

## Using Q Methodology to Assess Journalism Faculty Attitudes Toward the Teaching of Writing

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*ABSTRACT: Although Journalism faculty have long agreed on the problem of poor student writing skills, educators have differed on how to improve the teaching of writing. The traditional approach focused on the quality of the finished product. In the last decade, some communication scholars have studied techniques utilized by English departments to enhance student creativity and productivity by stressing the importance of the entire writing process. More recently, writing instructors have worked to integrate product and process approaches. The goal of this research was to identify the extent of pedagogical agreements and differences among writing faculty of the Ball State University Journalism Department as part of a mission to improve student writing skills. Sixteen faculty members representing 5 educational sequences completed a Q sort to classify attitudes toward writing instruction as product- or process-oriented. The Q study revealed 2 faculty attitudes regarding their identification with and reactions to writing product or writing process. The data show that the 2 groups have similar reactions to new strategies to enhance writing instruction with a goal to improve student writing skills.*

### Introduction

Journalism educators have long agreed on the problem: poor language and writing skills of students. Complaints have targeted the decline in students' critical thinking, their weak news judgment and story structure, their lack of clarity and conciseness and their excessive grammatical and style errors. Although consensus may exist on the problem, faculty who teach writing courses often differ on suggesting appropriate solutions. Given the personal and creative nature of writing, there appears to be little agreement among journalism educators on the best methodologies for teaching writing (Wolf & Thomason, 1986).

Traditionalists call for a return to fundamentals, to address the quality of the finished written *product* that students generate. Defining themselves largely as "editors," they favor a teacher-centered classroom, where lectures are regularly given and papers receive detailed critiques with severe penalties for grammatical errors. In these classrooms, students typically rely on proven journalistic models (e.g., inverted pyramid) and fact sheets to write their stories.

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By contrast, faculty who view writing more as a student-centered cognitive *process* are inclined to act as *coaches* who guide student writers, helping them to select topics, solve problems, generate ideas and plan, shape and revise their writings (Walvoord, 1990). These educators tend to assign more ungraded, informal writing exercises, organize peer editing teams in the classroom and schedule student conferences regularly throughout the term.

Which pedagogical approach — *product* or *process* — will result in improving undergraduate writing skills across communication disciplines? Educators as well as communication professionals are now suggesting a balance between craft and creativity, a flexible strategy that nurtures the cognitive process while ensuring the quality of the final written product. This integrated approach to teaching writing is intended to provide students with opportunities to see the connections among mechanical, expressive and journalistic writing abilities as they work to enhance their skills in those areas (Ward & Seifert, 1990).

A journalism department should agree on appropriate pedagogical approaches in its mission of bolstering student writing standards. This is more easily accomplished if instructors understand their own predispositions and orientations toward the teaching of writing. Once faculty attitudes are understood, strategic efforts to influence and unify teaching behavior can become more effective.

Instruments based on R methodology could have been used to produce evaluations about writing techniques and pedagogical approaches. In this study, though, it was important to ascertain the philosophical similarities and differences among writing instructors through subjective evaluation. This study appears to be the first in-depth assessment of attitudes conducted with a "writing" faculty in a U.S. journalism program. Although it might be important at a later time to determine if nationwide philosophical trends exist, the goal here was only to promote behavioral change within one department. Q methodology was chosen because, besides measuring subjectivity, it is ideally suited for finite groups, particularly where generalizability of results is not a goal.

The purpose of this research was to assess feelings about approaches to writing instruction among several communication disciplines in the Journalism Department. Q statements were developed to reflect prescribed teaching approaches and activities. Would the writing faculty break into two groups that emulated the *product-* or *process-* orientation? Would more or different philosophies arise from the rankings of the Q statements? How much consensus about teaching approaches would exist among the writing instructors?

### ***Literature Review***

Writing scholars such as Murray (1972) were among the first to challenge conventional wisdom by suggesting that educators should initiate students into the process of discovery through language. Emig (1971) used protocol analysis to study the composing process of 12th-graders and found their writing was recursive, not linear. The students developed ideas intuitively rather than

methodically and proceeded through a writing assignment by moving back and forth among various writing stages (e.g., planning, writing, revising).

Pitts (1982) used verbal protocols (tape recordings of subjects' thoughts on writing) to describe the stages of the newswriting processes of professional reporters. In 1987 Ieron replicated this study using student journalists. Distinct differences were found in the approaches of professional reporters and student journalists to writing stories. As a result of these studies, scholars urged journalism educators to adopt new methodologies to increase interaction between teachers and students during the writing process and focus more attention on lead writing and editing for revision (Pitts, 1989). Similarly, Schierhorn and Endres (1992) discussed the role of instructors who coached student writers through the entire process rather than merely critiquing and grading the final product.

### ***Scope of the Challenge***

Resistance to change has been one of the problems facing journalism departments. There has consistently been little agreement among journalism educators on methodologies for teaching writing (Wolf & Thomason, 1986). Journalism texts have stressed traditional product-oriented editing approaches to teaching reporting and news writing. Anecdotal evidence has revealed that journalism departments lack consensus on how to grade student assignments for grammatical, style and structural errors. The predominance of "dysfunctional writing attitudes" among mass communication students is a result of the lack of "focused instructional strategies" for teaching writing in journalism departments. Many students struggle with writing, a seemingly essential skill for the major they have chosen (Riffe & Stacks, 1992).

### ***Product versus Process in Journalism Writing Research***

Bleske (1991) used a survey of 50 writing instructors from 13 universities to examine the status of writing-process practice in contemporary journalism education. One of Bleske's conclusions was that most journalism educators are probably somewhere between the two extremes of product versus process orientations to the teaching of writing. This finding supports the views of a growing number of writing teachers who are urging the adoption of a more integrated pedagogical paradigm. Even in the mid-1980s, when writing-process approaches were widely endorsed, English composition scholars such as Rodrigues (1985) were moving away from writing-process "worship" and calling for a "pluralization" of the writing curriculum that would balance creativity with structure and good mechanics. No single approach was believed to be the only way to teach writing, or the only way to diagnose problems in students' writing.

More recently, Martin (1992) suggested that educators maintain a balance between *product* and *process* techniques. Ruenzel (1995) stated that an overemphasis on *process* writing could adversely affect clarity, structure and thought. Olson and Dickson (1995) suggested that the trend in composition

instruction was moving away from creativity at the expense of grammatical correctness to a more balanced teaching approach.

## Method

In the spring of 1997, a Q study was conducted to determine how the Journalism Department at Ball State University collectively viewed the mission of writing instruction. The 16 participating faculty members represented several professional-skills sequences, including news-editorial, magazine, advertising, public relations and journalism (information) graphics.

The Q sample consisted of 45 statements (17 product, 17 process, 11 neutral). Some were culled from a literature review covering 30 years of studies and texts on writing. Others were developed from interviews with journalism faculty and communication professionals.<sup>1</sup> Each faculty member was asked to arrange the statements along a nine-point bipolar continuum from most agree (+4) to least agree (-4). Examples of the statements are as follows:

- Product*: I should penalize students for grammatical, style, usage errors.
- Process*: I should encourage my students to evaluate each other's writing.
- Neutral*: I should have my students complete in-class writing assignments.

The Q sorts were tabulated using the QMETHOD program as revised and rewritten by Schmolck for microcomputers: PQMETHOD (Atkinson, 1992).<sup>2</sup> One of the benefits of the PQMETHOD program is a degree of flexibility that allows investigators, if they wish, to compare and contrast hand-rotated factors with computer-generated factors. In order to determine which factors should be retained for the solution, at least two of the factor loadings, or person correlations, on each factor must be significant at the  $p \leq 0.01$  level. Factor loadings for this study were considered significant if they exceeded 0.384.

This significant correlation was calculated using a formula for the standard error of a zero-order loading, which is explained in Brown (1980). PQMETHOD also provided a descending array of writing statements and corresponding z-scores for all 45 statements on significant factors. Statements that were either above or below a z-score criterion of 1.0 were considered significant for that factor.

Initially, three unrotated factors emerged in the factor-extraction matrix produced by PQMETHOD. Examination of the unrotated factors showed that two factors could be clearly interpreted, and each factor met the minimum criteria with at least two significant factor scores. In assessing eigenvalues for the three original factors, only two factors had eigenvalues that were larger than 1.0, and together these two factors accounted for 40 percent of the variance.

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<sup>1</sup> Statements used for the Q sorts are available by contacting the authors, as well as a summary of factor scores for coaches and editors factors.

<sup>2</sup> PQMETHOD is a public domain program, which readers can retrieve from the following web site: <http://www.rz.unibw-muenchen.de/~p41bsmk/qmethod/>. The program is available in both PC and Mac versions.

Using judgmental rotation to bring clarity to the solution, the investigators found that nine of the faculty members loaded highest on one factor, and seven faculty members loaded highest on the other factor. The correlation between factors was 0.581, and because the correlation was relatively high, the investigators used the technique employed by Brown to determine distinguishing statements between two factors. This method called for the evaluation of the average ranking for each statement on each factor, and if there was an absolute difference of three or more between each set of ranks, then the statement was considered to be one that distinguished between factors.

## Results

The Journalism Department faculty was represented by 9 people from the news-editorial sequence, 3 from public relations, 2 from advertising, 1 from magazine and 1 from journalism graphics. Ten men and 6 women, with a mean of 6 years' full-time media writing experience, participated. The participants ranged from 1-27 years of full-time college teaching experience. The mean of faculty teaching of writing experience (at least 1 writing class) was 8 years.

The Q sorts resulted in 2 factor types. Factor 1, *Coaches*, had 9 respondents, and Factor 2, *Editors*, had 7. Unlike Bleske's 1991 survey, no clear-cut indication was found that age, professional media background or teaching experience was related to either factor. In fact, the subject who correlated highest as a *Coach* was the local newspaper editor, who is a long-time adjunct professor with more than 25 years of media experience. One of the younger instructors, with less than 10 years of combined teaching and professional writing experience, correlated highly with the *Editors*. Members of the news-editorial sequence were split in their responses with 5 *coaches* and 4 *editors*. The public relations group had 2 *coaches* and 1 *editor*. Both advertising participants correlated with *coaches*. Magazine and journalism graphics participants related best to *editors*.

Because of the high correlation, investigators anticipated similarities in the Q sorts of each factor. In fact, both *coaches* and *editors* had z-scores higher than 1.0 for the same 3 statements, 2 of which were identified as *neutral*. Both factors stressed the value of encouraging students to learn critical-thinking skills and felt students' writing skills would be enhanced by emphasizing the importance of reporting and information-gathering techniques. Both factors also chose a *process* statement to describe their expectations about student initiative in improving story structure and content during story revision.

### **The Coach Factor**

*Coaches* rated 7 statements above 1.0. (See Table 1.) Four of those were different from the statements rated highly by *Editors*. Of the 4 statements chosen by the *Coaches*, 3 were identified as *process* statements; the fourth was *neutral*.

**Table 1: Significant statements and z-scores for Coaches**

<u>Statement</u>	<u>z-score</u>
I should encourage my students to learn critical-thinking skills as part of their instruction in writing techniques (Neutral).	2.023
I should encourage my students to view writing as something that begins with original thinking about a story idea (Process).	1.846
I should emphasize that students read more newspapers and magazines on a regular basis (Neutral).	1.833
I should design assignments to enable students to write for a real audience (Process).	1.743
I should reward my students for originality and creativity in their writing (Process).	1.457
I should teach my students that they will become better writers by improving their reporting and information-gathering techniques (Neutral).	1.267
I should expect that my students will do more than just correct mechanical (grammatical) errors when revising their stories; they will show initiative in improving story structure and content (Process).	1.180
I should assign my students to peer editing teams (Process).	-1.015
I should adopt uniform (departmental) standards for grading grammatical, style and usage errors (Product).	-1.213
I should encourage my students to read their work aloud in class (Process).	-1.262
I should expect my students to write stories primarily to meet my requirements and expectations (Product).	-1.358
I am most effective as an instructor when I follow a linear approach of stated course objectives and teacher-led discussions (Product).	-1.422
I should tell my students how to "fix" their stories (Product).	-1.422
I should lower student apprehension toward writing by de-emphasizing penalties for grammar, style and usage errors (Process).	-1.462
I should take points off for every error a student makes in a writing assignment (Product).	-1.638
I should avoid scheduling class time for individual writing conferences with students (Product).	-1.910

*Coaches* felt they should design writing assignments so students could write for real audiences, encourage them to view writing as something that requires original thinking, and reward originality and creativity. The *neutral* statement chosen by *Coaches* dealt with encouraging students to read newspapers and magazines regularly.

The *Coaches* rejected 9 statements; 6 were *product* statements and 3 were *process*-oriented. *Coaches* and *Editors* rejected 4 of the same statements, including 3 *product* and one *process* statement. Neither group expected students to write stories primarily to meet an instructor's expectations; nor did they expect to tell their students how to "fix" their stories, or feel it necessary to avoid scheduling individual writing conferences during class time (all *product* statements). They were willing to penalize for grammar, style and spelling errors (*process* statement).

Interestingly, *Coaches* did not think it necessary to assign students to peer editing teams, or to encourage students to read their work aloud in class — both *process* statements they would be expected to endorse. *Coaches* rejected such *product* practices as adopting uniform standards for grading, and taking points off for every error students made in writing. They also rejected the *product*-oriented strategy of following a linear approach to course objectives and teacher-led discussions.

*Coaches* differed significantly from *Editors* on four statements. Using Brown's, method of absolute differences between statements, *Coaches* rated two statements significantly higher than *Editors*, one more neutral and one more negatively (Brown, 1980).

The greatest difference between the two factors is revealed in the statement concerning originality and creativity in writing, which strikes to the heart of the philosophical difference between *Coaches* and *Editors*. Traditionally, journalists have been taught to write according to prescribed models (e.g., inverted pyramid, prioritizing the who, what, why, where, when and how of a story from most to least important) and standards (e.g., news values) such as the "impact" of an event or a person's "prominence". Further, journalism educators have consistently evaluated a student's success in terms of the quality of a finished writing assignment. *Editors* rigorously adhere to those pedagogical approaches. The idea of rewarding originality or creativity in students' writing is contrary to the uniform, standardized model of writing to which *Editors* subscribe. Basic news writing is considered neither original nor creative; it just contains the facts.

*Coaches* most strongly rejected the statement dealing with taking points off for every error. Here, again, a philosophical difference exists between the groups concerning pedagogy. *Coaches* would prefer to encourage writers to develop confidence and independent thinking rather than impede students' creativity by deducting points for every error in an assignment. *Editors* believe that you learn from your mistakes, preferably while someone is editing your copy.

**Table 2: Distinguishing Statements of Coaches**

Statement	Coach	Editor
I should reward my students for originality and creativity in their writing (Process).	3	-3
I should give my students occasional, non-graded freewriting exercises (Process).	2	-1
I believe that students should be required to take a "Grammar for Journalists" course before they enter our program (Neutral).	0	-3
I should take off points for every error a student makes in a writing assignment (Product).	-4	1

### ***The Editor Factor***

*Editors* chose 3 positive statements that mirrored the *Coaches'* selections, but their choice of 2 other *product*-oriented statements distinguished them from *Coaches*. (See Table 3.) *Editors* felt strongly that they should grade student assignments with detailed critiques, and that they should penalize students for grammatical, style and usage errors.

*Editors* strongly rejected 8 statements. *Coaches* also rejected 4 of these. Of the 4 statements rejected only by *Editors*, one was *product* oriented, 2 were *process* statements and 1 was *neutral*. *Editors* did not believe that their students necessarily learned best when presented with traditional journalistic assignments (e.g., covering meetings). They strongly disagreed with the *process* statements about rewarding originality and creativity in student writing, and about allowing students to rewrite all graded assignments. They also strongly rejected a *neutral* statement concerning students taking a required special grammar course before entering the journalism program.

*Editors* rated 5 statements significantly different from *Coaches*. Even *Editors* support some *process* approaches, goals and techniques. In this study, *Editors* accepted at least one *process* practice, encouraging students to evaluate each other's writings, reflecting a shift from the traditional editor-centered classroom that typifies their approach to writing instruction.

Although the relationship between *Editors* and *Coaches* in this study reflected distinct differences in what were deemed appropriate teaching methods for improving student writing skills, it should be clear that neither factor is a pure *process* or *product* type. There are differences, but there are also some important similarities. There is common agreement that students will become better writers if they are taught critical-thinking skills, improve their reporting and information-gathering techniques, and show more initiative in improving their own stories.



**Table 3: Significant statements and z-scores for Editors**

Statement	z-score
I should encourage my students to learn critical-thinking skills as part of their instruction in writing techniques (Neutral).	2.148
I should teach my students that they will become better writers by improving their reporting and information-gathering techniques (Neutral).	1.757
I should expect that my students will do more than just correct mechanical (grammatical) errors when revising their stories; they will show initiative in improving story structure (Process).	1.689
I should grade student assignments with detailed critiques (Product).	1.611
I should penalize students for grammatical, style and usage errors (Product).	1.408
I believe my students learn best when presented with traditional journalistic assignments, such as meeting coverage, accident stories and obituaries (Product).	-1.032
I should tell my students how to "fix" their stories (Product).	-1.063
I should reward my students for originality and creativity in their writing (Process).	-1.077
I should give my students the opportunity to rewrite all graded assignments (Process).	-1.091
I believe students should be required to take a "Grammar for Journalists" course before they enter our program (Neutral).	-1.174
I should expect my students to write stories primarily to meet my requirements and expectations (Product).	-1.332
I should avoid scheduling class time for individual writing conferences with students (Product).	-2.050
I should lower student apprehension toward writing by de-emphasizing penalties for grammar, style and usage errors (Process).	-2.306

In this instance, the journalism faculty participants are of two definable types, and those types lie somewhere between the extremes of *product-* and *process-*orientations. Because these investigators have uncovered agreement between the two factor types, the development of a more integrated paradigm of writing instruction may be considered as a realistic goal and not merely an object of speculation.

**Table 4: Distinguishing Statements of Editors**

Statement	Coach	Editor
I should encourage my students to evaluate each other's writing (Process).	-1	3
I should concentrate on providing detailed directions at the outset of student writing projects (Product).	-1	2
I am most effective as an instructor when I follow a cyclical approach of idea generation, problem-solving, and a flexible approach to revision (Process).	1	-2
I should reward my students for originality and creativity in their writing (Process).	3	-3
I believe students should be required to take a "Grammar for Journalists" course before they enter our program (Neutral).	0	-3

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored the range of attitudes among journalism faculty regarding optimum approaches to improve student writing skills. The Q sort was valuable in differentiating between faculty dispositions toward the teaching of writing. Despite real and perceived philosophical differences, no rigid dichotomy of *process* versus *product* writing philosophy was found among these writing instructors. Importantly, writing faculty displayed significant consensus concerning teaching.

The study suggests that it would be useful for these writing instructors to initiate constructive dialogue concerning the common issues and techniques believed to be important in helping students become better writers. Discussion points include: encouraging students to use critical-thinking skills; providing more strategies to help improve news judgment; creating more real-world assignments; teaching how to edit better for structure and coherence as well as grammar, style, and usage; and facilitating individual student writing conferences. Finally, this study illustrates that there is still work to be done to bridge the gap between different teaching philosophies and training backgrounds of writing instructors.

Use of Q methodology identifies the expressed attitudes of the unit's writing faculty as well as their unspoken opinions. Final outcomes are a product of the various perceptions, philosophies and experiences of this faculty. Although further study would be needed to determine whether these findings are representative of a broader (i.e., national) range of journalism educators, they certainly will be most valuable to those who participated in the Q sort.

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