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Johan van Driel\*, Jannet van Drie and Carla van Boxtel  
**Struggling with historical significance:  
Reasoning, reading, and writing processes**

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**Abstract:** The concept of historical significance is seen as a key concept of historical reasoning. Assigning significance is based on criteria and related to the identity of who assigns significance. However, little is known about reasoning-, reading-, and writing processes when students attribute significance. The aim of this study is to investigate how students and experienced history teachers with a master's degree reason, read, and write about historical significance while thinking aloud. We analyzed the think-aloud protocols of twelve 10th-grade students and four history teachers on reasoning, reading, and writing processes. While thinking aloud, participants read two contrasting accounts after which they wrote an argumentative text about the historical significance of Christopher Columbus. Analysis of participants' think-aloud protocols and their written texts showed that students did not recognize historical accounts as perspectives—influenced by the historical context. In contrast, teachers looked for the authors' judgement, evidence, and context. In addition, students' limited use of metaknowledge regarding texts and the concept of historical significance hampered them. These outcomes provide direction for teaching reasoning, reading, and writing with respect to historical significance.

**Keywords:** reading processes, writing processes, historical significance, history education

**Zusammenfassung:** Das Konzept der historischen Bedeutung wird als Schlüsselbegriff des historischen Denkens betrachtet. Bedeutung wird auf Grundlage von Kriterien zugewiesen und hängt zusammen mit der Identität desjenigen, der die Bedeutung zuweist. Allerdings ist wenig über Argumentations-, Lese- und Schreibprozesse bekannt, wenn Schüler Bedeutung zuschreiben. Das Ziel dieser Studie ist, zu

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untersuchen wie Schüler und Geschichtslehrer in der Oberstufe über historische Bedeutung argumentieren, lesen und schreiben, während sie laut denken. Wir haben die Protokolle des lauten Denkens von zwölf Schülern der 10. Klasse und vier Geschichtslehrer in der Oberstufe auf Argumentations-, Lese- und Schreibprozesse analysiert. Während sie laut dachten, lasen die Teilnehmer zwei kontrastierende Berichte. Danach verfassten sie einen argumentativen Text über die historische Bedeutung von Christoph Kolumbus. Die Analyse der Denkprotokolle der Teilnehmer und ihrer schriftlichen Texte ergab, dass die Schüler historische Berichte nicht als Perspektiven erkannten, die durch den historischen Kontext beeinflusst werden. Im Gegensatz dazu suchten die Lehrer nach dem Urteil der Autoren, den Beweisen und dem Kontext. Darüber hinaus wurden die Schüler von ihrer begrenzten Nutzung von Metawissen zu Texten und dem Konzept der historischen Bedeutung behindert. Diese Ergebnisse bieten dem Unterricht eine Richtung für das Argumentieren, Lesen und Schreiben in Bezug auf historische Bedeutung.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Lezeprozesse, Schreidprozesse, Historische Bedeutung, Historische Bildung

**Resumen:** El concepto de significado histórico es considerado como la clave del razonamiento histórico. La asignación de significado a la historia se basa en determinados criterios y está relacionada con la identidad de quien asigna el significado. Sin embargo se sabe poco sobre los procesos de razonamiento, lectura y escritura que utilizan los estudiantes cuando atribuyen dicho significado. El objetivo de este estudio es investigar como estudiantes y profesores titulados en máster razonan, leen y escriben sobre la importancia histórica mientras piensan en voz alta. Hemos analizado los protocolos de pensamiento orales de doce estudiantes de décimo grado y cuatro profesores de historia con máster en procesos de razonamiento, lectura y escritura. Mientras pensaban en voz alta, los participantes leyeron dos relatos comparativos y después escribieron un texto argumentativo sobre la importancia histórica de Cristóbal Colón. El análisis de los protocolos de pensamiento orales de los participantes y sus textos escritos, reveló que los estudiantes no reconocían los relatos históricos como perspectivas – influenciados por el contexto histórico. En contraposición los profesores buscaron el juicio, la evidencia y el contexto de los autores. Además, el uso limitado de los metaconocimientos por parte de los estudiantes con respecto a los textos y el concepto de significado histórico, les obstaculizó. Los resultados de esta investigación proporcionan una guía para la enseñanza del razonamiento, la lectura y la escritura con respecto al significado histórico.

**Keywords:** procesos de lectura, procesos de escritura, significado historico, educación en historia

# 1 Introduction

People in the past have left traces such as weapons and diaries, which can be studied by historians. Historians judge these traces on their usefulness and use them when constructing a substantiated interpretation of the past. Secondary sources or historical accounts contain historians' interpretations and may be evaluated critically by other historians (e.g., Chapman, 2011; Megill, 2007; Seixas, 2016). Although procedural knowledge of reading historical accounts is important to understand history, our knowledge of how students read historical accounts is limited (Cercadillo et al., 2017; Innes, 2020).

Reasoning about historical significance is a key aspect of history (Lévèsque, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2012). Significance is assigned from a perspective and, due to different historical circumstances, can change over time (Lévèsque, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2012). For example, Columbus could be considered as significant because he contributed to the "discovery" and conquest of America or (seen more critically) because his journey opened an era of genocide of the native Americans. Historical significance is defined as everything that is considered important according to historians when they evaluate the past from a certain perspective.

The concept of historical significance is also important for history education. Hunt (2000) argued that reflecting on historical significance makes history meaningful to students. Focusing on historical significance gives teachers the opportunity to clarify long-term developments, which may contribute to a better understanding of present society (Hunt, 2000). Despite the widespread importance assigned to historical significance, little is known about how students reason when attributing significance.

The interface between language and subjects such as history has been widely acknowledged, but is still ill-defined (Lorenzo & Trujillo, 2017). When investigating the significance of an historical person, reasoning processes, reading processes, and writing processes are highly intertwined. For example, in order to argue for the significance of a person, a researcher must read accounts in which historians assign significance to that particular person. When individuals read and write, they employ explicit reasoning in order to comprehend and to create a text. Because students might encounter problems with these activities, it is relevant to study their learning processes while they reason, read, and write.

We aimed to investigate students' reasoning, reading, and writing processes as they assigned historical significance to Christopher Columbus and to evaluate how the assignment of significance is influenced by historians' perspectives. With this knowledge as well as knowledge regarding students' struggles, researchers can develop interventions regarding reading historical accounts. For this reason, we compared the approaches of 12 tenth-grade students and four history teachers.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Reasoning about historical significance

Reasoning with respect to historical significance encompasses a claim about the significance of a particular person, event, or development and the arguments that support the claim. These arguments relate to aspects of change and continuity as well as causes and consequences (van Boxtel & van Drie, 2018). The focus on (long-term) consequences provides opportunities to examine the relationships between events and between the past and the present (Hunt, 2000).

When students are asked to evaluate how significance is assigned to people in the past, they must understand that criteria are used in the process of assigning historical significance. Most criteria focus on the consequences of events in the past or on the importance of an event for the present time. (e.g., Hunt, 2000; see also Cercadillo, 2001; Counsell, 2004; Lévèsque, 2008). However, few studies exist that have investigated whether criteria for significance were applied when students argued for the significance of a past event or person.

In addition, students need to understand that historians are influenced by their historical context (Megill, 2007). Prior research shows students' (basic) awareness of perspectives when they assign significance. As Peck (2010) shows, students with different ethnic backgrounds regard the same facts as significant, but they construct different narratives. These findings align with others (Barton, 2005; Cercadillo, 2001; Seixas, 1994; 1997; Yeager, et al., 2001). However, previous studies have shown that students struggle with comprehending historical phenomena in their historical context and students tend to consider history from one perspective (Carretero & Kriger, 2011; Cercadillo, 2001; van Drie et al., 2013). Consequently, students may not understand that the assignment of significance may develop over time and instead may consider significance as unchanging.

### 2.2 Reading historical accounts

In order to develop and support claims about the historical significance of a particular person, it is important to read what historians have written about the person in question. Most researchers focus on reading primary sources, and there is evidence that heuristics like sourcing, corroboration, and contextualization are useful (e.g., Wineburg, 1991 & 1998; see also List & Du, 2021; Reisman, 2012). In history education, however, little is known about reading historical accounts that contain historians' perspectives (Cercadillo et al., 2017, Innes, 2000).

Reading historical accounts entails breaking down the text into small pieces in order to understand the main idea and how it is constructed (Schoenbach et al., 2012). This breakdown requires several higher order reading processes for reading accounts, such as determination of a reading objective, identifying the theme by summarizing, and discovering the relationships between words, sentences, and paragraphs (Schellings, et al., 2006). Therefore, students need to understand how a specific topic is presented linguistically and to recognize common historical language, like temporal clauses (Lorenzo & Dalton-Puffer, 2016). Using two or more contrasting accounts seems useful in order to understand an author's main idea (Bråten & Strømsø, 2011). Furthermore, there is reason to believe that knowledge of text structures or genre features may improve reading comprehension (Léon & Carretero, 1995).

Previous research shows that (young) students regard accounts as records of the past (Wolfe & Goldman, 2005). That is, students may consider accounts as sources of information and may struggle with comprehending accounts as substantiated perspectives on the past.

## 2.3 Writing historical accounts

The result of reasoning about the significance of a person is often presented in a text written in an argumentative style. In order to write a convincing text in the domain of history, arguments should be underpinned with evidence extracted from historical sources, which are accurately interpreted and comprehended within the historical context (Monte-Sano, 2010).

Students need to apply several processes when they write a text. During the first phase, content is retrieved from memory and organized. Afterwards, the generated ideas are translated into written text. Finally, the written text is edited during the review phase. While writing, it is important to monitor all processes. Awareness of the audience is also required (Hayes, 2012; Kellog, 2008). General writing processes may be subdivided into microprocesses, such as planning, monitoring, evaluating, and revising (Martinez et al., 2015).

Coffin (2006) describes three main genres (recording, explanation, and arguing) that belong to writing in history. Every main genre contains several subgenres. The subgenre “discussion” is part of the main genre “arguing” and is relevant for this study. The general structure of a discussion contains an explanation of background and issues, description of perspectives, and position (Coffin, 2006). In order to describe perspectives of other historians and to develop an own position, researchers may use phrases and words like “in addition” and “however” to describe historians' argumentation or to develop their own positions. Re-

searchers may then use (temporal) clauses like “the consequences were significant or temporal” in order to make historical events more or less important (Lorenzo & Dalton-Puffer, 2016; Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006). In addition, former research has shown that sourcing might be particularly relevant for writing in order to convince the audience (List & Du, 2021).

Students may struggle with higher order functions of language like involving counterarguments and using weighting strategies in order to integrate both sides while describing their own position (van Drie et al., 2006; Lorenzo & Dalton-Puffer, 2016; behing Matteos et a., 2018). Given that students regard historical texts as records (Wolfe & Goldman, 2005), students may encounter problems with describing historians’ perspectives (by using their historical context).

## **2.4 Aim of the research**

Our aim was to explore students’ reasoning about historical significance in the context of reading multiple accounts and writing a text while thinking aloud. To our knowledge, it is unknown how students reason, read, or write about contrasting historical accounts written in different times when they are tasked with developing their own perspective on the historical significance of a particular person.

To encompass these unknown factors, we formulated the following research question: How do reasoning, reading, and writing processes differ between 10th-grade students and experienced history teachers as they reason, read, and write about historical significance? We strove to answer the research question by analyzing think-aloud protocols and texts written by students and teachers.

# **3 Method**

## **3.1 Instruments**

In order to answer our research question, we used the think-aloud method. Although the think-aloud method has some shortcomings, it is widely seen as a reliable method to gain insight into thinking and reasoning processes (e.g., Charters, 2003; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; van Someren et al., 1994; Wineburg 1991).

In order to strengthen the trustworthiness of the think-aloud method, methodological triangulation is recommended (Chartres, 2003). To achieve this end, we also asked participants to write a text, all of which were incorporated into our analysis.

## 3.2 Participants

Participants of this study were twelve 10th-grade higher secondary students and four history teachers. All names were blinded and participation was voluntary. An equal number of men and women participated.

Students were selected from two classes at a suburban school in the center of the Netherlands. None of the students had been diagnosed with learning problems or struggled with the Dutch language. The task was formulated and performed in L1. All students were unfamiliar with our study's tasks and the concept of historical significance.

In order to trace students' weaknesses, we asked four teachers from the same school who were familiar with reading historical accounts to participate in this study. All participating teachers possess a master's degree in history and wrote a master's thesis about the western world after 1850; their teaching experiences ranged from eight to 23 years.

## 3.3 Task

We developed a task that centered on the historical significance of Columbus. The topic of Columbus fits within the curriculum of 10th-grade higher secondary education in the Netherlands, and this topic was chosen in consultation with the involved school.

Participants were asked to write a text in which they evaluated how the significance of Columbus has developed over time and whether Columbus Day should still be celebrated, which invited students to think about Columbus' significance in present times. This kind of authentic tasks (Appendix A) may elicit historical reasoning (van Boxtel & van Drie, 2018).

Participants received two accounts that contained the perspectives of Washington Irving (nineteenth century) and Howard Zinn (twentieth century). Although Irving's interpretation does not fit current historians' standards, his interpretation of Columbus is seen as representative for many historians in the nineteenth century. In terms of uniting the people of the United States of America (USA), Irving presents Columbus as a relevant figure in the "discovery" and in the founding of the USA. Zinn holds Columbus responsible for the culture clashes between European people and the native Americans, ending in the extermination of Native Americans. Although Zinn was criticized (Wineburg, 2013), his account is seen as representative for many center-left historians in the twentieth century. These different perspectives might enable students to recognize both accounts as interpretations of the past. Both texts, in particular the language of the nineteenth

century, are considered too difficult for students. Therefore, we reduced the texts to approximately 500 words and we avoid complex sentences. In order to recognize different arguments, we prefaced these using words and phrases such as “therefore,” “however,” and “in that time.” These words were always used as sentence-starters. A Flesch-Kincaid readability test (Kincaid et al., 1975) made clear that both texts were appropriate for 10th-grade students.

In order to discover that historians’ interpretations are influenced by their context, participants received additional background information about the political and cultural context of the USA in both the nineteenth and twentieth century. Students also received a brief biography of Columbus to ensure that all had access to the same factual information.

### **3.4 Procedure**

To ensure that students possessed enough background knowledge, students sat through two introductory lessons regarding the consequences of Columbus’ journey. We provided no specific instruction on reasoning, reading, or writing. The first author—an experienced teacher—taught the lessons, which were based on principles that should enhance historical reasoning, for example, using open questions, interacting in small groups, and employing whole-class discussions (van Boxtel & van Drie, 2018).

During the first lesson, the teacher instructed students on the consequences of Columbus for (some) people in (some) parts of Europe and America during Columbus’ life, after his death, and in the present. The teacher also instructed students on the symbolic value of his journey (Hunt, 200). Afterwards, the consequences of Columbus’ journey for the inhabitants of Europe and the native Americans were discussed. The lesson finished with a short whole-class discussion. The second lesson centered on the different perspectives of Columbus’ journey. In pairs or triads, students discussed how inhabitants from different countries in the present could interpret Columbus. In a second round, students discussed how people living in different periods interpreted Columbus’ journey. Each small-group discussion was followed by a whole-class discussion. The participating teachers were not informed about the content of the lessons.

The three authors and a fourth person, who is a specialist in assessing students, gathered data on students and teachers. All think-aloud sessions with students and teachers were organized in a separate room at school during school hours. Participants wrote their text on the computer and were allowed to work on the task for 60 minutes. All sessions were videotaped and transcribed afterwards.

### 3.5 Analysis

All think-aloud data were coded using a coding scheme that consisted of five main categories: Task, Reading, Reasoning About Significance, Writing, and General—all of which were divided into subcategories relevant for our purposes (Appendix B).

The subcategories related to Task included Reading, Rereading, Comprehension, Monitoring, and Evaluation. The subcategories related to Reading were Reading, Rereading, Summarizing, Monitoring, and Evaluating (Kendeou et al., 2011; Schellings et al., 2006). The subcategories that fall under Reasoning About Significance were partly derived from studies on historical thinking and reasoning: Background Author, Contextualization, Explicit or Implicit Use of Criteria Used for Significance, Asking Historical Questions, and Comparing Historical Eras (Hunt, 2000; Reisman, 2012; van Boxtel & van Drie, 2018; Wineburg, 1991). The task required participants to take into account and to compare several points of view and to develop their own point of view, so we added the following subcategories: Authors' Point of View, Own Point of View, Comparing Texts, and Comparing Authors' Backgrounds. We derived these subcategories from research on reading multiple texts (Bråten & Strømsø, 2011; List & Du, 2021; Wineburg 1991) and matched them to the two main categories, Reading and Reasoning About Significance. We considered these subcategories important for history and thus placed them in the category Reasoning About Significance. The category Writing consisted of the following subcategories: Reading Written Text, Formulating Text, Writing, Monitoring Writing Process, Evaluating Written Text, and Planning Text. These processes are considered important in writing research (Hayes, 2012; Martinez et al., 2015). Finally, the category General consisted of non-relevant talk and general talk related to the task.

All protocols were divided into segments (i.e., the units of analysis) under the same topic: utterances. Consequently, utterances were of different lengths. Except for (re)reading, most utterances contained one or two (sometimes incomplete) sentences. Two coders (the first and second author) coded and discussed differences in coding and the quality of the coding scheme as well as two protocols in a training phase, after which interrater agreement was calculated for three student protocols and one teacher protocol (516 segments, about 19.9% of all segments). Cohen's Kappa was .81, which is considered good.

The written texts were analyzed using a coding scheme—a four-point scale rubric (Appendix C). The coding scheme consisted of three main categories (Text Structure, General Writing Quality, and Domain-Specific Reasoning) and was an adaption of a previously used coding scheme that included writing and domain-specific elements (van Drie et al., 2018). All categories were divided into subcate-

gories. The first category, Text Structure, consisted of Introduction, Arguments Pro, Arguments Contra/Rebuttal, and Conclusion. The second category, General Writing Quality, consisted of Audience Awareness and Coherence. The final category, Domain-Specific Reasoning, consisted of Perspectives on Columbus, Contextualization, Reasoning About Significance, and Use of First-Order Knowledge.

All texts were coded by the first and third author. Two texts were coded and discussed in a training session. The remaining 14 texts were coded separately. In the second session, Cohen's Kappa varied between .71 (Use Criteria Significance) and 1.00 (e.g., Conclusion), which is considered to be acceptable or good. All differences were discussed until an agreement was achieved.

For every protocol, we calculated the percentage of all utterances related to each subcategory. Based on these calculations, differences in the think-aloud protocols between students and teachers were identified in several rounds. Themes were selected and representative utterances were presented in the Results section. This is in line with the thematic-analysis method as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Think-aloud protocols

Table 1 presents the results of the analyses of the think-aloud protocols and shows that students' protocols contain 154.33 utterances and teachers' protocols 186.75. Participants mostly engaged in writing activities. Students, compared to teachers, engaged more often in activities related to the main categories Task (17.79 %) and Reading (26.21 %). Teachers, compared to students, showed more utterances related to the main categories Reasoning About Significance (10.97 %) and Writing (52.90 %).

Most students (11) started by reading all the materials and then wrote their texts. While writing, they searched for information in the materials by rereading. One student took some notes between reading and writing. Three teachers used another approach. After reading (parts of) the materials, they reflected on the text (s). Finally, the teachers wrote their text. In the next sections, we discuss reading, reasoning, and writing processes more in detail.

#### 4.1.1 Reasoning processes

Differences in reasoning processes are presented in Table 1. Students were less active with respect to background author/author's viewpoint (1.05% and 0.05%, respectively), their own subjectivity (0.15%), and historical context (0.93%) compared to teachers (background author: 3.59%, author's viewpoint: 0.98%, own subjectivity: 0.71%, historical context: 1.90%). We found relatively fewer utterances in which students (1.67%) or teachers (0.89%) implicitly or explicitly stated criteria for significance. Overall, however, teachers' protocols showed more reasoning activities than students.

The variation in reasoning processes can be illustrated using the protocols from student Jayden and teacher Jill. Jayden was the only student who seriously reflected on the historical context and on the background of the author. He seemed aware that it was important to focus on the background of the author in order to comprehend the text—as evidenced by his rereading of Irving's account: "That is about history. It is not important." It appears that Jayden reflected on the historical context when he said, "Nineteenth century...Slavery is not acceptable in that time." However, Jayden did not relate Irving's scientific statements to his historical context during reasoning or writing.

Illustrative for teachers' method of reasoning is Jill's comment: "I am determining his position. How he, as an historian, is affected by his time." Jill tried to understand the authors' point of view by reconstructing their backgrounds through contextualization. She considered the historical context when she commented, "It is the era of slavery. Therefore, he [Irving] is a witness of the consequences." Contrary to students, she seemed aware of the importance of her own subjectivity when she said, "This is about peoples' suffering. That is important for me; that is why I am critical."

#### 4.1.2 Reading processes

The protocols of both students and teachers, as shown in Table 1, may have featured comparable percentages of activities as reading, summarizing, and monitoring, but we found differences with respect to the activities rereading (students: 11.37%, teachers: 2.04%) and evaluating texts (students: 0.62%, teachers: 2.49%).

**Table 1:** Mean Percentages and Standard Deviations for Activities in the Think-Aloud Protocols for Students and Experts

	Students ( <i>N</i> = 12) <i>M</i> in % ( <i>SD</i> )	Experts ( <i>N</i> = 4) <i>M</i> in % ( <i>SD</i> )
<b>Task</b>	<b>17.79 (8.64)</b>	<b>9.90 (3.26)</b>
Reading	1.98 (1.54)	1.78 (1.17)
Rereading	7.83 (5.07)	1.65 (1.62)
Comprehending	2.07 (1.87)	2.70 (1.80)
Monitoring	5.35 (3.70)	2.94 (1.72)
Evaluating	0.56 (3.70)	0.83 (1.15)
<b>Reasoning about significance</b>	<b>5.97 (5.09)</b>	<b>10.97 (6.52)</b>
Background author	1.05 (1.69)	3.59 (2.74)
Authors' viewpoint	0.05 (0.18)	0.98 (1.46)
Comparing texts	0.00 (0.00)	0.13 (0.28)
Comparing authors	0.00 (0.00)	0.13 (0.28)
Historical context	0.93 (1.39)	1.90 (1.65)
Criteria sign. implicit	1.62 (2.40)	0.77 (0.80)
Criteria sign. explicit	0.05 (0.18)	0.12 (0.15)
Own subjectivity	0.15 (0.53)	0.71 (0.85)
Own point of view	1.08 (1.52)	1.61 (0.98)
Asking questions	1.06 (1.67)	0.77 (1.01)
Comparing era's	0.13 (0.31)	0.26 (0.30)
<b>Reading historians' text</b>	<b>26.21 (12.08)</b>	<b>17.13 (7.21)</b>
Reading	8.68 (6.87)	6.48 (3.83)
Rereading	11.37 (6.83)	2.04 (0.98)
Summarizing	2.13 (2.43)	2.27 (1.89)
Monitoring	3.41 (2.39)	3.85 (2.10)
Evaluating text	0.62 (0.84)	2.49 (1.30)
<b>Writing</b>	<b>42.91 (14.71)</b>	<b>52.90 (14.35)</b>
Rereading written text	5.54 (5.47)	4.62 (4.77)
Formulating text	10.07 (6.10)	8.80 (2.83)
Writing	16.37 (6.89)	18.95 (3.93)
Planning text	0.79 (1.26)	2.98 (1.67)
Monitoring writing	4.66 (1.94)	12.03 (4.69)
Revising	2.55 (2.50)	3.02 (1.27)
Evaluating written text	2.93 (3.24)	2.50 (1.70)
<b>General</b>	<b>7.12 (4.22)</b>	<b>9.10 (3.05)</b>
Relevant	2.54 (1.92)	5.11 (2.96)
Non-relevant	4.58 (3.40)	3.99 (3.54)
<b>Average numbers of</b>		
Words	4622.58 (951.68)	5874.00 (1150.63)
Segments	154.33 (86.69)	186.75 (46.34)

The differences in the reading processes can be illustrated by the protocols of student Emmely and teacher Patrick. Emmely started by reading all materials. She read without comment, breaks, or rereading and seemed to comprehend the aim of the task as well as both texts and background information. When she was finished, she read the task again and started writing. During the writing process, she constantly reread substantial parts of the text to extract information for her own text.

When Patrick read Irving's account, he expressed doubts about both accounts and commented on the text. Illustrative were his comments on a passage about supposed resistance from the Catholic Church against the voyage of Columbus. He commented, "I thought, the church has already accepted that point of view." In contrast with Emmely, Patrick barely reread while writing parts of the accounts or the assignment; he did go back for some details such as Irving's first name.

Patrick's comments exposed an idea of historical accounts as being perspectives on the past. The following segment is typical for Patrick's way of reading:

He [Irving] is positive about Columbus. The European people were very important for the USA. Thanks to Columbus. However, .... uhm.... He is troubling with slavery. Irving states that he does not want to use the idea that slavery was common in Columbus' time to justify Columbus' mistakes. [...] He disliked slavery....It is before the civil war...the tensions between both parties could be noticeable....That is his point of view.

This strategy enabled Patrick to gain deep understanding of both authors' points of view and seemed to make rereading unnecessary. Emmely's protocol did not contain utterances pertaining to the authors' perspectives.

#### 4.1.3 Writing processes

With regard to writing processes, Table 1 shows comparable percentages for students and teachers. Teachers' protocols contained more segments about planning (2.98 %) and monitoring writing (12.03 %), compared to students (planning: 0.79 %, monitoring writing 4.66 %), but fewer segments about how to formulate written texts (students: 10.07 %, teachers: 8.80 %). Teachers and students showed comparable activities on formulating text, writing, revising, and evaluating written text.

The distinctions in writing processes between teachers and students may be illustrated with the protocols from student Lynn and teacher Nick. Lynn was one of the four students who thought about planning, "I have to present my arguments and counterarguments." Given the rest of the protocol, this was an isolated

remark. She focused her activities concerning monitoring writing on individual sentences within her text: “this sentence needs improvement.” Her revising activities also related to the formulation of sentences. After writing a sentence, she asked, “How do you actually say that?” and subsequently revised the sentence. In contrast to students, teachers developed a structure for their text. Thinking about the structure of his text, Nick said:

First of all, I have to think about the structure of my text. First an introduction with my point of view. uhm...uhm... it is an argumentative text. You are convincing people of something. So, in my introduction I should give my point of view. I have to finish with a conclusion and a recommendation about Columbus Day. In the middle part, I will write my arguments.

Contrary to Lynn, Nick’s approach enabled him to select historical facts and to offer support by selecting usable fragments from both texts: “This is my introduction. Then first...uhm...outlining...uhm...the development in the thinking about Columbus.” Nick’s comments about revising focused on the improvement of the quality of his arguments; for example, Nick would delete a sentence in order to strengthen an argument.

## 4.2 Written texts

Table 2 shows differences between the written texts of students and teachers. Teachers outperformed students on every aspect. The most outstanding differences are in the subcategory Introduction (teachers: 3.00, students: 1.50) and the main categories General Writing Quality (teachers: 3.13, students: 1.87) and Domain-Specific Reasoning (teachers: 3.44, students: 2.29). These results support the results of the think-aloud protocols. The differences can be illustrated using the texts from student Rayne and teacher Emma.

Although Rayne earned the highest score on his student text, there were remarkable differences between the introductions written by Rayne and Emma. Rayne started his introduction with three sentences about Columbus’ historical context and asked, “What could we learn from Columbus?” Subsequently, he wrote about the changing evaluation of Columbus and his own position. He finished his text, which was divided into clear paragraphs, with a short summary of his text. Teacher Emma wrote a clear and eye-catching introduction that outlined the structure of her text. The body contained a contextualized summary of the accounts of both historians as well as her own position. She finished her text with a short summary.

Compared to the teachers, none of the students related the historical context to the account of Irving or Zinn. Only student Rayne mentioned the changing his-

torical circumstances in his text. Although he made no remarks about the historical context in his think-aloud protocol, Rayne paid attention to the changing historical circumstances of Irving and Zinn:

In the past, people were more respectful of Columbus because they were delighted with the independence. In the second part of the twentieth century, the African-Americans were fighting for their rights. Because the rising focus on the treatment of the Afro-Americans, the respect for Columbus declined.

However, Rayne did not relate this sentence to the account of Irving or Zinn. Teacher Emma used the historical context in order to comprehend the authors. She wrote for instance: “Hundred and fifty years later, the historian Howard Zinn (1980) speaks much more negatively about Columbus. At that time, people were much more critical about the role of Caucasians in history.”

The last noteworthy difference between students and teachers relates to their opinion about Columbus Day. All students used the language from the task, which asked them whether Columbus Day should be celebrated. All students answered this question with a clear statement—either affirming (student Ann: “because of the emerging trade”) or denying (student Rayne: “because someone else would have found the USA”). In contrast, the teachers’ answers were more complex; for example, they changed the word “celebrated” to “remembered” (teacher Emma: “in museums or memorials”). This change enabled teachers to incorporate different perspectives, to avoid sensitivities in the audience, and to defend the existence of a day on which all inhabitants of America could remember Columbus’ journey to America.

**Table 2:** Mean Scores (Scale 1–4) on Text Structure, Writing, and Domain-Specific Reasoning

	Students ( <i>N</i> = 12) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Experts ( <i>N</i> = 4) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
<b>Text structure</b>	<b>1.60 (0.34)</b>	<b>3.01 (0.67)</b>
Introduction	1.50 (0.52)	3.00 (0.82)
Arguments pro	1.50 (0.80)	3.25 (0.50)
Counterargument	2.17 (0.39)	3.50 (0.58)
Conclusion	1.17 (0.39)	2.50 (1.00)
<b>General writing quality</b>	<b>1.88 (0.53)</b>	<b>3.13 (0.75)</b>
Awareness audience	1.50 (0.80)	3.00 (1.16)
Coherence	2.25 (0.87)	3.25 (0.50)
<b>Domain-specific reasoning</b>	<b>2.29 (0.40)</b>	<b>3.44 (0.13)</b>
Perspectives Columbus	2.00 (0.60)	4.00 (0.00)
Historical context	2.17 (0.94)	3.25 (0.50)
Criteria significance	2.33 (0.78)	2.50 (0.58)
Use key concepts	2.67 (0.49)	4.00 (0.00)

## 5 Conclusion and Discussion

This study focused on historical significance, an important aspect of historical reasoning, and aimed to gain insight into 12 students' reasoning, reading, and writing processes. Four history teachers with a master's degree were added to this study in order to grasp students' weaknesses. Our data revealed several differences between students and teachers. Judging by their think-aloud protocols, students were more active while working on the main categories Task and Reading. Teachers focused more on Reasoning About Significance and Writing. Students and teachers differed on a wide range of subcategories: Rereading Texts, Evaluating Texts, Background Author, Author's Viewpoint, Historical Context, their Own Subjectivity, Planning Writing, and Monitoring Writing. Overall, the outcomes of the think-aloud protocols matched the outcomes of the written texts. Teachers scored higher on all categories—especially on domain-specific reasoning and general writing quality.

These results suggest that students seemed unaware of the existence of “contextualized perspectives”; students saw Columbus' journey as either “positive” or “negative.” Although students recognized the different impact Columbus' journey to America had on the inhabitants of Spain and the native Americans, most students did not relate this to the perspectives of Irving or Zinn or to the different historical contexts in which both historians lived. This could be explained by Dutch teaching practices. Teachers consider teaching the ongoing interpretation of the past as too difficult for senior high school students (Wansink et al., 2018). It seems that students considered historical accounts as records of the past. This finding links to students constantly rereading parts of the texts, while writing, in order to extract facts and ignoring the authors' background, and context. Our findings align with those of Wolfe and Goldman (2005) and suggest that participating students' (10th grade) understanding of the past did not progress (much) compared to the sixth-grade students participating Wolfe and Goldman's study. In contrast, teachers regarded historians as interpreters of the past; they knew how authors' accounts were influenced by their historical circumstances, and some teachers made comments about their own historical subjectivity. Consequently, teachers attempted to reconstruct historians' perspectives by tracing the main idea, ascertaining how this idea was constructed, and in which context the text was written. Our finding supports findings from earlier research (e.g., Wineburg, 1991).

In addition, students did not expose the use of metaknowledge regarding historical accounts and the concept of historical significance. Students ignored criteria for significance while writing. Being more aware of the existence of criteria for significance might help students to construct a richer picture of the past.

Therefore, several researchers stressed the importance of criteria for assigning significance (Cercadillo, 2001; Lévèsque, 2008) and previous research has found that students seem capable of doing so (van Drie et al., 2013). Second, students used counterarguments and rebuttals in their written text; however, these counterarguments and rebuttals were poorly written. Participating teachers possessed more metaknowledge regarding texts and used that knowledge to write (more) audience-orientated texts by planning their texts, describing clear perspectives, and revising their texts. This mirrors earlier research on literacy (Kellogg, 2008).

The results of the current study may provide teachers direction on teaching writing about historical significance. First, instructional practices should focus on metaknowledge about historical accounts and knowledge of text genres. This might help to recognize accounts as “contextualized perspectives” and provide support to students as they read and write. In addition, student need to learn how to apply knowledge of historical significance, which might help them to construct a richer picture of the past. This means that teachers should encourage students to think consciously about questions regarding the authors’ main ideas, the construction of these ideas, and how the main idea is influenced by the historical context.

This study has several limitations. First, it is a small-scale study. All participants were selected from one school and one teacher taught all students, which may have influenced the outcomes of this study. Students who were familiar with other teaching styles may have used other activities and processes. In addition, our task was very complex. Students had to consider not only Columbus’ time, the nineteenth and twentieth century, but also the time in which they live. The multi-layered nature of the task and the demands that writing makes on the available capacity of students’ memory (Kellogg, 2008) may have been overwhelming. Finally, the aim of this study was to investigate reading, reasoning, and writing processes, but we may have lost sight on some of the details of these processes.

Future researchers should seek more evidence for these conclusions by conducting think-aloud studies with other age groups, other levels of education, or in other cultural settings. Perhaps future researchers could develop tasks that ask more explicitly for the use of criteria for significance. Future researchers should develop and investigate instructional practices which focus on supporting students’ reading, reasoning, and writing. In addition, we recommend that future researchers make a more in-depth analysis of reading, reasoning, and writing processes.

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## Appendix A

### Task

Columbus Day is celebrated on the second Monday in October in the United States. This day has been officially a national holiday since 1937. However, not all States celebrate this day. Some States find this day an insult to the descendants of the original inhabitants of the United States. The state of South Dakota celebrates this day but calls it “Native American Day.”

The US government wonders whether Columbus Day should be celebrated as a national holiday. A historical committee has been set up to investigate this issue. The committee receives these questions:

1. How has the assigned significance to Columbus developed over time?
2. Should Columbus Day be celebrated as a national day or not?

In order to make a decision about Columbus Day, you as a historian are asked to answer these questions.

Write a text to the committee in which you indicate to what extent Columbus is historically important. Also pay attention to how thinking about Columbus has developed over time. Then give a reasoned opinion on whether Columbus Day should be celebrated as a national holiday or not.

Use the texts in which two historians assign significance to Columbus (Text 1 and 2) and a text with background information (Background to the texts). Finally, you will find a brief biography about Columbus.

You can also use the information from the lessons. Write an argumentative text in which you answer the above questions. There is no prescribed length of the text. Attempt to write a text of at least 250 words. For this assignment you have one lesson.

## Appendix B

### Coding scheme: Think-aloud protocols

Category	Description	Example
<b>Task</b>		
Reading task	Reading task	Write an argumentative essay
Rereading task	Rereading task	
Comprehending task	Comprehending the aim of the task	Write an argumentative essay
Monitoring task	Monitoring tasks performance	I have to do three different tasks.
Evaluating task	valuation task	Let's read the task again. It is a funny task
<b>Reading</b>		
Reading text	Reading text	He had a great perseverance.
Rereading text	Rereading text	He had a great perseverance.
Summarizing text	Parts of the text are summarized.	He is positive but struggles with slavery.
Monitoring reading process	Utterances about the reading process	So, now I will read text 2.
Evaluating text	Utterances about the valuation of the task / recognizing faults.	I did not comprehend this part.
<b>Reasoning About Significance</b>		
Background author	Utterances about the author (aim, time he is living in)	Oh, he is from North America.
Authors' point of view	Summarizing authors point of view	For him, Columbus is a hero
Comparing texts	Locating similarities and differences between texts	Irving differs from Zinn because...
Comparing authors	Comparing background of both authors	Oh, that's the Civil Right movement
Using historical context	Using the historical context	It is a symbol of unity
Using criteria significance explicit	Explicit use of criteria for historical significance	He contributes to emerging trade
Using criteria significance implicit	Implicit use of criteria for historical significance	
Own subjectivity	Awareness own subjectivity	Suffering is important for me
Own point of view	Constructing an own point of view	
Asking questions	Asking historical questions	He is a controversial person.
Comparing era's	Comparing historical era's	What was Independence Day? Nowadays equality is more important

Category	Description	Example
<b>Writing</b>		
Rereading written text	Rereading written text	I wrote: "Problems..."
Formulating text	Formulating text before writing	uhm, I want uhm.... to share I will inform you
Writing	Writing parts of the text	First, I have to write, There-
Planning	Planning in order to structure text	after
Monitoring	Monitoring writing process.	Now I should write something about
Revising		It is not blessing but
Evaluating	Changing parts of the text. Evaluating written text	Delete this part of the argument
<b>General</b>		
Important activities	Important activities not related to task	I will mark that part
Non-relevant activities	Non-relevant activities	Oh, my daughter appreciates that

## Appendix C

### Coding scheme: Written Texts

#### Text Structure

<b>Introduction</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
None of the characteristics listed alongside are present / There is no introduction.	There is an introduction and: - Mentions a position on Columbus Day in the introduction. Or - Introduces the subject: the commemoration of Columbus.	There is an introduction and: - Mentions a position on Columbus Day in the introduction. and - Introduces the subject: the commemoration of Columbus.	Mentions a standpoint on Columbus Day in the introduction, introduces the subject: commemorating Columbus, does not yet mention arguments in the introduction and introduction invites to read.
<b>Arguments pro</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
An argument is put forward to support the position.	- Several arguments are mentioned, but they are not elaborated. Or - An argument is mentioned and worked out.	Several arguments are mentioned, and an argument is well worked out.	Several arguments are mentioned, and more than one argument is worked out well.
<b>Arguments contra</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
No counterargument is mentioned or not elaborated	A counterargument is mentioned, and this counterargument is refuted. Neither are elaborated.	Counterargument and rebuttal are present. The counterargument or rebuttal is elaborated.	Both the counterargument and the rebuttal are present and are being worked out.

**Conclusion**

1	2	3	4
There is a conclusion about commemorating Columbus, but standpoint or argumentation are not repeated / There is no conclusion.	Concludes with a conclusion about the commemoration of Columbus and 2 of the following: - Repeats position. - Repeats main arguments briefly and powerfully. - The conclusion is convincing. - Does not mention any new arguments in the conclusion.	Concludes with a conclusion about the commemoration of Columbus and 3 of the following: - Repeats position. - Repeats main arguments briefly and powerfully. - The conclusion is convincing. - Does not mention any new arguments in the conclusion.	Concludes with a conclusion about the commemoration of Columbus in which the point of view and main arguments are briefly and powerfully repeated. The conclusion is convincing. Does not mention any new arguments in the conclusion.

**General Writing Quality****Audience**

1	2	3	4
Do not apply the conventions belonging to the type of text. The style does not show understanding for the reader (too informal or too formal).	Hardly applies the conventions associated with the type of text (it is very informal). Is generally inconsistent in the use of a style that shows understanding for the reader.	Uses the conventions belonging to the type of text largely correctly (formal conventions are not used correctly everywhere). Overall, he is able to use a style (not too informal and not too formal) that shows understanding for the reader.	Uses the conventions belonging to the type of text correctly. Overall, he is able to use a style that shows understanding for the reader. The style makes the text attractive to read (e.g., by varying sentences, attractive beginning and ending).

<b>Coherence</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
Consistency in the text and within compound sentences is regularly not clear. The author's line of thought cannot always be followed. There is no (or no good) paragraph classification. Errors with referrals and linking words occur regularly.	Coherence in the text and within compound sentences is sometimes clear and sometimes not clear. The author's line of thought is generally fairly clear, but not always. There is a reasonably good paragraph classification. Errors with reference and linking words occur occasionally.	Coherence in the text and within compound sentences is usually clear. The author's line of thought is generally clear. There is a good paragraph classification. Reference and linking words are used correctly.	Coherence in the text and within compound sentences is clear. Paragraphs are linked into a coherent whole. The author's line of thought is clear and logical and consistently ordered. The connection between and within sentences is well indicated by the use of correct reference and connection words.

### **Reasoning About Significance**

<b>Perspectives on Columbus</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
A perspective on Columbus is distinguished.	Two different perspectives on Columbus are distinguished.	Two different perspectives on Columbus are distinguished and understood from the historical context.	Two different perspectives on Columbus are distinguished and the sources are mentioned and understood from the historical context.

<b>Use historical context</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
The historical context is not used to understand Columbus or is largely historically incorrect.	From the texts provided, the historical context is largely used correctly, but the historical context is not used to interpret the meaning of Columbus.	From the texts provided, the historical context is largely used correctly and is used to interpret the meaning of Columbus.	The historical context is correctly used to interpret the meaning of Columbus from the texts provided and from one's own knowledge.

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**Use criteria  
significance**


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1	2	3	4
Criteria for significance are not or not correctly used.	One criterion for significance is used implicitly or explicitly.	Several criteria for significance are implicitly stated.	Several criteria for significance are explicitly mentioned.

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**Use key concepts**


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1	2	3	4
In terms of content, the reasoning followed contains errors.	In terms of subject matter, the reasoning followed is broadly correct, but contains errors on a detailed level.	The reasoning followed is correct in terms of subject matter, but there is no/narrow use of subject terms and/or historical facts.	The reasoning followed is correct in terms of subject matter and use is made of subject terms and/or historical facts. Attention is also paid to structural concepts.

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