What Happens When Things Go Wrong: Women and Writing Blocks

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When I began writing this paper, I expected to have some difficulty. Like many people, I have a history of painful writing blocks. The odd thing about my blocks is that they haven't interfered with my journal writing, personal communication, administrative memos, lecturing, or other forms of teaching. They have only come into play in my formal academic prose.

Over the years, I have observed that I am not alone. Many of my undergraduate women students, in particular, tend to have far more difficulties with and vocal misgivings about academic prose than my male students do. They are talented, motivated young women who write frequently in journals, who have exciting ideas, who explain themselves articulately when they talk and when they write informally in the first person. However, they freeze, balk, or resist when it comes to negotiating the challenges of academic prose.

During a six-year period when I taught at the School of Interdisciplinary Studies at Miami University, I had the opportunity to watch a variety of male and female undergraduates as they blocked—and unblocked—on yearlong senior projects. In the Western Program (as it is called), students design their own majors after completing two years in a core curriculum; during their senior year, they complete an academic project in their area of focus. As coordinator (for two years) of the workshop that brought together all those working on senior projects, I was able to observe the seniors' progress and hear what they said about their work, both in formal workshops and individual conferences held over the course of the year. I collected drafts of work in progress, asked for self-reports at regular intervals, and administered a self-report inventory at the end of the process.

What I noted were visible differences between women and men students in the ways that they described their writing blocks. My impression from written reports of their experiences was that women and men writers tended to block with about an equal degree of frequency. Most described at least one major occasion of blocking during the course of their projects. Many women, however, seemed to block for longer periods of time than did their male counterparts, and they also seemed to experience more prolonged and overt psychological distress over their failure to make progress. Their experience—as
well as my own—led me to investigate the possibility that some kinds of writer's block, particularly those involving academic prose, might have gender-specific components. I was especially interested in the question of how men and women might approach and negotiate long-term writing projects differently.  

**Current Scholarship on Writing Blocks**

Most of the existing literature treats the paralysis that many writers suffer from time to time as an equal opportunity problem. A cognitive model, perhaps best exemplified by Mike Rose's work, points to "rule rigidity" among blocked writers. That is, inflexible or conflicting composing rules and planning strategies channel writers into "narrowed interpretive planning or composing styles" (72). Writers get "stuck" because they don't know what to do next, or because they don't have a sufficient repertoire of choices to help them move beyond counterproductive and limiting sets of heuristics.

A second model, focusing on the affective components of writing blocks, sees anxiety of various sorts as the root of the problem. For example, John Daly and Michael Miller posit within the writer a dispositional characteristic that they call "writing apprehension." Someone suffering from writing apprehension characteristically avoids writing tasks and feels anxious about them. In his own review of the literature on this construct, Daly addresses the issue of gender, but he finds the data mixed and, thus, concludes that it is likely that gender differences do not strongly influence writing apprehension. Another proponent of the affective model, Robert Boice, provides a therapeutic behavior modification regimen designed to help blocked writers. As an addendum to his work, Boice tantalizingly notes that although he has not particularly discussed its political implications, for a variety of reasons he knows that women may experience more barriers to writing than men do, and he believes that the issue of gender bias in the world of academic writing needs to be investigated (213-14).

Reed Larson's research also locates writing dysfunction in the affective realm, but he presents situational characteristics that contribute to it rather than locating the source of the problem in some inherent characteristic of the writer. Overarousal—a state characteristic of students "unable to establish expectations for themselves that were consistent with what they could realistically do" (23)—led to high anxiety among the subjects he studied; underarousal, or boredom, characterized those students unable to conceive of the task as a problem-finding situation. Presumably, both men and women are subject to states of over- or underarousal. Whether individuals are particularly vulnerable to either state by virtue of their gender is a question that Larson does not raise.

Both cognitive and affective models of blocking behavior have tended to focus on the individual subject, without considering an individual's social positioning as a possible factor in blocking behavior. In contrast,
contextualists—including Lynn Bloom, David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, and Rose in his later work—have begun to suggest that difficulty in mastering writing tasks may be (in Bloom's words) a "function of the interaction between the individual and his or her environment rather than a function of one or the other acting alone" (119). According to the contextualist view, communication problems, including problems in written communication, result in part from a problematic fit between the cultural expectations and understandings that an individual brings to a given task and those that the environment demands for effective functioning. Because women and men stand in different kinds of relationships to established knowledge and the knowledge conventions that transmit power and authority, we might expect the blocking they experience in their writing tasks to differ. For both women and men, engaging in academic discourse means envisioning oneself as having sufficient cultural authority to utilize a privileged language associated with authority. Moreover, it also entails experiencing oneself as accepted by others as possessing appropriate cultural authority. In some cases, it may also involve a third component: grappling with the power relations inscribed in the discourse itself. All three of these factors can (and sometimes do) become problems for male writers. However, by virtue of their social positioning and long-standing exclusion from cultural authority, it is difficult for women to escape them.

**Men's Reports of Writing Blocks**

These models differed substantially in their ability to predict the senior-thesis writers' reports of what happened when things went wrong in their writing. The thirty-five men in the workshop tended to talk about their periods of being blocked in strategic terms, as the cognitive model might predict. Druid, for example, reported getting stuck when he "didn't know a good general direction or rule to go by." As he recounted, "I was... at the mercy of my inspiration." Jonathan wrote that he had problems when he "could not find a way to analyze the data." Like Druid and Jonathan, many of the men in the workshop seemed to think of their project as a problem to be solved, with greater or less economy of effort. To the extent that they described their blocking in any detail (and they were less apt to do so than the women), their problems fell into three different categories, all of which the "gender-neutral" literature on writing blocks might have predicted.

The first centered on finding an acceptable strategy for conceptualizing, researching, and presenting the project. Many of the men reported an initial period of intimidation at the beginning of the project, when they began to discover the enormity of the topic they had chosen. For example, Greg, by his own admission a frequent blocker, reported "trouble getting a handle on or deciding on an approach" to his project on U.S. intervention in Grenada. Ron, who hardly ever had trouble writing, remembered that his only block occurred when he was "narrowing down the topic to exactly what I was going
to do.” Until these writers were able to narrow the topic successfully, they remained anxious, unable to identify the most useful strategies for investigation. Cognitive and affective components both entered into their writing blocks.

Andy’s and Gary’s experiences with blocking suggest a second type of situation that stymied some of the male writers. For them, competing tasks took time away from project development, and the result was a loss of momentum (or what another affective theorist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, has called “flow”) that made writing difficult. At the outset, Andy was scared to begin his project, a fantasy novel, but after writing about a hundred pages, he seemed to hit his stride. An individual with multiple involvements in the community, however, he then became “busy with other things for several weeks and couldn’t keep at it.” As a result, he “lost contact and didn’t want to start again.” (Ironically, the situation of multiple competing responsibilities is one that Tillie Olsen associates with women’s writing barriers.) Fortunately, Andy’s block lasted only about three weeks. Gary, a student government vice-president, often found his extracurricular involvements demanding more time than his classwork. “The only time I got stuck,” he wrote, “was when I was very busy with non-class activities.”

The third kind of blocking that male students reported occurred toward the end of their projects, and it classically fit Larson’s underarousal model. Several described themselves as bored with their topics, and they had to exert a mighty, if unenthusiastic, effort to finish. Eric, who almost did not finish his project designing a public relations strategy for a particular client, wrote simply that “the project got tedious.” Jeff’s project, a well-conceived experimental design investigating burn-out among special education teachers, left him burned out in the final weeks of project preparation. If he had it to do over again, he wrote at the end of the process, “I might do something that had more of ‘me’ in it. You see, doing a project like mine was ‘safe’ in that it followed a very set pattern—in writing style, as well as research style. So something that was a bit more me, more heartfelt if you will, may have given me a greater sense of self-growth, although I did feel satisfaction from completing this.”

Women’s Reports of Writing Blocks

In contrast to their male peers, the thirty-eight women exhibited patterns that the existing cognitive literature on writing blocks would have been far less likely to predict. While the men most frequently wrote about their cognitive progress in analyzing issues, the women more often wrote about themselves and the affective processes involved. Many exhibited affective blocks, and even more exhibited a concern about mediating between themselves and the demands of an (academic) audience. When the women spoke about being stuck or having difficulty making progress on their projects, the problems they spoke about tended to fall into four general categories:
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Difficulties with Audience
They reported problems imagining an audience and meeting the sometimes conflicting needs of different audiences. Many doubted their ability to interest any real audience and expressed skepticism that the audiences they had in mind would respond favorably or appropriately to what they had to offer.

Difficulties with Ethical Responsibility to the Subjects of the Projects
In cases where individuals or groups (either living or deceased) were the focus of their work, they feared overstepping boundaries by reducing persons to oversimplified versions of themselves. They expressed concern that their work might be merely exploitative—using the experiences of their subjects for personal gain, or characterizing them in a way that they would not characterize themselves.

Difficulties Utilizing Research from Secondary Sources
Many felt lost in their research material or overwhelmed by it, in peril of losing what it was they wanted to say as they tried to accommodate themselves to their sources. Alternatively, many claimed to have become stymied by a lack of materials—an inability to encounter anything at all that seemed to pertain to the problem they had in mind or that sparked a reaction of any sort.

Difficulties with Voice
Trying to write academic prose seemed to give many of them a sense that they were obliterating themselves from the project; nevertheless, when they wrote of their own experiences in a voice that they felt comfortable with, they expressed doubts that the problems they addressed were anything other than idiosyncratic, and they feared that no one would attend to their message.

In short, for these women—in a way that was not true for most of the men—their writing became a vehicle for finding an appropriate definition of self and the relationship of the self to the world outside.3

Connecting with Others: Support, Nonsupport, Conflict
The real, live people on the receiving end of their writing concerned many of these women writers enormously. When unable to imagine who might want to hear about an issue, when dealing with conflicting claims of audiences, when forced to imagine the audience as a "generalized other," a majority of the women blocked. Nikki, a writing-center peer tutor who frequently served as a concrete audience for the work of others, in general had
little trouble writing. She sometimes used the class itself as her audience, addressing it directly and adding at the end of a long, technical paper, “Oh, yea! Thanks for listening!”

But not all of the women were as confident of the interest of intended or concrete audiences. For example, Genelle, writing a project on women’s communication patterns with other women, consistently had difficulty getting the two (male) members of her small workgroup to listen. About midway through the first semester, she noted in a journal entry that they seemed to ignore her project whenever the three of them got together to share writing: “It was really odd on Tuesday. We met and when Ted or Jeff each talked about their project, they completely ignored me.” Trying to explain to herself why this seemed so, she wrote: “They have a lot in common because they take the same classes, and have a lot of the same problems, and they really understand a lot about each other’s project. Maybe they don’t think I can give them any worthwhile advice, or maybe I don’t comment on what they want commented on, or I don’t comment enough. I don’t know.” While Genelle continued to try to find a way to communicate with them, she encountered a major period of blockage in her writing. When she was required to submit a well-structured proposal on her project for another class, she produced a seventeen-page proposal on which both her sociology professor and her (male) senior project advisor gave her an “A-.” She was pleased with herself—until she encountered her small group again:

They talked about [my proposal] and said they were glad that I finally did produce something but that they couldn’t really tell anything by it. That was fine. It didn’t make me feel great because I thought I had done something really substantial and they just blew it off. Then Ted said that some of the writing was really bad and Jeff agreed with him. They didn’t offer any suggestions, didn’t show me where it was bad. They just said some of it was really bad and that I needed to have spent more time on it.

Recalling her advisor’s praise, Genelle was able to brush off the criticism—temporarily. But then she began to doubt herself: “I thought they must be right. My research prof probably doesn’t know anything about writing and Geoff [her advisor] was probably busy.”

What we can learn from Genelle’s experience (aside from some of the limitations of collaborative peer groups) goes beyond Genelle’s own experience. The refusal of important concrete audiences to acknowledge the legitimacy of Genelle’s project, communicated through a refusal to discuss anything but technical details, left her feeling without an audience. In an extreme way, her experience may mirror the experience of other women determined to pursue issues significant to them in academic prose. The response from well-intentioned others is sometimes stylistic criticism and often none at all, perhaps because they may not be familiar with a problem, or they may lack a sense of its significance, and, thus, they may be at a loss for
any response to make other than technical or procedural. Nor is Genelle's experience unique to undergraduate women, as Angela Simeone notes in *Academic Women*: "Because research on women is perceived as being outside of the mainstream, biased, political, unimportant, and/or inaccurate, women whose interests and work lie in this area are at an obvious disadvantage in being published" (71). For an undergraduate, this dismissal or marginalization may simply take the form of silence—a non-response that communicates that the message has not been taken seriously as a stimulus to dialogue.

In Janet's case, failure to find interested others led to problems in sustaining motivation on her project, an examination of the nature and impact of adventure-oriented environmental education programs. In her first semester self-evaluation, Janet evinced a good deal more self-confidence than Genelle ever did; yet she, too, had made only sporadic and mediocre progress on her project all semester long. "I like my idea," she wrote. "It's relevant to myself and (if I may be so bold) the world. I think it's developed pretty well. I kind of feel alone in thinking about it." At the end of her evaluation, almost as an afterthought, she wrote that she had received feedback from her advisor only once all semester.

The point, in part, is that women (particularly women who take their own experiences seriously) may be more likely than their male counterparts to receive questionable responses or no response at all from individuals operating out of male-centered disciplinary communities. Yet many males also received precious little encouragement from advisors. Perhaps a better reading of the situation is that audience reaction (or nonreaction) may have played a heavier role in these women's motivation to write than in men's. Women were far more likely than men to mention lack of response or a sense of isolation as an important factor in their attitude toward their projects. If, as Dale Spender notes, women have culturally been expected to "restrict their own opportunities for expression by concentrating on the development of male [conversational] topics" (49), then the lack of a response to work that represents risk-taking self-expression may be particularly devastating. Most men, Spender indicates, have had more experience being taken seriously in conversation simply by virtue of their sex. Women often have had more experience acting the part of the good listener or the facilitator of mixed-sex conversations, rather than the part of the initiator of important topics that others are likely to take seriously.

With surprising frequency, women also expressed a sense of having failed audiences, handing in notes of apology with rough drafts or chapter drafts of their projects. Amy, whose project on the negative effects of tracking in public schools was characterized by a mechanical and forced prose that belied her intensity of feeling about the project, even apologized for the self-evaluation she wrote: "Mary, I'm sorry this isn't much of an evaluation. I thought about this for two days and it still turned out awful."
Just as paralyzing as these situations was the situation of the writer who kept in mind audiences with conflicting claims. As Anne Aronson suggests, these women suffered from Virginia Woolf's "Angel in the House" syndrome—the necessity for keeping everyone happy that leaves a writer unsettled, unable to write, and manifestly unhappy. "I'm having trouble not getting sidetracked while trying to please three very different advisors," Jenny wrote in a project on more effective ways to teach ancient history in high schools. "The advice of my advisors is very good, but if I were able to do all that they suggest, I would be working on forty projects in addition to my own." Genelle found herself "being pressured to take approaches that [she] didn't want to take," but added, "This was my own fault because I was not aware of the exact approach I wanted; so I took suggestions and became dissatisfied, but failed to voice that concern because I felt intimidated. I also felt guilty because I thought I was creating problems for everyone, and so for a while I tried to pursue others' suggestions for my project." In the absence of a clear agenda or method for the project, these writers looked to please the "experts"—and they ended up feeling co-opted, confused, and angry.

Christina explicitly identified her own particular writing block as being "paralyzed in face of audience—I can't write this; there are too many views to take care of. What words will I use? How do I ever start off?" She considered dropping out of college for a while in order to avoid the project required for graduation. After several agonizing months of work with her advisor trying to break the logjam, she stumbled onto a strategy that worked for her. She rejected an academic approach to her project, an examination of women's power to subordinate themselves by unquestioningly accepting patriarchal linguistic constructions. Instead, she drafted letters to particular individuals—her mother, her best friend, younger women she knew—thinking of herself as entering into dialogue with these concrete others whose needs and points of view she could anticipate. She then took "excerpts from those letters and put them together to make [her] essay."

Those writers able to identify themselves as part of a group who would need or be interested in what they produced were most successful in completing the project without serious hindrance, overcoming occasional stoppages and blocks without excessive agony. Nikki, for example, directed her prose on battering within lesbian relationships to three audiences with overlapping concerns, audiences in which she counted herself a member: persons interested in stopping battering within intimate relationships, feminists committed to the welfare of all women, and women committed primarily to other women. Sherry, a premed student, found a focus and a purpose through critical theory, which enabled her for the first time to see herself as an intellectual. Through reading Michel Foucault and Terry Eagleton for another of her classes, she decided that "the role of an intellectual is to expose those practices which contribute to or undermine the existing power structure." She also discovered a focus for her project on electronic fetal
monitoring: to “create women’s dialogue that will help people reclaim some of the power that the medical professional seems to monopolize.” In both cases, these women saw themselves as engaging in a dialogue with others like themselves in some way, others who would need what they wrote.

The problems of these senior women with audience might provide support for Peter Elbow's exhortation that at certain stages of the writing process we might be well advised to “close our eyes as we speak”—that is, to ignore the audience. This is useful advice, perhaps, in some instances, except that for many of these women, the impetus for writing often seemed to come from a sense of connection to audience. Carol Gilligan's research on women's moral development suggests that many women in our culture may be particularly attuned to values and issues connected with relationship. For each of the women above, the question of audience became an issue of how to establish, maintain, and responsibly contribute to a connection with the other or a group of others. In the absence of the ability to envision the other, or envisioning the other as hostile or indifferent to the message, these women often ceased to be able to make progress.

Gilligan's theory of women's moral development also helps place in context another aspect of these women's blocking. In several cases, they backed off from the material they were analyzing, hesitating to make generalizations that would oversimplify, misrepresent, or speak for another. Rita, trying to find an appropriate form and voice for a project on Vincent van Gogh, wrote, “I had to figure out how to say something that is not some kind of slander against the subject of my project because it was his life after all! (I still haven't totally resolved my feelings on this one).” Tammy, a white middle-class woman acutely aware of her difference from the black and white South African women that she wrote about, said, “By using stories of women’s lives offered in books that compile many interviews, I am removing the actual story of the woman to the third degree. This bothers me. I do not want to speak for these women!” The awareness of difference, increasingly apparent to some of these women as they wrote their projects, led them to be overly cautious about doing anything that would obscure, flatten, or distort the difference between themselves and their subjects. Their responsibility (as they saw it) to respect the integrity of the experience of others often left them floundering for a focus in their project, since nothing short of complete fidelity to the experience of their subjects would do. This heightened awareness of difference and hesitation about overgeneralization marked several of the women but few of the men.

Personal Involvement, Acceptability, and Self-Representation

The two other prominent difficulties women mentioned—problems utilizing research from secondary sources and problems finding a voice that felt both appropriate and comfortable—both involved several concerns: assessing the degree of personal involvement in the project that was practicable
for the writer, assessing its acceptability to potential audiences, and fighting
to assert and maintain presence of the self in the material being discussed. As
the subtitle of the book by Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues, Women’s
Ways of Knowing, suggests, the development of self, voice, and mind are
inextricably linked for most women. Differing strategies for developing an
appropriate representation of self in prose seemed to lead to either boredom
or anxiety, depending on the particular strategy chosen.

Some of the men (such as Jeff and Eric) seemed far more frequently to
become bored with their projects before the end. Motivation to write often
became a problem, and deadlines became the motivation to write. As Greg
noted of his project, it was “a matter of just going ahead and doing what I was
supposed to do or had to do to get the job done according to my standards.”
There were women who exhibited the same pattern of boredom in their
projects—and they were usually those whose projects evidenced the least
struggle with academic discourse conventions. For them, mastering dis­
course conventions became the problem to be solved. They were unable to
see those conventions and methods as means of investigating problems of
their own devising, and the project took on a life of its own from which they
eventually found themselves distanced and alienated. For example, asked
what she had gained from her project on the role of international law in
developing nations, Jennifer answered, “This project made me realize that I
don’t want to pursue a masters and Ph.D. in political science, as I find the
reading material dreadfully boring.” Joy, an honors student whose tech­
nically superb investigation of the effectiveness of area labor-relations com-
mittees indicated a more thorough understanding of the discourse conven­
tions in her particular field (social psychology) than did the project of any
other student, reflected in retrospect that her work on the project was “rather
erratic . . . I don’t think I did enough fundamental rethinking of the project
after the first semester.” After meeting the expectations of a certain type of
academic prose in her writing, she doubted that she would ever attempt an
examination of such an issue again. Betsy lost interest in her project on the
vernacular architecture of barns halfway through it. Only when she departed
from conventional academic prose and focused on oral histories of the
farmers and farms did her enthusiasm for the subject return: “I am really
excited about continuing studying people and including interviews in my field
work,” she wrote at the end of the project. Any intrinsic interest in vernacular
architecture or academic research on vernacular architecture had been lost
by the wayside. (The same was true, however, of the projects of at least two
of the men: interviews bolstered an interest in projects that they feared were
in danger of becoming “over-academicized.”)

Far more common than the bored writers, however, were those who
became overstimulated and anxious during the course of their projects.
Anxiety seemed to stem from two sources: the fear that the writer’s own
perspective might become lost in the welter of materials encountered, or the
anxiety accompanying failure to find materials that adequately addressed the problem as the writer had formulated it in her own mind. Julia, at the end of a semester of difficulty in locating sources that addressed the problems of the woman journalist, asserted, "I still fight to retain my vision." Often women went to the library expecting to find materials that did not exist—that they themselves would need to write if they were to exist at all. Liz, for example, talked about how proud she was that she had persisted in digging through boring books to find the materials she needed for a study of women's development organizations in Senegal and Kenya; yet, she added, "I feel the need to find one book that totally substantiates what I've written." As with many women writers, the likelihood that she would find such a book was substantially less than that of a writer who had chosen a topic more central to male academic discourse. Tammy, after hours in the library, returned to lament her "difficulty finding the necessary resources": "While the books I have read address certain questions of oppression, and discuss the lives of the women involved in South Africa, they fail to mention the need for sisterhood, the drive a woman feels to 'bond' with other women against oppression." Not finding resources that explicitly addressed the values problem as she had constructed it left her floundering for structure and direction.

The bored women strongly resembled the "procedural knowers" that Belenky and her colleagues studied: women "absorbed in the business of acquiring and communicating knowledge" (95). Having mastered the procedures, they had not yet found a mode of connecting to the problem they studied, and they rapidly lost interest. The overanxious women described above stood on the verge of procedural knowing. However, their insistence on pursuing questions neglected in traditional male-centered discourse communities left them in danger both of losing connection with the project and of losing any sense of effective procedures and strategies for exploring a problem through research.

Another group of overstimulated or anxious women fell into the category that Belenky and her colleagues call "subjective knowers." Passionately involved in the subjects of their projects—in many cases they themselves were indirectly the subject of their projects—they responded to the threat of having their points of view procedurally invalidated by discrediting the validity of academic discourse altogether. Melissa, Christina, and Cat, for example, flatly resisted the notion of writing in academic prose or making any accommodation to it. "At the beginning I knew that my voice would not be heard in a 'research' paper or even an analytic essay, but I knew no familiar form with which to write true to my voice," Christina wrote at the end of her project. She finally wrote a persuasive essay based on minimal research, an essay that she believed adequately represented herself to her audience. Still, at the end of the process, she added, "I wonder sometimes... if I am somewhat unapproachable, operating in my own world—my own particular notion of how things are."
Melissa struggled all year on a project on the experiences of Southeast Asian refugee women in the United States. Her advisor was a sociologist who insisted on a methodologically rigorous, empirically based project, believing that anything else was not scholarship but mere "journalism." She expressed doubt throughout the year that his notion of "scholarship" was any more valuable than the detailed and personal oral histories she wanted to collect. She compromised between his conception of the project and her own by writing a schizophrenic project: half for her advisor, in which she had no interest, and half for herself, in which he had no interest. "There is an inner struggle I have been experiencing," she wrote at midyear. "First, how much of myself should be in the final project? Secondly, what kind of an audience should I address? (Now replace 'should' with 'do I want to' and you have my inner struggle.)"

Cat absolutely balked when pushed to connect her own work in photography with that of other photographers:

This paper is not going to be scholarly. This paper is supposed to be what I want to write, self-pity or whatever. I want to say: I feel like I am getting fucking nowhere. I feel like I am fucking being patronized. Somewhere I got the feeling that this project was an independent endeavor, a culmination showing maturity and experience. . . . One of the biggest frustrations of my undergraduate years has been that I don't feel I have been "taught to think" for myself. I've been taught to think for someone else, to be a sort of brown-nosing grade-grubber trying to figure out what the prof wants.

For Cat, the pressure to connect with any academic, disciplinary, or artistic community was pressure to deny her own needs and impulses.

Some women resolved the tension between self and a learning that seemed to obliterate the self by self-consciously searching for a "voice" that would maintain the right of the self to be present in the work. In her project, Rita combined standard academic prose with short stories written from van Gogh's point of view (as she imagined it) and with a form she called "creative essays," a form that she "wrote in a fit of egotism, thinking [she] could be another John Berger." Sarah, whose project on feminist therapies for eating disorders largely relied on academic prose, interpolated fictionalized versions of her own journal entries—implicit indications to the reader that the person who wrote the academic essay, as a victim of eating disorders, remained passionately involved in the subject even if the prose style seemed to discount that involvement. Robin struggled endlessly with her advisor, a psychologist, over the question of "voice" and ultimately refused to write as he requested. Instead, as a recovering drug addict herself, she chose to write a manual directed to "the suffering addict." In a blistering year-end evaluation of her advisor and of academic writing in general, she wrote proudly that her project finally had "very little to do with the 'academic' world." She added, "What happened to the kid in all of this? Well, I will not forget that person because I was once there."
A Question of Identity in Academic Discourse Communities

Two decades of feminist work suggest that negotiating a discourse that has historically and systematically labeled women's perspectives as "other" carries with it certain emotional risks. Elizabeth Flynn succinctly summarizes the problem when she poses the question, "What does it mean to compose as a woman?":

[Feminist research and theory] argue that men have chronicled our historical narratives and defined our fields of inquiry. Women's perspectives have been suppressed, silenced, marginalized, written out of what counts as authoritative knowledge. Difference is erased in a desire to universalize. Men become the standard against which women are judged. (425)

To enter into a discourse shaped principally by men's experience and values may leave some women uncomfortable with, even anxious about, some of the ways of thinking it demands. Thus, women's location vis-à-vis male-centered discourse communities may lead as a matter of course to nonfunctional or contradictory strategies or paralyzing "rule rigidity." Mary Daly's work demonstrates dramatically the sense in which the very words we use depict a patriarchal reality. Spender and Robin Lakoff both observe the necessity of being "bilingual" to operate effectively as a member of a muted group: that is to say, as women, we must constantly translate our own concerns (for which we may be struggling to find a language) to those of the dominant (male) language. For many women, the process of writing academic prose may nearly always involve an extra step: the clarification of an issue in the language of one's own experience, and its translation into a mode of discourse that may have no readily available structure to accommodate it. As Julia Penelope and Susan Wolfe put it:

Patriarchal expressive modes reflect an epistemology that perceives the world in terms of categories, dichotomies, roles, stasis, and causation, while female expressive modes reflect an epistemology that perceives the world in terms of ambiguities, pluralities, processes, continuities, and complex relationships. (126)

Although I am somewhat uncomfortable with the dualism implicit in Penelope and Wolfe's assertion, I am still persuaded that the social positioning of women in our culture usually leads us toward adopting the "female expressive modes" they describe.

While men entering academic discourse communities may be more likely to see themselves as apprentices mastering a process that will allow them to contribute to a generalized body of knowledge, women are—for good reason—more likely to see themselves as outsiders with misgivings about entering the circle of the elect. For many of the women I worked with, the process of undertaking an independent academic research project involved
a serious examination of what their relation would be to received bodies of knowledge, procedures, and methods. Those who could be self-consciously critical of those procedures and conventions—or those who could remain detached from them—seemed to fare best in terms of being able to conceive, carry out, and complete a senior project. Those willing to trust their own experiences and to formulate problems for study accordingly, but who lacked a language of critique, frequently found themselves unable to proceed for long periods of time.

If writing is necessarily a social activity in which, as Marilyn Cooper puts it, "a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems" (367), it is also necessarily a political one. The experience of women writing suggests that we should be wary of calls for students to learn to write uncritically within discourse communities. If we teach women students only to reproduce existing discourse conventions as ways of reaching particular audiences, we run the risk of placing them in situations in which conflicting strategies, anxiety, boredom, or writing apprehension may appear as a matter of course. To ask them to enter into discourse uncritically is to ask them to enter into a relationship with others and with language itself, and many may feel uncomfortable doing this. For the women I studied, the issue of "voice" was not merely a pragmatic one of reaching the audience they desired; more often, it involved a question of identity itself, and how much control they had over language in the face of discourse communities that they often experienced as hostile to their self-definitions.

At the same time, however, we need be cautious about approaches to process that are solely expressive or cognitive in orientation. Although these tend to provide suggestions that unblock some writers temporarily, they do nothing to address the values conflicts at the heart of the dilemmas experienced by the women writers I studied. Any assessment of factors involved in the writing process that purports to be gender-neutral runs the risk of obscuring the ways in which certain writing contexts may be more fraught with peril and internal contradictions for women than for men.

Moreover, though the differences in negotiating academic discourse conventions that I have found have mainly to do with gender, it is important to note that the population of students I studied—both women and men—were nearly all white and upper-middle class. Of the four black students who registered for the senior project workshop, two dropped out (in different years) midway through the first semester. A third ended up needing four semesters to complete the process. I wonder now about the extent to which they may have experienced powerful values dilemmas that differed in kind from those of individuals marginalized solely by gender. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, describes an Afrocentric feminist epistemological orientation that includes some of the concerns voiced by the women whose project development I observed, but which differs in yet other ways from the orientation toward knowledge of Eurandrocentric culture. Research by
neither the cognitive nor affective schools has captured the roles that race, class, or other marginalizing factors may play in making writers uneasy with the identity construction required by academic discourse and in blocking their writing altogether.

Despite their many instances of blockage, the news from the women I studied on the whole was encouraging. As Jenny put it at mid-year, “I'll get there but it gonna hurt.” For me, Chris, whose project concerned the loneliness lesbian women in small towns face, summed up both the pain and the triumph of the women who persisted in asking hard questions about the conventions (and identities) that discourse communities made available to them:

I still have many questions. I wonder if my project makes sense to the audience. I wanted it to make sense for I wonder what I can do with my information and knowledge. I feel the need to do something more ... and I'm sure I will somehow. I wonder what my mother and the women who filled out my survey will think. Did I write what they believe? Will my mother understand it? Can I really make a difference by saying what I know or believe? Is there a way to have everyone understand what happens in my head? Will I find many people to help me make changes—or many people I can help? Did [my project discussant] think I didn't have enough theory? Was my language too passive? Should I make minor changes for the library copy? Will my project help other students? Should I have done something else?—

I couldn't have.

Notes

1 I do not want to claim what I found among Western Program students to be universally the case. In many ways, the Western Program is unique. A self-conscious alternative to the standard undergraduate curricula in many large state institutions, it is a living-learning community that was set up a decade and a half ago as an embodiment of progressive Deweyan educational ideals. In its emphasis on active learning through seminar participation and its writing-intensive, issue-oriented curriculum, the School of Interdisciplinary Studies provides a different kind of initiation into academic discourse than do most discipline-based programs that require a student to choose from a list of predefined majors. For instance, in their required core curriculum, Western Program students typically do not focus in any self-conscious way on the particular types of discourse conventions appropriate to different disciplinary communities. The audience for which they write in the most immediate sense includes their peers and the faculty of the Western Program community, with whom they share both curricular and co-curricular experiences. Moreover, because of the critical bias of the program’s curriculum, more women students undertake senior projects with feminist themes than one might ordinarily expect to be the case.

2 Had I used strict protocols on the actual composing behavior of these women students, I may indeed have found at the heart of women’s blocking the “rule rigidity” that the men mentioned in their self-reports. It may also be that some men suffered from the same sorts of affective blocking I found in the women’s self-reports, and that more probing would have encouraged them to articulate more about these difficulties. Nevertheless, the self-report
procedure was the same for both men and women, and the questions and assignments that they responded to were the same. When asked to describe the factors that led to their blocking, the men nearly always responded in task-oriented terms; women, in contrast, nearly always drew on language that suggested issues of identity and relationship to audience.

3 In their study of the careers of academic women, particularly those on the margins of the academy, Aisenberg and Harrington discovered in the scholarly work of many a similar focus on personally meaningful issues and a similar identity investment in their scholarly work. The women that they studied tended to be preoccupied in their work with social transformation and the contexts of power, and they frequently crossed disciplinary boundaries or undertook projects unconventional for their disciplines. Often, their failure to adhere to standard disciplinary agenda brought with it high professional costs (83-106).

4 Roth makes this suggestion as well.

5 See Reither; Bizzell.

6 Lester Faigley makes this case in advocating a social view of composing that entails awareness of the contexts in which writing takes place. James Berlin has also issued powerful calls for an approach to rhetoric that "attempts to place the question of ideology at the center of the teaching of writing" (492).

Works Cited


Daly, John A. "Writing Apprehension." Rose, When a Writer 43-82.


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ATAC Elections

Elections for officers of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition will be held at the ATAC special interest session of the Conference on College Composition and Communication convention in March 1991. Please send nominations and self-nominations to Irene F. Gale; Department of English; University of South Florida; Tampa, FL 33620-5550. All nominees must be present at the special interest session.