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**AUTHOR** Reilly, Jill M.; And Others  
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**ABSTRACT**

A study examined the effects of treatment (guided vs. nonguided prewriting assignments) on the quality of college freshmen's interpretation of the character/setting relationships in two short stories. Subjects, 52 students in two college freshman composition classes, were randomly assigned to an experimental group (required to make inferences about characters and settings) and a control group (asked to complete factual information questions). Findings indicated that the experimental group produced final essays superior to those produced by the control group. Results also showed that guided prewriting activities may be more beneficial in preparing students to write interpretative essays, which involve more initial analysis and organization of ideas, rather than expository essays. In a second study, students in eighth and eleventh grade English classes, as well as freshman and junior college students, read the stories and completed a guided prewriting assignment (experimental group) or answered questions about the story's characters (control group). Like the first study, findings indicated that the experimental group at all grade levels produced final essays of superior quality to those produced by the control groups. Findings further indicated that the effects of prewriting did not vary significantly with grade level: both secondary and college experimental groups benefited more than their respective control groups. (Statistical tables are appended.) (JD)

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Prewriting

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THE EFFECTS OF PREWRITING ON LITERARY INTERPRETATION

Presented by:

Jill M. Reilly

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Co-authors

Richard W. Beach  
Leslie A. Crabtree

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Running Head: Prewriting

### The Effects of Prewriting on Literary Interpretation

Recent development in writing instruction has stressed the need for exploratory "prewriting" development of information and ideas prior to organizing drafts or editing. There is evidence as to the positive effects of completing "prewriting" activities on the quality of the final draft. Odell, (1974), Burns, (1979), Hillocks, (1980), Meyer, (1982), Cummings, (1981), and Lambert, (1985) found positive results on final draft quality.

The benefits from such prewriting may accrue from developing information in response to questions (Benton, et.al, 1984; Benton & Blohm, 1985), or freewriting (Hilgers, 1980), or organizing information according to an expository text structure (Applebee, 1985). Students can acquire interpretative heuristics from completing "guided" prewriting assignments which require students to generate, organize, and evaluate information in a systematic manner in preparation for writing an interpretative essay (Manzo, 1975; Tutulo, 1977).

Prewriting questions that involve only generating information may not help students transfer that information into an interpretative essay. More "guided" prewriting activities also include metacognitively-based review activities useful for assessing the relevancy of information in relationship to an interpretative

hypothesis (Baker & Brown, 1984; Brown, Palincsar, & Armbruster, 1984).

In simply comparing the effects of prewriting versus no prewriting on differences in final essay quality, this research has not taken into account the influence of a number of other factors such as the nature of topic or text being written about or difference in grade level that may interact with treatment in the effects on final essay quality.

#### Differences in text difficulty.

The prewriting effects may also vary according to difference in the difficulty level of or explicitness of information in the text. With texts that are more difficult, with more implicit meanings requiring more interpretation, prewriting may be more beneficial than with texts requiring less interpretation. For example, if students are asked to interpret relationship between setting and characters' behavior in a text, subjects may perform better with texts in which the relationship between setting and character was more explicit than with a text in which the relationship was more implicit. Or, certain texts may be so difficult or complex that subjects will have difficulty writing effectively about them regardless of the assistance provided by prewriting.

Subjects' cognitive and/or ability levels

The effects of prewriting may also vary according to differences in subjects' age or cognitive levels. From early to late adolescence, readers demonstrate an increased ability to interpret (Purves, 1981; Educational Commission of the States, 1981; Hillocks & Ludlow, 1984; Beach, 1984) possibly due to a shift from concrete to formal operations stages (Applebee, 1978; Hynds, 1985). If older readers have acquired certain interpretative skills, then they may be less dependent on prewriting than younger students. On the other hand, if readers have not acquired the requisite interpretative skills, the prewriting activities may be of little use to them.

Also, the previous research has not examined the effects of variation in the extent to which experimental subjects complete certain prewriting tasks on final essay quality. Within an experimental group completing prewriting, students who are better able to complete the prewriting tasks may perform better than students who are less able to perform the tasks.

This report presents the results of two studies, each study focusing on a different factor influencing the effects of prewriting on the quality of final interpretative essays. Study I will examine the differences in the effects of prewriting due to differences in the difficulty level of the text being interpreted. Study II will examine how the effects of prewriting vary according to differences in grade.

STUDY I: The effects of guided assignments on college students' essay interpretation of short stories.

This study examined the effects of guided prewriting assignments on the interpretation of character/setting relationships in two short stories, one with relatively more explicit information versus one with relatively more implicit information about character/setting relationships.

The effects of guided prewriting on the quality of essay interpretation may vary according to text being interpreted. For example, in texts in which certain meanings are explicitly stated, students may be less dependent on the guided prewriting than with texts in which the meanings are implied. When meanings are implied, the guided prewriting may assist the reader in inferring those implied meanings.

Question

This study examined the following question: What is the effect of treatment (guided vs. non-guided assignments) on the quality of college freshmen students' interpretative essays for two stories that differ according to the explicitness of meaning?

Method

Subjects

The subjects in this study consisted of 52 students enrolled in two college freshmen composition classes in a small urban college in the upper Midwest.

Materials

Two short stories, "Hills Like White Elephants" by Hemingway and "The Lottery" by Jackson, were selected to represent each of two groups of stories: stories in which the information about the influence of setting on characters' behaviors was explicit, as in "The Lottery," and stories in which the information was not explicit, as in "Hills Like White Elephants." In "The Lottery," information about the small town setting and the townspeople's conformity to group norms and rituals are explicitly portrayed, whereas, in "The Hills Like White Elephants," the influence of the setting on characters is less explicitly portrayed.

The guided assignments for both stories given to the experimental group asked students to answer inferential questions involving interpretation of the story. These questions go beyond the basic "who, what, where, and when" to ask the "why" and "how." In other words, the questions require students to critically search the text for information which when interpreted gives deeper meaning to the story.

The experimental group was also asked to complete an exercise sheet which grouped onto one page all the information contained in subjects' responses to previous inferential questions. Therefore, all the information needed to write the final essay was readily visible and formatted on one sheet, and the student could use the sheet to draw the parallels requested by the final essay question.

The directions for the non-prewriting control group asked only for factual information found within the text.

These prewriting activities were designed to prepare subjects to write about the following essay assignments:

For the Hemingway story: "Write a one- to two-page typewritten essay showing the two different settings in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." Also discuss the relationship that exists between the man and the girl. Finally, show how parallels can be drawn between the setting and the relationship of the man and the girl."

For the Jackson story: "Write a one- to two-page typewritten essay which includes the following: a description of the village and a description of the people. Then explain how these two factors work together to result in the stoning of Mrs. Hutchinson."

#### Procedures.

Subjects were randomly assigned to within-class treatment groups. Within each group students were randomly assigned to read one of two stories. Subjects in the experimental group completed guided prewriting activities requiring them to make inferences about the characters and setting as well as the relationship between characters and setting. Control group subjects completed questions asking for factual information about characters and setting in the text. Subjects in both groups then wrote essays asking them to define the influence of setting on the characters' behaviors.



Three judges rated the essays on six four-point scales according to "amount of support," "specificity of support," "degree of abstraction," "degree of understanding," "fluency," and "overall quality;" inter-judge reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) were: "amount of support" (.98), "specificity of support (.98), "degree of abstraction (.97), "degree of understanding (.97); "fluency" (.94) and "overall quality (.98).

These scores were combined to produce a total quality scores for each essay. Analyses of variance were used to determine the effect of treatment (guided prewriting versus non-guided prewriting) on mean essay ratings for stories combined (with repeated measures) and separately.

### Results

The mean quality rating scores for the experimental and control group for the stories combined and separate are presented in Table I.

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#### Stories combined.

The mean rating scores for each of the two stories are presented in Table I. Treatment (guided vs. non-guided prewriting) had a significant effect on combined story mean ratings,  $F(1,102) = 5.4$ ,  $p$

< .01, with experimental group subjects producing essays of higher quality ( $M = 29.2$ ) than the control group ( $M = 21.9$ ). For each separate story, treatment had a significant overall effect for the story, "The Hills Like White Elephants,"  $F(1,50) = 30.1$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not for "The Lottery" ( $p > .05$ ). For the Hemingway story, the experimental group subjects had essays of higher quality ( $M = 33.0$ ) than the control group ( $M = 20.0$ ).

#### Discussion

These results indicated that completing the guided prewriting activities resulted in essays judged to be significantly higher in quality for both stories combined, indicating that the prewriting assisted students in generating and organizing information in order to better develop their essays. However, treatment was significant for the Hemingway story, but not for "The Lottery." The experimental group subjects may have benefited more from the prewriting about the Hemingway story in which the information about character/setting relationships was not as explicit as in "The Lottery." Control group subjects may have been able to interpret as well as the experimental group subjects the character/setting relationships in "The Lottery" without the assistance of the prewriting activities. This suggests that the explicitness of information in the text influences the extent to which subjects needed benefited from completing the prewriting.

Study II: The effects of guided prewriting assignments and grade level on students' writing of essays about a short story.

No previous study has examined how prewriting effects may vary according to different grade levels. If early adolescent readers have more difficulty interpreting literature than late adolescents (Applebee, 1978; Hillocks & Ludlow, 1984) then they may or may not benefit from prewriting activities. If the interpretative task is simply too difficult for them regardless of assistance provided by the prewriting, then the prewriting will have no benefits. On the other hand, if the task is not demanding, which may be the case for older readers, then the prewriting may be unnecessary to doing well on the essay.

In order to determine differences in the effects of prewriting according to a range of different grade levels, four different grade levels were selected for use in this study: eighth, 11th, college freshmen, and college juniors. It was assumed that the interpretative task, which was to explain a main character's final action in a short story, would be most difficult for the eighth grade group and least difficult for the college juniors, who were preservice English education majors.

It may also be the case that within the experimental prewriting group, that the more prewriting completed (as measured by the number of questions listed), the higher the quality of final essays. Additionally, older experimental subjects may list more questions than younger subjects.

Questions. This study examined the following questions:

1. What is the effect of treatment (guided vs. nonguided) and treatment x grade level (eighth grade vs. 11th grade vs. college freshmen vs. college juniors) on overall quality of interpretative essays about a short story.
2. For experimental group subjects only, what is the effect of grade level on the number of prewriting questions answered?
3. For experimental group subjects only, what is the relationship between the number of questions answered for prewriting activities on students' writing quality?

#### Method

Subjects. The subjects in this study consisted of students in eighth grade and 11th grade English classes in a suburban high school in the upper Midwest. A high percentage of this high school's graduates go on to some form of higher education. The college freshmen consisted of members of four freshmen composition classes at a large state university in the upper midwest; the college juniors were students in three preservice English education methods courses at the same university.

#### Materials.

A short story, "Goodnight, Irene," by Robert Weesner was selected for use in this study. The story portrays an unassertive high school boy's, Felix's, attempt to develop a relationship with Irene, who has just moved to town. The boy's father, a single-parent who works the

night shift, is alcoholic and has difficulty helping Felix develop his self-confidence. After numerous attempts to set up a date with Irene, Felix finally makes a date but, at the end of the story, fails to appear at Irene's home.

All students were asked to write an essay with the following directions: "Now write an essay in which you give reasons for why Felix does not go to Irene's house at the end of the story. Give specific examples from the story to support your reasons."

The prewriting instructions for the control group were: "Did you enjoy this story? Why or why not? Try to be specific."

The prewriting instructions for the experimental group were:

1. List some character behaviors (actions) for each of the following statements:
  - a. Felix's behavior in his relationship with Irene: (Space was allowed three behaviors per subquestion)
  - b. Felix's behavior in his relationship with his father.
  - c. Felix's behaviors in his fantasies.
  - d. Felix's behaviors in his real life.
  - e. Irene's behavior in her relationship with Felix.
  - f. Irene's behavior in relationships with others.
  - g. His father's behaviors at work.
  - h. His father's behavior in his relationship with Felix.
  - i. His father's behavior on weekends.

2. Go back over your answers. List reasons for why Felix behaved and believed as he did. (Space was allowed to list eight possible reasons.)

For ease of reference, the above question 1, a-i will be collectively referred to as "Overall Behaviors." The questions about Felix's behaviors, a-d, will be called "Behaviors: Felix," Likewise the questions about Irene's behaviors, e-f, and Felix's fathers's behaviors, g-i, will be referred to as "Behaviors: Irene" and "Behaviors: Father" respectively. Subjects' responses to question 2 above will be called "Interpretation."

#### Procedures

40 subjects were randomly selected from each of four grade levels—eighth grade, 11th grade, college freshmen, and college juniors. Within each group, half the subjects were randomly assigned to an experimental group and half to a control group.

After reading a short story, experimental group subjects completed a guided prewriting assignment in which they listed and organized characters' actions behaviors as implying relationships with other characters. Subjects then indicated reasons for character's actions.

Control group subjects answered questions eliciting their emotional responses to character's actions behaviors and their interpretation of the main character's final action. Subjects in both groups then wrote essays explaining the main character's final action.

Judges rated the final essays on five four-point scales, "specificity of thesis," "degree of support," "degree of understanding," "fluency" and "overall quality." The interjudge reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) were as follows: "specificity of thesis," (.79347); "degree of support." (.92937), "degree of understanding," and "overall quality," (.89763).

These scores were combined into one "overall quality" score, a 2 x 4 ANOVA was used to determine the effects of treatment (prewriting vs. no prewriting) and grade level (eighth grade vs. 11th grade vs. college freshmen vs. college juniors) on the combined mean rating.

For the guided-prewriting group subjects only, multivariate and univariate analyses of variance was used to determine the effect of grade level on the mean number of questions listed for each of five question types about characters' actions, "Overall Behaviors," reasons for characters' actions, "Interpretations" and main character's behaviors, "Behaviors: Felix," Behaviors: Irene, and Behaviors: Father."

Pearson product-moment correlations between essay quality and the number of questions listed for each of the five prewriting question types. Regression analysis was used to determine the relative contribution of each of these five types to essay writing quality.

### Results

The mean quality ratings for the experimental and control group subjects for each of the four grade levels are presented in Table II.

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Treatment (guided vs. nonguided prewriting) has a significant overall effect on mean quality scores for grade levels combined,  $F(1,158) = 3.9, p < .05$ ; experimental group subjects performing significantly ( $M = 39.6$ ) better than control group subjects ( $M = 36.6$ ). As can be expected, grade level had a significant effect,  $F(3,156) = 9.6, p < .01$ . A Scheffe post hoc test ( $p < .01$ ) indicated that the college juniors ( $M = 42.8$ ) and freshmen ( $M = 41.5$ ) did significantly better than the eighth graders ( $M = 34.1$ ) or the 11th graders ( $M = 34.1$ ). However, the treatment X grade level interaction effect was not significant.

The mean number of questions for each question type for the four different grade levels are listed in Table III.

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MANOVA indicated that grade level had a significant overall effect on the number of questions answered,  $F = 2.9$ ,  $p < .001$ . Grade level had significant univariate effects on the number of questions involving:

- "Overall Behaviors," listing characters' actions,  $F(3,76) = 4.7$ ,  $p < .001$ ; a post hoc test (Scheffe,  $p < .01$ ) indicated with college juniors listed significantly more questions ( $M = 24.9$ ) than did the eighth graders ( $M = 18.6$ ).
- "Interpretations," reasons for characters' actions,  $F(3,76) = 7.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ; with college juniors ( $M = 6.7$ ) listing significantly more questions than eighth ( $M = 3.2$ ) or eleventh graders ( $M = 3.9$ ).
- "Behaviors, Felix," information about Felix,  $F(3,76) = 3.1$ ,  $p < .05$ ; with college juniors ( $M = 5.4$ ) listing more questions than eleventh graders ( $M = 3.7$ ).
- "Behaviors: Father," information about Father,  $F(3,76) = 6.5$ ,  $p < .001$ , with college juniors ( $M = 8.1$ ) and freshmen ( $M = 7.6$ ) asking significantly more questions than the eighth graders ( $M = 5.4$ ) and the 11th graders ( $M = 5.9$ ).

The experimental group's essay quality was related to "Overall Behaviors" (questions about characters' actions) ( $r = .49$ ,  $p < .01$ ); "Interpretations," (reasons for actions) ( $r = .41$ ,  $p < .01$ ), "Behaviors: Felix," ( $r = .43$ ,  $p < .01$ ); "Behaviors: Father," ( $r = .36$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and "Behaviors: Irene," ( $r = .43$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

A regression analysis with essay quality as the dependent variable indicated that the five different question types together explained .25 of the variance ( $p < .001$ ); subsequent stepwise analyses indicated that only listing information about characters' actions ( $R = .22$ ) had made a contribution that was significant ( $p < .001$ ).

#### Discussion

As in Study I, subjects for grade level combined completing the guided assignments performed better than subjects answering engagement and discription questions. The fact that there was no significant treatment x grade level interaction effect indicates that the guided prewriting was no more beneficial for some grade level groups than others.

For those subjects completing the guided prewriting questions, grade level had significant effects for four of the five questions types, with the college juniors listing significantly more questions than eighth graders for two types of questions and 11th graders in one type; for the fourth type, both college groups differed significantly from the secondary students. While all question types combined did have a significant contribution to explaining the variance essay writing quality, when the contribution of each question type was considered in a stepwise regression analysis, listing of information about characters was the only prewriting question type that had a significant contribution to essay writing quality.

Overall discussion: Studies I and II

These two studies indicate that, depending on the age of the subjects and the texts employed, guided prewriting activities results in final essays of superior quality when compared to no prewriting or nonspecific prewriting. In Study I, the Hemingway story contain less explicit information and in the guided prewriting treatment subjects did significantly better in writing final essays about the relationship between character and setting than did non-guided prewriting subjects. This suggests that the guided prewriting activities may be more beneficial in preparing students to write an interpretative essay with a more difficult text that requires more initial analysis and organization of information.

However, as indicated in Study II, the effects of prewriting did not vary significantly according to grade level, benefiting both secondary and college experimental group subjects more than both secondary and college control group subjects.

The fact that the older subjects, particularly the college juniors listed more questions than secondary subjects is to be expected. The more important finding is that, across grade levels, the amount of prewriting completed was moderately related to the quality of final essays. The fact that the activity of listing questions about characters' action made a particular contribution suggests that this activity is particularly helpful for the task of explaining a character's action.

The experimental assignment directly addressed the diverse tasks subjects needed to perform to explain a character's actions while the unguided prewriting assigned to the control group subjects asked only for an engagement response bearing little or no relationship to inferred meanings within the text. The guided prewriting assignment questioned subjects' understandings of the reading hierarchically moving from a recall level first to an inferential level (Hillocks, 1980).

The format of the guided prewriting assignment helped subjects generate material for their essays and to organize them. To defend a thesis such as the final essay requires here, both generating a broader base of material and organizing that information have been shown to improve both reading comprehension and writing quality (Larger, 1984 a & b).

Finally, the short-answer format for guided prewriting assignments removes grammatical and sentence-structure constraints from the prewriting task, and should, therefore help improve writing quality (Glynn, et al., 1992). This indicated that more emphasis might be placed on gathering data, then applying the information obtained in order to solve the literary problem posed by the final essay. Attention to the rhetorical problems inherent in writing the final essay were therefore delayed until subjects had completed all prewriting. This research has shown this delay to also be significant

in improving writing quality. (Scardamalia, et al., 1984; Flower, 1980; Flower and Hayes, 1980; 1984).

This research presented here raises questions about the fact that previous prewriting research failed to examine different factors influencing the effects of prewriting, casting doubt about generalizations regarding prewriting versus no prewriting.

#### Implications and further research

One implication of these results is that, in deciding on whether to include prewriting activities with essays, teachers and test-designers need to weigh various factors in deciding whether the potential benefits outweigh the drawbacks (additional testing time or unnecessary additional efforts by students). Such factors include the difficulty and length of the text and the grade level of students, as well as the relationship between the prewriting activities and the final essay tasks.

Further research needs to examine the influence of these and other factors on the effects of prewriting activities, employing the same prewriting activities and final essay assignments. This research could also examine individual subjects' perceptions of the difficulty of the texts as related to the interpretative tasks involved and the benefits of certain prewriting activities in composing final essays.

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TABLE 1

MEAN QUALITY RATINGS FOR GUIDED PREWRITING AND NON-GUIDED PREWRITING GROUPS FOR STORIES COMBINED AND SEPARATE: STUDY I.

|                                  | Guided<br>Prewriting | Non-guided<br>prewriting |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Stories combined                 | 29.2 (10.6)          | 21.9 (7.4) *             |
| "The Hills Like White Elephants" | 33.0 (9.6)           | 20.4 (5.3) *             |
| "The Lottery"                    | 25.2 (10.3)          | 23.5 (8.9)               |

\*  $p < .001$



TABLE 2

MEAN QUALITY RATINGS FOR FINAL ESSAYS PRODUCED BY GUIDED PREWRITING  
AND NON-GUIDED PREWRITING GROUPS FOR EACH OF FOUR GRADE LEVEL GROUPS

( $N = 160$ )

|                  | Guided<br>Prewriting | Non-guided<br>Prewriting | Total     |
|------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| grades combined  | 40 (10.9)            | 37 (9.6)**               |           |
| eighth grade     | 34 (9.6)             | 35 (7.4)                 | 34 (8.5)  |
| 11th grade       | 36 (10.5)            | 33 (5.4)                 | 34 (8.4)  |
| college freshmen | 45 (9.4)             | 38 (13.3)                | 42 (12.0) |
| college juniors  | 44 (9.7)             | 41 (8.8)                 | 43 (9.3)  |

\*\*  $p < .05$

TABLE 3

MEAN NUMBER OF GUIDED-PREWRITING QUESTIONS FOR EACH OF FOUR GRADE LEVELS AND CORRELATIONS BETWEEN QUESTIONS AND ESSAY QUALITY

(N = 80)

| TITLES        | Prewriting Question Type |                       |                        |                        |                         |
|---------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
|               | "OVERALL BEHAVIORS"<br>a | "INTERPRETATION"<br>b | "BEHAVIORS FELIX"<br>c | "BEHAVIORS IRENE"<br>d | "BEHAVIORS FATHER"<br>e |
| grade level   |                          |                       |                        |                        |                         |
| eighth grade  | 20 (8.3)                 | 3 (3.0)               | 10 (3.1)               | 5 (2.1)                | 6 (3.2)                 |
| 11th grade    | 19 (6.2)                 | 4 (2.5)               | 13 (16.4)              | 4 (1.8)                | 5 (2.4)                 |
| college fr.   | 23 (3.1)                 | 5 (2.3)               | 11 (1.2)               | 4 (1.4)                | 7 (1.2)                 |
| college jrs.  | 25 (4.3)                 | 7 (1.8)               | 11 (1.8)               | 5 (1.4)                | 8 (1.5)                 |
| Correlations: |                          |                       |                        |                        |                         |
| essay quality | .49*                     | .41*                  | .43*                   | .36*                   | .43*                    |

- a.  $p < .01$ , college juniors mean sig. higher than eighth graders' mean (Scheffe,  $< .01$ )
- b.  $p < .001$ , juniors sig. higher than eighth or eleventh graders
- c.  $p < .05$ , juniors sig. higher than eleventh graders
- d.  $p < .001$ , college freshmen and juniors sig. higher than eighth and eleventh graders.

\*  $p < .01$