

Gender Differences

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n What Makes Writing Good?

leading English teachers identify examples of student writing as excellent.¹ Not surprisingly, 75 percent of the pieces so judged are autobiographical.

Personal essays have long been at the heart of assignments in writing classes at the elementary, secondary, and higher levels of education. Teachers of fiction-writing usually encourage their students to write about things they know rather than about remote topics with which they have little acquaintance. Some thoughtful critics contend that all fiction is in essence autobiographical.

Linda H. Peterson, a researcher from Yale University, has explored how gender differences are reflected in autobiographical writing.² She studied the essays of two groups: in the first group were students representing 10 states and 2 foreign countries, as well as diverse racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds; in the second group were 18 students, "predominantly from Utah, approximately three-quarters with Mormon backgrounds." The male/female mix in each group was about equal.

Male and female readers — each knowledgeable in rhetorical theory — evaluated the essays in terms of (1) *significance* (Does the writer understand the significance of the event and communicate it effectively to the reader?); (2) *clarity* (Does the writer render the episode and its context in a clear, coherent way?); and (3) *richness of detail* (Does the writer use exam-

ples and details to depict the episode and make it interesting to the reader?).

The findings have significant implications for teachers of English at all levels because they point to noticeable differences in the ways males and females approach autobiographical writing. They may also provide clues to student preferences in reading and suggest that some students may be judged unfairly when their autobiographical writing is evaluated.

This research reveals that female writers approaching autobiographical assignments almost always focus on what Peterson terms "relational" matters, the relationship of the writer to other people or to groups. Males, on the other hand, generally focus on topics that relate "to the self alone, the self as distinct from others." Peterson attributes this disparity to differences in the way boys and girls are raised and how they perceive themselves.

Attempting to test Peterson's findings, I turned to *Speaking for Ourselves*,³ a collection of brief autobiographical statements written by 87 authors of books for young adults. I opened at random to six autobiographical sketches, three by women (Judy Blume, Vera A. Cleaver, and Paula Danzinger), three by men (Christopher Collier, Robert Cormier, and Paul Zindel) in an attempt to test a theory of which I was somewhat skeptical.

What Peterson said holds true essentially for each of the authors whose sketches I read. Judy Blume describes both places she has lived and members of her family, some of whom she mentions by name. Vera Cleaver writes about her late husband and about her father and grandfather. Paula Danzinger tells how having John Ciardi as a teacher and becoming close to him and his family helped to mold her as a writer.

On the other hand, Christopher

Collier tells about his growing up as a series of events, as challenges that he meets alone and conquers. He mentions no other person in his sketch except, fleetingly, his brother, and then only to explain how he came to write his first book. Robert Cormier identifies himself in some of his fictional characters and tells about the impact that historical events like the Kennedy assassination had on him as a writer. He writes nary a word about any other human being who helped to shape his life. Paul Zindel deviates only slightly from this pattern. His essay essentially chronicles his accomplishments and how his early life impacted on them, but he mentions no family or friends. The exception occurs when he mentions his high school English teacher, Miss Burger, who threatened suicide when her students misbehaved, but this relational comment is quite unlike that found in the sketches of the female authors in that Zindel uses it as the impetus to tell a story.

Peterson's article is significant because it illustrates the ways in which gender differences subtly affect human reactions to events and to student performance. Interpretation of events and of performance is, according to Peterson, much determined by one's gender, a fact that teachers cannot ignore when they assess student work. □

¹W. E. Coles and J. Vopat, (1985), *What Makes Writing Good?*. (Lexington, Mass.: Heath).

²L. H. Peterson, (May 1991), "Gender and the Autobiographical Essay," *College Composition and Communication* 42, 170-183.

³D. Gallo: Compiler and Editor, (1990), *Speaking for Ourselves*. (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English).

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