"SORRY, BUT I SUCK AT WRITING": A STUDY OF WRITING SELF-EFFICACY
IN FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

MARY-ELIZABETH GREENE. "Sorry, but I suck at writing": a study of writing confidence in first-year college students. (Under the direction of DR. JOAN MULLIN)

In this study, current research on writing self-efficacy—"confidence that one can perform successfully in a particular domain" (Bruning 25)—and data from a local survey of first-year college students, or freshmen, is used to examine dispositions towards writing abilities among students tagged as "advanced" and "average." Two studies were conducted, the first with 62 freshmen in first-year writing courses and the second with 26 freshmen enrolled in a jump-start summer program. The first study found that the majority of the students reported a lack of confidence in their writing skills and largely identified as basic writers; the second study's results were the opposite. This dichotomy between writing self-efficacy in students labeled in university writing placement testing as "average" versus students labeled as "advanced" raises questions about labeling and writing performance. The study concludes with a call for further research regarding pedagogical strategies that promote writing confidence regardless of the students' assumed ability.

DEDICATION

I want to first dedicate this thesis to my parents, Ray and Nancy Greene, who have always pushed me to be the best that I can be. It makes me incredibly happy to know that I have made them proud. They also have infinite patience with how much I have talked through my ideas with them; they calmly listened to me and offered what opinions they could, even when they barely understood what I was talking about. Secondly, I would like to dedicate this to my brother, Joshua Greene, whose thoughts can be just as crazy and disorganized as my own. He has helped me several times to navigate the labyrinth of my mind and is a constant encouragement. While I have thought that I would be perfectly happy as an only child several times, there is really no living without him.

Next on this dedication list is my absolute best friend in the whole world: Laura Schroeder. She has always kept me on track and, even though she lives two hours away, she will always make time for me to vent about the frustrations of life and graduate school. My roommate, Hannah Foxworth, is also highly deserving of dedication. She has lived with me through the insanity of writing this thesis, which is truly a heroic feat. Through promises to remind me to eat and to take me on walks when I have not seen the sun in a while, she has been the reason for my continued sanity.

My sanity has also been kept intact through the commitment to a fun, stress-free, and completely supportive working environment with my Thesis Writing Support Group. Each Tuesday, we met in the library and wrote our little hearts out for hours, taking well-deserved breaks to appreciate the presence of GIFs, memes, and—most important of all—cats on the internet. We laughed together, which is quite arguably the best therapy possible), became frustrated together, and asked each other a thousand questions. I could

not have asked for a better group of ladies to share the journey with: Alex Batty, Taryn Dollings, Kelsey Helveston, Lora Beth Johnson, Amanda Loeffert, and Hannah Mayfield.

I would like to thank my friends, co-workers, and mentors, who have all been wonderful in acting as editors, sounding boards, and life support: "Other" Beth Caruso, Leah Cauley, Chris "Attila" Harrington, Son Huynh, Suzanne Ingram, Jessi Morton, Olivia Rines, Jenn Vogt, Breanne Weber, and Kerin Weston.

Finally, there are two professors I would like to dedicate this thesis to. The first is my long-time mentor and thesis committee member, Dr. Meg Morgan. Meg changed my life when, as my undergrad advisor, she introduced me to the Comp/Rhet track when I thought I was doomed to study and teach Literature (no offense to my Lit friends). Since that time, she's been encouraging and supporting me to no end, helping me from the very beginning to make this thesis a reality. The second professor is Dr. James H. McGavran, or Dr. McG as I called him. I had the honor of taking several classes with him during my time as an undergrad and as a graduate student. When he passed away in December of 2014 shortly after I'd finished what would be my final class with him, it was devastating. He was a wonderful professor who always pushed me to go further, to try harder, to look deeper. When I applied for graduation this semester, I requested a copy of the recommendation letter he'd written for me to get into grad school, something he agreed to do enthusiastically. Reading about how proud he was of me and the high hopes he had for me gave me the final push I needed to finish strong in my Masters program. I hope to continue making both Meg and Dr. McG proud as I step fully into the academic world.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAC	Communication across the Curriculum
CxC	Communication across the Curriculum (UNC Charlotte Acronym)
FYW	First-Year Writing
UTOP	University Transition Opportunities Program
UWP	University Writing Program
WRC	Writing Resources Center

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: CONFIDENCE IN WRITING

Confidence is an important trait to have as a writer; unfortunately, many first-year college students lack this trait. For writers, they need to believe in themselves and their abilities in order to create a successful text, to put their ideas into writing, to share their pieces, and to humbly receive feedback. Student writers are generally forced to complete tasks for graded assignments regardless of whether or not they have the confidence to do so effectively. This lack of confidence can then produce several things: poor quality, indifference, and heightened apprehension and/or anxiety. Furthermore, it appears that students labeled as "average"[1] in university writing placement testing and SAT scores are more likely to experience this lack of confidence than their "advanced"[2] counterparts. This phenomenon has led me to explore existing literature on confidence in writing and to use data from a survey of UNC Charlotte freshmen to further examine whether students tagged as average and advanced have the same dispositions towards their writing abilities.

Beginning in the 1970s, one of the major research interests in the composition field has been writing self-efficacy. To date, the majority of this research has focused on how factors such as anxiety and apprehension affect student confidence in writing and what connections exist between writing self-efficacy and performance. My review of current literature found only one study to mine: Zimmerman and Bandura, in their 1994 article

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[1] Average: students who have been placed into the basic first-year writing course
[2] Advanced: students who have been placed into the advanced—sometimes combined or accelerated—first-year writing course

titled "Impact of Self-Regulatory Influences on Writing Course Attainment," collected data from students in a regular composition course as well as from students in an advanced course. However, the aim of their study—to observe the "role of self-efficacy beliefs concerning the academic attainment and regulation of writing, academic goals, and self-standards on writing course achievement" (845)—differs greatly from the present study's goals: to observe and measure student writing attitudes, self-efficacy, and self-evaluation of writing abilities.

For my research, I conducted two studies with first-year college students: one with 62 students placed in average first-year writing courses[3] and the other with 26 students enrolled in a jump-start summer program for underrepresented entering freshmen.[4] The first study found that the majority of the students reported a lack of confidence in their writing skills and largely identified as basic writers; in contrast, the second study's results were the opposite, revealing a dichotomy between the two groups in terms of writing confidence levels.

The main title for my thesis, "Sorry, but I Suck at Writing," is a phrase that I have heard several times as a tutor in UNC Charlotte's Writing Resources Center (WRC), where I worked for two years, as well as from my own first-year writing (FYW) students. Sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students: students from all levels, from different majors and backgrounds, have described their writing skill in such a crude manner. However, the majority of the students who tell me they "suck" at writing are freshman, or first-year college students. This is usually followed by a great deal of

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[3] UNC Charlotte's UWRT 1101: Writing and Inquiry in Academic Contexts I
[4] UNC Charlotte's University Transition Opportunities Programs (UTOP), the goal of which is "to facilitate the underrepresented student's transition from high school to college"

confusion on my part when, upon looking at the students' papers, I simply cannot understand why they hold such a negative opinion of their writing skills; usually, their writing is strong with few mechanical errors, good transitional flow from paragraph to paragraph, and thoughtful expression of content knowledge.

My initial reaction is to assure these students that, contrary to their personal opinions, they do not "suck" at writing, but are instead doing quite well and are headed in the right direction for their assignments. Imagine my confusion when, more often than not, they quickly and sternly disagree with me. These students are absolutely adamant about their negative disposition towards their writing skills to the point that no matter what I say, either as an experienced writing tutor or as their instructor, they absolutely refuse to believe me. These encounters have led me to wonder how epidemic this phenomenon of low self-efficacy and denial is and, later on, how students assess themselves in terms of writing ability.

1.1   Current Confidence Levels

Over the past decade, Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, a consulting firm that works with colleges through assessment and fundraising, has conducted annual national research studies of college students. For their National Freshman Attitudes Reports, they survey students regarding a number of aspects that affect college readiness, including study habits, financial support, career paths, openness to receiving help, and academic confidence. In the 2013 National Freshman Attitudes Report, "103,756 incoming, first-year college students at 306 colleges and universities nationwide" were surveyed (3). For the aggregate results, students were split into two main categories: what type of college they attend, whether it is a four-year private institution, a four-year public institution, or a two-year

public or private institution; and first-generation college students versus non-first-generation college students.

The report surveyed 100 items, including questions related to academic confidence, study habits, desire to graduate, openness to receiving academic assistance, and career-related questions. Two of these items, both from the verbal confidence category, stood out: "I am capable of writing a very clear and well-organized paper" and "I have difficulty organizing my ideas in a paper, and I tend to make a lot of punctuation and grammar mistakes." The results show that 61.9% of incoming freshman at a four-year public institution reported feeling capable of writing a clear and well-organized paper while 32.5% reported having difficulty with organization and grammar.

In the 2014 National Freshman Attitudes Report, which surveyed 100,727 incoming students with the same 100-item survey, Noel-Levitz found that 62.8% of four-year public institution students reported being capable of writing a clear, well-organized paper, a 0.9% increase from the 2013 report. For the organization and grammar difficulties item, there was a 1.4% decrease to 31.1% (6). The 2014 Report then went on to survey students again in the 2014 Changes in Attitudes Report, which aimed to study the changes from the beginning of the semester to the "midpoint." Of students enrolled in four-year public institutions, 61.9% reported feeling capable of writing a very clear and well-organized paper. When surveyed again halfway through the semester, 77.6% of students agreed with that statement, resulting in a 15.7% increase. Unfortunately, the report fails to mention whether any of the original 61.9% changed their answers from "agree" to "disagree" at the midpoint (6).

These reports show that freshmen are coming into the writing classroom feeling more prepared for writing than their predecessors. The Changes Report also shows that student confidence increases during the semester. However, there are still 22.4% of students who feel less than confident in their writing skills. The reports then fail to explain what percentage of students started out as confident and then became less so, an oversight due to their strict focus on detailing student success. To better explain the value of these figures, we first must look at the value of writing self-efficacy.

<p align="center">1.2 Importance of Self-efficacy in Writing</p>

Having confidence means that you believe in yourself. Therefore, having writing confidence means that you believe in your skills as a writer. Furthermore, it can be reasonably argued that nearly all careers require at least basic writing skills and that a major form of communication is via email, which requires clear, concise writing in order to present oneself as an intelligent, educated person. Finally, confidence in these skills can help people to reach heights beyond the college classroom and into their careers.

Dr. Reza Hasmath from the University of Melbourne's School of Social and Political Sciences led a study in which she interviewed over 100 "professional staff in large corporations in Melbourne, New York and Toronto." The results indicate that a strong correlation exists between confidence and occupational success. According to the study, participants "who self-reported higher levels of confidence earlier in school earned better wages, and were promoted more quickly" ("Self-Confidence" para. 3).

This idea of confidence having a role in success can be transferred into the academic realm. Writing self-efficacy in several studies conducted over the last couple of decades— some of which I discuss in detail below—has been linked to success in the classroom,

oftentimes the college classroom. It has generally been found that higher levels of writing self-efficacy have a positive correlation to proficiency, quality, and performance. In their article, "Writing Essays: Does Self-efficacy Matter? The Relationship between Self-efficacy in Reading and in Writing and Undergraduate Students' Performance in Essay Writing," Merce Prat-Sala and Paul Redford explain that "[i]n higher education, where students typically enter with relatively high levels of academic skills, efficacy beliefs could be a key factor in educational performance" (9). In FYW, this translates to higher confidence, which likely leads to improved writing skills, a notion supported with significant research. Roger Bruning, Michael Dempsey, Douglas F. Kauffman, Courtney McKim, and Sharon Zumbrunn outline several reports linking self-efficacy to performance and achievement in the beginning of their article, "Examining Dimensions of Self-Efficacy for Writing." All researchers noted—McCarthy et al., Shell et al., Pajares et al., and Zimmerman et al.—found a clear relationship between writing efficacy beliefs and writing performance.

Success in writing can then reasonably feed into other academic and, later, career success. If writers have confidence in what and how they write, whether this is in an important email, a report, or a proposal, then that confidence is likely to impact other aspects of communication, generating greater success. Taking this chain of events into consideration, writing confidence can impact students outside of the FYW classroom as well; writing confidence can positively impact students as they graduate our universities and transition into their chosen fields. However, there are some hurdles students must work through in order to become truly confident in their writing.

1.3   Factors That Affect Confidence

Confidence can be a rather fragile trait, one that takes a considerable amount of time to build up yet can be torn down quickly. It is also common knowledge that self-confidence can be broken down by such factors as negative body image and bullying. Just as these factors can severely impact a person's self-confidence, these terms can be connected to writing issues to help explain how writing confidence is similarly affected.

Body image issues morph into self-perceived writing quality issues that can be found in weak vocabulary, transitions, and organization; essentially, how the paper looks, specifically to the writer but to others as well. Bullying, on the other hand, comes in the form of harsh, negative feedback, which can easily dishearten even seasoned writers. As with self-confidence, these instances can lead to experiencing apprehension, anxiety, negative attitude, and low performance. First, we will look at the effects apprehension, anxiety, and attitude can have on writing self-efficacy.

1.3.1   Apprehension, Anxiety, and Attitude

Apprehension is a student's fear of writing when they are certain that they will have to write in a class. Anxiety is quite similar to apprehension, but is a somewhat vague feeling in that it is brought about by the fear that writing in a class may occur. Attitude can be affected and can affect both of these feelings and can be defined as how a student feels about writing. The relationship between self-efficacy, writing, and such correlating factors as apprehension, anxiety, and attitude is cyclical in nature, which can lead into a downward or upward spiral. Having apprehension towards writing and a negative outlook on the task can contribute to lower writing self-efficacy. Alternatively, having less confidence in

writing can heighten apprehension and worsen the attitude one has about writing. All three of these factors have been studied extensively by several researchers.

In the mid-to-late 1970s, John Daly and his associates published several studies regarding writing apprehension and its interactions with other aspects of writing, such as competency and performance. In each study, Daly found statistically significant differences between what he termed high apprehensives[5] and low apprehensives[6] in areas of writing, including performance, skill, and comprehension. In his article from 1978, "Writing Apprehension and Writing Competency" in *The Journal of Educational Research*, Daly studied "3,602 undergraduate students enrolled in a mandatory basic composition course at a large midwestern university," having them complete a writing apprehension measure as well as a questionnaire assessing writing competency (11). This study was focused on competence as measured through standardized testing, and Daly's results supported his hypothesis that students with high writing apprehension did not perform as well as low apprehensives. This leads to the thought that students who do not "exhibit the appropriate and necessary writing skills" will likely perform unsuccessfully with writing assignments (13), and therefore will experience little to no confidence in their writing.

Furthering Daly's previous research into writing apprehension and its effect on writing performance and competence, Lester Faigley led a smaller study of 110 undergraduates in beginning composition courses with Daly and Stephen P. Witte. Unlike previous studies that Daly and other colleagues in the field performed, Faigley focused specifically on the differences between high apprehensives' and low apprehensives'

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[5] Students who exhibit high levels of apprehension towards writing.
[6] Students who exhibit low levels of apprehension towards writing.

performance on two types of essays: argumentative and personal. The findings of this study for general differences between structural writing competence in high and low apprehensives was, as expected, basically identical to Daly's earlier findings. However, in Faigley's specific study of performance levels based on essay types, while the expected statistically significant difference in performance between high and low apprehensives was apparent when it came to the personal essay, there was no significant difference between performance levels of high and low apprehensives for the argumentative essay. This led the researchers to wonder if the intimate nature of the personal essay made it more difficult for high apprehensives to cope with than the prescriptive argumentative essay.

Taking research on high and low apprehensives in a different direction, Patricia Wachholz and Carol Etheridge completed a study of "43 developmental writers in three freshman composition classes" (3) that looked into differences in self-efficacy beliefs between the two groups of writers. Though ideas of confidence have been noted in the two prior studies, self-efficacy—closely related to confidence though it may be—was not a keyword for Daly, Faigley, and their associates. Also unlike the previous studies, Wachholz and Etheridge were interested in writing confidence over competence and performance, taking writing samples and using them to identify areas in which students felt that their writing confidence was influenced. The results of the study showed that students with high apprehension held low self-efficacy beliefs regarding their writing and supported the idea that a relationship exists between self-efficacy and performance.

On the other hand, Willa Wolcott and Dianne Buhr focused their research on discerning whether or not a link between writing attitude and performance exists. Through the University of Florida's Writing Center, Wolcott and Buhr "administered a writing

attitude questionnaire to 100 developmental writing students" (4). The researchers broke attitude down into three categories for this study: apprehension, perception, and comprehension of the writing process. While they found that only a portion of the students' answers, test scores, and essays supported a relationship between attitude and performance, they did find other relationships between attitude categories: perception to skills, comprehension to ability, apprehension to confidence, and confidence to performance.

Writing attitude can also be studied with a narrowed focus, as Richard Louth, Carole McAllister, and Hunter McAllister showed in their study of 136 freshman composition students. Instead of concentrating their research on students' attitudes towards writing as a whole, they focused on the relationship between writing attitude and a specific type of writing activity: collaborative writing. The students were split into groups where half were enrolled in courses that utilized peer activities frequently and the other half were enrolled in courses that participated only in individual activities. At the conclusion of this study, Louth, McAllister, and McAllister found that peer interaction can be more beneficial for students and their attitudes towards writing.

1.3.2 Writing Comprehension and Performance

Another area on which writing confidence—especially lack of confidence—can have a significant impact is the realm of academic achievement. Barry J. Zimmerman and Timothy J. Cleary, in their chapter "Adolescents' Development of Personal Agency: The Role of Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Self-Regulatory Skill," explore the ties between self-efficacy and academic achievement. They admit that level of intellect certainly plays a role in academic achievement, but that IQ itself offers no explanation for why "intellectually gifted individuals…do not perform well" at times (qtd. in Pajares 52).

Zimmerman and Cleary go on to outline several studies "documenting the significant relation between self-efficacy beliefs and achievement in academic settings" (Pajares 53). Moreover, they explain that "[p]ath analytic studies have shown that self-efficacy has a direct effect on students' academic performance" in areas such as writing and mathematics (Pajares 53-54). The results of these path analysis studies show that self-efficacy can indeed account for the gap that sometimes occurs between level of intellect and academic performance. This, then, becomes further evidence for the significance of the issue at hand: the importance of promoting confidence in student writers. While I discuss this idea of empowerment in the third chapter, the following chapter focuses on the background and methodology of the two studies conducted for this thesis. These studies explore the question of whether or not a confidence gap exists between average traditional[7] freshmen who entered UNC Charlotte in the fall and average/advanced traditional freshman enrolled in UTOP who entered UNC Charlotte in the summer.

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[7] Students who have transitioned directly from high school into college.

CHAPTER 2: CASE STUDY: CONFIDENCE IN VARYING POPULATIONS

As with others in the field, notably John Daly and Ken Davis, my research gathered empirical data from students. In chapter eight of *Research Methods in Education*, entitled "Survey Research," Joseph Check and Russell K. Schutt explain not only the basics of survey research—including design, common errors, and ethics—but why surveys remain popular in research. They explain that "[s]urvey research owes its continuing popularity to its versatility, efficiency, and generalizability" (160). Unlike other data-collection methods, surveys can measure several different variables at once without requiring a significant amount of the participants' time. Another reason for surveys' popularity stems from the ability to "lend themselves to probability sampling from large populations," meaning that they exhibit a certain appeal "when [sample generalizability] is a central research goal" (160). Thus, utilizing surveys and questionnaires[8] was the best choice for collecting data regarding the general dispositions towards writing in my two sample populations.

2.1   First Study

Originally, I designed a longitudinal survey-based study that utilized three surveys and would span the course of one academic year and two classes: UWRT 1101 and UWRT 1102, courses create the cornerstone of UNC Charlotte's FYW. I wanted to study students'

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[8] While the terms "survey" and "questionnaire" can be used interchangeably, the term "survey" tends to be used more generally for collecting data while a questionnaire is a specific method used to collect data. In the case of the second study for this thesis, these two terms were used to distinguish the two instances of data collection at the beginning and the end of the summer session.

progression from UWRT 1101 to UWRT 1102 and if/how their perspectives changed from one semester to the next. I excluded the advanced UWRT 1103 course from the study as it is an accelerated course in which students spend one semester in FYW instead of two.

In the spring of 2014, after gaining approval from the IRB to begin the study, I received a list of UWRT 1101 instructors. Then, in late August 2014, IRB-approved recruitment letters were sent to 25 instructors asking them to share the link to the survey with their students. Survey One was live for approximately two weeks.

Survey Two was designed to follow up on the participants' experiences from UWRT 1101 as well as their expectations of UWRT 1102. In the beginning, chosen major was an important factor because one of the main research questions of the original study asked whether or not this factor related to writing confidence and perceptions of writing. While chosen major could still factor into writing experiences, level of engagement, and perceptions, I now believe that major would have a stronger relationship with writing confidence in upperclassmen and graduate students, meaning that this information is not as pertinent in this freshman-focused study.

After sending out a link via email to all Survey One participants (who provided their email in lieu of a signed consent form), Survey Two was live for approximately two weeks in mid-to-late January 2015. However, due to a 91.94% drop in participation from Survey One to Survey Two, the planned Survey Three was canceled. While the data collected from Survey One is still viable and has been analyzed using SPSS, the data from Survey Two is obsolete.

2.1.1   Participants

In the fall semester of 2014, there were sixty-six sections of UWRT 1101 open for enrollment, leading to a possible 1,417 participants. The first survey collected sixty-two results, a 4.38% response rate. No incentives were offered; it was up to the instructors for each section to share the survey with their students, who then had the option to volunteer as a participant. In this sample, 88.71% were between the ages of eighteen and twenty with an equal representation of male and female. For ethnicity, 66.13% were Caucasian/White, 12.90% Hispanic/Latino, 8.06% African American/Black, 6.45% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.23% Middle Eastern, and 1.61% identified as either Native American/Alaskan or Other (Figure 1). Fifty-five of the sixty-two participants spoke English as their native language.
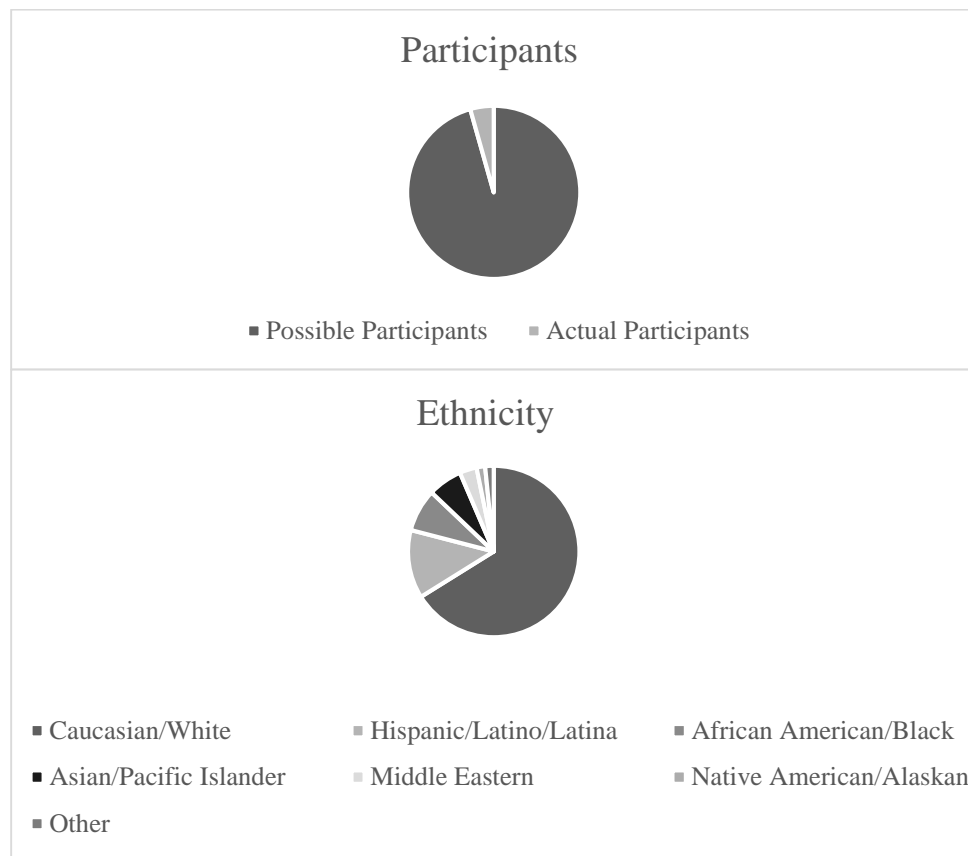

Figure 1: First study response rate (top), ethnic demographics for first study participants (bottom)

2.1.2   Methods

Once designed, I created the survey using SurveyShare, a web survey and questionnaire tool used for designing and conducting surveys. This twelve-item survey gathered demographic information—including age, gender, and major—as well as thoughts and feelings regarding academic writing, personal writing, and the FYW program prior to completing any major assignments in UWRT 1101. Questions regarding perceptions and level of engagement with writing included writing encountered in the classroom, personal and/or creative writing, the importance of writing to future careers, amount of writing in the major chosen major, and what level of writing—basic, intermediate, or expert—the participant identified with. A copy of Survey One is located in Appendix A.

2.1.3   Analysis

Once data collection is complete, SurveyShare collects the results and presents them initially in an aggregated fashion with percentages. Additionally, SurveyShare allows researchers to view the data by question and by individual participant. I originally planned to analyze the data with SPSS in order to check for different correlations, namely between chosen major and confidence as a good academic writer. However, given the change in direction for this study from how major can impact writing confidence to questioning the reasons behind a confidence gap between freshmen entering in the fall and UTOP students entering in the summer, percentages became the better option for identifying and observing said gap.

2.2   Second Study

In order to collect additional data, a new study population was suggested by my thesis committee: students enrolled in UTOP. This program begins in the second summer session, which usually begins the first week of July, only a few weeks after the participants have graduated from high school. Students enroll in three courses for a total of seven credits and spend the entirety of the summer session living on campus. Along with attending classes and a two-hour study hall each day, participants form groups led by mentors, usually juniors or seniors, and participate in different group activities designed to acquaint the students with each other and with how life at the university works. After completing UTOP, students then have the opportunity to participate in a learning community during their freshman year.

As there were fewer students enrolled in UTOP than in the fall semester—around ninety students versus the over one thousand enrolled in UWRT 1101—I wanted to survey all UTOP students in FYW, including those enrolled in the only summer section of UWRT 1103. Since the majority of participants were enrolled in UWRT 1101 and their answers to the same questionnaire and survey were similar to their UWRT 1103 counterparts, including UWRT 1103 students did not appear to have a significant impact on the results compared to if I had included freshmen enrolled in UWRT 1103 for the fall.

2.2.1   Participants

Twenty-six traditional freshmen enrolled in three Summer UTOP sections of UWRT 1101 and one section of UWRT 1103 were surveyed with the permission of their instructors, Suzanne Ingram and Lynn Raymond. Only students who were at least eighteen years of age were permitted to participate in the survey due to consent procedures. A larger

number of participants were female (78.26%) than male (21.74%). Ethnically, 86.96% identified as African-American while one participant identified as Hispanic/Latino/Latina and two participants identified as Caucasian/White (Figure 2). All participants were recently graduated from high school with 60.87% usually receiving A's in their English courses, 34.78% receiving B's, and one participant usually receiving a C. For the second part of this study, 73.91% of the participants who filled out the questionnaire also completed the closing survey.
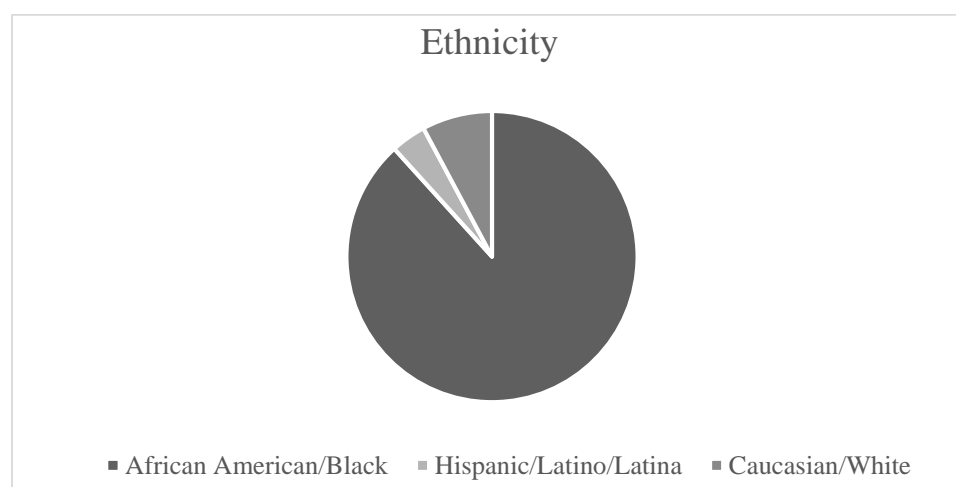

Figure 2: Ethnic demographics of second study participants

2.2.2   Methods

Unlike the first study that was conducted digitally, participants in this second study were given physical copies of the questionnaire and survey at the beginning and the end of the courses. The 14-item questionnaire was designed to capture their confidence in writing, stemming from both high school experiences and college expectations, as well as what they saw as the value of different writing skills and of writing itself. Participants were also asked to define good writing and bad writing.

The closing survey covered the same items as the questionnaire in order to record change over the progression of the course. In addition, eleven new questions were included that focused on the students' experiences in the course and the effect those experiences had on their beliefs about writing and about themselves as writers.

2.2.3   Analysis

For both the questionnaire and the survey, the answers were manually aggregated for study and comparison. In order to match the first survey, percentages were again used as the main method of analysis. Qualitative responses to the short essay questions were sorted into categories created by the answers themselves and then matched to one another.

2.3   Interviews

Following the completion of the study involving UTOP students, three interviews were conducted in person with those closely involved with the participants: Shawn Simmons, Director of UTOP; Suzanne Ingram, UWRT 1101 instructor; and Lynn Raymond, UWRT 1103 instructor. The purpose of these interviews was to learn more about UTOP and its students in order to paint a clearer picture of why a gap exists between UTOP students and traditional freshmen entering in the fall. A copy of the interview questions for the director and the instructors can are located in Appendix D.

CHAPTER 3: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: SO WHAT

This study has answered some questions but has left me with others that remain unanswered. The conclusion to this thesis covers the results of both studies, the implications, and my final thoughts on this experience, including a call for additional research. To start, I report the results of the first study's single survey and the second study's opening questionnaire and closing survey. With the second survey, I begin with the quantitative results before delving into the qualitative portions. Finally, I compare the results of the two populations in the implications section after identifying the limitations of both studies.

3.1 First Study Results

The survey of traditional freshmen entering UNC Charlotte in the fall 2014 semester provided a baseline for the second study. When participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement "You are confident in your writing skills," 27.42% disagreed with one additional participant indicating that they strongly disagreed. Meanwhile, 45.16% of participants indicated that they were confident in their writing skills. This left 25.81% of participants undecided. When added to the percent of those who identified as unconfident, a total of 54.84% of participants overall were not confident in their writing skills (Figure 3a). None of the participants indicated that they strongly agreed with the statement.

Furthering the self-evaluation of the participants' writing skills, they were asked what type of writer they considered themselves in terms of skill. None of the participants identified as an advanced writer, an expected outcome where student writers are concerned, especially entering freshmen. Half of the participants (50%) labeled themselves as basic writers, 38.71% as intermediate writers, and 11.29% of respondents were unsure (Figure 3b). It is important to note that the confidence and writer type questions on the survey did not include definitions or examples to prevent skewing personal definitions held by the participants, an idea examined again in the second study. When asked if they agreed that writing is an important life skill, 45.16% of participants agreed and 41.94% strongly agreed, giving a total of 87.10% of participants who feel that writing is an important skill to have in life. In comparing this to the 4.84% who either strongly disagreed or generally disagreed and the 8.06% who were undecided, a significant gap appears between this belief of importance and reported levels of confidence (Figure 3c).

3a: Writing Confidence

■ Confident ■ Unconfident

3b: Writer Type

■ Basic ■ Intermediate ■ Unsure

3c: Writing as an Important Life Skill

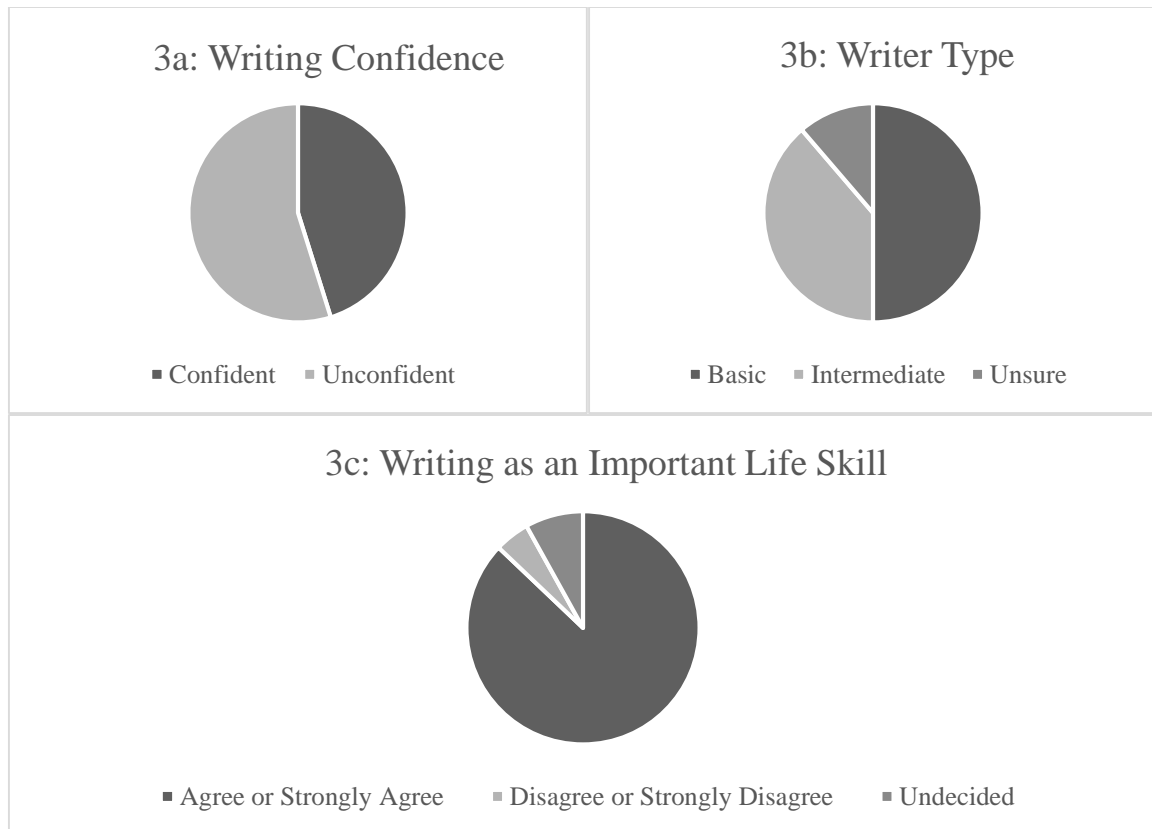■ Agree or Strongly Agree ■ Disagree or Strongly Disagree ■ Undecided

Figure 3: (a) Confidence in writing, (b) writer types, (c) rating of writing as an important life skill

Based on the fact that practice makes perfect and the hypothesis that engaging in personal writing activities can improve writing attitude and, in turn, writing confidence, participants were asked how much time they spent per week on activities such as writing poetry, journaling, and songwriting. Nearly half of the participants (48.39%) reported that they do not engage in personal writing activities. For the remaining 51.61% of participants, 37.10% spend between one and three hours per week writing while 14.52% write for between four and six hours per week (Figure 4). None of the participants reported engaging in personal writing activities for at least seven hours per week.
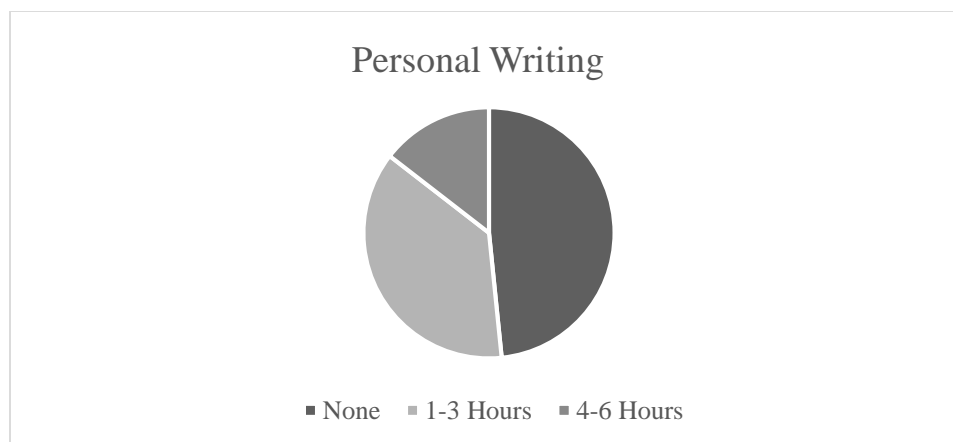
Figure 4: Personal writing engagement

Finally, participants were asked to share their expectations regarding writing for their UWRT 1101 course, an item for which they could check all that applied. The responses were largely positive and hopeful, with none of the participants expecting to learn nothing new, to not be adequately prepared for further college writing at the conclusion of the course, for their writing to not change, or for their writing to become worse. The majority of participants (88.71%) believed that their writing would improve, 67.74% that they would be adequately prepared for further college writing, and 64.52% that they would encounter new types of essays. Only two participants indicated that they were already prepared for further college writing while two other participants opted to write in their own answers: "I will gain further insight upon writing skills and what it would take to pursue a career in writing" and "I will encounter new ideas and perspectives of writing."

I then examined responses to confidence level, the importance of writing as a life skill, and writer type. For participants who identified as confident writers, 96.43% either agreed or strongly agreed that writing is an important life skill with only one respondent stating that they were undecided on the importance of writing. In terms of writer type,

57.14% of confident participants identified as intermediate level writers and 35.71% as basic level writers. Two participants were undecided. Of those who identified as either unconfident in their writing skills or who were undecided, 79.41% believed that writing is an important life skill (Figure 5). With the three respondents who either disagreed or strongly disagreed that writing is an important life skill, all three identified themselves as unconfident writers as well.
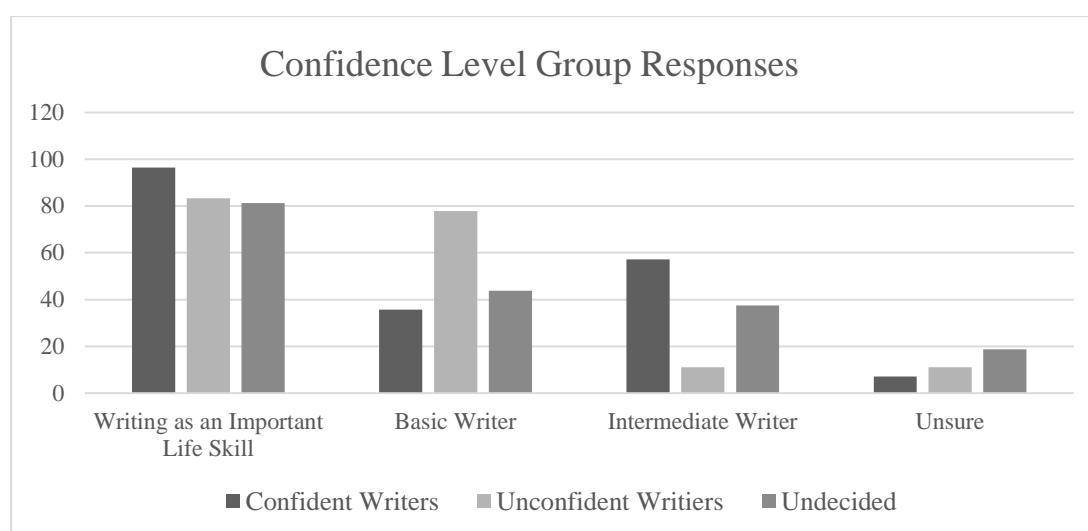

Figure 5: Comparison of responses based on confidence level

3.2   Second Study Questionnaire Results

The second study is split into two parts: how participants felt at the beginning of their second summer session and how they felt at the closing of the course. For this section, I will begin by sharing the results of the opening questionnaire before moving on to the closing survey. Finally, I will compare the two and highlight the changes in participants' opinions from the start to the finish of the course.

The first major quantitative portion of the opening survey asked students to rank eleven different writing skills on a five-point scale of importance, with one being the lowest and five being the highest. Out of these eleven items, organization was collectively considered to be the most important skill, with 65.22% of participants ranking it as a five on the scale. None of the participants ranked organization as a one or two, 13.04% ranked organization as a three, and 21.74% ranked organization as a four. The next popular skill highly ranked as a five was creativity (60.87%), with 30.43% ranking this item as a four, and one participant each ranking creativity as a two or three.

The third most popular option for skills that are important for a writer to master was grammar proficiency with 52.17% of participants ranking this item as a five. When added to the 26.09% who ranked grammar proficiency as a four and the 17.39% who ranked this item as a three, this comes to 95.65% of participants. While this does not exceed the 100% of participants who ranked organization as a three or above, it is equal to the percentage of participants who rank creativity as a three or above in regards to importance.

Other significant responses to ranking the importance of eleven different writing skills for a student writer are research skills and critical thinking with 39.13% of participants rating each of these items as a four. Adding these percentages to respondents who ranked these items as a five, critical thinking raises to 73.91% and research skills to 62.22%. Lastly, when looking at the number of participants who ranked these two items as a three or above, 95.65% of participants agreed that both critical thinking and research tactics are important skills, with the final votes rating these items as a two, putting critical thinking and research skills on par with grammar proficiency and creativity as traits valued highly by student writers. The above mentioned skills are highlighted in Figure 6.
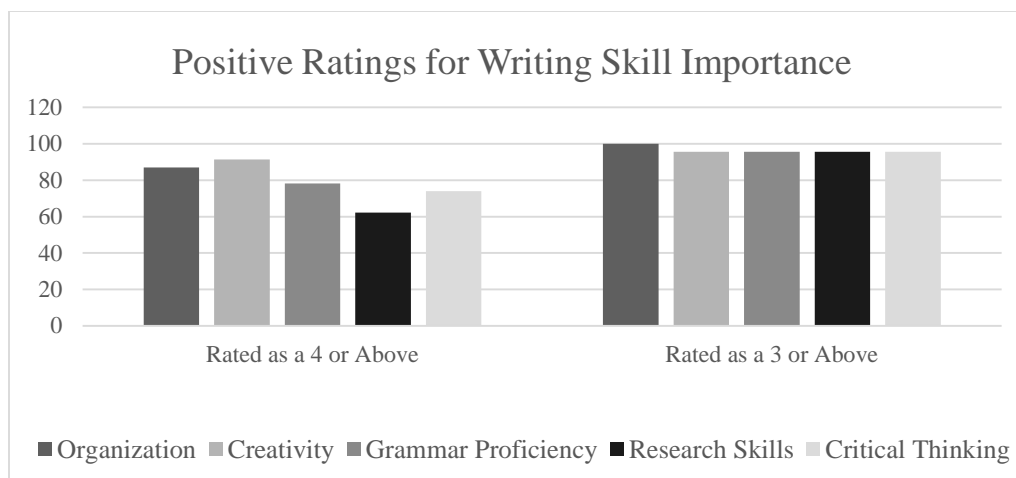
Figure 6: Comparison of positive ratings for writing skill importance

Another item participants were asked to rank was creating outlines. In this UTOP sample population, more participants agreed that creating outlines was not very important to a student becoming a good writer, with 43.48% rating this item as a two or below as compared to the 26.09% who rated creating outlines as a four or above. A rating of two or three was chosen by 30.43% each. When adding these percentages to the percentage of participants who rated creating outlines as a one, a total of 73.91% of participants agreed that creating outlines is not a necessary skill to have as a student writer.

Extensive vocabulary was another contested item on the important skills list. For a rating of two or below, 21.74% of participants agreed that this item is not an important skill while 39.13% rated extensive vocabulary as a four or above. A total of 39.13% of respondents rated extensive vocabulary as a three. Upon adding the percent of participants who rated this item as a three to both the lower and higher ends of the spectrum, the result is a nearly even split with 60.87% agreeing that extensive vocabulary is not an important skill for student writers and 60.57% agreeing that this item is important.

When it comes to understanding citation styles, the spread was relatively even with 17.39% rating this item as a two, 26.09% as a three, 17.39% as a four, and 30.43% as a five. Only two participants rated understanding citation styles as a one. When adding the percentages for a rating of four and five together, slightly fewer than half of the respondents, 47.83%, agreed that this is an important skill to have for a student writer. These negative responses are highlighted in Figure 7.
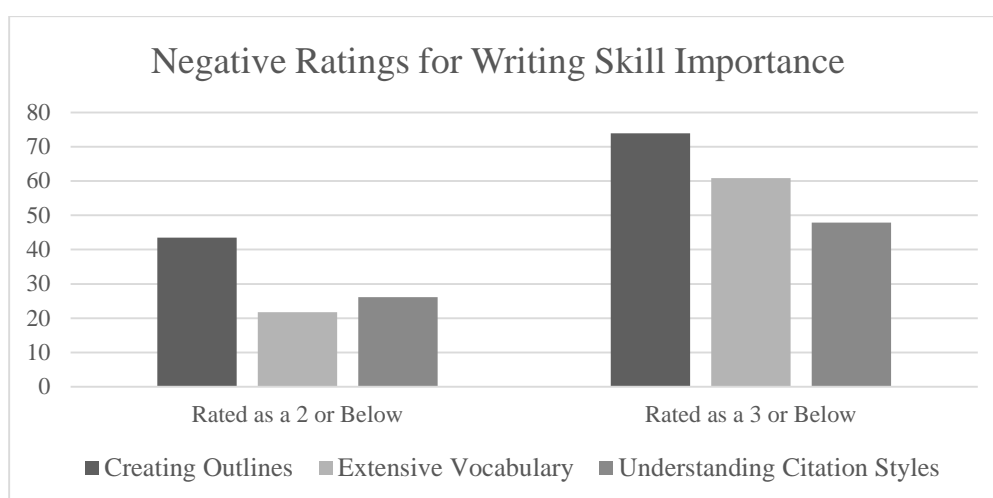

Figure 7: Comparison of negative ratings for writing skill importance

Participants were also asked to rate how important the enjoyment of reading and writing is to achieving success as a student writer. For enjoying writing, a rating of three or four was selected by 26.09% of respondents each. Added to the 30.43% who rated this item as a five, a total of 82.61% of participants agree that enjoying writing is an important aspect of a successful student writer. However, only 60.87% of participants ranked the importance of enjoying reading to the success of a student writer as a three or above, a 21.74% discrepancy between the two items as seen in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Comparison of ratings for importance of enjoying writing and reading

The final item that participants ranked based on importance was computer proficiency; 26.09% of participants rated computer proficiency as a four or above while 39.13% rated this item as a two or below. Once the 34.78% of respondents who rated computer proficiency as a three is added to both sides of the spectrum, 73.91% agree that computer proficiency is not important (Figure 9).
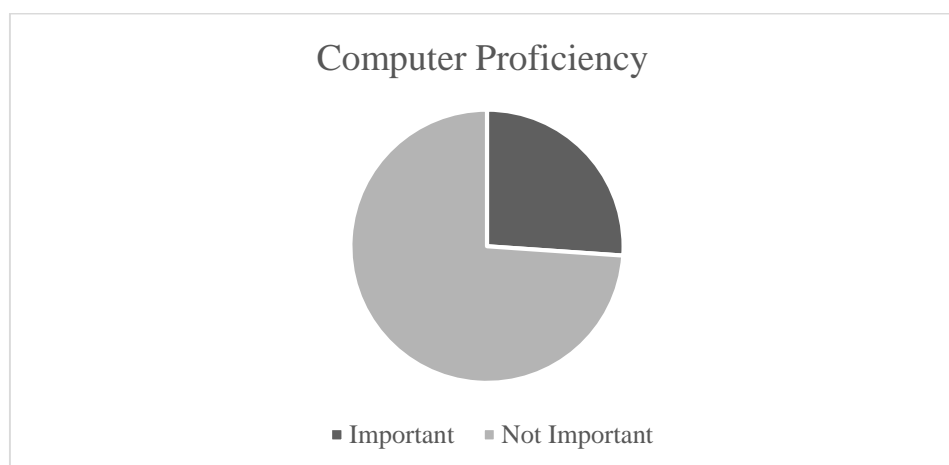

Figure 9: Importance of computer proficiency as a writing skill

Finally, participants were given the opportunity to add a skill or aspect not listed in the ranking that they believed was important to have as a successful student writer. One respondent suggested patience as an important aspect, rating it as a three. The other participant who decided to write in their own skill chose punctuation, rating it as a five on the importance scale.

The second major quantitative portion of the opening questionnaire was a true or false section containing seven questions pertaining to participants' beliefs about writing and the impact writing will have on their lives. Participants were asked whether they considered the statement "I am a good writer of school papers" to be true or false. This population was largely confident in their academic writing skills with 82.61% indicating that they believed the statement to be true when applied to them (Figure 10). Continuing in this confidence direction, participants were then asked whether or not they enjoy academic writing or personal writing, with 73.91% of participants reporting that they do not enjoy academic writing and 69.57% reporting that they do not enjoy personal writing.

Figure 10: Confidence levels among UTOP students

For the final four questions, the majority of the participants (91.30%) believed that writing is an important life skill, 65.22% believed that they were prepared for college writing prior to the start of the course, 56.52% believed that they will encounter a substantial amount of writing in their majors, and 47.83% believed that they will encounter a substantial amount of writing in their careers (Figure 11).
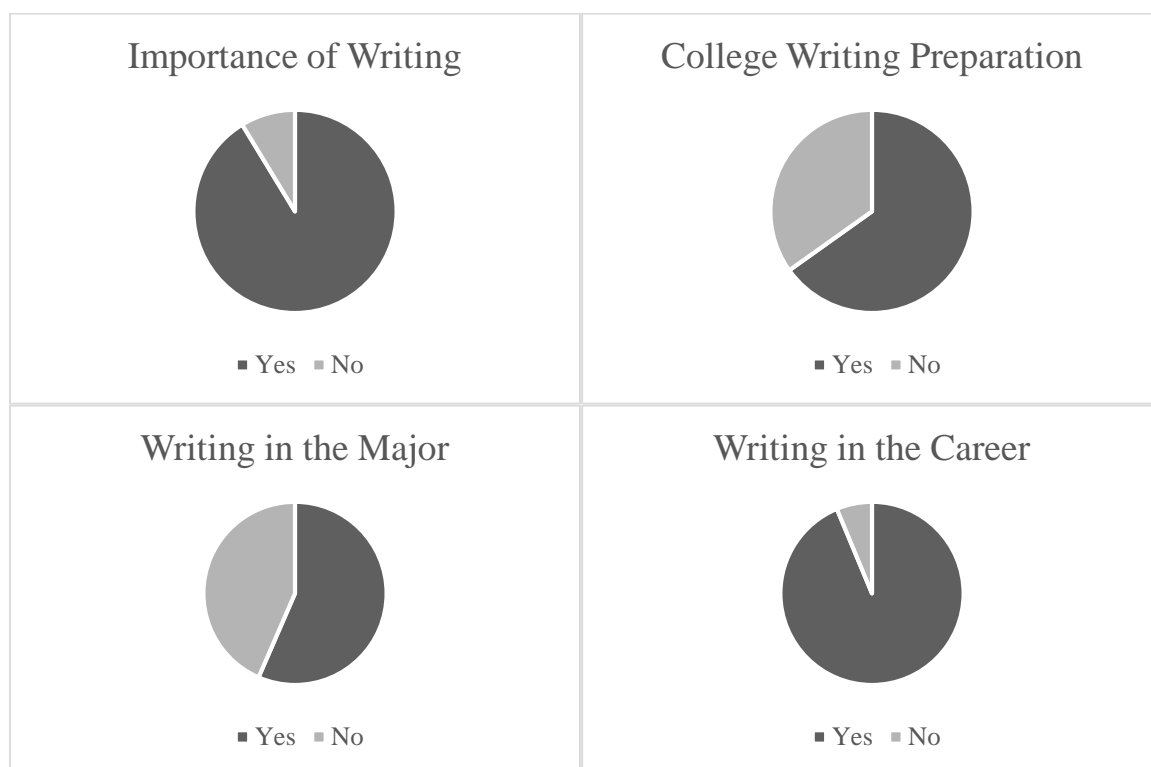

Figure 11: Belief in writing as a necessary life skill (top left), belief in being prepared for further college writing (top right), expectation of encountering a significant amount of writing in the chosen major (bottom left), expectation of encountering a significant amount of writing in the chosen career (bottom right)

Qualitatively, participants were asked to provide their personal definitions of good and bad writing in two short essay questions. The majority of the responses focused on higher-order functions of a text with good grammar standing alone as a lower-order function, a trait that appeared in 30.43% of the definitions for what contributes to good

writing. Similarly, Organization/structure and a high level of reader engagement were identified as traits of good writing by 30.43% of the participants. The most popular single trait of good writing, however, was for a text to have a good flow as identified by 39.13% of participants. Writing well, or strong writing, was also identified by 13.04% of participants as a trait that is necessary for good writing.

The final trait, identified by 26.09% of participants as necessary for a text to be considered good writing, was a focus on audience. When other identified traits that could indicate that a text is audience-targeted are included, the percentage increases to 65.50% of participants. These traits are level of engagement and relatability, which occurred in the definitions provided by 30.43% and 13.04% of participants, respectively. When the 8.70% of participants who identified understandability[9] as a necessary trait for good writing is included in the audience-targeted category, the percentage changes to 74.20% of participants.

Four other traits identified as necessary for a piece of writing to be considered good appeared in multiple definitions. These traits are: having a clear purpose (26.09%), providing sufficient detail (21.74%), employing a personal/authentic writing style or voice (17.39%), conveying a mood (13.04%), and staying on topic (13.04%). The frequency rates for all traits—categorized as major and minor traits—identified as hallmarks of good writing are illustrated in Figure 12.

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[9] The term "understandability" refers to how easy it is for a reader to understand a text. This can be included in the audience-targeted category because of the importance for a writer to gear language and explanations towards a specific audience. When this aspect of audience-targeted writing fails, it can also affect how engaged the reader is with the text and how well the reader can relate to both the author and the content.

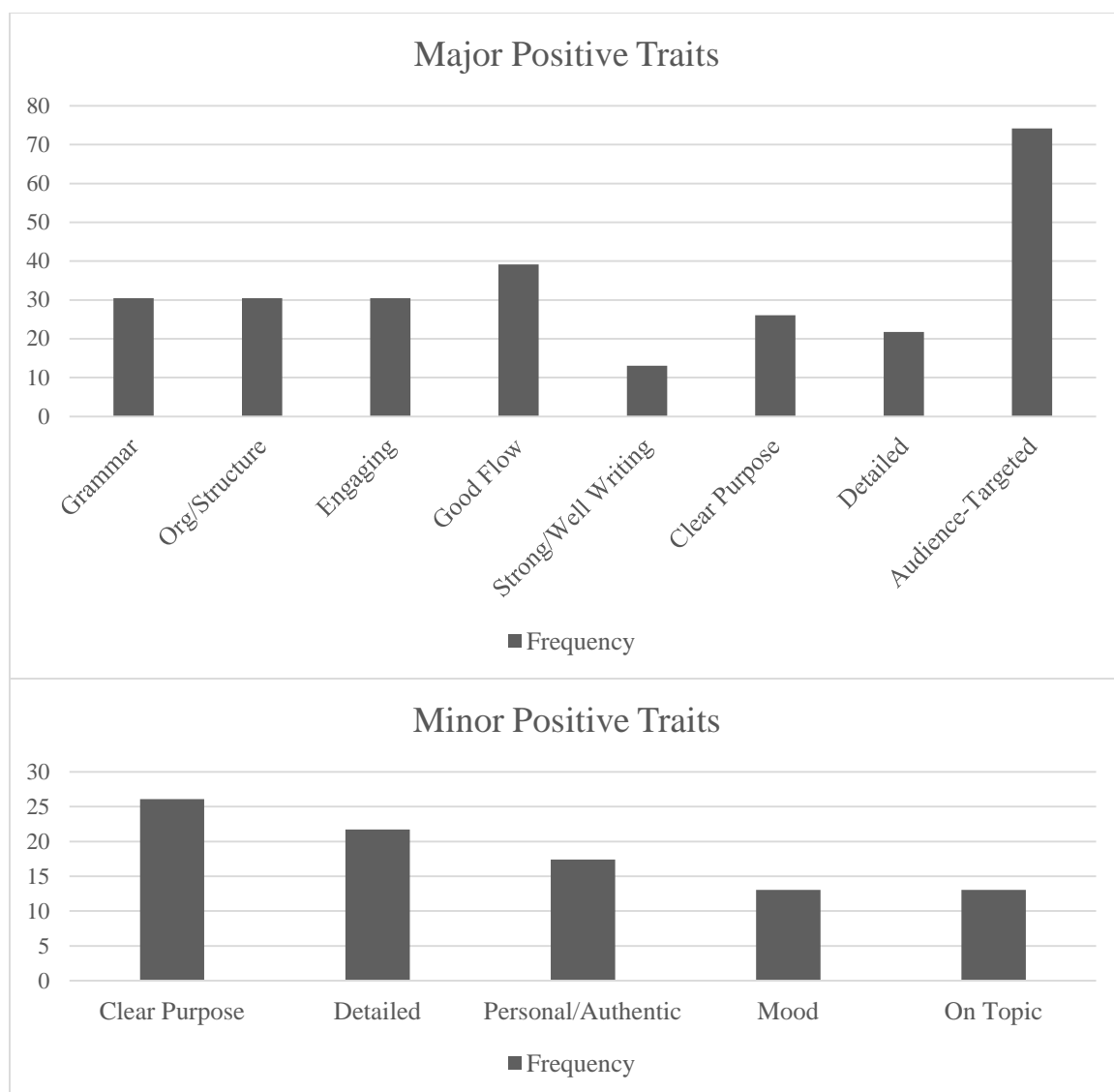## Major Positive Traits

Minor Positive Traits

Figure 12: Major traits identified as hallmarks of good writing (top), minor traits identified as hallmarks of good writing (bottom)

In personal definitions of bad writing, grammar errors appeared as a major trait, with 34.78% agreeing that struggles with grammar create bad writing; this is one more respondent from the 30.43% of participants who identified good grammar as a trait of good writing. At the top of the list again, however, was the flow of a text. A total of 43.48% of participants stated that what they termed as bad flow is a trait of bad writing. As with the identification of successful grammar usage influencing whether or not a piece of writing is

considered good or bad, this response saw a difference of only one participant between the two definitions. Lack of organization and of detail were also frequently identified as traits of bad writing, both appearing in 30.43% of definitions. While exhibiting a lack of focus on intended audience did not appear in any of the definitions for bad writing, level of engagement (30.43%) and understandability (8.70%) appeared.

Finally, multiple participants identified three other traits of bad writing. Unclear writing was identified by 13.04% of respondents. The same percentage of participants then identified a lack of meaning as a trait of bad writing, creating a 22.25% gap between those who identified conveying a clear purpose as a trait necessary for writing to be considered good. Lastly, 8.70% of participants stated that writing they consider to be boring is bad, a 21.73% difference from those who considered a high level of engagement as necessary for good writing. The frequency percentages at which these traits appear in definitions of bad writing are illustrated in Figure 13.
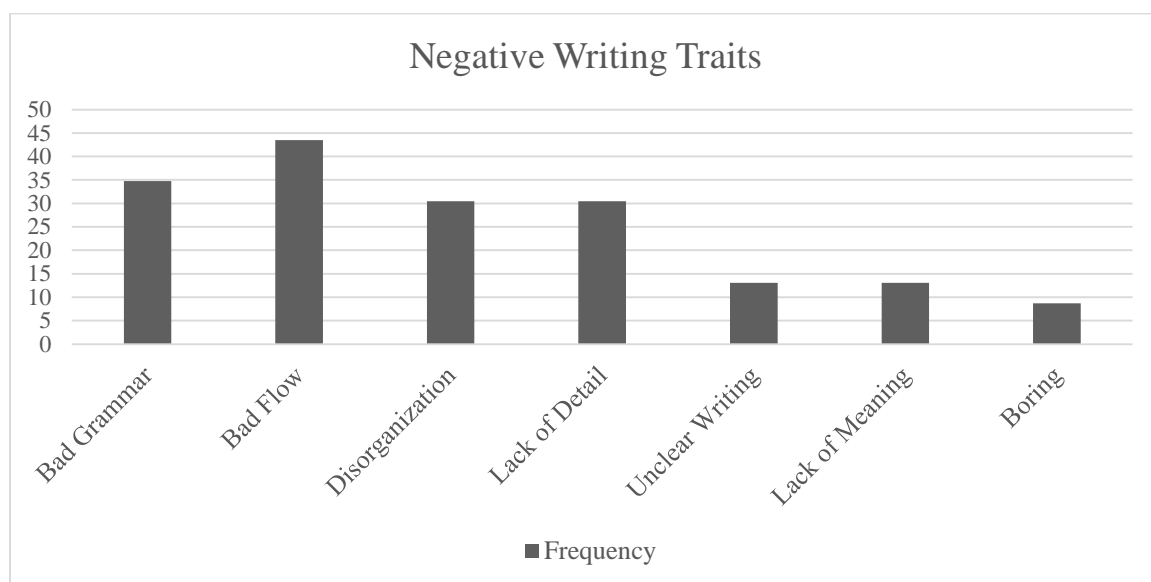

Figure 13: Frequency rates of traits identified as hallmarks of bad writing

3.3   Second Study Survey Results

In the opening questionnaire, 100% of participants rated organization as a three or above in terms of importance. In the closing survey, 100% of participants rated organization as a four or above, with 64.71% rating organization as a five, highlighting organization again as the most important skill for a successful student writer to master according to this UTOP sample population.

Organization was not the only skill that 100% of participants rated highly. Knowing research skills was rated by 64.71% of participants as a four or higher on the scale of importance. When the 35.30% of participants who rated research skills as a three is added, this item reaches 100%. This same sum occurs when looking at a rating of three or above for critical thinking and for grammar proficiency, with the rating of four or higher totaling 88.24% and 82.35%, respectively. Compared to the responses recorded during the opening questionnaire, participants often rated critical thinking as a five instead of a four while grammar proficiency was usually rated as a four instead of a five. Organization, however, remains as the only skill with zero participants rating the item as a one, two, or three (Figure 14).
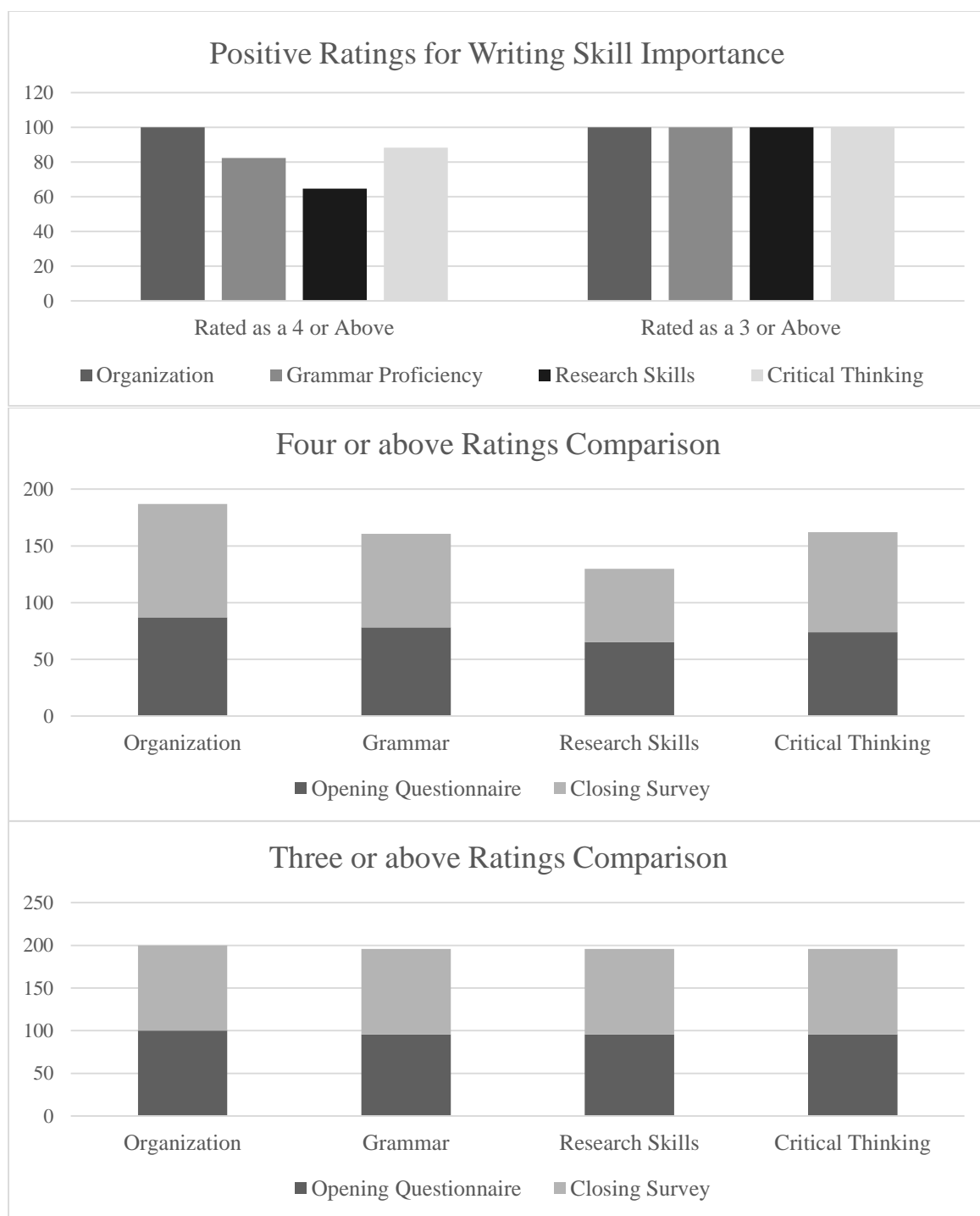
Figure 14: Comparison of major positive ratings for writing skill importance (top), comparison of major skills rated as a four or above from the opening questionnaire to the closing survey (middle), comparison of major skills rated as a three or above from the opening questionnaire to the closing survey (bottom)

Items that dropped in importance from the opening questionnaire were creating outlines and computer proficiency. Both of these skills were originally deemed unimportant by the majority of the participants and became more so over the course of the summer session. Creating outlines was rated by 82.35% of participants as a three or below, with 35.30% rating this item as a three, an 8.44% decrease. Computer proficiency was rated by 87.30% of participants as a three or below. An equal number of participants, 35.30%, rated this item as either a two or a three. Compared to the 73.91% of participants who believed that computer proficiency was not an important skill to have as a successful student writer in the opening questionnaire, the result is a decrease of 13.39% (Figure 15). A slight decrease in the importance of creativity was also observed, with more participants rating this item as a four instead of a five.
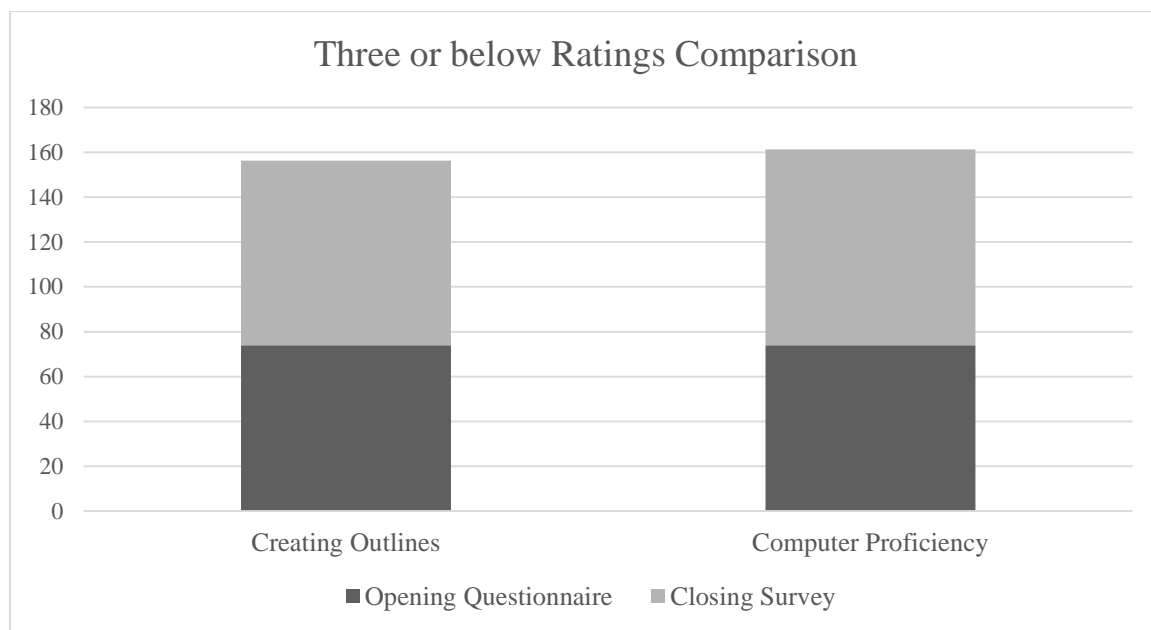

Figure 15: Comparison of creating outlines and computer proficiency rated as a three or below from the opening questionnaire to the closing survey

Not all of the items provided in the importance scale experienced a decrease. One item remained relatively the same from the opening questionnaire to the closing survey: extensive vocabulary. The same number of participants rated this item as a three in terms of importance. As with the opening questionnaire, the closing survey shows that extensive vocabulary was relatively even on both sides of the spectrum when the participants who ranked this item as a three are added to each.

The final three items in the skill list experienced an increase in importance. Originally, 73.91% of participants rated understanding citation styles as a three or above; in the closing survey, 82.35% of respondents rated this item as a three or above, with the largest percentage, 29.41% of participants, rating this item as either a three or a four. The highest increase, however, can be found in the responses to the level of importance for the enjoyment of writing and reading. A total of 88.24% of participants rated enjoying writing as a three or above, and 76.47% rated enjoying reading as a three or above. The result is a 5.63% increase for enjoying writing and a 15.60% increase for enjoying reading. This also decreases the gap between these two items, from a 21.74% gap in importance observed in the opening questionnaire to an 11.77% gap in the closing survey (Figure 16).
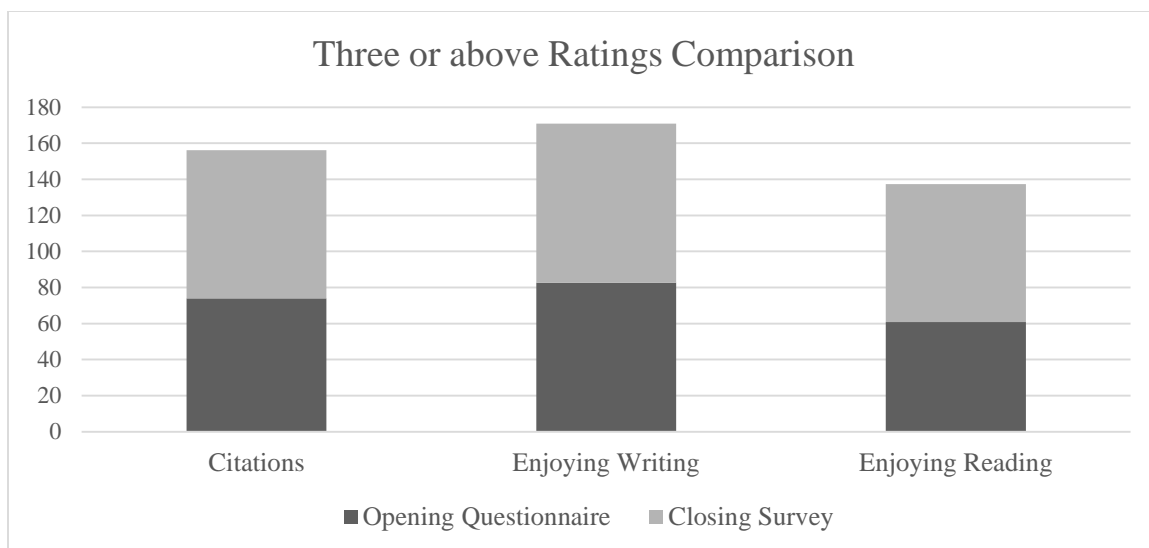
Figure 16: Comparison of citations, enjoying writing, and enjoying reading rated as a three or above from the opening questionnaire to the closing survey

The repeated true or false section of the survey largely remained the same with minimal change occurring in responses to the following statements: I am a good writer of school papers, I enjoy writing during my free time, I think that writing is an important life skill, I think that I am prepared for college writing, and I think that I will have a lot of writing in my major. The statement regarding enjoyment of academic writing received a negative response originally, but roughly evened out by the end of the semester with 47.06% of respondents agreeing that they do enjoy academic writing as compared to the 26.09% who agreed previously. Slightly more participants (52.94%) disagreed with the statement. The responses to the item concerning expectations for writing amounts in prospective careers was relatively even in the opening questionnaire while 76.47% of participants reported this statement to be true in the closing survey.
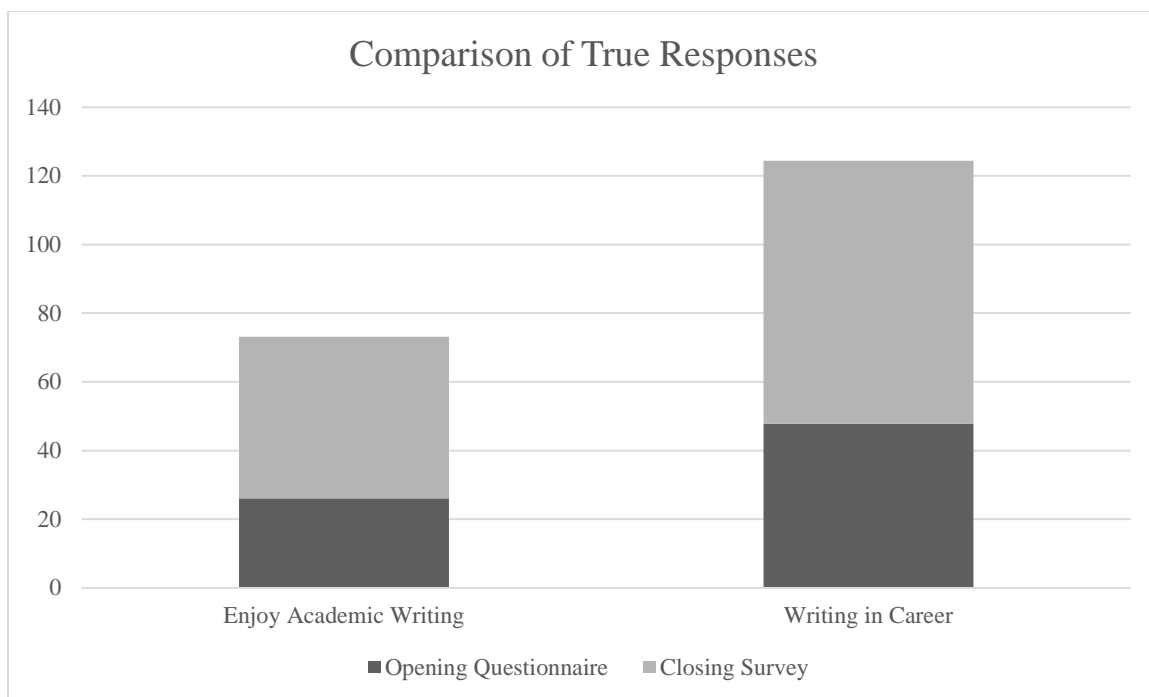
Figure 17: Comparison of true statement indications for enjoying academic writing and expecting a significant amount of writing in the chosen career from the opening questionnaire to the closing survey

Participants were then asked about their experiences in the course. The first question expanded the true or false statement regarding preparedness for college writing, specifically asking the respondents to rate their level of preparedness for the writing they experienced in the course. The majority of participants (58.82%) stated that they were somewhat prepared for this course while 35.29% felt that they were very prepared. When questioned about level of preparedness for further college writing and for non-academic writing as a result of participating in their writing courses, 82.35% stated that they felt very prepared for further college writing and 70.59% responded with the same answer for non-academic writing. Figure 18 illustrates the responses to these three questions.

Preparedness for Writing in the Course

■ Somewhat   ■ Very   ■ Unsure

Preparedness for Academic Writing

■ Somewhat   ■ Very   ■ Unsure

Preparedness for Non-Academic Writing

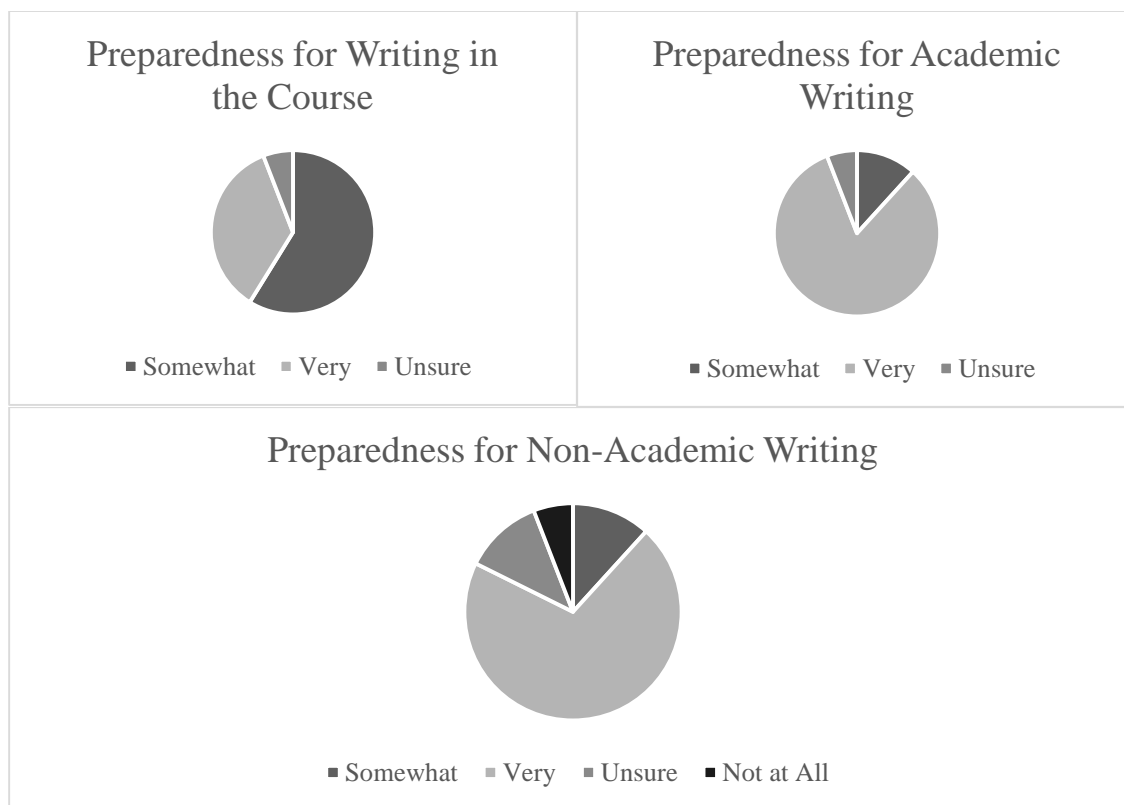■ Somewhat   ■ Very   ■ Unsure   ■ Not at All

Figure 18: Level of preparedness for writing in UWRT 1101 or 1103 (top left), level of preparedness for academic writing following completion UWRT 1101/1103 (top right), level of preparedness for non-academic writing following completion of UWRT 1101/1103 (bottom)

For the final questions of the closing survey, participants were asked to assess how what they had learned in their courses impacted their future in writing and themselves as writers. When considering the possibility of whether or not skills they learned in their writing courses would transfer to future courses, 92.31% of participants stated that they would take what they learned and apply it in other courses, specifically time management and writing style. When asked if participants believed themselves to be better writers as a result of the course, 84.62% reported that they improved as a writer with one participant explaining that he/she did not necessarily become a better writer but did experience an increase in tolerance for the act of writing (Figure 19).
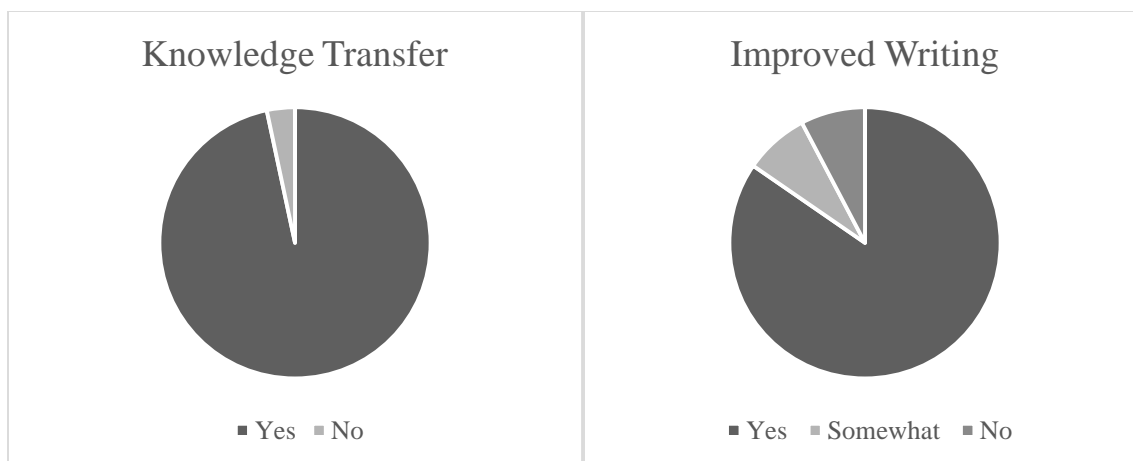
Figure 19: The possibility of transferring knowledge from UWRT 1101/1103 to other college courses (left), belief that writing skill has improved following the completion of UWRT 1101/1103

Qualitatively, there was a notable change in how participants defined good and bad writing after having experienced their writing course. The structure of their definitions were shorter and more precise instead of using several different qualifications to explain a single trait. Moreover, there was a significant drop in identifying the concept of flow as an indicator of quality in writing, from 39.13% to 11.76% in definitions of good writing and from 43.48% to 11.76% in definitions of bad writing, equaling decreases of 27.37% and 31.72% (Figure 20).
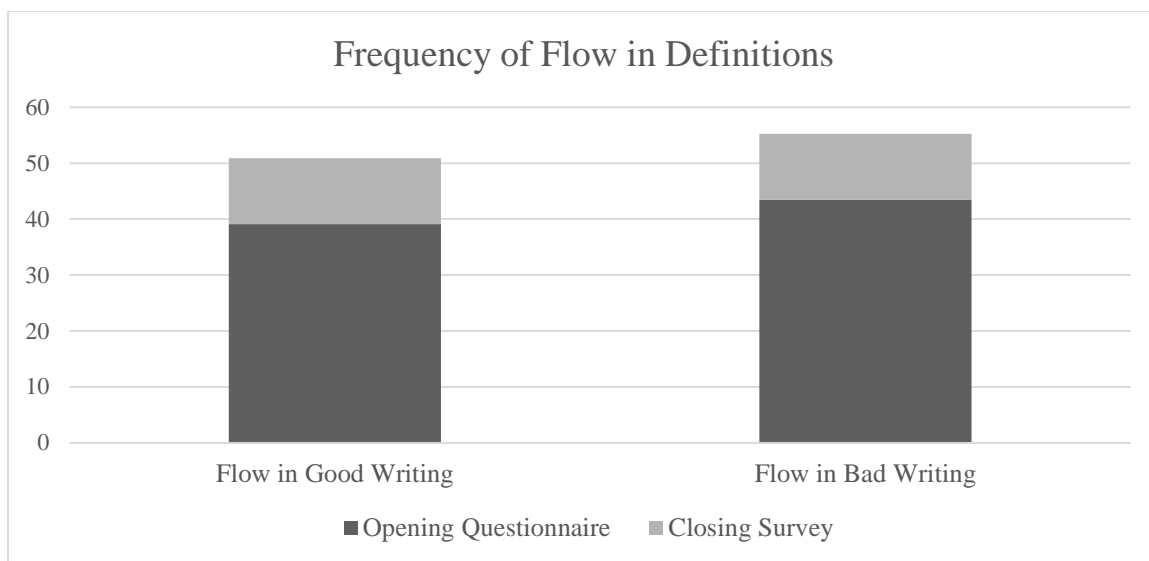
Frequency of Flow in Definitions

Figure 20: Frequency of flow appearing in good and bad writing definitions from the opening questionnaire to the closing survey

After this perception shift expressed by the participants' responses, they collectively identified four main hallmarks of writing quality in both categories. Grammar was again identified, though its recurrence decreased by approximately ten percent in definitions of good and bad writing. Portraying a clear purpose became the most frequently identified trait of good writing with 35.29% of participants including this trait in their definitions. The second and third most popular traits, reader engagement and understandability, remained at the top of the list, meaning that participants still considered audience-targeted traits to be clear indicators of good writing at the conclusion of their writing courses. When it comes to updated definitions for bad writing, a text with low understandability became the most frequently identified trait, increasing from 17.39% to 47.06% of participants agreeing. The second and third most popular negative traits, low level of engagement and lack of meaning, remained relatively the same. However, they replaced disorganization and lack of detail, both of which decreased in frequency to

11.76%. The top positive and negative traits impacting the quality of writing as identified by participants are illustrated in Figure 21.
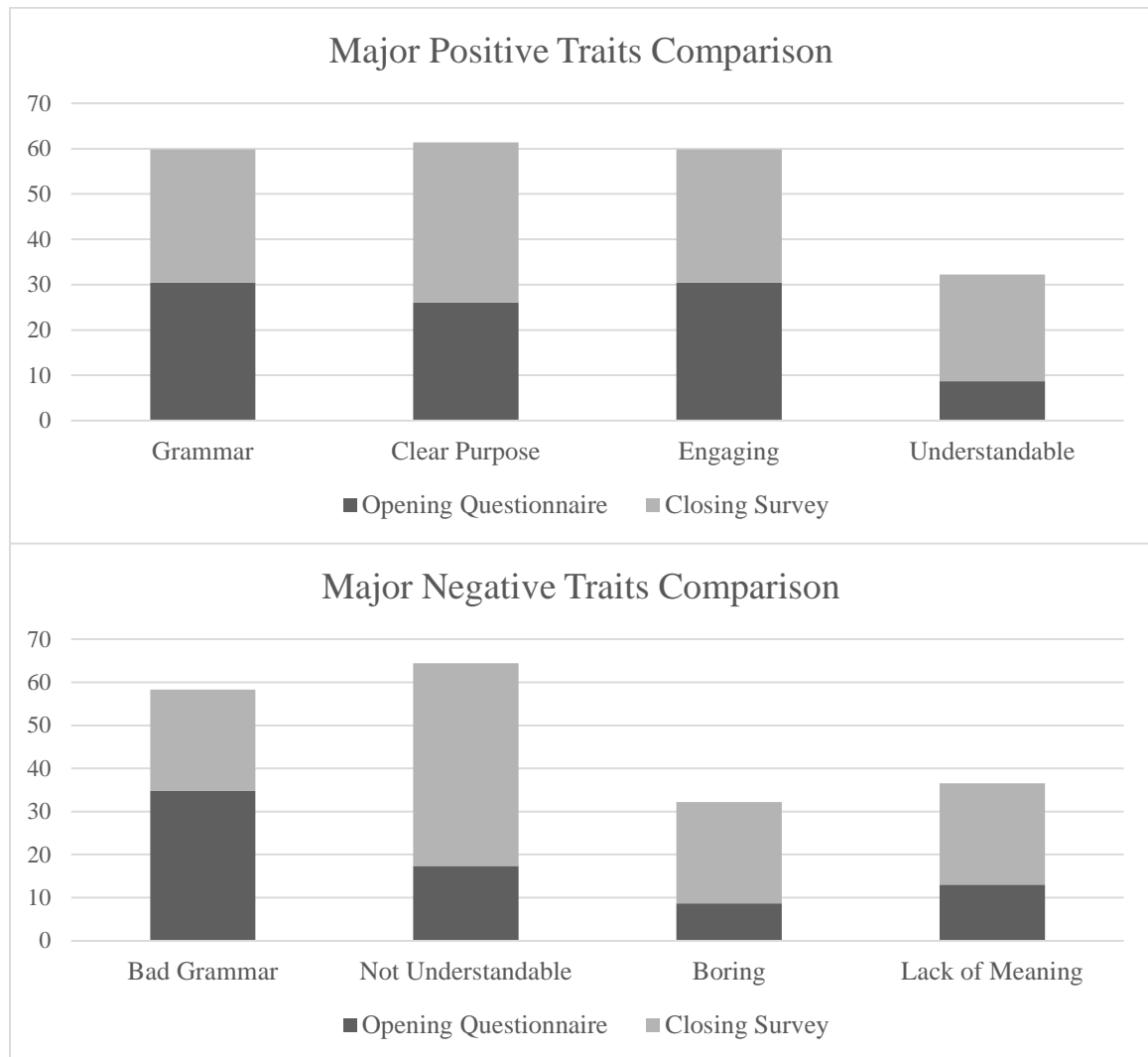

Figure 21: Major positive traits identified as hallmarks of good writing (top), major negative traits identified as hallmarks of bad writing (bottom)

3.4 Limitations

The first study encountered a significant limitation in that subsequent parts were cancelled due to a severe drop in participation from an already miniscule sample size,

especially when compared to the number of participants this study could have surveyed. While the second study experienced a decrease in participation as well, it was not as severe. For both studies, limitations include the small sample sizes, the focus on only one university, and the shorter time period in which these studies were conducted instead of the intended year-long longitudinal nature of the first study, which would have provided a data regarding changing attitudes as seen in the second study.

3.5   Implications

My two studies provided several implications about both student groups and, perhaps, first-year college students in general. From the first study, participants who stated that they were unsure of their confidence in writing were considered to be not confident in their skills as a student writer.[10] Confident or not, the majority respondents agreed that writing is an important life skill. As a result, those participants who do not feel confident in their writing ability but believe that writing is an important life skill may experience— either now or in the future—apprehension and/or anxiety towards writing, which could impact their confidence levels in a spiraling fashion as explained in the first chapter of this thesis.

The second study provided additional implications. To start, positive responses to items such as organization, critical thinking, and research skills in terms of importance for successful student writers were not unexpected. Organization is not only a key factor in a well-developed text, but is a key factor in scoring well on the standardized tests students spend the majority of middle and high school preparing for and performing on. Critical thinking and research skills are also impressed upon students early, and all three aspects of

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[10] The argument here is that the question of whether or not one is confident allows for a response of yes or no with an uncertain response indicating a lack of confidence.

writing remain important in college writing classrooms. Other practices that were likely introduced to students prior to beginning college are creating outlines and working with citation styles. From my own tutoring and teaching experiences—not to mention my time as an undergraduate—I have observed that students generally either love or hate outlines and find citations necessary but annoying.

Responses to enjoying writing and reading were not wholly unexpected. In thinking about the relationship between reading and writing coupled with the positive effects that excelling in one activity can have on the other, particularly in the correlation of reading to writing, one would expect the results of the enjoying writing item to mirror the results of the enjoying reading item. This was not the case; numerous participants responded that they enjoyed writing over reading, quite the opposite of what I expected. The response that greatly surprised me, however, was to computer proficiency. Considering the digital age these participants are living, working, and writing in—especially with the current popularity of e-portfolios in writing programs, the frequency of in-class writing activities being completed on a laptop, and the replacement of daybooks with blogs in some classrooms—the negative rating for this item was unexpected.

Definitions for good and bad writing provided by participants came with a few surprises as well. While some participants simply recorded the opposite of their good writing definition for their bad writing definition, others were more detailed. One participant in particular identified traits he/she believed were necessary for a text to succeed as a good piece of writing, but alleged that these were traits he/she was taught were important, not what he/she truly believed, which is that a definition for good writing does not exist. This belief, according to the participant, is based on the idea that writing is

assessed based on arbitrary categories and that no one should have the authority to decide whether or not a writer's attempt at communication is good. The same respondent went on to assert that bad writing is another myth created by the use of arbitrary categories in assessing the quality of writing. For the definition of bad writing, this participant was not alone in his/her opinion, with one other respondent agreeing that bad writing does not exist.

The results from comparing the two populations show a significant gap between average and advanced students in FYW in terms of confidence and college preparedness. First, it is important to note that some similarities do exist between the two groups surveyed: the identity of the participants and their enrollment in FYW. Both groups are made up of traditional freshmen transitioning from high school into college. Both groups experience a FYW course, either UWRT 1101 or 1103, in their first semester or—for the advanced group—summer session. Furthermore, the participants from both groups are likely to experience similar writing activities and assignments. While each instructor in UNC Charlotte's FYW program holds individual teaching philosophies and approaches, the aim of the classes remains the same, and the majority instructors provide students with similar class elements. When it comes to comparing the data from both studies, other similarities appear, such as how the majority of participants in both groups believe that writing is an important life skill.

Yet, the present study found that these average and advanced student groups are more different than they are similar. For example, while 45% of the students from the first group claimed that they are confident in their writing skills, over 83% of students in the second group believed that they are good academic writers. Level of preparedness for

college writing also highlighted a significant difference, with 3% of students in the first group believing themselves to be prepared versus 65% in the second group (Figure 22).
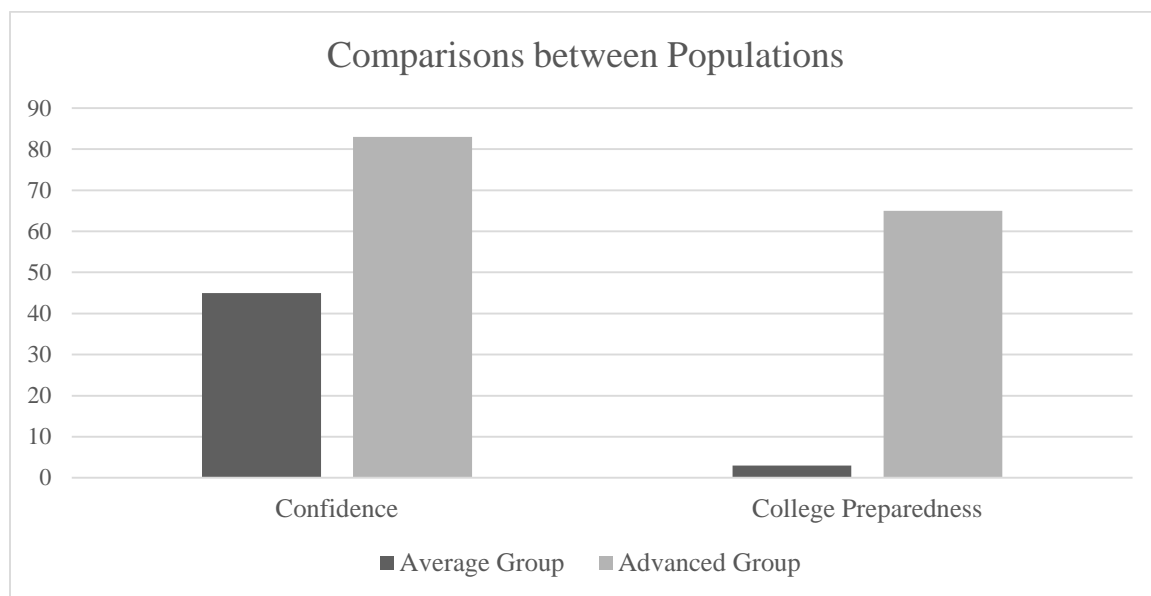

Figure 22: Comparison of confidence levels and levels of college preparedness between the average and advanced populations

The 38% gap that these discrepancies make apparent is puzzling largely because of the similarities that exist between the two groups. Adding to the puzzle is the fact that over half of the participants in the advanced group were enrolled in UWRT 1103 instead of 1101. This sample population is considered advanced in this study not solely based on how they have been tagged in terms of writing ability, but on their involvement in a head-start program (UTOP) as well, particularly since summer session courses are generally more intense than their regular semester-long counterparts due to incorporating the same amount of work in a shorter timeframe.

So why does a gap in confidence between these two populations exist? The interviews that I conducted with UTOP Director Shawn Simmons and UTOP instructors

Suzanne Ingram and Lynn Raymond were an attempt to answer this question. Before looking into this further, however, it would be beneficial to provide background information on both FYW and UTOP. UNC Charlotte's FYW program was housed in the English Department for decades before moving in 2012 to stand alone as a program in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The program currently offers four courses: UWRT 1101, UWRT 1102, UWRT 1103, and UWRT 1104, the latter of which is a new 3+ course.[11] As a part of the General Education core requirements, every incoming freshmen and even some transfer students must take one or two of these courses[12], though not necessarily in their first semester. According to census data presented by UNC Charlotte's Undergraduate Admissions, 3,319 freshmen entered the university in the fall 2014 semester, all of whom would have to take courses in FYW. A handful of these students participated in UTOP.

When UTOP was first founded in 1986, its main aim was to help African American students, most of whom were first-generation college students, transition from high school into college in order to improve their chances of retention. In the past ten to fifteen years, UTOP has branched out to include students from other underrepresented populations, such as those from low-income families and from the LGBT community. Students who fit the parameters of UTOP's target population receive a letter from admissions informing the student of what the program is and what it offers. Prospective UTOP students then have the opportunity to gain more information about the summer bridge program and the learning community offered during the first year when they attend orientation.

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[11] UWRT 1104 is a non-advanced version of UWRT 1103. Its designation as a 3+ credit hour course comes from the attached writing lab.

[12] Both UWRT 1101 and 1102 must be taken in sequence, but students taking the advance UWRT 1103 take only UWRT 1103.

Once they are a part of the program, UTOP students are introduced to resources differently than non-UTOP students. For example, UTOP students attend a required study hall for two hours every weekday evening and experience dedicated access to tutors for their courses. Throughout the second summer session, these students are sorted into numerous small groups led by one or two mentors (some of whom are former UTOP students) who attend classes with them. This dynamic of working in small groups that all come together for study hall fosters close relationships between the students as well as solid mentoring relationships. Finally, UTOP moved their offices to a new space within the past two years and now has a dedicated area for their students, one that includes computer labs, meeting spaces, and direct access to administrators. In the near future, Simmons plans to incorporate service learning and study abroad opportunities to the list of resources for his students.

The majority of the services and resources mentioned above are available to non-UTOP students as well. UNC Charlotte employs tutors from several disciplines through Tutorial Services, and writing tutors are available to help students, faculty, and staff in the WRC six days a week. Both of these tutoring services are free. Some departments at UNC Charlotte function with cohorts, which are groups of students who take classes and study together in a manner similar to UTOP students. Studying abroad is also a resource that hundreds of students take advantage of. The difference comes from how UTOP students are introduced to certain resources as opposed to non-UTOP students.

The first main difference in introduction to access is with tutoring services. All UTOP students are required to visit the WRC; on top of this, they have tutors who come to their study hall one night a week. While there are some FYW instructors who require their

classes to attend at least one tutoring session in the semester, not all do, especially considering the possibility that requiring tutoring sessions could have an adverse effect on a student's attitude toward the service as compared to a student who chooses to visit the WRC on their own terms. UTOP students are also required to attend study hall, a practice that encourages successful study habits and time management. Though this may be a practice that some learning communities require of their students, Athletic Services is the only other group on UNC Charlotte's campus that I know of to hold mandatory study halls, though all student athletes are not required to attend every night; instead, Athletic Services splits their study hall sessions up by sport. This means that students who are not involved in UTOP, a learning community, or a sport will learn about different services and resources available to them when they attend orientation, but may not hear about them again.

When asked what Simmons believes enables UTOP students to feel more confident in their writing skills when compared to their non-UTOP counterparts, he gave most of the credit to the students themselves as well as to their instructors, including Ingram and Raymond, who work with UTOP students every summer. Both FYW instructors then gave that credit back to UTOP administration, agreeing that the students themselves are responsible for their confidence, as well. However, while Ingram and Raymond agree that time and class size differences between a summer session and a regular-length semester impact student interaction with one another and with course materials, the similarities between the two instructors' ideas about UTOP student writing confidence end there. Ingram did not observe a difference in performance or confidence levels between her UTOP students and her non-UTOP students; Raymond did.

Raymond, who is the lecturer for the single UTOP section of UWRT 1103, was not surprised at all to hear that a gap in confidence exits between the two populations. During my interview with her, Raymond shared several possibilities to explain why UTOP students are more confident in their writing, and it begins with a broader sense of self-efficacy: confidence as a college student. Through her experiences, Raymond has noted the significant amount of support UTOP students receive from peers, mentors, and administrators. This support, which includes learning the layout of campus, experiencing dorm life and discovering how to use the money stored on their student ID cards to make different purchases, empowers UTOP participants. As Raymond theorizes, these students experience all of the confusing, stressful factors that can overwhelm any incoming freshman in a safe, controlled setting. Conversely, non-UTOP students are largely left to experience these same anxiety-inducing situations on their own. In other words, as UTOP participants become more confident about living as a college freshmen, they become more confident about their class performance as well, including college writing.

3.6   Final Thoughts and Call for More Research

The two studies conducted for this thesis identified a significant gap in confidence levels between advanced and average student writers. The studies did not, however, identify a solution to rectify this discrepancy. Furthermore, there are still several questions left unanswered, such as why students who demonstrate proficient writing skills to their instructors and tutors negatively evaluate those same skills, leading them to claim that they suck at writing. In order to empower our student writers and assist them in becoming successful college graduates, additional research needs to occur in order to answer these lingering questions and to develop a strategy to accomplish this goal.

From here, there are several paths to take. One step would be to study how different pedagogical strategies can impact students' beliefs in their lack of writing self-efficacy. In other words, how to effectively move students from "Sorry, but I suck at writing" to "I believe I'm a good writer." While several researchers have offered ideas, few have put them into practice to study the results with the exception of how collaborative writing and group activities can positively impact student writers. This is the most important avenue in terms of closing the confidence gap identified in this thesis. However, further research must be conducted to better understand the gap as well.

I am calling for a larger, more structured study of freshmen writers entering in the fall semester who are enrolled in UWRT 1101 and UWRT 1103. I acknowledge that the results of studies as small as mine cannot be directly applied to the populations they represent as a generalization. However, it is highly unlikely that such a gap exists only at UNC Charlotte, meaning that studies of students enrolled in equivalent courses at other universities must also be conducted. To better understand how these courses affect writing confidence and such contributing factors as apprehension, anxiety, and attitude, longitudinal studies are a necessity, specifically ones that compare the efficacy levels of students enrolled in UWRT 1101 and 1102 to those enrolled in UWRT 1103. The results of such studies would not only provide a basis for deciding which pedagogical strategies would have the greatest chances of successfully empowering student writers by encouraging confidence, they would likely answer my original question of why some students negatively evaluate their writing skills in opposition to their actual performance. Ultimately, our students, instructors, writing programs, and universities will all benefit greatly from the results of such endeavors.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY ONE

Are you male, female, transgender, or do you prefer not to answer?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Prefer Not to Answer

Are you between the ages of 18 and 20?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

What is your ethnicity?

- ☐ African American/Black
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Caucasian/White
- ☐ Hispanic/Latino
- ☐ Middle Eastern
- ☐ Native American/Alaskan Other
- ☐ Prefer Not to Answer

Is English your native language?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement:

You are confident in your writing skills.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement:

You feel that writing is an important life skill.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

How many hours do you spend on personal writing (e.g. poetry, journaling, songwriting, etc.) each week?

- ☐ 1-3
- ☐ 4-6
- ☐ 7-9
- ☐ 10 or more
- ☐ I Don't Engage in Personal Writing Activities

What type of writer do you consider yourself in terms of skill?

- ☐ Basic Writer
- ☐ Intermediate Writer
- ☐ Advanced Writer
- ☐ Not Sure

How many courses are you taking this semester?
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6 or more

How many days per week do you attend classes?
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6

What is your declared major? If you have not yet declared a major, which would you choose if you had to pick today?

Finally, what are your expectations regarding writing for this course? Please check all that apply.

- ☐ My writing will improve
- ☐ I will encounter new types of essays
- ☐ I won't learn anything new
- ☐ I will be adequately prepared for further college writing
- ☐ I will not be adequately prepared for further college writing
- ☐ My writing will not change at all
- ☐ My writing will become worse
- ☐ I am already adequately prepared for further college writing
- ☐ Other: _____

APPENDIX B: OPENING QUESTIONNAIRE

Please choose one of the following for questions 1-3:

1. Are you: ☐ Male   ☐ Female   ☐ Transgender

2. Are you: ☐ African American / Black   ☐ Asian / Pacific Islander
            ☐ Hispanic / Latino / Latina   ☐ Caucasian / White
            ☐ Native American / Hawaiian   ☐ Middle Eastern
            ☐ Other:

3. Are you: ☐ 17 years of age or younger
            ☐ 18 years of age or older

4. What is your personal definition of good writing? (please write out your answer)

5. What is your personal definition of bad writing? (please write out your answer)

6. How important are the following for a student to be a good writer? (1 being the lowest importance and 5 being the highest)

Grammar Proficiency	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Research skills	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Extensive vocabulary	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Enjoying writing	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Creating outlines	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Creativity	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Enjoying reading	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Understands Citation Styles	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Critical Thinking	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Organization	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Computer Proficiency	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Other:	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

7. The grade that I usually got in High School English was:
☐ A   ☐ B   ☐ C   ☐ D   ☐ F

The following questions are true or false. Please choose one:

8. I am a good writer of school papers.   ☐ True   ☐ False

9. I enjoy academic writing.   ☐ True   ☐ False

10. I enjoy writing during my free time.   ☐ True   ☐ False

11. I think that writing is an important life skill. ☐ True   ☐ False

12. I think that I am prepared for college writing.   ☐ True   ☐ False

13. I think that I will have a lot of writing in my major. ☐ True   ☐ False

14. I think that I will have a lot of writing in my career. ☐ True   ☐ False

APPENDIX C: CLOSING SURVEY

1. What is your personal definition of good writing? (please write out your answer)

2. What is your personal definition of bad writing? *(please write out your answer)*

3. How has this course changed your opinion about writing? (please write out your answer)

4. How important are the following for a student to be a good writer? (1 being the lowest importance and 5 being the highest)

Grammar Proficiency	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Research skills	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Extensive vocabulary	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Enjoying writing	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Creating outlines	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Creativity	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Enjoying reading	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Understands Citation Styles	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Critical Thinking	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Organization	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Computer Proficiency	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Other:	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

5. The grade that I think I deserve for this course is:
   ☐ A   ☐ B   ☐ C   ☐ D   ☐ F

The following questions are true or false. Please choose one:

6. I am a good writer of school papers.   ☐ True   ☐ False

7. I enjoy academic writing.   ☐ True   ☐ False

8. I enjoy writing during my free time.   ☐ True   ☐ False

9. I think that writing is an important life skill.   ☐ True   ☐ False

10. I think that I am prepared for college writing.   ☐ True   ☐ False

11. I think that I will have a lot of writing in my major. ☐ True   ☐ False

12. I think that I will have a lot of writing in my career. ☐ True   ☐ False

The following questions are asking about your experience in this course:

13. How prepared were you for the writing in this course?
    ☐ Not at all ☐ Somewhat ☐ Very ☐ Unsure

14. Do you feel prepared for further college writing because of this course?
    ☐ Not at all ☐ Somewhat ☐ Very ☐ Unsure

15. Do you feel prepared for non-academic writing because of this course?
    ☐ Not at all ☐ Somewhat ☐ Very ☐ Unsure

16. Did this course function the way you expected it to? Explain. (please write out your answer)

17. Which assignments were the most helpful? Why? (please write out your answer)

18. Which assignments were not helpful? Why? (please write out your answer)

19. What was the most helpful feedback that you received during this course? (please write out your answer)

20. What was the least helpful feedback that you received during this course? (please write out your answer)

21. Do you think that you will carry what you learned from this course with you to other college courses? (please write out your answer)

22. Do you feel that you have become a better writer after taking this course? How or Why not? (please write out your answer)

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions for Shawn Simmons:

1. What makes a student a good candidate for UTOP? As in are there specific qualifications?

2. What does "underrepresented" mean to UTOP?

3. When do students usually have contact with UTOP for the first time? Do you reach out to certain (or all) high schools, at SOAR, through recruitment?

4. What is the aim of the head/jump-start summer program? Does it work? Why?

5. How does the UTOP learning community function? Are there continued resources beyond the first year?

6. The main office for UTOP has moved into a larger space. How does this affect the office's interaction with students?

7. What do you think enables UTOP students to feel more confident in their writing as opposed to non-UTOP students entering in the fall?

Interview questions for Suzanne Ingram and Lynn Raymond:

1. What are the major differences in your curriculum between a regular semester course and a summer short-session course?

2. Do you see a difference between your classes with freshmen entering in the fall and with UTOP students in the summer in terms of the students and how they interact with both the course material and with each other?

3. Is there a difference in overall performance level between these two student groups? If so, what is the difference and why do you believe it exists? If not, why do you believe they are so similar?

4. Finally, why do you think UTOP students are more confident in their writing than freshmen entering in the fall taking a regular semester course?

VITA

Mary-Elizabeth Greene was born on March 16th, 1990 in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she spend the first twenty-one years of her life. After transferring in from spending a year living in Blowing Rock, North Carolina to attend Appalachian State University, Greene moved back to Charlotte to complete her Bachelor of Arts in English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She graduated Summa Cum Laude as a Sigma Tau Delta honors in English student.

Prior to graduation with her BA, Greene was accepted as an early-entry student to the Master of Arts in English program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Greene served on several committees during her time as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, including the Faculty Advisory Library Committee, the First-Year Writing Program's Course Re-Design Project for UWRT 1104 (a hybrid writing course with an attached online lab), and the First-Year Writing Awards Judging Committee. She also served on the executive board for the English Graduate Student Association for two years, once as Co-Treasurer and once as Co-President.

In May of 2016, Greene graduated with honors from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, earning a Master of Arts in English with an emphasis in composition and rhetoric. After taking a year or so off to gain more experience in teaching, Greene plans to pursue a doctorate degree in composition and rhetoric.