TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING THROUGH THE USE OF REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Schools in Lebanon are divided into two types: Anglophone and Francophone. These schools use English and French respectively, as the teaching language of the main subjects. Usually, these schools teach the second foreign language (English or French) as a third or foreign language. For instance, French speaking schools teach English as a third foreign language (EFL). These learners usually go to private universities that use English as the medium of instruction and therefore become in need of learning academic English. English as a Second Language (ESL) learners usually develop their skills of academic writing in formal instructional settings. However, their cognitive development, emotional experiences and their command of the second language (L2) might affect their proficiency in academic writing. Both ESL instructors and learners recognize academic writing as one of the most demanding features of learning English. ESL learners, particularly those coming from French background in Lebanon, find difficulties in writing persuasive and argumentative texts. This is due to the fact that to be able to produce such texts, writers have to understand the linguistic features of persuasive and argumentative texts (Hyland, 2003). In addition, being able to write cohesively according to the conventions of a specific academic context is even harder for L2 learners to accomplish (Flowerdew, 2002). One strategy to facilitate such learning is through active scaffolding process in the early stages of teaching and analyzing (Ahn, 2012). The aim of this study is examining the effects of applying a genre approach, reflection, to develop academic writing in a Lebanese local university. The genre approach has been used with English sophomore level learners during a 45-hour course. Data is collected through essays the learners wrote throughout the course. The evaluation of the essays reveals that the learners' analytical abilities and their writing products has improved. This improvement gives the learners confidence in their abilities which in turn makes them overcome their fear of writing..

KEYWORDS: Academic writing, Reflection, ESL, Lebanon, Genre.

INTRODUCTION

Schools in Lebanon are divided into two types: Anglophone and Francophone. These schools use the English and French languages respectively, as the language of instruction. Consequently, math, science and social studies are given in English or French, depending on the school. Usually, these schools teach the second foreign language (English or French) as a third or foreign language. For instance, French speaking schools teach English as a third foreign language (EFL). Most often, these learners go to private universities that use English as the medium of instruction and therefore become in need of learning academic English.

English as a Second Language (ESL) learners usually develop their skills of academic writing in formal instructional settings. However, their cognitive development, emotional experiences and their command of the second language (L2) might affect their proficiency in academic writing. Both ESL instructors and learners recognize academic writing as one of the most demanding features of learning English. ESL learners, particularly those coming from French background in Lebanon, find difficulties in writing persuasive and argumentative texts. This is due to the fact that to be able to produce such texts, writers have to understand the linguistic features of persuasive and argumentative texts (Hyland, 2003). In addition, being able to write cohesively according to the conventions of a specific academic context is even harder for L2

learners to accomplish (Flowerdew, 2002). One strategy to facilitate such learning is through active scaffolding process in the early stages of teaching and analyzing (Ahn, 2012).

A number of process-oriented research studies have explored writing behaviors, composing strategies, and the constraints that learners face in producing a coherent text (Al-Zankawi, 2018; Abboud, 2016; Shin, 2008). Skilled L2 writers essentially have perceived a number of key components in their writing: sense of audience, recursive and nonlinear natures of the writing processes, and proper management of discourse levels. However, they have to be provided with sufficient planning practice. Research findings suggest that L1 and L2 writers are similar in that both writers have constraints on the act of composing itself. The skilled L2 writers are engaged in more interaction with the emerging text and are consistently involved in more strategies, including planning, rehearsing, rescanning, revising, and editing.

Four essential criteria for developing good academic writing skills have been investigated such as attitudes towards academic writing tasks, planning, writing paragraphs and essays, and evaluating students' own writing. Advancements in writing proficiency can be accelerated when, with sufficient scaffolding, learners are encouraged to experiment concurrently with several aspects of the writing process, thereby understanding interconnections. In ESL academic writing, instruction has mostly moved away from a traditionally product approach to a process approach where instructors work with students on their written drafts and provide feedback for continuous improvement. The process approach centers around writing activities that engage learners in the process of writing, such as generation of ideas, drafting, revising, editing etc., whereas in the product approach the instructor evaluates grammatical and language structures, and content in general, and grades the work without opportunities for feedback and revisions. Process approaches focus on cognitive strategies that can be applied to writing tasks before developing a piece of writing that is well developed. Through this approach, the process allows the student to develop one's own voice and they become more self-directed (Abboud, 2016).

The genre approach, particularly at the early learning stage, emphasizes the development of students' awareness of reoccurring textural structures. The teacher's active involvement, through explicit explanation of the contextual dimension, can scaffold for students the distinctive use of the language appropriate to the various genres (Henry & Roseberry, 1998). When L2 students are left to discover for themselves the complexities of how language works in different genres, they are likely to be thrown back on the discourse conventions of their own cultures (Christie, 1999).

The beneficial aspects of the genre approach have been asserted by a significant number of genre theorists. For example, the genre approach enables students to make sense of the world around them and to become aware of writing as a tool that can be used and manipulated (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998). As Paltridge (2006) claims the genre approach focuses on increasing students' awareness of different ways of organizing information in writing, by discussing distinctive features of different purposeful texts. As a result of this process, students systemically acquire a meta-linguistic awareness of the English language, which empowers them to manipulate information and accomplish different purposes through writing.

In short, the genre approach provides students with the confidence to handle 'real world' writing as it improves students' attitudes and desire toward learning a language. Many arguments have been put forward in support of genre as an organizing principle for the development of L2 learning programs.

Purpose of the study

Academic writing is an essential skill needed to successfully complete university which use English as a medium of instruction. This skill is challenging to acquire, especially for English as a second language (ESL) learner. This challenge has prompted many researchers to investigate possible ways that would assist ESL learners successfully attain academic writing skill. One of these approaches is the genre approach. Hence, this study aims at investigating the effects of using genre approach of writing, reflections, to teach English academic writing.

Research questions

To investigate the effects of using reflections to teach academic writing, the following questions are studied:
- Is implementing the use of reflections to ESL learners at a local Lebanese university improve the learners' academic writing skills?
- How effective is using genre-based writing-reflections- in improving learners' academic writing?

Methodology

The purpose of study is to present the experience of two lecturers in the English Department at a Lebanese private university in implementing the genre approach –use of reflections- in teaching academic writing.

Design

To answer the research questions, action research method is utilized. Action research is a process whereby researchers, in our case, the lecturers, seek to discover whether their plan of action improves the learners' performance. In other words, action research aims at informing the researcher of the success or failure of their

'teaching' method (Sagor, 2000, Chapter 1). Action research studies are vital for academics because the focus of these studies is considered by the researchers who use the findings to improve their performance.

In this study, we have followed the qualitative method of analyzing data.

Participants

The participants are the 45 learners in the two sections of ENG 201 at a local university in Beirut-Lebanon. They have consisted of a convenient sample since they are the researchers' learners. ENG 201 is a B2-C1 level of English. The aim of this course it to improve learners' academic writing to prepare them for their senior study.

Instruments

To collect data, we have administered a pre-and post-writing test. A prompt related to an article discussed in class has been given as a pre-test where the learners have had to respond to it in a 4- paragraph essay. Then, after learning the format of writing reflection, a prompt has been given as a post-test. Both essays of pre- and post-test have been evaluated using the *Common Core State Standards Writing Rubric* (CCSSWR) *developed* by the English Professional Learning Council (EPLC) and Turnitin (2012) (see Appendix).

Procedures and Data collection

The Spring 2020 semester began on February 11th, 2020. The learners came from Remedial English with B2 level, with basic academic writing background. The participants sat for their first diagnostic test which served as the pre-test on February 18th, after having covered the first reading article. The essays were collected and corrected using the *CCSSWR.*

During the week of 25-28 February 2020, participants learned the structure and organization of reflection.
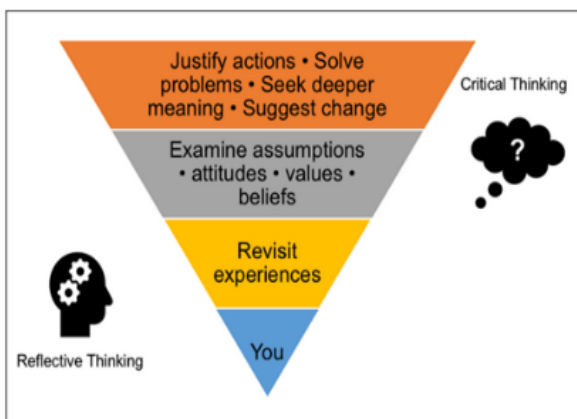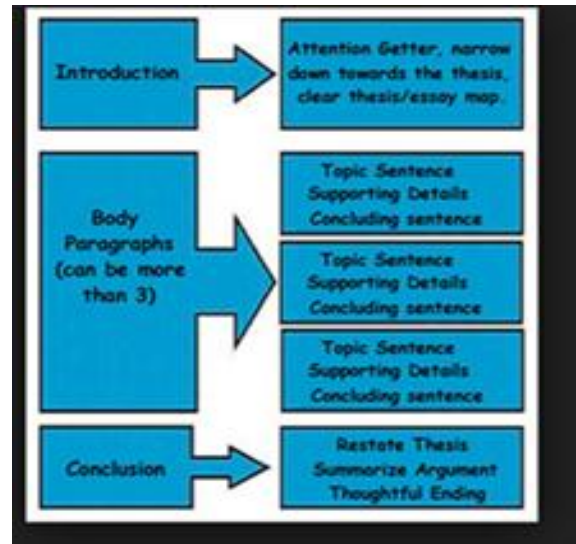

Figure 1: The Thinking Process (adapted from Mezirow 1990, Schon 1987, Brookfield 1987)

Moreover, the principal components of writing a 3-body paragraph essay were revised; the revision included activities on writing effective thesis, active introductions and appropriate summaries.

During the month of March, the participants wrote two reflections that were corrected and commented on. Then, during the week of April 1-4, 2020, the participants completed the post-test.

DISCUSSION

After each writing test, we recorded the participants' grades on Excel sheets to later calculate the means of the pre- and post-tests.

Table 1: Pre/Post tests means.

	Pre-test	Post-test
Av. Means	65/100	75/100

Table 1 reveals the improvement that the participants have experienced. The mean of the pre-test has been 65/100 and that of the post-test has increased by 10 points to become 75/100. This finding concurs with the literature on the effectiveness of teaching writing through the use of genre approach. Following the genre approach has presented the learners with a structure they can follow to enable them to refine and organize their ideas and present them in a well-written academic essay (Nacera, 2010). By using the genre approach, reflections, the participants have been able to write more complex, coherent and unified essays (Munoz-Luna, 2015). In addition, the reflections have given voice to the participants, a medium where they can express and defend their views. This act has turned them into autonomous and confident writers. By using reflections, the learners have realized that their writing skills have improved (Panouragia & Zaifiri, 2012) and this in turn has encouraged them to endorse reflective writing.

The samples writing below, written by the same participant, show the amount of enhancement in the participant's writing skills.

Pre-test sample- Student A

Prompt: what does the olive tree in Sacco's *Palestine* represent?

Olive trees are a major agricultural crop in the Palestinian territories. The olive tree is seen by many Palestinians as being a symbol of nationality and connection to the land particularly due to their slow growth and longevity. Olive trees are considered as the major agricultural crops, and are the past, present, and the future.

> Mira Alameddine 4 minutes ago
> No clear claim representing what you believe the tree symbolizes

> Mira Alameddine
> Your paragraph has language mistakes and your topic sentence does not represent the pain idea that explains your vision of what the tree symbolizes

First of all, olive trees are considered as the major agriculture crops in Palestine. Most of the olive trees are grown for olive oil production. It has been estimated that olive production accounted for 57% of cultivated land in the Palestinian territories. In 2014, an estimated 108,000 tonnes of olives were pressed producing 24,700 tonnes of olive oil – which contributed US $10.9 million in added value to the crop. Around 100,000 households rely on olives for their primary income.

Post-test sample- Student A

Prompt: Research the effects of harassment and write a reflection on how harassment has damaging effects on society.

I had been in an Islamic only girl's school since fifth grade, so sexual harassment was, for me, presented only in films or at least far away from Lebanon. However as I grew up, I realized it is wide spread in our country and even existed in elementary schools. For example, my 11 year old cousin doesn't enter the bathroom in his school's playground because there is no lock on the doors and thus is in danger of sexual harassment. He is one in many others, from students to workers that are subjected to harassment in its different forms which results in damaging effects on the individuals and the society.

The victims of sexual harassment endure a lot of problems besides being harassed. The victim mainly becomes traumatized physically and emotionally; they feel anger, denial and shock of the situation, and fear, shame and low self-esteem due to the society's view of the case. In addition to psychological effects,

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nares, headaches, and panic attacks. The society is too affected
ment because of the victims and the ones experienced
e work place having a harasser makes the job effectiveness of the

> Comments   ▾ ✕
> Mira Alameddine 5 minutes ago
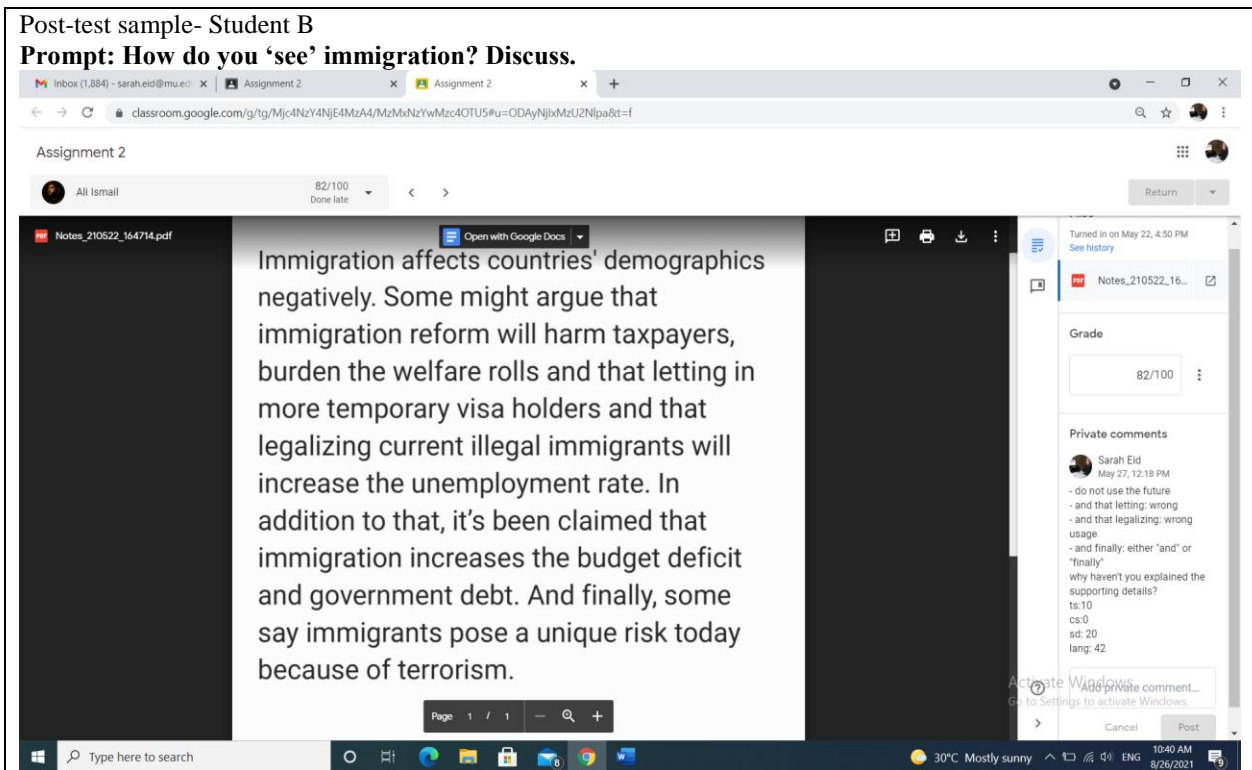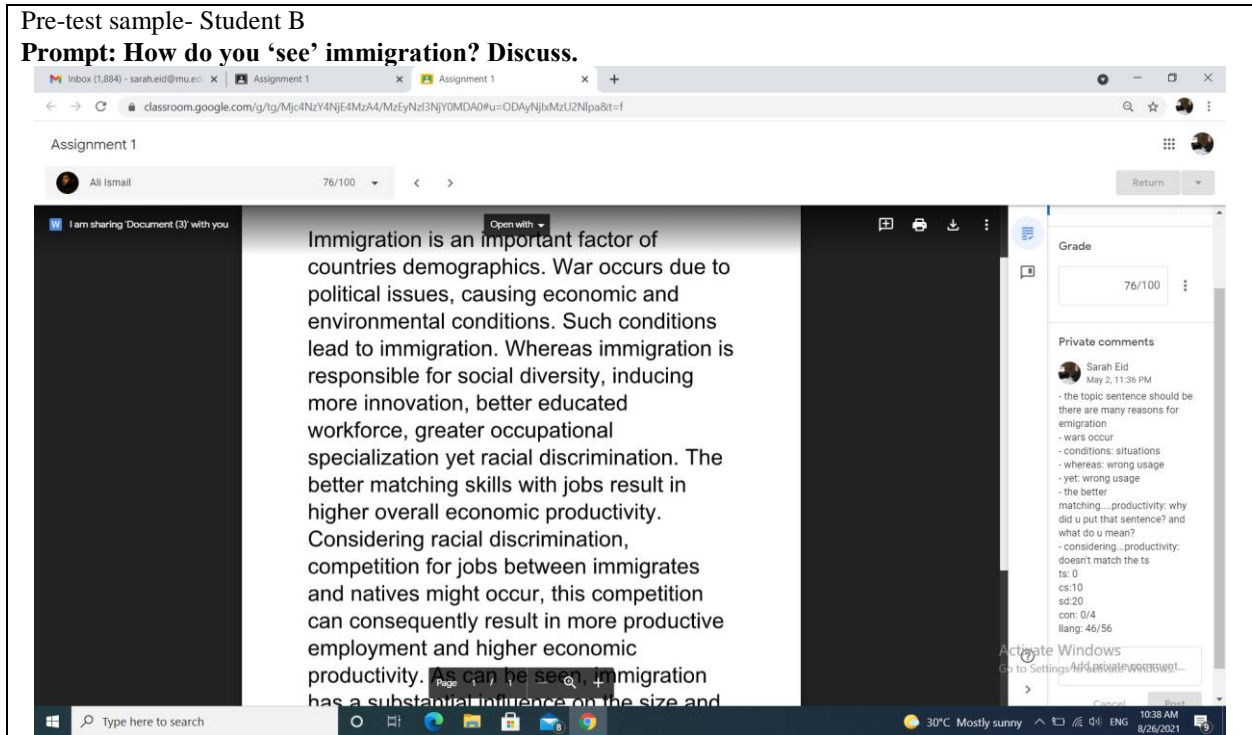> Good introduction; relates to her own experience

> Comments
> Mira Alameddine 5 minutes ago
> Clear topic sentence

> Comments
> Mira Alameddine 6 minutes ago
> Presence of connectors to maintain coherence

As the first sample of student A above reveals, there is no clear claim. This in turn, has rendered the essay with no adequate support. Moreover, the essay has lacked connectors which brings coherence. In terms of an effective essay, this sample is weak. On the other hand, the second sample has a clear claim. This claim has led to adequate supporting details. Moreover, the sample is coherent, with its ideas logically flowing. Finally, sample two represents good reflective analysis.

Pre-test sample- Student B
Prompt: How do you 'see' immigration? Discuss.

Post-test sample- Student B
Prompt: How do you 'see' immigration? Discuss.

The second sample of student B clearly shows that the learner's ability in writing a clear and focused topic sentence has improved. In the first paragraph, the topic sentence is not supported with appropriate details that develop the idea. Moreover, transitions have been used out of their place. The second sample clearly reveals the improvement the learner has experienced. The topic sentence has become clear and focused; it has been adequately supported, and the transitions have been properly used. All in all, the learner has been able to produce a coherent and cohesive paragraph.

Limitations
A one limitation faces this study. The participants are a convenient sample. This limitation can be overcome by conducting a further research whereby other instructors implement the method in their own classes. In this manner, the effectiveness of following the genre approach-reflective essays- can be validated.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that using reflections is successful in teaching academic writing for non-native speakers of English. Through reflections, the learners have been able to develop a clear perspective and line of reasoning when tacking the subject of discussion. This ability is the result of the link they established between their experiences and the knowledge they have. Moreover, reflections gave these learners a new understanding of how and what they think, leading them to a newfound knowledge, that their information is incomplete, and life is never either white or black as they had believed before.

Through reflective writing, the ESL learners have been able to express their ideas and what they think of while writing their essays. Because they have been able to understand what and why they have written the information they have done, it has assisted them in improving the quality of their future writing.

The authors highly encourage ESL teachers to use the genre of reflections in teaching their non-native speakers writing. The reflection technique gives learners confidence in writing since it improves their critical thinking. Once ESL learners develop confidence in their intellectual abilities, their overall view of their abilities improves. This improvement boosts their self-esteem and encourages them to write. The fear of writing diminishes, and they become more willing to learn from their mistakes. Once ESL learners reach this level, they become competent writers.

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Appendix

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS WRITING RUBRICS (GRADES 11-12)   **ARGUMENT**

ARGUMENT					
Description	**5 Exceptional**	**4 Skilled**	**3 Proficient**	**2 Developing**	**1 Inadequate**
Claim: The text introduces a clear, arguable claim that can be supported by reasons and evidence.	The text introduces a compelling claim that is clearly arguable and takes a purposeful position on an issue. The text has a structure and organization that is carefully crafted to support the claim.	The text introduces a precise claim that is clearly arguable and takes an identifiable position on an issue. The text has an effective structure and organization that is aligned with the claim.	The text introduces a claim that is arguable and takes a position. The text has a structure and organization that is aligned with the claim.	The text contains an unclear or emerging claim that suggests a vague position. The text attempts a structure and organization to support the position.	The text contains an unidentifiable claim or vague position. The text has limited structure and organization.
Development: The text provides sufficient data and evidence to back up the claim while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both the claim and counterclaim. The text provides a conclusion that supports the argument.	The text provides convincing and relevant data and evidence to back up the claim and skillfully addresses counterclaims. The conclusion effectively strengthens the claim and evidence.	The text provides sufficient and relevant data and evidence to back up the claim and fairly addresses counterclaims. The conclusion effectively reinforces the claim and evidence.	The text provides data and evidence to back up the claim and addresses counterclaims. The conclusion ties to the claim and evidence.	The text provides data and evidence that attempt to back up the claim and unclearly addresses counterclaims or lacks counterclaims. The conclusion merely restates the position.	The text contains limited data and evidence related to the claim and counterclaims or lacks counterclaims. The text may fail to conclude the argument or position.
Audience: The text anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases about the claim. The text addresses the specific needs of the audience.	The text consistently addresses the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases about the claim. The text addresses the specific needs of the audience.	The text anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases about the claim. The text addresses the specific needs of the audience.	The text considers the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases about the claim. The text addresses the needs of the audience.	The text illustrates an inconsistent awareness of the audience's knowledge level and needs.	The text lacks an awareness of the audience's knowledge level and needs.
Cohesion: The text uses words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, creates cohesion and clarifies the relationship between the claim and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claims and counterclaims.	The text strategically uses words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text. The text explains the relationships between the claim and reasons as well as the evidence. The text strategically links the counterclaims to the claim.	The text skillfully uses words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text. The text identifies the relationship between the claim and reasons as well as the evidence. The text effectively links the counterclaims to the claim.	The text uses words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text. The text connects the claim and reasons. The text links the counterclaims to the claim.	The text contains limited words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text. The text attempts to connect the claim and reasons.	The text contains few, if any, words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text. The text does not connect the claims and reasons.
Style and Conventions: The text presents a formal, objective tone that demonstrates standard English conventions of usage and mechanics while attending to the norms of the discipline (i.e. MLA, APA, etc.).	The text presents an engaging, formal and objective tone. The text intentionally uses standard English conventions of usage and mechanics while attending to the norms of the discipline (i.e. MLA, APA, etc.).	The text presents a formal, objective tone. The text demonstrates standard English conventions of usage and mechanics while attending to the norms of the discipline (i.e. MLA, APA, etc.).	The text presents a formal tone. The text demonstrates standard English conventions of usage and mechanics while attending to the norms of the discipline (i.e. MLA, APA, etc.).	The text illustrates a limited awareness of formal tone. The text demonstrates some accuracy in standard English conventions of usage and mechanics.	The text illustrates a limited awareness of or inconsistent tone. The text demonstrates inaccuracy in standard English conventions of usage and mechanics.

CCSS WRITING RUBRICS 2