Rarely Say Never: Essentialist Rhetorical Choices in College Students' Perceptions of Persuasive Writing

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Abstract: Research on persuasive writing has investigated writing quality but has not fully considered students' perceptions of writing and of the language used in persuasive writing. Essentialist language – including words like "always," "every," and "prove" – insists on one explanation, ruling out other possibilities and making for poorer-quality, one-sided arguments. In Study 1, undergraduates provided characteristics they believed were important to writing and listed rhetorical indicators of those characteristics. Analysis revealed students identified essentialist-related characteristics (e.g., one-sidedness, inclusion of other viewpoints) as related to writing persuasiveness. Study 2 investigated students' actual reactions to essentialist language. Participants read pairs of writing samples (one with essentialist language, one non-essentialist), indicated which was better and why, and rated each sample's persuasiveness. Results revealed no difference in how often students chose essentialist samples or non-essentialist samples as better, although different reasons were associated with essentialist and non-essentialist choices. Students who preferred non-essentialist writing rated it as more persuasive, but students with essentialist or no preference rated the persuasiveness of essentialist and non-essentialist samples similarly. These results support the notion that many undergraduates fail to consistently adjust their judgments of essentialist writing to align with a reported awareness of the essentialism-persuasiveness relationship.

Keywords: essentialism, dualistic language, persuasive writing, college writing

Research in the psychology of writing has established that writing is cognitively taxing, requiring a variety of cognitive processes influenced by multiple factors (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hayes, 2000; Mertes, 1991). Other research has focused on the development of writing ability and factors related to writing quality (Crammond, 1998; Hays & Brandt, 1992; Knudson, 1992). Within the research on writing, persuasive writing is often a focus due to its importance and to the gap between student writing quality and national standards for persuasive writing (Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, & Kreth, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005).

Employers recognize the vital importance of writing – over 70% of employers listed good written communication as a desirable attribute, making it the third most sought-after employee characteristic in the National Association of Colleges and Employers' 2016 Job Outlook survey. Evidence of the importance of persuasive writing specifically is the presence of analytical and problem-solving skills on the desirable attribute list; over 60% of employers indicated each of these skills as important (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2015). When employers hire individuals who are unskilled writers, they often pay a high price. According to a CollegeBoard study, United States businesses spend over $3 billion annually on remedial writing training (The National Commission on Writing, 2004). Thus, strong persuasive writing capabilities have clear societal and financial value.

Unfortunately, students consistently perform worse in persuasive writing than they do in other forms, such as narrative writing (Applebee 1994; Crowhurst, 1990; Greenwald, Persky, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). Based on the 1980 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, less than 33% of 11th graders could write persuasively at an adequate level (Crammond, 1998; Knudson, 1992). When the assessment was repeated in 1998, only 45% of 12th graders wrote at a sufficient level or above on a persuasive writing task (White & Vanneman, 2000). The 2011 NAEP found that only 27% of 8th and 12th graders wrote at or above a proficient level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), as defined by competency shown through organization, development, and support (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012; White & Vanneman, 2000). The NAEP assessment also included less persuasive writing for younger students due to its difficulty and cognitive "inappropriate"-ness (Applebee, 1994; Applebee, 2011), demonstrating a general acceptance that young people struggle to write persuasively at an ideal level. From the time in between 12th grade NAEP assessments and college, there is little reason to believe that students' argumentation improves to a satisfactory level (Brockman et al., 2010; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005). Moreover, Brockman and colleagues (2010) assessed what university professors nationwide considered "good" writing to be after faculty complained that undergraduates "can't write" (p. 43). They reported that professors believed writing ability develops over time and that "good" writing is difficult to define and varies by discipline.

Evidence also suggests that United States students are worse at using persuasive appeals than students in Britain and New Zealand (Connor, 1990), perhaps because United States schools' standards for persuasive writing are potentially problematic and restrictive. The Common Core Standards applied to K-12 students may imply that there is only one type of good writing – the kind that conforms to the Standards. As students learn to believe that persuasive writing must look a particular way, they may lose the flexibility that truly good writing requires (Adler-Kassler, 2017). For instance, the definition and purpose of persuasive writing, according to the Standards, focuses on supporting claims whereas informational writing's purpose puts more emphasis on complexity of ideas and accurate portrayal of information (National Governors Association Center, 2010). This sharp distinction between the definitions of persuasive and informational writing may lead students to believe that the features and purposes of these types of writing are separate when, in reality, good persuasive writing will likely contain the complex ideas and accurate information that the Standards emphasize for informational writing.

Problems may arise not only from the way standards are presented, but also from the use of the terms "persuasive writing" and "argumentative writing," which may lack the precision needed to promote good writing. The names "persuasive" and "argumentative" writing evoke ideas of Win-Rhetoric, which focuses on competitive arguments and persuading the audience (King, 2010). If students are to attend more carefully to multiple sides of an argument, presenting a Listening-Rhetoric approach – which requires paying attention to opposing views rather than writing them off immediately – may be better (Booth, 2004; King, 2010). A similar approach to Listening-Rhetoric is invitational rhetoric, which embodies the feminist values of safety, value, and freedom by striving to promote respectful discussion rather than argument (Foss & Griffin, 1995; Johannesen, 2012). These rhetorical approaches shed light on possible problems within an educational system's framing of persuasive writing, both in name and in purpose. Overall, it is clear that United States students' persuasive writing quality is not meeting educators' standards even if the reasons for this deficit are myriad and not fully understood.

Previous research on persuasive writing has focused on the effects of one-sided or two-sided arguments, based on the premise that two- or multi-sided arguments are more persuasive. This premise is supported, for example, by O'Keefe's (1999) finding that non-advertising texts that presented and rebutted counter arguments were more persuasive. The inferiority of one-sided arguments in writing may provide the key to understanding why persuasive writing quality is so low. Knudson (1992) found that "relatively few" (p. 175) of his high school student participants addressed an opposing side in their persuasive writing. Even college students often fail to include opposition (Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005). This quality may be lacking in student writing because persuasive writing is cognitively more demanding than other types of writing (Crowhurst, 1990), perhaps since it follows a different structure than most verbal encounters. Persuasive writing requires positioning an argument in context as opposed

to the relative similarity that narrative writing enjoys to telling a story in speech. This difficulty sometimes leads to persuasive writing being taught and developed after other types of writing, another potential reason for students' failure to write at the desired level (Crowhurst, 1990). Additionally, college students are still cognitively developing the ability to better analyze assumptions about and sources of information (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010), another possible contributor to one-sidedness in students' persuasive writing. The acquisition of many language skills follows the rule that comprehension precedes production (Falk, 1979), so it is possible that many students at least implicitly understand the inferiority of one-sided arguments before they are able to effectively incorporate multiple viewpoints into their own writing, or even perhaps before they are able to recognize simple linguistic markers of allowing for multiple viewpoints (cf. Hyland, 2000; Uccelli, Dobbs, & Scott, 2013).

One-sided arguments have been accepted as part of the cause of poor writing quality, but the language used in one-sided arguments and the reasons students might think one-sidedness benefits their writing have not been extensively evaluated from a psychological perspective. Input from rhetoric/composition studies provides preliminary information on the language of argumentation. To that end, Van Laar (2007) defines one-sided arguments as those that fail to adequately account for parts of an issue. The types of fallacious language used in one-sided arguments are phrases that reflect a sense of essentialism, or black-and-white dualism. This category of essentialist constructions – at the simplest level, words like "always," "every," and "prove" – inherently insists on a singular explanation that too quickly reduces a range of possibilities that should be considered. Essentialist terms may fall into the rhetorically-identified, and theoretically-discussed, categories of "ambiguous quantifiers," which are expressions that fail to specify quantity (Raffray & Pickering, 2010); "single-word fallacies," in which one word is too general or invokes a biased attitude (Edelman, 1940); and "secundum quid fallacies," which neglect qualifications (Walton, 1999). Moreover, linguistic forms that convey stance, such as hedges and boosters (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Hyland, 2013; Vazquez & Giner, 2009) are mechanisms by which one-sided arguments can be established (via boosters) or avoided (via hedges; Hu & Cao, 2011). Essentialist terms are also reminiscent of a type of language that has been studied psychologically – generic utterances, which are defined as broad, category-based language that is, in general, true but need not apply to all members of the category (Hollander, Gelman, & Star, 2002). For example, saying "tigers are fierce" instead of "this tiger is fierce" is a generic utterance. Generic utterances and these other rhetorical categories reflect dualism but alone do not fully encompass black-and-white thought processes and their linguistic indicators as essentialism does.

Essentialism holds that some categories have an unobservable, underlying "essence" behind them – for instance, shared characteristics that make a "tiger" part of the "tiger" species beyond the dictionary definition of "tiger" (Gelman, 2004). A human preference for black-and-white classifications of things, people, and ideas may underlie

the utility and prevalence of essentialist language (Harnad, 2005; Park & Judd, 2005; Sutherland & Cimpian, 2015). Generic language, a small piece of essentialist language, is general enough that the information it relays can be applied in other situations – it is useful in more than one specific context, allowing for faster learning (Sutherland & Cimpian, 2015). However, generic language and essentialist language can be harmful both to writing quality and to society. When essentialism is applied socially, it is the belief that people of different groups are inherently, fundamentally, and permanently different. These beliefs can lead to a false understanding of certain people and to categorization of people based on group membership without properly allowing for individual variation within the supposedly "defining" characteristics of a group (Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012). This type of generalization can be applied socially or otherwise but regardless reflects thought processes. It is known that people will later apply characteristics to a group more universally if they hear about it through generic language (Gelman, Star, & Flukes, 2002; Goldfarb, Lagattuta, Kramer, Kennedy, & Tashjian, 2017). Inasmuch as essentialist language encompasses and expands the concept of generic language, the negative implications likely also follow.

Despite the lack of explicit psychological discussion of or research on essentialist constructions, the literature demonstrates students' use of one-sided arguments (Knudson 1992; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005), which seem to involve the use of language that ignores possible exceptions to rules (Kraus, 2015; Van Laar, 2007; Walton, 1999). However, the relationship between essentialist constructions and college students' perceptions of persuasive writing is not well understood. It stands to reason that the dualistic nature of thinking implied through the use of essentialist terms in persuasive writing affects how the argument is perceived by the writer and the audience (O'Keefe, 1999).

The present investigation considered student perceptions of and interactions with essentialist rhetorical structures in persuasive writing. Study 1 identified what students claim to value in persuasive writing and how they define those qualities. Study 2 determined how these values aligned with their perceptions of essentialist terms, representing a first step in understanding disparities and alignments between what students report is important in persuasive writing and how they actually respond to writing and essentialist language.

1. Study 1

1.1 Method

Participants
Study 1 was conducted in two phases, both of which recruited volunteers through the psychology department research participant system and the university writing center.

Phase 2 also recruited volunteers from another college via a college-wide email. Phase 1 participation was independent from Phase 2 participation. Forty-eight students completed Phase 1, and 136 students participated in Phase 2. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 22 (Phase 1 $M = 19.29$; Phase 2 $M = 18.56$). Nearly 60% of participants in each phase were first-year students; approximately 70% in each phase identified as female; and over 94% in each phase reported English as one of their first languages. In both phases, participants were compensated with entry into a gift card drawing and, in some cases, research credit in credit-participating psychology classes.

Materials and Procedure

This study consisted of two surveys: the first asked students what characteristics were important to writing and the second asked students to operationalize those characteristics by listing example constructions or key features of each characteristic. [This multi-phased, survey approach was adapted from Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, and Saville (2002), who used the method to ask students about characteristics of master teachers.]

Phase 1: Student-Identified Key Writing Characteristics. Volunteer participants gained access to the electronic survey via Qualtrics and completed the survey online after giving informed consent. Participants were asked for their age, year in school, gender identity, major(s), minor(s), first language, and language fluencies. Participants then indicated what type of writing they are most often asked to do in their courses, given the options of descriptive, expository, narrative, persuasive, or "other, please specify." Three items using a 5-point Likert scale followed this, asking to what degree they agreed that good writing is critical to success in school, is critical to success in life, and is an important skill (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Following this, nine open-ended questions asked participants to list at least three characteristics that "are central to making writing high quality," "damage writing quality," and "you personally use to judge the quality of writing." Similar prompts were given asking about characteristics within the categories of credibility and persuasiveness. For example, participants were asked, "List at least three characteristics that you personally use to judge the credibility of writing." At the end of the survey, participants were debriefed and given the option of being included in the gift card drawing. Using the coding process explained in the Results/Discussion section, 27 primary writing characteristics were identified from participant responses and used in the creation of Phase 2.

Phase 2: Student-Operationalized Characteristics. Participants in Phase 2 accessed the survey electronically via Qualtrics and gave their informed consent before beginning their participation. Participants answered the same demographic, type of writing, and writing belief questions as in Phase 1. Participants were then asked, for each of the 27

writing characteristics identified in Phase 1, to provide up to three specific writing behaviors or constructions that reflect each characteristic in an open-ended manner. For example, Detail was identified as an important writing characteristic in Phase 1, so in Phase 2 students were asked to report how they would recognize detail in writing by providing specific behaviors that indicate detail. After answering this question for each of the 27 characteristics, participants were debriefed and then offered the opportunity to enter into the gift card drawing.

1.2 Results and Discussion

Writing Beliefs

Students reported descriptive writing (*n* = 62, 33.69% across both phases) and persuasive writing (*n* = 55, 29.89% across both phases) as the types of writing that their college classes most often required. Using data collapsed across both phases, most participants reported agreeing or strongly agreeing they believe that writing is critical to their success in school (94.57%), that being able to write well is an important skill (97.25%), and that writing is critical to their success in life (86.41%; see Table 1).

Table 1. Writing Belief Scale Items

Statement	Study 1 (both phases)		Study 2	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
I believe that good writing is critical to my success in school.	4.52	0.80	4.52	0.80
I believe that being able to write well is an important skill.	4.53	0.72	4.41	0.84
I believe that good writing is critical to my success in life.	4.20	0.94	4.05	1.01

Note. Responses were on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Phase 1: Student-Identified Key Writing Characteristics

In Phase 1, participants were asked to list characteristics that create, that damage, and that they personally use to judge writing quality, persuasiveness, and credibility – totaling nine questions in all. The characteristics generated for each question were coded using an open coding process in which similar responses were grouped as one distinct writing characteristic. For example, responses of "good structure," "layout of the essay," and "well-organized" were coded into the characteristic of Organization/Structure. Two researchers coded the data and reached consensus on the

final coding. Across the nine questions, 27 characteristics were identified as being prevalent in the responses. Characteristics were deemed important to writing but not necessarily desirable; for example, Bias and One-sidedness were identified as characteristics that were important to consider because they could damage writing. The coding of characteristics arose from participants indicating the presence and/or absence of the characteristic as important to writing. For example, the characteristic of Fluidity was created from responses that writing should flow well to be high quality and that writing with poor flow damaged quality.

Table 2. Writing Characteristics by Category

Quality	Persuasiveness	Credibility
Argument Clarity/Consistency$_{ar}$	Argument Clarity/Consistency$_{ar}$	Argument Clarity/Consistency$_{ar}$
Concision$_{ar}$	Bias$_{ar}$	Bias$_{ar}$
Detail$_{ar}$	Concision$_{ar}$	Evidence/Support Strength$_{ar}$
Evidence/Support Strength$_{ar}$	Detail$_{ar}$	Inclusion of Other Viewpoints$_{ar}$
Thesis/Argument Strength$_{ar}$	Evidence/Support Strength$_{ar}$	Logically/Factually Sound$_{ar}$
Attuned to Audience$_{au}$	Inclusion of Other Viewpoints$_{ar}$	Credible Sources/Information$_{sc}$
Grabs/Retains Attention$_{au}$	Logically/Factually Sound$_{ar}$	Knowledgeable Writer$_{sc}$
Credible Sources/Information$_{sc}$	One-sidedness$_{ar}$	Scholarly Sources/Information$_{sc}$
Creativity$_{sm}$	Persuasion Techniques/Appeals$_{ar}$	Quality Sources/Information$_{sc}$
Evidence of Writing Process$_{sm}$	Refutation of Opposition$_{ar}$	Mechanical Correctness$_{sm}$
Fluidity$_{sm}$	Thesis/Argument Strength$_{ar}$	Professionalism$_{sm}$
Mechanical Correctness$_{sm}$	Attuned to Audience$_{au}$	Word Choice/Language$_{sm}$
Organization/Structure$_{sm}$	Grabs/Retains Attention$_{au}$	
Sentence Structure$_{sm}$	Persuasive Effectiveness$_{au}$	
Word Choice/Language$_{sm}$	Credible Sources/Information$_{sc}$	
	Knowledgeable Writer$_{sc}$	
	Mechanical Correctness$_{sm}$	
	Organization/Structure$_{sm}$	
	Voice/Tone$_{sm}$	
	Word Choice/Language$_{sm}$	

Note. Subscripts denote the classification theme of the characteristic. Argument related is indicated by *ar*, audience related by *au*, source/citation related by *sc*, and style/mechanics by *sm*.

The 27 characteristics were organized based on the writing category (quality, persuasiveness, and/or credibility) for which participants reported them as important, as seen in Table 2. Some of the characteristics were found to be important in more than one category. These results reveal that students perceive 27 unique characteristics as contributing to the quality, persuasiveness, and credibility of writing.

The 27 characteristics were grouped into four larger classification themes: style/mechanics related (sm), argument related (ar), source/citation related (sc), and audience related (au). The subscripts next to the writing characteristics in Table 2 indicate the classification theme of the writing characteristic. Students reported writing characteristics in certain classification themes with higher frequencies for certain categories of writing – specifically, style/mechanics-related characteristics with writing quality, source/citation characteristics with credibility, argument characteristics with persuasiveness, and audience characteristics with both quality and persuasiveness. This summary reflects only the general trend of the data, as students did recognize the importance of writing characteristics in many classification themes to the categories of quality, credibility, and persuasiveness. However, some categories were less diversified than others in how students assigned the importance of writing characteristics. For instance, while audience-related characteristics were reported as important to both writing quality and writing persuasiveness, no audience-related characteristics were reported as important to writing credibility. Another example of unexpected characteristic distribution into categories was the presence of Knowledgeable Writer as important to writing persuasiveness and credibility but not to writing quality.

Students identified the four writing characteristics that seem indicative of essentialism – Bias, One-sidedness, Refutation of Opposition, Inclusion of Other Viewpoints – as particularly impacting writing persuasiveness, as educators may have hoped. Additionally, Bias and One-sidedness were prevalent in responses regarding what damages writing persuasiveness, while Refutation of Opposition and Inclusion of Other Viewpoints were prevalent in responses for what creates persuasive writing – stances in line with the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association Center, 2010). Of the four characteristics that seem most related to essentialism, all were identified as related to persuasiveness and two were reported as also related to credibility, but none were reported as important to writing quality. Although the lack of essentialism characteristics here could be considered covered by the inclusion of some other argument-related characteristics – such as Argument Clarity/Consistency or Logically/Factually Sound and Strong – listed as important to writing quality, this pattern is concerning, as it suggests that while students seem to understand the basic essentialism-persuasiveness and essentialism-credibility connections, they may not have a full understanding of the importance of essentialism in writing quality, especially if the writing is not labeled as persuasive writing.

Phase 2: Student-Operationalized Characteristics

In Phase 2, students operationalized the 27 writing characteristics from Phase 1 that collectively contribute to writing quality, persuasiveness, and credibility. For each writing characteristic, students were asked to provide rhetorical constructions, which were described to students as writing behaviors that indicated the presence of the specified characteristic. The responses from Phase 2 were coded using an open-coding process for each of the 27 characteristics. The coding was divided between two coders who then reviewed each other's coding. Because of the open-coding process and no *a priori* prediction of the number of codes or likely distribution of those codes within each characteristic, the data were not recorded in a way that lent themselves to measures like Cohen's kappa (e.g., Perreault & Leigh, 1989); thus, the simpler method of percent agreement was selected. Overall inter-rater agreement across all 27 characteristics was 85.74%, and coders resolved disagreements on the final coding. For each writing characteristic, the constructions given by participants were grouped based on similarity, resulting in a list of example constructions for each characteristic. Based on the number of participants who reported a construction as an indicator of a characteristic, the constructions were ranked in order of importance to the characteristic, and the top three constructions were selected as representative for each writing characteristic. For instance, the three most prevalent ways participants reported recognizing Detail in writing were: it strengthened/supported the argument, was descriptive, and was specific.

At a general level, the student-derived definitions for essentialism-related characteristics match standard (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) and academic definitions of these terms (Weida & Stolley, 2014), further indicating that students do understand these writing characteristics, at least conceptually if not in practice. For example, Purdue OWL defines rebuttal as "evidence that negates or disagrees with the counterclaim" (Weida & Stolley, 2014), a definition that is in accord with the elements of students' definition of Refutation: arguing against opposition, acknowledging counterarguments, and using external evidence or sources.

For some writing characteristics, two or three of the top constructions were extremely similar. In these cases, it seemed that students were not differentiating between the characteristics; thus, the characteristics were collapsed into one. The three characteristics of Quality Sources/Information, Credible Sources/Information, and Scholarly Sources/Information were collapsed into one characteristic because students defined them almost identically, indicating that they may view sources/information as being simply appropriate or inappropriate, with "appropriate" encompassing high quality, credible, and scholarly without making much distinction between these adjectives. Further evidence of students perhaps relying on information from their writing instruction without much cognitive processing is that students often used the word "scholarly" in their definition of Scholarly Sources/Information. Participants also failed to make meaningful distinctions between Mechanically Correct and Sentence Structure (collapsed into Mechanically Correct) and between Logically/Factually Sound

and Evidence/Support Strength (collapsed into Logically/Factually Sound & Strong). This collapsing process reduced the original 27 characteristics to 23.

After collapsing the necessary characteristics, the coders transformed the top constructions for each characteristic into sentence form. The final product, shown in Table 3, is the sentence form of the top constructions, as identified by students, for each writing characteristic. According to these results, students differentiate and define the 23 unique characteristics in Table 3.

Table 3. Top Constructions for the 23 Unique Writing Characteristics Generated by Students

Argument Clarity and Consistency
The writer provides strong and specific information that is cited, credible, and relates back to the argument being made.
The writer refers to content that is relevant to the thesis throughout the entire piece.
The writer's argument, language, and explanation are easy to understand and follow, even for a reader who is not an expert on the topic.
Attuned to Audience
The writer adjusts language to a level the audience will understand and explains terminology if necessary.
The writer ties in examples or subject matters with which the audience can relate and connect.
The writer is aware of and understands their intended audience.
Bias
The writer strongly favors one argument in their presentation of evidence and fails to provide a counter argument or other views.
The writer weaves personal opinion into their argument and may portray opinion as evidence.
The writer's personal experience with or feelings toward a topic influence their presentation of the argument.
Concision
The writer avoids using extraneous words and wordy, run-on sentences to convey an idea.
The writer uses language that is succinct and to the point, not drawn out or longer than necessary.
The writer only includes information necessary to enhance their argument and eliminates unnecessary details, or "fluff."
Creativity
The paper proposes original ideas or connections that offer new, unique perspectives on the topic at hand, and are therefore distinguishable as the writer's own.
The writer provides interesting topics and information and presents information in a way that is enjoyable for the audience.
The writer utilizes unique, descriptive vocabulary, interesting transitional words, and overall strong word choice.
Detail
The writer adds information in such a way that it strengthens or supports the argument of the paper.

The writer is descriptive in their use of language and goes beyond simple statements.

The writer avoids broad or vague statements, instead offering specific examples.

Evidence of Writing Process

The paper is organized in a logical manner.

The writer created multiple drafts of the paper.

The writer created an outline in order to plan the organization of the paper.

Fluidity

The writer uses smooth transitions (in the form of words or phrases) between main ideas, minimizing sudden stops or changes.

Paragraphs are smoothly connected and contain main ideas that flow from one relevant idea to the next.

The overall writing flows consistently; this includes the main ideas, arguments, paragraphs, and even sentences.

Grabs/Retains Attention

All facets of the writing must be interesting and engaging throughout the entirety of the paper.

The writer uses a quality hook at the beginning of the paper, paragraph, or sentence.

Interesting details, surprising statistics, and/or shocking facts from outside sources are used.

Inclusion of Other Viewpoints

The writer explicitly acknowledges differing views or counterarguments, thereby addressing any weaknesses in the argument and possible alternative explanations.

The writer concedes other viewpoints in order to refute or explain why they represent a weaker or more flawed perspective or explanation.

The writer acknowledges that issues are complex and may be approached with multiple perspectives.

Knowledgeable Writer

The writer incorporates multiple sources that are credible and relevant.

The writer has extensive knowledge on the subject, which is evident in the paper.

The writer presents evidence such as facts, quotes, and examples to support their argument.

Logically/Factually Sound and Strong

The writer uses evidence throughout the paper to support their argument.

The writer cites reliable, credible, or generally high-quality sources.

The writer utilizes details, quotations, statistics, and other forms of factual information from outside scholarly sources

Mechanically Correct

The writer uses proper grammar that is free of errors, with no run-on sentences or fragments.

The writer's punctuation is correct.

The sentences are well crafted with varying structures.

One-sidedness

Opposing or countering arguments are not acknowledged or incorporated.

One side of the argument is strongly favored in the paper.

The paper lacks other perspectives or viewpoints.

Organization/Structure

The paper has a smooth, clear, consistent flow from one idea to the next.

The paper is easy to follow and understand and does not leave the reader feeling confused.

There is a strong conclusion that ties all of the writer's ideas together.

Persuasion Techniques/Appeals

The writer provides external information such as statistics, quotes, or examples to support the argument.

By the end of the paper, the reader is convinced by the argument given.

The writer uses ethos, pathos, and logos in their argument.

Persuasive Effectiveness

By the end of the paper, the reader is persuaded to agree with the writer's argument.

The writer supports their statements with examples, evidence, and analysis.

The writer's argument causes the reader to reconsider or to question beliefs and opinions on the subject.

Professionalism

The writer's word choice is appropriate for the paper, using higher-level vocabulary and avoiding slang.

The tone and voice of the paper is formal.

The writer tends to use third person pronouns.

Quality Sources/Information

Sources utilized are scholarly, having been obtained from peer-reviewed academic journals, databases, or university publications.

The writer cites sources appropriately throughout the paper and in the works cited.

There is some indication that the information comes from reliable sources or is written by an expert.

Refutation

The writer provides adequate evidence and explanation to acknowledge, but ultimately disprove, opposing viewpoints.

The writer does not ignore opposing views and arguments, but instead clearly addresses them and provides any necessary explanation.

The writer uses reliable evidence from credible sources to confront opposition to their argument.

Thesis Argument/Strength

The thesis sets the precedent for the paper by outlining the main ideas to be discussed.

The thesis is located in the introduction of the paper, usually at the end of the first paragraph.

The argument is supported by numerous, well-researched examples and analysis with appropriate level of detail.

Voice/Tone

The writer conveys voice and tone through descriptive and clever, yet professional, word choice.

The writer conveys voice and tone through understanding and appropriately addressing the audience.

The writer should maintain a consistent tone and writing style throughout the essay to establish their voice.

Word Choice

The writer provides sophisticated, eloquent language that uses advanced vocabulary.

The writer refrains from repeating the same word many times throughout the essay.

The writer provides language and content that is appropriate to both the audience and subject.

Study 1 provides details about undergraduates' writing perceptions that can be useful to professors when instructing students on writing. Professors can use these results to predict what their students will be considering when they ask them to write well, credibly, or persuasively and where they may need to provide more instruction if, for instance, their definitions or expectations are different or more detailed (e.g., "scholarly") than what these representative students indicated.

Although Study 1 provides a new look at student perceptions of writing, it has some limitations. An intentional limitation of this study is that it only speaks to student perceptions. This approach was chosen due to lack of research in this area (e.g., versus instructor-driven perceptions and definitions) and due to the existing problem of poor student writing. However, these results do not represent people of higher education levels who could apply different academic experiences to the tasks of identifying and defining writing characteristics. Furthermore, this study speaks to students' general perceptions of writing but can only speculate about their understanding or interpretation of essentialist rhetorical constructions per se – a limitation that Study 2 begins to address.

2. Study 2

Study 1 provided a unique look at students' psychological perceptions of writing but alone could not determine if students differentiate and/or prefer essentialist or non-essentialist language. The results of Study 1 showed that students can identify that certain writing characteristics associated with essentialism – Bias, One-sidedness, Refutation of Opposition, Inclusion of Other Viewpoints – impact persuasiveness, but it

remains to be seen if this knowledge carries over into students' actual interactions with writing.

Considering the evidence that one-sided arguments and the language accompanying them hurt writing persuasiveness (Knudson 1992; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005; O'Keefe, 1999), alongside the evidence that United States students often do not meet educators' standards (Brockman et al., 2010; Crammond, 1998; Knudson, 1992; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012; White & Vanneman, 2000), it seems that, somewhere in the developing writing process, students fail to properly apply the knowledge they demonstrated in Study 1 – e.g., that one-sidedness hurts writing. By having students interact with one type of essentialist writing, Study 2 shed experimental light on whether students might operationally use or prefer essentialist language despite seemingly conceptually recognizing its harm.

2.1 Method

Participants

Seventy-nine students from the psychology department participant system volunteered to take part in Study 2. Participants were predominantly first-year students (78%), identified as female (76%), and ranged in age from 18 to 21 ($M = 18.49$ years). All participants reported English as their only first language, and only nine participants indicated that they were fluent in at least one additional language. Participants were offered the opportunity to enter a gift card drawing as compensation, and some were offered research credit in credit-participating classes.

Materials

To see if students preferred essentialist or non-essentialist writing, writing that differed only in this variable was needed. Although there are many ways to embody essentialism in writing and thus a variety of ways to investigate essentialist rhetoric, the interest here was on acute reaction and sensitivity in short passages as a start to this kind of rare experimental investigation. This required a restriction in the type of essentialism addressed explicitly so that roughly equivalent samples could be tested. Linguistic stance markers such as boosters and hedges are arguably the simplest first step in testing comparative reactions to essentialist and non-essentialist language. The use of such markers – and the relative importance of hedges in particular – has been shown to predict persuasive writing quality (e.g., Uccelli et al., 2013), distinguish persuasive research articles in many disciplines (e.g., Gillaerts & Van de Velde, 2010; Vazquez & Giner, 2009), distinguish L1 writers from L2 writers (e.g., Hyland & Milton, 1997), and predict advanced writers over early writers (e.g., Aull & Lancaster, 2014). As an initial investigation, then, essentialism was manipulated in terms of presence of hedges (non-essentialist) or absence of hedges and presence of boosters (essentialist).

Six pairs (sets 1-6) of writing samples were created using actual student writing as the base for the samples. The researchers read student essays from several psychology senior seminar classes and selected segments to modify for the sample pairs. A sample was extracted and modified to create two very similar writing samples – one with essentialist language and one with more moderate, non-essentialist language. As suggested above, inclusion of hedges was used to convey non-essentialism and essentialist passages were formed via a distinct absence of hedges and an occasional booster. There were two sample pairs that were one-sentence long each, two that were two-sentences long, and two that were three-sentences long. Three of the six sample pairs included citations (a one-sentence pair, a two-sentence pair, and a three-sentence pair). Two experts approved the final writing sample sets, and then 12 adults who were seasoned, but not professional writers nor academics, and were not affiliated with the study in any way, confirmed the manipulation success with a hit-rate of 97.2%. The final sets are provided in Table 4; when presented to participants in the study, the samples were labeled with letters and essentialist/non-essentialist indicators were removed.

For each set, student participants indicated which they preferred in each pair. To ask participants to explain their preference for essentialist or non-essentialist writing, the list of characteristics that students deemed important to writing persuasiveness in Study 1 (see Table 2) was included in the Study 2 materials. The list of 19 characteristics deemed relevant to persuasiveness was used rather than the entire list of 23 characteristics to directly compare reported and enacted perceptions of the relationship between persuasiveness and essentialism. The original 19 characteristics were reduced to 17 options for students to choose from because Mechanical Correctness and Organization/Structure were not relevant given the researchers' editing for mechanical correctness and the lack of large-scale organization in a short writing sample.

Procedure

Study 2 incorporated a 2x6 experimental design. The primary independent variable was essentialism (2), and the within-participants design exposed participants to both levels: essentialist and non-essentialist. An incidental, secondary within-participants independent variable was set (6), given 6 pairs of samples (see Table 4). The three dependent variables were choice, reason, and persuasiveness rating. Choice was defined by participants' preference for the essentialist or non-essentialist sample in each set when asked which was better. The phrasing "better" was used to get an initial subjective reaction before asking students to more objectively assess the persuasiveness. Reason was defined by selection of up to three characteristics from the provided list as guiding their choice between essentialist and non-essentialist samples. Persuasiveness rating was measured by participants' rating of each sample's persuasiveness on an 8-point (0-7) Likert-type scale.

Table 4. Writing Sample Pairs for Study 2

Set	Sentences	Citations	Essentialist Sample	Non-essentialist Sample
1	1	no	Every year inevitably brings with it new devices, updates, and social media sites, which have an undeniably positive impact on our lives, making daily tasks easier and more convenient.	Each year brings new devices, updates, and social media sites, which most would argue have a positive impact on our lives, making some little things "easier" and more convenient.
2	1	yes	The social stigma that comes with using the word 'like' has long been negative, indicating superficiality and lack of intelligence (Fuller, 2003).	The social stigma that comes with using the word 'like' tends to be negative, implying superficially and lack of intelligence (Fuller, 2003).
3	2	no	The use of mobile phones has become uncontrollable, leading to the development of "checking habits." Individuals check their devices all the time so that it becomes a habit, leading to addiction and anxiety when the device cannot be checked.	The uncontrollable use of mobile phones could be described as a "checking habit." In some cases, individuals check their devices so frequently that it becomes a habit that may lead to addiction and anxiety when the device cannot be checked.
4	2	yes	All students cram at the end of the semester, proving that this behavior is due to procrastination rather than choice. Unfortunately, cramming and procrastination result in low levels of academic life satisfaction (Balkis & Duru, 2015; Brinthaupt & Shin, 2001).	A majority of students report cramming at the end of a semester, most of whom indicate this is due to procrastination rather than choice. Unfortunately, cramming and procrastination are correlated with lower levels of academic life satisfaction (Balkis & Duru, 2015; Brinthaupt & Shin, 2001).

| 5 | 3 | no | When confronted by negative feelings or thoughts, everyone turns to some sort of activity or hobby as a distraction. For example, men will turn to alcohol consumption in response to a discontented mood. Distractors such as alcohol are a poor solution because they lead individuals to substance abuse or to other concerning addictions and behaviors. | Often when people are agitated by negative feelings or thoughts, they turn to some sort of activity or hobby to distract themselves. Men, for example, have been observed to more readily turn to alcohol consumption as a way to respond to a discontented mood. Distractors such as alcohol are not the best solution as this may lead individuals towards substance abuse or other concerning addictions and behaviors. |
| 6 | 3 | yes | The gender difference in reactions to hook-ups is a direct result of the sexual double standard experienced by men and women. Men can engage in hook-ups without damaging their reputations. Conversely, women are expected to hook-up with men; however, when they do, they are criticized for not being respectable or lady-like (Stinson, 2010). | The gender difference in reactions to hook-ups could stem from a sexual double standard for men and women. Frequently, men engage in hook-ups without damage to their reputations. Conversely, women are often expected to hook-up with men; however, when they do, they are subject to criticism for not being respectable or lady-like (Stinson, 2010). |

After giving informed consent, participants were shown (via Qualtrics) the six pairs of samples in random order and asked the same questions about each. Within each pair, the writing samples (essentialist and non-essentialist) also were shown in random order. Participants were informed that they would see two writing samples, one after another, and told to pay attention to the letters labeling the samples because they would be asked to answer questions based on those labels. After reading both samples within a pair, participants were asked which they thought was better, leaving aside their personal agreement with the samples. They were then given the list of 17 writing characteristics and asked to choose and rank up to three characteristics that contributed most to their decision about which sample was better. Finally, again in random order,

they were shown the samples one by one and asked to rate the persuasiveness on a Likert-type scale of 0-7, anchored by "not at all persuasive" (0) to "extremely persuasive" (7).

After participants had responded with their choice, reason, and persuasiveness ratings for each sample pair, they were asked the same writing belief and basic demographic questions that participants answered in Study 1. Upon completion of the survey, participants were debriefed and given the chance to enter into a gift card drawing.

2.2 Results and Discussion

Writing Experience and Beliefs

Participants reported that their college classes required persuasive (n = 33; 41.77%) and descriptive (n = 26; 32.91%) writing most often. Most students agreed or strongly agreed that writing is critical to their success in school (93.67%), that being able to write well is an important skill (89.87%), and that writing is critical to their success in life (77.22%). Table 1 shows the average agreement to these writing beliefs on a 5-point scale. Similar to Study 1, fewer participants agreed that writing is critical to their success in life than agreed to its importance as a skill and in school, despite evidence that writing helps develop social and political skills that students may view as critical to personal and professional success in life (Enos & Lauer, 1992; Hays & Brandt, 1992; NACE, 2015).

Ratings of Persuasiveness

Figure 1 shows the average persuasiveness ratings (±1 *SE*) for the essentialist and non-essentialist sample in each of the 6 sets. A 2x6 Repeated Measures ANOVA tested the effects of the within-participants independent variables of essentialism (2) and set (6) on persuasiveness ratings. Overall, participants rated non-essentialist samples (M = 4.36; SD = 0.91) as significantly more persuasive than essentialist samples (M = 4.15; SD = 0.90), $F(1,75)$ = 4.704, p = 0.033, η_p^2 = 0.059. The effect of set was marginally significant, $F(5,71)$ = 2.154, p = 0.059, η_p^2 = 0.028. Exploratory post-hoc pairwise comparisons (LSD) on the marginal effect of set on ratings revealed that set 6 was rated higher overall, regardless of essentialism, than sets 1, 2, and 4 (all p's < 0.05), and marginally higher than set 3 (p = 0.066), but did not differ from set 5 ratings (p = .652). No other pairwise comparisons of sets were significantly different in ratings (all p's > 0.05). However, there was a significant interaction between the essentialism and set variables in regards to the persuasive ratings, $F(5,71)$ = 6.695, p < 0.001, η_p^2 = 0.082; that is, the effect of essentialism was dependent on the set.

Univariate analyses of the effects of essentialism in each set further analyzed the interaction. In three of the sets (sets 2, 3, and 6), there were no significant differences in
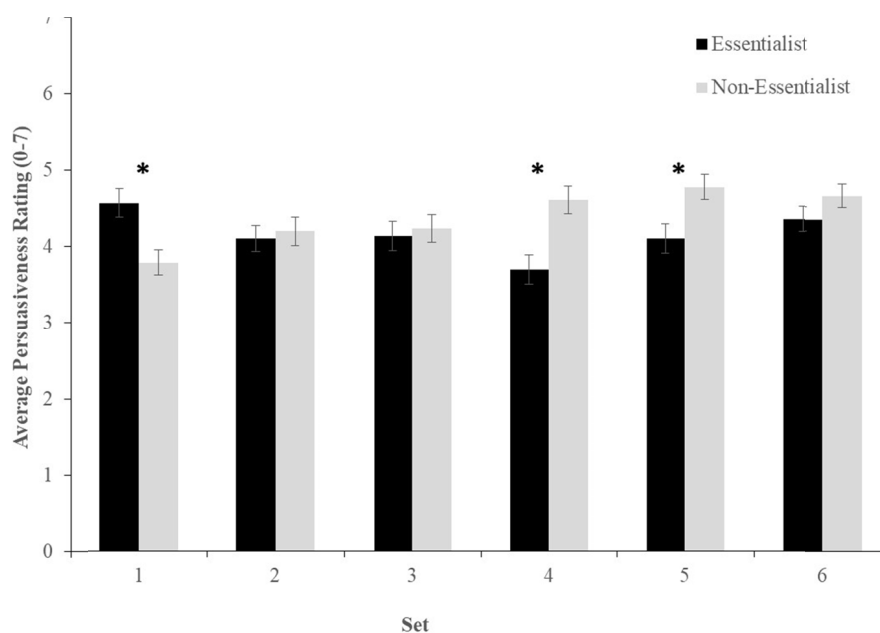
Figure 1. Average persuasiveness rating (±1 SE) for each essentialist (black bars) and non-essentialist (gray bars) sample in each set. Asterisk indicates significance.

Note. Three participants failed to provide a persuasiveness rating for one sample each; therefore, the data above represent n = 76.

the persuasiveness rating of essentialist and non-essentialist samples [set 2: $F(1,78)$ = 0.288, p = 0.593; set 3: $F(1,77)$ = 0.025, p = 0.874; set 6: $F(1,78)$ = 2.038, p = 0.157]. In set 1, a set of one-sentence samples with no citations, the essentialist sample was rated significantly more persuasive than the non-essentialist sample, $F(1,78)$ = 8.856, p = 0.004, η_p^2 = 0.102. On the other hand, participants rated non-essentialist samples as significantly more persuasive in sets 4 and 5 – set 4: $F(1,76)$ = 12.140, p = 0.001, η_p^2 = 0.138, set 5: $F(1,78)$ = 5.873, p = 0.018, η_p^2 = 0.070 – which included two-sentence samples with citations and three-sentence samples without citations, respectively. Thus, students in this study did not consistently rate non-essentialist samples higher in persuasiveness, indicating some degree, at their level, of lacking sensitivity to the undermining impact of this type of essentialist language. In contrast, professionals rated essays as more persuasive when hedges – the type of linguistic non-essentialism formed in the present study – were judiciously used (Uccelli, et al., 2013).

Choice of Essentialism

Each of the 79 participants indicated which sample (essentialist or non-essentialist, as linguistically defined in this study) they thought was better for each of the 6 pairs/sets, resulting in 474 total choices made by participants. Of the choices made, 222 were in favor of essentialist samples (lack of hedges and/or presence of boosters) and 252 were in favor of non-essentialist (judicious hedges, no boosters) samples. A one-sample chi-square goodness of fit test revealed that the difference in these choice frequencies was not significant. That is, although non-essentialist samples were rated as more persuasive overall, students did not choose the non-essentialist samples as better significantly more than the essentialist samples, $\chi^2(1) = 1.899$, $p = 0.168$. Thus, students' failure to uniformly select non-essentialist samples as 'better' underscores a lack of sensitivity or responsiveness to essentialist language as problematic or damaging to persuasiveness.

Reasoning for Choice

A chi-square independence test was used to evaluate the writing characteristics – or reasons – participants selected to justify their choice between essentialist and non-essentialist samples. Results revealed that students' choice between essentialism and non-essentialism was not independent of the reasons cited for being better; that is, choosing an essentialist sample as better was associated with different reasons for being better compared to the reasons given for choosing a non-essentialist sample as better, $\chi^2(16) = 26.442$, $p = 0.048$. Figure 2 shows the distribution of reasons given based on the essentialism of the choice made. Characteristics that were given as reasons for essentialist choices more frequently than for non-essentialist choices where observed
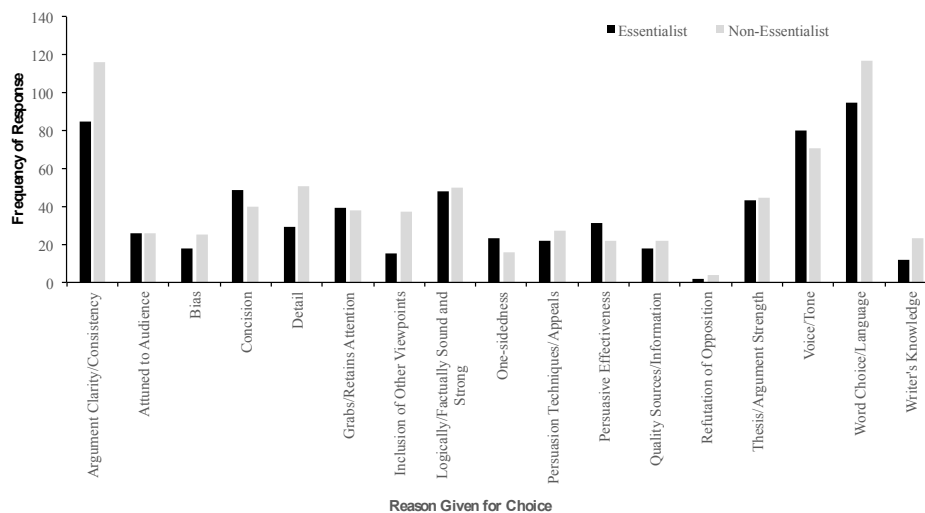
Figure 2. Frequency of reasons given for choice for essentialist (black bars) and non-essentialist (gray bars) samples.

frequencies exceeded expected frequencies by more than one were (in order of greatest observed versus expected difference): Voice/Tone, Concision, Persuasive Effectiveness, One-sidedness, and Grabs/Retains Attention. The characteristics more often given for non-essentialist choices in order of greatest observed-expected frequency difference were: Inclusion of Other Viewpoints, Argument Clarity/Consistency, Detail, Writer's Knowledge, Word Choice/Language, and Bias (each with an observed-expected frequency difference of more than one). Although participants did not distinguish significantly between essentialist and non-essentialist in their choices, the fact that different reasons were given for essentialist and non-essentialist choices demonstrates that students did perceive a difference in the samples – they identified the essentialism in some capacity. Students did not treat the samples identically despite their close similarity; instead, they perceptively and differentially identified characteristics that differed between the samples when justifying their choices.

Exploratory Analysis of Choice Groups

The original 2x6 Repeated Measures ANOVA revealed that non-essentialist samples were rated as more persuasive. However, this finding speaks for the participants as a whole without looking at the differences in persuasiveness ratings for individuals with different overall preferences. After determining a lack of significance in the overall choices made between essentialist and non-essentialist samples, the researchers explored individual patterns of choice, separating participants into three groups: those who preferred essentialist samples (chose essentialist samples for at least 4 of the sets),

those who preferred non-essentialist samples (chose non-essentialist samples for at least 4 of the sets), and those with no preference (chose essentialist samples and non-essentialist samples each half the time). Surprisingly, the distribution of participants in these choice groups was approximately equal, with 27 (34.18%) showing essentialist preference, 28 (35.44%) showing non-essentialist preference, and 24 (30.38%) showing no preference. To explore further whether the primary results regarding persuasiveness ratings mapped onto individuals' preferences for or against essentialism, these choice groups were treated as a new between-participants variable alongside the within-participants variables of essentialism and set. Table 5 shows the average persuasiveness ratings for essentialist and non-essentialist samples for each of the 3 choice groups.

Table 5. Persuasiveness Ratings By Choice Group

	Essentialist		Non-Essentialist	
Choice Group	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Essentialist Preference	4.18	1.01	4.12	0.95
No Preference	4.29	0.88	4.19	0.88
Non-Essentialist Preference	4.01	0.82	4.74	0.79

A 2x6x3 Mixed ANOVA assessed whether individuals within these choice groups (3) rated samples significantly differently based on essentialism (2) or set (6). As with the original analysis, this analysis reaffirmed a significant effect of essentialism, $F(1,73) = 4.885$, $p = 0.030$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.063$, no main effect of set, $F(5,69) = 1.833$, $p = 0.118$, and an interaction between set and essentialism, $F(5,69) = 4.755$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.256$. New results incorporating the choice group variable revealed no main effect of choice group, $F(2, 73) = 0.497$, $p = 0.610$, no interaction between set and choice group, $F(10,140) = 1.161$, $p = 0.32$, and no three-way interaction between set, essentialism, and choice group, $F(10,140) = 0.330$, $p = 0.972$. However, there was a significant interaction between essentialism and choice group, $F(2,73) = 9.759$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.211$.

Paired-sample t-tests assessed the interaction between essentialism and choice group. There was no significant difference between persuasiveness ratings of essentialist and non-essentialist samples for individuals in the essentialist preference group, $t(25) = 0.541$, $p = 0.594$, or the no preference group, $t(22) = 0.402$, $p = 0.692$. On the other hand, individuals with a non-essentialist preference demonstrated significant differences in their persuasiveness ratings of essentialist and non-essentialist samples, $t(26) = -5.339$, $p < 0.001$, such that they rated essentialist samples ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.82$) significantly less persuasive than non-essentialist samples ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 0.79$; see Table 5). This group of non-essentialist-preferring participants saw essentialist language as consistently impacting persuasiveness and were likely the driving force for the overall significant main effect of essentialism on persuasiveness ratings.

Correlations

To get a better idea of the relationship between persuasiveness ratings and individual participants, Pearson correlations were run between age, year in school, average essentialist ratings (E-rating), average non-essentialist ratings (NE-rating), and the three writing belief items of importance to school (School), important as a skill itself (Skill), and importance to life (Life); see Table 6. There was a significant positive correlation between individuals' average essentialist and average non-essentialist persuasiveness ratings, $r(74) = 0.539$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that some participants had a tendency to rate persuasiveness as higher in general and some rated persuasiveness lower in general. Of primary interest, however, were significant negative correlations between average essentialist persuasiveness rating and age, $r(75) = -0.263$, $p = 0.021$, and between average essentialist persuasiveness rating and year in school, $r(75) = -0.244$, $p = 0.032$, indicating that older students and students with more years of education were associated with lower persuasiveness ratings on essentialist samples than younger students or students with less education. These results indicate that, in general, older/experienced students may be the ones who identify this type of linguistically-formed essentialism as hurting persuasiveness and quality, consistent with educators' standards for academic persuasive writing, as well as with other findings that more experienced writers have better command of the strategic use of hedges and boosters (cf. Aull & Lancaster, 2014).

Table 6. Pearson's Correlations Between Selected Variables

	Age	Year	E-rating	NE-rating	School	Skill	Life
Age	–						
Year	0.807***	–					
E-rating	-0.263*	-0.244*	–				
NE-rating	0.109	0.139	0.539***	–			
School	0.037	-0.041	0.086	0.180	–		
Skill	0.084	-0.003	-0.086	0.023	0.810***	–	
Life	0.116	0.000	0.048	0.111	0.539***	0.700***	–

*Note. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001*

3. General Discussion

Study 1 asked students to identify and define writing characteristics that impacted the categories of writing quality, persuasiveness, and credibility – revealing that different characteristics were considered important for different categories of writing. Study 2 provided insight on how well students' reported perceptions of writing from Study 1 matched with their actual interactions with writing. It might be argued that the shift from Study 1 to Study 2 represents a shift from conceptual to operational understanding (cf. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Hyland, 2008; Hyland, 2013). From such a

perspective, perhaps results of some misalignment are not surprising. Furthermore, only a particular type of essentialism/non-essentialism was studied here, leaving open the possibility that the same students may have shown greater sensitivity to other types of essentialism in writing. Yet studies of this type arguably allow us to start identifying an emergence timeline for different aspects of the transition from conceptual to operational understanding or performance.

At first glance, the main effect of essentialist language (as constructed at the local linguistic level in this study) on persuasiveness ratings indicates that students did recognize a difference in persuasiveness between essentialist and non-essentialist writing that was significant. However, this main effect of essentialism was due primarily to the group of non-essentialist preferring participants who, based on the correlations, were likely older and/or more educated. The fact that there were negative correlations between age/year in school and essentialist persuasiveness ratings but not positive correlations between age/year in school and non-essentialist ratings indicates that the distinguishing factor between choice groups may be a sensitivity to the negative effects of essentialism (lack of hedges, unwarranted presence of boosters). The apparent ability of older or more educated students to identify essentialism as less persuasive may be due to educational experience and/or due to cognitive development that allows them to better analyze sources and information (cf. Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Boes et al., 2010). The developmental timeline may also relate back to the initial utility of essentialist terms in helping people learn information about groups that is generally applicable to most group members (Sutherland & Cimpian, 2015). Nevertheless, through experience and education, older students may come to realize the value of more context-specific information that gives a more accurate representation of reality.

Interestingly, the reasons students gave for their choices – whether essentialist or non-essentialist – indicate that they accurately identified the differences between the samples, even if they then proceeded to choose the essentialist sample as better. The reasons more often given for non-essentialist choices were (in order of greatest observed-expected difference): Inclusion of Other Viewpoints, Argument Clarity/Consistency, Detail, Writer's Knowledge, Word Choice/Language, and Bias. Their responses indicated that non-essentialist language includes other viewpoints and that this broader, more moderate language made for a clear, detailed argument that shows the writer as knowledgeable. Thus, when participants made non-essentialist choices, they not only identified what made the non-essentialist sample different from the essentialist sample, they then chose the non-essentialist sample as better, enacting students' reported understanding from Study 1 that essentialism affects persuasiveness. Although Word Choice/Language showed up more often as a reason given for non-essentialist choices, it was the most given reason for any choice (see Figure 2), suggesting that, even though the characteristics provided in Study 1 were broad categories that did not specify the types of linguistic options used in Study 2, participants understood that the most notable difference between the samples was at the level of linguistic forms and that this difference affected their decisions.

On the other hand, when essentialist choices were made, the reasons for these choices where the observed frequency most exceeded the expected frequency were: Voice/Tone, Concision, Persuasive Effectiveness, One-sidedness, and Grabs/Retains Attention. As with the reasons given for non-essentialist choices, the reasons given for essentialist choices demonstrate at least an implicit understanding of the difference between the samples. Even with the focus on linguistic forms used here, essentialist language is characterized by its one-sidedness and extreme tone that fails to account for other possibilities, and the reasons of Voice/Tone, Grabs/Retains Attention, and One-sidedness reflect that essentialism. Although Concision can certainly be present in non-essentialist writing, in this case, Concision as a reason for essentialist choices could reflect a student belief that concision – which was defined in Study 1 as not being wordy and including only necessary information – justifies excluding other viewpoints. Despite recognizing the essentialism in the writing in these cases, students nonetheless chose it as better. While students may have been taught that one-sidedness is wrong, being instructed to have strong, supported, and concise arguments could lead students to identify one-sided writing as better. The tiered expectations of the Common Core Standards, for example, mean that students explicitly learn early on to support their arguments and only later are told to include and refute other viewpoints (Adler-Kassler, 2017); the more ingrained learning of persuasiveness as convincing or supporting just one argument may result in essentialist preferences. Indeed, in the context of the short passages used in Study 2, which differed primarily on linguistic markers, students could have selected the essentialist passages as 'better' because of the initial utility that makes them faster or easier to process. Yet, this would only account for the 'better' selections of a third of the participants; another third showed no overall preference between the two types of samples. As discussed earlier, the progression of older and more educated students towards a non-essentialist preference could be due to a change in writing education in college, the development of better analytical skills, or a combination of the two (among other factors).

One of the most intriguing findings from Study 2 was the Essentialism*Set interaction (see Figure 1) in which essentialism was significantly preferred when choosing between the samples in set 1 but non-essentialism was preferred in sets 4 and 5. Set 1 was a short, single sentence without citations (see Table 4). Perhaps because the samples were presented alone, one sentence without citations appeared casual, speech-like, or advertisement-like, leading students to react to more extreme language as appropriate, similar to how higher degrees of certainty are tolerated in abstracts compared to articles (Gillaerts & Van de Velde, 2010). Alternatively, set 1 samples made statements about how technological advances improve the quality of life. Having grown up with technology as an integral part of their daily, even moment-to-moment, lives, the participants may have felt that the essentialist version aligned more with their personal beliefs and let that influence their decision despite being instructed to disregard their personal level of agreement with the content. On the other hand, sets 4 and 5 were longer statements and set 4 had citations, which perhaps gave students the

context of the sample being part of formal, non-advertising writing for which essentialist language is not ideal. The content of sets 4 and 5 may also have influenced participants, resulting in more non-essentialist choices for these sets. Set 4 discussed the negative consequences of students cramming to study; students may have found that the essentialist sample automatically grouped them personally into a group that was then connected to an undesirable consequence. Set 5 made statements about how individuals distract themselves from negative thoughts. Because the samples were developed from actual student writing, they dealt with real issues that are personally connected to students – technological advances, gender inequality, cramming, etc. However, unlike the other sets, sets 4 and 5 start their statements with subjects that encompass the participants of this study: "students" in set 4 and "everyone" in set 5. As speculated with the essentialist preference for set 1, participants' personal connection to the statements may have impacted their preferences, but with sets 4 and 5, the subjects they connected to were grouped with a negative statement. As social essentialism would predict (Rhodes et al., 2012), the danger of essentialism is exactly this inadequacy of representation that is best felt by those being poorly represented. The potential link between personal/emotional connections and essentialism preference begins to speak to the political and social importance of research on essentialism.

Consistent with findings that many students are not even aware of hedges and boosters (Hyland, 2000), the present studies revealed that many students (i.e., approximately two-thirds of the sample in Study 2) do not reliably recognize essentialist language in this arguably simple form as having a negative impact on writing quality or persuasiveness, a reality that could have profound consequences. Generic language, a subset of essentialist language, leads to generalization of group members (Gelman et al., 2002; Goldfarb et al., 2017) and reflects harmful social essentialism that fails to account for individual differences (Rhodes et al., 2012). Even when it seems like essentialist language could be unifying, it may not be. Using terms like "all" or "everyone" often fails to account for a reality of diversity. For example, the counterpart to the Black Lives Matter movement, All Lives Matter, did not make *everyone* feel more valued. Instead, many black people felt this essentialist language ignored a reality in which their lives were less valued (Victor, 2016). Although the entirety of the relationship between essentialist language and social views is not yet understood, it is not beyond reason that essentialist language promotes essentialist thinking (and vice versa) that perpetuates a failure to understand people from different social, ethnic, gender, or economic groups.

If students are to recognize exceptions to rules, individual differences, and the need for analytical thinking in their lives, the difference between essentialist and non-essentialist language, from the simple forms exhibited here to the most complex forms, should be prevalent in their writing education. Failure of at least high school education systems to produce students who are aware of the harms of essentialism could be symptomatic of larger, societal issues. The principles promoted by non-essentialist writing go beyond simply "persuading" to include the safety, value, and freedom of the

audience, which are recognized as feminist tenets (Foss & Griffin, 1995). As a society still working towards gender, race, and sexual identity equality, the values embodied by non-essentialist writing will hopefully become ever more ingrained in society and the education system.

With the potential harm of essentialist language clear, it is important to consider how non-essentialist writing can be effectively taught. For United States students in K-12, the Common Core Standards should be reconsidered and used to promote critical thinking skills and the inclusion of multiple viewpoints in persuasive writing prior to high school, which is currently when the Standards recommend adding counterclaims into persuasive writing (Adler-Kassler, 2017). Moreover, the values embodied by Listening-Rhetoric and invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995; King, 2010) that allow for writing that is based more on discussion than argument could be helpful if incorporated into educators' descriptions of persuasive writing and its evaluation. In terms of taking immediate action, educators can use Study 1 data that describes students' explicit beliefs and knowledge of writing characteristics to understand their students' viewpoints on writing. If professors want students to write in a balanced, non-essentialist way, they may want to ask students to focus on including the characteristics Inclusion of Other Viewpoints, Detail, and Argument Clarity/Consistency in their writing and discuss rhetorical constructions that achieve those goals, including explicitly pointing out essentialist word choices and language to avoid. The results of these studies revealed that students can distinguish essentialism and non-essentialism, but many students still choose essentialist writing as better; thus, having college professors highlight what they want to see in writing can make expectations clearer for students.

Although this investigation has laid groundwork for understanding student perceptions of writing and essentialism, it has limitations that future studies may address. This study looked only at students' perceptions of writing that included essentialism of one, and arguably the simplest, type; it remains important to fully characterize the prevalence of essentialism in writing and the contexts in which essentialist or non-essentialist language are more often preferred and, especially, produced. In addition, the present study did not ask students directly about essentialism and non-essentialism; future research could investigate how bringing issues of essentialism to their immediate consciousness impacts subsequent interactions with essentialist and non-essentialist samples. Furthermore, the Essentialism*Set interaction indicates that essentialism or non-essentialism is not universally preferred – factors yet to be researched affect the reception, and likely the production, of essentialist language. Results indicated that students with a non-essentialist preference were likely older. The development of essentialist and non-essentialist preferences should be researched further to clarify how perceptions of essentialism change with age and education. Finally, all of these issues can be further analyzed by form or type of essentialism, extending beyond the simple form experimentally considered here. Although there is still much to learn about the impact, development, and use of essentialist language in

various contexts, this investigation descriptively and experimentally demonstrated that essentialist language provides a new perspective on persuasive writing quality in the United States and is worth investigating further.

Acknowledgements

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