

The Effect of Reading-To-Write Approach on EFL Undergraduate Essay Writing

Adnan I. Abu Ayyash

Department of Languages and Translation
Birzeit University, Palestine

Ruba A. Khalaf

Department of Languages and Translation
Birzeit University, Palestine

Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate the effect of pre-writing reading on the undergraduate English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' performance in academic writing. Specifically, the main aim of the study is to examine whether the employment of 'reading-to-write approach' improves the university learners' essay writing at home situation. It also tries to check if the suggested approach makes any difference in the target group's writing. Control group and experimental group research design was used to examine the difference between the two groups and to determine if the suggested approach could make any significance statistically. The two groups sat for pretest and posttest in cause and effect essay writing. To compare the performance of the two groups in the posttest, an Independent Sample T-test was used. The results of the posttest indicate that there is a noteworthy improvement of the experimental group's essay writing. In addition, the study used grading rubric as criteria to assess the population's performance in the major components of academic essay writing. The study findings show that the learners' literacy is a major concern for the students as evident in the lack of reasonable ideas in their writing. Additionally, the paper is a genuine call to foster reading habits that would eventually develop academic writing.

Keywords: directional model, integration, literacy, motivation, pedagogy

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1. Introduction

Academic writing has long been a serious problem for (EFL) university students at home situation. This is evident in the low performance in their writing tasks, basically essay writing, which are prescribed in their English courses outline. The difficulties our students encounter in essay production range from their inability to elicit ideas, lack of literacy, wrong word choice, and major writing mechanics. This paper deals with an approach used to teach essay writing as a core skill in an advanced English course (ENGC 231) to 67 Palestinian university students. This course is usually given to all university students regardless of their specializations. The suggested approach which is called Reading-to-write (RTWA) has largely been employed in many EFL teaching writing settings (e.g. Heeney 2015; Boudersa 2013; Chuenchaichon 2011; Delaney 2008; Olson 2002; Grabe & Kaplan 1996). However, this paper will address how pre-writing reading activities improve our students' essay writing. It will also focus on the effect of reading on the students' learning styles when approaching essay writing. To apply the RTWA, the researchers will use the control and experimental group method.

It should be admitted that learning writing through reading is not new in EFL; still examining various approaches to learn essay writing at our home situation needs to be evidently tested.

2. Aims of learning English at university level at home situation

All undergraduate students are given the opportunity to develop their English language communication skills through being offered different English courses for all levels. These courses aim to provide students with a strong basic foundation in pre-academic English to better enable them function within the university requirements. At home situation, we have three basic levels of English categorized in accordance with the students' scores in the University English Placement test, which is part of Birzeit University admission requirements (see Birzeit University website - admission).

The target population of the proposed read-to-write approach will be the A level (ENGC 231- Advanced) students in the second semester of the academic year 2015-2016. In accordance with the course description, the students are expected to write and revise several essays. In this course, the students should be able to refine their prewriting and revise strategies to produce focused and detailed essays on different topics.

In short, the main objective of writing is to consolidate and foster the learners' language competence and their language material learnt by reading. Teachers should pay attention to the fact that writing, which is considered a long process, must be taught in a graded manner.

3. Research questions

This paper tries to answer the following questions:

- 1- How can reading-to-write approach (RTWA) make a difference in the undergraduates' essay writing skills?
- 2- To what extent can guided pre-reading activities improve the undergraduates' essay writing?
- 3- Can reading-to-write approach be a driving force towards fostering reading habits among EFL learners?

4. Significance of the study

Essay writing is a serious problem that our students encounter at the university level. It has been noted that our students' results were the lowest in the writing component of any of EFL communication courses, particularly in essay writing. This paper is a genuine attempt to handle this problem through teaching essay writing through reading, in a straightforward and precise pedagogical approach. Not only is the suggested approach expected to improve EFL learners' ability to write good essays, but it will also motivate them to develop good reading habits.

5. Literature review

5.1. What is writing?

Writing is a basic language skill that aims to consolidate and foster the learner's language competence and the language material learnt through other skills, basically reading. Like other language skills, writing is a long graded process that includes learning sub-skills such as pre-writing activities, handwriting, copying, dictation, constructing sentences, and guided composition. In discussing learning model, Emig (1977) clarifies, "Writing represents a unique mode of learning- not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique." (p.122). Nunan (1999) admits that writing is a difficult process that involves a continuous knowledge gathering over a long time. Therefore, learning to write academic essays by our EFL learners is considered a challenging task that requires introducing and addressing other important sub-skills that would help learners produce well-structured pieces of writing. Brown (1987) confirms the previous argument when stated, "Written products are often the result of thinking, drafting and revising procedures that require specialized skills." (p.335). Similarly, Zamel (1983) clarifies that the writing skill should be viewed as a reproductive method that involves realizing and expressing ideas in meaningful context.

5.2. Pre-writing reading affects students' essay writing skills

EFL courses often tend to integrate the four language skills. However, classroom practices may encounter difficulties in fully applying this trend in actuality, if not failing to do so. Research in TEFL and linguistics confirms that reading influences learners' ability to produce good pieces of writing as reading is simply considered as a utility to writing (e.g. Brown 1987; Byrne 1988; Escibano 1999; Murcia & Olshtain 2000; Delaney 2008; Heeney 2015). Not only does reading give the learners the chance to see how others write, but it also exposes them to a wide range of language spectrum usage. In addition, reading can broaden the learners' literacy, among other areas, about topics they are asked to write about. Tierney et al (1989) emphasize the need to combine reading and writing to activate and motivate critical thinking. At home situation, our learners have always voiced that eliciting ideas is a major problem in their essay writing. This should never imply that other difficulties in writing, such as word choice, clarity, flow of ideas and cohesion, are less important. Therefore, pre-writing reading activities, be in-class or out-class or be intensive or extensive, are expected to help learners learn writing styles, new vocabulary, writing structure and techniques, readability, informative ideas, etc. When writing, learners may also like to set what they read as models, both in structure and content. This explains that reading needs to be considered as an essential element that develops and improves learners' ability to write well. Langer & Flihan (2000) summed up the similarities between reading and writing processes:

[T]he work on reading and writing processes indicates that writing and reading are

deeply related activities of language and thought that are shaped through use. The structures and strategies that writers and readers use to organize, remember, and present their ideas are generally the same in writing and reading. (p.121)

5.3. Why reading-to-write?

Although approaching writing tasks through reading is not new in EFL pedagogies (e.g. Hirvela 2004; Brown 1987; Krashen 1984; Smith 1983), applicability in learning essay writing at our home situation is still in question. Researchers highlight the importance of learning writing through reading under different pedagogical names, for example, reading-to-write construct (Delaney, 2008), the role of reading in writing (Plakans, 2009), what is good writing? (Peha, 2003), genre-based pedagogy (Hyland, 2007), and reading-to-writing directional model (Chuenchaichon, 2011).

However, the scope of implementing this approach in our EFL writing classes is still confined to writing tasks that focus on reading with comprehension, analysing reading passages, summary writing, acquiring new vocabulary, writing reflections to written texts, and paragraph writing. When teaching essay writing, say cause and effect, our EFL teachers may use reading articles as models of writing for the identification of essay parts, cohesion in writing, and cohesive devices. But, when it comes to in-class essay writing practice, learners are asked to use essay writing techniques to write essays on a given topic. At this stage, our learners tend to write essays that lack important elements of good academic essay. Basically, essay components such as presenting genuine ideas, the flow of ideas, appropriate word choice, exemplification, reasoning, clear claim, and correct writing mechanics are likely to be problematic in their writing. In order to handle such difficulties in essay writing, there is a need to effectively implement reading-to-write approach in our writing classes. The points remain in question in this respect are: how can this approach be applied in essay writing class? To what extent does it work? Does it have any significance on improving essay writing? These themes will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

It is naïve to claim that these pedagogical assumptions are taken for granted in addressing essay writing problems. Surprisingly, Tuan (2012) claims that research fails to provide a clear-cut practical demonstration of the effect of reading on writing. In short, evidence is needed to prove that reading-to-write works in our essay writing classes.

6. Methodology

6.1 Student sample

The student sample consisted of two ENGC 231 course classes of 67 regular students from different faculties at Birzeit University in semester II, in the academic year 2015-2016. This course is an obligatory advanced EFL course for all university students. All students of the sample took ENGC 141 course, which focuses on reading comprehension and paragraph writing, as a pre-requisite to their ENGC 231 course. The sample students were taught ENGC 231 course by the same teacher. Class 231/division 23 was randomly selected as control group and Class 231/24 as experimental group. Table 1 shows the details of the sample groups.

Table 1: The sample Details

Number of control group by		Number of experimental group by	
Year Level	Sex: Male = M Female= F	Year Level	Sex: Male=M Female= F
1 freshmen	14 M 11 F	1	11 M 11 F
2	3 M 1 F	2	4 F
3	1 M 1 F	3	3 F
4	1 M 3 F	4	2 M 1 F
Total	35	Total	32

6.2 Pretest and posttest

The control and experimental groups were given the same pretest and posttest as research instrument. The study sample sat for the pretest in the eighth week of the 16-week semester, after the essay writing component was introduced in accordance with their course outline. The results of the pretest would determine if the two groups' level of English essay writing would be the same. The two groups were asked to write a five-paragraph essay of about 300 words on a topic chosen randomly by the teacher. The topic was: **Why do some people prefer not to carry mobile phones?** The time allowed for each test session was 90 minutes. (see Appendix E). The above topic was an example of a cause and effect topic which was meant to prepare students to write on any topic in the same category.

As for the posttest, the two groups were asked to write an essay on the same pretest topic with the same directions, time allotment, and the classroom setting. This test was given after seven weeks of learning cause and effect essay writing. The purpose of the posttest was to check if pre-writing reading-to-write approach, which was used in the experimental group classes, can help improve our learners' English essay writing.

6.3 Instruction approach: procedure

The control group's learning material was chapter 6 (pp. 94-110) of the writing textbook, *Introduction to Academic Writing (Level3)* (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). This chapter presents a graded way of learning cause and effect essay. Specifically, it introduces the cause and effect pattern of essay, its ways of organization, alongside exercises on the identification of essay parts of this pattern through two model essays, essay analysis, transition signals and essay production activities. The students were asked to do all the exercises of the chapter as in-class activities which were checked and corrected by the teacher. The chapter was covered in seven weeks.

While part of the experimental group's learning material was selected from the above textbook, particularly the organisation of cause and effect essay, other learning material was added. For example, reading articles related to the posttest essay topic were used as pre-writing reading-to-write activities. During a seven-week instruction, the procedure followed in the experimental group's writing classes could be summed up in the following steps:

- Learners were introduced to the essay organization presented in chapter 6 of the above textbook. (p.95).
- Learners were taught how to identify essay parts: introduction and thesis statement, body and conclusion. Teacher used the model on p. 96 from the above textbook.
- Learners were trained on writing thesis statements of different essay patterns. Teacher elicited learners to think of cause and effect essay topics and to write thesis statements.
- Learners were trained on outlining, writing introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion.
- Learners were asked to use cause and effect transition signals in meaningful contexts. Learners were asked to refer to these markers on p. 101 of the same textbook.
- In class work, the learners were asked to brainstorm ideas on the essay topic: **Reasons that make some people choose not to carry mobile phones.**
- The teacher wrote the learners' frequent ideas on the whiteboard. These ideas were:
 - ✓ Expensive devices
 - ✓ Health reasons
 - ✓ Maintaining privacy.
- Then, the teacher chose reading articles that would largely cover the learners' above ideas. The articles were adapted to meet the academic essay format. They were:
 - a. Kwan (n.d.), *What are the Disadvantages of Mobile Phones*
 - b. Greenspan (2011), *Why I Don't Have a Cell Phone*
 - c. James (2011), *My Life Without a Cell Phone: an Amazing Tale of Survival*
- Learners were asked to read the three articles at home for in-class discussion.
- In the coming class, the teacher received the learners' feedback on the articles and checked reading comprehension.
- The teacher warned the learners of the serious consequences of plagiarism, and explained the University's strict laws in this respect.
- One week later, the students were asked to write a five-paragraph essay on the same pretest topic in the posttest session. At that time, no article of the three and/or any was allowed in the test.
- Teacher collected the posttest papers for grading.

In short, the learning procedures in the experimental group's class work included word listing, word mapping and clustering, word categorizing, and guided pre-writing reading of three articles on the essay topic within a limited period of time. The whole process took seven weeks before writing the essay final draft.

6.4 Essay Evaluation

The pretest and posttest papers (134) were graded by the same teacher. Each essay in both tests was corrected out of 100 points. However, the total mark breakdown matches the essay assessment which was adapted from ACE/ESL 49, 2014 files Cause and Effect Grading Rubric. Using this grading scale stems from the fact that it is designed to assess the major components in any academic essay, particularly cause and effect. Additionally, writing assessment scales are expected to reflect the objectives of learning essay writing. One of the Assessment Scales that matches the rubric used in this study is what Hamp-Lyons (1987) presented as the Revised Assessment Scale and the Global Method in which the writer layout her criteria for what to be

assessed in writing. According to Hamp-Lyons, a very good writing, for example, should include basic elements such as its ability to convey the writer's message, its logical division of ideas, its ability to present clear ideas and its correct writing mechanics.

7. Results and discussion

As the focus is on the effectiveness of (RTWA) to essay writing, the results of the posttest performance of the control and experimental groups were highlighted. To ensure statistical significance, the researchers conducted an Independent Sample T-test. The results of the two groups were reported in the tables below, where table 2 shows the groups statistics (see Table 2) in terms of the group's number of students, mean value, standard deviation (Std), and std error mean.

Table 2: Control group and experimental group statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
score	control	35	60.7143	11.63810	1.96720
	experimental	32	71.6875	10.97339	1.93984

The results of the t-test for independent samples, as shown in Table 3 (see table 3), indicate a statistically significant difference, $t(65) = -3.961$, $p < 0.001$, between control group ($M = 60.7143$, $SD = 11.63810$) and experimental group ($M = 71.6875$, $SD = 10.97339$).

Table 3 : Results of independent samples test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed score	.200	.656	-3.961	65	.000	-10.97321	2.77015	-16.50558	-5.44084
Equal variances not assumed			-3.972	64.933	.000	-10.97321	2.76276	-16.49094	-5.45549

In order to assess the students' performance in the different components of the essay, an adapted format for cause and effect grading rubric was used. (see Cause and Effect Grading Rubric under Appendix A). When asked about the major problems in essay writing, most learners stated that they lack reasonable and genuine ideas on the essay topics. Definitely, there are other difficulties in cohesiveness, logical division of ideas, in addition to writing mechanics. The results of the

experimental group's posttest (see Appendix D) show that 51.43 percent of the learners were very good in stating clear causes of the given essay topic, '*Why do some people prefer not to carry mobile phones?*', whereas 31 percent of the control group failed to do so (see Appendix C). For example, the first group presented their reasons on the topic that included ideas such as interruption, expensive gadgets, hacking, radiation, annoyance, no real life relationship, distraction, etc. In fact, these ideas were elicited from the pre-writing articles they were asked to read; however, the wording of the learners' essays was clearly different from that of the articles. It should also be clarified that literacy and ideas taken from the pre-writing readings were used as prompts and stimuli for writing. No plagiarism or copying has been noted in the writing. Our university has very strict laws concerning plagiarism and academic integrity that should literally be observed.

The experimental group ability to restate the thesis and summarize the main points is evident, where 40 percent (see Appendix D) of the students in this group managed to do so, whereas 22.86 percent (see Appendix C) of the control group did so.

At the paragraph level, 54.29 percent of the experimental group gave very good specific reasons in their topic sentences, supported with details and examples in the posttest (see Appendix D). On the other hand, 28.57 percent of the control group learners were unable to present clear supportive reasons or ideas. Apparently, the gap between the two groups in terms of presenting ideas is a wakeup call for the question of literacy of our learners.

While there is a significant difference in the results of the pretest and posttest of both groups in presenting clear topic sentences (see Appendixes A,B,C & D) , the experimental group's posttest results have shown a percentage of 23.47 percent higher when compared to those of the control group (see Appendixes C & D).

Surprisingly, the word choice and mechanics item of both the experimental and control groups has shown a slight difference between the two who scored the percentages of 31.25 percent and 28.57 percent respectively. This fact spotlights that writing mechanics should be approached from another perspective, other than pre-writing readings. However, it may be assumed that word choice might have benefited from such readings.

It must be clarified that the study has ignored the variable factor which assumes that the sample students' results might have been affected due to the fact that the students are from different colleges. However, this assumption has no effect on the experiment as the reference of the students' level of English is the same.

8. Conclusion

The significance of using pre-writing reading activities, either in-class or out of class, is evident in presenting sensible and reasonable ideas that reflect the learners' literacy. However, it looks naïve if assuming that guided reading is the only feasible and applicable learning strategy to improve essay writing. The paper results indicate that it is pedagogically valuable to foster good reading habits among our learners and to help them shift from exam-oriented writers to writer-based writers who could be able to select their own readings and enrich their writings with knowledgeable thoughts. Another indication of the research is that teachers are invited to foster

the relationship between reading and writing skills in a way that shows a *real* integration between the two. For example, at an early stage of learning essay writing, teachers can ask learners to write a paragraph on a topic derived from a reading passage they have read and analysed. Literacy, then, is an issue EFL teachers at home should prioritize when teaching essay writing.

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About the Authors:

Adnan I. Abu Ayyash is a lecturer of EFL at the Department of Languages and Translation at Birzeit University. He had the chance to work in different Palestinian universities before joining Birzeit University. His research interests are discourse analysis, error analysis, classroom centeredness research, methods of TEFL, academic writing, and ESP.

Ruba A. Khalaf is an instructor of EFL at the Department of Languages and Translation at Birzeit University. She worked in different educational institutions in Palestine. Her research interests are vocabulary, methods of TEFL, and academic writing.

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Appendixes:

****Appendix A : Grading results of control group (35 students) pre-test essay writing by item, number and percentage**

	Item	Needs improvement	OK	Very good	Excellent
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	Content (30%)	Number of students	%						
1	Clear Thesis Statement and Introduction	18	51.43	12	34.29	5	14.29		
2	Overall Clarity of ideas States clear cause and effect ideas	20	57.14	9	25.71	6	17.14		
3	Conclusion Restates the thesis and summarizes the main points.	22	62.86	9	25.71	4	11.43		
	Organization (30%)								
4	Body: Clarity of Topic Sentences (Each body paragraph includes a topic sentence that connects to the thesis)	19	54.29	12	34.29	4	11.43		
5	Paragraph-level (Transitions, cohesiveness of main ideas, reasons, supporting points and specific detail connect directly to topic sentences. Each reason is supported by facts, examples, or descriptions.)	23	65.71	7	20.00	5	14.29		
	Language (30%)								
6	Grammar (Correct form and usage and cause and effect collocations)	14	40	12	34.29	9	25.71		
7	Word Choice and Mechanics (demonstrates accuracy, control of spelling, punctuation, capitalization,)	19	54.29	9	25.71	7	20.00		
	Formatting/Writing Process (10%)								
8	Essay is double spaced Essay has a title page that is formatted correctly Essay is neat and presentable	6	17.14	7	20	17	48.57	5	14.29

		/100							
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**Source: adapted from . Cause and Effect Grading Rubric. Retrieved 12 Dec. 2015 from:

<https://canvas.instructure.com/courses/871041/files/30662753>

Appendix B: Grading results of experimental group (32 students) pre-test essay writing by item, number and percentage

	Item	Needs improvement		OK		Very good		Excellent	
		Number of students	%	Number of	%	of	%	Number of	%
	Content (30%)								
1	Clear Thesis Statement and Introduction	16	45.71	13	37.14	3	8.57		
2	Overall Clarity of ideas States clear cause and effect ideas	18	51.43	9	25.71	4	11.43		
3	Conclusion Restates the thesis and summarizes the main points.	20	57.14	9	25.71	3	8.57		
	Organization (30%)								
4	Body: Clarity of Topic Sentences (Each body paragraph includes a topic sentence that connects to the thesis)	17	48.57	10	28.57	5	14.29		
5	Paragraph-level (Transitions, cohesiveness of main ideas, reasons, supporting points and specific detail connect directly to topic sentences. Each reason is supported by facts, examples, or descriptions.)	21	60	7	20	4	11.43		
	Language (30%)								
6	Grammar (Correct form and usage and cause and effect collocations)	13	37.14	11	31.43	8	23		
7	Word Choice and Mechanics (demonstrates accuracy, control of spelling, punctuation, capitalization,)	12	37.50	12	37.50	8	22.86		

	Formatting/Writing Process (10%)								
8	Essay is double spaced Essay has a title page that is formatted correctly Essay is neat and presentable	3	8.57	6	17.14	17	48.57	6	17.14
	/100								

Appendix C : Grading results of control group (35 students) posttest essay writing by item, number and percentage

	Item	Needs improvement		OK		Very good		Excellent	
		Number of students	%						
	Content (30%)								
1	Clear Thesis Statement and Introduction	7	20	15	42.86	9	25.71	4	11.42
2	Overall Clarity of ideas States clear cause and effect ideas	11	31.43	17	48.57	5	14.29	2	5.71
3	Conclusion Restates the thesis and summarizes the main points.	15	42.86	10	28.57	8	22.86	2	5.71
	Organization (30%)								
4	Body: Clarity of Topic Sentences (Each body paragraph includes a topic sentence that connects to the thesis)	11	31.43	14	40	8	22.86	2	5.71
5	Paragraph-level (Transitions, cohesiveness of main ideas, reasons, supporting points and specific detail connect directly to topic sentences. Each reason is supported by facts, examples, or descriptions.)	10	28.57	15	42.86	7	20.00	3	8.57

	Language (30%)								
6	Grammar (Correct form and usage and cause and effect collocations)	6	17.14	16	45.71	8	23	5	14.28
7	Word Choice and Mechanics (demonstrates accuracy, control of spelling, punctuation, capitalization,)	6	17.14	14	40.00	10	28.57	5	14.28
	Formatting/Writing Process (10%)								
8	Essay is double spaced Essay has a title page that is formatted correctly Essay is neat and presentable			4	11.43	9	25.71	22	62.86
	/100								

Appendix D : Grading results of experimental group (32 students) posttest essay writing by item, number and percentage

	Item	Needs improvement		OK		Very good		Excellent	
		Number of students	%						
	Content (30%)								
1	Clear Thesis Statement and Introduction	4	11.43	6	17.14	15	42.86	7	20
2	Overall Clarity of ideas States clear cause and effect ideas	2	5.71	6	17.14	18	51.43	6	17.14
3	Conclusion Restates the thesis and summarizes the main points.	3	8.57	9	25.71	14	40	5	14.28
	Organization (30%)								
4	Body: Clarity of Topic Sentences (Each body paragraph	3	8.57	12	37.5	13	40.62	4	11.42

	includes a topic sentence that connects to the thesis)								
5	Paragraph-level (Transitions, cohesiveness of main ideas, reasons, supporting points and specific detail connect directly to topic sentences. Each reason is supported by facts, examples, or descriptions.)	3	8.57	3	8.57	19	54.29	8	22.85
	Language (30%)								
6	Grammar (Correct form and usage and cause and effect collocations)	4	11.43	8	22.86	18	51	2	5.71
7	Word Choice and Mechanics (demonstrates accuracy, control of spelling, punctuation, capitalization,)	4	12.50	12	37.50	10	31.25	6	17.14
	Formatting/Writing Process (10%)								
8	Essay is double spaced Essay has a title page that is formatted correctly Essay is neat and presentable	1	2.86	1	2.86	15	42.86	15	42.86
	/100								

Appendix E : Essay writing : Pre-test /Post-test

Name:..... Time allowed: 90 minutes

Write a five-paragraph essay of about 300 words on the following topic:

Why do some people prefer not to carry mobile phones?**Remember to:**

1. Brainstorm ideas before writing.
2. Write an outline for your essay.
3. Use the essay structure i.e. Introduction- Body - Conclusion
4. Write a clear thesis statement.
5. Use appropriate transition signals.
6. Pay attention to the writing mechanics.