

# Perceptions of Choice in Writing of University Students

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**Abstract:** There is an assumption in education that allowing students to choose their writing topics and positions is beneficial; however, there is little research to support this belief, particularly from the students' perspectives. In the present study, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with students at a large university in the Southwest of the United States after they completed two in-class argumentative writing assignments in a course on exceptional children, one where they chose their writing position and one where they were assigned their writing position. As a group, these 20 students (13 female, 7 male) were above average writers in their first to third year of study, and the majority of them were education majors (70%), followed by arts and sciences (25%), and design and the arts (5%). The interview protocol focused upon their shifting perspectives on the underlying motivational construct of choice related to this and other writing assignments. Taking a grounded theory approach to thematic analysis, findings indicated that having choice in writing was important because it allowed students to write about topics that they find easier, more interesting, and possess greater knowledge. Choice also allowed students to demonstrate their autonomy, which they believed, influenced their motivation and writing quality/grades. While the university students in this study generally preferred choice, a majority of them identified benefits of not choosing, including opportunities to improve writing tenacity, enhance their writing skills, and achieve new perspectives.

**Keywords:** writing motivation, writing instruction, university students, argumentative writing, choice



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## 1. The Perceptions of Choice in Writing of University Students

Writing is a necessary life skill for success in classrooms, workplaces, and community contexts (e.g., social networks). Students write to learn as a means to organize, explore, and process new content as well as demonstrate their acquired knowledge (Graham, 2006; Klein, et al., 2016). As a result, less proficient writers are less likely to be successful in the classroom and workplace (Graham, 2006). Despite the importance of writing to many life outcomes, a majority of students in the United States do not learn to write proficiently (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). This is not limited to students in elementary and secondary grades, but also includes university-bound students. In fact, a growing number of university students do not write at a collegiate level (e.g., College Board, 2017; Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates, 2002) for a multitude of reasons including the fact that writing is a difficult, complex task that requires discipline, effort, knowledge, and skill (e.g., Graham, 2018; Hayes, 2012; Hayes & Flowers, 1980; Kellogg, 1986; Kellogg, 2008). Difficulties associated with writing have been shown to contribute to students' declining interest in writing, ability to focus while writing, and negative feelings about writing and writing performance (Clearly, 1991; Wright et al., 2021), which is why it is important to consider motivational strategies to support and encourage students to write (Aitken, in press; Graham, 2018). Given the challenging nature of writing, a possible solution is to motivate students by providing them choice in their writing topic and position.

Not only is writing a mechanism for reflection on personal experiences, but it can lead writers to a better understanding of their evolving identity and new viewpoints. One useful mechanism for gaining new perspectives may be through argumentative writing (Neely, 2014). Argumentation enhances critical thinking and provides opportunities to engage with content more deeply by considering alternative perspectives (Ferretti & Fan, 2016). Argumentative writing is one of the most common (Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates, 2002) and best ways to improve conceptual understanding of the subject matter (Wiley & Voss, 1999). Further, it is a prominent method used to discuss controversial issues through mechanisms such as debating topics, persuading another of an alternate view, and resolving conflict (van Eemeren et al., 2014). Argumentative writing enhances critical thinking by comparing competing ideas, evaluating the reasons and evidence supporting those ideas, and developing a rational conclusion based upon their evaluations (Klein et al., 2016).

## 2. Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination Theory

Choice is theoretically grounded in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which provides a useful lens to describe intrinsic motivation. Self-determination

allows individuals to exercise their capacity to choose in order to meet their wants and needs, providing opportunities for them to act in a self-determined manner which enhances an individual's intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1980). Increased motivation leads to many desired outcomes including heightened task persistence and improved performance in and across multiple contexts (e.g., Cerasoli et al., 2014; Fischer et al., 2019; Fishbach et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2012; Papaioannou et al., 2006) including the classroom. In a recent meta-analysis, Howard and colleagues (2021) found that intrinsic motivation led to improved academic achievement. Learning, academic growth, and mastery are natural consequences when one is intrinsically motivated to interact with the environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Patall et al., 2008; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010).

Self-determination theory applies a cognitive perspective that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are needed for intrinsic motivation and psychological fulfillment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, students who feel in control (autonomy) to successfully complete an assignment (competence), while at the same time feeling connected to members of their educational community, should be intrinsically motivated to learn and complete academic tasks because their self-determination needs are being fulfilled. Of the psychological needs associated with self-determination, autonomy, most clearly aligns with choice because autonomy needs are met through volitional action (Patall, 2012). When a student feels autonomous and in control of one's choices, intrinsic motivation is enhanced (Patall, et al., 2008). Not surprisingly then, choice has been found to enhance motivation in educational settings (Hall & Webb, 2014; Patall, et al., 2010), increase feelings of competence and academic performance (Aitken et al., 2022; Patall et al., 2010; Royer et al., 2017), and decrease problem behaviors (Hall & Webb, 2014; Lane et al., 2015; Royer et al., 2017; Vaughn & Horner, 1997). For example, Hall and Webb (2014) examined the correlation between intrinsic motivation and students' perception of autonomy. The students of autonomy-supportive physics professors (i.e., professors who provided opportunities to choose) had higher academic performance, intrinsic motivation, and interest in physics (Hall & Webb, 2014). Similarly, Patall and colleagues (2010) found that providing high school students (grades 9-12) choice between two similar homework assignments had a positive impact on intrinsic motivation and feelings of competence to complete homework assignments as well as promote stronger performance on related unit tests as compared to students who were randomly assigned to a no-choice condition.

### **3. Choice and Preference**

Given the importance of intrinsic motivation to learning and literacy, it seems imperative that educators use methods, such as choice, to increase student motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Flowerday & Schraw, 2000; Patall, et al., 2008). However, the relationship between choice and motivation is complex. There is

research that has challenged the notion that choice is a universal tool to motivate positive behavior and other desired outcomes (e.g., Flowerday, et al., 2004). In fact, some quantitative studies have found that choice may have no, or even a negative, impact on motivation and other outcomes depending on the characteristics of the choice, situation, or individual (Patall, 2012). For instance, choosing while feeling a sense of autonomy yields stronger positive effects than when an individual is pressured into making a decision (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The number of choice options can also affect the effectiveness of the choice (Patall, 2012). Additionally, characteristics of the situation (e.g., occurs in a realistic setting instead of a lab; Patall, 2012) or individual factors (e.g., age, education) can have differential effects on outcomes. Limited research also suggests that choice may be more effective for younger (Patall et al., 2008) and less educated individuals (Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

A related, but distinct construct, preference, complicates our understanding of choice. An open question in the choice literature is whether choice is effective because of the sense of autonomy one experiences based on the act of choosing. Alternatively, choice may be effective because the individual gets their preference. However, it is possible in studies examining the effects of choice for students to receive one's preference without choosing. For example, a common procedure in studies on choice is to randomly assign participants to a choice or no-choice condition. A student in the choice condition is allowed to choose their course of action (e.g., write an essay for or against a particular topic), whereas a corresponding student in the control condition is "yoked" to the decision made by a student in the choice condition (i.e., write in favor of the topic). In this particular case, a student in the control condition who "preferred" to write in favor of the topic would be viewed as receiving their preference but not being provided with choice. Accordingly, choice is the act of choosing and preference is receiving one's desired option.

Choice is more likely to enhance autonomy and intrinsic motivation when choosing reflects an individual's personal preferences, interests, and values (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Katz & Assor, 2007; Patall, 2012; Tafarodi et al., 2002). However, choice and preference are inextricably linked because when one chooses, they receive their preference. Few studies have investigated whether the effects of choice are the result of the act of choosing itself or if effects are a consequence of receiving one's preference among the choice options. For example, quantitative studies have found that situational interest may outweigh the effects of choice (Flowerday & Shell, 2015; Wilde et al., 2019), suggesting that receiving one's preference is more important than choosing. No qualitative study exists comparing students' perceptions regarding the importance of choice versus preference, which can be important for educators to understand so that they can

provide students with optimal learning experiences. In the current study we discussed these phenomena with university students.

Educators assume that giving students a choice in what they write is beneficial, particularly for less interested students because choice provides them with a sense of control (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). However, little research is available to support this assumption, with quantitative studies demonstrating positive effects (Bonzo, 2008), negative effects (Flowerday et al., 2004), and both positive and null effects (Kim & Kim, 2016). The majority of quantitative studies, however, found that choice had no effect on writing outcomes (Barry, et al., 1997; Carroll & Feng, 2010; Edwards & Juliebo, 1989; Flowerday & Schraw 2003; Gabrielson, et al., 1995; Myers, 2002; Schraw, et al., 1998). The qualitative writing choice literature is limited to a single study (Erwin, 2002), which compared the writing practices of two elementary school teachers and found unrestricted choice may provide students with the powerful opportunity to use writing to work out difficult life situations (e.g., alcoholic parent, divorce).

The purpose of this study was to investigate university students' perceptions of the importance of choice to university students when writing using writing as a means to explore and understand controversial topics in a particular subject-area (i.e., special education). Broadly we aimed to understand how students think about choice when completing such assignments. We expected students would indicate they had multiple opportunities to choose and felt motivated by the act of choosing. In line with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), we believed that they would derive a sense of autonomy from choosing, which would be viewed as being more valuable than merely receiving their preference when writing. Finally, we anticipated students would identify multiple reasons for why choice in writing is important, including the ability to choose topics and positions they find interesting (e.g., Cordova & Lepper, 1996) and chose topics and positions where they possess the requisite knowledge to generate ideas for a higher quality essay (Graham, 2006). The current study is unique. It is the first study, to our knowledge, to examine university students' views on choice and preference when writing, and how they thought these constructs impacted their writing and why.

## **4. Method**

### **4.1 Context**

This study was part of a larger study that investigated the effects of choice on writing performance and writing motivation with 224 university students in nine sections of an introductory special education course in the Southwestern United States. The effects of choice were tested with a clustered randomized control trial as part of normal course procedures and required writing assignments (Aitken et al., 2022).

As a guest lecturer, the first author presented two 75-minute lessons where each lesson began with students reading a case study about a controversial issue in special education (e.g., medicating a second-grade student with ADHD symptoms). After reading through the scenario, half of students were randomly assigned to choose which side of the topic they wanted to defend in the first assignment (e.g., write a letter to your spouse to persuade them that they should/should not give their son medication for ADHD symptoms) and half were told which side to defend. This was then switched during the second assignment, so that every student was assigned a position one time and allowed to choose one time.

Once students had either chosen or been assigned their writing positions, they engaged in three stages of timed and structured discussion activities, modified from Kuhn and Crowell (2011). They worked in partners and small groups to generate ideas, debate counterarguments, and plan their essays. At the conclusion of the discussion exercises, students were given 25 minutes to write in class in response to the writing prompt. At the end of 25 minutes, the students were instructed to submit their essay to the online learning management system (Blackboard) before leaving the classroom. Student grades were based on participation only. However, as part of the study, we scored essays for holistic writing quality in two phases. First, all papers were scored on a 1 to 6 point-Likert-type scale (Cooper, 1997; White, 1985; Williamson, 1993) guided by the 12th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) holistic scoring guidelines in persuasive writing. NAEP is a national assessment of multiple subjects, including writing, across the United States in multiple grades (National Assessment Governing Board, 2016). In phase two, the raters took all essays at each score value (e.g., 3) and decided if each essay was equal to the score (e.g., 3), slightly higher (e.g., 3+), or slightly lower (e.g., 3-). This resulted in an 18-point scale (Penny, et al., 2000). The first author and a research assistant scored the essays after training. Training reliability in phase one was 93.33% and 90.00% in phase two. Overall reliability for essay scores was 96.82% (phase one) and 95.57% (phase two).

All study procedures were approved by the University's institutional review board (IRB). At the end of the in-class lecture and writing sessions, students were invited to indicate if they would be interested in participating in an interview. Interested students were contacted via email with the informed consent form and encouraged to ask any questions via email or in person before the interview.

## 4.2 Participants

A subset of university students (n=20) who were present for both sessions of the writing activities of the larger study were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of how choice influences their writing experiences. Generally, interviewees were female, pre-service teachers with above-average writing quality scores from the first essay. See Table 1 for more detail.

Purposive sampling (Singleton & Straits, 2005) was used to select interviewees: (a) across different course sections, (b) when they were in the choice condition for the first or second session, and (c) whether they received their preferred position during their no-choice condition. Attempts were made to include interviewees with a range of writing quality scores; however, students with lower scores were less likely to respond to email invitations or keep their interview appointments.

*Table 1.* Interview participant characteristics

	Writing Quality Score	Gender	Year	College enrolled
Bianca	9	F	1	Education
Angel	11	F	1	Education
Clarisse	12	F	1	Education
Charles	11	M	2	Arts & Sciences
Rachel	17	F	2	Arts & Sciences
Thalia	8	F	1	Arts & Sciences
Selena	13	F	1	Education
Zoe	11	F	1	Arts & Sciences
Grover	13	M	2	Arts & Sciences
Annabeth	12	F	1	Education
Leo	7	M	1	Education
Calypso	7	F	1	Education
Nico	10	M	1	Design & the Arts
Percy	13	M	2	Education
Piper	13	F	3	Education
Juniper	5	F	3	Education
Tyson	8	M	2	Education
Gracie	11	F	1	Education
Hazel	14	F	1	Education
Jason	12	M	2	Education

*Note.* Writing Quality Score is based on a 1 to 18 scale, higher scores representing better writing.

### 4.3 Data Collection

The first author conducted 30-40 min, in-person, semi-structured interviews to better understand participants' perceptions of choice on writing and gain a richer understanding of the differences in their experiences between having choice and not having choice. See Table 2. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. Prior to coding, all transcripts were checked for accuracy.

Following the interview, and in order to process data collection, the first author wrote memos within 24 hours of each interview to gain analytic insights and ensure trustworthy inferences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Maxwell, 2013; Tracy, 2013). She returned to these memos after reading transcripts, listening to the interviews, and throughout the analytic process. In doing this, she compared initial impressions to her emerging views on the research aims, the data, and the interviewees. For instance, after interviewing Leo she wrote, "[he] came across as cocky with an inflated sense of confidence...I wonder if more students with low writing scores will describe themselves as being a confident/good writer." In a later memo, she pondered whether he was angry and why. Weeks later, she went to her thought partner (see Researcher Subjectivity and Validity) to get her perspective on Leo's possible emotional state during the interview. The first author proffered that Leo was acting oppositional for no reason. When her thought partner pushed back on the contention, they reviewed these memos and listened to a portion of his interview. Through this reflection on the previous memoranda and other data, the first author abandoned the notion that Leo was being oppositional for no reason.

### 4.4 Data Reduction and Analysis

The analytic framework included a three-step process of primary coding, axial coding, and constant-comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). During primary level coding, the first author predominately used open, descriptive codes that employed in vivo coding methods (Saldaña, 2016; Tracy, 2013) as well as a priori codes for "quality" and "motivation." After completing primary coding and writing memos for 10 of the 20 interviews she oscillated between axial and open coding, constantly comparing (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) current coding structure, while noting potential new codes and how codes related to one another. By fluctuating between open and axial coding, she was able to organize the data around the axial codes while allowing additional codes to emerge as necessary.

During axial coding, she organized 57 codes into the following hierarchical codes (Tracy, 2013): (a) five motivation codes (general motivation, interest, difficulty, knowledge, autonomy), (b) four quality codes (general quality, interest, difficulty, knowledge), and (c) three benefits of no-choice (perseverance, better writer, new perceptions). She iteratively developed a codebook which identified primary codes, code definitions, and an example of each code. The final codebook included



Table 2. Interview Protocol

Associated Research Items	Interview Questions
How do university students talk about the experience of choice in university writing assignments?	<p>How do you feel about getting to choose, generally?</p> <p>Can you tell me about other assignments where you had some choice? How did you feel about having choice?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> Choice in books to review, choice in which questions to answer on a test, research topics</p>
How do university students characterize choice, as compared to preference, when discussing choice in writing?	<p>Can you tell me about other writing assignments where you had some choice? How did you feel about having choice?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Probe:</i> Why was that important?</li> <li>• How do you feel different about writing in different settings?</li> </ul>
What are the most salient reasons that students think choices are important with writing?	<p>How do you think having a choice shaped your experience of this writing activity?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> Writing quality, writing motivation</p> <p>Can you tell me about other writing assignments where you had some choice? How did you feel about having choice?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> Composition course</p>
How do students discuss benefits of not having choice in writing?	<p><i>Probe:</i> Quality, motivation</p> <p>Do you like have choices in your assignments? Examples?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> Quality? Motivation?</p>

12 codes (Appendix A). Once she solidified the codes through axial coding, she sorted, organized, and analyzed each datum to create connections between other quotes, categories, and ideas using constant-comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Throughout this process, she engaged in analytic memo writing to process and synthesize the data to develop higher-level analytic meaning (Miles et al., 2014).

#### **4.5 Researcher Subjectivity and Validity**

As a former teacher of third-grade students with emotional behavior disorders and as a university instructor, the first author had assumed that choice was a useful tool motivationally and pedagogically. Particularly with her elementary students, she believed providing three or fewer choices provided them a sense of control, which led to increased interest and motivation. Second, she created the instructional procedures of this study for an assignment when she taught a section of the introductory special education course. Although there were benefits to pilot testing these procedures and positive feedback was received from her previous university students, these experiences may have created a bias as to the benefit of the in-class discussion and writing activities. This bias may have affected how data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted.

To guard against the potential bias in the findings, several steps were taken to address credibility issues and ensure trustworthy inferences. First, the first author recorded interviews and returned to the audio recordings throughout data analysis so that she could interpret tone and pauses which influenced the meaning of their statements. Second, she wrote memos throughout the data collection and analytic process to justify coding decisions and document her reflexive interpretation of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Maxwell, 2013; Tracy, 2013). Third, the first author used multiple forms and sources of data (e.g., recorded interviews, written interview transcripts, the codebook, memos) to triangulate the data and provide credible findings. Fourth, data collection and data analytic procedures were frequently discussed with trusted colleagues who were familiar with qualitative research procedures to guide data collection and data analysis. Fifth, the first author shared student statements and analytic inferences with the second author, an expert in the writing field, to provide context for meaning making. Sixth, the first author discussed nearly all aspects of this study with a thought partner, including data collection, data analysis, inferences, and findings. The thought partner was a paid research assistant who had recently earned her master's in Counseling and Psychology and was considering a doctoral program. The first author shared her thoughts and insights after interviewing students after nearly every coding session. The thought partner read and listened to excerpts of interviews whenever there was uncertainty whether the first author might be experiencing researcher drift. These

actions were taken to guard against potential threats that could undermine the validity of the findings (Maxwell, 2013).

## 5. Findings

University is a time for many students when they first experience a new kind of freedom. For the first time, these students are making a multitude of decisions every day: everything from when, where, and what to eat to what to do one minute to the next. Life is full of choices! One participant, Tyson, provided an anecdotal description of how his opportunities to make choices and his life has changed since coming to university:

I love [choice]. (laughs). I think in like high school and middle school and elementary school, you sort of feel like you're just being moved from place to place. And always growing up being told, "[at university] you'll get so much more choices and stuff." And you do. And I actually really, really like that. I think it's much better like that. So definitely, I think the more choices the better.

Having the power to choose may have given many of the students a stronger sense of identity and the opportunity to express themselves, which might be mirrored in their newfound university freedom. All of the students that were interviewed felt that choice in writing was important and identified for four primary reasons for this. However, more than half of the students described benefits associated with not choosing with this type of assignment. These themes are explored in more depth below.

### 5.1 How Students Talk About Choice in Writing Assignments

The students unanimously believed that choice was not only important in their writing assignments but in other contexts as well. Many students described writing assignments they had in high school as well as university, which is not surprising given that 17 of the 20 interviewees were either in their first or second year in their university studies. For instance, Calypso shared:

[High school teachers] would give us a creative writing task, but then they would try to restrict us. So (.)<sup>1</sup> I mean, I couldn't really enjoy it because they were just, you know, kind of lying and saying, "Oh you know, this is creative writing," but I was very limited on what I could write. So, that kind of made me feel negatively towards writing, but I think now that I've gotten into college, I do feel that my English professor kind of promotes more liberal writing, putting your passions and opinions in it... so I think I've definitely gotten a stronger connection with writing.

Calypso, and others, looked at their more limited writing choices in high school more negatively as compared to having more choices at university. Not only did students feel more freedom, but their writing attitudes shifted as well.

When the first author probed Hazel, a first-year university student, regarding how she felt about having an open-choice writing assignment, she realized that the types of writing assignments and feelings of autonomy were changing for her as well. Hazel responded slowly with the inflection of questioning, “I was kind of sitting there, like, I don't know what to do? I've never had this much power before?” She went on to say that in previous writing assignments, she rarely had the opportunity to make “small choices.” Even during the interview, months after the free-choice writing assignment, she still sounded surprised with being able to choose any topic she wanted.

Although nearly all students spoke positively of open choice, six students mentioned having too many choices can be stressful for an assignment because of not knowing what the professor “wants.” Jason, Selena, Thalia, Angel, and Clarisse ended up saying that acting autonomously and/or writing on something that interests them outweighed their professor-pleasing concerns. All but one described how they worked through their open-choice assignment topics with either their professor, a peer, or a writing center tutor. Each came to the conclusion that they would prefer to have open choice than be restricted but Jason added, “30 choices is still overwhelming, though.”

As part of the interview protocol, all interviewees were asked about other writing assignments in which they had choice. Most often, they shared experiences from one of the university writing courses where they, as Hazel mentioned, could write about almost any topic they wanted. Even assignments with moderate limitations, students described feeling a great deal of freedom within the supposed confines. Percy described an assignment where he had to write an argumentative essay on who the next person should be on the US 20-dollar bill.

Well I wanted to replace him with Neil Armstrong, and so it was really cool because it was a topic I cared about...I got to choose who I wanted on the \$20 bill, why I wanted them or if I wanted to change it or not. So I think I got to incorporate a lot of what I cared about into it, so it was better.

Even with the limitation on the writing topic, Percy valued choosing Neil Armstrong because he was able to write about a historical figure that interested him, which Percy believed made for a better quality essay.

While several students contrasted their high school writing experiences with their university writing experiences, Thalia described having dichotomous choice on an argumentative topic in her Advanced Placement (AP) literature course. While she was sharing why writing on a topic that she is passionate about is important to her, in passing, she mentioned that in her AP literature course, they assigned writing prompts, “so we didn't really get to choose our topics very often, except, like, you

know, like once or twice. I mean, I guess you get to choose your side on it. So that is like choosing (.) technically.” At the first opportunity, the first author probed her on this comment. She further described the writing prompts as the topic already being selected,

So, you’re given a topic and you can choose what the author depicted...like, that’s (.) it. You can choose which side of it, but you aren’t but (.) it’s a prompt (.) you have to write that [topic] but at the same time, you get to choose what side of the argument you are on. So, I mean, it is a choice, but at the same time, you aren’t getting to choose what part of the book, I *guess*, you’re getting to [choose].

Thalia did not see choosing her position as a “real” choice even though she recognized that it was technically a choice; maybe, just not a meaningful choice. She then went on to contrast the dichotomous choice in her AP courses with her university English courses where she “got to choose whatever [topic she] wanted.” Broadly speaking, the students reported that having choice in writing assignments is important. Further, most compared their high school and university writing experiences saying they had a lot more freedom choosing their writing topics in their university courses. Some were surprised, but nearly all ( $n = 19$ ) expressed positive experiences with having open choice across disciplines. Finally, Thalia described choosing her position on an argumentative writing topic as not a real choice because she did not get to choose the subject of the argumentative paper.

## 5.2 Choice vs. Preference

Although students expressed enthusiasm for having choice related to writing topics, a more nuanced reflection upon the data revealed that some students confused the ideas of “choice” and preference. Meaning, they may have said that “choice” was important but, in context, they may have meant that getting their preferred side, regardless of choosing, was what was actually important. For instance, Gracie said having choice made writing easier, but then said if she had gotten her preference the writing task would have been easier:

Because that's what it is, it's an argumentative paper. So, having the choice between the pro and the con is easier. Because when I didn't get to choose [emphasis added], I liked the other side better [emphasis added] because there was more that I could have written about.

Nico also provided evidence of why some students may use the word “choice” when they might have meant preference. After exclaiming that he would not want to be forced to eat an ice cream flavor that he didn’t choose, he went on to analogize, “when it comes specifically to writing, yeah it's always good to choose. Because then you're definitely sure that you're gonna get a topic you're interested

in. Or at least you think you can write about.” Choice is important because you will get what you want.

Not only did the students confuse the terms broadly, but seven participants inconsistently reported the relative importance of choice as compared to preference to them personally. For instance, initially Percy said, that choice “didn’t really make too big of a difference” because he was assigned his preferred position. However, later in the interview he said that choosing made him “care more” and feel more attached to that side of the argument. Therefore “[he] argued a little harder in the discussion portion and got a little bit better ideas.” Nine additional students specifically stated whether choosing or receiving their preference was most important.

### 5.2.1 Preference

Four students said receiving their preferred writing position was more important than choosing. Zoe, who was not assigned her preferred position in the non-choice condition, was emphatic about receiving her preference: “I feel like [getting my preferred side] was the thing that mattered the most” because she had more ideas to support the position she was not assigned. Similarly, Gracie explained:

It’s not about the choice, it was about what I was gonna have to write about... like I’m pretty much fine about writing about anything as long as I know what I’m writing about. So it’s not so much that I didn’t get to make a choice...but it was the fact that I didn’t get the one I wanted.

### 5.2.2 Choice and Autonomy

Five students, however, expressed wanting to have the “power” to make their own choices. For them, it went beyond merely receiving their preference; choosing is important because it allows them to act autonomously, and to express their personal preferences (Cordova & Lepper, 1999; Patall, 2012; Tafarodi et al., 2002; Ullmann-Margalit & Morgenbesser, 1997). Piper, a mother who had returned to university after raising four children, enthusiastically replied to a probe of why she thought choice was important: “Because it’s empowering! You already have a bank of experiences and a bank of knowledge, and so you feel like you’re setting yourself up for success.”

In a particularly rich interview, Grover provided the following analogy:

So definitely, having a choice helps. It also helps that you want it (.) you chose this topic. It wasn’t given to you. You know? It’s one of those things where then you’ve (.) you get into the confidence mode. Like this is what I wanted to write about. It’s not what someone told me I had to write about... It’s like listening to music. If you just have it on shuffle and you’re just getting a random song, every now and then...you get kind of bored. But then when

you choose the songs that you want to listen to (.) then you get more excited and you feel like you're more in control. And you have more control over what you're gonna be doing with it. You know, you can skip the song or you can play another one.

While Piper and Grover shared the empowering aspect of autonomy, choice can also be motivating because individuals want to exert control or their power.

Four interviewees described control over their writing topic, generally, and/or grades being an important aspect of choice. When Annabeth was asked how she felt once she realized she was not going to choose, but before she knew her topic, she said she was “bummed out” because she did not feel in control: “When you're not in control it's kind of like you're scared because you don't know what's going to be thrown at you.” An integral component of autonomy is having a sense of control (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). If one does not feel that they have a sense of control because they are denied the opportunity to choose, they cannot have a strong sense of autonomy.

Regardless of whether students reported choice or preference as being more important, seven students agreed that “having to” write on a certain topic had negative impacts on their writing. For instance, Juniper repeated the idea four times that being “forced” to write on a topic detrimentally influenced her writing motivation (“cause you're just kind of forced and usually the things you're forced into, you don't like. So, it's 'I don't like it,' that's why it's harder.”) and the quality of her writing:

It's easier to write about, and when people get a choice, then it's like their writing becomes a little better. If they don't have a choice, they're just kind of forced to write things and it doesn't always turn out the best. But if they're given a choice, it just makes a lot more sense and looks a lot better.

Students also described the opportunity to exercise their autonomy in positive ways; many talked about choice being important because they could exercise their personal freedom when they got to choose. Percy explained, “I wasn't as interested in [the topic], but just having that freedom...it meant I could choose something that had scientific data [which] made the writing process easier...that freedom lets you play to your strengths.” Further, Zoe shared:

I think it's easier for students if they have choices [in writing], 'cause they have the freedom to be more creative and do what they want, and if students do what they want then they're gonna produce better work, I feel like. So, it's definitely a good thing if we get choices.

However, neither Percy nor Zoe unequivocally claimed that choice was more important than receiving their preference. Percy, early in his interview, stated preference was more important but then seemingly switched to choice. Zoe

adamantly professed that getting to write on her preferred position was more important. If you re-read Zoe’s (and to a lesser extent Percy’s) quotes in this paragraph, replacing choice with received preference, the statements still make sense. While both use language to suggest that exercising their autonomy is important (e.g., freedom), the use of freedom in both cases describes benefits of writing about something you have knowledge, interest, or data to support your essay rather than feeling a sense of autonomy.

**5.3 Salient Reasons for Choice in Writing**

The four top reasons why students believe choice in writing topics is important revolved around four interconnected themes: interest, knowledge, difficulty, and autonomy (Table 3). All interviewees mentioned interest as a reason for choosing their writing topics. When students are interested in the writing topic, they (a) have more knowledge and ideas, (b) have increased motivation to write, and (c) are more likely to write a higher quality essay. The second highest reported reason choice was important had to do with the students’ prior knowledge. Since this is related to ideation (Graham, 2006), knowledge can have an impact on the written product. Some described this in terms of knowledge abundance while others described the stress of a knowledge deficit. Third, some students want to be able to choose the easier essay topic. Several students described ease/difficulty in connection with other reasons (e.g., knowledge) for having choice in their writing topics. For example, it is easier to write about topic when students have sufficient background knowledge. Finally, students described how choice influenced their motivation using autonomy-enhancing vocabulary (e.g., “freedom”) and with autonomy-reducing terms (e.g., “forced to write”).

*Table 3. Most Salient Reasons for Choice*

k	Theme	N	Benefits of Choice	Detriments of No Choice
71	Interest	20	“when I care about what I’m writing about, or when I know about what I’m writing about, I think the quality of the essay improves a good bit.”	“I think if it’s something you’re passionate about or want to do then you’re obviously gonna create better work...but if it’s something that you’re not interested in, you’re not gonna wanna work on it at all.”
65	Knowledge	16	“you get to think of your strengths and	“Oh, and now I need to think of a whole new ideas



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			weaknesses with each topic, and you choose one that you're the most confident in,"	because sometimes when I have to write something and I don't have any ideas, I just stress over it because ... it's gonna be a bad paper and then I'm gonna get a bad grade."
58	Difficulty	13	<p>"makes it easier to think of things to write about," which would help her write "a more detailed essay."</p> <p>"[he] would always choose the easier option."</p>	<p>"I always hated when we had to write about something that we didn't get to choose. I always hated that because...it's a lot harder to write about something when you don't get to pick"</p>
44	Autonomy	14	<p>"Because it's empowering! You already have a bank of experiences and a bank of knowledge, and so you feel like you're setting yourself up for success."</p> <p>"just having that freedom...it meant I could choose something that there was a lot of scientific data on and made the writing process easier that way, so I think that freedom kind of lets you play to your strengths."</p>	<p>"when you're not in control it's kind of like you're scared because you don't know what's going to be thrown at you."</p> <p>"cause you're just kind of forced and usually the things you're forced into, you don't like. So it's 'I don't like it, that's why it's harder.'"</p> <p>"If they don't have a choice, they're just kind of forced to write things and it doesn't always turn out the best"</p>

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Note. k = number of coding instances; n = number of participants.

## 5.4 Benefits of No Choice

In the experimental phase of the larger study, students were randomly assigned to choose to write about one of two sides of an argumentative essay. Every student could choose which side to argue for one essay, but for the other essay, they had to argue the position given to them. An unexpected theme that emerged was related to the advantages associated with not choosing in this writing activity. Eleven of the 20 students mentioned at least one benefit. Additionally, nearly all of the students, 8 of the 10, who did not receive their preferred position during the no-choice condition talked about the importance of not choosing. The benefits of not having a choice on this assignment, according to the students, included: (a) increasing their capacity for more tenacity (b) becoming a better writer, and (c) gaining new perspectives.

### 5.4.1 Increased Capacity for More Tenacity

Some students made the point that, realistically, choices are not always available and even though they might feel disappointment, it is possible to persevere. Selena mentioned this while discussing becoming a better writer whereas two other participants tied this idea to the final benefit, gaining new perspectives. Grover, in particular, felt strongly that this was an important experience for him and his fellow students to have.

You know, sometimes, you can't always get what you want as Mick Jagger would say. But it's life you know, you don't always get what you want. And so you kind of have to roll with the punches. I've always been a big fan of just playing with the cards that you're dealt. And I wasn't given the cards I wanted, but I'll make the best out of it... it just feels like nowadays if someone doesn't get what they want, (.) it just ruins everything...I mean you can do what you can, but sometimes you just got to know it's not all about you.

The students saw being able to persevere as a valuable experience because in the "real world," such as a future job, they will not always get their choice and so they should practice rolling with the punches. Persisting, despite not receiving their preference, may have given them the opportunity to increase their capacity for more tenacity.

### 5.4.2 Better Writers

Ten students said they believed being assigned a perspective different from their own could ultimately help them become better writers. They described becoming better writers in different ways. For instance, Thalia believed not having a choice helped her learn more and Selena thought it gave her the opportunity to be "able

to adjust [her] writing." Bianca said, "I think choosing, it does have an effect on how you write. But also, not being able to choose what you wanted makes you a better writer. Because then you have to go against what you personally believe." She went on to recall a high school writing assignment where she did not get to choose her topic and did not agree with it but wanted to appease her teacher. She concluded that the assignment was, "challenging for me as a writer, but it made me become a better writer, because I [did] something that is out of my normal."

Perhaps one reason not having choice may help improve writing is that when students do not have choice, they may put in more effort, which may result in better writing. Charles said he liked choosing for the first essay but not the second because it "makes you think more," about how he would have to evaluate the non-preferred position. Similarly, although Gracie felt very frustrated over not getting her preferred side, she admitted that it pushed her analysis, "I think not having that choice actually influenced me to delve more into the research prompt and [to] have to look for pieces of the puzzle that would fit."

These accounts supported Nico's experience of not receiving his preferred position when he was on a speech and debate team in high school. He said,

There's a notable difference in how I write, depending on if I care about the topic or not. And, on a somewhat side note, let's not forget anger, even. (.) If I heavily dislike a certain topic, I might try and knock it out of the park, purely to prove to myself that I can, (emphasis added) because I hate it...[with] the [debate topic], I almost argued harder for the side I hated to prove to myself that I could.

For Nico, and perhaps others, the more he disagrees with a point of view, the harder he may work on a paper. Near the end of the interview, Nico again revealed his determination and desire to become a better writer.

Like I said, a good writer can argue any topic. But a great writer can care about any topic. So, I want to become that level of great so I can find something to care about in any topic that I write about.

Taken together, although Nico may not be initially interested in or believe in a topic, the desire to be a great writer pushed him to feel intense emotion (e.g., anger) and work with such intensity that he feels that he has "knocked it out of the park" by writing a high quality essay. However, we cannot know if he would have written an even a better paper than if he were assigned his preferred position. While Nico's account is the most intense reaction to someone not receiving their preference, it raises an interesting point about the persistence students can take on when they do not get to choose their topic or point of view, particularly when they are motivated to become better writers.

### 5.4.3 New Perspectives

Another theme we found was that not receiving choice, particularly in this assignment, was important because it helped students see a new perspective. Eight students discussed how taking their non-preferred position helped them see other points of view and how much they enjoyed that experience. They characterized this with phrases such as “thinking outside the box,” “expanding [their] mind,” “broadening [their] view.”

Annabeth shared her process of eventually having appreciation of being denied her choice. Initially, she was “bummed out” because she felt a lack of control. Once she was assigned the topic she did not want, she described feeling more stress because she did not have many ideas. She worked through the discomfort by asking herself, “Okay if I was in this position, how would I see it?” By asking that question, it helped her work through the experience of not choosing as her perspective began to change, “and it just made me grow because (.) I saw a whole new point of view of that situation. I know I just like (.) I don’t know, it just expanded my mind so ... I think it is definitely positive.”

Later in the interview when reflecting on the assignment she went into greater detail describing why a new point of view was important to her:

Annabeth: I did like it [not getting to choose] even though it was a bit uncomfortable, but I feel like you do have to be uncomfortable sometimes just to experience life more.

Angelique: So it sounds like your feelings changed over the process of the assignment?

Annabeth: Yeah... I feel like in the beginning I was happy I got to choose what I could do because it's what I'm comfortable with, and then the second time when I didn't get to choose what I could do (.) I was like (.) uncomfortable but being uncomfortable actually led to me growing as a person (.) as I said before, because I got to think outside the box (.) and try to think in a whole new perspective and I never thought I would ever think about [the other point of view] in that way.

Both Thalia and Annabeth compared how they felt in the choice and no-choice writing experiences, but Annabeth described a transformative experience in gaining a new perspective. Not only was it important for her to understand another point of view, but she described how the experience allowed for not just intellectual growth, but personal growth as well.

Many students described the importance of not choosing because it helped them see another point of view. In the interview with Jason, we talked about this in light of this specific assignment. After he wavered between the importance of choice and not having choice in writing, so he was asked whether it was important

to let students choose or to assign topics in this particular assignment. He responded:

I think that I advocate for not choosing just because I think it gives everyone a better understanding of both points of views. (emphasis added) However, I do personally enjoy choosing things, but I would say that the assigned groups is more helpful for understanding a topic.

Intrigued, the first author circled back to this issue at the end of the interview where he laid out examples of when it is better for students not to have writing topic choice. Jason shared:

When it's something that's content-based like a book or an article, I would rather have the choice of a prompt. But if it's something that's like political or with two sides, I could say that the choice isn't needed... I would say it is more important to not have choice because that is where you can make people see both sides of things (emphasis added).

Throughout the interview, Jason seemed to want to make a definitive decision as to whether giving choice in students' writing topics was a good pedagogical practice. Initially, he thought it would be "problematic" for a student to write an argumentative essay on something they do not believe, but decided that it was more important to deny students choice, in hopes of forcing them to see both sides of an argument.

Eleven of the university students believed there were benefits to not choosing. In closing, Zoe nicely brought together the benefits of no choice including working harder and becoming a better thinker, seeing new perspectives, and increasing her capacity for tenacity.

Angelique: Was there anything good about not choosing in the assignment in class?

Zoe: It made you think harder about your points and you had to think outside of the box I feel like. So-

Angelique: And is that a good thing?

Zoe: Yeah, it is a good thing 'cause I feel like in life you're gonna have to ... I don't know how to put it, but in life you're gonna have to side or talk about something you don't wanna talk about, like for a job or something, so you're gonna have to do it eventually. You're not always gonna get what you wanna do.

Although Jason and several other students, "personally enjoy choosing things," they identified more important benefits associated with not choosing, such as

opportunities to increase their capacity for tenacity, become a better writer, and gain new perceptions.

## 6. Discussion

In this study, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of university students' perceptions of choice and writing. Specifically, we sought to understand their perspectives on the underlying motivational construct of choice related to the writing assignments associated with this study and other university writing experiences. The students unanimously believed that choice was not only important in their writing assignments, but most voiced benefits to not choosing, particularly with this assignment.

The overarching aim explored how students talk about their experience of choice in university writing assignments. They described having much more latitude to choose topics that are important to them as compared to in high school. Even when their university writing assignments were moderately limited, students described a great deal of flexibility within the supposed confines. Having the power to choose gave many of the students a stronger sense of autonomy, identity, and the opportunity to express themselves, which was mirrored in their newfound freedom that had come with their university experience. This finding is consistent with previous studies' findings that choosing supports a feeling of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Six students described stresses associated with having unlimited writing topics which is consistent with the choice literature. Offering too many options can make the effort of choosing outweigh the benefits (Patall, 2012). The students reported that they were able to ultimately work through their choice worries and concluded that they prefer having choice. However, these concerns should be investigated with future research into the optimal number of choice options for university students and how to support students when navigating an open choice writing assignment.

Specifically, we probed whether choosing or just receiving one's preferred writing topic is more important and remains unresolved based on this study. Not only did some students use choice and preference interchangeably; they also used the word choice to describe the act of receiving their preference. This confound is understandable because when individuals choose, they are also receiving their preference (Patall, 2012). Despite this confusion, a subset of students (n=9) voiced the relative importance of either choice (n=5) or preference (n=4). Seven other students made statements related to the importance of both choice over preference as well as preference over choice, indicating a probable confusion between the terms or an unsolidified decision. Those who saw preference as more important said it was because they had more ideas, knowledge, or they thought it would be easier to write about their preferred side. On the other hand, students who viewed

choice as more important indicated it enhanced their feelings of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Additionally, we examined the most salient reasons why students believed having choice in writing was important. The four themes that were most often reported included interest, knowledge, difficulty, and autonomy. Having choice in writing is important because it allows students to write about topics that they find easier, more interesting, and possess more knowledge/ideas. Further students reported exercising their autonomy as the fourth reason for choice. In line with self-determination theory, they described motivational benefits of having the power to choose their writing topic and the detriments associated with being “forced” to write on a non-preferred topic. These reasons for choice were not isolated benefits but interconnected. For instance, students had more ideas for topics they found interesting, which made their writing experience easier.

Some of the most interesting and surprising findings about students’ beliefs about choice were their perceived benefits of no choice. The reasons students felt that not having a choice was beneficial included the opportunity to: (a) increase their capacity for tenacity, (b) become a better writer, and (c) gain new perspectives. Some students made the point that, realistically, choices are not always available and even though there might be some disappointment, it is still possible to persevere. Practicing this skill was important because there are times in life where “you can’t always get what you want.” Most students mentioned this benefit incidentally although one student strongly felt all university students should experience this.

The second theme that emerged was that students believed being assigned a perspective different from their own could help them become better writers. They articulated different ways this could develop. Some described learning or thinking more about the topic, whereas others talked about having the opportunity to practice adjusting their writing or putting more effort toward the writing assignment. In fact, not choosing and not receiving their preferred topic can stimulate such strong emotion so that the student is motivated to “try and knock it out of the park, purely to prove to myself that I can.” This level of determination was fueled by the desire to “be a great writer who can write and care about any topic” even if it is not the topic that they believe in. From a self-determination perspective, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are three foundational components of intrinsic motivation that influence behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). While not choosing limited students’ autonomy, perhaps the opportunity to become a better writer offset potential decreases in self-determination and intrinsic motivation because it enabled students to strengthen their perceived writing competence. Future research should consider how not having choice in writing influences the three components of self-determination.

A third benefit to not choosing was the opportunity to gain a new perspective on a controversial issue. Several students mentioned the benefits of “growing”, “thinking outside of the box,” and being more receptive to different points of view when they did not get to choose. In fact, although students reported that they, “personally enjoy[ed] choosing things,” sometimes they discerned more important benefits beyond those associated with choosing, particularly seeing a new perspective. This benefit may be unique to making choices in writing, and argumentative writing in particular, because writing is a mechanism to organize, explore, process, and learn new information (Ferretti & Fan, 2016; Graham, 2006). Future researchers should investigate the importance and impact of considering different perspectives in writing assignments.

Previous research has found that choice has differential effects based on age (Patall et al., 2008) and education background (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). Choice may be less important to university students due to the social, educational, and personal development that occurs as young adults transition from high school to university. Nearly all of the interviewees described the new freedoms, experiences, and concepts they were having at university. It is possible that developing new perspectives was more meaningful than a dichotomous choice (as in this study) because developing new ideas are part of the early adult, university experience. Similarly, young adults may be more appreciative of “rolling with the punches” because they have a stronger sense that they need to be prepared for real world experiences where they know they “don’t always get what [they] want.” These perceived benefits of no-choice could be unique to traditional students in their first or second year because of university. Therefore, these benefits of not having choice in writing should be investigated with students from different backgrounds (e.g., non-traditional university students) and levels (e.g., middle school, graduate students). Similarly, a variety of factors can influence students’ perceptions on choice in writing not directly addressed in this study (e.g., English learner status and other sociocultural factors). This raises a potential limitation of this and other qualitative studies, that the findings, while illustrative, are not easily generalizable to a larger population.

Another potential limitation is that the findings related to the benefits of not choosing are limited to a unique writing assignment. The writing assignments in this study occurred within 75-minute class sessions whereas students described completing the writing assignments from their other courses that they wrote over multiple weeks. Two students mentioned that choice would be more important if they were to spend several weeks researching and writing on a topic but the fact this writing assignment was only one class period made choosing less critical. This potentially important theme did not emerge and is an important area for future research.



## 6.1 Implications for Educators

Although many educators believe that providing choice in writing is important (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000), the findings from this study suggest that choice is not a universal tool for increasing writing motivation. Particularly at the collegiate level, students may expect to have a lot of latitude with choosing their writing topics because of their experience in other university courses and their growing feelings of autonomy. Offering dichotomous choice, on the other hand, may not seem like a “real choice” and, therefore, have limited benefit. While this may suggest that university instructors should always provide open choice, moderate choice limitations (e.g., who should replace Andrew Jackson on the \$20 bill and why) may still provide the motivational effects of open choice. If educators allow students to write on any topic, they should be ready to provide guidance to students in narrowing their focus because open choice may be overwhelming for some students. Additionally, if an instructor decides to provide limited choice options, they should consider writing topics that students find interesting and/or they have background knowledge that supports idea generation so that the students’ choice reflects their personal preference.

Educators should generally allow students to choose their writing topics because university students believe that it can increase motivation and their writing quality. Students are likely to choose a topic they find interesting, less difficult, and have sufficient background knowledge. When students can choose a topic that they have sufficient background knowledge they are able to produce more ideas and write a better quality essay (Graham, 2006). Being able to choose between topics based on their background knowledge could be particularly important for writing tasks where students are not expected to research the specific prompt prior to writing but rather demonstrate their knowledge such as on an examination. For writing assignments that occur over several weeks or months, choice is also important because it allows students to choose an interesting topic that they are motivated to research, learn more about, and write effectively.

Finally, educators should consider opportunities to assign writing topics or positions. There may be circumstances where the pedagogical purpose, such as understanding perspectives, could be outweighed by the potential benefits of choice. In addition to building students’ tenacity, assigning writing topics can encourage students to learn about something new or gain a new perspective, which is something they may not do when they have the choice. With argumentative writing in particular, having students take the position that they do not hold might be initially bothersome but, in the end, be “worth it” because it could “broaden [their] minds.” And isn’t expanding minds, despite the growing pains that can come with learning, why we became educators in the first place?

## 7. Conclusion

This study provides important guidance for educators and researchers on university students' perspectives on using choice in their writing assignments. Consistent with self-determination theory and previous research on choice, 20 students reported that choice in writing topics was important because they are more motivated when they can write on interesting and less difficult topics that they have sufficient background knowledge. Further, choosing fostered feelings of autonomy, empowerment, and expression of their identity. Many contrasted their open choice writing options at university to their more limited choices from their high school experiences. Despite their appreciation of choice, a majority of the students discussed benefits of not choosing their writing topic including the opportunity to increase perseverance, improve writing skills, and gain new perspectives. While these benefits of denying choice may be unique to university students and/or writing topics, these findings highlight the multi-layered influence choice can have in the classroom and that it is imperative to continue this meaningful line of research and inquiry.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> A (.) indicated a short pause in the conversation.

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## Appendix A: Codebook

Table 4. Codebook

Short	Detailed	Quote
Mot	The below "motivation" codes deal with reasons why they want to have choices or make a choice. Most of these comments occur in talking about choosing writing topics but there are instances where the speaker may be describing other types of choices. They may or may not be connecting motivation and quality. If they do, the statements should be dual-coded both as at least one motivation and at least one quality code. Typical words used to describe motivation-related codes include "want".	N/A
Mot_Int	Motivation and Interest; Student describes wanting to and/or why they want to write about something that they are interested in. Phrases that fall under "interest" may include "passion", "passionate", "caring about".	"Yeah, I think it just makes it more <b>fun</b> and <b>the more you care about something</b> , the better the product's going to be and because I had choices I cared and like put more effort in."





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Mot_Diff	<p>Motivation and difficulty; Student describes the degree of difficulty (or lack thereof) of one choice versus another. [[This is more likely inferred as mot_diff than qual_diff.]]</p>	<p>“I think it was important [that he chose the side he wanted] because it made writing a paper a lot easier.”</p>
Mot_Know	<p>Motivation and Knowledge; Student describes how much knowledge or ideas for writing they have influences their motivation.</p>	<p>***“It’s not what someone told me I had to write about... It’s like, it’s like listening to music. If you just have it on shuffle and you’re just getting a random song, every now and then that you don’t - you get kind of bored. But then when you choose the songs that you want to listen to, then you get more excited. And you get more, um what’s the word? You get more uh, you feel like you’re more in control. And you have more control over what you’re gonna be doing with it. You know, you can skip the song or you can play another one.”</p>
Mot_Auto	<p>Motivation and Autonomy; Student describes being able to be in control of their choice/destiny. Mot_Auto can also show a lack of autonomy as in being forced. Key words to look for include “free”, “freedom”, “control”, “forced” (as in lack of autonomy).</p>	<p>***Q: Why do you think it’s more difficult if you don’t have a choice?          “Cause you’re just kind of <b>forced</b> and it’s... usually the things you’re <b>forced</b> into, you don’t like. So it’s ‘I don’t like it, that’s why it’s harder cause I don’t like this.’”</p>

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Qual	The below “quality” codes go beyond the motivation codes because to receive a “quality” code the quote must tie the topic to performance. Most of these comments occur in talking about choosing writing topics but there are instances where the speaker may be describing other types of choices. They may or may not be connecting motivation and quality. If they do, the statements should be dual-coded both as at least one motivation and at least one quality code. Typical words used to describe motivation-related codes include “better”, “stronger” or refer to getting a better grade.	Again, not a code just an explanation for the quality codes
Qual_Int	Quality and Interest; Student ties together interest (or lack thereof) and the quality of writing/performance.	***“I think so. ‘Cause there’s, there’s certainly amendments that are more <b>interesting</b> than others. Like, no quartering of soldiers in houses – <b>would’ve been a really dull essay</b> ... The longer amendments – Would’ve just been, I think uh, a bit more tedious to do (laughs)... So yeah. I think I definitely like having the choice.” ***“And I got to write about well I want to replace him with Neil Armstrong. And so it was just really cool because it was a topic I cared about... it was – I got to choose, you know, every aspect of how I was going to write that. Even though it was about a topic, like everybody wrote about the \$20 bill, I got to choose who I wanted on the \$20 bill, why I wanted them or if

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Qual\_Diff

Quality and difficulty; Student connects the level of difficulty to the quality of performance.

I wanted to change it or not. So I think like I got to incorporate a lot of what I cared about into it, **so it was better**.  
\*\*\*"I think so. 'Cause there's, there's certainly amendments that are more interesting than others. Like, no quartering of soldiers in houses – **would've been a really dull essay**... The longer amendments – Would've just been, I think uh, **a bit more tedious to do** (laughs)... So yeah. I think I definitely like having the choice."

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