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## WRITING ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN

**Elizabeth Spatz**

An exciting project that not only improves writing but improves lives is one in which my students study their prejudices about the opposite sex. Most of them are not even aware of their sexist attitudes, yet I have never met one who is free of them. Each time I lead my students through the project, not only do we have an exciting time, but all of us grow together. They invariably produce the finest writing of the semester and often come to see themselves and each other more realistically and compassionately. For teachers who are willing to travel down unfamiliar paths in their classrooms, this is one I recommend without hesitation.

A few years ago, while discussing my own uncertainties about men, I decided to do what a friend suggested: to actually test my beliefs by interviewing a number of men, both strangers and friends. It turned out to be the first step in my overcoming my own prejudices and learning to see men differently for the first time in my life. Then, when I continually discovered my own prejudices expressed on the pages of my students' journals, I decided to take a risk and assign the same project to them. I have been using it in both my composition I and II classes for two years now, and it is the most successful thing I have ever done.

This project occurs toward the end of the semester, after we have had plenty of time to feel safe and comfortable together. We have all been actively peer editing as well as sharing honest journal entries and essays, so we have established an atmosphere of trust. In sharing my own writing, I try to model an honest, open approach which encourages them to tackle subjects that are significant to them.

They begin in their journals. On the top of a page they write the words "Men are..." or "Woman are..." and then make a long, unedited list of all of their beliefs about the opposite sex. This process is exciting to watch. Some

students plow right in, filling page after page. Some try to write the right answers— comments such as "Men are just like women" or "Men and women are equal." Others spend most of the time scratching their heads and staring into space. Some pour out nineteen years of frustration, confusion, and bitterness. Often I go around and glance at their pages; without fail, I can pick up a list from either sex and find exactly the same beliefs. "Men are not trustworthy." "Women are not trustworthy." "Men will tell you anything to get their way." "Women will tell you anything to get their way." "Men are manipulative." "Women are manipulative." If they do not object, I read some of these aloud, and we are on our way.

Some students have a difficult time expressing their full range of prejudices in the classroom, surrounded as they are with "the enemy." They are given time to work on their lists at home, knowing I will not be satisfied until they fill a few pages. I sometimes show them my original list, embarrassingly honest and irrational as it is, so they feel safe to express themselves fully.

When their lists are complete, I check them. I want to be sure that they have included significant beliefs, not simply trite, generalizations such as "Women shop too much" or "Men get too involved in sports." I like to see that they have gone below the surface and looked at the real differences they perceive between the sexes and how those differences interfere with trust and communication. While there is nothing wrong with checking out their superficial beliefs, I want to see some substance as well.

Our next step is turning their beliefs into questionnaires with which to interview at least twenty-five men or women. This is when the groans resound off the walls and reverberate down the halls. "You expect me to ask guys about this stuff— total strangers?" Yes, I tell them, it is a wonderful way to meet new people.

Before creating their questionnaires, I provide them with some sample questions from previous classes so they can develop an idea of what works and what doesn't. Some students elect to write a list of fifty or more true or false statements. Others make up a shorter list of questions which require in-depth answers. The students with backgrounds in psychology demonstrate how to ask the same question in more than one way in order to recognize when someone is not telling the truth.

Often their questions reflect the one serious relationship they have had so far, or their parents' marriages, or their relationships to their brothers and sisters. In their peer editing groups, they share their questionnaires, not beginning their interviews until they agree that their questions will work. While what they end up writing is totally up to them, I do insist that the interviews themselves be taken seriously.

The classroom is our first laboratory. Everyone interviews everyone else. I am always surprised at how few are brave enough to interview their teacher, and I am completely candid in my answers. There are no restrictions on what subjects may be investigated, but I tell them there is also no obligation to answer a question that they feel is inappropriate or intrusive. The process of interviewing and being interviewed is an integral part of the learning experience for them. For example, date rape has become so common that there are always a few people who have had the experience or are closely connected to someone who has. I encourage them to ask questions about these issues, questions about the confusion men feel about women's mixed signals as well as questions about male sexual responsibility. If a student does not choose to answer these questions, that is acceptable. Learning to say no, learning who is worthy of trust and who is not are all important lessons they can get from the experience. Because there is no coercion, implied or stated, many students reveal secrets they have never previously shared, and there has never been an incident where trust has been violated.

As they leave the boundaries of the classroom, I suggest that they not limit themselves to people who are their age, background, and education. One of my core beliefs turned out to be true only for men who were raised Catholic, but had no meaning at all to other men. The wider the variety of the interviews, the more interesting the answers are likely to be. Sometimes I send them to nearby colleagues' offices, warning them which instructors are likely to respond to intimate questions from students and which might seriously suggest that I be tarred and feathered. One woman student in her forties, who was in an abusive marriage at the time, came bouncing into my office looking years younger, delighted at the discovery that there were men in the world like the philosophy instructor next door whose answers had truly surprised her. The more men she interviewed, the more hopeful she became about freeing herself from a self-destructive life.

What is most exciting about this project, unlike many others, is that we never have a clue where we will end up when we begin. Some young men

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learn that they have been continually finding only superficial, status-conscious women, when the world is filled with many women who are neither. Often they are disturbed at having their beliefs shattered but finally become optimistic that there may be alternatives to the relationships they have had so far. The women who have been raped are at first afraid but then freed of many of their fears as they question men on these subjects and find compassionate friends.

Usually the interviews take two weeks. During this time, we either read essays on the subject of men and women in Composition I, or short stories, poems, and plays in Composition II. When everyone's project is finished—when they have discovered that some of their brothers, sisters, boyfriends, and girlfriends answered remarkably alike while others were surprisingly different—or when they have learned that they have actually drawn women or men into their lives who confirm their beliefs, no matter how painful they are—or when they have met a wide variety of people out there who did not, in fact, confirm their expectations—then it is time to study their conclusions and write their papers.

I suggest that they study their material until they find a slant that works for them. Anything at all is possible, and this is where they give their creative sides full expression. Those who are having difficulty meet with me or in small groups to discuss their alternatives. In some ways, this is my favorite time because I have no idea where they will go with their material, and I am so frequently surprised by what they do. Many complain that this is the most difficult stage; others find their essays effortlessly write themselves. Without exception they admit to having learned more about themselves and each other than they would have imagined at the start.

What kinds of essay do they produce? One young man, whose previous essays had been wordy, boring, and filled with irritating jargon, had a wonderful time writing a spoof of the whole project. For the first time in my course, he revealed his lighter side. Writing under a stuffy pseudonym, he satirized men's views of the women's movement and made the entire class laugh out loud. He left the course more comfortable with himself as a writer and as a male.

Other interesting and often entertaining essays cover topics such as the power politics of dating, communication rituals between the sexes, amusing descriptions of male bonding from the female point of view, and

female bonding from the male perspective. One woman's paper was written in the style of a television dating show and succeeded both in making some important points about honesty in relationships and being delightfully funny.

One woman who had been raped wrote a brilliant essay about men's attitudes toward rape and abortion. She chose to interview the husbands and partners of women who were in a support group to help them deal with these issues. What she found not only surprised her, it changed her life. The men shared their deepest fears and pain, their helplessness, and she discovered that men are also victims of rape and that they need support and understanding as well. No longer as afraid of them, she learned to look at her life and the men in it in a new way.

While it is always disturbing to discover how common the issues of rape, child abuse, and incest are, at the same time it is encouraging to watch students begin to explore these subjects in their essays. As they write about their own experiences and find a variety of wonderful books and articles that offer them support, as well as interview understanding men and women on the subject, they take the first steps in recovering from a serious trauma. What usually happens is that once one or two individual students begin to share their rough drafts on one of these sensitive subjects, two or three others will decide to explore their experiences as well. Excellent, important essays usually result.

Although there are always surprises and twists that I cannot anticipate beforehand, certain results are inevitable. My students are eager to talk about what they are learning, excited by the responses to their questions, and deeply confused as their prejudices often prove invalid. They are not the same writers or people they were when they began. Often they will call me or run into me well after the course is over, still enthusiastic about how this project changed their lives. And their writing improves as well. The final test of a worthwhile writing project to every teacher is how we feel when we face that huge stack of essays. With this project, I cannot wait to dive into them, and I truly enjoy what I read.

For teachers who are willing to take risks in the classroom, who are able to create safe atmospheres where students feel comfortable to be themselves, who are not afraid to explore subjects that may be intimate, and who want to give their students an invaluable opportunity, I suggest trying

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this writing project. One final word of caution: I would not have tried this with my students if I had not already done it myself. If you decide to take them on this journey, either commit yourself to taking it with them, or take it yourself first, but do not send them out there alone. They will have only as much trust in the process as your experience, not your words, bring to it. Yes, it is quite a risk, but the growth that accompanies it makes it worth the price.

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