Translation versus Direct Composition:
The impact of L1 on L2 Writing

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Abstract: *This study aims at investigating the effect of EFL learners' L1 system or knowledge on the quality of their L2 essays or compositions in terms of content, organization, and style. This study is based on the analysis of 46 English compositions written by EFL Arab university students. It particularly examines differences between resulting from two writing processes (i) essays written first in Arabic and then translated into English by the same student, and (ii) essays written direct into English. composing directly in English. It also examines the relationship between these two writing processes and students' proficienc levl. The results reveal that although the two major factors of composing process and proficiency level did not significantly affect the quality of written texts, yet translations were rated slightly higher than direct compositions.*

1. Introduction

In an EFL context like Saudi Arabia, classroom instruction with frequent recourse to L1, mainly through translation, prevails throughout the various levels of language education. As a result, instructional effects are easily seen. For example, students' attention is directed only to surface level, similarities between L1 and L2 often result in learners' over-dependence on L1 in their foreign language written production. Hence, it is argued that these learners' conscious awareness or their competency in L1 (Arabic) knowledge proportionally affects the quality of their L2 writings.

2. Review of Related Literature

The effects of LI on L2 language writing have been studied on both product and process levels. In terms of product, studies of compositions written by L2 learners focus, most notably, on contrastive rhetoric, by analyzing the transfer of L1 rhetorical patterns into L2 writing (Kaplan, 1966, 1983). This influence has also been accounted for in terms of developmental and cognitive factors (Mohan & Lo, 1985; Ringbom, 1987; Cumming, 1989; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Noor, 1994, 1996b; Verhoeven, 1994). Research on L2 composing processes has identified similarities in the behaviours and strategies of L1 and L2 writers. Comparisons of students' composing in their L1 and L2 have revealed the transfer of knowledge of L1 writing (Edelsky, 1982), thinking and revising strategies (Cumming, Rebuffot & Ledwell, 1989; Hall, 1990) on L2 writing. The positive impact of L1 writing expertise on the quality of texts produced in

L2 has also been highlighted recently (Cumming, 1989; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992). Research on L2 has also shown that L2 writers employ their L1 to "get a strong impression and association of ideas for essays" and produce essays "of better quality in terms of ideas, organization and details" (Lay, 1982:406) and to "meaningfully link image to word" (Spack, 1984:664). L2 learners have also been found to use their L1 as "an important resource in their continual processes of decision making while writing" (Cumming, 1989:128).

Cummins et al. (1984) found that their subjects' (Japanese and Vietnamese EFL learners) academic-, cognitive-, and literacy-related skills in English were strongly predicted by variables, one of these being L1 academic proficiency. Cummins (1991-a, 1991-b) also showed that considerable transfer from one language to another was possible, given sufficient exposure and motivation to learn. In a recent study, Cohen (2000) found that direct writing may be the most effective choice for some learners when they were under time pressure. Thirty-nine intermediate learners of French performed two essay-writing tasks: writing directly into French as well as writing in L1 (English) and then translating into French. The results demonstrated that two-thirds of the students did better on the direct writing task across all rating scales; one-third, better on the translated task. While raters found no significant differences in the grammatical scales across the two types of writing, differences did emerge in the scales for expression, transitions, and clauses. Retrospective verbal report data from the students indicated that they were often thinking through English (their L1) when writing in French (their L2), suggesting that the writing tasks were not necessarily distinct in nature.

3. Research Objectives

The main objective underlying this study is to investigate the effect of EFL Arab learners' awareness or competency in their L1 system or knowledge on the quality of their L2 essays or compositions in terms of *content, organization*, and *style*. To achieve this objective, the following research questions were developed:
1) Is the quality of student's written compositions in L2 affected by their language of composition? Do students compose directly in the L2 or do they compose in L1 then translate into L2? Does this vary with students' proficiency in L2?
2) Are syntactic complexity and quantity of errors in students' written compositions in L2 related to students' competency in L1? Does this vary with students' proficiency in L2?

4. Research Design

4.1. Participants
Forty six Saudi University English majors who are native speakers of Arabic were chosen as study subjects (Ss). The subjects were divided into two language

ability groups, Beginners (BEG) and Intermediate (INT), on the basis of their performance in an English proficiency test (discussed below).

4.2. Elicitation technique

In order to achieve the study objectives, two types of writing processes were employed: (i) writing in L1 (Arabic) then translating into L2 (English), and (ii) composing directly in L2 (English).

The two groups were asked to write on one of the following four topics within 60 minutes. The four topics involved the expository rhetorical pattern of comparison[1]:

4.3. Test administration

The test was administered in three phases:

(i) Phase one: The participating groups were divided into two equal groups; one was asked to choose a topic and write about it in Arabic, whereas the other was asked to choose a topic and write about it in English.

(ii) Phase two: The same procedure was followed in phase two, except that the writing assignment was alternated between the two halves and the participants were asked to choose a different topic from the one they had written on previously.

(iii)Phase three: All the Arabic versions were returned to the research participants to translate them into English.

4.4. Test evlauation

The 92 English compositions (46 written directly in English and 46 written first in Arabic and then translated into English) were rated in terms of their: *(1) content, (2) organization* and *(3) style*[2]. Ratings consisted of holistic judgements on a 5-point rating scale for 11 *analytical* subcomponents[3] making up the three major components: (1) *content*: specific, development of ideas, overall clarity, interest, and thesis; (2) *organization*: introduction, logical sequence of ideas, conclusion, and unity; and (3) *style*: vocabulary use and variety of form. Appendix 3 contains the criteria applied in evaluating each subcomponent. All the 92 blind-coded compositions were evaluated by two experienced EFL instructors.

4.5. Error analysis

For the analysis of syntactic complexity, two counts were prepared: (1) overall number of words in each composition and (2) mean length of T-units. The analysis of error frequency was based on counts of three types of errors that are likely to interfere with the communication of a writer's intended meaning: (1) *lexical choice*, (2) *awkward form* , and (3) *transitional problems*. Wrong lexical choice was defined as inappropriate or incorrect use of a word that leads to obscurity or misunderstanding of writer's intended meaning as in:

(1) I'm very surprised by *prosperity* of videos.

Awkward form errors consist of grammatically and/or semantically deviant constructions   that interfere with naturalness of writer's expression and/or obscured writer's intended meaning   as in (2) below. Transitional problems include inappropriate or incorrect use of transitions, either on a sentence or a discourse level, that disrupt the logical sequence of writer's ideas and often involve a logical leap as in (3):

(2) University life *needs to become independent myself.*

(3) An advanced type of notebooks costs thousands of riyals, *otherwise*, that of normal PCs does only few hundreds of riyals.

For quantitative measures, total words were tailed by computer, and two judges (the researcher and another experienced EFL teacher) counted T-units and the three types of errors in all the papers. When differences in the judges' counts occurred, they were resolved through discussion.

4.6. Statistical Analysis

To study the effect of the competency in L1 on the quality of students' written text in the L2, a 2X2X3 (proficiency level [BEG vs. INT] X composing process [translation vs. direct composition] X writing component [*content, organization, and style*] factorial design was used. For the analysis of error frequency, a similar 2X2X3 (proficiency level X composing process X error type [*lexical choice, awkward form, transitional problems*]) factorial design was also employed.   In both cases, the proficiency and process factors operated   as independent variables, and a holistic rating scores for each component of writing and frequency counts of error types were created as dependent variables in the two analyses.   For the analysis of syntactic complexity, the total number of words and the average length of T-units were treated as dependent variables in 2X2 (proficiency level X composing process) factorial design.

5. Results Discussion

5.1. Quality of writing

As shown in Table 1 below (Direct Writing), the results of a repeated-measures ANOVA revealed significant main effects for the factors of writing components [$F(3,48)=3.45$, $P<.05$], syntactic complexity [$F(3,48)= 893.79$, $P<.001$], and error types [$F(3,48)=18.77$, $P<.001$].

Table 1: Three-Way ANOVA of Dependent Measures : Direct Writing

Source	SS	Df	MS	F
Writing Cmponents	307.89	3	102.63	3.45*
Syntactic Complexity	116978.50	3	38992.84	893.79**
Error Types	1994.19	3	664.73	18.77**

*$P<.05$ **$P<.01$

The same results were also obtained from the Ss performance in the translation process (see Table 2 below); whether in the writing components [$F(3,48)=3.93$, $P<.05$], syntactic complexity [$F(3,48)=1577.26$, $P<.001$], or error types [$F(3,48)=16.28$, $P<.001$]

Table 2: Three-Way ANOVA of Dependent Measures : Translation Process

Source	SS	Df	MS	F
Writing Cmponents	351.30	3	117.10	3.93*
Syntactic Complexity	234435.71	3	78145.24	1577.26**
Error Types	3214.00	3	1071.33	16.28**

*$P<.05$ **$P<.01$

Table 3 below displays the means and standard deviations (SD) of the subjects' performance in the dependent variables (*content, organization,* and *style*) in both writing processes (Direct Writing and Translation).

Table 3: Means & SD of Dependent Measures: Content, Organization, Style

Subjects Groups	Direct Composition			Translation		
	C	O	S	C	O	S
INT						
χ	72.4	62.7	48.5	74.8	61.2	53.5
σ	18.35	13.74	5.35	18.96	11.43	5.35
BEG						
χ	65.7	59.5	44.8	69.2	57	47.1
σ	16.91	12.31	4.48	17.31	10.6	4.96

The figures below show converted raw scores in percentages

The data shows that although the two major factors of composing process and proficiency level did not significantly affect the quality of written texts, translations were rated slightly higher than direct composition (total percent mean scores: 63.1 for translation and 61.1 for direct composition).

    The significant interaction effect between the proficiency and process indicates that higher-proficiecy students (INT) did not benefit as much from translation as low-proficiency students (BEG). As shown in Figure 1 below, BEG scores were more than 4 percentage points higher on translation (61.75% vs. 57.80%, $t=3.08$, $p<05$), whereas INT mean translation score were less than 1 percentage point higher (64.84 vs. 63.95).

Figure 1: Means of the Scores of Ss Writings in Direct & Translation Variables
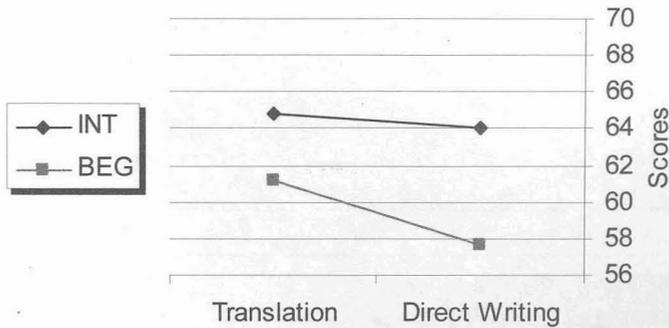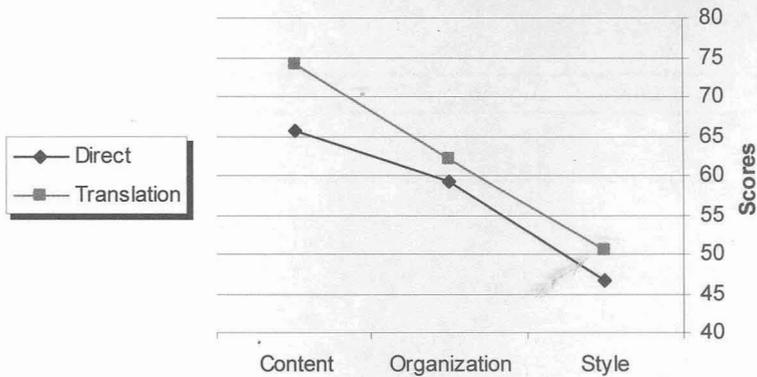

Figure 2 below shows that translations significantly outscored direct writings only in *content* (74.6 vs. 65.5, $t=2.66$, $p<.05$). However, the results did not show significant differences in the other two variables (*organization* and *style*).

Figure 2: Means of the Scores opf Ss Writings (Direct vs. Translation Variables)

This result reveals that Ss did not benefit much from translation in terms of organization and style. Therefore, one can argue here that organization and style could be seen as a relative strength of direct compositions, instead of translation.

5.2. Syntactic complexity
With respect to length of compositions, students in both groups wrote significantly longer texts through translation (see Figure 3 below) and used more complex sentences in terms of words per T-unit in their translations (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 3: Means of the Number of Words in Ss Writings in Direct & Translation Variables
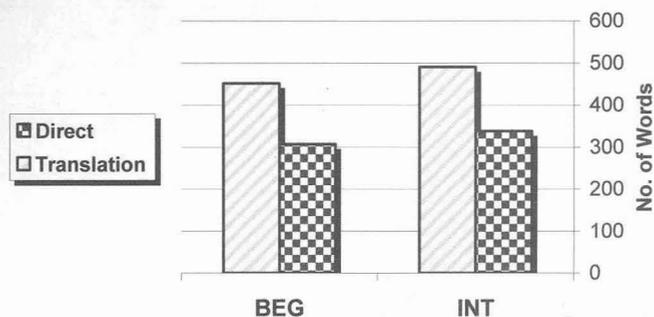

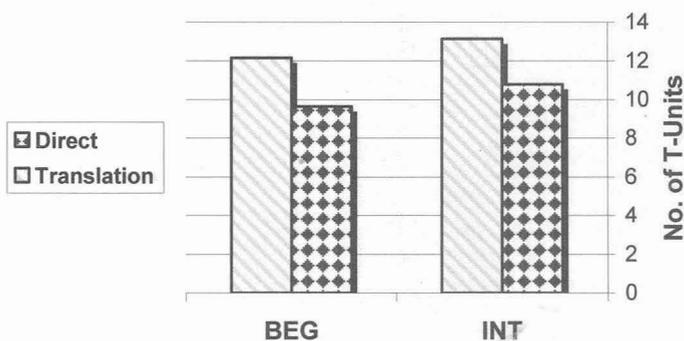*Figure 4: Means of the Number of T-Units in Ss Writings in Direct & Translation Variables*

Table 4 below displays that both groups of the study subjects wrote significantly longer compositions through translation than in direct writing, for INT (490.8 vs. 337.8, t=50.03, p<.001) and (451.4 vs. 307.3, t=65.85, p<.001) for BEG. Their translations increased in syntactic complexity in terms of number of words per T-unit (26.2 vs. 21.3, t=2.79, p<.05 for INT and 23.6 vs. 18.8, t=2.65, p<.05 for BEG) (see Table 5 below).

Table 4: Means of the Number of Words in Ss Writings in Direct & Translation Variables

Subjects Groups	No. of words		Difference	% + / -
	Direct	Translation		
INT	337.8	490.8	153	45.3 + (translation)
BEG	307.3	451.4	144.1	46.9 + (translation)

Table 5: Means of the Number of T-Units in Ss Writings in Direct & Translation Variables

| Subjects Groups	No. of T-units		Difference	% + / -
	Direct	Translation		
INT	21.3	26.2	4.9	23 + (translation)
BEG	18.8	23.6	4.8	25.5 + (translation)

5.3. Quantity of errors

Overall, more errors tended to occur in translation than direct writing, and error type was a significant factor: errors of awkward form were more frequent, lexical choice errors came next in frequency, and transition errors were relatively infrequent (see Table 6 below).

Table 6: Frequency of Percentages of Error Types among the Ss Groups in Direct & Translation Variables

Subjects Groups	Direct Composition			Translation		
	LC	AF	TP	LC	AF	TP
INT	26.77	64.84	8.39	42.30	50.58	7.12
BEG	26.26	66.05	7.69	31.58	61.74	6.68

LC=Lexical Choice; AF=Awkward Form; TP=Transitional Problems

Figure 5: Frequency of Percentages of Error Types in Direct & Translation Variables
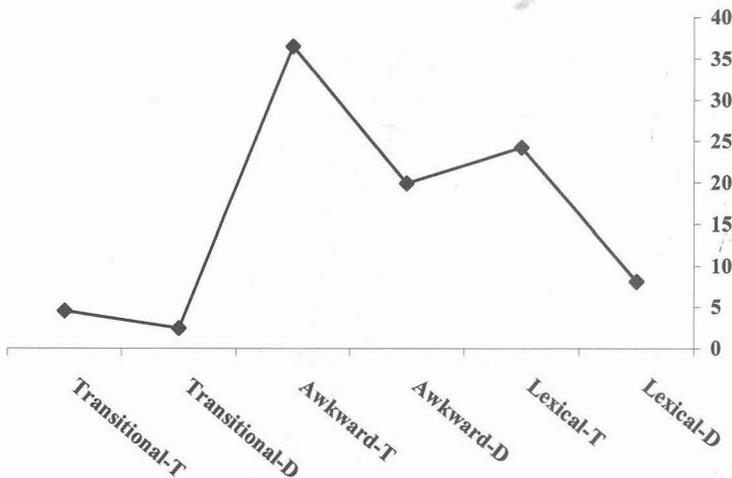
D=Direct composition   *T*=Translation

The tendency of students to produce more awkward forms in their translation versions correlated positively with increased syntactic complexity. That is, as syntactic complexity increased in the translation versions, awkward forms more frequently interfered with the intended meaning. This tendency may be related to the findings that increased prediction resulting from attempts at more complex integrative thinking by L2 writers leads to more problems in terms of clarity on syntactic level (Jacobs 1982). At the same time, a portion of the tendency toward more errors in translation may result from overattention to surface level translation, as suggested by Lado (1979) in interpreting his findings that translation led to more syntactic errors than did written recall of reading passages.

Figure 6: Frequency of Percentages of Error Types in Direct & Translation Variables for INT
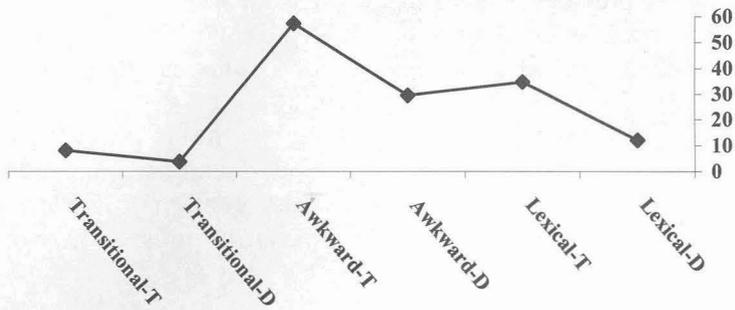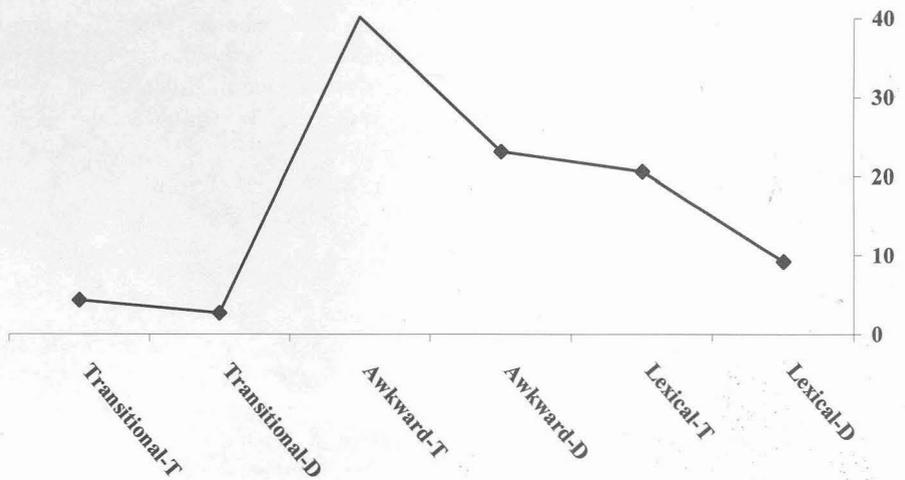

Figure 7: Frequency of Percentages of Error Types in Direct & Translation Variables for BEG

The results also reveal an interesting finding: 21% of the low proficiency students errors were in lexical-translation (see Figure 6). This indicates that due to lack of vocabulary in the L2, these students resorted to transfer negatively the lengthy ideas from L1 while writing compositions in Arabic in order not to affect or moderate the content of their compositions.

6. Conclusion

The findings suggest that the use of L1 may enable many students to explore ideas fully on their own intellectual and cognitive levels. Those students whose L2 skills are so limited as to impede the discovery of meaning through L2 writing can benefit from invention and exploration of ideas from L1, especially at the prewriting and planning stage. This is true of most lower-level study Ss whose attempted level of complexity of ideas seemed to have been beyond their ability to express that complexity directly in English. This result supports the findings of some previous studies that demonstrated the transfer of knowledge of L1 writing and thinking and revising strategies into L2 writing (e.g. Edelsky, 1982; Lay, 1982; Spack, 1984; Cumming, 1989; Cumming, Rebuffot & Ledwell, 1989; Hall, 1990; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992).

Writing in L1 first helped many students write significantly longer texts and used more sentences in terms of words per T-unit as compared to writing directly in English. However, this process shows a tendency of students towards commiting more errors particularly in awkward forms and lexical choice respectively.

Notes

[1] The expository rhetorical pattern of comparison was chosen to see the effect of the mother tongue factor (if there is any) on the performance of the study subjects. The four topics are: 1. Compare the city life with the life in the country-side.; 2. Compare travelling by a car and travelling by an airplane; 3. Compare study in a secondary school and study in college; 4. Compare camping in the desert and camping in a forest.

[2] This three-part division *(content, organization,* and *style)* is similar to that used by Cumming (1989).

[3] The present study adopts *analytical scoring,* which "breaks performance down into component parts (e.g., organization, wording, ideas) for rating on multiple scales" (Stiggins and Bridgeford, 1983:26).

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APPENDIX 1: English Proficiency Test (Cloze Test) :
Passage 1:
If you ask some people, 'How did you learn English so well?' You may get a surprising answer: 'In my sleep!'

These are people who have taken _____ in one of the recent experiments _____ test learn-while-you sleep methods, _____ are now being tried in several _____ and with several subjects, of which _____ is only one.

Specialists say that _____ sleep-study speeds language learning _____. They say that the average person _____ learn two or three times as _____ during sleep as in the same _____ during the day and this does _____ affect his rest in any way. _____ word of warning,

however: sleep-teaching _____ only hammer into your head what _____ have studied already while you are _____.

In one experiment, ten lessons were _____ over the radio at intervals of _____ fortnight. Each lesson lasted twelve hours _____ 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. The ____ three hours of English grammar and _____ were given with the student awake. _____ 11 p.m. a soothing *lullaby* was _____ to send the student to sleep _____ for the next three hours the _____ whispered the lesson again into _____ ears. At 2 a.m. a sharp _____ was sent over the radio to _____ the sleeping student up for a _____ minutes of *revision*. Then he was _____ back to rest again while the _____ purred on. At 5 o'clock his _____ ended and he had to go _____ the lesson again for three hours _____ his hard-earned breakfast.

Passage 2

One day a farmer, who was well known in his village as a mean man, said, 'I will give ____ meals and twenty five pence to ___ who is willing to do a ___ work for me.' This offer was ___ by a hungry tramp, who was ____ interested in the meals than the _____ . 'You can have your breakfast first,' _____ the farmer, 'and then you can _____ work.' After the farmer had given _____ a very small breakfast, he said, '_____ you can have your dinner. This ____ save us a lot of time.' ___ tramp agreed, and ate a poor ____ . When he had finished, the farmer ___ , 'What would you say to having _____ also while you are about it?'

'___ will try,' replied the tramp, 'to ___ another meal.' Then he had his ___ , which again was not a very __ meal. When it was over, the farmer ___ very pleased and said, 'Now you _____ do a long day's work.' 'No, _____ you,' was the tramp's reply, as ____ rose to leave, 'I never work ____ supper!'

APPENDIX 2: Choose ONLY ONE topic and write an essay about it. Time allowed is 60 minutes only: 1. Compare study in Secondary school and study in College; 2. Compare the city life with the life in the country-side; 3. Compare travelling by a car and travelling by an airplane; 4. Compare camping in a desert and camping in a forest.

APPENDIX 3: Criteria for evaluating 11 subcomponents of writings

	Categories	Criteria
	Content	
1.	Specifics	Vivid examples, supporting details
2.	Developed ideas	Explanation or elaboration of the main idea; ideas relevant to the given topic
3.	Overall clarity	Presentation of ideas easy to understand, not confusing
4.	Interest	Writing capturing reader's attention with imaginative, insightful, unusual perspective
5.	Thesis	Main idea/point of view of writer clear, reasonable and representing the text (may be explicit or implicit thesis)
	Organization	
6.	Introduction	Opening focusing or pointing to what the writer will talk about, appealing to reader, preparing for what is coming
7.	Logical Sequence	Ideas following logically within paragraphs
8.	Conclusion	Synthesis of entire paper through summary, suggestions or predictions based on what has been said, strong finish preferred
9.	Unity	Ideas throughout paper relating to main point
	Style	
10.	Vocabulary	Sophisticated range, variety, appropriate register
11.	Variety of Form	Variety of sentence beginnings, participle phrases, subordinate clauses and discourse markers