

Writing Motivation and Text Genres as Contributing Factors to Historical Writing Performance of College Students

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Introduction

Writing is a critical literacy skill that plays an increasingly important role in everyday life (Graham & Perin, 2007). Adult learners who continue to postsecondary education are expected to demonstrate proficient writing skills in most of their college classes. However, writing also is a complex endeavor that requires individuals to not only deploy cognitive resources for producing varied texts, but also to integrate a host of writing skills and strategies, all while monitoring and adjusting their writing-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to successfully meet their goals (Harris et al., 2006; Troia, 2006). As pointed out by MacArthur and his colleagues (MacArthur et al., 2015), the great demands that complex writing has placed on writers' self-regulations require substantial motivational resources to be included into the writing processes. Because of this complexity, many individuals find writing very challenging and fail to perform well on important writing tasks.

Essay Writing and Critical Thinking Skills for College Students

When it comes to students enrolled in postsecondary programs, prior research has found that many students are underprepared for college, particularly in the area of academic writing. The prior evidence indicated that only 27% of 12th graders perform at or above proficient level in writing (NCES, 2012). College instructors routinely assign writing for the purpose of deepening understanding of the knowledge and ideas, which usually requires students to be able to discuss key concepts in a coherent and accurate manner, and display writing that conforms to accepted writing conventions (Perin & Lauterbach, 2018). From this sense, writing has been playing a critical role in helping college students develop critical thinking skills that are important to their college success. However, a great number of students who enter higher education with inadequate preparation have been found to experience challenges in meeting these writing requirements in college, particularly in disciplinary writing that typically adopts compare-contrast and argumentative text structures (two major types of the subject-area assignments in college).

Writing Motivation: Self-Efficacy and Goal Orientations

Motivation plays a critical role in students' writing performance, particularly those who struggle with writing (MacArthur et al., 2015). Prior research has studied writing motivation as a multi-component construct. *Writing self-efficacy* has been found to correlate with academic

achievement in general, and writing performance in particular (Bruning & Kauffman, 2016). As pointed out by MacArthur et al. (2016), students with a mastery goal orientation tend to focus on competence development and task mastery. Those with performance-oriented goals tend to focus on demonstrating competence in comparison to their peer or other individuals. Performance-avoidance goals, on the other hand, are focused on avoiding unfavorable judgments by others. Existing research targeting the three *goal orientations* for writing has indicated that mastery and performance-approach goals are positively associated with writing self-efficacy beliefs (Pajares et al., 2000), whereas performance-avoidance goals are negatively correlated to self-efficacy (Yilmaz Soylu et al., 2017).

Research Purpose

Prior evidence has shown that a substantial portion of college students struggle with demonstrating proficient writing to fulfill college writing requirements. Although motivation has been found to be related with academic learning in general, and writing achievement in particular, to date very limited research studies have examined the motivational and disciplinary writing profiles of the college students, as well as the relationships between writing motivation, essay genres, and writing performance. The ultimate goal of this research study is to help college instructors and writing specialists better assist their students, especially those struggling writers, by enhancing effective writing and motivational interventions and supports.

For the college students in various majors, instructors tend to engage them in writing essays through a critical lens by a) comparing and contrasting key concepts or events, and/or b) presenting a strong and clear argument well supported by evidence, with the consideration of counter argument so as to analyze critical concepts or issues in a comprehensive manner. While both genres are critical in using essay writing as an effective learning tool (particularly for historical content), it's important to examine whether and if any, to what extent writing prompts reflecting two different genres may have differentiated impact on the writing outcomes of college students.

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- a) What is the writing motivational profile (i.e., writing self-efficacy, goal orientation for writing) of college students?
- b) What is the (compare-contrast vs. argumentative) essay writing performance of college students?
- c) Do text genre (i.e., compare-contrast vs. argumentation) impact college students' essay writing outcomes in a differentiated manner?

Methods

The current project is a correlational quantitative research study. A total of 44 undergraduate college students (28 male and 16 female) were involved. Mean age of the

participants was 22 years, among which 32% were White, 16% were African American, 39% were Asian American, and 13% were Hispanic. Each participant was asked to complete a writing motivation survey that included two subscales: writing self-efficacy and goals orientation for writing. In addition, each student also wrote a total of two historical essays: one compare-contrast essay vs. one argumentative essay, based on the given prompts. For each of these two specific genres, students were provided with two historical prompts from which they can choose to respond. The generated essays were evaluated based on the following indices: essay length, compare-contrast vs. argumentative essay elements, and holistic text quality.

Writing measures

Total Words Written. Total words written (*TWW*) is an index of writing productivity. It is viewed as a reliable and valid measure for assessing students' writing outcomes.

Essay Elements. The *compare-contrast essay elements* were scored using the procedures adapted from Shen and Troia (2018), which include introduction, comparisons, contrasts, evidence/details, conclusion, and use of transition words. The *argumentative essay elements* were scored using a researcher-developed rating scale, which include claim, counterclaim, supporting evidence, concluding statement, and use of transition words. Each element will receive a score of 1 if presented. Each of these structural elements was rated on a 0–2 scale. A score of 0 was assigned when a target element (e.g., conclusion) was absent; a score of 1 was assigned when the target element was present, but elementary; and a score of 2 was assigned when the target element was developed and advanced.

Holistic Writing Quality. Each student's essay quality was scored using a 6-point Likert rubric (ratings ranging from 1- 6) adapted from De La Paz et al. (2017). This rubric holistically evaluated the ideas generation, text structure, genre elements, essay coherence, transition, and writing mechanics.

Writing motivation measures:

The motivation questionnaires adopted in the current study were developed by MacArthur, Philippakos, and Graham (2016), which consisted of two scales: Writing Self-Efficacy (18 items) and Goal Orientations for Writing (11 items) were used in this study. This motivation measure was reported to demonstrate adequate construct validity and internal consistency (see also MacArthur et al., 2015).

Data Analysis and Results

All data were analyzed using SPSS software. The two writing motivation scales were analyzed first before running further statistical analyses. Factor analysis was used to explore the loading of each item on the apriori factors for the two motivation scales. Items were expected to exhibit factor structure loading of .50 or greater. Mean and standard deviation for the writing motivation and writing performance scores were then calculated and reported. A series of comparison

analyses were applied at two levels: 1) writing self-efficacy vs. goal orientations for writing motivation variables, 2) writing performance scores on length, genre elements, and holistic text quality (for compare-contrast vs. argumentative essays).

Instrument Analysis for Motivation Scales: Self-Efficacy vs. Goal Orientations

The principal components analysis (PCA) extraction with varimax rotations of the factors with Kaiser normalization was conducted for responses on both the *Writing Self-Efficacy Scale* and *Goal Orientations for Writing Scale*. The 18 items on the self-efficacy scale were found to load on two unique factors that explained 63% of the total variance: self-efficacy for strategies vs. self-efficacy for self-regulations, explaining 36% and 27% of the total variance, respectively. 12 items loaded on the strategies factor (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$), and 6 items loaded on the self-regulation factor (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$) (See Table 1).

For the Goal Orientations Scale, three factors were extracted that explained 25%, 24%, and 20%, respectively, of the variance. Four items intended to measure mastery goals loaded on the first factor on mastery goal (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$), four items that measured avoidance goal loaded on the second factor (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$), and the remaining three items loaded on the third factor that measured performance goal (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$) (See Table 2).

Table 1 Writing Self-Efficacy Scale: Rotated Component Matrix

Self-Efficacy Variable	Factors	
	SE for Strategies	SE for Self-Regulations
1. I can write a paragraph that has a clear topic sentence.	.798	
2. I can think of good ideas to include in my writing when I am planning.	.855	
3. I can write a good persuasive essay.	.795	
4. I can organize my ideas into a plan that makes sense.	.598	
5. I can keep writing even when it's difficult.		.697
6. I can write paragraphs with details to support the main ideas.	.813	
7. I can use a chart or graphic organizer to plan how to present my ideas.		.630
8. I can avoid distractions while I write.		.809
9. I can write an essay with a strong conclusion.	.627	
10. I can evaluate whether my paper is well written.	.645	
11. I can plan time to get my writing done by the deadline.		.772
12. I can write an interesting introduction that makes the reader want to read the paper.	.712	
13. I can revise my papers to make them better.		.635

14. I can find the right words to express my ideas.	.583	
15. I can focus on my writing for at least 1 hour.		.738
16. I can write a summary of the important points from an article I read.	.651	
17. I can evaluate whether I am making progress in learning to write.	.539	
18. I can edit my papers to fix errors.	.595	
Eigenvalue	10.07	1.30
% of variance	35.68	27.46
Cronbach's α	.94	.87

Table 2 Goal Orientations for Writing Scale: Rotated Component Matrix

Writing Goal Orientations Variable	Factor		
	Mastery	Avoidance	Performance
When I'm writing in this class, I'm trying to ...			
1. improve how I express my ideas.	.843		
5. become a better writer.	.712		
7. better organize my ideas.	.842		
10. persuade others with my writing.	.808		
2. keep people from thinking I'm a poor writer.		.754	
4. hide that I have a hard time writing.		.809	
8. avoid making mistakes in front of my classmates.		.785	
11. hide how nervous I am about writing.		.821	
3. get a good grade in the class.			.879
6. pass this class.			.808
9. complete all the assignments for the class.			.810
Eigenvalue	3.21	2.54	1.79
% of variance	25.4	23.6	19.6
Cronbach's α	.82	.80	.80

Means and standard deviations of raw scores for the two writing motivation measures are reported in Table 3. The dependent measures included: writing self-efficacy, as defined by efficacy for strategies and efficacy for self-regulation; goal orientations for writing, as defined by mastery-, avoidance-, and performance-goals. The paired t-test was conducted with the two self-efficacy variables, and the result shows that the participants demonstrated significantly higher

self-efficacy for implementing writing strategies than self-regulating strategies. The repeated measure ANOVA was conducted with the three goal orientation variables. The data indicate that all three types of writing goal orientations were significantly different from each other, with performance-based goals scoring the highest, followed by mastery-based goals. The avoidance goal orientation seemed to receive the lowest scores.

Table 3 College Students' Writing Motivational Profiles and Comparisons

Measure	M (SD)		
Self-Efficacy			
Strategies	81.23 (13.17)		
Self-regulation	77.70 (16.05)	$t = 2.261^*$	$p = .029$
Goal Orientations			
Mastery	4.01 (.75)		
Avoidance	2.76 (1.04)		
Performance	4.70 (.51)	$F = 58.95$	$p < .001$

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4 shows the college participants' performance on writing compare-contrast and argumentative historical essays. The dependent variables of the generated texts included: essay length (calculated as total words written, or TWW), genre elements, and holistic writing quality. A series of comparison tests were conducted with these writing variables. The students were found to generate significantly longer compare-contrast essays compared to their argumentative papers. Their compare-contrast essays also included significantly more genre elements than argumentative texts. However, the holistic quality of the generated historical texts didn't show significant difference between these two genres.

Table 4 College Students' Writing Performance and Comparisons by Genres

Measure	Compare-Contrast Essay M (SD)	Argumentative Essay M (SD)	t	p
TWW	265.70 (130.25)	235.58 (98.08)	2.358*	.023
Essay Elements	4.41 (2.36)	4.91 (2.32)	-2.186*	.034
Holistic Text Quality	3.09 (1.25)	3.05 (1.27)	.443	.660

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion and Implications

The current study examined the writing motivational profiles (particularly in the areas of writing self-efficacy and goal orientations for writing) and historical writing performance for college students. The results showed that the participants in this study demonstrated significantly higher self-efficacy for implementing writing strategies than self-regulating strategies. This finding is expected due to the fact that students are provided with many opportunities to learn various writing strategies such as advance planning, editing, revising, etc. since early age/grade in school years. However, self-regulation strategies such as goal setting, self-instructing, and self-evaluating skills barely are taught explicitly or systematically in k-12 schools or post-secondary institutions. Therefore, more efforts are called for to incorporate the teaching of these critical self-monitoring and self-regulating skills into daily writing instruction to boost students' writing motivation, particularly self-perceived efficacy on regulating their writing processes and behaviors.

Among all three types of the goal orientations for writing, the college students' performance-based goal orientation was found to score the highest, followed by mastery-based goal orientation. The avoidance goal orientation seemed to receive the lowest scores. Given that the prior research has found positive relationships between performance- and master-oriented goals with the writing performance (e.g., MacArthur et al., 2016), I would strongly encourage that college instructors consider engaging their students in various writing activities across different subject areas, topics, and genres to boost their positive goal orientations, especially mastery-based goals. In addition, college instructors could also assist their struggling students who experience difficulties in using writing as a tool to foster and demonstrate critical thinking skills through analyzing, reasoning, summarizing, persuading, etc.

Lastly, the current study showed that when composing historical texts, the college students wrote significantly longer compare-contrast essays compared to argumentative papers, whereas argumentative essays included significantly more genre-specific essay elements than compare-contrast texts. Based on the results, it is recommended that writing interventions be provided to college students that are designed to enhance their idea generating and planning skills based on writing prompts, especially for composing argumentative essays. Besides, genre features and elements need to be explicitly taught at college writing classes to further improve students' abilities to write strong genre-specific essays across various disciplines.

Project Dissemination

A conference proposal based on the current study has been submitted to the 2026 New York State Reading Association's (NYSRA) Annual Conference, to be held in November 2026. A manuscript is currently in preparation and will be submitted to *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, which is a peer-reviewed journal, for publication.

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