

A Comparative Study of Teaching Critical Thinking Through Persuasive Writing to  
Average, Gifted and Students with Learning Disabilities  
By Claire Hughes (2000)

This study examined the impact that a curriculum designed to teach critical thinking through persuasive writing had on gifted, average, and students with learning disabilities. The research addressed four questions. The first determined that there were initial differences in critical thinking abilities among fourth and fifth grade gifted, average and students with learning disabilities, as measured by performance on a persuasive writing task. Gifted students outscored average students who outscored students with learning disabilities.

The second question determined that after instruction, all ability groups significantly improved their overall writing scores when presented with a minimum of 20 hours of direct instruction in the reasoning elements of persuasive writing and when compared to a group of students of similar abilities. However, there were differences in the manner in which students of different groups improved. All students improved in their use of opinion statements. Gifted students also improved in elaboration; average students improved in all areas; and students with learning disabilities improved their use of opinion statements.

The third question determined differences between gifted students, average students, and students with learning disabilities in the opinion stances selected, the delineation of audience, and the types of reasons chosen. There were no initial differences between the ability groups in their use of positive or negative arguments. However, gifted students referred more to the moral or meaning of the poem, while students with learning disabilities referred more often to their reaction to the poem. Such differences remained consistent after instruction. Thus, while instruction was significant in the improvement of the structure of persuasive writing for students of all achievement levels, they improved in different ways.

Finally, teachers' use of critical thinking questions was a better predictor of student post-test scores than students' pre-test scores. The classrooms of teachers who implemented the curriculum over an intensive period of time showed more growth than those who implemented it over a longer, less intense period of time.

Implications from this study include the need to teach critical thinking to students at all achievement levels in an intensive, focused manner, recognizing that there will be differences in the ways that students grow.