to his positions from the 1980s and 1990s. Though some scholars have argued for hybrid pedagogical models that incorporate both academic and personal writing (Mlynarczyk; Paley; Tobin), most additions to the Bartholomae/Elbow debate simply take up or reshape old ideological positions. The debate remains, largely, a choosing of sides.

What is troubling, however, is that although this scholarly dialogue is premised on determining how best to develop student writers, the debate often fails to include actual student voices and interests. What do students *like*? Moreover, what do students *do*? Further, this debate needs to be updated to reflect the ways in which pedagogical approaches to writing instruction have changed since Bartholomae and Elbow took up their positions. With the scholastic endorsement of Writing in the Disciplines, which extends college writing instruction across academic fields rather than housing it in the composition classroom alone, questions of what makes writing good, appropriate, scholarly, or personal need to be reexamined. The present study—an examination of students' personal reference use in 30 college English papers—was designed to begin to address these questions and start to fill these holes in our understanding.

II. BACKGROUND—TRACING THE PERSONAL IN COMPOSITION & LITERARY STUDIES

Literature as Personal: A History of Reader-Response

Though Bartholomae's academic writing is generally considered the "winner" of this synecdochic debate in composition studies, the impulse to study personal responses exists across disciplines. The related field of literary studies has similarly wrestled with the problems and possibilities of subjective interpretation, and because the field has a reader-centered branch of criticism, there is reason to suspect that literary studies may have a somewhat more inclusive attitude toward personal response in academic writing.

Reader-response criticism can be characterized, most basically, by the value it places on the individual reader and his or her subjective interpretation of a text. This emphasis subverts the more traditional theoretical notion that the reader should not be included as an object of analysis in the interpretive process. As Stephen Mailloux explains, this multifarious school of criticism is made up of "a multiplicity of approaches that focus on the reading process: affective, phenomenological, subjective, transactive, transactional, structural, deconstructive, rhetorical, psychological, speech act . . . ." (19). For reader-response critics, a text is never static, nor imbued by the author with a singular correct reading or set of correct readings.

Though literary critic I.A. Richards is often strongly identified with New Criticism, his discussion of emotions and individual interpretations in the early part of the twentieth century laid the groundwork for the concerns of reader-response critics. In 1929's *Practical Criticism,* Richards points out the lack of standardization in literary response and criticism, explaining, "It is all the more surprising then that no treatise on the art and science of intellectual and emotional navigation has yet been written; *for logic*, which might appear to cover part of this field, *in actuality hardly touches it*" (11, emphasis added). He makes clear that literary interpretations are by nature individualized, though he does not celebrate this fact (rather, he bemoans "the incurable fact that we differ immensely in our capacity to visualise, and to produce imagery of the other senses") (14). Despite this lamentation, however, Richards in effect bolsters the validity of a reader's personal response, even when such response is in opposition to authorial intention. He explains, "images are erratic things; lively images aroused in one mind need have no similarity to the equally lively images stirred by the same line of poetry in another, and neither set need have anything to do with any images which may have existed in the poet's mind" (15).

Scholar Louise Rosenblatt also focuses on the individual reader's experience with a text, and her work has been particularly influential in literary pedagogy. Her ideas, tracing back to her 1938 work, *Literature as Exploration*, also served as the foundation for what would come to be called reader-response criticism. Four decades later, during reader-response criticism's heyday, Rosenblatt's *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* advocated for the power (and the practical necessity) of a reader's personal response to a text. Rosenblatt explains that "a text, once it leaves its author's hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work—sometimes, even, a literary work of art" (ix). Each reader, Rosenblatt argues, must "create a poem" out a text (11), and she celebrates this subjectivity: "part of the magic—and indeed of the essence—of language is the fact that it must be internalized by each individual human being, with all the special overtones that each unique person and unique situation entail" (20). But, what should students do with this magic and this individuation when responding critically to a work of literature?

Rosenblatt offers us pedagogical guidance. "When we teach literature" she argues, "…we are dealing with each student's awareness, no matter how dim or confused, of a certain part of the ongoing sequence in his life, as he seeks to marshall his resources and organize them under the stimulus of the printed page" (*Making Meaning* 63). Rosenblatt also anticipates criticism about this individualized method. Acknowledging that almost all literature instructors desire, first and foremost, for their students to come to enjoy reading, she finds that "in practice, however, this concern tends to be overshadowed by the emphasis on whatever can be easily systematized and measured" (63). Certainly, the pedagogical emphasis on testing is only more exaggerated today. Rosenblatt cautions against a "get-rich-quick" approach to literature, wherein dates, genres, and authorial biographies are studied at the expense of cultivating students' personal interpretations (71). Significantly, though, Rosenblatt's discussion of pedagogical theory here primarily concerns elementary through secondary school-level students—not those in the college classroom. In lectures of several hundred students, as is common for many introductory literature courses at large universities, Rosenblatt's highly personalized instructional ideals are simply impractical, and her pedagogy's resistance to evaluation thus limits its possibilities in higher education.

Despite a surge in popularity in the 1970s and 1980s (complementing the expressivist boom led by Elbow and others), reader-response criticism's critical reach proved limited. Literary critic Terry Eagleton describes the 1980s as a "pragmatic period of short-term views and hard-nosed material interests, of the self as a consumer rather than creator"—and this popular view may have left little room for the reader-as-creator role envisioned by reader-response theorists (199). In Eagleton's tracing of the ebbs and flows of literary criticism in the last three decades of the twentieth century, reader-response theory goes largely unmentioned (indeed, Stanley Fish is dropped in only in passing) (203). Thus, despite a period of popularity, this school of criticism left a relatively shallow imprint. (It is worth noting, though, that the burgeoning field of cognitive literary theory[1] is now beginning to take up many of the questions of reader-response theory.)

The Reality: Personal Writing from Our Students

Still, regardless of any critical bent or ideological leaning, many professors of literature and composition find that they *will* encounter personal responses in their students' writing. Even if assignments of an "informal, subjective, self-expressive nature" are avoided, like reading response journals or personal essays, many professors find that some students will share about themselves and their lives in critical or analytic assignments—even when they are expressly discouraged from doing so (Valentino 277). As Ellen Laird explains in an article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, her 30-year tenure as a community college English instructor has taught her that the student essays she receives "may or may not relate to the assignment and may or may not conform to format and length requirements. The essays would, however, be about something the students wished and probably needed to write about." Marilyn Valentino, a community college professor of composition and literature and former CCCC chair, has also found that no matter how carefully she designs assignments to be objective or text-centered, some students still write about their *personal experiences*. This type of expressive writing can be especially troubling for professors when students produce essays that verge into highly personal confessions. Valentino shares such an experience, recalling the feelings she experienced after reading a student's response to Langston Hughes's "Harlem," which alluded to the student's childhood sexual abuse. Valentino recounts: "My first reaction was one of disbelief. I had not asked my students to write a personal response. I had precisely instructed them to stick to the poem" (274). Valentino further explains that being confronted with her students' written confessions made her deeply "uncomfortable, worried I'd say the wrong thing, frightened to say nothing." The consistency with which she received unassigned personal writing made her realize, though, that “these private revelations from students were not going to go away” (275). In “Ethical Issues Raised By Students’ Personal Writing,” professor Dan Morgan recalls similar feelings of exasperation upon receiving a highly personal narrative instead of the strategically designed argumentative paper he had assigned:

---

[1] Cognitive literary theory is a mode of literary criticism informed by current understandings of brain functions (see Keen; Lehrer; Zunshine).

> [A]fter many weeks of discussing argumentative writing and many illustrations, I use an argument assignment based on a seventy-item list of Harper's Index Facts. Last fall, one of my students turned in a paper that was not even marginally connected to any one of these items. Instead of an argument, he wrote a personal narrative in which he talked about falling in with the wrong crowd, smoking a lot of marijuana, doing petty crimes to sustain his habit, and dabbling with Satanism, which eventually led to not one but two suicide attempts, which he survived only because God was watching over him. The paper was heartfelt and fairly well written, but had nothing directly to do with the specific argument assignment or the specific (and generous) list of possible topics. (322)

Still other scholarship suggests a disconnect between professors’ ideological positions and what they actually find compelling in student writing. In *What Makes Writing Good,* editors William Coles and James Vopat asked 48 college instructors to select an example of excellent student writing. Though this 1985 book predates the Bartholomae/Elbow debate, it offers insight into the kinds of essays writing teachers valued (which are likely the same kind of essays many writing teachers value today). In discussing the text, Lester Faigley makes the important observation that though the group of respondents represented diverse academic orientations and writing professions, from technical writers to theorists to popular authors, the majority of the contributors—30 out of 48, or five-eighths—chose personal experience essays as their "best" examples (120). Contributors cited their student authors' "honest[y]," "integrity," and "authentic voice" as playing a role in the essays' successfulness (qtd. in Faigley 121). These words sounds downright Elbowian, though most contributors would not likely calls themselves "expressivists." What this essay collection suggests, I believe, is that teachers *like* reading personal essays—sometimes even in spite of themselves—and think such essays can yield good writing. This collection also suggests that students may be most comfortable with this kind of writing, and thus write more persuasively in the genre.

Faigley questions the fairness of this preference for personal epiphany. Citing two student papers from the collection, he explains:

> I have a great deal of sympathy for students like Norma Bennett, who must cope with difficult family situations as well as the pressures of college, but why is writing about potentially embarrassing and painful aspects of one's life considered more honest than, say, the efforts of Joe Williams' student, Greg Shaefer, who tries to figure out what Thucydides was up to in writing about the Peloponnesian War? (404-5)

Indeed, in emphasizing the persuasive power of "honest" or "authentic" selves, professors take on a problematic role of being the ones to affirm or dispute students' authenticity.

As these professors' experiences confirm, being "opposed" to personal or expressive writing and excluding it from one's course syllabus cannot always insure against students self-disclosing in writing assignments; some students will share their personal responses and stories anyway. But are these anomalies? Or does this occur so frequently that we need to change the way we think about personal references in student writing? Further, do we send conflicting messages to students about what we value in their writing?

Adopting Conventions of the Academy—Rite of Passage or Burdensome Obstacle?

Despite the anecdotal suggestion that students "can't help" but write about themselves, many students have internalized a common dictate from their high school English teachers: "Don't use 'I' in your school writing."

In *A Rhetoric of Pleasure: Prose Style and Today's Composition Classroom,* T.R. Johnson cites the informal surveys that professor Guy Allen conducts at the beginning of the college writing course he teaches each semester. Allen finds that consistently, "More than 65 percent of students feel that they must keep themselves out of their writing" (Johnson 62). (Troublingly, Allen also notes that more than 85 percent of students report a "dread of writing in an academic setting") (62).

In their examination of the differences between expert and novice writers, Ann M. Penrose and Cheryl Geisler make a like observation: "What it means to be an insider in the academic domain has largely been defined by the objective, competitive stance of mainstream academic argument at the expense of the personal knowledge and connective goals . . . ." (507). In Penrose and Geisler's study, a college freshman and a doctoral student were given the same assignment: to write a five-page paper on a topic from philosophical ethics, using eight scholarly articles as sources. Janet, the college freshman, was unfamiliar with this topic, while Roger, a doctoral student in philosophy, was well-versed in the domain. The authors observed that while Roger frequently evaluated scholars' claims against his own personal understanding, Janet's paper suggested that she had accepted all scholars' claims as facts. Interestingly though, Penrose and Geisler found that Janet's think-alouds *did* contain critical evaluation and personal reflections, yet these observations were missing from her final paper, which "eliminated any evidence of her own role" in the analytic process (509). The authors also observed that Janet "continually resisted inserting herself in the text" (509). During one think-aloud writing session, for example, Janet "corrected" an accidental inclusion of the personal pronoun "I," explaining, "It's not supposed to be in first person . . . that's silly" (509). Janet's instinct, this reveals, was to attribute argumentative claims to herself by using a personal reference, yet her revision shows that she had internalized the notion that personal pronouns were inappropriate in academic discourse.

As for the pedagogical implications for teaching a student like Janet, the authors find that the difference between novice and expert writers is more than simply content mastery. They argue that for Janet to become a more persuasive and authoritative writer, "she needs to believe there is authority to spare—that there is room for many voices" (511). Janet needs to overcome what she has learned about "the customary split between public and personal" (509).

Professor Anne Herrington similarly argues that students need to feel more connected to and part of academic conversations. Herrington finds that students perceive the "intellectual villages" of academia as "quite distinct from themselves," which produces detached and distant writing. She posits that "it is only when we insert—instead of effacing—ourselves that we can hope to *assimilate* the village's ways instead of using them as external tools or *accommodating* ourselves to them" (Herrington 111, emphasis in original).

Herrington designed a study intended to illuminate *how* students approach academic writing, so that we might better guide them. In the study, Herrington followed two students in a writing-intensive anthropology course, examining their multiple essay drafts and the feedback they received from their teaching assistant (TA). She also interviewed the students and TA. Herrington noted several occasions where the students' assumptions or expectations were different from the teaching assistant's—and she points out the opportunities lost in these moments of disconnect. Reviewing the TA's feedback on student Kate's draft, Herrington observes:

> Here [the TA] made a change without explaining that it is just a convention of academic research to focus on the "literature" itself instead of the researcher's activities. In an interview, Jim [the TA] indicated that his reason for making the change was that "she doesn't need to tell us that she went to the library. . . . They're meant to sound like professionals not college students." The point is that Kate didn't know the conventions of "professionals." (108-109)

This writing that the teaching assistant found so unprofessional is what Linda Flower calls *"Writer-Based prose,"* or prose that articulates the author's thought process or writing process. *Writer-Based prose* is perhaps the most self-consciously subjective form of personal reference—such writing not only inserts the author into a paper, but it shows the audience every mental (and sometimes physical, as was the case with Kate) step along the way.

This pressure to suppress one's personal identity in writing endures at the graduate level as well. In "Conventions, Conversations, and the Writer: Case Study of a Student in a Rhetoric Ph.D. Program," authors Carol Berkenkotter, Thomas N. Huckin and John Ackerman follow a first-year graduate student, Nate, as he navigates his graduate studies and confronts "the conventions and the conversations" of his academic community (10). By reviewing Nate's academic papers and his own written self-reports of his writing activity and progress, the authors find that Nate struggled to convert his writing, which was strongly influenced by expressivist scholars, to the "social science expository prose" preferred by his professors (40). In one self-report, Nate expresses his frustration: "I feel like I'm butting heads finally with ACADEMIC WRITING—and it is monstrous and unfathomable. . . . I feel that [rhetoric scholars] have access to the code and I do not" (21).

Nate's use of personal references is cited by the authors as one of the weaknesses of his writings early in the semester—they determine his use of first-person pronouns to be "excessive" (15). Though Nate continues to use "I" in his writing throughout the academic year, the authors note—and endorse—where his usage changes. Of Nate's first-person writing that "works," the authors explain: "In personalizing his argument and making it less abstract, Nate has constructed an I-based scenario where [his opposition to a scholarly author] is topicalized, making a focus on the first-person pronoun fully justified" (27). Interestingly, this effective pronoun use occurs in a memo to his professor *about* his critical paper, which had been less successful. In this memo, Nate diagnoses the weakness of his paper: "My thoughts and the writing I've used to capture them are shallow . . . I lost, if you will, my voice—or never had it from the start . . . I think it is more a question of trying to say too much too soon" (23). When Nate gave himself permission to position himself as a subject in opposition to an author, and to make *personal claims* about himself and his beliefs, the study authors find that his writing becomes stronger. Still, later in the article, the authors cite one component of Nate's writing growth as beginning to use "sentence subjects [to] refer to the subject matter under discussion, not just to himself" (36). Thus, by Berkenkotter et al.'s evaluation of Nate's writing, personal writing is permitted at the graduate level, but situationally, not universally.

Like Nate, I have also desired to use expressive writing in my graduate scholarship. Consider the following vignette with which I began a critical literature review examining attitudes toward personal writing in the college classroom:

> *When I was twenty-two, I began teaching special education in an elementary school in a poor neighborhood in Brooklyn. I fell in love with the students right away. I was also grossly undertrained and overwhelmed by the incredible violence in the school. I left midyear, ten pounds thinner and deeply depressed. I promised myself I would never think of it again.*
>
> *Indeed, when I'd start to miss my students, or feel guilty for leaving them—disrupting their years and lives—or think of my first real world experience as a failure, it made me shudder, and I forced the thoughts out of my mind and pleaded with my memory not to bring them back.*
>
> *Slowly, a year or so after I'd left the school, the words started forming: "When I was twenty-two, I began teaching special education in an elementary school in a poor neighborhood in Brooklyn." Without realizing it, I was thinking about my experience in the way that I would write about it—though I had absolutely no desire to record the story on paper.*

Is this an appropriate opening for an academic paper? Should I have kept this memory to myself—is it too personal, too casual, too unacademic? Or, would it make you want to read on? Is it within my right as a scholar to write this way?

As I read students' and scholars' opinions about personal writing, these flashes of memory, these Proustian gusts came over me. And though my use of the first-person pronoun is not articulating a personal opposition to my academic subject, and thus is not in line with Berkenkotter et al.'s example of appropriate personal writing, the professor for whom I wrote the paper deemed it an effective introduction. Responding to my in-text questioning of the appropriateness of including my story, the professor commented, "Actually, I can't imagine a more appropriate—or more ironic—opening for this particular paper!"

Still, these very academic "conventions" seem to be different for students and experienced scholars. Professor Amy Robillard points out the disparity in scholarly attitudes toward students' personal writing and scholarly attitudes toward academics' personal writing. Robillard observes that scholars frequently begin articles in esteemed publications like *CCC* or *College English* with a brief personal narrative, much as I did in my graduate paper, and in result, "we're usually drawn into the piece. We want to keep reading" (75). She goes on to say that when scholars whose names we know and whose work we respect, like Linda Brodkey, Julie Lindquist, and Lynn Z. Bloom employ narratives, "we trust that [they] have very good reasons for opening their essays with personal stories" (75). But, Robillard argues, "we don't always grant this same trust to our students when they tell us their personal stories in writing we assign" (75). It is only logical that some of our students have similar reactions to the books, essays, and articles we ask them to read, yet when students use personal narratives in critical writing assignments, it is frequently assumed that they are over-sharing or simply not following the writing prompt, rather than allowed that they, too, might be making informed rhetorical choices to strengthen their papers.

In sum, this literature review indicates that the Bartholomae/Elbow debate is indeed overly simplistic. Not all personal writing is confessional and secret-spilling, not all personal writing is innately unacademic, and certainly, not all personal writing serves the same rhetorical purpose. Further, our stylistic ideologies do not always firmly align with our preferences as readers.

Though the academy's interest in issues of personal writing is evidenced by this sustained attention in scholarship, discussions have remained primarily theoretical and have relied heavily on anecdotal evidence. While small-scale case studies valuably illuminate the processes of an individual student or two, the conversation would be profoundly bolstered by empirical data. How common are personal responses, really? Further, while many believe that any presence of first-person pronouns signals personal, subjective writing, the anecdotal cases discussed previously suggest that there are several categories of personal writing, and that these different types of expressivism produce a range of rhetorical effects. The current study attempts to name and refine these categories—which include the previously discussed *Personal Experience, Writer-Based prose,* and *Personal Claims*, along with *General Claims* and *Prior Knowledge*—to begin to fill in this empirical gap. Is it a mistake to lump all use of personal references into the category of “personal writing”? Are professors and scholars who oppose “personal writing” perhaps throwing out the baby with the bath water? Would helping students distinguish between these varying types of personal reference inform their stylistic and rhetorical choices?

By reviewing a sample of 30 short papers written by college students in a general requirement literature survey course, I will examine how frequently—and in what ways—students reference themselves when responding in writing to a piece of literature.

III. STUDY

Data Source

Data for this study was collected from an undergraduate literature course at a large, public southwestern research university. Successful completion (or testing out) of a survey course in literature is a graduation requirement for all students at this school, and the particular literature course under study is part of a large menu of course offerings that fulfill this requirement. These courses are large, generally serving between 200 and 300 students who range from sophomores to seniors. Lead professors are supported by teaching assistants from the departments of English, Rhetoric, Comparative Literature, Linguistics, and Women’s and Gender Studies.

In the literature course reviewed for this study, students were assigned two two-page critical papers. Students were asked to:

> Write a 2-page essay that develops fully an interesting, insightful, tightly focused argument that engages a text we’ve read and/or talked about thus far. Your essay

> should provide the reader with clear support and with argumentation that fully justifies your conclusions, and it should be written in a style that is both felicitous and sophisticated. Its argument should be both complex and clear.

The prompt further offered general essay ideas, inviting students to:

- Make a connection using a text studied—put “this and that together” and explain both the details and the significance of that connection
- Locate yourself in a conversation (from section, from lecture, from your reading, from life)
- Agree with a writer and extend his or her ideas with your own examples
- Ask a question, then answer it
- Reconstruct a “light bulb moment” you had while reading.

Thus, this open-ended prompt allowed students to make connections with literature as varying as the works assigned for the class, which ranged from Anne Bradstreet’s poetry to a critical essay by Vladimir Nabokov to Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula* to Quentin Tarantino’s screenplay for *Pulp Fiction* (see Appendix A for a course reading list). Students were required to revise their first paper, but were also permitted to resubmit for a new grade any paper they had substantially revised. Some students turned in the same paper four or five times; others completed the assignment only once. The papers included in this data set were first drafts; this allows for a sample that accurately reflects students’ responses to an open-ended assignment without the influence of instructor feedback and evaluation (though by nature of a graded writing assignment, the instructor, as reader/grader, is perhaps an unavoidable influence).

The sample consists of 30 papers from 22 students (nine male; 13 female). Eight students (four male; four female) have two separate papers in the data set. Though students whose papers make up this sample are those who turned in revised papers on the last class day, the data set represents a range of students: some who revised multiple times, suggesting more serious or grade-conscious students, and others who were turning in revised papers for the first time, hoping to remedy a low-course grade with last-chance revisions.

Methodology

Papers were examined for explicit personal references—something personal and particular to the student author. Such references, marked by first-person pronouns, included the articulation of personal responses (feelings, thoughts, ideas), personal experiences, and personal identity. Through selective coding at the sentence level, the following categories emerged: *General Claims*; *Prior Knowledge*; *Writer-Based prose (writing process); Writer-Based prose (ideation process); Personal Experience;* and *Personal Claims.*

Only sentences that explicitly reference the student were coded (e.g., "I think," "I feel," "this makes me think," "When I was a kid"). While the first-person "I" was, predictably, the most common signal of a personal response, most instances of "we," "you," or "our" were not, in fact, offerings of personal reaction, and thus were not coded. These pronouns were generally used to refer to the reading audience ("We first meet the character"), a hypothetical "anyone" ("If one reads this novel"), and a collective whole

("Our society"), but these references were not particular to the student author and could generally be replaced with non-pronoun synonyms. Though sentences usually fit into a single coding category, compound sentences were occasionally double coded when their clauses expressed separate ideas. For example, in the sentence,

> I have seen the episode before and thought nothing of their friendship, but after reading the essay I could not help but wonder if there was something going on between the two,

the first half of the sentence is categorized as *Personal Experience*, while the second clause is coded as *Writer-Based prose*. Only six sentences were double coded (so insignificant a figure that the total number of comments in each paper and in the data sample was not altered). Finally, as will be discussed further, these different types of personal writing represent a wide-range of both subjectivity *and* potential rhetorical power. For the purpose of organization, the presentation of these categories will move from what was found to be generally less effective (and interestingly, less personal) to generally more effective (and more personal).

Ge*neral Claims* are assertions or tenets of the student's argument that reference the student author. These *General Claims* frequently begin with "I think," "I feel," and "I believe," yet these claims are marked by not being *about* the student himself (that is, the "I think" or "I feel" could be deleted without changing the meaning of the sentence). For instance,

> Yes, I believe that Hemingway wrote The Three-Day Blow to suggest that there was more than a friendly bond between Nick and Bill, and that there was actually a homosexual tension throughout the story,

and

> I feel like the main argument here is that the more femininity a woman exposes the more vulnerable she is to be considered either a "monster" or an "angel,"

are examples of these *General Claims*.

Prior Knowledge describes comments wherein the student makes an explicit connection to previously held ideas or understanding (for instance: "I know I think of the KKK burning crosses in old black and white photos when I think of racism"). Because *Prior Knowledge* involves the student's own factual conceptions, such assertions are not generally cited or linked to published sources.

Writer-Based prose, a term and concept borrowed from the work of Linda Flower, is prose marked by the author's expression of thoughts and feelings about the particular assignment at hand. Flower describes this writing style an "associative, narrative path of the writer's own confrontation with her subject" (19-20). Flower contrasts *Writer-Based prose* with Reader-Based prose, or writing done in a "deliberate attempt to communicate something to a reader . . . [via a] shared language and shared context between writer and reader" (19). In sum, the less sophisticated *Writer-Based prose* serves as a "replay of the writer's discovery process," while the further-developed Reader-Based prose presents "an issue-centered rhetorical structure" (19).

In this study, I initially divided *Writer-Based prose* into two subcategories: *the ideation process*—the writer's intellectual journey from idea to idea (in general or for the particular assignment), and *the writing process*—the writer's actions in writing the given assignment. Two examples of *Writer-Based prose* that illustrates a student's *ideation process* are:

> "He said…" is a pair of words that I noticed that come up on multiple occasions throughout the story,

and

> This is how I have come to the conclusion that her disease had everything to do with her relationship between her and her husband.

Both of these examples *show* us what triggered the student author's thoughts, and how those thoughts progressed. An example of *Writer-Based prose* that illustrates a student's *writing process* is:

> I had brainstormed the idea for this paper, but afterwards, it took me several weeks to be calm enough to sit down and write.

In this example, the student is self-consciously talking about writing *this* assignment, and her writing process not only undergirds the essay, it becomes part of the narrative. Since examples of writing from both subcategories of *Writer-Based prose* produced the same effect—that is, illustrating for the reader the writer's exploration of a subject—statistical analysis and further discussion of *Writer-Based prose* will refer to a singular category.

There is indeed a value to *Writer-Based prose* as part of a writer's process; however, such prose should serve as a method of articulating ideas and following them on their developmental trajectory (i.e., "this makes me think of this which makes me wonder about this," and so on and so forth) for the *writer* alone. Flower cautions of the limitations of this writing style, noting that many problems or errors in academic writing, ranging "from a mere missing referent or an underdeveloped idea to an unfocused and apparently pointless discussion . . . can often be traced to the writer's underlying strategy for composing and. . . failure to transform private thought into a public, Reader-Based expression" (19).

The *Personal Experience* category was used to code discussion of any event, experience, or condition from the student's life. These articulations were generally marked by having occurred in the past ("Young women dream of being models; I know this because I wanted to be one too"), though occasionally, students referenced present or ongoing events/conditions ("I know what ADHD does; all the panic, worry and loss of sleep wracks on me").

In an online draft of her latest book project, Professor Trish Roberts-Miller describes why writing about one's own life can be an effective writing strategy. Explaining how personal narrative can be used as a focusing incident with which to begin one's writing, she writes:

> [O]ne describes how one's own understanding of a topic has evolved. I have used the same introduction when I have begun every book, but it has never appeared in the final version. It is a focusing incident/personal narrative that narrates how I came to do the kind of work I do. It may work to get me writing because it helps me place the specific project in a larger issue I find interesting;

> when it comes time for the completed manuscript, however, it's clearly not useful to a community of scholars. Obviously, it functions to get me started writing, and is therefore useful. Someday, perhaps, I will actually publish it. ("Craft of Scholarly Writing")

Dr. Roberts-Miller raises several interesting points here: first, that writing about one's own life makes sense as a strategy to start writing on a topic of interest, and second, that that expression of personal experience may not necessarily be rhetorically effective for one's audience.

Personal Claims, the next category, describe assertions that, unlike *General Claims, are* specific to the student. In *Personal Claims*, the student is the true subject of the claim, as illustrated by the following examples: "And I should not let people without ADHD make me think that I am inferior or that my condition is a form of weakness" and "So I stand firm with Langston Hughes."

Findings

Table 1: ***Average Number of Personal References Per Paper, by Type***

	General Claims	**Personal Experience**	**Writer-Based Prose**	**Personal Claim**	**Prior Knowledge**	**Total Personal Sentences**
Sample Average	2.78	5.88	2.69	8.00	1.00	6.86
Standard Deviation	2.18	8.34	1.49	7.07	0.00	8.67
Sample Total (of 1163 sentences)	50	47	35	16	3	151

Of the 30 papers examined, 22, or 73.3 percent, contained at least one explicit personal reference. On average, 13 percent of the total sentences of all papers contained personal references. Papers with personal references (the eight papers with no personal references will be excluded from subsequent calculations) contained, on average, seven personal references (6.86) (Table 1). However, the high standard deviation (8.67) indicates a wide-range of personal reference usage in the papers surveyed. One student, for example, made only one "personal" comment out of 52, referring to the way he empathized with a novel's teenage character, while another student wrote a highly personal essay wherein 76.4 percent of all comments were personal.

Table 1 displays the average number of personal references per paper in each of the five categories. *General Claims* was the most frequently used category (50 total occurrences). The next most common type of personal reference employed was *Personal Experience* (47 occurrences). However, the high standard deviation in *Personal Experience* also illustrates its skewed distribution—more than half of all comments occurred in one student's paper. Students were next most likely to use *Writer-based Prose* (35 occurrences). Students were less likely to make *Personal Claims* (16 occurrences—but again, the standard deviation is high as 13 occurred in the same student's paper). Finally, students were least likely to employ *Prior Knowledge* (only three occurrences).

When the student paper which contained a disproportionately high number of personal references was removed from the sample, students were most likely to make *General Claims* (49 occurrences), next mostly likely to use *Writer-based Prose* (33 occurrences), and then to reference their *Personal Experience* (21 occurrences). Finally, students were equally unlikely to make *Personal Claims* (three occurrences) and to employ *Prior Knowledge* (three occurrences).

Table 2: ***Average Proportion of Personal Reference, by Type***

	General Claims	**Personal Experience**	**Writer-Based Prose**	**Personal Claim**	**Prior Knowledge**
Sample Average	0.49	0.17	0.26	0.03	0.05
Standard Deviation	0.40	0.28	0.24	0.10	0.13

Table 2 shows the average proportional use of personal references in a student's given paper. While the small sample size limited the emergence of patterns, some trends could be seen. Significantly, when students use personal references, they make *General Claims* nearly fifty percent of the time (indeed, six students made exclusively *General Claims*). Just over a quarter (26 percent) of personal references are likely to be examples of *Writer-Based prose*, while 17 percent of the average student's self-references present a *Personal Experience.* As suggested by the figures discussed previously, students articulate *Prior Knowledge* and make *Personal Claims* sparingly (five percent and three percent of the time, respectively). This order of proportions mirrors the frequency trends indicated in the data set overall, once the paper with a disproportionately high number of personal references was removed from the sample.

Self-References: Types and Frequency of Use

As the previously discussed data has shown, students in this study most frequently referred to themselves when making *General Claims.* Eighteen out of 30 student papers contained at least one self-referencing *General Claim.* These *General Claims* frequently begin with "I think," "I feel," and "I believe," yet these claims are marked by *not* being about the student herself (that is, the "I think" or "I feel" could be deleted without changing the meaning of the sentence). For instance,

> Yes, I believe that Hemingway wrote "The Three-Day Blow" to suggest that there was more than a friendly bond between Nick and Bill, and that there was actually a homosexual tension throughout the story,

could be revised to

> Hemingway wrote "The Three-Day Blow" to suggest that there was more than a friendly bond between Nick and Bill, and that there was actually a homosexual tension throughout the story,

without changing the sentence's meaning. Similarly, shortening

> I feel like the main argument here is that the more femininity a woman exposes the more vulnerable she is to be considered either a "monster" or an "angel,"

to

> The main argument here is that the more femininity a woman exposes the more vulnerable she is to be considered either a "monster" or an "angel,"

not only does not alter the sentence's meaning, it also makes the claim less tentative. (And generally, it is implied that a writer thinks, feels, believes, or is of the opinion of whatever claim or argument he or she puts forth.) Because the personal referents employed in these *General Claims* can be cut without changing the sentence's meaning (and indeed, sometimes such cuts enhance the sentence's meaning), it can be assumed that most instances of self-reference in *General Claims* are superfluous and do not enhance a student's written composition. (After all, as Strunk and White assert, "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts") (23).

Indeed, frequent use of *General Claims* had the effect of weakening a student's ideas. For instance, one student, who made no other type of personal reference, filled more than a quarter (26.3%) of her paper with first-person *General Claims*, such that it felt almost like a tick or habit when she began sentences with "I think" or "In my opinion." In one part of her paper, the student wrote:

> Further, I think he had mentioned a very good point here, and I totally agree with him.

This assertion serves mainly to praise and agree with the author; that is, it does little rhetorical work itself. (It is worth noting that this student is a non-native English speaker.) Another student's use of *General Claims* that begin with personal references served to produce assertions that came across as tentative or uncertain. For example, the student wrote,

> A conclusive analysis I can draw from this novel by Clemens, is that while it can be seen as a seemingly offensive and derogatory novel, it also has the potential to become a powerful learning experience for the appropriate reader.

The prefatory first-person reference feels a bit like hedging, rather than like an assertion that was meant to be "conclusive"; indeed, simply cutting the sentence to

> While the work can be seen as a seemingly offensive and derogatory novel, it also has the potential to become a powerful learning experience for the appropriate reader,

makes the claim both stronger and more clear. Thus, while first-person writing suggests that the writer is talking about him- or herself, the self-references made in *General Claims* were markedly impersonal.

The *Prior Knowledge* category of personal reference was rarely used by students in this sample (in fact, just three students employed this category, and sparingly, making just one reference to *Prior Knowledge* each). Though tapping into one's prior knowledge seems like a strong writing strategy, the articulation of these previously held ideas often felt unresearched or sloppy. One student, in an essay about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* wrote:

> There are many aspects of racism in both the dictionary and in people's minds. I know I think of the KKK burning crosses in old black and white photos when I think of racism.

Perhaps in part because the prefatory sentence about the varying "aspects of racism" is so vague, the student's display of his personal knowledge of racism seems hollow or misplaced. What makes the student think of this image? Why did he choose to write about this memory rather than look for more concrete information?

Writer-Based prose, or writing that provides a narrative of the student writer's thought- or writing-process was the next most frequently used type of personal reference after *General Claims*. The prevalence of *Writer-Based prose* is unsurprising in light of

Flower's finding that "As both a style of writing and a style of thought, Writer-Based prose is natural and adequate for a writer writing to himself or herself" (19). Indeed, in examples from these students' essays, Flower's description of *Writer-Based prose* as a kind of pre-writing rings very true. One student, Sally,[2] wrote about Huck and Jim's relationship in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

> When reading the book I got the impression that they were becoming good friends that had each other's back.

This type of explanatory narrative, Flower explains, prompts readers to question "Why?" and "So what?" as they are given a "blow-by-blow account of the writers' discovery process" (25). Indeed, as the teaching assistant for the course, I was on the one hand glad to learn that this student was picking up on one aspect of Huck and Jim's friendship. On the other hand, this kind of statement is undeveloped and thus unsatisfying. What I wanted to know as a reader—and these are all questions that went unaddressed in the paper—were what moments in the text signaled to Sally that the pair was developing a friendship? What suggested their loyalty? More significantly, were there moments that challenged this friendship or loyalty? Did her impression change at different points in the book? Did the novel's ending alter or confirm her impression? All in all, I wanted this idea to *do more.* Borrowing Flower's words again, Sally needed to move from her "Writer-Based focus of 'How did I go about my research or reading of the assignment and what did I see?' to a focus on 'What significant conclusions can be drawn and why?'" (37).

---

[2] This and all other names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

In other instances, students recorded their processes of working on this particular critical paper. One student wrote,

> In our class at points over the past few weeks, we have worked with the idea of history and what it means in your life,

while another student prefaced a claim with,

> Yet after reading and re-reading (just like [the course professor] says to do) this article . . . .

Still another student wrote:

> From many of the articles that I have read thus far two of which really grabbed my attention.

Like the *Writer-Based prose* that deals with larger ideas or concepts, these observations—local to the specific writing assignment—have a similar shallowness. By referencing the professor, the course, and reading assignments, these students demonstrate a very limited (and, in all fairness, an accurate) sense of their papers' audience: me, the teaching assistant. This type of sentence feels almost stream-of-consciousness, and represents a good foundation for a flow of ideas that will lead to more effective writing. Flower notes that such an "unretouched and underprocessed version" of a writer's thought can be a strong building block to the "good writing" that results from "the cognitively demanding transformation of the natural but private expressions of Writer-Based thought into a structure and style adapted to a reader" (20).

References to a *Personal Experience* of the student author occurred in eight student papers. Students who referenced personal experiences often had more total instances of personal reference, likely because they often told stories that were expressed over several sentences. The types of personal experiences expressed ranged from the quotidian ("The other day I was watching a TV show called *Mad Men* when a certain situation reminded me of this essay") to the observational ("Sometimes when I am reading a text or novel, I will notice that I am skipping the exactness of some words or lines, I am not stopping to think about the exact usage and purpose of every word") to the confessional ("My mind is filled with what ifs and exaggerated consequences in a never-ending cycle of torture").

Just as Dr. Roberts-Miller articulated, this kind of writing has considerable value as a method of brainstorming, or as a ritual or warm-up to launch one's self into the often daunting writing process. As she also cautioned, however, this strategy has limits in rhetorical effectiveness. For instance, when John writes,

> Once a teenager myself, I know the structure of peer influence is based on a social hierarchy of interactions,

and Maren offers,

> One of the most solid and concrete examples I can think of is my own personal experience with being a fellow consumer in the Untied State of America,

we can nearly *hear* the students having these thoughts and getting going with their ideas. As readers, though, we are more concerned with where these starting points will lead them.

Finally, only two students made truly *Personal Claims*, wherein—unlike with the broader *General Claims*—the students were the genuine subjects of their assertions. One student, Christina, a student profiled in greater detail later in this paper, makes a *Personal Claim* in parallel to a claim by author Langston Hughes. She writes:

> Just as Hughes urged black poets to draw on their heritage as a source of strength, I must also look at my anxiety disorder as a source of strength.

With this *Personal Claim*, Christina is demonstrating her ability both to synthesize the author's position and to relate it to her own life. In relation to an article about race and identity, Maren, the only other student who made personal claims, concluded,

> I am a person that has had the opportunity to consume so many different things from so many different cultures thus making me an "individual melting pot."

Though both Christina's and Maren's claims are equally "personal" self-disclosures, Maren's claim is significantly less critical and not closely tied to the literature, creating, I would argue, a less effective assertion.

Thus, this empirical look at students' use of personal references both offers insight into the Bartholomae/Elbow debate and complicates it. First and foremost, and despite any traditional proscriptions, three-quarters of students' papers included the personal pronoun "I." However, first-person sentences made up only a very small percentage of total sentences in the data set (13 percent). Also significant is that the most common type of personal writing was not really personal at all: students make *General Claims* that begin with "I" or "my" as a stylistic—but not semantic—choice. Additionally, the highly personal confessional writing that scholars usually use when defining "personal writing" was very much an anomaly in this sample. Only one student, Christina, wrote a paper that would fit into this category. On the other hand, this may suggest that students do not feel they have the academic authority to make *Personal Claims* or reference a *Personal Experience*. Finally, the prevalence of students' employment of the idea-building *Writer-Based prose* suggests that this "debate" should be expanded to examine the writing process, not only the writing product.

Five Case Studies

While the data collected in this study offers an important look at the statistical frequency and variety of students' personal reference use, case studies can provide important insight that numbers alone cannot. The following four case studies, presented from relative essay weakness to relative essay strength, help to illustrate the rhetorical intentions of students' personal writing, and to examine the effects of such writing. Table 3 shows how frequently each student used personal references from each of the five categories in their papers. Table 3 also shows what percentage of sentences in a student's paper contained personal references. Table 4 illustrates the students' proportional use of each type of personal reference in their papers. The fifth and final case study demonstrates a students' careful avoidance of personal reference, and analyzes the effects of this choice.

Table 3: *Case Studies: Number of Personal References Per Paper, by Type*

	General Claims	**Prior Knowledge**	**Writer-Based Prose**	**Personal Experience**	**Personal Claim**	**Total Personal Reference**	**Total Paper Sentences**	**Percentage "Personal"**
Sally	3		6	5		14	36	38.9%
Jocelyn	2	1	2	1		6	43	14.0%
Jocelyn (2)	2		2			4	37	10.8%
Maren	3		1			4	35	11.4%
Maren (2)				5	3	8	24	33.3%
Christina	1		2	26	13	42	55	76.4%
Marina						0	48	0.0%

Table 4: ***Case Studies: Proportion of Personal References by Type***

	General Claims	**Prior Knowledge**	**Writer-Based Prose**	**Personal Experience**	**Personal Claim**
Sally	0.21		0.43	0.36	
Jocelyn	0.33	0.17	0.33	0.17	
Jocelyn (2)	0.50		0.50		
Maren				0.62	0.38
Maren (2)	0.75		0.25		
Christina	0.02		0.05	0.62	0.31
Marina					

N=1

SALLY

Sally, a college junior, wrote a paper in response to Leslie Fiedler's critical essay "Come to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!," a work that suggests an underlying homoeroticism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Sally made numerous references to herself in her paper; in fact, excluding the three *General Claims* that included personal pronouns, just over 30 percent of the sentences (or 11 of 36) in Sally's short paper were explicitly about Sally (Table 3). Sally was almost equally likely to write about herself in *Writer-Based prose* (six sentences) as she was to invoke a *Personal Experience* (five sentences). Through her *Writer-Based prose,* Sally takes the reader along with her as she relates how she watches the television program *Mad Men*, becomes reminded of Fiedler's essay, subsequently questions the relationship between two male characters, and finally, decides that there is nothing romantic going on between the two characters. Sally writes that she then continues to watch the series and explains, "Then a couple of episodes later in the season something happened that changed my whole perspective." The two male characters did develop a sexual relationship, and despite wondering about this possibility in prior episodes, Sally conveys her surprise to her readers: "I was shocked because everything I once thought was proved wrong." Sally draws a parallel between the relationships of Tom and Huck and the two characters on *Mad Men*, and because of this connection, she comes to find Fiedler's perspective not only *not* homophobic, as another critic she referenced suggests, but also, plausible. Sally explains,

> I now feel that boys or men getting together to become friends does not always mean they are flirting, but it could sometimes. . . . Even if Fiedler's notion was not right, I like how it made me think and see Huck and Jim in a different way.

Though Sally does use some of the strategies recommended in the professor's prompt (indeed, she "makes a connection using a text studied" and she then "agree[s] with a writer and extend his or her ideas with [her] own examples"), her paper feels like it is just skimming the surface of major ideas. We as readers get to watch Sally's ideas develop, and we follow her almost stream-of-consciousness writing until she comes to her conclusions. Though there is something somewhat exciting about "going along for the ride" with Sally, the paper reads like it is getting Sally *ready* to write the paper this *should* become. This "replay of the writer's discovery process" is setting up Sally to analyze these discoveries, to examine the significance of finding a 21st century television example that relates to a 1948 literary essay and a novel from 1885, and to look critically at why she suspected there was a romantic relationship between the two male television characters, decided against it, and then ultimately found her hunch proven true (Flower 19). Though Flower would agree that Sally's paper "does have an inner logic of its own," it requires significant revisions because "the reader is forced to do most of the thinking, sorting the wheat from the chaff and drawing ideas out of details" (25). If Sally can learn to recognize her *Writer-Based prose*, she can learn to transform her burgeoning ideas into a more sophisticated, persuasive, audience-oriented essay.

JOCELYN

College sophomore Jocelyn wrote an essay exploring whether contemporary women are still bound by the “angel” and “monster” roles that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar outline in their foundational work, *The Madwoman in the Attic.* Outside of making two impersonal *General Claims* that will not be further analyzed, Jocelyn showed the most variety of any of the other students in terms of the types of self-reference used, making references in each of the *Writer-Based Prose, Personal Experience* and *Prior Knowledge* categories (Table 4). Early in her paper, Jocelyn shares her *Prior Knowledge* about the angel-monster dichotomy:

> Ever since I was born, or at least as far as I can remember, women have been seen like this for a long time.

Because Jocelyn is framing this as a memory, she does not need to “prove” what she is saying with any research or citation; the effect, though, is a vague and hollow sentence. In a way, it feels sloppy—could she offer explicit examples of women being categorized this way? Could she trace feminist theory’s continued use (or abandonment) of this angle-monster dichotomy? Granted, this assignment called for a two-page critical essay—research was neither required nor expected (though students were invited to look at outside sources)—but Jocelyn’s reliance on a loose memory is insufficient for a final draft. Later on in the paper, Jocelyn asserts:

> Young women dream of being models; I know this because I wanted [to] be one too.

Again, Jocelyn is using her localized experience/prior knowledge to make a huge generalization about women. Though in all likelihood, her readers would agree that a number of young women do aspire to be models, Jocelyn's evidence—her own desire to be a model—proves a faulty logic. In one of her paper's concluding sentences, Jocelyn writes,

> From listening to others, as well as to the professor, I feel as if no one is truly able to rationalize whether the question of "angels" or "monsters" is still used today.

In the first part of the sentence, "From listening to others, as well as to the professor," Jocelyn is using *Writer-Based prose* to illustrate how people in this literature course have influenced her thinking on this topic; however, by naming such a local group, Jocelyn makes clear that she sees a very limited scope for her paper's audience. Finally, though Jocelyn's assertion in the latter part of this sentence, "I feel as if no one is truly able to rationalize whether the question of 'angels' or 'monsters' is still used today," is rather superficial, it is bolstered to some degree by her making it personal—it is harder to call the sentence empty, hollow or an example of hedging because Jocelyn has indicated that *she* believes it. If I comment on the vagueness of this statement, will Jocelyn feel that I am calling her thinking weak? Does this presence of "I" demand a different sensitivity in grading? The difficulty this subjectivity can pose in our evaluation of student work will be further discussed in the conclusion section of this paper.

MAREN

Maren, one of only two students to make genuinely *Personal Claims*, wrote a paper on the topic of identity. Though Maren uses a popular press article assigned to the class as the subject of her argument, her statement of subject is the only explicit reference to a piece of literature in the entire paper. Her thesis statement reads as follows:

> In the article 'Who Says a White Band Can't Play Rap?,' the author, Joe Wood, claims that what you consume has a direct correlation with who you are as a person. The idea that 'you are what you consume' is something that can be seen in our everyday lives and even experienced by every one of us individually.

Because of this wide focus, which fails to "develop fully an interesting, insightful, tightly focused argument that engages a text we've read and/or talked about thus far" as the essay prompt asks, Maren's examples feels scattershot—she references both her own upbringing as a Jordanian-born American and the popularity of rap music with white audiences. Thus, when Maren writes,

> However I take a look at myself today and realize that I am so much more than just another Jordanian girl that can speak Arabic, cook Arabic foods, and be well aware of the Middle-Eastern culture,

I am interested, but not persuaded that it is essential to her paper. Responding to Maren's personal experience—which is something she had not previously shared with me—like Jocelyn's paper, will require a heightened sensitivity.

CHRISTINA

The next case study subject, Christina, a junior, had the highest number of personal references in her paper—and by a landslide. Indeed, in her profoundly personal essay, Christina made 42 explicit references to herself (making up more than 75 percent of all total sentences). Like Maren, Christina focused on identity issues, comparing her own challenges with an anxiety disorder to Langston Hughes's discussion of the different tenets of his identity. (In his essay "Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes rails against an unnamed black poet who says, "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet") (n.p). In the first half of her essay, Christina describes in painful detail how an anxiety disorder affects her daily life—confessing that her

> mind is filled with what ifs and exaggerated consequences in a never-ending cycle of torture,

and that she is

> living in fear of this overdue English paper.

Christina then explains how she used to resent her anxiety as a barrier to her success, likening herself to the very poet Hughes criticizes (in that she wanted to be simply a great student, not a student who was great *in light* of her anxiety disorder). Christina admits:

> I believe I am smart and I am proud of my accomplishments, but sometimes I feel that if I did not have ADHD then I would be significantly better in academics.

In the second half of the paper, Christina connects her experiences to the struggles that Hughes faced, and uses his attitude toward his identity—that we cannot and should not escape where we come from—to reshape her views. She explains that the challenges of her anxiety disorder have given her an exceptional work ethic, a tenacity in studying, and a resiliency that lets her thrive in difficult settings.

Unlike most students in this sample, Christina makes truly *Personal Claims*. The claims are about her, not simply attributed to her with an "I think" or an "I feel." This, I argue, is in part what gives this essay a rhetorical power that other papers containing self-references lacked—Christina uses "I" with purpose, not as filler. Further, she makes a compelling comparison between her own life and ideas from Hughes's essay, and drives that connection home as the essay progresses. In fact, she concludes by saying:

> So I stand firm with Langston Hughes. We should not blame our inherent characteristics for our troubles, but instead embrace them and know the strength that they give us. Just as Hughes did this with his race, I am doing with my learning style.

This direct and sustained connection to a piece of literature also strengthens this paper by giving it an organized framework and scope.

MARINA

Finally, our last case study, Marina, was selected because of the total absence of personal references in her paper (as previously mentioned, only eight out of 30 total papers contained no personal references). Marina's paper raises other important issues in this debate as it illustrates her careful and conspicuous avoidance of *Personal Claims*. Further, examining her paper helps to fill in what numbers gloss over—the complexity of abiding by the “Don’t use I” dictate is not revealed in numeric coding (indeed, with zero personal references, Marina’s paper was not part of the analyzed data).

Like Christina, Marina writes in response to Langston Hughes. In her paper, Marina uses the experience of Asian-Americans to illustrate the rigidity of ethnic categories and expectations. She writes:

> Some second generation Asian Americans cannot speak their native languages and know nothing about their native culture. Yet, they are not seen as “whites.” In fact, others expect Asian Americans to know their language and may even look down at them for the fact that they do no speak their native tongue. The Asian Americans who were able to keep some of their culture and knew the language would judge the Asian Americans who tried to assimilate fully. This results in assimilated Asian Americans not fitting well into either category . . . . This causes Asian American to never really find their cultural identities.

This example reads as if Marina is fighting every urge to talk about her own experience with this kind of identity struggle or the experience of someone she knows. By *not* citing a specific person or example, however, Marina ends up trying to speak for *all* Asian-Americans, and makes sweeping and unsupported generalizations. This example undermines the notion that impersonal papers are inherently more academically successful or appropriate.

IV. CONCLUSION

Results from this study support previous anecdotal findings that students write about themselves in their academic writing—and the results suggest that they do this with frequency. More significant, though, is the striking diversity in this so-called "personal" writing, which ranges from basic claims that include a prefatory "I feel" to highly reflective private disclosures. Interestingly, results from this study support *both* positions in the Bartholomae/Elbow debate. The commonly used *General Claims*, wherein students tack on a throwaway personal tag, *are* examples of ineffective personal writing, and certainly do little to develop a student's voice. Conversely, the personal disclosures made by students in *Personal Claims* or references to their *Personal Experiences* are *not* inherently informal or unacademic—in fact, skillful use of these categories requires a particularly strong understanding of a text or concept, and offers persuasive rhetorical possibilities. Indeed, the oversimplified clash over personal and academic writing, too static for too long, needs to be expanded to examine these different types of expressive writing and particularly, the rhetorical effect of each. It is far more nuanced than simply using personal pronouns.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM & FUTURE RESEARCH

How should this evidence of students' use of personal references in their responses to literature influence our pedagogies? Most basically, personal pronoun usage needs to be incorporated into a larger discussion of the rhetorical situation. In "Ethos Versus Persona," professor Roger D. Cherry traces the historic distinctions between ethos and persona, argues against the commonplace conflation of these terms, and highlights the power of self-representation in a given rhetorical situation. Cherry explains that self-representation in writing is:

> a subtle and complex multidimensional phenomenon that skilled writers control and manipulate to their rhetorical advantage. Decisions about self-portrayal are not independent, but vary according to the way in which writers characterize their audience and other facets of the rhetorical situation. (n.p.)

In the same way that we as instructors need to recognize distinctions between the different types of personal reference—rather than naming all use of "I" in papers as "highly personal"—we also need to help students distinguish among these different types of personal writing, and recognize the strengths, weaknesses, and appropriateness of each for a given rhetorical situation. This attention to rhetorical situation is emphasized by Davida Charney and Christine Neuwirth in their textbook *Having Your Say: Reading and Writing Public Arguments*. The authors note: "For example, your professors probably prefer appeals to logos over appeals to pathos, while the general public responds more to arguments with many pathos appeals" (67). We need to help students make similar considerations in determining the contexts where personal references—and which types—might be welcomed or discouraged. For instance, the personalization of *General Claims* with "I think" or "I feel" should be pointed out as a generally hollow and redundant stylistic technique, while the strategic inclusion of a *Personal Experience* should be highlighted as having persuasive possibilities, depending on the given rhetorical situation.

Further, emphasizing the usefulness of *Writer-Based prose* as a drafting or prewriting technique, as well as its ineffectiveness in one's final product, may also help students. Flower explains that helping students see this distinction can benefit their writing and even their morale:

> Teaching writers to recognize their own Writer-Based writing and transform it has a number of advantages. It places a strong positive value on writing that represents an effort and achievement for the writer even though it fails to communicate to the reader. This legitimate recognition of the uncommunicated content of Writer-Based prose can give anyone, but especially inexperienced writers, the confidence and motivation to go on. (37)

As briefly discussed previously, evaluating students' personal writing can be challenging. How can we make clear, in feedback and assessment, that weakness in the way a piece of *Prior Knowledge* is shared or a *Personal Experience* is discussed is not an indictment of that knowledge or that experience? When Maren asserts that she is "so much more than just another Jordanian girl that can speak Arabic, cook Arabic foods, and be well aware of the Middle-Eastern culture"—how do I encourage her to develop that idea or to question its rhetorical appropriateness for her paper topic without diminishing the identity work she is trying to do? Similarly, while Christina's paper skillfully and persuasively connected her *Personal Experience* to the writing of Langston Hughes, which demonstrated a strong understanding of Hughes's challenging essay, what if it had not? What if she had shared such personal information and it had not "worked"? Is it harder to assign a low grade to a paper when a student has shared so much about herself? Though all students deserve thoughtful feedback, the idea that personal writing demands more nuanced evaluation raises another question—is it fair to those who write objectively if we are more delicate in responding to those who use personal pronouns? Conversely, and returning to a primary concern of the Bartholomae/Elbow debate, are our responses to personal writing less academically beneficial?

Though highly personal writing was found to be quite uncommon in the papers examined for this study (unlike the confessional or sensational nature of most examples given in scholarship about personal writing), such disclosures—however infrequent—do raise issues of responsibility and safety. Should it be up to professors to discern through students' personal writing whether they are reaching out for help or simply trying out a stylistic technique? Does writing, by its expressive nature, demand that composition and literature teachers be prepared to make those kinds of judgment calls? When Christina explained that her "mind is filled with what ifs and exaggerated consequences in a never-ending cycle of torture," and that the "panic, worry and loss of sleep wracks on [her]," should I have stepped in to offer help or at least a listening ear? Should I have suggested she see a counselor? Should I have encouraged her to talk to her academic advisor? Or, should I have trusted from her paper's conclusion that she has found peace with her anxiety disorder, and that she recognizes how she is strengthened by it? Scholars have approached this challenge differently, with some calling on teachers to familiarize themselves with their school's mental health and counseling services and the appropriate processes for referrals (Valentino; Berman) and others, like professor Dan Morgan, countering that he has "misgivings about the ethical appropriateness of issuing an unsolicited referral to counseling" and that he has found that "hardly any students have ever welcomed referrals to counseling—or agreed to them" (320; 323).

While the present study has shown the wide range of personal responses, personal references often carry an implicit or explicit emotional undercurrent, and future research should examine students' expressivism in light of scholarship on emotion and affect. In "Moved by 'Their' Words: Emotion and the Participant Observer," Mary Ann Cain helps fill in why the emotionality of personal responses can be so problematic for professors and scholars:

> We tend to regard feelings as "personal" and not subject to critical engagement. Similarly, in Composition scholarship, we either embrace emotions acritically (as in classroom narratives and professional memoirs) as "powerful" or ignore them (as in conventional research) since no "evidence" exists to "prove" an interpretation of a subject's emotions. . . .When we frame the "personal" (and, in turn, emotion) as a problem, as a matter of whether, when and how to include it in scholarly practice, emotions are not only understood as irrelevant to critical engagement, but also make critical engagement with a subject impossible. (54)

Perhaps, as Cain intimates, our academic approach to the personal needs major ideological revisions. And indeed, there are tremendous benefits and possibilities to students experiencing personal responses to literature—feeling students are engaged students, and in a required literature survey course, as was examined in this study, I cannot think of a better end result. In *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation*, Susan L. Feagin explains:

> Having emotional and other affective responses to a work of fictional literature is a very important part of appreciating it, and the capacity of a work to provide such responses is part of what is valuable about it. Those who appreciate a work of literature typically become involved with it and respond to it. (1)

If we believe that students' personal and sometimes emotional responses to literature signify interest, analysis, and thoughtfulness, do we need to provide an outlet for such responses in writing? If so, should such writing be distinct from critical evaluations of a text? Cain points out the academic limitations—for students, professors, and the field of composition studies—of not valuing personal responses:

> Yet when scholarly practices preclude critical engagement with the emotional, they also deny the pedagogical aspects of all discursive exchanges, including those between researchers and subjects. In Composition Studies, such a denial seriously limits our profession's ability to more fully realize the interrelationships between theory and practice, and between scholarship, writing, and teaching. (54)

Finally, though this study attempted to begin to describe empirically the frequency with which students use personal pronouns in their writing and the ways in which students write about themselves, much more work needs to be done to update the Bartholomae/Elbow debate and to reexamine the ideas of reader-response criticism. Future research might take up the questions of Penrose and Geisler's study to look for a correlation between novice and expert writers and the use of personal references—is personal writing something we grow out of or grow into? Comparing the grades given to essays that include personal references and those that do not would also be illuminating—do "personal" essays tend to receive higher or lower grades than purely objective ones? In a response to the Bartholomae/Elbow debate in 1995, Don H. Bialostosky observed: "This debate is getting old" (92). The debate, though, is not getting old—rather, it is ripe with new questions and concerns that we owe it to our students to explore.

Appendix: Course Reading List

Works are listed in the order in which they were assigned.

Robert Frost—“The Road Not Taken”
Vladimir Nabokov—“Good Readers and Good Writers”
Robert Frost—“Education By Poetry,” “After Apple Picking”
Steven Johnson—“Metaphor Monopoly”
Perrine—"The Nature of Proof in the Interpretation of Poetry"
Ernest Hemingway—*In Our Time*
Mary McCarthy—"Settling the Colonel's Hash"
Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar—“The Queen’s Looking Glass”
Anne Bradstreet—“The Prologue”
Phillis Wheatley—“On Being Brought from Africa to America”
Nikki Giovanni—“Linkage: To Phillis Wheatley”
David Foster Wallace—2005 Commencement Address
Charlotte Perkins Gilman—“The Yellow Wallpaper”
Charlotte Perkins Gilman—“Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”
Frederick Douglass — *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
T. S. Eliot—“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”
Hilda Doolittle—Selected Poems
Langston Hughes—“The Negro Artist & the Racial Mountain”
Langston Hughes—Selected Poems
Countee Cullen—“Yet Do I Marvel”
Joe Wood—“Who Says a White Band Can’t Play Rap?”
Américo Parédes —"The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez"
Rodolfo Gonzales —"My Name Is Joaqín"
Samuel Clemens—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
Jane Smiley—“Say It Ain’t So, Huck”
Raymond Chandler —“The Simple Art of Murder”
Raymond Chandler —“Red Wind”
Flannery O’Connor —“Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”
Flannery O’Connor —“A Good Man is Hard to Find”
William Faulkner—“Barn Burning”
Quentin Tarantino — *Pulp Fiction*
Toni Morrison— *Sula*
Sandra Cisneros—*The House on Mango Street*
John Sayles—*Lone Star*

References

"Bartholomae's Conversation with Elbow." *Mind Bloggers,* Mind Bloggers, 2009. Web. 7 May 2010.

Bartholomae, David and Peter Elbow. "Responses to Bartholomae and Elbow." *College Composition and Communication* 46.1 (1995): 84-92. *JSTOR.* Web. 11 November 2009.

Berkenkotter, Carol, John Huckin and Thomas N. Ackerman. "Conventions, Conversations, and the Writer: Case Study of a Student in a Rhetoric Ph.D. Program." *Research in the Teaching of English* 22 (1998): 9-43. *JSTOR.* Web. 20 April 2011.

Berman, Jeffrey. *Risky Writing: Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001. Print.

Berman, Jeffrey. "Syllabuses of Risk." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The Chronicle of Higher Education, 15 February 2002. Web. 25 April 2010.

Bialostosky, Don H. "Romantic Resonances." *College Composition and Communication* 46.1 (1995): 97-103. *JSTOR.* Web. 11 November 2009.

"Bumping with Bartholomae." *Compassionate Composition*, Compassionate Composition, 24 February 2009. Web. 27 April 2011.

Cain, Mary Ann. "Moved by 'Their' Words: Emotion and the Participant Observer." *A Way to Move: Rhetoric of Emotion & Composition Studies.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 2003. Print.

Charney, Davida and Christine Neuwirth. *Having Your Say: Reading and Writing Public Arguments*. New York: Pearson, 2006. Print.

Cherry, Roger D. "Ethos Versus Persona: Self-Representation in Written Discourse." *Written Communication* 15.3 (1998): 384-410. *Gale Group*. Web. 2 May 2011.

Coles, William E., Jr., and James Vopat. *What Makes Writing Good*. Lexington: Heath, 1985. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. "Afterword." *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 190-208. Print.

Elbow, Peter. "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries." *College English* 70.2 (2007): 168-188.

Faigley, Lester. "Judging Writing, Judging Selves." *College Composition and Communication* 40.4 (1989): 395-412. *JSTOR.* Web. 20 April 2011.

Feagin, Susan L. *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. Print.

Flower, Linda. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." *College English*, 41.1 (1979): 19-37.

Herrington, Anne J. "Composing One's Self in a Discipline: Students' and Teachers' Negotiations." *Constructing Rhetorical Education.* Ed. Marie Secor and Davida Charney. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992. 91-115.

Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Nation.* 23 June 1926.

Johnson, T.R. *A Rhetoric of Pleasure: Prose Style and Today's Composition Classroom*. Portsmouth: Heinemann-Boynton-Cook, 2003. Print.

Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Print

Laird, Ellen A. "OK, So I'm Not Joyce Carol Oates." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The Chronicle of Higher Education, 31 October 2008. Web. 25 April 2010.

Lehrer, Jonah. *Proust Was a Neuroscientist.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007. Print.

Mailloux, Stephen. *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982. 9-228. Print.

Mlynarczyk, Rebecca Williams. "Personal and Academic: Revisiting the Debate." *Journal of Basic Writing* 25.1 (2006): 4-25. Web. 13 November 2009.

Morgan, Dan. "Ethical Issues Raised by Students' Personal Writing." *College English* 60.3 (1998): 318-326.

Paley, Karen Surman. *I Writing: The Politics and Practice of Teaching First-Person Writing.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2001. Print.

Penrose, Ann M. and Cheryl Geisler. "Reading and Writing Without Authority." *College Composition and Communication* 45.4 (1994): 505-520. Print.

Richards, I.A. *Practical Criticism*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1929. Print.

Roberts-Miller, Trish. "Craft of Scholarly Writing, a Work in Progress." *The Land Tramples with Dancing*, The Land Tramples with Dancing, 2011. 4 January 2011. Web. 20 April 2011.

Robillard, Amy E. "It's Time for Class: Toward a More Complex Pedagogy of

Narrative." *College English* 66.1 "Special Issue: The Personal in Academic Writing (2003): 74-92. *JSTOR.* Web. 20 April 2010.

Rosenblatt, Louise. *Literature as Exploration*. New York: Appleton-Century: 1938. Print.

---. *The Reader, The Text, the Poem*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1978. Print.

Strunk, Jr., William and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style* (4th Ed). Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999 [1919]. 23. Print.

Tobin, Lad. "Process Pedagogy." *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*. Ed. Gary Tate, Amy Rupiper, and Kurt Schick. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 10-14. Print.

Valentino, Marilyn J. "Responding When a Life Depends on It: What to Write in the Margins When Students Self-Disclose." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 23 (1996): 274-83.

Zunshine, Lisa. *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Print.