

## Gender Differences in Writing among Islamic University of Gaza Students

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores gender differences in the writing of Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) students who were requested to write on similar themes and under controlled settings. Few previous studies have been designed to examine gender differences in writing through analyzing texts produced in uncontrolled conditions. The current research settings were almost controlled to lower the possibility that other factors rather than gender may affect the results. The researcher applied a two-part questionnaire on 33 students (42% male, 58% female) whose ages range from 19 to 26. The questionnaire was intentionally designed to measure which gender has the higher tendency to write in response to different occasions and what are the major gender differences in writing. A mixed method was implemented to conduct this study. Thus, the study can be considered descriptive considering the process of text analysis and evaluation, but quantitative with reference to highlighting and collecting the characteristics of participants writing. The findings showed some grammatical, syntactical, and lexical differences in students' writing that can be traced back to gender. It also revealed that male students have higher tendency to write more frequently than female in response to different occasions and feelings.

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### Introduction

Many theorists, both feminists and antifeminists, have attempted to prove that women use a different language. Surprisingly, most of them consider the language of men as the positive norm and women's language as being defined in relation to it. Despite the presence of broad theoretical resources on gender differences, actual empirical investigations have not provided a coherent picture of this issue. Since Lakoff (1975) called attention to linguistic differences between genders, several studies have been conducted to inspect linguistic features of men and women. Some studies have focused on phonological and lexical differences (Trudgill, 1972; Eckert, 1989) and some on discourse functions, such as compliments and apologies (Homes, 1995) or turn-taking (Tannen, 1991). Results from these studies indicated that there are gender differences in writing, yet some researchers claim that other factors rather than gender contribute in the findings of their studies.

Two of the earliest theories that are concerned with gender differences are "difference theory" and "dominance theory" (Gorjian & Parviz, 2014). According to Nemati and Bayer's (2007), "difference theory", men and women even those within the same group tend to adopt different ways of speaking as they live in separate cultural worlds. In "dominance theory", women and men live in a world where power and status are unequally distributed.

Previous studies tried to examine gender differences in various contexts and among random social segments by analyzing different texts and contents (Mobaraki & Jahromi, 2019; Hijazi, 2019; Jahromi & Mobaraki, 2019; Mahdavarad & Mokhtari, 2019; Neisi & Shekaramiz, 2019; Pourshahian, 2019). Consequently, this involves other factors such as social, cultural, and educational schemes of participants from different ages and backgrounds. For

this reason, there is a need to investigate gender differences through gathering pieces of script written in the same context, the same topic, and within the same age group. The purpose of this study is to enhance knowledge of men's and women's writing through controlling other factors e.g. age, writing themes and settings. The researcher implemented one data collection instrument (DCI), a questionnaire, on a representative group of IUG students. Each participant was requested to answer a two-part questionnaire consists of three multiple-choice items and an open-ended question.

## Literature Review

Most theorists have focused on description of the female writing alone, as if the male writing was an implicit norm. This practice of describing things associated with women as if they were deviant from a male norm is termed as *phallogentric*<sup>2</sup>. Wittig (1983) says: "there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine; the masculine not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general".

It is fairly well-known that many women writers in the nineteenth century adopted male pen names, both to guarantee that their work would receive serious critical attention unspoiled by stereotypes of women's poorer skill, and also to escape the charge of roughness which fell on women dealing with sensitive literary themes. In her essay "Women and Fiction", Virginia Woolf emphasized the idea of women's neglect:

The history of England is the history of the male line, not of the female. Of our fathers we know always some facts, some distinction. They were soldiers or they were sailors; they filled that office or they made that law. But of our mothers, our great grandmothers, what remains? Nothing but a tradition. One was beautiful; one was red-haired (...) we know nothing of them except their names and the dates of their marriages and the number of children they bore (Woolf,1967).

In the same essay, Woolf concluded the reasons why women face difficulties when they write. First, the form of the sentence does not technically fit them as it is made by men. Second, the values in life and art are not the same for men and women that causes tough criticism for women as not just being different, but weak, trivial, and sentimental. A third difficulty that hinders women's writing is, according to Woolf, their tendency to reveal their own causes rather than depicting others' concerns and struggles. It is safe to predict such feature within women's writing as it has to do with women's instinctive traits. It is plain similarly to see how this tendency has been gradually disappeared as women nowadays are well- equipped to hold others' pens and write with a complete objective ink. Woolf has also predicted these changes in a number of her essays which can be referred as *Woolf's prophesy*. She announced that women are in their way to go beyond their personal self-centered concerns and tackle politics and history with their pens (Woolf,1967).

### **Theoretical framework**

The history of women's writing:

Studies favoring the education of women began appearing with some regularity from the early Renaissance on *Christine de pisan* (1364-1430). Few works of literature were rarely produced by women at that age one example is Louise Labe (1526-66), a poet of the 'school of Lons', whose father decided to educate her almost equal to male. Education in England was a kind of high-class practice restricted to the daughters of the nobility and rich (Mills, 1995).

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<sup>2</sup> phallogentricism is the practice of placing the male in fact coterminous with "human" ( Wittig, 1983)

A number of very specific historical developments explain why women were unable to compete in the construction of literary masterworks until the nineteenth century. Woolf (1967) argued that if Shakespeare had had a sister, she would not have been denied access to Latin rhetorical training and hence to the symbolic tools with which to create public art. Woolf (1967) summarized women's gradual progress in gaining accessibility to write with some beautiful words.

If Dorothy Osborne had been born in 1827, she would have written novels and if she had been born in 1527, she would not have written a single word. But if she had been born in 1627, when writing books was considered unreasonable for a woman, there was nothing immoral in writing a letter and so by degrees the silence is broken (Woolf,1967).

Cameron (1990) estimated that from the first English women who began to appropriate the means of literary production for themselves, Osborne and Cavendish, to Jane Austen expands more than a century. Three to four generations of women's writers, according to him, were in the process of learning the "trade" spread among them. He added that without their practice, the English literature might never have had a Jane Austen, a Charlotte Bronte, a George Eliot, or a Virginia Woolf.

The writing characteristics of women's vs. men's

- a) (Lakoff, 1975) discussed *hedges*<sup>3</sup> as a feature of women's insecurity. By hedges, she is referring to the frequent use of phrases such as 'like and 'you know'.
- b) According to Hiatt (1977), women tend to write shorter sentences that are structurally less complex than that of men. She also declared that women have a higher frequency regarding the use of exclamation marks and parenthetical statements. On the basis of this evidence, she argued that women use a less authoritative style which can be related to what Lakoff (1975) stressed concerning women's lower tendency to show confidence while speaking. Finally, she stated that women's style is also more perceptive than that of men since they are deprived of access to a world of actions.
- c) Woolf in her "women and fiction" 1929 concluded the characteristics of women's writing as follow: "courageous, sincere, not bitter, and finally it does not insist on its femininity but at the same time a woman's book is not written as if a man would write it" (Woolf, 2017).
- d) Julia Kristeva used the term *the semiotic*<sup>4</sup> to refer to the pre-linguistic stage of development of the child. The semiotic is an area of rhythm, color, and play in the language. Women, according to Kristeva, have a privileged access to the semiotic and are more likely to transfer this to writing (Kristeva et al. 1981). In other words, they suggested that women tend to break the rules more than men when they write because they are instinctively influenced by this linguistic phenomenon. It is true to
- e) believe that this accessibility allows women to produce more figurative and poetic pieces of literature.

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<sup>3</sup> Hedge is a linguistic and conversational tool that is usually used to avoid declaring a clear viewpoint by means of certain words or phrases like 'I think, usually, to a degree etc.'

<sup>4</sup> *The semiotic* is an area of rhythmic beating in active opposition to *the symbolic*, the steady system of language. The semiotic is considered chaotic and as an area of language manipulation. The semiotic is usually advanced in poetic writing. It's, according to Kristeva, represented into the unconscious on entering the symbolic order of the father, the law. Kristeva thinks that women, because they don't have an appropriate place within the symbolic, have a special relation with the semiotic (Kristeva et al., 1981)

- f) Mills (1995) compared two texts that have been written on the same topic by male and female authors. She concluded that women's sentence is more emotional and descriptive. She also emphasized that the narrator presence is more obviously noted in women's writing. On the hand, she characterized men's sentence of being factual, lifeless, and apparently objective.
- g) Jespersen (1922) argued that women tend to take the direct common route in selecting their vocabulary while men, in contrary, tend to take the narrower paths for themselves. Consequently, he hypothesized that women are linguistically quicker than men in learning and responding. A man is slower as he takes longer time in weighing his words and picking the most appropriate one that best fits his intended meaning. Finally, he advised those who are interested in acquiring a foreign language to start with books written by female authors.
- h) Jespersen (1922) stated that women are fond of adverbs of intensity, 'so', and 'to a degree'. For example, 'The play was profoundly directed by him', 'it's so lovely', and 'To a degree I like her dress'. The writer justified this feminine feature by women being quick in their responses without finishing their thoughts. In other words, it is difficult in a hasty to find something sufficient to say.
- i) Jespersen (1922) claimed that men are fond of *hypotaxis* and women of *parataxis*. He described male method of connecting sentences as Chinese boxes since they split their short sentences steadily. On the other hand, he depicted women's profoundly long sentences as a set of pearls joined together on a string of ands and other connecting words.
- j) Many theorists claimed that women have greater rapidity of thought. A concept that has been tested by some experts and the results showed that women are faster in reading and in interpreting paragraphs. Despite this conclusion, women's rapidity was not considered as a proof of intellectual power as some of the slowest readers were highly distinguished men (Ellis, 1904). Swift (1735) also support the same idea by stating that people, who master a language and have a mind full of ideas, will tend to be hesitant toward their choices. Whereas common people who have only one set of ideas, one set of words and these are always ready at the mouth. An expressive metaphor was used by him to illustrate the meaning; "so people come faster out of the church when it's almost empty, than when a crowd is at the door".
- k) Swann (1989) claimed that the difference between men and women lies in the it is and preferences of both genders concerning writing. Women, according to him, have more positive attitudes towards writing because men prefer factual writing while women prefer imaginative one. He also added that women's writing is reflective as it deals with people and emotions while men prefer facts and public forms.

### **Previous studies**

Despite extensive theorizing on the research topic, few studies have been operated to examine it empirically. One of the oldest studies that have been conducted for the sake of underlining differences between the writing of both genders is the study done by an American professor called Jastrow. He found that women tend to pick their vocabulary from the immediate surroundings, the individual, and the concrete, while the masculine preference is for the more remote, the constructive and the abstract. He added that men have a higher tendency to choose alliterative words. (Ellis, 1904)

A study titled *The Role of Iranian Students' Gender in Using Email Writing Linguistic Features*. has recently been published by Muhammed Parviz and Bahman Gorjian. The results of this study revealed that, males' emails had

more spelling and grammatical errors than females'. Furthermore, females tended to use more interpersonal cues than their counterparts. Females were more aware of contextual cues rather than males such as in using appropriate titles, formal of greeting, politeness phrases, and attitude markers. With nearly equal length, students from both genders used textual, contextual, and interpersonal markers differently (Gorjian & Parviz, 2014).

Another more recent paper has been conducted to investigate gender differences in vocabulary use in essay writing by university students revealed that male students use more nouns related to certain social and economic activities and scientific phenomena related to the topic. Female students, on the other hand, use more personal pronouns and certain words related to psychological cognitive processes. They tend to emphasize the people involved in the given topics rather than the accurate information about the topic. They also tend to use more vague phrases which can simply function as hedges. Finally, they try to ease the impact of the argument as they are writing, even when they are writing to unknown readers (Ishikawa, 2015)

Table (1) : Summary of Gender Differences Revealed by Previous Studies taken from (Ishikawa, 2015)

	Male	Female
(Koppel et al.,2002)	noun specifiers (that, one)	negation (not), pronouns, prepositions (for, with, in), conjunction (and)
(Argamon et al.,2002)	determiners (a, the, that, these), quantifiers (one, two, more, some)	pronouns (I, you, she, her, their, myself, yourself, herself)
(Newman et al., 2008)	numbers, articles, prepositions (on, to, from)	pronouns (I, my, me, she, their, them), social words (sister, friends), psychological processes (mad, uneasy), verbs, negations, references to the home (home, house)

## Methodology

The study focuses on similar-aged university students writing on the same topic under the same conditions. It aims to address two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Which gender has the higher tendency to write in response to different occasions and feelings?

RQ2: What are the gender differences in the writing of IUG students?

## Participants

Forty students from different majors (42% male, 58% female) participated in this study. All of them were studying at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) and their age ranged from 19 to 26. All students (males and females) were requested to fill in a two-part questionnaire in a maximum time limit of 20 minutes for each student. Seven questionnaire samples were already filled by male students and considered as a pilot sample.

## Instrument

A two-part questionnaire was designed to measure two main constructs which are tendency to write in response to different occasions and gender differences in writing. At the top of the instrument's paper stand the demographic data of the participants followed by some guidelines. The first part consists of three multiple-choice items that are mainly concerned with measuring students' tendency to write in response to different occasions and feelings. The three items were intended to reflect nearly the same content as a procedure for reliability. The second part of the questionnaire is considered as an open-ended question that is purposefully planned to motivate students to write. Minimum and maximum word limits were provided as the length of the text was considered as a

criterion of judgment in the text analysis phase. It is important to say that the DCI was refereed by a jury of experts from (IUG) as a procedure for insuring its validity.

### Data analysis

Regarding the first part of the DCI, the researcher counted the frequencies of choices manually and calculated their percentage. A text analysis has been implemented to analyze the second part of the questionnaire. A set of criteria have been chosen by the researcher to highlight gender differences in writing. The analysis criteria are grammatical structures, *hedges*, *metaphors*, *vernacular*, length and finally adverbs of intensity. For each criterion, the researcher counted the occurrences and calculated the average per extract.

### Results and Discussion

The first part of the questionnaire was designed to measure which gender has the higher tendency to write in both serious and sentimental modes. Concerning the first item of the questionnaire (Q11), the results showed that both male and female students tend to follow different tracks rather than writing when they want to promote a certain idea or product. It is worth noting that men's tendency to write is higher than that of women regarding this point. Answering (Q12), female students presented a low tendency to write when experiencing happiness. Male students, however, showed higher tendency to write in response to happiness in comparison to women. Regarding the third questionnaire item (Q13), women picked more options that indicated their tendency to write when they feel sad, yet still lower than that of men. It is worth mentioning that both genders produced the highest tendency to write responding to sad events in their lives as shown in table (2).

Table (2): Results of the first part of the questionnaire

QI	Female		Percentage		Male		Percentage	
	writing	others	writing	Others	writing	Others	writing	others
Q11 If you want to promote a certain idea/topic	2	17	10.5%	89.4%	5	9	35,7%	64.2%
Q12 When you feel happy	2	17	10.5%	89.4%	3	11	21.4%	78.5%
Q13 When you feel sad	6	13	31.5%	68.4%	6	8	33.3%	66.6%

The second part of the questionnaire is designed to examine the characteristics of both genders' writing and compare their extracts in several areas such as: ill-grammatical structures, *hedges* (2), *metaphors*, *vernacular* (3), length and adverbs of intensity (4).

To start with grammatical errors (GE), as illustrated in table (3), the male students totally (T) committed 20 grammatical errors with an average (A) of 1.4 errors per each questionnaire sample. The extracts of female students revealed 15 grammatical errors with an average of .7 errors for each excerpt as shown in table (4). It's significant to say that these findings are consistent with (Gorjian & Parviz, 2014).

Table (3): males' grammatical errors

QN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	T	A
GE	2	2	2	1	2	-	-	-	2	1	2	2	2	2	20	1.4

Table (4): females' grammatical errors

QN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	T	A
GE	3	-	2	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	3	-	1	1	-	-	1	1	-	15	.7

The second criterion of judgment is the existence of *hedges* (H) in the writing of participants. As shown in table (5), the male students use only 4 *hedges* in their 14 extracts with an average of .2 *hedges* per excerpt, whereas; female students use 12 *hedges* in their 19 extracts with an average of .6 *hedges* per excerpt as illustrated in table (6). This result supports the claim that women tend to use hedges more than men (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 1995; Murphy, 2010).

Table (5) males' use of hedges

QN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	T	A
H	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	4	.2

Table (6) females' use of hedges

QN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	T	A
H	-	-	-	1	6	-	1	2	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	.6

The third point of comparison is the illustration of meaning through the implementation of *metaphors* (M). The analysis of both genders' extracts revealed that women profoundly inject their meaning with similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech. They applied 48 metaphors in their 19 extracts with an average of 2.4 metaphors for each excerpt as shown in table (7). On the other hand, male students use only 20 metaphors in their 14 samples with an average of 1.4 metaphors per extract as summarized in table (8). This can be safely linked with what Julia Kristeva termed as *the semiotic* to refer to the pre-linguistic stage of development of the child. *The semiotic* is an area of rhythm, color, and play in the language. Women, according to Kristeva, have an advantaged access to *the semiotic* and are more likely to transfer this to writing. (Kristeva et al., 1981)

Table (7): males' use of metaphors

QN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	T	A
M	-	-	2	-	-	1	1	-	2	4	3	1	1	5	20	1.4

Table (8): females' use of metaphors

QN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	T	A
M	-	2	2	1	-	5	10	2	1	1	2	1	4	4	2	7	2	-	2	48	2.5

Another concept of divergence is the switch to vernacular (V) among both genders during the process of writing. It is significant to say that the guiding principles of the questionnaire contain a sentence of caution regarding the use of vernacular. Despite warning the participants from using slang variety, i.e. vernacular, male students registered two switches to the colloquial dialect. The female students, in contrary, did not make any similar switches as shown in tables (9) & (10) bellow.

Table (9): males' switches to vernacular

QN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	T	A
V	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	.1

*Table (10): females' switches to vernacular*

QN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	T	A
V	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0

The DCI is also designed to measure which gender tend to produce longer extracts as the minimum and maximum range of words were provided. The female tends to produce longer extracts than that of male which can be associated with what Jespersen (1922) theorized concerning the language of women. Women, according to him, are linguistically faster than men. They are faster to learn, to hear, and to answer. Men, by contrast, are slower and more hesitant when it comes to producing language.

Finally, the text analysis presented women's higher implementation of adverbs of intensity (I) as they produced 10 adverbs within their 19 samples with an average of .5 adverbs per extract. Surprisingly, men produced 6 adverbs in their 14 extracts with an average of .4 adverbs for each excerpt. Although it is widely consensual that women's tendency to use these linguistic features, the results did not actually indicate a stark distinction between the two genders as you can see in tables (11) & (12) bellow.

*Table (11): males' use of intensive adverbs*

QN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	T	A
I	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	-	-	1	-	-	6	.4

*Table (12): females' use of intensive adverbs*

QN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	T	A
I	-	1	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	2	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	1	-	10	.5

In addition to what was mentioned, text analysis also revealed other gendered features. First and most importantly, the feminine property of joining sentences with a thread of ands and similar words which is apparently opposing the masculine sentence patterning. It is obviously notable that men tend to split their sentences regularly with periods. This observation can fairly be linked to what Jespersen (1922) said in the same regard.

## Conclusion

After deep investigations of the topic, a stark distinction between the theoretical mess of gender writing and its authentic empirical prompts can be stated. Some of the theoretical assumptions are utterly irrational and have no clear-cut evidence. Despite being few and limited, the investigational studies have raised a distinct set of conclusions. The current study declared that there are gender differences in the writing of IUG students in some grammatical, syntactical, and lexical areas. It also revealed that men's tendency to write in response to different occasions is higher than that of women.

The existence of such differences in the writing of both genders can be traced equally and logically to the fact that language is both inherited and acquired. A word of judge, though, cannot be uttered to prefer a language of a certain gender over the other. We can never assess one gender of being linguistically better than the other since each gender has its distinct physical and psychological properties. In a nutshell, women are instinctively programmed to do certain tasks perfectly, where men have their own divergent world of jobs that women may not even want to try. It is worth mentioning that these findings obviously go in consistent with some theories and contradict others. Hence, it is crucial to call for further empirical studies that are truly fundamental to backup or refute this theoretical quarrel. The researcher recommends similar studies concerning the stylistic features of language among both genders.

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