

Misreading Masculinity: Speculations on the Great Gender Gap in Writing

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294

In this article, Tom Newkirk challenges readers to reconsider how gender differences in writing—in which girls significantly outperform boys—are read.

The push for men to express their feelings presumes that we have feelings, and we do have a few, but they remain sub-merged, and the airing of them often violates their authenticity.—Roger Rosenblatt (1998, p. 244)

In middle school, during one of her periodic bouts of frustration, my older daughter met with one of her male friends to talk through her troubles. Midway through he stopped her, “I have an idea—do you have a bicycle?”

“Yeah,” she said, puzzled.

“Well, ride it.”

“Whatever!”

When she told me the story, his logic made perfect sense: simply recounting what makes you sad won't change anything. What you need to do is act, move, release this frustration. Talk, in other words, is an avoidance of action, of resolution, of decision-making. But when I told this story to a female friend of mine, her reaction was that his advice amounted to avoidance: rather than confronting the problems by talking through the frustration, he seemed to say you can run away—or at least ride away—from them. Furthermore, in a classic example of the mismatches that Tannen (1992) has made part of our gender folklore, my daughter's friend saw his role as offering advice, when my daughter wanted a listening partner who might *share* his own frustrations rather than *fix* hers.

If we view writing as drawing on strongly gendered attitudes, such as the ones on display in this conversation, it is small wonder that the writing of boys and girls differ from the first invented spellings they create. Vivian Paley once remarked that children “think they invented the differences between boys and girls, and, as with any new invention, must prove that it works (1984, p. ix). The difference was systematically explored first by Donald Graves in the early 70s, and subsequent researchers have confirmed the sharp and persistent differences in the writing of boys and girls. Perhaps more problematic is another set of studies which demonstrate, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the biggest gender gap that now exists is not in the areas that have received the most attention, girls falling behind boys in mathematics (a gap which is closing). It exists in writing (where the gap is *not* closing) (Cole, 1997). According to the most recent reports of

the Educational Testing Service, the gap in writing between males and females at the eighth-grade level is over six times greater than the differences in mathematical reasoning (Cole, 1997, p. 15).

Another way to look at the magnitude of this gap is to compare it to the differences in writing performance of ethnic and racial groups. In the 1996 NAEP assessment for eighth graders, White students outperformed Black students by 29 points (on a 500-point scale) and Hispanic students by 21 points; females outperformed males by 25 points (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donohue, 1997, p. 167). In other words, the gap between females and males is comparable to that between Whites and racial/ethnic groups that have suffered systematic social and economic discrimination in this country.

I realize that this may seem a provocative comparison, particularly when one considers the historic economic advantage of males, particularly White males. It runs counter to the general thrust of most equity research (e.g. Sadker & Sadker, 1995) which has focused on the ways in which schools have “failed at fairness” in educating girls. My point is not to engage in a disadvantage competition, nor to deny the ways in which girls are often silenced in schools, nor to equate the gender gap (in language performance, particularly writing performance) to the ways Black and Hispanic students are more systematically discriminated against. I do, however, want to claim that male students often perceive school-defined literacy as excluding—or even dismissing—their own narrative preferences, and conclude early on that proficiency in school-based writing is more “natural” for girls. The subsequent, well-documented gap in performance may be a result of this perception.

I will begin by summarizing the research on gender differences in writing and then proceed to the more complex question of how these differences are read—or misread.

ALIENS IN THE HOSPITAL

Since Donald Graves’ research on gender differences in the early 70s, researchers have documented consistent gender differences in writing:

- When first graders were asked to imagine themselves as an animal in a story they might write, there were clear gender differences in the choices. Girls tend to choose domesticated animals (cat, horse), while boys choose animals that are dangerous and wild (cougar, monster) or comic (monkey) (Ollila, Bullen, & Collis, 1989).
- Second-grade girls tend to choose “primary territory” (home, school, parents, friends) as topics for writing. Boys consistently choose secondary territory (professions) or extended territory (wars, presidents, space) (Graves, 1973; McAuliffe, 1994).
- Second-grade boys write stories which focus on contests, physical and social, in which the protagonists act alone. Success is determined by winning or losing in these combative tests. By contrast, girls’ writing tends to focus more on joint action and protagonists who struggle to remain connected to the community (McAuliffe, 1994; Trepanier-Street, Romatowski, & McNair, 1990).
- When boys include females in their stories, they tend to be passive and, not coincidentally, professionless (Gray-Schlegel & Gray-Schlegel, 1995–96; Many, 1989). They tend to write about males in traditional roles of authority. When, for example, boys were asked to invert gender roles and write about a male nurse, one had the hospital invaded by aliens to change the terms of the task (Trepanier-Street, Romatowski, & McNair, 1990).
- Because boys’ writing deals so consistently with physical contests, it is far more violent than girls’ writing (S. Peterson, 1998), a trend one pair of researchers called “disturbing” (Gray-Schlegel & Gray-Schlegel, 1995–6, p. 167).
- In a study of first-year college students, women wrote autobiographical essays that were judged better than those of their male counterparts (Peterson, 1991). In analyzing the differences, she found that males tended to write about times when they acted individually, often in physical challenge that built confidence. Women tended to write about a crisis in a relationship (boyfriend, family, or an encounter with culturally different persons). In terms of writing qualities, males showed no deficit at rendering detail; their lower scores were due to a perceived difficulty in rendering “significance,” in the capacity to reflect on the meaning of the experience.
- Boys’ preferences in reading and writing narratives are more closely aligned with visually mediated storytelling—film, TV, video games, computer graphics. They also rank humor higher than girls do. Millard (1997) suggests that the traditional literature-based curriculum may ignore the more visually-mediated narratives that boys prefer.

It is one small step to turn these differences into deficits. The writing of males can be read as endorsing a whole set of anti-social values: the use of violence to resolve conflict; the lack of empathy for victims of violence; the subordination of women; extreme individualism and competition; and escapism. Even to allow such writing might be seen as complicity in a culture that condones male violence. Boys might also be viewed as drawing inspiration not from good literature, but from the morally questionable and exploitative

visual media/toy culture. It is only one more small step to take on a missionary role or at least a prohibitory role—to ban the violence, convert boys to more realistic and socially responsible fiction, wean them from space and aliens, guns and blood. Yet I suspect that any frontal assault on boyhood, as it has been culturally constructed, is a misreading of male students that is doomed to failure.

READING “VIOLENCE”

A major difficulty with the debate about “violence,” as it relates to the media’s effect on boys, is the almost unlimited scope of the term, often covering everything from the first 30 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* (Bryce, 1998) to Roadrunner cartoons, from the Kennedy assassination to the death of Kenny on *South Park*, from mass suicides to hockey games. Of course, a waiver is granted to the violence in great literature—Grimm’s fairy tales, *Hamlet*, the Bible—which for some reason uplifts and humanizes us. Can anyone doubt that the medieval audience listening to *Beowulf*, which would become the first classic of British literature, didn’t delight in Grendel’s sheer awfulness? This waiver raises the question: is the criticism really about violence or is it about taste? Is it about all violence or just “low class” violence in the more popular media?

There is also a troubling—and in my view sexist—assumption of *extreme male susceptibility to any presentation of violence*. During one of the crackdowns on violent rap music, noted African American scholar Henry Louis Gates¹ often claimed that the critics of rap were holding a double standard. Black males, he argued, were being treated as “dry tinder” ready to ignite when they heard the rappers advocate violence. Yet no one worried that White women would start imitating Madonna (except in a campy way); everybody would assume that White women would maintain some ironic detachment, some bemusement at Madonna’s antics, a presumption they would not extend to Black males. While I’m still troubled by some of the lyrics Gates defends, I think his caution is a good place to start in looking at boys’ writing about violence. It is a mistake, I feel, to automatically equate boys’ use of violence in writing with any desire to be vicious or sadistic. To do so ignores the possibility that “violence” can be mediated, viewed with humorous detachment, and appropriated for a variety of non-violent ends, including the maintenance of friendship.

We can see the way this appropriation works in a literacy narrative written by a White, first-year college student. Andrew Schneller² tried to identify the school practices that killed his love of writing. Andrew does not now enjoy writing, and he says he “want[s] to do . . . as little as possible.” But it was not always this way:

The first day of school that year I met Jon Cortis. Jon would later become my best friend through elementary school and in junior high we were inseparable. . . . I remember an as-

signment where we were supposed to draw a picture and write a sentence about it. I drew a shark (I used to spend my summers on the beach and developed a fascination with sharks). Jon drew a scuba diver covered with missiles and lasers. His sentence was “The underwater trooper kills all the sharks.” Not to be upstaged I decided to add missiles and lasers to my shark and wrote: “Attack sharks kill underwater troopers.” It was a very weak sentence, but I was (and still am) extremely competitive.

Second grade Jon was in my class again. This year we focused on writing. We had to write a story each week. It seemed that all of Jon’s stories were about underwater troopers killing my attack sharks. His stories always ended with a shark named Andrew dying in a different gruesome manner each time. Again I retaliated by having my sharks destroying his troopers, always ending with a Trooper named Jon dying some humiliating death.

I suspect that if this writing were subject to the analysis traditionally used in studies of gender, Andrew’s and Jon’s stories would fit the familiar pattern—violent, competitive, individualistic, devoid of female characters, and, from a teacher’s standpoint, numbingly repetitive. Yet in Andrew’s account, the stories are intensely social; they help to form a continuing bond with his best friend. In fact, they remain the clearest—and most positive—memory that Andrew has of his literacy learning. Dyson (1993) has coined the term “social work” to describe the work writing can do to define and bond friendship groups in a classroom. This “work” may not be evident in the writing itself, appearing more in the talk and negotiation (“Can I be in your story?”) that surrounds the writing. In Andrew’s case, seemingly antisocial, violent writing paradoxically performed a positive collaborative function.

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As Andrew moved through school, he lost the opportunity to make choices about reading and writing, and cites only one other positive experience, in seventh grade with his underwater opponent Jon.

That summer we read *Jurassic Park*. It was the first book I read on my own in a long time. I enjoyed it and recommended it to Jon, who also read and enjoyed it. There must be something about dinosaurs ripping people to shreds that appeals to twelve-year-old boys.

Here we see the pattern repeated; a book with sensationalist violence performs real social work, strengthening a social bond between friends. After they saw the movie they discussed the

differences between the movie and the book, finding the book better. Andrew concludes, “I had regained my love of reading.”

Print literacy is made attractive and possible by being embedded in systems that are . . . more attractive to the learner.

Another way to look at this affection for violence is to return to the opening conversation between my daughter and her friend. Recall his suggestion was to act, not to talk, to choose movement over reflection. When I asked one of my son’s friends why he didn’t do any voluntary reading, he responded, “Why should I choose to read, when I can *do* something?” Literacy gets in the way of the need to move, to talk, to play, to live in and with one’s own body. In one sense, writing represents the choice of language over physical action; yet this choice can be mitigated by stressing action in the writing. Watch any first-grade boys composing and you will see the drama of hands simulating explosions, accompanied by sound effects, with intervals of consultation with friends about who is in which space ship. When I have asked boys how their writing differs from that of girls, they are dismissive of the *lack* of action in the girls’ stories. As one said, making a face, “They write about walking home together.”

MULTIPLE WORLDS

Dyson (1989) argues that writing, such as Andrew described, involves the intersection of multiple worlds. The texts are, in Bakhtin’s terms, “heteroglossic” (1981, p. 293), containing echoes of various language systems. Note Andrew’s comment on later elementary school writing:

This was the year I read my first novel, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis. Jon also read the book and we used to discuss the parts we did and didn’t like, incorporate some of the characters into our writing. By the end of the year I think I had read all of the books of Narnia and killed Jon off close to twenty times in my stories.

While I can imagine Andrew’s teacher wondering aloud about Andrew and Jon, their sharks, laser guns, and mutual death, it is important to acknowledge the complexity, the multiple worlds integrated into these stories:

1. *Outside expertise*—Andrew’s interest in sharks was tied to his fascination with the ocean and surfing.
2. *Visual representation*—the writing system was tied to a drawing system.
3. *A toy or video culture*—they drew on their knowledge of the laser weapons from video games, cartoons, and toys (modeled after this culture).

4. *A friendship culture or social world* (Dyson, 1993)—writing became a collaborative (*and competitive*) form of play that helps sustain his friendship with Jon.
5. *A curriculum culture*—where writing was expected at certain times, in certain amounts to fulfill an academic expectation. In transforming largely visual narratives to written narrative, students negotiate popular culture and academic work.
6. *A culture of established literature*—where characters from their reading of the Narnia Chronicles make their incongruous appearances among the sharks and lasers.

Paradoxically, this complex orchestration of cultures and symbol systems does not make writing harder—rather these systems serve as multiple supports, multiple inducements. They are the “complex and living” attractions of literacy. To strip the writing act of these systems—by prohibiting drawing, assigning uninteresting topics, isolating a child in a tutoring situation without peers, devaluing references to popular culture, or prohibiting “violence”—is to remove the possible appeal of writing itself.

Implicit in Dyson’s (1989) argument for the “multiple worlds” of writing is what might be called a “piggyback” theory of literacy learning. The fundamental premise of this “theory” is that print literacy is made attractive and possible by being embedded in systems that are, at least initially, more attractive to the learner. Primary-school children regularly break into print by making elaborate drawings, with a label at the bottom—print literacy being pulled in the wake of the visual. Dyson (1997) shows how drama and performance can be a motivating culmination of the writing process, particularly for African American children whose writing is often rooted in voice, performance, and participation.

The greatest potential drawback for the young writer—perhaps the writer of any age—is the perception that writing entails solitude, isolation from peers, loneliness. Writing becomes much more appealing if it leads to peer solidarity, if it becomes a badge of membership. Israel (1999) has shown how the 3rd grader boy in her class formed “clubs” based on their preference for either the Cowboys or the 49ers (two nationally popular American football teams). Some of the writing, early breakthroughs to print, took the form of ritual insult: “the Cowboys rule the 49ers drool.” Membership in these clubs was the primary and indispensable inducement to write. Both Israel (1999) and Dyson (1989) reverse the logic usually used to explain collaboration. Normally collaboration is seen as the *means* to the end of producing a piece of writing. From the child’s standpoint, though, writing may be viewed as a *means* to collaborate, a ticket to participate; the fundamental attraction is not producing a piece of writing but the social opportunities the writing opens up and maintains.

For boys, this language of affiliation will often be coded in the language of violence and assault, so it is essential to read

the subtext of the message. While Andrew was repeatedly using his attack sharks to tear “Jon” apart, he was in fact maintaining a channel of friendship. And a decade later, he looks back to these stories as the high point of his literacy history.

HUMOR AND THE BURDEN OF SINCERITY

Devin Bencks, my son’s best friend, has spent so much time at our house that for a while he would put items on the shopping list (“Heah Mr. Newkirk, how about some Cool Ranch Doritos?”). Around sixth grade he developed an imaginary friend, Ed. If you asked Devin a question, like if the Red Sox would make the playoffs, he’d say, “I don’t know, I’ll have to talk to Ed.” When the time came for the state sixth grade tests, Devin and the rest of New Hampshire’s sixth graders were required to imagine they could be anyone for a day, and to write a story about their day as that person. Devin found this assignment “cheesy,” calling for a predictable kind of hero worship which he was not about to give into. The very act of writing for a distant, examining body provoked his resistance, “They don’t care who I admire; they just want to see if I can write, sentences, periods, that kind of stuff.” So he wrote about Ed.

If I could be anyone for a day, I would be Ed because he is so cool and he rules. If I was Ed I would wake up on a bed of nails surrounded by fire. I would then use my rat Bink’s saliva to extinguish the flames.

He goes on to spend an afternoon dancing with Whitney Houston, later renting a herd of goats, and finally riding off with McNeill (of the McNeill/Lehrer NewsHour) “into the sunset with our goats.” In fact, Devin memorized his essay and turned it into a performance, which, three years later, he can still do upon request.

While at first glance, this assignment might seem non-ideological (students can choose any person), I suspect that Devin found it unappealing for several reasons. The assignment suggests that the primary attitude of the writer should be open respectfulness, directed, most likely to a member of his or her parent’s (or grandparent’s generation). In other words, the assignment subtly calls upon the writer to “identify with the interests of those with power over him—parents, teachers, doctors, public authorities” (Pratt, 1996, p. 529). At the very least, it requires him to identify with authorities giving the test. Even to write about Martin Luther King Jr. in this context is to play the good student, dutifully respectful of a cultural icon, something Devin was unwilling to do. So he chose parody, a form of calculated resistance that went to the very edge of unacceptability.

This deep affection for parody and controlled resistance might be viewed as an example of what Erving Goffman (1961) calls “underlife.” While Goffman studied “total” institutions, particularly mental hospitals, his theory fits the less-

than-total institutions such as schools, and it offers an explanation of the psychological necessity of parody. According to Goffman (1961), institutions project an official view of what participants should be putting into and getting out of the organization, “what sort of self and world they are to accept for themselves” (p. 304). Yet for the inmates (and even employees) of the institution to completely accept “the embrace of the institution” is to lose a sense of personhood. Small acts of rebellion (silence, refusal to take pills, mockery of aides) constitute an “underlife,” an attempt by the individual to “keep some distance, some elbow room, between himself and that with which others assume he should be identified” (Goffman, 1961, p. 319). While Goffman sees this “resistance” as necessary for institutional life in general, it may be especially attractive to some boys who find “good studenthood” to be acquiescent, unmasculine, a denial of who they are and want to be. Goffman clearly sees this form of resistance as a human need, not particularly a male need, and Finders (1997) provides an excellent account of the often parodic underlife of adolescent girls.

Boys are often in the difficult position of maintaining their standing as sons and students, while at the same time distancing themselves from “sincere” behaviors and language that they see as threatening and feminine. Parody is one way of meeting *both* these demands. Devin’s Ed story is at once a rejection of the sincerity demand of the state assignment—yet it is also an identifiable genre that the evaluators recognized. So he was able to pull off the coup of mocking the assignment *and* getting a higher score than almost all of those who chose to take it seriously (such as my son who wrote on Cal Ripken, Jr.).

Small acts of rebellion . . . constitute an “underlife.”

We can see this balancing act in another piece co-written by Devin and my son in third grade. Devin and Andy wrote a progress report for their teacher, John (Jack) Callahan. The report contains some inside jokes that even the writers don’t understand. But Nabu was an imaginary character Jack invented to teach a math unit—when the unit was over Jack told students that Nabu died. Here’s the report:

John Richard Callahan Progress Report Date 2/6/93
Newkirk/Bencks

Jack is suffering since his good friend Nabu died. I think his donut cholesterol has gone up since. It has been affecting his work. I think he has donitides. I think he should be tutorhood and I think I found the person that would be perfect for jack madonna. I’ve talked to madonna and jack will meet her at 3:11 at wiconsin’s bingo parlor she’ll be wearing her Vogue uniform. I’ve heard they’ve made a new dunken donuts at _____. I think jack should take summer school because he needs to work on his cursive sevens. I think he

should install a toilet in the room. We have not been able to see a successful ircele imitation if by the end of the week he doesn't do the imitation he will be exspeeled.

This is the marking of how aubknockshis your sin has been this half year

The boys construct an elaborate rating system and then conclude:

I hope you are plaesed with what we've written. So now you know how poor a student jack is. I hope you can get jack back on track.

Sincerely Mr. Newkirk/Mr. Bencks

In this progress report, the two boys were both resisting and embracing the institution of school—or rather, they were embracing *by* resisting. They appropriate the language of authority and admonition, the presumption to rank, even the prerogative to threaten. They skate close to potentially sensitive areas, Jack's affection for donuts and by implication his concern for his weight; and they introduce the subjects of sexuality, arranging the rendezvous with Madonna at the Wisconsin Bingo Parlor. Yet their "progress report" is an unmistakable expression of affection, and it's difficult to imagine a more effective vehicle.

If we view "sincerity" as a gendered attitude that boys may perceive as threatening or at least best avoided, it calls upon us to reconsider literacy practices that are usually advocated as universally good. Millard (1997) raises questions about the "personal growth model," advocated by Dixon (1967) and implicitly endorsed in much whole language practice. This model which stresses personal relationships, "expressive" writing, directness of feeling, and sensory awareness may be perceived by boys as gendered female. Millard (1997) notes that a literature-based curriculum for teenage readers usually stresses novels which explore character and making sense of individual experience. In her interviews with boys, these books were often dismissed because "nothing of consequence ever happened" (p. 43). Yet realistic, introspective fiction often is considered "better literature" than comedy, science fiction, crime novels, and nonfiction, in other words, genres that traditionally appeal to boys and could form the models for their writing. Millard claims the school curricula have "naturalized" a novel-reading practice that in the 19th century was enjoyed almost exclusively by women.

Another invitation to sincerity that boys may resist is the introspective self-analysis that has become part of the portfolio movement. Boys may perceive the invitation to self-evaluate their development as something less than an open request. In fact, they may see it as a double-bind; there are two possible responses, neither very appealing. One option is to employ the "sincere" language of self-improvement (e.g. "I think I am a much better reader this quarter") which can feel like "sucking up," and is a much too close "identification with the interests of those who have power over them" (Pratt, 1990,

p. 538). Yet if they suggest boredom, dislike for reading, lack of progress, they might find themselves in violation of the true intentions of the teacher, eager to see the student on the positive train to self-improvement. And if we accept Tannen's (1992) claim that males are sensitive to hierarchies of authority, boys may question the point of self-evaluation from a clearly subordinate position of power (i.e. when the grade ultimately comes from the teacher).

CONVERTING THE NATIVES

By arguing for a distinct culture of boys, I do not mean to suggest that these preferences should be considered inevitable, or in the long run entirely beneficial. As Peterson (1991) has argued, development in writing involves "cross dressing," a capacity to move out of stereotypical gender positions. This is clearly an important goal, for both boys and girls. But as Millard (1997) has shown, crossdressing comes easier to females than males; "tomboy" has never been the pejorative term for girls that "sissy" is for boys. If masculinity is a more tightly constructed cultural category, with sharper penalties for deviance toward the feminine, it follows that to create equity in access to literacy, teachers will need to acknowledge the cultural materials (e.g. the affection for parody and action, interest in professional sports, cartoons, videos games) that boys (and *many girls*) bring into the classroom (for an example see Salvio, 1994). To fully engage this cultural material, it is necessary to understand the masculine distaste for sincerity, and the complex ways that the positive can be encoded in the negative, praise in criticism, friendship in violence, love in death.

One key to working with this cultural material is recognizing the openness of even the most "violent" writing to parody and humor. In fact, much of the violence boys like is "violence with a wink," violence that parodies itself or at least suggests its own unreality (the James Bond movies are full of such moments). The student who can engineer humor within the context of an action story almost invariably gains status. So, while it is tempting to bring boys into the "realistic fiction" camp, another strategy is to explore the ways in which they honor parody in their own stylized "violent" writing. Here are some other suggestions:

—We need to recognize the ways writers do innovate within stereotypical male genres. My sense is that this writing does evolve (as it did when Andrew introduced the Narnia characters). Recall also how Jon killed off Andrew in "a *different* gruesome manner every time." I recently read a space adventure story which began with the usual group of boys in a plane, which came under attack, and as they got closer to the attacking place they saw that it contained *their fathers*. Now, there's a twist.

—We need to recognize cartooning as an important art form and narrative medium. It often seems there

is an implicit hierarchy in school art programs where copying Monet's *Water Lilies* is seen as more valuable than creating a caricature; where the quilter comes in for an artist residency, and the cartoonist doesn't.

—We need to be familiar with the narrative models that boys emulate. This may mean seeing some movies, watching some TV we might not otherwise choose to watch. Furthermore, we might ask how we can draw on these visual narratives to teach the conventions of story writing—plot, dialogue, detail, suspense, humor, character. How can we help students come closer to those models of narrative they find most appealing?

300

The most serious mistake, it seems to me, is viewing these preferences as pathologies, as anti-social ways of being that must be modified, or, if that is not possible, banned. I view this attitude as a form of cultural suppression that is sure to alienate male students from literacy and the school culture in general. Boys become the “natives” to be converted to more socially responsible preferences. It calls to mind W.E.B. Dubois' question—“How does it feel to be a problem?” (1989, p. 3) ●

Notes

1. The comment noted here was made during a talk Gates did at the University of New Hampshire in the fall of 1989.
2. Andrew's quotes come from a literacy biography that he completed for my freshman English class.

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