

# A letter to Like: How to get good grades for writing

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## Introduction

In 2012 Utrecht University started a project to develop a method and materials for the improvement of composition skills of students in primary education (grade 4 – 6). As part of this project a pilot study was conducted to gain insight in what students already know about writing and to pretest the developed materials.

In short, we investigated:

- what students in primary education know about writing
- whether this knowledge is related to text quality
- if process instruction increases students' metacognitive knowledge
- if process instruction improves text quality.

## Theoretical background

Metacognitive knowledge is essential in writing and writing instruction, as is demonstrated by Harris, Graham, Brindle & Sandmel (2009), and instruction should focus on process aspects of writing (Graham et al., 2012; Koster et al., 2014). Schoonen & De Glopper (1996) have shown that metacognitive knowledge and text quality are related for students in secondary education (grade 9). We wanted to examine if this also applies to younger students (grade 4-6), and if we could improve students' writing performances by process based strategy instruction.

## Method - Participants

For this study 593 students (48,6% male, 51,4% female), grade 4 - 6, mean age 10,6 years (*sd* 1,05), were recruited from various parts of the Netherlands.

Participants per condition per grade

Grade	N Control	N Intervention
4	130	71
5	117	61
6	126	88

Students in the control condition were given a writing assignment without any specific instruction, students in the intervention condition first received a series of three writing lessons before accomplishing the writing assignment.

## Method - Materials

*Writing assignment*

The students had to write a letter of advice to Like - a fictitious peer - on how to get good grades for writing:

"Next week, a new student will arrive in your classroom: Like. Like was born in the Netherlands, but has lived in England for some time. The school system in England is different from the Dutch system. Like is not exactly sure how to write a good text in Dutch, because there are many aspects that you have to take into account. Write a letter to like to explain how to write a good text in Dutch, and thus, to get good grades for writing. Give Like as many tips and advice you can think of."

*Writing lessons*

In three lessons students were taught a general approach for writing tasks, using acronyms that represent the steps of the writing process.

Acronyms for writing lessons

Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
<b>VOS</b> Fox	<b>DODO</b> Dodo	<b>EKSTER</b> Magpie
<b>Verzinnen</b> Generate Content	<b>Denken</b> Think	<b>Eerst nadenken</b> Think First
<b>Ordenen</b> Organize	<b>Ordenen</b> Organize	<b>Kiezen &amp; ordenen</b> Choose & Organize
<b>Schrijven</b> Write	<b>Doen</b> Do	<b>Schrijven</b> Write
	<b>Overlezen</b> Read	<b>Teruglezen</b> Read
		<b>Evalueren</b> Evaluate
		<b>Reviseren</b> Revise

## Method - Procedure

*Assessing text quality*

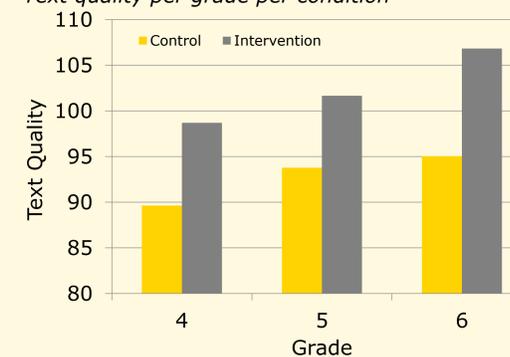
To assess text quality, a five-point scale with benchmark essays was used. Each essay was rated by a jury of three raters. The average reliability of the juries was 0.89.

*Coding procedure writing advice*

The writing advice was classified into 10 categories: content, organization, style, spelling and grammar, punctuation and capitals, presentation, process, behavior, physical, and miscellaneous. Classification was done by two raters. The reliability between raters over all categories is 0.87.

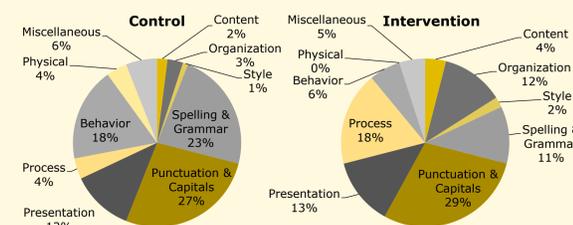
## Results

*Text quality per grade per condition*



Main effect of grade,  $F(2, 584) 11.74, p < .001$   
Main effect of condition,  $F(1, 584) 66.09, p < .001$

*Categories of writing advice per condition*



## Relation advice – text quality

*Regression coefficients for advice categories*

Category	$\beta^*$	S.E.	t	p
Spelling & Grammar	0.30	0.04	7.5	<.001
Process	0.28	0.04	7	<.001
Punctuation & Capitals	0.27	0.04	6.75	<.001
Presentation	0.25	0.04	6.25	<.001
Organization	0.12	0.04	3	.004
Content	0.09	0.04	2.25	.032
Behavior	0.07	0.04	1.75	.086
Miscellaneous	0.04	0.04	1	.232
Style	0.03	0.04	0.75	.30
Physical	0.03	0.04	0.75	.301

\* Standardized  $\beta$

Based on the given advice, 39% of the variance in text quality is explained.

## Conclusions

Even beginning writers possess metacognitive knowledge on various aspects of the writing process, although this knowledge mostly covers the more superficial aspects of writing, like punctuation and the use of capitals. Our results show that knowledge about writing and text quality are related. Students who give more advice, write better texts. Type of advice matters, there are six categories of advice that contribute significantly to text quality: content, organization, presentation, process, punctuation and capitals, and spelling and grammar. Students who received extra process based strategy instruction, gave more advice in general, and more advice in the categories organization and process. Across all grades students in the intervention condition write better texts than students in the control condition. It can be concluded that process based strategy instruction, even in a relatively small intervention, is effective in increasing students' metacognitive knowledge of writing, and improving students' writing.

## References

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## Further information

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