

Not Just Skills: Writing, Research, and Character

Jeff Rients

In this research report, Jeff Rients narrates his attempt to find out about the connection (if any) between success as a writer/researcher and Character Strengths. He describes his survey tool and results, discovering that many different Character Strengths can play into successful writing and research, but some strengths are valued more than others.

What I Wanted to Know

Nearly everyone you know is a writer. You're a writer, too. Have you ever made a shopping list or texted a friend? That's writing. Similarly, nearly everyone is a researcher. You ever bargain shop, comparing prices among multiple vendors? Or have you ever looked up something on Wikipedia to settle an argument? Congratulations, you did some research.

But, as much as I truly believe that we're all writers and researchers, the common understanding is that many people are writers but only some people are capital double-u "Writers." And we may all do research, but the general belief is that only some people are "Researchers." What is the difference between ordinary writers/researchers and those special people we somehow agree are "real" Writers and Researchers?

There are lots of possible ways to answer this question. Perhaps those special Writers have way more experience at writing than the rest of us, but I'm not so sure. There are lots of examples of great wordsmiths dying young.

Perhaps success at getting your work published magically turns you into a Writer. But in this era of widespread digital publishing, does that mean more people get to be Writers thanks to the Internet? I have my doubts. Technical skill at crafting interesting texts is often suggested as the key to being a Writer, but I suspect that presents an incomplete picture as well. I won't name names, but there sure seem to be a lot of celebrated Writers whose books seem like crap to me. That's a personal opinion, but I stand by it.

Here's what I think: Writers are Writers and Researchers are Researchers because of the kind of people they are, in terms of temperament. That is to say, I believe that the content of their character is at least as important to their success as their ability to string words together into coherent sentences, or their skill at discovering new facts through systematic investigation. I suspect this is the case because even many people who are competent at writing and research seem to avoid these tasks, while examples abound of people with less-than-excellent technical skills who still manage to hold down jobs that require these skills.

By the word *character* I mean “positive traits” that “allow us to acknowledge and explain . . . features of a good life,” as defined by Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman in their 2004 work *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (12). Peterson and Seligman provide a systematic framework to understanding character. As the result of research that looks at human values across cultures and throughout history, Peterson and Seligman propose a classification scheme consisting of twenty-four distinct Character Strengths.¹

To test this hypothesis—that character counts when writing and researching—I put together a survey.

How I Tried to Find Out

My Survey

I created a survey using Google Forms, a free tool available as part of the suite of online applications tied to Google Drive. The survey consisted of 7 questions, made available as 4 sections (separate screens):

¹Thanks to Jim Almeda, Kerrie Calvert, and Lyla Ramires of Illinois State's Health Promotion and Wellness Unit, as well as Phyllis McCluskey-Titus of ISU's School of Educational Administration and Foundations. Their workshop “Incorporating Concepts of Character into Your Classes” introduced me to the Peterson and Seligman schema and provided an important venue for thinking through this research project.

Section/Screen 1

Q1: In a word or phrase, describe your current profession.

Q2: Do you do any form of writing as a regular part of practicing your profession? (Please consider “writing” broadly here. For example, if you regularly make a to-do list for that day’s activities, that counts as writing.)

- Yes, I write at work.
- No, I never write in my job.

Q3: Do you do any form of research as a regular part of practicing your profession? (As with the previous question, please consider “research” broadly. For example, if you sometimes look up a part number in a catalog to order a new one, that is a form of research.)

- Yes, I do research at work.
- No, I never do research in my job.

Section/Screen 2

Q4: Do you think of yourself as a **Writer** with a capital double-u?

- Yes.
- No. I may write, but other people are Writers.

Q5: Do you think of yourself as a **Researcher**?

- Yes.
- No. I may do research, but other people are Researchers.

Section/Screen 3

Q6: Which of the following Character Strengths do you think are most important to a successful WRITER? Please check no more than FIVE.

- Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence/Awe/Wonder
- Bravery/Valor
- Creativity/Originality/Ingenuity
- Curiosity/Interest/Novelty-seeking/Openness to experience
- Fairness
- Forgiveness
- Gratitude
- Honesty/Authenticity/Integrity
- Hope/Optimism/Future-mindedness
- Humility
- Humor/Playfulness
- Judgment/Critical thinking
- Kindness/Generosity/Care/Compassion/Niceness
- Leadership
- Love
- Love of Learning
- Perseverance/Persistence/Industriousness
- Perspective/Wisdom
- Prudence
- Self-Regulation/Self-Control
- Social Intelligence/Emotional Intelligence/Personal Intelligence
- Spirituality/Faith/Purpose
- Teamwork/Citizenship/Social Responsibility/Loyalty
- Zest/Vitality/Enthusiasm/Vigor/Energy

Although listed alphabetically here, the order of presentation for each user was randomly generated to prevent biasing the results toward the items at the top of the list. (This is why many ballots list candidates in random order rather than alphabetically; otherwise Aaron Aaronson would get an unfair advantage at the polls.) A note at the bottom of the screen directed anyone confused by any of the categories to a link leading to *The VIA Classification of Character Strengths*, a two-page document briefly defining each of the twenty-four Character Strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman. Another way of stating my research question, therefore, is “Which of the twenty-four Peterson/Seligman Character Strengths are most important to successful Writers and Researchers?”

Section/Screen 4

Q7: Which of the following Character Strengths do you think are most important to a successful RESEARCHER? Please check no more than FIVE.

[The same list appears here as for question 6, in a randomly generated order independent of the order of the previous list. The same note linking to the same explanatory document appeared at the bottom of the screen.]

Note: No personal identifying data was collected or stored as part of this survey. There is no way to connect the answers to any individual who took the survey.

How I Got the Word Out

On the Saturday morning after I finished drafting the survey, I posted a link to it in three different online venues: Facebook, Google Plus, and my personal blog. The message at all three venues read as follows:

Howdy, friends!

I'm doing an informal research project in the lead up to teaching First Year Composition in the fall. If you do ANY sort of writing OR research as part of your profession, please consider following this link to a brief survey:

[link appeared here]

No personal info is being collected as part of this research. Thanks in advance for all your help!

The total number of *possible* respondents is difficult to estimate. I have 365 Facebook friends, my Google Plus account has 2,841 followers, and 761 people subscribe to my personal blog. Since there is some degree of overlap of the three audiences, the total initial reach of the survey was less than 3,967 people, but more than 2,841. Furthermore, three Facebook friends and a Google Plus follower took it upon themselves to reshare the message. Also, my blog is syndicated to a small blogging network, the total readership of which is unclear to me.

The Raw Data

Two days after I posted the survey, I checked for responses. I had hoped for maybe 20 responses, so imagine my joy when I had 127 total sets of answers! Thanks to an option in Google Forms, survey responses are automatically dumped into a Google Spreadsheet, which time stamps each entry. The full data set (including any new additions; the survey remains open) can be found here: tinyurl.com/yauqrt32.

In order to count the items in questions 6 and 7, I copied the relevant column of data into a new Google Doc. I then used the Find (ctrl-f) function to search for each Character Strength. This function automatically returns the number of times the search term is found in the document. Because the word “love” is both one of the Character Strengths and also part of the phrase “Love of Learning,” I had to read every entry containing the word Love and do a manual count. As I was crunching the data for question 6, I received an additional response, which was incorporated into the data set for question 7.

What I Discovered

A summary of the Character Strengths of Writers as selected by the first 127 people to respond can be found listed on Figure 1.

Figure 2 shows what the same 127 people plus the one extra (mentioned above), picked as their top five Character Strengths for Researchers.

I suspect that there are lots of other questions that could be asked about my data set. Is there any connection between the profession of the respondent and their selected Character Strengths? Do some Character Strengths cluster together? For example, Fairness, Teamwork, and Social Intelligence might tend to appear together in the same answers for question 7, possibly because those respondents thought about research as a group activity.

Reported Character Strengths of Writers

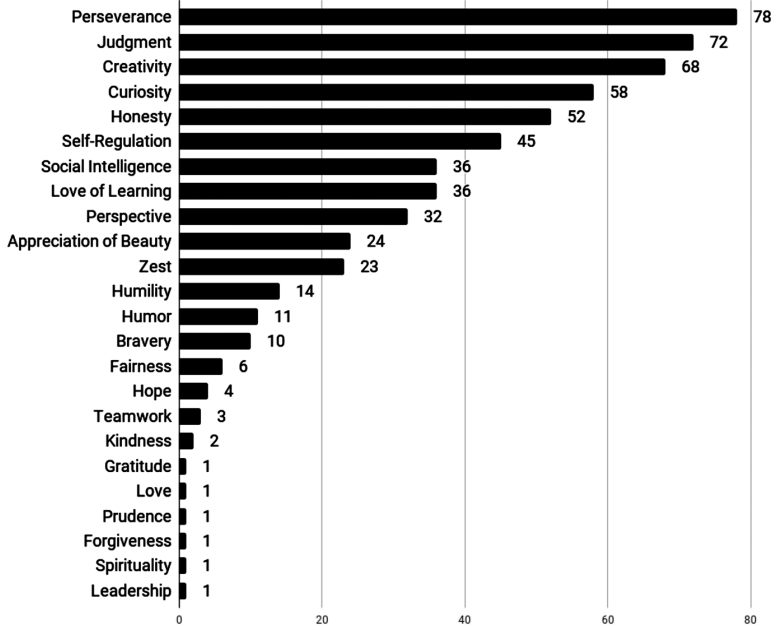


Figure 1: Reported Character Strengths of writers.

Reported Character Strengths of Researchers

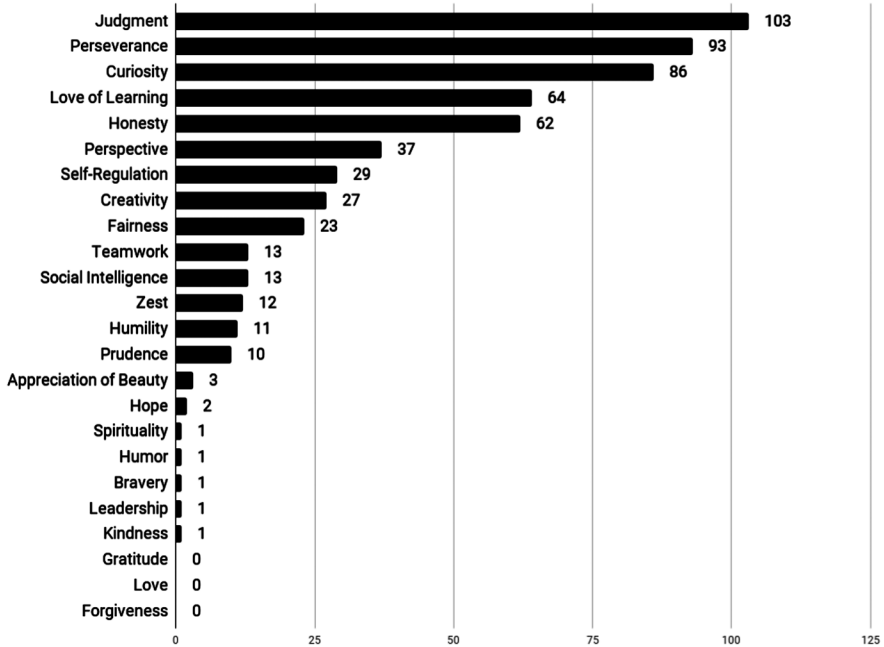


Figure 2: Reported Character Strengths of researchers.

What I Think It Means

Looking at Figure 1, a consensus profile for a successful Writer seems to emerge. Taken as a whole, my respondents clearly favored Perseverance, Judgment, Creativity, Curiosity, and Honesty as the most important Character Strengths for Writers. Not only does this seem to support my hypothesis that certain personality traits can be linked to success at writing, it gives us an idea as to what those personality traits might be.

I was not surprised to find Creativity among the top answers, because I think when you say Writer a lot of people imagine a novelist or other creative type. But I didn't expect for Perseverance and Judgment to be more popular choices. In our culture, we tend to think of Creativity as some sort of magical power that you either have or you don't. Good Judgment and Perseverance aren't made of pixie dust, nor are they obviously directly connected to writing in the same way you can draw a bright line from Creativity to a successful novel or screenplay or whatever. There's a lesson here, I think. Hard work and critical thinking skills are even more important to success as a Writer than whether or not you are a creative artistic type.

I also find it interesting that every single Character Strength is represented in that first batch of responses. For every one of Peterson and Seligman's Character Strengths, there was at least one person who considered it important to being a successful Writer. Looking at the raw data, all but one of those 127 people considered themselves a small double-u writer.² That suggests to me that the outliers (i.e. the individual people who suggested Gratitude, Love, Prudence, Forgiveness, Spirituality, or Leadership) aren't *wrong*. They just draw on different Character Strengths when they write. Or else they've observed that strength in a Writer they admire.

Looking at Figure 2, the Character Strengths of Love, Gratitude, and Forgiveness found no supporters. Apart from those three, the range of Character Strengths associated with the successful Researcher was nearly as varied as those for Writers. Perseverance and Judgment again emerged as the top two Character Strengths, only with their relative positions on the list reversed. Instead of Creativity in the number 3 spot on the list, though, we find Curiosity, followed by Love of Learning and Honesty.

These top Character Strengths for Researchers make a lot of sense to me. Research is often a long, laborious pursuit of new knowledge. Sometimes only tenacity and love of what you're doing will carry you to the end. And

²The lone exception self-identified as a Graphic Designer.

truthfully reporting your results guarantees that your research will contribute to the ongoing project of building a better, smarter world.

By the way, if you are interested in seeing how your Character Strengths match up with these survey results, try the Values In Action Character Strength survey at www.viacharacter.org/www/Character-Strengths-Survey.³ The results will order the 24 Character Traits, ranking them from those you most closely identify with to those that are less developed in you personally. Maybe some of them will line up with the top Character Strengths for a Writer or a Researcher. Or maybe you'll need to figure out a way to turn your own Character Strengths to your advantage when you write and research.

Bibliography

Peterson, Christopher, and Martin E. P. Seligman. *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, Oxford UP, 2004.

The VIA Classification of Character Strengths. VIA Institute on Character, 2017.

³You'll have to register for an account, but they don't seem to be flooding my email with messages or anything like that.



Jeff Rients is a doctoral candidate in Illinois State University's English Studies program, where he studies the impact of changes in printing technique and technology on the formation of authorship in 19th century British literature. He splits his time between the English department and ISU's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, where he creates materials and programming for faculty development. When not working, he spends his time watching cartoons with his daughter or playing *Dungeons & Dragons*.