The Influence of Guided Free Writing on Student Interest in Writing in a High School Classroom

Emerson Crichton

Wake Forest University

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Introduction

Background

Writing is often taught with the single goal of student success on exams and testing. This goal can take away from opportunities for natural and experiential writing in the classroom. Middle school teacher Kirkwood (2009) shares, “The demands of teaching writing while meeting high-stakes testing requirements can be overwhelming for students and teachers” (p. 46). Students may lack motivation to write if they consider the task academically stressful. Writing can be taught with the goal of enjoyment in mind, as students can use writing as a mode of self-expression or engage in the process as a hobby. In an article addressing the development of writer identity, Roberston and Goss (2016) state, “But all of those things are in support of developing students who believe in themselves as readers and writers-who have a reader and writer identity” (p. 31). While this may not be true for all students, many secondary students may share their lack of motivation and enjoyment when asked to engage in writing in the classroom. Teachers may themselves lack excitement when teaching the skill, as expectations may be to guide students toward success in testing rather than to introduce creative outlets and a variety of genres. Students’ lack of motivation to write may affect their test scores and their ability to communicate via writing. Not only is it a core standard to be taught, but it is a life skill necessary for students to learn and develop over time.

Purpose

The importance of informal writing may be overlooked by a curriculum taught specifically for testing success. This research project's primary goal is to collect and analyze data about students' possible developing interest in writing via different genres. To become familiar with the positive effects of introducing students to various modes of writing, teachers must first

find a way to engage with writing on their own (Robertson & Goss, 2016). If there is no passion from the teacher, how are students to be persuaded and engaged when introduced to something beyond traditional academic expectations? Robertson and Goss (2016) share, "That means thinking about how we use reading and writing in our personal and professional lives as tools to learn and grow and sharing that thinking with our students" (p. 31). Using free writing as a tool to experiment with different genres can be a practice for both students and teachers. It may be an outlet for students to explore different ways to express themselves and share ideas, while also providing a place for a teacher to better understand their students and create community through writing.

Concerning student success, many sources claim classrooms that implement free writing produce higher test scores. Free writing helps students with writing anxiety to explore genres that may not seem as stressful or intense as the ones they worry about. Li (2007) suggests, "As a student came to gain a clearer understanding of the requirements of academic writing, they became less confused and anxious, and their self-confidence about academic writing improved" (p. 47). Defending the use of free writing through the success of students in academic testing creates a goal of educational success while also supporting the development of writer identity. When considering the potential implementations of free writing in the classroom, this research study asks: How does guided free writing influence student interest in writing in a high school English classroom?

Positionality

The researcher finds this topic important because writing is a skill students may find task-oriented, therefore lacking interest in the process or outcomes. The researcher's experience with writing in high school was similar to what is still being taught in schools today. In the

researcher's experience, writing is commonly taught to support success on state exams or essays, not as much for student enjoyment or experimentation. As a result, there may not be many opportunities for students to write in different genres or topics outside of academic expectations. While writing is a life skill, it can also be a mode of self-expression and a form of communication. If students only have experience with writing as an academic task, there will be no motivation to develop a writer's identity.

The researcher believes interest in writing should matter. Beyond writing as a skill, it may be an opportunity for students to communicate, express themselves, and engage in other activities where writing is a priority. If students feel interested and motivated to write, they may also show excitement about sharing their work or ideas with others. This will bring a sense of classroom community as students get to know one another through their guided free writing, a way to experiment with different genres and develop a writer's identity.

The researcher is biased in believing that using guided free writing is an enjoyable activity and not a task. The researcher finds it exciting to share her writing with others and feels empowered to hear the work of other individuals. While students may feel intimidated to experiment with new writing genres, they may also feel worried about sharing their work with classmates. The student's comfort levels will be considered within the research study, not forcing any student to share writing that may feel vulnerable or private. Certain boundaries, such as avoiding specific topics or genres, will be put in place to support each student's experience with guided free writing.

Organization

The organization of this study is as follows: introduction, literature review, methods, results, and discussion. To better understand the goal of the research, the introduction provides

information on the initial question and why the researcher has chosen to implement free writing. The literature review further expands upon other resources and tools that individuals have used to promote student interest in writing. The literature review also includes information about the current issue of a lack of interest in writing. The methods section shares the teaching and research methods, including data collection and analysis efforts. The information from the methods section includes pre-and post-surveys, along with free writing from students who participated in the research. The results section shares both qualitative and quantitative data on the effects of free writing implementation in the classroom. Finally, the discussion section examines and expands upon important concepts that connect the literature review and the data analysis, including limitations and considerations for future teaching and research.

Literature Review

Deciding how best to educate students through writing pedagogy has been a consistent debate. Many researchers have concluded that the purpose of writing instruction develops with time, influencing how writing is taught. An example of the initial concept of writing instruction is as follows: “The beginnings of writing instruction are mundane and functional rather than artistic and intellectual” (Murphy, 2012, p. 11). Throughout history, writing was a skill that started as a high-class privilege and slowly evolved socially. Murphy (2012) expands on this claim, stating, “Understanding the breadth of writing instruction will, for instance, be a great help to securing a better understanding of the literate power of women in ancient Greece” (p. 32). Murphy’s statement supports the development of writing beyond instruction and its impact on social and gender roles in society.

Robinson (1977) considered different researchers' work in the 20th century. Robinson (1977) claimed studies from Strickland (1962) and Loban (1963) demonstrated that “emphasis grows also from an awareness that oral language precedes writing, both historically, in diverse cultures, and individually, in human development” (Robinson, 1977, p. 18). Both Murphy (2012) and Robinson (1977), even though they are reporting on different periods in history, recognize the consistent impact of writing instruction. The concern about student motivation and interest also appears in Robinson’s (1977) research: “Concern for motivation is beginning to generate some studies aimed at what induces young people to write and how differing motivations seem to affect resulting compositions” (p. 19). The history of writing instruction is complex and influential, showing the development of privilege and social influence in parallel with the evolution of writing instruction.

Supporting the Development of Writers' Identity

To further understand the goal of this research, it is necessary to define writer's identity. Research would support the definition of a writer's identity as students who believe in themselves and the writing they produce (Roberston & Goss, 2016). For students to think of themselves as writers, teachers should prioritize considering ways to support students' writer identity development. Cremin and Locke (2017) explain the difference between students' relationships with writing at home versus writing for school. The authors state, "These were distinctively described as 'writing for self' and 'writing for others.' The former was characterized by a sense of personal agency; the latter by a perceived lack of choice and control" (Cremin & Locke, 2017, p. xxvii). Providing a space where students' ideas are not limited and choices are available is the first step in supporting the development of a writer's identity. Robertson and Goss (2016) claim, "I want my students to recognize that we write for many purposes, to different audiences, and we often blur the lines of genre much more than a state writing assessment would have us believe" (p. 32). Both Robertson and Goss (2016) and Cremin and Locke (2017) agree that teaching writing for purposes beyond exams and assessments ultimately supports writer identity development.

Recognizing what makes a student feel like a writer is also important to consider. Lammers and Marsh (2018) share a student speaking of her school experience, stating, "... such as the 100% on her research paper and her excellent AP exam score represented official acknowledgment of her writing abilities in this context. However, Laura often found school unreceptive to her passionate writer identity enactment" (p. 104). Lammers and Marsh (2018) share her three academic purposes and their connections to the development of writer identity as "...to contribute one's own personally meaningful ideas to the academic conversation (autobiographical), to fulfill academic discourse expectations by connecting evidence and quotes

to claims (discoursal), and to perform their intellectual work by adding depth and development of ideas (authority)" (p. 86). It is more than creative writing that can allow students to develop writing identities; academic writing can also promote autonomy and voice.

Addressing the Issue of Motivation

Research confirms there are multiple reasons students struggle to develop the motivation to write. Students can only find interest and enjoyment in writing if their teacher models or prioritizes it. Gau et al. (2003) share evidence of the four significant causes for the lack of students' desire and motivation, including "Teacher methods and attitudes affect students' motivation to write" (p. 22). Wright et al. (2020) further expand on this idea, stating, "Therefore, having a positive attitude toward writing is important for students to engage in writing practice, and conventional wisdom would predict that this would be fairly stable over time" (p. 162). Bruning and Horn (2000) suggest *motivation-enhancing conditions,* including displaying teacher writing, writing tasks that support student success, and establishing communication for revisions. Modeling a positive attitude is one of the first steps to influencing student engagement and motivation, giving the educator a crucial role in helping students engage with writing.

In addition to the teacher's role in portraying a positive relationship with writing, research also discusses curriculum. Not only does the stress of writing affect student motivation, but the method of instruction specific to writing can also cause a disgruntled reaction (Wright et al., 2020). Gau et al. (2003) suggest a second evidential cause of lack of motivation is, as stated, "The curriculum does not support the students' urge and abilities to write independently or the teachers' abilities to teach it effectively" (p. 22). Bruning and Horn (2000) share solutions to provide support for contextual writing. These include encouraging goals, teaching writing strategies, and using peers as writing partners to develop literacy communities.

Finally, concerning this research, Gau et al. (2003) claim their third point of concern as "a lack of positive writing experiences impacts students' self-worth as a writer and inhibits their ability to express themselves in written form" (p. 22). Allowing students to have choices when writing will encourage motivation. Autonomy promotes self-belief, and research expands on the importance of self-belief. Wright et al. (2020) state, "A student with strong self-beliefs as a writer would be more likely to work hard and persevere through a challenging task, knowing he or she has the necessary skills to be successful" (p. 162). Motivation-enhancing conditions support student choice, including encouraging students to write about topics of personal interest, writing in a variety of genres, and providing choices about what they will and can write (Bruning & Horn, 2000).

The research completed by Wright et al. (2020) considers the motivation and interest in writing in middle school students. The authors consider the writing shift between grades, claiming most students enter middle school with a general interest and motivation to write. Their study looked at students' motivation toward writing and how it shifts through middle school. Specifically, they "surveyed children at two school districts to determine their beliefs and motivation about writing. Then, [they] modeled how those beliefs changed across grade levels" (Wright et al., 2020, p. 149). The data collection was the result of thirty questions that asked students to reflect on their relationship with writing and whether or not they felt they were writers.

The analysis of Wright et al.'s (2020) data clarified that students may be more inclined to think positively about something if their teacher has a joyful attitude toward it. "Therefore, having a positive attitude toward writing is important for students to engage in writing practice, and conventional wisdom would predict that this would be fairly stable over time" (Wright et al.,

2020, p. 161). The research then considered negative experiences in writing instruction. Students participating in the study shared a decline in motivation that remained steady through eighth grade. The conclusion of the study states, "The development of intrinsically motivated middle school writers requires a larger commitment to the professional development of teachers, an alignment of curriculum and assessment across students' careers, and the student engagement with authentic and meaningful writing activities across genres" (Wright el al., 2020, p. 163). This resource supports guided free writing being used in the forthcoming research study as a means to allow students to write authentically and with meaning in the classroom.

Using Writer's Notebooks as an Organization Tool

A common organizational tool for students is a writer's notebook. A writer's notebook functions as a mix of a journal, diary, and notebook, removing any restrictions of formal note-taking or structural stress (Oleson, 1999). The beauty of the writer's notebook is that it can be a place to begin a stream of thought, return and expand, or finish an idea. There does not have to be a definite end. Falconer (2020) shares, "For a notebook to be generative, it may not even have to be opened and reread: the act of having consigned thoughts and detail to its pages can be enough" (p. 11). Again, the writer's notebook should be a non-stressful location for brainstorming or free writing that can become something engaging for students but does not need to be expanded upon.

Using a writer's notebook supports students of all levels of writing (Kirkwood, 2009). There is no restriction on what students can write and explore, allowing each student to write without risk and with confidence. Kirkwood (2009) further supports this claim by stating, "The notebook allowed students to feel comfortable taking writing risks at their own level" and "...when we worked on a prewriting strategy such as listing, beginning students may have only

started writing four or five items. A more advanced writer, however, would often fill a page with items in a list" (p. 47). The notebook is not a place to hold students back, rather it is a place to allow students to explore.

The writer's notebook is a space to store memories and ideas that students can return to and use later if they choose. Buckner (2005) explains that "A writer's notebook creates a place for students (and writers) to save their words – in the form of a memory, a reflection, a list, a rambling of thoughts, a sketch, or even a scrap of print taped on the page" (p. 4). This idea reflects on the informal nature of the notebooks and the difference in approaches and uses based on the student. Not only does it function as a place of memory and initial ideas, but it can also be a place to perform and execute creative transformation with how students approach recording details (Falconer, 2020).

Finally, handing each student a writer's notebook is a way to give them personal belonging and connection to the classroom community. The notebook can be a safe space for students to explore and consider ideas specific in the form of memory and reflection (Oleson, 1999). Even beyond the idea of sharing ideas, something as simple as the organization can be the student's preference, given that it is their notebook. Buckner (2005) expands on this idea, stating, "I leave the organization up to the kids. Sometimes students will use Post-it notes to make tabs for lists, poetry, special stories, and so on" (p. 14). Inevitably, the writer's notebook is a place for students to express themselves and their ideas. While opportunities to share may arise, students will know they are not required to share the personal things they find written on the pages of their notebooks.

The Implementation of Free Writing to Support Student Interest in Writing

Li (2007) defines free writing as “the act of writing quickly for a set time from ten to fifteen minutes, just putting down whatever is in the mind, without pausing and worrying about what words to use, and without going back to modifying what has been written” (p. 42). Free writing aims to allow students to express thoughts and ideas informally. Park (2020) shared a comment from a student, who stated, “If there was no free writing, I would not have time to write in my time. Also, because of freewriting, I think my writing skills got much better than before. I got to express my thoughts and words” (p. 323). Both Li (2007) and Park (2020) discuss students' ability to share what they are thinking, without the stress of a grade or deducting them for a lack of correct spelling and grammar.

Much of the research supports having students engage in free writing during the first part of class. Specifically related to the time, the first ten minutes have been shared as the most beneficial time to implement free writing (Dunn, 2022; Li, 2007). The short writing period helps students avoid worrying about edits and producing work they feel has to be perfect (Li, 2007). Even though studies were able to support the ten-minute writing period, other pieces of research include student responses to the time limit; “I didn’t like the 10-minute time limit. It’s too short. How many words I can write in 10 minutes depends on the topic and my clear head” (Park, 2020, p. 324). The student's reflection represents the possible stress that can come with the quick time limit; however, in further analysis, it does prevent thinking too much about their writing and instead supports the expectation of merely sharing initial thoughts.

In further support of student engagement with free writing, research claims that student choice is part of the success of this mode of writing. Dunn (2022) shares, “If students could pick what they write about, or at least how to write about a given topic, they expressed a greater level of enjoyment for writing” (p. 16). Students find autonomy in choosing what they write about, a

positive element that comes with free writing. Beyond choice, free writing supports a "kickstart" to their thinking (Dunn, 2022, p. 20). Functioning as a form of a brain dump, free writing can be further explained as unfocused exploring (Elbow, 1989). Elbow (1989) explains this concept as "I have a thought, perhaps out of the blue, or perhaps while writing something else, and I give myself permission to pursue it on paper in an uncontrolled way" (p. 48). The function of free writing supports students' ability to write informally, without the stress of a grade or exam.

Finally, free writing does more than provide students the opportunity to engage with low-stakes writing; it also supports the development of thinking and writing skills (Park, 2020). As a means and access to different types of writing, students build a better understanding of why writing is important through exploration and various modes of understanding (Li, 2007). Li (2007) further explains this idea, stating, "The focused aspect of the freewriting exercises enables students to concentrate on thoughts about a specific topic and generate insightful thoughts and ideas. The brevity of the writing exercise also made the students realize that it is possible to practice writing within a short period of time" (p. 49). Li (2007) also addresses the effect free writing can have on English learners, stating, "More interestingly, several students reflected that writing not only strengthened their English writing but also enhanced their thinking skills" (p. 324). To express the grand effect that free writing can have in a classroom, Elbow (1989) claims the following: "Nevertheless freewriting has come to serve, I now see, as a model of what seems to me an important *kind* of goodness in writing" (p. 61, *emphasis in original*).

Dunn's (2022) research supported a lot of the concerns of student interest that this research is considering. Dunn aimed to consider reluctant writers and how better to engage those students using quick writes. Her research question asked, "To what extent does quickwriting boost adolescent students' enjoyment of writing? And in particular, how much does quickwriting

boost reluctant writers' enjoyment of writing?" (Dunn, 2022, p. 4). The methodology described the use of seven implemented quick writes over a semester. Focus groups functioned as the main form of data collection, supported by pre-planned questions and informal conversations.

While Dunn's (2022) goal was to better engage reluctant writers, it did seem as though the guided free writes were successful, depending on the day. Dunn (2022) shares in her results section, "Of the six Conditionally Reluctant Writers, all gave the same condition for either enjoying or tolerating writing: choice" (p. 16). Throughout the rest of the results section, quickwriting was explained as effective on the days that students had an interest in what was being written. Those days often included a version of choice that gave students creative freedom. The research supports the positive use of quickwrites when students feel they have autonomy in their writing. To further analyze the findings, Dunn (2022) claims, "While they may not always have liked quickwriting, nearly every student found enjoyment in at least one quickwriting prompt" (p. 20). Dunn's findings support the implementation of the forthcoming research study, given that their students have found success in quickwriting and student choice can be a driving force to reinforce motivation.

Methods

Overview

The goal of this research is to understand how the implementation of guided free writing in a secondary English classroom can enhance student interest in writing. Students are being allowed to express themselves and explore different writing genres they may not have much experience with, or expertise in, due to a lack of instruction or experience. Research suggests the lack of student motivation to write may be due to the minimal amount of experiential writing opportunities they are given. With that in mind, this research study explored how students' interest in writing evolves during a semester of guided free writing.

Setting

The research for this study was conducted in a public high school located in the southeastern United States. The study took place during the spring semester in a high school English class. The school has fluctuated between an A and B performance grade for the last five years based on the school report card. 32.1% of the high school students have been recorded as economically disadvantaged within the school. The research was completed in a 10th-grade English honors classroom. For the context of the research, an honors classroom is a class that challenges students academically more than a standard course. This means, for instance, that students are often required to write more, including length of essays, consistent collaboration, and challenging assessments that may include more critical-thinking or problem-solving.

Participants

All participating students were under the age of eighteen and gave consent to participate in the study. Consent was given by the minor student and the legal guardian or parent of the individual. The consent form addressed what the study included and what data would be

collected from student participation. This information was not only shared via a written consent form but also verbally shared with students before the research began. Student protection was the priority of the researcher, and all student identities are protected by the use of pseudonyms within the research paper. While there were twenty-seven students in the class, ten provided full consent to participate in the research. The ten students who consented are included in the data analysis and represented in the findings section of this report.

Teaching Methods

The pedagogical approach in this research included incorporating guided free writing into students' daily schedules over a period of time. The students' guided free writing took place in a writer's notebook to help them stay organized. Students were allowed to write in multiple genres and formats and to share and reflect with their peers.

The structure of daily guided free writing gave students time to write every Tuesday and Thursday for five weeks. The writing sessions took place at the beginning of class, giving students seven minutes to write and three minutes to share in pairs and as part of whole-class discussion. The prompts (for example, see Appendix A) varied by day and were given to the students by the teacher via a PowerPoint presentation. At the beginning of each section, students dated and titled their entries for organizational purposes. This also supported the summative assessment, which asked students to return to their entries and writing sessions to find lines or moments they were most proud of. Finally, students created a whole-class graffiti board, adding their chosen lines or moments onto a large sticky note to create a montage of what they believed to be their best writing moments from five weeks of writing. All writing was modeled by the teacher, and both the teacher and students were given the opportunity for their writing to be discussed, shared, or debated, depending on the prompt.

Data Collection

An overview of the data collection includes a pre-survey, post-survey, collection of writer's notebooks, and a summative writing project that includes writing samples from their notebooks. Student observations and field notes are also included in the data collection for this research project.

The pre-survey (for a sample, see Appendix B) reveals students' interest in writing, giving them a space to reflect on how they feel during and about writing, and what they believe their current skill level to be. The pre-survey consisted of ten questions, including eight Likert scale questions and two short-answer questions. The Likert scale questions inquired about subjects such as their familiarity and opportunities they have been given to write in certain genres, or how often they feel they can write outside of an academic format or lens. Students also had the opportunity to share their current interest in writing and what genres they prefer to write in, if given the choice, in the format of open-ended questions. The post-survey (for a sample, see Appendix C) asked the same questions as the pre-survey, allowing students to reflect on their writing experience after the five weeks of implemented guided free writing. This included reflecting on any new genres they felt a newfound interest toward or any changes in how they feel toward writing. The post-survey included an extra question that asked students to rate their experience with guided free writing over the previous five weeks. The survey questioned if they felt confident in their writing abilities and how they felt about sharing their work. Finally, students reflected on the guided free writing experience over the time it was implemented, and they shared feedback on the experience if they had any.

The guided free writing was introduced with a prompt or question to promote student thinking about a topic. If there was a certain genre or format the students were expected to write

in, it would be noted with the prompt. Students then had seven minutes to write, without the worry of grammar or punctuation, and instead were directed to keep their pencils moving the full seven minutes. The teacher shared their model before opening the floor for students to share their writing. Then, students were prompted to turn and talk to their neighbors about what they wrote, if they were willing to share, before opening the floor to a whole-class discussion about what students wrote. This included their ideas, specific examples, or even their approach to the given guided prompt. Some prompts promoted creative freedom, others opened the floor for debate and discussion about certain topics or ideas. While discussion was important, it is critical to note the student's written work was the primary data collection for this research paper.

The final piece of data in the collection was a whole-class graffiti note. Students were directed to take seven minutes to go back through their prompted writing and highlight their three favorite lines or ideas they wrote. Students were then asked to share with their neighbors. However, instead of sharing the specific work, students were to recognize what they noticed about themselves as writers. After sharing, students collectively and anonymously wrote their selected moments on a large sticky note using colors and a large font to fill the page. This act allowed students to share the work they were proud of and create a whole-class writing demonstration of the work they completed over the previous five weeks.

Data Analysis

The research project included constant comparative analysis. Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe coding as the creation of concepts based on data that already exists. Specifically, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were used to analyze the collected data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Open coding supported the creation of initial codes, axial coding considered coding across different data sources, and selective coding regarded the central themes of the

collected data throughout the research. All forms of data collection supported the process of data analysis, or making meaning out of the data (Merriam, 2009).

To support data analysis, all data collected from the pre- and post- surveys were compiled into two Google spreadsheets. The first spreadsheet included student pseudonyms and their responses to each question. The spreadsheet also included the exact responses each student gave for the open-ended questions. The same process was used when recording the data for the post-survey on a separate spreadsheet. After both surveys were completed, the researcher returned to the students who gave consent, and examined their responses specifically. The spreadsheets were then condensed to focus on the ten students participating in the study.

To better analyze and visualize the changes in student responses from the pre- to post-survey, each Likert-scale question was compiled into a pie chart. The pie chart demonstrated the responses and percentages of specific student answers, keeping the same key pattern in both survey pie charts. After all data were transitioned, the data from both the pre- and post-surveys were compared side by side for each question. Due to the color key remaining the same in both pie charts, it was easy to analyze any shifts from before and after the guided free writing sessions.

Trustworthiness

To maintain trustworthiness throughout the research process, the researcher was consistently with the students to support their work in the classroom, both for research purposes and as their student teacher. The researcher also demonstrated examples of their own writing to share with students. This consistent and intentional engagement was the most effective way to consistently ensure trustworthiness between students and the researcher (Creswell, 2007). This engagement included building rapport with students in school weeks before the research began.

The triangulation of artifacts and methods also included different forms of data, such as surveys, observations, and a final writing assessment. Finally, the researcher's positionality was explained in the introduction to this paper.

Results

For five weeks, students participated in free writing sessions twice weekly to inform the following research question: How does guided free writing influence student interest in writing in a high school English classroom? This research showed that students responded positively to guided free writing and found themselves more confident and motivated to write in the classroom. Some common themes noted throughout the research included students developing and finding interest, emerging writers' identity, and motivation to write. These themes were supported by the pre- and post-surveys given to students, student engagement, and participation during the writing sessions.

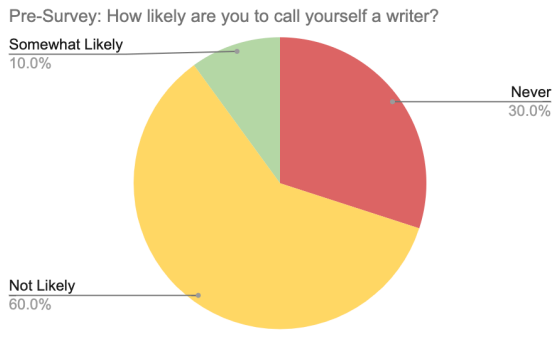
The guided free writing prompts allowed students to explore different types of writing. This exploration includes poetry, lists, argumentative pieces, and fictional writing. Prompts include examples such as the following; "Rewrite a popular movie or book plot from the villain's point of view," "What are the steps to making the perfect peanut butter and jelly sandwich," and "Describe your high school in the year 2080." While students were provided with guided prompts, they were free and encouraged to choose how they approached each prompt, including both the style of writing or plot depending on the prompt.

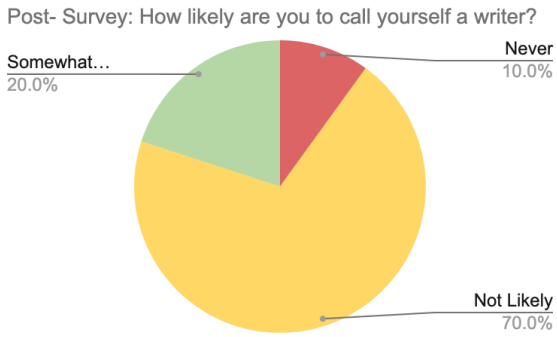
Writer's Identity

The pre- and post-surveys asked a series of questions about writers' identities to better understand how students saw themselves as writers. While some of these questions considered students writing for themselves versus others, other questions asked how often students were able to choose what they wrote about. These questions asked students to consider writing both inside and outside the classroom.

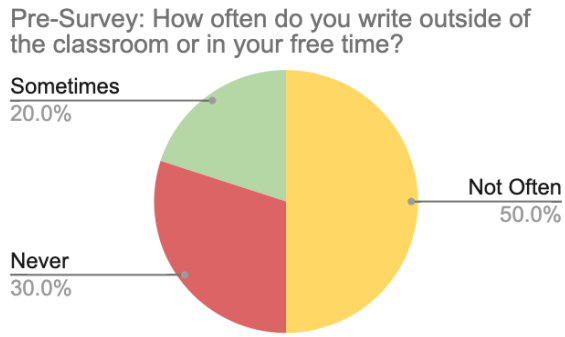
Writing for Self

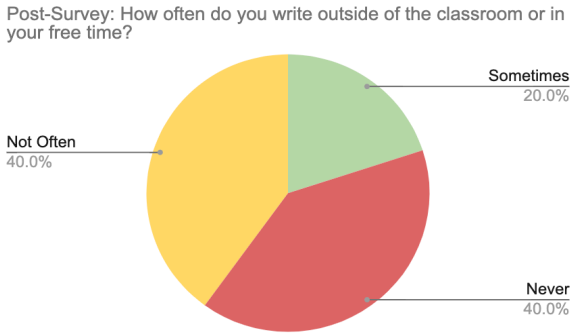
One of the first questions both the pre- and post-surveys asked students was "How likely are you to call yourself a writer?" In the pre-survey, three of the ten students reported they would never call themselves a writer, six said it was not likely, and one claimed it was somewhat likely to consider themselves a writer. In the post-survey, the ten students answered the same question. One reported they would never call themselves a writer, seven claimed it was not likely, and two shared they were somewhat likely to call themselves a writer. One student who shared they would never call themselves a writer in the pre-survey proved stagnant in the post-survey; however, the other two who shared they would never call themselves a writer in the pre-survey reported it was not likely in the post-survey. Of the six who shared they were not likely to call themselves writers in the pre-survey, five stayed stagnant, and one shared they found themselves somewhat likely to consider themselves writers. The students who initially shared they were somewhat likely to call themselves a writer did not change their response in the post-survey. In summary, fewer students shared they were not as likely to refer to themselves as writers, and more moved toward not likely, or even somewhat likely. While it is not a large shift, students move further away from never referring to themselves as writers, and sharing there is an increased change. This is seen in the decrease of 20% from the never response, and increased not likely or somewhat likely response by 10%.





Another question both the pre- and post-surveys asked students included, “How often do you write outside the classroom or in your free time? Of the ten students, three stated they never write in their free time or outside of the classroom, five shared not often, and two claimed sometimes. The post-survey showed a small change, with four students sharing that they never write in their free time. Three of these students shared the same answer in the pre-survey, and one, who shared not often in the pre-survey, changed to never in the post-survey. One student who shared that they sometimes wrote in their free time in the pre-survey found themselves not often writing in their free time when filling out the post-survey. Another student who shared in the pre-survey said they did not often write outside of the classroom found during the time of the post-survey that they sometimes do. Other than these changes, the other students all shared the same information in the pre- and post-surveys regarding this question. The change in data shows a small shift that students are less likely to write in their free time. This shift is only 10% from not often to never, and the students who responded sometimes stayed stagnant.

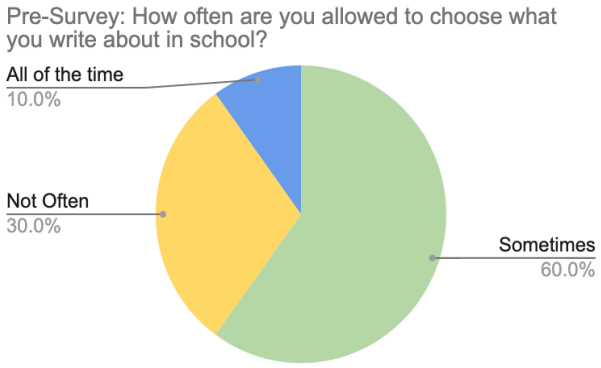


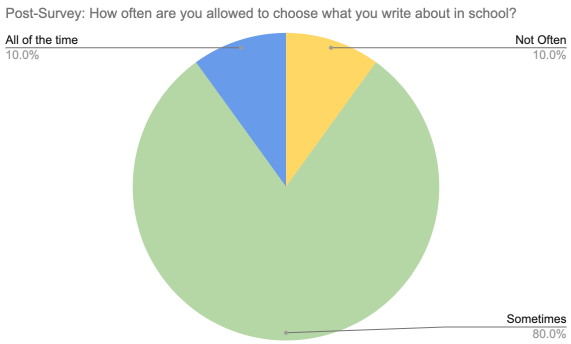


Writer’s Choice

When considering a student’s, or writer’s, choice in what they write or how they write, a series of questions in the surveys were asked. The first question is as follows: “How often are you allowed to choose what you write about in school?” In response to this question, three of the ten students said it is not often they feel they have a choice in their writing. Six students shared

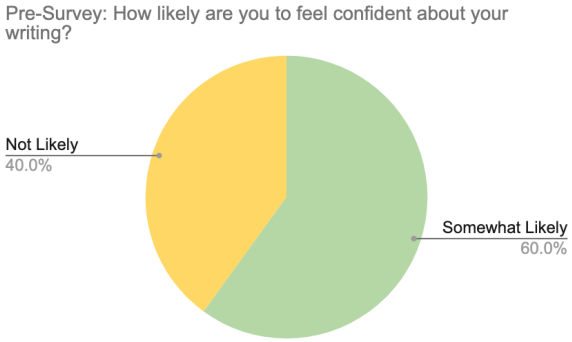
they felt they had choice sometimes, and one student said that they feel they have choice all of the time. When taking the post-survey, only one student shared they felt it was not often they had choice in what or how they wrote. Two of the three students who originally chose not often changed to sometimes in the post-survey. This resulted in eight students claiming they feel as though they have choice sometimes and one student still believing they have choice all of the time. The data for these questions shows a major shift, as 20% of students who felt it was not often they were able to choose what they write about shared they now sometimes feel they have autonomy. This results in an 80% sometimes response, 10% all of the time, and only a 10% not often showing students feel they are more likely to choose what they write about in school at the time of the post-survey than they did when taking the pre-survey.

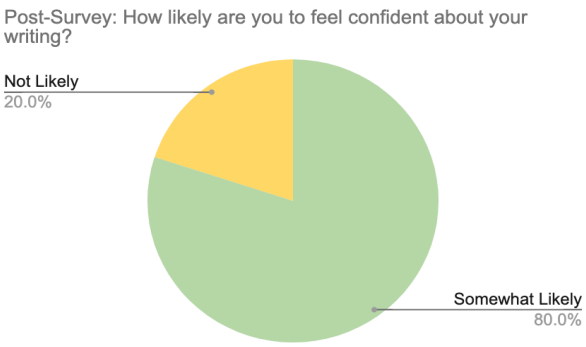




Students were also asked, “How likely are you to feel confident about your writing?” Of the ten students, four students shared in the pre-survey they were not likely to be confident in their writing and the other six shared they were somewhat likely. In the post-survey two students who shared they were not likely to be confident in their writing shared they now felt somewhat likely. In the post-survey, two students shared they still were not likely to be confident in their writing, while the other eight stated they were somewhat likely. In summary, this data shows

students growing confident in their writing, shifting from 60% somewhat likely to 80% likely,





decreasing the not likely response by 20%.

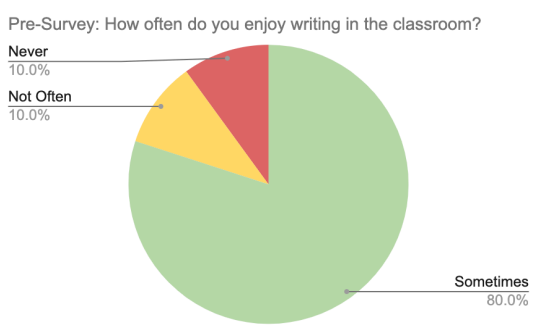
Student Motivation

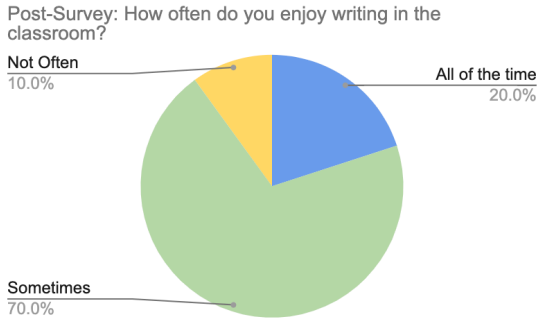
The following sections consider how students respond to writing and how often they feel writing is more than a task but something they can enjoy. The questions consider how often students find purpose and enjoyment in writing and how reflection and discussion contributed to a positive writing experience.

Enjoyment and Interest

There were two questions in the pre- and post-surveys that gave students the opportunity to express their relationships and interests in writing. The first question of each survey asked students the following: "How often do you enjoy writing in the classroom?" In the pre-survey, one student shared they never found enjoyment in writing in the classroom. Another student claimed it was not often they enjoyed writing. The other eight students said it was only sometimes they enjoyed writing. In the post-survey, there was a positive response from students. Not one student claimed to never enjoy writing; the student who submitted that response in the pre-survey shared it was not often in the post-survey. Optimistically, the other nine students had a positive response, with seven sharing they sometimes enjoyed writing and two claiming they

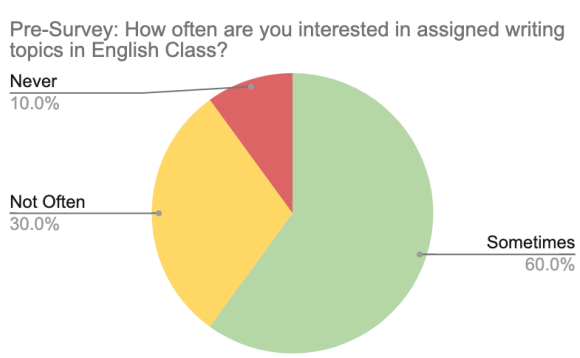
found enjoyment all of the time. As the data shows, there is a positive shift in the pre- to post-survey data. Not one student shared that they never enjoyed writing. In the pre-survey no students reported they enjoyed writing all of the time, and in the post-survey 20% of the students reported a consistent enjoyment of writing. The elimination of never enjoying writing demonstrates an increase in student enjoyment in writing after the five weeks of implemented free writing.

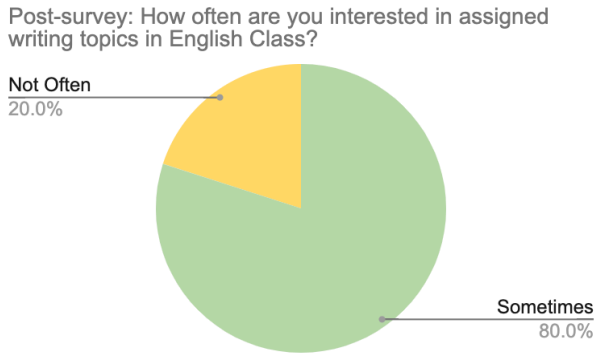




Following the initial survey question, students were asked, “How often are you interested in assigned writing topics in class?” In the pre-survey, the students shared a variety of responses. One of the ten students shared they never enjoyed assigned topics. Three students claimed it was not often they enjoyed assigned writing topics, and the final six shared that sometimes they were interested in assigned topics in an English class. This was another question students showed a positive response to in the post-survey. Two of ten students shared that it was not often they enjoyed assigned writing topics, while the other eight claimed they sometimes accurately represented their interest in writing topics in an English class. This is another question that demonstrates a shift including completely eliminating never from the quantitative data. Students' response to sometimes being interested in assigned topics shifted from 60% to 80%. The

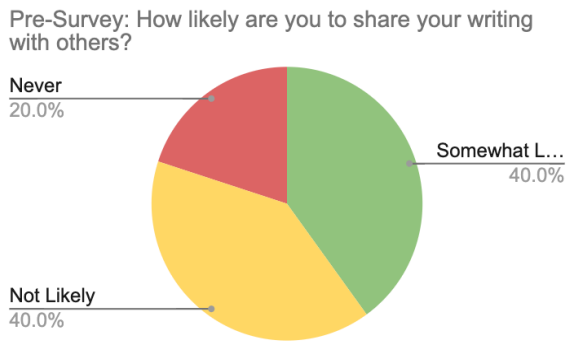
response of never was completely eliminated in addition to the response of not often decreased from 30% to 20%.

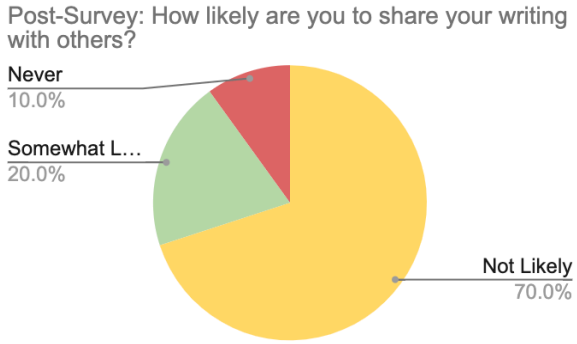




Positive Community and Environment

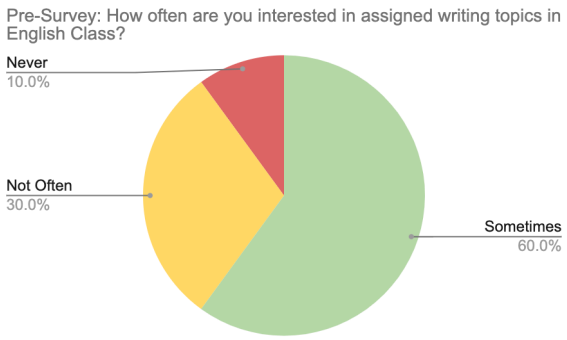
To better understand how discussion and reflection were received throughout the research session, students were asked, "How likely are you to share your writing with others?" In the pre-survey two students shared they would never share their writing with another student or individual. Four other students shared it was not likely, and the other four students said they were somewhat likely. This question had the most change in response from the pre- to post-survey. 20% of students who felt they were somewhat likely to share work shifted to not likely. The overall post-survey response was 70% not likely.

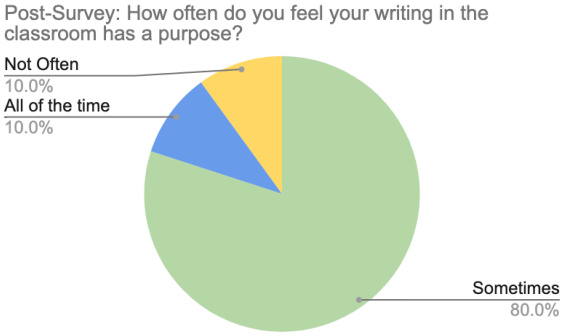




Students were also asked, "How often do you feel your writing in the classroom has a purpose?" In the pre-survey, the ten students shared a variety of responses. One student shared

they felt it was not often they found purpose in their writing. Six students claimed it was sometimes they felt their writing had purpose in the classroom, and three students shared they had purpose all the time in their response. In the post-survey, there was not much change. One student still felt it was not often they felt purpose. Eight students felt it was sometimes purposeful, and one student was consistent with the pre-survey sharing they found purpose all of the time. In summary, this question demonstrated a shift from pre- to post-survey completely eliminated never from the data. The response of not often decreased 20%; this means 90% of students leaned toward feeling their writing had a purpose with a 90% total response between sometimes and all of the time.





Developing Interest and Reflection

The surveys, and change from the pre- to post-survey, show that the guided free writing sessions had a positive impact on students' interest in writing. Students had the opportunity to share their interest before the freewriting sessions in the pre-survey and interest that developed over the course of the free writing in the post-survey. Two open-ended questions gave students the opportunity to share their writing experience prior to guided free writing as well as experiences they have had in other classes.

In the pre-survey, students were asked “What genres and modes of writing do you enjoy? Why?” Some students shared certain writing genres they enjoyed most but also that they enjoy some type of guidance. Student 8 shared, “I usually enjoy creative writing but also when I get given a topic because I am not always that creative.” Student 4 shared, “I like free writing about things that interest me because it feels easy. I also like the type of poetry where it's all creative and doesn’t need a rhyme scheme because it gives me clarity.” Three of the ten students specified they enjoy writing about adventurous or action based prompts. Student 5 shared an example of this response stating, “I like to write about adventure because it gives you a lot of things to write about because you do a lot of things adventuring.” Student 10 also shared a similar response; “I like writing about more adventurous things. If I am interested in what I am writing about, I will enjoy writing a lot. I like answering outside the box questions. They make me think a little harder and I like that.”

In the pre-survey, students were also asked “What are your favorite writing activities you have completed in class? Why?” Students were asked this question to prompt consideration of what students usually write about, and how often it is directly prompted or based on student choice. The responses to this question were varied, as some students shared prompts in response to literature read in class while others stated they liked to write about experiences or goals they have. For example, student 8 shared, “Last year in my English class I had to write a twist to *Romeo and Juliet* and I enjoyed that because it felt creative and I was actually interested in what I was writing.” Another student, student 2, wrote “I enjoyed writing an essay on Auschwitz because I got to learn about the camp, its conditions, what happened there, and some of the stories from survivors.”

In regards to students recollecting writing about experiences and goals, a few of the student responses provide specific examples. Student 3 shared, “Writing activities about things you’ve done before/from childhood.” Student 9 wrote a similar response, stating, “What I want to be in the future. Because I like to dream about what I might be in the future.” Student 10 wrote a more specific response as follows; “One of my favorite things that I wrote was a poem about how much I love my dog. Even though I don’t like poetry, I liked finding words that rhymed.” All of these responses support writing activities students have completed in the past among different classes.

In the post-survey, students were able to reflect on the guided free writing sessions through two open response questions and one scale response. The scale response asked students the following, “How would you rate your experience with guided free writing over this period (1-10)?” From the ten students considered for this research, all students responded with a seven or higher. More specifically, three students gave the guided free writing a seven and three students shared an eight. The other four students provided three nines and a ten. These results show a predominantly positive response to the guided free writing implementation.

The first open ended question allowed students to share their favorite moment from the free writing sessions. The question asks, “What was your favorite genre or writing prompt from this semester? Why?” Looking at student responses, there was no specific prompt that stood out as most successful. Student 1 shared, “My favorite prompt was when we picked/wrote 5 songs we would play for snoopy because I like music and it allowed us to express ourselves + opinions in writing.” Student 5 responded stating, “The prompt where we had to choose what to take off of our survival boat. It made us debate a lot and it was fun.” Both of these responses shared certain prompts that students enjoyed while also explaining why. The student responses also

considered the discussions post-writing sessions and how students responded to sharing their work. Prompting discussion and debates was part of the research, and the responses demonstrate positive responses to conversations about student writing.

The second open ended question gave students the opportunity to share what they liked or would change about the overall experience. The question read as follows; “What is one thing you liked and/or would change about your experience? Why?” Student 3 shared, “One thing I would change is how often we did them, I really enjoyed them so I would’ve done it more, maybe a warm up every day.” Student 4 also shared “I liked the creative freedom we got because it allowed me to think for myself.” These student's responses represented the goal of guided free writing well. Their responses represented the hopes that students would feel they had freedom to be creative and want to engage with writing more in the classroom.

Many students also shared their appreciation for the creative freedom and autonomy given throughout the free writing sessions. Student 10 stated, “One thing I liked about my experience is when I was allowed to write whatever I wanted without the worry of it being right or wrong, and also not having to worry about spelling. I could just write whatever came to mind.” Student 9 responded, “I liked it because I learn more words when we are sharing and I learn more about what people would write, and that’s interesting.” Finally, student 8 wrote, “I liked that we got to be creative and say what we wrote out loud this can help everyone know how other people think.” A majority of student responses were positive; however, some students did share some constructive criticism. Student 3 shared, “I would do broader subjects to allow to show more creativity than just be a defined box.” Student 7 also shared they would have liked more short story prompts.

Discussion

Interpretation of Data

The goal of this research project was to show how the implementation of guided free writing could influence student enjoyment of writing. Overall, the data and student engagement suggest that the guided free writing sessions were a positive addition to the class. The change from pre- to post-survey data for the majority of the questions showed students building confidence and enjoyment while writing, especially throughout the free writing sessions. Much of the student reflection included details about autonomy and creativity similar to the research conducted by Dunn (2022). This action research study may be considered successful given that fellow researchers have previously discussed students' desires to make decisions and write without limitation, including both reluctant and engaged writers (Dunn, 2022).

One of the major themes noted throughout the student responses was the opportunity for students to be creative. Multiple students shared that they enjoyed the guided free-writing sessions because it gave them the opportunity to be creative without the stress of grammar, spelling, or an overall grade. These claims support past research, as it has been shared that students build a positive relationship with writing when they do not feel the stress of a grade and/or have the chance to choose what they write (Dunn, 2022; Li, 2007). One of the main goals of the prompts provided to students was to create each one broad enough so that students had an idea to lead with, but to take their own ideas and strengths and then experiment with those. The prompts also allowed students to think about or write about topics that they do not usually get the opportunity to engage with, and many students responded positively to prompts that challenged them the most in those areas. Supported by past research, the goal of giving students an opportunity to explore is often the main contribution when positive writing engagement and

feedback (Dunn, 2022). For example, students were asked to write a top ten list. There was no guidance on what the topic had to be, or how much detail to give. Student 2 responded to this prompt stating, "Top 10 list because I got to talk about sports which I am passionate about." Another student shared, "The top ten list because it made me reflect on the things I liked most." Giving students a choice helped to create a positive response in students as they were able to have autonomy over their writing.

One aspect of creativity that seemed overlooked was the writer's notebooks. While many students utilized them, there was not a connection between writer and notebook expressed in past research. While all levels of writers in the current study were supported by the use of notebooks, similar to Kirkwood's (2009) students in his research, there was no indication of a commitment to creating an individual space within the notebook itself. Further, there was limited interest in creating a unique space within the individual notebooks through the use of post-it notes or stickers, as had been demonstrated in past research (Buckner, 2005). Even though the writer's notebooks were not a creative success in the present study as much of the research claimed, for some students it was still a helpful organizational tool and one they held onto for the entire five weeks of writing.

Another theme that arose from the data, observations, and research was reflection and the act of 'writing for self.' One of the most impactful parts of the research was watching students share and discuss. Students were asked to discuss what they were comfortable sharing in pairs before transitioning to a whole class discussion. Watching students smile, laugh, and react to one another's writing supported the idea that guided free-writing can help develop a positive and collaborative learning environment. Student 9 shared, "I like it because I learn more words when we are sharing and I learn more about what people would write, and that's interesting."

Student commentary shows that even though students are 'writing for self' as claimed in previous research, they are also learning about and building relationships with fellow classmates (Cremin & Locke, 2017). Guided free-writing gives students not only the opportunity to learn through reading other students' writing but also to better understand who their peers are and what their interests may be. Students would often share, and others would respond with compliments or comments such as, "that was impressive" or "that was a really good idea." Elbow (1989) mentions there is a goodness in both writing and reflection. In this study, communicating in a way that brings joy through writing and reflection was central as part of the discussions and commentary from students. Once again, it is important to emphasize that class discussion allowed students to share writing they were proud of while also receiving valuable feedback from their peers.

Implications For Teaching

Incorporating guided free-writing into the classroom takes designated time, often flexible time, that supports students as they write and discuss. The researcher believes that setting a certain time to write keeps students from stressing or obsessing over certain aspects of writing, such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling. To implement guided free writing in a non-overbearing way, teachers should consider introducing it as part of a schedule, or reoccuring activity. Due to students needing to warm up to experimenting with writing and sharing their work, it is not something to expect students to automatically respond well to. Upon introduction of the task, the immediate explanation of why we write and how the sessions will look supports previous research (e.g., Bruning & Horn, 2000). Modeling a positive experience with guided free writing can support students as they enter and engage with the sessions.

The prompts given to students were created after getting to know them in hopes of growing their excitement for writing. When implementing guided free-writing, it is helpful to know your students before creating prompts, as the educator can find content or genres that students may enjoy experimenting with or engaging in. Written prompts can do more than offer a new genre to explore; they can also help teachers access student interests such as sports or video games in which they are more likely to respond. Taking time to learn about student interests can enhance the positive feelings students have toward guided free writing and motivate them to continue to engage themselves in future sessions.

Limitations

Some limitations that were found while implementing this research included interrupting the students' normal warm-up schedule to create time for the writing sessions. Students were scheduled to interchange reading and writing every day of the week; however, the writing sessions were functioning as journaling. There was no discussion or prompt involved, and the time of writing was longer than seven minutes. As a result, it took students a few sessions to warm up to the idea of sharing during the discussions period. To develop conversation, prompts were altered to support debate or disagreements students could respectfully discuss. For example, one writing prompt asked students to select five out of twelve items they needed to get rid of on an abandoned raft to survive. Students responded well to this prompt, creating arguments and reasoning for their choices throughout discussion even though they may not have had time to write out their arguments.

Another limitation, especially toward the end of the research, was students' ability to keep track of their writer's notebooks to reflect upon at the end of the research session. At the end of the session, the final project was for students to go back through their writing and highlight three

moments or lines they were most proud of. Students were then asked to share and write their lines on a large notebook pad to create a class graffiti note. For the students who were not able to keep up with their notebooks, this task was difficult. This limitation did cause a lack of authentic discussion from a few of the students, as they had no work to respond and react to.

Future Research

If this research were to continue in the future, it would be important to make sure there are a wide variety of guided prompts. This could be taken or influenced by the pre-survey with a direct question about what students are looking to write about. Researchers should also consider the amount of time students write in a focused manner. It was directed that students write for the entire allotted time. However, some students struggled to complete this task. It may be worth increasing the amount of writing time to support student focus and tolerance. This could be something as simple as thirty sections per session or asking students what they need to support their writing journey.

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Appendix A

Writing Prompts

3/18

Write an introduction to a movie that starts with this setting...

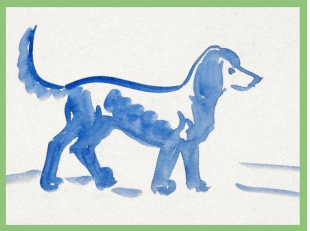
3/20

What are the steps to making the perfect peanut butter and jelly sandwich?

3/25

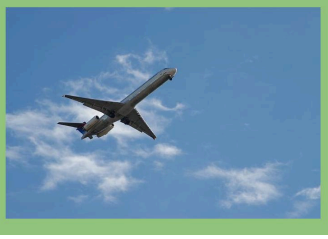
Continue this poem:

The sky outside a bright glowing green,
The little blue dogs anything but mean.



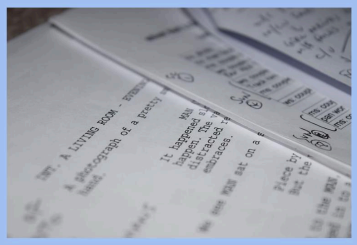
3/27

It's the last week of summer abroad, and your character has one more person to say goodbye to before they leave for the airport.



4/8

Rewrite a popular movie or book plot from the villain's point of view.



4/10

Write about a food memory that you have!

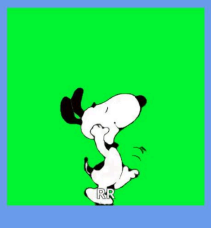
4/15

You are in charge of adding a new word to the dictionary. What word do you chose? What is this words definition? Why did you choose this word?

4/17

What is Snoopy listening to?

Write the 5 songs you would recommend him listen to over the long weekend! What is the vibe of your playlist?



4/22 Final Reflection

1. Return to your writing entries from the beginning. Highlight 3 of your favorite lines from any of your pieces. (They can be from different days)
2. Write about why you chose the lines you chose. What did you notice about your writing style? How would you describe yourself as a writer?

Appendix B

Pre-Survey

1. How often do you enjoy writing in the classroom?

Never Not Often Sometimes All of the time

2. How often do you write outside of the classroom or in your free time?

Never Not Often Sometimes All of the time

3. How often do you feel your writing in the classroom has a purpose?

Never Not Often Sometimes All of the time

4. How often are you interested in assigned writing topics in English classes?

Never Not Often Sometimes All of the time

5. How often are you allowed to choose what you write about in school?

Never Not Often Sometimes All of the time

6. How likely are you to call yourself a writer?

Never Not likely Somewhat Likely Very Likely

7. How likely are you to share your writing with others?

Never Not likely Somewhat Likely Very Likely

8. How likely are you to feel confident about your writing?

Never Not likely Somewhat Likely Very Likely

9. What genres and modes of writing do you most enjoy? Why?

10. What are your favorite writing activities you have completed in classes? Why?

Appendix C

Post-Survey

1. How often do you enjoy writing in the classroom?

Never Not Often Sometimes All of the time

2. How often do you write outside of the classroom or in your free time?

Never Not Often Sometimes All of the time

3. How often do you feel your writing in the classroom has a purpose?

Never Not Often Sometimes All of the time

4. How often are you interested in assigned writing topics in English classes?

Never Not Often Sometimes All of the time

5. How often are you allowed to choose what you write about in school?

Never Not Often Sometimes All of the time

6. How likely are you to call yourself a writer?

Never Not likely Somewhat Likely Very Likely

7. How likely are you to share your writing with others?

Never Not likely Somewhat Likely Very Likely

8. How likely are you to feel confident about your writing?

Never Not likely Somewhat Likely Very Likely

9. What was your favorite genre or writing prompt from the semester? Why?

10. How would you rate your experience with guided free writing over this period?

1—----------5—----------10
I did not enjoy it I enjoyed it

11. What is one thing you liked and/or would change about your experience? Why?

Appendix D
Recruitment Script

You are invited to participate in a research study I am conducting with Dr. Alan Brown from Wake Forest University.

This study examines student interest in writing using guided free writing. Our classes will integrate guided free writing sessions to implement different forms of writing that promote student choice and interest in writing.

As part of your English class, you will participate in a series of activities involving reading, writing, discussing, and presenting takeaways from a selected text.

Your participation in this study includes:

- completing a survey before and after the study
- allowing the use of your written work from class assignments to be analyzed as data

Your participation in the study will take about ten minutes to complete each questionnaire. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefit. You may choose not to answer any questions on the questionnaire for any reason.

To withdraw or drop out from the study at any time, you should send an email to Ms. Crichton (cricea20@wfu.edu) or Dr. Alan Brown (brownma@wfu.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, (336) 758-5888, irb@wfu.edu. Please reference IRB00025731 when contacting the IRB.

Appendix E
Adult Student Informed Consent

Student Interest in Writing

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The risks from participating in this study are not more than would be encountered in everyday life. Everyone will receive a grade on these assignments whether or not they agree to participate in the study. While we cannot promise any direct benefit from participating in this study, we hope that this research will help us better understand whether or not guided free writing can develop student interest in writing.

All assignments are required for this class, but you can freely decide to participate in the research or not. You can refuse to participate or withdraw later even if you initially agree to participate. If you decide not to participate, now or later, there will be no negative consequences. Deciding to be in the study or not or withdrawing later will not affect your grades in any way. To withdraw or drop out from the study at any time, you should send an email to Ms. Crichton (cricea20@wfu.edu) or Dr. Alan Brown (brownma@wfu.edu).

The study team will take the following precautions to keep your information confidential. Access to research data will be limited to the study team. All required research materials will be kept on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked file cabinet in the Education Department of Wake Forest University for three years after the study is closed.

We may publish/present the results of this research. We may share research data with other investigators without asking for your consent again. Any information we publish, present, or share will not contain information that could directly identify you.

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Student Acknowledgement

By selecting "I agree," you indicate that you agree to participate in this research study. If you do not wish to participate, please select "I do not agree" to participate.

____ I agree to participate in this research study.

____ I do not agree to participate in this research study.

Student Name: _____

Student Signature: _____

Wake Forest University
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Student Name:

Click here to participate in this study.

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Parent/Guardian Permission Form

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As part of your child's English class, your child will participate in a series of activities involving reading, writing, discussing, and presenting takeaways from a selected text.

Your child's participation in this study includes:

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Your child's participation in the study will take about ten minutes to complete each questionnaire. Your child's participation in this research is voluntary. Your child may discontinue their participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefit. Your child may choose not to answer any questions on the questionnaire for any reason.

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