

# Student Attitudes and Perceptions of a Learning Task and Effects on Task Performance

Greg Kerkvliet, Department of English, gregory.kerkvliet@uwrf.edu

## Introduction

Effectively addressing student emotions is a significant topic in teaching and learning. When it is emphasized, instructors are prodded to engage student emotions for positive effect; this advice can overlook how those students are often at a life stage of increasing self-knowledge. Attending to student attitudes and perceptions during their learning processes can lead to useful interventions to increase student success. Such interventions could prompt a) increased situational metacognition about their learning experiences and abilities and/or b) increased resilience against the habits and attitudes that decrease their chances of success.

Secondarily, in writing courses, scholars and students often express the importance of topic options that capture and sustain student interest. My experiences with academic assignments, however, indicate that passion for a topic can lead students down unproductive learning paths; for example, choosing to write an argument/opinion paper when the purpose is analysis or synthesis leads to a missed opportunity for that student to practice a useful academic reading and writing skill.

### Background

Perceptions and attitudes fall under the category of dispositions, whose connection to learning has been studied frequently. Driscoll and Wells note the potentially broad definition of dispositions outlined by other scholars, for they “are not knowledge, skills, or abilities—they are qualities that determine how learners use and adapt their knowledge.” Driscoll and Wells outlined a more specific description for dispositions.

### Dispositions...

“are a critical part of a larger system that includes the person, the context, the process through which learning happens, and time”

“are not intellectual traits like knowledge, skills, or aptitude, but rather determine how those intellectual traits are used or applied”

“determine students’ sensitivity toward and willingness to engage in transfer”

“can positively or negatively impact the learning environment; they can be generative or disruptive”

“are dynamic and may be context-specific or broadly generalized”

## Reference

Driscoll, Dana Lynn and Jennifer Wells. “Beyond Knowledge and Skills: Writing Transfer and the Role of Student Dispositions.” *Composition Forum*, vol. 26, Fall 2012, pp. 1-15, compositionforum.com/issue/26/beyond-knowledge-skills.php.

## Acknowledgements

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## Methods

The sample consisted of 28 volunteers from two of my English 200: Reading and Writing in the Disciplines sections. Students completed three questionnaires during the process of writing a researched argument essay.

Questionnaire 1: After reviewing assignment guidelines and past student examples

Questionnaire 2: After submitting first draft, before one week of class workshops on drafts

Questionnaire 3: After submitting final draft

The questionnaires consisted of two prompts:

1. A multiple-response prompt focusing on the options listed in the table below (choosing none of the options was also an option)

2. A brief reflection on one of the options chosen. The options for #1 were updated in each questionnaire to reflect the same prompt at different stages of the process. Questionnaire 3 included four yes/no questions that prompted what kinds of additional help they received.

### Response Options: Student views of the assignment affected by...

Anxiety from past writing experiences	Class lectures, lessons, and/or activities
Confidence from past writing experiences	Perceived value of the assignment
Low interest level in the topic options	Goals as a college student
Sufficient interest level in the topic options	Understanding of the assignment’s purpose and format
High interest level in the topic options	

The additional data consisted of two post-assignment pieces:

1. Student attendance for the class periods that focused on research, argument, and essay concepts and strategies
2. Rubric assessment (see right) of student performance on the research and argument aspects of the essay

The rubric assessment focused on aspects of writing that were specifically emphasized in class during the period the questionnaires were completed.

Researched Argument Essay Rubric	Points
Reasons consistently use relevant, credible, and/or persuasive research to forward or support an idea.	0-8
The claim is a clearly and consistently emphasized position.	0-6
The claim understands the possible concerns of at least 3 relevant stakeholders, addressing them effectively at some point.	0-3
The claim displays effective use of the rhetorical triangle of persuasive appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos).	0-3

## Discussion/Conclusion

Here are some interesting additional data points:

- Students who had self-confidence about the task due to past writing experiences dropped 32.2% from Q1 to Q2, then rose 24.5% from Q2 to Q3.
- Students who were “at least slightly nervous” about the assignment dropped 25.9% from Q1 to Q3 and 28.1% from Q2 to Q3.
- Students who said their interest in their topic positively affected their process averaged a rubric score of 13.5, compared to 13.3 for those who didn’t state that.
- In Q3, half of the students who answered “yes” to being nervous about the quality of their final draft also answered “yes” to being confident about their past experiences helping them. Those who answered “yes” to both had an average rubric score of 15, compared to 12.25 for those who were nervous but not confident.

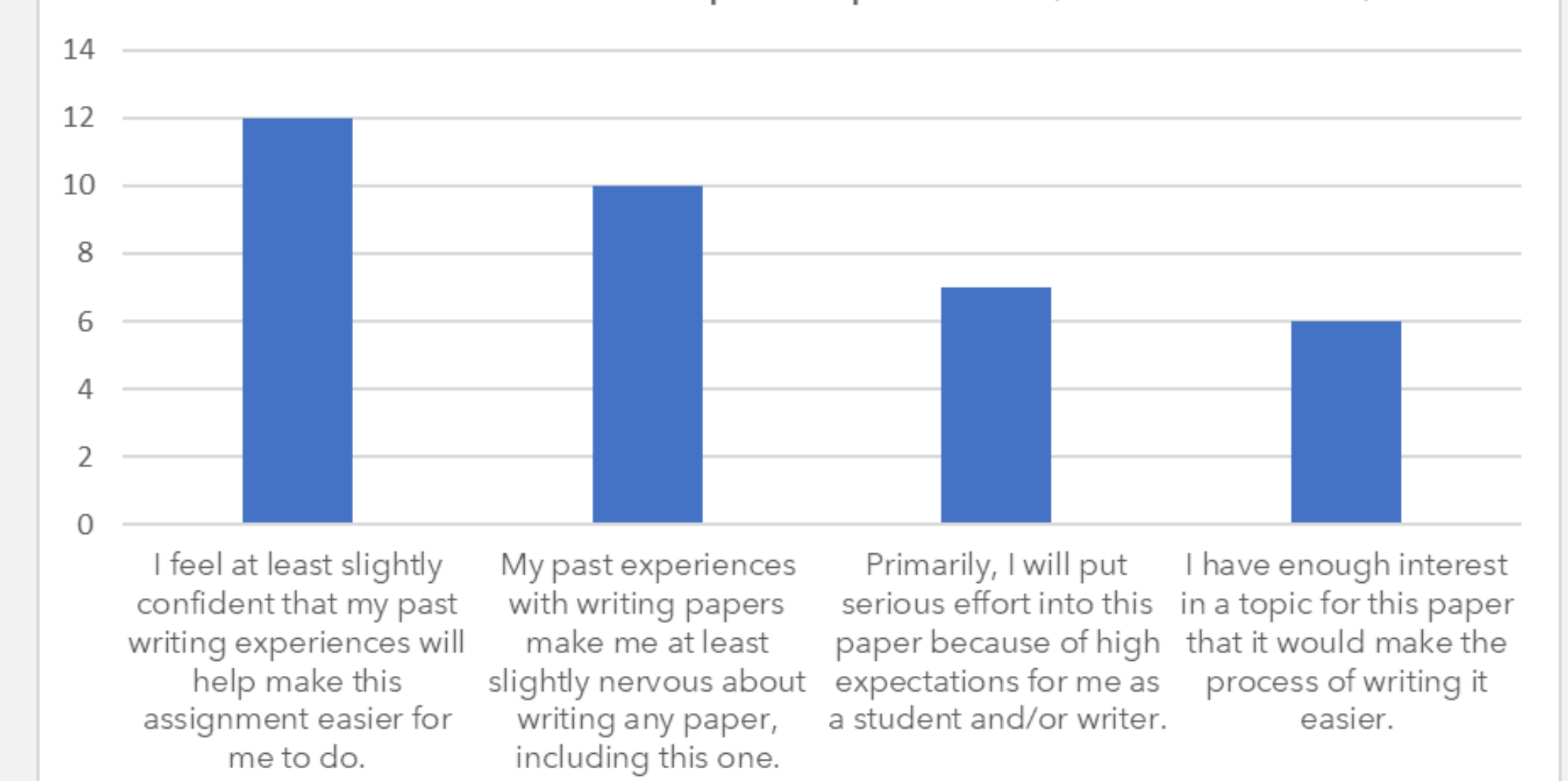
It would be hasty to make any significant determinations from this data, but among other conclusions, the results could be hinting that

- peer and/or instructor feedback, whether that is feedback on a writer’s individual draft or large-group feedback on someone else’s draft, makes a noticeable difference in student perceptions of the task; and
- writers’ interest in a topic does not significantly increase the quality of their work.

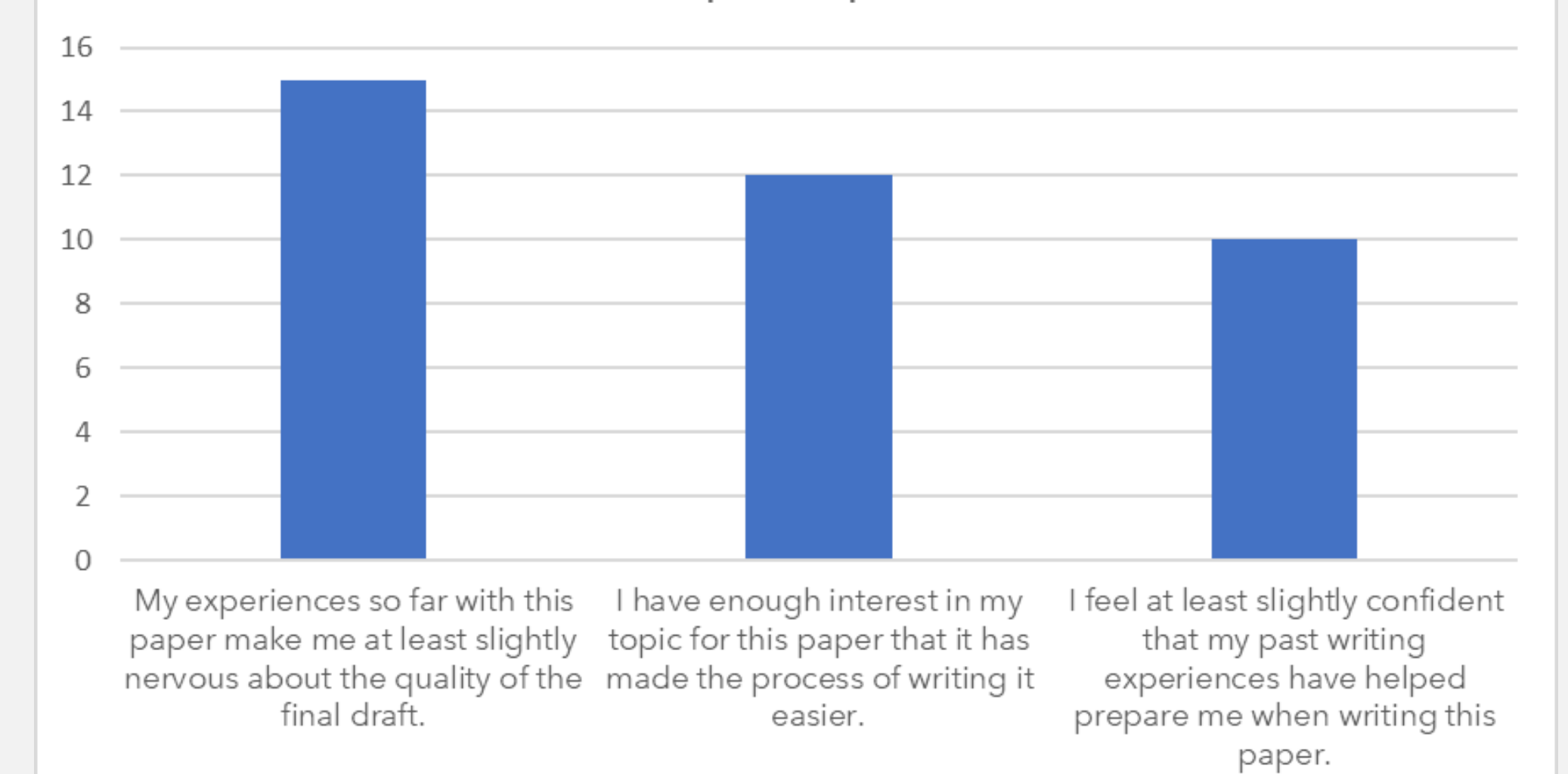
It is important to continue collecting data. Several factors made this sample much smaller than hoped, but the generally small size of a writing course also means it would be difficult to discern much about a semester’s worth of data, even from several courses. Future questionnaires will likely be revised to address other essays and specific class lessons.

## Results

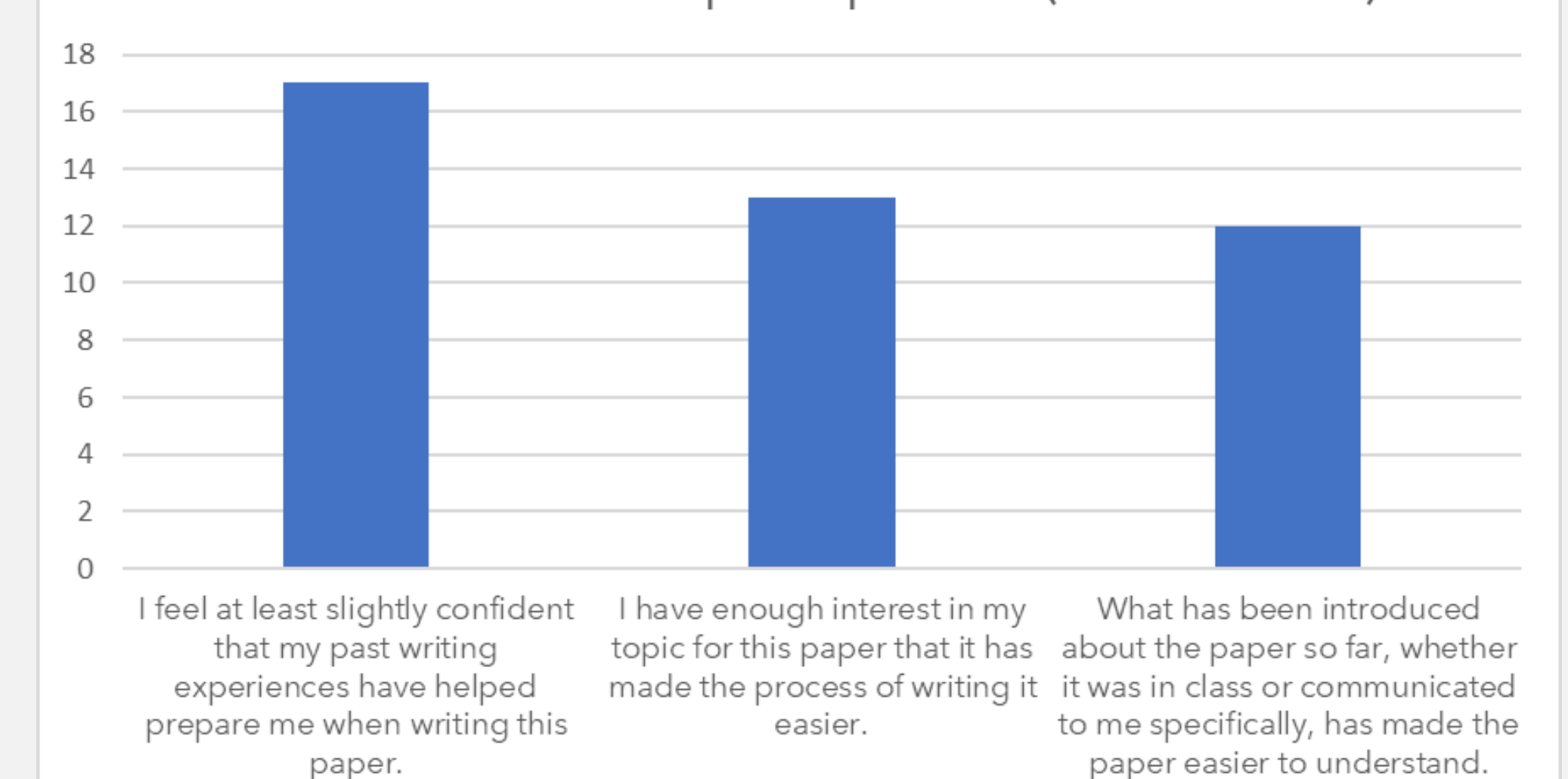
Questionnaire 1 Top Responses (18 students)



Questionnaire 2 Top Responses (26 students)



Questionnaire 3 Top Responses (27 Students)



Rubric Results (26 students)

