

“University and High School Are Just Very Different”

Student Perceptions of their Respective Writing Environments in

High School and First-Year University

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges faced by first-year students as they negotiated the transition from the writing environment of high school to the writing environment of university. The research for the dissertation was undertaken using a mixed-method explanatory design. This yielded a description of students' perceptions of the differences between their high school writing and first-year university writing environments. The research questions were as follows: what are high school students' perceptions of their writing environment; and what differences, if any, do students perceive as different in the writing environment between high school and first-year university? A total of one hundred and forty-four Grade 12 students completed a quantitative survey asking for their perceptions of the high school writing environment, and twenty students took part either in qualitative focus groups or individual interviews. A follow-up interview was conducted with fourteen of the original twenty participants while they were in the process of completing their first term at university. The results indicated that students' perceptions were very much influenced by individual teachers and instructors and by their own expectations. Recommendations, implications for further research, and implications for program development are offered as a way to extend the knowledge in this area.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Transition Year

In terms of time, the gap between a high school student and a first-year university student is often a very small one. One day students are high school seniors (grade 12) and two months later, many of them enter post-secondary education. In Canada, the latest statistics report that approximately 40% of high school students nationally went on to study at a post-secondary institution directly from high school (Statistics Canada, 2004). Six years later, only 23.2% of students in Manitoba went directly from high school to a post-secondary institution (University of Manitoba, 2010). Students tend to find that the expectations at university are very different from what they were accustomed to in high school (Carroll, 2002). First-year university students have to make a rapid adjustment to a learning environment which provides more autonomy, but requires more individual responsibility, than high school (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordstrom, 2009). Changes in the expectations of written work can be particularly challenging. The first challenge that the first-year student faces is in understanding that written assignments at the university level generally demand that students analyze topics rather than simply report on them (Carroll, 2002). This expectation of greater depth in the investigation of topics might be more manageable if it were not for the second challenge. The second, and more difficult, challenge for first-year college/university student is the move from the high school writing environment, in which writing situations are for the most part similar across subject areas, to the university environment where every discipline has its own discourse community (Hartman, 1989).

For many first-year students, making the transition from the high school writing environment to the college/university writing environment can be daunting because students possess limited knowledge of what academic writing entails (Lee & Tajino, 2008; Strachan, 2002). Lee and Tajino (2008) reported that it would benefit students if instructors were more explicit about “the purposes of academic writing and emphasize how it is different than general writing” (p. 7). Hartman (1989) discovered that not only are the writing assignments different, but the types of writing activities expected are particular to each discourse community. First-year students have to learn to write “the academic prose that is expected and required in the discourse community of the university, and [many instructors believe] that recent high school graduates are not yet prepared to enter that discourse community” (Appleman & Green, 1993, p. 191). Similarly, Beck and Jeffery (2009) observed that “educators are becoming increasingly aware that the writing skills of high school students are not adequate for success in post-secondary education” (p. 231).

Beck and Jeffery (2009) explain that part of the problem associated with making the transition from high school writing to first-year university writing is that students do not understand the “requirements and difficulties of subject-based academic writing” (p. 232). They concluded that instructors should work to clarify their expectations and correct any misconceptions about the kinds of textual features that are most effective for communicating knowledge in the subject areas. The authors stated that “preparing students for a range of types of academic writing requires explicit instruction in the important features that distinguish one type of writing from another” (p. 233). They also observe that first-year instructors commonly assign the analytical, thesis-supported essay. This type of essay requires the writer to “know and skilfully coordinate complex grammatical structures involving subordinate clauses, to represent

hierarchical relationships among ideas, and to employ specialized vocabulary to convey abstract concepts” (Schleppegrell, 2004, as cited in Beck & Jeffery, 2009, p. 236).

Though writing is a complex cognitive and social activity that develops over a lifetime, Beaufort (2007) notes that students are expected to master all that they need to learn to be successful writers in all disciplines in a twelve week first-year writing course offered in most universities in the United States. As Fulkerson (2005) reported, the task is further complicated for instructors by the absence of consensus on “whether to assign topics, how to assign topics, and what types of topics to assign; over the role of readings and textbooks; over peer-response groups; over how teachers should grade and/or respond to writing” (p. 655). In Canada, there are no dedicated first-year writing (composition) courses such as those that are offered in the United States (Graves & Graves, 2006; Smith, 2006). Smith (2006) reports that writing instruction in Canadian universities has moved to a more inter-disciplinary approach in which multiple faculties now offer writing courses that are more subject-area specific. These courses are not, however, composition courses and do not “share a unified site of research, inquiry, and teacher training like the ‘first year writing course’ which is still the most common site of composition instruction among most American institutions” (Smith, 2006, p. 320-321).

Personal Rationale for the Study

In undertaking this study, I was operating on the basis of two premises: (1) that first-year university students need to be able to write academically; and, (2) that most first-year university students struggle with learning how to write academically in the different discourses in which they are asked to write during their first-year. First-year is perhaps the only year when students will be asked to write assignments for eight to ten different courses. By second year, students

have chosen a major, and their writing assignments become more specialized. In addition, not only do first-year instructors appear to operate under the premise that first-year students cannot write academically but so does the institution. In the United States, most, if not all, colleges/universities offer first-year composition writing courses of some kind to their incoming first-year students (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002). The fact that such a class exists and that almost all first-year students are required to take it, suggests that the instructors, and those who make decisions regarding required courses, are under the impression that first-year students are not writing well enough to handle college/university assignments. Smith (2006) reports that, in Canada, there is a belief that “academic writing instruction is a basic literacy matter and thus only necessary in high schools and not universities” (p. 326). She attributes this attitude to the fact that Canadian universities have not had a “serious crisis in university students’ writing skills” as had happened in the United States (p. 326).

In writing my candidacy exam, I researched the writing environment in high school, and compared it to the writing environment in first-year university to determine whether the writing strategies that Graham and Perin (2007) had found to be successful with students in grades 4-12 might be applied to first-year writing students. I also examined the differences between these two groups of students, who are very close in age but operating in very different writing environments, in order to determine whether the difference between the environments, and whether the corresponding difference in instructor expectations, affected the students’ ability to acquire and use Graham and Perin’s (2007) writing strategies. The differences I found, in the research, regarding the types of writing that were expected of students in high school, and those that were expected of first-year students in university appeared to be a contributing factor to the difficulties first-year students report in university.

In addition, one of my colleagues and I have, over the course of our PhD studies, taken an interest in first-year students and the struggles they encounter when they write academic essays for the various courses in which they engage. We have conducted research to see if first-year students are aware of the repertoire of strategies they need if they are to be successful writers in university. Though the study was a pilot study, the findings indicated that first-year students are not sufficiently aware of the strategies to make informed choices about them (O'Brien Moran & Soiferman, 2010). They appear to operate on the assumption that all strategies are equally important, rather than trying to pinpoint the strategies that will prove the most useful in any given writing assignment.

When university students and/or their parents hear that I am studying for my PhD in the area of language and literacy and find also that I am particularly interested in investigating ways to help first-year students become more successful in writing essays, they suggest that the work is long over-due. They regale me with stories about the struggles they, or their children, had in trying to make sense out of the expectations of first-year instructors in terms of writing essays or assignments. In addition, business people tell me that new employees often cannot write a proper report. From my limited data, it appears that writing ability is a continuing concern for first-year students and their parents.

When my children began university, they had come from a high school that I considered a very good one in terms of literacy education. Students were expected to write, and write often, not only in English classes but across the curriculum. Even with this preparation, my daughter and my son both struggled when it came time to write their first university essay. It appeared to them that their instructors wanted a different kind of writing than to what they were accustomed.

Upon closer examination, and after consultation with their instructors, they determined that the difference between the writing they had done in high school was not as great as they had supposed, but rather that there was a difference in the ways in which instructors articulated their expectations. It was this disconnect, from the known to the unknown, which initially gave them trouble. At the time, I wondered why first-year instructors did not give more guidance to their students, rather than responding to questions on an individual basis when asked.

Therefore, my research grew out of an interest in the writing demands that universities place on first-year students. First-year students are often expected to be successful in courses whose content is unfamiliar, adapt to demands that are new and different, familiarize themselves with the varied expectations of a number of different instructors, learn new vocabulary and discourse knowledge, interact with a new set of peers, and learn how to write an academic essay in multiple discourses. It is hardly surprising that so many first-year students struggle with their new responsibilities.

Theoretical Rationale for the Study

This study is based on the cognitive theory of learning. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) identify the two main assumptions that underlie the cognitive approach: “(1) that the memory system is an active organized processor of information, and (2) that prior knowledge plays an important role in learning” (p. 284-285). The authors observe that principles of perception, insight, and meaning are significant for cognitive theorists. In terms of learning, cognitive theorists believe that “learning involves the reorganization of experiences in order to make sense of stimuli from the environment” (p. 285). In this approach, learners attempt to solve problems by testing different explanations until one is identified as the solution. Unlike

behaviourists, cognitive process theorists hold that the control for learning lies within the individual rather than the social group.

In his work in cognitive theory, Piaget (1966) suggested that learning was the result of the learners' interaction with the environment and repeated exposure to particular experiences. The theory of instruction proposed by cognitive theorists is one in which learners attempt to make sense of new situations by drawing on their prior knowledge. Learning becomes meaningful only when it can be related to concepts that already exist in a person's cognitive structure. Thus, students do not learn by memorizing information but instead acquire understanding of new experiences. By acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to understand phenomena through a series of problem-solving exercises, students are able to apply knowledge regardless of the situation in which they find themselves.

Piaget (1966) proposed that the concept of schema, which he defined as the basic structure through which an individual's knowledge is mentally represented, changes over time. As children develop, new schemata emerge and pre-existing schemata are modified and merged with the new cognitive structures (Ormrod, 1990). Piaget (1966) theorized that, when individuals interact with their environments, they develop and shape their schema. According to Piaget, people interact with their environment through two processes known as assimilation and accommodation. In assimilation, an individual interacts with the environment based on existing schema, while, in accommodation, an individual modifies an existing schema to take into account the new experience. These two processes are complementary and learning results both from assimilation and accommodation.

Ormrod (1990) believes that:

learning is reflected in the process of accommodation, because it is through accommodation that cognitive changes occur. However, an environmental event cannot lead to accommodation of schemata unless that event can be related (assimilated) to those schemata in the first place. (p. 140)

She further suggests that “assimilation is a necessary condition for accommodation to occur: you must be able to relate a new experience to what you already know before you can learn from it” (p. 140). The ability for students to use that which they already know and integrate it with the new material to be learned is an important principle in cognitive learning theory.

An instructional model that is based in cognitive learning theory is one in which students are encouraged to “not only acquire knowledge but also improve their cognitive abilities to employ and extend their knowledge” (Tennyson & Rasch, 1988, p. 369). Tennyson and Rasch (1988) propose that instructors develop learning situations that focus on the acquisition of higher-order thinking skills and processes. In this situation, students are encouraged to take their existing knowledge and use it to solve new problems. Students who engage in solving problems learn to extend their prior knowledge through discovery rather than acquiring it from the instructor. When students take the time to understand the new material, they are better able to retain it. It is important, therefore, that instructors consider students’ prior knowledge.

The development of writing instruction as a cognitive process began in the early 1970’s. One of the early pioneers in this field was Emig (1971) who looked at the cognitive writing/composing processes of twelfth grade students using think-aloud protocols. The research of Flower and Hayes (1981) built on the findings of Emig (1971) in also using think-aloud

protocols to determine how experienced writers compose texts. Flower and Hayes' (1981) model, the Cognitive Process Model of the Writing Process, was based on three processes they called planning, translating, and reviewing. The foundation of their model was based on an understanding of cognitive science. Flower and Hayes (1981) theorized that simple cognitive operations could help writers make complex writing decisions during the writing process. They posited that the writing process consisted of a series of problem-solving strategies that experienced writers used but inexperienced writers did not. They hypothesized that using a problem-solving approach when writing allowed writers to monitor their writing decisions as they composed text and to change direction when the text no longer made sense, thus employing cognitive strategies.

This study draws on the cognitive theory of learning by undertaking the investigation of the effect of writing environments on the basis of students' perceptions of the differences between the writing environment of high school and the writing environment of first-year university. In order to understand the difficulties some students experience in adjusting to the new writing demands placed on them in university, it was important to gain an understanding of their perception of the way in which the skills and supports they have matched the respective challenges they face in the high school writing environment and the university writing environment.

Purpose of the Study

When first-year students come to university, they are often overwhelmed by all the things that are different from high school: they are expected to be independent thinkers and learners; they must learn how to manage their time more effectively; they have to pick their own courses

and arrange their own timetables; they have to cope with less frequent feedback from instructors; they need to learn how to think critically and analytically; they learn that their access to academic staff is limited; they find that there are different forms of classes taught (e.g., lectures, tutorials, computer-based or online learning, field work, sit-down or take-home exams); they struggle in first-year classes because of the size; they find that there are now a broader range of acceptable answers; they have to learn to relate to peers from different socioeconomic, age, and cultural groups. One of the greatest challenges, however, appears to be the assimilation into the discursive practices of university.

The purpose of my study was to investigate the challenges faced by first-year students as they negotiated the transition from the writing environment of high school to the writing environment of university.

Research Questions

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was utilized in this study. The quantitative component was used to get a base-line measure of how students perceived their writing environment in high school. The qualitative individual interviews gave a more detailed picture of how selected high school and first-year students perceived the difference in the writing environments of high school and university.

The research questions were:

1. What are high school students' perceptions of their writing environment?
2. Do students' perceive a difference between the high school and first-year university writing environments?

The quantitative survey addressed question one in a more general way and was administered to one hundred and forty-four grade 12 students from four high schools in a western Canadian city, who indicated that they would be going on to study at one particular western Canadian University. The qualitative component consisted of twenty selected students who had agreed to participate in one of three focus groups or eleven individual interviews.

Significance of the Study

Approximately twenty-five percent of first-year students drop out of university, despite rating themselves as having been academically well-prepared for their studies (University of Manitoba, 2007). The students who drop out have said that they had difficulty keeping up with their studies or that they found the programs too demanding. Many of the students also indicated that their grades were not what they had expected when they began university. As the responses seem to indicate, the unexpected academic demands of first-year studies, in some cases, contributes to students' decisions to leave university. One of the specific difficulties students encounter in their first-year is the challenge of learning to write in the various disciplines. If students are made aware that they need to acquire the domain specific discourse knowledge required for each course they attend, they will, perhaps, have an easier time adapting to their new writing environment.

Ultimately, these data could prove beneficial in the universities' ongoing efforts to retain more of their first-year students. If the research shows that students perceived a difference in the writing environments, further research would need to be done to determine if, in fact, understanding the difference in writing environments might lead to different outcomes. If the transition from high school writing to university writing could be made easier for students, then

perhaps more students might make the transition successfully. This study sought to investigate students' perceptions of the differences between the high school writing environment and the first-year university writing environment in an effort to understand the difficulties in that transition. It did not attempt to analyze the curriculum offered in high school English Language Arts classes or to investigate the kinds of programs offered at the university but rather sought to uncover students' perceptions of those classes and programs. It is not possible, therefore, to comment on either on the basis of this study. While the investigation of students' perceptions of the classes and programs is an important consideration in the evaluation of curriculum, it is a single piece of a larger whole. There are a number of other factors (e.g., teacher/instructor perspectives, analysis of curriculum, analysis of first-year university courses) that would have to be considered before suggestions about programming could be made.

Scope of the Study

The findings of this study may be able to inform a broad range of first-year writing programs in Canada, programs in which the teaching of academic essay-writing in first-year university classes has been, and continues to be, a problem due to the variety of discourses in which first-writers find themselves. In addition, the findings might inform the practice of both secondary and post-secondary instructors by foregrounding the effect of writing environments on student learning. The scope of this study, however, is limited by its focus on the students' perceptions of the environment.

Assumptions

Underlying the study were the following assumptions:

1. Student perceptions of writing can be identified through a quantitative survey and through individual interviews. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in an explanatory mixed-method design would permit me to investigate student perceptions, using the data gathered from a larger population to get a general sense of high school students' perceptions and qualitative interviews to further investigate the quantitative results.
2. The difference in writing environments between high school and first-year university would be recognized by students. This study is predicated on the assumption that students would be able to distinguish between important features of the two writing environments.
3. Students would be able to articulate their perceptions of the writing environments, both in high school and in first-year university, and be able to make judgments about the value of the instruction they received in high school relative to the instruction they received in first-year university.
4. Students would be able to discuss the kinds of writing instruction that existed in high school in both their English Language Arts classes and their other content area classes and be able to compare it to the kinds of writing instruction that existed in first-year university.

5. An underlying assumption of the cognitive learning theory perspective is that the way in which students perceive, interpret and process the information they receive from their writing environments would be perceivable and reportable. This focus on information processing is the focus of much of cognitive theory.
6. In cognitive theory, there is also an assumption that individual perception may differ from social constructions of reality. This is why it was important to interview individual students to determine whether their perceptions of the learning experience were similar.
7. Cognitive theorists also theorize that different aspects of experience cannot be studied in isolation from one another. The assumption of this study was that, by interviewing the same students in high school and first-year university, I would discover students' perceptions of the kinds of writing instruction that characterized the high school writing environment and the points at which it differed from the university writing environment.
8. It was also assumed that it would be possible to define, in concrete terms, the instructional strategies that might improve students' acquisition of writing strategies.

Definition of Terms

The following terms have been used throughout this study and have been defined as follows:

Academic Essay - is defined here as an assignment that is written in response to a question. Students are expected to present a point of view (expressed in a thesis statement) that is informed by research. The aim is to develop a supporting argument for the thesis proposed.

Academic Writing – is broadly defined as any written assignments at the university level that fulfills an educational purpose. Academic writing does not necessarily apply to only an academic essay; writing of any kind, in any discipline such as lab reports, discussion papers, business reports, summaries, etc. would all be considered forms of academic writing.

Comprehensive Focus English Language Arts Course - addresses a variety of informal and formal discourse ranging from oral discussions, free-writing, letters, improvised drama, and journals to reports, formal presentations, documentaries, short and book-length fiction, and poetry (Manitoba Curriculum Guide, 2000).

First-year Student – is any student who is attending university for the first time and is taking all first-year courses.

Instructor – is used to refer to any person who teaches at the college/university level.

Literary Focus English Language Arts Course - emphasizes the aesthetic uses of language: language that enlightens, fosters understanding and empathy, reflects culture, expresses feelings and experience, and brings enjoyment (Manitoba Curriculum Guide, 2000).

Novice Writer – refers to any writer who enters a new discourse community and has to learn all the protocols that are associated with that new discourse. For the purposes of this thesis, novice writers will refer to first-year university students.

Secondary Student – is a student who is studying in a high school setting.

Teacher – refers to a secondary school instructor.

Transition Year – the year, right after high school, when many students begin studying at a college/university for the first time.

Transactional Focus English Language Arts Course - emphasizes the pragmatic uses of language: language that informs, directs, persuades, plans, analyzes, argues, and explains.

Transactional Focus addresses a variety of informal and formal discourse, ranging from notes, telephone calls, and oral discussions to reports, feature articles, formal presentations, business letters, and documentaries (Manitoba Curriculum Guide, 2000).

Writing Environment - is defined as the physical classroom setting, and the demands placed on the writer in that setting by both their teacher/instructor and the differing writing demands of specific writing genres. The writing environment is made up of: (1) the content taught which includes the facts, concepts, and procedures explicitly defined with a particular subject matter; (2) the pedagogical methods employed which include methods which are designed to give students the opportunity to observe, engage in, and invent and discover expert strategies in context. These methods can be accomplished by modeling, coaching, and scaffolding; (3) sequencing of learning activities which involves the order and organization of learning activities which affect the way information is processed and retained (adapted from The learning environment, Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991).

Writing Expectations – refers both to student expectations in high school and first-year university and teacher and instructor expectations in high school and first-year university.

Summary

In order to better understand what first-year students' experiences are in learning how to write an academic essay, it is important to listen to the students themselves (Delaney, 2010; Groves & Welsh, 2010; MacBeath, 2001; Rohrkemper, 1985; Scherff & Piazza, 2005; Sizer & Sizer, 1999; SooHoo, 1993). There are studies that look at students' transition from high school to first-year university and at the problems that students face when they get to university (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Krause, 2001; Lea & Street, 2001; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2010; Tinto, 1996). None of the current research, however, has followed a single group of students, recording their respective experiences of the high school and university writing environments, as the students make the transition from high school to university. This study attempted to rectify that oversight by listening to the students' perceptions of their academic writing journey in the transition from high school to first-year university courses.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

The writing students are required to complete in high school is often very different from the writing that they are expected to complete in first-year university (Carroll, 2002). Even students who had been successful writers in high school sometimes struggle at university. Carroll (2002) found that some:

[university/college] faculty members and administrators [still] cling to the myth that adequately prepared students should be able to write fluently and correctly on any topic, at any time, in any context, this study demonstrates that even students who were generally successful in high school are unable to fulfill this fantasy. (p. xi)

If one were to ask college/university instructors about high school students and their level of preparedness for university writing, many would answer that students are not prepared for the demands of higher education (Sanoof, 2006). A particular difficulty experienced by students making the transition to college or university is in understanding faculty expectations for academic writing.

Carroll (2002) also observed that first-year students were expected to write more complex papers addressing challenging texts that require greater depth of understanding and a rhetorical sophistication for which they may not be ready. She further observed that the assignments that were often called ‘writing assignments’ in university, were, in fact, complex activities that call for high level reading, research, and critical analysis. Though it appears from the Sanooff (2006) study that high school teachers think that they are adequately preparing high school students for

the rigours of academic writing in first-year university, first-year university instructors believe that students are coming to them unprepared.

The disconnect between teachers and instructors appears to be one of the difficulties that students face when they are transitioning from the high school writing environment to the first-year writing environment. If it is true, as Berlin (1987) has argued, that writing instruction is an essential part of any university curriculum, then more study needs to be undertaken to try to bridge the writing gap between high school students and first-year students. Berlin further observed that despite the training and intelligence that students bring to higher education, they are unprepared to deal with the new demands put on them at the university/college level. It is for this reason that freshman writing courses in university/college have been a part of the first-year curriculum throughout the century in the United States.

This chapter will provide an overview of the high school writing environment and instruction, the university/college environment and first-year instruction, the transition from high school to university/college, and, a comparison between the two environments.

High School Writing Environment and Writing Instruction

In 1981, Applebee studied writing instruction and how it was taught in two mid-western high schools over a period of one year. The focus was on ninth and eleventh grade students. Data were gathered through classroom observations and interviews with teachers and with selected students. In addition, Applebee conducted a national questionnaire survey of teachers in six major subject areas: English, foreign language, mathematics, science, social science, and business education. The survey responses were limited since Applebee had to rely on self-reported data by the teachers as to what they were doing in their classrooms in terms of teaching

writing. However, Applebee was satisfied that the responses did reflect teachers' attitudes about good practice and allowed the researchers to investigate how those attitudes varied with such factors as subject area and grade level.

The observational studies concentrated on the nature and frequency of situations in which students were being asked to write in all subject areas. Applebee (1981) found that, using a broad definition of writing;

an average of 44 percent of the observed lesson time involved writing activities, with mechanical uses of writing (such as short-answer and fill-in-the-blank tasks) occurring 24 percent of the observed time, note-taking 17 percent, and writing paragraph length or longer occurring only 3 percent of the observed time. Similarly homework assignments involved writing of at least paragraph length 3 percent of the time. (p. 93)

In addition, Applebee observed that the time that elapsed from the point at which the teacher began an assignment until students were expected to begin to write averaged just over three minutes. Instruction of any kind was rare, and pre-writing activities consisted of teachers talking about form (length and layout of the paper).

In 1984, Applebee began what he termed the second phase of his study of writing in secondary schools. This study shifted focus to individual students' writing skills, and "examined the changes that occur when teachers emphasize writing as a tool for exploring new ideas rather than as a way to test previous learning" (p. 4). In addition, data were gathered through a study of the textbooks used in a variety of secondary school subject areas and a study of the writing development of fifteen students over a sixteen month period. He found that, contrary to the stated purpose of teaching writing, composition textbook exercises required writing of even

paragraph length only 12% of the time. In addition, “all of the major school contexts, class work, homework, teachers’ assignments, and textbook suggestions, are dominated by activities in which students provide information without constructing text” (p. 184).

In his examination of writing in high school, Applebee (1984) characterized high school writing assignments as

being typically first-and-final draft, completed in class and requiring a page or less of writing. Topics for these assignments are usually constructed to test previous learning of information or skills, hence the students’ task is to get the answer ‘right’ rather than to convince, inform, or entertain a naïve audience. (p. 184)

Applebee found that 95% of the writing assignments suggested by typical high school composition textbooks were designed to test previous knowledge. He further discovered that the “types of writing that students do in high school years narrow rather sharply around summarizing and analyzing tasks” (p. 184). Due to these limited uses of writing, Applebee concluded that writing was more likely to be assessed than taught, and that teachers were more concerned with product rather than process. In addition, Applebee observed that “the high school years are a time of transition from reliance on primarily time-ordered or descriptive modes of presentation toward more analytical methods of organization” (p. 185). However, Applebee observed that students still incorporated narrative text in their analytic writing tasks, and that their lack of organizational structure leads them to provide a long list of points without organizing them into groups of related ideas.

Applebee (1993) updated his initial writing research from 1981 and 1984 in 1993 when he asked teachers in a national survey how many pages of writing of any sort students had done

for class during the previous week. In the sample of public school teachers, Applebee found that teachers self-reported that their students had done, on average, 3.9 pages of writing during the previous week. Applebee found that the total amount of writing was greater compared to his earlier studies. He theorized that this was a result of including activities such as answering comprehension questions and writing in journals as part of the writing completed in class that was not part of his original studies. Applebee concluded from this later study that when it comes to teaching writing in the secondary schools

the most frequently-used techniques remain very traditional: written comments, assignment of a grade, and correction of errors in mechanics. Thus, although it is clear that that process-oriented instruction is broadly recognized as an appropriate approach to teaching writing, it does not seem to have led to drastic reformulation of what teachers do, at least in the context of writing about literature. (p. 171)

Hillocks (2006), in an attempt to update the research completed by Applebee (1981) sought to determine if the teaching of high school writing had undergone any changes since it was last studied by Applebee. When Hillocks (2006) conducted his research on the teaching of writing in high school, he discovered that students were writing substantial pieces more than 3% of their time (i.e., relative to Applebee's finding (1981), there had been a slight increase in time on task). Despite the evidence that more writing was taking place in high school classrooms, Hillocks (2006) found that there was still a great deal of similarity in the way that writing had been taught twenty years earlier. Students were still required to do more superficial writing such as fill in the blanks and answer short answer questions.

In the course of their discussions about their own high school students and the type of writing students were being required to produce, Alsup and Bernard-Donals (2002) found that high school students were not practicing the writing process as they had been taught to do. Though the students had been instructed in the process model of writing, with an emphasis placed on revision, they did not make any material changes to their papers in the re-write, despite having received peer and teacher feedback on their drafts. Alsup and Bernard-Donals observed their students *dutifully* going through the process of revision but with little effect. They reported that, in high school, students see “finding a topic and writing a paper on that topic as primarily expository and the research process as fact-finding” (p. 125). The students did not appear to engage with their topics and did not question their research findings. The students *performed* the writing process steps, but did so without any real sense of engagement with their topics. The authors argue that the writing process needs to be more “than isolated tasks that students complete; it needs to require critical thinking” (p. 125).

Davies (2010) hypothesized that one of the problems with teaching students how to write in high school is that there are no dedicated composition classes. Writing essays is simply part of high school English classes where the main focus is on teaching literature. She contends that “as long as literature and writing are combined, some teachers will focus primarily on literature and not on writing. What writing is done is in response to literature” (p. 127). In Davis’ view composition should be offered as a separate course in grades 11 and 12. Similarly, Sullivan (2010) observed that the “high school English curriculum needs to be less exclusively focused on literature and should include a mix of historical, sociological, scientific, theoretical, personal, and literary readings” (p. 251).

Davies (2006) commented that most students in high school do not move beyond the “five paragraph essay” format that they learned in middle school. Likewise, Jordan (2006) found that high school students like the comfort of writing the “five paragraph essay” because it provides a scaffold that they need to be successful. The problem, as Jordan sees it, is that students fail to understand that one writing template cannot be used for all writing situations and that this often leads to students becoming frustrated and confused about how to write an essay. Mosley (2006) characterized high school writing as formulaic and predictable. She attributed this phenomenon to the fact that each high school teacher has too many students and too little time to mark papers, so teachers allow their students to follow a formula to produce a product. Kittle (2006) found that “[high school] students were expected (and accustomed) to simply follow directions and do their best to meet the teacher’ expectations” (p. 139). In his research, Hillocks (2006) observed the same type of writing instruction that Davies (2006) and Jordan (2006) found. The students in his study were also being taught how to write by adhering to the writing structure known as the five paragraph essay model.

High school writing, according to the Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education (1998), should enable students to explore, shape, and clarify their thoughts, and to communicate them to others. It asserts that, by using effective writing strategies, students will learn to discover and refine ideas and to compose and revise with increasing confidence and skill. The guide stresses the need for students to know and apply processes and strategies in developing skills. This procedural knowledge includes knowledge and skilled use of the six language arts (read, write, listen, speak, view and represent) as well as related processes, including processes of inquiry, interaction, revision and editing, reflection, and metacognition.

The Language Arts section of the Western Canadian Protocol (1998) emphasizes the following goals and outcomes that students should be aware of and use in their writing: an awareness of different genres; an awareness of audience; an awareness of writing for a purpose, an ability to experiment with language, an ability to generate ideas before writing, an ability to create original texts, an ability to produce multiple drafts, an ability to edit, an ability to revise, an awareness of organizational structures, and finally, an ability to edit for grammatical structure.

The English Language Arts framework of outcomes and standards, in the Western Canadian Protocol (1998), does not speak specifically to writing strategies but does mention the importance of accessing prior knowledge. This section stresses the need to analyze connections between personal experiences and prior knowledge in an effort to extend interpretation of text and to monitor understanding. I suggest that the type of activities mentioned in the Western Canada Language Arts curriculum (1998) are not designed to prepare students for the type of critical writing that is required in first-year university courses. It is important to emphasize, however, that the stated goals of the Western Canada Protocol do not include the expectation that high school English Language Arts teachers will prepare high school students to write in first-year university.

University/College Writing Environment

In first-year classrooms, students have to understand not only the conventions of academic writing in general (Haar, 2006) but also the way in which that writing differs depending on the discipline. Students will write differently in history than they do in engineering or computer science courses. What is 'correct' in one discipline will not necessarily be correct in another discipline. Students who left high school believing that the difference

between one subject and another lies in the content now have to contend with an environment in which the rules of writing and thinking change with every new classroom. The result, according to Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), is that, though many faculty members seem to believe that ‘good writing [is] good writing’, “what was deemed good writing in one discipline was not good writing in another discipline” (p. 83).

First-year writing courses can act as a transition, bridging students’ experiences writing in high school to the new demands placed on them in first-year courses. Students in first-year university often find that they have to change the way that they write due to the different writing environment in which they find themselves. Along with a new way of writing, they find themselves grappling with new and differing expectations (Carroll, 2002; Strachan, 2002). Carroll (2002) further discovered that first-year instructors expect students to already know how to write for situations they have not yet encountered, despite the fact that writing assignments in each course are governed by unique domain specific knowledge and vocabulary. It is not unusual to find first-year students struggling to figure out what their instructors want in terms of academic writing (Strachan, 2002). One of the students in McCarthy’s (1987) study summed it up in this way: “First, you’ve got to figure out what your teachers want. And then you’ve got to give it to them if you’re gonna get the grade...and that’s not always so easy” (p. 233). McCarthy also observed that first-year students often feel that they have entered a world where no one speaks their language, and where they can not understand what is expected of them.

A significant problem for some students is the degree and complexity of coursework that is required in first-year university. Carroll (2002) observed that the type of writing expected in first-year university was different than the writing expected in high school. She discovered that

many students entering university felt they had mastered the ‘one size fits all’ five paragraph essay in high school and were surprised to discover that this model was not an acceptable way to write academic essays. In their study, Sommers and Saltz (2004) quoted a first-year student who said, “what worked in high school isn’t working anymore” (p. 125).

Carroll’s (2002) work entailed studying a randomly selected sample of 46 incoming first-year students in order to assess student learning. Her longitudinal study followed the students from first-year through fourth year at one American university. From the initial group of 46 students who signed up to participate, she ended up with a final sample of twenty students in fourth year. Students left the study for various reasons: some dropped out of university, some left to study at a different university, and some decided that they did not have the time to devote to the study. In the study, Carroll collected samples of all the students’ written work from each semester they attended. In addition, students completed written self-assessments of successful and unsuccessful learning experiences after each semester and sat for a personal interview at the end of each semester.

Carroll (2002) observed that college/university students do not necessarily “learn to write better but they do learn to write differently” (p. xii). They learn how to “produce new, more complicated texts, [and] address challenging topics with greater depth and complexity” (p. xii). As a result, “the basic skills necessary to negotiate complex literacy tasks in college go far beyond the ability to produce grammatically correct, conventional, thesis-driven schoolroom essays” (p. xii). In addition, Carroll found that “what are often called ‘writing assignments’ in college are in fact, complex ‘literacy tasks’ calling for high-level reading, research, and critical analysis” (p. xiv). It was her observation that faculty “may underestimate the difficulty of such

tasks, students' needs for repeated practice, and the ways in which expectations for literacy differs across disciplines, courses, and professors" (p. xiv).

For Miller, Bender, and Schub (2005) the college/university environment sets conditions that affect the ways in which students learn and in turn students shape their own environment. The authors identify four components that characterize and shape college/university environments: a physical component, a social component, an institutional component, and, an ecological climate dimension that is shaped by the other three. The authors hypothesize that the social component, in which there is an interaction between the members of a faculty and students, can impact student expectations. This can ultimately influence students' overall performance inside and outside the classroom. The fact that students' classroom performance can be affected by their interactions with instructors means that it is an important area in educational research. This was one of the reasons that I thought it was important to investigate students' perceptions of their teachers/instructors writing expectations, their availability for help outside of class, and their ability to provide clear directions for assignments.

As far back as 1979, Ramsden found that in college/universities "little systematic thought has been given to the design of academic environments which encourage student learning" (p. 411). He believed that it was important to look at the characteristics of academic contexts and to see the ways in which they differ in expectations for students. He was surprised to discover that researchers had paid little attention to the organization of the academic environment, and that there was no agreement as to what constituted an academic environment. Ramsden proposed using students' perceptions to compare different college environments. In order to measure student perceptions, he developed a 47 item questionnaire which he administered to second-year

students in six university departments: social science, applied science, natural science, two arts departments, and the School of Independent Studies at Lancaster University.

A total of 285 students completed the questionnaire; the average response rate for each department was 66%, and in no department did the response rate fall below 52%. Ramsden (1979) asked questions concerning: instructor relationship with students that included providing help; the commitment shown to improving teaching and to teaching students at a level appropriate to their understanding; the overall workload of the courses; what methods of teaching were used, formal or informal; the perceived relevance of the course to students' careers; the frequency and quality of academic and social relationships between students; the extent to which standards expected of students were clear and unambiguous; and the amount of direction given to students in choosing and organizing academic work.

The results from the course perceptions questionnaire by Ramsden (1979) showed that students "in the different departments see the process of learning and teaching in contrasting ways. Each department appears to possess a distinctive 'atmosphere' or culture in which approaches to learning are realized" (p. 417). In addition, the questionnaire identified student perceptions that the learning environment in several academic departments made different demands on the way students learn. In follow-up interviews, Ramsden quoted one student whose response was representative. He said, "they [course instructors] have gone so far into their own area that they've forgotten that we know nothing, essentially, compared with them" (p. 421).

Ramsden (1979) concluded that "students value an environment in which their teachers make genuine efforts to help them to learn" (p. 425). In addition, he found that the different departments appear to require contrasting approaches to learning from their students. Students

also reported that a supportive learning environment was necessary if they were to become fully engaged in the material. Ramsden identified a positive learning environment as one that takes into account the teaching, course organization, subject areas, and assessment methods.

Becoming familiar with the university writing environment is complicated not only by the variety of discourses in which the students have to write, but also by the background knowledge that students bring with them from secondary school. Krause (2001) said:

the complex task of becoming integrated into the university context is further complicated by the fact that students bring to the learning situation a unique set of experiences and perceptions which, combined with contextual variables, impact on cognitive development and the quality of learning. (p. 149)

In her study of first-year students, Krause (2001) found the first major writing assignment is one of the “more challenging of academic demands at university” (p. 150). Tinto (1996) similarly said that ‘academic difficulty’ was one of the most common reasons why first-year students leave the university, and that one of the most significant sources of difficulty was learning how to write the first assignment. McInnis, James, and Hartley (2000) suggested that academic difficulty often includes what they call “reality shock” (p. 19) which comes from receiving a lower than expected grade. The authors speculate that students who are unable to adjust their expectations to the new forms of assessment and grading may drop out. Krause (2001) also found that the novice writer has “limited understanding of the intended audience, their expectations, and their demands” (p. 150). In addition, “the often alienating environment in which students find themselves imposes further pressures. Students must adjust to new forms of assessment within the context of a much larger class than they may have had at school” (p. 150).

First-year students often feel alienated in their large lecture classes and the tutorials where they only see their tutor once a week. It is for these reasons that first-year students have difficulty with their first major writing assignment (Krause, 2001).

In addition, first-year students are often unprepared for the multiple learning environments that they encounter in university. Lea and Street (2000) discovered that students' academic performance in first-year was dependent, in part, on their ability to adapt to the "range of diverse and often contradictory cultures that students have to learn to negotiate and survive" (p. 101). Surprisingly, the capacity to adjust to these differing environments is sometimes inversely correlated to the success students had experienced in high school. Haggis (2010) found that first-year students are often reluctant to change the way that they approach learning especially if they had been successful in learning in their high school environment. This is a particular challenge when it comes to learning to write an academic essay. If students had received high marks for writing assignments in high school, then they may not see the need to change the strategies that had worked for them. In short, students' inability to recognize the difference between the writing environments of high school and university may adversely affect their capacity to adjust to the writing expectations of the university.

The above information speaks to the theoretical underpinning of the cognitive theory of learning that posits the importance of taking into account students' prior knowledge when teaching new concepts. This study attempted to discover the kinds of writing students were required to complete in high school, the types of writing instruction they received from teachers, and the way in which the instruction facilitated the completion of their written assignments in the new environment of first-year university.

First-Year Writing Instruction

In the absence of a universal definition of what instructors mean when they discuss college/university writing (Alsup & Bernard-Donals, 2002; Sullivan, 2006), it becomes difficult to examine what the expectations are for first-year writing instruction. If a decision can be made regarding quality of student writing, then a definition of what instructors expect of college/university students should be available. In fact, Sullivan (2006), found that there is no such definition, and perhaps more troubling, instructors do not have a clear definition of what constitutes college/university level writing.

Tinberg (2010) also discusses the difficulty of defining what exactly is meant by the term ‘academic writing’. He says that “academic writing varies considerably depending on the course, or major. Assignments [that students are expected to write] vary dramatically, depending on genre, purpose, and intended audience” (p. 170). However, Tinberg does advocate the following skills as necessary in academic writing from his own experience in the classroom: using research in a purposeful way that relies on original sources; employing conventional citation format; composing drafts; showing evidence of critical reading; and creating a realistic reader or audience.

When discussing what is meant by college-level writing, McCormick (2006) focuses on the carefully researched essay that is typical of first-year assignments. She says, “research [writing] is often the most challenging for students, and I believe it is the most under-taught type of writing by teachers” (p. 199). McCormick stresses the need for students to learn process writing in a collaborative classroom setting. She believes that, only by being explicitly taught these skills, will first-year students improve their writing. In addition, she says

All of these skills are essential for college-level writing, but they are often not explicitly taught stage by stage to students when they are engaged in writing research papers. If students are expected to possess skills that they are often not taught, they regard themselves as incompetent, as unable to write correctly, as already failures at college-level writing. (p. 200)

McCormick believes that when students are taught to transfer these skills, they will be able to move away from the formulaic writing that typifies most high school students.

Howard (2005) reported “that the very first step to designing an educational experience, in first-year university, is to assess student expectations of both their own capabilities and the challenges or demands that would match those expectations” (p. 31). Howard believed that

the need to discover the student’s beliefs and expectations should be foremost in our minds [instructors of first-year courses] as we design the educational environment and activities that will engage the student and produce the outcomes that are important to us, as well as our students. If students expect certain things to be true, they will operate in a manner consistent with those expectations. (p. 32)

Based on this reasoning, questions for this study were designed, in part, to discover students’ expectations of the kinds of writing they would be required to complete in university. It was important to this study that I acquired an understanding of students’ prior expectations of the university writing environment. If first-year writing courses are to be effective, curriculum design must be informed with an understanding of students’ perceptions of the process. It is only with an understanding of those perceptions that instructors can begin to design writing courses that may lead students from the understanding they had of writing in secondary school to the

understanding they need of academic writing if they are to succeed at university. This research project attempted to discover students' perceptions of the writing environment in high school and their perceptions of the writing environment in first-year university.

For first-year students, "generating ideas and planning take on many different forms as students move into different methods of research and data collection" (Carroll, 2002, p. 74). Carroll (2002) further states that "students usually do not have time to seek peer review and write multiple drafts unless a course is structured to encourage a more extended writing process for challenging writing tasks. In addition, editing is often last minute and frequently haphazard" (Carroll, 2002, p. 74). However, as students progress through their years at university, they come to understand that more difficult writing projects require more sophisticated strategies for gathering information, planning, organizing, and meeting the expectations of readers.

Historically, essays have been the traditional method of evaluating students' understanding of their subject area in university courses (McCune, 2004). McCune (2004) states that:

writing essays ideally requires students to engage actively with material, to examine ideas in depth, to integrate and critically evaluate what they read, and to state their understanding further . . . learning to write essays for a particular discipline can also be seen as a way in which students gain access to the academic discourse of that discipline. (p. 257)

McCune's (2004) study involved the recruitment of first-year psychology students from a Scottish university, to participate in interviews about their learning. Students were interviewed about their writing three times over the course of the term: once before any assessment had been

started, again after their first essay was finished, then finally after their third essay. In addition, the three writing tutors who marked the essays were interviewed to gain their perspectives. As well, students were given essay-writing sheets to record their observations and these were collected along with copies of their essays. In the interviews, students were prompted to talk about how they went about writing their essays and to explain the reasons behind their ways of working. Students were also asked to discuss the help and feedback they had received for their essays and were asked to describe any changes in their essay writing. McCune found that students talked about three key components: “the role of evidence in their essays, the structures of their essays, and the conclusion of their essays” (p. 260).

McCune (2004) concluded that the students, in her study, approached essay writing as “an ordered discussion of relevant material, the students’ own thoughts about the topic were not central to their essay writing and they did not focus on establishing meaning” (p. 258). For these students, the essay was comprised of a number of discrete parts that seemed to bear little relation to the other parts. For other students, their own interpretations were paramount in the essay. She observed that these students

evolved a coherent view on the topic from their reading, which determined their use of evidence and the organization of their essay. They were focused on making meaning, and developing an individual view of the topic based on a firm empirical foundation. (p. 258)

In addition, the simple dispensing of writing advice does not seem to make a difference in the way that students write. She hypothesized that “one reason why students may remain wedded to inappropriate conceptions is that their existing conceptions influence their interpretation of any

advice they are given” (p. 258). In addition, the misinterpretations students bring to the essay writing process may be due to their misinterpretation of assessment criteria, or an overly simplified version of instructor expectations.

In an effort to ground her findings, McCune (2004) cautions that first-year students might not have “full insight into their learning and its development” thus making it problematic to make changes to writing instruction based on students’ perceptions (p. 261). However, she does find that it is important to understand how students perceive their learning environment in order to understand the outcomes of students’ learning. Based on her study, she suggested that first-year students find it difficult to understand the feedback that they receive from their instructors or tutors, despite the fact that the advice was based on sound writing pedagogy. The students in McCune’s study reported that the handouts were not helpful nor was the feedback from the writing tutors. She speculated that the problem students were having with feedback might have been with the discipline-specific discourse. Instructors and tutors have worked within their respective academic discipline for years and are proficient in the language, thereby making it difficult to explain to students what may be said and how to say it (McCune, 2004). In addition, because students reported difficulty adapting to self-directed learning, they may have had difficulty applying the advice they received to their essays. For first-year students who are used to positive reinforcement from their high school classes, it is difficult to develop new writing strategies on the basis of advice that accompanied a lower than expected grade. Students also sometimes struggle to understand that the writing of an academic essay is difficult even for experienced writers and that a good essay requires a great deal of revising. McCune (2004) suggested that one of the factors contributing to students’ lack of success derives from the nature of their learning experiences prior to university. This is one of the reasons I chose to interview

the same students as they moved from high school to first-year university because the method provided me with the opportunity to record students' perceptions of the two environments and of the skills they brought from one to the other.

American Perspective

First-year composition classes in the United States owe their origin to Harvard University, which first implemented mandatory composition classes in 1874. These classes were formed to deal with students' poor writing skills and were originally intended to be offered only as a "stop-gap" measure (Brooks, 2006). Brooks (2006) explains that composition classes did not go away. Instead, composition classes became a required course in almost every first-year students' program in almost every higher education institution in the United States. This came about due to faculties' beliefs that a first-year composition course was a necessity for every student. Brooks (2006) notes that first-year composition has become a part of the culture of American society and is supported by both those within higher education institutions and those outside the institutions.

Courses in first-year composition typically concentrate "solely or primarily on problems of oral and written composition" (Brooks, 2006, p. 98). Brooks (2006) further stated that "composition as a conception of writing . . . denotes a specific first-year course in American higher education and connotes practicality, utility, and mechanical correctness" (p. 98). First-year composition courses were deemed necessary for college students, due to the difficulties in writing exhibited by students on their entrance exam. University faculty operated with the view that no "freshman class had ever been able to write in the manner thought appropriate for college work and that additional writing instruction had always been deemed necessary for college

students” (Berlin, 1987, p. 24). Despite university faculty trying to shift the responsibility for teaching writing to high schools, Berlin (1987) said, “no group of entering students . . . has ever been able to manage the rhetorical tasks required in college without the college providing instruction in writing” (p. 25).

Berlin (1987) further stated that: “writing instruction is essential for college students” (p. 3) and that:

as beginning students [first-year students] encounter an overwhelming array of new ideas and new ways of thinking, the rhetorical training they bring with them inevitably proves – regardless of their intelligence or training – unequal to the task of dealing with their new intellectual experiences. (p. 3)

Berlin observed that it is for this reason that freshman composition courses have continued to be required by almost every first-year student.

Canadian Perspective

In contrast to the American tradition of compulsory first-year composition courses, Canadian universities do not have a history of offering courses that “concentrated solely or primarily on problems of oral and written composition” (Brooks, 2006, p. 98). Brooks (2006) contends that Canadian scholars did not embrace first-year composition courses, in part, because of the core course focus on “mechanical superficiality.” In addition, in Canada, prior to World War II, first-year English courses had a literary focus and writing instruction was largely confined to instruction for writing about literature (Brooks, 2006). Brooks (2006) attributes this

to the influence on Canadian universities from Britain and the desire to form a Canadian curriculum independent of the influence from the United States.

Nonetheless, Graves and Graves (2006) found that there was a wide variety of writing courses, programs, and degrees offered at Canadian universities. The authors say that “it seems that almost any approach to teaching writing has been or currently is being taught somewhere in Canada” (p. 1). Unlike the practice of American universities, writing courses offered in most Canadian universities focus more on academic writing than on composition. Composition classes in the United States typically focus on the discrete elements of writing, including more mechanical features like grammar, spelling, and sentence structure, whereas academic writing programs in Canada focus on writing for meaning and rhetorical strategies. Another difference between the two traditions is that the writing courses at Canadian universities “resulted from the specific and local conditions of the university and the students that the university seeks to educate” (p. 1). Johnson (2006) said that, unlike American universities and colleges, Canadian universities

have never embraced the curricular concept of the “Comp” [composition] class per se; and, with remarkable hegemony has persisted into the present decade in offering introductory English courses founded on a synthesis of composition instruction and training in critical analysis - a synthesis which was the distinctive legacy of nineteenth-century Canadian adaptation of British-style belletristic rhetoric. (p. 55)

In many Canadian universities, however, writing has begun to emerge as an interdisciplinary concern that extends throughout the institution, rather than being segregated in a single discipline such as an English Department (Graves & Graves, 2006). As a result, independent writing programs, often housed in learning assistance centres, have developed at

many universities to assist first-year students in learning to write an academic essay. These programs generally operate outside specific courses and are not usually affiliated with any faculty or discipline. These came about in part because of the pressure from students and faculty for improved writing skills. However, universities in Canada often find that English departments are reluctant to engage in the “teaching of writing, especially academic writing that might evolve into service teaching for other departments and colleges” (Graves & Graves, 2006, p. 8). English departments seem reluctant to shift the focus of first-year courses from the traditional approach of critical thinking and analysis of great works of literature, to a more practical-based English education “which they have associated with the teaching of writing outside the service of interpreting literature” (p. 9). This has left the teaching of writing up to other disciplines, including the writing centre approach.

In a research report entitled *First-year students' undergraduate experience at Canadian Universities* (2011), 88% of University of Manitoba students self-reported feeling confident that they were able to meet the academic demands of first-year university. In addition, 89% felt that they were performing adequately in written assignments. It is difficult to determine what ‘performing adequately’ meant to these students since there were no definitions given on the survey. However, it is still interesting to note that the perceptions’ of these first-year students indicates that they are fairly confident of their academic abilities coming in to university, including their writing ability. It would have been interesting to have followed these same students from the time they wrote the survey (at the beginning of the term) to the end of the term to determine whether their confidence remained strong when they were immersed in the new writing environment of first-year university.

One of the problems that students have when they enter the university writing environment is in determining the different expectations of individual instructors in the different subject areas (Beaufort, 2007). The fact that students can often satisfy their university writing requirements by taking courses in which there are writing assignments but no writing instruction is also problematic. It was, therefore, important to investigate the way the students' perceived writing instruction in a variety of courses in which there was a significant writing component.

Transition from the High School Writing Environment to the University/College Writing Environment

Making the transition from high school to first-year university is problematic for many students because of the difference in learning environment (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002). Learning how to cope with, and navigate through, all the new personal and academic demands can make the transitional year a time of great personal stress for first-year students (Brady & Allingham, 2007; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Tinto, 1996). There has been a great deal of research on some of the problems that first-year students face during their initial year at university (Beaufort, 2007; Bozick & Deluca, 2005; Carroll, 2002; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan & Majeski, 2002; Parker, Hogan, Estabrook, Oke & Wood, 2006; Tinto, 1996). The following discussion will outline some of these problems identified by the above researchers.

Students moving from high school to first-year university are in a transitional stage, and their writing reflects this transition. Russell and Foster (2002) refer to these students as

between worlds, and their writing reflects this transition. Generally students are leaving a more nurturing environment in secondary school and entering an environment of greater responsibility and greater personal challenge. In most systems students must reorient themselves to new institutional expectations, the challenge of disciplinary discourse, and new structures of learning and writing . . . in terms of writing development, students entering higher education are moving out of the relative comfort of writing for teacher, examiners, and classmates, where the conversations are limited to the world of education: the classroom, the examination. (p. 10)

Transitional challenges are often compounded by the differences between the high school and university learning environments. Krause (2001) reported that students who dropped out of university in their first term contrasted the “daunting university environment with the ‘security’ of [high] school, which was associated with the support of friends and the accessibility of teachers” (Krause, p. 154). Krause further discovered that “one of the transition experiences that students found particularly difficult involved adjusting their academic expectations and coming to terms with the standard of work required of them in their first academic essay” (p. 156).

In fact, Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordstrom (2009) found that many first-year students struggled when making the transition from high school writing to university writing, despite having achieved success as high school writers. It may be that the writing that is expected from students in high school is different than the kinds of writing expected of students once they enter university. In university, faculty have different expectations regarding structure and argument than are usually found in high school (Freedman & Pringle, 1980). According to Beaufort (2007), students are not always motivated to examine, or modify, their writing

practices. For many first-year students, “the primary purpose for writing in a compulsory writing course is completing the tasks necessary to get the needed grades, the credits toward graduation” (Beaufort, 2007, p. 38). Some students see these courses as “writing to produce writing” (Dias, 2000), rather than opportunities to use writing to engage with the subject matter in a more in-depth way.

The problems that students must learn to cope with during the transition year can be broken down into two categories: personal and academic. Personal problems relate to levels of independence and new-found freedom, while academic problems can be characterized by the new learning demands placed on students by their first-year instructors. First-year students in transition are often surprised to learn that no one monitors their attendance in class, no one checks their homework, and there are few, if any, reminders when assignments are due. In addition, there are fewer assignments in university so each assignment is worth more and counts for a larger portion of the overall course mark than might have been the case in high school. High school students, by contrast, operate in an environment of some dependency where the rules and regulations of attendance, assignments, parental involvement, teacher monitoring, and feeling of security are regular occurrences. Many students coming to university have trouble entering an environment in which they feel that no one cares what happens to them.

In post-secondary institutions, there is no set curriculum for writing instruction and the same classes within a discipline will often have different goals and outcomes (Hansen, 2006). In addition, in making the transition from high school writing to first-year university or college writing, students also need to learn how to write different forms of essays than they wrote in high school (Carroll, 2002). Instead of the narratives and expository prose that students often wrote in

high school (Applebee, 1981), first-year students are now required to write academic essays that require critical analysis papers that are longer and more complex than what they had to write in high school (Carroll, 2002).

More importantly, perhaps, every time students enter a new discipline, they become ‘novice’ writers again because each discipline is subject to its own rules (Downs & Wardle, 2007). The differences “encompass not only subject matter, but different ways of thinking, different social purposes, and values in the discourse communities, different genres, different kinds of rhetorical issues, and even, different writing processes between disciplines” (Beaufort, 2007, p. 140). Beaufort goes on to say that in order for writers to be successful in different genres and discourse communities, they need not only to learn the appropriate writing strategies for each discipline, but also to understand the difference and learn the methods to write in each discipline. Applebee (1981) also found that “language is used differently in the various academic disciplines: vocabularies are specialized, forms of argument and organization are conventionalized, and the typical modes of discourse vary” (p. 100). In addition, first-year students taking introductory courses could encounter as many as eight to ten different discourses.

Another concern for first-year students is the level of independence with which instructors expect students to operate (Kuh, Gonyea, & Williams, 2005). In order to do so, students need to understand the expectations that instructors have of them. Often, those expectations are not explicit (Russell & Foster, 2002). The result is that students entering first-year courses often bring with them their habits of writing from high school, and they “experience the shock of difference, and often failure” (Russell & Foster, 2002, p. 11). First-year students are expected to make decisions that they may never have had to make before. They need to learn

to meet new people, get along with roommates, take care of banking, follow a budget, shop for food, do laundry, get themselves to class on time, be up to date on their coursework, and manage their time. While they may, at first, enjoy the freedom to make their own decisions, students soon learn that it is easy to get behind in their coursework if no one is monitoring them. In addition, many students are living away from home for the first time and miss their families and friends.

Miller, Bender, and Schub (2005) found that “high school teachers typically teach students to use daily planners or agendas to plot out future assignments” (p. 15). The authors observed that in high school, teachers constantly remind students when assignments are due. In contrast, college/university instructors “distribute a syllabus that typically expects the students to determine what needs to be done . . . and to decide for themselves when to do it” (p. 15). A problem arises because the expectations between the student and institution are not clearly articulated for either the student or the college/university. Miller, Bender, and Schub further observed that “entering students [have certain] expectations about learning conditions, course requirements, and the level of effort (participation) to be expended . . . and these important relationships are not always agreed upon” (p. 26). In addition, the “incongruence between the expectations of the first-year student and the reality of their actual experiences requires an adjustment [on the part of the student]” (p. 28).

Miller, Bender, and Schub (2005) reported that “if the student expects to be able to write well, based on high school success, and college [university] writing assignments receive failing grades, there is a mismatch” (p. 29). In addition, the authors found that high schools require little writing, and often students are able to complete assignments the night before they are due.

In contrast, college/university courses require written essays on topics that need to be researched, thus necessitating a greater investment of time. The authors also indicate that it is important for first-year students to “get with the program quickly” and make the required adjustments to college/university if they are to be successful. They believe that if students’ expectations and their realities match, then it is easier for students to make the transition from high school to first-year university. Miller, Bender, and Schub also stress the need for students to be willing to change their expectations to match their new learning environment.

Bandura’s (1982) social cognitive theory explains that the way in which individuals interpret the results of their performance affects and alters both their self-belief and their ability to handle new situations. He hypothesized that people are more willing to engage in tasks in which they feel confident and more likely to avoid those in which they do not. Bandura also determined that self-efficacy beliefs determine the degree of effort individuals are willing to invest in an activity. It also has an effect on the length of time they will persevere if they run into difficulties. Individuals with a low sense of self-efficacy believe that situations are worse than they are. By contrast, individuals who have a high sense of self-efficacy are more likely to approach difficult tasks with confidence in their abilities. Because the type of writing the students in this study were expected to complete in university was perceived by the students to be different than the type of writing they had completed in high school, it was useful to investigate their respective senses of self-efficacy as writers.

The change in the writing environment from high school to university seems to be an important aspect of the transition year experience. Lea and Street (1998) found that a “student’s personal identity . . . may be challenged by the forms of writing required in different disciplines”

(p. 159). First-year students often seem to subscribe to the belief that “the academy [university] is a relatively homogeneous culture, whose norms and practices have simply to be learnt to provide access to the whole institution” (p. 159). The multiplicity of discourses in the first-year writing environment challenges that belief. In first-year university, Lea and Street found that:

from a student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting and to handle social meanings and identities that each evoke. (p. 159)

Some of the struggles identified by the students Lea and Street (1998) interviewed were as follows: (1) students found that different disciplines and/or faculties have different expectations; (2) students moved from subject to subject without recognizing the changes in expectations or without a strategy for adjusting to those changes; (3) students found that what seemed to be an appropriate piece of writing in one field was often found to be quite inappropriate for another; (4) students reported that guidelines from departments did not help very much; (5) students had difficulty adapting general advice about writing techniques and skills to writing particular texts in a particular context. It was further discovered that “student perceptions were influenced by their own experiences of writing within and outside higher education” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 164). The students found that there were a great number of differences in the interpretations and understanding of what constituted good writing within, and across, courses, subjects, and disciplines.

Alsup and Bernard-Donals (2002) argued that there is no such thing as a seamless transition from high school to first-year university, and that there should not be. Students are at

different points in their lives between high school and first-year university and their writing reflects that. Students are introduced to academic writing in first-year university and are taught that that form is necessary to inquiry. They are not usually required to do creative writing in university, not because university instructors do not value creative writing, but because there is an understanding that students will spend the majority of their working lives writing more non-fiction pieces. High school students, in contrast, are not limited by the argumentative essay, and write in a variety of genres such as stories, poems, and plays. The authors argue, in fact, that high school students should not just be taught how to write for university/college. They suggest that there is nothing wrong with students experimenting with different genres in high school. The greater problem arises when high school teachers allow students to write with few demands or expectations. High school teachers can make creative writing rigorous if they engage their students in thinking about their assignments. That is not, however, the way they teach writing. It is the authors' contention that, if the writing students are required to complete in first-year university is the same as the writing they were required to do in high school, they will not be challenged intellectually.

Students often have a difficult time adjusting to the types of writing they have to produce in university. They are used to writing in a variety of genres in high school using similar writing strategies in each (Applebee, 1981). This study attempted to discover the way in which students view the writing they are asked to produce in university. I wanted to determine if the students in the study noted a difference in the tasks they were being asked to complete, the support they received, and the writing strategies they used. If they did notice a difference, I wanted to discover what that difference was. I hoped that, in determining students' understanding of the

types of writing they were being asked to produce in different environments, I might gain insight into the problems the students face in making the transition from one environment to the other.

Writing across the Curriculum

Another factor that impacts high school students as they make the transition to first-year writing is the expectation that they will be able to complete assignments in multiple disciplines. The term *writing across curriculum* (WAC) is a broad term used by colleges and universities to refer to content courses in which writing is a medium of the learning process rather being the subject of the course. In most WAC programs, the responsibility for writing development was shifted from first-year composition courses to content courses in which students were expected to acquire writing proficiency through instruction and practice in a variety of content courses and fields (David, Gordon, and Pollard, 1995).

In addition, the understanding of literacy across curriculum differs between high school and university. In secondary settings, literacy across the curriculum began with the Dartmouth Conference in 1966 in England and provided the initial incentive for the development of school language policies (May & Wright, 2007). Many secondary schools, prior to the Dartmouth conference, were “compartmentalized, and constrained within rigid subject boundaries” (May & Wright, 2007, p. 374). This was the nature of secondary schools, in which subjects were clearly separated. This led to the perception among subject-based teachers that literacy was best left to the English department. However, even within English departments, Gunderson (2000) observed that “most secondary teachers do not consider reading and learning to read as issues that are of much importance to them” (p. 692). After the Dartmouth Conference, however, there was an expectation that literacy would be taught across curriculum in secondary schools.

The Dartmouth conference has been credited with changing the way that writing is taught in secondary and post-secondary schools (Kantor, 1987; Smagorinsky, 2002). One of the reasons for the shift was that the conference brought together representatives from various countries (e.g., United Kingdom, United States, Canada) for the first time in an attempt to re-examine the English curriculum in schools and universities (Smagorinsky, 2002). It was the first in a series of conferences in which representatives of English-speaking countries discussed the ways in which writing was being taught. One of the results of the conference was an agreement among the participants to shift writing instruction from learning product to learning process. Smagorinsky (2002) observed that the Dartmouth participants, in particular those from the United Kingdom, argued that the purpose of engagement with the English curriculum was to promote the personal growth of individual learners rather than to have students engage in a teacher-directed emphasis on the texts themselves.

Dixon (1967), in his discussion of the issues that were raised at the conference, articulated the implications for instruction that were suggested at the conference: (1) teachers would no longer be the sole authority for what was happening in classrooms. Instead working on a developmental approach, pupils would learn to take on their own tasks within a framework of choice that the teacher introduced and helped them develop; and, (2) classrooms would foster collaborative learning among students. The conversation also centred on the curriculum where the “body of knowledge in a syllabus or curriculum guide represents our hopes of what pupils will discover and build as discussion arises from day to day, not a package to be handed over” (p. 81). It was recommended that no pupil “should ever be given an assignment which does not, at that time in the class, [make the student] feel that it was worth doing” (p. 78). The implication of looking at the curriculum as something that can be adapted based on students’ needs is one that

is important if teachers are to foster a dialogue of language in the classroom where all members are participants in learning.

Smagorinsky (2002) reported that the participants at the Dartmouth conference suggested that writing should take on a more exploratory character rather than always following formal conventions. Writing was to be taught as a process of discovery rather than simply reporting correct or approved information. The Dartmouth Conference also led to the recommendation that students should also learn subject content through writing (Kantor, 1987). This, in turn, became the theoretical underpinning for courses known as Writing Across Curriculum (WAC) courses in which instructors assigned writing as a way for students to engage with the material in a more in-depth fashion.

Knodt (2006) found that WAC programs were sometimes housed in English departments and sometimes in campus-wide programs. He explained the assumptions underlying the WAC programs are that

students need to learn to write in many college disciplines and that many (or all) members of the faculty need to be involved in creating writing opportunities for students. Students in such programs write reports, observations of experiments, summaries of readings, in addition to essays. Readings are often in many disciplines . . . this change might further fragment the goals of the course [first-year composition] because now faculty from many disciplines with presumably even more varied notions of what college-level writing entails would be teaching the subject. (p. 150)

Knodt (2006) reported that, with each discipline teaching a different approach to writing, students who are studying in a number of different disciplines might be obliged to approach writing assignments for each in quite different ways.

Comparisons between the Two Writing Environments

Literacy across the curriculum seems to be more problematic in the university environment than in the high school environment. An essential difference between first-year university and secondary school is that writing in secondary schools does not, to the same degree, differentiate between domains because the university is not a single writing environment (Hansen, 2002). First-year students move from class to class, and from discipline to discipline, thus making it difficult to master the different protocols in each class (Hansen, 2002). In addition, many first-year composition teachers are unfamiliar with the various discourses in other disciplines and so they are unable to teach the “specialized discourses used to mediate other activities within disciplinary systems across the university” (Downs & Wardle, 2007, p. 556). This difference in the writing environment has an impact on the ability of instructors to provide explicit instruction in writing strategies.

When faculty from different disciplines were interviewed by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) they expressed the view that ‘good writing was good writing’. However, upon closer examination and through interviews, the researchers discovered that “what was deemed good writing in one discipline was not good writing in another discipline” (p. 83). If instructors wanted their students to be successful in their courses, they needed to share with them what was expected in that discipline in terms of writing. Some instructors wanted a thesis statement in the introduction, while other instructors saw that as “giving away the conclusion before they had

presented reasoned evidence in support of their argument” (p. 84). These differences in discourse conventions create a problem for students because the same terms (audiences, thesis, documentation style, sources, organization, grammar, and mechanics) are used from “course to course, discipline to discipline” (p.87), but the terms have their own unique definitions dependent on the discipline in which they are being used (discipline-specific criteria). This can be very confusing for the novice writer who understandably thinks that ‘evidence’ in one discipline is ‘evidence’ in another discipline (p. 87). It is this “‘insider’ talk which covers a wide range of inferred connotations that leads to confusion among first-year writers, and makes teaching writing across the disciplines problematic” (p. 88).

General Writing Expectations

An important difference between high school and first-year university is the writing environments in which first-year students find themselves. In secondary schools, the curriculum guides the teacher in planning writing activities and the activities are more or less compatible with each other, even across the disciplines. Applebee (1981) reported that “broad discourse purposes or uses of language are common in the various high school subjects” (p. 150) but that the same commonality is not found in first-year university. In post-secondary institutions, there is no set curriculum and the same classes within a discipline will often have different goals and outcomes (Hansen, 2006). Writing instruction is left to the individual content area instructor. Bloom (2006) said that for many American colleges and universities, instructors are content to settle for student writing that is of a B level. She calls this “good enough writing” (p. 71). In addition, there is no shared foundation among disciplines that could be used to begin teaching

first-year students. An essential difference between first-year and secondary school is that writing in secondary schools does not differentiate between domains to the same degree.

The differences between the writing situations in high school and those in university or college are significant enough that preparation for one may not result in preparation for the other. High school students “in general are accustomed to writing reports (recall or summary of information in source texts) or advocacy (opinion) essays” (Beaufort, 2007, p. 25). Beaufort (2007) further suggests that, as high school students make the transition to academic writing in universities, they often have trouble developing the more analytical writing style that is required. Beaufort came to this conclusion after conducting a case study with an undergraduate student from a major private university in the United States. Data were collected in the student’s first-year, junior year, senior year, and then for two years after he had graduated. Data collection involved: personal interviews, writing samples from various courses, evaluator’s comments on the papers, and observations of the student’s first-year writing course. In addition, data were collected through personal interviews with the student’s first year writing instructor. Beaufort was able to form a picture of what college/university students learn as they progress through different courses, in different disciplines, and in different faculties. She came to the conclusion that students will not “automatically bridge, or bring forward, appropriate writing strategies and knowledge to new writing situations unless they have an understanding of both the need to do so and a method for doing so” (p. 177).

Another difference between adolescents and first-year students is that writing in universities and colleges is often produced under tight time constraints (Carroll, 2002). Carroll (2002) found that most student writing is completed close to the due date that the professors have

set as the deadline; often only completed a day or two before, or even the night before.

According to Carroll, this does not allow first-year students to concentrate on strategy or writing process. High schools students do not operate under the same time deadlines as first-year students and their writing assignments are shorter than those that are expected at the university level (Applebee, 1981).

Alsup and Bernard-Donals (2002) found in their first-year university writing course in a college in the United States, that “they had thirty-eight students who were ‘prepared’ as writers in high school and by the compulsory first-year writing course, but who were put profoundly ill at ease when asked to wrestle with difficult questions and take positions on controversial issues” (p. 116). The authors wondered if first-year students have problems because of the “sorts of things [that] are not learned in high school, or maybe [the] sorts of things [that] are learned there that are made more complicated once students get to college” (p. 118).

From his experience teaching both high school students and first-year students, Kittle (2006) outlined two factors that he believes affect the transition of writers from high school to college/university in their writing classes:

First, is that the circumstances and contexts of high school and college writing classes are very different, and those circumstances and contexts strongly impact pedagogy. Second, the avenues of communication between high school and college teachers of writing are not nearly as open as they should be. The effect of these two factors is widely differing sets of expectations among students, high school faculty, and college writing teachers. (p. 140)

This stems in part from the view of high school and university instructors that writing is a skill that students should have learned in elementary school and that, if students are to be taught to write at university at all, teaching students how to write is the domain of the English department. Russell and Foster (2002) believe that “writing development [has to become] a more conscious part of teaching and learning, while at the same time recognizing and valuing the varied and specialized nature of writing in both secondary and higher education” (p. 30). The authors go on to say that

new articulations of writing development must take into account the profound mismatch in expectations of teachers in secondary and higher education. The goals of the two are often different, and this may well be necessary and right, given the responsibility of higher education to select and prepare people for specialized work and greater responsibilities as citizens. But if teachers and examiners and policy makers on either side of the secondary/higher education divide do not talk to each other, directly and/or indirectly, about student writing and writing development, then the mismatch will continue, and may grow as specialization in higher education increases. (p. 29)

Lunsford (2006) takes a completely different stance from some of the other commentators quoted in this literature review. He contends that high school students should not be expected to come to college/university already versed in the language of college writers. He argues that the place for students to acquire an understanding of university level writing is in university. In addition, he holds that university level writing should be understood to include a broader definition. He suggests that

by college-level writing we may refer not to products they [students] are capable of producing when they come to us, but rather to the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they bring to college, assets that will allow them to develop their abilities to produce the types of writing we value in our institution. (p. 179)

Lunsford (2006) speaks to the theoretical underpinning of this research in stressing the importance for university instructors to understand the prior knowledge that students bring with them from high school. It may be more effective for instructors to build upon the knowledge structures the students already possess rather than attempting to introduce new structures for the same concepts. This was one of the reasons I felt it was important to gain an understanding of the writing knowledge students bring from high school and the way in which those perceptions might influence their views while learning to write in first-year university.

Instructor Expectations

One of the principle differences between the writing environment in high school and first-year university is instructor expectations. Davies (2006) said after “having taught high school English for thirty-one years [I realize] that there is no guarantee that students who do well in high school composition will automatically do well in college [university] composition” (p. 31). One of her students told her, “Well, my first two papers were pretty bad, but my professor just expected something different, and when I learned what he wanted, I started to do better” (p. 31). In addition, Davis found that “the expectations vary greatly between colleges [universities] and even among professors in the same college [university]” (p. 32). She further stated that differing instructor expectations puts high school teachers at a disadvantage because they do not know the sort of things each college professor will want in terms of writing skill.

Thompson and Gallagher (2010) discovered that students face many challenges when they begin university and that these challenges are compounded by the fact that

students who learned to do well in their high school English classes . . . suddenly find themselves facing unknown and often unpublished criteria; they don't know what an A paper looks like, and they might have a professor who won't, or can't, provide a clear description the way their high school teachers did. These students, who learned to play the high school game by following the high school rules, will find themselves playing a completely different game in college, where the rules may change from professor to professor. The first-year of college isn't just another grade level – it's a whole new culture. (p. 26)

In addition, the authors found that what earns a passing grade for one professor might earn a failing grade from another professor. Thompson and Gallagher (2010) observed that, in high school, students are aware of the things the teachers are looking for in terms of writing, because teachers are bound to follow standards set by their school district, whereas “in college, students must figure out for themselves what counts as acceptable performance” (p. 28).

Blau (2010) found that college and university professors expect their undergraduate students to enter into a discourse community and produce the type of scholarly paper that experts in the field produce for scholarly journals. The problem, as Blau sees it, is that students are expected to produce these kinds of papers without ever having read one, thus

rendering the act of writing an artificial kind of composing, guided by formula and outlines and formal requirements designed to ensure that students' papers will at least

appear to observe the formal conventions of published work in a particular discourse community. (p. 29)

Blau suggested that such expectations are unrealistic because experts who produce scholarly papers are themselves experts in their field of discourse. Students are not experts in the field. In fact Blau argued that they do not know enough about the discipline to be able to comment on it. They do not speak the same language, and they are unfamiliar with the history of the discourse. Blau observed that “most students especially in lower-level courses don’t expect or aspire to ever become members of the discipline communities into which they are introduced” (p. 30). Expecting first-year students to be able to write scholarly papers in the various discourses may be an unrealistic expectation for many students.

Harris (2010) went further in her assessment of the sorts of things students need to know in order to turn out assignments that will meet the requirements of academic writing. She stressed the need for students to be able to understand the assignments and to figure out what their instructors want them to do. She calls this “reading the assignment” (p. 183). Harris further argues that, without the ability to critically read the assignment, students are left wondering what to do. She explains those students often read assignments and interpret them based on their previous experiences with writing assignments. In high school, teacher expectations may not be as high on any particular assignment because it is only one of many assignments. In first-year studies, there tend to be fewer assignments and written work is held to a higher standard. Instructors judge not only the quality of ideas, but also the presentation of those ideas. In addition, grammar, spelling, and organization are also judged at a higher standard (Montana State University, 2010; Mullendore & Hatch, 2000).

In high school, students are often asked to reproduce what their textbooks tell them about events, so called “information retrieval”, while in first-year university, students have to be more active in learning and understanding disciplinary fields of study (i.e., transforming knowledge) made up of many different events and viewpoints about which they are expected to make judgments (Russell & Foster, 2002). Russell and Foster (2002) reported that

Students in transition between [high school] and university can’t yet fully negotiate the various imperatives at play: voices warning against plagiarism, voices of personal experience and resistance, voices of textbook authority, and voices of competing theories in the discipline. Their only resort seems to be a hollow imitation of the voices in academic texts. (p. 13)

The difficulties of making the transition stem, largely, from the change to a different way of understanding writing. Russell and Foster discovered that first-year students often fall into “knowledge telling” strategies (see Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) and are unable to synthesize sources in the way that their professors expect. This is, in part, due to university instructors who “often do not typically view themselves as having direct responsibility for helping students to improve their writing about the subject matter of the courses they take” (Russell & Foster, 2002, p. 23). Applebee (1984) also found that instructors in higher education have, as their focus, the reading and criticism of the text, with little time, if any, spent teaching students how to write.

Acker and Halasek (2008) reported on a study that paired Ohio State University and two area high schools that send numerous students to the university. The study involved an e-portfolio project. This was a program through which high school and university instructors conducted joint research that sought to address K-16 language arts alignment and student success

in university. The collaborators invited student authors to write essays and receive feedback from both university and high school writing faculty with an e-portfolio system. The study was based on the premise that “feedback from both sides of the transition would help students better understand differences and similarities of what constitutes good writing in high school and the university” (p. 7).

The findings of the study indicated that “high school and college writing teachers do not so much look for or respond to different elements of writing as much as they emphasize different elements” (Acker & Halasek, 2008, p. 7). The high school teachers’ responses were based on some rudimentary principles such as “all good writing should have a thesis, clearly stated in the introduction. Subsequent paragraphs should each present a point that supports this thesis and the essay should end with a logical conclusion. Writing throughout the essay should be clear, concise, and correct” (p. 7). In contrast, the college teachers’ responses were informed by an understanding of

good writing as having features that vary from one situation to another. These variations depend, for example, on the subject of the writing, its purpose, and the reader’s expectations . . . the features of good writing in a literature course will differ greatly from the features of good writing in business or astronomy, and what seems clear to one audience might not be clear to another. (Acker & Halasek, 2008, p. 7)

Sanoff (2006) found that, when asked about students’ overall preparation for college, 65% of high school teachers reported that their students were being prepared for college while 84% of college/university instructors reported that high school graduates were either unprepared or were only somewhat prepared to pursue a college degree. Thirty-six percent of high school

teachers felt that students were very well prepared for college while only fifteen percent of college/university instructors felt that students were well prepared. In fact, when asked about students' abilities:

faculty members [instructors] say that students are inadequate writers . . . In composition, students are usually unaware of what it takes to write even a four-to-five page essay every two or three weeks. [The instructors asserted that] One reason is that they [students] are not asked to write in quantity for high school English class. (Sanoof, 2006, p. 3)

Sanoof (2006) further discovered that most teachers were not aware of the expectations that colleges had for first-year students. He found only 11% of the teachers felt that colleges were very successful in making academic expectations clear to them. This was echoed by college/university instructors who believed that their institutions were not very successful in making academic expectations clear to high school teachers. Sanoof believes that there is definitely a need for better communication between high schools and colleges in terms of writing expectations for students. One professor interviewed by Sanoof said that “colleges need to start listening to high school teachers more than just dictating what they expect from high school students” (p. 5).

Sanoof's (2006) conclusions are based on two national surveys administered in the United States: one survey was sent to instructors in colleges/universities, and the other was sent to high school teachers. The surveys were designed to compare the views of college instructors with those of high school teachers. One of the questions on the survey asked participants to give their opinion of students' writing ability. Sanoof found that there was a substantial discrepancy in

teachers' and instructors' views. While college/university instructors reported that students were not prepared for college/university demands, Sanoof found that high school teachers were far more positive in their estimation of high school students' abilities. He discovered that 44% of college/university instructors thought that students were not well-prepared for college-level writing. By comparison, only 10% of high school teachers thought that students were not well-prepared for college-level writing. In addition, just 6% of college/university instructors viewed students as well-prepared writers, compared to 36% of teachers.

This was where I identified a gap in the existing research. While there exist studies of the writing students do in high school and studies of the writing students do in their transition year there was a lack of research into students' perceptions of the two writing environments as the students progress from one to the other.

Student Perceptions

If instructors are to get a complete picture of the first-year writing experience at university, then it is important to invite students into the discussion, and have them speak about their writing experiences in the different discourse communities. In addition, in order to contextualize the views of writing that students hold once they get to university, it is essential to understand their perceptions of the writing environment they had experienced in high school. The report, *Listening to Students Voices (Education Evolution, 2005)*, suggests that often “students are still being left out of the conversation [about how to improve schools] all together” (p.1). The report found that even when students are asked for their perceptions, their suggestions are often not incorporated. Students are expected to adapt to their traditional learning environment rather than having the learning environment adapt to the needs of the students

(Sizer & Sizer, 1999). This leads to what Groves and Welsh (2010) refer to as a system designed as a “one size fits all” approach to learning.

MacBeath (2001) suggests that “students, together with teachers, and parents can play a much more active, participative, reciprocal role” (p. 90) in the development of classroom conditions. In addition, Groves and Welsh (2010) say that “students’ perceptions related to their learning and school experiences are as valid and important as those of other members of the school community, such as teachers, parents, and administrators” (p. 90). They further state that “the most effective means for attaining reliable and valuable information about students’ views and the factors that influence these views is to ask the students themselves” (p. 90).

Scherff and Piazza (2005) suggest that “student opinions and perceptions can contribute relevant and necessary information concerning the status of writing in the English language arts classroom” (p. 274). The authors surveyed nearly 2,000 high school students in the United States across schools and grade levels to investigate their perceptions of writing instruction and what these perceptions might have for gaining a better understanding of writing instruction. They were particularly concerned with the students’ perceptions of the opportunities to learn to write and to practice writing. In their own classrooms, the authors observed that students had become increasingly product-oriented and had departed from the process approach they were being taught. Scherff and Piazza discovered that most studies have examined writing instruction through classroom observations, teacher-reported data, or analyses of students’ writing, such as the study carried out by Applebee (1981). In addition, the authors learned that “the absence of student experience from current educational discourse limits the insights of educators as well as that of students” (p. 279). Scherff and Piazza (2005) observed that “giving voice to students also

eases the ‘culture of silence’ that exists in schools and classrooms . . . “(p. 279). The authors further concluded that “students can be trusted to give valuable information regarding what occurs at school” (p. 293).

Delaney (2010) reported that “traditionally high school students have not been given many opportunities to offer their insights and comments on education and schooling” (p. 1). He further recommended those teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders in education “should pay attention to what students have to say . . .” (p. 1). The importance of listening to students was corroborated by Soohoo (1993) who voiced his concerns that

somehow educators have forgotten the important connection between teachers and students. We listen to outside experts to inform us, and consequently, we overlook the treasure in our very own backyards: our students. Student perceptions are valuable to our practice because they are authentic sources; they personally experience our classrooms first hand . . . As teachers, we need to find ways to continually seek out these silent voices because they can teach us so much about learning and learners. (p. 389)

The perceptions of students provide an important insight into questions of the degree to which instructional materials and methods are effective and intellectually accessible.

Similarly, students’ perceptions of the university writing environment provide important information regarding the effectiveness of writing courses and the usefulness of the writing supports in the different writing courses. For example, Krause’s study (2001) investigated “students’ perceptions of their social and academic experiences from their first to their final year at university” (p. 147). She interviewed forty-six students about their experiences before, during, and after completion of their first major writing assignment. Krause found that “the most

effective university transition experiences are those which facilitate integration into the university community through positive educational experiences that are responsive to students' needs" (p. 147). In addition she theorized that the "initial academic writing experience is a far-reaching and influential vehicle which contributes to the relative success of the academic integration of first-year students" (p. 147).

Carroll (2002) found that first-year students struggle in understanding the expectations of their professors. In addition, however, Carroll also found that: (1) students need assistance in understanding the assignments and in learning what the guidelines are for performance; (2) students need to be provided with models to study; (3) students need specific feedback on their writing assignments; and, (4) students need opportunities to improve their writing after receiving feedback. Further, Carroll found that first-year students expected more explicit instruction from their instructors since they often did not understand what was expected of them when completing assignments. Carroll (2002) says that the emphasis on academic writing in first-year means that students are not rewarded for writing narratives or personal opinion pieces as they had been in high schools. Instead, students are expected to learn how to write like 'academics', which means that students have "to respond to and incorporate into their own text the work of others, construct an analysis or argument, make assertions and explicitly develop them" (p. 64). She observes that "these complex literacy tasks require students to read challenging texts, locate and interpret relevant sources, apply appropriate knowledge and concepts, and ultimately produce coherent, edited written work" (p. 64).

Students' perceptions of writing assignments are further complicated by their instructors' expectations of those same assignments. In a *Survey of Early Leavers* conducted at the

University of Manitoba (2007), sixty percent of first-year students rated their written communication as good or excellent; only 4% considered that they had poor written communication skills when they enrolled at the university. Only 3% reported that they had enrolled in a remedial course to improve their writing ability. It appears that these students believed themselves to have been adequately prepared for the university writing environment.

In contrast, Carroll (2002), in her investigation of first-year courses discovered that many first-year instructors believe that the problems they saw with their students' essays were the direct result of high school teachers not teaching the basics of writing. They believe that first-year students should have been taught to write in high school. They are under the impression that if only "someone, somewhere could teach students to write once and for all" then students would be able to write "well-crafted, cogently argued, eminently readable essays" (Carroll, 2002, p. 2).

Chapter Overview

This chapter explored the difficulties that many students encounter when they begin first-year university. In an attempt to understand why some students have trouble making the transition from high school to first-year university, studies were analyzed with respect to: teacher and student expectations and the mis-match that can occur between the two the differing writing environments in the various courses that come with distinct vocabularies and distinct expectations and the inherent challenges of academic writing.

I argued that it is critical to recognize the importance of listening to student perceptions of the differences between the high school writing environment and the first-year writing environment. It could be argued that students are in the best position to be able to articulate the

differences between the writing environments because it is the students who are navigating the differing courses and the differing instructor expectations.

If we are to gain a better understanding of the ways in which students make the transition from a high school writing environment to a first-year writing environment we have to listen to the things students say about that transition. We have to be prepared to listen to their perceptions, not only of the different writing environments, but also of their writing assignments and the instructors who teach them. We have to look at how they go about learning how to write an academic essay, what things they find useful to know, and what they think they need to know.

We cannot, however, take for granted that there is only one writing environment at the university. In fact, Beaufort (2007) and Carroll (2002) both discovered that students found it difficult to write in first-year because of the various discourse communities to which they are attempting to become a part of. One of the challenges facing these students was that vocabulary, organization, and purpose is often discourse specific. It is difficult for the students to understand what they were being asked to do in terms of writing because they did not understand the language and structure that is being used in each course (Carroll, 2002). In addition, because language is so course specific, students fail to see the similarities and generally believe that they have to change their style of writing with every course they are taking (McCarthy, 1987). This operates against the students' initial sense that "the academy [university] is a relatively homogeneous culture, whose norms and practices have simply to be learnt to provide access to the whole institution" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159).

This research is timely since the transition from high school to university is increasingly being identified as a difficulty for many students. According to Russell and Foster (2002)

“students’ writing development plays an important – though often unacknowledged – role in the crucial transition from secondary school to university in most national education systems” (p. 1).

In most nations, whether a student can enter and remain in higher education – and thus move into positions of greater responsibility and status in the society – depends in large part on whether she/he has developed her/his writing. (p. 1)

Yet, “there are no firm lessons, much less one best way to develop students’ academic writing” (p. 3). Students often struggle with learning the specific discourses of individual subject areas, and the discipline-specific courses often do not provide any formal university writing instruction.

In order to fully comprehend some of the challenges facing first-year students when they make the transition to university, it is important to listen to them and to take their comments seriously. They are in the best position to speak about their first-year writing environment and, specifically, with their struggles to master the academic essay. The research that has been done in the past on the transition of students from high school to first-year university does not specifically investigate students’ perceptions of the differences in writing environments. This study attempts to rectify that omission by following the same students from Grade 12 through first-year university to listen to their perceptions of the writing environment in first-year university.

Chapter 3

Methods

Introduction

The literature in Chapter Two gives a general overview of the writing difficulties that first-year students may encounter when making the transition from high school to university. The literature on first-year university writing (Beaufort, 2007, Carroll, 2002) discusses students' perceptions of their writing environment in first-year university. They do so, however, using very limited case study approaches. In order to get a more complete picture of the first-year writing experience at university/college, I wanted to invite a greater number of students into the discussion. In order to understand the effect of transition on first-year students' perceptions of the writing process, it was necessary to understand students' perceptions of the writing environment in high school. The focus on student perceptions is intentional. As Groves and Welsh (2010) reported, "increasingly it is recognized [by instructors] that high school students' views about learning and school experiences are important considerations in education" (p. 87). They further concluded that "the study [of high school students] reinforced the idea that students do hold well-articulated views about their own learning and school experience and when given the opportunity, they can and do express their insights and opinions clearly" (p. 87). The findings of Groves and Welsh emerged from a study of fourteen grade 11 students at a high school in Perth, Australia. The students completed a survey and "took part in small focus group discussions that sought to elicit their views, opinions, and insights regarding their own learning and school experiences" (p. 87). Analysis of the data indicated several factors that were seen to

be influential in students' learning and social experiences. These included: students' diverse needs, student voice, relationships, responsibility and control, and teacher qualities.

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to investigate the challenges faced by first-year students as they negotiated the transition from the writing environment of high school to the writing environment of university. The study was designed to collect data both before and after students start university, and then to compare and analyze students' perceptions of the writing environments to see if students perceived a difference between the high school writing environment and the first-year university writing environment. This study was designed to gather information from students' perspectives rather than from instructors' perspectives. Because it was the students who were writing in the different environments, it was their insights that proved most valuable to this study.

Research Questions

The research questions that informed this study were:

1. What are high school students' perceptions of their writing environment?
2. Do students' perceive a difference between the high school and first-year university writing environments?

Design of the Study

In order to gather data on this topic, a mixed method, explanatory design approach was utilized (Creswell, 2005). The explanatory design was chosen for its capacity to reflect research findings in two complementary ways. Quantitative research often translates into the use of statistical analysis to make the connection between what is known and what can be learned through research. Collecting and analyzing data using quantitative strategies requires an understanding of the relationships among variables using either descriptive or inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics are used to draw inferences about populations and to estimate the parameters of those populations (Trochim, 2006). Inferential statistics are based on the descriptive statistics and the assumptions that generalize to the population from a selected sample. With quantitative analysis, it is possible to get visual representations for the data using graphs, plots, charts, and tables. For researchers using quantitative analysis, the conclusions are drawn from logic, evidence, and argument. The interpretation of raw data is guided by the general guidelines presented to evaluate the assertions made and to assess the validity of the instrument. Quantitative analysis also employs protocols to control for, or anticipate, as many threats to validity as is possible.

Qualitative research, in its broadest sense, means any kind of research that does not rely on statistical measures. Creswell (2008) defines qualitative research as

a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or a human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures. Data are typically collected in the participants' setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes. (p. 4)

Researchers who use qualitative methodologies operate from the viewpoint that the perceptions of the participants are valuable in gaining an understanding of the questions investigated.

McMillan (2008) said that “there are multiple realities as different people construct subjective meaning from the same event. As a result much of what is reported in qualitative studies is participants’ perspectives” (p. 271).

In phase one, of this study, the quantitative approach was used to gather a large amount of data from one hundred and forty-four targeted high school students to form a baseline of student perceptions of their high school writing environment. In phase two, three focus groups (9 students) and eleven individual interviews were conducted with high school students, using a qualitative approach, to facilitate an investigation of students’ perceptions in a more in-depth fashion. In phase three, fourteen individual interviews with first-year students, using a qualitative approach, were conducted. The rationale for using a mixed-method approach was that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods were sufficient to provide me with the information I required for the exploration of my topic. As Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick (2006) explain the benefit of the explanatory design is that the quantitative data provide a general understanding of the research questions. The qualitative data are then used to explain the descriptive results by exploring the participants’ views in more depth.

Context of the Study

The research was carried out with students who attended high schools in a western Canadian city. Only those students who self-identified as going on to study at a specific university in Western Canada in September 2011 were selected. The students came from different socio-economic groups and diverse backgrounds.

The respective high schools were chosen because they traditionally have the highest number of their Senior 4 students go on to study at the university compared to other school divisions in the province (University of Manitoba Records, 2009). Because the research required that students' perceptions of the high school writing environment be compared to their perceptions of the university writing environment, and because the second part of the research was being undertaken at the specific university, it was necessary to select high schools in which large numbers of students have historically chosen to attend the chosen university for the study.

Participants of the Study

The participants in the study were one hundred and forty-four Senior 4 (grade 12) high school students who were enrolled in an English Language arts class, at the time of the survey. The participants were purposefully sampled, with only those students who self-identified as intending to study at the specific university in September 2011 being invited to participate. The parents of the targeted students under the age of 18 were contacted through a letter sent home by the classroom teacher. Those students over the age of 18 were given the letter inviting them to participate by the classroom teacher. In addition, parents were asked, by means of the letter of consent, if their child would be willing to be part of a study involving becoming members of a focus group and/or participating in individual interviews two times over the course of six months. In phase 2, twenty high school students agreed to take part in either a focus group or an individual interview. In phase 3, fourteen of the original twenty students were individually interviewed when they were in first-year university.

Research Instrument

In phase one, 144 participants who self-identified as going on to study at a selected university in western Canada in September 2011 completed the writing survey (See Appendix A). The thirty-four item self-report scale was designed to identify nine broad areas associated with a high school writing environment: (1) three items asked for information concerning registration, including in which strand of English Language Arts they were enrolled, how many years they attended the high school, and whether they were in the French Immersion program; (2) four items asked for students' general perceptions about their English language arts class; (3) three statements aimed to discover to whom students turn for help when writing an essay; (4) two statements asked about time management; (5) four statements discussed the types of written feedback students received from their teachers; (6) two statements dealt with the length of writing students do in high school; (7) four statements dealt with students' perceptions of teacher involvement and relevance of assignments; (8) three statements asked about students' perceptions of their competence as writers; and, (9) seven general statements asked for students' perceptions about what they thought writing would be like in first-year university, or how well they thought they would do in writing at the university. For each item, participants were instructed to choose whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. In addition, one question asked students to indicate all the types of writing that they had completed in high school in any kind of class. There were sixteen prompts from which to choose, with students being asked to check as many as applied. (see Appendix A for survey instrument).

The survey took approximately twenty minutes to complete. Information from the surveys was used to gain a better understanding of how students' perceive their writing environment. Once the quantitative data had been collected, qualitative data were collected in an attempt to facilitate a further investigation of students' perceptions in a more in-depth fashion than the one-time surveys allowed. In phase two, twenty high school students were interviewed, either in focus groups or through individual interviews. By following students from high school to first-year university, the research sought to establish a greater understanding of students' awareness of the change in the writing environments to determine if students perceived a difference between the writing environments of high school and those in first-year university.

Some of the questions for the three focus groups and eleven individual interviews were developed prior to the survey and some were developed after the survey. Since the purpose of my study was to discover students' perceptions of their writing environment, I thought it was necessary to ask them questions about how much writing they did in high school, the kinds of writing they completed in their English Language Arts classes, and whether they had any difficulty completing their writing assignments. These questions were developed prior to the survey. Additional questions were developed after the survey in order to obtain more information about student perceptions of the type of assistance they received from their teachers in English Language Arts classes. The questions were open-ended, but were guided by the following:

In High School

- How much writing did you do in your high school English Language Arts classes?

- What kinds of writing did you do in your high school English Language Arts classes?
- Did you have any difficulties completing your writing assignments in English Language Arts? Why or why not?
- Were your English Language Arts teachers' expectations for the assignments made clear to you? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that your English Language Arts teachers gave you enough direction in how to complete your written assignments? Why or why not?
- What kind of help did your English Language Arts teachers provide if you were having difficulty completing your written assignments? Please explain.
- Is there anything that would have made completing your written assignments in English Language Arts easier? Please give examples.

1. In First-Year University (individual interviews)

- How many pages was your first writing assignment?
- How did the first assignment go? Please talk about some of the difficulties that you may have found in completing that first assignment?
- Did you feel that your instructor gave you enough direction in how to complete your written assignment? Why or Why not?
- What kind of help did your instructor provide you if you were having difficulty completing your assignment? Please explain.
- How is the writing you have to do in first-year university different than the writing you had to do in high school?

- Are you having any problems adjusting to writing in first-year university? Why or why not? Please explain.
- Is there anything that would have made completing your written assignments in your writing courses, easier? Please give examples.

Procedures

Phase 1

The data collection procedures were started in January 2011, when a letter was sent by email to the Superintendent of a school division in Western Canada asking for permission to carry out a pilot study of the research instrument at one of the high schools in the division. Once permission had been received from the superintendent, an email letter was sent to the principal of the targeted high school requesting his cooperation in testing the research instrument with four to six of his students. He gave his permission, and six permission forms outlining the parameters of the study were delivered to the school. These letters went home with the students for their parents to read and sign. On February 14th, the quantitative survey was administered in the high school. Four students were present to fill out the survey. When they had completed the survey, they were asked questions about the survey instrument in a focus group format. The students' input was very useful in generating additional questions for the survey, and, accordingly, the survey instrument was amended to reflect their comments.

The fifteen questions that were added to the survey instrument on the basis of student feedback were designed to identify: the amount of writing students are required to complete in their English Language Arts classes; the amount of writing they are required to complete in their other courses that have a writing component to them; the role of their teacher in ensuring students learn how to write in English Language Arts classes; the role of the teacher in ensuring

that they learn how to write in their other courses; how relevant the writing assignments are to their future program of studies (two questions); students' level confidence as writers; their sense of competence as writers (two questions); whether or not students intended to attend a faculty that would require a substantial amount of writing; their level of confidence going to university with their present writing ability (two questions); and, whether students were looking forward to attending university. Once the survey had been amended, the survey instrument was test piloted again. On March 29th, 2011, during a follow-up visit to the high school, the revised survey was administered to twenty Senior 4 (grade 12) students.

The survey was amended once more following the proposal defence of this dissertation, with three more questions added. The additional questions were designed to determine which English Language Arts class in which the students were currently enrolled, the number of years they had been attending their current high school, and whether they were enrolled in a French Immersion program.

For the dissertation, data in phase one, were collected quantitatively, by means of a survey, and in phase two qualitatively, by means of three focus groups and eleven individual interviews. As mentioned, only those students who were intending to study at a specific Western Canadian university in September 2011 were chosen. In addition to the request for students to participate in the first stage of the research, the permission forms asked whether students would be willing to participate in focus groups/individual interviews a second time in November 2011 at the end of their first term in the university.

Once all of the permission forms had been received, appointments were arranged at each of the four schools. During the months of April/May 2011, the targeted students were asked to

complete the short quantitative survey asking them about their experiences with writing during their senior year's classes (grades 10-12). These months were selected because they corresponded with student availability (i.e., after spring break but before final exams). In total, one hundred and forty-four high school students took part in the quantitative survey out of three hundred and five students.

Phase 2 and Phase 3

In the permission letter, students were asked whether they would be willing to participate in focus groups or individual interviews, with the first occurring in April/May 2011, and the second occurring in November 2011 (i.e., during the students' first-year university term) after the students had handed in their first writing assignment. Twenty students agreed to participate in either a focus group or an individual interview on the two occasions. On both occasions, students were questioned about courses they were taking that had a writing component as part of the course requirements. The focus groups/individual interviews took place at a time and place that was convenient to both the interviewer and the focus group/individual interview members. All focus groups/individual interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Each of the participants was given a pseudonym before data was reported. A research assistant was hired to assist in recording the main points of the focus group onto chart paper. This research followed University of Manitoba ethics guidelines for research involving human subjects and was approved by the Education and Nursing Research Ethics Board (see appendix C for ethics approval certificate).

Analysis of Data

Quantitative

Data from the surveys were analyzed quantitatively employing descriptive statistics and frequency distributions (Gliner, Morgan & Leech, 2009; Trochim, 2006). Descriptive statistics allow a researcher to draw inferences about populations and to estimate the parameters of those populations (Trochim, 2006). In addition, the use of descriptive statistics permits some degree of generalization from a selected sample to the population. Quantitative analysis also provides the opportunity to use charts to give a visual representation of the results. The results reported here are drawn from self-reported data and are reported strictly as descriptive percentages. The survey was pilot-tested in February 2011 and was checked for reliability and validity through the use of a focus group conducted with students after they had completed the survey. During the focus group, follow-up questions were posed to the participants to determine the validity of the questions used on the survey. As a result of the pilot study, the survey was altered to include a number of questions the participants felt needed to be asked (see above for a complete list of the kinds of questions added).

When analyzing the quantitative data from the survey questions, SPSS [Statistical Package for the Social Sciences] was used to do the calculations to discover the frequency of responses from the students who filled in the survey. Each question was analyzed using descriptive data and is reported here as percentages of students' responses based on a five point Likert scale.

Qualitative

The first set of qualitative data were gathered using two different formats. While it was the initial intent to gather data using a focus group approach, it soon became apparent that some

students were not comfortable participating in focus groups. Therefore, in the first round of data collection with high school students in May/June 2011, three focus groups (9 students in total) were conducted and eleven individual interviews were conducted. The second round of data gathering, which occurred in November 2011, involved first-year university students. All of the data collection in the second round involved individual interviews (fourteen in total).

In the first round of data collection with the high school students, there were twenty participants. That number dropped to fourteen for the second round of data collection. This attrition can be attributed to two reasons. One student did not choose to attend the selected university and, thus, was dropped from the study. The other five students cited time as a major factor for their inability to participate in the second round of interviews.

In the first round of qualitative data collection, students who were in their final year of high school discussed their perceptions of the high school writing environment. They were prompted to report on their perceptions of their high school English Language Arts classes, their English Language Arts teachers, and any other courses that required them to write papers of some length. The prompts consisted of statements designed to encourage students to discuss (a) the amount of writing they were required to produce in high school; (b) the kinds of writing they did in high school; (c) the kinds (e.g., grammar, content) of direction they received from their English Language Arts teachers; (d) the process of writing they utilized in writing their papers; (e) the level of learner independence; and, (f) the writing they produced for other courses besides English Language Arts.

In the second round of qualitative data collection, students who were in their first-year of university were prompted to discuss their perceptions of the differences between the writing they

had to do in high school and the writing they had to do in first-year university. The prompts consisted of questions designed to encourage students to discuss (a) the length of the assignments they had to complete; (b) the difficulties they may have found in completing their first-year assignments; (c) the kinds of help their instructors provided; (d) the level of preparation they felt they possessed for writing in future university courses; and, (e) the problems they might have been having adjusting to first-year university.

The focus group participants had the opportunity at the end of each focus group to read over the notes made during the session. At that time, they were able to verify the information and make any changes they deemed necessary. All focus group tapes were transcribed by me. The individual interviews were also transcribed and returned to the participants for member-checking (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Before beginning the process of coding for themes, the transcripts were read once to get a broad overview of the data. In conducting the initial read through, certain themes began to emerge. These initial themes were written in the margins of the transcripts. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) suggest, “the core feature of qualitative data analysis is the coding process” (p. 132). The authors define coding as “the process of grouping evidence and labelling ideas so that they reflect increasingly broader perspectives” (p. 132).

Once the codes had been identified from the first focus group, recursive coding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) was used for the remaining transcripts. In this way, codes that had been identified subsequent to the first reading were added to the coding system. When coding was complete, a report was prepared, summarizing the prevalence of codes, discussing similarities and differences in related codes across distinct original sources/contexts, and comparing the relationship between one or more codes.

Once I had coded the data, an independent reader was given the transcripts and was asked to code the data. The independent reader was trained by me in the method of recursive coding. After we each had had an opportunity to read through the transcripts and to identify themes in the data independently, we met to discuss and compare the codes to determine the degree of agreement. The comparison resulted in an inter-rater reliability of ninety-two percent agreement based on the codes that were generated by both my research assistant and me.

Student Demographics

A total of 144 high school students completed the quantitative survey (see appendix 1). Students from each of the three different strands of English Language Arts offered, in a western Canadian high school, were represented on the survey. The strand with the highest percentage of students (46%) was the Literary Focus English Language Arts class, compared to 36% who were in the Comprehensive focus, and 17% who were in the Transactional focus class. It should be noted that the English Language Arts class that was checked off on the survey was the course in which the students were enrolled when the surveys were filled out. Some of the students indicated verbally that they had taken more than one English Language Arts course in grade 11 and grade 12.

The majority of the students (76%) had spent their entire three years of high school in the same school, with very few (15%) students only being at the high school for one year. In addition, only 8% of the students identified themselves as being in the French Immersion program, while 92% were in the English program.

Reliability and Validity

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) describe the way in which researchers determine the reliability and validity of a survey instrument. They suggest that researchers formulate a questionnaire using data from focus groups in a pilot study format to verify validity of the research instrument. The focus group members are then asked to evaluate the clarity of the questions to measure reliability. If necessary, the questions are modified to improve clarity and the resulting questionnaire is used in another pilot study with new participants. In this study, I developed a survey instrument based on the research studies of high school writing environments. The questions were generated from studies by Applebee (1981) and Hillocks (1986) who both independently studied high school writing. Reference to previous studies of high school students was appropriate because that was the focus of this study.

The original pilot study was carried out with four students who had volunteered to take part in the study. They completed the original survey and I then conducted a focus group with the members. We discussed the questions and I asked if there were any other questions that they thought I needed to ask. They suggested another fifteen questions which I outlined at the beginning of this chapter. The survey instrument was adapted to take into account the new questions.

A different focus group consisting of ten students was surveyed using the new survey instrument. The survey content was checked for inter-item reliability between the two focus groups. The distribution of answers from the one hundred and forty-four participants who filled out the survey was consistent among students, and across schools, thus indicating the reliability of the survey instrument. The answers to the questions provided insight into the students' perceptions of their high school writing environment indicating internal validity of the survey

instrument due to its ability to measure what it was designed to measure. External validity was established by employing the survey instrument in four different high schools to ensure a greater breadth of representation of the population.

In addition, the transcripts from the individual interviews were returned to participants for member-checking in an effort to ensure that the transcripts were an accurate reflection of their experiences. Methodological triangulation was employed for validity by utilizing an explanatory design by which quantitative data was verified by the qualitative data. Triangulation using both quantitative and qualitative methods was used to increase the likelihood that the limitations of one method would be compensated for by the other. Data source triangulation was also employed to measure the internal validity of the qualitative data. This was accomplished by comparing the identified themes from each individual participant to the identified themes across all participants.

Reliability of the quantitative survey was established by ensuring that the participants were given the same instructions for completing the survey, that they all received the same amount of time for completion, and that definitions were provided on the survey for any words that might have been problematic. Students were also instructed to ask for clarification of any terms or questions of which they were unsure. This study sought to maintain qualitative reliability through the use of an independent coder who coded the transcripts for themes and met with me to determine whether we had assigned the same codes to the interviews.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of my study was to investigate the challenges faced by first-year students as they negotiated the transition from the writing environment of high school to the writing environment of university. In order to do that, it was important that I had the opportunity to

interview the same students about their perceptions of both the high school writing environment and the first-year university writing environment, and allow them to report on the similarities and differences between the two.

When planning my study, it was important to think about the research questions and to determine the best way to collect data to answer those questions. I wanted to have a large sample group and believed that the use of a survey instrument provided the greatest opportunity to do that. It was also important, however, that I had the opportunity to talk to some of the participants to further explore some of the findings from the quantitative data. The use of an explanatory mixed method design was chosen in an effort to provide a more complete understanding of students' perceptions of their writing environments. The use of only one source of data collection would have been limiting.

Chapter 4

Results and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings or results generated from the study of grade 12 students' perceptions of their writing environment in high school and first-year university using a mixed-method, explanatory design, approach (Creswell, 2008). The following questions provided the framework and purpose of the research:

1. What are high school students' perceptions of their writing environment?
2. Do students' perceive a difference between the high school and first-year university writing environments?

Results

The data were organized into two general categories, with the first consisting of high school students' perceptions of their writing environment and the second consisting of students' perceptions of the differences between the high school and first-year writing environments. The quantitative data and the qualitative data were both broken down according to major themes. In the final analysis, the themes from the quantitative data and qualitative data were collapsed and are discussed together. Under each theme, and subtheme, discussion of the data are organized in the following manner: (1) a review of existing literature; (2) the quantitative survey data for the present study with accompanying pie charts; (3) the qualitative data incorporated with the

quantitative data where applicable; and, (4) an analysis of the data, taking into account both the current literature and the results of the present study.

Table 4.1

Identification of Themes in Phase 1, Phase 2 and Phase 3

Phase 1 & Phase 2	Themes	Sub-themes
Data gathered from:	High School Student's Confidence as Writers	(a) kinds of writing assistance received; (b) level of learner independence in high school
Quantitative Surveys (144 students), and Focus Group and Individual Interviews with High School Students (20 participants)	Writing in High School	(a) the amount of writing required in high school English Language Arts classes; (b) the kinds of writing required in high school English Language Arts classes; (c) writing in high school content area courses; (d) teacher engagement in students' writing in English Language Arts and content area classes; (e) the degree to which writing assignments relate to student advancement as writers in English Language Arts and content area course; (f) students' sense of writing competence relative to marks received in English Language Arts and content area courses.
May/June 2011		

Phase 1 & Phase 2	Themes Written Feedback Received from Instructors Expectations of Writing in First-Year University	Sub-Themes (a) the amount of direction given for completing English Language Arts assignments in high school
Phase 3 Interviews with first-year university students (14 participants) November 2011	Differences between the High School Writing Environment and the First-Year University Writing Environment	(a) confidence of students entering university in terms of writing ability; (b) overall length of the papers required in university; (c) how to conduct research and format papers correctly; (d) time management; (e) instructor expectations; (f) becoming self-directed learners; (g) instructor direction; (h) class size and anonymity; and, (i) email as preferred method of communication.

As shown in Table 4.1, the data will be presented in two stages. The first stage, phase 1 and Phase 2, will discuss students' perceptions of the writing environment in high school. Four major themes were identified. Within those major themes, a number of subthemes were

identified, some were taken from the survey, and some emerged from the high school interviews. They will be discussed in the order above. The second stage, phase 3, of the data analysis will discuss the differences between the high school writing environment and the first-year university writing environment. The data are organized according to the identified themes above.

High School Writing Environment

High school students' confidence as writers

On the quantitative survey students were asked whether they felt confident writing an essay in their high school courses, both in their English Language Arts class and in their content area courses. The quantitative survey results on student confidence as writers are presented in figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3. There are no qualitative data available on student confidence as writers as that topic was not addressed in the qualitative interviews. This was an oversight that was not noticed until the data were being analyzed.

The statements concerning students' confidence were included because I wanted to get an overall sense of students' perceptions of their confidence as writers going from the high school writing environment to the first-year university writing environment. My interest was based on the research from the University of Manitoba (2007) that reported 88% of first-year students were confident entering university with their writing abilities. I wanted to find out if the high school students in the present study had the same level of confidence. As was discussed in Chapter 2, Bandura (1982) reported that students were more likely to engage in new tasks if they felt confident in their abilities to handle the new situations. Almost half of the students surveyed reported that they felt confident in their writing abilities coming out of high school as shown in

Figure 4.1. This is consistent with the literature which suggests that first-year students are confident coming into university with the writing ability they possess. However, this confidence often gives way to a feeling of inadequacy once they receive their first essays back from their instructors (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002; McCarthy, 1987). McCarthy (1987) observed that students experienced some degree of shock and disappointment upon receiving a lower than expected grade on their first assignment. This often led to the realization that the expectations of the instructors were not always compatible with the writing knowledge students brought from high school. In addition, in an individual interview McCarthy conducted with a first-year student, the student confessed that “first, you’ve got to figure out what your teachers want. And then you’ve got to give it to them if you’re gonna get the grade . . . and that’s not always so easy” (p. 233).

The level of confidence in writing ability reported by the students in this research may be linked to academic success in high school since the students self-selected for the present study. Many of the high school students who were interviewed suggested that they had been successful students in terms of getting good marks in their English Language Arts classes.

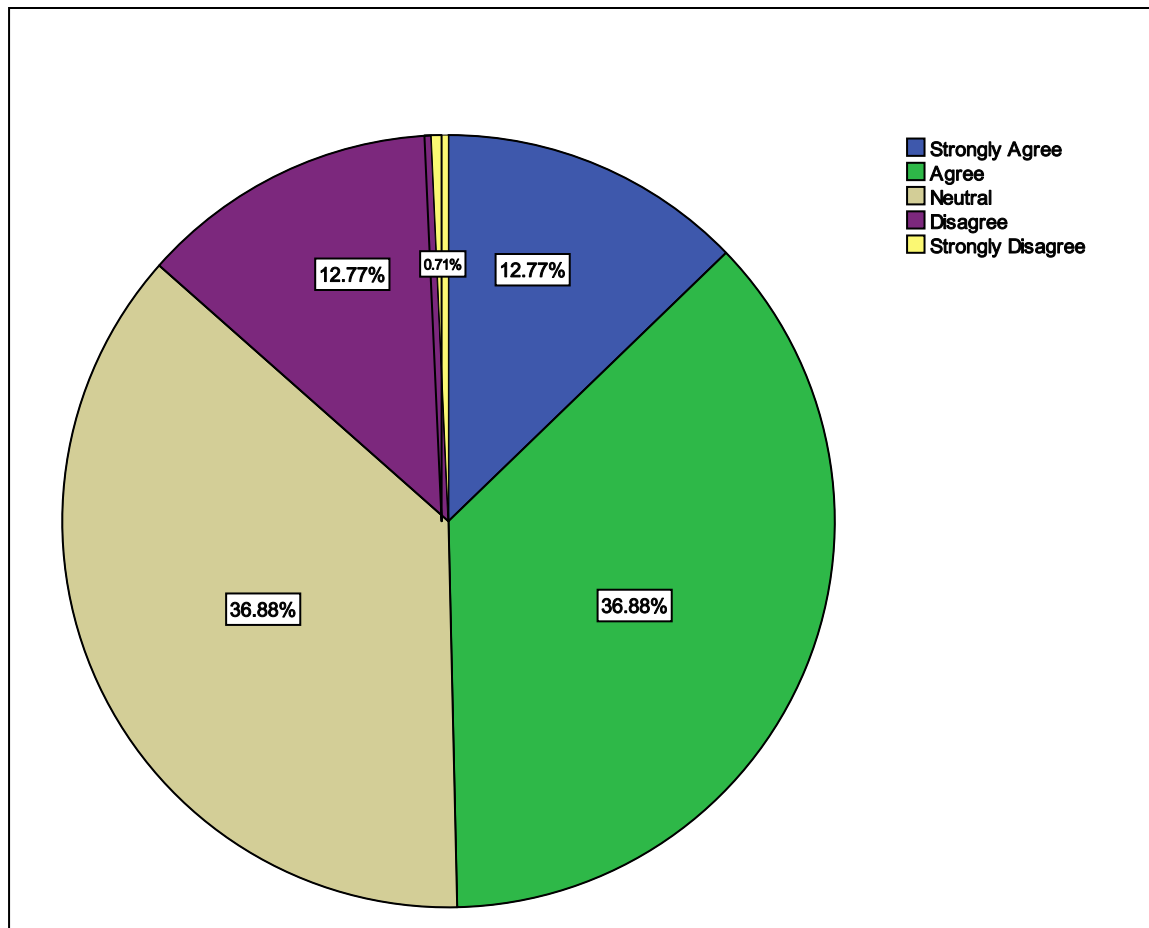


Figure 4.1 I feel confident writing an essay in English Language Arts

Figure 4.2 also speaks to the students' perceived level of confidence as writers. Forty-one percent declared they agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident writing in their other courses, while 44% were neutral and 13% disagreed with the statement.

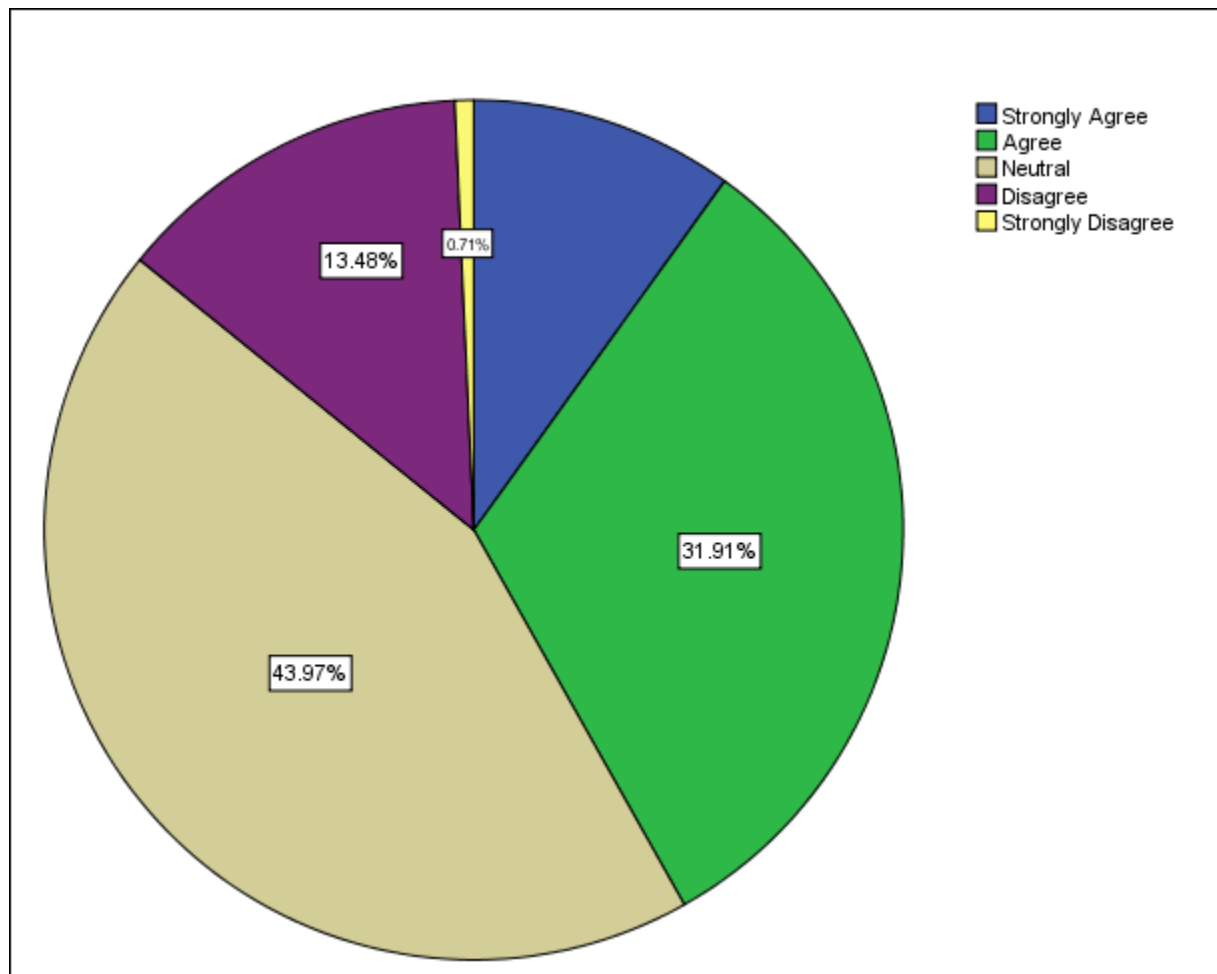


Figure 4.2 I feel confident writing an essay in my content area courses

Under the same theme of student confidence, figure 4.3 reflects high school students' reports of the confidence they perceived in their abilities as writers after that they had received three years of instruction in their English Language Arts classes.

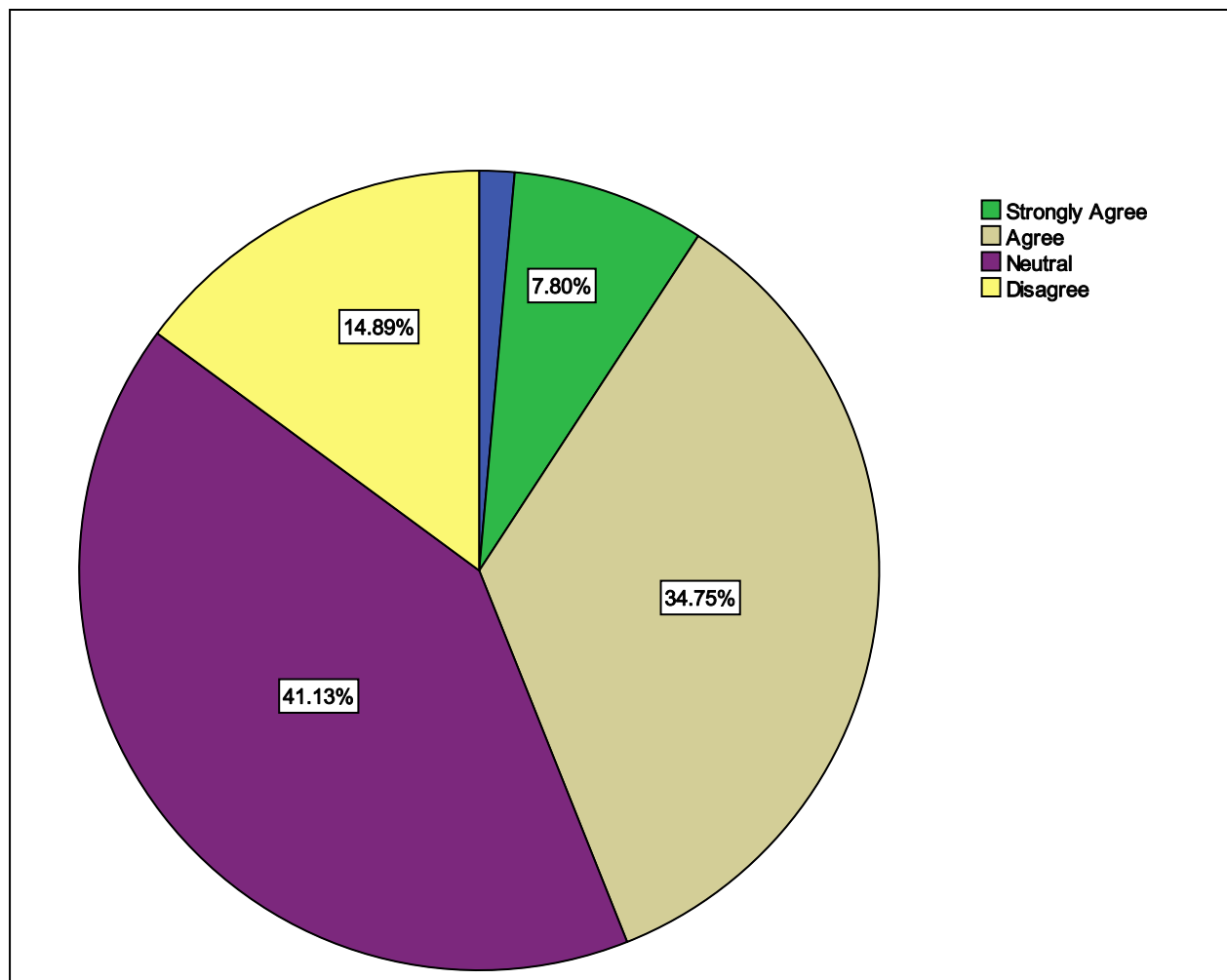


Figure 4.3 I feel confident now that I am an adequate writer

The three statements that related to students' confidence as writers show similar results. The results were all in the range of 45% to 50% indicating that a majority of the students had a high level of confidence in their writing abilities as they prepared to enter first-year university. Not surprisingly, students who identified themselves as being successful writers in high school had a higher level of confidence in their abilities as writers than did the students who did not identify themselves as being successful writers in high school.

Kinds of writing assistance. Under the main theme of student confidence in their ability to write papers in their high school classes is the subtheme of the kinds of writing assistance students received from their teachers or their friends. The subtheme was included at this point in the discussion because it relates to the level of confidence students have in their ability to write papers in their high school classes. As Bandura (1982) noted, students who are more confident in their abilities are more likely to seek help than those students who are less confident in their abilities.

This section deals with students' self-reported intentions to seek help with schoolwork, when needed. Newman (1990) characterizes help-seeking as a strategy that involves not only each individual child but also the peer group that makes up each classroom. In his view, academic help-seeking involves other people with whom the child interacts and receives assistance. Help-seeking also fosters social influences on learning and intellectual development. Newman found that the child who asks questions and seeks assistance when it is required not only solves the immediate problem of alleviating academic difficulties but also obtains the skills and knowledge necessary to become a more self-directed learner. Figures 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6 reports the data concerning the kinds of assistance students felt they might seek from their

instructors. It also reports on the different individuals students identified as being resources to which they might turn when they need assistance with their assignments. There was no comparable qualitative data that discussed whom students asked for assistance if they were having difficulty with assignments.

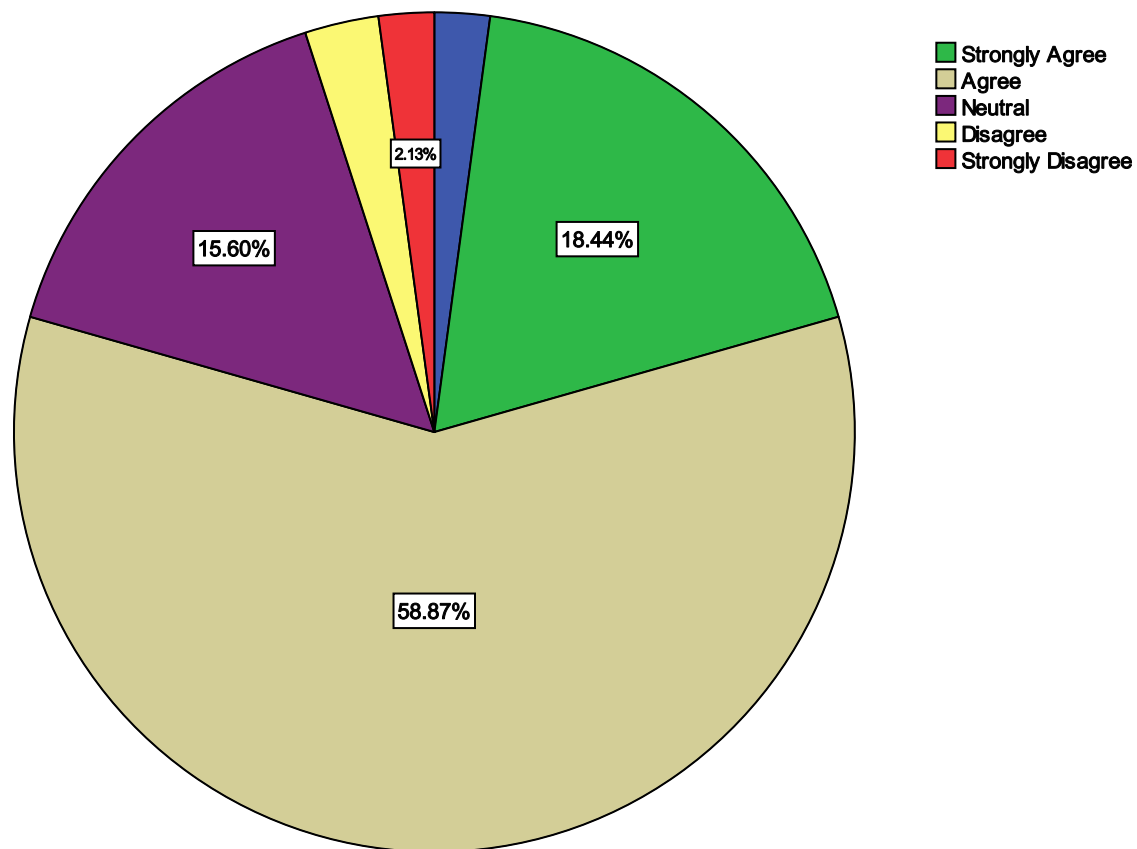


Figure 4.4 My English Language Arts teacher encourages me to ask for assistance with my assignments.

Figure 4.4 reports on the number of students who reported that their English Language Arts teachers encouraged them to ask for assistance when writing an essay. The results indicate that a large percentage (77%) of students perceived their English Language Arts teachers to be

actively soliciting requests to help with assignments. There is a subtle difference between teachers passively offering assistance and actively offering assistance. In the first instance, students may be aware that the teacher is available if they have any problems but expect that students will take the initiative to ask. In the second instance, teachers are taking the initiative to offer help if they perceive that a student is experiencing difficulties.

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) suggest that it is important for teachers to be available to guide their students during the writing process. The support is necessary at various stages in the process (e.g., editing, revising, or feedback) and can take a number of different forms. Pritchard and Honeycutt found that the degree of teacher direction contributed to the students' views of themselves as writers. If students perceive that their teachers are available to offer support, they are more willing to take risks in the classroom. In many cases, this willingness to take risks reflects the degree of confidence students have in their writing abilities.

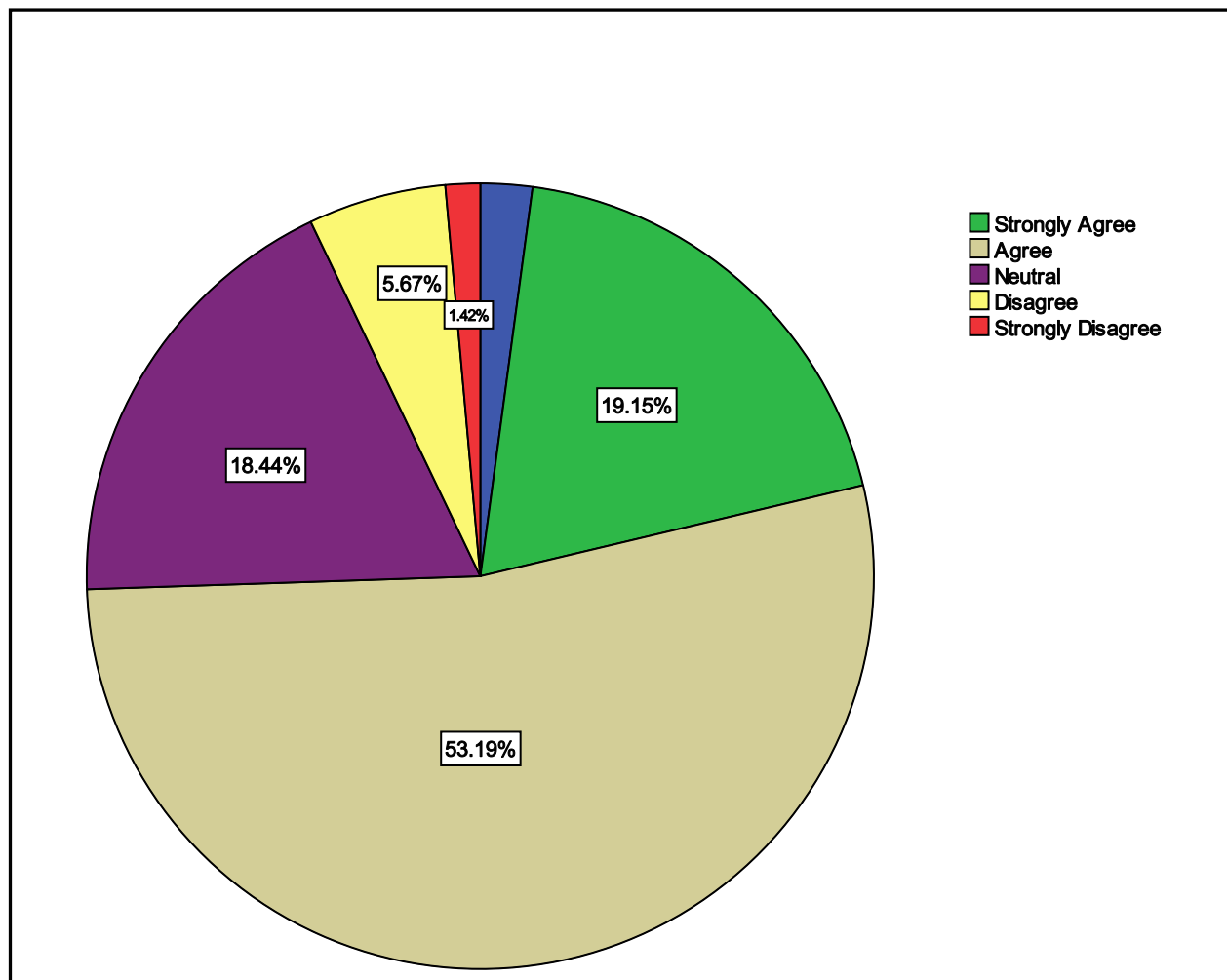


Figure 4.5 If I do not understand an assignment, I ask for assistance from the teacher

Figure 4.5 indicates the percentage of students who said that they would go to their teachers for help if they did not understand an assignment. Seventy-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that they would go to the teacher for help, while 18% were neutral, and 6% declared that they would not go to the teacher for help.

Figure 4.6 also speaks to the question of where a student might turn to find assistance.

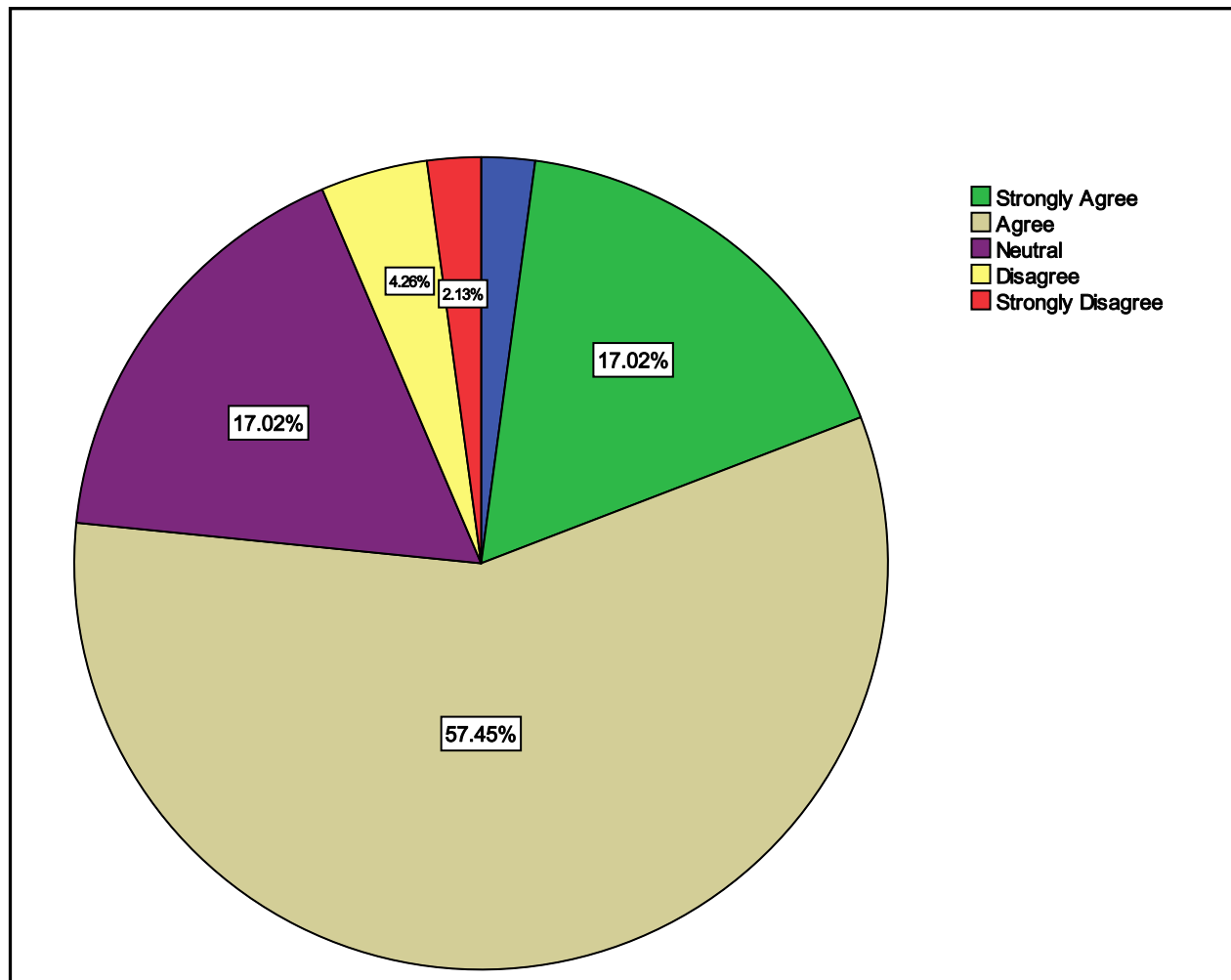


Figure 4.6 If I do not understand an assignment, I ask for assistance from a friend.

The percentage of students who reported that they would ask a friend for assistance was very similar to the percentage of students who reported that they would go to a teacher for help with an assignment: 74% agreed or strongly agreed that they would go to a friend if they were having difficulty with their assignments, 17% were neutral, and 4% did not feel that they would go to a friend for help.

Ryan, Gheen and Midgley (1998) report that the literature suggests that students asking for help from another person, whether it is the teacher or another student, is an important strategy for learning and success in school. This study corroborates these findings. In this study, 72% of the students reported on the quantitative survey that they would go to their teachers for help if they did not understand an assignment and 74% reported that they would go to a friend for help if needed.

Level of learner independence in high school. The majority of the students reported on the survey that they were comfortable asking either their teachers or fellow students for help if they were having difficulties with their school assignments. However, in the first round of qualitative interviews, students expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of guidance their high school teachers were willing to provide.

Snyder (2000) studied the relationship between learning styles and academic achievement in high school students. She found that an important aspect of students' ability to perform well on achievement tests was their willingness to be more independent in their thinking and less dependent on teacher direction. She concluded that students need to be actively involved in constructing their own knowledge about the subject they are studying. Similarly, Kinzie (1990) found that, in order for students to benefit from learning, they must be able to make appropriate instructional choices based on effective learning strategies. She further reported that "exercising control over one's learning can be in itself a valuable educational experience, instructional decisions are made, the results experienced, and the best tactics for different instructional situations can be discovered in the process" (p. 6). In addition, Kinzie concluded that self-regulation of learning implies a high level of cognitive engagement that involves continuously monitoring learning, including rehearsal and self-checking.

The monitoring of one's own understanding appears to be an important element of effective learning (Kinzie, 1990). However, the students in this study did not appear to be ready for that level of independence. Six of the fourteen students reported that some of their high school teachers did not provide enough direction in their classes, and the students felt that they had to assume more responsibility for their own learning than they might have been ready to do in high school.

Betty in her comments about her perception of her current high school English Language Arts class reported

Like for grade 12, I am so lost. I think the grade 12 teacher wants us to feel like . . . what it should be like so we are on our own; we should know what we are doing. So he just gives us like no guidance and we are just left in the road . . . I think he tries to focus on us being free, but it is too free. I need some direction.

Similarly, Marilyn found that:

I have this teacher for chemistry, and she gives us no direction, and when I am in class I am super frustrated with her, but when I get out of the class, I am like this is reality and I know in university the teacher is not going to be by your side explaining everything . . . and she is like this is completely wrong, but she doesn't tell you what is wrong and you just have to try again, but I think that is the class that I have learned the most in . . . [because] you have to learn it yourself.

Jody reported the same experience. Commenting on one of her English Language Arts teachers, she said:

And she doesn't go around and check if you did your homework, like she, it isn't just that she doesn't care. She cares if you show her that you are putting in the effort and you can go and ask her questions and stuff like that.

Brad made the same point when discussing one of his teachers, "Yes [he provides help] but he never approaches you, if you are interested in improving, he is there to help."

Marilyn expressed a similar sentiment about her teacher, saying that the teacher believes that "you have to become independent learners because, in university, no prof[fessor] is going to be [standing] over you." Marilyn also said:

She never asks in class if anyone needs help but if you go and find her she puts in the time for you, but you have to go up to her and show her what you have done and if [she finds] something that you didn't look over or study, or something, then she doesn't help you. She says you are wasting my time, and I'm not going to help you.

Speaking about the same high school teacher, Marilyn also found that:

Another thing she taught us was time management, how to be responsible for our own work which is what we will need in university. Like high school teachers always accepted late assignments, you could hand in assignments after the final exam, they didn't care, and some students didn't do any work until after the final exam.

The students in this study suggested that the amount of help they received varied depending on the individual teacher. Students reported that some teachers were very helpful while other teachers were not. This is not surprising considering the different learning styles of students and the different teaching styles of teachers. Some of the students may have needed more direction than other students. The literature (Kinzie, 1990; Snyder, 2000) suggests that students are more successful if they learn to be independent and can self-regulate their own learning. The students in this study expressed frustration with having to assume that independence in high school but realized once they got to university that they needed to be independent. The same students who had complained about the lack of help they received from their teachers admitted that being forced to become independent learners in high school worked to their advantage once they got to university.

Writing in high school

The theme of writing in high school emerged from students' perceptions of the way in which they learned to write their essays in English Language Arts. The data for this section were gathered from both quantitative (survey questions) and qualitative (interviews) data. Under the main theme, there are also subthemes that will be discussed in this section: (a) the length of writing assignments required in high school; (b) the kinds of writing produced in high school; (c) writing in other high school courses besides English Language Arts; (d) teacher engagement in students' writing; (e) the way in which writing assignments relate to advancement as writers; and, (f) the degree to which competence as writers related to marks received.

The writing process. Students responded to a number of statements that asked them about their use of the writing process when composing papers in high school. Figures 4.7, 4.8,

4.9, and 4.10 all relate to the writing process and to the way in which students employ the strategies associated with the writing process. There are also data from the qualitative interviews in which students discussed the ways in which they wrote their essays in high school.

The process approach to writing is not a new approach. It has been used in writing instruction since the early 1970s (Keh, 1990). In this approach, students learn how to compose a paper by following specific steps in the writing process. There are many variations to the writing process but most follow a multiple-draft process, which usually consists of first generating ideas or pre-writing, then composing a draft with an emphasis on content, and, finally, revising the text to refine the content. In order for the process approach to be effective in classrooms, feedback is needed at all stages of the process (Keh, 1990). Keh (1990) further states that it is the feedback that pushes the writer through the writing process to the eventual end product.

McCormick (2006) suggested that students must learn process writing if they are to be successful, saying that it is only through the explicit teaching of the step-by-step process of writing that students can improve their writing ability. McCormick further stated that it is only when students learn how to use the process model of writing that they are able to move away from the formulaic writing that they learn in high school (e.g., the five-paragraph essay). Learning how to write an academic essay by following the writing process has proven to be an effective method of writing for experienced writers (see Flower & Hayes, 1981).

The following charts (figures 4.7-4.10) provide the results from the quantitative survey that asked students if they made use of the writing process when they wrote papers, both in their English language arts classes and their other classes that required writing of some kind.

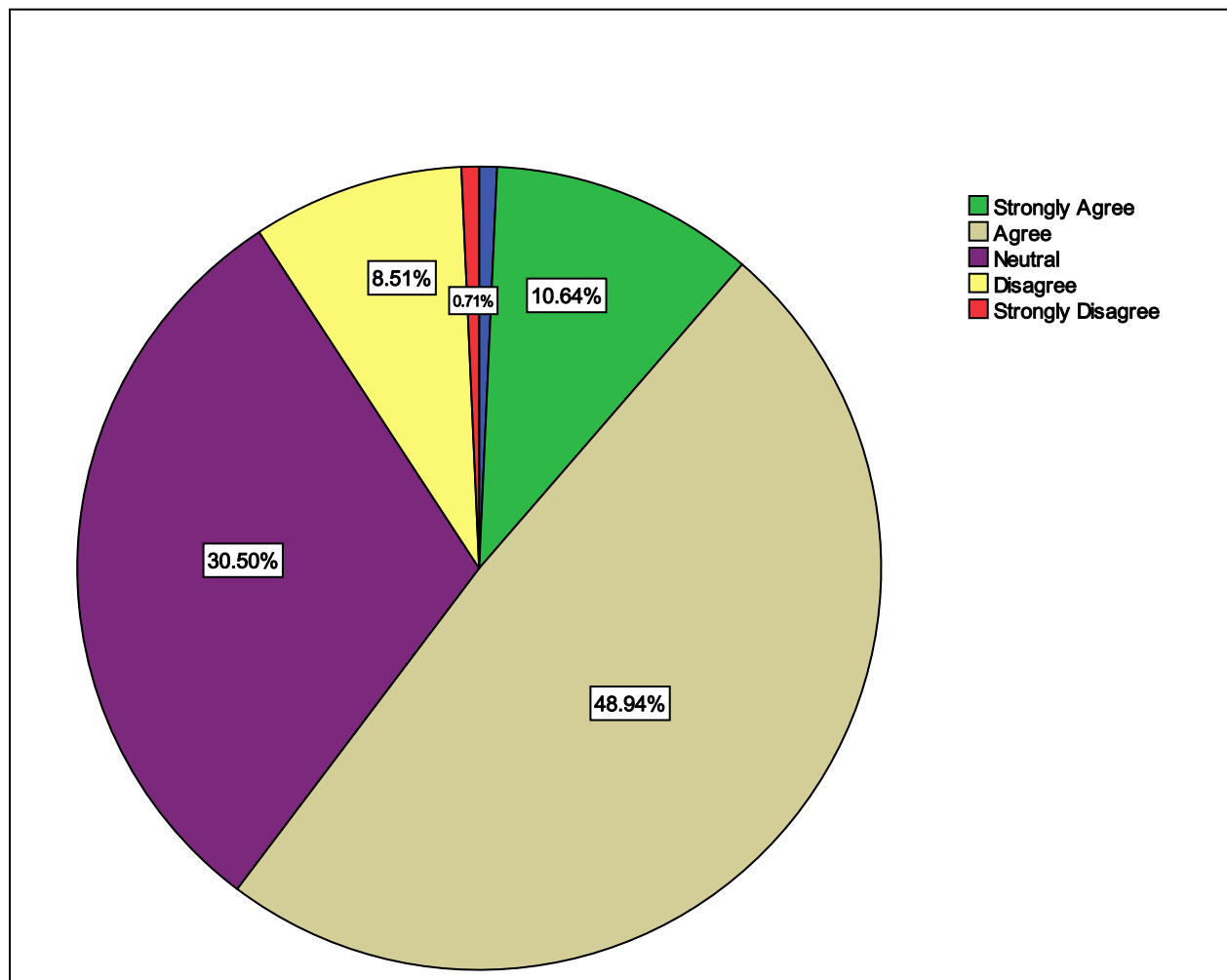


Figure 4.7 Students were asked if they follow the writing process of draft, revise, and re-write when they were writing their essays in English Language Arts classes.

Figure 4.7 shows the percentage of students who indicated that they followed the writing process of planning, writing, and revising when composing their essays. Sixty percent of the students agreed, or strongly agreed, that they followed the writing process in high school; approximately 30% were neutral, and approximately 10% disagreed, or strongly disagreed, that they used the writing process when composing their essays. These results differ from

Applebee's (1981) findings that assignments were usually first and final draft, were completed in class and required a page or less of writing. He further concluded that the teachers in his study were more concerned with product rather than process. In Applebee's (1993) later study he found that although the process approach to writing was recognized as an appropriate method of teaching writing, it was still not being widely implemented in the classrooms he observed. The results from this study indicate that a high percentage of students reported using the process approach to writing. It may be that teachers today provide their students with the time to edit and revise their essays. This is an area that needs to be investigated further.

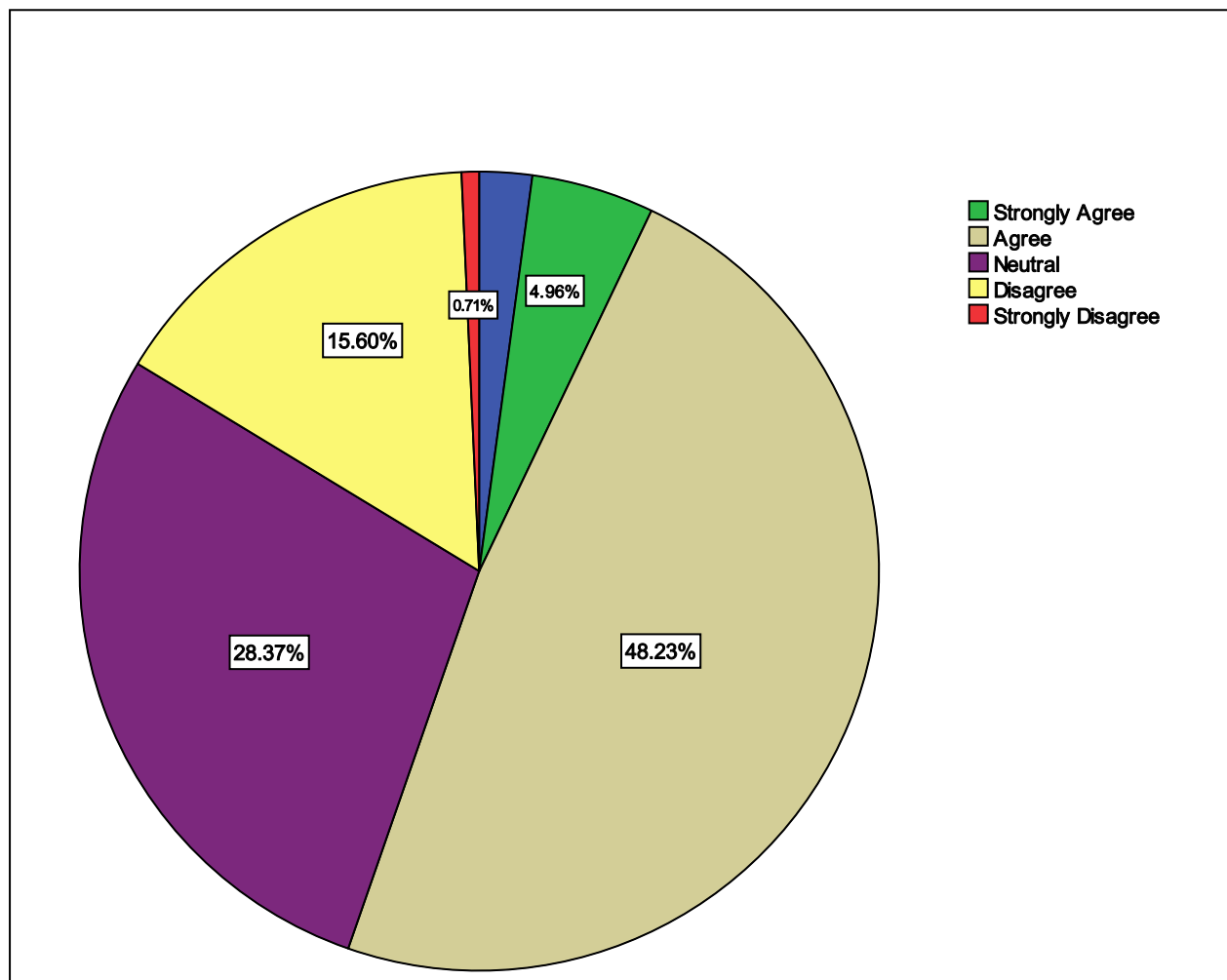


Figure 4.8 I begin writing my essays early enough that I have time to edit and revise before handing in the essay.

Figure 4.8 indicates the number of students who reported that they had time to edit and revise their essays before handing them in. Fifty-three percent of the students said that they agreed, or strongly agreed, that they had sufficient time to edit and revise when they wrote their

essays for their English Language Arts teachers, while 28% of the students were neutral, and 16% disagreed with the statement.

Although the research on the writing process (Graves, 1983; Murray, 1985) distinguishes between the two terms, there was no distinction made between the two terms of ‘editing’ and ‘revising’ on the survey and perhaps there should have been. Graves (1983) and Murray (1985) describe revision as a process of discovering what the author wants to say and adapting the text to clarify the message rather than correcting errors. Some researchers (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006) view revision as the most important part of the writing process. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) found that revision instruction was largely neglected before teachers started using the process approach to writing when teaching students how to compose text. In the present study, over half of the students indicated that they had time to go back and edit and revise their English Language Arts papers. This is an area that needs further investigating. It would be beneficial to find out how students define editing and how they define revising. The literature, noted above, suggests that revision is an important component of the writing process but due to the ambiguity of the question, on the survey, it is not possible to draw conclusions concerning what it was that students did with their papers during the editing and revising stage.

The data presented from this study indicates that over half of the students surveyed reported that they followed the writing process when completing their assignments. They also reported that they had time to edit and revise their assignments before submitting them. The literature is clear both about the importance of following a process approach to writing and the benefits that come from working through the process rather than focusing on the written product alone (Keh, 1990; McCormick, 2006).

In this study, seven of twenty students reported that they had some instruction in the writing process when they were asked whether their English Language Arts teachers had provided them with direction in how to write their essays. Comments in this section ranged from students reporting that they had received a great deal of assistance in learning how to write an essay, including direction in the drafting of outlines, the composition of a rough draft, the process of revising, the process of editing, the process of re-writing, and the composition of the final copy. Four of the seven students observed that they used the writing process when completing papers. Three of the seven students did not follow the process model, though they acknowledged that they had been instructed in that practice.

Monica said:

For me, personally, I did not do the outline and the draft, I just wrote whatever I felt like, and then revised it, and made that my essay. I did not make any drafts, or make any outline, I just wrote the essay because I am not a person who loves to write a lot, yeah, I just wanted to get it over with.

Like Monica, Melissa reported:

I don't do much revising. I find that I don't have to. I usually get down what I want to say the first time. If I do revise, it is just going over the paper, changing a few words here or there. Maybe I will change paragraphs around . . . once I put it down, I m happy with it so there is no need to change anything in the essay. I just never felt the need to go through the stages of writing. I know we are supposed to do that but I never do.

Erica said that “in high school they [teachers] don’t really say you had to do this [the writing process] so I would just start writing and then look it over and then okay [and hand it in].”

Page found that her English Language Arts teachers:

always tried to teach us the steps [of the writing process] and they gave us booklets to help us, like how to write the thesis, revise, and get your main points . . . we did drafts, revise, editing, but mostly on essays. We also had rubrics telling us how they would be marked. We had sample essays within the booklet that he gave us.

Ashley said:

I would have liked more feedback throughout the process of writing whatever you’re writing, so actually giving you the chance to hand it in when you are half way done, like just having them revise a draft, I think if they actually told you that you had the chance to do that, I think that would change a lot.

Having teacher feedback that helps with the process of writing was deemed important by Jason. He said:

What we did for our essays is we had to get them peer-reviewed from another person and then we could send them in to her to get checked over if it was before the actual deadline. And then she would say what needed to be fixed up, she would go over it with you, and so then you could go back and change it up if something, if she doesn’t think this fits here and it would go better in a different spot then you can go, fix it, and then hand it back in.

Luke also found that his teacher made the effort to provide guidance during the actual writing of the essay:

I remember for a couple of assignments in grade 12 she said get your thesis statement down, get your thesis paragraph, and then she took that, and read it over, and she gave us what we could improve, what your strong points are, and your weaknesses. And then we did the same thing for a whole draft and then a final copy.

Only four out of the twenty students interviewed reported that they followed the writing process when writing their essays and that they had the time to edit and revise their essays. This differs from the results of the quantitative survey in which 60% of the students reported that they followed the writing process when composing essays. The findings of Flower and Hayes, 1981, Keh, 1990, and McCormick, 2006 stressed the importance of having students follow the process approach when writing an essay. However, there are many ways of using a process approach to writing and this study did not make a distinction between the different approaches. Rather it gave students a very generic definition of the writing process (draft, revise, and re-write) which may explain why the results of the quantitative survey were much higher than the qualitative interviews. Similarly, Alsup and Bernard-Donals (2002) observed that though students had been taught the process model of writing, they were not following the process when completing their papers except in a very superficial way that saw students performing isolated tasks without questioning the process. In the qualitative interviews the seven students who reported that they followed the process model of writing said that they wrote multiple drafts of their essays in high school, but the same students found that they did not have time to make use of the process approach to writing in first-year university. Beaufort (2006) reported the same finding in her

study. She determined that university students did not have time to write multiple drafts of their essays due to time constraints.

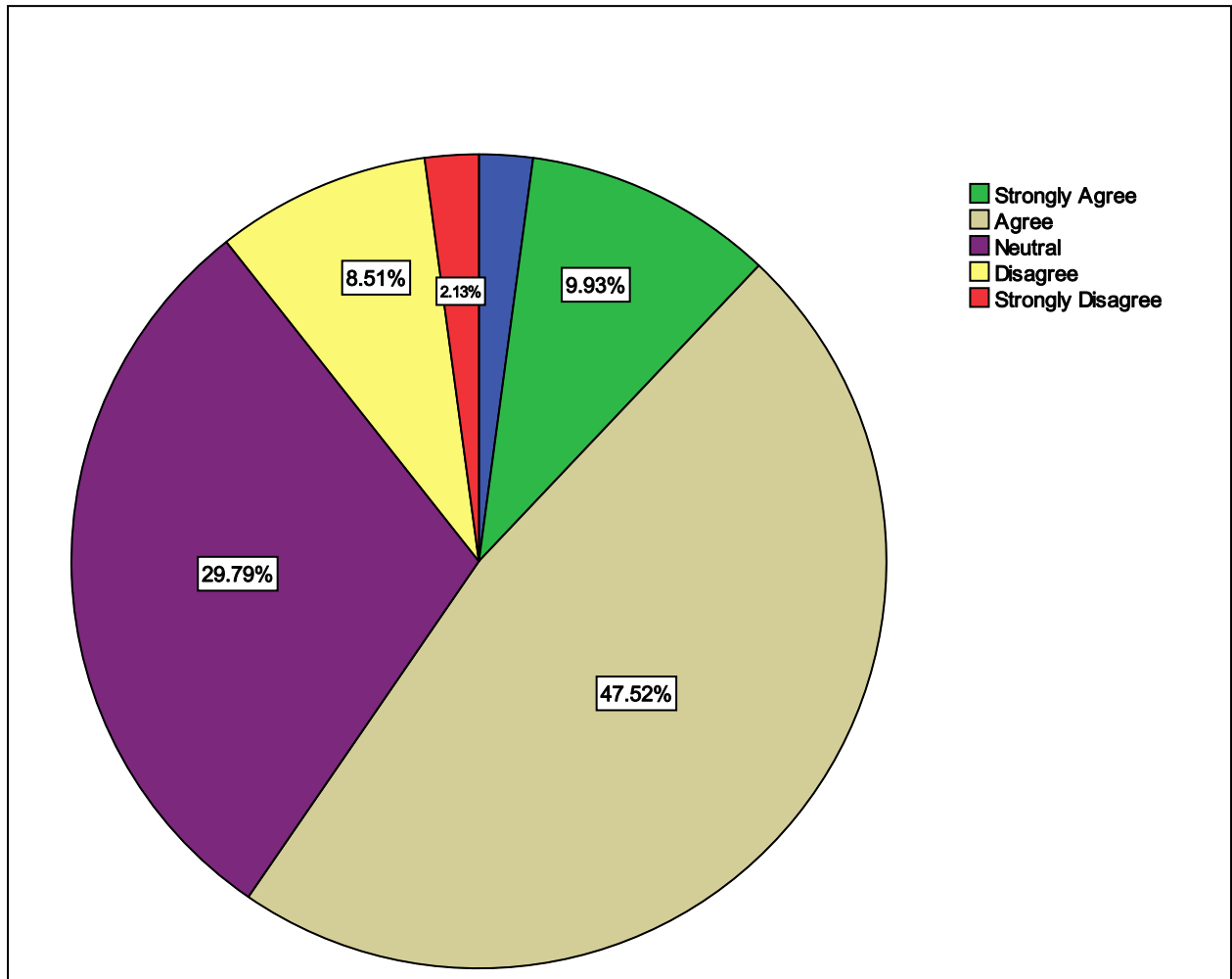


Figure 4.9 I feel like I have enough time to complete an essay in my English Language Arts course.

Figure 4.9 presents the results of the statement asking whether the students felt that they had enough time to complete an essay in their English Language Arts course. Fifty-eight percent

agreed or strongly agreed that they had enough time, 30% reported that they were neutral on the question, and 11% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had enough time to complete their essays in English Language Arts. Surprisingly, perhaps, the data from the qualitative interviews suggests that students often feel that they have too much time to complete assignments in high school. The consensus from the students (15 of 20) interviewed points to a sense that there is more than enough time to complete assignments in both English Language Arts classes and content areas classes. In fact, students reported that they were given so much time to complete assignments that they could miss two weeks of classes and still keep pace with their classes. Erica commented that “In high school we had tons of time. You would say, I can’t hand it in, and the teacher would be like, oh you don’t have it ready, that’s fine. Tomorrow is fine.” Similarly, Page found that her teachers “didn’t expect you to be done, it would be like if you actually need more time than this, then you are going to have to do it on your own time but they gave you all the time in the world.” Ashley also reported that “I would like miss a week of school. I would come back and we hadn’t done anything. It’s just the same thing over and over again.”

In addition, some students (5 of 20) talked about their respective teacher’s failure to allocate time in accordance with the size and complexity of the assignment. They indicated that teachers often gave them too much time for certain assignments, and not enough time for other assignments. Luke reported that “because in high school it’s more like every couple of weeks you’d have an assignment for, like a short 600 word essay or something like 800 words...and we had a long time, and they [his teachers] really helped us with that. So, it was the same kind, the same amount of writing we’re doing now, it was just spaced out a lot more.” Billie said, “in

high school the teacher would spend days or even weeks talking about the project before she even assigned it.”

The findings of the studies by both Applebee (1981, 1984, 1993) and Hillocks (2006), concerning the length of assignments that students were being asked to produce in high school discovered that most students were producing papers that were two to three pages in length. In addition, the writing assignments focused more on short answer questions and fill-in-the-blank assignments than on paragraph type papers. Both Applebee (1981, 1984, 1993) and Hillocks (2006) observed that students were not required to conduct research and for the most part wrote narrative pieces that asked for their opinion on a topic. Given these results, and taking into account the findings from this study, it is perhaps not surprising that students reported that they had ample time to complete their assignments, since the assignments they were being asked to complete were typically only 2-3 pages in length.

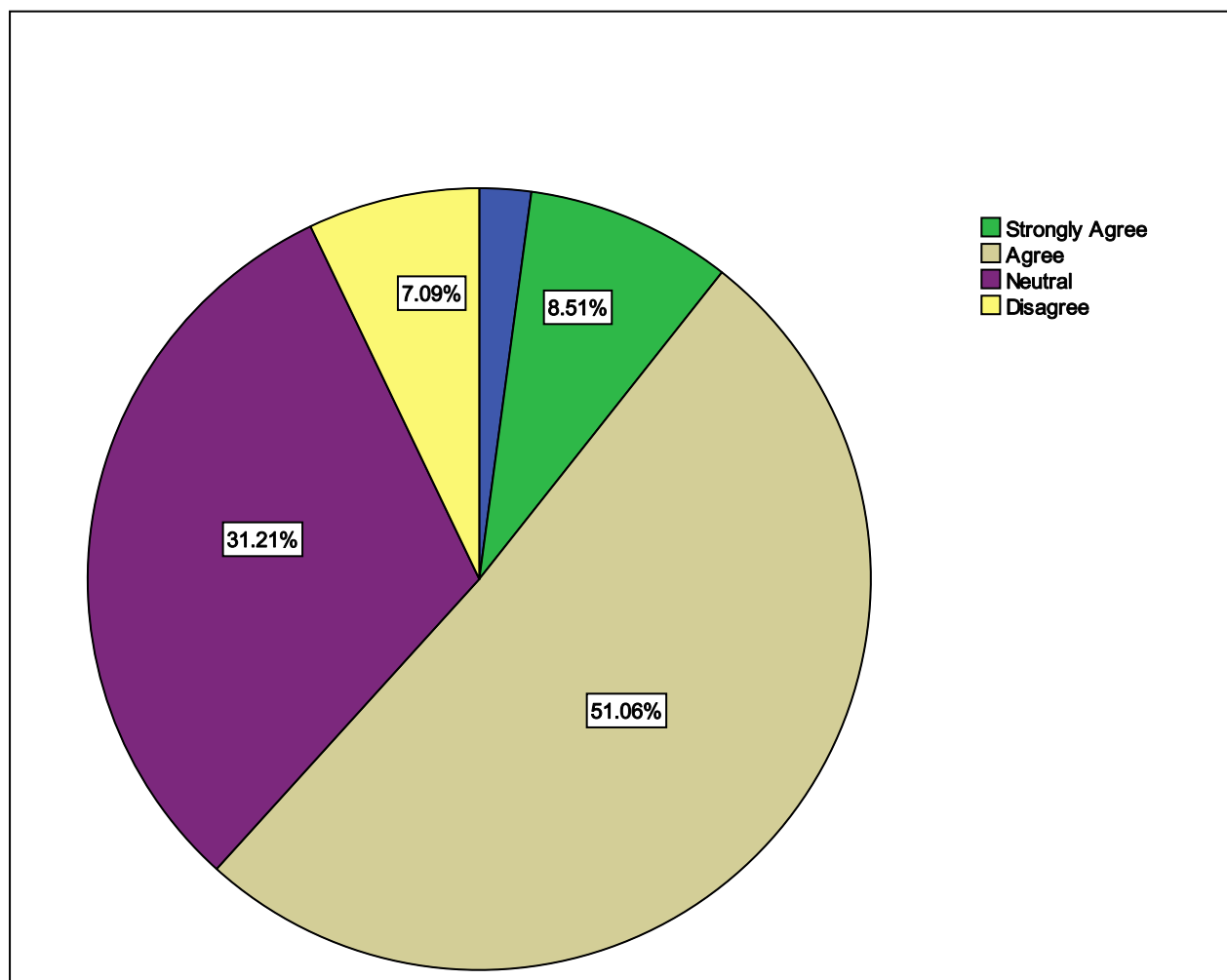


Figure 4.10 I feel like I have enough time to complete an essay in my other courses.

The percentage of students who reported that they had enough time to complete written assignments in other courses was very similar to the percentage of students reporting enough time to complete assignments in English Language Arts: 59% agreed or strongly agreed that they had enough time, while 31% were neutral, and 7% disagreed that they had enough time to complete their assignments.

High School Writing

This section is broken down into six sub-themes of the writing students had to do in high school. The sub-themes are as follows: (a) the length of writing assignments required in high school (figures 4.11, 4.12, and Table 4.2); (b) the kinds of writing in high school (Tables 4.3 and 4.4); (c) writing in other high school courses (figures 4.11 and 4.12); (d) teacher engagement in students' writing (figures 4.13 and 4.14); (e) outlines, models, and examples; (f) writing assignments relate to advancement as writers (figures 4.15 and 4.16); and, (g) perception of writing competence in relation to marks received (figures 4.17 and 4.18). Each will be discussed separately using both quantitative survey questions, and qualitative data.

The Length of Writing Assignments Required in High School

Most of the current literature suggests that high school writing assignments are brief. Miller, Bender, and Schub (2005) found in their study that high school English Language Arts teachers require little writing, and often students can get away with completing assignments the night before they are due. The findings of the current study are consistent with what Applebee (1981, 1984, 1993) and Hillocks (2006) found in their studies of writing instruction in high schools. Both Applebee (1981, 1984, 1993) and Hillocks (2006) characterized the kinds of writing that high school students were expected to do as superficial and reported that students were asked to repeat or relate back information that the teachers had already organized.

Table 4.2

The Length of Writing Assignments in High School

The Length of Writing Assignments Required in High School English Language Arts Classes	
Eight of the twenty respondents indicated that their papers were on average two to three pages each (40%).	
Eleven of the twenty respondents indicated that their papers were on average three to five pages each (55%).	
One of the twenty respondents indicated that most of the papers written for English Language Arts were over five pages (5%).	

Students were asked to report on the length of the writing assignments they were expected to complete in high school both in their English Language Arts classes and their other courses. Figures (4.11 & 4.12) display these results. It was important to ask this question because of the findings of Applebee (1981, 1984, 1993) and Hillocks (2006) who both found that students were not required to write papers of any length in high school. I was interested in discovering if students were still writing short assignments thirty years later.

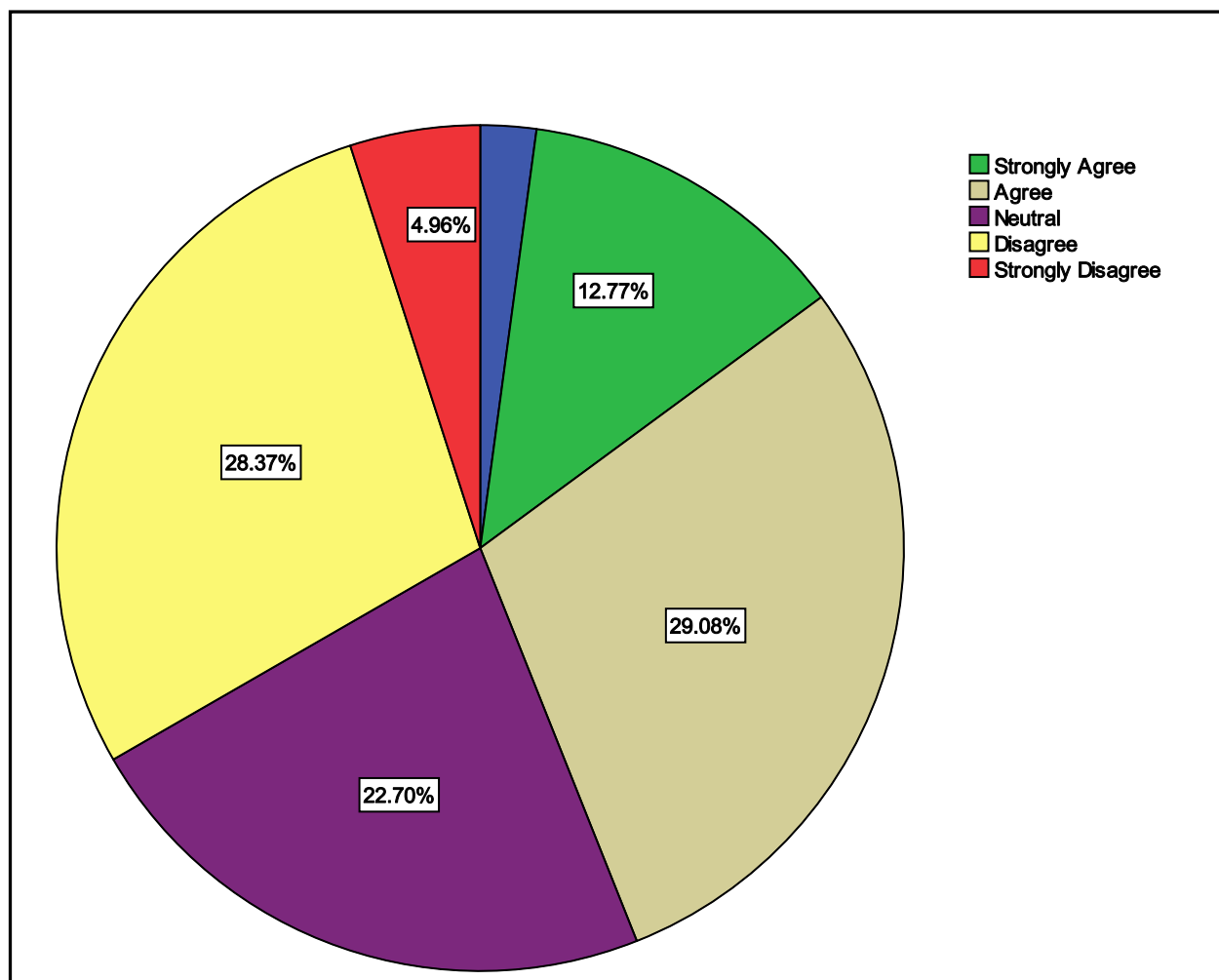


Figure 4.11 I had to produce substantial pieces (5 type written pages) of writing in my English Language Arts class.

Students were asked whether they had to produce substantial pieces of writing in high school classes. Figures 4.11 and 4.12 provide results, respectively, from their English Language Arts classes and other courses where they were required to write substantial papers. In this study 'substantial' was defined as five typewritten pages. Forty-two percent of students reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had to produce substantial pieces of writing, while 23% were neutral, and 24% disagreed that they had to write papers of that length in English Language Arts classes. When asked whether they had to produce substantial pieces of writing in other

courses, 28% agreed or strongly agreed that they did have to write longer papers, 22% were neutral, and 49% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their other courses required them to write substantial pieces of writing.

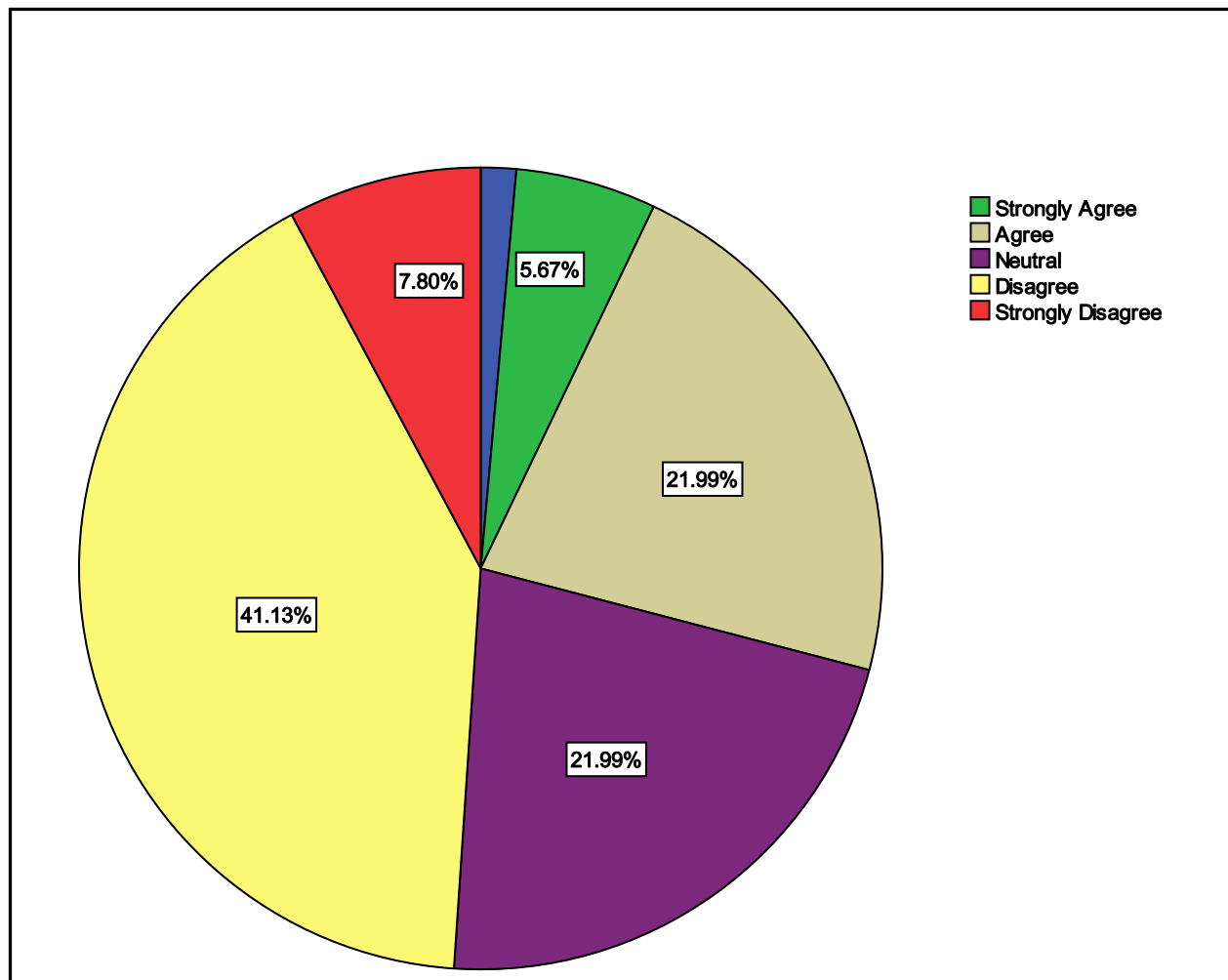


Figure 4.12 I had to produce substantial pieces of writing in my other courses.

On the survey students were asked to recall the length of writing assignments they were required to complete in their high school English Language Arts classes from grades 10 – 12. Like the previous studies of Applebee (1981, 1984, 1993) and Hillocks (2006), this study found

that high school students were generally required to write short assignments. There was a noticeable similarity between the responses of the students in answer to the question of how much writing they were required to do in their English Language Arts classes in high school. The following responses are representative of the students who were interviewed. Bob reported “We did mostly essays [in high school] and they were from 400 words to 3000 words.” Eight students indicated that the writing they did in English Language Arts consisted of assignments, of at most, two to three pages, double-spaced (Nora, Monica, Barb, Erica, Judy, Ashley, Bob, Marilyn). For Billie, the average length of high school papers was a little longer: “I did probably on average two large essays a year . . . for me large is three to five pages.” Barb indicated that she was already getting concerned about the length of papers she would have to submit in first-year university, saying “I am a bit concerned about the length of the papers I will have to write [in university] because in high school we don’t have to write long essays, we maybe have to write six pages, double-spaced, 12 point font so that is not a really long paper.” Marilyn was also concerned about her preparation for writing assignments at university, noting the brevity of the papers she was asked to write in high school. She reported that “in the regular [Language Arts] classes we didn’t do too much writing at all. Like I found it was little to nothing . . . I know this sounds bad, but [we did] nothing [in high school English]. I feel that everything we did in that one class throughout the year, I could have done in one night.”

The high school students who participated in the focus groups and the individual interviews reported that they did not do a substantial degree of writing in high school. They felt that the papers they were required to complete were, for the most part, short (2-3 pages). It was their perception that the kinds of writing they were required to complete in their high school English Language Arts classes consisted of mainly short-answer questions and journal reflection

entries. The absence of longer writing assignments was a concern to some of the students (7 of 20). They worried that they were not being properly prepared for first-year university writing assignments. It was interesting to discover that the students in this study reported results that were very similar to what Applebee (1981, 1984, 1993) and Hillocks (2006) found in their respective research. It appears that not much has changed regarding the length of assignments students are expected to produce in high school.

The Types of Writing In High School

Students were asked to check off the types of writing they did in their high school classes, both in English Language Arts and their other courses that required some writing. Table 4.2 identifies the kinds of writing they were expected to produce during their high school years (grades 10 – 12). There was no place for students to indicate how many times they had produced each type of writing. Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn as to frequency.

Table 4.3

Types of Writing Students Indicated they Completed in their High School Classes

Types of Writing	Yes	No
Research Paper	84%	15%
Short Answer Questions	87%	12%
Personal Narrative (a non-fiction piece about themselves)	47%	52%

Types of Writing	Yes	No
Essay	94%	6%
A Poem	71%	28%
Analysis of a poem, story, or other reading	76%	23%
Short Story	77%	21%
Newspaper Article	62%	37%
Speech	65%	33%
Argumentative Paper	61%	38%
Lab Report	57%	42%
Summary	57%	41%
Evaluation	41%	57%
Journal	57%	41%
Professional Letter (Business letter)	36%	64%
Collaborative or Group Paper	25%	70%

The sheer variety of tasks that students were expected to produce indicates that, though students no longer do the kinds of surface writing that Applebee (1981) and Hillocks (1986) identified in their respective research studies. The students reported that they were targeting their writing to their understanding of what the teachers expected them to say.

The above data on the kinds of writing emerged from the quantitative surveys. However, the question of the kinds of writing students were required to submit in high school was also addressed in the focus groups and the individual interviews. The following information is a summary of the data.

Table 4.4

Kinds of Writing Students Reported They Completed in High School

Kinds of Writing
Ten out of 20 students interviewed indicated that their English Language Arts teachers required them to write essays using the five-paragraph essay format.
The other kinds of writing identified by one or more students included: short answer questions, opinion papers, long answer questions, newspaper articles, book reports, poems, short stories, speeches, journals, magazines, letters, reflective questions, interpretation papers, memoirs, creative stories, research papers, compare-contrast papers, poetry analysis, character studies, plays, and, toasts.
The students also identified the different kinds of papers that they were required to submit. These included: argumentative; expository; narratives; descriptive; persuasive; and personal viewpoint.

Davies (2006) observed that most university students do not move beyond the ‘five-paragraph essay’ they learned in high school. Similarly, Jordon (2006) said that high school students are comfortable with writing the five-paragraph essay because it is a format that is easy to follow. He said that students experience writing difficulties when they fail to understand that the five-paragraph essay will not work in all writing situations. In the present study, results from the focus groups and the individual interviews indicated that half of the students (5 out of 10)

were still trying to use the five-paragraph model in first-year university but finding only limited success with the model.

According to the students, the essay format that was taught the most often in high school English Language Arts classes was the five-paragraph essay. This finding is consistent with the findings of Hillocks (2006). Hillocks (2006) found that, when it came to teaching writing, most high school teachers used the five-paragraph essay model, a formulaic structure consisting of an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. In her study of first-year students, Carroll (2002) discovered that the students felt that they knew how to write academic essays because they had mastered the five-paragraph essay. For these students, their perception was that the five-paragraph essay was a 'one size fits all' essay, and they were surprised to discover that this model was not always an effective way to write academic essays.

The findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature. Ten of the twenty students interviewed mentioned that their English Language Arts teachers taught them how to write the five-paragraph essay. According to Luke, "we all learned the whole five-paragraph format, the intro, three body paragraphs, and then the conclusion." Similarly, Judy, when discussing the kinds of writing she did in high school, said that "the teacher just said, write an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion." Shirley also reported that her teacher also taught her how to write the five-paragraph essay: "my grade eight English Language Arts teacher insisted that we know exactly how to write a five-paragraph essay off the top of your head, what goes into it." Ashley said "I think it was basically the same thing, the five-paragraphs . . . generally they wanted it in the five-paragraphs, right up until grade 12." Marilyn and Jody also reported that their teachers "gave us an outline, like do an introduction, body, conclusion,

the five-paragraph-essay” when discussing the kinds of writing instruction they received in their high school English Language Arts classes.

Writing In Other High School Courses

The data for how much writing students were expected to complete in their other classes, besides English Language Arts, were collected in the qualitative interviews. There was not a comparable question on the quantitative survey asking students about the kinds of writing they were required to complete in their other classes.

This study corroborates the findings of Applebee (1981) who found that writing was used in very limited ways in most classrooms. He found that the majority of writing students were being asked to do in high school involved the answering of short answer and fill-in-the blank questions. Similarly, Langer (1986) found that the writing the students were asked to do focused on completing short answer study questions, taking notes, and writing essays. Knipper and Duggan (2006) reported that integrating writing in the content areas enhances comprehension. They found that “writing to learn engages students, extends thinking, deepens understanding, and energizes the meaning-making process” (p. 462). They further declared that writing to learn is an opportunity for the students to recall, clarify, and question what they know about a subject, and what they still want to know.

In the present study, students were also asked to comment on the kinds of writing they did in their other high school courses. In the qualitative interviews, the students identified a variety of writing activities that ranged from answering short answer questions, to the writing of notes, summaries, reflection journal entries, lab reports, and essays. The writing assignments varied in length, depending on the task. Erica remembered writing an essay in her Grade 11

History class. She said “the paper was supposed to be really long. I think mine was one of the shortest ones, mine was under ten pages. It was [between] seven to ten pages.”

Jack found that “I took a few social studies and history courses, and it was somewhat the same way [as English Language Arts]. We were expected to write in essay format, but we weren’t marked on essay format.” He also said, “In my history class in grade 11, he [the teacher] didn’t really care if it was in essay format. He wanted a response based on the reading we did and based on the facts.”

Some students (8 out of 20) commented on the lack of instruction or direction when it came to writing essays in other courses. Erica said:

I think they just assumed because we all had to take an English course so it would be like, oh yeah, it’s just like English, like an English essay, and they would just reiterate it has an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

Similarly, Shirley said:

We didn’t get any direction in other classes about what type of writing the teacher was looking for cause I know in social studies and geography we were given essay questions but we didn’t have to write a proper essay, just a paragraph that covered all the points he wanted us to cover, so it was a little annoyingly weird to get an essay question but not be required to write an essay.

Barb found that:

In my law class, we wrote argumentative, and more opinion essays. I think the last one I wrote was about 4-5 pages . . . they were research based papers, she looked for citations and stuff, statistics, and she wanted information from a book, from the internet, and from another source . . . she gave us a do not list, like don't use Wikipedia and don't get all the information from one source.

For students in science classes, it appeared that the direction was not geared toward writing instruction, though teachers provided some guidance in how to structure the lab reports.

Page said:

In science classes it was basically an outline and what they expected. Fill in sections, you did the first format, and then they would tell you, this is good. We had to basically put in summaries and what we understood about the lab.

Jason expressed a similar view:

In science class he gave us a set of instructions and most of the time we did not get a set diagram that we could look at but we were able to ask him for help and he was happy to help.

Luke also found:

In grade 10 chemistry, we had so many lab reports. That was ridiculous. I couldn't handle that. I just found that harder because we did not get as much guidance for lab reports and I remember we had a page with a hundred common mistakes, common

mistakes, but a hundred of them. So, it was like trying to look through them, but they were helpful in writing up a lab report.

The number of assignments students were expected to complete varied by teacher, as did the kinds of writing. It was the students' perceptions that they received very little guidance as to how to complete the writing assignments they were being asked to produce. Many students (11 of 20) reported that, when they attempted to find out what the teachers' expectations were for the various writing assignments they had to complete, their teachers' comments were vague. Students felt that their teachers did not provide the necessary direction that would have made completing their assignments more successful.

The findings of the present study indicate that it was the perception of the high school students (15 of 20) that they participated in various writing assignments in their content area classes with no clear sense of purpose for the various tasks. The students' (15 of 20) perceived that they were not given enough writing guidance for assignments in their content area classes. The existing literature very clearly identifies the benefit of writing to learn in content areas (Knipper & Duggan, 2006; Langer, 1986), and yet, this practice was not being followed, according to the students who took part in this study. It is not enough, however, to merely increase the number and length of writing assignments. Though Applebee (1984b) concluded from his studies on the nature of writing instruction that school writing tasks are often limited and unrewarding, he cautioned against teachers increasing the amount of writing that students are expected to do without addressing the levels of reasoning and kinds of knowledge that students need in their respective content area classes.

The number of different writing assignments identified by the students in high school was consistent with what Hillocks (2006) discovered in his research when he concluded that the teaching of writing was little more than the making of assignments. Applebee (1981) found that the kinds of writing assignments students were expected to do in high school were designed to test previous knowledge rather than to explore new ideas. Students were expected to arrive at a right answer. Applebee concluded that students were expected to produce a product based on what the teacher had taught. They were not required to analyze or evaluate the information.

When prompted in the interviews, the students listed all the kinds of writing they were expected to do in their high school English Language Arts classes. These ranged from short answer questions to essays. Jody said “I really didn’t do much writing [in high school]. I think I wrote one essay this year [Grade 12], and a couple of long answer questions, and for the provincial exam, I wrote an essay, so not a lot [of writing].” Similarly, Marilyn reported:

I found the regular English Language Arts classes didn’t do much writing at all. Like I found it was little to nothing . . . they were rather useless, like she [the teacher] would spend so much time on things that didn’t need so much time, like she would be okay here is twenty minutes, write down five sentences about what you think this book will be about. We didn’t need twenty minutes for that, maybe two minutes. So, I found there was a lot of wasting time or there would be this big project but you only have a week to do it, so not good time-management skills [on the part of the teacher].

Judy said that she did a variety of writing in her grade 12 English Language Art class: “we did three essays . . . and then we did short stories that were two pages long, and then we did descriptive [writing], point of view, personal essays, poetry, we did an article, and, an editorial.”

Jason said “we wrote a couple of research papers, not very many, I remember doing two for sure, I think one in grade 11 and one in grade 12 . . . most were [based] on your own ideas . . . we had an idea and then we went with it. We wrote a couple of poems, one or two each year.” Brad remembers his Grade 11 and 12 teacher stressing “insights, he mainly wanted insights [into different topics], we did resumes, business letters, journals, long answer questions, reflective journals, and poetry.” Billie remembered writing “a unit on newspapers so we did like writing articles, and we did long in-depth book reports, but [we] mostly [wrote about] Shakespeare.” Page said that “we did quite a bit [of writing in high school], there was a variety of stuff, and it was not just essays. I did research papers, essays, exam questions, poems, and all the variety of papers.”

It was the students’ perceptions that they completed a variety of writing assignments during their high school years. The data from the quantitative survey was consistent with this finding. On the survey, students reported that they had to write essays, research papers, short answer questions, poems, short stories, newspaper articles, and journals in high school. Though the sheer number of writing assignments increased the volume of the writing the students were required to produce, it also led to a number of the participants (6 of 20) expressing dissatisfaction or confusion. They reported frustration at having to write so many different kinds of assignments. They were particularly unhappy with the lack of clear direction given for the assignments. The students (11 of 20) talked of getting high marks on their English Language Arts assignments but they also reported that the marks they received did not have any meaning for them. They felt that they could turn in work of any quality and still get a good mark. They also reported that they did not often bother to try to incorporate the teacher comments they received on their papers because the comments were often not helpful. In addition, if they did

read the comments the students (6 of 20) did not always see ways in which they could incorporate the teacher comments into their next paper because they perceived each assignment to be a stand-alone assignment.

The findings from Applebee's (1984) interviews with high school students were very similar with the kinds of comments made in this study. In Applebee's research, the students reported that teachers' comments were specific to the paper under consideration but did not specify how the improvements could be incorporated into their next papers. For example, if they wrote a poem, they wrote a single poem and did not write another until the next year when the annual poetry unit came around. Similarly, if they were asked to write a journal, it was not handed in until the unit was completed with no opportunity to incorporate the feedback. Thus, the comments they received after the fact were not helpful for improving their journal writing. It was the students' perceptions that this was the case with the majority of the assignments they had to do in high school. Because the assignments were so varied, and because the students did not have to do another assignment of the same type, the students did not see how they could utilize teachers' comments to improve their writing. For the students who participated in this study, they reported that these kinds of assignments made writing haphazard and disjointed. The lack of clear direction in high school English Language Arts classes caused students to become frustrated when completing assignments.

Teacher engagement in students' writing

Figures 4.13 and 4.14 report on the data concerning students' perceptions of their high school teachers' interest in how well they learned how to write papers in their classes.

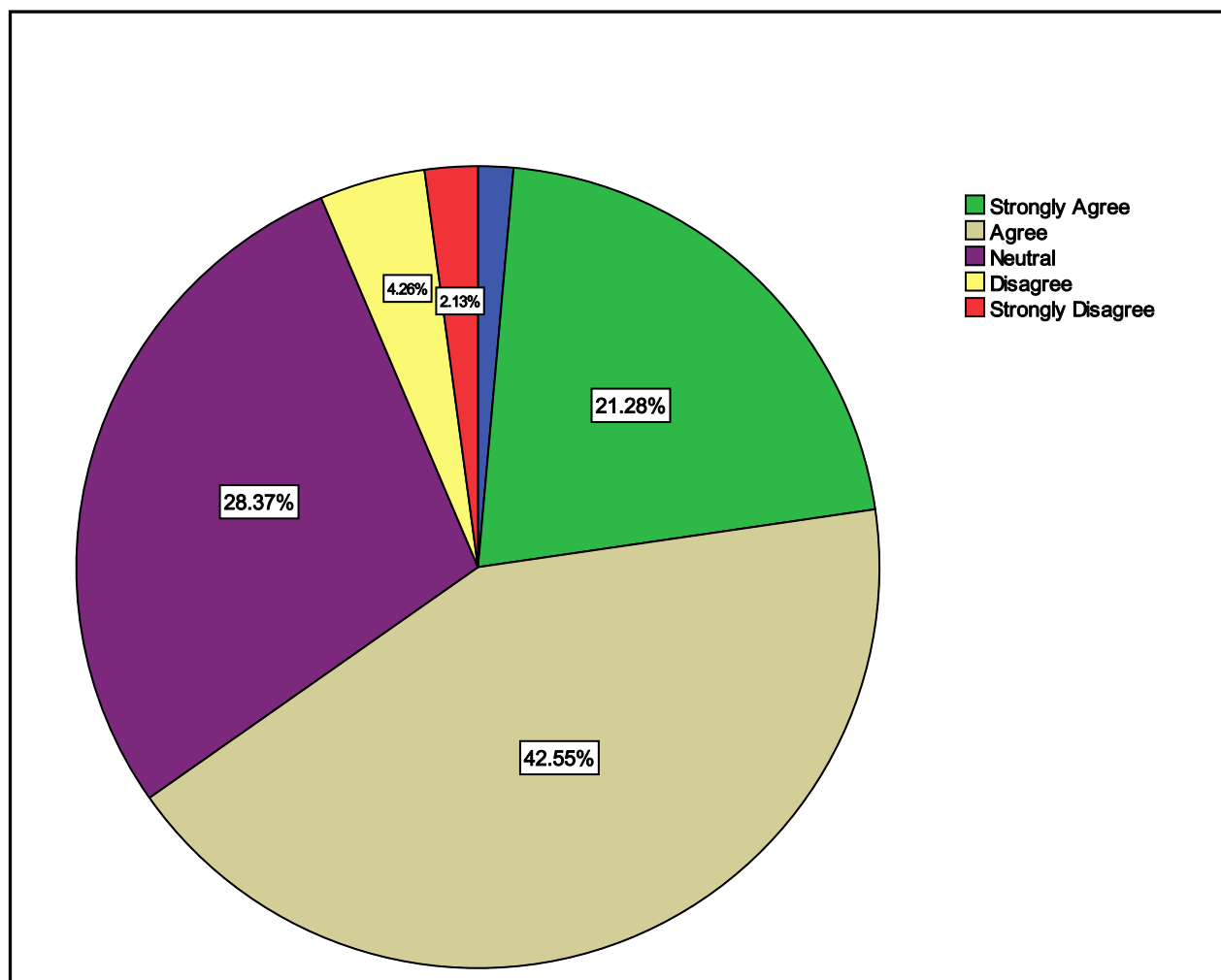


Figure 4.13 My English Language Arts teachers are invested in ensuring I do well in learning how to write in their classes.

Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) reported that if students see that their teachers have an interest in student performance, students are more likely to be involved, engaged, and motivated for schoolwork. A teacher can make a difference in students' sense of self-efficacy, which impacts a students' belief that they can be successful in the classroom. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) found that students' judgment of their efficacy might be higher or lower depending on the

teacher and classroom environment. If students have a teacher who actively engages them in the learning tasks, then students' overall performance can increase.

A supportive teacher can make a difference in student motivation as Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) point out. Such teachers can assist their students to *see* themselves as capable and able to navigate assignments successfully. Similarly, in their study of two hundred and fifty second-year students from a small Canadian university, Brady and Allingham (2007) found that there was a relationship between the success of students and their perception of the degree of support they received from their instructors.

In terms of instruction, students were asked for their perceptions regarding the degree to which their English Language Arts teachers were invested in ensuring students improved as writers. Sixty-four percent agreed that their teachers were interested in making sure that they learned how to write, 28% were neutral, and only 6% disagreed that their English Language Arts teachers were interested in how well they learned how to write in their classes.

In the present study, students were asked whether they felt their teachers were invested in ensuring they would be successful in learning to write. The positive responses to the questions of the degree of support students perceived to be coming from teachers, and the degree to which teachers encouraged students to seek help, may be related to the degree of confidence the students reported when asked if they felt confident writing a paper in their courses.

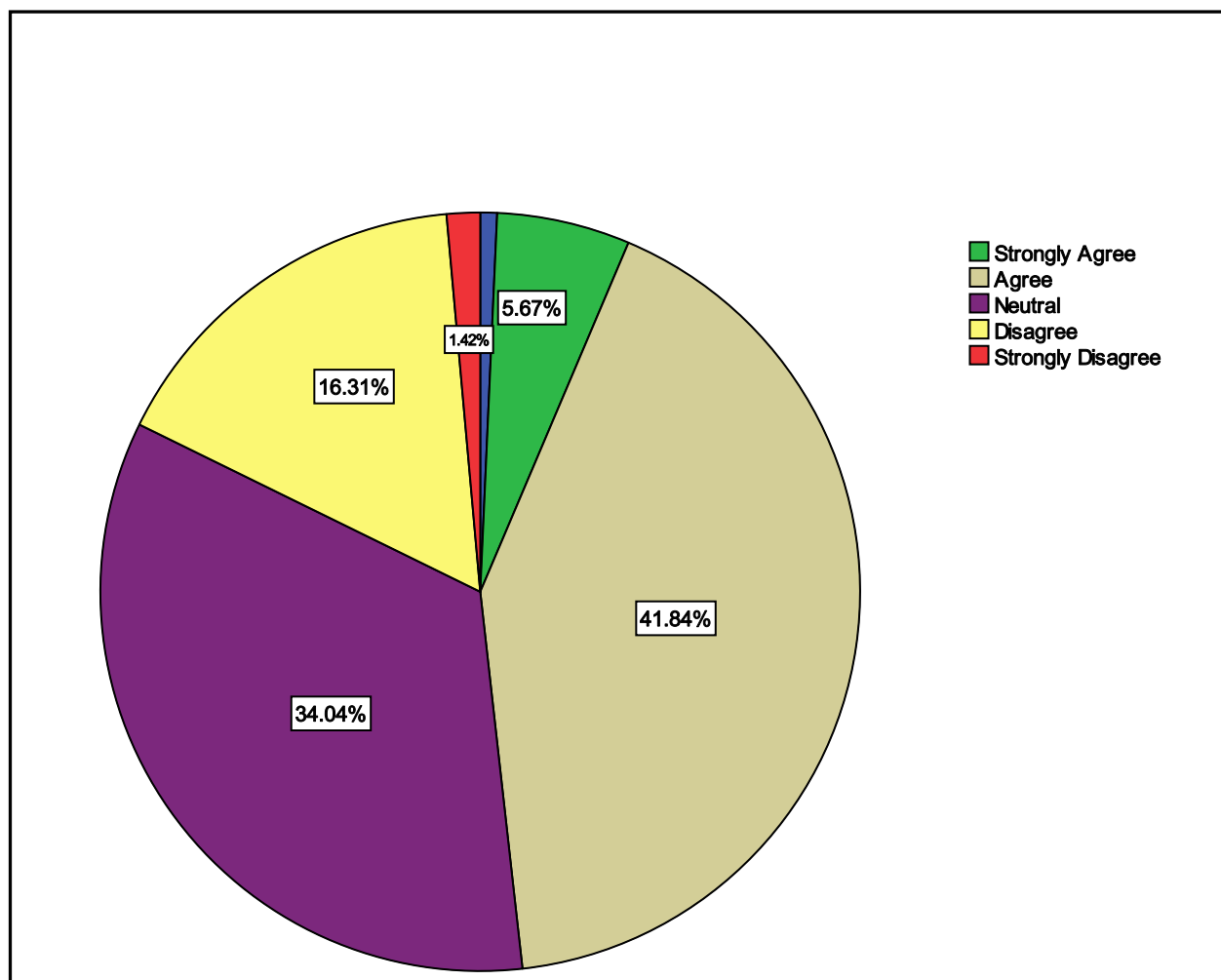


Figure 4.14 My other teachers, besides English Language Arts, are invested in ensuring I do well in learning how to write in their classes.

Figure 4.14 reports on the question that asked whether teachers in other courses were invested in ensuring they did well in learning to write, 48% felt that their teachers were invested, 34% were neutral, and 17% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their teachers were invested. Five of the twenty students interviewed in the present study reported that their teachers in the content areas did not provide much in the way of guidance with assignments. This was in answer to the question ‘Did you feel that your content area teachers gave you enough direction in

how to complete your writing assignments’? It was the students’ (10 out of 20) perception that teachers in the content areas assumed that students knew how to write papers because they had taken an English class, and thus did not spend time explaining what they wanted in their assignments. Erica found that “I think they just assumed because we all had to take an English course so it would be like, oh yeah, it’s just like English, like an English essay, and they would just reiterate it had an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, and some kind of a thesis.” Shirley remembered that “we didn’t get any direction in other classes about what type of writing the teacher was looking for in the assignments.” Nora commented that

“I found it hard in my World Issues class because the teacher didn’t really give us any guidelines or rubrics. I don’t know what he wanted. It was like you were supposed to know how to write essays . . . sometimes you would give a one page answer that was just one long paragraph and he never said anything. It was like anything goes. I wish he had given us some guidance on what he expected.”

Two of the students mentioned that their teachers assigned short answer style questions but only marked the content without commenting on the composition. Shirley said “in social studies and geography we were given essay questions but we didn’t have to write a proper essay, just a paragraph that covered all the points he wanted us to cover, so it was a little weird to get an essay question but not be required to write an essay.” Similarly Jack was surprised to discover that “we were expected to write in essay format but we weren’t marked on essay format.” The students also reported that the types of writing that was expected in science classes were mostly lab reports and summaries rather than essays. Though some science teachers gave outlines of the way in which they wanted the labs written up, for the most part, once again, students were not

given any specific guidelines to follow. Luke mentioned that “we did not get as much guidance for lab reports.”

The results from this study indicated that it was the perception of many high school students (12 of 20) that the writing they had to do in the content areas consisted primarily of short answer style questions in which they were given specific questions on a topic and asked to consult their textbooks to find answers. This type of assignment asked students to provide summaries of material from their textbooks placing considerable emphasis on the importance of the subject content and little, if any, emphasis on the assignment’s composition. In fact, teachers often did not grade the effectiveness of the writing itself unless they also happened to be English teachers who were teaching a content area course like history.

Outlines, Models, And Examples

In the writing process, the use of outlines, models, and examples can provide the type of structured help that students require if they are to obtain a general understanding of the process of composition (Langer & Applebee, 1987). Langer and Applebee (1987) hypothesized that when students can see a clear purpose in the writing tasks (i.e., outlines, models, examples) they are being asked to perform, and when the individual activities students are being asked to undertake are contextualized as parts of a larger whole, writing becomes a process rather than a product for students. These various activities can provide discrete supports to the larger process, and the teacher’s role becomes one of providing the instructional support, or scaffolding, that will enable students to undertake new and more difficult tasks (Langer & Applebee, 1984). Langer and Applebee (1984) affirmed that these scaffolded “tasks are purposeful for the student because they grow out of what the student wants to do, but cannot do without the teacher’s help”

(p. 176). The authors further state that the role of instructional scaffolding is to provide students with appropriate models and strategies for addressing new problems. These models and strategies will, eventually, enable the students to do the tasks on their own.

In this study, a similar theme emerged in the qualitative data concerning the use of outlines, models, and examples in class. In response to the question of whether the students' English Language Arts teachers provided enough direction in ways to complete assignments in English Language Arts in grades 10 – 12, some students reported that they had teachers who provided the models and examples to facilitate their understanding of the writing process. These students reported that they found the writing aids extremely helpful. Again, the responses varied depending on the students' respective teachers. It is worth noting, I think, that the examples the students gave with respect to outlines, models, and examples all pertained to the Grade 12 high school English exam. There was no way of discerning the number of times high school teachers made use of outlines, models, or examples in other ways.

Nora said, "In second term, because we were getting ready to write the provincial exam, our teacher showed us examples of the various kinds of questions that we would have to answer and how many points that question received . . . it was helpful."

Bob said:

The good thing about examples is that it gave us an example of how to write short and concise essays which is the way to go when you are writing an exam but especially the provincial exam . . . I find it easier to write when teachers give you guidelines because otherwise you don't know what to do. My teacher was always very helpful in telling us

what was expected in the essay, and gave us essay guidelines of what we had to include in the essay.

Brad reported a similar practice on the part of his teacher: “If you asked him for examples, he would give you so many other assignments that you could do for practice, and he would offer his room for you to practice [when getting ready for the provincial English exam].” Brad also said that: “He [English Language Arts teacher] made this . . . it’s called the diamond writer, and it gives you like step by step [guidance] just tell what you need to say, the introduction, what you need to change, and it’s just really, really helpful.” Caroline also found the use of examples was very useful when getting ready to write a large report: “[For our twenty page report] he showed us an example. We read through it. He had examples from past years for us to look at. And I guess figure out the organization from there . . . we also had an outline, things we had to have [included in the report] like an introduction, the summary statement.”

Jason found that: “She [English Language Arts teacher] had displays of past assignments, and other topics and stuff, and she would always say if you want to come and look at these, feel free, they are up here. If you want them, but if you’re comfortable without it, then go ahead and write it.”

Writing Assignments Relate To Advancement as Writers

When conducting the pilot study with Senior 4 (grade 12) students in the Spring of 2011, I asked students whether there were any questions they thought I should have asked on the survey. One of the questions they suggested concerned the degree to which writing assignments related to a student’s development as a writer. It was the perception of all of the students (4 of 4) who took part in the focus group that writing assignments in high school were not challenging,

had little purpose beyond serving as make-work projects, and did not appear to advance students' writing abilities. The students expressed the view that the kinds of papers they would be expected to write in first-year university were going to be different than the ones they had been writing in high school. It was their perception that their high school teachers had not done enough to prepare them for the kinds of writing they anticipated they would have to do in university.

Figures 4.15 and 4.16 report on the data gathered on the quantitative survey regarding the degree to which students perceived that their writing assignments had some effect on their advancement as writers. It is noteworthy that, though the students involved in the pilot study worried that their high school writing assignments did nothing to advance their skills as writers, the students who completed the survey did not appear to have the same concerns. There were no qualitative data available concerning these questions since these were not questions that were posed to students during the focus groups or interviews.

The research conducted by Applebee (1981) seems to corroborate these findings. He found that high school students were tasked with what he referred to as "mechanical" writing assignments which he characterized as short answer and fill-in-the-blank. The students who participated in the focus group and the individual interviews were more critical of their writing assignments than were the students who completed the quantitative survey. This discrepancy could be explained by the attributes of the students who volunteered to participate in either the focus groups or the individual interviews. It was my impression that these students because they were university bound might have had concerns about the types of assignments they were being asked to complete that may have been different than the perceptions of the general student

population. It was these students' perceptions that the kinds of papers they were being asked to produce in high school were not helping them learn how to write the way they would be expected to write in first-year university.

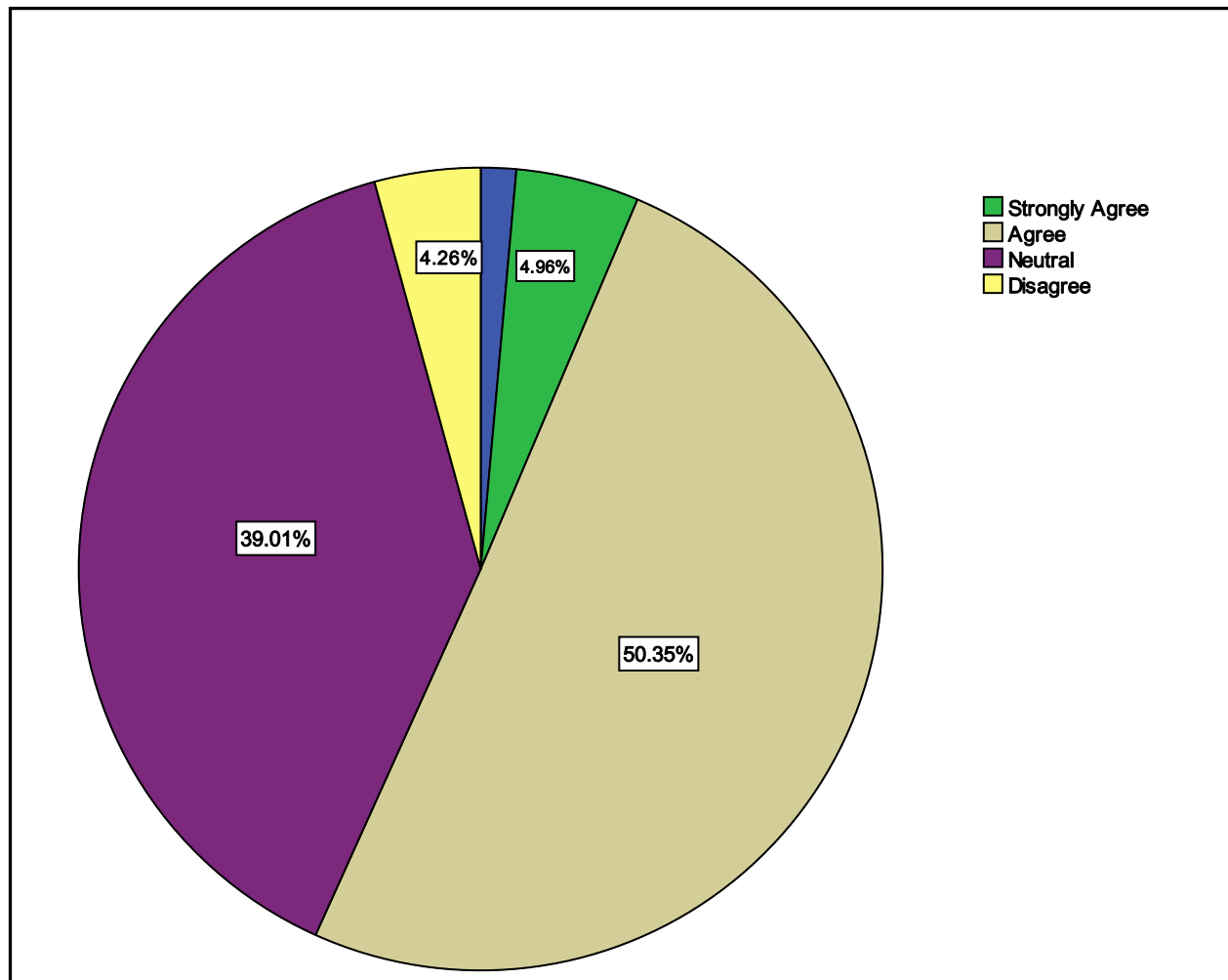


Figure 4.15 The writing assignments we are required to complete in English Language Arts relate directly to our advancement as writers.

When students were asked whether the writing assignments they had to do in English Language Arts classes related directly to their advancement as writers, 55% agreed or strongly

agreed that the assignments did help them become better writers, 39% were neutral, and only 4% disagreed that the assignments related to their advancement as writers.

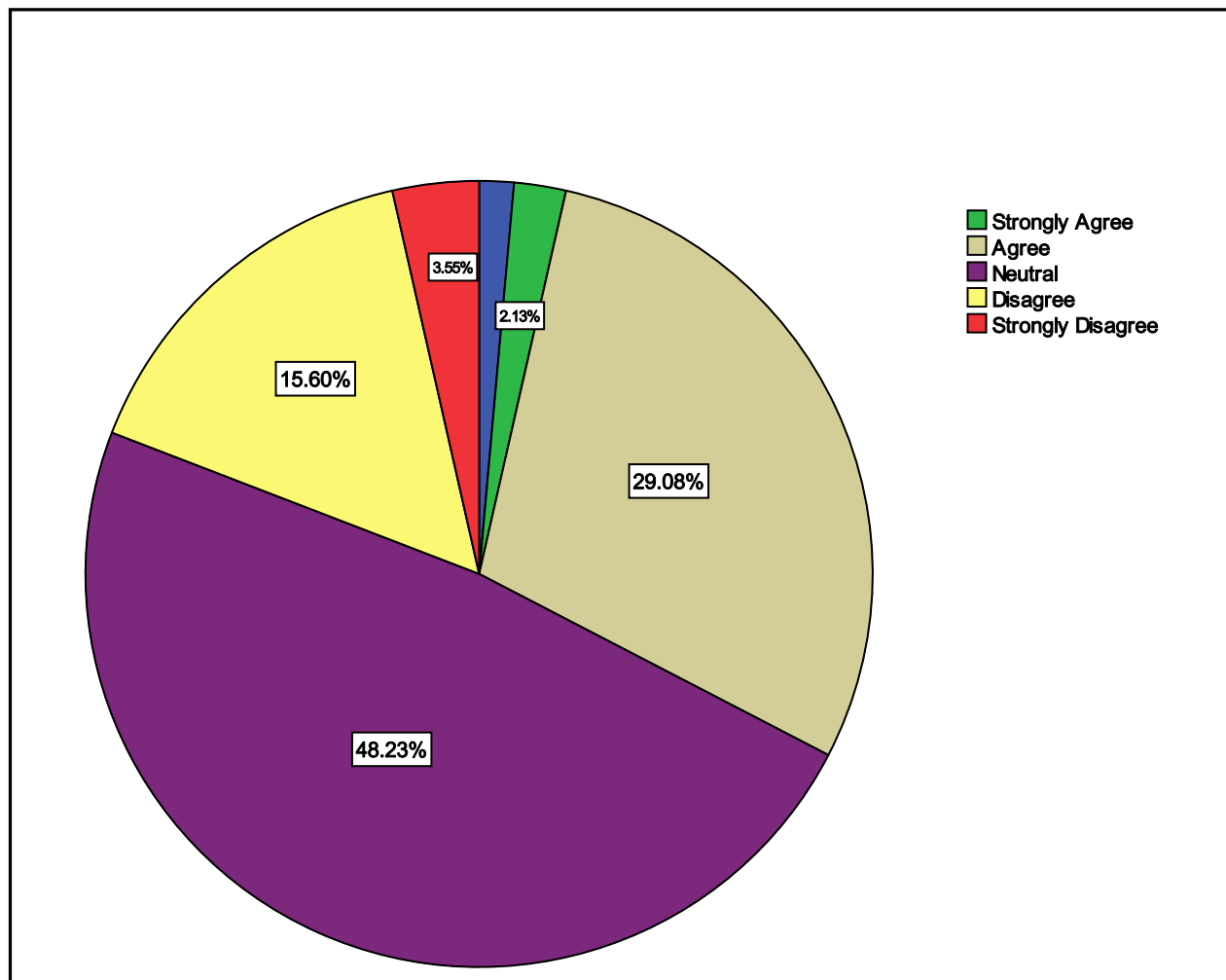


Figure 4.16 The writing assignments we are required to complete in our other classes relate directly to our advancement as writers.

When the students were asked whether the writing assignments they were required to complete in other classes contributed to their advancement as writers, 31% agreed or strongly

agreed that their assignments helped them become better writers, 48% were neutral, and 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the assignments led to them becoming better writers.

This question necessarily follows the question regarding English Language Arts assignments and their contribution to helping students advance as writers. Once again, some (3 of 4) of the focus group students who participated in the pilot study expressed the opinion that their content area teachers did not make an effort to help students improve their overall writing ability. They believed that essays in the content areas were marked for content with little or no consideration given to the quality of the writing. The students reported some confusion regarding the way in which essays were taught and graded in content courses. They wrote their essays for content courses the same way they wrote essays for Language Arts classes and did not understand why the writing products would be assessed differently.

Perception of Writing Competence In Relation To Marks Received

This question was added to the survey as a result of the pilot study focus group. Their reason for adding this question emerged from students' perceptions that the grades they received in high school for writing assignments did not reflect their ability or effort in writing. They felt that they received high marks simply for submitting their assignments regardless of the time or effort they invested. Because the marks they received seemed arbitrary, the grading did not give them any indication of the ways in which they could improve their writing.

The students in this study, who participated in the focus groups, and individual interviews, expressed concern that their high school grades were inflated and therefore had no bearing on the quality of the work they were producing. The practice of handing out grades to students who do not deserve them has been a concern of educators since 1894 when a committee

at Harvard University reported that there were too many A's and B's being awarded (Laurie, 2007). Laurie (2007) commented that "teachers who give students undeserved marks may create the illusion of successful student performance, but their practice is akin to decreasing student expectations with the predictable consequence of lower student performance" (p. 32). In Laurie's study, conducted in Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick, Canada, he found that there was a negative correlation between grade inflation and student performance.

According to Sandler (2009), grade inflation occurs when high grades are awarded for low achievement. The result of this practice is that the grades are no longer representative of student academic achievement in their courses. Similarly, Ziomek and Svec (1997) define grade inflation as an increase in grades without a parallel increase in ability. Andrews (1983) said that "grades should be indicators of academic achievement so they can be relied upon as evidence of a student's readiness for further study" (p. 81). Grades are meant to convey levels of academic achievement and express them in terms that everyone understands. The problem with this approach is that grades are often subjective and open to interpretation by individual teachers (Ziomek & Svec, 1997). High school grades are especially vulnerable to inflation as teachers reward grades based on varying standards and purposes. Even teachers within the same schools can base their marks on different criteria leading to diverse grading practices (Ziomek & Svec, 1997).

Grades can have an impact on a "student's sense of achievement, acting as goals that provide motivation to engage productively with, go deeper into, or push beyond course material" (Sadler, 2009, p. 811). Sadler (2009) further found that "many students are capable of discerning among inflated, token, and high-merit grades especially (but not only) when they are able to

gauge for themselves the quality of their own work, independently of external judgments” (p. 811). Grades can act as a support to students’ achievement only when the grades accurately represent the achievement.

Figures 4.17 and 4.18 address the question of whether students’ self-perceptions of competence as writers is related to the grade they receive in their classes. There is no qualitative data available for this question since it was not a topic that was raised in the qualitative interviews or focus groups.

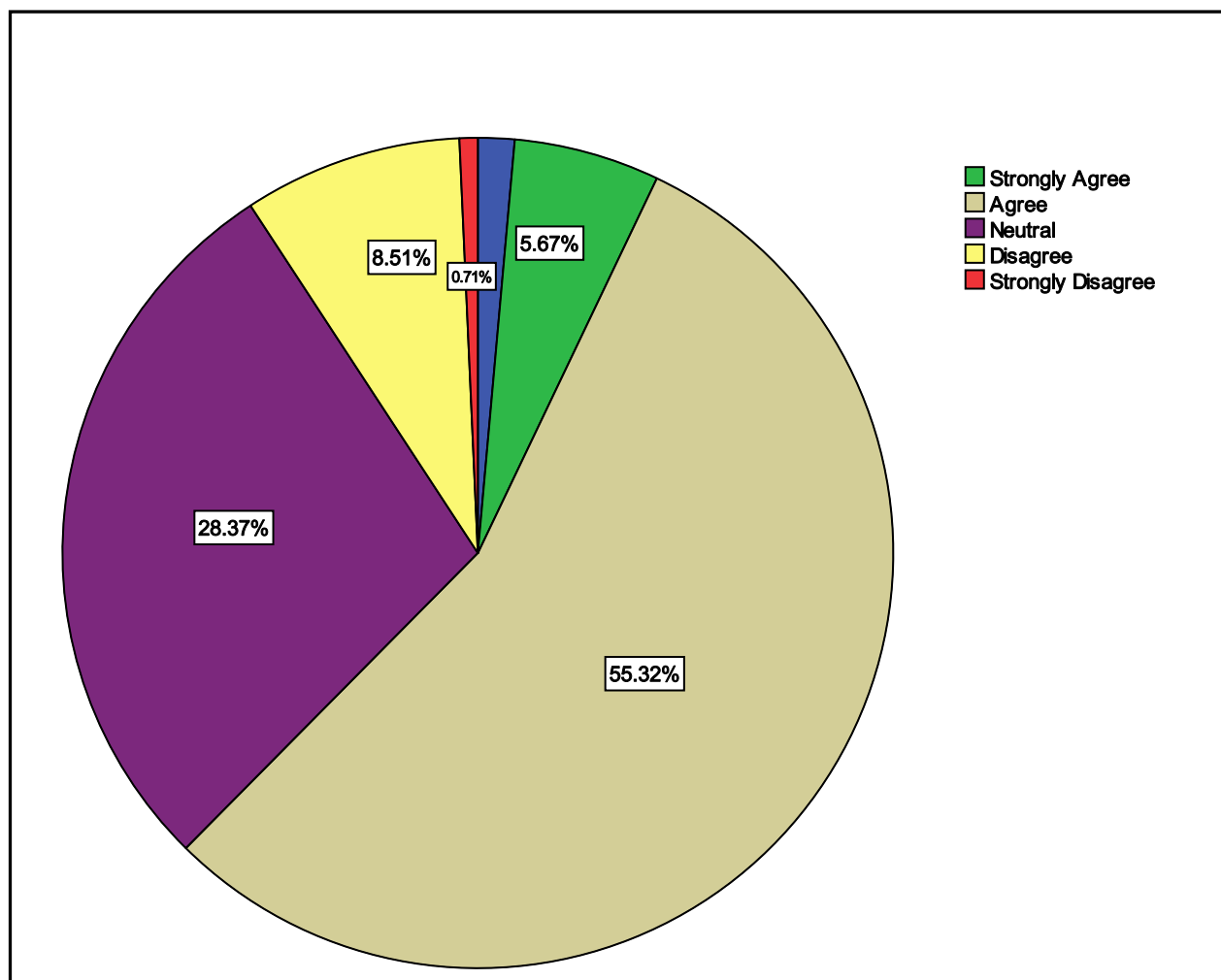


Figure 4.17 I feel that my competence in writing relates to the mark I receive in English

Language Arts

The students (4 of 4) who participated in the pilot study reported that they did not think that the marks they received reflected their competence as writers. That is, it was their perception that their competence was not as great as their marks might suggest. However, the students who completed the survey did not seem to have the same concern. As shown in figure 4.17, 61% of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the marks they received in English

Language Arts related to their competence as writers, 28% were neutral, and 10% disagreed that the marks related to their ability to write competently.

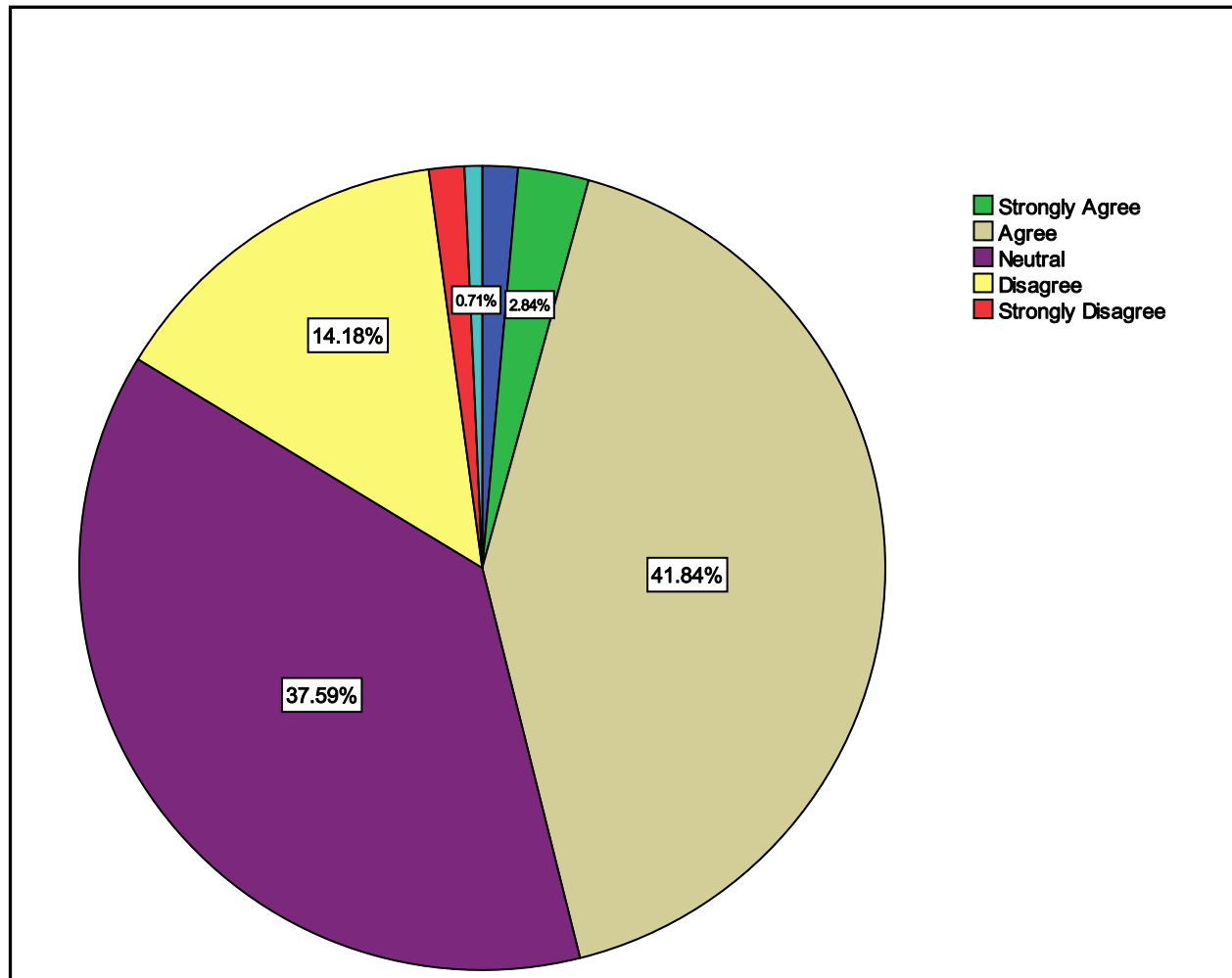


Figure 4.18 I feel that my competence in writing relates to the marks I receive in other classes besides English Language Arts

When asked the same question about the marks they received in their other courses, 47% felt that their competence in writing related to the marks they received in their other classes, 38% were neutral, and 15% disagreed that the marks they received in their other classes were an indication of their competence as writers. This was not a question that was included in the pilot

study, but it was added because it followed logically from the previous question regarding students' perceptions of the relationship between marks and competence in English Language Arts classes.

The results from the quantitative survey are different from the results of the qualitative data in terms of how students view their marks. This difference could be accounted for, again, by the make-up of the students who participated in the qualitative research. Perhaps, as suggested by Sadler (2009) some students are better able to judge their own work and the relative merits of that work. The students who participated in the qualitative interviews were, by their own admission successful in high school in terms of marks received, and they may have been better able to judge the quality of their own work and that is why they expressed concern that they were being rewarded for achievement that they felt they did not deserve.

Written Feedback Received From Teachers/Instructors

The use of feedback is an important step in the writing process if students are to improve their overall competence in writing (Chaudron, 1984). Chaudron (1984) observed that as learners receive feedback as to the effectiveness of writing, and when they are required to make revisions based on that feedback before they can say their product is finished, "they will discover that good writing involves an interaction between their ideas, the expression of the ideas, and their reader's perceptions and reactions" (p. 2). Chaudron further found that students' development as effective writers depended upon the degree of instructor feedback they received. Student progress was also affected by their relative degree of awareness of the effects of their writing on readers.

Applebee (1984) determined that the kinds of comments made on high school students' papers are often not helpful. He found that teachers' comments often focused on form, especially at the word and sentence level, without providing a great deal of explanation as to why a different form would be more suitable for the paper or how to employ the different form. The students interviewed by Applebee reported that they had to conform to rather strict guidelines, and if they moved outside of those guidelines, they were corrected. They also found that the comments they received generally did not tell them how they could improve their overall writing.

The results from the next four figures (4.19, 4.20, 4.21, and 4.22) will be discussed together at the end of this section. The discussion will include a discussion of the qualitative data that also addressed feedback.

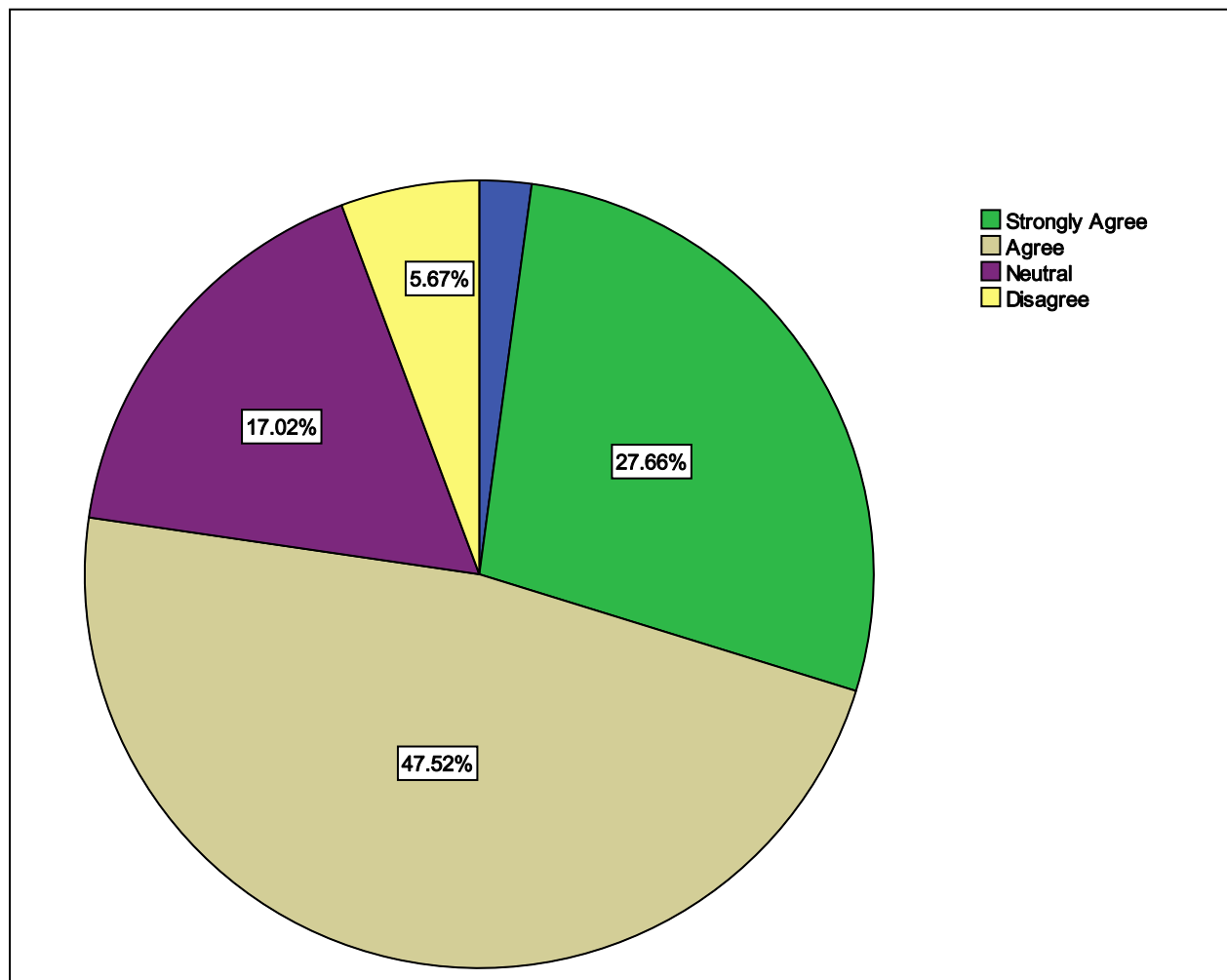


Figure 4.19 Written feedback from my English Teachers was helpful in improving the quality of my essays.

The results from this study concerning written feedback showed that 76% of the students who filled out the survey agreed or strongly agreed that the feedback they received helped them to improve the quality of their essays, 17% were neutral, and 6% disagreed that the written comments were helpful. It was encouraging to find that the students perceived that the kinds of teacher feedback they received helped them improve as writers. These results are consistent with the results from earlier statements in this study regarding student confidence as writers, their

perception that their teachers cared about their improvement as writers, and, their perception that the teachers encouraged them to ask for help if they had any difficulties with their assignments.

Figure 4.20 also records student responses about written feedback from their English Language Arts teachers.

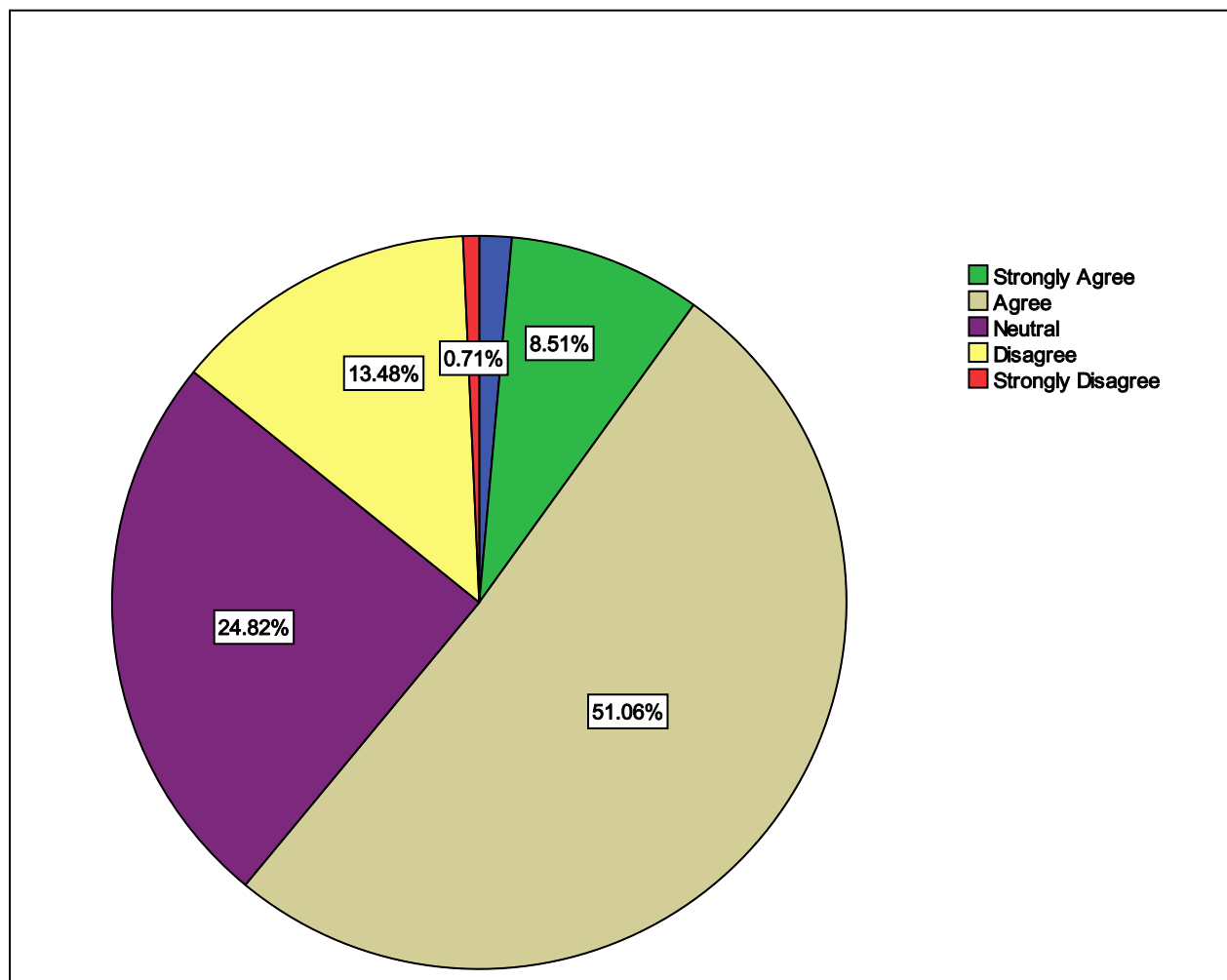


Figure 4.20 The kinds of comments I received from teachers on my essays dealt with ways to improve the meaning of my essay.

In answer to the question of whether the comments received from their teachers dealt with ways to improve the meaning of their essay, 60% agreed or strongly agreed with that

statement, 25% were neutral, and 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the kinds of comments they received on their paper dealt with ways to improve the meaning of their essay.

Figure 4.21 also addressed the question of teacher feedback, this time concerning other classes they were taking besides English Language Arts.

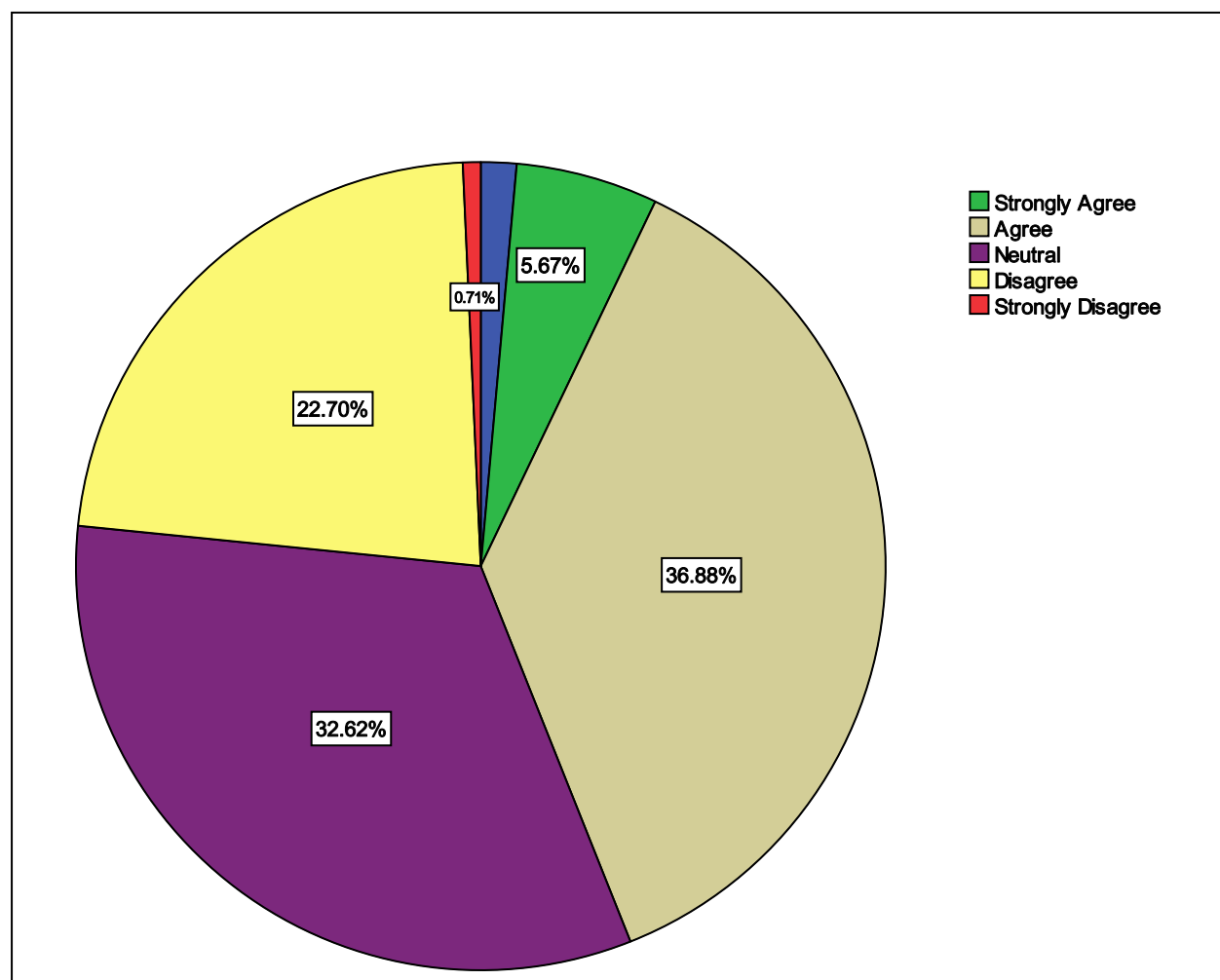


Figure 4.21 When I produced writing in other classes, I received written feedback from my teachers about the quality of the paper.

When asked about the kinds of comments they got from their teachers in other courses, 43% agreed or strongly agreed that the written feedback from teachers concerned the quality of

the paper, 33% were neutral, and 24% disagreed that the kinds of comments they received from their teachers dealt with the quality of their paper.

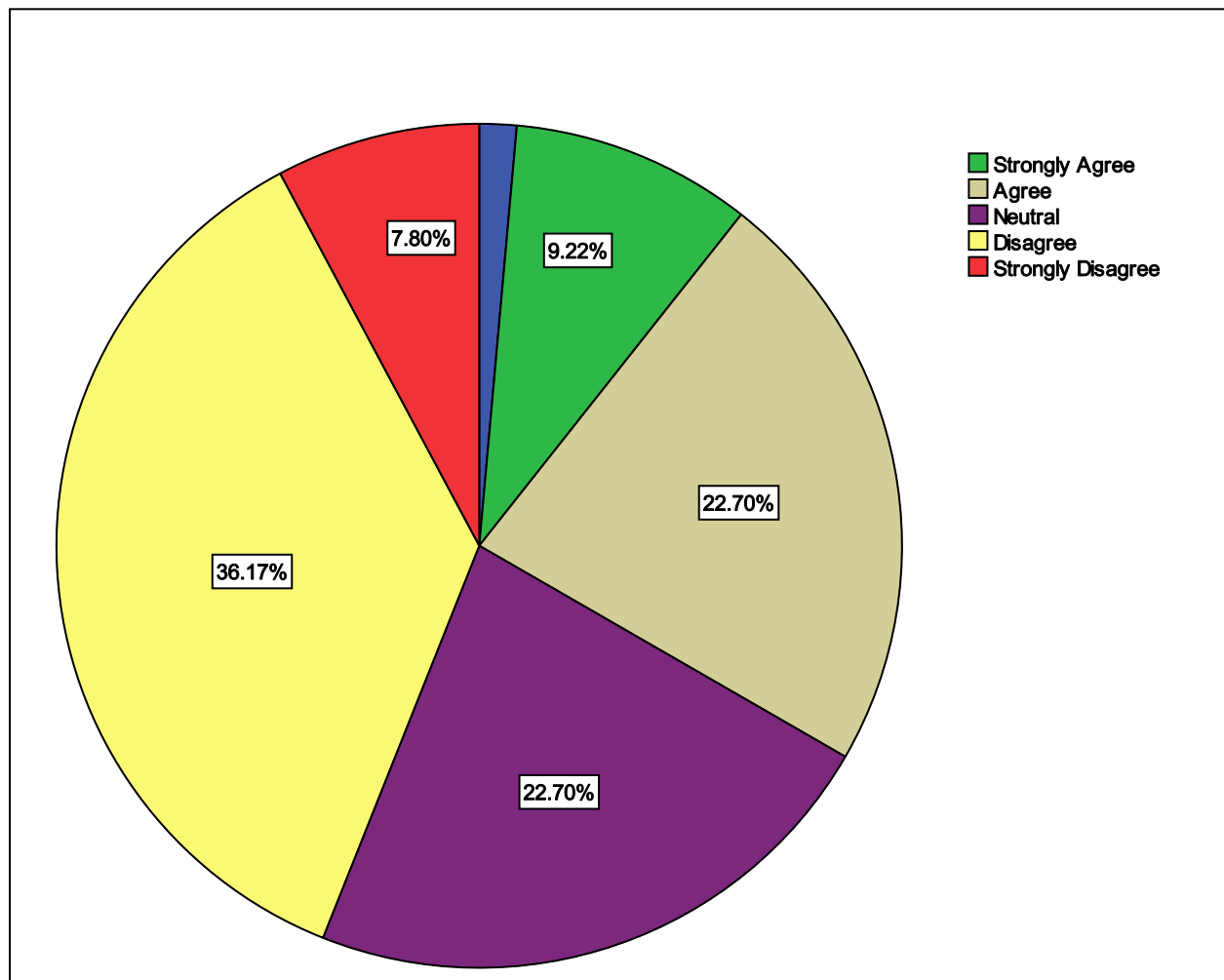


Figure 4.22 The kinds of comments received from my teachers on my essays dealt mostly with grammar (e.g., spelling, punctuation).

When asked whether the comments they received from their English Language Arts teachers dealt predominantly with grammatical correctness, 21% agreed or strongly agreed with

that statement, and 23% were neutral, while 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the main type of feedback they received dealt mostly with grammar errors. As Chaudron (1984) observed, if students are to develop as competent writers, they need instructor feedback that is designed to help them understand ways in which they might more effectively develop their ideas and write for meaning. Instructor feedback on the mechanics of writing was less effective. Applebee (1984) found that the kinds of comments made by teachers often tended to focus on elements of writing that he referred to as *form*. He defined form as the mechanics of writing and distinguished these from the process of making meaning. In the qualitative data analyzed for this study, there were mixed results concerning the degree to which students found their teacher comments beneficial. In this study, students were prompted to remember the kinds of feedback they received on their papers from their English Language Arts teachers. The responses ranged from recollections of some students that they had received only directions for undertaking corrections in grammar, to observations from other students that they had been permitted to re-write their papers on the basis of teacher comments.

Nora said:

I just found in my English classes that the comments and grades were unclear. We had to go and ask the teacher if we wanted more information, but you couldn't tell based on the comments or the marks [about] what you did good or what you needed to improve on. The comments tended to be vague.

Betty found that the comments she received from her teachers in high school tended to be the same as those that Nora had received:

In grade 12 all the comments were vague. Like if there is a paragraph, and the comment says write this in more depth, and how much depth I would ask myself, I would write it, and he would be like, still not in-depth enough, and I would ask how in-depth do you want it. I would have liked a comment like, at least if he had given me an example of what in-depth writing looked like, maybe that would have helped, but I just felt like all the comments were like on top of the cream or something . . . more superficial.

Shirley also found that her teachers did not give particularly clear directions in ways to improve essays:

In grades 10 and 11, I felt that both the teachers I had didn't even know how they were supposed to mark, they didn't know what rubric they were using so they couldn't really mark it accurately I guess, so it was kind of frustrating because I didn't get any feedback whatsoever, it was like a check mark beside good sentences, and I was like what does that mean . . . I like to know what teachers are looking for. Just don't tell me what to do, because I won't do it.

Judy was dissatisfied with the instruction she received in Grade Twelve. She felt that, at that stage, her teachers were no longer trying to teach her how to write. She reported that "in Grade 12, they expect you to know everything" and, therefore, did not provide any instruction in how to write an essay. For Judy, this was very frustrating. She would have liked some direction in how to write a proper essay.

Melissa, on the other hand, was very satisfied with her Grade 12 teacher. She found that:

My teacher this semester is very organized. She gives out rubrics that tell you what she wants you to do. She has very specific expectations and she makes sure that she tells you what those are. We can also ask her for clarification if we have to.

Similarly, Page observed that:

my English teacher helped me a lot. He would help show me what I was doing wrong and how to improve it . . . he always had rubrics, and he always explained what he wanted to be written . . . sometimes you would have to go back, if I didn't fully understand it, I would have to go and ask him . . . I think they [high school teachers] were pretty good at teaching. He [English Language Arts teacher] helped me like basically . . . any ideas I had, he would try to help me elaborate more, and put what's most important and learn how to organize it better, like putting the most important idea first.

Jack found that his teachers were helpful:

My teachers would often give us sort of general comments but they were always open to us coming to them to ask to explain why we got this comment or what we could improve on or to fix this, that sort of thing. And I think that worked well because it was easier to figure out exactly what they meant rather than just sort of seeing something like sentence fragment written on our paper, and not being able to figure out quite what we did wrong.

Jody commented generally on the kind of writing she did in high school, and the nature of comments she received from her English Language Arts teacher:

Yes, we got rubrics but they were not strictly followed. As I said, the teachers were just happy if you handed in something and since most of the papers we did were just give your own opinion, there was nothing to get wrong . . . like I said, our teachers didn't really check homework, or even ask questions to see if we had read the book . . . I did maybe 15 minutes of homework a night and I was always caught up . . . I honestly do not feel like I have accomplished anything [in high school English Language Arts].

Marilyn's comments, while not specific to the kinds of feedback she got from her English Language Arts teachers on essays, did address the ethos of the high school she attended, and the sensibilities of the teachers at the school:

I think in high school you should learn more, so it was just such a waste of time. It is impossible to fail. Like, if you fail, then you really didn't even show up. If you show up, then you are pretty much good to go. Even a lot of our teachers said that you are not going to fail high school if you come to every class.

Ashley reported that, unlike other students in the study, her teachers did not allow students to re-write essays for credit:

I never got the chance to re-write an essay or any form of writing, it was just like you get what you get, so suck it up, just take it. So there was never a chance because they expect you to know how to go through it and actually do it while you are going through is so that's the time to ask questions [because] once it's actually [handed] in like [that's] the end kind of thing.

On the other hand, Brad reported that: “[we could correct our essays and hand them in again] he corrects us, he wants us to improve, and I remember him saying at the beginning, just revise it, and let me look at your work . . . and you’ll improve and I have.”

Judy had a similar experience:

In grade 11 I got to write an essay. I mean, the whole class did. We got to write it three times and I found that really nice. For example, you went from a 70 to a 95. And the teacher was amazing at giving you comments and telling you like switch the sentence and also she would spend her lunch hours helping students.

Regarding the kinds of written feedback received from teachers, the quantitative and qualitative data appear to contradict one another. The survey results revealed that students felt their English Language Arts teachers’ feedback was designed to improve their writing skills. However, the qualitative data gathered both through the focus groups and the individual interviews provided a different view of teacher feedback. It was the students’ (6 of 20) perceptions that some teachers gave very good feedback and that the feedback helped them improve in their writing, while other teachers did not provide feedback that the students found useful. Some students (8 of 20) reported that they valued teachers who took the time to give relevant written feedback designed to help students improve as writers. Other students (12 of 20), however, found that the kinds of feedback they received from their teachers were vague and irrelevant. In some cases, the students (10 of 20) felt that any feedback that could not be directly applied to their specific essays was not useful, and, thus, felt that the teachers were not helping them to become better writers.

It was also important to investigate whether the students perceived that the written feedback received from teachers pertained more to surface errors than to content. Applebee observed that teachers tended to make comments on students' command of stylistic elements and on the format of the paper (e.g., page lay-out, paper length, and adherence to standard usage). In this study, the students varied in their reports of the kinds of feedback they received. It appeared to be dependent on the individual teacher. The results reported in Figure 4.20 addressed student perceptions of the written feedback they received from their English Language Arts teachers.

Comments on the surface errors are not considered as useful as comments about ways in which to improve the overall meaning of a text (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) discovered that before the process approach to writing, teacher comments regarding improving a student's paper tended to focus on grammatical correctness. Similarly, Applebee (1984) observed that the kinds of comments he saw written on student papers also focussed on the surface correctness of the paper.

The fact that only 21% of students reported that their English Language Arts teachers focussed mainly on grammar is encouraging as is the high percentage of students (44%) who disagreed with that statement. Applebee (1984) observed in his study that teachers, for the most part, gave written feedback on only the surface errors of students' papers. In contrast, in this study, 76% of the students reported that the written feedback they received from their teachers was aimed at improving the overall quality of their essays.

The Amount of Direction Given For Completing English Language Arts Assignments in High School

One of the qualitative questions asked students if they felt that their English Language Arts teachers gave them enough direction in how to complete their assignments in English Language Arts in grades 10 – 12. The answers ranged from not a lot of direction to extensive direction. There was no quantitative survey question that dealt with the amount of teacher direction given to students.

Applebee (1981) found that most high school teachers did not give specific directions to their students beyond reading the assignment to them and telling them the length of paper that they were obliged to write. Similarly, when Applebee (1984) conducted individual interviews with high school students, the students reported that the writing instruction they received [in high school], if any, was limited to a description of the final form the piece was to take. Applebee was surprised by the specificity with which students could describe the form their writing was to take. He discovered that the shape of the product was made clear to the students down to the number of paragraphs that they had to write (e.g., the five-paragraph essay). Applebee further discovered that students were given the organizational structure but were often left wondering why they were writing the essay or how to write the essay. Students viewed writing as a means to an end.

Not surprisingly, students in the present study ranked their high school writing instruction from very good to very poor, depending on the teachers they had. Their satisfaction with the writing instruction they received in high school did not appear to have any correlation to the kinds of writing they did. It was the perception of most of the students (13 of 20), that high

school instruction consisted of assignments that were only two to three pages long, that they had no direction, teachers accepted whatever they handed in, and students received high marks regardless of the quality of material they submitted. Students' (12 of 20) spoke of teachers who did not care what they did in class, who gave them lots of time to hand in assignments, and did not make comments on their papers that would help them improve their writing.

In this study, the responses given by the students in answer to the question of how much direction was given to them revealed a range of approaches that depended on the individual teacher. Some teachers provided guidance, rubrics, and clear expectations, while other teachers provided no guidance, no rubrics, and no clear indications of expectations. The lack of clear expectations was a source of frustration for students (7 of 20). They complained that some of their teachers did not explain to them the basis on which they received the marks they did on their assignments. They also expressed annoyance that some of their teachers used marking rubrics to grade assignments but did not provide the rubrics to students before they had to hand in their assignments.

The following two responses are typical of the student perceptions concerning teacher direction and how it differed depending on the individual teacher. Bob said that his "English teacher was really good about explaining assignments and giving us what she wanted us to include in the assignment." However, Monica found that while some of her teachers were very good, others were less helpful:

One of my teachers definitely does [give clear expectations] he gives us a rubric. He tells us basically what is expected of us. We can always go to him for help, he gives us straight answers, it is really good usually . . . one of my other teachers, she never gave us

a rubric, never told us what was expected of us, when we asked her she didn't even know really [what she wanted] so we didn't know what to write about or do really, so our project . . . we had to try extra hard because we didn't know what was expected of us.

Barb had the same problems that Monica identified. Some of her teachers were very good about making their expectations known while it was the students' perceptions that others did not provide students with the same sense of direction. The teachers who did not give clear directions were often a source of frustration for the students:

They [English Language Arts teachers] would give us rubrics and tell us exactly what everything was worth and they would pretty much just take that rubric right back and just fill it out with your marks. One teacher I had was really disorganized, I didn't really understand what she wanted and she could go on and talk for hours but it wasn't really in regards to what you were talking about in the first place. I finally gave up trying to talk to her.

Likewise, Erica became very frustrated with her teacher's lack of clear directions for writing an essay. She said:

I remember a teacher I had in grade 10, sometimes if you asked questions, sometimes asking for more information, she would say, 'well that's for you to decide' and things like that. It made me very frustrated. And, I didn't really like that, because if she tells me just do what you think is right, then I would hand something in, and I would lose a lot of marks for it. It made me really upset . . . they want us to use our own thoughts and feelings, but then at the same time marking it wrong. It just seemed that one teacher did

not want to help you, where she was very free-spirited. Oh go and do your own thing and then I will mark you wrong. The other ones, if I was to ask them a question, they would be like, they would pause to think about it in a way they wouldn't give me everything but in a way they could still help me. And I liked that, they weren't always helpful but at least it seemed like they were trying. The other one was just like, okay, go.

The students' comments indicated that the amount of direction provided was dependent on each individual teacher. Some teachers gave considerable direction and other teachers gave very little direction.

Expectations of Writing in First-year University

The last seven questions on the survey asked students to comment on their expectations of the writing protocols and writing instruction they would encounter when they entered the university. The questions asked students: (1) whether they thought writing in first-year university would be similar to high school (figure 4.23); (2) whether they expected their instructors to be available for consultation if needed (figure 4.24); (3) whether they thought they would feel comfortable asking for help from their instructors (figure 4.25); (4) whether they planned on attending a faculty that would require a lot of writing (figure 4.26); (5) whether they felt confident going to university with their present writing ability (figure 4.27); (6) whether they felt confident that they would do well in their first-year writing assignments (figure 4.28); and, (7) whether they were looking forward to going to university (figure 4.29).

First-year writing courses are the sites of important transitions for students, one of the courses in which students must wrestle with the differences between their existing procedural knowledge and the protocols of a new learning environment. According to Beaufort (2007)

students are not always motivated to change their learning styles when they begin university and as a result, they continue to use what worked for them in the past. In addition, first-year students' expectations have been shown to be an important factor in how well they will do in a new task (Lea & Street, 1998). As has been previously mentioned, students in a *Survey of Early Leavers* conducted at the University of Manitoba (2007), expressed confidence in their overall writing ability upon entering first-year university. One of the goals of this current study was to establish a record of high school students' expectations of university writing demands prior to their entry to the university environment in order to determine whether their expectations prior to first-year studies matched their experiences when they arrived at the university.

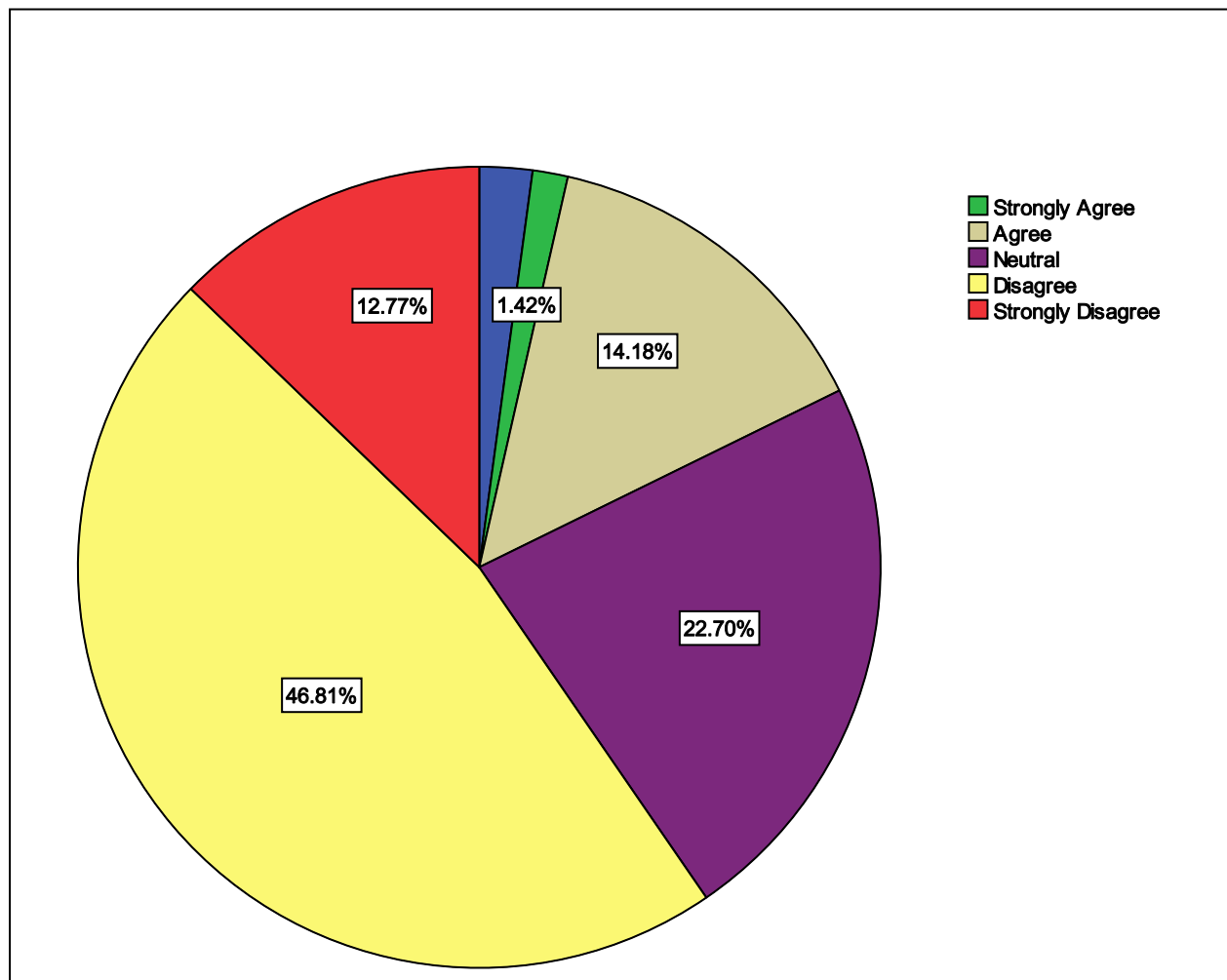


Figure 4.23 I think that writing in first-year university will be very similar to writing in high school.

Figure 4.23 reports the results of what students reported when they were asked if they expected the writing in first-year university to be similar to the writing they had to do in high school, 15% agreed or strongly agreed that the writing would be similar, 23% were neutral, and 60% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the writing in first-year university would be similar to the writing in high school.

The quantitative findings to this question are similar to the findings from the qualitative data. Both indicated that high school students perceived that the writing they would be expected to complete in first-year university would be different than the writing they were required to produce in high school. Some of the students' responses indicated that they were concerned about the kinds of writing that they would be required to produce at university and the amount of writing they would be expected to produce.

These findings are similar to the findings of Carroll (2002), McCarthy (1987), and Strachan (2002) who reported that first-year students often struggle with understanding their instructors' expectations because they perceive those instructions to be very different from what they were used to receiving in high school. Carroll (2002) and McCarthy (1987) both observed that the students in their respective studies thought they already knew how to write an essay and were surprised to discover that the types of writing they were expected to do in university was different than the type of writing they had produced in high school. These results are not consistent with the findings from this study where the students in both the quantitative survey and the qualitative interviews said that they knew the writing they would have to do in first-year university would be different. They were just not sure what that difference would be.

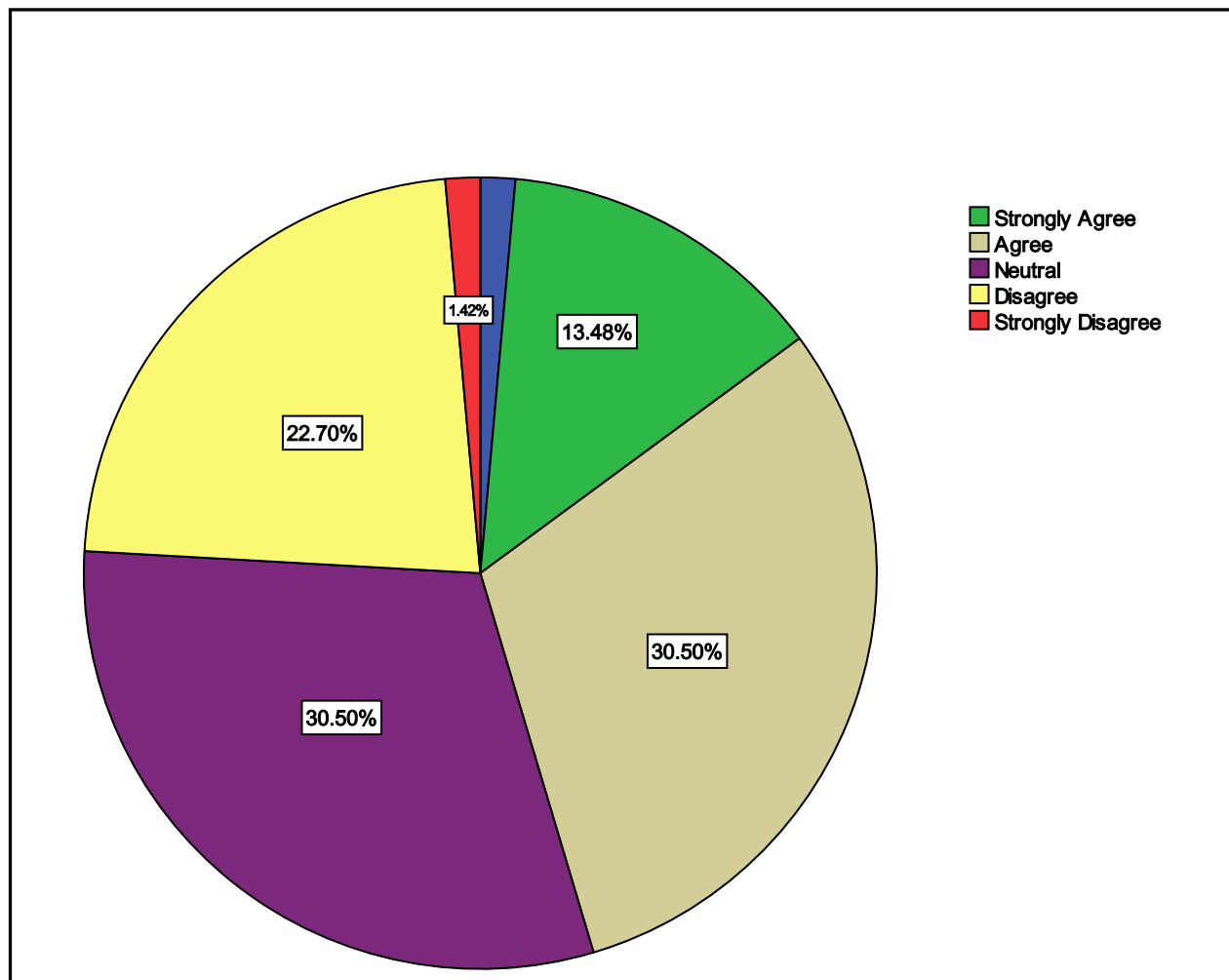


Figure 4.24 I expect that the instructors in first-year university courses will be available for consultation if I need assistance.

In continuing the investigation of students' perceptions of writing in high school versus writing in first-year university, students were asked whether they thought their instructors at university would be available for help if needed. Forty-three percent agreed or strongly agreed that their instructors would be available for consultation if needed, 30% were neutral, and 24% felt that their instructors would not be available for help.

The students who participated in the qualitative interviews gave similar answers to the question of whether they thought their university instructors would be available for help if they needed it. The students commented that they expected their first-year instructors would be available to help them if they had questions. They were fairly confident that getting help would not be a problem. Barb commented that “the teachers here in university are very much available and give you help. They give you very specific answers to your questions. It seems like if I needed to, they [professors] would be available.” Marilyn found that “I know what the professor wants and she is willing to give you as much help as you want.” Similarly, Caroline found that “the profs are very open to answering questions . . . they are available.”

Some students were concerned about asking for help and stated that they would not feel comfortable going to their first-year instructors for assistance. Jody noted that “I feel like some of my professors are kind of more rushed. It’s like yeah, that’s the answer, okay? But, I guess if you are teaching four classes, I guess it’s hard on them too.” Monica felt more comfortable going to see her TA “Whenever I have any problems the first thing I would do is go to my TA not my instructor cause the instructor is doing all the lectures and all that so she has her own work to do.”

The findings of this study are similar to those of Miller, Bender and Schub (2005) who stressed the importance of the social component in a university environment. They hypothesized that the interaction between the members of a faculty and their students can impact students’ overall performance in the classroom. This is an important area and one that needs further study. If students are more successful in classrooms where instructors develop a social rapport then perhaps that is an area that first-year instructors, especially, should be aware of when planning their courses.

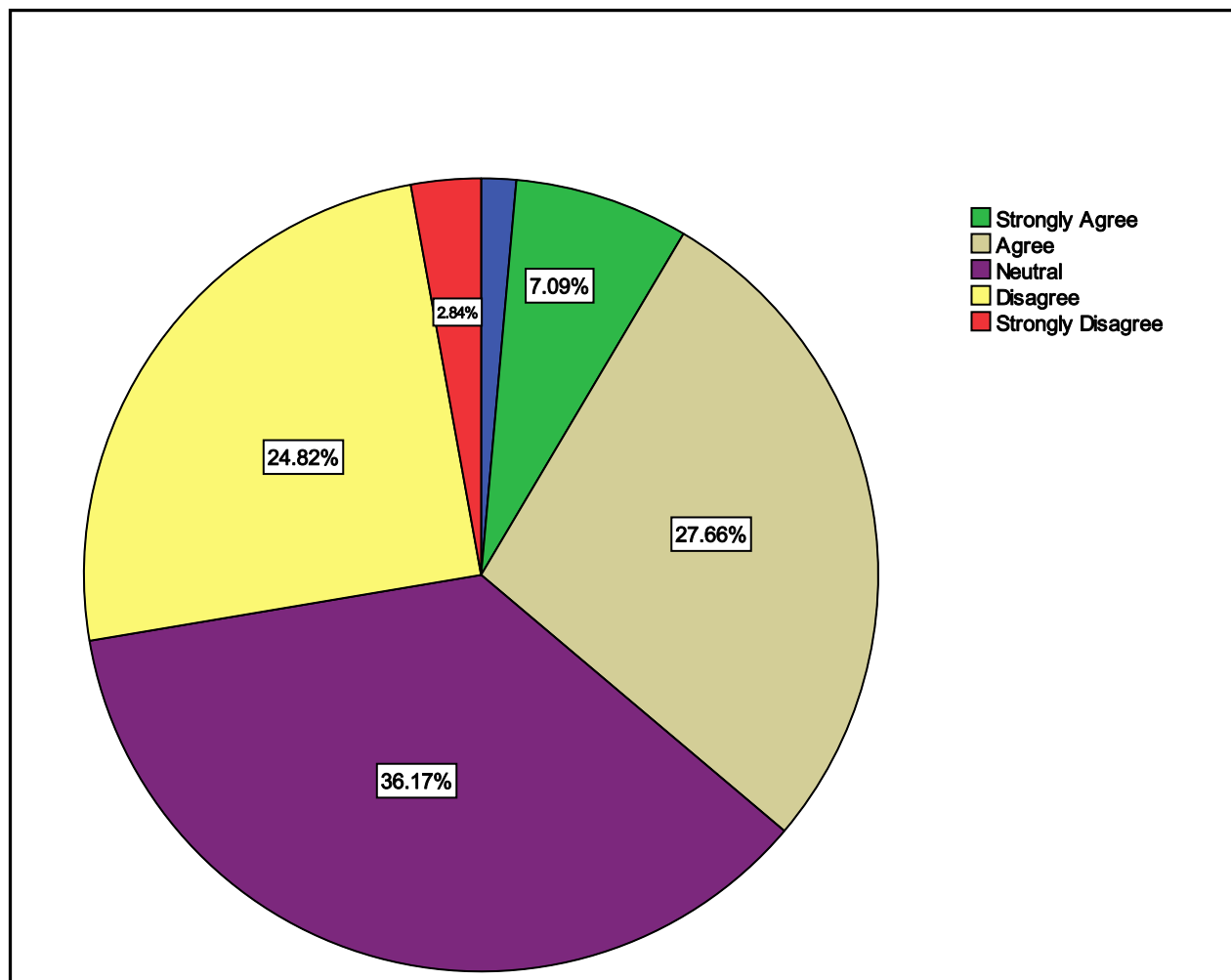


Figure 4.25 I think I will feel comfortable asking my first-year instructor for help if I do not understand something.

Figure 4.25 above represents the response to the survey question regarding high school students' degree of comfort in anticipation of asking university instructors for assistance with writing assignments. When students were asked if they would feel comfortable asking their first-year instructors for help if they did not understand something, only 35% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they would ask for help, 36% were neutral, and 28% said that they would

not feel comfortable asking their instructors for help if they were having trouble with an assignment.

Only 35% of the students in this study reported that they would be comfortable asking their university instructors for assistance. This finding is similar to Ramsden's (1979) study where he concluded that although students attached importance to an environment where their instructors make an effort to help them both inside and outside of class, this was not always the case in their courses. The fact that students attach importance to having a classroom environment where they feel comfortable asking questions is one that needs further investigation.

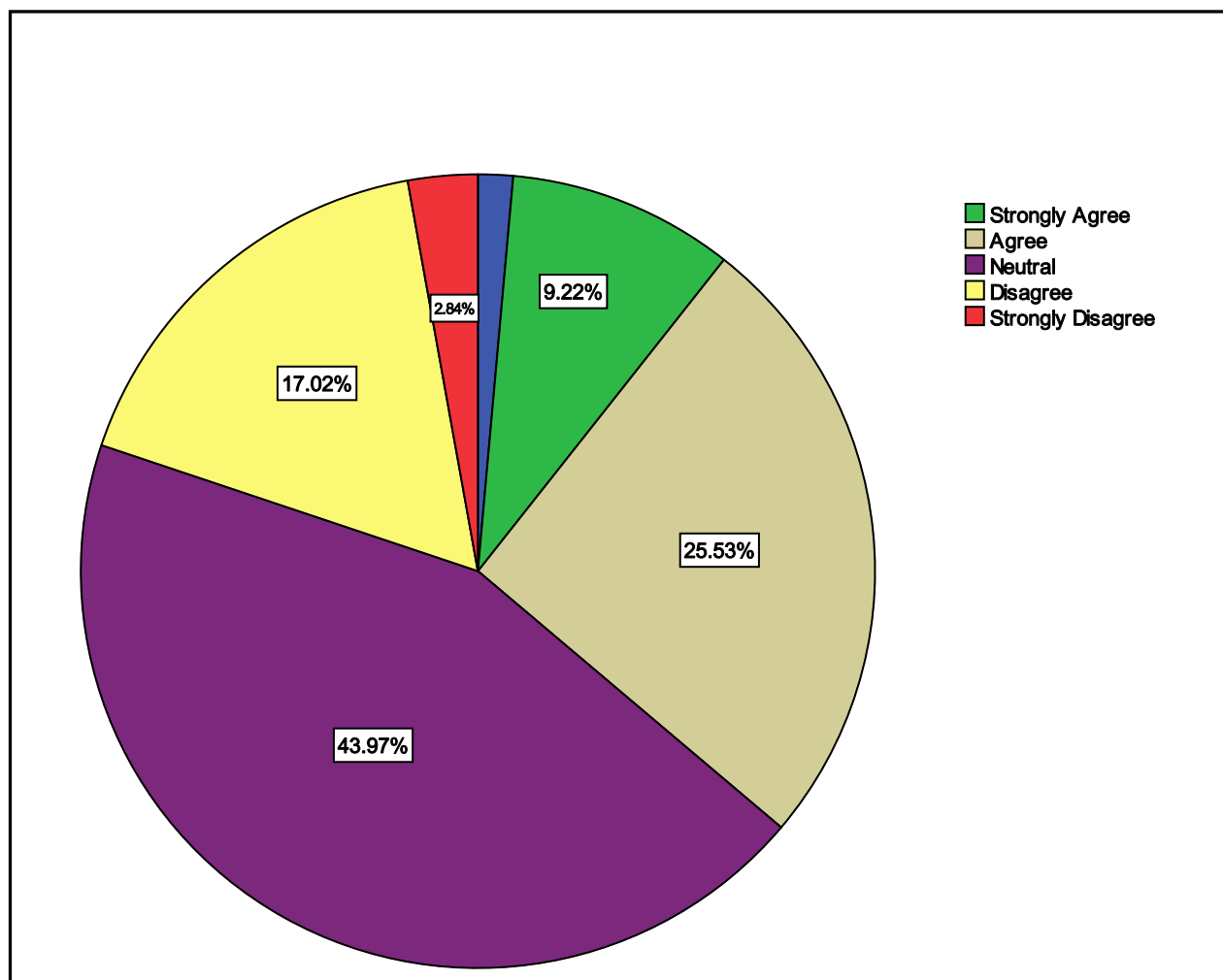


Figure 4.26 I plan on attending a faculty, at university, that will require a lot of writing.

As a result of the pilot study, this question was added to the survey. Their reasons for suggesting the addition of the question emerged from a discussion of the faculties the students were planning on attending at a specific university in Western Canada. They indicated that, if they were planning on attending a faculty that required a lot of writing (e.g., Faculty of Arts), they would be more concerned with the kinds of writing they had been expected to produce in high school. For example, one of the students said that, because he was going to be attending the

Faculty of Engineering, the kinds of writing he was being asked to complete and the length of the assignments in high school had little relevance to his studies. Thirty-five percent of the students surveyed revealed that they planned on attending a faculty that would require a significant amount of writing, 44% were neutral, and 20% reported that they were not planning on attending a faculty that would require them to write a lot. In this study, 35% of the students reported that they planned on attending a faculty that required them to produce a significant amount of writing.

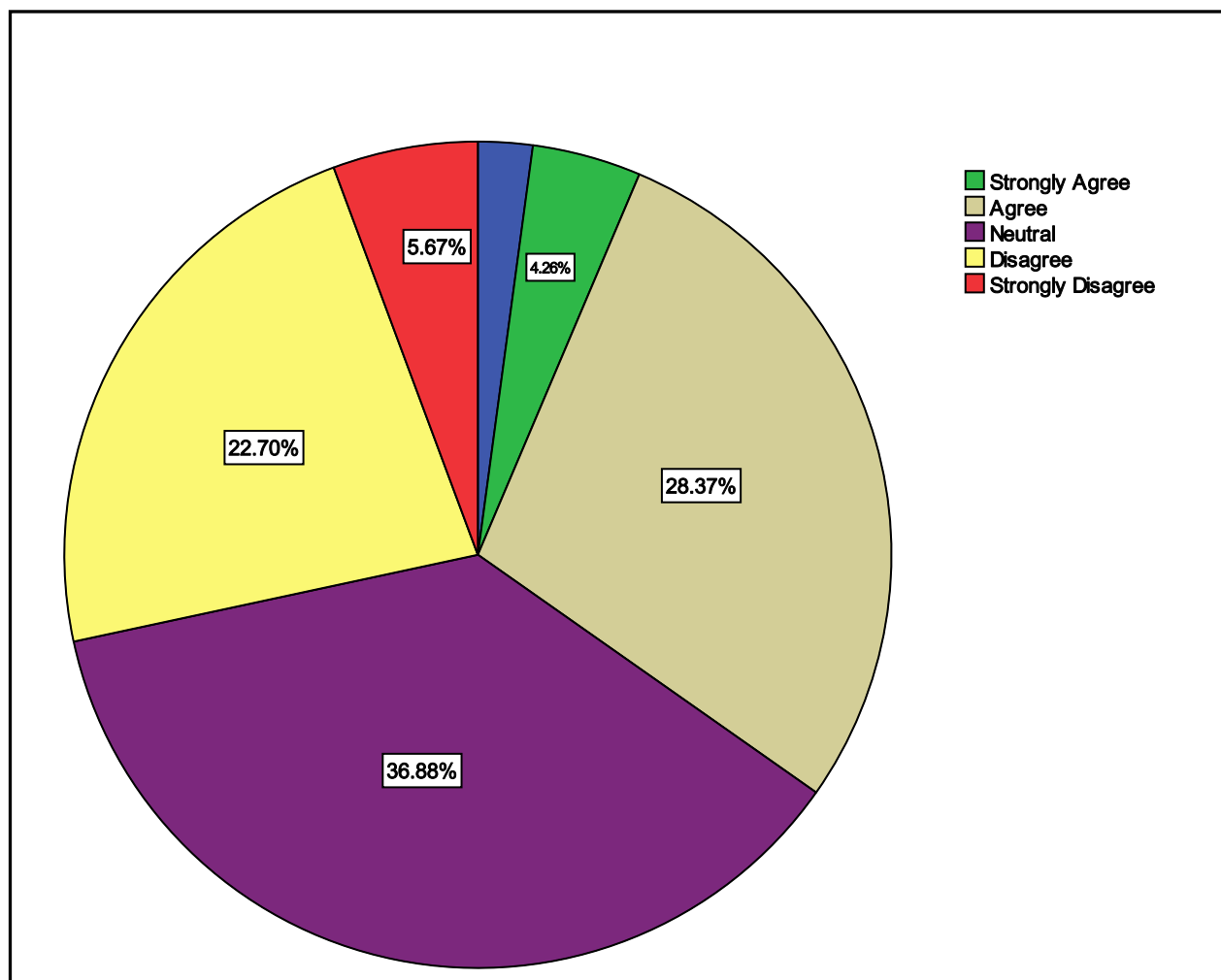


Figure 4.27 I feel confident going into university with my present writing ability.

In answer to the question of whether they felt confident going to university with their present writing ability, 32% indicated that they felt confident, 37% were neutral, and 29% reported that they were not confident about their writing ability.

The results of this study are inconsistent with the research that was conducted at the University of Manitoba in two separate studies (2007, 2011) pertaining to student confidence going to university with their present writing skills. In the first study 60% of first-year students rated their written communication as good or excellent; only 4% considered that they had poor

written communication skills when they enrolled at the university. The second study corroborated that finding when 88% of the students reported that they were confident that they could meet the academic demands of first-year university. It is not possible to comment on the discrepancy since this was not a question that was followed up in the qualitative interviews presents a limitation.

Figure 4.28 is a follow-up to the preceding question and also indicates that students, in this study, were not as confident in their writing ability as earlier research indicated.

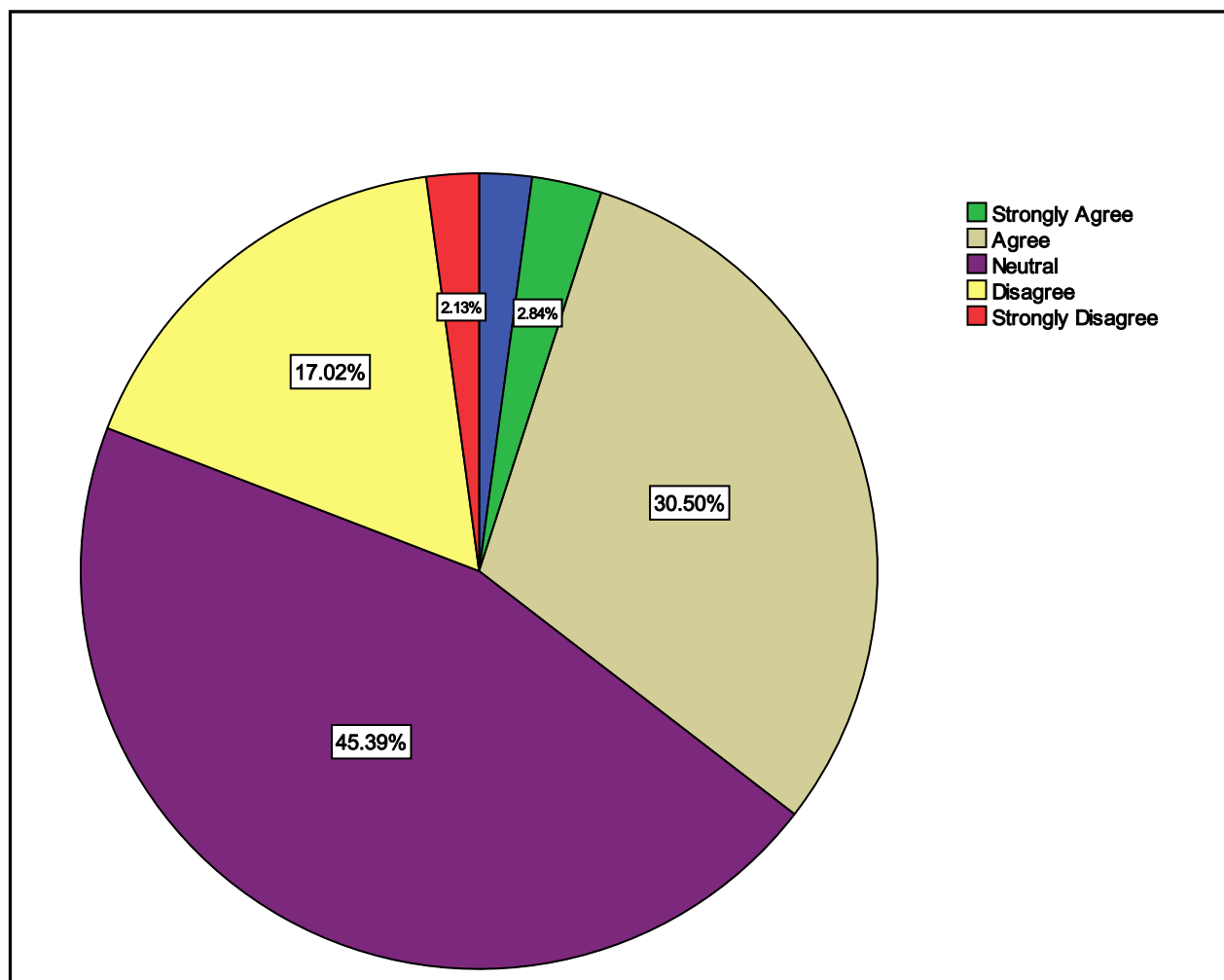


Figure 4.28 I feel confident that I will do well in my writing assignments at university.

Students were also asked if they were confident that they would do well in their writing assignments at university: 33% indicated they felt confident that they would do well, 45% were neutral, and 19% expressed the opinion that they were not confident that they would do well in their writing assignments at university.

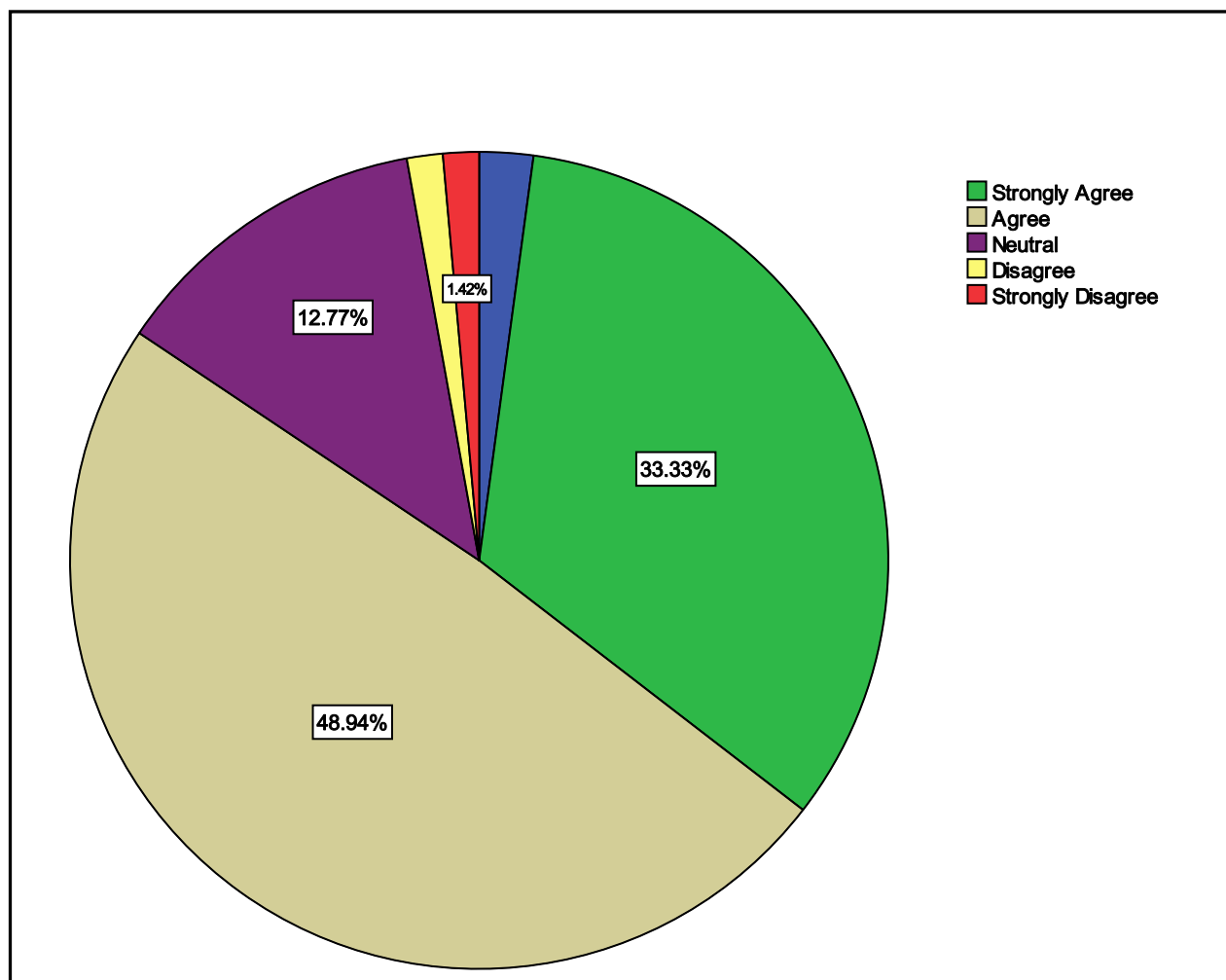


Figure 4.29 I am looking forward to attending university.

The last question on the survey asked students if they were looking forward to going to university: 82% agreed or strongly agreed that they were looking forward to attending university, 13% were neutral, and only 2% responded by saying that they were not looking forward to attending university. This question was asked because of the research carried out by Bandura (1982) which stated that people's self-confidence impacts their ability to handle new situations. He discovered that people who are more confident are willing to make more of an effort to

persevere if they run into difficulties when learning something new. Eighty-two percent of the students reported that they were looking forward to attending first-year university which may speak to their overall confidence in their ability to tackle a new experience. They perceived that university would be different from high school but were looking forward to that change and also looking forward to leaving high school behind. Many of the students saw attending university as the next step in their development as adults.

One of the goals of this study was to establish a record of high school students' expectations of university writing demands prior to their entry to the university environment. The results indicated that the majority (82%) of the high school students were looking forward to attending university. The students (60%) were aware that the kinds of writing they would be expected to complete in university would be different from the kinds of writing they had produced in high school. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons why only 32% were confident in their present writing ability and why only 33% thought they would do well in their university writing assignments. In terms of what they expected from university faculty and staff, 43% expressed the opinion that their instructors would be available for help, but only 35% indicated that they thought they would go to their instructors for help. The qualitative results provided some insight into these quantitative results.

Students' Perceptions of the Differences between the Writing Environment in High School and First-Year University

This section provides a report of students' perceptions of the writing environment in high school and first-year university. These qualitative data were gathered from individual interviews during the second round of data collection in November 2011. The students who participated

were all in their first term of university and had received their first written assignment back from their instructors. In the interviews, they were asked to comment on the differences they found between the high school writing environment and the first-year writing environment. The students did not fill out a second survey so there is no quantitative data for comparison in this section.

The students' perceptions of the differences between high school and first-year university in terms of writing were divided into the following sub-themes. The sub-themes are (a) confidence of students entering university in terms of writing ability; (b) overall length of the papers required in university; (c) how to conduct research and format papers correctly; (d) time management; (e) instructor expectations; (f) becoming self-directed learners; (g) instructor direction; (h) class size and anonymity; and, (i) email preferred method of communication.

Confidence of Students Entering University in Terms of Writing Ability

When students first enter university many of them are confident that the writing skills they learned in high school will be adequate to meet their needs in university (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002; McCarthy, 1987). However, the level of confidence high school students have with their writing ability appears to depend to a large extent on the degree to which they were successful in high school (Russell & Foster, 2002). Students who had achieved a measure of success in high school reported that they were confident that they could handle the writing demands of university. This was consistent with a research report entitled *First-year students' undergraduate experience at Canadian Universities* (2011) where 88% percent of University of Manitoba students self-reported feeling confident that they were able to meet the academic

demands of first-year university. In addition, 89% felt that they were performing adequately in written assignments.

Similarly, in an earlier survey, also conducted at the University of Manitoba (2007) called a *Survey of early leavers*, 60% of first-year students rated their written communication as good or excellent; 4% considered that they had poor written communication skills when they enrolled at the university, and only 3% reported that they had enrolled in a remedial course to improve their writing ability.

The results from this study were similar to the two earlier studies conducted at the University of Manitoba (2007, 2011) and with the results reported by Russell and Foster (2002). The students interviewed for this study were similarly confident in their writing ability coming in to first-year university. Almost half of the high school students surveyed in May/June 2011 (49%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident in writing an essay in their English Language Arts classes, 37% were neutral and 13% indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were comfortable writing an essay in English Language Arts.

These results, however, are at odds with students' reports of their experiences *after* they had begun their first-year studies. Almost half of the students (6 out of 14) in the present study reported that they often did not know their instructors' expectations for assignments. The results from the survey completed when the students were in high school were mixed. Some students (5 of 20) reported that their teacher expectations were clear or, if they were not, teachers were always available to provide further guidance. Others (7 of 20) complained that their teachers did not provide enough guidance and were not available for help outside the classroom. This topic was revisited in interviews with the students after they had begun their first year of university

study. Students (8 of 14) again reported that they were often unsure of their respective instructor's expectations for written assignments. Betty reported that "when we got the assignment the prof would say when you are writing your reflection just write about what you have learned, what you want to learn, and what was interesting during the class and I was unsure. There was no clear direction." Betty expressed the same frustration with the lack of direction "Maybe if he had given an explicit example than at least we can follow that example. But then he was just like it's 3000 words, it's an essay, if you want more details just go and read your outline and we don't talk about it at all." Judy found the lack of direct instruction to be a problem. "That is pretty much the thing I am struggling the most with right now because they don't really tell you how to write a lab report or what they expect you to do, so it is pretty much like they tell you in a really broad way so is not specific."

This perceived lack of direction in first-year university had the effect of making students unsure about what they were supposed to do in their assignments. Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordstrom (2009) found that many first-year students struggled when making the transition from high school writing to university writing, despite having achieved success as high school writers. One of the differences the students noted between high school and first-year university was the perceived lack of direction from their instructors which impacted the amount of success they enjoyed. The lack of direction expressed at the university level differed from the perceived lack of direction provided at the high school level. It was the perception of students (5 of 20) in high school that the lack of teacher direction did not effect their overall marks while, in first-year university it was the perception of the students (8 of 14) that the lack of instructor direction in how to complete assignments did have an effect on their overall class marks.

Overall Length of the Papers in University

In the second round of interviews (i.e., after students had been at the university for three months), the students perceived that the kinds of writing they were required to produce at university was different from the writing they had to produce in high school. One of the differences identified concerned the length of the essays that were required. In retrospect, nine of the fourteen participants found that the essays they had to produce in first-year university were longer than the ones they had to produce in high school.

Bob said, “[my assignment in first-year university] was about three to four pages, 1500 words . . . a lot longer than high school.” Nora found that “now we have to write longer papers . . . in high school two pages is fine, but here it’s like a certain word count, like 1500 words . . . so that makes it a little bit more difficult.” She went on to say that “in high school they weren’t really on you about getting the certain amount of words or pages but here [in first-year university] it’s a lot different . . . sometimes the length is hard to get.”

Barb also found that the papers she was expected to write in first-year university were longer than the ones she had to write in high school. She said:

In my religion course, it [my essay] was supposed to be five pages, about 1000 to 1500 words and I never wrote anything longer than probably three pages in high school. It was a bit of shock to me [in university] . . . in high school it was like do whatever you want, you just pick a topic.

Betty also found that the main difference between writing in high school and writing in university was the length of the written assignments. In university, she said, the word count is very important:

.... there is no word count in high school, you have to write a page or two, but here it's like you need 3000 words . . . but in high school there is no guidance to that, and so you just write whatever.

She went on to say that “[in Biology] we wrote a ten page paper. It was 3000 words. It had to be an argumentative paper. It had to have a bibliography so we had to back it up with evidence. It was a lot of work [compared to high school].”

In contrast, Luke found that there was no difference in the length of essays or papers that he had to write in high school and the ones he was asked to write in first-year university:

I have handed in two papers now . . . both were 1500 words. It's a little bit more [i.e., the length of papers in first-year university] but not that much . . . my papers in high school were around 1500 words too. They were not that much different from high school, it was so hard [to get used to writing in first-year university] because in high school I am so in the mode of doing five-paragraph essays, and here I have to try to break it down more, and make it, just like especially the sources, you have to do so many sources just to get the information, to have that amount of words.

In terms of length of assignments, 42% of the high school students surveyed said that they wrote papers that were at least three pages in length in their high school English Language

Arts classes. In the first round of individual interviews, high school students were also asked how long their papers had to be: eight out of the twenty students interviewed reported that they wrote papers that were two to three pages long, while eleven out of the twenty students reported writing papers that were three to five pages long. This is consistent with what Applebee (1981, 1984, 1993) and Hillocks (1986) found in their respective research. On the basis of the data collected for this study, and the data collected by Applebee (1981, 1984, 1993) and Hillocks (2006), it appears that the amount of writing in high school English Language Arts classes has not changed significantly in thirty years. Students are still writing shorter pieces of between two to three pages for most of their assignments.

The perceptions of the students who were interviewed indicated that the amount of writing they had to do in their high school English Language Arts classes was minimal. The kinds of writing reported on the surveys, while not necessarily fill in the blanks, does still tend to be heavily weighted towards short answer questions. Eighty-seven percent of the students reported on the survey that they had to write short answer paragraphs in their English Language Arts classes.

How to Conduct Research and Format Papers Correctly

Carroll (2002) found that, for first-year students, generating ideas and planning becomes more complex as they are expected to learn different methods of research and data collection than they had used in high school. It is often difficult for students to learn how to incorporate the work of others into their own work. First-year students must learn not only to integrate external sources to their essays, but also to locate those sources and to interpret texts that are often complex and challenging. Learning to conduct research is one of the challenges that first-

year students face when writing an academic essay since, in many cases at least, claims and assertions in high school writing could often be substantiated with the writer's insights and opinion. Research was seldom required.

Carroll (2002) observed that first-year students struggle to understand the differences in instructor expectations when they arrive at universities. Though they may have been successful writers in high school, the strategies they had used are no longer effective in first-year university. Similarly, Beaufort (2007) found that high schools students were accustomed to writing reports or opinion essays and often had trouble developing the more analytical style that was required in first-year university. Because, as Applebee (1993) reported, high school students are often not required to do in-depth investigations of topics, they do not develop the analytical skills those investigations require. This appears to create some difficulties for first-year university students who are expected to interpret texts and find evidence to prove their interpretations.

In this study, the students expressed some concerns about writing papers that incorporated research. Monica found a difference, not only in the length of the papers, but also in the amount of research that she was expected to do. She said:

[The difference between high school and university in terms of an essay] It was long, it took longer for me to do that, [and there was] a lot of research, I wasn't able to give my own opinions, I had to claim something and then do research to prove that thing so that was a big change for me. In high school it was mainly my opinion. And the length too. The essay was 1500 words.

Janet also found there was a notable difference between the research required in essays in high school and in first-year university. She said that:

A lot of our papers [in high school] were basically done together in class, we would go over everything and you just basically really didn't have to do anything but put it in your own words . . . and then here [first-year university] it's all your own research . . . in high school we didn't do research, it's all your own opinion, and a lot of like a book report, we would go over a topic in a book and then put it in your own words.

The idea of having to do research rather than rely on one's own opinion was echoed by Bob, who said:

The ones [essays] I am writing at least are more research based than opinion. The majority of the writing I did in high school was in English and that was more analysis and this is more research. We have to look up scholarly papers and before in high school you had your two books that you used as your main sources and you had other works written on those books and you used those as your other sources.

Monica, likewise, found problems with having to do research in first-year university. She said: "[I had problems with] the research and I wasn't able to give my own opinion . . . in high school you do not have to do any research and it is not that lengthy so you manage that very well."

Similarly, Nora found that the need for research required an adjustment in her writing process. She said that:

finding all your research which is probably the hardest part [in first-year university] cause if you have a certain idea you have to find a source that will back it up, to prove it, to show that you didn't just come up with it off the top of your head, so that's hard.

Betty also reported a difficulty in learning to conduct research before she wrote her papers:

Well, first of all, the research is different cause in high school we are just taught that if you just research in like a website try to go for dot.ca, or dot org., that's all we were taught. I don't know about other people but during high school at least where I came from not a lot of people did research on books, we just all went on- line and did research on-line, but if you actually come to university, books are important and journal articles, cause that's what I usually use [in first-year university], and during high school I didn't even know what that was. And in university that's what you should use those sources instead of using just websites, so a variety of research is required and then the format itself, the essay format, you need a title page, you need [page] numbers, you need a title, you need a page header, all those and the bibliography is so different, you have to put authors, and titles in a certain way, you have to put dots here, and you can't put dots here. It's very different from start to finish, and you can't use certain language, you just can't do what you did in high school in first-year university, you just can't . . . in high school I would just say that it is proven or it is supported by this fact, but in university in the paper

you actually have to say this thing is proven by this person, this researcher, from this experiment so you have to state it.

Judy also mentioned the difficulty of learning how to write using sources in her papers. She found:

It was really different [from high school to first-year university] at the beginning, it was difficult cause you know you are used to expressing your feelings and thoughts and here [first-year university] you are not allowed to because no one really cares, it's a research paper right because whatever you say you have to back that up with source, with research.

Along with learning to do research when writing academic essays, students also talked about the difficulty of learning how to properly format papers in first-year university. Five of the fourteen students interviewed mentioned that one of the major differences between high school and first-year university was learning how to properly format their papers. They said that they had never learned how to properly format papers in high school and they did not know there was such as thing as APA formatting. Writing in first-year included the challenge of finding out how to cite references in their papers, with such challenges as learning where to place brackets, and which punctuation to use.

Barb commented on what she saw as the difference:

[The difference between high school and university] is the formats: Chicago Style, MLA, APA. Never heard of any of those things so I didn't realize there was a difference. Like

adding sources to the end. We did bibliographies but they weren't like numbered. There were no like footnotes, or anything. Like none of that. It was like here is what I used. Just like a page of websites and books and stuff. Now you actually have to source it and everything.

Luke also mentioned that he did not learn to cite in high school: "we didn't really do that in high school except we did some APA in my grade 12 psych course but other than that I didn't really have to do that [formatting an essay]." He further said, "I wish we had done more APA formatting in high school. Just practicing getting that cause that was so hard when I was working on my first paper."

Nora also said, "I found [APA formatting] was hard to follow, there is so much, they are so picky about formatting . . . that's hard to get used to."

Marilyn also mentioned that it might have helpful to have been taught formatting in high school: "If they would have taught us an APA style in high school, I think it would have been more beneficial, and really they should. They teach us the five-paragraph essay, but no formatting, nothing."

Learning to correctly format a paper appeared to be problematic for many of the students. It was, however, also a skill to which they attached a great deal of importance. From the comments received, it appeared that the students considered the challenge of learning to format correctly to be the single most important aspect of learning to write an academic essay. The students (14 of 14) reported that learning to conduct research was another area in which they had limited or no experience. In general, it was their perception that their high school teachers had

not taught them to conduct research or format a paper properly. The students reported that they felt under-prepared for the tasks.

Time Management

Learning to manage time is one of the skills that first-year university students require if they are to be successful (Trueman & Hartley, 1996). The authors came to this conclusion after studying first-year psychology students over a period of three years. They were interested in discovering how students managed their time once they began university. Students were asked to fill in a time-management scale that asked them about their daily planning schedule and their long term planning schedule. The results of the study indicated that first-year students often underestimated the amount of time it took to complete academic tasks. By underestimating the amount of time required, students often felt rushed to get their assignments completed on time. They felt that they did not have enough time to complete readings and that they were always behind in assignments. In particular, McCune (2004) found that first-year students do not understand the amount of work that is required to write an essay and often underestimate the time needed to compose an essay in university.

First-year students are also often surprised to find that their instructors do not take attendance in class, that no one checks homework assignments, and that there are few, if any, reminders when assignments are due (Beaufort, 2007; Bozick & Deluca; Carroll, 2002; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Tinto, 1996). The level of independence expected of first-year students can be disconcerting for students coming from a high school environment in which they did not have much independence and where the teacher assumed much of the responsibility for ensuring students stayed on track. First-year students find it easy to fall behind in their coursework when

no one is monitoring them (Beaufort, 2007; Bozick & Deluca; Carroll, 2002; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). Carroll (2002) observed that university students often do not have the time to create multiple drafts of their essays due to time constraints, and this finding was supported by Beaufort (2007) who agreed that first-year students would benefit from following the writing process but she found that students just do not have the time.

Nine of the fourteen students found that they had less time to complete their essays in first-year university than they had had in high school and that each of the assignments had a greater weight in first-year university.

Bob said:

There is less time to do it in . . . it's a lot more in a lot shorter time, Because in high school it's more like every couple of weeks you'd have an assignment for, like a short 600 word essay or something like 800 words . . . and we had a long time, and they [his teachers] really helped us with that. So, it was the same kind, the same amount of writing we're doing now, it was just spaced out a lot more. But it was the same kind of thing, they set deadlines for you, it was just that the deadlines were a lot further apart obviously for the same amount of writing.

Jody found that her three assignments in first-year university were worth 100% of her grade. This came as a surprise to her. She reported a concern that the weight of the writing assignments meant that each would have a considerable effect on her grade. She also noted that, with the pace of the university schedule, she would not have time to catch up if she fell behind:

When you have three assignments which make up 100% of your grade, where like two assignments and an exam are worth 25, 25, and 50 . . . I can totally understand how people could be so behind being in university right from high school. Because in first-year university, you have no time to catch up . . . it doesn't slow down for you, it just gets harder cause especially because a lot of it is cumulative, because if you missed something in the beginning you are going to have to know it at the end.

Jody also reported that in high school she had plenty of time to complete her assignments and that her English Language Arts teachers gave her extensions if her essay was not ready on the due date. She expressed surprise at the rate at which the material was covered in first-year university: "It's just so speedy, I thought it would be a slower pace but it's not . . . it's intense, and the review, you don't get a review." She further said that "You can't think actively, you're not thinking about it, not understanding it, you're writing notes as fast as you can, and then you have to go home and review those notes and learn." She also noted the absence of slower periods in the day or week that might be used to rest or get caught up, saying that, after working at an intense pace in one class, "you have to go to class and do it all again. Its a shock."

This theme was echoed by a number of the students. Erica said, "I am under the strain of time and pressure which doesn't go over too well." Barb said, "It's very difficult to keep up with writing essays amongst readings but I do put my essays first cause you actually have to hand in physical papers, but then that sets me further behind in my readings." Monica found that, "It was difficult to manage my time . . . the pace is really fast." Betty said, "That's what caught me big time. I wish I had more time. Everyone is like why is a day only 24 hours, it should be 36 hours, and we need more time."

Judy commented on her inability to keep up with her courses, despite spending a lot of time at the university:

I am really stressed right now, I always put extra work and I am always neat and organized and now I feel like, I am here until 9 or 10 at night but I don't find results. I am expected to do the work and get results, but here I feel like maybe you have to put in 50 times the work maybe. I don't know I am still really nervous and really stressed . . . I am so frustrated cause in high school they don't prepare you for this, not at all, seriously it is just so like emotionally and psychologically stressful and just, so, I don't know.

The students in this study generally acknowledged a problem with their lack of time-management skills and noted that they were having difficulty juggling school work, home life, and working. They also expressed surprise at the pace of the courses and commented that they were not used to courses moving so quickly. Having become accustomed to the pace of high school, where they might have a month to complete an assignment, and where the delivery of course content was less rushed, the inability to adjust their time management strategies led a number of students to report high levels of stress and the concern that they were not able to properly control or govern their lives.

These results are consistent with the research of Trueman and Hartley (1996) and McCune (2004) who found that first-year students do not understand how long university assignments will take to complete. They are used to the writing environment in high school where they could often complete writing assignments the night before they were due.

Instructor Expectations

Applebee (1993) found that high school teachers' expectations of individual writing assignments were often lower than those of university instructors, because, in part, each high school assignment was only one of many. In first-year university, there are generally fewer assignments but each is weighted more heavily and is marked against a higher standard. It is also the case that, in high school, students will usually write assignments on more general topics, producing descriptive essays or reports, while students in first-year university are generally asked to produce argumentative essays (Applebee, 1993; Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordstrom, 2009). This difference is particularly significant since it often results in high school students arriving at university without the experience of having to produce writing assignments that are based on the analysis of text or that require some element of research (Freedman & Pringle, 1980). In addition, instructors at university often judge grammar, spelling, and organization at a higher standard than high school teachers (Montana State University, 2010; Mullendore & Hatch, 2000).

Davis (2006) found that first-year students often had difficulty making the transition from high school writing environments to first-year writing environments because they felt that they were unable to predict or interpret instructor expectations. It appeared to the students that every instructor had different expectations. These left students struggling to understand the purpose of the assignments and the processes they were meant to follow to achieve those purposes (Davis, 2006).

Harris (2010) stressed the need for instructors to provide students with the tools to understand their assignments. One of the difficulties students face when interpreting

assignments can be that they apply strategies that were based on their previous experiences with writing assignments. For students entering their first year of university studies, this can create a difficulty. Their existing knowledge seems to be ill-suited to the new environment. First-year instructors often have different expectations for writing assignments that are based both on their own criteria and their own subject area. As Carroll (2002) reported, it is not uncommon for first-year students to struggle with the expectations of their instructors, and to require help in interpreting assignments.

Six of the fourteen students reported that their instructors in first-year university expect higher standards than their high school teachers did. Caroline said:

I'll be writing the same way I did in high school and I'll get like a B or a C+ as opposed to an A+ that I would have gotten in high school, so it's very different . . . I don't really understand it [first-year writing] cause, before [in high school] it was just like write what you know, and they would give you the marks for it. But its different here.

Caroline also noted that, in university classes, she had to engage in more planning before she could start writing and that she had to keep thinking about the text while she was writing. She found that, in high school:

You could do like half the work [of first-year university] and get like an A+, but in university, you could work your hardest on something but you're not going to do well at all. It's just difficult; university and high school are just very different."

Bob's reported experience with the transition to university was very similar. He found that:

there are higher standards too [in first-year university], like there has to be because these are like academic papers, and you have to have reputable sources, and you have to format it a lot more concisely, and you have to use a lot more evidence [in university].

Given the expectations of instructors at the university, Jody felt that her high school teachers should have had higher standards for their students:

If they [high school teachers] were a little more strict, if they didn't hold your hand so much in high school . . . the atmosphere is just so different . . . it's just the way they talk to you and treat you [in high school], it was like anybody can do well. But, in university, anybody could do well, but it's just you have to do a lot more work, you have to work for it, big time.

The need to investigate topics in depth when producing writing assignments in university was noted by a number of students. Shirley observed that "In high school you could get away with being more general, more kind of vague." Billie said, "The actual course content is much more in-depth [in first-year university] than it was in high school." Similarly, Luke found that "the difference this year [first-year university] is the depth of the material."

Students' perceptions of the amount of instructor direction they received in first-year university was split along the same lines as they had identified in their high school interviews. The spectrum went from instructors who delivered content information and did not explain what

they expected in terms of assignments to instructors who gave students outlines and models to follow, providing explicit direction in what was expected in the class. The relative degree of direction in assignments seemed to correspond with students' reports of satisfaction with their instructors. If students felt that instructors were not providing sufficient direction in terms of expectations, then students expressed dissatisfaction with those instructors. On the other hand, instructors who were perceived to have made the effort to give clear guidelines were perceived to be good instructors.

Becoming Self-Directed Learners

Bandura (1982) found that the expectations students bring to university influence their overall performance both inside and outside the classroom. Similarly, Kuh, Gonyea, and Williams (2005) found that student performance can be affected when their expectations do not match the experiences they bring with them from high school. The authors further hypothesized that students must have a reason for learning if they are to develop a commitment to becoming more self-directed learners. Howard (2005) found that students' estimations of their respective abilities need to match their understanding of the challenges they face if they are to be successful at university. Kuh et al., (2005) found that if first-year students' expectations come close to instructors' expectations, students could operate in a manner that is consistent with those expectations. These kinds of understandings seem necessary for students to operate in a self-directed manner.

With regard to writing instruction in particular, McCune (2004) observed that students' existing conceptions about the nature of good writing can impair their ability to understand assessment criteria and instructor expectations. She suggested that students who were unable to recognize the difference between their existing conceptions and the new models would find it

difficult to make adjustments on the basis of instructor feedback. She found that first-year students often had difficulty adapting to self-directed learning relying instead on pre-existing knowledge and static benchmarks. This may lead them to reject the suggestions they received on their essays particularly if they had received marks that were lower than they had expected.

Twelve of the fourteen students interviewed reported that, in high school, it was not particularly important to be a self-directed learner. They reported that their teachers monitored their progress, followed up with students whose assignments were late-even tracking those students down to ensure that work would be completed.

Jody observed that:

They [university instructors] don't tell you really what to read, they don't talk about it in class at all. You have the syllabus on the first day and then you're supposed to look at the syllabus and go, oh well, we are talking about this on this day so I have to read, and you know they don't tell you that you have to have this done here, or here, no, it's just on the syllabus, you have to figure out what you have to do all year . . . there is no direction from the teacher. We have to put in the effort, it is on us . . . in first-year university, the instructors will help you out, but they are not there to help you out [like they were in high school], that's why it's so hard, and time management. And being here in the environment it's a lot easier not to study at school . . . lots of distractions.

Billie also found that "everything is on the students . . . you have to give yourself enough time to do it, and making sure that you have all the information, and that you're actually doing the type of essay that they [first-year instructors] want you to do."

Erica reported that “If you do want or need help you have to actually go and seek it, they won’t be at your beck and call.” She commented that her high school teachers would always ask her if she needed help and would come to her if she did poorly on an assignment or a test.

Nora said that “the student has to go for help rather than the teacher monitoring you [like they did in high school]. Betty said the same thing about her high school experience:

I feel like I got more structure in high school than I do in university. Well you know those common phrases like university is all about you have to do it, and teachers don’t chase you obviously, so instructions are less in university compared to high school because in high school teachers can bug you as much as they want, well it depends on the teachers too, but in university it is very different, they just give you the syllabus or rubric and say go and read it, that’s what you have to do. Just go for it. So, yeah, in university, I feel it is less instruction. In university, the profs are really helpful but you have to go and ask for help whereas in high school the teachers would follow you around.

Marilyn said that, in high school, if she went and asked for help, her teachers would. “pretty much write it [the essay] for you. In university, if you ask . . . they make you figure it out whereas in high school it’s kind of handed to you.” She continued, “I just find you’re babied [in high school], where in university I kind of like it better because they let you figure it out. They let you find all the answers; they just guide you that way.”

Caroline found it difficult in her first-year courses because she was “so used to being told exactly what’s expected but now it’s just very broad . . . [and] if you don’t go to class you are basically screwed, it’s on you, everything is on you.” She observed that the university instructors do not help students unless the students request that help. She also spoke about the difference in the pace of studies between high school and university with the pace in high school

being very slow compared to that of first-year university. With regard to the weight of assignments at the university, she found that individual university assignments were weighted much more heavily: “everything that’s assigned is worth the same amount as say a final exam in high school . . . it’s like everything is worth so much. It’s really different.”

Many of the students who were interviewed reported that they received a great deal of guidance and hand-holding in high school. They found that this was usually not their experience in university and that they had to learn how to be more self-directed. They revealed that, in high school, the teachers reminded them of what needed to be done in terms of readings or assignments. By contrast, they found that in first-year university they were responsible for ensuring that they were aware of the schedule for readings and assignments. Most instructors did not tell them when their next assignment was due, and they had to consult the syllabus for directions. Miller, Bender, and Schub (2005) found that high school teachers typically get students to use daily planners to keep track of readings and assignments. However, in university, instructors provide a syllabus with course expectations at the beginning of term, and instructors expect students to determine what needs to be done and to decide for themselves when to do it.

Instructor Direction

In commenting on first-year university experiences, students complained that their instructors did not provide enough direction when giving writing assignments. This is consistent with the existing literature (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002; McCarthy, 1987). The students further suggested that they were often confused about their instructors’ expectations regarding assignments, and it was their perception that each instructor wanted something different. The students also found that once they identified their instructors’ expectations, they found it much easier to do the assignments.

Nine of the fourteen students commented on the amount of instruction that the professors were prepared to give to the students. Some students reported that their instructors were very helpful while others reported that their instructors did not provide enough instruction to help them complete their assignments.

Jody said, “I feel like they [university instructors] are not there to teach you. They are just there to give you knowledge, and then give you the exam. They’re not teaching you the best way that you learn.” She further said that:

You have to be more specific in your questions [to your instructor] or they will just delete it, and they just don’t care because they are not going to make the effort to help you out.

. . . the instructors are always rushed, it’s like they are saying it’s not my job to teach you.

In contrast, Barb found that her instructors in first-year university were very helpful: “Our instructor gave us an outline, and then he went into more depth too. He gave us notes, pretty much a whole class on it.” She added:

The teachers [here in university] are very much available and give you help, give you very specific answers to your questions. I found in high school, in past grades, they were very vague about things. You would ask a question but you would get a completely different answer that wouldn’t help you at all.

However, she also reported:

He [the instructor] doesn’t really say this is how you write stuff, it’s just like here is a course and you’re going to write stuff. It doesn’t really say anywhere [on the syllabus] that it’s [the course] going to teach you how to write cause that’s not what you’re learning about . . . I don’t really blame him for not putting that[writing instruction] in,

because that's not what his course says. He's not going to teach you how to write, he's going to teach you about other stuff, and then you have to write about it.

Barb's comments contextualize how students' expectations are sometimes unrealistic concerning the amount of direction they get from their instructors. She reported that even though her instructor did not articulate his expectations regarding the writing assignment, she realized that was not the focus of his course. I think this is one of the problems that first-year students encounter in university. They do not fully understand that not all courses are writing courses and therefore, the instructor is under no obligation to teach them how to write a paper. This is an important finding considering how classes are taught at university. Many of the instructors are content area specialists but are not writing specialists and perhaps it is not reasonable to expect them to provide the amount of direction that first-year students appear to need if they are to be successful.

Monica, in her discussion of the degree of assistance instructors gave her in her first-year courses, said:

[Instructor direction] is different. Some instructors they will tell us this is your homework, this is your reading stuff that you have to do tonight, but some instructors don't. I am finding that hard because in high school like you know the teacher will tell you that you have to do this, and you have to do that, and the exam is going to be based on this, or that, but in here you don't get that.

Judy reported a similar experience. She made the following observation when discussing the process of writing chemistry lab reports:

That [direct instruction] is pretty much the thing I am struggling the most with right now because they don't really tell you how to write a lab report or what they expect you to do,

so it is pretty much like they tell you in a really broad way so it is not specific and you don't know, like even when you get your lab report back you don't know what you did wrong or how to improve. They don't tell you that. They just deduct a mark and you're like I don't understand, so that's something that's pretty hard right now. I've talked to him about four times about those lab reports, so now I've just given up, he's just repeating the same things over and over again, and I'm not getting anything out of it.

Caroline also experienced frustration with the lack of clear directions for writing assignments. She said:

When you go to class, they [professors] kind of just talk, but they don't really talk about the projects, like we would [in high school] spend days or even weeks talking about the project before it's even assigned kind of thing. But here it's just like here's the assignments, here you go. They read it over, but it's exactly as written, but we could do that too, but it doesn't help at all . . . they're just not giving [me] enough guidance.

The students also commented on the amount of instruction they received from their TA's. Billie found that the TA's, "were more like high school teachers" in the amount of direction they provided. Betty, on the other hand, did not get as much direction from her TA as she would have liked:

I am assuming that she [the TA] is the person who should go over what is required in the essay more thoroughly [than the instructor] but she just said it is all in the rubric, you can read it, she just set the basics, it has to be 3000 words, it has to be argumentative, you have to do research, and that's about it.

The students' comments about the degree of instructor direction they received in first-year university were very similar to the comments they had made about their high school

teachers. In both instances the students reported that some of their instructors were very good about giving direction while others were not.

Class size and Anonymity

In their review of literature, Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber (2007) found that first-year students often feel anonymous when they begin university and that that feeling of anonymity makes it difficult for them to establish a new learner identity. They are used to teachers in high school who know who they are and are easily approached for help. In contrast, students reported that their university instructors were only available to them once a week between set hours and that, due to the size of first-year classes, the instructors did not know them. Scanlon, et al., (2007), reported that students wanted some personal connection to the lecturers that was not possible. Students' feelings of anonymity were also reinforced by their lack of interaction with other students. Many high school students had been used to classes in which they had known the other students for many years and they experienced a sense of isolation in university courses in which they did not know any of their classmates.

Cuseo (2007) in his review of literature found that first-year students wanted, and expected, that there would be more interaction with their instructors. They often discovered that this would not be the case, for the most part, due to large class sizes. He further discovered that large class sizes leads to student passivity, student anonymity, and a lack of individual accountability amongst students.

Ten of the fourteen students who were interviewed spoke about adapting to the large classes that are part of the first-year university experience. For example, Barb pointed out that when talking about the difference between high school and university:

[there are] a lot bigger classes. The classes are like a movie theatre. That's what I tell my parents and friends about when they ask. It's like you are at the IMAX and there are lots of people around you and there is one guy at the front talking to you.

Billie also commented on the size of the classroom: "The big difference is obviously the actual size of the classroom" since high school class sizes are much smaller.

The large class size made Betty feel uncomfortable about asking questions: "I just feel like when I am in a big class, when the teacher says does anyone have a question, I feel more hesitant . . . in the larger classes, I just wouldn't [ask a question]." She explained that she does not ask questions in class, worrying that she might "look dumb."

Shirley described what it is like to be in a large lecture theatre this way: "In the large lecture classes it is a lot more separate . . . it's a lot more impersonal." However, Shirley also found that she liked being anonymous in the large lecture classes: "For me actually it's kind of a relief [to be anonymous]. Janet reported the same thing, saying "I actually like it better [being anonymous] because then, if you do something silly, it's no big deal because nobody knows who you are . . . I like big classes."

Similarly, Erica reported that she liked the fact that she was anonymous in the large classrooms:

I actually like university much more. It is kind of strange having so much freedom without teachers knowing you on a one to one basis, like by your first name and having the worry, the constant worry about getting picked on for questions, there's still that worry but they have their designated victims now. You can get lost in the crowd, I kind of like that feeling of not like knowing the people you are passing everyday . . . it's kind of nice to be anonymous. I find it relaxing . . . I personally like that. For some reason

they [university instructors] feel more approachable than the ones in high school, maybe it's just because they don't already know me so then I have the opportunity to prepare myself, and introduce myself to them, it will be how I like it to be . . . in high school teachers always had expectations [of what I could do]."

Barb also reported that she was more comfortable in large classes where instructors would not seek her out as had happened in high school:

your instructors are not going to call you out after class and say why didn't you do this and this kind of thing, like you should have known. Don't you remember my lecture, how come you scored so low on this test? In high school, the teachers do that.

Nora also observed that being anonymous "gives you a sense of independence, it's kind of nice no one else in the class knows you, you can just get to know other people and that's kind of nice."

For Judy, however, being anonymous "was really awkward, I find that discomforting . . . like you know I used to like going up and asking questions . . . like I want them [university instructors] to know me."

This was one of the unexpected findings of the study. In contrast to the general findings in the literature, five of the fourteen first-year students interviewed for this study reported that, for the most part, they liked being anonymous in the large lecture theatres. They cited several reasons for this: (1) when they were in the large lecture theatres they felt that they did not have to adhere to someone else's [high school teachers] expectations; (2) they were not labelled as they had been in high school; (3) because instructors did not know who they were, they were not called upon in class to give answers to questions; and, (4) being anonymous gave them a sense of independence. They found that, because the instructor did not know them, they had to take on

more responsibility for getting their own work done. They realized that the instructor was not going to chase them for their assignments.

Email Preferred Method of Communication

The use of computer technology has changed the way that students interact with their professors, especially when communicating outside of class time (Li, Finley, Pitts & Guo, 2010; Stephens, Houser, & Cowan, 2009). Li, Finley, Pitts, and Guo (2010) found that students prefer asynchronous tools such as emails to communicate with their professors. The authors reported that research on the “effects of student-faculty interaction outside of the classroom have consistently found that informal contact between professors and their students was positively associated with personal, social, and intellectual outcomes as well as students’ overall satisfaction with their college experience” (p. 3). They found that email communication has replaced the traditional office hours format for many students as a means to ask questions or obtain information or additional help. Students reported that email is simple to use and their overall satisfaction on getting help outside of the classroom was improved.

Kelly, Keaten and Finch (2004) reported that the use of email provides students with more options to interact with their instructors outside of class time. This is especially beneficial for reticent students who were more comfortable using email than meeting with their instructor during face-to-face office visits. The authors further found that reticent individuals often view themselves as having poor communication skills and report that the idea of meeting with their instructors in person made them anxious. The students testified that they were comfortable using emails to communicate with their instructors because they had the time to plan their message carefully, thus reducing their anxiety levels.

Stephens, Houser, and Cowan (2009) found that email communication between instructors and students has become common in higher education. It has proven to be an important channel providing students with expanded opportunities to interact with their instructors and is becoming the preferred means of communication between students and faculty. Students report positive effects from their interaction with their instructors through the use of emails. The option of email can allow students who would not normally interact with their instructors an avenue for engagement.

Ten out of fourteen students expressed a reluctance to ask questions in their first-year courses especially during the lectures. These participants suggested that they did not want to appear to be stupid if they asked a question to which everyone else already knew the answer. They also did not like the idea of going to see their instructors during office hours and much preferred email.

Jody said, “I think I would more email him just because I like that type of thing better. Then it’s in writing. They give a lot more detail [when you email them].” Billie also found that, “[though] we can go and see her [our instructor] after class or during office hours. I don’t go after class because everyone else goes after class, but she responds to emails within forty-eight hours.” Similarly, Luke expressed a preference for emails “I emailed the TA once or twice about citations and she just gave me specific help. She answers quickly.” The students also reported that it is often easier to get questions answered by email than it is to talk to the instructor after class. Janet said, “At the end of class, there are always long lines of people asking questions about the assignment so I just use her email address.” Marilyn also said, “I just emailed her [after missing class] and she sent me the PowerPoints.” Shirley does not like to talk to her

instructors. She said “I am not a terribly social person. I prefer to email. I’m fine with that. It’s just talking to people that I have problems with. I’ll do it if I have to but I don’t like it.”

Only one of the students informed the researcher that she does not email her instructor. She believed that such contact was inappropriate because:

We were told we were not allowed to use it [professor’s email], they [the TAs] said your prof doesn’t want to hear from you. And if we think it’s important we’ll talk to her . . . but the TAs say okay we’ll get back to you and they never do.

Students reported that, in high school, they asked questions in class because the classes were smaller and teachers knew who they were and could call on them by name. In first-year university, students were reluctant to ask questions in the large lecture theatre classes because they did not want to ask obvious questions or questions that other students might think were not relevant. They expressed a reluctance to go and see their instructors because they did not want their instructor to think that they did not understand the material. They also revealed that they would rather try to find answers out by asking friends, fellow classmates, or someone who had previously taken the course.

The students reported that their instructors were, usually, very approachable and seemed willing to provide help outside of class. It appears that it is the students themselves who are reluctant to avail themselves of this help rather than reluctance on the part of the instructors. Only one student expressed her frustration with going repeatedly to her instructor and not being given any information that she could use when completing her assignment. As a result of this, she just gave up.

Summary

This chapter addressed the research questions posed to each participant, as well as the survey results from the larger student population. For the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were used in an attempt to gauge student perceptions of the writing environment in high school. The qualitative analysis was carried out with the students who consented to take part in either focus groups or individual interviews. Individual themes were generated from the data, and direct quotes were used to provide evidence from the participants themselves.

The analysis of the data presented in this chapter was arranged in accordance with the different stages of the students in their transition from high school to university. The students' perspectives followed this framework: (1) students' perspectives of their high school writing environment; (2) students' perceptions of what they expected the writing environment in university to be like; and, (3) students' perceptions of the differences between the high school writing environment and the first-year university writing environment.

The first section of the chapter reported the students' retrospective look at writing they had done in their high school years, including their perceptions of the assignments they had been given and their interactions with teachers. In general the high school writing environment was perceived by the students as a safe, nurturing environment in which teachers were not only available to offer assistance but also actively encouraged the students to seek help if they did not understand the assignments. It was an environment in which there was a requirement to complete many different kinds of writing, but in which the overall length of writing assignments was relatively short (2-3 pages). It was also a writing environment in which the feedback from teachers dealt more with the content of the paper, than grammatical errors.

The second section of the chapter reported students' perceptions of the writing environment they expected to find when they arrived at the university. When they were asked, on the quantitative survey, whether they felt confident of their writing ability in high school, 41% agreed, but when asked whether they were confident of their writing ability going into first-year university, only 32% said that they were. Students were also asked whether they thought the kinds of writing they would have to do in university would be similar to the writing they had to do in high school. In answer to this question, it was clear that a majority (60%) expected substantial differences. When the students were asked to reflect on the degree of support they received during their high school years, they generally reported that their teachers were available for help with assignments. By contrast, less than half of the students, when interviewed in high school, thought their university instructors would be available for help with assignments. However, once they were in university, they found that their expectations concerning instructor support were unfounded. Students (9 of 14) reported that their instructors were available for help, if needed, but that they often did not take advantage of that help.

The third section of the chapter provided a report of students' perceptions of the differences between the writing environment in high school and first-year university. The differences the students identified were notable. The first of these differences concerned the overall length of the papers the students had to write: in high school, they reported, they were generally expected to write two or three pages, whereas, in first-year university, the required length ranged from five to ten pages. The students also reported that once they began to undertake writing assignments in university, they had to learn to conduct research which they had not done in high school. They also had to learn how to properly format a paper. They found instructor expectations of assignments to be very different from teacher expectations in high

school. With regard to their general transition to university, students generally reported that they had to be more independent in their learning at university that they had had to be in high school. In addition, many students (8 of 14) reported feeling overwhelmed with the large class sizes. Interestingly, however, five students reported that they liked the feeling of anonymity that the large class sizes afforded them. Students generally expressed a preference for dealing with their instructors through email rather than face-to-face meetings.

It was apparent that many of the students understood that the writing they would do in university was going to be different from the writing they had had to do in high school. It also appeared that they were prepared for that difference and prepared for less explicit teacher direction. On the other hand, they did not seem prepared for the sheer volume of work that was expected of them in terms of readings and assignments. They expressed a concern that the increased work load was seemingly unmanageable, but most also admitted that they were not good at managing their time effectively.

The next chapter will provide the limitations of the study, the implications for practice, the implications for further research, and the implications for program development.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications

Introduction

The purpose of my study was to investigate the nature of writing environments faced by first-year students as they negotiated the transition from the writing environment of high school to the writing environment of first-year university. The study was conducted in three phases. The first phase involved administering a one-time quantitative survey to high school students in a Western Canadian Province. Only those high school students who self-identified as planning on attending a specific university in Western Canada in September 2011 were targeted. A total of 141 students filled in the survey. The second phase involved conducting qualitative interviews with twenty students who volunteered to either be a part of a focus group (nine students) or to be interviewed individually (11 students). The focus groups//individual interviews were conducted with the high school students in May and June 2011. The students were asked to give their perceptions of the writing environment that they had encountered in their three years of high school. The third phase involved conducting individual interviews with the same students who had been interviewed during the second phase. In the third phase students were asked to give their perceptions of the differences between the high school writing environment and the first-year university writing environment. Fourteen of the original twenty students who had been interviewed in May/June were re-interviewed in November 2011. One of the students who had been interviewed in phase two had to be withdrawn from the study because she did not end up attending the specific university targeted in September 2011. Five of the students declined to be re-interviewed due to other commitments.

The chapter is organized around the two research questions that framed my study:

1. What are high school students' perceptions of their writing environment?
2. Do students' perceive a difference between the high school and first-year university writing environments?

I have chosen, in this chapter, to focus on the major themes for each question. The two themes that will be discussed in the first question are: (1) instructor expectations and direction; and, (2) length of writing assignments. These two themes were chosen because the students in the focus groups/individual interviews directed many of their comments to their perceived lack of instructor expectation in high school and on how few pages of writing they had to produce in high school. For the second question I discussed the following themes: (1) instructor expectations; (2) class size and anonymity; and, (3) email as the preferred method of communication. The first theme was chosen because it was similar to the theme that emerged from the high school students and I wanted to be able to compare the students' perception of their instructors and how the expectations may have differed. The second two themes were chosen because they provide an overview of what first-year students expect at university in terms of learning and instructor assistance.

Phase 1 What Are High School Students' Perceptions Of Their Writing Environment?

This study found no global consensus among the high school students concerning the writing environment in high school on both the quantitative survey data and the qualitative data. However, it was my observation that more negative comments than positive ones emerged in the focus groups/individual interviews with regards to both their teachers and their overall

perceptions of high school writing. The students commented on what they perceived to be an inadequate amount of writing required in high school and expressed the concern that they had not been properly prepared for the demands of university writing assignments. Their expectations of university writing assignments prior to attending the university appeared to have been based primarily on comments made by high school teachers and friends or family concerning the nature of university writing assignments. The comments of the students who participated in the qualitative interviews can perhaps be explained by the fact that the students self-selected to take part in either the focus groups or individual interviews. These students might have been biased in their views of the English Language Arts teachers they had in high school because they were all, by their own admission, good students. As a result, they were worried that they had not been adequately prepared for the kinds of writing they would have to do in university. These students may have been expecting a more rigorous approach in the Language Arts classes based on their perceptions of what university study would require in terms of writing assignments.

In the qualitative interviews, many of the high school students (12 of 20) were very critical of both their high school teachers and the writing assignments they were asked to complete in high school. They expressed frustration that, although their English Language Arts teachers told them that the writing assignments they would be expected to complete in university were different than those in high school, the teachers did not accurately identify those differences for them. However, as might be expected in studies such as this, the responses obtained depended to a large extent on the individual participants. The students in the study either found their high school teachers to be extremely helpful and effective (8 of 20) or they found them ineffective (12 of 20). There seemed to be no middle ground. Similarly, student satisfaction

with high school writing instruction seemed to depend on the individual teacher with whom they had studied. With regard to the nature of writing assignments, there was consensus. It was the perception of 8 of the 20 students interviewed that writing assignments during their high school years generally consisted of assignments that were only two to three pages long. In the quantitative data 24% of the students surveyed reported that they wrote papers that were less than five pages long. In the quantitative survey, however, 42% of the students reported that they had to produce substantial pieces of writing in their English Language Arts classes, with substantial being defined as five type written pages. These results are once again at odds with each other and difficult to explain except to reiterate that the data were students' perceptions and therefore individual differences are to be expected.

The students reported that they often received no direction for the assignments, that teachers accepted whatever the students handed in, and that students received marks that they felt were not necessarily indicative of the quality of their work (i.e., many students believed that they received higher grades than they deserved). It was also the students' perception that some teachers did not care what students did in class, that students were given too much time to hand in assignments, and that teachers sometimes did not provide the sort of feedback that would help them improve their writing. In contrast, other students reported that some of their teachers were very helpful and that they felt that those teachers provided clear directions and were always available for consultation if they needed assistance with their assignments. As mentioned, this seeming dichotomy of views could be explained by looking at the individual participants' who were involved in the study. The quantitative surveys were filled out by a wider range of participants than the qualitative interviews. The results were also dependent on individual teachers. This was to be expected since each teacher approaches the topic of writing instruction

in a different manner. The Language Arts curriculum, as articulated in the Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education (1998) does not specify how teachers should teach writing nor does it provide guidelines as to the types of writing assignments that students are expected to complete. This leaves writing instruction up to each individual teacher and therefore could explain why students provided the answers they did in the qualitative interviews.

Seventy-six percent of the students thought that the feedback they received from their teachers was helpful in improving the quality of their essays. This difference in views can perhaps be explained by the individual students' perceptions. The students who volunteered to be interviewed were more likely to be the high-achieving students, a supposition that was verified by the comments made in the qualitative interviews regarding how well they did in high school. These students might have been more negative regarding the amount of writing they had to do in high school because they suspected that the essays they would have to produce in university would be longer.

Instructor Expectations and Direction

Students' perceptions of the nature of a good learning environment appeared to depend on the clarity of teacher expectations of and/or directions for assignments. Some students reported that their high school teachers were very clear in their directions and gave clear expectations. These teachers also often provided marking rubrics so students understood the basis of the assessment. Other teachers did not give clear directions, leaving students to guess at the respective teacher's expectations for the assignments. Nearly half (9 of 20) of the high school students reported difficulties in understanding what was expected of them in individual writing assignments. These students felt their teachers did not articulate their expectations or give

students clear directions as to the nature and purpose of assignments or the process they were expected to follow to complete them. One of the students reported that when she went to her teacher for help on an assignment, the teacher did the work for her without explaining what she did wrong or how she could have changed it herself.

Half of the students, in Phase 2, (10 of 20) reported that their teachers made the effort to teach them how to write. They reported that these teachers provided guidelines, handed out rubrics, and were available to provide assistance if students were willing to ask for help. These teachers set standards that they wanted their students to reach and provided the guidance necessary to help them accomplish their writing goals. The teachers also provided writing models and outlines when preparing students for the provincial exam. The students found these aids to be very useful because they fostered writing growth. Once again, this apparent dichotomy cannot be explained except to say that it was the students' perceptions of individual teachers and each teacher was different.

In contrast, a few (6 of 20) students criticized the apparent lack of teaching standards they witnessed in high school classrooms throughout grades 10 to 12. They reported that some students could pass courses without doing any work. For example, one student observed that she missed a week of school without falling behind the other students. It was the students' perceptions that when these teachers did give direction, the instructions were so vague as to be of no use. The students felt that comments written on papers did not help them improve their writing that the teachers did not seem to be aware of what they should be marking, that the marks received did not indicate to them either the things they did well or the things that needed to be improved. The students also commented that, by the time they got to Grade 11 and 12, it was

assumed that they would already know how to write an essay. It was their perception that their teachers gave them no meaningful writing instruction at all.

I found the students who were interviewed for this study were very articulate in their assessment of the teaching they required from their classroom teachers. Six of the fourteen students wanted teachers to provide clear expectations and enough direction that they understood what they were expected to do for each assignment. The students (12 of 14) predicted that the kinds of writing assignments they were asked to produce in high school would not be the same as the ones that would be required in university. In addition, eight out of fourteen students articulated the need for teachers to explain why students received the marks they did on their assignments. According to the eight students, this was not immediately clear when they received their papers back. They also expressed frustration that the allocation of marks was often not clearly explained, and that the rubrics that were used to mark papers were not provided before the assignments were due. The eight students said that sometimes they would get back their marked papers with a rubric but, at that point in time, the information was less useful to them. The students were left wondering why the teachers did not give out the rubrics before the assignments were completed as a guide to the writing process.

As can be expected, students (8 of 20) reported higher levels of overall satisfaction with their teachers when they perceived that the teachers clearly articulated their expectations and provided them with explicit directions when completing their written assignments. In contrast, students (6 of 20) were less satisfied with the teachers they had in high school whom they perceived as not making an effort to explain to them what it was they were looking for in their assignments. These students reported that they felt they should not be left to guess what it was

their teachers wanted. They also realized that they could not depend on their fellow students to help them with assignments since their peers were often having difficulties as well. This finding has far-reaching implications for instruction, particularly at the university level where students are often already struggling with difficulties related to the new expectations of university instructors, course content, their own learning styles, and outside influences. The findings of this study are consistent with the literature concerning instructor expectations that has been articulated by a number of researchers. Carroll (2002) found that students struggle with instructor expectations in university due to a lack of clear and explicit direction. Similarly, Davis (2006) discovered that university students struggled because they were unable to predict or interpret their instructors' expectations. Harris (2010) found that when students are unsure of what their instructors' expectations are, they tend to apply strategies based on their previous experiences with assignments in high schools. This is not a good strategy considering Applebee (1993) reported that high school teachers' expectations were lower than in university because each assignment was only one of many. It appears that students want and need clear, explicit direction from their instructors if they are to feel confident in completing assignments in high school and first-year university.

Length of Written Assignments

It was the perception of the students in this study that they did not do enough writing in their English Language Arts classes. They reported that the assignments were too short to be useful and, as a result, students were not able to explore any type of writing in sufficient detail. When I was interviewing the students, I was left with the impression that the lengths of the writing assignments in high school were seen as being unworthy of serious attention by the

students. Even those students who wrote between three to five pages expressed a disdain for the assignments. The overall perceptions of the students seemed to indicate that the amount of writing they had to do in their high school English Language Arts classes was not sufficient. The kinds of writing reported on the surveys, while not necessarily fill in the blanks, did tend to be still heavily weighted towards short answer questions. Virtually all of the students surveyed reported that they had to write short answer style questions in their English Language Arts classes. They also reported writing a variety of other assignments ranging from poems to research papers. The sheer variety of writing assignments reported by students does seem to indicate that the types of writing assignments are different than those observed by Applebee (1981, 1984, 1993) and Hillocks (2006). The fact that students were required to write in so many different genres made incorporating teacher feedback difficult since it was the students' perceptions that the feedback they received on one assignment could not be applied when writing another assignment.

The data from this study demonstrate that, while students are required to write in a greater variety of styles than Applebee (1981) had reported, they are still writing relatively short assignments in high school English Language Arts classes. The kinds of assignments required in high school English Language Arts classes tended to be stand-alone assignments that are completed independently of other writing assignments (i.e., students produce one piece of writing in a particular genre and then move on to the next unit of study). This may make it difficult for the students to apply what they have acquired in one assignment to another similar assignment. The implications of this finding concern high school curriculum. Perhaps students would be better served if teachers were to identify connections between the different writing strategies used in individual assignments. This might facilitate student awareness of the ways in

which the skills they acquire in one assignment could be transferred to other assignments both in the course and in other courses in which students were expected to write papers of a similar kind.

The next section will look at the differences that students perceived between the high school writing environment and the first-year university writing environment.

Differences in the Writing Environment between High School and First-Year University

Instructor Expectations

Students (18 of 20) in this study found that they had to adjust their writing strategies in order to conform to the new expectations of university instructors. The students reported that teacher expectations in high school did not seem to be as high as those of instructors in university. As noted above, Applebee (1993) came to the same conclusion. Students expressed their disappointment in discovering that the writing products for which they might have received a grade of A+ in high school often merited only a C+ in university classes. They struggled to understand how writing expectations could have changed so much from high school to university. It was the students' (18 of 20) perceptions that their high school teachers should have better prepared them for the kinds of writing they would be required to produce in university. They felt inadequately prepared for conducting research, for analyzing the assignments, for drafting an outline, and for writing an academic essay. The students (6 of 20) expressed disappointment that their high school English Language Arts teachers had not held them to a higher standard for written work, especially once they had reached Grades 11 and 12. The results from this study indicated that the students (19 of 20) perceived that some of their teachers

in high school did not have high expectations for them and that they could write a paper the night before and still receive a high grade. This is an area that needs further investigating.

First-year students often arrive at the university thinking, mistakenly, that instructor expectations for assignments will be the same as they had been in high school (Beaufort, 2007), yet 60% of the students in the present study reported that they expected that the assignments would be different. They reported that they did not understand instructor expectations for writing assignments and were often left wondering what they needed to do to get a good mark. They reported that they understood how to get good marks in high school but that these strategies were not working in university. The students in this study were surprised to discover that each instructor in first-year university seemed to have a different set of criteria for marking papers. This caused the students considerable anxiety as they struggled to understand the kind of writing they would need to produce in each course. The results from this study indicate that first-year students are more comfortable with writing situations in which instructor expectations have been clearly articulated. First-year instructors could help ease the transition from high school to university by clearly stating their expectations for each assignment and by providing rubrics that illustrate the way in which assignments will be marked as well as models such as scholarly articles. The research conducted by various researchers (Carroll, 2002; Davis, 2006; Harris, 2010; and Freedman & Pringle, 1980) verifies that understanding instructor expectations is a major concern to first-year students as is the amount of direction provided for assignments.

Students also reported difficulties in adjusting to the need to conduct research for university-level writing assignments. In high school, the students were not usually expected to conduct research for their essays. Students who did undertake research were generally permitted

to use general purpose search engines (e.g., Google or Yahoo) or online information sources such as Wikipedia. Some students reported that they were expected to cite their sources and to include a bibliography or reference page but that teachers were not particular about the degree to which students followed the format. Though some students indicated that their high school English Language Arts teachers had taught them to follow the MLA format, the teachers did not seem particularly concerned about students' adherence to it.

Given the fact that most of the students (12 of 14) in the study reported that they had not done research for their high school writing assignments, it is not surprising to find that they also reported difficulties in learning to conduct research in university. Freedman and Pringle (1980) reported that university assignments required some element of research that was not expected in high school assignments which did lead to some difficulties for first-year students. Students described the problems they had with finding suitable evidence for their essays, with analyzing the sources they found, and with understanding the way in which they were expected to incorporate the sources into their essays. These difficulties were compounded by their confusion regarding the use of opinion in an academic essay. In many cases, high school teachers had allowed them to include statements of opinion in their essays. They were surprised to discover that the practice was not common in university writing assignments and confessed that their reliance on opinion when writing an essay was a difficult habit to overcome.

The students (12 of 14) also found that the challenge of learning to format their essays properly was something of an ordeal for them. The fourteen students in this study were all required to learn to format their first-year essays using APA formatting. They reported that they found the use of APA confusing and that they were frustrated that they lost marks for failing to

punctuate citations and reference entries properly. The use of formatting was a foreign concept for most of the students (12 of 14) because they had not learned to format essays in high school.

In general, the students (12 of 14) in this study expressed disappointment that their high school teachers had not taught them to conduct research or to format their essays. They indicated that they thought that they should have been taught to write academic essays in high school when they would have had more time to concentrate on the process. In high school, they felt they would have had time to learn the subtleties of the academic essay form, whereas in university the pace of the semester forced them to concentrate on nothing but the completion of assignments. The results from this study indicate that university-bound students believe that instruction in academic essay, formatting, the research process, and the use of evidence are all topics that should be part of the high school curriculum. One of the other major differences that students found between high school and first-year university was the size of their classrooms.

Class Size and Anonymity

While the existing literature on first-year transition identifies the size of post-secondary institutions and, in particular, the size of first-year classrooms, as being a source of distress for many first-year students (Cuseo, 2007; Scanlon, et al., (2007), five of the students in this study reported that they preferred the larger size of post-secondary institutions and classrooms. They indicated that they liked the large lecture theatres because of the anonymity that it provided. While the larger size obliged them to become more independent, it also allowed them to define themselves in new ways. They suggested that the long relationships that high school teachers had had with students and their families led the teachers to expect certain behaviours from students. In arriving at the university, many students were relieved to find that their first-year

instructors had no such expectations. It is still the case, of course, that many students will be challenged by the transition from the relatively small environment of high school to the larger and more impersonal environment of university campuses. Nonetheless, it is interesting to have a different perspective on the question being expressed by the students in this study.

E-Mail Preferred Method of Contacting Instructors

In high school, students reported that they had been more likely to ask questions in class because the classes were smaller and teachers knew who they were. In first-year university, however, students said that they were reluctant to ask questions in the large lecture theatre classes because they did not want to ask obvious questions or questions that other students might think were not relevant. They also expressed a reluctance to go and see their instructors because they did not want their instructors to think that they did not understand the material. Though the students reported that their instructors were very approachable and willing to provide help outside of the classroom, the students said that they rarely took advantage of their instructors' office hours. The students said that they generally preferred to try to figure things out on their own or to ask friends or fellow classmates for assistance.

Interestingly, however, the students also reported that they were comfortable in contacting instructors by email. Email appeared to provide a safe means of communication for those students who are reluctant to ask their instructors questions either in class or outside of class. The students reported that instructors seemed agreeable to email as a communication channel and that instructors generally responded to emails promptly. While the volume of email for instructors with large classes may, in some cases, make this strategy unworkable, it appeared to be effective for many of the students in this study.

Overall Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

In the qualitative component of this research in particular, the students who participated in this study were very forthcoming with their opinions about the writing environment they found in high school and the ways in which it differed from the writing environment in first-year university. Their comments were both thoughtful and well-informed, and many interesting insights were gleaned from the data. In their discussion of high school English Language Arts classes, it became apparent that some of the students (6 of 14) felt they had not learned as much about the process of essay-writing as they would have liked. It was the students' (10 of 14) perceptions that the performance standards for writing assignments in their high school English Language Arts classes was too low and, as a result, the students felt that they had not been adequately prepared for the rigors of university writing assignments. They seemed frustrated that they had not been taught to format their essays, to use evidence, or cite references, and that they had not been held to a higher standard in high school.

The first-year students in this study had certain expectations of university life and university instructors. It appeared, however, they had not completely anticipated the effect that other outside influences (e.g., work, family, and relationships) would have on their academic success (11 of 14 students). Nevertheless, students (10 of 14) did complain that they did not have enough time to complete assignments, they did not receive enough direct explicit instruction, and they did not always understand what was expected of them. Despite the perception that their instructors did not provide them with enough direction in terms of what their expectations were, the same students also reported that they did not go to their instructors for help when they experienced difficulty in completing assignments. Interestingly, despite the

concerns about the absence of direct instruction in first-year studies, students (12 of 14) also reported that they enjoyed their independence and liked working without instructor interference. In fact, the majority of the students (12 of 14) in the study noted on a number of occasions that there was only so much their university instructors could do to help them and that they were the ones who needed to take charge of their respective learning paths. They noted, for example, that it is difficult to impress upon first-year students the importance of attending class when students know that no one is taking attendance. In many ways, the students were far more sympathetic to the lack of direct involvement on the part of university instructors than they were to familiarity of the high school teachers.

On the other hand, the students (11 of 14) consistently reported frustration with the absence of clear indicators of expectations for writing assignments from university instructors. However, that concern needs further exploration. From listening to the first-year university students' perceptions about the lack of instructor direction, I have come to the conclusion that many of the students (7 of 14) were not looking for explicit direction in writing but for specific guidelines about the way in which the assignments will be assessed. In short, they wanted instructors to tell them, with some degree of exactitude, what they need to do to get a good mark. In general, the seven students who felt their instructors were not providing clear direction were also the students who reported that they were not achieving the high marks they were used to getting in high school. Students (5 of 14) who were satisfied with the instructor directions were generally performing well in their courses.

The research in the area of writing instruction and students' perceptions of what that writing instruction is has focused almost exclusively on either the high school writing

environment (Applebee, 1981, 1984, 1993; Hillocks, 1986) or the university writing environment (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002). There is no research that has attempted to look at both environments in the same study. This research did that. Comparing the perceptions of high school students and then following the same students to first-year university and obtaining their perceptions of university writing has led to insights that could not be obtained by focusing on only one environment to the exclusion of the other. In addition, students who enter university often have difficulties learning how to write an academic essay and this study illuminates what some of those difficulties are and perhaps provides some information that high school instructors might find useful in their own practices.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study was that the surveys were filled out only by those students who took the time to get their parents to sign the permission forms, or students who were already 18 years of age and could sign their own permission forms. The fact that the students had to remember to take the permission forms to their parents for signatures limited the number of students who ultimately participated.

Another limitation was that the students volunteered to take part in either the focus groups or individual interviews. This led to a self-selected group of students who were interested in sharing their perceptions of high school and first-year university writing environments.

This study also relied on information from the students who had self-identified as going on to study at a selected Western Canadian University. The fact that I limited it to these students meant that many students were not eligible to fill in the survey and that they could not participate in either the focus groups or the individual interviews.

The questions that were asked on the survey did not always align with the themes that emerged in the qualitative interviews. This was one of the reasons that I wanted to use an explanatory approach as it is difficult to generalize findings and draw inferences simply on the basis of quantitative research. The differences in data from the quantitative and qualitative could perhaps be explained by the nature of qualitative research where researchers identify their personal stance with regards to how their experiences and backgrounds shape the interpretations they make through the coding and theme process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Similarly, as per qualitative research methodology, I did not approach the focus groups and individual interviews with a set of questions already formulated but instead allowed the questions to emerge and change as the participants discussed their own perceptions. I had a set of tentative questions prepared, but I did not always use them as I followed topics and themes identified by each participant because I wanted to discover individual students' experiences and perceptions of the writing environments. My own biases, as articulated in my personal stance, may have led me to search for certain themes in the qualitative interviews, but I believe these were minimized by using actual quotes from the participants to illustrate my findings and interpretations. I also employed a second researcher to independently review my data to see if he came up with the same themes. In addition, in an effort, not to lead the students into commenting on areas that they did not broach on their own, I was reluctant to ask them specific questions. This is a limitation that, perhaps, I should have been more aware of during the individual interviews.

Implications for Further Research

Suggestions for further research based on the results of this study are:

- A larger sample could be employed using students from different high schools in the city rather than limiting the study to one school division. In addition, because the university students in this study were, for the most part, University 1 students, the results could have been skewed. It would be beneficial to interview students from direct-entry programs (e.g., Engineering, Business, Fine Arts, Music) to get their perspectives of the writing environment in first-year university.
- Students who were planning on attending different universities could also be surveyed about their perceptions of the high school writing environment. Follow-up interviews could be conducted to see if there is a difference in the perceptions of students attending different universities.
- A follow-up interview could be conducted with the students at the end of their first year to see how well they had adjusted to university learning and, more specifically, how well they had adjusted to the university writing environment. Another interview could also be conducted with the students in their second year of university to see how they were coping, and to see if they had a different perspective of the writing environment and of university in general.
- A survey could be conducted with first-year students to further investigate the findings of this study that indicated some students liked the anonymity of their classes. This could

be conducted with a large group of students to see the degree to which this attitude is prevalent.

- A follow-up study is warranted. One that investigates in more depth the nature of the high school writing environment by exploring the kinds of writing tasks assigned to students, the approaches Language Arts and content area teachers take to teaching writing, the scaffolding they provide, the nature of feedback, and how students respond to the feedback.
- A longitudinal study across secondary and post-secondary writing environments that incorporated interviews with teachers and instructors, interviews with support staff, interviews with first-year instructors, and a document analysis of participants' writing assignments.

Implications for Program Development

The students in the present study articulated clear differences between the respective writing environments of high school and first-year university. In many instances, the differences had to do with the need for students to become more independent and to take on more responsibility for their own learning.

Recommendations for Secondary School Teachers

- Perhaps teachers in high school need to start training students to take on more of the responsibility by requiring completion assignments in a more timely fashion.

- Teachers in high school also need to think about providing their students with a chance to improve their overall writing ability by encouraging their students to re-write papers following explicit feedback.
- Students would also benefit from practicing one kind of writing more often than once a year.
- High school teachers may want to consider teaching fewer genres but teaching to mastery rather than a greater number of genres without taking the time necessary for students to acquire competence.
- When teaching the five-paragraph essay teachers should explain to students how they can use their understanding of the five-paragraph essay and adapt it to new writing situations.

Recommendations for Post-Secondary Instructors

- In first-year university, instructors should be more clear in their expectations.
- The instructors should also make the effort to understand that their students have come from a more teacher directed environment where they are used to being told what to do. More scaffolding needs to take place in university if students are to successfully make the transition. The students, in the present study, knew that university was going to be different, but it was the students' perceptions that no one told them exactly how it was going to be different and how they could successfully make the transition.
- Instructors who teach courses in first-year should make reference to what the students already know and build from the skills students already possess. A case in point is the

five-paragraph essay. Students would benefit from understanding the limitations of the five-paragraph essay. In first-year students are comfortable with the five-paragraph essay and therefore writing instructors may be better advised to explain to students how they can take what they know about the five-paragraph essay and adapt it to the new environment. Students would benefit from having their instructors teach them how to review literature. This would include their expectations for citation of sources.

- First-year instructors who are teaching in other disciplines (e.g. sciences and arts/humanities course) should instruct their students in how to write papers in their specific genres.
- Instructors who teach first-year courses should make their students aware of the resources that are available to them (e.g., writing centres and tutoring centres).

This study did not look at the programs offered to first-year students nor did it gather information on the teaching processes employed by instructors. It did, however, seek to gather data from select students, recording their perceptions of the respective writing environments and modes of instruction. The general consensus among the students was that there was a profound difference between the ways in which writing was taught in high school and university. Perhaps university instructors of writing could design a bridge between the two environments by foregrounding some of the similarities and introducing new writing strategies while continuing to make reference to the students' prior knowledge. Given that a number of the students reported that they reverted to the familiar five-paragraph model when they did not understand new writing strategies or expectations, it may be more effective to begin university writing instruction from

the point at which high school instruction ended. The students may be better able to build on an existing foundation.

Recommendations for Theory

Cognitive theorists believe that there are certain factors that affect the efficiency with which new material can be learned (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007). One of the factors identified as being important in the process of acquiring new information is the clear articulation to the students of the importance of the new information (Ormrod, 1990; Piaget, 1966). This appears to be more effective than allowing the students to impose their own meaning on new concepts. In addition, since learning is a function of the way in which information is mentally processed, teachers should be aware of both what students learn and how they attempt to learn it. In this study, it appeared that students (12 of 14) were often aware of what they were meant to know but not of the way in which they were meant to acquire the knowledge. This observation was particularly common in the students' reports of their perceptions of the first-year writing environment. In this study, students reported that their transition to the first-year writing environment was sometimes complicated by their inability to understand the change in expectations. Since new information is more easily acquired when students are able to contextualize it within their prior knowledge perhaps instructors should make more of an effort to connect the new information to information students already have on the subject.

In terms of instruction, first-year instructors should take into consideration that students come to the university with prior knowledge in many areas, including writing instruction. This knowledge can either be beneficial to students or can hinder them when they are attempting to acquire new information. This is an element of the learning process that instructors should keep

in mind when teaching first-year students. If instructors take into account the cognitive theorists' view that students learn more effectively when they are told of the importance of new information, it should follow that instructors can help facilitate the acquisition of new information by pointing out information the student might already have on the subject and explaining the way in which the new information builds on the prior knowledge.

In secondary school it is not unusual for teachers to work with what students already understand about a topic. This is often not the case in university. Cognitive theory was very useful in my analysis of the data as students (9 of 14) commented on their perceived inability to take what they already knew and apply it to the new writing environment. However, to further understand the students' perceptions, it might have been useful to incorporate those elements of phenomenological methodology that allow a researcher to investigate "the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of [a] phenomenon for [a] person or group of people" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). This might have given me a greater understanding of the seemingly contradictory research findings between the quantitative data and the qualitative data. The students' perceptions could have been analyzed with an understanding of the multiple ways in which participants interpret the same experience. A phenomenological perspective may have allowed me to focus more on the consciousness of the students' remembered experiences and may have led to greater insight into how each participant framed their perspectives.

Final Conclusion

This study was designed to investigate the challenges faced by first-year students as they negotiated the transition from the writing environment of high school to the writing environment of first-year university. The findings hold promise for developing a better understanding of some of the difficulties students face in making the transition. One of the advantages of the study was the opportunity to interview the same students as they moved from high school to first-year university, a circumstance that permitted me to record the similarities and differences between the perceptions. In addition, because the first round of data gathering included questions on students' expectations of the first-year writing environment, I was also able to compare their expectations to their experiences.

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Appendix A

Quantitative Survey for High School Students

UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Education

1. Which Language Arts Class are you taking this semester?

Transactional

Comprehensive Focus

Literary Focus

2. How many years have you been attending this high school?

One

Two

Three

3. Are you in the French Immersion Program?

Yes

No

4. I feel confident writing an essay in English Language Arts.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

5. I feel confident writing an essay in my other courses (e.g., history, law).

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

6. I follow the writing process in my essays (i.e., planning, writing, revising).

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

7. I begin writing my essays early enough that I have time to edit and revise before handing in the essay.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. My teacher encourages me to ask for assistance, if needed.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. If I do not understand an assignment, I ask for assistance from the teacher.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. If I do not understand an assignment, I ask for assistance from a friend.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

11. I feel like I have enough time to complete an essay in my English language arts course.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

12. I feel like I have enough time to complete an essay in my other courses (e.g., history).

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

13. Written feedback from my English teachers was helpful in improving the quality of my essays.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

14. The types of comments I received on my essays dealt mostly with grammar (e.g., spelling, punctuation).

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

15. The types of comments I received from my teacher on my essays dealt with ways to improve the meaning of my essay.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

16. When I produced writing in other classes, I received written feedback from my instructors about the quality of the paper.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

17. I had to produce substantial pieces of writing in my English Language Arts class.

(Substantial is at least 3 papers of 1000 words each, or 5 type written pages each)

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

18. I had to produce substantial pieces of writing in my other courses.

(Substantial is at least 3 papers of 1000 words each, or 5 type written pages)

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

19. My English Language Arts teachers are invested in ensuring I do well in their classes in writing.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

20. My other teachers, besides English Language Arts, are invested in ensuring I do well in their classes in writing.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

21. The writing assignments we are required to complete in English Language Arts relate directly to our advancement as writers.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

22. The writing assignments we are required to complete in our other classes relate directly to our advancement as writers.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

23. I feel confident now that I am an adequate writer.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

24. I feel that my competence in writing relates to the marks I receive in English Language Arts.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

25. I feel that my competence in writing relates to the marks I receive in other classes besides English Language Arts.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

26. Which of the following kinds of writing tasks were you asked to do during your high school years (grades 10-12) in any kind of class? (Some answers will overlap. Please check as many as apply).

Research paper

Essay exam questions

Personal narrative (a non-fiction piece about yourself)

Essay

A poem

Analysis of a poem, story, or other reading

Short story

Newspaper article or letter to the editor

Speech

Argumentative paper

Lab report

Summary

Evaluation

Journal or other reflective writing

Professional letter

Collaborative or group paper

27. I think that writing in first-year university will be very similar to writing in high school.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

28. I expect that the instructor in first-year university courses will be available for consultation if I need assistance.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

29. I think that I will feel comfortable asking my first-year instructors for help if I do not understand something.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

30. I plan on attending a faculty, at university, that will require a substantial amount of writing.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

31. I feel confident going into university with my present writing ability.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

32. I feel confident that I will do well in my writing assignments at university.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

33. I am looking forward to attending university.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Appendix B

Interview/Focus Group Protocol

In High School

- How much writing did you do in your high school English Language Arts classes?
- What kinds of writing did you do in your high school English Language Arts classes?
- Did you have any difficulties completing your writing assignments in English Language Arts? Why or why not?
- Were your English Language Arts teachers' expectations for the assignments made clear to you? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that your English Language Arts teachers gave you enough direction in how to complete your written assignments? Why or why not?
- What kind of help did your English Language Arts teachers provide if you were having difficulty completing your written assignments? Please explain.
- Is there anything that would have made completing your written assignments in English Language Arts easier? Please give examples.

2. In First-Year University (individual interviews)

- How many pages was your first writing assignment?
- How did the first assignment go? Please talk about some of the difficulties that you may have found in completing that first assignment?

- Did you feel that your instructor gave you enough direction in how to complete your written assignment? Why or Why not?
- What kind of help did your instructor provide you if you were having difficulty completing your assignment? Please explain.
- How is the writing you have to do in first-year university different than the writing you had to do in high school?
- Are you having any problems adjusting to writing in first-year university? Why or why not? Please explain.
- Is there anything that would have made completing your written assignments in your writing courses, easier? Please give examples.

Appendix C

Ethics Approval Certificate



CTC Building
208 - 194 Dafoe Road
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2
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www.umanitoba.ca/research

APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

April 21, 2011

TO: L. Karen Soiferman (Advisor S. Straw)
Principal Investigator

FROM: Judy Inglis, Acting Chair
Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

Re: Protocol #E2011:026
"Secondary and Post-Secondary Students' Perceptions of the Writing Environment"

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by the **Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board**, which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement. This approval is valid for one year only.

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat in advance of implementation of such changes.

Please note:

- If you have funds pending human ethics approval, the auditor requires that you submit a copy of this Approval Certificate to the Office of Research Services, fax 261-0325 - please include the name of the funding agency and your UM Project number. This must be faxed before your account can be accessed.
- if you have received multi-year funding for this research, responsibility lies with you to apply for and obtain Renewal Approval at the expiry of the initial one-year approval; otherwise the account will be locked.

The Research Ethics Board requests a final report for your study (available at: http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/ethics/ors_ethics_human_REB_forms_guidelines.html) in order to be in compliance with Tri-Council Guidelines.