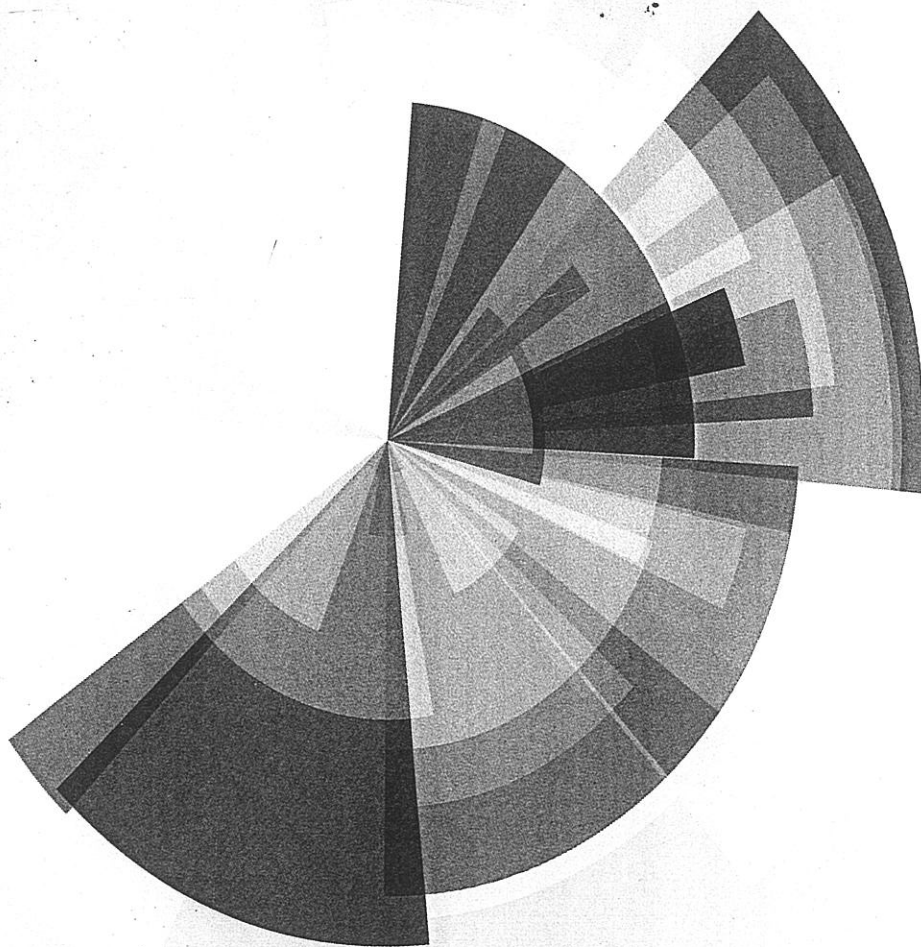


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# Writing in Higher Education (Lack of) Knowledge and Learning?

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**Madalena Teixeira**

Assistant Professor  
Polytechnic Institute of Santarém/  
University of Lisboa

**Roberto Azevedo**

Teacher  
Escola Básica  
do 1º ciclo nº6 de Peniche  
Polytechnic Institute of Santarém

## ABSTRACT

La reconnaissance de l'importance de l'écriture tout au long de la carrière scolaire des élèves et de la compréhension comme se rapportant directement à leur succès, a conduit à plusieurs études mettant en évidence la pertinence de ces compétences. Ces investigations suggèrent que la plupart des étudiants ont plusieurs difficultés à l'écrit, et notamment des limites au niveau de l'argumentation et l'auto-correction. Ce contexte nous conduit à penser que les douze années de scolarité ne garantissent pas la maîtrise de l'écriture standard.

Dès lors, ce travail se propose d'analyser les compétences en écriture, et processus inhérents à la mise au point de cette compétence chez les étudiants universitaires (1ère année), en particulier en ce qui concerne la production de textes argumentatifs.

Les résultats montrent que les élèves ont des difficultés en matière de procédures et de connaissances scientifiques, difficultés qu'ils peuvent surmonter étant donné l'utilisation de stratégies utilisées depuis 2011 dans le 1er cycle de l'éducation de base.

De plus, il est intéressant de noter que la majorité des élèves révèlent aussi la nécessité de directives précises et d'une supervision de l'enseignant dans le cadre de leur travail.

Writing is regarded not only as a core competence in the acquisition, display and evaluation of all knowledge in the school environment context, but also as a foremost skill in any act of citizenship within a social and cultural environment in multiple supports, whether paper or digital. Thus, failure in performance in writing is often synonymous of failure not only in school since in Portugal students are evaluated primarily by their writing

and consequently also in a wider social perspective.

In higher education this responsibility is particularly important "because students spend much time reading, selecting, and retaining information that it is presented in the form of texts and, moreover, they need to communicate their knowledge, study and be evaluated based on their own texts productions..." (Vasconcelos, R. M.;

Monteiro, S.; Pinheiro, M. 2007, p.75).

Increasingly in Portuguese classrooms, the power of argumentation, associated to writing, becomes gradually more important, in so far that students are offered various challenges where they have to make choices, take options and make judgments through debates and discussions, for example. In many cases, the explanation and justification of points of view is suggested,

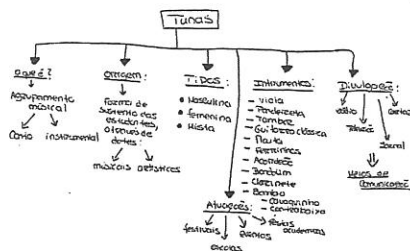


Figure 1 - concept maps

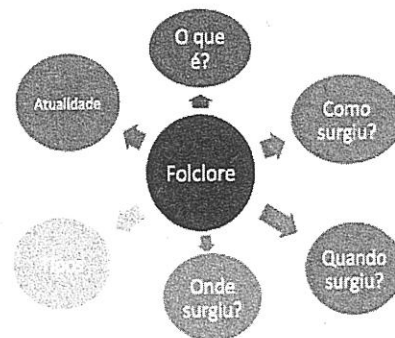


Figure 2 - scheme

in order to guide students to arguing and producing argumentative texts. Thus, we encourage students to demonstrate that they are able to transmit, explain and sustain their knowledge, feelings, opinions and ideas.

Several researchers have based their studies on the analysis of students' writing skills from basic to higher education. Regarding this last phase of school, we found that most students revealed considerable difficulties in writing (Ramires, 2002) and that they need to select, organize and handle the information in their textual productions in a more adequate way. They must therefore pay special attention to coherence and cohesion procedures. Otherwise their textual productions will not show the necessary consistency in all sorts of texts. (Nietto and Alves, 2007). For that reason Schönemann and Ribeiro (2007) draw attention to the fact that the major problems of these students, regarding to writing, lies in the ideas (or lack of them), in the difficulty of correcting respective tasks autonomously, in the weak explanatory power and in the superficiality of the themes they expose.

In higher education, one may think that students should only express their knowledge through writing; however it appears that this area also should be devoted not only to its instrumentation vs. application, but also to the continuation of their learning. The improvement of this capacity should be encouraged, since it is not so automatic or autonomous. Kusner et al (2006) even claim that the twelve years of school do not ensure the mastery of spelling. Teixeira (2012), in a case study that compares students from the first cycle of mandatory teaching and students from the

first cycle of higher education, detected that there are spelling mistakes of the same type. These results highlight the need for the explicit teaching of spelling, regulated by basic principles of morphology, verbs, phonological and phonemic awareness.

It follows that it is necessary to uncover the reasons that are the basis of these difficulties in order to define strategies and methodologies to overcome such deficiencies, since we believe that only then will we be able to form independent and capable learners, in order to improve their performance in terms of writing and, consequently, integration and participation in active life.

Given the difficulties of this task, it seems that we should realise that such competences should not only be developed in the early years of schooling, but throughout the entire school career. Therefore, at some points during the students' development, it is necessary to provide tools to assist and help them, thus, furthering the procedure facilitation.

**Methodological Procedures**

Therefore, and taking as basis the conceptualization of fundamental steps of the writing process, such as planning, writing and reviewing (Azevedo & Teixeira, 2011; Barbeiro & Pereira, 2007), and the characteristics of the argumentative text and its main functions (Bronckart, 2003), we presented a report of an experience with students in the 1st year of the 1st Cycle of Higher Education - year 2011/2012. This exploratory study was conducted during a writing workshop held in the Course of Linguistics – 8 hours.

The proposed activity was to write an argumentative text, aiming to defend a certain type of music as being the one that best represents Portugal internationally. As a way of activating knowledge and contact with a speech similar to what they should use in textual production, we presented the video used for the competition of Fado Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The activity was conducted in three main stages: planning, writing and reviewing. All material produced by students was collected during the stages of this process, and was used in order to help themselves to become aware of the didactic sequence and their own difficulties while they were practicing.

The criteria of evaluation of writing that was used are those defined by the Ministry of Education, for the 1st Cycle of Basic Education: i) number of words; ii) number of paragraphs, iii) number of lines, iv) title v) subject; vi) structure; vii) coherence and cohesion.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

**Analysis of planning**

The process of writing the text began with the realization of planning that was used as a support during this task. Diversified activities were suggested in order to assist students during this stage, such as writing all the ideas related to the topic, asking suggestions from other groups, interviewing colleagues, making diagrams, conceptual maps and/or brainstorming.

Through the analysis of those plans, it was

- **Entrevistar colegas**

- Até que ponto as letras podem influenciar a mentalidade das pessoas?
- Por que razão se lembraram de mostrar a sua indignação através da música?
- Que resposta acha que o público teve em relação ao vosso género?
- Como acham que o ritmo da vossa música “fica no ouvido”, chama atenção das pessoas?
- Como surgiu a música de intervenção?
- Músicos que se destacaram.
- Em que se inspiraram?
- Características da música.

Figure 3 - script for an interview

found that most groups decided to make conceptual maps - Figure 1 - as support of their writings.

In addition to this strategy, some students used the description of how they would develop the theme; others prepared a list of guiding questions, which they tried to answer during the textualization process, and schemes - Figure 2. Others attempted to define concepts. One group prepared a script for an interview - Figure 3 - as an achievement of sustainability to the responses they needed to accomplish the goal that they defined for that text.

We also verified that during planning, there was no reference to the structure of the text. Through this observation, we can infer that the structural composition is relegated to a second plan, it means that the content appears to be more relevant than the structure of the future text. We noted, however, the diversity of media supports that was used as an aid in the writing of the text, as well as various degrees of planning. We believe, therefore, that students have tried to structure the texts in an implicit way, with no evidence that there has been a careful and explicit structuring.

### Analysis of textualization

#### Formal and quantitative analysis of the initial texts

We then analysed, formally and quantitatively, the initial and final texts produced by the groups. The parameters of “observation” focused on the number of words, paragraphs and lines that each text

contained.

The table that follows - Table 1 - shows the differences between groups regarding the number of words, paragraphs and lines that each text initially contained.

grupo	Nº de		
	palavras	parárafos	linhas
1	315	7	28
2	485	6	53
3	358	11	30
4	181	5	16
5	317	5	24
6	578	10	47
7	127	3	13

Table 1 - Number of words, paragraphs and written lines in the *initial* texts produced by each group

Through the analysis Table 1, it is possible to observe that these 7 groups correspond to the total of our sample, and they used an average of 337 words in their texts. However, two groups - Groups 4 and 7 - used significantly less words than the average - 181 and 127 words, respectively, in contrast, two other groups - Groups 2 and 6 - have used a number above the average - 485 and 578 words.

Regarding the number of paragraphs, it is observed that there are two groups - Groups 3 and 6 - that stand out considerably more to others, with 11 and 10 paragraphs, respectively. In contrast, in the text of Group 7 there were recorded only three paragraphs. Although the text of Group 6 has higher number of words than the one of Group 3 - although a paragraph less -, in a way those two texts have different structures.

Regarding the number of lines of text, placing images in the text influenced their number. Thus, while Group 2 has fewer words than the sixth group, the latter has a larger number of rows interfering with its length. Moreover, we considered relevant the inclusion of images, because they interfere with the reading of the text, assisting its understanding. Given that, we think that images make texts more attractive and therefore more appealing to the reader.

#### Formal and quantitative analysis of the final texts

The following table will comparatively analyze the number of words, paragraphs and lines of each final text.

grupo	Nº de		
	palavras	parárafos	linhas
1	323	7	28
2	488	6	50
3	408	10	33
4	240	9	22
5	385	6	28
6	605	10	45
7	258	4	19

Table 2 - Number of words, paragraphs and written lines in the *final* texts produced by each group

Table 2 shows that an average of 387 words was used in the students' written productions. The sixth group stands out in comparison to groups 4 and 7 due to its high number of words - 605; compared to these two groups that have a very small number - 240 and 258. Establishing a comparison of initial and final texts in terms of the number of words, we find that there is an increase in the number of words in all texts. This observation becomes especially clear in the text of Group 7, with an increase of more than 100 words.

Regarding the number of paragraphs, there are no major changes from the Table 1. The number of paragraphs is very close to that observed previously in most texts; however, Group 4 increased its text in 4 paragraphs, number higher than all the others.

Regarding the number of lines, once again Groups 4 and 7, produced the texts where we found more changes - an increase of 6

grupo	titulo
1	Tunas como património Nacional Cultural Imaterial da Humanidade
2	Música Pimba - Candidatura a Património Cultural Imaterial da Humanidade
3	Sem titulo
4	Artigo sobre o rock em Portugal
5	Música de Intervenção — mais de que uma música, uma voz!
6	O folclore — Bailinho da Madeira
7	Candidatura da música ligeira a Património Cultural Imaterial da

Table 3 - Title of the texts

lines compared to the original. It should also be highlighted the fewer three lines in Group 2 in the text, although it increased in the number of words. Although this might seem to be contradictory, it is not, insofar the use of images interfere significantly in the form of text.

In sum, in this comparison established between the initial and final texts, we find that the most significant discrepancy is concerning the number of words. Regarding the number of paragraphs and lines, a significant disparity is not observed.

### Content Analysis

After the completion of the formal and quantitative analysis of the texts, we proceed to an analysis of their content. Thus, we analyze the title, topic development, the structuring of the text, language, coherence and cohesion of the text.

#### Title

The first step was to examine the title, considering that this should be a short phrase with a certain degree of creativity and a reference to the subject that would subsequently be developed throughout the text. The following table lists the titles given to their texts by the groups.

One of the facts that come up in a first

analysis is the lack of creativity in titles. In most cases, the title is the name of the musical genre that was chosen for the theme of the text. One group did not give any title and another group attributed the objective of the work as the title. Thus, we emphasize the “Music Intervention - more than a song, a voice!”, which seems to be the one that best represents the characteristics that a title must have – it is appealing, creative, mobilizing, and not very extensive.

#### Theme

At this point we have to verify whether there was a deviation to the theme of the text and if it was explicitly stated in the main objective of the task. By analyzing the texts, we found that there was no evasion of the issue and that the main objective to the proposed text was quite explicit.

#### Structure

The analysis of the structure of the texts produced by students is based on the idea advocated by Bronckart (2003) in which an argumentative text consists of four parts: premise, argument, counter-argument and conclusion. In this way, it seems this is a simple and clear structure, which makes its assessment.

Thus, in general, we found that most of the texts presented the premise in their beginning, then the arguments and ended with the conclusion. However, we found that there were two cases in which no assumptions were presented as background throughout the text; still one that has no conclusion. We found another common factor to them all: in no case there were counter-arguments, only a list of arguments, essentially historical, serving as basis to the text. We consider, then, that all texts are presented as very informative and little argumentative. The main objective to the proposed text is explicit.

#### Textual coherence and cohesion

To make sense, a text should present a construction that is logical, well-structured, and has a proper use of connectors which allow textual coherence and cohesion.

Thus, in the process of textualization, we

noticed that there are difficulties in establishing a link between paragraphs and between sentences in some cases. In order to overcome it, students were provided with a table - Table 4 - with various argumentative articulators, showing examples of use.

Even though, and even with such table, we found that most of the texts had little cohesion and that many of the paragraphs and sentences were “disconnected” from the previous ones. This means that there is neither coherence nor connection of ideas. Their constituents should be better related to each other in order to contribute to its interpretation. The text must be understood as a whole and not as a sum of parts, in which only the theme unites them.

### Analysis Review

After writing a first draft of the texts, it was suggested to students to review it. Thus, in order to assist this process we provided a self-assessment scale - Figure 4. This grid contains specific clues to perform this task consistently, and simultaneously to conduct them to a reflective process.

Through the analysis of the grids, we find that there are many similarities in their fulfilment. Most groups think that the text they inserted was clearly explained, not too deviating from the subject, that the language used was in accordance with the receiver and that ideas and phrases were clearly stated.

However, there are different cases in which some groups think they should have added information and rewrote parts of the texts, while others feel they had enough information and did not need to change anything in their writings. In some grids, we also found that there are groups which have repeated ideas in some parts of the text. In no case was it reported to be excessive information in texts.

After completing the grids, it was suggested to students that during the review they should record the changes and explain the reason for such modifications. Thus, we find that in some texts the students removed information that was already there, altered the vocabulary by using synonyms, and inserted connectors. In some texts ideas were clarified and phrases changed

in order to respect tenses and person categories so as to achieve consistency throughout the text. In some cases there was also punctuation adjustment.

### Final Remarks

Writing skills are fundamental in society nowadays. It is essential to provide students with a concrete and qualified basis, because only by this way they will become active and reflexive participants in everyday life in the early twenty-first century.

In this study, we present a focus on the teaching and learning of the written text, with emphasis on the argumentative text, aiming at the students' argumentative thinking development, directing their speech to the proposed objective, subject and reader, improving their ability to write. Therefore, students have to understand that the writing process is complex and lengthy, and involves reflection and self-questioning, forcing the decision-making that has implications in the final text.

Throughout this paper, we sometimes wondered if the difficulties experienced by students are a reflection of their training, i.e. if at university they are exposed to a number of activities that they are not prepared to solve. The teaching of writing in higher education is still a moment to "test" the (un-)knowledge of students as well as an excellent time for learning.

As we first noticed, there was a general lack of knowledge, regarding the type of text that was to be elaborated by students, which interfered in the quality of their text. However, writing cannot be limited to its genre and cannot be seen in a mechanical way in which writing follows a standardized procedure, without the experience (written or read) of its own individual subjectivities. The knowledge that the students have about different types of texts and their peculiarities is undoubtedly important; nevertheless, the writing process is more elaborate, complex and of higher demand to the students, without the existence of any prescription previously defined.

Summarizing, throughout the writing process, students must be clearly guided and supervised by teachers, in an early stage, in order to be able, further on, to

<b>para reiterar, reafirmar</b>	retomando a questão, penso que, a meu ver, creio que, estou certo, em nosso entender
<b>para concordar, provar, exprimir certeza</b>	efetivamente, com efeito
<b>para refutar, manifestar oposição, restringir ideias</b>	no entanto, mas, todavia, contudo, porém, apesar de, em sentido contrário, refutando, pelo contrário, ao contrário, por outro lado, com a ressalva de
<b>exemplificação</b>	por exemplo, como se pode ver, assim, tome-se como exemplo, é o caso de, é o que acontece com
<b>explicitar</b>	significa isto que, explicitando melhor, não se pretende com isto, quer isto dizer, a saber, isto é, por outras palavras
<b>para concluir</b>	finalmente, enfim, em conclusão, concluindo, para terminar, em suma, por conseguinte, por consequência
<b>para estabelecer conexões de tempo</b>	então, após, depois, antes, anteriormente, em seguida, seguidamente, quando, até que, a princípio, por fim
<b>para referenciar espaço</b>	aqui, ali, lá, acolá, além, naquele lugar, o lugar onde, ao lado de, à esquerda, à direita, ao centro, no meio, mais adiante
<b>para indicar ordem</b>	em primeiro lugar, primeiramente, em segundo lugar, seguidamente, em seguida, começando por, antes de mais, por último, por fim
<b>para estabelecer conexões de causa</b>	porque, visto que, dado que, uma vez que
<b>para estabelecer conexões de consequência</b>	de tal modo que, de forma que, tanto que, e por isso
<b>para expressar condição, hipótese</b>	se, a menos que, a não ser que, desde que, supondo que, se por hipótese, admitindo que, excepto se, se por acaso
<b>para estabelecer conexões de fim</b>	para que, para, com o fim de, a fim de que, com o intuito de
<b>para estabelecer relações aditivas</b>	e, ora, e também, e ainda
<b>para estabelecer relações disjuntivas</b>	ou, ou então, seja...seja, quer...quer
<b>para expressar semelhança, comparação</b>	do mesmo modo, tal como, pelo mesmo motivo, pela mesma razão, igualmente, assim como

Table 4 - Argumentative Articulators

	SIM	NÃO		SIM	NÃO
Introduzi o texto de forma clara?	X		Introduzi o texto de forma clara?	X	
Desvie-me do tema proposto?		X	Desvie-me do tema proposto?		X
Repeti-me em algumas partes?		X	Repeti-me em algumas partes?	X	
Inclui pormenores que não estão relacionados com a ideia principal?		X	Inclui pormenores que não estão relacionados com a ideia principal?		X
A linguagem utilizada está de acordo com o destinatário do texto?	X		A linguagem utilizada está de acordo com o destinatário do texto?	X	
Há ideias ou frases que não estão explícitas?		X	Há ideias ou frases que não estão explícitas?		X
Substitui as palavras repetidas por outras sinónimas?	X		Substitui as palavras repetidas por outras sinónimas?	X	
Preciso acrescentar alguma informação?		X	Preciso acrescentar alguma informação?	X	
Tenho informação excessiva no texto?		X	Tenho informação excessiva no texto?		X
Inclui todos os pormenores importantes, exemplos específicos, ou factos?	X		Inclui todos os pormenores importantes, exemplos específicos, ou factos?		X
Algumas ideias ou pormenores estão descontextualizadas?		X	Algumas ideias ou pormenores estão descontextualizadas?		X
Preciso reescrever algumas partes?	X		Preciso reescrever algumas partes?		X
Tenho necessidade de mudar algumas partes?	X		Tenho necessidade de mudar algumas partes?	X	
Rei o texto para verificar a ortografia e pontuação?	X		Rei o texto para verificar a ortografia e pontuação?	X	
Li o texto, no fim, para verificar se estava claro?	X		Li o texto, no fim, para verificar se estava claro?	X	

Figure 4 - scheme filled in by students

overcome their difficulties and become autonomous and reflective in writing tasks (and others) that they carry out.

MADALENA TEIXEIRA  
ROBERTO AZEVEDO

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