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# *Ending the Cycle of Frustration: How I Overcame the Hindrance of Writer's Block*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction and Literature Review**

I have struggled with my composing process for as long as I can remember, but I have never really addressed the problem until now.<sup>2</sup> My composing process is not hindered by grammar or how to structure a sentence, but by what is known as “writer’s block.” There are many instances where I will sit in front of the blank computer screen for hours at a time unable to produce any fluent thoughts, and frankly, I don’t know why. I will write out a sentence, then erase it. I will try another sentence, and then scratch that one out too. It is a never-ending cycle of frustration, and there has always been a part of me that has wanted to find that assured solution that would end this case of writer’s block for good.

There have been many research studies performed on the different composing processes of college students (Perle; Pianko; Carlbring and Andersson).<sup>3</sup> For instance, Sharon Pianko performed the study “A Description of the Composing Processes of College Freshman Writers.” Pianko wanted to characterize the composing processes of a group of freshman writers and analyze the particular dimensions of composing that would uncover the differences within specific categories such as age, gender, etc. The dimensions included in the study were elements, moments, stages, behaviors, and prior experiences. These features were known to have shaped the composing processes of these college writers. Pianko concluded that teachers should affect the students’ written products in a positive way, and this will help them expand and elaborate the stages of their composing processes. Students should be able to become more aware of their dimensions so that they can explore new

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<sup>1</sup> There was a lot of time and effort put into developing the title for this academic research project. In the beginning, I had no idea what my title would be because it all depended if I would be able to overcome writer’s block or not. After conducting my primary research I was able to say that I have overcome the hindrance of writer’s block, and that I could use that research for my title. The first section of my title involves a personal experience, because whenever I did experience writer’s block I would always feel like I was in a never-ending cycle of frustration.

<sup>2</sup> Originally, I was going to conduct a research project on how social media affects one’s self-esteem, but it didn’t really go anywhere where I wanted. After consulting with Professor Launier, I realized that I have had this underlying problem of being hindered by writer’s block that could be solved by conducting a self-experiment. I have experienced writer’s block for as long as I could remember, and I decided to finally address this problem.

<sup>3</sup> I believe a student’s composing process is the most important aspect if they experience writer’s block or not. I wanted to discuss a college student’s composing process, because I believe it would help the audience understand where writer’s block is thought to come from and how it plays such a big role. There were many studies done on college student’s composing process, but I found Pianko’s study to be most interesting and most relatable to my research project.

ideas, concepts, and emotions through which they can develop a better understanding of their writing process (Perl; Pianko). The composing process is essential when it comes to writing. This process can be responsible for making a student's thoughts flow fluently or it can impede them, but they might not know how or why this happens (Marzano; Hart; Bakhshi Anand; Passman).

There are many inhibitions that can be discovered within one's composing process that would explain why they might experience writer's block (Rose; Perl). I have found that the main causes of writer's block include work apprehension, procrastination, perfectionism, evaluation anxiety, fear of failure, and following rigid rules of writing (Rose; Hart; Cass; Sulkes; Oliver; Boice). Needless to say, the causes of writer's block are multiple, but among those causes, the most prevalent are perfectionism and procrastination (Boice). Many students don't know this, but a perfect writing piece does not exist.<sup>4</sup> The determination to write a perfect piece could feasibly lead to a cognitive block. A writer might start to think that some of their thoughts that they want to write might not be good enough (Rose and Sternglass). However, procrastination works in a different way. When a student waits too long to begin an important writing assignment, they are forced to write on a deadline.<sup>5</sup> The student may experience writer's block due to the emotional realm, or fear of assessment, since they are feeling anxious and pressured to complete the assignment. Then, the student feels as if that they are not able to produce anything to the best of their ability (Cass).

Emotional realm and a variety in cognitive styles are the better-known causes of writer's block, but what about the concept of rigid rules?<sup>6</sup> This cause is commonly overlooked, but was addressed by the researcher Mike Rose. In the article "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block," Mike Rose tries to discover what separates a group of students who do not experience writer's block from those who do. Rose thought that the answer could lie within the emotional territory—*anxiety, fear of assessment, uncertainty, etc.* Or perhaps, he thought, blocking arose from the variation in cognitive style. Rose found that neither of these theories were correct. After clinical interviews and testing, he concluded that all of the students who experienced writer's block were all operating either with writing rules or with planning strategies that impeded, rather than enhanced, their composing processes.

While some students are hindered by rigid rules of writing, others are hindered by the thought of making too many errors (Rose; Oliver; Boucher). Lawrence J. Oliver, Jr. discusses that some teachers are too worried that their students are producing too many errors (e.g. spelling, grammar, and sentence structure) and non-errors (e.g. variety of expression and inadequate concentration of ideas), rather than seeing if they are actually producing a piece of writing to the best of their ability. Oliver explains that these students experience writer's block because of how much they worry about making these mistakes. In addition, they might have a fear of evaluation since they know that they might not reach their teacher's expectations. Stanley Sulkes adds to Oliver's conversation by explaining that some writers are petrified by the irrational fear of failure. He explains that as long as fear is submerged, students will continue to feel uncomfortable and will

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<sup>4</sup> It might have been bold of me saying this, but I really believe that there is no such thing as a perfect piece of writing. Even the most prestigious authors have trouble sometimes with writing their pieces. Striving for perfection is difficult, because then all you are focused on is how the audience will interpret it, if it will grab their attention, or if it is good enough for others to read. I know whenever I write I try to make it as perfect as I can and that is when writer's block takes over. I start thinking too much about how to impress others and I am not able to produce the best to my ability.

<sup>5</sup> Procrastination can take over a student's life, and is one of the main causes of writer's block according to some researchers. I decided to add this concept in one of the questions in the survey I conducted, because I wanted to know how many of my peers who are college students suffer writer's block due to procrastination.

<sup>6</sup> Focusing too much on writing rules and conventions can cause writer's block, and a student might not even know it. They might focus too much on spelling and grammar, not know how to word something properly, be impeded by their own planning strategies, or even worry about how to structure a sentence. I know I have experienced writer's block due to rigid rules and planning strategies, and by doing secondary research I was able to add to the conversation by adding my personal experiences.

not fully concentrate on the assignment that they are given. When a student experiences writer's block, there could be a number of causes that they might not even know about. However, with every cause there is usually a solution that could help one overcome the hindrance of writer's block.<sup>7</sup>

One would need to understand why they are blocked before they can find a solution that will work for them (Hart; Bakshi Anand; Barber). Many researchers believe that writer's block can be overcome by using different models that involve creativity (Sulkes; Boice; Dusatko; Hay). Robert Boice, the author of "Writing Block and Tacit Knowledge," believes that causes, such as perfectionism and procrastination, can be unblocked through the existing models. The models are known as the creativity model, the separate components model, and the IRSS model. All of these models have to do with generating creativity within the mind and also developing a new strategy of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is the kind of knowledge that is difficult to transfer to another person by means of writing it down or verbalizing it (Boice). Boice believes that the problem of writer's block often remains unrecognized because writing and publishing skills are regarded as tacit skills and, therefore, are not taught within schools.<sup>8</sup>

As I was examining secondary research, I found that many of my references had some of the same solutions that students could possibly use to overcome writer's block. After one knows the cause of their writer's block, they can then find a suitable solution to use. Free writing, questions that stimulate thinking, encouragement, completing an outline before one writes, talking out-loud then writing down those thoughts, eliminating all distractions, and changing one's surroundings are all solutions that could possibly help a student overcome writer's block (Rose; Hart; Oliver; Boice; Nelson; Schrag). Every researcher believes that at least one of these solutions could help a student, but there is also a chance that none of these could help. Geoff Hart, the author of "Writer's Block: Different Causes Have Different Solutions," explained that there are three different categories in which the cause can come from and how each of these categories have different solutions. The three categories of cause were psychological, barriers related to the mechanics or writing, and literacy or esthetic causes that arise from artistic goals. The solutions he gives are very similar to others listed in the beginning of this paragraph. Hart believes that mechanical exercises, working within the genre's criteria, and keeping your muscles loose are the most productive solutions one could use.<sup>9</sup> It was also said that if the solution doesn't work the first time, try again. Many researchers found that performing the solution more than once increases the chance of it benefiting the writer (Passman; Sulkes; Oliver; Davis).

When one is writing, staring at a blank page and being unable to produce fluent thoughts are some of the most unsatisfying moments ever. I would know. Researching different causes and solutions relating to writer's block has most certainly opened my eyes about what I have to do to overcome writer's block. I also found it very sustaining to know that there are so many research studies being done to help those who are hindered by writer's block. Furthermore, the conversation

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<sup>7</sup> When I typed this sentence, I wasn't sure if I was right or wrong. I could be wrong in a sense that if someone tries every single solution and none of them work they could just give up. But if they were determined enough to overcome writer's block they would keep trying until they were satisfied with their results. For this research project, I wasn't expecting to overcome writer's block fully, but I was expecting to lessen the hindrance. And from what other researchers said, for every cause there is usually a solution to that cause one should just keep trying until they get the results they want.

<sup>8</sup> This passage raised a lot of questions for me, and it is definitely something I would want to look into more if I had more time. What if we were taught tacit skills in school, would writer's block exist? The idea of tacit knowledge has genuinely intrigued me, because I believe most of the underlying problems of writer's block could be solved.

<sup>9</sup> Geoff Hart explains that working within the genre's criteria, mechanical exercises, and keeping your muscles loose are the most productive solutions one could use. When I first read sentence, I personally didn't believe that any of those solutions could help me overcome writer's block. However, when I thought about it more and more, and after I did more secondary research I found that not every solution is meant for everyone to use. Our brains work in a different way, and this is why there are different causes to writer's block. I believe his solutions could help some people, but not me in general.

will continue to develop and grow over the years to hopefully help more students overcome their cases of writer's block.<sup>10</sup>

## Methods

For my research project I have conducted three different types of primary research. For the first type of primary research, I have created a survey that will ask an average college student ten basic multiple choice questions about their own writing process, composing process, and writer's block in general.<sup>11</sup> The questions that were included in the survey were: What type of high school did you attend?<sup>12</sup> Please specify your gender. Do you believe writing comes naturally to you? Which of the following hinders you the most as a writer? Do you, or have you ever, suffered from writer's block? What does the term "writer's block" mean to you? If you have ever experienced writer's block, how did you try to get rid of it? How often do you write an extensive writing assignment (Ex. Essays, reflections, responses)? Do you ever find yourself having trouble starting any writing assignments? And when you are given a writing assignment, when do you begin to write it? I sent the survey via Facebook messaging to 50 recipients, 25 men and 25 women, who are currently in college.

Second, I conducted one-on-one interviews with one UCF professor from the Department of Writing and Rhetoric and two UCF students who are non-English majors.<sup>13</sup> In these interviews I wanted to discuss their thoughts about writer's block, if they have ever experienced it, and how it can affect their writing process and composing process. Some of the questions during my interview with the UCF professor were: What does writer's block mean to you? Have you ever experienced writer's block, and can you give an example? From a teacher's perspective, do you think most students writer's block is caused by a cognitive or emotional block? How would you help a student overcome writer's block? And do you think techniques should be taught to students so that they don't experience writer's block? The two UCF students were asked very similar questions, but there were a couple of differences, such as: When you do experience writer's block, how do you try to overcome it? And, from a student's perspective, do you think your writer's block is linked cognitively or emotionally? I recorded all three interviews by using a voice recorder, and I would occasionally take notes on some of the important aspects of the interview.

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<sup>10</sup> As new research develops, there will hopefully be more awareness brought to the issue of writer's block. Maybe the causes and solutions of writer's block can be addressed in schools to help students. Either way, I feel that the conversation of writer's block will continue to grow over the next years. As the conversation develops, there could be more underlying causes found, and new solutions that could help students overcome their hindrance of writer's block.

<sup>11</sup> I decided to choose a survey as a method of primary research, because I wanted to see how writer's block affected my peers, who are in college. I did not want to conduct a poll, because I felt that if I asked questions about their own composing process and writing process it would reveal more information about what kind of writer they are. The survey engine I used allowed me to create 10 questions, so I had to pick and choose what questions I added.

<sup>12</sup> The question "What type of high school did you attend?" allowed me to look at if education was a key factor in whether or not you experience writer's block. The choices I listed were: public school, private school, trade school, and home school. It is known that those who attend a private school receive a better education than those who attend a public school. So does would this have anything to do with whether a student experiences writer's block? What if private schools taught different than public schools and trade schools? Would the education make a difference?

<sup>13</sup> I chose to do interviews as a method of primary research, because I felt that if I were to talk to a professor and two students they would have different perspectives of what writer's block meant to them. I chose students who did not participate in the survey that I conducted, so that they wouldn't be asked the same questions that were asked on the survey. My goal in the interviews was to make it as conversational as possible so that they would feel more comfortable about sharing their experiences.

Lastly, I conducted a self-experiment in which I chose seven different techniques to perform on different writing assignments that could conceivably help me overcome writer's block.<sup>14</sup> The first technique that I tried was free writing. Free writing is a technique in which I would continuously write for a set period of time without regard to spelling, grammar, or the topic. The second technique that I tried was to talk out-loud and then write down my thoughts. I would record myself talking about the assignment, and afterwards I would listen to myself and would write out the thoughts that I previously said. The third technique that I used was to complete an outline before beginning the assignment. The fourth technique that I decided to try was to change my surroundings. I usually complete all of my major writing assignments in my dorm room where I know it will always be quiet, but I thought maybe changing my surroundings would help. This meant I could either go write outside, in the library, in a study lounge, or anywhere that wasn't in the comfort of my own room. The fifth technique that I would use is to eliminate all distractions. There would be times where whenever I experienced writer's block I would just go on the Internet or on my phone to waste time that I could always use to think of new ideas. For this technique I would have to put my phone out of reach and also disable my Internet access to eradicate all distractions. The sixth technique that I used was to listen to quiet music while writing.<sup>15</sup> The type of music was not limited so I could listen to classical, jazz, or comforting music that would not be a total interruption. The last technique that I decided to use was to take post-it notes and create a flexible outline. For this technique there would be one idea per post-it note, and I would be able to arrange them the way that I want. Furthermore, for this segment of primary research I would set a stopwatch for the total time that it would take me to complete an assignment, and then I would set a stopwatch for when I was experiencing writer's block. Every time that I performed a technique, I would make sure that recorded several different aspects that I found most important. I recorded the technique that I was using, the assignment that it was performed on, how long it took me to complete the assignment, the conditions (such as where I was or if I was alone or not), and the estimated time that I would stop. Then I would reflect on how I believe the technique worked for me, such as if it did or did not help me overcome writer's block.

## Results

### Survey Results

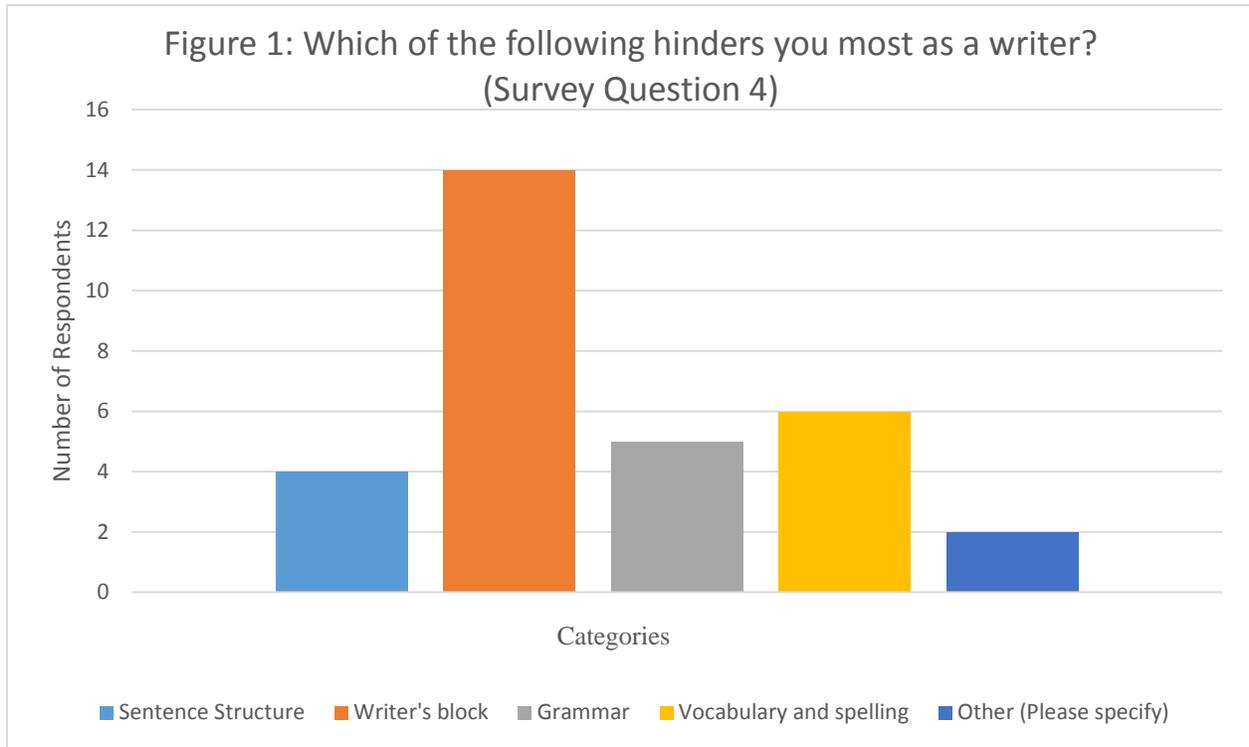
After analyzing the data collected from the survey that I had conducted, I found the results to be rather interesting. Overall survey results can be found in Appendix A. Overall, there were 31 respondents: 13 male and 18 female. The first question in the survey asked if they went to a public school, private school, trade school, or if they were home schooled during their high school career. Out of the 31 respondents, 77.42% (24 respondents) attended a public high school, and only 22.58% (seven respondents) attended a private school. There were no respondents that attended a trade school or were home schooled. The third question asked if they believed writing comes naturally to them, and while 64.52% said yes, 35.48% said no. The fourth question asked which of the following hindered them most as a writer: sentence structure, writer's block, grammar, vocabulary and spelling, or other (in which they had to specify). Out of the 31 total respondents, 12.90% (four respondents) chose sentence structure, 45.16% (14 respondents) chose writer's

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<sup>14</sup> I believe that the self-experiment is the most important primary research method that I will conduct in this research project, because it will allow me to see which solution(s) that will help me overcome writer's block. The techniques that I chose to use in my self-experiment were based on if I thought they would help me. There were some techniques that I would use from academic articles and yet there were others that I would use that I found from popular sites (mostly blogs).

<sup>15</sup> When I chose this technique, I was already pretty sure that it wasn't going to help me overcome writer's block. I decided to use it, because I figured it was worth trying and maybe it would help if it was classical music. There were also studies being done that classical music helps a student concentrate more. I also wanted more options to work with, so that I could get more accurate results.

block, 16.13% (five respondents) chose grammar, 19.35% (6 respondents) chose vocabulary and spelling, and 6.45% (two respondents) chose other in which they specified as “thesis formulation” and “b/s-ing” (see Figure 1).<sup>16</sup>



The fifth question in the survey asked if they have, or have ever, suffered from writer’s block during their lifetime. Out of the 31 respondents, 26 respondents (83.87%) said yes and five respondents (16.13%) said no.<sup>17</sup> The sixth question asked the respondents what the term “writer’s block” meant to them. For this question, the respondents were allowed to select all of the choices that they thought applied to them. Table 1, provided below, will displays the results that were collected from this question.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> I found the results to this question very interesting, because out of the 31 total respondents 14 answered that writer’s block hindered them most as a writer. That is almost half of the respondents. This question was also interesting, because it was a question where I allowed the respondents to choose “other”, in which they would have to specify their answer. The answers that I received were “thesis formulation” and “b/s-ing”. I never really thought about it till now, but thesis formulation has always set me back as a writer. It was always difficult to think of a thesis that your audience would enjoy and be interested about. The answer “b/s-ing” totally caught me off guard, because I really didn’t understand what it meant. I took it as they don’t put much time into their work and basically just “b/s” their way through writing it which hinders them as a writer. Either way, I found the results to this question quite intriguing because then I knew writer’s block was not a small issue for other students as well.

<sup>17</sup> These results were very surprising to me, because to see that 26 out of 31 respondents say they have or are suffering from writer’s block made me believe that this is actually a common hindrance among college students. Even though the 5 respondents answered no to this question, maybe they really do suffer from writer’s block but don’t want to admit it. Or maybe they really don’t suffer from writer’s block, and they are able to write papers with complete fluency. If I had more time to conduct more research, I would want to ask these respondents why they answered no to this questions.

<sup>18</sup> Table 2 shows some very interesting trends that I found while I was analyzing my data. There were a total of 70 responses, and this meant some people chose more than one answer to explain what writer’s block meant to them. The most popular answers were: not having the motivation or inspiration to write, not being

**Table 1: What does the term “writer’s block” mean to you? (Survey Question 6)**

Answer Choices	Number of Responses	Percentage
Not having the motivation or inspiration to write	17	54.84%
Procrastinating too often	9	29.03%
Not having an organized writing process	6	19.35%
Not having a quick composing process	8	25.81%
Being unable to overcome a fear of failure	4	12.90%
Being unable to overcome the idea of not being a ‘good writer’	3	9.68%
Being unable to produce quantity over quality	4	12.90%
Not being able to produce consistent or flowing ideas	19	61.29%
Other (Please specify)	0	0.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>

The seventh question in the survey asked the respondents how they try to get rid of writer’s block. For this question the respondents were allowed to select all of the choices that they thought applied to them. There were six answer choices to choose from: (1) procrastinate until the deadline is so close you have no choice but to work non-stop, (2) create an outline hoping to write down all the points you want to cover, (3) ask for advice, (4) go do something non-academic related (such as go work out or go out to eat) then come back and start writing, (5) try to look up ideas in books or on the Internet that could help you with you writing assignment, and (6) other (in which they had to specify).<sup>19</sup> There were a total of nine responses (29.03%) to the choice of procrastinating until the deadline, ten responses (32.26%) to the choice of creating an outline, seven responses (22.58%) to the choice of asking for advice, 17 responses (54.84%) to the choice of going to go do something non-academic, ten responses (32.26%) to the choice of looking up ideas for the writing assignment, and two responses (6.45%) to the choice of other.<sup>20</sup> Those who chose other wrote “music” and “fight through it.”<sup>21</sup> The eighth question in the survey asked the respondents how often

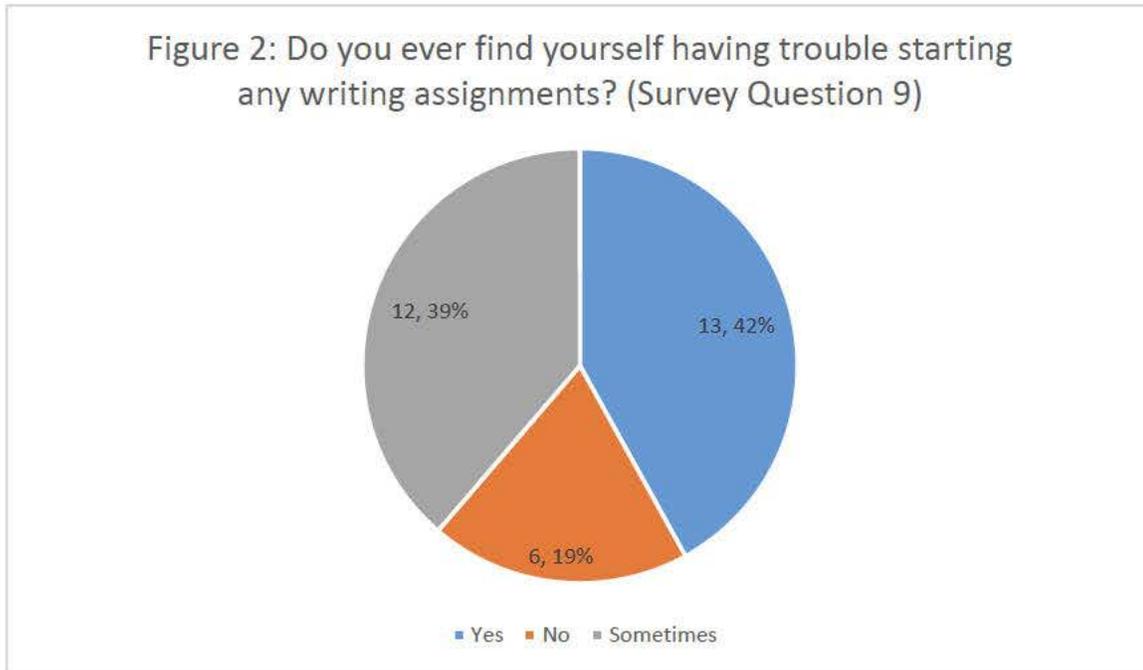
able to produce consistent or flowing ideas, and procrastinating too often. If I were to take my own survey, I would have chosen these answers as well. The term “writer’s block” can have varying definitions, as shown through this question. I believe it depends on overall what type of student you are, because that will determine what kind of writing and composing process you have.

<sup>19</sup> I had a lot of fun developing this question, because all of the choices I listed were based on what I do whenever I am impeded by writer’s block with an exception of the procrastinate until the deadline. Throughout my school career, I would always try to find new ways to help myself overcome writer’s block. Over the years, these methods would only temporarily help me for the time being.

<sup>20</sup> I found the results to this question interesting, because the most popular answer was to go do something non-academic related (such as going out to eat or going for a run). However, there were some answers that stood out to me because they were in close second. There were 10 respondents who chose to create an outline and 10 respondents who chose to look up ideas for the writing assignment. I didn’t think there would be a lot of people who would chose to create an outline, but maybe that helped them overcome their writer’s block. I thought more respondents would choose to procrastinate, but there were only 9 responses to that choice.

<sup>21</sup> There were two respondents who chose “other” as one of their choices, and one respondent wrote “music” and the other wrote “fight through it”. I found these answers very interesting, because I have never really thought of using these whenever I am suffering from writer’s block. The answer “music” was intriguing to me, because I know a lot of students like to listen to music while they are writing to help them concentrate. This might help some students, but I also know some who believe music is distracting. The answer “fight through it” is not an answer I was expecting. I don’t know many people who want to sit in front of a computer screen

they write extensive writing assignments (ex. essays, reflections, and responses). 70.97% (22 respondents) said once or twice a week, 12.90% (four respondents) said three to four times a week, 0.00% (zero respondents) said five or more times a week, and 16.13% (five respondents) said hardly ever. The ninth question asked respondents if they ever find themselves having trouble starting any writing assignments. While thirteen respondents said yes, six respondents said no, and twelve respondents said sometimes (see Figure 2).<sup>22</sup>



The last question of the survey asked the respondents when they begin a writing assignment. Five respondents (16.13%) answered as soon as it was given, 19 respondents (61.29%) answered sometime between the time it was given and the due date, and seven respondents (22.58%) answered right before it's due.

There are a few questions that I broke down even further, in which I looked at males versus females to see if they are affected by writer's block differently. Eight females answered no and the other ten females answered yes, while only three males answered no and the other ten answered yes.<sup>23</sup> For the question, "Which of the following hinders you most as a writer?" eleven out of the fourteen responses for the choice of writer's block were from females and the other three

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until they finally think of something to write. How do they "fight through it"? I would want to ask this respondent how this process works for them, and if they would recommend it to others.

<sup>22</sup> I chose to add the choice of sometimes into this question, because I know not all students have trouble starting writing assignments every single assignment they are given. There are times where I will spend hours thinking of how to start an assignment, but there are other times where it doesn't require any time for me to start an assignment. I think it all depends on the difficulty of the assignment and what type of genre it is.

<sup>23</sup> Even though I didn't have an even number of males and females for this survey, I still found these results interesting. While 8 females said they don't believe writing comes naturally to them, only 3 males answered the same. Do males have a natural ability to write? Why do more females believe the process of writing doesn't come naturally to them?

responses were from males.<sup>24</sup> The most common hindrances among males were grammar and sentence structure. For the question, “Do you ever find yourself having trouble starting any writing assignments?” eight females answered yes, eight answered sometimes, and two answered no. There were five males who answered yes, four who answered sometimes, and four who answered no. Some trends stood out more than others did, but I am very surprised with some of the results that I have received.

## Interviews

For my second method of research, I decided to conduct three one-on-one interviews with a professor from the Department of Writing and Rhetoric and two of my peers, who are not English majors, from the University of Central Florida.<sup>25</sup> The full-length interviews recordings can be found in Appendix B. In these interviews, I wanted to discuss their thoughts about writer’s block, if they have ever experienced it, and how it affects their writing and composing process. I found some of their thoughts and comments very unique, and I have been granted permission to share them with the public. The first interview that I conducted was with Professor Launier, who is currently my ENC 1102 professor. The interview lasted approximately 32 minutes, and I started off by asking what writer’s block means to him as a professor. His response was, “There is no such thing for me.” He went on to say that writing is a process, and that he works through writer’s block because it is just a part of that process. However, then Professor Launier commented, “If we are victim of writer’s block or if we suffer from writer’s block, then there is something going on in our process that isn’t working for us.” This leads to the discussion that we had about how perfectionism is probably one of the main sources of writer’s block, and also that many students will put off writing assignments since they don’t know where to start.

I go on to ask Professor Launier what he thinks the best solution for writer’s block would be. He offers the idea of writing all of your ideas on post-it notes in order to make a flexible outline. He explains that this technique could help you actively write all of your ideas down, and not just sit in front of a blank computer screen. I asked Professor Launier if he thought most students experience writer’s block cognitively or emotionally. He replied, “It’s more likely to be something in the effective (emotional) domain rather than in the cognitive domain.” Additionally, he says that if one is a perfectionist or if they procrastinate there is always some type of emotional component that will make them frustrated or upset. The final question that I asked Professor Launier was if he thinks that techniques should be taught in school to help students overcome writer’s block. He thinks that if a student has a writing issue, it should be addressed. Professor Launier had a very different view about the idea of writer’s block, but he also studies the subject on a daily basis.

The second interview I conducted was with one of my peers, Chrissy Mazzotta, who currently attends the University of Central Florida and is a Health Services Administration major. The interview lasted for about 4.5 minutes, and I first asked what writer’s block means to her. She answered, “It means you are trying to write a paper and you get stuck because you can’t think of anything else to write about.” This was a typical answer, but when I asked her if she has ever experienced writer’s block she said, “I have, it’s like the worst thing ever!”<sup>26</sup> When I asked her how

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<sup>24</sup> I was surprised by the difference in which more females are hindered by writer’s block than males are. I can’t help to wonder of why this is. Do males have a different cognitive style of writing? Are females more susceptible to writer’s block due to emotional realm?

<sup>25</sup> I decided to choose a Professor from the Department of Writing and peers who were not English majors, because I knew that they would all have a very different intake about the idea of writer’s block. I figured my Professor would have a different view because he teaches students about writing and he also studies writing and literature for a career. As for my peers, they don’t study writing or literature nor do they write every day.

<sup>26</sup> This was probably the most negative response that I received while conducting my interviews, but I couldn’t agree more. I can relate to her response, because there are so many times where I stop because of writer’s block and I just want to give up. It really is the worst thing ever. Chrissy usually experiences writer’s

she tries to get rid of writer's block, she explained to me that she usually walks away from the computer, gets something to eat, and then goes back to writing. She commented that it usually makes more sense to her after she has had time to step away for a couple of minutes. I asked Chrissy if she experiences writer's block because of emotional causes or cognitive causes. She answered that her writer's block is caused by emotional realm because she gets herself worked up if she isn't able to produce any fluent thoughts. Chrissy believed that techniques should be taught in schools to help those students who suffer from writer's block because she was taught ways to help overcome some challenges when she was in school.

The third interview that I conducted was with another peer, Chris Lawson, who currently attends the University of Central Florida and is a Forensics major. The interview lasted for about four minutes, and when I asked Chris what he thought writer's block meant he said, "Writer's block, to me, is simply when I am trying to get a paper completed for a class and I just can't get started." He also commented, "It's just like a wall that I can't seem to move past, I'm just stuck." Chris goes on to explain that, for him, it's hard to appeal to an audience sometimes and that is what causes his writer's block. He wants to impress the audience at all costs, but this also forces him to think close mindedly. I asked him how he tries to get over writer's block and he said he likes to go take walks or ride his skateboard around campus. When I asked Chris is he thought his writer's block is caused emotionally or cognitively he answered, "It's probably half and half, like a mixture of both. . ." Chris explains that he focuses on writing rules and conventions, but he will also get frustrated when he is stuck, which leads him to block even more. He believes that techniques for writer's block shouldn't necessarily be taught as a class, but should be addressed within the classes you are taking.<sup>27</sup>

### **Self-Experiment Results**

The last method that I decided to conduct for my research project was a self-experiment. I chose to perform seven various techniques on seven different assignments to see which ones might help me overcome my hindrance of writer's block (see Table 2 for organized results).<sup>28</sup> The first type of technique that I used for my self-experiment was to write an outline before writing the assignment. This technique was performed on the "Summary and Critical Engagement Essay" for my ENC 1102 course. I was in my dorm room, alone, and there was no TV or music playing. It took me a total of 310 minutes, or 5.16 hours (150 minutes, 2.5 hours on February 16, and 160 minutes, 2.66 hours on February 17) to complete this assignment. The estimated time that I would stop, due to the frustration of writer's block, was 83 minutes, or 1.38 hours. This was a long assignment compared to the others that I used, but overall this technique did not work well for me. I wrote an extensive outline before I began my assignment, and there would be times where I would be stuck in my outline not knowing how to word something in my paper. My outline would also get in the way, and I wouldn't be able to produce new ideas because I would want to stick to my original concepts within the outline. In the article "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block," Mike Rose discusses a problem with one of the students he was studying. The student felt trapped inside his original plans and outlines, could not generate any alternatives, and was blocked. I can certainly relate to this student, because it was a time where I felt like I had nowhere to go and I was not able to brainstorm any innovative ideas.

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block when she is trying to impress an audience, and when this happens she says it is hard to overcome since she is so worked up.

<sup>27</sup> Originally, I thought techniques for writer's block should be taught within the classrooms, but I agree with Chris's statement more. I believe if the student is experiencing some kind of issue that is impeding his/her writing or composing process it should be addressed. If the problem is addressed, a teacher who does have experience with this type of knowledge, can help the student overcome those challenges.

<sup>28</sup> I chose the 7 techniques by searching through academic articles and also popular sites, such as blogs. Once I found the 7 techniques that I wanted to do I planned out which assignments I wanted to do with which technique. I tried to avoid the techniques such as, keeping your muscles loose, because I felt like that would not benefit me or this project in any way.

The second technique that I used was to change my surroundings, such as to go outside or go to the library.<sup>29</sup> I performed this technique for Reflection 6 that was used for my work log in my ENC 1102 course. I was in the library, by myself yet there were others around me, and I was not listening to music. It took me about 85 minutes, or 1.41 hours, to complete this assignment. The estimated time that I would stop was about 32 minutes, or .53 hours. I usually write all of my writing assignments in my dorm room, because I know it will be quiet. I feel like changing my surroundings helped a little bit, but there were still times where I would lose my train of thought because of everyone who was around me. I was easily distracted by the people, which would stop my flow of thoughts mid-sentence. There were times when I was frustrated because I couldn't think due to everyone around me, but being in the library forced me to finish my assignment within a reasonable time.

The third technique that I used was to eliminate all distractions, such as not using my phone or going on the Internet. I performed this technique on my Virtual Child Assignments #10 and #11 for my Developmental Psychology course (DEP 2004C). I was in my dorm room, with my roommate, and she had the TV on a low volume. It took me 65 minutes, or 1.08 hours, to complete Virtual Child Assignment #10, and 50 minutes, or .83 hours, to complete Virtual Child Assignment #11. The estimated time that I would stop was about 35 minutes (20 minutes for #10 and 15 minutes for #11). Eliminating all distractions didn't really change anything about how I write because I would still stop in frustration because I wouldn't know what to write. However, whenever I was frustrated with not knowing what to write I would just stare at the computer screen instead of going on the Internet or my phone. This technique didn't help with diminishing my writer's block at all. The fourth technique that I used was to free write. I performed this technique on the Genre Reflection 3 assignment for my ENC 1102 course. I was in my dorm room, with my roommate, and there was no music or TV playing. It took me approximately 70 minutes, or 1.16 hours, to complete this assignment. The estimated time that I would stop was only about 14 minutes.<sup>30</sup> The total time also includes the time I spent brainstorming ideas beforehand. This technique worked very well with helping me overcome writer's block. For this technique, I would just write and not think about the writing rules that slow my composing process. While I wasn't thinking about certain writing rules, my thoughts were flowing faster and were put together. I also wrote down all of my initial thoughts instead of holding them back. It was much easier to not worry about writing rules and conventions, because then my thoughts would flow more frequently than usual.

The fifth technique that I used was to talk out-loud and then write down my thoughts.<sup>31</sup> I performed this technique on my Research Proposal and Annotated Bibliography for my ENC 1102 course. I was in my room, alone, and with no music or TV playing. This assignment took a couple of days to complete, but the estimated time that it took was about 525 minutes, or 8.75 hours, for both the proposal and annotated bibliography. The estimated time that I would stop, due to writer's

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<sup>29</sup> I found this technique in a blog while I was doing secondary research for my project. I thought this would be a good technique for me to try, because I rarely leave my room when I am doing important homework assignments. Even though I chose to go to the library for this specific assignment, if I had more time to conduct more primary research I would have tried different places all over campus and would see which location worked best for me.

<sup>30</sup> The estimated time that I stopped for this assignment was so minimal that it surprised me. This was the first technique that actually helped me overcome writer's block, and there was no better feeling. I felt accomplished, because I was able to produce all of my thoughts fluently with stopping for 15 minutes at a time wondering where I should go from there. I can only hope that once I practice this technique more, the time that I stop due to writer's block will keep decreasing.

<sup>31</sup> I knew this technique would be time consuming, because I do not have the software that allows me to speak and it just automatically types it on the computer. I had to talk into my voice recorder on my laptop, and then once I was done talking out the assignment I listened to my recording and typed it out while I was listening. There would be times where I didn't hear myself correctly and I would have to go back and re-listen to the certain point in the recording. Overall, it wasn't that bad it just took a lot of time.

block, was about 35 minutes, or .58 hours.<sup>32</sup> This technique helped a tremendous amount, and even though it was really time consuming, it helped my composing process stay fluent. I would say all of my thoughts aloud, and then I would listen to them and type them out. It was much easier talking out my thoughts rather than trying to think about them while I am writing. I didn't think about writing rules and conventions, which led me to just talk fluently and say all of my thoughts that I initially had.

The sixth technique that I used was to listen to quiet music. I performed this technique on Reflection 7 for my work log in my ENC 1102 course. I was in my dorm room, alone, and I was listening to classical music quietly. It took me approximately 160 minutes, or 2.66 hours, to complete this assignment. The estimated time that I would stop was about 50 minutes, or .83 hours. This technique did not help me at all because I was easily distracted by the music that was playing. Even though there are many studies that show music can help a student focus, I don't believe it helped me stay focused, and it really didn't do anything to help keep my composing process fluent.

The last technique that I used was to use post-it notes to create a flexible outline.<sup>33</sup> I performed this technique on Genre Reflection 4 for my ENC 1102 course. I was in my dorm room, alone, and I had the TV on quietly in the background. It took me approximately 75 minutes, or 1.25 hours, to complete this assignment. The estimated time that I would stop was about 9 minutes, or .15 hours. This technique I believe worked very well, because I was able to create an outline and also be flexible with it. I would write down one idea per post-it note, and arranged the post-it notes in the way that would make sense with the prompt. It took about 30 minutes to complete the post-it note outline, but when I actually sat down to write the reflection, it only took 75 minutes. I was very fluent while writing, because I had a flexible outline to go by and I also was not focusing on many writing rules and conventions.

The table below shows the type of technique, how much time it took to complete the assignment, and the estimated time that I would stop.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The amount of time I stopped due to writer's block was very low with this technique. Talking out loud allowed my thoughts to flow consistently without stopping. The whole assignment took me as long as it did because I had to listen to myself talk and type it out as I listened. If I had the software that allowed me to talk and it typed it out for me, I would have been done so much quicker. I was impressed by the way my composing process changed when I was talking out loud, it was like writer's block has never affected me before.

<sup>33</sup> This technique was recommended by Professor Launier during our interview. He thought it would help me overcome my writer's block, and he was right. I think I enjoyed using this technique the most because it is very simple to do and I can take it with me everywhere I go. This type of outline gives me enough flexibility that I won't be stuck trying to think of new ideas, because I could just write that idea on a post-it note and stick it somewhere within the outline I have already designed.

<sup>34</sup> I wasn't really sure how to organize this data, because all I really had was the amount of time I spent on the assignment and how long I stopped during the assignment. I didn't find a way to show the difference between the times, because each assignment took a different amount of time to complete. If I were to redo this project I would perform each technique more than once to compare and see how I improved or if nothing changed.

**Table 2: Self-Experiment Observations**

Type of Technique	Amount of time it took to complete assignment (minutes)	Estimated time that I would stop due to writer's block (minutes)
Write an outline before writing the assignment	310	83
Change surroundings	85	32
Eliminate all distractions	115	35
Free writing	70	14
Talk out-loud then write down thoughts	525	35
Listen to music	160	50
Post-it note outline	75	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,340</b>	<b>258</b>

## Discussion Section

### What Has Been Learned?<sup>35</sup>

After completing my primary research for this project, I have realized that I am not alone when it comes to experiencing writer's block. The results from the survey pointed out that majority of the respondents DO experience writer's block. In the survey, 14 out of the 31 respondents selected that writer's block hinders them the most as a writer. Whether it is caused by cognitive reasons or emotional reasons would be something to look further into. The term "writer's block" can have different definitions depending on the person and the type of writer they are. According to the survey, not having the motivation and not being able to produce consistent or flowing ideas were the most popular definitions. Many respondents chose the answer of going to go do something non-academic, such as going out to eat or working out, as a way to overcome writer's block. The interviews also showed the different point of views from Professor Launier, who studies language and writing on a daily basis, to my peers, who commented that writer's block is usually always a hindrance to them when they write. There were many points made during the interviews, and some were very different from one another. The most important notion I can take from this project is that I am able to overcome writer's block. By performing my own self-experiment I was able to find a few techniques that actually work for me, and that I will be able to use for the rest of my life. I found that the techniques of free writing, talking out-loud and then writing my thoughts down, or creating a post-it note outline could all work for me and almost completely rid me from the hindrance of writer's block.

My initial goal was to step into this conversation to seek guidance on how I can overcome my writer's block. The results from my primary research have shown that I have accomplished that goal, and that I should take the knowledge I have learned and add to the conversation of

<sup>35</sup> For the discussion section, I wanted to break it up into 3 different sections to make it more organized. The 3 sections would be what I have learned from primary research, limitations that have occurred, and how I would expand the conversation. Not only does it organize the section, but I believe it brings more fluidity to the paper so that the audience has a better understanding of what this whole project was about.

overcoming writer's block.<sup>36</sup> Depending on what is causing writer's block, the writer should be able to find a solution that will benefit them in the long run. Yet, there are other ways to help one overcome writer's block. Lawrence J. Oliver argues that the strategies should not be considered panaceas for writer's block, but they have helped unlock the words and ideas of many students. Therefore, they should be among the tools that reading teachers have at their disposal when assisting students with writing problems. So, should teachers play a greater part when a student is experiencing writer's block? Many authors say that encouragement from teachers can benefit a student when they are experiencing writer's block, but there are many students who have a fear of addressing their problems (Sulkes).

### **Limitations<sup>37</sup>**

Having only fourteen weeks to create and conduct this research project was not nearly enough time for me. I sent out my survey via Facebook message to originally 50 people, 25 male and 25 female. I figured this would cause some bias, because I knew not everyone would respond. Out of the 31 total respondents, 18 females responded and only 13 males responded. This caused some digression, because I wanted to have a balanced number. If I could have conducted this survey differently, I would have posted the survey on a variety of college forums and would have hopefully received more results. It would have taken more time, but I would have loved to have at least 100 responses to truly see how writer's block affected college students.

As for the interviews, I originally was going to interview two college professors, one from the Department of Writing and Rhetoric and one from the Department of Chemistry. Due to my chemistry professor's busy schedule, I was not able to meet with him at the time. Also, I interviewed two of my peers, who are not English majors. Initially, I also wanted to meet with two English majors as well, but I did not have enough time between the other courses I am taking.

I have been working on my self-experiment since mid-February, but I still wish I had more time to try other techniques. I was only able to try seven techniques, which corresponded with some of the assignments that were planned ahead of time. Not only did I want to try new techniques, I would have also liked to try the techniques that did work more than once to receive better results. Another limitation to this project was that this research exclusively focuses on how writer's block affects early college students. What if my research was opened up to seniors in college or even freshmen in high school? What if there was a way to address this problem in high school so that there would be no worry about it in college? Studying a more diverse group of students would raise more questions on how different age groups are hindered by writer's block.

### **Expanding the Conversation**

Whether a student experiences writer's block due to work apprehension, perfectionism, or the fact that they can't look past the rigid rules of writing, the problem needs to be addressed. There are many techniques that can be used to overcome writer's block, but should these

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<sup>36</sup> This academic research project has proved that I have successfully overcome the hindrance of writer's block. I had to put a lot of thought in about how I would add to the conversation, because I knew that was the most important part of this project. I had no idea where to start first, so I figured I would start with the encouragement of teachers because I believe that is very important when it comes to addressing a writing issue.

<sup>37</sup> With every research project, there are many limitations that come along with it. There happened to be a few limitations within my research project, and I wanted to take the time to address them. I believe it is important for the audience to know what my original plan was going to be, but because of time it just did not work out that way. If I had more time to complete this project, there would be a lot more being done to make it as accurate as possible. I encountered some limitations over the semester that made me very upset, because I think it would of made a huge difference in my project.

techniques be taught in schools?<sup>38</sup> Growing up, I was never taught any techniques to overcome writer's block, and sometimes I wasn't even encouraged to try and get past it. There is a point in time where certain writing issues should be addressed, but how could teachers know when to do this? Robert Boice discusses the idea of tacit knowledge, which I explained earlier is the kind of knowledge that is difficult to transfer to another person by means of writing it down or verbalizing it.<sup>13</sup> I believe teachers should bring the awareness of tacit knowledge into the classroom, because there are many students that struggle from this process. Also, it is therefore important that the teacher, in addition to commenting on and correcting a paper's mistakes and deficiencies, call attention to and praise whatever strengths it has.<sup>12</sup> I believe the most important aspect of this research paper is that teachers should become more aware of the writing issues students face. What if teachers brought awareness to the idea of tacit knowledge to the classrooms? Would writer's block exist? Nevertheless, studying how to overcome the hindrance of writer's block could benefit education nation-wide.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> As I said earlier, maybe it is best if techniques were not taught in schools, but if a student has a writing issue then it should be addressed. The awareness of if a student has an issue or not should be considered, because it could make a difference the earlier it is fixed. What if my issue of not being able to overcome writer's block was addressed earlier, such as my freshman year in high school? Would it have solved other underlying issues that I had?

<sup>39</sup> While developing this research paper, I have not only learned something about myself, but I have also learned that the most important aspect of this course was to participate in an on-going conversation. My goal was to create a project to add to this conversation, and I believe I was successful in doing so. In the beginning, I had no idea where my genuine inquiry was going to take me, but after fourteen long weeks I have finally finished something I never thought would be possible. I am always nervous entering an English or writing course, because for writer's block would always be a hindrance to me. After entering ENC 1102 I never thought I would be here finished with this research project 20+ pages later. This project allowed me to enter a conversation, and then also add to it. It has also helped realize that real genuine inquiry has no boundaries. I am left here with hundreds of more questions that I want to be answered, but hopefully somewhere down the road they will be.

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## Amanda Wimmersberg



Amanda Wimmersberg is currently a sophomore at the University of Central Florida pursuing her B.S.N. in Nursing with a minor in Health Sciences. Upon graduating, she plans to keep going to school to receive her MSN in Nursing. During her first two years at UCF, she has been recognized on the President's Honor Roll and Dean's List. She is a volunteer in the Emergency Room at the Florida Hospital, and also has a part time job as a server. When she is not working or studying, Amanda enjoys running half-marathons, surfing, and being outdoors.

# Appendix A

**SurveyMonkey** Upgrade [awinnersberg](#)  
 Home My Surveys Survey Services Plans & Pricing [+ Create Survey](#)

ENC 1102 Research Project Design Survey Collect Responses Analyze Results

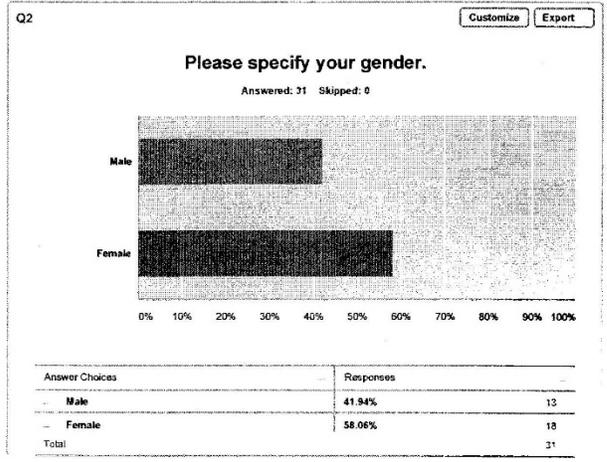
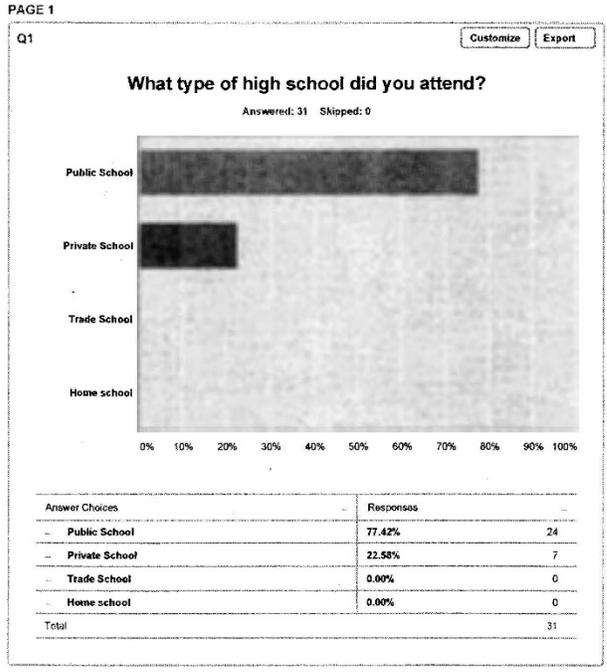
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- SAVED VIEWS (1) ?
- EXPORTS ?
- SHARED DATA ?

**No shared data**  
 Sharing allows you to share your survey results with others. You can share all data, a saved view, or a single question summary. [Learn more >](#)

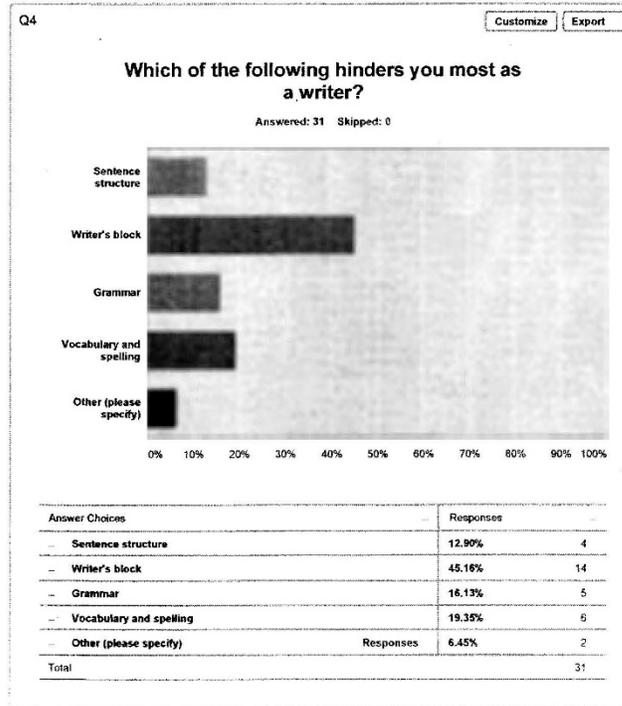
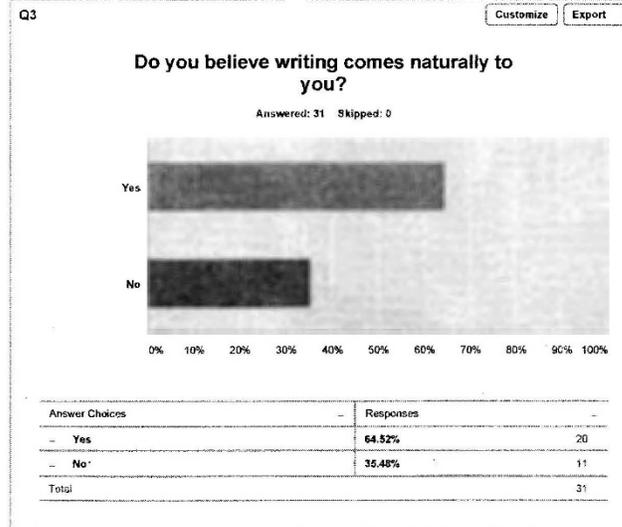
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RESPONDENTS: 31 of 31 Export All Share All

[Question Summaries](#)
[Data Trends](#)
[Individual Responses](#)

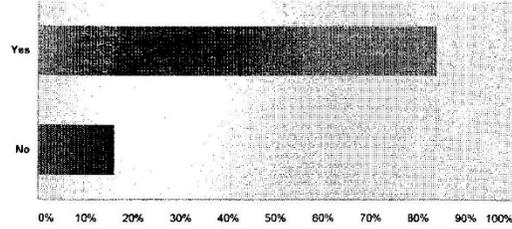


Answer Choices	Responses
Total	31



**Do you, or have you ever, suffered from writer's block?**

Answered: 31 Skipped: 0



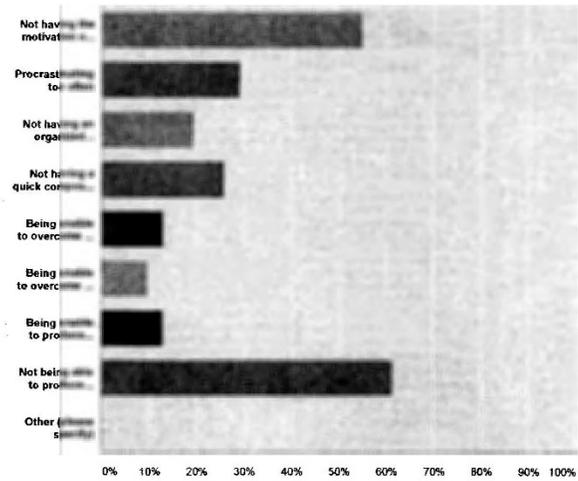
Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	83.87% 26
No	16.13% 5
Total	31

Q6

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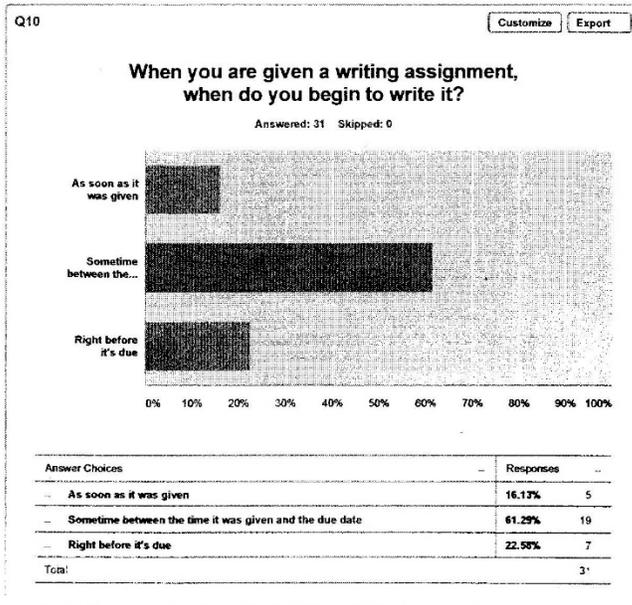
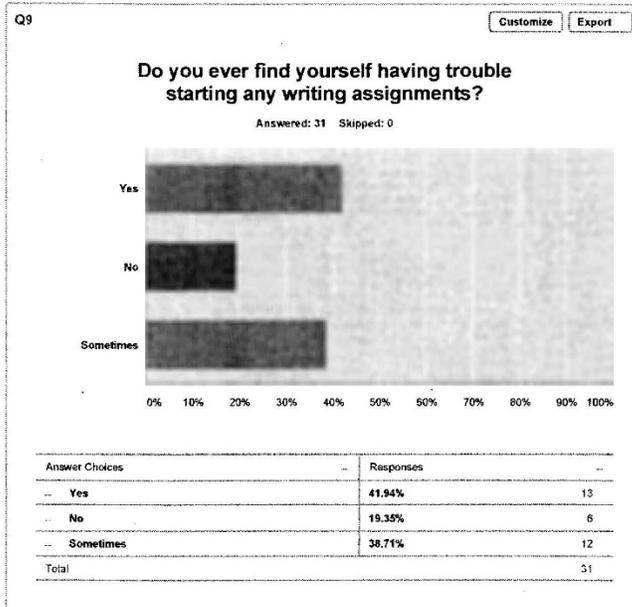
**What does the term "writer's block" mean to you? (Select all that apply)**

Answered: 31 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
Not having the motivation or inspiration to write	54.84% 17
Procrastinating too often	29.03% 9
Not having an organized writing process	19.35% 6
Not having a quick composing process	25.81% 8
Being unable to overcome a fear of failure	12.90% 4
Being unable to overcome the idea of not being a 'good writer'	9.68% 3
Being unable to produce quantity over quality	12.90% 4
Not being able to produce consistent or flowing ideas	61.29% 19
Other (please specify)	0.00% 0
Total Respondents: 31	

Answer Choices	Responses
Once or twice a week	70.97% 22
Three to four times a week	12.90% 4
Five or more times a week	0.00% 0
Hardly ever	16.13% 5
Total	31



## Appendix B

Interview with Professor Launier:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/4tcsd0axsye42qo/Interview%201%20%28Professor%20%29.m4a>

Interview with Chrissy Mazzotta:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/7s30ggdo2pst5v1/Interview%202%20%28Christina%20Mazzotta%29.m4a>

Interview with Chris Lawson:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/rjbr2w74uad1xx/Interview%203%20%28Chris%20Lawson%29.m4a>