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Steven O'Brien
Kean University

Verneda P. Hamm Baugh
Kean University

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Effects of Minimum Word Counts on Writing Tasks

Steven O'Brien and Verneda P. Hamm Baugh, Ph.D.

Kean University

Abstract

The ability of students to successfully fulfill coursework requirements is an important topic in the fields of education as well as psychology. The present study was designed to examine the effects of placing a minimum word count on a writing task. The participants were asked to complete a writing prompt that may or may not have contained a minimum word count. The number of words written for both groups was then analyzed. The data from the two groups showed that there was a significant difference between the group who received a minimum word count and those who did not. The minimum word count group wrote more, which suggests that there may be a benefit to including specific word count requirements on this type of task. While the quality of the writing was not evaluated in this study, the results suggest that word count requirements may encourage more detail in some writing tasks.

Introduction

A common practice in education is requiring students to complete writing tasks based on prompts. Often, these tasks are accompanied by externally imposed expectations such as length, content, etc. Of the multiple ways educators can guide students to have well thought out ideas, one of the most popular is the concept of a word limit. A word limit is defined as a maximum value of words or characters that can be used in a writing sample. Word limits can keep writing pieces short, or they can force the student to create more thorough ideas. This technique is often used in today's classrooms, but not much is known about how it affects the student. Motivation to complete the task may be affected by the expectation placed on the student. How the student responds to this added "pressure" may influence their ability to effectively complete the task.

Academic motivation, like most things, varies from student to student. Upbringing, parental involvement, and career goals are just some of the factors that affect the student's effort level. Brouse, Basch, Leblanc, McKnight, and Lei (2010) conducted a cross-sectional study that looked at various potential influences on

academic motivation in college students. The main focuses in this particular study were gender, class, and source of tuition funding. Students completed surveys designed to measure intrinsic motivation to know, intrinsic motivation toward accomplishment, intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation, extrinsic motivation that is identified, extrinsic motivation that is introjected, extrinsic motivation that is externally regulated, and amotivation. Brouse et al. (2010) found that females scored higher on all intrinsic motivation measures while men scored higher on amotivation, or the inability or unwillingness to participate. These results show that females, overall, have more motivation to complete academic tasks than boys. But why? Why do males have a lower level of motivation to complete schoolwork?

To attempt to shed more light on this phenomenon, Roger Vallance (2011) conducted a study to examine academic motivation of teenage boys between 13 and 17 years of age at a suburban Catholic secondary school in Western Australia. Surveys assessing "what I actually do" and "what I want to do" were given to 522 students. Results indicate that perception of work standards are formed by the perception

of the student's effort. If the student feels that they worked harder on an assignment, they believe that the standard of work would increase as well. This shows that students believe there is a strong correlation between effort levels and learning. The issue then becomes how to raise effort levels and motivation on writing tasks among males.

Bruning and Horn (2002) published an article that attempted to outline how to develop motivation to complete a task that is extremely important, not only in academia, but in general everyday life. Four "clusters" were proposed as factors in developing motivation to write. The first was nurturing functional beliefs about writing. This cluster is concerned with showing the student that writing is useful in everyday life and that the writing has a grander meaning than just a grade in a classroom. The second cluster emphasized fostering student engagement through authentic writing goals and contexts (Bruning & Horn, 2002). This cluster is mainly concerned with having students write about topics of interest. The third cluster stressed providing a supportive context for writing. This involves the teacher breaking complex tasks down, encouraging, and helping the student write to a level of appropriate ability. The final cluster proposed by Bruning and Horn highlighted the need to create a positive emotional environment. This cluster attempts to create a friendly environment for students to engage in writing. These measures can help younger male and female students become better and more efficient writers. A student who is comfortable with writing will be better equipped to overcome expectations or parameters placed on them while conducting a writing task.

The ability to self-regulate is an important trait in undergraduate students.

But when the ability to self-regulate is hindered by the introduction of external expectations, such as word limits, the student is forced to adhere to external guidelines and change their writing style as a whole. Kevin W. Eva's (2010) editorial discussed the effect of word limits in medical education writings. He suggests that it is much easier to write a long paper than a short one. Eva goes on to explain that when fewer words are allowed, the author is forced to choose words more carefully and refrain from deviating from the main ideas of the writing. Conversely, Eva acknowledges that the strict limits on words in medical writings perpetuate many problems that plague the medical education research field (Eva, 2010). One of the problems Eva identifies is the compromise of the overall quality of the work. For that reason, official limits on words in medical education research have been removed. However, Eva still contends that most medical writing can be sufficiently described quickly and although a word limit may not be there officially, one should always have the length of a piece in mind when writing.

Hideyuki Sakihama (2005) conducted a study to examine the effects of placing a limit on the length of an exposition-writing piece. The main areas of concern were the organization of the ideas in the writing. College students were given a writing prompt and divided into three groups. The first group was allotted a maximum of 200 characters, the second group was allotted 400 characters, and the third group was given an unlimited number of characters to get their points across.

Sakihama (2005) found that students in the 200-character group wrote about fewer important points than did those in the 400-

character and unlimited groups. Sakihama inferred that the most restricted group, the 200 characters group, had to work harder to select the ideas they wanted to put down. Since they did not have the ability to write about superfluous ideas, they were forced to select, omit and structure their writing in a way that they would not go over the 200-character limit. The results suggest that being limited to using fewer characters promoted students' selection and organization of ideas (Sakihama, 2005).

A student's response to pressure or expectations can greatly affect the work they present. Students who have strong self-control capabilities, better stress-coping techniques and a strong support system are better equipped to produce a higher level of academic writing. While much is known of factors that can influence student interest level, external expectations, and motivation level on writing tasks, there is little formal research on the effects that word counts have on such tasks. With the increase in competency-based testing in the education system much attention is paid to the mechanics of writing and grammar but the focus here is on how to encourage significantly more writing. Developing good writing skills is the ultimate goal, however, the first step may be to simply identify variables that encourage writing in general.

The present study was designed to explore the effect placing a minimum word count has on a writing task. The focus was not on the overall quality of the writing itself but on the amount of writing produced. It was hypothesized that placing a minimum word count would increase the amount of writing a student completes on the given assignment.

Method

Participants

Three courses were randomly recruited from the spring 2013 course catalog at a northeastern public University. The total number of students who participated in the study was 56. At the completion of the study, there were a total of 16 male participants and 40 female participants. All were enrolled students at a 4-year university and ages for all participants ranged from 18 years of age to 43 years of age. The participants self-reported as ~44% Caucasian, ~21% Hispanic, ~14% African American, ~7% Asian and 14% did not report or reported as "other". College major and college level were not assessed.

Materials

Two data collection sheets containing the writing prompt "What would you do if a magical genie granted you three wishes and why?" were developed. The control group received the prompt with no minimum word count. The experimental group received the same writing prompt with a minimum word count stated as "no less than 150 words".

Procedure

Professors of 3 randomly selected courses from the spring 2013 course catalog were approached for their permission to solicit student participants from their classes and a date was set for the study to be administered. On the approved date, students were invited to participate in the study and those who agreed read and signed a consent form and were given one of the two writing prompts. Students were given

ten minutes to complete the writing assignment.

Results

A t-test found a significant difference between the word count groups on number of words written in response to the prompt, $t(54) = 5.66$, $p < .001$. The group whose writing prompt contained a minimum word count wrote an average of 117.43 (S.D. = 31.37) words and the group that did not have a minimum word count wrote on average 72.57 (S.D. = 27.04) words.

Discussion

The present study was designed to explore the effects placing a minimum word count has on a student completing a writing task. It was hypothesized that placing a minimum word count would increase the amount of writing a student completes on the given assignment. For this study, the hypothesis was confirmed.

The minimum word count requirement had a significant effect on how much the student wrote. This information can play a vital role in both the educational and psychological fields. The findings of this and related studies help shed light on a factor that may encourage students to include more content and possibly improve the final product. The ability of students to explain their ideas and values will help them, and educators, get more out of writing assignments.

This is a concept that is supported by Sakihama (2005) who suggested that students who have restrictions placed on their work covered less important topics than those who were free to write as much as they needed. In his study, Sakihama

analyzed the work of the students and came to the conclusion that students who are free to write more will be able to discuss topics in greater length and detail. As with the present study, the students who were given the minimum word count requirement wrote more.

Although it is true that the participants in the present study elaborated more, on average, when they were given a minimum word count in the writing prompt, the average number of words written still fell under the requested 150 words. However, this may have been a result of the time limitations imposed in the study.

There may be ways for educators to better equip students with the necessary parameters to write effectively. For example, more time may be needed to write an effective essay. The ten-minute writing limit in this study may have affected the student's ability to elaborate further on the topic presented. The time limit, which they were made aware of, could also have added further pressure beyond the given word count. Students may have paid too much attention to the ticking clock, which may have increased anxiety levels and limited their ability to elaborate more effectively. As Bruning and Horn (2002) suggest, the writing environment can influence the stress and anxiety of the writer.

It is also possible that reinforcements may be needed to encourage deeper writing and elaboration. Students may not have the desire to complete writing tasks if there is no clear reward for putting forth the effort, as may have been the case in this study. A reward for adequately completing a writing prompt may encourage students to put more thought into what they write to complete the prompt. Determining factors related to failure to complete writing requirements

could aid educators in clearly defining expectations and identify variables that help motivate the writer.

Another important variable to assess is the writer's appraisal of their feelings of the task before, during, and after the writing exercise. Feelings of pressure, anxiety, or inability to complete the task can hinder the writing process. Identifying the areas of concern can help educators create environments and structure tasks to get the best work from their students.

Other areas that may be examined in further research include the type of writing prompt used. Bruning and Horn (2002) suggest that fostering student engagement through different writing styles and topics can enhance performance. Writing about interesting topics can actively engage students and they will likely get more out of the exercise.

The results of the present study indicate that minimum word count requirements can be used to help students better elaborate on ideas. Although the quality of the writing samples was not evaluated in the present study, writing requirements in conjunction with a supportive writing environment may foster more elaborative writing. Further investigation into these concepts can continue to expand our understanding of how to best help students to meet requirements and write effectively.

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