



# Effects of writing beliefs and planning on writing performance



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## ABSTRACT

White and Bruning (2005) distinguished two sets of writing beliefs: transactional and transmissional beliefs. In this paper we analyse their beliefs scale and suggest two hypotheses about how such beliefs relate to writing performance. The single-process hypothesis treats the beliefs as different amounts of engagement, whereas the dual-process hypothesis claims that the beliefs represent different types of engagement. We then describe the results of an experiment with 84 university students as participants that assessed the relationship between writing beliefs, different forms of pre-planning and different aspects of writing performance. Our results support the dual-process hypothesis, and suggest that transactional beliefs are about the preference for a top-down strategy or a bottom-up strategy, while transmissional beliefs are about the content that is written about. These beliefs interact in their effects on text quality, the amount and type of revision carried out, and the extent to which writers develop their understanding. They also moderate the effectiveness of outlining as a strategy.

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## 1. Introduction

Performance of higher level cognitive tasks is influenced by people's conceptions of what the task involves. This is particularly true of a complex production task like writing where the "stimulus" for the writer's response comes from within the individual writer as opposed to a comprehension task where this can be objectively specified for all participants. Although the importance of task definition in writing has long been recognized (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), it has typically been looked at within the context of specific tasks – how the problem representation is defined and developed, and how this then influences other aspects of the process – rather than as a more general characteristic that individuals bring to the task.

Recently, however, White and Bruning (2005) have developed a writing beliefs inventory designed to assess individual differences in conceptions of writing (see also Sanders-Reio, Alexander, Reio, & Newman, 2014). Such individual differences are important not just in determining how individuals go about writing but also as a potential moderator of the effects of different writing interventions (Kieft, Rijlaarsdam, & Van den Bergh, 2008). White and Bruning showed that writing beliefs are systematically related to the quality

of the text that writers produce, and speculated that this was because writing beliefs affect writers' engagement with the writing process. They did not, however, go into detail about the form that engagement takes in the writing process.

Our first aim in this paper is to flesh out what engagement might consist of in the context of writing. We will suggest two alternative possibilities. The first is a single-process hypothesis. It assumes, essentially, that writing beliefs affect writing quality by influencing the extent to which writers engage in knowledge-transforming processes during writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). The second is a dual-process hypothesis. It assumes that effective writing depends on a combination of two conflicting processes – high-level problem solving and spontaneous text production – and that writing beliefs influence the extent to which writers prioritize these two processes (Galbraith, 2009). The key difference being that the single-process hypothesis assumes that engagement varies along a single dimension – from low to high engagement – whereas the dual-process hypothesis assumes that it varies between different types of engagement.

Our second aim is to test these hypotheses. We will do this in two ways. First, we will assess effects, not just on text quality, but also on the extent to which writers revise their texts during writing, and on the extent to which they develop their understanding as a consequence of writing. We will argue that the single-process hypothesis predicts that the measures will vary in a similar way: writers who produce higher quality text will also engage in greater

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amounts of revision and experience greater developments of understanding as a consequence of writing. By contrast, the dual-process hypothesis, which assumes that the two conflicting processes make different contributions to text quality and the development of understanding, predicts that effects on these measures will vary depending on the way in which writers with different beliefs prioritize the two conflicting processes.

Second, we will manipulate the type of planning carried out before writing. Previous research has suggested that making an outline before writing enables writers to carry out higher-level problem solving more effectively than when writing is not pre-planned and hence is typically associated with the production of higher quality text (Galbraith, Ford, Walker, & Ford, 2005; Kellogg, 1988, 1994). We will argue that the two hypotheses make different predictions about the effect that outlining will have for writers with different writing beliefs. The single-process hypothesis predicts that outlining will have similar effects on text quality and the development of understanding, and that this will be the same for writers with different writing beliefs. By contrast, the dual-process hypothesis predicts that the effect of outlining will vary depending on the extent to which writers with different beliefs prioritize higher-level problem solving processes, and will have differential effects on text quality and the development of understanding.

In the following sections, we first describe the specific writing beliefs identified by White and Bruning (2005). We then explain the basis for the single- and dual-process hypotheses in cognitive models of writing. We conclude by outlining the specific predictions of the two hypotheses about the effects of writing beliefs under different planning conditions on text quality, revision during writing and the development of understanding.

### 1.1. Implicit writing beliefs

The Writing Beliefs Inventory (White & Bruning, 2005) consists of two uncorrelated sub-scales. One, the *transmissional beliefs* scale, represents a belief that writing involves the transmission of information from authoritative sources to the reader. Highly loading items include: “Writing’s main purpose is to give other people information”, and “Writing should focus around the information in books and articles”. The other, the *transactional beliefs* scale, represents the belief that writing is an emotional experience which involves the development of understanding as the text is built. Highly loading items include: “Writing helps me understand better what I’m thinking about”, and “Writing often involves peak experiences”.

White and Bruning (2005) found that writers with high transactional beliefs produced better quality text than writers with low transactional beliefs, and that writers with low transmissional beliefs produced better texts than writers with high transmissional beliefs. There was no interaction between these variables; hence, the two sets of beliefs had independent and additive effects on writing quality. In addition, they found that writers with high transactional beliefs or low transmissional beliefs were more likely to view writing as a means of self-expression and were more likely to write for pleasure than writers with low transactional beliefs or high transmissional beliefs. Overall, this research suggests that the two sets of beliefs are associated with differences in writing performance and attitudes towards writing.

These findings are straightforward. What is much less clear is how the relationship between the two sets of beliefs is conceptualized and why they lead to differences in writing performance. In their paper, White and Bruning (2005) suggest that the two scales map on to a single underlying dimension of engagement. Thus, they suggest that writers with “predominantly *transmissional* writing beliefs (e.g., a high transmissional–low transactional belief

configuration) would demonstrate lower levels of affective and cognitive engagement during the writing process” and that writers with “predominantly *transactional* writing beliefs (e.g., a high transactional–low transmissional belief configuration) would demonstrate higher levels of affective and cognitive engagement during the writing process” (White & Bruning, 2005, p. 168). The problem with this is that it implies that the two sets of beliefs are similar beliefs in being either predominantly transactional or predominantly transmissional. In doing so, they emphasize their similar hypothetical effects on engagement but ignore their empirical status as independent beliefs.

To overcome this ambiguity, we propose two solutions. First, we will restrict the terms “transmissional” and “transactional” to refer to the two sets of empirically independent beliefs, and use the term “engagement” to refer to the hypothetical underlying dimension through which White and Bruning assume they have their effects. Second, we propose that the difference between the two sets of beliefs is, as indicated by the items that load on the two scales, a difference between “transmissional” beliefs about the *source of content* in writing (whether it should involve authoritative sources or not) and “transactional beliefs” about the *process of writing* (whether or not it involves the development of ideas during the course of writing). The fact that the scales are uncorrelated indicates that it is possible to believe, for example, that the process does involve developing ideas during writing while at the same time believing that writing should be about the opinions of authoritative sources.

Overall, we draw two conclusions from White and Bruning’s research. First, they have identified empirically two independent sets beliefs about writing. We have added to this the suggestion that transactional beliefs are primarily about the process of writing whereas transmissional beliefs are primarily about the source of the content. Second, although the two sets of beliefs could in principle affect writing performance in different ways, White and Bruning hypothesize that they in fact have their effects through a single underlying dimension of engagement. Writers with predominantly transactional beliefs are assumed to “view the purpose of writing as a way to personally and critically construct the text by actively engaging their own thinking into the process” (White & Bruning, 2005, p. 168). Writers with predominantly transmissional beliefs are assumed to “envision writing as a way to transfer information from authoritative sources to the reader in a manner that limits how the writer’s ideas are reflected in the text” (White & Bruning, 2005, p. 168). In the next section we consider two contrasting accounts of the processes that might be involved in writers “actively engaging their own thinking into the process”.

### 1.2. What is engagement?

Cognitive models of writing share the emphasis that writing is not simply a matter of translating preconceived ideas into language but that it is an active process in which writers develop ideas in the course of writing. This assumption maps directly onto the transactional beliefs scale, which we have argued reflects beliefs about how the process of writing should be carried out. There is a less direct correspondence with the transmissional beliefs scale, which we have argued is primarily concerned with the content to be written about.

#### 1.2.1. The knowledge-transforming model

The account that is most directly related to White and Bruning’s conception is Bereiter and Scardamalia’s (1987) contrast between knowledge-telling and knowledge-transforming models of writing. The key difference between these models is the extent to which writing is treated as an active transaction with the reader. Thus, in

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