



# Do students' beliefs about writing relate to their writing self-efficacy, apprehension, and performance?



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## ABSTRACT

This study tested a model in which beliefs about writing, writing self-efficacy, and writing apprehension predict writing performance. The Beliefs About Writing Survey, the Writing Self-Efficacy Index, and the modified Writing Apprehension Test were administered to 738 undergraduates to predict their grade on a class paper. In a hierarchical regression, beliefs about writing predicted variance in writing scores beyond that accounted for by writing self-efficacy and apprehension. Audience Orientation, a new belief associated with expert practice, was the strongest positive predictor of the students' grade. Transmission, a belief in relying on material published by authorities, was the leading negative predictor. Writing self-efficacy predicted performance, albeit modestly. The traditional measure of writing apprehension (anxiety about being critiqued) was not significant, but Apprehension About Grammar, a new construct, significantly and negatively predicted performance. These results support the possibility that beliefs about writing could be a leverage point for teaching students to write.

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## 1. Introduction

Social cognitive theory established the importance of beliefs in human learning and performance. The most important of these beliefs are self-efficacy beliefs, one's confidence in one's ability to perform tasks required to cope with situations and achieve specific goals. People with high self-efficacy are more likely to take on challenges, try harder, and persist longer than those with low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989). People with high self-efficacy tend to be less apprehensive and to confront anxiety-producing situations to reduce their threat, while those with low self-efficacy avoid such situations (Pajares, 1997). Bandura maintains that there are four sources of self-efficacy, with the most influential being one's previous successes and mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997).

Thirty years of research with students ranging from fourth graders to undergraduates supports the linkages between self-efficacy, apprehension, and performance with respect to writing. Students with high writing self-efficacy write better and are less apprehensive about writing than those with low writing self-

efficacy (e.g., McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer, 1985; Pajares & Valiante, 1999). Correlations between writing self-efficacy and writing performance have ranged from .03 (Pajares & Johnson, 1994) to .83 (Schunk & Swartz, 1993), clustering around .35, while correlations between writing performance and writing apprehension have ranged from  $-.28$  (Meier, McCarthy, & Schmeck, 1984) to  $-.57$  (Pajares & Johnson, 1994).

### 1.1. Beliefs about writing

More recent work has extended the social cognitive view of writing by exploring whether another type of belief, beliefs about writing, also relates to writing performance and its established correlates, writing self-efficacy and apprehension. In contrast to writing self-efficacy beliefs (i.e., one's beliefs about one's own writing skills), beliefs about writing address what good writing is and what good writers do. As Graham, Schwartz, and MacArthur (1993) wrote, "The knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that students hold about writing play an important part in determining how the composing process is carried out and what the eventual shape of the written product will be" (p. 246). Mateos et al. (2010) similarly described these beliefs as "filters leading students to represent the task of...writing to themselves in a particular way," with the various models of writing created by these beliefs leading to "different engagement patterns" (p. 284).

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Scholars of both educational psychology and writing and rhetoric have studied beliefs about writing. Palmquist and Young (1992) conducted one of the first empirical studies of these beliefs, an examination of the belief that writing is an innate gift that some have and others lack. Overall, undergraduates who believed that writing ability is innate were more apprehensive about writing, had lower estimates of their writing skills and abilities (a belief akin to self-efficacy), and were less confident in their potential to become good writers. The authors concluded that the belief in innateness “appears to make an important, though largely unacknowledged, contribution to a constellation of expectations, attitudes, and beliefs that influence the ways in which students approach writing” (p. 159). More specifically, the authors found an interaction between self-appraisals and apprehension, and the belief in innateness. Among students who had low assessments of their own writing, the belief in the innateness of writing ability strongly correlated with writing apprehension, while among students with high appraisals of their own writing, the belief in innateness did not relate to apprehension. The authors suggested that students with low assessments of their written work and high writing apprehension might use the belief in innateness to rationalize their poor performance.

Silva and Nicholls (1993) studied the beliefs underlying six traditions of teaching writing: those emphasizing (a) personal involvement, (b) writing for understanding, (c) mechanical correctness, (d) collaboration, (e) cognitive strategies, and (f) models of good writing. The authors developed two genre-neutral scales, one based on the characteristics of good writing espoused by each tradition and the other reflecting the writing strategies that emerged from each perspective. A principal components analysis (PCA) of each scale, followed by a second-order PCA of the resulting components, yielded four emphases: (a) personal meaning and enjoyment of words, (b) a recursive approach fostering understanding, (c) focus on audience and strategies, and (d) surface correctness and form.

Lavelle (1993) published a number of studies about students' approaches to writing, a broad construct encompassing beliefs about writing, writing self-efficacy, writing goals, and writing strategies. A factor analysis of college students' survey responses yielded five approaches that fell into two categories, deep and surface. The deep approaches included the elaborationist approach, characterized by personal and emotional involvement, and the relative-revisionist approach, with its strong audience awareness and in-depth revision. The surface approaches were the low self-efficacy approach, with its relative lack of writing strategies; the spontaneous-impulsive approach, characterized by a one-step process and lack of personal meaning; and the procedural approach, with its reliance on strategies. Writers using deep approaches had a stronger sense of audience and revised more, both globally and locally. Those using surface approaches were less invested in their writing, used fewer writing strategies, and were less aware of their audience and writing process.

### 1.1.1. Transaction and Transmission

White and Bruning (2005) explored whether two established beliefs about reading, Transaction and Transmission (Schraw & Bruning, 1996, 1999), influence students' writing. Writers with high Transaction beliefs are emotionally and cognitively engaged in their writing process. They see writing as a means of deepening their understanding of the concepts they write about and their own views. By contrast, those with high Transmission beliefs regard writing as a means for reporting what authorities think. These writers stick to the information and arguments they find in established sources. Transaction and Transmission are independent of one another, so individuals can espouse neither, one, or both of

these beliefs. Students with high Transaction beliefs earned significantly higher grades for their written work, while those with high Transmission beliefs received significantly lower scores. Transaction positively correlated with writing self-efficacy, but did not relate to writing apprehension. Transmission related to neither self-efficacy nor apprehension. The authors suggested that these beliefs influence writing performance via affective (e.g., apprehension), cognitive and behavioral writing processes.

Mateos et al. (2010) extended White and Bruning's (2005) work by studying writers' adherence to Transaction and Transmission beliefs along with their support of the epistemic beliefs examined by Schommer-Aikins (2004). As in the White and Bruning (2005) study, Transaction positively correlated with academic achievement, while Transmission negatively related to achievement. Additionally, Transaction negatively related to Fixed Ability (intelligence is defined, not malleable), Simple Knowledge (knowledge is comprised of discrete facts, not complex, conceptual structures), and Quick Learning (learning occurs immediately or not at all). Transmission positively related to Simple Knowledge.

### 1.1.2. Kellogg's model of writing development

The development of the four-factor beliefs about writing framework presented here was guided by Kellogg's (2008) cognitive model of writing development. Kellogg built on Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987) two-stage developmental model of Knowledge Telling and Knowledge Transforming. Knowledge Tellers record what they know about a topic, primarily as their ideas occur to them. Knowledge Transformers are aware of discrepancies between what they intend to write and what their text actually says. These writers revise to bridge these gaps, and they refine their understandings and rethink their ideas as they work. Kellogg added a third stage, Knowledge Crafting, which describes expert writing. Knowledge Crafters tailor their writing to an audience they have richly represented in their minds. They select which information to include and decide how to present it with this audience in mind.

A major difference between the writers in these three stages is the number of perspectives and representations they maintain as they write. Knowledge Tellers have one main perspective, their own representation of the text, and only a tenuous grasp of what their paper actually says. Knowledge Transformers consider two perspectives, their ideal text and their actual manuscript; they revise to make their paper more like their ideal representation. Knowledge Crafters juggle three rich and stable representations of their work: their ideal paper, the text as it actually reads, and the text as they think their readers will understand it. Writers in this final stage regulate themselves cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally.

Writers move from one stage to the next only after many of their writing skills have become fluid and their ability to represent their text, in its ideal and actual forms, well developed and stable. Because of the heavy demands writing makes on working memory, particularly central executive function, Kellogg (2008) estimated that it takes writers about 10 years to master each of the first two stages. Only experts and those who write extensively reach stage three, and normally not before adulthood. Even then, they usually write at this level in only a few genres. Because the oldest students that Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) studied were undergraduates, Kellogg reasoned that most of them were in the first two stages because they would not have had the time to gain stable executive control over the skills associated with stage three.

Although Kellogg (2008) clearly delineated these stages, he did not cast them as discrete. Rather, he described writing skills and representations as being on a continuum. He allowed that writers in the first stage may have some conception of their audience and their actual text, but maintained that such representations are

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