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Stranger Than Fiction: A Study of Student Perceptions of Writer's Block And Film in the Composition Classroom

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STRANGER THAN FICTION:

A STUDY OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF

WRITER'S BLOCK AND FILM

IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Kimberly Marie Miller

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

The School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Kimberly Marie Miller

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

_____ _____

Gian S. Pagnucci, Ph.D.
University Professor &
Professor of English, Advisor

_____ _____

Nancy Hayward, Ph.D.
Professor of English

_____ _____

William O. Boggs, D.A.
Professor of English
Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania

ACCEPTED

_____ _____

Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: *Stranger Than Fiction:* A Study of Student Perceptions of Writer's Block And Film in the Composition Classroom

Author: Kimberly M. Miller

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Gian S. Pagnucci

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Nancy M. Hayward
Dr. William O. Boggs

Writer's block is an issue that continues to persist in popular culture, even if it is a discussion that has been nearly abandoned in recent years. As example, a review for the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) notes that the main character, Kay Eiffel (Emma Thompson) is suffering from "intense writer's block," but fails to elaborate on what that phrase means, thus indicating that the reader would already understand this term without explanation (McCarthy, 2006). This study made use of the power of popular culture, specifically film, to engage writing students in an exploration of their beliefs about writer's block.

Through the research methods of surveys, observation, paper analysis, and interviews, data revealed that students entered the participating composition classrooms with preconceived understandings of writer's block. Additionally, student ideas of writers block were influenced, in some cases dramatically so, by clips of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) that were shown as part of this study.

The impact of this study is clear. In *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*, Mike Rose (1984) indicates that, although writer's block is commonly discussed, "it is one of the least studied dysfunctions of the composing process" (p. 1). This dissertation study opens a discussion that has been nearly abandoned since the 1980s through the modern and oft-used method of film use in the composition class.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of people significantly influenced my ability to complete this project. I will try to keep it brief, but am sure I will fail miserably. Skip ahead if you wish.

Above all else, I am deeply grateful to my Lord Jesus Christ. Thank You for answering my frequent prayers and allowing me to finish this work for Your glory.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

Figure 1. A representation of writer's block.

INTRODUCTION

The scene goes something like this…

He appears to be broken—a man, attempting to write and yet finding no words. The foreground of the room is dimly lit, desolate, with only a table, pen and ink. In the background a rumpled bed tells of the sleepless nights spent tossing and turning, no cohesive thoughts to be written. The writer sits, staring at another partially-filled page, one that will likely be crinkled and crushed before joining so many others tossed at his feet, unworthy of publication. He runs his fingers anxiously through his hair—waiting… waiting for something to happen—and yet nothing does. And so he sits, hopeful that inspiration will arrive—whether through a doctor, muse, or divine intervention—and somehow allow him to write again.

This scene from the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) shows a young William Shakespeare as a writer who seems to be struggling with a block in his writing process. While many writers, scholars and writing students talk of the phenomenon of writer's block—or the related areas of writing anxiety and writing apprehension—there are few, if any, who have linked writer's block to popular culture in the composition classroom.

Since the 1980s, composition scholars have shown an interest in writer's block. Rose's extensive work (1980, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985) began a serious consideration of the challenge of writer's block. A range of scholars have followed up on Rose's work (Baxter, 1987; Boice, 1983, 1993; Davis, 1987; Day, 2002; Donlan and Andreatta, 1987; Faigley, Daly, Witte, 1981; Riffe and Stacks, 1992; Tighe 1987). Additionally, there are many recent dissertation studies that have also been conducted to consider various areas of writer's block and writing apprehension (Bell, 1984; Clarke, 2005; Crumbo, 1998; Harnett, 2007; Hayward, 1991; Hettich, 1994; Matthews, 2001; Poff, 2004). While early researchers called for future studies in writing apprehension and blocking issues (Daly and Miller, 1975; Rose, 1985), more recent studies have shown that the need for further research on writer's block remains. Matthews (2001) states in her dissertation about writer's block that "the greatest implication of this study is the need for further research, especially as it relates to teachers' attitudes and writing apprehension and instructional practices" (p. 151).

Significant among the aforementioned studies are those of Sandra Itzel Poff (2004) and Rebecca Hettich (1994). Poff's study *Regimentation: A Predictor of Writer's Block and Writing Apprehension* establishes the differences and connections between writing apprehension and writer's block, issues that will be explored in more detail later

in this dissertation. In her study *Writing Apprehension: A Critique*, Hettich (1994) attempts to clarify the terminology used to describe and analyze writer's block, and she considers the history and status of psychological representations of writing apprehension in composition studies. In both dissertation studies, the scholars have opened discussions on just some of the many issues that fall under the heading of 'writer's block'.

Additionally, the aforementioned studies are valuable and indicate a need for further research into the area of writer's block. Neither Poff nor Hettich consider the increasingly important role of popular culture in influencing student beliefs regarding writer's block. In fact, it seems there are no studies currently published that link these two factors together. This dissertation sought to explore that critical link through an examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject was shown.

Hettich's work is also important because it highlights a shift in the field of composition since Rose's work. While writer's block has been a subject of study (Baxter, 1987; Boice, 1983, 1993; Davis, 1987; Day, 2002; Donlan and Andreatta, 1987; Faigley, Daly, Witte, 1981; Riffe and Stacks, 1992; Tighe 1987), to some extent more research attention has been focused on writing anxiety. However, ask any group of composition students about writer's block, and they will not only know what it is, many will say that they suffer from it. This can lead us to ask why concerns about writer's block exist and where those ideas about writer's block come from.

One of the major factors that is absent from all books, dissertation studies, and articles that have been researched for this study is that of popular culture's influence on student perceptions of writer's block—and further, whether this influence can impact

students' own writing practices. There are countless portrayals of writers struggling to produce written texts in popular culture. For example, a sample of recent Hollywood feature films that include writers struggling to produce written texts are: *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), *Finding Forrester* (2000), and *Adaptation* (2002). All of the films mentioned have enjoyed some level of success at the box office, and so are more likely to have been seen by a large number of student writers.

The image of the blocked writer has persisted over time in film, reaching as far back as *Lost Weekend* (1945) and the better-known *The Shining* (1980). Since scholars have yet to consider the impact of these films on general societal perceptions that may have over time been fed to students, there is merit to pursuing research in this area.

<div align="center">Study Overview</div>

Writer's block is an issue that continues to persist in popular culture. As example, a review for the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) notes that the main character, Kay Eiffel (Emma Thompson) is suffering from "intense writer's block," but fails to elaborate on what that phrase means, thus indicating that the reader would already understand this term without explanation (McCarthy, 2006). Additionally, in a study on the role of a writer's freedom in the composing process, Hunzer (1995) indicates that "Writer's block is a common expression used by people as they discuss their writing habits" (p. 2). While the terms used to refer to writer's block may differ (a topic to be elaborated on later in this chapter), the idea is essentially the same and it is clear that it is an important area of interest in popular culture. This study sought to make use of the power of popular culture, specifically film, to engage writing students in an exploration of their beliefs about writer's block.

This study aimed to explore the intersection of the academic and the popular through an examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject was shown. To study this issue, I examined four college composition classrooms in an effort to understand student perceptions of writer's block. Students participating in the study viewed portions of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006)—a feature length narrative film that features writer's block as a main theme—and were then asked to discuss the film and write about it. The discussions and papers were analyzed to see how the film influenced the participating students' thinking about writer's block. Additionally, some students were asked to participate in an interview where they were able to elaborate on their experiences with writer's block.

The film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) is an important example of a film featuring a writer struggling with writer's block, as this issue is a significant problem for one of the protagonists, Karen Eiffel, throughout the film. It makes sense to study this particular film for a number of reasons. The film was released in 2006 and won or was nominated for a number of awards, including Best Actor and Best Actress (Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, & Horror Films, USA), as well as Best Actor (Golden Globe) and Best Original Screenplay (National Board Review USA and Writers Guild of America). The stars of the film, Will Ferrell and Emma Thompson, are well-known, celebrated actors. These factors make this film highly desirable for students to see and engage with because the film has already established some relevant popular and scholarly success. Additionally, a number of students had already seen the film, which meant they were already familiar with the narrative. And further, some research notes that it is beneficial to see a film multiple times when the film is being used for a class assignment

or discussion (Corrigan, 2007; Cruz, 1999; Bordwell, 2004). Students who were seeing *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) for the second or more times were an asset to the study because they had more insight into the film than others who were seeing it for the first time.

The Significance of this Study

In *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*, Mike Rose (1984) indicates that, although writer's block is commonly discussed among composition instructors and scholars, "it is one of the least studied dysfunctions of the composing process" (p. 1). This study provides relevant research into what has increasingly been an area of concern for composition theorists and writing teachers since the 1980s. A host of scholars have considered issues surrounding writer's block since that time (Chandler, 2007; Clark 2005; Crumbo, 1998; Hayward, 1991; Hettich, 1994; Poff, 2004; Wiltse, 2001), yet Poff (2004) indicates that more research of writer's block issues is needed to help define the problem and pose new, relevant solutions or management of writer's block (p. 182-184).

Through the examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject is shown, this dissertation considered how writer's block is understood by composition students, and how this problem, deemed by Rose to be a "dysfunction," might be better understood and addressed by composition teachers.

The Use of Film in this Study

This study aimed to explore the intersection of the academic and the popular through an examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject is shown. Films have a significant impact on their

audience and so provide an interesting, and yet unstudied, opportunity for composition instructors to reach their students. In this study, the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) was used to open the discussion of writer's block with composition students.

Students likely understand and enjoy films because they are already so familiar with them. Scholars have argued that films have a powerful effect on their audiences (Bywater and Sobchack, 1989; Corrigan, 2007; Godawa, 2002; Field, 2001). Film is a relevant pedagogical tool in classrooms outside of film studies because films can have a significant impact on their audiences. Fain (2004) states that teachers need to provide an education to which students can relate, and he indicates that popular culture is one of the best ways to make that connection. This means that film can be a useful teaching tool, and it also means that composition scholars could focus more of their attention on the kinds of messages that are being sent to film audiences.

In *An Introduction to Film Criticism*, Bywater and Sobchack (1989) consider some of the various types of critiques that are available to student writers who wish to write about films. The authors indicate that one of the main problems with students who attempt to write about films is that they rarely are able to decode the images of a film in order to make a relevant judgment about it (Bywater & Sobchak, 1989, p. xi). This also is critical to my study. If students are accustomed to watching films and teachers are using them in increasing numbers in the classroom, it is imperative that more studies be conducted to explore in greater detail the pedagogical issues that relate to using film to teach composition.

It is worth considering whether a film featuring writer's block as a main theme might be a relevant and powerful pedagogical tool for composition instructors to use in

their classrooms to establish and expand student perceptions of this common writing issue. The reason for this is that a movie audience is at once immersed in the experience and unable to stop it, short of turning off the DVD or walking out of the theater. In *The World in a Frame,* Leo Braudy (1976) states,

> Films demand continuous attention. They give us a sense of the
> uninterruptable, an unflowing of time that we cannot stop, although we can
> turn away. But if we turn away, we know that we will miss something, and the
> more of this continuous context a film creates, the more the objects in film
> detach themselves and return to the "real life" that gave them birth. (p. 34)

Braudy reveals that viewing a film such as *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) may allow for a more serious understanding of the issue of writer's block simply because the audience will be immersed in the film as they view it.

In his article, "Studying Film as Integrated Text," Ulrich Wicks (1983) agrees that films can be a powerful, if often misunderstood and misused, teaching tool. Wicks says that students are

> …spending most of their time at the movies, and/or in front of the television
> set. What is all this visual-verbal exposure doing *to* them? What are they
> doing *with* it? We're not sure—one conclusion seems sensible: all this
> exposure is doing a lot to them, but they're not doing much with it. (p. 53)

Wicks indicates here that students aren't effectively utilizing the information gleaned from the films they are viewing. Too often students are watching mindlessly, with a goal of simply being entertained by the film (Godawa, 2002). Dennis Adams and Mary Hamm attempt to articulate a solution to this problem in their book *Media and Literacy:*

Learning in the Information Age (2006) as they consider the issues surrounding the use of technology in the classroom, as well as teacher strategies for engagement with various forms of mass media. The authors state that there is "no reason why we can't turn the one-way commercial system of mass media into a two-way process of reflection and discussion" (p.33). This point is critical here because film was used for this study in order to accomplish a goal of students engaging with the issue of writer's block through the film, and not simply watching the film for their enjoyment.

Wicks, Godawa, and Adams and Hamm all argue that students are engaged by film but don't know how to use that engagement effectively for learning. This dissertation used the power of film and harnessed it for teaching and learning by examining student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject was shown. Through this research, the study hopes to inform instructors' pedagogy in the future regarding writer's block, and perhaps encourage them to consider making assignments or schedule class writing time with this common writing problem in mind. Additionally, this dissertation reveals a need for further research into the area of film use in the classroom.

The instructors involved in this study specifically or in any classroom in general must be careful to create assignments that facilitate an emotional response from the students in order to maximize the benefits of the learning process. The assignment must go beyond having a trivial impact, so that students can be immersed in reflection, analysis and the writing process in regard to their experience with the film. Susan Blau's concern in "Discovering Voice Through Media Writing" (1995) is that students fear being authentic in their writing after years of teacher criticism. According to Blau (1995),

having students write about films can serve educators' "pedagogical goals and at the same time allow students to find their audible, dramatic, and authentic voices" (p. 4). Blau makes an important point. In order for this dissertation study to have been successful in determining the impact of the film on student perceptions and understandings of writer's block, the writing assignment associated with viewing the film needed to be clear with specifically defined goals. This allowed students to attain the maximum benefits in understanding their own ideas regarding writer's block both before and after the film was viewed. This, of course, also allowed for a more authentic study and research outcomes from this dissertation.

Next, I will consider relevant definitions that will be used throughout this dissertation study.

Definitions

This study aimed to explore the intersection of the academic and the popular through an examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject was shown. In order to establish the foundation for this study, I will now consider specific definitions that are critical to this research and dissertation.

Popular Definitions of Writer's Block

Writer's block has been known to cause even the most accomplished and experienced writers great distress. Ideas about writer's block are common in popular culture, often fueled by discussions of writer's block by popular authors. In *On Writing*, Steven King (2000) takes curious readers through his typical writing process, at one point elaborating on his struggle to finish *The Stand.* King (2000) states, "I wasn't the first to

discover this awful place, and I'm a long way from being the last; this is the land of writer's block" (p. 203). And in *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*, Norman Mailer (2003) notes simply that "There is a touch of writer's block in almost every working day" (p.139). While students may expect writer's block to be an issue for career-authors, some may find it surprising that they too, as novice writers, may experience writer's block when they try to write.

Writer's block is perceived as a legitimate struggle among writers. Anne Lamott states in *Bird by Bird* (1994) that not only is writer's block real for all kinds of writers, but that it is inevitable (p. 176). She states simply that "writer's block is going to happen to you" (Lamott, 1994, p. 176). This statement leaves little doubt of the reality, at least by Lamott's estimation, of a writer—whether professional or novice—experiencing writer's block in his or her own writing life.

Lamott is not alone in her belief that writer's block is inevitable. Writer's block, according to Mailer (2003),

> …is part of the experience of writing. At a certain point we are going well for a page or two, perhaps even as many as four or five. On happy days, one is writing as if it's all there, a gift. You don't even seem to have much to do with it. You're only around to transcribe what's coming up. Then comes the moment when our ambition orders us to keep going: 'Three pages away from the end of the chapter. You can't stop now, not with this marvelous streak.' At this point, so often, sentences begin to strain, and you feel, no, we've got to pack in for now— dammit, dammit—now tomorrow morning will be lost, but no, don't try to finish now, you're going to wreck it. That's what you learn over time. (p. 139)

Writer's block is one of the inevitable facts of the writing process for many, if not most, writers (Mailer, 2003; Lamott, 1994).

Moving from popular definitions, I will next examine "writer's block" as discussed in composition research literature, as well as attempt to distinguish the term "writer's block" from other terms that are often substituted and seemingly connected.

<center>*Writer's—Block, Apprehension, Anxiety or Resistance?*</center>

Some related terms in composition literature that are often substituted haphazardly with that of "writer's block" include "writing anxiety" and "writing apprehension" and even at times "writing resistance". While these terms initially seem to mean the same—or at the very least similar—things, this is not necessarily the case. And yet, while there are differences in these terms, it is quite difficult to differentiate them at times because scholars overlap their use. In her dissertation titled *Writing Apprehension: A Critique*, Rebecca Hettich (1994) notes that because apprehension, anxiety, and blocking are so closely related, "it is difficult to measure a feeling of anxiety without also considering a writer's attitude, or a block in the composing process" (p. 1). It is critical to this study to clarify the use of the terms mentioned here, as well as to distinguish the term 'writer's block' in the process.

Faigley, Daly and Witte (1981) noted in their study of writing competence and performance in undergraduate students that "writing apprehension is associated with the tendency of people to approach or avoid writing. Highly apprehensive writers find writing unrewarding, even punishing" (p. 16). This emotional side of composing is noted by other scholars as well. In "Determining the Independence of Dispositional and Situational Writing Apprehension," Donlan and Andreatta (1987) agree with this

definition, stating that apprehension and attitude toward school and writing are connected (p. 2). Thus, the definition of writing apprehension appears to include an aspect of a student's attitude toward writing.

In her study "Reducing Apprehension in English Classes," Mary Ann Tighe (1987) considers a teacher's role in helping students work through writing problems. To begin the study, Tighe (1987) defines writing apprehension as meaning "fear or anxiety about writing" (p. 3). But writing anxiety may be another distinct issue altogether. Faigley, Daly and Witte (1981) are among the pioneers in studying student writing problems. These researchers indicate that writing anxiety is associated with students who score lower on standardized tests than other students (p. 16). Conversely, Riffe and Stacks' (1992) study of student personalities and the connection to writing apprehension concluded that students earning higher standardized test scores consistently indicated having positive attitudes about writing (p. 43).

The apprehensive student may *become* the anxious student (Faigley, Daly, Witte, 1981, p. 16), but they are not necessarily at the same stage at the same time. Therefore, these terms may not be accurately labeling the students if they are substituted as similarly describing the obstacles student writers may face. As Hettich (1994) points out, "it is not always clear whether negative attitudes toward writing go hand in hand with feelings of anxiety, although this is often the case" (p. 6). Regardless, it seems that both writing apprehension and writing anxiety tend to occur *before* the writing process even begins, while it can likely be agreed that writer's block occurs most often *after* a writer has already begun composing.

Writer's block may be a symptom of either or both writing apprehension or writing anxiety. Writing apprehension and writing anxiety are also sometimes associated with "writing resistance." These terms, while interconnected, are still quite distinct. While Hettich's (1994) study considers the issues surrounding writing apprehension, she also considers blocking as a symptom brought on by a writer who is apprehensive or anxious about the process of writing. She states, "Writers who express anxiety and frustration with writing also commonly experience procrastination or writer's block—an actual, physical stop in the writing process" (Hettich, 1994, p. 11). But at the same time these terms still cannot necessarily stand alone. In "Freedom as Constraint in the Writing Process," Hunzer (1995) notes that as a student's level of anxiety or apprehension increases, so does the likelihood he or she will experience writer's block (p. 4)—once again connecting and yet distancing these related and unique terms.

Finally, it is worth at least briefly noting the sometimes-used term 'writing resistance'. In her dissertation, *The Reluctant Writer: A Descriptive Study of Student Behavior and Motivation in the Composition Classroom*, Nancy Hayward (1991) first notes that educators admit writing resistance exists but have no cohesive definition of this issue (p. 3). In order to establish a firm foundation for her own study, however, Hayward (1991) attempts to provide a tentative definition of this issue, which is: "Resistant students are those who fail to become engaged in their writing and learning and exhibit such behavior as open hostility or excessive absences or who adhere to the 'rules' of writing in order to avoid change" (p.4). This definition seems to be closely aligned with that of writing apprehension. Regardless, it is yet another possible term that could be substituted or misunderstood to share a similar meaning as that of writer's block.

14

Writer's Block in Composition

The debate regarding a clear definition of "writer's block" is only the beginning. The next issue is defining the term for the sake of this study. Various thoughts regarding the definition of writer's block have circulated over the years, not the least of which is Mike Rose's thorough and foundational definition in his work *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension* (1984). Rose defines writer's block here as an "inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment. Blocking is not simply measured by the passage of time, but by the passage of time with limited productive involvement in the writing task" (1984, p. 3). Rose emphasizes productivity, not just time. Other life factors—a job or family—can limit writing time, but the inability to produce words is a key consideration of blockage.

Rose (1980) also indicates in the article "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block," that students who are dealing with writer's block often suffer mostly due to emotional issues such as fear, anxiety, or insecurity (p. 85) This could be why these and the aforementioned terms are often substituted for the term "writer's block" in more recent studies of this and related issues. To take the definition a step further then, one must understand that a person who is suffering from writer's block might be under an additional amount of stress because of this problem. In fact, it could be the case that a writer struggling with writer's block is stymied because of fears regarding the writing process itself, which can at times seem to be rather mysterious (Mailer, 2003, p. 237). Peter Elbow agrees, stating that "writing is hard, mysterious work" (1981, p. 314). This emotional side of writing may even exhibit

itself as a fear of beginning the writing task at all, especially for new writers who have limited writing experience.

The pedagogical debate about writer's block can be illuminated by an understanding of the roots of the process movement. Vandenberg, Hum and Clary-Lemon (2006) note that the process movement of the 1970s gained prominence when composition researchers asked what writers do as they write, but this movement was challenged by the 1980s, when researchers wondered whether the original process movement ignored the context in which the writer was situated and its potential impact on the writer's process and product (Vandenberg et al., 2006, p. 3). Either of these pedagogical stances would have a distinct influence on the understanding of and research about writer's block. Without a consensus in pedagogy, composition scholars are also unlikely to agree on issues related to writer's block. Regardless, scholars have continued to consider this writing problem, just as they continue to debate composition pedagogy.

Writer's block is an issue faced by many, if not most writers, at some point or other in their process. According to Boice (1993), for example, estimates of graduate students who qualify to write dissertations and yet do not finish them run as high as 50%, and academics who need to continue in scholarly writing endeavors but are unable to complete writing tasks comprise 50-85 % of faculty (p. 20). These statistics may surprise the academic reader, but the statistics of student issues linked to writer's block may not be any better. Unfortunately, as Rose (1984) notes, "researchers have no surveys or tabulations of how many writers—professional or student—experience writer's block" (p. 1). Thomas Petzel (1993) agrees, in his paper presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, "Development and Initial Evaluation of a Measure of Writing

Anxiety," that "little is known about extent of the psychological and behavioral dimensions of such problems among college students" (p. 3). Because it is such a frequent occurrence for many or even most writers, measuring the impact of this writing problem may be too difficult for researchers.

Regardless of the mystery of writing and its processes and problems, however, the reality for most writers is that they do experience writer's block at some point in their composing lives, and whether the block is long term or short term, the issue is critical to them. Writer's block not only slows the process of writing, but it can also cast doubt for the writer on his or her ability to compose at all. While there seems to be no universal solution for writer's block, there is a need to better understand this situation so that student writers can be helped to deal with it and emerge as stronger, more confident writers. In order to contribute to that goal, it was the aim of this dissertation study to more fully examine student perceptions of writer's block, and to explore how one film that features writer's block as a main theme influences students' beliefs regarding blockage.

Now that the definition for writer's block and its related terms have been defined, the term "film" will next be considered, as well as how film might possibly be used in the composition classroom. This will reveal some of the background for film studies and connections between writing and film.

Film

Audiences can perceive the word "film" to mean any number of things, from associations with entertainment to enlightenment, from popular culture to high art. For the purpose of limiting the research focus of this study, I looked at one feature film,

Stranger Than Fiction (2006). While there are clearly other films that might have fit the criteria for this study—*Finding Forrester* (2000) or *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), for example—*Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) is a film students are likely to have already seen or want to see as part of a discussion on writer's block.

According to Amaya-Anderson (2008), the word film "connotes a form of art alongside painting, sculpture, and photography. In this way, the word can be linked to the term *cinema*, the aesthetic elements that define the art itself. Another term, *movies*, is a label used to understand film as an economic commodity, a mass-produced artifact" (4). Like Amaya-Anderson, I have used these terms interchangeably throughout this dissertation study in order to encompass all possible meanings the idea of "film" may bring forth.

Now that the word film has been defined, it is critical to establish the need for this study in composition research. To achieve this end, the benefits of including film in the composition classroom will next be considered.

<center>Film in the Composition Classroom</center>

In order to establish a need for this study, first the benefits of including film in the composition classroom will be considered.

<center>*Advantages of Including Film in the Composition Classroom*</center>

Various modern films, including *Barton Fink* (1991)*, Adaptation* (2002) and *Finding Forrester* (2000), have considered writing issues or writing as a career, and professors are increasingly using films like these in various ways and with differing goals in composition classrooms (Bishop, 1999, Caille, 1999). In the article "Jargon and the Crisis of Readability: Methodology, Language, and the Future of Film History," Steven

<center>18</center>

Ross (2004) considers the images that are both included and excluded in a film. Ross (2004) notes, "The cinematic text, as film scholars have shown us, is composed of images that become imprinted on the imagination far more effectively than do plot lines" (p. 130). An examination of the literature on composition and film highlights three distinct advantages to using films in the composition classroom. These advantages serve as the foundation for using the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) to encourage discussion and impact student thinking about writer's block in composition classes. These advantages include: (1) students' familiarity with film, (2) film's dramatic impact on its audience (students), and (3) film's ability to encourage deeper thinking and analytical discussion.

The first, and fairly obvious, benefit of film use in the composition classroom is that society, and thus students, are highly familiar with film. This means that students will not have to be instructed on how to watch a film, talk about it, or relate to it since they generally know how to do those things; although it is also true that in order to achieve the greatest benefits from including film in the composition classroom, instructors would be wise to guide their students through this process with structured goals and questions for a unified and thorough experience.

Students are capable of at least engaging with films, however, because of their previous experiences with this medium. As Maloney and Miller (1999) state,

> The emphasis on film as a formal medium or as a content driven text has ignored some of the significant ways in which film has become what we might call a "naturalized text" for students. By naturalized text, we mean an object that has become so familiar to students that the mechanisms by which that object produces meaning and value for students are often obscured by students' relative familiarity

with the object. (p. 33)

The benefit, as Maloney and Miller see it, is that students have become so familiar with films that this medium becomes a "common discursive text" that an entire class can easily interact with (p. 33). Film can make engaging in a discussion or lesson regarding writer's block or other topics much easier and thus more effective for both instructors and students.

But just because students are familiar with film and the culture that created it does not mean that it must be included in the composition classroom. The argument for the inclusion of film in the composition classroom goes deeper than familiarity. The second benefit to including film in the composition classroom is that film is capable of impacting its audience in a way that many other mediums cannot. In *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, Multimedia*, Monaco (2000) states that "film has changed the way we perceive the world and therefore, to some extent, how we operate in it" (p. 262). Film can directly impact audience perceptions of relevant issues portrayed in the narrative. In this case, viewing the film might help students to rethink what writer's block is as well as how a person can work through this challenge.

Additionally, students may have preconceived ideas regarding writer's block before they even enter the composition classroom. This study intended to discover what these ideas are and how viewing a film such as *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) might influence or inform those ideas through an examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject was shown. Frank Manchel (2003) states in "What Does it Mean, Mr. Holmes: An Approach to Film Study,"

In order to comprehend, learn from, and remember what you hear, you have to

already think something about what you are being told, you have to care about

it, and it has to cause you to revisit what you thought you knew, and modify your

thought. (p. 221)

In order to use film in the composition classroom to open a discussion of writer's block,

it is necessary to understand student perceptions of writer's block both before and after

seeing the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). Whether students enjoy the film or not,

they will likely have an opinion about the film and/ or the experience of viewing the film.

When composition students view a film such as *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) and at the

same time engage with the idea of writer's block, it is possible that they may reconsider

their previous ideas and possible misconceptions regarding writer's block and perhaps

even about the composing process itself.

Finally, the last benefit of including films in the composition classroom is that

films can encourage deep reflection. For students in a composition classroom this can

help them engage in the writing process, provide inspiration, or even challenge their

current ideas regarding a topic of focus in a film. Bywater and Sobchack (1989) state that

film criticism "is a process that gives value to the reader and writer far beyond the scope

of the immediate film or films under discussion… it is a process that encourages clear

thinking, the weighing of alternatives, the evaluation of evidence, and the risk of having

to defend judgment publicly" (p. xv). Film study can encourage an emotional response in

an audience that is more difficult to achieve in other mediums. Professors who bring

films into their classrooms to increase student interest in thinking about—and eventually

engaging in—the writing process may find a different level of understanding than the

students would have if the film had not been included film in their classes. As students

engage in interpretation, through writing or discussion, they are prompted to think more deeply about the film. Of course, the benefit of this is not limited to the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) and a one unit discussion of writer's block. Instead, the practice of thinking deeply hopefully will carry over into other areas of students' academic work.

Further, film viewing often leads audiences to desire interactive discussion and reflection. As Desjardins (1987) states, students are "usually eager to share their reactions" on a film, and a writing assignment gives them "specifics to discuss" (p. 12). For this dissertation study, the writing assignment associated with viewing the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) allowed students to both consider their own ideas regarding writer's block, as well as present those ideas in a manner that helped reveal their own struggles with writer's block.

It is my hope that this dissertation study will establish other potential benefits of using a film to increase student understanding of writer's block. However, this review would be incomplete without considering criticisms of the practice of using films to teach composition.

Criticism of Film in the Composition Classroom

It has been clearly established that there are a number of benefits to introducing film to the composition classroom, but there are additionally some issues that may challenge the success of this practice. There are two criticisms that must be considered before introducing a film into any composition classroom, as this study proposes to do. These criticisms include the fact that some instructors struggle to determine a goal for using films in their classrooms, and at a more basic level, how to use films effectively in

their curriculum (Bishop, 1999; Caille, 1999). These issues emerge from the instructor's inability to define the connection between film and writing in composition classrooms.

In an examination of the relationship between film and composition, Caille (1999) is critical of the way many composition instructors have brought film into their classrooms. The first criticism, according to Caille (1999) in the article "Interpreting the Personal: The Ordering of the Narrative of Their/ Our Own Reality," is that "the ambiguous status of film in the composition class often leads to unreflective understanding of what film is, what film does, and the types of work which are required for bringing film into the composition class" (p. 2). Because the goals associated with introducing film to the composition class are rarely well-defined, instructors sometimes struggle to connect this practice to the course content. If success is to be achieved in this area, an instructor must learn effective strategies for employing film in the composition course. In terms of the impact of this dissertation study, an instructor who wishes to use the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) to establish a foundation for a discussion or assignment associated with writer's block in the future may need help defining the purposes behind such a connection and practice before embarking on any assignments or showing of the film.

Additionally, Caille (1999) states that introducing film to the composition classroom "postpones the question of writing in relation to film interpretation by making writing solely the means by which the student can record and craft an already sanctioned interpretation; and by doing so, it fuels the controversy about the use of film in the composition class" (p. 3). The controversy, according to Caille, is whether a student should focus on the film or the written product when a film has been shown in the

composition classroom (1999, p. 3). Instructors often struggle with balancing the disciplines of film study and composition instruction. To benefit one, they ask, must the other suffer? Often teachers are hard-pressed to establish an answer that satisfies both areas. This study sought to establish one approach for instructors to attempt to balance these two areas.

The second criticism of using a film in the composition classroom is that some instructors do not agree that there is a clear connection between reading a film and reading a piece of written material. Wild (1999) states in the article "Writing Images: Some Notes on Film in the Composition Classroom," that a connection between film and writing is difficult to make because "the very notion of reading does not easily extend to the complexities of the film viewing experience" (p. 23). While Wild (1999) does not say there is no relationship between the two disciplines, it is clear that he, as do other composition instructors, finds some fault with this practice. One of the main problems here, according to Wild is that "anyone can read anything into a film" (1999, p. 25). Even though the students and professor are viewing the same material, it is likely that the experience is different for each audience member. If the interpretations are too radically different, a student may miss the lesson an instructor is hoping to share through the film viewing experience.

In terms of this dissertation, there was also a possibility that some students could miss the connection between the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) and the presentation in the film of writer's block. The result was that the student(s) who failed to make the connection struggled to engage further in the discussion, assignment and interview. This problem is relevant to this study, yet it is my contention that the impact of such an issue

24

for future studies is minimized by the fact that there were a greater number of students who willingly engaged with the film, discussion and assignment in this study. And students who didn't pick up on the theme of writer's block in the film provided a source of interesting data for this study, even if that data presented challenges to this proposed teaching method in the future. Overall, while using film in composition classes can present writing teachers with some challenges, the potential benefits noted in the literature seem to outweigh the drawbacks.

I have so far argued that it is valuable to link film and the study of writer's block because writer's block is a persistent popular concept, and film is typically well-received when it is used in the composition classroom. The practical side of this issue, however, will next be the focus of this chapter.

Using Film

While composition instructors may appreciate the idea of using films in their classrooms, some may struggle with the practicality of this pedagogy. They may wonder how to transition from viewing film to using it as a pedagogical tool.

Movies can provide new teaching opportunities. Cruz (1999) indicates that "movies allow students to see the process of composing; they facilitate the inclusion and affirmation of myriad cultural backgrounds, diverse levels of skills, and multiple ways of thinking about college reading, writing and communicating" (p. 101). In challenging students to think beyond what they had considered was possible, films can open the range of possibilities for creativity, evaluation, as well as understanding writing processes and writers as people. There are a number of films that could help make these connections—

films like *Adaptation, Stranger Than Fiction, Shakespeare in Love, Finding Forrester,* or *Misery.*

The relationship between the visual communication of films and the textual communication of the written word is often misunderstood, if not ignored altogether by instructors who use films in their composition classes (Wild, p. 23, 1999). And while it is true that scholars should be careful about comparing printed communication such as novels or poetry with films, there is a connection between these two methods of communication. Annie Dillard states that the printed word cannot and should not compete with the movies on their ground because printed words cannot approach the spectacle of the movies (1998, p. 18-19). Films about writers and writing issues can provide insight into these issues, and instructors may be able to use these ideas and the "spectacle" of film to increase student interest in writing.

Visual mediums like film or television encourage the audience to respond in ways that printed materials do not. Annie Dillard states that film and television can stimulate the audience in ways that literature often cannot (1998, p. 18). The sometimes uncontrollable or unconscious response the audience has to a film may lead them to react in ways they might not otherwise react to situations that are played out before them. This is also the reason, however, that audiences are drawn to films. Audiences connect with films because of the visual and realistic nature of the medium, as well as its ability to help them escape, in many ways, their own reality.

While audiences may respond quickly and emotionally to films, this does not mean that translating those experiences into written words will be easy (Wild, 1999, p. 22). To help eliminate this problem, or at the very least deal with it more successfully,

instructors should be careful with assignments. Wild notes that the assignments need to "build on ideas and terms that are generated through the films and the student essays discussed in class… subsequent assignments can build on and work with a connection between cinematic form and the formal structures of student essays" (1999, p. 29). The emotional connection that students have with film coupled with the carefully created assignment will be crucial to taking films from the level of entertainment to education.

Now that I have considered reasons for using film in the composition classroom, challenges to this practice and some viable solutions, I will next establish the primary research questions of this study.

Primary Research Questions

This study was built around a number of key ideas. First, writer's block persists as a popular cultural concept. Because of this, it was worth asking what students know about writer's block and if they worry that they, too, could suffer from writer's block at some point in their academic or professional careers. Second, film is a useful teaching tool, but its use to teach composition concepts has only received limited study. This research aimed to study the use of a film to teach about a composition concept. This was accomplished through an examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject was shown. Finally, this study compared two different teachers and four classes of triangulated data. The issues on which this study was grounded led to the following research questions:

- What kinds of ideas about writer's block do study participants hold at the start of their composition course?

- What ideas about writer's block emerge from the discussions of and papers about the writer's block film shown in each class?

- What key similarities and differences emerge across the classes concerning students' developing understandings of writer's block?

The first question, "What kinds of ideas about writer's block do study participants hold at the start of their composition course?" emerged from a need to establish student participants' ideas regarding writer's block before the investigation in order to discern whether the film clips of *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) had any impact on those initial student perceptions. It was the goal of this question to illuminate a pattern among the student participants regarding their early perceptions of writer's block. In order to find the answer to this question, students were first asked to complete a pre-film viewing survey, which asked students a variety of questions about writer's block, including their current perceptions and knowledge of this writing problem. Students then viewed clips of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), and then discussed those clips. This discussion was observed and analyzed to determine the initial response of the students to the film. Students were then asked in a writing assignment to consider their early experiences and perceptions with writer's block, as well as to bring these thoughts into communication with their currently perceptions of this writing problem. In the event that the students struggled to engage with the writing assignment, there was an interview following the writing assignment that was intended to help illuminate the answers to this question.

The first research question provided a baseline for discussing writer's block in the composition classrooms for this dissertation. In order to establish the possibility of impact on the students' perceptions regarding writer's block, it was first necessary to

clarify what the students believe about writer's block *before* viewing the film. This research question established the students' preconceived notions about writer's block. This question also worked to establish the study's focus on student perceptions. In this study, students were viewed as key informants.

Crumbo (1998) indicates the connection between student perceptions regarding their writing and their performance in composition classes (p. 5) in her dissertation, *Writing Apprehension and the Effects of "I Think I Can, I Think I Can,"* Crumbo notes that there is a correlation between student perceptions of writing and writing apprehension. Crumbo indicates that student perceptions of their professors' comments and the professors themselves relate to writing apprehension because students may respond negatively to their professors and/ or professors' comments. But Crumbo (1998) is not the only researcher to consider student perceptions of writing or of themselves as writers. Kamm (1998) and Myatt (2008) also voice a call for student perceptions to be included in their own, as well as future, studies in composition pedagogy. Kamm's dissertation, *Perceptions of Writing in a Community College Composition Course* (1998), asks both students and teachers to consider the perceptions of writing in a beginning composition course for the sake of better understanding this classroom environment. Myatt's dissertation, *Conflicting Identities?: First-Year Students, Feminist Composition Pedagogies, and Film Representation* (2008) seeks to connect composition, perception and film in a unique and powerful way. Myatt (2008) notes that students are rarely asked what they think of their identity or how they are represented in films, a problem that her dissertation sought to remedy (p. 2).

Like the aforementioned studies (Crumbo, 1998; Kamm, 1998; Myatt, 2008), this study was built on a belief in the necessity of illuminating students' points of view so as to allow instructors to gain better understandings of what viewing films might do to and for their own students.

The second question, "What ideas about writer's block emerge from the discussions of and papers about the writer's block film shown in each class?" is necessary because another goal of the study was to consider the impact viewing a film can have on student perceptions regarding writer's block. This question emerged from my desire to reveal student ideas about writer's block from a common starting point, in this case, the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). Additionally, this question explored any changes in student participants' ideas regarding writer's block.

To determine the answer to the second research question, it was necessary to give the students participating in the study an opportunity to complete a specific assignment where they were to consider the implications of their own thoughts regarding writer's block in relation to those portrayed in the film viewed for the composition class. This assignment was a short writing assignment where students were asked to consider the impact of the film on their own thoughts and writing processes. This writing assignment was analyzed later in this study.

To gather additional data for this question, I observed students as they discussed the film. I was listening for key points to establish patterns of engagement with the film. Specifically, I wondered if students felt the film was a representation of writers, writing, and writers block that was familiar to the students' own experiences, or if they felt the film presented these issues in an unfamiliar or unfair way.

The second research question established whether the film that was viewed had any significant impact on how students think about writer's block. In other words, before viewing the film a student may have never heard of the term writer's block, or were unable to define this problem in their own writing, or perhaps is not a significant issue at all in the writing process, whereas after viewing the film these perceptions may have been altered slightly or perhaps significantly. To determine these changes, the writing assignment included a specific question that asked student participants whether any changes occurred. In the event that a student was struggling with writer's block and was unable to engage with the writing assignment, students had an opportunity to instead engage with the same question in an interview.

The third question, "What key similarities and differences emerge across the classes concerning students' developing understandings of writer's block?", grew from a desire to consider patterns that might develop based on the data collected. Because the study consisted of at least twenty participants across four classes, it was possible that there would be overlapping ideas or common patterns of belief among the participants regarding writer's block. I looked for such patterns as I worked to answer this third question. I also looked for unusual students who stood out as holding markedly different perceptions of writing, writers, or writer's block among all three classes. Paying close attention raised interesting points of departure within the analysis of some of the sets of data.

Study Design

I chose to collect data in four writing classrooms in order to answer my research questions. Each classroom consisted of between 15 and 30 students. I elected to be open

to researching various kinds of writing classrooms, whether beginning composition, creative writing, or even advanced composition courses because the issue of writer's block is not one that is limited to one type of writing classroom more than another. In the end, I conducted the study in one 200-level College Writing course and three basic Oral and Written Interpretation courses. In these writing classroom environments, where students are required to engage in a number of writing tasks that may have been uncomfortable for them, it was more likely than in other classrooms that the issue of writer's block may have manifested itself. Through a pre-screening survey, the observation of a discussion after a film has been shown, a short writing assignment, as well as student interviews, I hoped to unpack student understandings of writer's block, as well as the impact viewing a film about writer's block might have on these students' beliefs.

To answer my research questions, the following methods were employed: First, all student participants completed a survey of basic questions regarding their perceptions of writer's block before viewing the film (Appendix A), and then, after viewing the film, students were asked to respond to a writing prompt (Appendix B) in the form of a short, three to five page essay. I analyzed this essay by coding relevant passages and analyzing the data for any patterns that emerged. Second, students engaged in a discussion regarding their perceptions of the film. I observed these discussions, and recorded and transcribed the discussions in my notes to be analyzed later. Third, a representative sample of students was determined and interviewed for further information regarding their experience with writer's block both before and after the assignment for this study.

Theoretical Framework

Previous studies regarding film use in composition classrooms, though limited in number, have served to open the discussion regarding this subject. Specifically, and most recently, Amaya-Anderson's (2008) dissertation, *Film in Composition: Developing Critical Thinking Skills Through the Study of Film in First-Year Composition*, laid a generous and thorough foundation regarding film use in the composition classroom upon which I built my own research. Amaya-Anderson (2008) considered a range of genres and topics in regard to the inclusion of film in the first-year composition classroom, while studying this area from the perspectives of Bishop and Costanzo in a case study of several composition classrooms. Amaya-Anderson (2008) also builds on the work of Johanna Schmertz. In Schmertz's (2001) dissertation, *Filmcomp: Reframing Composition Pedagogy Through Film*, the author attempts to update the research surrounding film in the composition classroom, a topic which Schmertz claims hadn't been seriously researched for a significant amount of time. I hope to build on the dissertations of both of these women with my own research. These dissertation studies are relevant to my own work for a number of reasons, not the least of which is their timeliness, having been completed in recent years. This means that their research, theoretical applications, as well as the technology utilized to study the phenomenon of teachers using film in the composition classrooms will still be relevant by today's standards. Additionally, these studies are grounded in the work of Ellen Bishop (1999), who compiled the first collection of articles in a number of years regarding the use of film in the composition classroom, titled *Cinema-to-raphy: Film and Writing in Contemporary Composition Courses*. This collection of articles is also critical to my own study.

Film use in the composition classroom is a key component of my study, and yet it is not the only pedagogical issue. My study also needed to consider relevant research into the area of writer's block. While this area has been studied extensively in recent years in dissertations (Bell, 1984; Chardon Clarke, 2005; Crumbo, 1998; Harnett, 2007; Hayward, 1991; Hettich, 1994; Holmes Matthews, 2001; Poff, 2004), as well as articles and books (Baxter, 1987; Boice, 1983; Davis, 1987; Day, 2002; Donlan and Andreatta, 1987; Faigley, Daly, Witte, 1981; Riffe and Stacks, 1992; Tighe 1987), none of these scholars have considered the interaction of popular culture with a specific film featuring writer's block. However, my study was informed by the work of Rose (1980, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985), as his work is critical to the understanding and study of writer's block.

It is interesting and essential to note that discussions of writer's block have occurred at various points historically in relation to composition pedagogy, and yet, these discussions have not been ongoing, but rather, sporadic in their frequency. Discussions of writer's block began not with compositionists, but psychologists (McLeod, 1987, p. 426). In composition pedagogy, writer's block was first defined and examined by the likes of Mike Rose in the late 1970s and early 1980s, at a time when scholars and educators were beginning to consider writing as a process rather than a product (Vandenburg et. al, 2006, p. 1). This consideration of writing as a process was examined extensively by the likes of Linda Flower and John Hayes (1977, 1979, 1980, 1986, 1988), and Peter Elbow (1981), among others, providing a new opportunity for composition researchers to ask what writers actually do as they write (Vandenburg et al, 2006, p. 1). This opportunity also gave researchers like Mike Rose a chance to ask what issues writers faced in their quest to complete writing tasks, whether professional or personal. Eventually though,

composition scholars began to critique the process movement, asking whether process

"left us with any content" (Tobin, 2001, p. 12) and so scholars began to focus less on

process and more on ideas, giving birth to a postprocess, more cognitivist, movement

(Tobin, 2001, p. 10). Students then were faced with a challenge of ideas rather than

process, which opened another opportunity for writer's block discussions to emerge when

students began to struggle with conceiving ideas that fit the context of their instructors'

assignments.

But more recent considerations of writer's block do exist. My study was also

based on the work of several dissertation studies that were conducted in recent years.

First, Rebecca Hettich's dissertation (1994), *Writing Apprehension: A Critique*, provides

a philosophical consideration of writer's block that other dissertations do not have.

Hettich considers the inconsistent way writing apprehension has historically been

portrayed in other studies and lays a foundation for future studies that will attempt to treat

issues of writing apprehension. To do this, Hettich reviews relevant literature, and

considers the opinions of both writing instructors and students. Hettich's stance was a

great help as I considered how students think about writer's block while also engaging

the possible impact of a film on these perceptions.

Debra Ann Holmes Matthews' dissertation (2001), *In Our Voices: A Pedagogical*

Approach to Reducing Writing Apprehension will also be a foundational focus of my

study as it considers the issues of writer's block from a pedagogical standpoint. Holmes

Matthews (2001) is specifically interested in whether pedagogical practices affect, or

even reduce, writing apprehension. This was a key component to this study, where the

practice of showing a film to writing classes was studied in regard to its influence on perceptions of writing apprehension.

Finally, I adopted a cultural studies approach for my research. Though, as George and Trimbur point out in "Cultural Studies and Composition" (2001) that connecting cultural studies and composition pedagogy can be difficult (p. 79), they argue that such efforts are vital. George and Trimbur's study situates cultural studies practices from its beginnings in the 1950s UK (p. 74) through its influence in composition classrooms today (p. 79). The authors point out that "there are major points of convergence between cultural studies and composition" (George & Trimbur, 2001, p. 79), thus connecting the two areas though not resolving many of the problems presented by the intersection of these areas. George and Trimbur (2001) help define the goal for my own dissertation—to attempt to bring together two related pedagogies that have, in the past, struggled for cohesion. My aim was to bring these areas together as I highlighted a common composing issue (writer's block), while establishing a path toward including cultural studies in the form of film in the composition classroom.

My study built on these teaching techniques by asking the instructors to adopt a specific pedagogical approach for using the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) to aide in discussion and engagement with issues of writer's block.

Data Collection

This dissertation was a qualitative research study in which I collected triangulated data about using a specific film to introduce the concept of writer's block in composition classrooms. This study employed a variety of data collection methods including surveys,

classroom observations, and close reading and coding of student essays regarding students' experiences with and ideas about writer's block.

For this study data was collected in four composition classrooms. Sites for this study were selected from four-year colleges or universities where instructors already use films in their writing classrooms. It was necessary for this study to find instructors who already discuss writer's block as part of their regular composition course focus, or those who were willing to add this topic to their course content. This limited my impact on the course structures and helped maintain typical classroom activities and learning that usually take place in these composition courses.

My target number of student participants was ten per class, for a total of 30 students. The participating classrooms actually yielded a larger number of participants than I anticipated, as 82 students were eligible to participate in this study, and actually did participate in some manner, whether through all of the available methods or a sampling of those methods. This number provided a rich amount of data while still being manageable.

<center>Study Limitations</center>

The goal of this study was to discover students' perceptions of writer's block as well as to determine whether viewing a film on this topic would impact those perceptions. There were, however, some limitations to the study based on the general design of the study itself.

The first limitation of this study is that I selected the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) but did not allow instructors to select their own film for their classrooms. While this might be seen as imposing my own rules on the classrooms I studied, the benefit was

greater than the perceived limitation. The benefit is that all students in all classrooms were able to consider the same information gleaned from the film, which allowed comparisons to be made between instructors and participating classrooms. The limitation, however, was that the instructors had to agree to allow the time for students to view this film in class, thus potentially influencing or slightly altering the instructors' pedagogies.

The second limitation of this study was that the research was conducted in Western Pennsylvania, within reasonable driving distance of Grove City, Pennsylvania. The reason for this limitation is that I am currently employed full time at Grove City College and was not able to take time away from my small department of three full-time instructors to conduct research in too wide a geographic area. While this did limit my sampling range, the participating instructors were able to provide a valuable mix of students to study.

Benefits

There are several benefits to using film in the composition classroom that should emerge from this study. According to Kasper (1999), "students will see a pattern of discourse and critical connections which provide a focus for the piece they will write" (p. 123). Through this dissertation study, many students made the connection between what is being taught and studied in the classroom and the writing process itself, through the lens of film study. Kasper (1999) notes that "film can illustrate for students that writing is not so much a matter of mastering technical skills, but of engaging in an active process of inquiry and communication" (p. 123). Specifically, viewing the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) encouraged students to consider the issue of writer's block in a way that perhaps they may never have thought about before. The visual and aural elements of the

38

film helped students explore the writing process through a medium with which they are familiar and capable of engaging at many levels.

This study hoped to benefit several participating classes of students and may have provided a deeper understanding of an important pedagogical issue that could be the foundation for future studies. Some of those who might be interested in this study or future studies based on this study include college composition and film instructors as well as students of either of these disciplines. This specific study will help those teachers involved in the study to enhance their pedagogy. The study also should help student participants gain a deeper understanding of writer's block.

College composition and film instructors may be interested in this study because it can contribute to the discussion of the effectiveness of film use in composition classrooms. An additional value of this study is that it considers student perceptions of writer's block, which is an issue that many new and experienced writers are familiar with but have not always discussed. This study will hopefully open this writer's block discussion to a greater number of people.

Finally, students of both film and composition may be interested in this study because it specifically considers student ideas regarding both the use of film in the composition classroom as well as student perceptions of writer's block.

Chapter Summaries

Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation explore the need for this study in composition pedagogy as well as the benefits of such a study to the field overall. Chapter 2 considers previous research in the area of film use in the composition classroom as well as student perceptions of writer's block. Chapter 3 of this dissertation describes the qualitative

research methods employed for this study. It details the methodology of surveys of composition students, observations of three composition classrooms, and a close textual analysis of short papers written by composition students after viewing the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). The data gained from these methods will be analyzed and compiled into reports that will be discussed in further detail in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 6 will consider the implications of the study's overall findings, as well as possible future studies that may emerge from the findings of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 2

A LITERATURE REVIEW OF WRITER'S BLOCK, FILM THEORY,

AND COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

This literature review will consider previous research into writer's block, film,

film use in the composition classroom, as well as student perceptions of these issues.

A key finding in early composition process research was that most students did

not understand much about their own writing process or were aware that they were even

engaging a process as they wrote (Flower and Hayes, 1988). Student writers do not often

consider that what they are doing may be thought of as a process. To establish this point,

Flower and Hayes (1988) state that "Writers at work do not decide on "their purpose" as

the textbooks advise; they create a web of purposes. They set goals, toss up possibilities"

(p. 531). If student writers are so often unaware of their writing process, it is important in

a study about writer's block to encourage students to think of their writing process as a

part of every writing activity in order to better define the moments, if and when they

occur, that they are blocked.

It seems that making students aware of the process they use (Hunzer, 1995;

McLeod, 1987), as well as encouraging them toward positive emotions about writing can

have a dramatic impact on students' self-perceptions as writers (Lavelle and Zuercher,

2001). What the literature fails to consider, however, is whether newer and perhaps more

relevant tools, such as films featuring writing issues like writer's block, can be of any use

to changing perceptions of reluctant, anxious, or blocked student writers.

The late 1980s and early 1990's marked a turning point with influences from the

cognivist movement beginning to seep into the composition pedagogies of many

instructors (Mutnick, 2001, p. 183). Alice Brand's (1990) study, "Writing and Feelings: Checking our Vital Signs," considers the types and frequency of emotions experienced by college student writers. Brand (1990) notes through her analysis of participating writers' self-report data and questionnaires, that "The positive emotions outranked the negative emotions when students considered writing in general and when they actually composed. While relief and satisfaction ranked among the highest, relief preempted satisfaction for all groups except college students" (p. 295). Emotions play a key role in the writing process, one that is seldom considered in many composition classrooms. Student emotions may be a factor in this study of student perceptions of writer's block because they may impact the likelihood that a student is blocked at some point during his or her writing process.

In the article "Writing Blocks and Tacit Knowledge," Robert Boice (1993) notes that "productive writers were far more likely to say positive things to facilitate their writing" and "fluent writers often plunged into planning for writing and actual writing with little self-talk about the process or perils of writing and with no felt need for 'warm up'" (p. 29). These studies show that articulated, emotional moments in the writing process may be connected to a writer's success. This reveals the need for a study such as this where a writer's emotion and perception are crucial to the research.

This literature review seeks to provide a solid foundation for this study through the examination of previous research into film's ability to influence its audience, as well as the way that this medium has been used in the past in composition classrooms. The literature in this area will reveal that film has often been used without enough consideration of its impact on the student audience (Bishop, 1999; Caille, 1999; Schmertz

and Trefzer, 1999; Wicks, 1983). The literature will also show that little research has been done regarding the use of film for specific pedagogical purposes, like influencing student beliefs about writer's block.

The rationale for considering the use of film in the composition classroom, as well as its ability to influence and impact the audience will be clear, based on the discussion of the ability of film to influence its audiences' thoughts and behaviors (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004; Chanock, 1999; Chiaromonte, 1973; Godawa, 2003; hooks, 1996), as well as its unique ability to interact with its student audience in a classroom setting (Amaya-Anderson, 2008; Braudy, 1976; Bywater and Sobchack, 1989; Dillard, 1998; Ohler, 2008).

To begin, I will examine the issue of writer's block in general, as well as the way this issue has been discussion in composition classrooms.

Writer's Block

Writer's block is a common writing problem (Boice, 1983, p. 184), but as was stated in Chapter 1, this term is often misapplied and misunderstood (Hettich, 1994). And yet, while the notion of writer's block persists in the academe and popular culture, there was a time in the recent past where the discussion of writer's block seemed to fall out of fashion. Few scholars had discussed the topic since the initial studies in the 1970s and 1980s when behavioral therapists published the bulk of their work (Boice, 1993, p. 33). While some of the best known studies in and analysis of writer's block were conducted by Mike Rose (1980, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985) and Robert Boice (1983, 1993), as well as Alice Brand (1989, 1990), other studies were conducted by behavioral therapists like Nurnberger and Zimmerman as early as 1970 when they treated the avoidance behaviors

of a thesis-writing graduate student through psychiatric and psychological intervention methods.

Despite this lapse in time and interest, though, Hunzer (1995) states that "Writer's block is a common expression used by people as they discuss their writing habits," (p. 2) even in more modern studies, making it appear that writer's block is a natural extension of writing and thus should be expected. This varying scholarly attention has led to the information about writer's block being somewhat disjointed. Rebecca Hettich's (1994) thesis study *Writing Apprehension: A Critique* attempts to reveal the way that college writing apprehension is viewed as an unresolved problem by many scholars, through the examination of the work of Daly and Miller, Rose, as well as others. Hettich (1994) notes that terms such as 'writer's block' are still

> subject to a wide and unwieldy range of definitions, and this range is due, in
>
> large part, to a lack of consensus, within the teaching and research community, on
>
> more basic questions such as whether an attitude is emotional or 'cognitive,'
>
> whether apprehension can be conceived of as both emotional and cognitive, and
>
> whether writing apprehension is subjectively or socially constructed. (p. 12)

Regardless of such disputes, writer's block persists as a commonly-perceived writing problem in both academic and professional writing.

Writer's block has been considered to be a problem by various writers and scholars for years (Baxter, 1987; Boice, 1983, 1993; Davis, 1987; Donlan and Andreatta, 1987; Faigley, Daly, Witte, 1981; Hettich, 1994; Riffe and Stacks, 1992; Tighe 1987). Robert Boice presents an interesting inquiry into this area in both the 1983 study, "Treatments for Writing Blocks," and his 1993 study, "Writing Blocks and Tacit

Knowledge." In these studies, Boice considered both whether writing blocks are treatable through conventional behavioral therapy techniques (1983) as well as types of writing blocks and why they are so often overlooked by scholars (1993). Boice discovered in these studies first that "clinicians need no longer consider writing blocks as difficult problems demanding extra-ordinary therapies" (Boice, 1983) and second that "blockers need more deliberate teaching and more patient teachers to unblock" (1993). These findings indicate that classroom management strategies and renewed pedagogies that consciously consider writer's block as an issue for classroom discussion may be the best defense for any writer, whether experienced or inexperienced, against or when working through writer's block.

In "How Teacher Opinions about Writing Instruction Correspond with Student Attitudes about Writing," Kevin Davis (1987) asks whether teacher attitudes could influence student performance and attitude in the writing classroom. Through the examination of faculty and student data collected from surveys and opinionnaires, Davis (1987) surmised that certain attitudes and careful use of language in the classroom and creation of assignments can in fact influence negatively or positively student attitudes about writing or themselves as writers. This claim supports Boice in that teachers can have an impact on student perceptions of themselves as writers and of writer's block issues, if they consciously choose to engage this common writing problem in their classrooms.

For their article, "The Role of Writing Apprehension in Writing Performance and Competence," Faigley, Daly, and Witte (1981) studied undergraduate writing students to discover if highly apprehensive writers would perform differently than low apprehensive

writers on standardized tests. The authors (Faigley, Daly, and Witte, 1981) selected

students for the study who had completed the Daly-Miller writing apprehension test

(1975) as part of an ongoing evaluation project at their university. Research was then

conducted via measures of writing competency and essays written by the participants that

were evaluated extensively by the authors as well as independent judges (Faigley, Daly,

and Witte, 1981, p. 17-18). Faigley, Daly, and Witte (1981) discovered through their

study that there were "marked differences between high and low apprehensive writers"

(p. 19) that participated in the study. Further, this discovery led the authors to postulate

that "different instructional materials and methods may need to be used for highly

apprehensive writers given their differential performance in writing" (p. 20). These

findings only serve to support the notion that college writing teachers need to consider

the issue of writer's block in their pedagogy, and include relevant supportive materials

that will engage students who already struggle as highly apprehensive writers.

Daniel Riffe and Don Stacks (1992) agree that the need to introduce supportive

pedagogy for apprehensive or blocked writers is critical in their article, "Student

Characteristics and Writing Apprehension." The authors (Riffe and Stacks, 1992) note

that mass communication students who struggle with writing consistently indicate

negative writing attitudes and avoidance of careers and classes where writing is central

(p. 43). Through the examination of standardized tests from freshmen, sophomores,

juniors and seniors in mass communication courses, Riffee and Stacks' (1992) research

supports findings from studies in English writing classrooms. This indicates that the issue

of writing apprehension or writer's block may also impact students outside of English

department writing classes. This study is not only relevant then, but critical, to the

pedagogy of a range of instructors in classrooms where extensive writing is necessary. This data supports the notion of this study that, regardless of the type of classroom that is considered, writers can have writer's block and so may need help dealing with it. The consideration of new pedagogies with which to engage writer's block is essential for instructional success in this area.

While writer's block can occur at any point in the writing process, it seems that most often writer's block happens as the writer begins writing because, for many writers, the hardest part of the process is getting started. In the article, "On Opening the Floodgates: How I Write," Charles Bridges (1988) consciously examines his own writing process. Bridges (1988) states that "my writing is marked by a lot of false starts and throwing away much of what I've written" (p. 33). But whether at the beginning, middle, or end of the writing process, writer's block can be a terrifying problem for writers, novice or experienced.

The next question, however, is how writers themselves feel about writer's block, as well as what they do when they encounter this problem in their own writing process.

Writers on Writer's Block

Writers who have experienced and spoken about writer's block seem to have differing ideas about where the block originated and how they overcame it. Murray (1986) states in "One Writer's Secrets" that the "so-called 'writing block' is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance…one should lower his standards until there is no felt threshold to go over in writing. It's *easy* to write. You just shouldn't have standards that inhibit you from writing" (p. 152). While other expressivist writers may disagree with Murray that it is "easy to write," his point is

relevant because in order for there to be a real problem of writer's block, the writer must have set some kind of standard that has not been met; in this case the standard likely being tangible recorded ideas that one can share. In other words, for writer's block to occur, no clear progress in the mind of the writer can have been made in a pre-established time frame. Writers like this may emphasize "freewriting, voice, personal narrative, and writing as a form of discovery" (Tobin, 2001, p. 9). In this case a writer may believe, like Murray, that he or she is in control of handling and thus in some way "curing" writer's block him or herself. Here, getting words on paper is more important than how the words got there.

In "The Art of Composing," Frank D'Angelo (1988) agrees with Murray when he states he has "seldom" had writer's block, although, he clarifies that this does not mean that problems never arise as he composes because he discards "incomplete or unfruitful ideas *before* I begin to write" (p.48). D'Angelo and Murray indicate that writers have some control over their writing process and so can choose to see writer's block as a problem to be overcome or as an opportunity for better writing to be done.

In contrast, some writers see writer's block as more of an inconvenience or a welcome friend than a hindrance. Bell (1988) states that she even finds a

> perverse kind of solace in the recurring "this-is-the-time-the-words-won't-come"
> syndrome I encounter each time I begin to write. It is a signal that all is as usual.
> And although I end each writing session by promising myself I'll never put
> myself through such agony again, a part of me knows the vow is just a ploy:
> I won't write again until next time. (p. 3)

The familiar feeling that some writers have of not knowing what to write next may make writer's block seem more like a friend than a foe in the writing process.

Frank Smith sees the issue still differently. Smith's book *Writing and the Writer* (1982) examines the writing life—from reasons to write through specific considerations of writer's block and other writing problems. Smith (1982) indicates that writers seem to have trouble writing at the times when they need to do so most (p. 129) to meet deadlines or move ahead in a writing task. In "Heuristics and Aquatics: Writing with a Purpose/ Riding with a Porpoise," Steve Lynn (1988) states, "My impression is that I know a whole lot more about how I initiate writing than I know about how I keep it going and finish it" (p. 129). Because writer's block can happen at any time in the writing process writers may have a difficult time preventing a block from occurring, understanding it and, of course, dealing with it.

Research indicates that while writer's block is a common writing problem (Boice, 1983, p. 184) few scholars, teachers or writers deal with it as effectively as they should. Additionally, teacher attitudes and interest in engaging the issue of writer's block in the classroom can be a factor in helping apprehensive writers to write more freely, avoiding writer's block if possible—or, at the very least, dealing with it more efficiently when it does occur.

Students with Writer's Block

In *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*, Mike Rose (1984) states that professional writers are not the only ones who suffer from writer's block because, according to his research, at least ten percent of college students also block frequently (p. 1). Rose's work considered an area not frequently researched—that of cognitive

psychology's relationship with writer's block. Here, Rose (1984) utilizes a questionnaire he developed to identify students struggling with writer's block, next isolating those students who struggled at various levels with writer's block, videotaping them during the composing process and finally analyzing the videotapes and notes and essays produced by the students (p. 17). This work opened the discussion of writer's block among students for the academic world and laid the foundation for his future book, *When a Writer Can't Write* (Rose, 1985), a collection of essays from teachers and writing scholars.

When a student is dealing with writer's block, the issue may be even more unique. Unlike professional, experienced writers who have dealt with writer's block numerous times already and know that they will likely do so again, student writers dealing with writer's block may find this problem defeating. Since writing is already an emotional activity for most students (McLeod, 1987), instructors need to understand how writer's block might also be a problem for them in order to help them avoid the suffering that comes with it (Smith, 1984). This suffering can manifest itself as writer's block, or perhaps even in the abandoning of the writing task altogether.

In the article "Some Thoughts about Feelings: The Affective Domain and the Writing Process," Susan McLeod examines the emotions of student writers by elaborating on current research in this area and considering where further research is needed. McLeod (1987) notes that for students, writer's block tends to manifest itself when they "show evidence of autonomic nervous system arousal—paper wadding, pencil chewing, sighing—but they describe this agitation in negative terms. They are anxious, frustrated, blocked; they have difficulty continuing" (p. 432; see also Smith, p. 2, 1983). This statement reveals that students rarely think of blocking as a common part of the

expert writers' process in the same way that they might consider it part of their own writing process.

In the article, article "Reducing Writing Apprehension," Michael Smith (1984) considers the nature of writing apprehension as well as its effects and teaching methods that may actually increase the intensity and frequency of the blocking problem in writing. In order to examine these issues, Smith offers a range of assignments for students from writing to rewriting paragraphs and then asking the students to grade and finally defend their grading of this work (p. 10). According to Smith (1984), well-designed lessons such as the one described here "must be the focus of any program to reduce writing apprehension" (p. 11). The reason for focusing on assignments in this case is simply because "highly anxious writers may behave destructively" (Smith, 1984, p. 10). When students are unable to continue writing, there are other ramifications as well— procrastination, a lack of editing time, or worse, the piece never gets written at all (Boice, 1993, p. 29). Eventually these issues can carry over into a dislike for composition classes, or perhaps even school. These blocked writers may begin to see writing as a risky behavior, one with which they are not interested in engaging to the point of avoidance whenever possible (Boice, 1993; Smith, p. 3, 1983).

Pedagogy to Address Writer's Block

Teachers have various ways of dealing with students who suffer with writer's block. Some teachers discuss the issue openly, encouraging their students to get something written no matter what it is (Lamott, 1994), while others barely mention it at all for any number of reasons (Boice, 1993, p. 22). In *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott (1994) examines her own journey as a writer, as well as

what the culture believes about writers and writing. She (Lamott, 1994) states that when

writer's block manifests itself in her students, she encourages them

> to get one page of anything written, three hundred words of memories or dreams
>
> or stream of consciousness on how much they hate writing—just for the hell of it,
>
> just to keep their fingers from becoming too arthritic, just because they have made
>
> a commitment to try to write three hundred words every day. Then on bad days
>
> and weeks, let things go at that. (p. 178)

For some teachers, there seems to be little else to tell their students about writer's block

than that they must get through it by any means possible. But, in addressing writer's

block at all, these instructors have validated this writing problem for students who may

never have consciously discussed its impact on their writing process and/ or product.

Not surprisingly, Boice (1993) found in his study, "Writing Blocks and Tacit

Knowledge" that, while largely not untaught about in many composition classrooms,

writing blocks are "a real clinical problem, common in academic settings" (p. 184). In

order to come to this conclusion, Boice (1993) reviewed literature on the types of writing

blocks, focusing on why specifically there is little consideration among scholars as to the

tacit knowledge of writing fluency. Boice's extensive work in this article reveals a

distinct need for further scholarly consideration of writer's block, such as this study, in

academic circles.

But Boice's work has further impact. As a professor of psychology rather than

composition, Boice considers the issue of writer's block from a different perspective than

that found in previous research on this issue. Boice (1993) considers the most common

causes of and cures for writer's block through the compiling of literature on the subject,

as well as two trained judges who helped with the analysis of 100 manuscripts (p. 24).

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Boice (1993) noted that blocking is rarely influenced

by a single cause, but rather is a "complex of related problems" (p. 29). Possibly one of

the most important finding of Boice's (1993) study, however, is that since writer's block

is caused by a series of complex problems, it cannot be solved by one method only (p.

36). Specifically, Boice (1993) notes that simply encouraging blockers to identify and

supplant negative self-talk is "not sufficient to keep them writing amid distractions and

busy schedules;" instead, blocked writers also need "external pressures and social

supports to make writing efficient and effective" (p. 36).

For students, the benefit of instructors who openly discuss writer's block is that

those students who feel they are the only ones going through this part of the writing

process will realize they are not alone (Boice, 1993, p. 24; Hettich, 1994, p. 1). Alice

Glarden Brand (1989) considered the issue of writer's block from a psychological

perspective in her book *The Psychology of Writing: The Affective Experience*. Brand

(1989), who calls writer's block "a severe and global writing dysfunction," also indicates

that writer's block, for the most part, largely failed to impact the composing process of

most student and professional writers (p. 130). That said, Brand (1989) also relates that

most of these writers still felt emotions such as "anxiety, frustration, anger, and

confusion, the negative active emotions [that] have been thought to sabotage writing" (p.

130). While writers did feel negatively at some point during the writing process about

their writing or their ability to complete the writing task, it seems that, according to

Brand, these negative feelings were not enough to sabotage the writing project overall.

Now that the writing process and writing issue of writer's block, as well as student perceptions of these issues have been established, the next issue that will be discussed is film. Film is relevant to discuss because it was used in this dissertation as part of the research study itself. Understanding what film is and how it can impact its audience is essential to the foundation of this study.

Film

It is also important to consider how film as a medium of communication and engagement will be an integral part of the study. It is necessary to understand the nature of film itself—what it is, what it does, and how it communicates with and influences the audience. In order to achieve this end, the nature of film, the impact of film on its audience, as well as problems associated with using and understanding the film medium as an instructional tool will be discussed.

The Nature of Film

Film is a unique medium because it engages its audience on the aural, visual, and emotional levels all at the same time (Braudy, p. 43, 1976). Braudy (1976) states that "a film is nevertheless the sum of all its choices, premeditated or improvised, rightly or wrongly delegated, rightly or wrongly included" (p. 9). A film is not a haphazard collection of images and sounds, then, it is a purposefully-composed piece created by a filmmaker or filmmakers intended to reach the audience in a very specific way. A film where writer's block is a central theme, for instance, will represent this writing problem in a particular manner, one that is carefully crafted to communicate a specific meaning to the audience. Thus, film is a unique tool for studying an issue like writer's block in the composition classroom.

Film is also a unique medium (Amaya-Anderson, p. 6, 2008) because it is composed once in the filmmaking process and it is composed, or re-composed, a second time, each time that a film is viewed (Dorton, 2005). It is for this reason that films cannot be compared to other forms of communication. Braudy (1976) states, "Movies are also difficult to appreciate within the standards of other arts because of the characteristic mixture of eternity and immediacy in any film" (p. 10). A film is a paradox because it is grounded in the moment it is made or viewed and yet it is not a part those moments; it is part of its own space and time. Somehow film is able to achieve this unique and powerful impact all at once, something that few audiences are likely to consider when they view a film.

Finally, a film is the same stylistically, every time it is seen, even if there are some who would argue that something different can be seen in a film each time it is viewed (Bordwell, 2004; Braudy, 1976; Field, 2001; Staiger, 1992). Braudy (1976) states that

> While a performance of a piece of music may be preserved on a record and a particularly great performance of a play preserved on film, they still remain variations of the original. But a film, however immediate, is an original in itself, preserving all aspects of its performance as necessities of its form. (p. 11)

A film, unlike other forms of art to which it might be compared, is original and new every time it is shown and viewed. The reason for this is, of course, because the film—with all of its edits, sound effects, and other techniques, is a complete package, perfected.

Because of its visual nature, film has the ability to affect its audience in a dramatic way. Film communicates in a unique manner, and in many ways it is not at all

the same type of communication that occurs with the written word. In "Representing Student Culture: Field Research and John Singleton's *Higher Learning* in the Composition Classroom," Donna Dunbar-Odom (1999) states that seeing cultural issues made real on the film screen helps audiences to "develop questioning and observing strategies" (p. 53). If this is true, the audience that views a film representing writer's block will begin to develop ideas about it based on what they have seen in the film. Additionally, this audience may question their previous perceptions of writer's block, and possibly begin to create new perceptions of these areas.

Films are a unique method of communication, but they do not have to be complex or deeply psychological to impact a culture. In "It's Just a Movie," Greg Smith (2001) explores pedagogical practices for introductory media courses. Smith (2001) states "All cultural products carry cultural meaning" and he continues that just because a film narrative is not particularly complex does not mean it has no value or insight into the society that produced it (p. 132). This notion is similar to the idea of writing. If writing can impact society, film acts in a similar manner, but perhaps even on a greater scale. Smith (2001) states that regardless of their depth, films are capable of influencing the beliefs and perceptions of a culture, a point that is directly relevant to this study.

A film that represents writer's block may influence the perceptions of an audience who views such a film. In "Rear Window: Looking at Film Theory Through Pedagogy," Maloney and Miller (1999) agree, stating, "film, as a cultural text, can both reflect and affect the cultural system in which it exists" (p. 39). This also means that films can impact and influence audiences in any number of ways. A film about writer's block could

be used as a tool in increasing the understanding of this noted writer's issue to the audience who views such a film.

Finally, the pervasive nature of the film medium (Amaya-Anderson, 2008; Cruz, 1999; Gershovich, 2009; hooks, 1996) makes it worth considering for this study. In "Mapping the Use of Feature Films in Composition Classrooms," Dulce Cruz (1999) states that "Movies are an inextricable part of our expandingly multimedia-centered lives" and audiences spend a great deal of time consuming them (p. 101). Because film is so accessible and, as Cruz deems it "stimulating," audiences can and will readily engage with it in learning and non-learning situations. bell hooks (1996) agrees with this idea in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*. hooks (1996) considers the impact of films on American culture through the individual analysis of several modern films. hooks (1996) states that "Movies do not merely offer us the opportunity to re-imagine the culture we most intimately know on the screen, they make culture" (p. 9). If it is true that the film medium can have this significant impact on a culture, it is essential that film be studied from multiple perspectives. This study will consider film in the classroom, a topic that has not before been considered in relation to writer's block.

Film as Interactive Medium

Film is an interactive medium that of course requires an audience. But this medium works in a specific way, creating within its audience expectations, engagement, and, ultimately, tries to influence the audience to adopt new belief systems or way of being. Bordwell and Thompson (2004) note in *Film Art: An Introduction*, that "any work of art presents cues that can elicit a particular activity from the perceiver" (p. 49). In film's case, the audience can react in any number of ways, but the pertinent issue to this

study is that film audiences do, in the end, react in some way, regardless of what the reaction is. In short, film demands the attention of its audience (Amaya-Anderson, p. 7, 2008). This constant engagement will likely have an impact on the audience, whether for long or short amounts of time. This study will use this interaction to see how viewing a film on writer's block impacts the audience.

As a form of engagement, film draws viewers into a new world, allowing them to see life in a new way, and to temporarily forget the world in which they currently live (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004; Bywater and Sobchack, 1989; Chiaromonte, 1973; Field, 2001; Godawa, 2002; hooks, 1996; Ohler, 2008). bell hooks (1996) states, that "Whether we call it "willing suspension of disbelief" or just plain submission, in the darkness of the theater most audiences choose to give themselves over, if only for a time, to the images depicted and the imaginations that have created those images" (p. 3). This "willing suspension of disbelief" can have a dramatic impact on the viewer. hooks (1996) states further that "much of the magic of cinema lies in the medium's power to give us something other than life as it is" (p. 9). The audience, in an effort to escape their own lives, is willing to suspend their belief in reality in order to do so. This makes the audience a willing participant in the manipulation that film can bring. Again, such a powerful experience can potentially be used for learning, something this study will explore through interviews, observations, and written student accounts of their experiences with writer's block, and how these experiences relate (or perhaps don't relate at all) to the portrayal of writer's block on film.

In order for this suspension of belief to have its full impact, the audience must accept reality as portrayed by the film world. In *Film Art: An Introduction*, Bordwell and

Thompson (2004) note that "all stylized art, from opera, ballet, and pantomime to slapstick comedy, depends on the audience's willingness to suspend the laws of ordinary experience and to accept particular conventions" (p. 53). As example, the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) presents a main character (Harold Crick, played by Will Ferrell) who can "hear" an author (Kay Eiffel, played by Emma Thompson) narrating his life as it happens. This author also has the power to choose to kill Harold, who is the main character in her novel, or let him live for this film to work. The audience can not hesitate to question the possible reality of this situation, this fiction of having someone narrate a life. This study will partly explore the issue of a fictional film being used to teach about a real world concept, writer's block.

Though films are always a representation of reality, they are never reality themselves. Stephen Prince (2010) notes in *Movies and Meaning: An Introduction to Film* that movies are an art of time as well as space (p. 5). Because of this interconnected relationship between reality and fiction, films may be favored over printed material. In *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, Multimedia*, Monaco (2000) states, "because films can give us such a close approximation of reality, it can communicate a precise knowledge that written or spoken language seldom can" (p. 161). The difference between films and printed materials is summed up clearly in this statement; however, the ideas warrant further explanation. While films can portray writer's block or other composing problems for student audiences in a way that literature cannot, films are still removed from reality in many ways. For the sake of this study, however, the connection between the audience's interaction with film and the representation therein was of utmost importance. Additionally, while films about writers and writing can provide insight into

composition issues, audiences are only able to view what the filmmakers choose to portray for them. This makes it critical to understand that a representation of writer's block on film is an issue that has been manipulated through the lens of the filmmakers.

The other related issue here is that images must be engaging in order to keep the audience interested and completely immersed in the film experience. In "The Meaningful Image," Lewis Jacobs (1964) notes that every image in a film is important if it is to "convey subject matter clearly and meaningfully and sustain the viewer's attention" (p. 23). Filmmakers want to have a final film that is flawless and powerful. In order to achieve this end they must control the making of the film entirely from start to finish (Smith, p. 128, 2001). Bywater and Sobchack (1989) state,

> In their surface rush of images and sounds, films present a powerful visual
> and auditory experience immediately available to all. The mainstream narrative
> film produced for theatrical release captures the viewer's attention and delivers an
> emotional payoff. Little thought is required to decipher images and sounds, to
> know what's happening in the film or make a judgment about whether a film is
> worth seeing. (p. xi)

The carefully crafted film contains images and sounds that can keep the audience's attention and successfully portray the film's story with the greatest impact. For this study, using a major motion picture, *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), ensures a high level of image/ film quality production which hopefully means student viewers will be affected by viewing the film.

Film scholars are not the only ones who have stated the case for film's deep

impact on society; writers also have noted that films are important and possible rivals for

their own reading audience. Norman Mailer addresses films briefly in *The Spooky Art:*

Some Thoughts on Writing. Mailer (2003) states, "Movies are more likely than literature

to reach deep feelings in people. Movies are more primitive, or so I would argue. Film

delves into deeper states of consciousness" (p. 198). This impact is noted by others as

well. Likewise, author Annie Dillard addresses films in *The Writing Life*. Dillard (1989)

states, "The printed word cannot compete with the movies on their ground, and should

not. You can describe beautiful faces, car chases, or valleys full of Indians on horseback

until you run out of words, and you will not approach movies' spectacle" (18-19). In

terms of writer's block, an area that has escaped the descriptive and analytical powers of

many scholars, film is a medium that may perhaps be the key to communicating with

writers and students alike in a powerful and dramatic way.

Annie Dillard also makes note of the impact of film, favoring this medium as

having more influence on its audience than her own profession of writing. Dillard (1989)

states

> Why would anyone read a book instead of watching big people move on a screen?
>
> Because a book can be literature. It is a subtle thing—a poor thing, but our own.
>
> In my view, the more literary the book—the more purely verbal, crafted sentence
>
> by sentence, the more imaginative, reasoned, and deep—the more likely people
>
> are to read it. The people who read are the people who like literature, after all,
>
> whatever that might be. They like, or require, what books alone have. If they want

to see films that evening, they will find films. If they do not like to read, they will not. People who read are not too lazy to watch films on the television; they prefer books. I cannot imagine a sorrier pursuit than struggling for years to write a book that attempts to appeal to people who do not read in the first place. (p. 18-19)

These somewhat connected and yet still unique forms of communication present ideas in different ways to different audiences. In today's society, in fact, the college-age audience often prefers the visual communication of films to the written communication in novels or other printed works, and so many authors attempt, mistakenly so, to write books for college-age audiences who would rather be watching a movie. This pursuit, as Dillard notes here, is one of false hope, where the audiences are so different that the attempt to push them together is almost always unsuccessful. The reason for this of course is that the film audience and the literature audience are often seeking different experiences. This makes the present study linking film use to the study of writer's block highly useful. This study aimed to tap a powerful medium even writers recognize as having great impact.

Visual mediums like film or television encourage the audience to respond in ways that printed materials do not (Chiaromonte, 1973; Ohler, 2008). Annie Dillard (1989) states,

Films and television stimulate the body's senses too, in big ways. A nine-foot handsome face, and its three-foot-wide smile, are irresistible. Look at the long legs on that man, as high as a wall, and coming straight toward you. The music builds. The moving, lighted screen fills your brain. You do not like filmed car chases? See if you can turn away. Try not to watch. Even knowing you are manipulated, you are still as helpless as the male butterfly drawn to the painted

cardboard. (p. 18)

The sometimes uncontrollable or unconscious response the audience has to a film may lead them to react in ways they might not otherwise react to situations that are played out before them. This is also the reason, however, that audiences are drawn to films. Audiences connect with films because of the visual and realistic nature of the medium, as well as its ability to help them escape, in many ways, their own reality. A film about writer's block may help students to not only escape reality but also to find a new reality regarding this writing problem. This study aimed to explore the effect that viewing a film about writer's block could have on a composition student audience.

The Challenge of Viewing Films

Because films are a unique medium, there are some challenges to the audience who views a film about writer's block. Some of these challenges include the manipulative nature of the film medium, the difficulties of interpreting a film, and the sometimes subconscious impact of the film viewing experience.

The viewing experience of film can be challenging to the audience because to some extent films manipulate their audiences. The nature of film includes editing techniques, camera work and sound effects that work together to produce a cohesive experience that appears to be reality onscreen. But this can mean that the audience is often unaware of the manipulation that is occurring. Braudy (1976) notes that "Too often we accept a film as a window on reality without noticing that the window has been opened in a particular way, to exclude as well as to include" (p. 22). Thus, the audience often forgets that melancholy music and dark lighting makes a sad movie scene seem even more depressing. The fact that the filmmaker has total control over what the

audience is viewing means that there are aspects of the motion picture that are enhanced

or minimized so as to create a view of the world or subject matter that the filmmaker

wants the audience to see (Godawa, 2002). For this study, *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006)

of course shows only some aspects of writer's block, not a whole experience.

Films can also open an audience's eyes to reality. Braudy (1976) states that one of

the greatest contributions of film to the culture is that it has allowed us to know the way

we see and have seen ourselves (p. 180). The impact of films is found most dramatically

in its visual nature. As Syd Field (2001) states in *Going to the Movies*, "movies are

stories told in pictures, and while action and dialogue are integral parts of the screenplay,

the storyline unfolds through visual images. An event happens, and then we see a

character's reaction to that event; that's the story which unfolds from beginning to end"

(p. 27). These images encourage the viewer to experience the story chiefly through the

eyes of the protagonist, causing a distinct and powerful interaction to occur between the

onscreen character(s) and the person sitting in the theater or at home on the couch. This

interaction is powerful and oftentimes subconscious. Bywater and Sobchack (1989) state

that "stories told in movies seem to many observers to be an even more powerful

stimulus than those told in other mediums" (p. 116). Thus, films featuring writer's block

may, in fact, be so powerful that they are capable of sharpening or possibly even

changing current perceptions and beliefs about writer's block.

Finally, a challenge of film viewing is that audiences can be unfamiliar with

particular camera and editing techniques and their meaning or effect on them (Chanock,

1999). Braudy (1976) states that "Unless a film contains obviously intrusive

camerawork—flashing lights, rapid montage, striking camera angles—we have difficulty

believing that there may be problems in interpreting films comparable to the problems we find in fully understanding other arts" (p. 20). The viewing audience, however, is increasingly adept at understanding film techniques and meanings because of the increase in the pervasiveness of the visual media (Boyd and Robitaille, 1987; Chiaromonte, 1973; Comprone, 1973; Desjardins, 1987; Fain, 2004; Monaco, 2000; Schmertz, 2001). For *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), the unusual narrative technique could create challenges to the viewer along with images of Will Ferrell repeatedly looking up toward a God-like narrator's voice. This study will explore such issues related to *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006).

Audiences are not simply passive observers to the scenes playing out before them in a film, however. In "Notes on Audience Response," Gerrig and Prentice (1996) state that "There has been a tendency in film theory to characterize viewers as necessarily passive—the claim, in a variety of forms, has been that film psychologically immobilizes viewers and makes them the unknowing victims of ideology" (p. 393). While some members of an audience may be categorized as passive, most members of the audience are much more aware of what is happening before them in a film. A filmmaker who portrays writer's block will have to make decisions regarding the portrayal of this writing problem. In so doing, the filmmaker will impact the audience and influence their understanding of the film. Additionally, the filmmaker's influence on the film's creation and execution may even impact the audience's perceptions and beliefs about writer's block. While some viewers will be more engaged with a film about writer's block than perhaps others will, all viewers will likely be impacted by the film to some degree. Because most student participants/viewers of *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) understood

and accepted writer's block as real and important, the doors for future investigation have been opened by this study.

The nature of film and its challenges now leads to a discussion of film as a pedagogical tool in the composition classroom.

Teaching Composition Using Film

The relationship between the visual communication of films and the textual communication of the written word is often misunderstood, if not ignored altogether by instructors of writing courses, as well as students in those courses. And while it is true that scholars should be careful about comparing printed communication with visual communication, there is a connection between these two methods of communication.

Why Teach With Film?

There are a number of reasons educators choose to use film in their composition classrooms. Some of the reasons that will be highlighted here include: the ease of introducing and utilizing the medium, the desire to teach new or differing points of view, and the desire to teach rhetorical analysis in a new and interesting way.

Literacy instruction of all kinds can and should begin in the classroom, under the guidance of a knowledgeable and engaging instructor (Adams and Hamm, 2006). Teachers who are both aware of and willing to engage with film in the classroom can begin a dialogue with students regarding this medium. This is valuable to do since film is often teaching students outside the classroom already. bell hooks (1996) notes:

> whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many
> people. It may not be the intent of a filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but
> that does not mean that lessons are not learned. It has only been in the last ten

years or so that I began to realize that my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read. (p. 2)

To fully utilize this powerful and familiar teaching tool, instructors need to make a conscious effort to carefully design a pedagogy that includes film as a tool, with a clearly defined reason for its use. Additionally, instructors will need to be aware that students may see this pedagogy initially as more entertaining than educational. This study will look exactly at this issue, exploring how film can be used to engage students in discussions with writing issues like writer's block.

Various studies have shown that film can be used to teach parts of the composing process. Dulce Cruz (1999) states that "using movies in the composition class helps me to teach student aspects of the composing process that, I believe, are transcultural and important if they are to live in more engaged ways" (p. 102). Since it has already been established that films are familiar and writer's block is an area that impacts most, if not all, writers, Cruz's statement is critical. Cruz argues that film can and indeed should be used to instruct students regarding composition process.

Additionally, films can be used to reveal new and different points of view to students (Amaya-Anderson, 2008). If students come to the composition classroom with preconceived notions regarding writer's block, it is possible that through an examination of this issue on film, students will find their perceptions influenced, even if in only minor ways. Regardless of the level of influence, any change in a student's perception of writer's block through film is worth examining for this study. Amaya-Anderson (2008) states that, "In this way, film presents a lived experience that students engage in to

understand their lives and their world" (p. 9). This study revealed that film can help students gain a deeper understanding of an issue like writer's block.

Instructors may choose to use films in the composition classroom to help engage students in issues of rhetorical analysis. In their article "Reading Multiculturally and Rhetorically: *Higher Learning* in the Composition Classroom," Schmertz and Trefzer (1999) state that

> by teaching students to read the rhetoric of film in the writing classroom, we are exploring two goals at once: we engage students in an analysis of the rhetorical and the cultural codes that operate to define subject positions— including redefining their own—and we seek to empower culturally underprivileged students by giving them access to a literacy that is both academic and critically self-reflexive. (p. 87)

Increasing the opportunity for rhetorical analysis and engagement is another reason that instructors may choose to use films in their composition classrooms. Some instructors argue that this is really the only way to instruct students in a rhetorical curriculum (Wicks, 1983). This means that instructors should consider using film in their composition classrooms to encourage students to analyze their response to and understanding of writer's block so as to engage with it in new and deeper ways. Specifically, in terms of writer's block, this may mean an opportunity for instructors to show students how the concept of writer's block is a rhetorical construction as much as it is also a reality for many writers.

Ulrich Wicks (1983) indicates in "Studying Film as Integrated Text" that instructors should teach students that "the images they are seeing in movies and on

television are akin to the images they construct in reading a novel or a play or poem; the difference is that someone created the image in the film or TV program- and thus is rhetorically manipulating them" (p.56). While the connection of these areas will not guarantee success in the composition classroom, it does make the benefits of such a practice much more likely.

Caille (1999) states that her purpose in bringing film to the classroom is to foster an exploration of our own experience of watching a film within the workings of this specific film, within the conventions which we bring to the consumptions of cultural productions, while keeping in mind that the context of the class also affects the conventions we normally bring to bear on a particular experience of film. (p. 9)

For instructors using a film to get students to think about writer's block, there will also need to be some consideration of the culture that made the film and the one in which it is being shown. If these issues are carefully considered, students and instructors will both likely have positive experiences with the film shown in the composition classroom.

The aforementioned benefits of using film in the composition classroom to increase student understanding of writer's block and perhaps to even influence their perceptions of this common writing problem, make the need for this study clear. With the increasing use of film in composition classrooms (Bishop, 1999), and the fact that this practice has seldom been considered (Amaya-Anderson, 2008; Schmertz, 2001), this study and its benefits are relevant to modern composition pedagogy.

Challenges to Using Film in the Composition Class

There are various challenges to using film in the composition classroom. Some of these issues include establishing a clear purpose for film use in the composition class, understanding the differences between film and writing, and attempting to connect the two areas for pedagogical purposes.

The first challenge to introducing film into the writing classroom is that instructors often have no clear reason for doing so in the first place. This can be a problem because without a clearly defined goal, the instructor might not be sure why he or she is including film in the class, and thus, what he or she hopes to achieve by doing so. In "Interpreting the Personal: The Ordering of the Narrative of Their/ Our Own Reality," Patricia Caille (1999) reveals that many composition instructors use film in their classrooms without a consideration of goals or implications (p. 1). In this essay, Caille (1999) explores the difficulties she has personally had with introducing film to the composition classroom while maintaining her individuality as an instructor. As Caille (1999) states, film is often included in the English classroom due to teacher choices that "are not always self-conscious ones" (p. 2). And, Daniel Wild (1999) indicates in "Writing Images: Some Notes on Film in the Composition Classroom," that the "very notion of reading does not easily extend to the complexities of the film viewing experience" (p. 23). And yet, some instructors attempt to connect reading and film viewing skills, unaware that film studies is a separate field of inquiry, not identical to composition pedagogy in the way they in fact are hoping it is. Instructors who wish to use film to engage students on issues like writer's block must have a clear reason for

doing so, as well as an understanding of the film medium as different from that of other forms of communication.

A second problem for introducing film to the composition classroom is that some scholars believe that the cultural perceptions regarding film as a "low class" of art may influence its use in the classroom (Braudy 1976; Boggs and Petrie, 2004). Joseph Boggs and Daniel Petrie (2004) state in *The Art of Watching Films*, that "Unlike the novel and the poem, film communicates directly, not through abstract symbols like words on a page but through concrete images and sounds" (p. 2). The previously-established unique nature of the film medium must be understood in order to use it effectively in any classroom. The effect of this may be that instructors need to learn to treat film with the same respect they use for literature and other forms of perceived high culture.

The lack of respect that many composition instructors have for film also means they would be less inclined to use it in their writing classrooms, for fear of judgment from parents or other teachers. In *The World in a Frame*, Leo Braudy (1976) notes that "Many casual viewers have even assumed it [film] indicates an absence of art, especially in a culture whose standards for high art have been dictated by the great modernist writers and painters, for whom *mere* representation was a dead style, to be avoided at all costs" (p. 21). The effect of this may be that instructors treat film with less enthusiasm and integrity than they do, for instance, literature or other forms of perceived high culture. It is possible that composition instructors who attempt to use films to influence student understanding of writer's block may have an unspoken prejudice against using film in their classrooms; a prejudice that may work against their goals for including such a film in their class curriculum. Because teacher opinions on student attitudes have

71

already been shown to impact student writing (Davis, 1987), it is possible that this connection can also be made in other areas, such as teacher attitudes about film and the success of film use pedagogically in the writing classroom.

Other challenges to using film in the composition classroom abound. One such issue is how to use film without minimizing the importance of writing instruction in the process. In other words, instructors must be careful to use film as a supplemental tool rather than a replacement to writing instruction (Bishop, 1999). In order to achieve this end, Fischer (1999) states, "the first task of teachers of composition and film classes is to make connections between cinema and writing apparent to their students, to break down the false dichotomy that has structured thought on the subject" (p. 171). For this study, the links between composition and film were discussed as the study was introduced to the classroom, in order to help make the rationale clearer for using film to instruct students about writer's block.

Student Perceptions of Film in the Composition Classroom

Student perceptions are an integral part of this study. It is critical then that student views of including film in the composition classroom be considered as part of this literature discussion. When bringing film into the composition classroom, the first challenge for teachers is often that students view film primarily as an entertainment media and not an educational media. In the essay, "Writing Images: Some Notes on Film in the Composition Classroom," Wild (1999) makes this challenge clear. In this essay, Wild (1999) elaborates on the plethora of obstacles an instructor may encounter as he/she attempts to use film as a pedagogical tool in the composition classroom. Wild (199) states that

despite the general interest and predilection students might show for a writing

class with a focus on film, this enthusiasm can easily turn to hostility when

composition teachers are seen as transgressing into the terrain of their popular

culture to dissect and desecrate the experience of film. This is especially the case

when film is used only as classroom material in service of something else, that is,

as supplementary audiovisual material which might complement or make

accessible some other pedagogical project. (p. 24)

Instructors who wish to successfully include film in the composition classroom should

work to make their pedagogical goals clear in order to help students realize that films can

be powerful educational tools. This study will examine this issue.

Caille's (1999) work "Interpreting the Personal: The Ordering of the Narrative of

Their/ Our Own Reality," also shows that student perceptions of film are often limited.

Caille (1999) says that students often are surprised to find film being used in a

composition class (p. 3-4). Students seem to believe such use is inappropriate, perhaps

violating the same entertainment versus education principle that Wild discusses. Caille

(1999) states that "even though students are eager to learn about film, bringing film into

the classroom also appeals to a certain curiosity, a sense that film does not belong to the

classroom- some teachers would say that the students perceive the use of film in the

composition classroom as 'transgression' (p. 3-4). Students who believe their instructors

have drawn film into the composition classroom in this way may feel the need to defend

the pleasure they find in film viewing (Caille, 1999, p. 4). Further, Caille (1999) notes,

bringing film into the composition classroom is a sort of "intellectual critical work" that

constitutes a threat to the pleasure students have as they view films (p. 4). Thus,

instructors who are willing to bring film into the composition classroom in an effort to impact student perceptions of writer's block as part of this research study may encounter some student resistance.

Many students, though, regard film use in the composition classroom as having a positive impact on the class. In the essay "Rear Window: Looking at Film Theory Through Pedagogy," Maloney and Miller (1999) consider the way they elected to use film in their own writing classrooms so that the films they selected would have a positive impact on student learning. The authors (Maloney and Miller, 1999) note that the familiarity students have with film can make it "a common discursive text" for the class, and a medium which can reduce student resistance to learning (p. 33). This means that a film about writer's block could impact student perceptions of this writing problem in a positive way because the film would be common to all members of the composition class in which it was used.

Additionally, many students enjoy when an instructor brings film into the classroom. Donna Dunbar-Odom (1999) discusses this very thing in her essay, "Representing Student Culture: Field Research and John Singleton's *Higher Learning* in the Composition Classroom." In the article, Dunbar-Odom (1999) explains how she used the John Singleton film *Higher Learning* to encourage students to move beyond typical composition essays into research of real depth. Through this essay, Dunbar-Odom notes that most students agree that they would rather watch a film than "pretty much any other classroom activity" (Dunbar-Odom, p. 51, 1999). Because of this realization, the author was able to successfully draw her students into deeper and more analytical research papers. Dunbar-Odom's success means that, for the sake of this study, there also is a

possibility that participating instructors will find success in encouraging composition students to consider their own perceptions of writer's block through the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006).

According to Linda Desjardins' (1987) study, "Is a Picture Really Worth a Thousand Words?" instructors who take advantage of the students' desire to engage with film can find gratifying results "when every part of the lesson has been carefully coordinated: a haphazard approach can be as frustrating to the students as to the well-intentioned teacher" (p. 13). Desjardins (1987) incorporated film into her literature classes in an effort to utilize the students' familiarity with film to increase their interest in reading. Through the study Desjardins (1987) discovered that assignments and lessons must be considered carefully for an instructor to achieve success when bringing film into other classrooms.

While films can be a valuable pedagogical tool to use in the composition classroom, it is clear that film cannot be introduced and used with success without much careful consideration as to why it is being used and how it should be used first. Additionally, films are not the perfect tool; they cannot meet every pedagogical need an instructor has. Cruz (1999) states that "films are not the complete answer to all our needs in the composition classroom, but they can be the catalysts that help students understand the process of composing" (p. 113). Films can be a valuable addition to the composition classroom, and, when used wisely, can positively influence student perceptions of learning.

Student Beliefs About Writers

To understand student perspectives on writer's block, it is first necessary to understand student beliefs about writing overall. This is because it has been shown in various studies that student beliefs about writing may directly impact their ability to write (Baxter, 1987; Bloom, 1985, p. 121; Daly, 1985; Hettich, 1994; Hollandsworth, 1988; Kamm, 1998; Larson, 1985, p. 22; Selfe, 1985). Additionally, it is important to discuss the emotional aspect of student beliefs about writing, as well as how instructor pedagogy may influence those beliefs (Davis, 1987; Donlan, 1987; Harris, 1985, p. 165) in order to establish both a need for this study, as well as the impact an instructor may be able to have on student perceptions of writer's block and their ability to deal with this writing problem.

In the article "Beginning Writers: Diverse Voices and Individual Identity," Joy Ritchie (1989) studied the culture of writing workshops and the impact of these cultures on student writing. Specifically, Ritchie studied two students, Brad and Becky, who were part of a classroom that was not instructed with the implementation of rules, but rather through new forms of thinking and writing, such as writing workshops. Ritchie (1989) noted that students bring assumptions concerning writing in college from their previous education that are closely related to the rich and complicated scene of the writing class (p. 159). The impact of this, according to Ritchie (1989) is that "Students then leave school conceiving of writing as an act of retrieving a fixed body of information and putting it into a correct form to meet the requirements of the teacher and the institution" (p. 159). Instructors who fail to consider student perceptions about writing may also fail to reach

their students with lessons about writing as well. This study will examine such beliefs, especially those about writer's block.

But students may be impacted in other ways by their writing beliefs. According to McLeod (1987), "some students who fail continually on a task learn to be helpless at that task and to see failure as inevitable on similar tasks—in many cases giving up before they have even begun" (p. 431). This cycle of failure goes beyond failing one composition class to having great impact in all classes because students may begin to view writing as defeating them before any assignments are given. In a case like this, writer's block may become a regular occurrence rather than a one-time inconvenience. Students may learn to link writer's block with failure, causing repeated problems for themselves in composition classes.

A negative student attitude about writing may penetrate the psyche and reveal itself through emotions more often than one might think. In "How Teacher Opinions about Writing Instruction Correspond with Student Attitudes about Writing," Kevin Davis (1987) considered whether teacher attitudes might influence student writing. To study this area, Davis collected data from both basic composition and composition courses, and from students and instructors alike. In this study, Davis (1987) found significant correlations between teacher and student attitudes. Davis (1987) noted that students' poor attitudes toward writing are "merely extensions of their fears, lack of self confidence, and inflexibility" (p. 4). These issues, as one can imagine, are more intense than a composition instructor might be prepared to deal with.

But, as Sally Chandler (2007) indicates in "Fear, Teaching Composition, and Students' Discursive Choices: Re-thinking Connections Between Emotions and College

Student Writing," these emotional issues open up a "new 'way to move' for composition studies. The study of emotion as discourse not only eliminates objections about the individual psychology of students, it also connects researchers to methods that go beyond reflection and self-reporting" (p. 53). Chandler's (2007) study specifically examined a composition class where students had to tutor other students in the university writing center as part of the course's curriculum. In this study, Chandler (2007) examined student attitudes and anxiety in regard to their own and others writing, finding that instructors need to reconsider how connections between written and emotional discourse can help them support students "as they strive to meet expectations for college writing" (p. 54). The benefits of considering not only student attitudes about writing, but the related issue of what emotions these attitudes develop will reveal the need for new composition pedagogy that extends beyond simple classroom practices to include the individual student's needs as well (Hettich, 1994).

Susan Day (2002) examined the opposite of writer's block in her article "Make it Uglier: Make it Hurt, Make it Real: Narrative Construction of the Creative Writer's Identity" when she considered the experience of "writer's flow" (p. 127). Day (2002) studied four creative writers of different ages and genres through taped interviews and interpretations of their life stories to discover that for these writers, "blockage was simply not an issue" (p. 127-129). Day (2002) did discover, however, that the self-image of these creative writers was an "enactment of their identity, not merely a step along the way" (p.130), thus providing a link between the writer's self-perception and the issue of writer's block. What writers think of themselves as writers, and possibly even of their

writing process, according to Day, seems to be of great importance to avoiding or dealing with writer's block.

For the sake of this study, student perceptions about writer's block were of great importance because these perceptions could impact students' ability to engage with this writing problem, and it may have influenced their attitudes toward instructor pedagogy on this subject. Student writers who were comfortable with their own writing, their writing process, as well as teacher criticism may have had an easier time dealing with writer's block than those who struggled with these areas. These factors, as well as others, were critical to this study.

Beliefs and Emotions

It is necessary to consider the issue of belief or perception for this study because the way students feel about writing and writing issues may directly impact their ability to write and the possibility that they may encounter writer's block. Susan McLeod (1987) states that "Beliefs are convictions that are not necessarily provable," but indicates that this is a significant issue for composition instructors because "Our students come to us with a great many beliefs about writing which diminish their perception of their own skills as writers" (p. 429). According to McLeod, a student who does not believe in him or herself as a writer may find it difficult to continue writing when writer's block surfaces at some point in the writing process. This challenge may be enough for a student to stop writing altogether, thus causing him or her to fail to complete an assignment and then begin a habit of hating writing assignments or writing tasks.

Student beliefs about writing are directly relevant then to the issues discussed in this dissertation. If a student has negative feelings about writing, he or she may do poorly

79

on written assignments (Davis, 1987), thus causing an instructor to see the student as a poor writer, rather than an individual with negative beliefs about writing. Additionally, students with negative feelings about writing may suffer more frequently with writer's block than those who have positive feelings about writing. Conversely, students with positive feelings about writing tend to perform better on written assignments (Hettich, 1994). This study sought to understand how blocking relates to student beliefs about writing.

Closely related to the issue of beliefs is that of emotions, because beliefs often lead to the emotions upon which an individual may act. In Alice Glarden Brand's (1989) book *The Psychology of Writing: The Affective Experience*, and various resulting articles by the same author, including "Writing and Feelings: Checking Our Vital Signs" (Brand, 1990), Brand uses several fields of inquiry to consider the issues of emotion as they relate to writing. Brand studied the emotion of writers by asking emotion-based research questions of college writing students and in-service teachers of English. These participants completed the Brand Emotions Scale for Writers to self-report the emotions of their writing. Through this research, Brand discovered that writer's emotions change as they engage in the writing process and that negative emotions often remain strong throughout the writing process (Brand, 1990, p. 293-295).

According to Alice Glarden Brand's (1989) extensive work studying the emotions of writers, too often the term 'emotions' is substituted for that of 'beliefs' or even 'values' when in fact these terms are quite distinct (p. 290). In *The Psychology of Writing: The Affective Experience*, Brand (1989) defines the term 'emotions' as referring to "a complex inner or mental condition that has physiological readiness, characterized

by increased alertness and heightened yet nonspecific feeling" (p. 290). The writer experiencing 'emotions,' by Brand's definition, would be one who may be unable to even express what is happening inside, and at the same time is fully aware that there is indeed *something* happening within. Emotions may be engaged when writers feel overwhelmed, excited, or nervous about a writing task. And, according to Brand (1989), a writer's emotions may "change discernibly" when they write (p. 199). Thus, a writer who is blocked may feel depressed, while breaking through the block could lead to an emotional high. Novice writers may not understand their writing process enough to control such emotional fluctuations.

Some of the most common negative emotions experienced by writers, according to Brand (1989), include "loneliness, depression, shame, and shyness only rarely and weakly" (p. 297). These emotions may have a significant impact on a writer's ability to compose. Writers who struggle with these emotional issues may struggle with the writing task, idea generation, and other writing issues. The interesting point here, however, is that many writers feel "more confused than bored when composing" (Brand, 1989, p. 297). So perhaps teachers can use these emotional reactions to engage student writers.

But harnessing such emotional energies is far from easy. As Lamott (1994) states, "There are few experiences as depressing as that anxious barren state known as writer's block, where you sit staring at your blank page like a cadaver, feeling your mind congeal, feeling your talent run down your leg and into your sock" (p. 176). It is during this state of a writing block that the emotions of not being able to write and the reality of the situation can collide and explode within a writer until he or she must decide on a way to engage the problem or give up writing altogether.

Student Emotion and Instructor Pedagogy

Student emotions and instructor pedagogy are connected, although seldom consciously by either the instructors or students. Sally Chandler's (2007) research indicates that instructors cannot simply force composition pedagogy and writing assignments on students without first considering the emotional contexts by which those students have entered the composition classroom (p. 66). In so doing, instructors will likely find more success in reaching their composition students. Chandler (2007) notes that most students feel they are good writers, in need only of help with proofreading their work (p. 59). This misconception can only be handled by an instructor who is aware of the emotional aspect of writing, and also encourages his or her students to engage honestly and emotionally with the writing task.

Teaching students to be less emotional and negative about writing tasks may be impossible, however. Sally Chandler (2007) found in her study that students with unusually high levels of anxiety about writing are further stressed by assignments that encourage critical thinking. Chandler (2007) states that "we cannot teach students academic discourse, at least not in the conventional sense of giving examples or providing direction for what to do. Rather, this discussion suggests that we need to orchestrate emotional contexts that evoke and scaffold the discourses we seek to teach" (p. 66). This point is critical to this study, where instructors are currently struggling with how to discuss and influence writer's block in their writing classrooms. Instructors wishing to openly talk about writer's block will have to be careful in how they engage their students in this pedagogical area.

The need for instructors to consider students' emotions and beliefs in their instructional pedagogy can also be seen in the paper "Basic Writing: Breaking Through the Barriers of Apathy and Fear," by Barbara Baxter (1987). Here, Baxter (1987) indicates that if instructors work to change their students' attitudes about themselves as writers by "making the writing experience a positive, pleasurable one," then they will have given those students the skills for future self-directed learning opportunities (p. 10-11). In this paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Conference on English in the Two-Year College, Baxter (1987) notes that to accomplish this end, it is necessary to build student self-confidence and relieve their anxiety in a safe, student-centered atmosphere (Baxter, 1987; Brand, 1989 & 1990; Chandler, 2007; Clark and Wiedenhaupt, 1992; Davis, 1987; Hendricks, 1987; Hunzer, 1995; Wiltse, 2001; Wintrowd and Blum, 1994). But, it is clear that this goal cannot be achieved through a formula that will work for all composition classrooms (Ritchie, 1989, p. 153). Instead, instructors need to be aware that each classroom situation is different, and each student unique, a fact that will require serious and careful consideration as each activity and assignment is planned.

The Impact of Emotion on the Assignment

Scholars have made a call for more research on the impact emotions have on students' ability and willingness to write (Bradley, 2001; Chandler, 2007; Hettich, 1994; Kamm, 1998; Light, 2002; Smith, 1984). The reason for this is that educators already have noticed a relationship between student perceptions of themselves as writers and the written products they produce. In a paper presented at the National Council of Teachers English Conference titled "Determining the Independence of Dispositional and

Situational Writing Apprehension," Dan Donlan and Sylvia Andreatta (1987) considered whether teacher intervention would change the level of student writing apprehension by studying the writing of over three hundred secondary students as they completed writing assignments under various conditions. The participants also completed pre- and post-tests of writing apprehension for the study. Donlan and Andreatta (1987) found that teacher intervention actually has little effect on writing apprehension, but they noted that writing apprehension is associated with poor attitudes toward school and low achievement (p. 2).

Kevin Davis (1987) agrees, stating that "research indicates that we can be fairly certain that student writers with high apprehension and/ or bad attitudes about writing exhibit certain behaviors which manifest themselves as restricted writing processes and as reduced textual complexity and quality" (p. 4). The attitudes students hold in regard to writing may have a direct impact on their ability to engage successfully with writing tasks, thus creating the opportunity for them to struggle with a writing problem such as writer's block.

The personal nature of writing is another reason some students may let their emotions interfere with completing an assignment. Because students may fear having someone grading or judging their writing, some students may choose to write nothing at all and thus fail the assignment, and possibly the class (Walsh, 1986), rather than exposing themselves to such criticism. The fear may ultimately manifest itself as writer's block. In Walsh's (1986) study "New Directions in Research on Writing Apprehension," the author reviews the usefulness and impact of the 1976 Daly and Miller questionnaire on more modern research studies about writing anxiety. Walsh (1986) notes that some people find writing more difficult than others, and that those who feel "greater

84

apprehension not only tend to be less capable writers but they also seem to be less aware of subtleties of language and of the ways in which those subtleties can be used to help them improve their communication skills" (p. 3). A writer who struggles with writing assignments and tasks, according to Walsh, is also more likely then to struggle with writer's block as well.

Barbara Baxter (1987) states that "perhaps because writing involves much self-revelation, students hide their fear behind surface apathy or avoidance behaviors" (p. 3). These avoidance behaviors, like failing to ask for help on the assignment or not turning one in at all, may become recursive issues for students who allow the emotional aspects of writing to drive their interaction with school-related writing assignments. In cases such as this, writing anxiety may have led to writer's block which, in turn, may have led to self-destructive behaviors such as overall failure in a composition course. The emotional nature of writing and the anxiety that sometimes accompanies the writing task may influence student success or failure in writing. This indicates a clear need for further research in the area of writer's block, research like that of this dissertation study.

Students enter writing classrooms with various preconceived ideas about writers and writing. The research presented in this section indicates that a supportive, encouraging classroom can have a positive impact on student perceptions of themselves as writers, and thus decreases the likelihood that students will encounter writer's block as they complete class writing tasks.

Conclusion

Although writing instructors can be confident that their students are familiar with some aspects of the writing process, they cannot assume that their students have

sufficient knowledge for excelling in the academy where writing is concerned (Boice, p. 20, 1993). Issues like writer's block may be unfamiliar to students and so dealing with these issues becomes the writing instructors' challenge. To deal with writer's block and the similar areas of writing anxiety and resistance, instructors, according to Baxter (1987) "need to provide opportunities for our students to learn to think critically, to experiment actively, and to apply their new skills in meeting the demands of the academic community and the workplace" (p. 7). These opportunities must engage the students in a way that helps them gain a more positive view of themselves as writers. One possible way to do this is to use film in the composition classroom. Costanzo (1986) notes that "if I once regarded film study as a path to better writing, I now see film and writing as equal partners traveling along the same road" (p. 86).

This study was situated in that intersection between film and composition. As I have argued in my review of the literature, though some research has explored the issue of writer's block, this topic has not been studied in enough depth or frequency. And no studies of writer's block have examined how students would respond to a composition instructor using film to teach about writer's block. This study examined student perceptions as they related to film use in the composition classroom, specifically perceptions of and responses to a film about writer's block.

In the next chapter, the research methodology for this study will be explained.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This dissertation study sought to discover student perceptions of writer's block as they enter the composition classroom and after they have viewed several film clips. The study examined whether those perceptions were influenced by an explicit classroom discussion of writer's block through viewing clips from the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), where one of the protagonists is herself struggling with writer's block. This study focused in the following research questions.

Research Questions

This dissertation research was developed through exploration of the following research questions:

- What kinds of ideas about writer's block do study participants hold at the start of their composition course?

- What ideas about writer's block emerge from the discussions of and papers about the writer's block film shown in each class?

- What key similarities and differences emerge across the classes concerning students' developing understandings of writer's block?

Well designed research questions are critical to any research study. In *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, Maxwell (2005) states that "The research questions are the heart, or hub, of the model; they connect all of the other components of the design, and should inform, and be sensitive to, these components" (p. 5). Solid, thoughtful research questions help the researcher to stay on task and implement relevant research methods for the study. My research questions emerged from the desire to

understand student perceptions of writer's block, alongside an interest in the influence of film in the writing classroom.

The initial version of my research questions were conceived at the start of my study. My questions were then fine tuned after a thorough analysis of the literature relevant to the issues of this dissertation study. Miles and Huberman (1994) note that "The formulation of research questions may precede or follow the development of a conceptual framework […] Research questions may be general or particular, descriptive or explanatory. They may be formulated at the outset or later on, and may be refined or reformulated in the course of fieldwork" (p. 23). While it is possible that during the course of this study these questions may be reconsidered or even rewritten, the questions have helped set the goals of this research from the very beginning of this study.

Answers to these questions were sought from data gathered in surveys of composition students regarding their perceptions of writer's block, observations of discussions about film clips from the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), and analysis of student papers written in response to a writing prompt about writer's block.

Research Goals

This study aimed to explore the intersection of the academic and the popular through an examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject was shown. The research methods selected worked together to provide answers to the study's questions (Maxwell, 2005, p. 2).

There are, of course, a number of goals one might have for conducting a research study. I have worked to clarify my own goals in the hope of avoiding confusion during the research process. Maxwell (2005, p. 16) notes that personal goals are valuable

motivators for effective research studies. A personal and practical goal (Maxwell, 2005, p. 16) of my study was that the research inform the work of my dissertation study, enable me to complete my Ph.D. coursework at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and ultimately to help me keep my job as an Instructor of Communication Studies at Grove City College. A scholarly or intellectual goal (Maxwell, 2005, p. 21) of the study was to provide the foundation for future studies in writing pedagogy, the inclusion of film in the writing classroom, as well a better understanding of writer's block. Because writer's block has been studied often, but never as it relates to film, the intellectual goal of this study is critical (Maxwell, 2005, p. 21).

It was helpful to understand these goals as I began the research for this study because the data collection and analysis could not be based solely on my personal desires or I would be in danger of "creating a flawed or biased study" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 18), something I hoped to avoid, despite knowing that no study is completely without flaws. Throughout this chapter I will examine various ways that I attempted to avoid flaws and bias in this study.

Next, the purpose of the study will be considered.

<div align="center">Purpose</div>

This dissertation study was a qualitative analysis of student perceptions of writer's block before and after viewing clips from the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). This study aimed to explore the intersection of the academic and the popular through an examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject was shown. As was the case for Faigley, Daly and Witte (1981) in their study "The Role of Writing Apprehension in Writing Performance and

Competence," my study also has "important implications for research in writing and writing apprehension" and it is my hope that the results of this study will indicate that using a variety of instructional materials and methods for highly apprehensive writers will help enhance their writing performance (p. 20), and help strengthen their perception of themselves as writers (Baxter, 1987; Brand, 1989 & 1990; Chandler, 2007; Clark and Wiedenhaupt, 1992; Davis, 1987; Hendricks, 1987; Hunzer, 1995; Wiltse, 2001; Wintrowd and Blum, 1994; See also Amaya-Anderson, 2008, p. 91).

In order to achieve this end, a pre-screening survey was distributed to participating students to determine their ideas about writer's block as they entered their composition classes; student discussions were observed after participants had viewed the film in order to establish any changes in student perceptions of writer's block that may have emerged between the survey and discussions; I conducted an analysis of student papers written in response to a given prompt to determine any patterns in student thinking regarding writer's block, as well as to further explore any emerging themes in this area among participating students. Finally, a sample of student participants was selected to participate in a brief interview regarding their experience with this research study and their perceptions of writer's block.

I will next discuss the research design for this study.

Research Design

Qualitative Research

I elected to use qualitative research methods for this study because:

Qualitative research aims to understand and communicate its subjects' experiences, interpretations and meanings, and consequently qualitative data and argument can be highly compelling, with a distinctive 'real life' immediacy and

resonance. (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 22)

The experience and beliefs of the study subjects were of critical importance to this research study and so were foundational to the research design. I was interested in what students believe about writer's block, and so their thoughts and emotions regarding this issue were critical to this study. Using qualitative methodology in my research was beneficial to the outcome of the research findings.

Qualitative research methods are considered to be quite thorough because they include the analysis of an array of data that represents differing and vast parts of the subject matter under examination (Erlandson et. al., 1993; Mathison, 1988; Maxwell, 2005; Miles and Huberman, 1994). This lends value to my study, which builds on the qualitative research tradition. It is my belief that the qualitative methods, triangulated data, and naturalistic approach of this study allowed for a more thorough and accurate analysis of the data and findings thereof.

Generally, qualitative data are not gathered quickly, but instead over a period of time, allowing researchers to dig deeply into a subject and thus give their audience a clearer picture of the issues than some other research methods that aim for less depth (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 10). For this study, I spent one class period with the study participants as I showed them the film clips from *Stranger Than Fiction* and then observed their conversation after the clips had been shown. I also completed an analysis of the students' writing through an assignment given for this study. Additionally, it was necessary to spend time interviewing some of the participants in the study to glean more information for the study. The amount of time spent with the study participants, as well as the accumulation of deeper and richer data means that it was more likely that I can

provide the readers of my study with a better understanding of student perceptions of writer's block, as well as a clear and concise analysis of the possible impact of a film on this writing problem.

Naturalistic Inquiry

This dissertation study involved a naturalistic approach to research. To discover student perceptions of writer's block, I decided to consider student survey responses, classroom observations, documents written by students in response to a writing prompt about writer's block and the film shown in class about this subject, as well as interviews with a small number of student participants. In so doing, I considered the different possible realities (Erlandson et. al., 1993, p. 15) about writer's block that students engage with both in and out of the classroom. This will also allow for future studies that consider predictions of future behavior and perceptions that can be influenced through the use of film in the writing classroom (Erlandson et. al., 1993, p. 17).

It is my belief that the methodology for this study is straightforward and not difficult to duplicate, should another researcher wish to attempt the same (or a similar) study. As Erlandson et al. (1993) state, naturalistic inquiries should provide the audience with evidence that, if similar respondents in similar contexts were used again, the findings of the study could be repeated (p. 33). I believe my study could be duplicated by other researchers in similar contexts. The differences that could emerge from other related studies might, however, grow from the increased use of film in writing classrooms that instructors are noting even at the present time (Adams and Hamm, 2006; Bishop, 1999; Desjardins, 1987; Fain, 2004; Wild, 1999) or from simply using different student research participants or even different films.

Triangulation

This dissertation study drew data from student surveys, classroom observations, document analysis of student papers and interviews in an effort to answer the study's research questions. Erlandson et al. (1993) calls this type of research 'triangulation' and state further that it is the best way to gain "various and divergent constructions of reality that exist within the context of a study," by collecting information about different areas from several points of view (p. 31). The need for triangulated data in an effective research study is highlighted by Erlandson et al. (1993) who state that data gathered directly from subjects should be checked against records and documents (p. 31). For the purposes of this study, the survey was checked against classroom observations as well as against a close reading of student papers and interviews with some of the student participants. This approach was used to help ensure the validity of the study's overall findings.

Maxwell (2005) defines triangulation as "collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods" (p. 112). This study utilized several classrooms consisting of students from a range of backgrounds that could influence their perceptions of writer's block. This range of students, as well as research methods, allowed for a wealth of rich data to be collected for the study.

Triangulation is considered to be a valid and thorough approach to research. Research and evaluation are generally improved through the use of triangulated data collection (Mathison, 1988, p. 13). Utilizing triangulated data collection in this qualitative study added to the validity of the research findings overall (Coffey and Atkinson, 1995; Erlandson et. al., 1993; Mathison, 1988; Maxwell, 2005) because the

consideration of only one source of information cannot contribute to the larger discussion in the way that three or more pieces of data can (Erlandson, et. al., 1993, p. 138).

Gathering data through triangulation allowed for a more complete and possibly more complex picture of writer's block to emerge than has been noted in previous research (Mathison, 1988, p. 15). Through this method of data collection, I hoped to reduce the risk of bias and random explanations, instead aiming for more valid conclusions to be found at the study's end (Maxwell, 2005, p. 112).

Next, the method of study participant and study site selection will be discussed.

Selection of Study Sites and Participants

Selecting study sites and participants is a critical, and yet difficult, part of any research project. Erlandson (1993) notes that

> the selection of a suitable site is a critical decision in naturalistic research, because the inquirer will conduct his or her study in a particular native setting to observe and record the day-to-day operations of the environment. Furthermore, the data collected in the research are limited to the selected site and its immediate context. Site selection affects the viability of the whole study, and great attention should be given to this process. (p. 53)

It was essential to this study to carefully select sites that would provide relevant and important research data (see Maxwell, 2005) and because of this I will attempted to carefully define the qualifications for the sites of this study before making the final selection.

Before selecting study participants, it was necessary to consider valid and relevant sites at which the study might possibly take place.

Participating Sites

In selecting study sites, I considered the primary goals and needs of this study. There are a few relevant areas that were necessary to consider in terms of study site selection for the overall success of this study. While no study site is ever entirely perfect for research, Erlandson (1993) notes that "The researcher should seek to find the best site possible within the boundaries of his or her resources, and the primary guides for site selection are the specific research topic problem and questions" (p. 54). It was my goal for this study to adhere to these guidelines as I sought relevant, valid sites for the study, noting that no site will be perfect regardless of my efforts.

While the research that was being conducted for this study is both relevant and useful to every writing course that is being taught at any college or university in the United States, there are several key issues that impact and ultimately limit the consideration of all but a few possible institutions as study sites for this research.

Study sites were limited to those that met the following criteria:

- Site is located within two-hour driving distance of Grove City College (where I teach full time).

- Site has instructors who teach writing courses in the English department. Because the study focuses on writer's block, any English writing course will work for this study.

- Site has instructors who use, even on a limited basis, films in their writing classrooms, or those who want to begin doing so.

- Site has instructors who have addressed writer's block in their classes or plan to do so in the future.

Once the participating sites were determined, it was necessary to select teachers who might want their composition students to participate in the study.

Participating Teachers

Because I am in contact on a regular basis with instructors from several local colleges, I am already familiar with many of their teaching practices and pedagogies. I emailed a number of English writing professors (see Appendix G- Email request and Appendix C- Writing Assignment) in an effort to locate and consider participants for this study. Because the sites I will describe below are already accessible to me, I did not have to be concerned about gatekeepers blocking access to the sites for my study (Erlandson, 1993, p.56).

One participating instructor chose to allow three sections of her composition classes to participate in the study, while another instructor chose to have one composition course participate in the study.

Participating Students in Each Class

For the sake and integrity of this research, I chose to study four sample classroom populations. This number was small enough to remain manageable and yet large enough to provide a significant representative sample that brought validity to this study. There were between 17-25 students in each class, with a total of 82 students who ultimately were eligible to participate in this research study.

Specific Study Sites

Class Descriptions

So as to establish each study population as a unique site participant in this study, I will consider each classroom situation and set up.

In all four classrooms, I was previously familiar with the participating instructors, and all four classrooms were part of institutions in the Western Pennsylvania area. The research took place in the fall semester of 2009. The names of the colleges have been changed so as to protect the identity of the instructors and student participants. For the sake of this research, the participating colleges will be known as Stevens University (SU) and Taylor College.

There were several reasons for selecting more than one site for this study. These potential study sites provided a range of economic and educational samples, as well as varying educational settings (Erlandson, 1993, p. 58). This was important because no two settings were exactly the same, thus preventing a generalization from one setting to another (Erlandson, 1993, p. 13; see also Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). This allowed for a range of student participants, from good academic students to not-so-good ones, who were more likely to provide differing accounts of their perceptions of writer's block, thus providing a more complex and more honest view of this issue for the study.

It is essential to note that this study could have included a significant number of respondents, given an unlimited amount of time and other resources. However, it is not possible to study "everyone everywhere doing everything. Your choices—whom to look at or talk with, where, when, about what, and why—all place limits on the conclusions you can draw, and on how confident you and others feel about them" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 27). I do understand that the choice to select a smaller number of classrooms and students may have limited the study's conclusions; however, it is also not possible to study "everyone everywhere" and so there do have to be limits (imposed by things such as work, family obligations, and time) for the sake of feasibility. The smaller sample involved in this study should be acceptable,

however, since qualitative researchers often work with smaller samples, "nested in their context and studied in depth" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 27).

Qualitative research, even that which is structured carefully and organized well, is rarely conducted without some problems (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 31). While I feel that this study design is sound, it is possible that these methods of research and data collection would lead to occasional setbacks. I faced these issues on a case by case basis and will discuss them later in the dissertation. Additionally, I will explore possible solutions to problems throughout this chapter as well as in the section regarding ethical concerns for this study.

<div align="center">Study Participation</div>

Overall, 82 students were eligible for participation in this dissertation study, based on the signed consent forms that were collected. Seventy-one of these students both signed the consent forms and turned in a paper, while nine students signed consent forms and did not turn in a paper and two students turned in papers but did not sign consent forms. The results of this study will often reflect and analyze these numbers and their related data in an effort to answer the research questions of this study.

The number of students who were eligible to participate in the research study for each class is represented in Table 1. The total number of students in the class indicates all students who might have elected to participate in the study. The term 'eligible' students indicates those students who completed and returned the Voluntary Consent Form (See Appendix J), as well as completed and returned the writing assignment for the study.

Table 1
Total and Eligible Student Participants

	Stevens University	Taylor class one	Taylor class two	Taylor class three
Total students	25	20	23	17
Eligible students	25	17	17	12

Table 2 shows the number of students, by class, who turned in a paper but did not hand in a consent form, as well as those who did not hand in a paper but handed in a consent form. The students who did turn in a paper but did not hand in a consent form were not be eligible to have their papers analyzed with the other students' papers, but both groups were eligible to participate in the interviews at the end of the study, if they chose to do so.

Table 2
Student Participants Who Turned in Papers and Forms

	Stevens University	Taylor class one	Taylor class two	Taylor class three
Paper no form	0	0	2	2
Form no paper	0	2	4	3

Survey

The study began with a short survey of participating students regarding their current perceptions of writer's block in order to determine what they know of this writing problem and whether or not they feel they have struggled with it.

Some of the questions I designed for the survey (See Appendix A) are called 'opinion/ value questions' by Erlandson et al. (1993, p. 88). These questions were meant to help determine what perceptions students had regarding writer's block before

discussing this writing problem or watching the film about it for this study. Other

questions created for this study are what Erlandson et. al (1993) refer to as 'experience/

behavior questions' (p. 88). These questions will allow the students to indicate when or if

they themselves have struggled with writer's block and how they have handled such

problems.

In formulating these survey questions, my goal was to allow a theory to emerge

from the responses, not to force a theory to be accurate through the responses to the

questions. Erlandson et al. (1993) refers to this as a posteriori (p. 50). In the results

chapters of the study, I will work to develop my own posteriori understanding of the data

collected.

Using a survey before students view the film clips from *Stranger Than Fiction*

(2006) helped clarify their ideas regarding writer's block as they entered the composition

classroom. Understanding student thoughts about writer's block before viewing the film

was essential if this study intended to determine the impact of a film or film clips on

students' beliefs about writer's block. This data relates to the first research question:

What kinds of ideas about writer's block do study participants hold at the start of their

composition course? This data did, of course, also inform the other research questions

since I attempted to use a tight study design in order to maintain a sense of cohesiveness

(Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 17). The survey gave students the opportunity to provide

for a basic response to questions they may never have considered consciously before.

Surveys, however, have both strengths and weaknesses (Desimone and Le Floch,

2004, p. 2). Some critics state that surveys do not allow for depth in understanding the

way that other research methods do (Desimone and Le Floch, 2004, p. 2). It is not the

goal of this portion of the data collection, however, to provide depth of understanding in this area. I relied on triangulation of data methods to gain greater depth in understanding the issue of student perceptions of writer's block. Despite their reservations, Desimone and Le Floch (2004) indicate that "Substantial research, however, offers support of the adequacy of survey measurement" (p. 4), helping to justify the use of a survey for this study.

Additional methods of research are critical to this study as well, however. The next method of research that will be considered is the observation of student participant discussions.

<center>Observations</center>

The second method of research for this dissertations study was that of an observation of class discussions after the students had viewed the film clips from *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). There was one small group discussion and then a whole class discussion, but the instructors did not participate in either of these discussions. Neither of the participating instructors wanted these discussions to extend to other class periods. The discussions were intended to focus the students' attention on the representation of writers, writing, and writer's block in the film clips that were shown. This method relates most closely to the second research question: What ideas about writer's block emerge from the discussions of and papers about the writer's block film shown in class?

It is important for students to participate in a discussion about a film after viewing it (Kasper and Singer, 1999, p. 122) because this discussion can yield issues involving the initial impression students have of the film. Observational research was beneficial to this

study because of its ability to shift the researcher's focus when necessary (Silverman, 1993, p. 43) and because it produced solid findings (Silverman, 1993, p. 45), thus making this study's methods and findings more flexible and reliable.

Through the observation of verbal student responses to the film through the post-viewing discussion, as well as the focus of the conversation, new student ideas about writer's block were observed and analyzed for the study. The analysis occurred as I logged all of the student responses as they were given, and then later considered patterns and themes that emerged through these discussions. For instance, one class or group focused mostly on the presentation of Kay Eiffel as a writer, while another class or another group focused on the presentation of writer's block in the film. The analysis of the discussions was necessary, as Erlandson (1993) states because, "The language we speak determines what we experience and in turn is driven by the categories we construct to make sense out of the world we experience" (p. 22). Allowing the students to articulate their thoughts regarding the film in a class discussion (as well as through the writing prompt) helped clarify their interaction with this medium and begin to make the connection between their perceptions of writer's block and popular culture. The method of observation connected the other two research methods of this study, creating an opportunity to see the relationship between student perceptions of writer's block, as well as the influence of popular culture on these ideas.

Observing the participating classrooms in this study was beneficial because doing so helped me understand, using my own senses, the environment in which the participants engage (Erlandson, 1993, p. 94). Additionally, it was a goal of this dissertation to understand the way that popular culture, specifically film, may or may not

influence the beliefs of the participants. This effort to examine the influence of popular culture on student perceptions of writer's block in this study aligns my research, at least in part, with the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1993), Geertz argues that, "Anthropologists have not always been as aware as they might be of this fact: that although culture exists in the trading post, the hill fort, or the sheep run, anthropology exists in the book, the article, the lecture, the museum display, or, sometimes nowadays, the film" (p. 16). Film's increasing influence on contemporary culture was observable as I sat in on the class discussions following the classes' viewing *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006).

To help make the observations reliable, I used similar data collection approaches in each class I studied: surveyed the students, showed portions of the film, observed a class discussion of the film clips that have been viewed, collected a writing sample from the students who are willing to participate, and interviewed a representative sample of participating students. Erlandson (1993) states, "Shared constructions provide the basis for communication between people, and shared experiences and communications about them generate additional shared constructions" (p. 24; see also Maxwell, 2005, p. 94). Using shared constructions for this study design helped illuminate patterns (and deviations from those patterns) in student thought. To engage the sample populations in discussions that were similar in nature, I provided a set of discussion points for the students before they watched the film so that they were aware of the ideas they were to note. For example, students were asked to consider the way the writer, Kay Eiffel, is presented in the film as opposed to the way her assistant, Penny, is portrayed. These discussion points were addressed again after viewing the film took place (See Appendix

F). This effort kept the students on task for the viewing itself and the class discussion that followed.

As with any method of research, there are concerns with observation as a research method. Erlandson (1993) states, "Words enable the construction and communication of experience because they classify it. However, at the same time, words also shape (Distort? Destroy?) experience by simplifying and stabilizing it" (p. 23). While words can distort or destroy intended meaning, it was the goal of this study to use triangulated methods to gain a cohesive picture of student perceptions of writer's block, one that utilized various methods to ensure a true consideration of this area.

Additionally, a concern of this study is that words cannot express everything that may need to be said about the film, students' thoughts about the film, or the film's portrayal of writer's block (Erlandson, 1993, p. 24). There was, of course, no way for students to say everything that could have been said about the issues that were relevant to this study, but it was a hope of this researcher to collect a significant amount of information regarding these issues so as to enable me to form some basic conclusions.

In order to conduct a successful classroom observation and avoid the aforementioned potential problems of observation, I formulated and adhered to a specific plan for observing the participating classrooms (Erlandson, 1993, p. 97; Griffee, 2005, p. 42). This plan consisted of recording observations in each classroom setting (Erlandson, 1993, p. 98) and transcribing those notes immediately following the observation so as to avoid losing any critical data. In transcribing the notes, I elaborated attempted to clean up misspelled words, grammar errors, or other potentially unclear statements or points. The notes of the initial observation were recorded using a rubric (See Appendix B) that had

been created to ensure a consistent observation approach across classrooms. Some of the issues that I felt could be relevant included the availability of technology, the number of students in the class versus the number of students present, as well as the breakdown of female to male students. By recording observations on the rubric during the classroom discussions, I aimed to minimize intrusion on the normal classroom activities, and also hopefully maintain a consistent organizational pattern for observing all participating classrooms. Once the rubric was completed and the class ended, I immediately transcribed any additional relevant notes from the rubric onto my laptop computer (A Dell 2007; using Microsoft Word).

Additionally, it was necessary for me to take notes on the nature of the class itself, including the number of students willing to engage in the discussion, as well as the level of interest of the students in this topic (which may be determined by the enthusiasm for answering questions, the engagement of students in the topic, as well as the kinds of answers shared) and issues related directly to viewing the film (See Appendix B). Developing a thick description of the classroom environment was important in the analysis of the class discussion later, and so I was prepared. To create this thick description, I used all of my senses and considered the context of the setting I was describing (Erlandson et. al., 1993, p. 146). While I made choices about what to observe and what to ignore (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 56), the addition of the rubric to log information about my observation helped me to avoid missing any key information that could have been relevant to the study.

The next method of research consisted of the analysis of student papers in response to a writing prompt connecting the participating students' perceptions about the film and writer's block.

Student Papers

Students who participated in this study were asked to write a three to five page paper in response to a writing prompt (See Appendix C) that challenged them to consider both their own perceptions of writer's block and those ideas about writer's block included in the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). In their writing, students were asked to connect their perceptions and those given in popular culture in a unified expression of what writer's block has come to mean to them and to society.

While I analyzed the papers upon their receipt, it is also important to note that analysis is an ongoing method of data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 50). The ongoing analysis of student documents encouraged me to consider the research site, the participants, and any possible gaps in research methods or data collection in the study.

Analyzing documents such as student papers can be helpful overall in enabling the researcher to understand the significance of the subject of study (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 54). This was the case for the student papers written for this study.

The Writing Assignment

The writing assignment for this study was created to ensure a consistency in student responses to the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). This writing assignment was also created to engage students to think more deeply regarding their perceptions of writer's block and those communicated in the popular medium of film (Desjardins, 1987; see also Faigley, Daly and Witte, 1981). It was essential when creating this assignment to

consider the students viewing the film and the teachers involved in the study, as well as the goals of the study itself (Baxter, 1987; Dunbar-Odom, 1999; McCune, 2004; Wild, 1999). In order to accomplish this end, I created writing prompts that were open-ended, so as to allow students to explore their own perceptions of writer's block.

There may have been some students participating in the study who have never written a scholarly paper about a film, thereby creating a challenge for this part of the research study. Bordwell notes (*Making Meaning*, 1989) that each audience member may decide to produce his/ her own interpretation of a film (p. 31), thus revealing the need for a clearly articulated and structured assignment for this study (See also Overstreet, p. 108, 2007 and Desjardins, 1987). In committing the instructions for the writing assignment to paper, it was my hope that I indeed articulated a clear assignment to the students participating in this study. Additionally, creating this assignment and providing the instructions to the students as a handout helped eliminate any misunderstanding regarding what was expected of students in regard to this assignment.

The questions given on the writing assignment (see Appendix C) include 'Feeling Questions' that allowed the students to explore their own history with writer's block and 'Experience/ Behavior Questions' that encouraged the students to explain how they handled writer's block when they previously encountered (or thought they had encountered) it (Erlandson et. al., 1993, p. 88). The writing assignment also asked the participating students to compare their own thoughts and experiences with writer's block with those of Kay Eiffel in the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). I indicated to students on this writing prompt that answering each question specifically was not as important as their consideration overall of their experience and Kay's, thus allowing the students some

freedom in how they approached the questions. This writing assignment hopefully allowed students the opportunity to elaborate honestly on their thoughts regarding the film and its message in the event they were too shy during class to talk, or if they were not able to participate in the conversation at all for any reason.

For students who struggled with articulating their feelings about writer's block through this writing assignment, there was an opportunity for them to do so in an interview—either via email, on the phone, or in person. Each of these opportunities allowed students a chance to still participate in the study without creating feelings of anxiety about communicating their feelings.

The instructions for this assignment were given to the participating students after they viewed the film or film clips. Students then had no longer than a week to consider and complete the writing assignment, although a participating instructor had the right and ability to make adjustments to the assignment's deadline as needed. This assignment was graded by both participating instructors for participation points. Instructors also provided an alternate writing assignment for those students who choose not to participate in the study.

Analyzing Student Papers

Once students wrote their response papers for this study, they turned these assignments in to the class instructor who logged student participation and then passed the assignments on to me for analysis. The analysis of these papers was critical to this study so that a shared construction of meaning may emerge among participants (Erlandson, 1993, p. 24). A thorough study of these documents helped provide the answer to the third research question: What key similarities and differences emerge across the

classes concerning students' developing understanding of writer's block? This method, along with the other methods of data collection, helped to develop a full and honest view of the subject.

In order to consistently and thoroughly consider the papers from students participating in this study, I created a rubric (See Appendix D). This rubric was designed to aid in the analysis of student documents, as well as to help me avoid feeling overwhelmed with the amount of data available from these documents, all of which might not be directly relevant to this study specifically (Erlandson, 1993, p. 99-100). This organizational structure allowed me to maintain focus while reviewing these important, data-rich documents.

Defining the terms of analysis for this study was critical. Maxwell (2005) notes that "Any qualitative study requires decisions about how the analysis will be done, and these decisions should inform, and be informed by, the rest of the design" (p. 95). For the sake of this study, several points were essential: student engagement with the film, *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), student perceptions of writer's block before and after viewing the film, and any patterns that emerged from students participating in the study overall.

The analysis of the papers was an ongoing process in the research. While this analysis began as soon as the papers were received, using the rubric (See Appendix D), the analysis also continued long after the rubric was completed (Maxwell, p. 95, 2005; see also Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 2 and Erlandson, 1993). Through the ongoing analysis of research data (surveys, observations and document analysis), patterns began

to emerge that shed light on the phenomenon of student perceptions of writer's block as well as the possible influence of film on these thoughts.

Coding Student Papers

In order to accurately analyze student papers it was necessary to code them consistently during the data analysis. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) state that

> All researchers need to be able to organize, manage, and retrieve the most meaningful bits of our data. The usual way of going about this is by assigning tags or labels to the data, based on our concepts. Essentially, what we are doing in these instances is condensing the bulk of our data set into analyzable units by creating categories with and from our data. This process is usually referred to as coding, although that can imply a rather mechanistic process. We prefer to think in terms of generating concepts from and with our data, using coding as a means of achieving this. (p. 26)

Coding was an essential part of the data analysis in this study; however, it should not be seen as a substitute for analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Rather, these concepts work together to create a cohesive picture of the research topic. For the sake of this study, this means that coding and analysis were used together to provide answers to the research questions using the data that is relevant to those questions, regardless of the method by which the data was gathered.

Codes are defined by Miles and Huberman (1994) as "tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to 'chunks' of varying size—words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting" (p. 56). I selected

codes for the document data based on relevant issues and subjects that emerged as the data was reviewed. These codes had to be meaningful to the data and research subject and inform the study as the data was reviewed and condensed (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 26).The codes for this research data were defined after the data was gathered, although they also emerged as the data was being gathered or even changed after the terms had been set (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 29). It was my intension to allow the codes to change as necessary for the study. Regardless, the codes allowed the data to be simplified, organized, and reduced to a manageable amount of information that could more easily be analyzed for this study.

Before I began coding the student papers for this study, I first read through all of the papers in an attempt to see what themes or patterns emerged from these documents. Next, I listed the most frequently cited issues that emerged. Finally, I read through the papers a few more times and noted in the text of these papers where the most relevant themes were found, using codes to do so. Some of these codes included emotional statements that the students made about writer's block (both positive and negative statements), personal anecdotes about writer's block, and emotional statements that the students made about the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), (both positive and negative). Coding the papers in this manner allowed me to return to relevant sections of the papers later as I was looking for overlapping themes or patterns among the classes in order to make meaning of this rich data.

During this study, coding was an ongoing process, one that changed or was adjusted as the data was compiled and analyzed. Waiting to code the data at the end of the data collection process could have been a mistake that jeopardized the outcome of the

study overall. In making coding an ongoing research effort of this study, I was able to reshape my perspective when necessary and uncover "real or potential sources of bias" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 65).

A final method of data collection was used to help inform the research of this study. Interviews of participating students will next be considered.

Interviews

Interviews were a great benefit to this dissertation study because they allowed participating students the opportunity to both expand on ideas discussed in class and their papers, as well as to voice their thoughts about writer's block if they had trouble articulating these feelings and perceptions through the other means available in this study. Students who may have trouble articulating themselves in writing, often are passionate and philosophical in other ways, such as vocally (Delbridge, 1997, p. 2). The interview allowed these students the chance to be included in this study while being sensitive to their writing anxieties.

Students were selected to participate in interviews after they turned in their response papers. Initially, the subjects were chosen randomly based on the fact that they had completed the writing assignment and consent form. These students were asked if they would like to participate in an interview via the email address they included on their consent forms (see Appendix J). Using email as a first contact with the students made sense because of scheduling and distance issues as well as student familiarity and comfort with technology. Additionally, in the academe, email is used almost daily, so I predicted that most students would receive my request in a timely fashion (Nalita, 2007, p. 996). Because the email request did not yield enough student interest, however, a second

request (and eventually a third) were sent to all participating students via email. Additionally, follow-up emails were sent to those students who indicated a desire to participate but never completed and sent their interview responses.

Because I feared some students would feel anxiety when writing their answers (whether in the assigned paper or email form), I also chose to call some students for either a phone interview or to possibly set up a time for a face to face interview. I chose to first call students who did not turn in a paper at all for the writing assignment, with the assumption that perhaps writer's block played a part in their inability to complete the assignment, and later I also called a sample of students who indicated they would like to participate in the study via email but never responded to multiple emails requests for interviews.

Before subjects were chosen for participation, questions for the interview were created. There was one set of questions created for the email interview and a slightly altered set of questions for the students who elected to participate over the phone or in person (see Appendix H and Appendix I). These questions, while brief, were intended to allow students the chance to expand on ideas presented in their papers or perhaps not at all during this study. Additionally, I felt I would get a better response to my interview request if students were aware that the interview would not take longer than a half hour of their time.

The interview portion of this study gave further depth to the issues presented and the data gathered. The interview is valuable in data gathering because it allows the "researcher to move back and forth in time as he or she probes and asks questions appropriate to the respondents' knowledge" (Erlandson, et. al., 1993, p. 94). For this

study, the interview allowed me to ask deeper, clarifying questions that created more depth for the study overall.

Finally, the field journal will be examined.

Field Journal

In an effort to inform the research already being conducted for this study, it was also my intention to maintain my own record of research in the form of a field journal. This journal served as a place to record my thoughts and assumptions as I engaged in the research for this study, before, during, and after the study.

Erlandson (1993) notes that a "reflexive journal supports not only the credibility but also the transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study" (p. 143). This diary was maintained on my laptop computer, but was not added to on a regular basis. As issues or questions surfaced and became relevant, I recorded these ideas in this electronic diary. The printout of this diary can then become a part of the study's audit trail (Erlandson, 1993, p. 143).

This reflexive journal was recorded throughout the process of the study. This ongoing activity allowed for consistent reflection and questioning activities to take place as I attempted to provide the study with further depth and insight (Erlandson, 1993, p.145). Additionally, through the recording of a reflexive journal, I further established validity for the study by incorporating my thoughts and expectations for the study and its participants. This data worked together with the other collected research data.

Film viewing in the composition classroom will next be discussed.

Film Viewing in the Classroom

For this research study, it is critical that the viewing environment in the participating classrooms be of a similar nature. While it is true that well-written film essays often require multiple viewings (Corrigan, 2007; Cruz, 1999; Field, 2003), in a classroom context multiple film viewings are impractical due to limited class time. In the interest of making this study feasible for the study participants, I worked to make the inclusion of the film in the classroom as non-intrusive as possible.

At the outset of the study, I spoke with the instructors of the participating classes before beginning the study to determine their preference for a time in the semester to include the film in the class. In this case, the instructors' previous use of film may have been relevant, as they may have elected to utilize their own pedagogical preferences for including film in the class for this study.

While it might have been more entertaining for the participating classrooms to be able to view the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) in its entirety, I was aware that this might not be possible. The film is 113 minutes long, which deterred both participating instructors from wanting to show the entire film in their class. In light of this, I opted to show only the clips that were relevant to the discussion of writer's block. This limited the amount of time for the film viewing to about 30 minutes. Because students were watching only clips of the film, I was able to emphasize writer's block in a way that I would not have been able to had I shown the film in its entirety. Therefore, for this study, showing only clips of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) was likely more effective than showing the film in its entirety would have been.

In order for the film clips to be shown successfully, it was necessary for the participating classrooms to contain the appropriate technology for sharing film clips. Thus, a VCR or DVD player and television that all students were able to see without interference was necessary for each participating classroom. Both of the participating classrooms had the necessary technology of a projector and DVD player.

Finally, in order for the participating students to engage appropriately with the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), it was necessary to create a set of discussion points for the students to consider both as they viewed the film and that they discussed after viewing the film or film clips (See Appendix F). These discussion points were intended to help all participating students focus on the same issues, and additionally helped the discussion to stay on topic after viewing the film or film clips. This was critical because without this guidance, students may watch the film for any number of other reasons, not the least of which might be for pure entertainment (Godawa, 2002; Overstreet, 2007). Because students are so immersed in and familiar with the medium of film, this is a possible problem for introducing film to a writing classroom (Chiaromonte, 1960). Using guiding discussion points helped eliminate this challenge.

<div align="center">Ethical Concerns</div>

It was a foundational goal of this study to protect the participating subjects from any unintended ethical wrongdoing that might cause harm to the participants. In any study, it is essential to control bias (Erlandson, 1993, p. 15) and protect subjects against "physical or psychological harm, including loss of dignity, loss of autonomy, and loss of self-esteem" (Erlandson, 1993, p. 155; See also Miles and Huberman, 1994). Other areas of ethical concern include:

- The subjects' privacy and confidentiality are protected

- The subjects are protected against unjustifiable deception

- Before the research can take place, the subjects have an opportunity to provide informed consent for participating in the study (Erlandson, 1993, p. 155)

While it is clear that no study is without the potential for harm (Miles and Huberman, 1994), there are established ways of protecting participants. It was critical to this study to protect research participants from any and all of these harmful ethical concerns. To do so, several safeguards were introduced, which are described in the next section (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Informed Consent

The first protection for study participants was that of the informed consent that they will sign in order to participate in this study (see Appendix E). This consent clearly communicates to potential study participants the nature of the study and their role as participants in the study itself, if they chose to participate.

The consent form that was attached to the initial description of the study allowed potential study participants to decline participation in the study altogether or to choose an option whereby they participate in only one part of the study. This gave potential participants the freedom to choose their role in the study without pressure regarding their selection.

Miles and Huberman (1994) also urge that study participants be protected from "blows to self-esteem or 'looking bad' to others, to threats to one's interests, position, or advancement in the organization, to loss of funding for a program, on up to being sued or

117

arrested" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 292). These potential problems can be controlled by having instructors who contextualize the study as part of their goals for teaching composition. My intention was to allow instructors great freedom and flexibility with the study so that more students could participate with less likelihood of any harm taking place on any level. The flexibility of this study allowed the integrity of the research to remain while also protecting participants from unintended harm.

Students also were likely to find participating in this study to be beneficial rather than harmful to them. This is because students needed to engage in order to do well in their class and, like any other required assignment, had to complete the work related to this study in order to do earn the participation points their instructors attached to this assignment. Their grades, however, were not a part of this study and so students' academic abilities were not connected in any way to their participation in this study, thus providing another safeguard to their reputation and self-esteem.

Finally this study received the approval of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Internal Review Board (IRB), as well as approval from the appropriate gatekeepers at the institutions at which the research was conducted. These approving bodies added validity to the study and protection to the participants.

Reducing harm is critical to any study for the sake of the data collected. Potential for harm to subjects may negatively impact the data collected from a study (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 292). Because I worked to be transparent with my subjects regarding the intentions of my study, as well as the use of any data collected during the study, it is my hope that the study participants felt confident that their participation in the study involved minimal risk.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methods by which this research study and data were collected. In order to answer the research questions that have been established for this study, the research methods of a student survey, classroom observation, document analysis, and interviews were employed. Additionally, the keeping of a reflexive research journal provided further insight about the data being collected.

Chapter 4 will present the data that was collected through the established research methods of this study.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present data collected through surveys, observations, analyses of papers, and interviews that illuminate student perceptions of writer's block as well as issues related to the use of film in a composition classroom.

I began my data collection with a short survey of each of the four participating classrooms, then I observed small and large group discussions; next, I analyzed papers written in response to a writing prompt, and finally, I interviewed a number of students regarding their perceptions of writer's block.

A description of the research methods used in each classroom will precede a description and analysis of the collected survey data. Desjardins (1987) describes a methodology similar to that which was used in this study. She states that

> A particularly successful scenario for using film in a composition/ literature class
> is to assign and then guide the reading of a story, follow with class discussion,
> generate a pre-film viewing writing assignment, view the film, and close with a
> post-viewing discussion and writing assignment. (p. 4)

For this study, the methodology used was that of a pre-film viewing survey, viewing of film clips from *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), post-viewing discussion, writing assignment and interviews. These methods, as used in each of the four participating classes, will be considered next.

Class One Study

The College Writing II class at Stevens University was the first class to be studied. This class consisted of an almost even distribution of women and men between the ages of 18-22.

The class began with Dr. McGill briefly introducing me. He then turned the class over to me. I described my study briefly to the students as I handed out the Informed Consent form for them to keep (see Appendix E), and also the Voluntary Consent form for them to sign and return to me (see Appendix J). I stressed to students that their participation was completely voluntary and would have no impact on their semester grades.

Survey

Next, I passed out the short study survey (see Appendix A) to the class, which took students about 10 minutes to complete. While students were completing the surveys, I prepared the media cart and DVD so that the film would be ready when the students had completed the survey.

Film Clips

Once the survey was collected, I briefly introduced the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) and shared three questions with the students that I asked them to consider as they watched the clips of the film. The questions are included in Appendix F.

Because of time constraints, Dr. McGill and I agreed that showing the entire film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) would not be possible because it is 113 minutes long and would take an entire class period to show the whole film. While showing the film in its entirety would have been ideal, it simply was not possible. Golden (2001) states in

Reading In the Dark: Using Film as a Tool in the English Classroom that while using a

whole film as a teaching tool is ultimately the best for learning, it is not always possible

or favorable (p. 96-97). In the case of this study, if the whole film *Stranger Than Fiction*

(2006) had been shown, I would also have had to return to the classroom and take another

class period to observe discussions and give the relevant assignment. This could have

created a number of problems, as having the students watch the film one class period and

discuss it in another period would bring the possibility that some initial responses and

reactions to the film could have been lost in a week's time (Golden, 2001, p. 96-97).

Since the class met only one time per week, Dr. McGill and I decided that showing

students the most relevant clips from the film, where writer's block is explicitly described

or discussed (see Appendix K), made better sense.

While the students watched the clips from *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), I noted

that they seemed to be very engaged with the film. The students laughed during the film

clips and seemed to be entertained by the film. The film clips that were shown during

class are noted in Appendix K. Showing the film clips took about 25-30 minutes of class

time.

Discussion Observation

I began the classroom observation by reminding students of the questions I asked

them to think about before they watched the film clips. I then asked students to get into

groups of three or four to discuss the questions, writing their responses on a handout with

the questions that I provided for them. I felt that having a printed version of the questions

would help encourage groups to stay on topic with their discussions (see Appendix F) and

provide for a recorded list of points made. Having a hard copy of student responses

would allow me another opportunity to be sure my gathered data was accurate and thorough.

Once the students had discussed these questions in their groups for about 10-15 minutes, I asked them to bring their chairs back into rows so that we could discuss the film as a class. In order to discuss both their group ideas and their individual ideas, and to take the discussion to a deeper level, I had another set of questions for them to discuss as a class (see Appendix B). This set of questions was more specific to the film itself, while the other set of questions was more general about writer's block. I shared these questions with the students verbally, rather than through a handout.

Dr. McGill sat in the back of the classroom and allowed me to lead the discussion. He did not participate in the discussion.

In order to record student responses, I brought my laptop and placed it on the media cart, with the questions (Appendix B) already on the screen. Because there was a screen up on the media cart, the laptop was a minimal distraction to the students in the class as most of them likely could not see it, though I did mention I would be typing their responses for my study.

As each student responded to the questions, I logged them on my laptop. Later, to correct typing errors or to clarify points made during the discussion, I reviewed my notes and fixed any problems (grammar or spelling errors). While it might have been beneficial to record the student responses either with a video camera or audio recording equipment, it is likely that the noise level in the room, both from shuffling students and a loud heating/ air conditioning system, would have made replaying, hearing, and transcribing student responses very difficult.

Because I am a very fast typist and not every student response necessarily correlated directly to the questions asked (either because they were repetitive or not relevant) I was able to record nearly every verbal response to my questions.

Writing Assignment

The discussion of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) took about twenty minutes to complete. Once the discussion ended, I handed out the writing assignment (see Appendix C) to the students. This assignment was given to all students, but I indicated both in the consent forms and verbally that they were not required to participate in the writing assignment if they didn't want to do so. If students did not want to participate in the writing assignment, Dr. McGill had created an alternate assignment for them to do instead. This assignment (whether mine or Dr. McGill's alternate assignment) would not be a part of the students' class grade, but would result in participation points.

Once I handed out the assignment instructions, I asked students if there were any questions. When there were no questions I thanked students for their help and reminded them that if they had any questions as they worked on the assignment they could feel free to contact me either via email or phone, both of which I had given them on the voluntary consent form that they kept.

Assignment Collection

Because the College Writing II class met once a week, Dr. McGill and I agreed it would be wise to collect the assignment the following week. Once Dr. McGill had logged the participation points for the students, he contacted me via email and we set up a time for me to pick up copies of the papers, which were unmarked and looked exactly as the originals. Dr. McGill kept the original papers.

Classes Two, Three and Four Study

I next used three sections of Oral and Written Expression (OWE) at Taylor College. Because I studied three different sections of the same course at Taylor, the research methods in each class were nearly identical. The difference between the classes came in the form of student responses during the discussions. Because the methodology was the same, however, I will distinguish each class by its student make up and then use one cohesive description of methods so as to avoid needless repetition.

The second participating class, Taylor class one, consisted of 17 students present, 7 male and 10 female. In this class there were four non-native speakers of English present.

The third class that was participating in the study was Taylor class two, which met immediately after the Taylor class one and was in the same library classroom and so had the same physical set up previously described. This class consisted of 18 students present, and was a nearly even split between male and female students, all between 18-22 years old.

The final class that was participating in the study was Taylor class three, and was also in the same library classroom that the previous two OWE classes had been held in. There were 13 students present for this class, although Dr. Davis noted that some students were missing due to athletic team obligations. There were only three females in this class, with the other 10 students being male.

Most students in these classes had laptops, while some had notebooks and pens or pencils.

Taylor OWE Study

At the beginning of Taylor class one Dr. Davis gave me the surveys for all of the classes, as well as the consent forms she had collected for all three classes.

In each class, Dr. Davis introduced me to the students at the beginning of the class with a brief explanation of my research, and then handed the class over to me. Dr. Davis sat in a chair at the side of the classroom in all three classes. She did not participate in the class discussions.

I briefly introduced the study to the students and I reminded them that their participation in the study was strictly voluntary and would in no way impact their status at Taylor College. Then, I explained that we would be watching clips of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) and I shared the first three discussion questions (see Appendix F) with them verbally before beginning the film clips.

Film Clips

The rest of the study took place in a way that was nearly identical to that described in the first classroom, though of course the student responses differed. To maintain consistency between study sites, I showed each class the same film clips (see Appendix K). Showing the clips took about 25 minutes of class time.

The three Taylor OWE classes seemed to enjoy the film clips, as they laughed throughout the viewing portion of the study.

Discussion Observation

Once the clips were finished, I asked the students to get into groups of three or four to discuss the questions I had mentioned before showing the film clips. I also passed out a copy of these questions so students could record their ideas on paper if they so

desired. This would provide a documented record of their thoughts, in the event that not every group shared with the class for each question.

In all Taylor classes, the groups talked among themselves for almost 10 minutes and then I asked the students to return their attention to the front of the class, where I had set up my laptop to record their discussions. While my laptop was more easily visible in the Taylor classroom than in the first participating classroom, as it sat on a table at the front of the classroom with no barriers, I explained how I would be using the laptop to record their discussion and the students did not seem to be bothered by its presence as, for the most part, they shared as freely as the students in the first class had.

I also did not record these classes on a video or audio tape, but simply typed student responses as they gave them on my laptop. The oblong shape of the room and the distance between any recording equipment and students sitting at or near the back of the classroom would have created similar problems described for the first class at Stevens University of recording and replaying the class later for transcription.

During the discussion portion of the study, I used the same questions in all classes (see Appendix B) so as to maintain consistency. Students in Taylor OWE classes one, two, and three responded well to the questions. The discussion lasted a little longer than 10 minutes.

Writing Assignment

Once students had answered all of the questions that were a part of the discussion portion of the study, I passed out the writing assignment to them and explained again that they were not obligated to participate in this portion of the study. I stated again that there would be no impact on their status at Taylor College if they chose not to participate. I

also explained that, as was the case in Dr. McGill's class, Dr. Davis had created an alternate assignment if the students preferred to do that instead. This assignment was to count as a participation grade but would not be graded based on content and so would not directly impact the students' grades, as long as the assignment was completed.

Once I handed out the assignment, I asked students if there were any questions. When there were no questions I thanked students for their help and reminded them that if they had any questions as they worked on the assignment they could feel free to contact me either via email or phone, both of which I had given them on the voluntary consent form that they kept. After that, students were dismissed from the class.

Assignment Collection

Because all three Taylor OWE classes met three times a week, and often had in class writing workshops on Fridays, Dr. Davis and I agreed it would be wise to have students complete their writing assignment in class the following Friday, and email both myself and Dr. Davis the assignment as an attachment. In collecting the assignment this way I did not have to return to Taylor to collect it. A handful of students chose to complete the assignment out of class instead, but most students completed it in class and sent it to me that same week, on Friday.

Upon the complete collection of writing assignments from all participating students (both at Taylor College and Stevens University), I carefully matched the consent forms with the writing assignments, to be sure that only papers with consent forms would be analyzed for the study. Additionally, the papers were sorted by class to be sure that participation could be logged accurately.

The participation and results will be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 5.

Interviews

In order to give a voice to students who had struggled with writer's block on this study's assignment, I chose to interview randomly selected students about their experience with this assignment specifically, and writer's block in general. I randomly selected several students from each class and emailed them about my interest in connecting with them for a short interview, either via email, telephone or in person (see Appendix L). In order to gain a larger sample of respondents, I eventually emailed most of the over 80 students who participated in some way in the study.

Because I feared that some students may not read emails on a regular basis, or that they might struggle to articulate themselves through written words, I also called students to ask if they would like to participate in the interview over the phone. I began with students who indicated through their consent forms that they would like to participate in the study, but then did not hand in a paper. I continued by randomly calling students who indicated that they would be open to talking to me on the phone after the study ended.

The results of all of these study methods for each classroom will be discussed in the following sections.

Results

Survey Participants

While the make-up of the student participants does not have a major impact on the results of this study, it is interesting to note that the students involved in this study come

from a range of backgrounds. The different ages, majors, and class ranks of the students reveal a diverse study population.

Once students had received and signed the voluntary consent form at the beginning of each of the participating classes, the survey (see Appendix A) was distributed. If a student did not wish to participate in the survey, I indicated that he or she could simply hand it in without completing it. The survey took classes less than 10 minutes for all participating classes to complete.

Twenty-seven students took part in the survey at Stevens University, 20 students from Taylor class one participated in the survey, 18 students from Taylor class two participated in the survey, while 15 students in Taylor class three participated in the survey. The ages of the students participating in the survey are considered in Table 3:

Table 3
Ages of Participating Students

School name	17	18	19	20	21	22	27	30	33	None given
Stevens	-	1	22	1	1	2	-	-	-	-
Taylor class I	1	17	5	1	1	-	1	-	-	-
Taylor class II	-	10	4	1	1	-	-	1	1	-
Taylor class III	-	11	2	-	-	-	1	-	-	1

Students participating in the survey ranged in age from 17-33, with one person who didn't include his/ her age on the survey.

The survey indicated that the first participating class from Stevens University consisted of three freshmen students, 24 sophomore students, no junior students, and one senior student. These results revealed that most students in the class had already taken the

College Writing I class, while three had tested out of College Writing I and one student had not been able to complete this requirement until his or her senior year.

In the three participating classes from Taylor College, there were 48 freshmen students represented and five sophomore students but no junior or senior students involved in the class.

Overall, there were 51 freshmen students, 29 sophomore students, no junior students, and one senior student who participated in the survey portion of the study. There were more freshmen students with less college writing experience than there were sophomore students who participated in this research study.

Students indicated that various majors comprised the make-up of their classrooms. The figure below illustrates this breakdown:
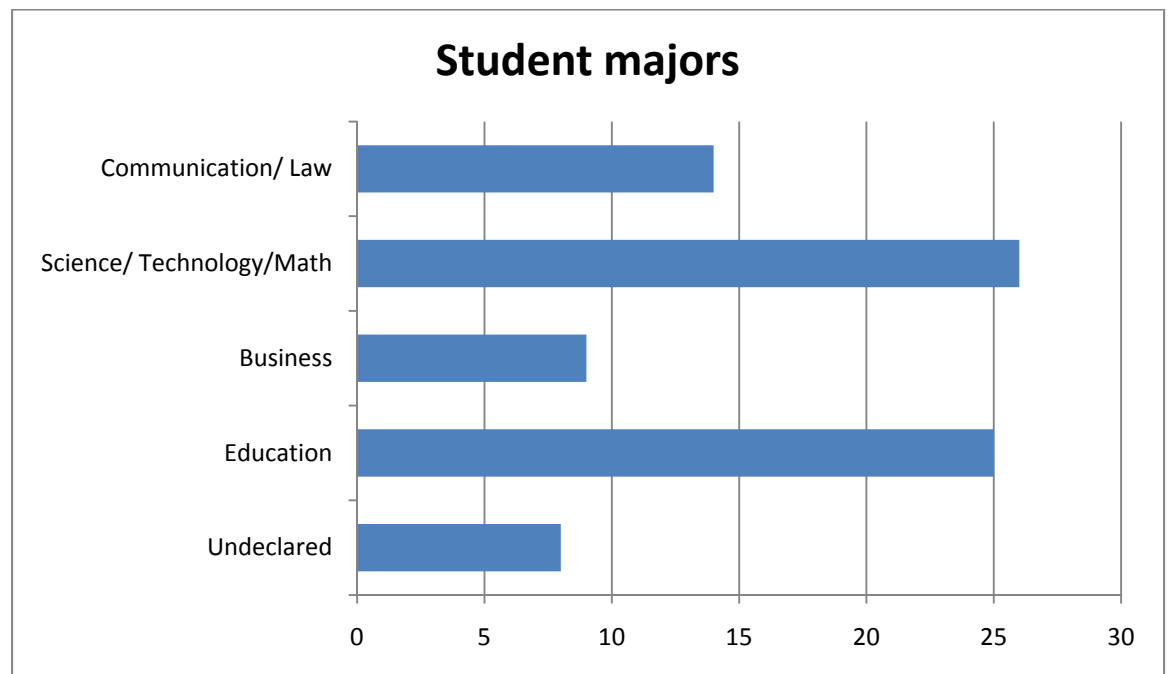
Figure 2. Student majors.

The array of major areas of study reveal that the study participants possess a unique dynamic that will show a wide representation of individuals responding to the

issues surrounding writer's block that are critical to this study. Ten students stated that they had declared a double major. These majors were counted individually on this chart.

The largest representation of majors is from one of the many areas of education, including special education, elementary education, as well as secondary education. There were 25 students who indicated an area of education as a major. Business majors (including business administration, business management, etc.) accounted for nine students in the study. Eight students had not yet declared a major, and so fit into the 'undeclared' category.

<p align="center">*Survey Answers*</p>

Students were candid in their responses to the survey questions, revealing similarities and differences in their perceptions of writing and writer's block.

Question one on the survey was: "Writing is an upsetting experience for me." In the case of the participating classes, students answered the question as follows:
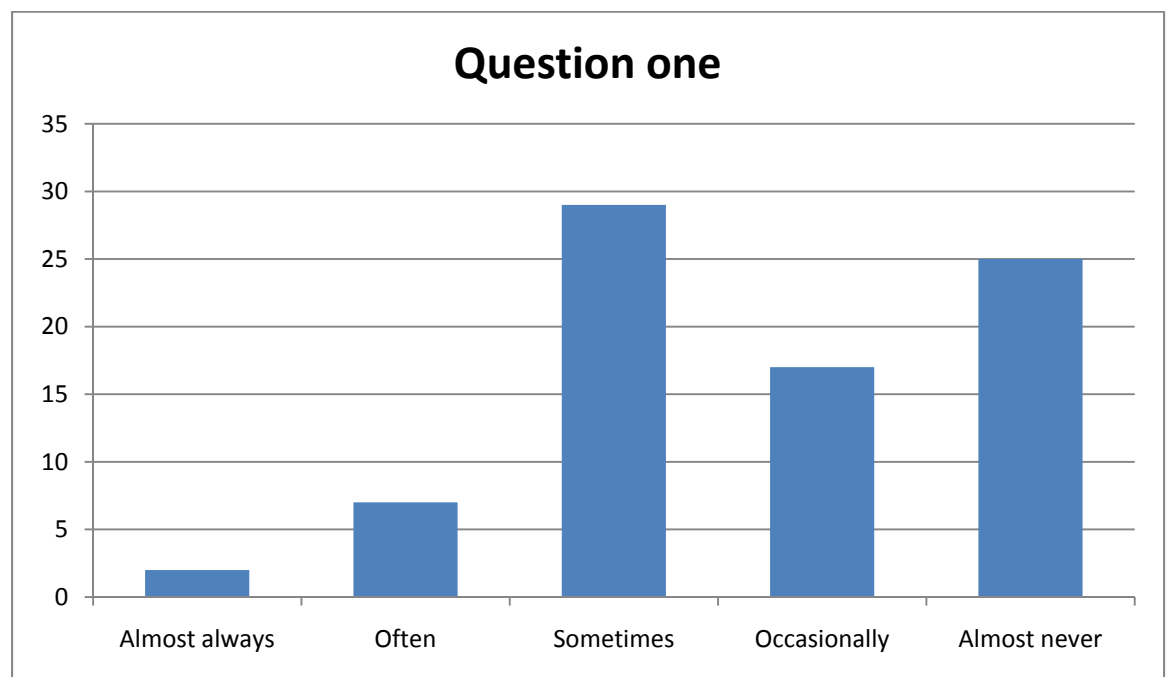
Figure 3. Question one.

Of the four classes participating in the study, the most interesting numbers to note are those that indicate most survey participants have, at some point been upset by writing. While only two students indicated that they "almost always" are upset by writing, while 29 students noted that they at least "sometimes" were upset by the writing experience. On the other hand, 25 students across all four classes also noted that writing is "almost never" upsetting.

Question two on the survey was: "I have sat at my desk for hours unable to write. –OR—I have missed deadlines because I was unable to finish a project. I would agree that this means I have had writer's block." Forty-eight student participants answered this question "Yes" while 32 students answered "No."

The number of students who felt they had endured writer's block was fairly consistent across the classes. The only disparity that could be noted came from Taylor class three, where 11 students felt they have not had writer's block, compared to the 4 students in this class who answered that they felt they had dealt with writer's block. In all other participating classes, more students felt that they had dealt with writer's block than those who felt they had not dealt with writer's block.

Question three on the survey was: "In his work *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension* (1984) Mike Rose defines writer's block as an "inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment. Blocking is not simply measured by the passage of time, but by the passage of time with limited productive involvement in the writing task" (1984, p. 3). Estimate how often you experience writer's block when completing writing task."

Student participants indicated overall that they occasionally or sometimes experience writer's block when completing writing tasks. Only 3 students indicated that they "Almost always" felt they struggled with writer's block when writing, while 10 students said they "Almost never" felt they struggled with writer's block.

Question four, "I believe writer's block is a real problem for ***most*** writers," was answered in the following manner. For all student participants considered, there were 56 'Yes' responses and 23 'No' responses. Taylor class one was nearly an even split on this question, however, with 11 students stating that they felt writer's block was a real problem for most writers and 8 students stating that they did not feel writer's block was a problem for most writers.

Question five, "I believe writer's block is only a problem for me," was answered in the following manner by all student participants collectively. Four students answered 'Yes," while 75 students answered 'No'.

Question six, "I have *asked for help* from instructors in the past with my writer's block," was answered collectively by all participating students in the following manner:
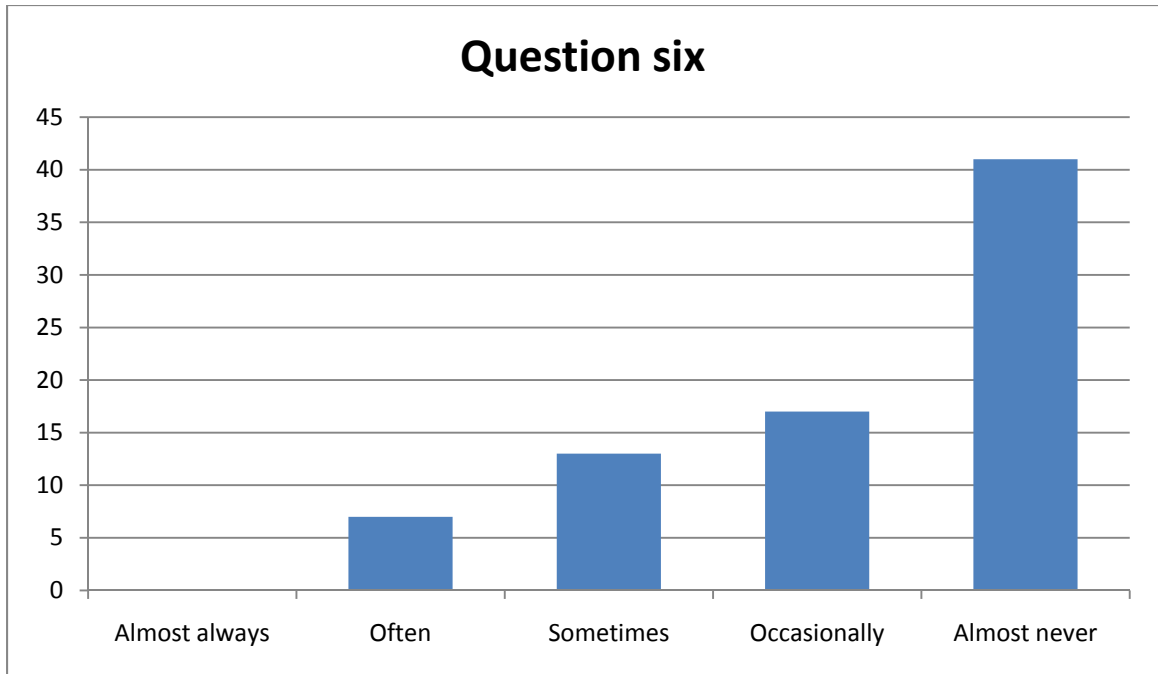
Question six

Figure 4. Question six.

No student in any of the participating classes said that they "Almost always" ask for help with writer's block. In fact, the majority of students in all classes stated that they "Almost never" ask for help with writer's block.

Question seven, "I have *received help* from instructors in the past with my writer's block," was answered collectively by participating students as follows:
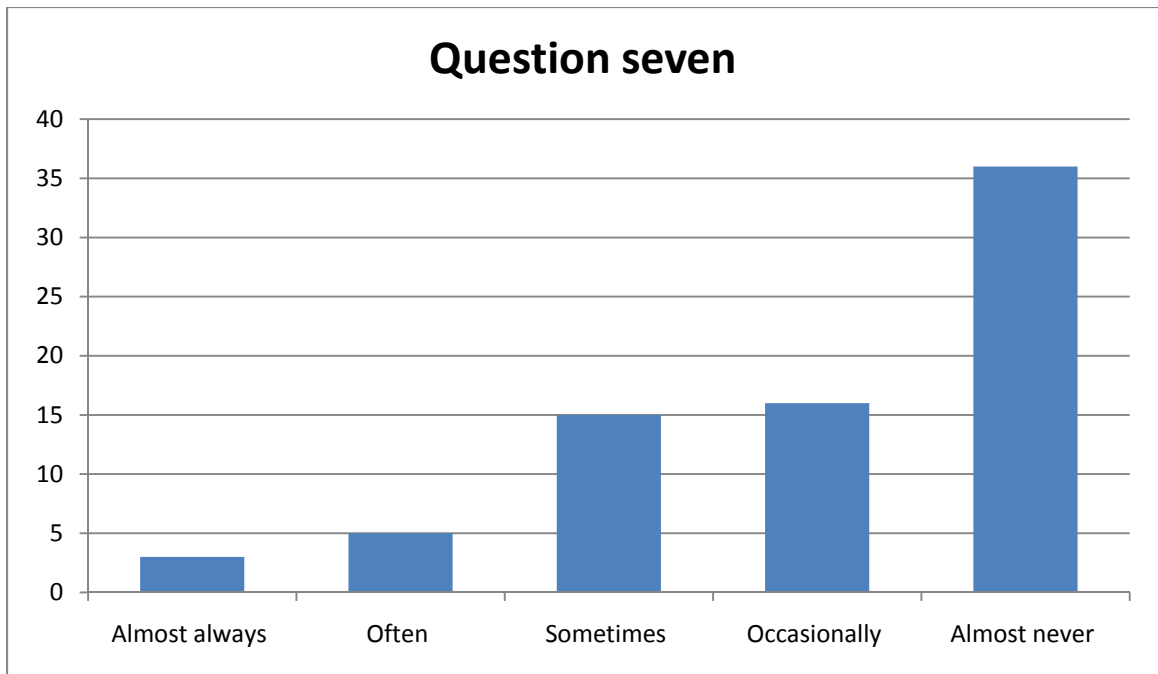
Figure 5.Question seven.

Most students in the participating classes indicated that they "Almost never" receive help from instructors when they struggle with writer's block. Interestingly, however, one student in the Stevens College Writing II course, one student in Taylor class two, and one student in Taylor class three each noted that they "Almost always" receive help when they are struggling with writer's block.

Question 8, "I believe my perceptions regarding writer's block have been influenced by," was a question that allowed a flexible response. For this question, students were encouraged to check any answers they felt applied to their own feelings. The numbers will reflect that many students chose more than one answer, and one student did not answer the question at all.

Collectively, student participants answered question 8 as follows:
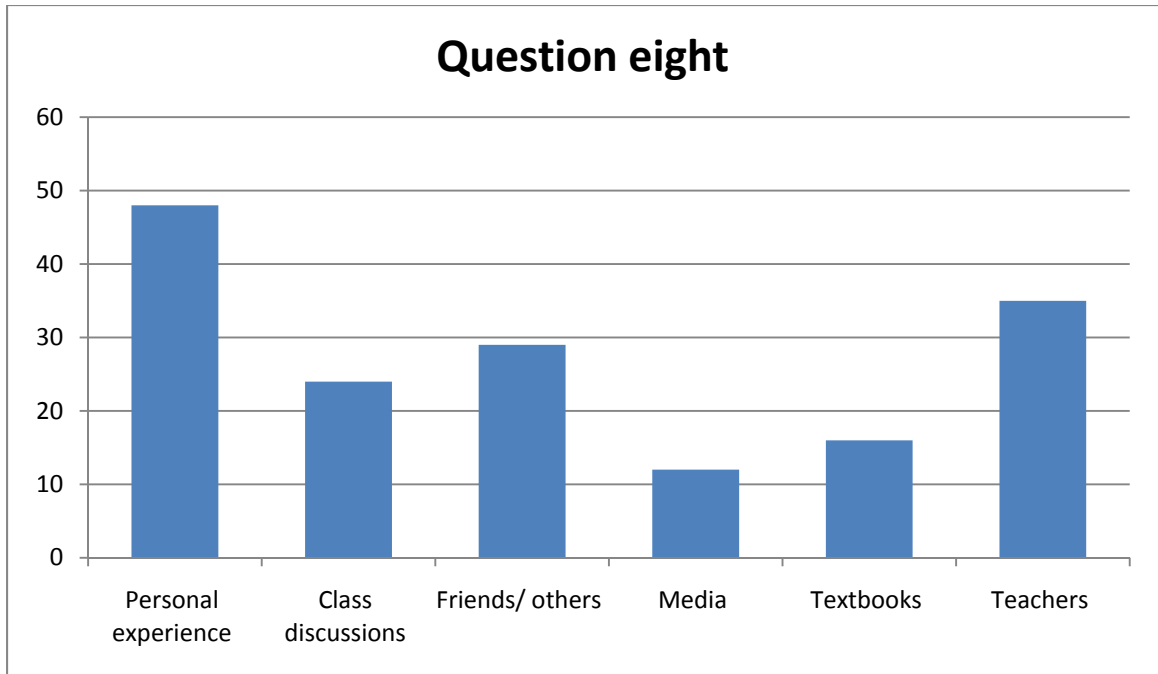
Figure 6. Question eight.

The majority of students in each of the participating courses indicated that their

perceptions of writer's block had been influenced by their personal experience. The

students indicated that they felt their perceptions of writer's block were influenced least

by the media.

Question nine, "I believe writer's block doesn't last long enough to be a real

writing problem," was answered collectively by the participating students in the

following manner:
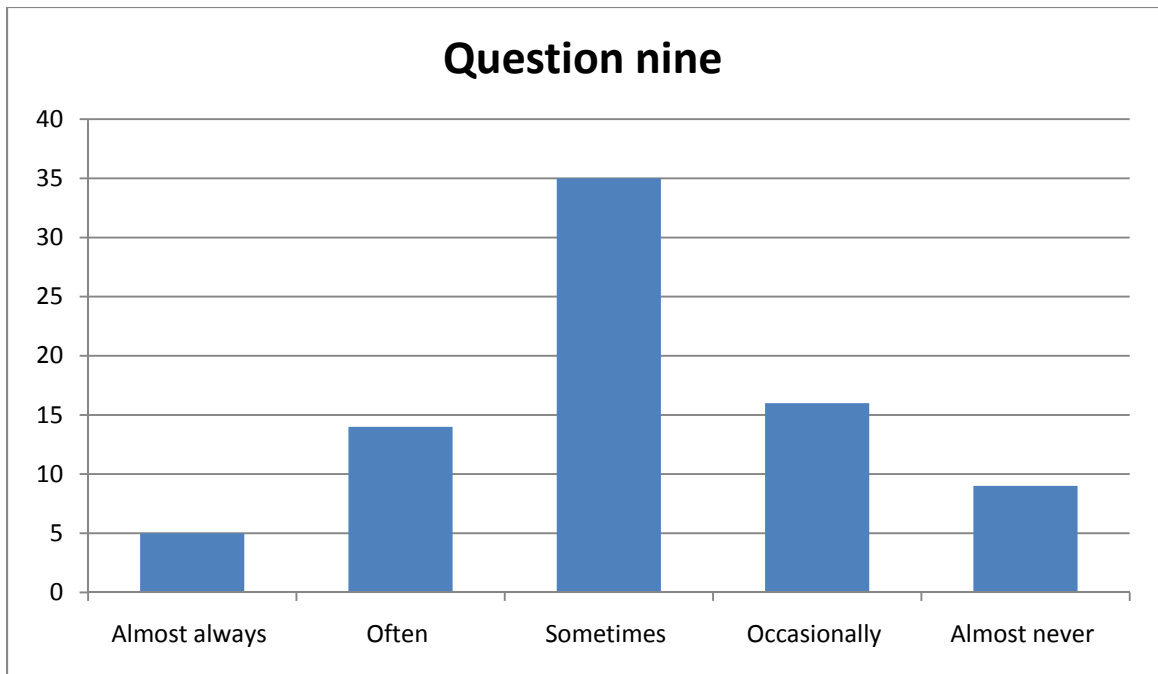
Question nine

Figure 7. Question nine.

Participating students indicated that they felt "sometimes" that their engagement with writer's block did not last long enough to be a real writing problem.

The final survey question, question ten, was "I believe writer's block can make a writer want to quit writing." This question was answered collectively by all participating students as follows:
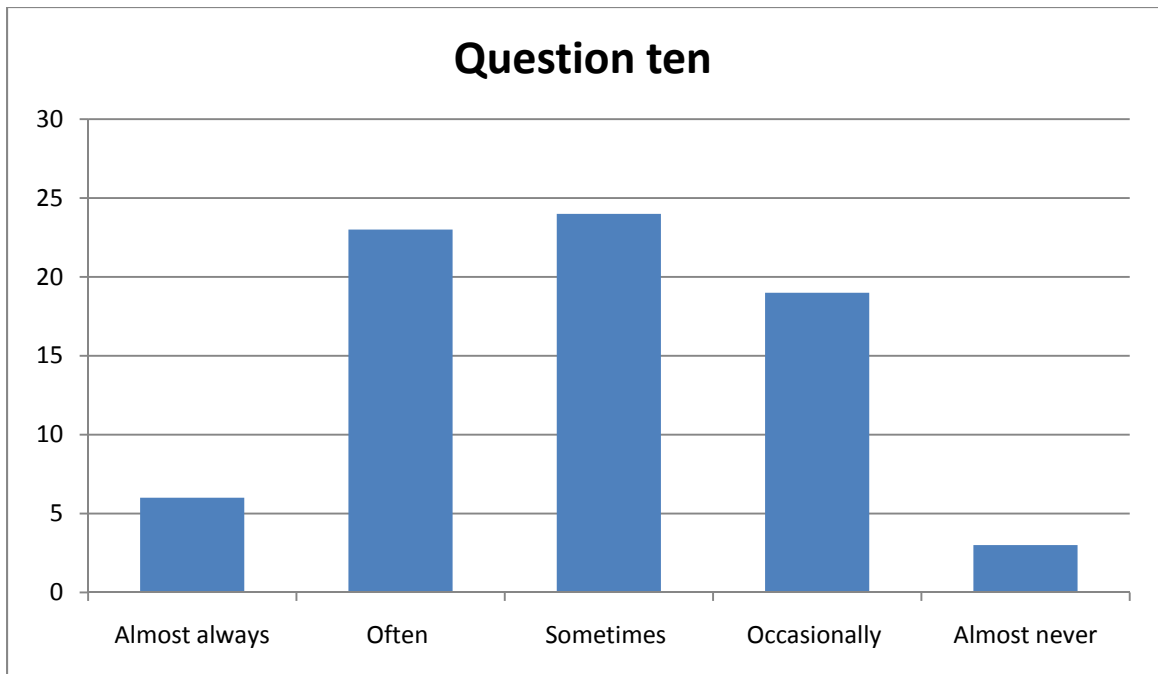
Question ten

Figure 8. Question ten.

Question ten received the most even distribution of all of the questions across the answers "Often," "Sometimes," and "Occasionally." A nearly even number of students felt that each of these answers was true for how frequently they feel writer's block can make a writer want to quit writing. Only six students felt that this would "Almost always" make a writer want to quit writing, while three students felt that writer's block would "Almost never" make a writer want to quit writing.

Students were also invited at the end of the survey to make any additional comments regarding their opinions of writer's block. Seven Stevens students, two students from Taylor class two, and one student from Taylor class three took advantage of this opportunity and commented on writer's block. These comments will be considered during the analysis of the survey results.

Discussion Observations

In order to establish a consistency in classroom observations across the four participating classes, I created a discussion guide (see Appendix B). This guide included the questions I asked students before they viewed clips from the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) (see Appendix F) and yet went further to include deeper, more detailed questions, follow up questions, and opportunities for students to elaborate on statements made during the discussion.

The small group discussions in each class lasted about 10 minutes, while the whole class discussion with the set of deeper, more specific questions lasted about 15-25 minutes for each class.

Small Group Discussions

The questions for the small group discussions (Appendix F), which were given to the students verbally before the film clips were viewed and also after they viewed the clips on a handout, were intended to get students thinking about writing, writers, and a writer's lifestyle. The questions were:

- How does this film present or discuss writer's block?

- What do you know about writers and the writing lifestyle? What do you think it is like to be a writer?

- How is the writer presented in the film? Is she someone you can relate to or someone who seems strange? How?

Students in the first classroom observation, Dr. McGill's College Writing I class at Stevens University, broke into five small groups to answer the questions. I named the groups Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, Group 4 and Group 5.

Class one at Taylor broke into four small groups to discuss the questions. I named the groups Group 6, Group 7, Group 8, and Group 9.

Class two at Taylor broke into four small groups to discuss the questions. I named the groups Group 10, Group 11, Group 12, and Group 13.

Class three at Taylor broke into four small groups to discuss the questions. I named the groups Group 14, Group 15, Group 16 and Group 17.

Students were not required to put their names on the paper with the discussion questions, though they did hand this paper in at the end of the class.

While the students discussed the questions, I stayed near the front of the classroom in order to allow them time to develop their thoughts and begin to write them on the handout. Then, after a few minutes, I wandered slowly around the room, listening in on a few group discussions, but not stopping to talk to students. I felt this would keep them on topic but not influence their answers as there is often a temptation with films and literature for students to feel that there is a "right" answer on the interpretation of these mediums (Harris, 1999, p. 70).

Question One: How Does This Film Present or Discuss Writer's Block?

For this question, Groups 1, 3, 4, 6, and 10 all agreed that the most prominent issue presented in the film was that the author, Kay Eiffel, was not able to finish her book. Groups 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 11, 15, 16 specifically addressed the way the film presented writer's block. Group 5 said, "It shows what writer's block is about. Presented it as very intense and almost as a mental illness."

Question Two: What Do You Know About Writers and the Writing Lifestyle? What Do You Think it is Like to be a Writer?

Groups 1, 3, and 12 noted that they were felt that being a writer would be frustrating because a writer would have to constantly deal with deadlines. Group 1 said that "It would be frustrating having your livelihood depending on your artistic ability. Pay is probably not substantial. Most intriguing writers are suspicious people. Demanding lifestyle to make deadlines. It would be hard to adapt yourself to each different character you're writing about, having to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Deadlines, that would be a problem." Groups 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 13, and 16 felt that being a writer would be a lonely and stressful lifestyle. Group 5 said that "There is a lot of pressure. If you suck you don't make it. There is a lot of stress." Group 6 noted that writing "takes a lot of effort and thinking. Also a lot of time and work. Stressful, especially if you have writer's block."

Group 17 said that being a writer would allow a "More free lifestyle. You can make your own schedule and be more creative."

Question Three: How is the Writer Presented in This Film? Is She Someone You Can Relate to or Someone Who Seems Strange? How So?

Groups 2, 3, 6, and 16 felt that Kay was presented in the film as crazy. Group 3 said that Kay "seems kind of crazy and really keeps to herself. She seems strange because she sat out in the rain hoping for an accident so she could write her ending."

Groups 4, 5, 10, 11 and 15 thought Kay was presented as strange. Group 10 said specifically that they thought she was "Strange because of her research methods."

Group 13 was not surprised by how Kay was presented, however. They noted, "The writer is presented how I imagined. I can kinda relate, but not to that extent. She is kinda strange, the things she says seem kinda cold. And she is trying to be independent."

Overall the small group discussions yielded some rich and interesting data. The most frequent perception students noted across the groups was that being a writer would be difficult because the deadlines would feel oppressive, demanding, or stressful. Additionally, most students had an undesirable image of writers and so felt they would not wish to pursue this lifestyle (or what they felt was the lifestyle) themselves.

Once students had discussed the three questions (Appendix F) for about 10 minutes, I asked them to come back together as a class to talk about their thoughts on writer's block and the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006).

Whole Class Discussion

The four classes were asked the same questions for the large group discussion (Appendix B) but they did not necessarily answer all questions or have the same answers to these questions. The results of each class discussion will next be considered. The answers will be analyzed in Chapter 5.

Films in the Classroom

Students were asked: "Do your professors use films in classes?/ How do you feel about this practice?" The majority of students responded that their teachers do, or have in the recent past, used films in various kinds of college classes. Most students admitted that they enjoyed this practice when it is not used too frequently, because, as one student noted, "I think it gives a different perspective on the course, but too much does not help." A few students said they did not like when professors used films in the classroom

because, as one student said, "I don't like it because it changes a film from entertainment to being class work," while another indicated that it was "an easy way out for a professor."

Stranger Than Fiction

Students were asked: "How does this film present writer's block? /How is writer's block discussed?" They responded students noted that the film showed "A lot of pressure for writers," and a "Lifestyle that was lonely, solitary." Students also noted that the film presented a number of ways to deal with writer's block, as well as how solitary the life of a writer can be.

Students were asked: "How is the writer presented in the film? Is she someone you can relate to or someone who seems strange? How?" Students responded that Kay Eiffel "went against the grain" and was "interesting." Most students felt that Kay was strange but had "interesting personality quirks" and didn't see her as harmful.

Students were asked: "Why is Penny sent to help Kay? What is Penny like? How does she dress, etc.? What are her mannerisms?" They responded that Penny and Kay were different and yet their personalities and solutions were acceptable and understandable within their characters. One student noted that "Penny was, "Straight-laced, hair pulled back, very structured." Other students noted that Penny was "very confident in herself," while Kay was "a hermit" and did not present herself the same way as Penny.

Students were asked: "What does Penny propose as solutions to Kay's writer's block?" Students noted that Penny offered mostly written solutions, while "The author was like I'm going to go outside and visualize people dying in car accidents." Most

144

students listed all of the methods by which Penny though Kay could end her writer's block.

Writers and the Writing Life

Students were asked "What do you know about writers and the writing lifestyle?" Students responded overwhelmingly that it was probably stressful to be a writer. Still, one student did say that writing would provide a "More free lifestyle—you can make your own schedule and be more creative with the things you do."

Students were asked "Is writer's lock something all writers end up with at some point or other or just the author in the movie?" Some students felt that all writers do end up with writer's block at some point, but "it's not always that extreme" [as it is in the film].

Eleven students in the participating classes stated that they had seen the film the whole way through before.

The results of the class discussions will be analyzed in the next chapter.

Student Papers

Once the writing assignment was collected from all classes, I quickly read over them to make a decision on how best to analyze these papers. I noticed patterns emerging through the papers that revealed some repetitive statements being made regarding writer's block, writers, writing, and films. In order to address these statements in my analysis, I created a rubric that would allow me to look for these types of statements in all of the papers. I felt this would be beneficial to the study as it would help reveal the impact of writer's block personally on the students, as well as to consider the impact of the film on the students' perceptions of writer's block. And further, this would also be

helpful in establishing answers to some or all of the research questions. This rubric is found in Appendix D.

Once the rubric was created, I read all papers and coded the statements included in each paper according to the issues noted in the rubric. Coffey & Atkinson (1996) note that the term "*coding* encompasses a variety of approaches to and ways of organizing qualitative data. As parts of the analytical process, however, attaching codes to data and generating concepts have important functions in enabling us rigorously to review what our data are saying" (p. 27). Through coding the writing assignments of participating students, I worked to allow the data to emerge organically to inform the research questions of this study.

The types of statements were broken into the following categories: Opinions of writer's block (negative, neutral, positive), Opinions of writers/ writing (negative, neutral, positive), Personal experience statements (actions to prevent or deal with writer's block), Film opinions (negative, neutral, positive statements, *Stranger Than Fiction*). I also allowed a place on the rubric for statements that, while important, did not fit into any of the aforementioned categories but might have an impact on the overall study. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) note

> Codes, data categories, and concepts are thus related closely to one another. The important analytic work lies in establishing and thinking about such linkages, not in the mundane processes of coding. The importance of the work lies in how we use the codings and concepts, not in whether we use computer software to record them or rely on manual ways of marking and manipulating the data. (p. 27)

Because I reviewed the papers before creating the categories for statements in the rubric, I was trying to enable the students to speak for themselves as to what issues they had found most worthy of addressing. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, I was able to create and use categories for this process that connected the students, their papers, and the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) in a way that was most useful for this study.

The categories on the rubric make sense because they helped reveal student opinions of writer's block and related issues, while also emphasizing their personal experience in these areas. Additionally, there is room here for student writers to consider the filmic representation of writer's block in *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), which a number of students clearly state in their papers had a direct positive impact on their perceptions of writer's block, a negative impact on this perception, and even at times, no impact at all.

<div align="center">

Data From Student Papers

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While not all students indicated how frequently they experienced writer's block, or if they have ever struggled with writer's block at all, a large number of students did specifically mention the frequency of their own experience with writer's block. One Thiel Class One student stated that

> I have had a serious problem with writer's block. I have felt writer's block a
> lot throughout my high school career. Every time I would have to write about
> a story or anything about my experience, I would get stuck and I would not
> know what to write about. I would sit all day and think of what I could do.

Other students echoed this sentiment in their papers as well.

There were 25 students in the College Writing class at Stevens University who were eligible to participate in this portion of the study, as they were students in a college writing course where writer's block is discussed. It is notable that this number includes all of the students in the class. Nineteen students noted that they either "sometimes" or "frequently" have writer's block, while only four noted that they "rarely or never" struggled with writer's block.

Seventeen students in Taylor OWE class one were eligible to participate in this portion of the research study. Eight students noted that they either "sometimes" or "frequently" had writer's block, while two said they "rarely or never" struggle with writer's block.

Seventeen students in Taylor OWE class two were eligible to participate in this portion of the research study. Twelve students in this class noted that they either "sometimes" or "frequently" have writers' block, while three said they "rarely or never" have writers' block.

Twelve students in Taylor OWE class three were eligible to participate in this portion of the research study. Six students in this class noted that they either "sometimes" or "frequently" struggled with writer's block, while three said they "rarely or never" have writer's block.

Overall nearly 70% of the participating students felt that writer's block was a problem for them at least some of the time when they are writing. A few students noted, however, that they felt they rarely or never struggled with writer's block. Table 4 represents the overall student responses to this question.

Table 4
Participating Student Experiences with Writer's Block

WB frequency	Stevens	Taylor one	Taylor two	Taylor three	Total
Rarely/ never	4	2	3	3	12
Sometimes	10	5	8	5	28
Frequently	9	3	4	1	17

Reasons for Writer's Block

A pattern that emerged in the papers involved the reasons that participating students felt they, or writers in general, had dealt with writer's block (students sometimes generalized used the word 'writers'). Similar reasons were mentioned repeatedly across the classes.

Students in the College Writing II class from Stevens University stated that there are various reasons they felt they experienced writer's block. Some of these include:

Table 5
SU Student Reasons for Writer's Block

Reasons students experience writer's block	Number of SU students
No inspiration/ ideas	12
Stress/ pressure/ procrastination	9
Distracted	4
Don't care about topic	3
They are told what to write about	2
Don't know much about the topic	1
Lack confidence (about writing or topic)	1

Taylor OWE class one students stated that there are various reasons they felt they experienced writer's block. Some of these reasons include:

Table 6
Taylor OWE Class One Writer's Block Causes

Reasons students experience writer's block	Number of Taylor class one students
No inspiration/ ideas	11
Stress/ pressure/ procrastination	4
Don't know much about topic	4
Lack confidence (writing or topic)	3
Distractions	2
They are told what to write about	1

Taylor OWE class two students stated that there are various reasons they felt they experienced writer's block. Some of these reasons include:

Table 7
Taylor OWE Class Two Writer's Block Causes

Reasons students experience writer's block	Number of Taylor class two students
No inspiration/ ideas	9
Stress/ pressure/ procrastination	3
They are told what to write about	3
Lack confidence	3
Don't know much about given topic	2
Mind wanders while writing (Distraction)	1

Taylor OWE class three students stated that there are various reasons they felt

they experienced writer's block. Some of these reasons include:

Table 8
Taylor OWE Class Three Writer's Block Causes

Reasons students experience writer's block	Number of Taylor class three students
No inspiration/ ideas	5
Stress/ pressure/ procrastination	5
Don't know much about given topic	3
Told what to write about	1
Distractions	1
Lack confidence	1
Other (Idea overload)	1

Overall students in all classes gave many of the same reasons that they experience

writer's block. A representation of all of the participating students is seen in Table 9.

Table 9
Comprehensive Representation of Student Writer's Block Causes

Reasons for writer's block	Number of students
No inspiration	37
Stress/pressure/procrastination	21
Don't know topic	10
Lack confidence	8
Don't know what to write	7
Distracted	7
Don't care about topic	3

Cures for Writer's Block

Participating students in all classes indicated that they handle writer's block in much the same way, as many of the same ideas for either avoiding writer's block, or handling it when it does occur, were mentioned in all classes.

Students in the College Writing II class at Stevens University noted many of the same methods that they use to deal with writer's block when it happens to them. Their answers are represented in Table 10:

Table 10
SU Student Cures for Writer's Block

Cures for writer's block	Number of SU students
Take a break from writing	12
Listen to music	5
Other (smoke, TV, visual stimuli)	5
Take a walk	4
Talk to others	4
Nothing/ forget it/ it will go away	4
Brainstorming	4
Observe others/ find inspiration	3
Get rid of distractions	2
Snack	2
Power nap	1

Taylor OWE class one indicated that they handle writer's block in the following

manner:

Table 11
Taylor OWE Class One Student Cures for Writer's Block

Cures for writer's block	Number of Taylor class one students
Take a break from writing	5
Brainstorming	4
Other (watch movie, run)	3
Talk to others	2
Find inspiration	1
Listen to music	1
Talk a walk	1
Get rid of distractions	1

Taylor OWE class two indicated that they deal with writers block in the following

manner:

Table 12
Taylor OWE Class Two Student Cures for Writer's Block

Cures for writer's block	Number of Taylor class two students
Take a break from writing	7
Other (Smoke, TV, read, organize)	4
Nothing (Over time it goes away)	3
Brainstorming	2
Find inspiration	3
Talk to others	2
Listen to music	2
Get rid of distractions	1

Students in Taylor OWE class three indicated that they deal with writer's block in

the following manner:

Table 13
Taylor OWE Class Three Student Cures for Writer's Block

Cures for writer's block	Number of Taylor class three students
Brainstorming	1
Find inspiration	1
Nothing/ forget it/ goes away	1
Other (outline)	1
Talk to others	1

A significant number of students in all four classes also directly addressed the

impact of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) on their perceptions of writer's block.

These perceptions will be noted in Table 14 where the descriptions of the film's impact

from the student papers are established with the number of students who claimed this

impact. The participating students noted the following impact from *Stranger Than*

Fiction (2006):

Table 14
Impact of Stranger Than Fiction on Study Participants

Film's impact	Number of participating students
Will deal with writer's block differently	22
Now have more information on writer's block	18
Now think about writers and writer's block differently	14
Now see writer's block as a serious problem	14
Film portrayed writer's block in extreme way	7
Now see that writer's block happens to others	4

There were a few students in each class who did not mention the film at all in

their papers, but instead chose to focus solely on their own perceptions of writer's block.

The students, per class, who did not at all address the film in their papers, are as follows:

Table 15

Student Participants Who Did Not Mention Film in Papers

Stevens University	Taylor OWE class I	Taylor OWE class II	Taylor OWE class III
1	2	3	5

The data gleaned from the student writing assignments will be analyzed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Once the writing assignments were collected, I conducted interviews with a sample of participating students. This method of data collection will next be discussed.

Interviews

On the writing assignment handout (Appendix C), I gave students the option of being interviewed. I noted that if students felt they had writer's block while writing the assignment, or if they would prefer to be interviewed rather than write the assignment, I would like to talk with them in an interview instead of the paper. In this manner, I was hoping to eliminate the possibility of missing any student perceptions of writer's block simply because a student may have felt writer's block or writing anxiety while engaging with this assignment. No students used the phone number or email address to contact me on their own; however, I did interview via email and on the phone seventeen of the participating students. In all of these cases, I made the initial contact with the students to ask if they would be willing to participate in an interview for the study.

There were 8 students who signed a consent form but did not turn in a paper for the writing assignment, either to me or an alternate assignment to the participating instructors. Because this study considers writer's block, and the related assignment asked

participating students to consider writer's block in the form of a paper, I had to consider the possibility that these students may have been unable to complete the assignment due to a writing block.

Using the email addresses given on the consent forms, I emailed multiple students to ask if they would be interested in participating in a short interview, either via telephone or email if they preferred. My first contact with students took place in November, with follow up emails in December and, in some cases, January. The initial email inquiry went out to 21 students, the second email went out to a different set of 21 students, and the third email went out to 24 students (See Appendix L).

Overall 29 students responded to one of the email requests I sent. Forty-eight students did not respond to the emails at all. Of those students who responded to the email, 22 students said they would like to participate in the interview. Fourteen of the students who indicated that they would like to participate, actually did so via email, while one student chose to participate through a phone interview. The remaining seven students who said they would like to participate in the interview were contacted twice more via email and some were contacted on the telephone as well, but none followed through with the interview.

Overall, there were a total of 17 students who completed interviews for this portion of the research study, either on the telephone or via email. One email interview student participant did not hand in a paper for the writing assignment, while one telephone interview student participant did not hand in a paper for the writing assignment.

Email interviews were created to help establish a different medium through which students could communicate their thoughts about writer's block. This rubric (Appendix H) asked students questions regarding their experience in general with writer's block, and more specifically with this writing assignment, as well as the ways in which writer's block has been addressed in their courses in the past. The phone interview rubric (Appendix I) was similar in nature, however, here students were also questioned on their desire for a phone interview rather than an email interview. Finally, the students who signed a consent form, but did not complete the writing assignment for the study, were asked specifically if writer's block had anything to do with their failure to complete this assignment. The rest of the questions and their answers will be considered next.

The following table shows the method by which students were interviewed, as well as the class of which they were a member during the fall semester of 2009:

Table 16
Interview Methods

	Phone interview	Email interview
Stevens University	0	2
Taylor OWE class one	0	5
Taylor OWE class two	1	4
Taylor OWE class three	2	3

Email Interview Responses

Student interview responses will be considered together, rather than separately by class.

Email interview question one was, "Why did you choose to conduct this interview as an email discussion rather than a phone conversation? Was it at all related to concerns about writer's block or your articulation of this writing problem? Explain." Students responded to this question as follows:

Table 17
Reason for Email Interviews

Question 1 answer	Number of students
Busy schedule	10
Easier to articulate thoughts	7

Three students answered both 'busy schedule' and 'easier to articulate thoughts' for question number one. Each answer was recorded separately.

Email interview question two was, "Did you feel you had writer's block with this assignment? Describe the experience (Were you able to write what you had hoped to write? Were you able to finish the assignment? How long did the assignment take you to complete? Why do you think you had writer's block? How did you end it?)." Students answered question two as follows: nine students answered 'no', they did not feel they had writer's block with this assignment, while four students said 'yes', they did feel that they had writer's block with this assignment, and one student did not specifically answer yes or no.

Email interview question three was, "Explain how you write or what steps you take to complete a writing task. (Any writing task is relevant- whether it is writing a list, letter, novel, poem, or school paper. What steps do you take- first, second third, and so on to complete the task?)." Students responded to this question as follows: nine students stated that they first plan, then write and revise, while five students stated that they simply start writing without any planning.

Email interview question four was, "In past assignments, when in your composing process have you recognized that you were struggling with writer's block (before you begin or while you are writing)? Use examples where necessary." Students responded to this question as follows:

Table 18
Interviewed Student Reasons for Writer's Block Experience

When do you experience writer's block	Number of students
Beginning of writing process	8
I don't have writer's block/ don't believe it	3
Other	2
All stages of writing process	1

Email interview question five was, "Have your teachers discussed writer's block in past courses? In what way did they address this issue? Was it helpful to you and your own writing process?" Students responded to this question as follows: nine students stated that 'no' teachers did not in the past discuss writer's block with them in class, while two students said that 'yes' teachers had in past courses discussed writer's block, and three students responded to this question in some other way.

Email interview question six was, "What do you think teachers could do to help you through this writing problem?" Students responded to this question as follows:

Table 19
How Students Felt Teachers Can Help With Writer's Block

How can teachers help with writer's block?	Number of student responses
Give/ offer help	11
Talk about it more	6
Nothing/ personal issue	3
Offer classes/ workshops	3
Extend deadlines	1

Some students responded to this question with more than one answer.

Phone Interview Responses

Three of the student participants who agreed to an interview preferred to do so over the phone. All three of these telephone interviews were transcribed onto my computer as they were occurring. The telephone interview questions can be found in Appendix I. The responses to these interview questions follow.

Telephone interview question number one was, "Why did you choose to conduct this interview as a phone conversation rather than via email? Was it at all related to concerns about writer's block or your articulation of this writing problem? Explain." Students responded to this question as follows: all three student respondents felt that it would be easier to articulate their thoughts verbally rather than in writing. All three indicated that they felt they were not very good writers.

Telephone interview question number two was, "Did you feel you had writer's block with this assignment? Describe the experience (Were you able to write what you had hoped to write? Were you able to finish the assignment? How long did the assignment take you to complete? Why do you think you had writer's block? How did you end it?)" Two of the three students did not feel that they had writer's block with this assignment, while the third student did not complete the assignment at all because she felt she did indeed have writer's block and was not able to do so.

Telephone interview question number three was, "Explain how you write or what steps you take to complete a writing task. (Any writing task is relevant—whether it is writing a list, letter, novel, poem, or school paper. What steps do you take—first, second third, and so on to complete the task?)" Students responded to this question as follows: All three students said they usually plan and then write, while one student also added that it "depends on the assignment."

Telephone interview question number four was, "In past assignments, when in your composing process have you recognized that you were struggling with writer's block (before you begin or while you are writing)? Use examples where necessary." Students responded as follows: one student did not answer the question but gave a specific example of writer's block. The student explained that "it was my very first essay for OWE, my teacher said write about a personal experience. I stared that the computer but nothing came to me. I tried to think of things that were important to me, and started to write about a story my friend and I made up." Another student said he/she were not sure and one student said at the beginning of a writing task is when he/she usually struggles with writer's block.

Telephone interview question number five was, "Have your teachers discussed writer's block in past courses? In what way did they address this issue? Was it helpful to you and your own writing process?" Students responded as follows: all three students said their past teachers have not mentioned writer's block in class.

Telephone interview question number six was, "What do you think teachers could do to help you through this writing problem?" Students responded as follows: all three students agreed that talking about it in classes would be helpful for students to learn how to deal with writer's block.

Conclusion

The data collection methods for this dissertation study have been considered in this chapter. I have also tried to present in a clear fashion key data collected from the study. I collected data from four writing classrooms in the form of surveys, two types of classroom observations, writing assignments and interviews. This data revealed that participating students entered the composition classroom with distinct ideas regarding writer's block, and that they responded to the film clips from *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). These findings will be used in the next chapter to answer the research questions posed for this study.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

This chapter interprets the data shared in Chapter 4 and discusses insights it provides to the study's research questions. In order to fully establish the impact of the data, I will consider each question individually in light of the data both separately and together, as the various data conflict and support the answers to the research questions posed for this study.

Participant Ideas About Writer's Block

Research Question One

The first research question, "What kinds of ideas about writer's block do study participants hold at the start of their composition course?" was examined through the data gathered in the survey of participating classrooms at the start of the study. Additionally, some data gathered through the analysis of student papers and interviews may help illuminate answers to this question.

The results of this study survey indicate that among the eighty students who participated, students ranged in age from 17 to 33 years old, with one person who did not include his/ her age, but who otherwise completed the survey. This range reveals that participating students represent a full picture of college students' and their perceptions of writer's block. Although, as Erlandson et. al. (1993) point out, researchers should be looking for "more quality than quantity, more for information richness than information volume," (p. 83-84) this number and range of students is not too large so as to be cumbersome, but yet is large enough to provide authoritative answers to this study's research questions.

It was clear from the student papers that many student participants felt they had struggled with writer's block at some point in their lives. 76% of the students in Stevens University's College Writing II class and 76% of the students in Taylor OWE class one said in their papers that they had sometimes or frequently struggled with writer's block, while 71% of the students in Taylor OWE class two and 50% of the students in Taylor OWE class three said they struggled with writer's block sometimes or frequently.

These numbers are interesting and yet do not give a full representation of all of the student participants. Some students did not mention in their papers at all whether they struggled with writer's block personally. Regardless, of the students who did articulate their struggles with writer's block, in all courses at least half or more of the students indicated that they had struggled with writer's block at some point. This shows that the student perceptions of the problem of writer's block may be viewed as significant for writing instructors, and so might be worth investigating and then considering in their own classes.

Survey Results

The results of the study survey indicate that more freshmen students participated in the survey than any other class rank (51 freshmen/ 29 sophomores/ no juniors/ 1 senior), which means the students academically may have had less writing instruction than if the study had been conducted in upper division writing courses. However, the age distribution indicates that there are a number of students of less-traditional freshman ages represented, with 13 of the 80 students surveyed being 20 years old or older as freshman, while the typical freshman student is 17 or 18 years old. It is possible that the class ranks and student ages may actually balance each other and not significantly impact the study

results, but at the same time could provide a more accurate picture of student perceptions of writer's block.

The declared majors of the study participants indicated that a large number of students were from majors that in some way connected to the fields of science/ technology or math (26), followed closely by those students in the field of education (25), with other students falling into the fields of communication (14), business (9) or undeclared (8). This meant that there was a wide range of declared majors for those students participating in the study, representing a vast range of interests and backgrounds in writing experience and coursework. Therefore, student views from all fields of study were represented in this dissertation, indicating that writer's block is not limited to students from majors where writing is frequently engaged.

The benefit of conducting this study in classes where a large number of students were education majors, however, is that the study could influence these students' own pedagogical choices when they become teachers. A similar idea is explored in Donna Dunbar-Odom's (1999) work "Representing Student Culture: Field Research and John Singleton's *Higher Learning* in the Composition Classroom." Here, Dunbar-Odom (1999) reveals that through the use of the film *Higher Learning*, students were better able to discuss their own college experiences. Thus, students who participated in this study and are also education majors may make the connection between this film and their perceptions of writer's block—connections that they may then take with them into their future classrooms, creating a lasting impact on theirs and future generations of writers.

Analysis of Survey Data Results

The data gleaned from the survey research indicates a wealth of information in regard to student perceptions of writer's block held at the beginning of the students' composition course. Specifically, it seems that many students felt that they have struggled with writer's block in the past and that writer's block impacts most writers. One student participant noted at the end of the survey that "I believe writer's block is something common with writers who are or who have had trouble writing in the past and are afraid to fail." And yet, these student writers also seemed unlikely to ask for help, because they say their instructors have shown an overall lack of belief in or sympathy for writers with writer's block. This point was evidenced by one student who said on his/ her survey that "Sometimes I feel that professors think that writer's block is not a real problem. When told this it makes me not want to write or feel comfortable writing." The lack of instructor understanding regarding writer's block was discussed as a problem for some writers both on the surveys and also later in their papers.

The data indicates that across the four participating classes, over 60% of the student participants felt they have sat at their desks for hours unable to write. These survey results show that most of the students either "occasionally" or "sometimes" say they struggle with writer's block on at least a semi-regular basis. In "23 Writing Prompts to Get You On a Roll," Taylor (2009) indicates that struggling writers should be aware that they are not alone. In fact, Taylor (2009) notes that even as readers consider his article, they can "be pretty certain that there are thousands of poets out there who are sloughing, just like us, through their own psychological Saharas and Death Valleys" (p. 17). Both Taylor's statement and this study's data results show that there is a need to

discuss writer's block in courses where writing assignments are regularly given to help students deal with this issue. This data also indicates a need for instructors to be better prepared to help students with writer's block (Bloom, 1985, p.132; Harnett, 2007, p. 226). Further still, these results indicate that students, before entering the composition classroom, often already have a basic understanding of writer's block, and many students also admit to struggling with this important composing point in previous classes.

In the space provided at the end of the survey, some students did elaborate on the issue of writer's block and the frequency with which it occurs in their own lives. While few comments were made in this section of the survey, those students who took the time to write a comment revealed that they held an overall disbelief in writer's block as an authentic writing issue. One student said, "I think people do not just want to take the time to think about what to write about. A good writer can write a good paper about anything," while another noted, "I do not experience writer's block. I can sit down and write a paper and it flows." Finally, yet another student said, "I don't believe this is a real problem, but an occurrence that most people deal with."

It is interesting that a total of 10 students (seven of whom were from SU's College Writing II class) wrote additional responses to the survey in this space provided, and that these responses generally showed an overall lack of belief in writer's block. These responses will be helpful in understanding any change in student perceptions that occurs due to the use of the film in the classroom because they establish the notion that some student participants did not at the start of the study feel that writer's block was problematic, or at least not an issue worthy of discussion because it is not something they personally deal with on a regular basis.

Curry (2010) agrees that writer's block is not as severe a problem as some think. In the article "How to Get Out of a Creative Rut," Curry states that

> being unable to write is primarily a state of mind. Fear is the basis for this state of mind, fear that the writer cannot write anything worth publishing. The mental trap is then set. It springs shut, dominating the writer's thoughts with problems of writing something that will sell. This insidious thinking persuades the writer to question every story idea that comes to him. He no longer becomes excited with glimpses of theme, characters, setting, threads of plot. He can only ask desperately, "But who will want it?" (p. 22)

Curry (2010) and the student participants who commented at the end of the survey reveal a general feeling of apathy concerning the severity of an issue such as writer's block. It is imperative to remember, however, that this feeling is being communicated at the start of the study and so might be influenced by watching the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006).

Upon entering the study's participating classes, most students (93%) indicated that they believed that writer's block was a problem most writers struggled with, thus revealing their perception that they were not alone in dealing with this writing issue. This finding supports statements made by writers like Anne Lamott (1994) who notes that "it is a fantasy to think that successful writers do not have these bored, defeated hours, these hours of deep insecurity when one feels as small and jumpy as a waterbug. They do" (p. 14). Student participants agreed with Lamott that writer's block happens to others as well as themselves.

Around half of the student participants indicated on the survey that they "almost never" ask instructors for help with writer's block. However, 21% of the participating

students indicated that they do "occasionally" ask for help. Interestingly, however, 45% of student participants said that they "almost never" received help with writer's block from an instructor, while 20% of students said they "occasionally" received help from their instructors. These numbers indicate that there is a need not only to discuss writer's block in the writing classroom, but also that instructors need to make greater strides to demystify the writing process, making it less of a taboo subject, especially for beginning or anxious writers because it is possible that these numbers are representative of other classes as well, where students might also be silently handling writer's block on their own.

These numbers become even more meaningful when they are linked with a statement made by one student in the space provided at the end of the survey. He/she stated that "Sometimes I feel that professors think that writer's block is not a real problem. When told this it makes me not want to write or feel comfortable writing." This statement reveals the unease that some students feel when broaching the subject of writer's block, and could also help explain why 41 students (51% of participants) said they have 'almost never' asked an instructor for help dealing with writer's block. Further, a student said in his paper that "we talked about writer's block and my professor felt that it was something students made up to help them have excuses about procrastinating."

If students do not think their professors believe in writer's block, they are understandably not likely to feel confident asking for help with this issue. Further, if, as Curry (2010) indicates, ending writer's block usually begins when the writer increases his/ her self-confidence, the process of curing or minimizing writer's block is likely to take longer than if a student felt confident already that their instructor would help walk

them through this process (p. 22). Additionally, it is possible that this lack of support and understanding could lead to more writing anxiety and thus, it may be less likely that the student will be able to successfully complete the writing task.

In order to identify student beliefs regarding the formation of their perceptions of writer's block, survey question number 8 was "I believe my perceptions regarding writer's block have been influenced by…" followed by a list of possible answers. This question allowed a flexible response. Students were encouraged to check any answers they felt applied to their own feelings. Possible answers included: personal experience, class discussions, friends/ other students, media (films, television), textbooks, teachers/ feedback, and other.

A large number of students (48) responded to this question by marking that they had learned most about writer's block through their own experiences with this issue. This information is critical to this study because if students learn more about writer's block through their own experience with this problem, they are saying they have not been as influenced in their perceptions of writer's block by other options given in this question. There were 35 students, however, who said they had been influenced by teachers in some way in regard to their perceptions of writer's block (although it is not immediately clear whether this influence is a positive or negative one). Based on the previous discussion regarding an overall lack of desire to ask instructors for help with writer's block, it is possible that students who learned about writer's block from teachers received a negative impression about this writing problem. It is equally possible, however, that this answer reveals that there are teachers who are considering the issue of writer's block in their classrooms, or at least with students individually who are struggling to write.

171

Question nine, "I believe writer's block doesn't last long enough to be a real writing problem," was the case "sometimes" for 44% of the student participants. This number stood well ahead of the next most popular response to this question, "occasionally," which accounted for 20% of the student participants. This response indicates that either sometimes or occasionally student participants felt that writer's block would not stop them from completing a writing task. At the end of the survey, one student noted specifically that "I believe writers simply come across a topic where they don't know how to begin their paper or how to express their feelings. I feel this lasts only momentarily until the writer has shortly decided on what he/she needs to write about." Again, this student has reinforced the idea that writer's block may not be considered a serious writing issue by many participating students.

The final survey question, question ten, was "I believe writer's block can make a writer want to quit writing." Nearly 60% of student participants indicated that they believed writers may want to quit writing because of issues with writing blocks. This indicates that before the research began in this class, a significant number of students felt that the severity of writer's block could be such that student or professional writers might not want to complete a writing task because of writer's block. Bloom (1985) supports this idea when she states in "Anxious Writers in Context: Graduate School and Beyond" that writer's block can be severe enough to impact a writer's whole life (p. 121).

The final survey question had an emotional element that some students responded to at the end of the survey. One noted that "Whenever I get writer's block, sometimes I feel like I'm stupid because I'm unable to think of a writing solution. I mean, I'm an art major for crying out loud! I'm supposed to be creative! And my brain has probably never

worked like it was supposed to and my whole thought process is always one huge block when I'm brainstorming." The frustration in this student's answer is clear. He/ she struggles with writer's block, and at the same time begins to question his/ her major and abilities as a creative being. This emotional aspect of writer's block and student perceptions is critical to this study. Because writers and scholars like Mike Rose (1980, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985) and Alice Glarden Brand (1989) have shown in their studies that writing anxiety may lead to writer's block, this dissertation study reveals that students have not changed in the years since these previous studies, and that the issues of writing anxiety and writer's block are still quite connected.

Other students also explored the emotional aspects of writer's block when discussing their perceptions of the subject at the end of the survey. One student noted, "I believe writer's block is something common with writers who are or who have had trouble writing in the past and are afraid to fail. Writer's block in my opinion is completely reversed by confidence." This more positive spin on writer's block reveals this student does not see the 'block' in his/ her writing as an insurmountable obstacle, but rather something all or most writers face and can overcome with a more confident attitude. More importantly, this insightful student has supported Curry (2010) who indicates specifically in the article "How to get out of a Creative Rut," that confidence is essential for a writer to emerge victorious over writer's block (p. 22).

There were also a few students who commented on writing and writer's block in an even more positive way. One student said, "I usually find joy in writing in that it's easy for me, and the only time writer's block has really affected me is a topic I don't know enough on." Two things about this statement are of interest to this study. First, this

student is focusing on the emotions associated with writing. This statement actually uses language similar to that of Alice Glarden Brand's (1989) in her work, *The Psychology of Writing: The Affective Experience* when she states that "when positive emotions have been cited during composing, these have been expressed as joy, heightened awareness, and inspiration" (p. 9). These positive emotions are likely to empower the student writer to avoid or overcome writer's block more easily than if their associations with writing are negative.

The second point of interest in this student's statement is that he/ she has only identified writer's block when he/she is faced with writing about a "topic I don't know enough on." Other students noted later in the study in the class discussions, papers, and also in the interviews that they too felt the most frustrated with writing when they had to work on a topic for a paper that they were either not excited about or were unfamiliar with. It is possible then that instructors should allow their students more freedom in selecting paper topics, in addition to helping them think of topics when the well seems to be dry. Still, instructors must be careful to distinguish when in fact a student lacks knowledge on a topic and when perhaps it may simply be a healthy pause as the ideas are forming. Murray (1985) notes in "The Essential Delay: When Writer's Block Isn't," that writers know "it is dangerous to start writing too soon when all the writer has on hand are ideas, concepts, theories, abstractions, and generalizations" (p. 221). Helping students identify whether their knowledge base is influencing their ability to write may also be worthwhile when dealing with writer's block.

Analysis of Student Papers

The data gathered from student papers revealed that students had a wide range of ideas regarding writer's block as they entered their composition classes. Few of these ideas were favorable and nearly all had been gleaned from their personal experience with this issue.

Perceptions of Writer's Block

Students indicated through their papers that they held specific perceptions of writer's block. Their thoughts as shared through this writing exercise are critical to this study. As Dunbar-Odom (1999) states,

> Every student in every classroom is, in a certain sense, an "expert" at being a student. He may not be the most gifted student on campus, but he still is certainly the "star" of his own student story. All assignments offer representations of higher education and/ or of student experience, and the written assignments ask students to respond in increasingly complex ways to those representations, with students ultimately responsible for an extended project for which they research an issue relating to the student experience that has, for whatever reason, struck them as particularly true, false, or significant. (1999, p. 46)

In the case of this study, the students were expert at being students and so their responses to the writing assignment prompt helped reveal ways they perceive writer's block, an issue that was critical to this study.

Some students noted in their papers that they felt they understood writer's block and had opinions of this problem while others admitted they struggled with writer's block even before coming to the composition course in which they were enrolled at the time of

175

the study. One student noted openly that he believed that writer's block was a "kind of excuse for a lack of ideas or focus" while another said writer's block was a "myth" that people use as an "excuse as to why they cannot write." This same student elaborated further that "I think the only way that writer's block can be true is if the research specifically shows it happens." These doubts about writer's block may have an overall impact on this study because it is possible that instead of viewing writer's block as a negative part of writing, students who admit this kind of doubt may instead be revealing that writer's block should be viewed differently by writers and instructors. It is possible that instead of writer's block being viewed as a problem, it should instead be seen as a natural and, perhaps positive, part of writing.

Other students struggled in their papers with the idea of labeling a writing problem in any way. One student noted that "having troubles with writing is obviously an actual problem, but there is not a need to label it as writer's block because it is just like all the other everyday things that people have trouble with." It is possible that the resistance to label a problem in writing as writer's block stems from any number of areas. Perhaps this student's previous lack of experience with this problem is at the root, or even his or her previous instructors' failures to discuss this issue effectively in their classes, both of which were issues revealed as critical to this study through the data that emerged from the surveys and class discussions. And yet, it may also be true that the struggle to label writer's block as such is because students do not view it in the traditional sense of blocking, but instead as one participant said "a pretty common struggle that people, especially authors, go through."

176

Many of the student participants were quick to indicate in their papers that they not only believed writer's block was real, but that they had suffered with this writing problem at one time or other. One student noted that

I have experienced writer's block for myself and I personally can tell you it is a real problem and it really hinders one's work. I can recall several times when I had writer's block from when I was a child in elementary school, all the way through high school, and now into college it can still be a problem.

This statement indicates that not only are students familiar with writer's block but that their experience with writer's block can continue through higher levels of proficiency in writing, an issue that was established previously by Lamott (1994), Mailer (2003) and Wyche (1990) among others.

Some students noted that anxiety may increase the likelihood that a student will struggle with writer's block. One student said, "writer's block is kind of like a basketball player that has gotten into a shooting slump. Once you start shooting bad your confidence drops and it is hard to get out of that slump but once you get that routine back it is easy to continue." This insightful analogy reveals that some students have connected negative feelings about writing to their struggle with writer's block. If a student can just end the writer's block in whatever way makes sense to them, then their writing confidence may return and so may help them complete their writing task.

Reasons for Writer's Block

Students indicated in their papers that there are a number of reasons they feel they struggle with writer's block; more significantly, there was also a pattern of similar

reasons the student participants in all courses felt for why they had gotten writer's block in the past.

While the specific numbers for each topic and class are shown in chapter four of this study, but some of the main reasons that students felt they struggled with writer's block were: No inspiration / ideas; stress/ procrastination; don't know anything about topic; told what to write about. These reasons for struggling with writer's block were mentioned in all classes in significant numbers in the student papers.

It is significant that a number of students indicated in their papers that they felt people struggle with writer's block more often when they are not interested in the topic, or when the topic is forced on them by an instructor. Reed Larson (1985) indicates in his essay "Emotional Scenarios in the Writing Process: An Examination of Young Writer's Experiences" however that "merely having interest does not insure that a student will avoid the pitfalls of anxiety or boredom—several of the students we have discussed got into trouble because they were *too* interested, becoming emotionally overexcited and losing control of their work" (p. 39). If this is true, then it is possible that student perceptions may be the result of their own experience with writer's block (i.e. at some point they were not interested in an idea and thus struggled with writer's block and now connect lack of topic interest with writer's block for others too) or that their perceptions of writer's block have been influenced by some outside force (friends, teachers, media, books, etc.).

The reasons the students feel they have dealt with writer's block are interesting because they reveal that students do not like to be given topics for papers and they become more anxious when writing on topics with which they are unfamiliar. These

issues are ones that are driven by the instructors, not the students, thus showing that instructors can play a future role in minimizing student struggles with writer's block.

The other reasons given for struggling with writer's block, according to the students, are ones they themselves either bring on by procrastinating about an assignment, or because they are under stress of some sort that impacts their ability to craft their papers. One student noted in his paper that "I spent hours upon hours in my Dad's office procrastinating and trying to find ways to write the measly two and a half page paper." In these cases as well, this reveals that it is possible for teachers to have an impact on a student's ability to write. By giving opportunities for class inspiration or ideas for dealing with stress, instructors may also help reduce these more self-inflicted writing stresses for their student writers.

Additionally, these factors are interesting because if instructors can be made more aware of why students feel they have writer's block, they may be able to better engage students in classroom writing tasks, or give them ideas of how to write outside of class by minimizing a number of stressful factors revealed through this study and its discussion.

Personal Anecdotes

Many students shared personal experiences regarding their memories of writer's block and how had it impacted their education thus far. One of the most powerful examples of this was a student who said that "In the tenth grade I was told to drop out of the honor's English program because of my writer's block. I was truly crushed by the fact that I had to remove myself from such an amazing opportunity and program because of writer's block." This story is crucial to understanding the long term impact of writer's block on a writer's perceptions about writing and about themselves as a writer. Bloom

(1985) notes that "Writers aren't simply the sum of their contexts. They bring individual differences in perception, ability, and disposition to their writing contexts—perceptions and abilities that were themselves developed through interactions with previous contexts" (p. 121). In the case of the aforementioned student, this situation surely had an impact on her—one that she is not likely to forget, possibly even affecting her self-esteem as a writer for the long term. And further still, it is possible in the future that when she deals with writer's block, the level of anxiety that it causes may even increase as she takes this situation with her into future writing tasks.

The language used by students in their papers to refer to writer's block was telling of their perceptions of this writing problem, as well as their insightfulness. One student called the subject of writer's block "taboo," as if even uttering the words 'writer's block' was off limits, while another referred to it as a "dreadful disease, stupid writer's block." While it is clear that writer's block is not a 'disease' this problem does in some ways mimic an illness. Reed Larson (1985) states that "Anxiety, boredom, and their related states do resemble diseases: They are associated with afflictions of thought and action" (p. 32). Regardless of the reason behind the writer's block, the result may be the same, a feeling that in fact resembles an illness, which explains why some of the participating students described their experiences with writer's block with such intense passion.

Yet another participating student called writer's block a "wretched problem" as if the thought was enough to turn his/ her stomach. The passion associated with this selection of words is telling, and could even be helpful in the writing task. Larson indicates (1985) that while passion is typically valued in writers, emotions "appear to have an uncertain status in writer's experiential worlds" (p. 20). Therefore, the word

choice in most student papers reflected a mostly negative opinion about the participating students' perceptions of writer's block but was ultimately very revealing about the status of writer's block among this set of students.

<div align="center">Conclusions of Participant Ideas About Writer's Block</div>

The results of the surveys and student papers show that the participating students understand writer's block and have both similar and differing opinions on the subject. Overall, the survey results indicate that students have a basic understanding of writer's block, influenced mostly by their own experience with this writing problem. Additionally, students felt that their instructors were not understanding about writer's block, and offered students little help or encouragement to get through this problem.

Student participants also revealed a passion in their opinions regarding writer's block. In their papers, and also in some comments made at the end of the surveys, students used very strong language to describe their thoughts about writer's block and its impact on their ability to complete a writing task.

The student participants also revealed that they have at least sometimes struggled with writer's block as they write, but that a number of students also believe that writer's block doesn't exist or is an excuse by lazy writers who can't think of anything to write about. Some students, though, indicated that they are frustrated by writer's block, enough that it could cause them to quit writing, or at least make them *want* to quit writing.

Overall the indication is that student participants are familiar with and frustrated by writer's block, and yet they feel there is little help beyond what they can do for themselves for this writing problem.

<div align="center">181</div>

A clearer and developing picture emerged regarding student perceptions of writer's block once students watched several clips of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) and then responded to this film in class discussions, as well as a paper, and later, interviews regarding their ideas of writer's block in relation to the film. These research methods and their results will help answer research questions two and three.

In order to answer the remaining research questions, the relevant research methods and their findings will next be considered.

Emerging Student Ideas of Writer's Block

Research Questions Two and Three

The second research question was "what ideas about writer's block emerge from the discussions of and papers and interviews about the writer's block film shown in each class"? Interestingly, there were a number of ideas that emerged from these discussions, papers and interviews about writer's block and the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). Here, students addressed the severity of writer's block and the ways in which the film portrayed this, as one group put it, "sickness."

The third, and final, research question was: What key similarities and differences emerge across the classes concerning students' developing understandings of writer's block? Because the student ideas that emerged in question two created the patterns for the whole classes that would answer question three it is nearly impossible to separate the answers to these questions. And so, there will be answers considered for both questions in this section of the chapter.

The discussions in class occurred in two contexts – once in a small group and once as a whole class. In both cases, student discussions were conducted using the

discussion questions created to engage students specifically on the topics relevant to this study. The results of the class discussions (both sets) will be considered first, and then the results of the analysis of the student papers will be considered in an attempt to fully answer research question two.

Small Group Discussions

During the class discussions, students established their thoughts about writers, the writing lifestyle, writer's block, and the presentation of these subjects in the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). The complete responses are shared in chapter four. Here, I will consider what these responses mean in light of research questions two and three.

Some students felt that the film clips from *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) presented writer's block as an issue that the audience should take seriously, while others felt that it merely gave a basic presentation of writer's block. Group 5 noted that "It [the film] shows what writer's block is about. Presented it as very intense and almost as a mental illness." Group 16 agreed, saying that writer's block was portrayed in the film as a "sickness." Considering that Larson (1985) established in his essay that the feelings associated with writer's block are closely aligned with those of a disease (p. 32), neither this film's presentation nor the students' understanding of the film seem to be inaccurate.

In the class discussions, one student noted that the film portrayed writers as having a life filled with "pressure." Group 13 noted that the film showed "the stress that writers go through when trying to find inspiration for writing." Curry (2010) indicates that this presentation may indeed be accurate but that it also need not be feared. The author (Curry, 2010) states that writers should "learn to accept the precariousness of the writing profession. It is never safe, not certain. But remember, too, that all the meaningful

aspects of living itself are uncertain. We cannot be sure those we love will still be with us the next time the moon rises or the sun sets" (p. 23). While the writing lifestyle can be tough and filled with all kinds of pressure, it is, according to Curry (2010), a worthwhile endeavor.

These statements and impressions indicate that students have engaged with the film in relation to writer's block, and in some cases have made insightful meaning based on these connections. But students did not stop there. They followed these conversations with discussions of their general ideas about writers and the writing lifestyle. The impressions here were even more interesting to this study, as many of the impressions students had about writers and writing, both in general and more specifically from the film, were negative.

Group 1 stated that "Most intriguing writers are suspicious people." This is an interesting impression, because the group is speaking in a generality and yet does not go into detail as to why they have created or accepted this idea of writers. However, group 9 agrees with group one that writers and their lifestyles may not be normal. They state, "Writers don't lead very normal or stable lives."

Many groups noted also that writers' lifestyles are greatly impacted by deadlines. Groups 1, 3 and 12 all mentioned the influence of deadlines on a writer's life. Group 1 said that "Deadlines, that would be a problem." And Group 3 said they "wouldn't like it [being a writer] because it's too much time by yourself and you have to base your life off deadlines." This distaste for deadlines is familiar, of course, because as students, the participants consistently face deadlines. It is possible that student participants view a writer's lifestyle as too similar to that of their current lifestyle as a student, and thus find

it undesirable. Bloom (1985) states that "Academic contexts are consistently important as an encouragement or deterrent to writers" and further, "the pressure of deadlines may inhibit writing" (p. 123).

Most of the student perceptions of writers and the writing lifestyle that were shared during the class discussions were negative ones. Group 9 described being a writer as "difficult," while Group 3 said it would be "stressful and lonely." Group 5 agreed that the writing lifestyle would not be desirable as "There is a lot of pressure. If you suck you don't make it. There is a lot of stress." Other student participants seemed to be less sure about writing or writers. Group 15 said that they "Don't know a lot about the writing lifestyle except for that they spend a lot of time at home thinking. In my own opinion to be a writer is really boring."

Student perceptions of writers and writing at this stage of the study do not seem to match with those of practicing writers, however. Bennett (2001) notes that "The act of writing is not as solitary as one might think" (p. 30).

A few groups, however, did make positive statements about writing and writers. Group 9 thought it would be "interesting," while group 17 thought that writing would offer a "more free lifestyle. You can make your own schedule and be more creative."

In all, student discussion responses reflected a mostly negative attitude about writers and writing that only seemed to be solidified through student responses to the film clips shown.

Stranger Than Fiction's Influence

The impression students had about writers and writing did not improve when they considered the representation of writers and writing in the film clips from *Stranger Than*

185

Fiction (2006). Most students felt that the protagonist, Kay Eiffel, was portrayed, according to group two, as "schitzo and a suicidal person. She is definitely not someone I can relate to. She is all over the place- nervous, freaky and crazy." Other groups described Kay as crazy, strange, or even a social outcast. Group 10 only felt she was strange for her "research habits," however they did not elaborate on why her research was strange. These perceptions support the presentation of Kay Eiffel in the film as an "eccentric author who is fixated on the deaths of her characters" (Rafidi, 2008, p. 149).

While no group felt that Kay was a positive representation of a writer, there were some students who saw Kay as an accurate representation of a writer. Group 13 felt that "The writer is presented how we imagined. We can kinda relate, but not to that extent. She is kinda strange, the things she says seem kinda cold. And she is trying to be independent." While there was a mention of Kay as "strange," this statement reveals the group as feeling somewhat more connected to Kay than the other groups, and perhaps capable of viewing her in an overall more favorable light. Group 11 also did not see Kay in a completely negative way. They state that she "has interesting personality quirks" but stop short of calling her crazy or weird.

Film Use in the Classroom

The students were not in complete agreement as to their feelings on their professors' use of films in the classroom as a teaching tool. I had expected (Journal entry 3) to find that nearly all students would like the inclusion of films in their classes; however, there were also many students who did have some negative feelings about this practice.

The students who like when professors use films in the classroom supported Bishop's (1999) findings that students could enjoy this practice as a change of pace from normal classroom activities or to help students better understand a new concept. Other students, however, felt that the use of films in their classrooms was distracting or an easy way out for the professor, thus supporting Wild (1999, p. 40). Wild states, "film for our students was the ethical equivalent of ice cream: some people liked it, some didn't; it could be made better or worse, but it was largely a matter of taste." For some students involved in the study, there was little or no impact made on their perceptions of writer's block through the film clips from *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) either because students in this camp resisted the use previously of films in their classrooms, or because this film in particular did not engage them.

Beyond the composition or writing classroom, participating students noted that professors in a variety of classes use films at various times and for a number of reasons. Some of the classes where professors used films that were mentioned specifically were: chemistry, creative writing, Western humanities, Foundations of Education, and sociology. It seems there is no limit to the number and types of classes that were mentioned as having had films included as pedagogical tools.

<div align="center">Whole Class Discussions</div>

After students had the chance to evaluate their responses to and share their thoughts about the film clips of *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), they came back together to discuss the film as a whole class. This discussion yielded further information in regard to research question number two. There were several common themes that emerged from these whole class discussions, which will next be considered.

Portrayal of Writers

One common theme that emerged from the classroom discussions of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), as well as the writing assignment, was that students felt that writers were portrayed in the film as strange, stressed, and even suicidal individuals. Other students seemed to hold professional writers in higher esteem than they consider themselves as writers. One student said in his paper that "I was very surprised that she admitted that she had writer's block because I felt that most writers would feel embarrassed to admit that as if it was a disease." This statement seems to indicate that student writers are more likely than professional writers to have writer's block, and that if they do it is acceptable to admit it. Further, it seems here that professional writers, according to this student, should not have writer's block, and should not admit it if they do. This misconception is easy to understand when one considers that many students in this study indicated that they know little about writer's block except for their own experience, and rarely if at all because it has been discussed in class openly in a supportive and understanding way.

This student perception of writers as being different from other people permeated the classroom discussions. Students in all four classes agreed that Kay Eiffel was portrayed as being someone to whom they would struggle to relate. Students specifically answered the questions given them verbally in the whole class discussions, seeming most frequently burdened in their interpretation of the film by Kay's disheveled appearance and barren, white workspace.

This was also a common theme in the student papers. Some students felt it was strange that Kay worked in such a plain environment, while others felt it made sense. One

student noted in her paper that "Her [Kay's] house was very plain, which I think is important for a writer. All of their thoughts and ideas should come from their mind and having a cluttered crazy room could distract you and take away from your imagination." It is important to note here that there were a number of students who not only understood Kay's environment, but also said that they too preferred to work in such an environment themselves when they are writing. This openness to Kay's environment may have given this film more credibility for some students, thus increasing the impact it had on their perceptions or at least intensifying their pre-existing ideas about writer's block.

The fact that students noticed and discussed Kay's workspace and understood her need for barrenness in her environment directly relates to statements made by successful writers on both sides of the "decorative" fence. Annie Dillard (1989) feels that a writer's life is "colorless to the point of sensory deprivation" (p. 44). Specifically, Dillard (1989) states that

> Appealing workplaces are to be avoided. One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark. When I furnished this study seven years ago, I pushed the long desk against a blank wall, so I could not see from either window. Once, fifteen years ago, I wrote in a cinder-block cell over a parking lot. It overlooked a tar-and-gravel roof. This pine shed under trees is not quite so good as the cinder-block study was, but it will do. (p. 26-27)

Dillard's description of an empty workspace is reminiscent of Kay's own decorative choices in her writing area.

And yet there are other writers who feel that their writing space needs to be messy. Bassin (2002) states in "I'm in the Milk and the Milk is in Me: Writing From the Night Kitchen":

> I believe I need expansive space within which to write. My desk is huge; in fact, I have two. But, despite my intent for a clear space to write within, all the surfaces are covered and cluttered: unpaid bills, correspondence, books, unfulfilled requests/ demands from friends and loved ones rush in, filling up space, leaving me always pushing against a too small and confined space to write in. (p. 300)

But perhaps it is not the space itself but the intent of the writing space that matters. Hal Zina Bennett (2001) agrees that every writer needs a place to write. He notes in *Write From the Heart* that "every writer needs a place of solitude. I always have to remind myself, however, that it is a state of mind, not a place" (p. 41). For Bennett, and perhaps others as well, a writer's space is more personal than the physical space where one works. For Kay, however, the personal space and physical space collided in her barren writing room. This was where she lived and worked.

Rafidi (2008) notes in "The Story Behind the Story: Stranger Than Fiction" that Kay's

> omnipotence is limited to her imagination, as her living space is comprised of three rooms with stark white walls. The mise en scene is indicative of the blank canvas that confronts every designer. Specifically it also suggests the artificiality of the film world; as a viewer we are alerted to the idea that the world we are watching is not real and that it is incomplete until Eiffel finds a way to kill Harold Crick. (p. 152)

In this sense, viewers are also aware that something important and revealing is being communicated through the visual portrayal of Kay's writing and living environment, whether they agree with this portrayal or not.

Overall students felt that writer Kay Eiffel was portrayed as a little off-balance, but most students were accepting of this. Students seemed to struggle most with the portrayal of Kay's appearance and living space, rather than with her personality.

Perceptions of Writing

Another theme that emerged from the whole class discussions and student papers was that students overall had similar negative perceptions of writers, writing, and the writing lifestyle. Many students mentioned words like stressful, crazy and pressure when they described writers and their lifestyles. Others, however said, "it's different for every person because some writers are structured and some are loose about it."

Some students, though, seemed to feel that perhaps they didn't know enough about writers or their lifestyles to make a judgment on this topic. One student stated that she felt there "is a lot of mythology about writers, like they are always eccentric people with piles of research in their offices. It's possible that people's views might be skewed from that." This statement is verified by Anne Lamott (1994) who states that there are those who believe successful writers

> sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I

know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have

made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling

wildly enthusiastic and confident. (p. 21)

Mythology like this may inhibit novice writers from fulfilling their writing goals.

It seems important to point out that only one student out of all four classes had a

positive view of writers and the writing lifestyle. One woman said that being a writer

would bring a "More free lifestyle—you can make own schedule and be more creative

with things you do," while another student noted in her paper that "writing can be a rather

fun way to express yourself." This openness to writing and the creativity it brings may

indicate that students with these more positive perceptions of writing may be more open

to discussing and engaging with writing problems than others who hold negative

impressions of writing and writer's block. Composition teachers can also conclude from

this data that far too many students view writing negatively. Thus, composition teachers

should probably focus more time and energy on making students feel positive about

writing, although they must also be aware that much of this negative foundation was laid

long before students entered the college composition classroom and so might be difficult

or impossible to overcome.

Portrayals of and Solutions for Writer's Block

The most common topic in the whole class discussions and student papers was

that of the portrayal of writer's block in the film, as well as the solutions offered for this

writing problem. Kay Eiffel's method for dealing with writer's block was to observe

people and imagine various ways of dying in an attempt to find the perfect way to kill her

novel's main character, Harold Crick.

192

Through viewing the clips from *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), students discovered that there are many ways to deal with writer's block, some of which they had never considered previously. Most students found Kay's methods to be different than the ways they had dealt with writer's block themselves. However, many students indicated in their papers that Kay's methods influenced them to think of different ways to deal with writer's block in the future. Many also said that if they suffered with writer's block in the future, they would try to spend some time observing others as Kay. This alone speaks to the positive impact viewing the film seems to have had on student perceptions of and students' ability to deal with writer's block.

A few students felt that Penny's methods of dealing with writer's block would work for them. Any student who mentioned both women in the film, however, also noted the difference in their engagement with writer's block. One student said it best: Penny had ideas as if "the answer is there," but that Kay "thought the answer wasn't here yet but it would come to her by divine intervention." The difference in the character's two ways of dealing with writer's block was definitely appreciated by student participants.

Many students also seemed to agree, surprisingly, that Penny's solutions might have been rational for her, but that those solutions were ridiculous for Kay because they were such different people. Some students felt that Kay's solutions were more rational than Penny's solutions overall. Students disagreed a lot on this question as many said that writing is too personal to say if this solution is rational or ridiculous. This indicates that students understood that dealing with writer's block was personal, and that perhaps there is not one 'right' answer for dealing with this problem. Taylor (2009) states that the ways

for dealing with writer's block are many, some of which will "work wonders" to get a writer through writer's block (p. 17).

Cures for Writer's Block

Another significant theme that emerged across the student papers was the ways students had in the past considered and used to overcome writer's block. While some of these ideas were similar to ones shown in the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), most student ideas for dealing with writer's block were unique and individualized. Taylor (2009) notes in "Writing Prompts to Get You on a Roll," that "There are almost as many systems for conquering writer's block as there are practitioners of poetry, and what has succeeded beautifully for some might not be particularly helpful for you" (p. 17). Still, discovering the ways in which others have conquered writer's block may at least give struggling writers hope that there are unlimited options for overcoming this writing problem.

Curry (2010) notes in "How to Get Out of a Creative Rut" that "being unable to write is primarily a state of mind" (p. 22). Some students participating in this study agreed. A few students noted that they understood that writer's block happens, but that it shouldn't be a reason to give up on writing. One student said that her theory on writer's block is "it happens, get over it." Another student agreed, stating,

> I don't believe writer's block is a big deal. If you do face this problem while writing a paper, you should just walk away from it for a few hours, so the pressure and stress is released and you can come back to the paper and have free flowing ideas.

This direct approach was shared by other students as well. This feeling about writer's block reveals that these students see writer's block as a surmountable problem, and one that perhaps does not warrant serious pedagogical instruction to deal with it.

A number of students noted in their papers that they have dealt with writer's block in the past by taking a break from writing. These students indicated that by getting away from their desks and paper topics, they were able to clear their minds and gain new insight into how to continue with their writing.

Other students noted that various activities helped them deal with writer's block. Some of the most frequently mentioned activities included listening to music, taking a walk, brainstorming, or talking to others. While Kay Eiffel did not use any of the methods noted here to deal with her writer's block, these student methods show that there are a variety of ways people may deal with writing problems, any of which may work for them. This finding also supports the class discussions, where students indicated that Penny's methods of dealing with writer's block may be ridiculous for Kay because each person deals with the issue in his or her own way. This shows that there may not be a perfect solution for writer's block that will work for everyone.

Stranger Than Fiction and Writer's Block

While there were a few students who did not mention the film at all in their papers, many students addressed the impact of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* on their perceptions of writer's block. This topic directly relates to question number two, and it may indicate whether a film about writer's block shown in a writing class will have any significant impact on student perceptions of this writing problem. Fain (2004) notes that there is proof

that the American youth will respond very positively to a chance to integrate popular culture into their education. It would be irresponsible of us as educators to not study and embrace this culture because the result will be that our youth will learn more, retain more, be better motivated, and most importantly of all, they will obtain an education that very much is relevant to the "real world" and one that is meaningful to them. (p. 593)

The students participating in this study supported Fain's claims. Students in the study made positive comments about their experiences with this film as it was used to support and inform the discussion of writer's block in their composition classes.

The most frequently cited impact of the film on student participants was that students said they intended to deal with writer's block differently in the future. Students who indicated this impact stated frequently that seeing Kay's many unusual methods for handling writer's block inspired them to get out of their rooms, away from their desks, and out into the world to look for inspiration. One student noted that the film "definitely provides anyone currently struggling with writer's block a slew of ideas to help them through it and anyone who isn't with a few to keep in mind for the future. I feel as though the film has been an advocate for the difficulties with writer's block in modern society and will continue to be a positive force for many writers." This statement, and others like it, reveals that the film did encourage the classes to think about writer's block and maybe handle this problem differently in the future.

Other students noted that the film impacted their perceptions of writer's block because they now see it as a serious problem, will think about it differently in the future, or they now simply have more information on the subject. All of these reasons also show

that the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) challenged students to think about writer's block in a new way, which for some meant labeling this writing problem that before was difficult for them to define. One student said that she "did not know people had a name for this, but it does make sense." Establishing a definition allows the student to see that this previously undefined problem has a name and that it is an issue that can be serious enough for discussion.

Some students felt that comparing their own experience with that of Kay's was impossible or at least unfair. One student noted that "In normal life school project deadlines can't be moved and we don't have the luxury of a personal assistant being assigned to us to help with anything we need." This student was not alone, however, as others also felt it was ineffective to compare their experiences with writer's block with Kay's experience. One student said "everyone is different and all people have a unique way of dealing with obstacles in their life." And yet this student also went on to elaborate that "I think Kay handled her writer's block well." So, even though it is a personal decision as to how one will deal with and eventually overcome writer's block, students were in most cases supportive of what Kay chose to do to finish her novel.

Most students felt that whatever it took to get past writer's block was fine; students were not judgmental or offended by most of Kay's efforts, except perhaps her visit to the hospital. Many students noted that this perhaps was the line that should not have been crossed in finding inspiration. Taylor (2009) agrees that there are definitely ways of curing writer's block that are not worth considering. The author (Taylor, 2009) states, "Mind-altering substances, for example, may have been just the ticket for our friend Coleridge, but they are emphatically not recommended" (p. 17). While there are

unlimited ways to deal with writer's block, it is important to note that participating

students, like Taylor, understand that not all options for handling this issue are valid.

Changing Perceptions

A significant number of students noted that their ideas about writer's block,

writing and/ or writers changed after viewing the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). One

student said

> After viewing the film my perspective on writer's block changed significantly.
>
> Prior to viewing the film I never gave writer's block much thought, chalking it up
>
> to a series of distractions that keep us from writing scholarly, or a lack of focus
>
> that can be just as detrimental … This revelation on writer's block will force me
>
> to think and act differently when facing writer's block.

Not only did perceptions of writer's block change due to this film, but some students also

stated that they would, in the future, handle writer's block differently, using ideas they

learned from Kay or Penny in the film.

Many students agreed that their perceptions of writer's block also were

dramatically impacted by viewing clips from this film in class. One student said

> After watching this movie, my view on writer's block changed dramatically.
>
> I used to throw the term 'writer's block' around loosely as an excuse, not
>
> actually believing that such a thing exists. But now after watching the movie I
>
> have seen that it actually is a real problem, especially for professional writers.

Students such as this one who now better understand the term and implications of writer's

block may also be instrumental in changing this mythology and perception in popular

culture. According to the survey results, many students know what they do about writer's

block based on their own experiences with this issue, as well as discussions they have had with friends and others about it. If students like this one, who now has a more firm grasp on understanding writer's block share what they have learned with others, it is possible that this will become a more acceptable and understood problem to deal with.

Other students noticed that writer's block can have a great impact on a person's writing career. One student noted "Contrary to my belief before I watched this film I now look upon writer's block and realize that it can be a major problem in a person's career." This idea shows that previously students saw writer's block as a mere inconvenience at worst, but because of the film clips that were shown in class, students realized that it was possible to struggle with writer's block for longer and more intense periods of time. Author Lynn Bloom (1985) agrees in her work "Anxious writers in context: Graduate school and beyond" when she states that writer's block "may be powerful enough to overwhelm the writer's whole life, especially if finishing a dissertation or writing articles or books is crucial to the writer's career" (p. 121). This intense level of writer's block was unfamiliar to several students who chose to address this newfound understanding in their papers.

For other students the change in perception was less intense. One student said "The film made me more aware of writer's block and that it really is a problem for me most of the time when I write. I think the film and writing this paper has helped me to look back and really think about how I work best." This newfound awareness may help this student, and others like her, deal with writer's block more effectively in the future.

Interviews

Some students agreed to participate both in the written assignment as well as the interview, while other students were unable to complete the writing assignment and so chose to engage in a conversation either via email or over the telephone in an interview regarding their experience with writer's block. While it was very difficult to get enough students to agree to an interview for this study, it is my hope that the representative sample of students gives more clarity to the overall picture of student perceptions of writer's block, and specifically as this topic relates to the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006).

Most of the students interviewed chose to do so via email. Fourteen students completed the email interview questions, indicating on their responses that they chose to use email for the interview because it was more convenient with their schedules or because they felt they could articulate themselves better through this medium than over the telephone.

Three students chose to conduct the interview over the telephone. These students indicated that they sometimes had difficulty articulating their thoughts in writing and felt that talking about their thoughts regarding writer's block would be easier, clearer, and more honest than doing so in writing.

Four of the participating interview students felt that they had writer's block with the assignment for the class; one of these four indicated that she did not complete the assignment due to her extreme writer's block on the topic. The rest of the students felt that the assignment was not difficult or they did not have writer's block as they completed this writing task.

These results indicate that, at least for these participants, writer's block was not an issue that had much impact on this assignment.

Many of the students interviewed indicated that when they worked on a writing task, they utilized some sort of process to complete the work. This correlates to Baroudy's (2003) point that "most successful student-writers are almost consciously or unconsciously process-writing fans" (p. 60). Because process writing has been used widely for so many years, students have obviously in some way internalized this discussion and applied it in their responses to the interview questions. While the terms students used differed, most of those interviewed said that they planned what they would write, then they wrote, and finally they revised their work. Only five students said that they started writing without planning of any sort beforehand.

Ten of the seventeen interviewed students stated that they most frequently recognized writer's block at the start of the writing task. This result was not necessarily connected to the previous finding that some students considered their writing to be done as a process, but indicates instead that getting started was viewed as the most difficult part of writing for those students interviewed.

Three of the interviewed students noted that they did not feel they suffered from writer's block or did not believe that this was a true writing problem. This data can be viewed through various lenses. It may show that some students interviewed may have had writer's block but not call it by that term, or perhaps it shows that these students have not had writer's block or been overwhelmed by it to a debilitating degree. Finally, the other option that this data may be revealing is that students who have had writer's block but do

not believe in it have found sufficient ways of dealing with the problem so that it is actually not viewed as such by them.

Twelve interviewed students stated that their teachers in past courses have not talked to them about writer's block as a significant writing issue. One student who was interviewed on the telephone said "No, God no. No one even mentioned it. I guess I've heard the term as a commonly heard term. I've never been asked if I've ever had writer's block before or pause in your writing. I guess I know mostly from hearing it around." This supports the finding in the surveys and student papers that students may know more about writer's block from their own experience or from friends or popular culture than they do from their composition teachers.

From the interview and survey data one might conclude that teachers are having a minimal impact, at best, on their students regarding writer's block. Many of the students surveyed had not asked teachers for help with writer's block in past courses. It is also possible that "hearing it around" is enough to give students a sense of understanding about writer's block. If indeed this is the case, perhaps an instructor who wants to use a film that has writer's block as a central theme, such as *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), might be wise to do so. A film such as this could be used to open this often-ignored discussion and allow students the opportunity to feel more comfortable asking for help when they are struggling with writer's block.

Additionally, the interviewed students indicated that teachers should do more to give help. The most frequently cited thing students said their teachers could do to help them with writer's block is to talk about it more in class and give or offer more help to students who seem to be struggling. By opening a dialogue about writer's block,

instructors may provide their students with a chance to overcome this difficult, and yet seemingly common, writing issue.

Conclusion

Through the examination of the data gleaned through this research study, it has become clear that the student participants had a basic understanding of writer's block when they entered the composition class they were a part of during this study. Most participating students indicated that they had at some point struggled with writer's block, though few to the degree to which Kay Eiffel did in the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006).

Additionally, student participants revealed a number of ways they have typically dealt with writer's block in the past, and that the film clips shown in class had a distinct impact on their thinking methods. About these students said that they may in the future use some of Kay's tactics to respond to writer's block.

CHAPTER 6

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS AND WRITER'S BLOCK

Major Findings

This study aimed to explore the intersection of the academic and the popular through an examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject was shown. This study aims to inform instructors' understanding of student perceptions of writer's block and whether a film about writer's block would have any impact on those perceptions.

The research questions for this research study were answered through data that was gathered from student participants in four composition classrooms at two colleges in Western Pennsylvania. The data was gathered through surveys, observation of class discussions, student papers and student interviews.

In Chapter 4 I presented the raw data that was collected through the aforementioned research methods. In Chapter 5, I analyzed the data that was gathered through the research methods for this study. In this chapter, I intend to consider the data gathered for this study and establish the need for future areas of study that relate to this information.

This data revealed considerable similarities and differences of opinions and experiences with writer's block among the participating students. At the start of the composition course, many students felt that writer's block was a problem, but not a significant one. The data also revealed that students had an understanding of writer's block that they attained predominantly through their own experience with this writing problem. Additionally, the data showed that students had many ways of dealing with

writer's block, some of which were repeated across classes and others that were unique to particular students. Finally, one of the most important findings of this study included a clear change for many students in their perceptions of writer's block as well as a better understanding of the participating students' ideas about writer's block.

This chapter will examine the recommendations, limitations, and conclusions of this dissertation study, as well as considerations for instructors who wish to use a film like *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) to discuss writer's block in their courses.

Recommendations for Implementation

There are benefits to introducing film into the composition classroom to influence student discussions of writer's block. These benefits likely go beyond the classroom in which they are revealed. As Fain (2004) states in "American Popular Culture: Should We Integrate it Into American Education?"

> By integrating study of the American popular culture into the education of our youth, we can better provide a means for them to take what they learn out into the world as adults. Our students obviously understand the popular culture in which they live; by merging the study of this culture with traditional education, they will be better able to grasp concepts, make sense of what they learn, and acquire perspective of the world in which they live. (p. 590)

This study intended to more thoroughly understand student perceptions of writer's block, as well as the influence of a film such as *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) on these ideas. Based on Fain's notion, however, it is clear that the implications of film use in the composition classroom may go beyond the school walls.

205

Taking Writer's Block Seriously

The findings of this research study have made clear that there is a need for instructors to consider more seriously the issue of writer's block in their composition classes. Many students noted that their past instructors have said that writer's block is used as an excuse for laziness, poor planning or even failing students. This is unacceptable. Since many student participants indicated that they have dealt with writers' block in some form, whether extreme or minor, at some point or other during their education, instructors should be prepared to discuss the issue with their students, and more importantly, take it seriously when it arises. Lynn Bloom (1985) notes that

> Teachers, dissertation advisors, researchers, counselors, friends, or others working with anxious writers need to understand the writing problem as fully as possible in the appropriate contexts in order to provide specific, workable solutions adapted to the writer's temperament and to the performance of multiple roles in multiple contexts. An anxious writer, fully understood in context, can be more readily helped to be less anxious, more productive—to be simply, a writer.
> (p. 132)

Whether student or professional, anyone who is struggling with writer's block longs to be known simply as a writer, not a blocked writer.

Using Film to Discuss Writer's Block

According to Amaya-Anderson (2008), "Teachers must work at bringing materials together that will not only generate discussion but also get students thinking about how a popular medium like film can implicitly contribute to the reproduction of

ideology" (p. 42). Using films in a composition class to encourage discussion about writer's block may be one way to help new perceptions of this writing issue to emerge.

However, for obvious reasons such as lack of time, institutional support, or knowledge of how to include film in a writing class, not every instructor will be able to use film in his or her composition classes. There are likely to be enough instructors across the country where these factors will not be major deterrents to using film, however, that some suggestions for making this idea viable are relevant.

The Successful Use of Films in Composition Classes

Cruz notes that using films as in the composition classroom can be beneficial to various pedagogical purposes because "films tell stories in the language of light, color, movement, and sound; they provide ready-made images, and so they capture the senses and emotions promptly, thus potentially exerting great influence" (Cruz, 1999, p. 102). Students participating in this research study agreed that they enjoyed the use of films in their classrooms, and more specifically the use of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). Overall the students involved in this study felt that the clips from this film informed their understanding of writer's block, and served as a useful tool to open the discussion of this subject.

Many of the participating students indicated that the use of clips from the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) helped them feel that writer's block is not only a valid writing problem, but also that their understanding of it, and how to deal with it, was informed through both viewing and discussing the film. According to Amaya-Anderson (2008),

For most people, film is a positive experience that initiates dialogue, critique, and

207

solidarity. It fosters thought and the pleasures of forming and making meaning. In taking this approach, teachers bring a social practice into the classroom as a way to work toward writing-course goals (p. 9).

For instructors who wish to successfully use films toward this end, or even to illuminate other writing issues in their own composition classes, they will need to make several accommodations and prepare carefully for the most beneficial outcome.

Caille (1999) notes that composition instructors who wish to use film in their classes need to first "define why film is being used" (p. 2). Without this kind of clarity established, Caille (1999) notes that film has often been vaguely defined for use in composition classes, which leads to "unreflective understanding of what film is, what film does, and the types of work which are required for bringing film into the composition class" (p. 2). For future instructors to effectively use a film like *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) in their composition classes, they must conscientiously define their reasons for doing so, and establish this purpose clearly for their students, in addition to choosing wisely which films or parts of films will be shown to the class.

Additionally, the results of this study illuminated that some participating students resisted the use of films in their composition classes. The reasons for this varied; however, instructors need to be aware that a prejudice against film use in the composition classroom may exist among some of their students who do not wish this form of 'entertainment' to be ruined by scholarly inquiry (Wild, 1999). Caille (1999) notes that using films for critical work sometimes presents a threat to the pleasure of film viewing,

and students often regard it as unconvincing, as reading too deeply into what is mere entertainment, a feeling which generates some frustration for both the

208

student and the teacher. Students feel that they are not learning as much as they would like about film—they are not being provided with the tools to become experts— whereas teachers complain that they should not need to waste so much time persuading the students that they should look more deeply into the presuppositions that watching film carry with it. (p. 4)

The challenge presented here is for a teacher to both get students who may not care about film to care about it, and additionally to establish clearly the reason for using this film in relation to this course content. Regardless, the task may not only be difficult, but impossible in some cases. Based on the findings of this study, there will likely still be students who struggle to understand why this film is being used in this class and also why they should care.

<p style="text-align:center">*Student Perceptions of Writer's Block*</p>

Instructors should be aware that participating students agreed that most people struggle with writer's block at some point as they write. This is telling because for most students the idea that other non-writers or beginning writers had at some time or other dealt with writer's block was not unusual; and yet, many students also indicated that they were surprised to hear Kay Eiffel admit she had writer's block, or they didn't think that professional writers struggled with writer's block at all. This fact reveals a need to broaden student understanding of who might have to deal with writer's block. It is helpful for students to be made aware that they are not alone in struggling with writer's block because they might then be more likely to talk about their writing problems with other students or perhaps even their instructors if they are aware that others deal with this problem too.

Many of the participating students noted that if they struggle with writer's block it is often at the early stages of writing—as they begin to write or even before they have started. A few students noted that they struggle throughout the writing process. What is interesting here is that most students considered their methods of writing to be a process, whether they specifically called it a process or not. The student participants consistently spoke or wrote of their planning for and execution of writing tasks.

Participating students stated that their understanding of writer's block stems mostly from their own experiences with this writing issue. Brand (1989) indicates that "Even if all words were neutral, personal experience is not" (p. 27). Because personal experience is not 'neutral' as Brand notes, it may significantly influence student understanding of writer's block. While this may not necessarily be problematic, it is important to consider the impact of this perception. Students who know about writer's block only or mostly from their own experience with it may not have a full picture of what writer's block is, and they may additionally be limited in their understanding of how to deal with this writing issue. This suggests that teachers can help students gain a better understanding of writer's block and thereby more control over it if teachers make writer's block an explicit topic for discussion in their composition courses.

Rethinking Writer's Block

One of the more interesting and less anticipated findings of the study was that some students who had been familiar with the term writer's block, and even indicated that they had dealt with it in the past, felt that writer's block is a part of the writing process and not necessarily a problem, revealing a level of comfort with writer's block that other student participants did not share. Similar to noted scholars and authors like

Bell (1988), D'Angelo (1988), Hunzer (1995), and McLeod (1987), these students simply did not see writer's block as a negative part of writing, but rather, a natural and expected one. One student said that "Writer's block is something everyone experiences at least once," and another said that "Soon enough you find a way to get out what you want to say." Another student stated that "It is natural that writer's block happens when we write essays." These ideas echo those of Bell (1988) who noted that when she experiences writer's block it is a sign that all is well (p. 3). In considering writer's block as a natural part of the writing process, these students and scholars have shown that writer's block should be seen in a more expected and accepted manner.

Scholars and instructors should take note of this other, more positive and accepting perspective of writer's block. If discussions of writer's block could be framed as being a natural part of the writing process, and further, an opportunity to engage in better writing, student writers may feel less inhibited in discussing writer's block and also less fearful when it does occur. One student stated that "Sometimes people don't deal with writer's block and that is amazing, but in a way they have never truly discovered what it is like to struggle with writing what comes next in a story, a paper, or a song." When viewed this way, writer's block moves from being seen as a writing problem to being an opportunity to create a better product overall. Although, as one student said, "I know I will get writer's block again because it happens to the best of us," perhaps reframing the idea of writer's block with students is a chance to remove the negative stigma this aspect of writing currently holds.

Student Perceptions of Writers and Writing

A great benefit of this study was that many participating students indicated that after participating they no longer viewed writers, writing, and/ or writer's block in the same way that they did at the start of the course. Many students said they did not realize that writer's block could be as severe as it was for Kay Eiffel, and that is perhaps why they also said they rarely or never asked for help with this problem.

Surprisingly, it was also revealed through this study that many students understood Kay Eiffel, despite the fact that they described her as 'suicidal' and 'crazy.' Students showed they understood Kay when they critiqued her assistant, the more organized, 'normal' Penny, for suggesting methods for dealing with writer's block that may have made sense for Penny, but certainly did not make sense for Kay.

One of the most critical issues to note regarding the impact of this film on participating students, however, is that many said they will deal with writer's block differently in the future, possibly using some of Kay's tactics. These students said that they felt getting out of their rooms and away from their desks, as Kay did to look for inspiration for her novel, might be worth the effort if it helps them get rid of writer's block.

Increasing Student Understanding

This study illustrated that participating students overall enjoyed and benefited from the use of the film clips from *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) in relation to the discussion of writer's block in their composition classes. While there were students who stated that their ideas of writer's block were not impacted at all from the film, the majority of students said specifically, whether in the class discussion, papers, or

interviews, that they enjoyed and benefited from this practice. This established clearly that the use of a film or film clips can work to increase student understanding of a specific topic, if utilized carefully.

For this study the realization was dramatic for most students because it is likely to impact their future writing endeavors. Students said viewing the film improved their understanding of writer's block. Drawing this idea out further, it is possible to say that this film may very well have lasting impact on the student participants' academic and professional careers.

Additionally, another critical finding of this study was that a number of students felt that their early ideas about writer's block were not accurate, thus indicating a change in students' perception of writer's block after viewing the film clips from *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). The students who noted that they felt their perceptions of writer's block changed believed this was so mainly because they were not aware that writer's block could impact a writer so dramatically and possibly end his/ her career. These students noted that they now had a greater understanding of writer's block, thanks to viewing the film clips.

Students also noted that they were surprised by the intensity to which writers could struggle with writer's block. In comparing their struggles with writer's block to Kay's, most students noted that they had never had to deal with the terrible writer's block that she did, and were previously unaware that writer's block could be such a debilitating problem.

By carefully altering pedagogical practices to include the use of films or film clips in the composition classroom, instructors may find that students become more interested

in the course and ultimately also gain a better understanding of course concepts overall. However, haphazardly forcing film into the composition classroom could still be unproductive and even a recipe for academic disaster.

Study Limitations

This study was limited by a few issues. First, the selection of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) limited the study by eliminating other films that might also have included the issue of writer's block. Second, the study was limited by the selection of participating college classrooms, which were within a reasonable driving distance of Grove City College. These limitations were noted in Chapter 1 of the study.

Other limitations became apparent as the study was being conducted. One such limitation was that the writing classes that had been selected were introductory composition courses and consisted mainly of freshmen students. While this was not overtly problematic to the study, it is a possible limitation in that more advanced writers were not represented and their input on their perceptions of writer's block was not able to be considered.

A second aspect of the previously mentioned limitation is that these studying introductory composition courses means the students have not been able yet to take more advanced courses where perhaps over time they would have eventually discussed writer's block. Again, while this issue did not seem to directly impact the study, it is worth noting that the introductory writing class eliminated the possibility of the student participants having a greater foundation from which they could have explored their perceptions of writer's block.

Another study limitation may have been the way I recorded student responses during the class discussions. While I am a fast typist and did my best to record every student response verbatim, it is certainly possible that a few utterances or responses were missed or not recorded in their entirety.

Finally, a limitation of the study may have been the fact that I was unable to show the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) in its entirety. The participating professors involved in this study were not able to make time for their classes to watch the film the whole way through, and so most of the participating students only had the clips as a reference point for their writing assignments. While a few students had seen the entire film, the entire film was not largely represented in their discussion or papers. However, the clips chosen for study did focus directly on writer's block which was the key issue of interest.

<center>Recommendations for Future Study</center>

Film use in the composition classroom is an issue that has not been taken seriously for the most part. Instead, often instructors use films in their classes with little thought of planning or impact. Because this study has illuminated some of the benefits of using film in the composition class, as well as ways for instructors to do so successfully, it is clear that it would be useful for more studies to be done in the future to consider more facets of this complex pedagogical practice.

First, while the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) does involve the issue of writer's block, this is not the only, or even main, focus of the film. In order to use this film effectively to supplement class discussions and assignments on writer's block, instructors would likely want to use clips of the film, in a fashion similar to that used in

<center>215</center>

this study. However, this is not the only film featuring issues related to writer's block. And, because thousands of films are made each year, it is possible that a film will be made in the future that solely features the issue of writer's block. It is possible, then, that another film might be used with similar, or even improved, results.

Second, different types of writing classes could be studied to see how they can be improved by using film clips on writer's block. Because any writing class could discuss the issue of writer's block, it would be interesting to see if a creative writing class, technical writing class, or even a business writing class, for example, would provide findings similar to those of this research study.

Third, a researcher might wish to ask for a future research study where other important writing issues could be addressed through the use of films that feature these issues. For instance, many modern films feature news writing research. A scholar who wishes to determine whether a film about the research practices of a news writer could influence student perceptions of this issue might uncover results similar to those of this study. To this end, an instructor might wish to give students an option as to which films they would prefer to view in an effort to make them a part of the pedagogical practice of the class. Heyda (1999) notes in "Challenging Antiwriting Biases in the Teaching of Film," that this is beneficial: "I learn a good deal about my students as moviegoers, something I would lose were I to choose the films we see" (p. 163). This, however, is only one example of other kinds of writing research that could be done using this research study as a model.

Finally, one of the major areas of possible future research is that of showing a film in its entirety. For the sake of this discussion, it would be interesting for a scholar to

find classrooms similar to those used for this study where showing the entire film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) would be possible within the course schedule. Or, another option would be to place the film(s) on reserve for viewing outside of the class. Maloney and Miller (1999) state that in this case film viewing would be treated as a homework assignment, "just as reading a novel would be" (p. 35). Using film in this way would allow instructors to more efficiently use class time, although other problems could surface with this method as well (for instance, students failing to view the film for homework, etc.). This reveals that no method for using film in or outside of the class is foolproof. Regardless, once the whole film was viewed by the students, the rest of the study could be conducted in the same manner that it was here. Discovering whether the results were the same or different from those of this research study which used only film clips could potentially be quite interesting.

Final Thoughts

This research study aimed to explore the intersection of the academic and the popular through an examination of student perceptions of writer's block in composition classrooms where a film on the subject is shown. This study was a successful examination of four classrooms, each with a unique dynamic of students who had distinct perceptions of writer's block and film use in the classroom.

Instructors who wish to use films in their composition classrooms need to be aware that there are important implications for using films in their classes as well as preparation that needs to occur before a film is shown. Additionally, films shown in the composition classroom should be used with a clearly defined purpose.

It is also clear from the results of this research study that instructors need to be careful when criticizing students for attempting to open a conversation about their inability to complete a paper especially due to writer's block. Perhaps greater understanding of the issues surrounding writing anxiety and writer's block will encourage instructors to talk more freely about their own writing issues with students, and also validate student concerns about their writing efforts. In doing so, students may feel more encouraged and perhaps more capable for completing a writing task.

Additionally, instructors may want to consider making discussions regarding writer's block and writing anxiety a regular part of their composition class pedagogy. Several student participants indicated that they believed this would be greatly beneficial to their ability to complete writing tasks. Such lesson plans or even writing workshops could give students inspiration for writing and perhaps new ways of dealing with writer's block—much like watching clips of the film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) did for many of the student participants in this study.

While there were some limitations to this study, overall the research has provided a clear and fuller picture of student perceptions of writer's block and the impact of film on those ideas. There are many ways teachers of writing courses can encourage students to finish their writing tasks and many ways students may themselves choose to write or be inspired to complete a writing task. As instructors, we must be open to any and all opportunities to encourage our students as they write. While film may not be the answer to all of the problems in our writing classes, instructors who choose to use films to support their pedagogy may find this practice is well-received and greatly effective.

Coming Soon…

If, as college writing instructors, we want our courses to be seen as relevant by our students, we need to make efforts to erase the image of our pedagogy as useless, outdated, or, worse, created lazily and thoughtlessly for our own benefit and with little or no regard for the students. The problem, as Pagnucci (2004) points out in *Living the Narrative Life: Stories as a Tool for Making Meaning* is that at times "We've made the academic experience so alienating that we don't really belong, at least not as persons with all our personal idiosyncrasies" (p. 29). But I want to belong—as an instructor, as a writer, and a mentor—and I want my students to feel that they belong too. To accomplish this, I must constantly make efforts to create and embrace pedagogy that is relevant and effective for my students.

My students, though, and yours, are too unique for me to say that there is only one way to work through problems like writer's block. But, in *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) when Penny asks Kay how she decided to end her story, Kay points out, that "like anything worth writing it came inexplicably and without method" (Forster). It is possible that this really is the best way to describe the writer's block experience. It is inexplicable and there is no foolproof method by which we can successfully end this problem all of the time and for every person. However, through the use of film in the composition class, we may just be able to offer our students an experience that will give them new ideas for understanding and dealing with writer's block.

219

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For the following survey, please respond honestly, selecting the answer that best reflects your own experience. You will not be identified through this survey, nor will your grade be impacted in any way by your participation in the survey.

Course: Age:
Major:
Year (Circle one): Freshman   Sophomore   Junior   Senior

1. Writing is an upsetting experience for me.
Almost always   Often   Sometimes   Occasionally   Almost never

2. I have sat at my desk for hours unable to write. –OR—I have missed deadlines because I was unable to finish a project. I would agree that this means I have had writer's block.
Yes   No

3. In his work *Writer's block: The cognitive dimension* (1984) Mike Rose defines writer's block as an "inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment. Blocking is not simply measured by the passage of time, but by the passage of time with limited productive involvement in the writing task" (1984, p. 3). Estimate how often you experience writer's block when completing writing tasks.

Almost always   Often   Sometimes   Occasionally   Almost never

4. I believe writer's block is a real problem for ***most*** writers.   Yes   No

5. I believe writer's block is only a problem for me.   Yes   No

6. I have *asked for help* from instructors in the past with my writer's block.
Almost always   Often   Sometimes   Occasionally   Almost never

7. I have *received help* from instructors in the past with my writer's block
Almost always   Often   Sometimes   Occasionally   Almost never

8. I believe my perceptions regarding writer's block have been influenced by (circle all that apply):
Personal experience   Class discussions   Friends/ other students
Media (films, television)   Textbooks   Teachers/ feedback
Other: (please specify)

9. I believe writer's block doesn't last long enough to be a real writing problem
Almost always   Often   Sometimes   Occasionally   Almost never

10. I believe writer's block can make a writer want to quit writing.
Almost always   Often   Sometimes   Occasionally   Almost never

Please feel free to elaborate on any other thoughts you may have regarding writer's block in the space below. Thank you for your participation in this survey.

APPENDIX B

Class dynamic-
# of students
Classroom description
Technology available
Any other relevant matters

1. Do professors use films in your classes? How do you feel about this practice?
2. How does this film present writer's block?
   a. Is it something all writers end up with at some point or other or just this author? How do you know this from the film?
3. How is writer's block discussed?
   a. In what ways is it described or articulated in the film?
4. What do you know about writers and the writing lifestyle? What do you think it is like to be a writer?
5. How is the writer presented in the film? Is she someone you can relate to or someone who seems strange? How?
   a. What does she look like? How does she dress? Where does she live? What are her mannerisms? Is she like a real person or a character?
6. Why is Penny sent to help Kay? What is Penny like? How does she dress, etc.? What are her mannerisms?
7. How are Penny and Kay different? (Philosophically, logically, emotionally?)
8. What does Penny propose as solutions to Kay's writer's block?
   a. Do these solutions seem rationale or ridiculous? Why?
9. What does Kay try to do to solve her writer's block?
   a. Do these solutions seem rationale or ridiculous? Why?
10. Who has seen this film before?
    a. When you saw the film for the first time was the issue of writer's block a main area of concern for you or was it something else? If something else, what?

Writer's Block Writing Assignment

The goal of this assignment is to clarify your own perceptions of writer's block through an analysis of the film, *Stranger than fiction*, in which one of the protagonists, Kay Eiffel, is herself struggling with writer's block as she attempts to finish her novel.

To achieve this goal, your assignment is as follows:

Write a two-three page essay exploring what writer's block means to you in your own writing life in comparison to what it means to Kay Eiffel in the film. In order to do this, you will:

- Have you ever felt you were struggling with writer's block? (share any relevant examples) How did you get through it? Or, do you think writer's block is merely a myth—something people talk about but that doesn't really exist (as one writer put it- "My Dad was a truck driver and never suffered from 'truck driver's block'."—so is it possible that writer's block isn't even a real problem?)

- Consider what writer's block meant to Kay Eiffel in the film *Stranger than fiction*. How was this concept discussed? What was she like as a writer? What was her life like? (You can describe her clothes, writing space, interactions with others, etc. where relevant), How did Kay's writer's block go away?

- Compare your own experience with that of Kay's. Did your beliefs about writer's block change after viewing this film? Do you think you will engage differently with writer's block in the future? How, why?

You needn't answer these questions in any particular order; rather, answer them in an order that is natural to you. In essence, you are to consider your own perceptions of writer's block, Kay's thoughts about the subject, and whether in the future you will deal differently with writer's block.

- If you feel you are having writer's block as you engage with this assignment, let's talk about it. My office phone number is (724) 458-3862. Please leave a message if I am not in, and I assure you I will get back to you so I can hear your thoughts and include them in my study.

I am interested in interviewing students from your class. If you would like to be interviewed, please contact me at your convenience, either at the phone number above or the following email address: kmmiller@gcc.edu. Thank you!

<u>Opinions of writer's block</u>
      <u>Negative opinions</u> (NOWB)

      <u>Neutral opinions</u> (NEWB)

      <u>Positive opinions</u> (POWB)

<u>Opinions of writing/ writers</u>
      <u>Negative opinions</u> (NOW)
      <u>Neutral opinions</u> (NEW)
      <u>Positive opinions</u> (POW)

<u>Personal experience statement</u> (PES)
      Students say they experience writer's block when
            They are told what to write
            They don't know anything about a topic
            <u>Action to prevent/ stop writer's block</u> (AWB)
<u>Film opinions</u>
      <u>Film and Writer's block positive</u> (FWBP)
      <u>Film and writer's block negative</u> (FWBN)
      <u>Film and writer's block opinions neutral</u> (FWB)

<u>Other statements:</u>

Informed Consent Form:

Stranger than fiction: **A study of writer's block through film**

You are invited to participate in this research study being conducted by Mrs. Kimberly M. Miller. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask me. You are eligible to participate because you are currently a student enrolled in a college-level writing course.

The goal of my study is to determine student perceptions of writer's block, and whether or not a film about writer's block will have any impact on those perceptions. In order to begin my analysis of these issues, I am asking that you fill out the following survey. Additionally, as part of this research, I will observe a class discussion following a short presentation of film clips. This study will also include an analysis of papers written in response to the film clips and your personal experience with writer's block. Finally, I may ask you to participate in a short interview after the study is complete.

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with me, your professor, or your institution. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you choose to participate, your information will be held in strict confidence and will have no bearing on your academic standing in current or future courses, nor on services that you receive from your institution.

 If would like further information about this project or if you have questions you may speak to me personally in my office (Grove City College, Hall of Arts and Letters, 200G), e-mail me (kmmiller@gcc.edu), or call me (724-458-3862).

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

APPENDIX E (continued)

<u>Project Director</u>:

Mrs. Kimberly M. Miller	Dr. Gian Pagnucci
Ph.D. Candidate	Committee Chairperson
Indiana University of Pennsylvania	Indiana University of Pennsylvania
(724) 458-3862	(724) 357-2261

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone 724-357-7730).

1. How does this film present or discuss writer's block?

2. What do you know about writers and the writing lifestyle? What do you think it is like to be a writer?

3. How is the writer presented in the film? Is she someone you can relate to or someone who seems strange? How?

APPENDIX G

Dear Professor _____:

My name is Kimberly Miller and I am currently a Ph.D. candidate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, as well as an instructor of Communication Studies at Grove City College. I am writing to you to ask if you (and one or more of your writing classes) would be interested in participating in my dissertation study, *Stranger than Fiction:* A Study of Writer's Block Through Film.

I am writing to you for help with this study because of our previous connection, . Also, you teach writing courses in the English department of your school, and you have expressed an interest in using films in your classroom or already are doing so.

This study is an attempt to consider student perceptions of writer's block as they enter a writing classroom, and ultimately whether a film about writer's block will have any impact on those perceptions. To study this important pedagogical area, I have established a study that will answer the following research questions: 1) What kinds of ideas about writer's block do study participants have at the start of their writing course? 2) What ideas about writer's block emerge from the discussions of and papers about the writer's block film shown in class? 3) What key similarities and differences emerge across the classes concerning students' developing understandings of writer's block?

In order to establish the answers to these research questions, my methods are as follows: 1) a short survey to be taken by study participants before viewing either clips of the film *Stranger than Fiction*, or the film in its entirety 2) Observations of the discussions that follow the film viewing, and 3) Analysis of papers that students have written in response to a writing prompt that I have created about this experience (see email attachment). Participation in this study may take as long as a week (or slightly more) of class time, or as short as two class periods, depending on your ability or desire to show the entire film or clips of the film, *Stranger than Fiction*.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information or if you have questions regarding participation in this study. I thank you graciously in advance for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Kimberly M. Miller
Ph.D. Candidate, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Instructor of Communication Studies, Grove City College

Student name_____ Class _____

1. Why did you choose to conduct this interview as an email discussion rather than a phone conversation? Was it at all related to concerns about writer's block or your articulation of this writing problem? Explain.

2. Did you feel you had writer's block with this assignment? Describe the experience (Were you able to write what you had hoped to write? Were you able to finish the assignment? How long did the assignment take you to complete? Why do you think you had writer's block? How did you end it?)

3. Explain how you write or what steps you take to complete a writing task. (Any writing task is relevant- whether it is writing a list, letter, novel, poem, or school paper. What steps do you take- first, second third, and so on to complete the task?)

4. In past assignments, when in your composing process have you recognized that you were struggling with writer's block (before you begin or while you are writing)? Use examples where necessary.

5. Have your teachers discussed writer's block in past courses? In what way did they address this issue? Was it helpful to you and your own writing process?

6. What do you think teachers could do to help you through this writing problem?

APPENDIX I

Student name_____ Class _____

1. Why did you choose to conduct this interview as a phone conversation rather than via email? Was it at all related to concerns about writer's block or your articulation of this writing problem? Explain.

2. Did you feel you had writer's block with this assignment? Describe the experience (Were you able to write what you had hoped to write? Were you able to finish the assignment? How long did the assignment take you to complete? Why do you think you had writer's block? How did you end it?)

3. Explain how you write or what steps you take to complete a writing task. (Any writing task is relevant- whether it is writing a list, letter, novel, poem, or school paper. What steps do you take- first, second third, and so on to complete the task?)

4. In past assignments, when in your composing process have you recognized that you were struggling with writer's block (before you begin or while you are writing)? Use examples where necessary.

5. Have your teachers discussed writer's block in past courses? In what way did they address this issue? Was it helpful to you and your own writing process?

6. What do you think teachers could do to help you through this writing problem?

VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM

I have read and understood the information on the form and I consent to volunteer to as a subject in this study under the condition I have selected below. I understand that any information I share is completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this Informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

☐ I consent to participate in the study questionnaire.

☐ I consent to have a short writing assignment for this course analyzed.

☐ I do not wish to participate in this study questionnaire.

☐ I do not wish to have a short writing assignment for this course analyzed.

Name (PLEASE PRINT) _____

Signature _____

Phone number where you can be reached: _____

Best days and times to reach you: _____

E-mail: _____

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

Date: _____

Investigator's Signature _____

APPENDIX K

Film clips from *Stranger than Fiction* (2006)

CHAPTER NAME	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
Taking Leaps	Meet Kay and Penny. Discover Kay has writer's block. Penny was sent to help.
Little Did He Know	Meet Harold Crick and Professor Hilbert
Comedy or Tragedy	Kay imagining car wrecks to see if that would be a way to kill her character, Harold.
Musical Conviction	Harold gets a guitar. Kay in ER looking for "visual stimuli" with Penny, who thinks she's crazy. Kay tells a concerned ER nurse that she is suffering from writer's block.
Significant Moments	Harold discovers Kay is the author/ narrator.
Writer's Resolution	Kay cures her writer's block. Describes it to Penny as coming to her "inexplicably and without method."
Critical call	Kay and (real) Harold Crick meet

Total length of clips shown, approximately 25 minutes/ Each chapter may or may not have been shown in its entirety.