

# Gender Differences in College Admissions Essays

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand how gender influences the writing style of students applying to college. It uses the variationist approach to sociolinguistics to collect and analyze data in order to demonstrate a difference between the way male and female students use language in their college essays. All the essays analyzed come from the book *50 Successful Swarthmore Application Essays* by William Han and Sean Cheng (2020), which contains application essays by students who come from many globally and economically diverse backgrounds. Results show that male applicants had a higher rate of personal pronoun usage while female students had a higher rate of hedging within their essays.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics; gender norms; college essays; pronoun usage; self-perception; students

## INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics is defined as the study of language relating to various social factors, including wealth, age, social status, region, and gender (1). In particular, there is a large body of study on gender in sociolinguistics. Gender is a factor that has been shown to influence how people communicate with others, and studying the effect of gender on language is essential to understanding society (2). It is also important to note that gender differs from sex, which for sociolinguistic purposes is viewed as a biological function and not how one chooses to present themselves to society according to a traditional binary of “men” and “women” (2). This study will purely be focused on analyzing linguistic differences by gender.

In this study, I aim to understand how gender can influence one’s writing, in particular, that of students applying to college. This work asks to what extent does the gender of a student influence the manner in which they write a college admission essay, as measured by specific sociolinguistic variables?

I hypothesize that male students applying to Swarthmore will demonstrate a higher likelihood of using first person language than the female students, as determined by the frequency of the tokens “I”, “my”, “me”, and “mine”. I additionally hypothesize that female students will have a generally higher rate of using hedging statements compared to the male students. I based this hypothesis on my observations of gender norms in society, like how increased use of personal pronouns can come across as having a more confident mindset. In society, men have typically been allowed this frame of mind more often than women, due to the idea that men are more often correct and henceforth don’t have to limit their presence as much. In contrast, women are mostly taught how to limit their presence for most of their lives, leading to a general lack of confidence and having to be more conscious of the words they use.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

As stated above, this study uses the variationist approach to linguistics, in which data is collected using variables and tokens in order to study how language use varies and changes in different social contexts (4). Using tokens, or measurable variables in language, allows sociolinguists to statistically demonstrate the ways in which people speak differently based on factors like age, gender, social class, and region. Studies on variation are essential to the field of linguistics, as proven by a study on patterns in Guyanese creole, which concluded that in order to properly determine factors in society through the study of language, studying variation of word usage and grammar is necessary (5).

In both general and variationist sociolinguistics, gender proves to be an interesting variable to study. In particular, how people present their gender through speech and language has been a topic of interest for many sociolinguistic studies. In my study, I am analyzing the gendered differences between writing patterns of highly intellectual students, given that all 50 of their applications were submitted and accepted into Swarthmore. However, the language use of high-achieving students frequently differs between that of the average student, and there are gendered differences between such high-achieving students too. This high-achieving, scholarly group forms a sort of community of practice, another situation that is frequently studied in sociolinguistics (2). In a 1999 study, researchers analyzed a community of “nerd” girls in California by describing the linguistic patterns in their speech (6). This is a prime example of examining gender in a community of practice, specifically the habits of young, “nerdy” girls. In my study, I can infer that based on the fact that the students are applying to Swarthmore, a school known as a more academic, scholarly college, they would fit into the “nerd” archetype that Bucholtz identifies. This research done by Bucholtz is pivotal in understanding differences in gender as well as how and why they may occur. It also limits any issues about differing communities and differences in language use that may be created between super intellectual and less intellectual groups in the data, as all the students who applied and were accepted would share a similar academic background. By exclusively using the essays of students applying to a school that engages a more “nerdy” demographic, I can eliminate some variables that may arise from academic differences and leave room to solely focus on gender.

Another study examined how male and female students

grades 6-9 write their essays. To do this, they analyzed the students’ keystrokes, frequency, typing speed, and deletion of phrases, and pausing on standardized English Language Arts (ELA) tests. Similar to reviewing essay style, this study provides context for token difference, given that female students were shown to be more prone to pausing and deleting while typing, performing keystrokes indicative of editing (7). The results of this study suggest that for some female students, they may be more hyperconscious of the verbiage they use when writing essays. This study also showed that on average, female students were more likely to score higher, which could be attributed to more evidence of editing within their essays (7). The study implies that increased editing among female students could be due to the societal norms of a woman having to show up as more presentable to be considered equally in writing. Similar processes could have been used by the participants in my study, which could result in different findings than my original hypothesis, meaning that female college applicants may have edited their essays in such a way that they are comparable in hedging verb and personal pronoun usage as the standard male applicant.

A study by Ishikawa in 2015 aimed to analyze the most commonly occurring words found in essays written by male and female university students. The study found that female college students were more likely to use increased levels of adverbs and hedges and were also more likely to use personal pronouns in their essays (8). In addition, the study also demonstrated how word usage could differ between men and women, even in an academic context. Similarly to Ishikawa, in a 2016 study on congressional speeches, Lenard suggests that the way women talk differently than men may be attributed to the forced gender roles in society. This study hypothesizes that women may use the “I” pronoun more than male counterparts in congressional speeches due to the implications that increased pronoun usage indicates more self-reflection and general awareness of how one presents themselves to the world, which differs from my hypothesis (9). Bei Yu additionally provides specific insight into men’s and women’s use of personal pronouns in a 2014 study, also using congressional speeches to determine the difference in pronoun usage of men and women, and why that might matter in the study of gender in sociolinguistics (10). In my research, I found my hypothesis to contrast those of Ishikawa and Lenard, but similar to that of the Yu study in 2014. The rationale for developing my specific hypothesis was due to my initial observations as a high school student, theorizing that male students were more likely to

use personal pronouns.

All the studies discussed, and my own work reported here, necessarily approach gender as a binary. However, Bucholtz notes in a study on gender versus sex that there is a vast difference between the study on sex and the study of gender in sociolinguistics, as sex covers the biological function whereas gender is defined as a constructed human binary of either men or women (3). I note that this study does not factor in the sociolinguistic differences between transgender people and cisgender people, nor does it account for those who fall between the gender binary. I also acknowledge that gender is a concept used in order to categorize stereotypes of the sexes and may not always serve as a completely accurate basis upon which to analyze linguistic patterns. Future research could involve more studies on sex versus gender and how the construct of gender affects or does not affect sociolinguistics. However, this study will purely analyze gender differences in essay writing according to the constructed binary.

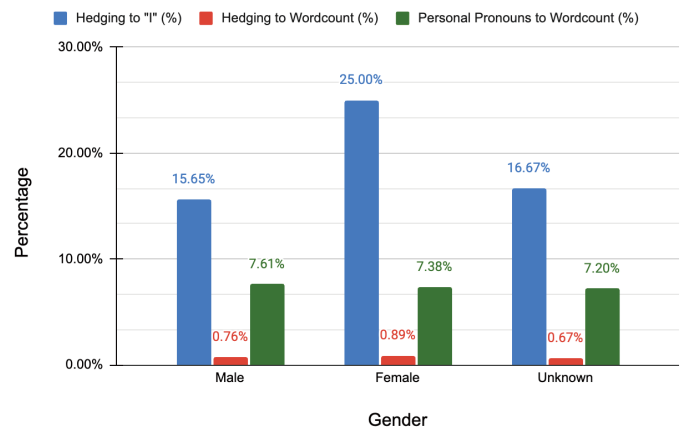
**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In this study, I chose to review and analyze essays from the book *50 Successful Swarthmore Application Essays* by William Han and Sean Cheng (11). This book includes 50 college admissions essays written by students coming from a multitude of diverse backgrounds, yet all roughly in their later teenage years. To extract the data, I accessed an online version of the text, which allowed me to get a word count for each essay. From there, I determined the gender of each student in the book, with three identifiers: male, female, and unknown if their gender was unspecified. Out of 50 participants, 19 were identified to be female, 18 were identified to be male, and the rest were left unspecified. After that, I counted the number of times the personal pronoun “I” had appeared in each essay, as well as “my”, “me” and “mine”. Additionally, to determine if there was hedging in the essays or not, I counted the number of typical hedging statements starting with the word “I”, such as “I think that”, “I feel like”, “I would”, “I could”, etc. For the purpose of this study, a hedging statement is identified as a statement that separates the personal pronoun “I” from a characteristic or action; through this, expressing a level of uncertainty in one’s thoughts or ideas. An example of a hedging statement tracked in this study would be “I think I demonstrate X quality” opposed to “I demonstrate X quality”. From there, I performed proportional analysis and divided the number of hedging statements by the number of “I” pronouns used, determining a ratio of how many of the “I” statements were used in a hedging

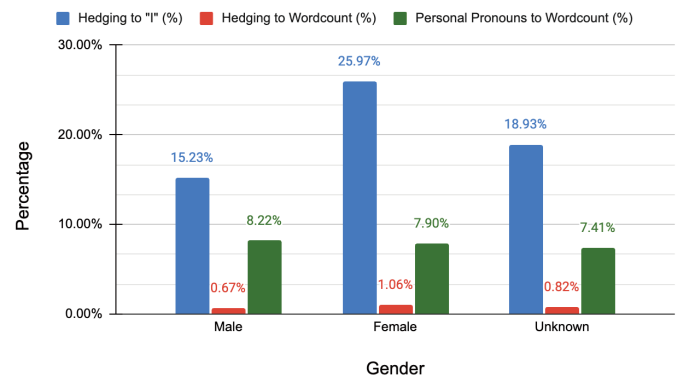
statement. Separately, I added all the personal pronouns (I, me, my, and mine) in each essay together, then divided them by the total word count to determine the ratio of total personal pronoun usage per essay. Finally, I divided the number of hedging statements by the total word count to determine the ratio of hedges per word count.

**RESULTS**

According to Figure 1, men were found to have a median personal pronoun to word count ratio of 7.61%, while women had a ratio of 7.38%. The mean ratio of personal pronoun usage to word count was also similar, being 8.22% for men and 7.90% for women (see Figure 2). The personal pronouns measured in this study were “I”, “me”, “mine”, and “my”. Conversely, women were found to have a higher ratio of hedging overall, with the median



**Figure 1.** Median Ratios Of Hedging & Personal Pronoun Usage.



**Figure 2.** Mean Ratios Of Hedging & Personal Pronoun Usage.

and mean ratio of hedging statements to “I” statements 25.00% and 25.97% respectively, while this ratio for men was almost 10% lower (see Figures 1 & 2). The median and mean ratios comparing hedging statements to total word count was also higher for women than for men. Overall, the data suggests that men are more likely to have a slightly increased use of personal pronouns such as the “I”, “my”, “me”, and “my” tokens, while female applicants were much more likely to use hedging statements as compared to male applicants. It is also worth noting that despite having a somewhat similar amount of total “I” statements, for the female students, more of these statements were hedges, showing that a vastly larger portion of the personal pronoun usage in females can easily be attributed to the beginnings of a hedging statement. Since a portion of the word count of personal pronoun usage can be attributed to “I” statements, in general, the data indicates that more women made “I” statements within the context of a hedging statement.

However, some factors that may have altered this data were potential outliers. In some essays, some students exhibited significantly higher rates of personal pronoun usage than the rest of their peer group. For example, one female student displayed increased personal pronoun usage, having a personal pronoun to word count ratio of 12.11% compared to the average female student’s ratio, 7.90%, a rate of almost 4% more than the average female student. This variation may have been attributed to the fact that this student wrote that she was a student journalist. Due to the nature of journalism, this student could have been inclined to write her essay as if it were an article about herself, and she most likely learned journalistic strategies that may have influenced how she chose to structure and write her essay. Additionally, a few students opted to part from traditional essay formatting and write their essays in the form of a poem, which affected the count of certain tokens. Despite the outliers, my initial hypothesis was correct in demonstrating an increased use of personal pronouns by male students and a higher proportion of hedging statements from female students.

## DISCUSSION

My results show that men had higher uses of personal pronoun usage, which could be correlated with higher rates of self-confidence. These results additionally demonstrate higher uses of hedging statements from women. Hedging statements have been shown to imply a sense of uncertainty that the claims are accurate or worthy to be heard, which aligns with many aspects of

gender norms for women in society (9). Like many other studies, the purpose of this research was to investigate the differences in how each binary gender communicates through a series of prompts. Unlike research before mine, I found that men have a higher rate of using personal pronouns in college essays (9, 12). However, in line with other studies, my findings still resulted in a demonstration of increased hedging statements by women.

My research additionally shows the importance of not only looking at the use of personal pronouns but also the context in which they are used. In my study, though male students used slightly more personal pronouns on average, female students used more hedging statements starting in “I”, meaning that female students used more personal pronouns in the context of hedging statements instead of standalone statements. This occurrence is often attributed to the roles women are expected to perform in society, such as being a passive, selfless caretaker who is not expected to know as much as her male counterpart (2).

Overall, my study challenges people to consider that increased personal pronoun usage may not necessarily be correlated with higher levels of confidence and a better perception of oneself. Noting that a larger percentage of the personal pronoun uses in female students in this study were attributed to hedging statements, the notion that using personal pronouns indicates higher self-confidence is dispelled, because hedging statements usually indicate insecurity or a lack of trust in one’s words. My research could provide an additional perspective on how gender roles can influence the ways in which a high school student expresses themselves through the use of language.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how gender can influence one’s self-expression in college admissions essays. This study analyzed admissions essays from the book *50 Successful Swarthmore Application Essays* by William Han and Sean Cheng (11). To better understand how gender could influence one’s self-expression, this study used these essays to examine the different usage of hedging statements and personal pronouns by gender. My research revealed that overall male applicants are more likely to have increased personal pronoun usage, while female applicants are more likely to use hedging statements.

While offering important data to add to a corpus of research, this study had some limitations. One of the most significant limitations was the issue of sample size. There were only 50 essays to analyze in the source

material, which is a small sample size from which to draw generalizable conclusions. Furthermore, an additional limitation within this sample size was that many essay writers did not explicitly express or identify their gender within their writing, limiting my ability to conduct gender based analysis on the data collected, which further limited the gendered sample size. Global student applications were also a factor that influenced the content of each essay. Each student is taught a different version of the English language and its grammar rules depending on what part of the global community they live in. Furthermore, the source material included different types of admissions essays, such as the Common App essays, QuestBridge essays, and Why Swarthmore essays. Each essay type has different prompts that may affect the way a student chooses to express themselves according to each type's guidelines, and different essay applications are aimed towards different demographics of students. Future studies could include specific analysis pertaining to the application essays of students from certain regions of the world and also of a specific economic class, while also focusing solely on one type of admissions essay. Finally, as mentioned previously, while this study does address gendered differences, it does not account for the differences between biological sex and gender. More studies could be done concerning how people whose gender does not match the biological sex given at birth or who do not conform to the gender binary choose to express themselves through linguistic variation.

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### DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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