

A COMPARISON BETWEEN ASSIGNED TOPIC AND
UNASSIGNED TOPIC WRITING COMPOSITIONS
OF FIFTH GRADE STUDENTS

THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate Committee of the
Department of Education and Human Development
State University of New York
College at Brockport
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Education

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April 1990

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a statistically significant and important relationship between fifth grade students' writing products when self-selected-topic compositions were compared to assigned-topic compositions.

The study was conducted over an eight-week period of time with 88 fifth grade students from a suburban school in western New York. There were 48 boys and 40 girls in the study. Each student was requested to write two compositions; the first composition was based on a topic of the student's own choice, the second composition was based on an assigned topic selected from a previous New York State "Survey Test in Writing." Scores comparing self-selected-topic compositions to assigned-topic compositions were analyzed using the point biserial coefficient of determination.

An analysis of the data revealed no statistically significant and important relationships between the scores of self-selected-topic compositions and assigned-topic compositions. While the statistics were not sufficient to reach the criteria deemed "educationally important", the general trend reflected higher mean scores for self-selected-topic compositions for both boys and girls. Girls acquired higher mean scores than the boys on both assigned and unassigned compositions. Students ranked as "satisfactory" writers by their classroom teachers exhibited the greatest increase in mean scores on unassigned-topic compositions.

Based on this study, further research in the area of process writing and topic selection would benefit the educational system. Skills, acquired while writing compositions on self-selected topics, will transfer to other educational and content areas.

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Statement of the Problem

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a statistically significant and important relationship between fifth grade students' writing products when self-selected topic compositions were compared to assigned topic compositions.

Questions to be Answered

1. Is there an important relationship between fifth graders' self-selected-topic compositions and assigned-topic compositions that have been holistically scored?

2. Is there an important relationship between the researcher's holistic scores, based on self-selected-topic compositions, and the classroom teacher's evaluation of fifth grade students' overall writing performance?

Need for the Study

In the past few decades children in the United States have been criticized for their poor writing skills. In an attempt to address these criticisms a new educational plan, the Integrated Whole Language Approach, has been introduced in many school districts.

This new plan advocates a process approach to writing. The focus is on the process, rather than on the product of the composition.

The writing process approach consists of three general stages: the prewriting stage (choosing a topic, brainstorming, research, getting ready to write); the writing stage (getting ideas on paper); and the re-writing stage (editing, expanding, improving). Graves (1983) contends that the very first step of the writing process, choosing a topic, is "the single most important factor contributing to writer variability" (p. 263). Other researchers support Graves and contend that when students are given the freedom to choose

their own topics, they are motivated to assume ownership and responsibility for their writing. Freedom of choice gives the students the opportunity to write about their own experiences, feelings, interests, and concerns. New topic ideas surface as the students participate in literature-based experiences. Many whole language enthusiasts believe that students write more confidently and acquire more skills when they are writing on a topic of their own choice.

There are pros and cons to both the integrated whole language approach and the traditional approach. Should the student's creative writing ability be addressed first or should the student acquire structural and mechanical skills first in order to provide a framework for his/her creative writing ability? Graves' (1984) research reflects that students first need to write their story on paper. Secondly, they can be taught standard structural and mechanical skills. Graves (1984) stated that students need to share their ideas with others but if educators stress structure and mechanics over creativity, the students may lose

their desire to write. Other researchers have found that skills exercises may interfere with the student's creative expression of ideas (Calkins, 1978, Turbill, 1982). Ezor's (1974) research found that specific techniques and structures could be taught and used as a framework for the students' creative writing ability.

Over the years educators such as Britton (1975) have maintained that students, especially those with low self esteem, are often devastated when faced with the decision of topic selection. To these students, even the first step of the integrated writing process, choice of topic, becomes a stumbling block.

Research is needed to address the pros and cons of the traditional approach and the whole language approach to writing in the elementary classroom. This research will also offer insight into Graves' (1984) question, "If given the opportunity in an environment providing the freedom to exercise choice in activities, will children produce more writing on their own than if the teacher gives specific assigned tasks?" (p. 41)

If the educational system in United States is striving to improve the quality of writing, it must be aware of the best approach and train the teachers accordingly.

Definition of Terms

Composition: A short essay written as a school assignment.

Assigned Writing Topic: The classroom teacher specifies the subject matter on which the student will write a composition.

Self-Selected Writing Topic: The student selects the subject matter for his/her composition. The topic often relates to the student's own experiences, dreams, interests, feelings, and concerns.

Limitations

The subjects in this study have received an education based on the whole language philosophy since they were in first grade. The conclusions from this study can not generally apply to all fifth grade students.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a statistically significant and important relationship in the writing products of fifth grade students when comparing self-selected-topic compositions to assigned-topic compositions.

The literature reviewed in this chapter has been divided into the following four subtitles: The Need to Write, Benefits of Self-Selected Topics, Benefits of Assigned Topics, and Procedures to Aid Children in Selecting Their Own Topics.

The Need to Write

It has been noted by many educators and authors that students who write regularly reap many benefits, both personally and socially. Writing allows students to be creative. Through the medium of writing, students can freely express their

feelings, ideas, thoughts and dreams. As a student writes, thinks, and rewrites he/she becomes a better writer. As he becomes a better writer, he becomes a better reader. When he explores ideas and organizes various thoughts together, he becomes a better thinker. His vocabulary increases and his powers of observation and description are sharpened. Through the process of writing, he becomes a more powerful and effective communicator.

Murray (1982) defined writing as a process which is not magic, but the result of a series of logical, cognitive, and affective activities that can be understood and learned. He described writing as an exploration. He believes that people need to write "to inform, to persuade, to entertain, to explain, but most of all to discover what they have to say." (p. 3)

Graves (1983) states:

Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is not an accident. Before they went to school they marked up walls, pavements, and newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens or pencils...anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say, 'I am.' (p. 3)

Atwell (1987) supported Graves' statement:
"Right from the first day of kindergarten students should be using writing as a way to think about and give shape to their own ideas." (p. 17)

She adds: "Students need to try out the content of their writing on others and on themselves as readers.... They need to find new topics to know what they know." (p. 88)

Calkins and Harwayne (1987) also stated a need for sharing writing, "When we share writing, we uncover and share who we are." (p. 21)

Forster (cited in Murray, 1982) states, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" (p 4)

Moravia adds, "One writes a novel in order to know why one writes it." (p. 4)

Fielding (cited in Murray, 1982) described writing as a "voyage, an odyssey, a discovery, because I'm never certain of precisely what I will find." (p. 3)

Day-Lewis (cited in Murray, 1982) explained the need to write:

I do not sit down at my desk to put into verse something that is already clear in my mind. If it were clear in my mind, I should have no incentive or need to write about it, for I am an explorer... We do not write in order to be understood, we write in order to understand. (p.4)

Benefits of Self-Selected Topics

It is the responsibility of the educational system to teach students the art of communication: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The art of writing has long been the source of students' apprehensions and teachers' frustrations. In the past ten years educators and students have been severely criticized by the media because of the decline in students' writing scores. In response to this criticism, many school districts have adopted the Integrated Whole Language Approach (IWLA) in an effort to improve students' writing skills. Traditionally, a written composition was the product of a classroom assignment with teacher-specified topics. Whole language advocates prefer to allow students to choose their own topics.

The whole language approach supports Murray's (1968) description of the "writing process" which comprises the following seven steps:

1. Selecting a topic
2. Sensing an Audience
3. Searching for Specifics
4. Creating a Design
5. Writing an Original Draft
6. Evaluating the Draft
7. Rewriting.

Step one, selecting a topic, is the focus of this research. According to researchers Atwell (1987), Calkins (1986), and Graves (1984), there are natural stages in a child's acquisition of writing. The first stage begins with ideas (topics) in the child's mind. A child is highly motivated to write when allowed to write on a topic of his/her own choosing.

Graves (1984) and Turbill (1983) contend that a student needs control of his/her own writing. Choosing one's own topic is considered important because it sets the tone for the whole writing project. Graves (1983) stated:

Topic is the single most important factor contributing to writer variability. When the topic is right or 'hot' the child has an access to an abundance of information, there is a ripeness to the connections within the information, the semantic domain is heightened, the language flows. Whether the child's writing is imaginative, personal narrative, or composing an information book the topic is usually hot because there is a strong root of personal experience or effect to the topic. (p. 263)

According to Graves (1983), "Variability is cited as a positive trait." (p. 258) A high level of variability is often the result when writers are allowed to choose their own topics and are given the opportunity to take risks. Healthy variance sees children willing to try new subjects, voices, and forms of organization and language. (Graves, 1983)

Whole language educators usually prefer to allow their students to choose their own topics. Researchers, Calkins (1986), Graves (1983), and Turbill (1986), have discovered that students wrote

more confidently when given the freedom to choose their own topics because they became personally immersed in the writing and assumed responsibility and ownership of the article. Calkins (1986) states that when students are allowed to choose their own topic, the assignment "transforms writing from an assigned task into a personal project." (p. 6)

Calkins also states, "If a child is really excited about his/her topic, then there is no end to the effort he/she will expend on the project." (p. 8)

Research data from Graves' (1983) study also revealed that self-selected topics had a big influence on handwriting development because the students' urge to express themselves cause them to be more relaxed in dealing with the mechanical aspects of handwriting.

Graves' (1983) research indicated that unassigned writing topics stimulated boys' writing and resulted in longer compositions. Additional data indicated that revision patterns in students' writing were positively influenced when the student was allowed to choose his/her own topic.

Whale (1985) describes writing in schools as a directed activity in which teachers assume responsibility for stimulating students to write. The teacher decides the nature of the writing task, the time of the day and the length of time to complete the writing. Whale contends that if the teacher always assigns the writing topics, the students' abilities may be limited. These students may develop the language and writing skills required by their teacher, but they may find it difficult to express themselves for their own purposes.

When students are required to respond to an assigned topic and when the expressive mode of writing is overlooked by teachers, the range of student writing abilities is limited. The expressive mode of writing is the base from which transactional and poetic writing develop. (Britton, 1975; Whale and Robinson, 1978; Whale, 1980.)

Graves' (1973) study analyzed seven-year-old students' writing for thematic choices in unassigned writing. The choices were categorized

into primary, secondary, and extended territories. (A territory can be an event, a theme, an experience, or a location.) Primary territory described writing about self, feelings, home, school, personal toys, teachers and "I" stories. Secondary territory described writing about objects, persons, and activities within the metropolitan community, for example, jets, boats, police, firemen, sports, crime, explosions, fires, bulldozers, and nurses. Extended territory describes writing about current events on the national and world scene, for example, presidents, Apollo 17, documented war, and space. Graves' data revealed that boys wrote more in secondary and extended territories whereas girls wrote more in primary territories.

Benefits of Assigned Topics

Some students welcome an assigned topic because it relieves them of the responsibility, effort, and time required for making a decision. Most of these students have had little practice selecting their own topics because teachers have traditionally assigned writing topics.

Graves (1983) stated that students who are fed topics, story starters and lead sentences as a steady diet, rightfully panic when the topic choice and motivation is their responsibility. They often make poor topic choices at the beginning of their writing experience.

Graves (1983) also states that some students are devastated when asked to choose their own topic because they believe they know nothing and have had no significant experiences in their lives. When students consider their own topic unworthy, they tend to resort to retelling television plots or write over and over on the same subject. (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983)

According to Atwell's (1987) research, when students feel insecure, "They tend to settle for risk-free topics that they don't genuinely care about, or topics that are so broad that it is difficult to write about them." (p. 90)

According to Britton (1975), "Assigned writing tasks should assist students to learn and practice an increasing range of modes of writing, of topics, and of forms." (p. 15) Teachers, by assigning

specific types of writing activities, control the students' range of writing experiences.

Whales' (1985) study advocates the use of teacher assigned topics and specific writing instructions because consistency and specificity in instruction are important aspects in promoting student growth. She also suggests that the teacher specify primary or secondary territory when delegating assignments to young writers because it gives the students the opportunity to practice writing in an expressive (personal) mode. She states that the expressive mode is the base from which transactional and poetic writing develop. Therefore, if the expressive mode is overlooked by teachers, the range of the student's writing is limited.

Graves (cited in Calkins 1986) stated that when children are in first and second grade they rarely agonize over topic choice. However, as children grow older they lose their easy confidence. "It is as if the protective cloak of egocentricity has been taken from them." (p. 68) His theory is that concern comes with audience awareness. ("Will the

others like my story?") ("Will others laugh at me because they think my story is silly?")

Calkins (1986) supported Graves' theory and stated that children, concerned about audience approval, may experience writers' block when asked to choose their own topic. They may need the teacher's assistance to learn how to select a topic.

Procedures to Aid Children in Selecting Topics

Occasionally, children struggle in selecting a topic for their writing. It is may be because they lack confidence. Calkins (1986) states that if children do not feel self-confident, they will probably resort to formalized, voiceless stories which are so common in classrooms where children rarely write.

Graves (1983) advises that students should choose topics based upon what they know, their own personal set of experiences; the events in their daily lives, their family, their vacations, their pets, the environment, and their interactions with other people in the community.

Calkin's (1986) research described her observations in a classroom where topics had always been assigned. She stated, "When teachers doled out topics, students became dependent on them. They'd come to believe their lives and experiences weren't worth writing about." (p. 23) They had come to believe they had no writing territory, no turf of their own.

Calkins used the following modeling technique to help overcome the dependencies resulting from the constant diet of assigned topics:

The teacher stands in front of the blackboard and lists four topic ideas of her own and explains why she is interested in each idea. She chooses one topic, stating the reason why she chooses that particular topic, and indicating that she would write on the other topics another day.

Next, the teacher invites the class to share their own topic ideas. She creates a list of Class Topics on the blackboard. When the list is complete she asks the students to copy the items on the list that are of interest to them and to add any other topics they choose. This personal Topic

List is kept in the front of their writing folder for future reference.

Turbill (1983) stated, "For too long we teachers have underestimated children's desire to write and their ability to find topics for themselves. We assumed that 'teaching writing' meant assigning topics and compelling children to write about them. We've constantly searched for 'good and exciting topics' in the belief that 'motivation' depended on our choice." (p. 43)

Turbill's Saint George Project research verified two principles: first, that even small children can find topics of their own; and, second, that children write best, and develop most rapidly as writers, when they write on their own topics and are given more control of their writing.

In her most recent book Turbill (1986) stated,

Children can find their own topics. When a child writes about things he or she has experienced--things that are really known and really cared about--then the responsibility of ownership for the writing stays with the young writer, and a distinctive voice sounds through the writing. (p.30)

Goebel (cited in Turbill, 1983) suggests that writing seems to feed on the input given to children: reading to them, talking with them, and

exposing them to worthwhile experiences. She encourages lively class discussions whenever children are anxious to share experiences, thoughts, and fears. Her students have written about "the visit to school of a blind man, alarm at a bushfire right beside the school, the technicalities of making an Easter basket, favourite songs, personal tastes in food, fear of the dark, frustrations caused by younger brothers and sisters, ..." (p. 43)

Bartlett (cited in Turbill, 1983) recommends literature as a source of inspiration for new topic ideas. She reads to her students and encourages them to read. Bartlett states that, "Ideas catch on in this class. No one is ever stumped for topics now that they have gained confidence as writers. They are very supportive of each other." (p. 44)

Harris (cited in Turbill, 1983) suggests ideas for children who experience writers' block and are temporarily stuck for a topic:

We regularly brainstorm ideas for our 'Good Story Topics Chart';
We keep a Story Box of assorted items--shells, seeds, spectacles, an alarm clock,--to stir the imagination and the senses;

We keep a 'Picture File', chiefly of magazine cuttings which the children bring from home. (p. 44)

Harris directs any child with a topic problem to the Chart, the Box or the File before she conferences with them.

Walshe (cited in Turbill, 1986), author of Every Child Can Write!, offers the following suggestions for teachers:

1. Keep a Class Topic Book to which the children make additions whenever they hit on an interesting topic.
2. Hold brainstorm sessions which list topics; then each child adds some of these to their personal list.
3. Rewrite well-known fairy tales.
4. Offer models for emulation; books, stories, poems, plays, comics.
5. Introduce the writing session by hosting an authors' circle wherein students read their own published books to their classmates. Discuss the books.

The above aids have proven to be effective methods in helping young writers become confident in choosing their own topics.

Design of the Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a statistically significant and important relationship between fifth grade students writing products when self-selected-topic compositions were compared to assigned-topic compositions.

Null Hypotheses

1. There will be not be an important relationship between fifth graders' self-selected-topic compositions and assigned-topic compositions that have been holistically scored.

2. There will be not be an important relationship between the researcher's holistic scores, based on self-selected-topic compositions, and the classroom teacher's evaluation of fifth grade students' overall writing performance.

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects of this study comprised 88 fifth grade students, 48 boys and 40 girls, of varying writing abilities from a suburban school in western New York State. These subjects had been educated in a whole language environment since first grade. The classroom teachers provided the researcher with grades based on each student's overall writing ability. The students were divided into five groups based on their writing ability: excellent performance (E), satisfactory-plus performance (S+), satisfactory performance (S), satisfactory-minus performance (S-), and unsatisfactory performance (U).

Materials

Materials for this study consist of:

1. A written composition based on an assigned topic from a previous New York State fifth grade "Survey Test in Writing."
2. A written composition based on a self-selected topic.

Procedures

The fifth grade students in this study were assigned a composition based on a topic selected from a previous New York State "Survey Test in Writing." The assignment given to the subjects was to write a composition based on the following introduction: "I was reading one day when suddenly something tapped me on my shoulder. Surprised, I reached up. I felt a big, hairy paw."

The students were allowed as much time as they needed to complete their compositions. They could write as many pages as they wished, but the minimum length was one page long. They were not allowed to use the dictionary, but advised to use their best invented spelling.

They were instructed to:

1. Write their first draft.
2. Read the draft carefully and edit it.
3. Rewrite a final copy.

All subjects were also requested to write a composition about a topic of their own choice. The other instructional criteria remained the same as the assigned-topic composition. They had approximately four weeks to complete both assignments.

Evauation

A four point rating scale was used, with four being the upper limit, to evaluate the two compositions.

- I. A level "4" paper showed that the student:
 - A. Develops the topic in an interesting, imaginative and coherent way using a logical plan of organization.
 - B. Develops ideas fully through the use of relevant details.
 - C. Shows skillful use of sentence variety.
 - D. Uses specific, vivid language.
 - E. Makes few or no errors in mechanics.
- II. A level "3" paper showed that the student:
 - A. Develops the topic using an acceptable plan of organization.
 - B. Demonstrates satisfactory development of ideas with adequate supporting details.
 - C. Uses sentence variety.
 - D. Uses appropriate language.
 - E. Makes errors in mechanics that do not interfere with communication.

III. A level "2" paper showed that the student:

- A. Attempts to develop the topic but demonstrates weakness in organization.
- B. Demonstrates weakness in the development of ideas with little use of detail.
- C. Demonstrates sentence sense, but has little sentence variety.
- D. Uses incorrect language occasionally.
- E. Makes errors in mechanics that interfere with communication.

IV. A level "1" paper showed that the student:

- A. Minimally addresses the topic but lacks organization.
- B. Does not use supporting details in the development of ideas.
- C. Demonstrates a lack of sentence sense.
- D. Frequently uses incorrect language
- E. Makes serious errors in mechanics that interfere with communication.

V. A "0" paper:

- A. Is totally unrelated to the topic.
- B. Is so illegible that no sense can be made of the composition.
- C. Is incoherent and the syntax is so garbled that no sense can be made of the composition. (New York State Education Department, 1982)

The readers who scored the compositions were trained according to the guidelines specified in the "Rater Training Packet" provided by the New York State Education Department (1982). The readers holistically scored each of the students' two compositions (one composition based on a self-selected topic and the second composition based on an assigned topic) on the basis of the above evaluation criteria. The holistic method of scoring is based on the assumption that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In holistic scoring, the rater looks at a piece of writing as an indication of how well the writer has used the

English language to communicate his message. Holistic scoring is a widely used procedure for evaluating student writing when there is a large number of writing samples to judge. Rather than making separate judgments about content, organization, syntax, mechanics, etc., the reader makes a single judgment about the overall quality of the writing. "Since a piece of writing communicates a whole message, holistic evaluation by a respondent provides a way of getting close to what is essential in the art of communication" (Cooper as cited in New York Education Department, 1982).

At least two readers scored each of the compositions in order to increase the reliability of the final scores obtained from the rating process. If there was a discrepancy, a third independent reader evaluated the composition. The discrepant score was dropped if two of the three scores agreed.

Analysis

The statistical procedure used to analyze the relationship between and the assigned-topic and the unassigned-topic compositions was the biserial coefficient of determination technique.

Summary

This study, based on writing ability, compared: the difference between unassigned-topic compositions and assigned-topic compositions of 88 fifth grade students, the difference between the researcher's holistically scored, self-selected-topic compositions and the classroom teacher's evaluation of the student's overall writing performance, and the difference between 48 boys' and 40 girls' unassigned and assigned-topic compositions.

Two sets of writing samples from each of the 88 subjects were evaluated by three readers. A modified four point holistic rating scale, adapted from the New York State Education Department Rater Training Packet (1982), was used to score the compositions. The statistical technique used to compare the scores was the biserial coefficient of determination .

Statistical Analysis

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a statistically significant and important relationship between fifth grade students' writing products when self-selected-topic compositions were compared to assigned-topic compositions.

Findings and Interpretations

The null hypotheses investigated in this study were as follows:

1. There will be no important relationships between fifth graders' self-selected-topic compositions and assigned-topic compositions that have been holistically scored.
2. There will be no important relationships between the researcher's holistic scores, based on self-selected-topic compositions, and the classroom teacher's evaluation of fifth grade students' overall writing performance.

Null hypothesis number one stated that there will be no important relationships between fifth graders' self-selected-topic compositions and assigned-topic compositions that have been holistically scored. The statistical procedure used to analyze the relationship between self-selected-topic and assigned-topic compositions was the point biserial coefficient of determination (r_{pb}^2). A preset value of 20 per cent was required to satisfy the criteria to be considered educationally important. Table 1 presents the statistical values obtained when self-selected-topic compositions were compared to assigned-topic compositions.

Table 1

A comparison between self-selected-topic and assigned-topic compositions of 88 fifth grade students.

Y =	2.65341	+	-.11932	*	X
Unadjusted r ²				=	.0063
Coefficient of Determination		=			.07966
Standard Error of Estimate		=			.75077
Variance of Estimate		=			.56366
Degrees of Freedom		=			88

The coefficient of determination value of .07966 was less than the required preset value of 20 percent, therefore revealing no important relationships between fifth graders' self-selected-topic and assigned-topic compositions. The data failed to reject the first null hypothesis.

Null hypothesis number 2 stated that there will be no important relationships between the researcher's holistic scores (R. Scores), based on self-selected-topics, and the classroom teacher's evaluation (T. Rank Scores) of fifth grade students' overall writing performance. The data used to compare the teacher-ranked scores to the researcher's holistic scores are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Researcher's Scores Versus Teacher Rank Scores

Y =	2.35227	+	0	*	X	
Unadjusted r ²						= 0
Coefficient of Determination						= 0
Std. Error of Estimate						= .8715
Variance of Estimate						= .7595
Degrees of Freedom						= 88

X = Researcher's Scores

Y = Teacher Rank Scores

The coefficient of determination value of 0 indicated that there was no important relationships

between the researcher's holistic scores on self-selected-topic compositions and the teacher's overall-performance scores. Therefore, the data failed to reject the second null hypothesis.

Summary

The results of the analysis of the data indicated no important relationships between fifth grade students' writing products when self-selected-topic compositions were compared to assigned-topic compositions. The results also revealed that there were no important relationships between the researcher's holistic scores, based on self-selected-topic compositions, and the teacher-ranked scores for the students' overall performance.

Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a statistically significant and important relationship between fifth grade students' writing products when self-selected-topic compositions were compared to assigned-topic compositions.

Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from analysis of the data.

The first null hypothesis was not rejected. There were no educationally important relationships between the scores of the self-selected-topic compositions and the assigned-topic compositions.

The second null hypothesis was not rejected. There were no important relationships between the researcher's holistic scores, based on self-selected-topic compositions, and the classroom teacher's evaluation of fifth grade students' overall writing performance.

The results of the coefficient of determination analysis indicated that there were no educationally important relationships between the writing products of the subjects when self-selected-topic compositions were compared to assigned-topic compositions. However, a slight trend emerged in favor of the self-selected-topic compositions. The research data revealed a 4.7 per cent difference in the subjects' mean scores indicating a small bias in favor of the self-selected-topic compositions.

When boys' and girls' scores for self-selected-topic and assigned-topic compositions were statistically compared, the boys' mean scores (2.51 for self-selected-topics and 2.44 for assigned-topics) revealed a 2.9 per cent difference favoring self-selected-topic compositions. The girls' mean scores (2.83 for self-selected-topics and 2.65 for assigned-topics) revealed a 6.8 per cent difference favoring self-selected-topic compositions. It might be concluded from the data that fifth grade students attain higher scores on self-selected-topic compositions than on assigned topic compositions.

An analysis of the data revealed that the girls scored slightly higher than the boys on both assigned-topic compositions (8.6 per cent higher) and self-selected-topic compositions (12.7 per cent higher).

The statistical data compared the number of words per self-selected-topic and assigned-topic compositions for fifth grade boys and girls. The boys' mean score, 217 words for self-selected-topic compositions and 219 for assigned-topic compositions, indicated a minute advantage in favor of assigned topics. These data conflict with Graves' (1973) research which indicated that unassigned writing topics stimulated boys' writing and resulted in longer compositions. This could be due to the fact that the male subjects in this study were ten years old and the subjects in Graves' study were seven years old. It is possible that by the age of ten, the boys lost their self confidence, their protective cloak of egocentricity. The girls' score, 270 for self-selected-topic compositions and 237 for

assigned compositions, indicated a trend favoring self-selected-topic compositions

A statistical analysis of the data compared the researcher's holistic scores on self-selected-topic and assigned-topic compositions to the teachers' grades for overall writing performance. The performance levels were identified as excellent (E), satisfactory-plus (S+), satisfactory (S), satisfactory-minus (S-), and unsatisfactory (U). The researcher's scores were slightly higher for unassigned-topic compositions at each performance level. The greatest difference, favoring self-selected-topic compositions, occurred at the satisfactory (S) performance level. It might be concluded from the data that excellent (E) and satisfactory-plus (S+) students performed almost equally well on unassigned and assigned-topic compositions. Satisfactory (S) students performed better on self-selected-topic compositions with a 9.1 percent higher mean score. The data partially support Atwell's (1987), Calkins' (1986), Graves' (1984), and Turbill's (1983) theory that students

write more confidently when given the freedom to choose their own topics because they become personally immersed in the writing and assume ownership of the compositions.

An analysis of the research data revealed boys' and girls' thematic choices for self-selected-topic compositions. The choices were categorized into four territories: primary (self, home, and school), secondary (community events), sports, (a sub-topic in the secondary territory,) and extended (national and world events). The boys wrote more compositions about sports and community events. The girls wrote more compositions about home and school. The data support Graves (1973) research which stated that boys wrote more in secondary and extended territories and girls wrote more in the primary territories.

Research data revealed that the girls in the study favored writing factual stories over fictional stories by a margin of three to one. The content in the compositions written by the boys in the study were almost equally divided between fact and fiction.

Statistical analysis revealed that there were no educationally important relationships among the factors of topic selection, writing ability and gender. The results of the study reveal trends, but the final statistics are not considered to be educationally important.

Implications for Research

The results of this study indicated a trend toward higher achievement when students were allowed the freedom to choose their own topics for writing assignments.

Further research could be conducted by replicating the procedures and methods of this study with third grade students and seventh grade students. Such a study could determine if age is a factor among the interactions of topic selection, writing ability, and gender.

A follow-up study could also be conducted with the group of students from this study to determine their growth as writers in both the areas of self-selected-topic and assigned-topic compositions.

A comparison study could be conducted with subjects from a traditional background and subjects from a whole language background to determine how teaching techniques influence writing skills.

A classroom observational study could be conducted to record and identify the students' attitudes and behaviors during the composing process.

Implications for Classroom Practice

This study revealed a trend toward higher achievement when students selected their own topics for their compositions. Many authorities on writing advocate that students be allowed to choose their own topics because student interest is a great motivation for writing.

The data suggest that the classroom teachers give their students every opportunity to choose their own writing topics. When students request a topic conference to help them choose a topic, the teachers' role is not to tell the students what to write, but to help them find out what they know and

show sincere interest in the students' ideas. By communicating an interest and asking relevant questions, teachers have the ability to inspire their students to create compositions based on their own topics.

Teachers can provide a conducive environment which would enable young writers to explore their own topics by:

1. Scheduling daily group sharing times so students could glean topic ideas from their peers.
2. Have students jot down topic ideas on a special "Topic List" in their writing folders.
3. Talk with students about how professional authors come up with their topics for writing.
4. Ask students why they chose a particular topic, helping them to become more conscious of their sources of topics.
5. Conduct occasional whole-group topic searches in mini-lessons asking students to record ideas they generate for future reference.

6. Schedule a specific writing period each day so students are prepared to come to class with a topic in mind.

7. Schedule time for daily journal entries.

8. Encourage students to write about personal experiences by suggesting topics based on their weekend, family, friends, neighborhood, likes, dislikes, earliest memories, hobbies, skills, responsibilities, fears, birthdays, holidays or favorite books, movies, trips or sports.

Even though unassigned topic choice appears to be more successful in terms of creativity and writing scores, students need to learn how to communicate their messages to the world around them. For example, they need to learn how to write a thank you note, a Science report, a Social Studies research paper, and book reports. Therefore, there are times when it is necessary for teachers to assign specific topics to their students. Balancing self-chosen-topic compositions with teacher-assigned-topic compositions provides students with a varied diet of writing experiences.

When teachers assign a specific topic, they should also provide prewriting activities to more closely connect the student to the assigned topic.

Prewriting activities may include lively class discussions, brainstorming sessions, and a listing of sub-topic activities. These prewriting activities elicit prior knowledge relevant to the topic and enable the student to personalize the writing. Calkins' (1986) research indicated that students need help in connecting the form a piece of writing takes with the topic.

Summary

Based on an analysis of the data, there were no statistically significant and important relationships between fifth graders' self-selected-topic compositions and assigned-topic compositions. There were no significant and important relationships between the researcher's holistic scores, based on self-selected-topic compositions, and the classroom teacher's evaluation of fifth grade students'

overall writing performance. There were no educationally important relationships between the fifth grade boys' and girls' writing products when comparing self-selected-topic compositions to assigned-topic compositions. There were no educationally important interactions among the factors of topic selection, writing ability, and gender for fifth grade students.

While the statistics were not sufficient to establish a statistically significant and important relationship between self-selected-topic compositions and assigned-topic compositions, the general trend reflected slightly higher scores for self-selected-topic compositions. Students ranked as "satisfactory" writers by their classroom teachers exhibited the greatest difference in scores in favor of self-selected-topic compositions. Both girls and boys performed better on unassigned-topic compositions. The girls achieved a higher score than the boys on self-selected-topic compositions and assigned-topic compositions. Interactions among the factors of topic selection, writing ability, and gender for fifth grade students were not considered to be educationally important.

There is still a need for further research with students at various grade levels. This information would aid the curriculum developing committee and the teacher in preparing a curriculum that would best fit the needs of students at all age levels.

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Appendix A

page 1

N. J. ELLIS PAPER SCORING STATISTICS

18-Apr-90

file: njgrade3	SEX	SEX	GRADE	GRADE	GRADE	GRADE	GRADE	GRADE	AVERAGE				AVERAGE				TERRITORY				FACT/FACT		
today 04/17/90	1	0	4	3	2	1	0		SCORES OF				#WORDS OF				-----				FACT	FACT	
04/18/90									CLASS	UNASSG	ASSG	DIFFERENCES	UNASSG	ASSG	DIFFS'	U-A	SELF	LOCAL	WORLD	SPORTS	FACT	FACT	
# TEACHER	SEX	GRADE	UNASSG	ASSG	SCDIFF	%DIFF	U'WORDS	WORDS	WDIFF	1	2	3	4	U-A		1	2	3	4			FACT	FACT
TOTALTOTAL	88	2.35	2.65	2.53	-0.12	-4.5%	241	227	14	27	29	16	16									55	33
							MAX 1998	540	1458														
							MIN 40	113	-73														
BOYS BOYS	48	2.19	2.51	2.44	-0.07	-2.9%	217	219	-2	9	13	11	15									25	23
GIRLSGIRLS	40	2.55	2.83	2.65	-0.18	-6.2%	270	237	34	18	16	5	1									30	10
GRADE POINT AVG COUNT																							
E	GRADE 4 9 TOT	9	3.33	3.22	-0.11	-3.3%	339	296	43	4	1	4	0									4	5
S+	GRADE 3 26 TOT	26	2.85	2.83	-0.02	-0.7%	327	227	100	6	10	5	5									15	11
S	GRADE 2 41 TOT	41	2.51	2.30	-0.21	-8.3%	190	220	-30	12	15	6	8									27	14
S-	GRADE 1 11 TOT	11	2.23	2.18	-0.05	-2.0%	161	204	-44	4	3	1	3									8	3
U	GRADE 0 1 TOT	1	2.00	2.00	0.00	0.0%	132	158	-26	1	0	0	0									1	0
ADDUCI		2.43	2.68	2.89	0.21	8.0%	178	212	-34								3.00					1.00	
DAVIS		2.22	2.36	2.33	-0.03	-1.2%	212	222	-10								3.00					1.00	
PURDY		2.25	2.83	2.40	-0.43	-15.0%	180	241	-61								3.00					1.00	
JOYCE		2.33	2.67	2.56	-0.11	-4.2%	234	221	14								3.00					1.00	
KRUCHTEN		2.56	2.72	2.58	-0.14	-5.1%	396	236	159								3.00					1.00	
# TEACHER	SEX	GRADE	UNASSG	ASSG	SCDIFF	%DIFF	U'WORDS	WORDS	WDIFF	1	2	3	4	U-A		1	2	3	4			FACT	FACT
1	ADDUCI	0	2	3.00	3.50	0.50	16.7%	90	192	-102	1											1	
2	ADDUCI	1	3	3.00	3.00	0.00	0.0%	96	198	-102	1											1	
3	ADDUCI	1	3	2.00	4.00	2.00	100.0%	66	264	-198		2										1	
5	ADDUCI	0	2	2.00	1.50	-0.50	-25.0%	60	280	-220	1											2	
7	ADDUCI	1	3	2.50	3.00	0.50	20.0%	84	150	-66		2										1	
8	ADDUCI	1	2	3.00	2.50	-0.50	-16.7%	156	256	-100	1											1	
14	ADDUCI	0	3	4.00	2.00	-2.00	-50.0%	336	128	208												1	
15	ADDUCI	0	2	2.50	2.50	0.00	0.0%	68	228	-160												2	
16	ADDUCI	0	2	1.50	2.00	0.50	33.3%	40	216	-176	1											1	
17	ADDUCI	0	3	2.50	3.00	0.50	20.0%	119	240	-121												2	
18	ADDUCI	0	1	1.50	3.50	2.00	133.3%	66	208	-142												1	
21	ADDUCI	0	2	3.00	2.00	-1.00	-33.3%	140	162	-22												1	
22	ADDUCI	1	3	3.00	3.50	0.50	16.7%	200	222	-22		2										2	
24	ADDUCI	0	3	4.00	2.50	-1.50	-37.5%	973	224	749												1	
27	DAVIS	1	3	2.50	1.50	-1.00	-40.0%	145	138	7		2										1	
29	DAVIS	0	3	2.00	2.00	0.00	0.0%	133	202	-69												1	
30	DAVIS	1	4	3.00	2.50	-0.50	-16.7%	221	188	33	1											1	
32	DAVIS	1	2	2.50	2.50	0.00	0.0%	301	210	91												2	
33	DAVIS	1	2	2.00	1.50	-0.50	-25.0%	124	225	-101		2										1	
34	DAVIS	1	1	2.00	2.50	0.50	25.0%	105	201	-96		2										1	
35	DAVIS	0	1	1.50	2.50	1.00	66.7%	252	209	43												2	
36	DAVIS	1	2	2.00	2.50	0.50	25.0%	130	182	-52	1											1	
37	DAVIS	0	2	2.00	3.00	1.00	50.0%	364	252	112		2										2	

file: njgrade3
today 04/17/90
04/18/90

# TEACHER	SEX	GRADE	SCORES OF				AVERAGE OF				TERRITORY				FACT/FICTI		
			UNASSG	ASSG	DIFFERENCES	U-A	UNASSG	ASSG	DIFFS'	U-A	SELF	LOCAL	WORLD	SPORTS	FACT	FICTI	
38 DAVIS	1	1	3.00	3.00	0.00	0.0%	186	259	-73							1	
39 DAVIS	0	4	1.50	3.00	1.50	100.0%	288	264	24								2
42 DAVIS	0	2	1.00	2.00	1.00	100.0%	56	161	-105	1						1	
43 DAVIS	1	2	3.00	2.00	-1.00	-33.3%	146	208	-62					4		1	
44 DAVIS	1	4	4.00	4.00	0.00	0.0%	333	486	-153			2					2
45 DAVIS	0	1	1.00	1.00	0.00	0.0%	90	113	-23			2					2
46 DAVIS	0	2	2.00	2.00	0.00	0.0%	75	220	-145					4		1	
47 DAVIS	0	2	3.50	2.00	-1.50	-42.9%	217	175	42					3			2
48 DAVIS	0	2	4.00	2.50	-1.50	-37.5%	648	306	342					3			2
49 PURDY	0	4	4.00	4.00	0.00	0.0%	288	540	-252					3			2
50 PURDY	1	2	2.50	2.00	-0.50	-20.0%	245	344	-99			2					1
51 PURDY	1	1	2.50	2.00	-0.50	-20.0%	160	175	5	1							1
52 PURDY	0	1	2.50	2.50	0.00	0.0%	133	288	-155	1							1
53 PURDY	0	1	2.50	1.00	-1.50	-60.0%	178	179	-1					4			1
54 PURDY	0	2	3.00	3.00	0.00	0.0%	161	248	-87					4			1
55 PURDY	0	1	2.00	1.50	-0.50	-25.0%	136	180	-44	1							1
56 PURDY	1	3	3.00	2.00	-1.00	-33.3%	139	209	-70	1							1
57 PURDY	0	2	3.50	2.00	-1.50	-42.9%	169	186	-17					4			2
58 PURDY	0	3	2.00	2.00	0.00	0.0%	110	187	-77			2					1
59 PURDY	1	4	3.50	2.50	-1.00	-28.6%	163	196	-33	1							1
60 PURDY	1	2	2.50	2.50	0.00	0.0%	112	192	-80	1							1
61 PURDY	0	3	3.00	3.00	0.00	0.0%	204	194	10					4			1
62 PURDY	1	1	3.00	2.50	-0.50	-16.7%	195	308	-113	1							1
63 PURDY	0	2	3.00	2.00	-1.00	-33.3%	185	234	-49					4			1
64 PURDY	1	4	3.00	2.00	-1.00	-33.3%	174	135	39	1							1
66 PURDY	0	2	2.00	2.50	0.50	25.0%	210	264	-54	1							1
67 PURDY	1	2	3.00	3.00	0.00	0.0%	273	285	-12	1							1
68 PURDY	1	3	3.00	3.00	0.00	0.0%	152	212	-60	1							1
69 PURDY	1	2	3.00	3.00	0.00	0.0%	197	258	-61	1							1
70 JOYCE	0	0	2.00	2.00	0.00	0.0%	132	158	-26	1							1
71 JOYCE	0	2	2.00	1.50	-0.50	-25.0%	113	131	-18					4			1
72 JOYCE	0	4	4.00	3.50	-0.50	-12.5%	325	320	5					3			2
73 JOYCE	1	2	1.50	2.00	0.50	33.3%	165	266	-101					3			2
74 JOYCE	0	2	4.00	2.50	-1.50	-37.5%	266	168	98			2					1
75 JOYCE	1	4	4.00	4.00	0.00	0.0%	1064	308	756					3			2
76 JOYCE	0	3	2.00	3.50	1.50	75.0%	157	192	-35					3			2
77 JOYCE	1	2	3.00	3.00	0.00	0.0%	175	216	-41	1							1
78 JOYCE	1	4	3.00	3.50	0.50	16.7%	196	224	-28	1							1
79 JOYCE	1	3	3.00	2.50	-0.50	-16.7%	155	305	-150					3			2
80 JOYCE	1	2	2.50	1.00	-1.50	-60.0%	216	195	21			2					1
81 JOYCE	1	3	3.00	2.50	-0.50	-16.7%	176	252	-76	1							1
82 JOYCE	0	2	2.00	2.50	0.50	25.0%	152	197	-45			2					2
83 JOYCE	1	2	2.00	3.00	1.00	50.0%	111	168	-57			2					2

file: njgrade3		SEX	SEX	GRADE	GRADE	GRADE	GRADE	GRADE	GRADE	AVERAGE				AVERAGE				TERRITORY				FACT/FICT	
today 04/17/90		1	0	4	3	2	1	0		SCORES		OF		#WORDS		OF		-----				FACT	FICT
04/18/90										UNASSG	ASSG	DIFFERENCES	U-A	UNASSG	ASSG	DIFFS'	U-A	SELF	LOCAL	WORLD	SPORTS	FACT	FICT
#	TEACHER	SEX	GRADE	UNASSG	ASSG	SCDIFF	%DIFF	U'WORDS	A'WORDS	WDIFF	1	2	3	4									
84	JOYCE	0	1	3.00	2.00	-1.00	-33.3%	248	128	120			3										2
85	JOYCE	0	2	2.00	2.50	0.50	25.0%	165	360	-195		2											2
86	JOYCE	0	2	2.50	1.50	-1.00	-40.0%	273	182	91		2										1	
88	JOYCE	1	2	2.50	3.00	0.50	20.0%	130	204	-74		2										1	
91	KRUCHTEN	1	3	4.00	3.00	-1.00	-25.0%	665	198	467		2											2
92	KRUCHTEN	1	2	2.50	2.50	0.00	0.0%	258	350	-92	1											1	
93	KRUCHTEN	0	2	3.00	2.50	-0.50	-16.7%	319	309	10		2											2
94	KRUCHTEN	0	3	3.00	3.50	0.50	16.7%	397	371	26		2											2
95	KRUCHTEN	1	3	2.00	3.00	1.00	50.0%	190	315	-125		2										1	
96	KRUCHTEN	0	2	1.00	2.00	1.00	100.0%	78	186	-108				4								1	
98	KRUCHTEN	0	3	2.00	2.00	0.00	0.0%	187	138	49			3										2
101	KRUCHTEN	0	2	3.00	1.50	-1.50	-50.0%	188	145	43		2										1	
102	KRUCHTEN	1	3	3.00	3.00	0.00	0.0%	407	288	119	1											1	
103	KRUCHTEN	1	3	4.00	2.50	-1.50	-37.5%	651	187	464		2											2
104	KRUCHTEN	0	2	1.00	1.50	0.50	50.0%	60	175	-115		2										1	
105	KRUCHTEN	0	3	2.00	4.00	2.00	100.0%	186	279	-93				4									2
106	KRUCHTEN	1	3	4.00	3.50	-0.50	-12.5%	1998	328	1670			3										2
108	KRUCHTEN	1	2	2.50	1.50	-1.00	-40.0%	136	170	-34		2										1	
110	KRUCHTEN	0	2	3.50	2.50	-1.00	-28.6%	314	137	177		2											2
111	KRUCHTEN	0	3	3.00	2.50	-0.50	-16.7%	170	168	2	1											1	
112	KRUCHTEN	0	2	3.00	2.00	-1.00	-33.3%	502	187	315				3									2
113	KRUCHTEN	0	3	2.50	3.50	1.00	40.0%	413	322	91		2											2
114																							
115																							

Appendix B

Smmary of Statistical Data

Variable <u>Name</u>	<u>Size</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Sample Std Dev</u>	<u>Sample Std Err</u>
Gender	88	.4546	.4994	.0376
Teacher Rank	88	2.3523	.8690	.0655
Research Score	88	2.5938	.7510	.0566
Group	88	.4971	.5014	.0379

Appendix C

A comparison between self-selected-topic compositions and assigned-topic compositions of 88 fifth grade students.

$$Y = 2.6534 + -.1193 * X$$

$$\text{Unadjusted } r^2 = .0063$$

$$\text{Coefficient of Determination} = .0797$$

$$\text{Standard Error of Estimate} = .7508$$

$$\text{Variance of Estimate} = .5637$$

$$\text{Degrees of Freedom} = 88$$

Appendix D

Researcher's Scores Versus Teacher Rank Scores

$$Y = 2.3523 + 0 * X$$

$$\text{Unadjusted } r^2 = 0$$

$$\text{Coefficient of Determination} = 0$$

$$\text{Standard of Estimate} = .8715$$

$$\text{Variance of Estimate} = .7595$$

$$\text{Degrees of Freedom} = 88$$

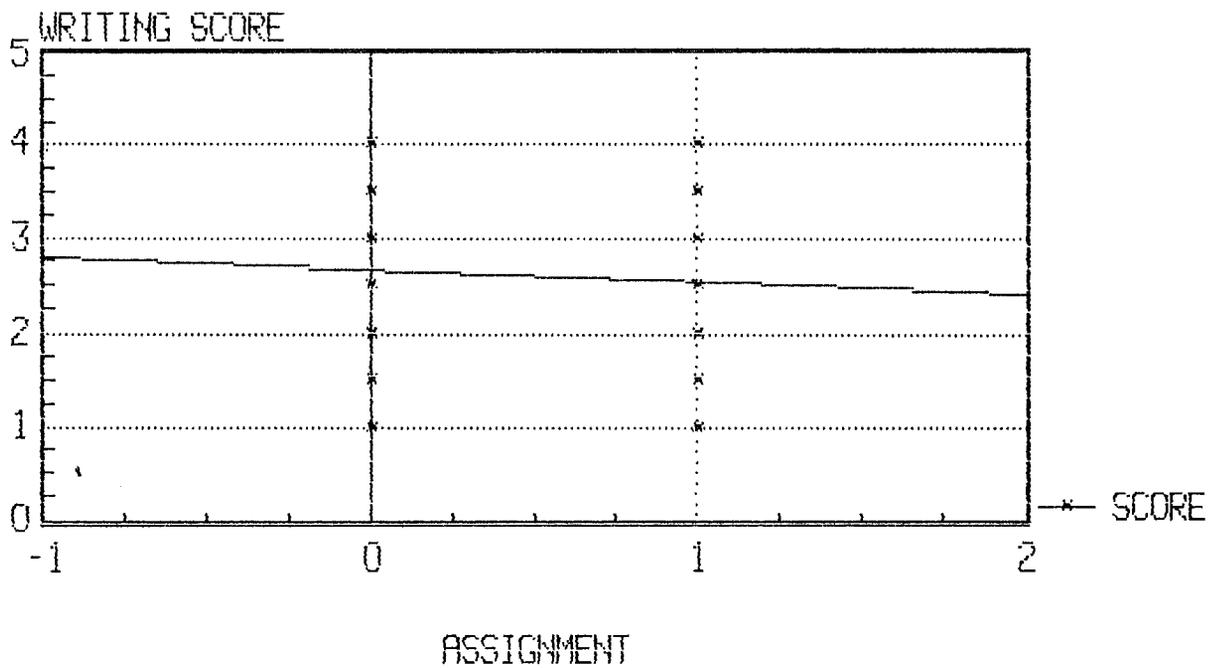
X = Researcher's Scores

Y = Teacher Rank Scores

POINT BISERIAL CORRELATION
BETWEEN ASSIGNMENT AND WRITING SCORE

0=UNASSIGNED 1=ASSIGNED

$$y=2.6534091-0.119318*x \quad r=-0.080$$

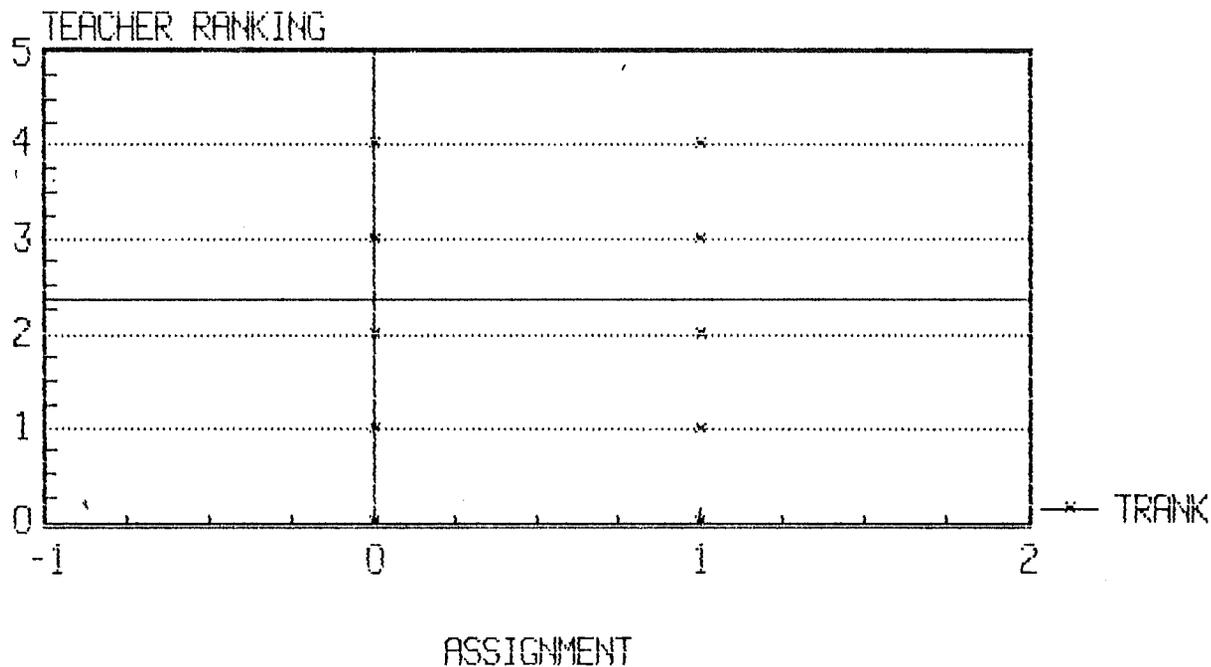


Appendix F

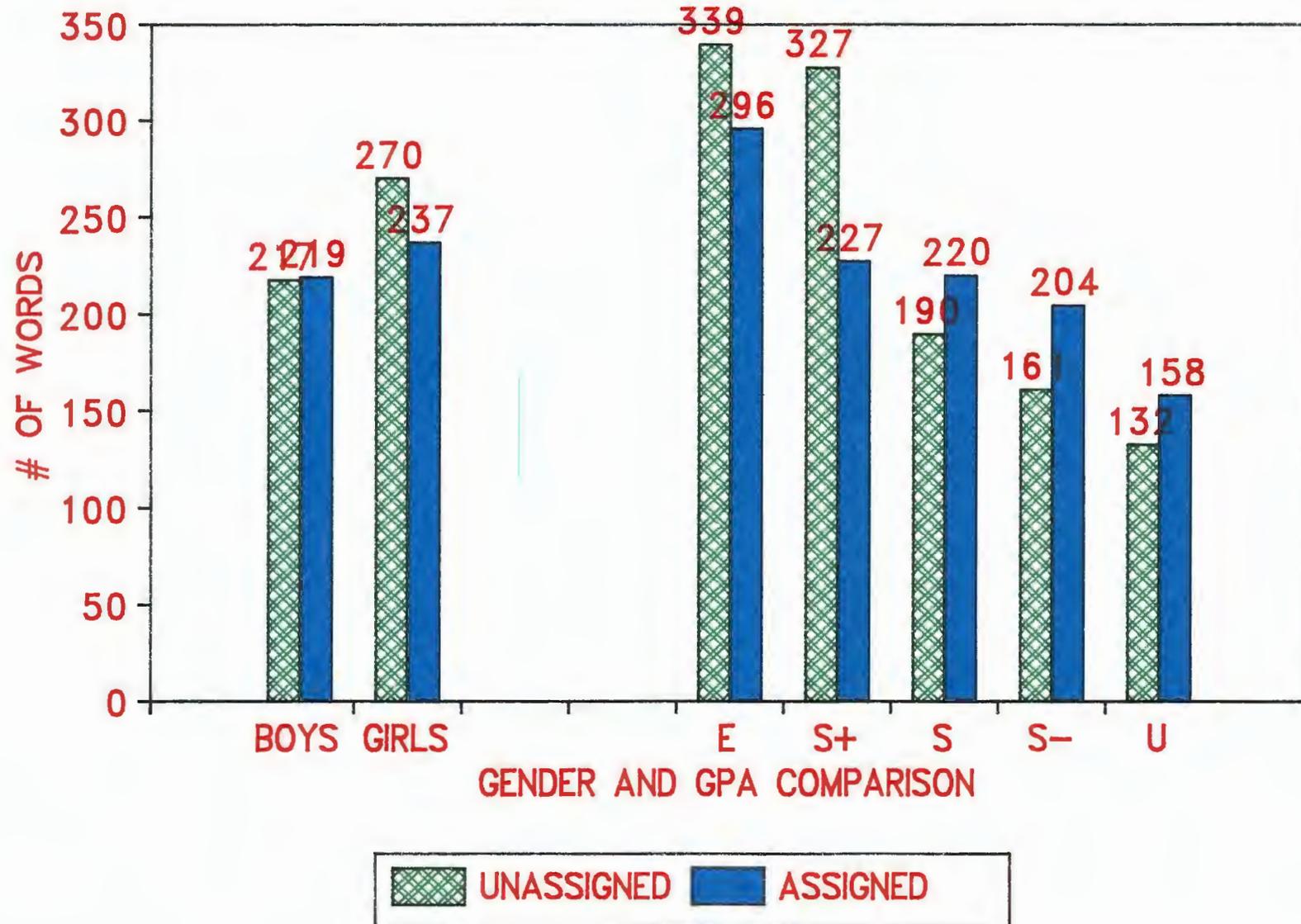
POINT BISERIAL CORRELATION
BETWEEN ASSIGNMENT AND TEACHER RANK

0=UNASSIGNED 1=ASSIGNED

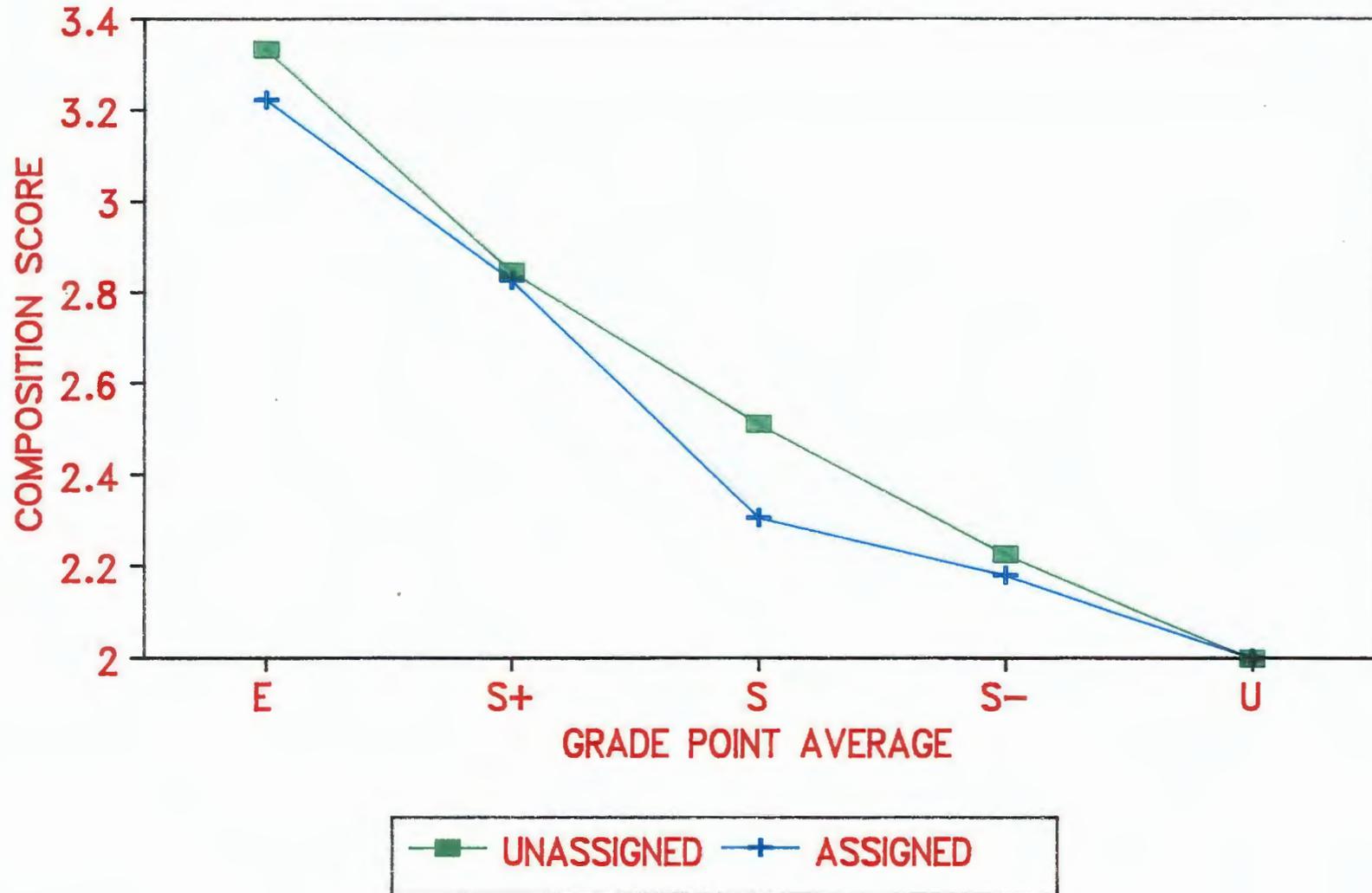
$$y = 2.3522727 + 0 * x \quad r = 0.000$$



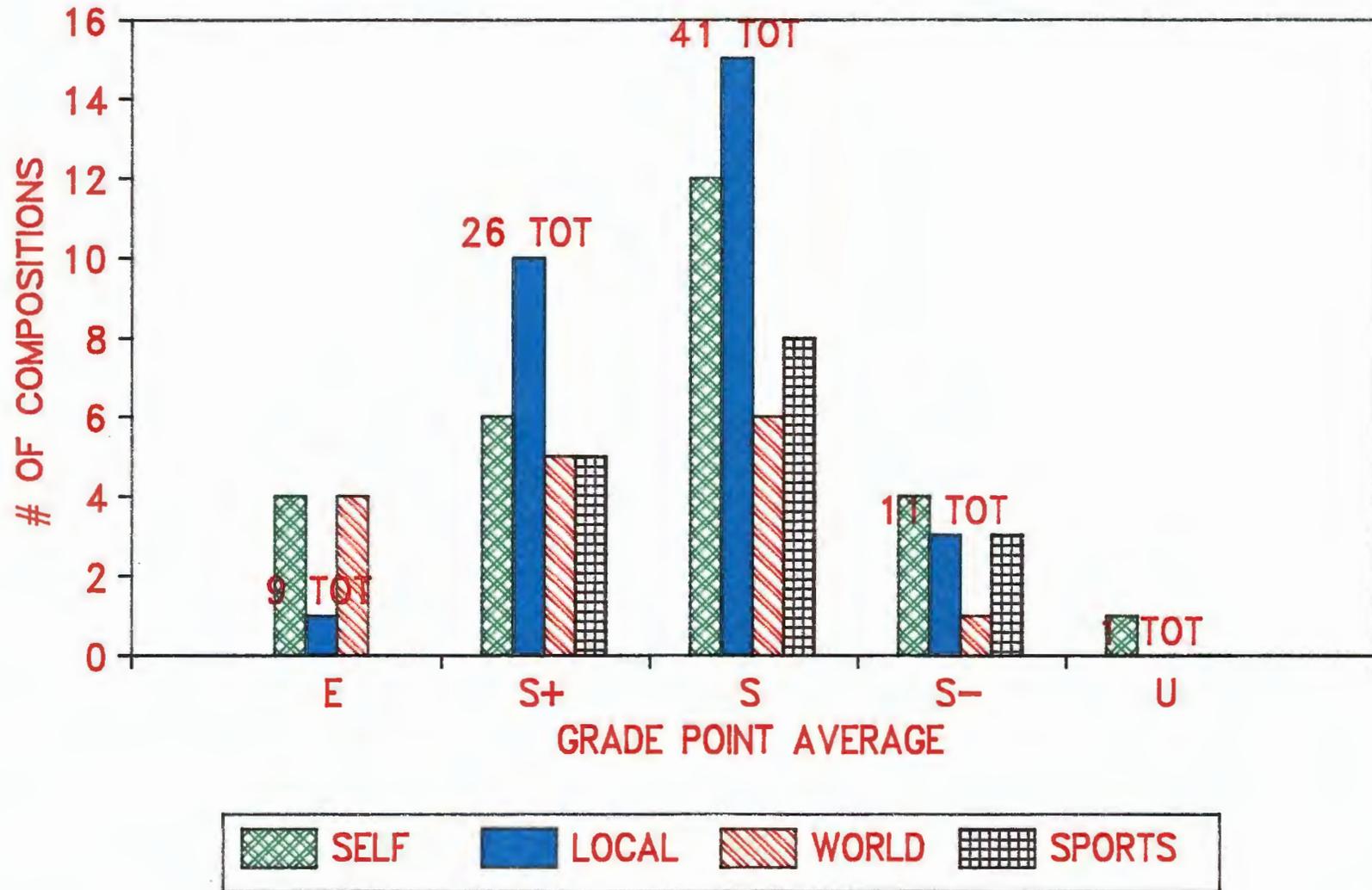
COMPOSITION WORD COUNT



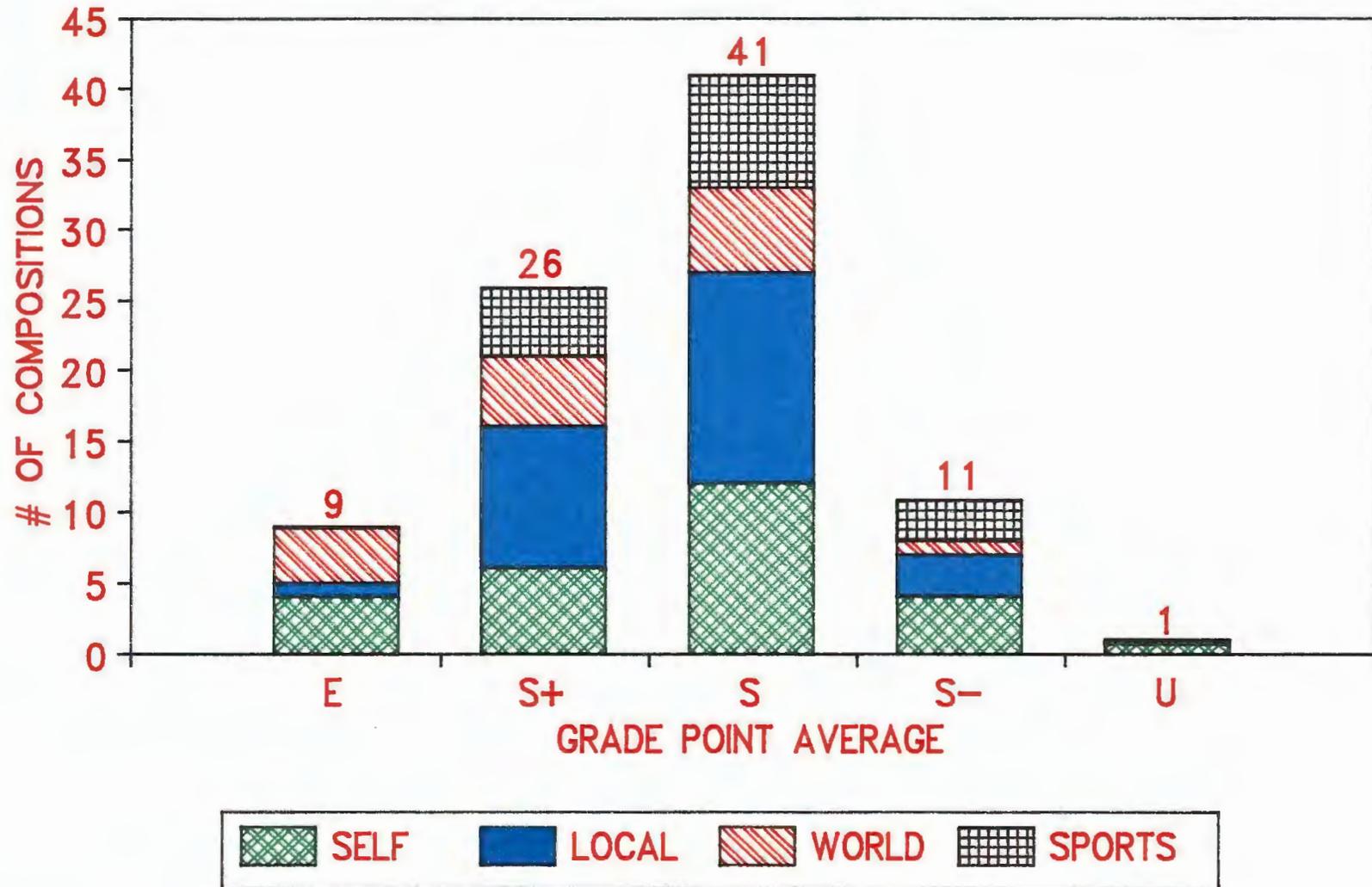
COMPARISON OF COMPOSITION SCORES UNASSIGNED AND ASSIGNED TOPICS



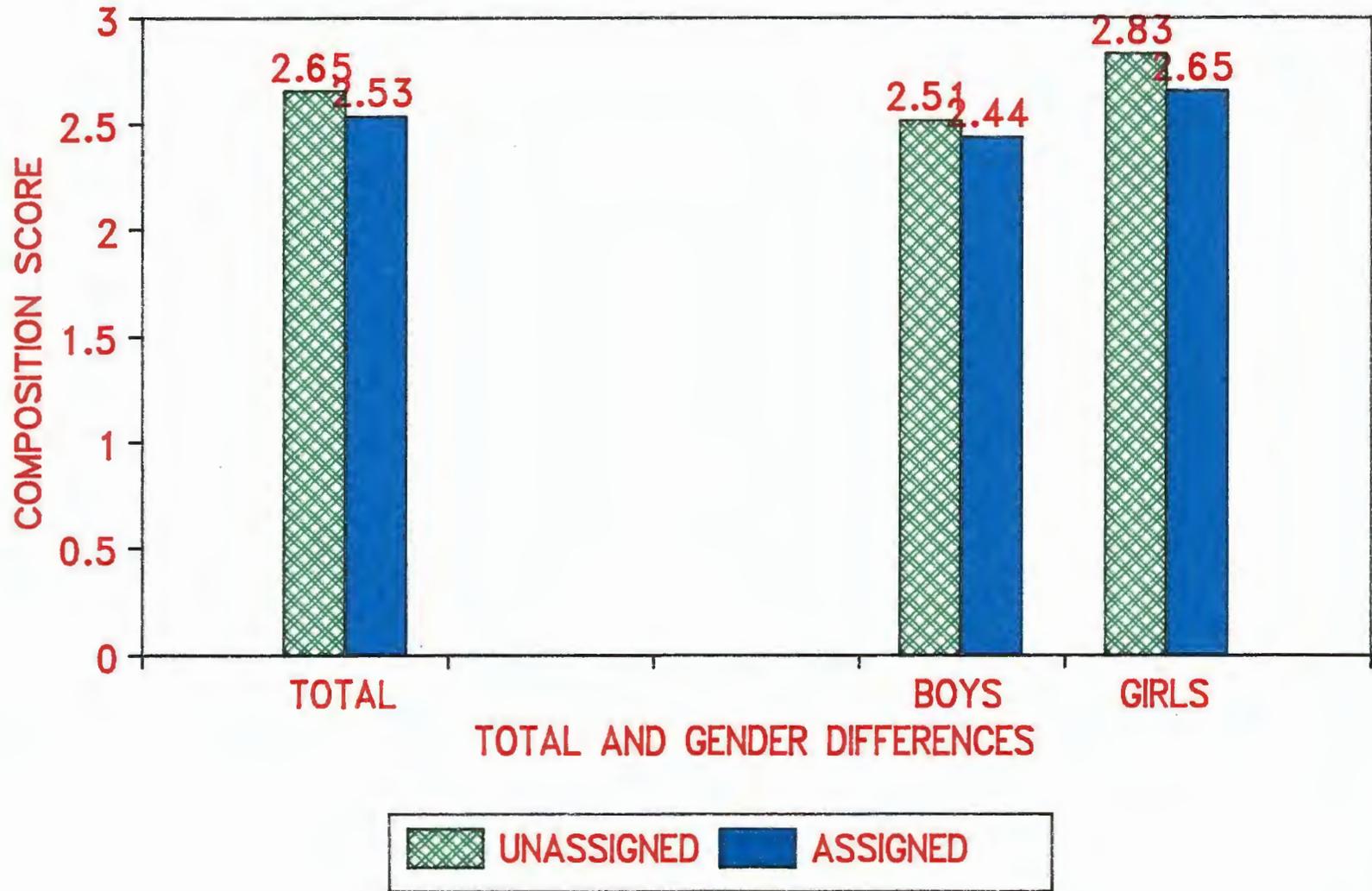
UNASSIGNED COMPOSITION TOPIC CHOICE COMPOSITION COUNT VS GRADE POINT AVG



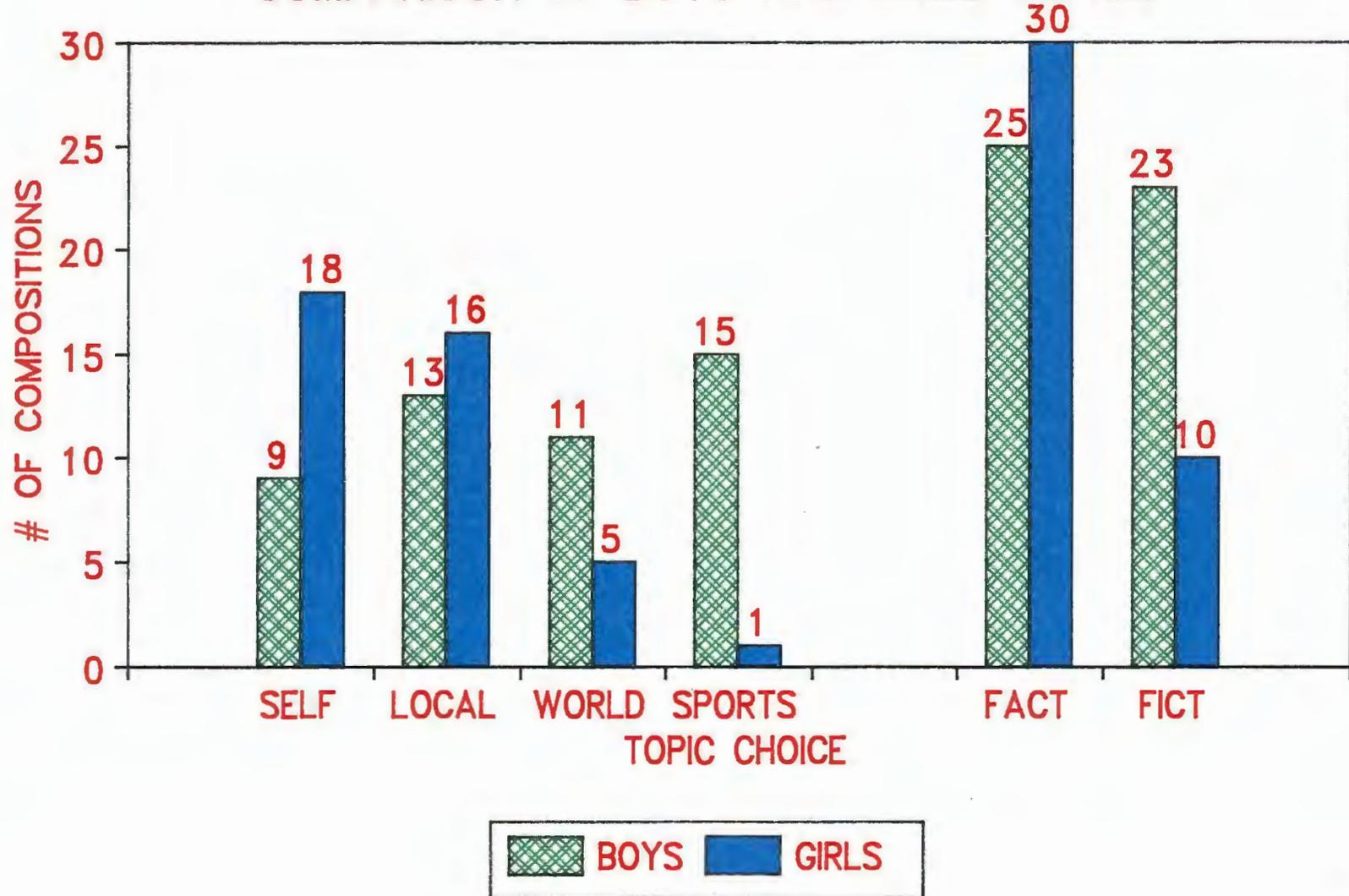
UNASSIGNED COMPOSITION TOPIC CHOICE COMPOSITION COUNT VS GRADE POINT AVG



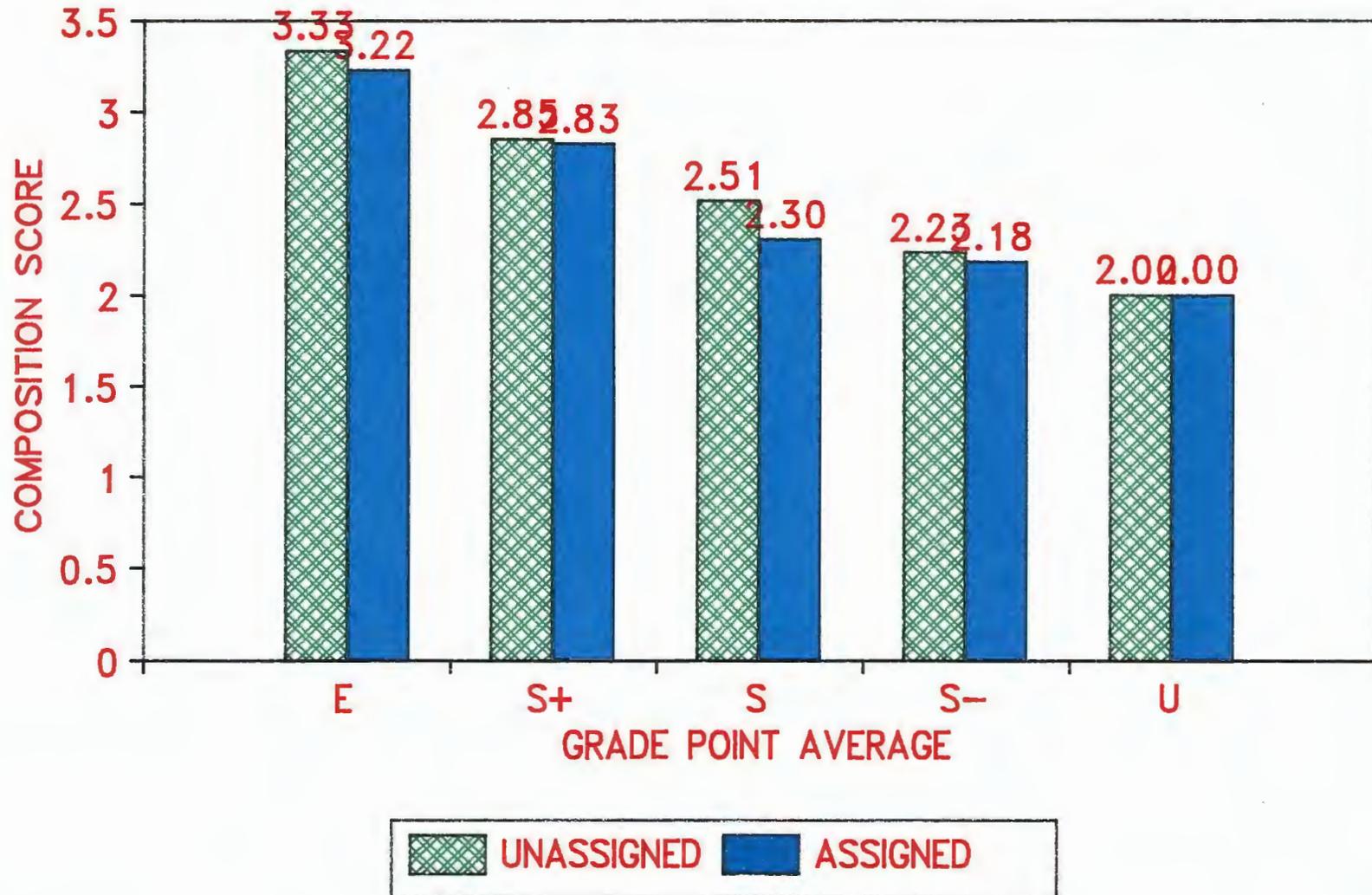
COMPOSITION SCORES UNASSIGNED AND ASSIGNED TOPICS



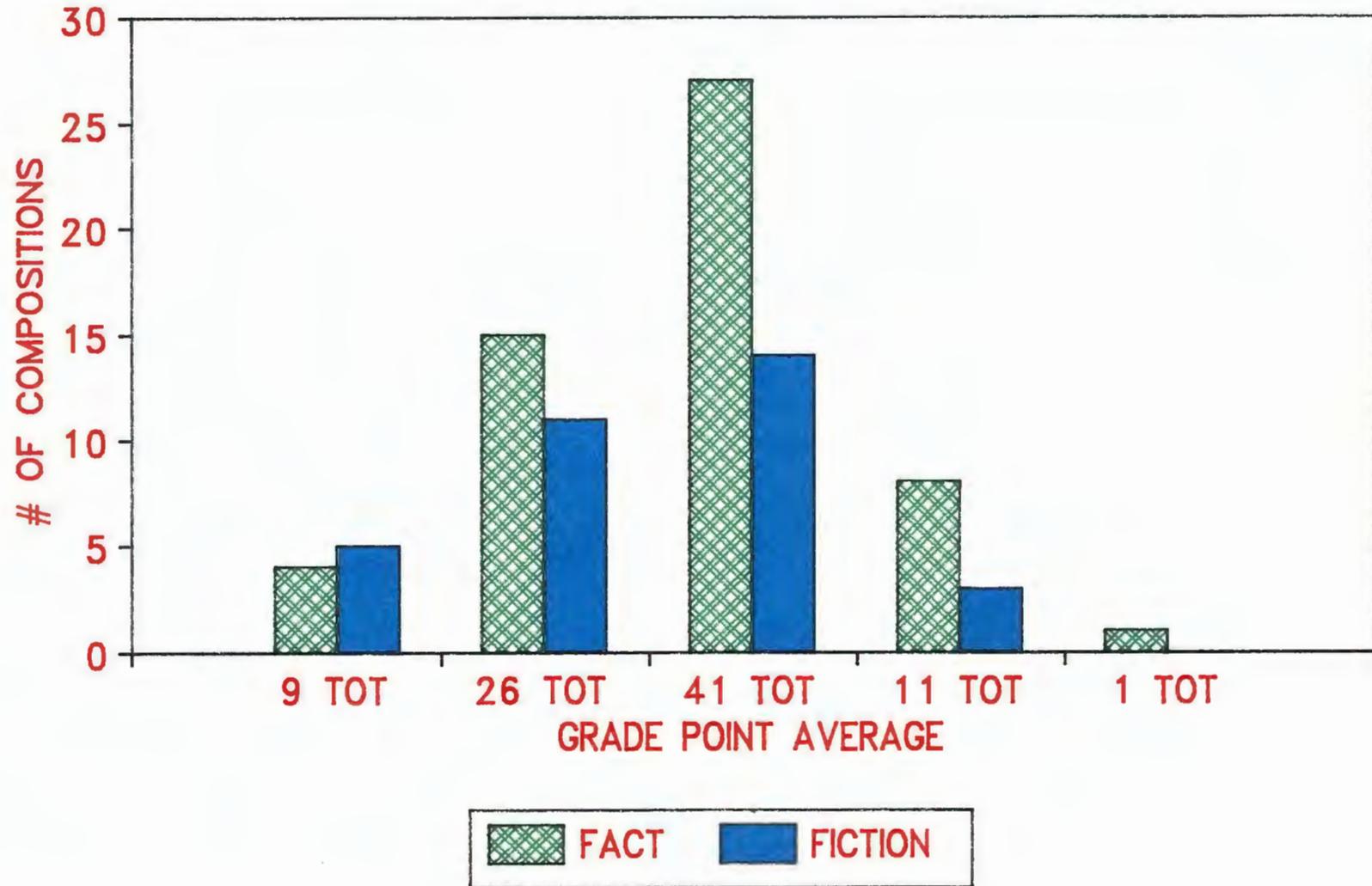
UNASSIGNED COMPOSITION TOPIC CHOICE COMPARISON OF BOYS AND GIRLS TOPICS



COMPARISON OF COMPOSITION SCORES UNASSIGNED AND ASSIGNED TOPICS



UNASSIGNED COMPOSITION TOPIC CHOICE FACT AND FICTION DISTRIBUTION VS GPA



Appendix O

Contingency Table - ' Score' X 'Group'

COLS: 'Score' C1 Base = 1, Width = 1

ROWS: 'Group' R1 Base = 0, Width = 1

	<C1	1	2	3	>3	Total
<R1	0	0	0	0	0	0
	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	0	9	36	32	11	88
	0	10	40.5	29.5	8	88
2	0	11	45	27	5	88
	0	10	40.5	29.5	8	88
>2	0	0	0	0	0	0
	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	20	81	59	16	176
	0	20	81	59	16	176

Appendix P

Summary Statistics

D.F. = 2

Chi-Square = 1.62

Prob. = .444

Cramer's V = .096

Contingency Coefficient = .096