

How to Ace TOEFL Writing

By the experts at

Magosh sh

Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[What is Magoosh?](#)

[Meet the Authors](#)

[Writing Section Breakdown](#)

[The Topics You'll Write About](#)

[Essay 1: The Integrated Writing Task](#)

[How to Structure Your Integrated Essay](#)

[Quoting and Paraphrasing](#)

[Essay 2: The Independent Writing Task](#)

[How to Structure Your Independent Essay](#)

[Using Examples](#)

[Common Writing Difficulties](#)

[Brainstorming](#)

[Planning Your Essay](#)

[Using Transitions and Structure](#)

[Varying Sentence Types](#)

[Pacing Strategies](#)

[How to Improve Your Writing Skills](#)

[Additional Resources](#)

Introduction

This eBook is meant to serve as a roadmap that provides a comprehensive overview of the TOEFL Writing Section, combining crucial information on test structure and question types and providing essential strategies and tips for doing the best you can on test day. The information in this eBook is a synthesis of some of the best content on the [Magoosh TOEFL blog](https://toefl.magoosh.com). No matter where you are in your studies, if you're preparing for the TOEFL, this eBook is for you!



What is Magoosh TOEFL?

Magoosh is an [online TOEFL prep course](#) that offers:

- over 100 TOEFL video lessons
- over 500 practice questions with video explanations
- +4 point score increase guarantee
- material created by expert tutors
- e-mail support from our tutors
- personalized statistics based on performance
- access anytime, anywhere from an internet-connected device

The screenshot shows the Magoosh dashboard interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'Magoosh' logo and links for Dashboard, Lessons, Practice, Review, Resources, Help, and Account. The main content area is titled 'Dashboard' and includes a 'Suggested Lessons' sidebar with links for TOEFL overview, grammar, and sample recordings. The 'Quick Practice' section features buttons for Practice Reading (27 questions left), Practice Listening (40 questions left), Practice Speaking (15 questions left), and Practice Writing (0 questions left). Below this is a 'Results Summary' section with a table of performance metrics for Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing, each accompanied by a pie chart showing correct and incorrect percentages.

	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing
Correct	82%	75%	100%	100%
Incorrect	18%	25%	0%	0%
Questions Answered:	57	28	9	10
Your Pace:	1:02	3:08	5:31	0:11
Others' Pace:	1:22	1:51	4:13	9:08

Featured in

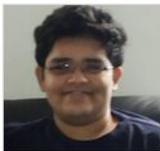


Why Our Students Love Us

These are survey responses sent to us by students after they took the TOEFL. All of these students and many more have used the [Magoosh TOEFL prep course](#) to improve their scores!



What was your overall score on the actual TOEFL?	102
What was your reading score?	27
What was your listening score?	23
What was your speaking score?	24
What was your writing score?	28
How did Magoosh help you?	I used it to find how the flow and the structure of the test is like. I did not have a lot of time to prepare for the test so reading the official ETS book was not advisable. I wanted something quick, interactive and not too pricey. I am glad that I turned to Magoosh! The videos, especially on the writing section gave really good tips and I am proud to say, it is the section that I scored the highest!



What was your overall score on the actual TOEFL?	103
What was your reading score?	26
What was your listening score?	25
What was your speaking score?	24
What was your writing score?	28
How did Magoosh help you?	Magoosh TOEFL is really good and i especially loved the reading and listening questions.



What was your overall score on the actual TOEFL?	110
What was your reading score?	27
What was your listening score?	27
What was your speaking score?	28
What was your writing score?	28
How did Magoosh help you?	<p>Primarily, Magoosh taught me the test much faster than I ever would if I had to do it by myself. Considering I had very little time, and that I had very good experience with Magoosh previously with their GRE product, I thought I'd give it a go. From the time I had registered, I had about 3 weeks to my TOEFL??</p> <p>Being a non-native speaker, it helps to have your academic background in English medium--which I did. So, what I needed was to learn the TOEFL i.e. the test pattern, the kind of questions, how to practice (especially note-taking!), what counts as a good answer, etc. Mr. Lucas Fink of Magoosh did a great job at breaking every section down and explaining the best ways to prepare for and tackle them. Additionally, it was nice to see they had quite a lot of well-made grammar lessons to help those not quite as adept in English, especially in their sentence-making.</p> <p>Although many tend to overlook the need to learn the test, I believe it is crucial to anyone who wants to attain a good score. And for that, I highly recommend prepping with Magoosh. They have helped me familiarize with and understand the TOEFL very quickly--all from the comfort of my home.</p>

Meet the Authors



Lucas Fink is the resident TOEFL expert at Magoosh. Standardized tests and English grammar are two of Lucas's favorite things, and he's been teaching both since 2008. He is a lifelong writer, a choosy reader, a persnickety editor, and a puzzle enthusiast.

David Recine has an MA TESOL and is an expert blogger at Magoosh. He has been teaching ESL since 2007, and has worked with students from every continent. When he's not teaching or writing, David studies Korean, plays with his four year old son, and takes road trips.

Kate Hardin has 6 years of experience teaching foreign language and writes for the Magoosh blog. She graduated from Sewanee in 2012, where she studied and taught German, and recently returned from a year spent teaching English in a northern Russian university.

Writing Section Breakdown

The TOEFL writing section includes an integrated task and an independent task, which work together to test your ability to communicate through writing in an academic environment. This is the last section of the test, and it will take about an hour to complete.

The integrated writing task will require you to read a passage, listen to a lecture, and then write an essay that uses information from both of these sources. The independent task will be on a topic similar to the topics in speaking task #2—that is, it will ask you to use personal experience to explain an opinion that you have.

Scoring

The writing section is scored by two trained graders. Each will give your essays a score on a scale of 1-5. If they give you very different scores, a third grader will review the essay to decide your final score. A high-scoring essay will be well-organized, will give clear arguments and examples to support those arguments, and will include all of the important information from the given sources (on the integrated task, of course). To get a high score, you need to have a clear main point, and everything in your essay should contribute in some way to that point. As in the speaking section, a few minor language errors are not a major problem—this section is about communicating fully, so if your errors don't interfere with communication and are not very many, then you probably don't have much to worry about.

The Scope of Your Essays

Many people try to include too much in their essays. Although it's tempting to explore gray areas and expand on the (admittedly, pretty boring) prompt, most essays are only 200 – 400 words, and there's just not time for that kind of development. Later, I'll write in more detail about how you can structure your essays, but for now, it's just important to

know that the best use of your time and space is to choose one position and to focus on it the whole time.

The Topics You'll Write About

The writing section will include one opinion question and one integrated question on an academic lecture and a reading passage. Both of the topics will be designed to be appropriate for a variety of people. The independent task will require no cultural knowledge and will only assume experience that almost everyone has, with a tendency to choose topics appropriate to students. It will ask you to indicate a preference or choose which of two options you support.

The Official Guide includes a fifteen-page list of topics from old TOEFL tests, so if you can get your hands on a copy of that book, that's the best way to ensure that you're familiar with the topics you may write about in the independent section. In case you can't, here are a few examples:

- Some would say it is more important to have an enjoyable job than to have a job with a high salary. Do you feel this is true or not true? Explain your thoughts using examples.
- Your family and friends are encouraging you to buy a new car. What are some benefits and downsides of purchasing a brand new vehicle? Explain your thoughts using examples.
- What is your favorite place to visit near your home? Explain your thoughts using examples.
- Many workers change jobs a few times in their career. However, a number of workers instead do the same type of work throughout their career. Of these two career paths, which is a better option? In your essay, include supporting details.

The integrated task may be on a wide variety of topics, including business, fine arts, history, anthropology, and so on—as in the reading section, almost everything that could

be taught in an entry-level course is fair game, although you won't encounter the hard sciences, math, and so on, since these would be unnecessarily difficult to write about. Reading about a variety of topics in your free time will help prepare you to write about whatever topic the integrated task may throw at you.

Essay 1: The Integrated Writing Task

Since you'll still be wearing headphones after the Speaking section, the writing section begins with the integrated task, for which you'll need to keep your headphones on. The materials you'll be using to answer the question are a reading passage and a lecture excerpt. Both of these will be longer than the ones you encountered in the integrated speaking questions—the reading passage will give you three minutes to read, and it will go into more detail than the one in the speaking section did. Whereas other integrated reading samples have served mainly to define a key concept, the one in the writing section will describe a process or defend a position. The lecture will then expand on this information by offering examples, explaining in greater detail, or, most likely, describing conflicting viewpoints on the topic introduced in the reading passage.

The question will follow one of several formulas. The question you answer will probably be almost identical to one of these:

- Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to explain how they cast doubt on specific points made in the reading passage.
- Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to explain how they challenge specific claims/arguments made in the reading passage.
- Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to specifically explain how they answer the problems raised in the reading passage.
- Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to specifically explain how they support the explanations in the reading passage.
- Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to specifically explain how they strengthen points made in the reading passage.

The first two are by far the most common; usually, you will hear a lecture that contrasts with the reading.

Altogether you will have 20 minutes to plan and write your integrated essay. The essay will not be long—most responses are between 150 and 225 words—but there’s still no time to waste. Remember that your organization and content are just as important as your language. Your essay needs to have a clear structure with separate points that transition smoothly. Most of all, it’s very important to draw from both the written and the spoken sources. If you only reference the written passage, the very best score your essay can get is a 1. In many ways, the integrated essay is a summary of the lecture that you heard, but be sure to mention *both* sources.

You can take notes as you read and listen. With enough practice you will be able to identify the important points in the reading passage that will most likely be discussed in the lecture, and your notes should reflect that. Then, when you listen, it will be easy to take notes that relate to the ones that are already on your paper. Make as many connections between the two as possible while listening. If you have trouble with this, it's okay—you can take a minute to connect information before you start writing, after the lecture is finished.

How to Structure Your Integrated Essay

Even though the twenty minutes you have to write the integrated essay will fly by, it’s still worth taking a minute or two to write an outline of your own prior to beginning your response (the test proctor will provide as much scratch paper as you need). Even jotting just a few lines that connect parts of your notes and circle the main examples you want to cover will give you the guidance you need to stay on task when writing your response.

Below I've written an outline that demonstrates an effective structure to use on the exam. I highly recommend that you practice writing with this outline as your guide, at least at first. Once you've gotten some feedback and have some good practice under your belt, you can deviate from it. At first, though, it's good to know the rules before you break them, and to have a structure you can rely on when test day comes.

- I. I. Introduction
 - A. General statement about the relationship between the resources you heard and read.
 - B. Short description of the structure of the lecture
- II. Body
 - A. Paragraph on first point
 - 1. Paraphrase the professor's point
 - 2. Contrast/compare with the reading
 - 3. *Give extra detail on the professor's point (optional)*
 - B. Paragraph on second point
 - 1. Paraphrase the professor's point
 - 2. Contrast/compare with the reading
 - 3. *Give extra detail on the professor's point (optional)*
 - C. Paragraph on third point
 - 1. Paraphrase the professor's point
 - 2. Contrast/compare with the reading
 - 3. *Give extra detail on the professor's point (optional)*
- III. Conclusion
 - A. *Restate the relationship between the two sources (optional)*

Quoting and Paraphrasing

Plagiarism and copying mean different things in different countries and education systems. What may be an entirely respectable way to draw from outside sources in your native culture may be considered immoral in the USA, or vice versa. Since US universities tend to have very strict policies about copying (most universities will at least fail an assignment that has plagiarized material; the most extreme universities will expel students if they plagiarize even once), it's important to get used to the American perspective on this issue before you start doing coursework.

On the TOEFL, fortunately, the matter is a little bit simpler, because you don't need to incorporate outside sources into your essays, and you don't need to use in-text citations beyond making it clear which information came from the lecture, and which information came from the reading sample on integrated tasks. But you will have a text, and it may be tempting to copy directly from that text. But that is **a bad idea**. You do not need to copy the exact words of **anything** on the TOEFL. Instead, you'll want to learn how to paraphrase. Here are some tips to help you stay on the right side of the border between using sources appropriately and copying them.

Work from Your Notes

I've written over and over again about how important it is to take notes. As you do this, though, try to avoid writing exactly what was said. Use shorthand and your own words for the thoughts in the lecture or text. If you don't copy the materials word-for-word into your notes, it's very unlikely that you'll accidentally copy something inappropriately.

If you do put a direct quote into your notes or response, put quotation marks around it so that it's clear to you and to the graders that you did not come up with that phrase yourself. Do not do this with long sentences, though—quotes should be just a couple of

words, maximum, and only in special situations. If you're not sure about including a quote, then don't.

Change Direct Quotes to Indirect Quotes

By turning direct speech into indirect speech, you dramatically improve your ability to paraphrase the content of conversations. In case you have no idea what I'm talking about, here's an example:

John said, "I think the university's new policy is a bad idea." = Direct speech

John said that the university's new policy was a bad idea. = Indirect speech

But go one step further: change some of the wording, too!

John said that the changes the university made to their policy seemed like a mistake. =

Paraphrasing

Essay 2: The Independent Writing Task

After you've finished the integrated essay, you'll move immediately on to the independent essay. For this essay, you'll be asked a question about your opinion on a given issue or topic. Your essay should explain your position on that issue. Usually, the independent essay is a little longer than the integrated one, since you'll have more time to write it (30 minutes as opposed to 20).

There's No Right or Wrong Answer

Essay graders are told to accept any viewpoint, so it's not possible to answer the question incorrectly. The most important thing is to support your argument and write as clearly as possible. Sometimes, this may even mean defending the opposite of the opinion that you actually have. If your true opinion is based on emotional arguments or abstractions rather than concrete facts or personal experiences, it may be better to choose the side that is easier to support. Usually, your actual opinion will be easier to support (there's a reason you believe it, after all!), but it's never a bad idea to practice defending positions that you don't believe in your practice essays, as this will help you learn to defend arguments well.

Focus on the Answer

Most independent essays are about 300 words long; the best are significantly longer. But bear in mind that every sentence you write should be related to your thesis. Another side of this is that you shouldn't go overboard in your examples. Pick one or two that demonstrate your point really well, and spend a short paragraph explaining how each of them fits into the topic. You won't have time to provide much background information about your examples, and you probably won't want to pick more than two or maybe three. It's definitely better to deal with a small number of topics in-depth than to list a bunch of different examples without explaining them. Making the relationship between an example and your main idea clear is absolutely key.

Structure Your Essay Well

For now, there are three main points I want to make. First of all, start and end your essay by stating your opinion so it's very clear to the reader where you're going. Second of all, take a few minutes at the beginning to jot down your ideas and make a short outline to keep you on track through the writing process. Although this may seem like a waste of time, it will probably save you valuable minutes in the long run, since you'll spend less time thinking about what you want to say or reorganizing your sentences when you realize that something doesn't make sense. Finally, don't forget to use transitions to make the essay flow better.

How to Structure Your Independent Essay

The structure of your independent essay is going to be at least a little different from that of the integrated essay you will have just finished. While your task in the integrated essay was to highlight similarities and contrasts, your task in this essay will be simply to defend your opinion. Because of this difference, you'll probably find it hard to write an independent essay in the same way that you write your integrated essay.

Introduction and Conclusion

I've mentioned before that you should start and end by stating your opinion. That's the easiest way of saying that it's important to have a clear introduction and conclusion. Without these, the reader may be confused, as your argument will lack context, and your essay will be awkward to read.

Checking Your Work

You'll want to have an idea of the structure of your essay even before you start writing, so take a minute or two at the beginning of the writing period to jot down an outline. Then you can jump straight into writing. If possible, though, try to have all your thoughts on the screen at about the 27-minute mark. Use the last three minutes to read through your essay again in its entirety and be sure that it flows well. Since your mind will probably jump around a bit as you're writing, it's really important that you leave yourself this time at the end to smooth everything out. This is also a good opportunity to check for spelling/grammar errors and typos.

Here's a brief outline you can model your essays on. This isn't something that you absolutely must follow every time to get a high score. It's just a learning tool and something to fall back on if you don't know how to tackle your topic on test day.

I. Introduction

- A. Very general statement about the world
- B. Specify the topic
- C. *Optional: show the other side*
- D. Give your opinion

II. Body

- A. State your first reason
 - 1. Explain the reason if needed
 - 2. Give a concrete example or detail
 - 3. *Optional: Second example or detail*
 - 4. Explain why the example supports your opinion
- B. State your second reason
 - 1. Explain the reason if needed
 - 2. Give a concrete example or detail

3. *Optional second example or detail*
4. Explain why the example supports your opinion

III. Conclusion

- A. Restate main idea
- B. *Optional: Reference reasons or opposite opinion*
- C. Real-world result of your argument

Using Examples

You may have noticed by now that the strength of your essay, particularly in the independent task, comes partly from the quality of your examples. The type of example that's best suited to your essay will depend on the topic. Let's talk about some common sources of examples you can use to support your essay thesis.

Personal Experience

Probably 80% of independent essay arguments come from personal experience, because it's your own experiences that typically shape your opinions. You can draw on your friends' stories and your family, in addition to those things you've personally done or seen. Personal experience arguments are particularly useful in questions that deal with education, raising children, and general lifestyle like questions like these:

- Your family and friends are encouraging you to buy a new car. What are some benefits and downsides of purchasing a brand new vehicle? Explain your thoughts using examples.
- What are some good things and bad things about continuing to live with your parents? In your essay, include supporting details.

Famous Person or Thing

You can also draw examples from well-known stories and personalities, whether they be historical or fictional. If you choose for a fictional or literary example, make it clear that although it's fictional, it demonstrates something that is applicable to real life. This is a great tactic for questions of national interest and for ones like these:

- If you could choose any place to visit in the world, where would you live? Explain your thoughts using examples.

- Who is your favorite singer or singing group? Why? Use specific reasons and details to support your choice.

Knowledge of the Subject

You don't need to have any prior knowledge to answer your TOEFL essay questions, but if you do know something about the topic you're given, you may want to draw on that knowledge. This is likely to be a more successful tactic than personal experiences or famous events when your question deals with a social or political issue like one of these:

- Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Modern mass media has helped people to be better informed than before. Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.
- Extracurricular activities (such as sports, band, debate, or a hobby club) can enhance a student's education. What is an extracurricular activity they you would recommend to students? Why? Use reasons and specific examples to support your choice.

Using Examples Well

Simply having a good example isn't enough. You have to use it well in your writing. That means connecting the concrete example to the more abstract ideas—your opinion or the reasons for that opinion. Say, for instance, I answer the following question about technology:

It could be argued that technology makes our lives easier and simpler. But there are certainly people who feel life has become more complicated due to modern inventions. Which opinion do you agree with? In your essay, include supporting details.

Here's my main idea:

Technology has improved our lives.

And then I give you a reason why I think that:

It has made long-distance communication better.

Now, I can easily bring up a specific example to support that reason:

For instance, I live many hundreds of miles away from my parents, but I talk to them by video chat every month.

All of that is great, but I need to make the connections between the parts. The most important thing I need to do is explain my example. Here are a couple of sentences that would help:

The technology behind the video chat is very new. Twenty years ago, before we had that technology, I wouldn't have been able to see my parents' faces so often. That change in technology has allowed me to communicate better with people I love even though I'm far away.

Notice how this makes a clear connection between the specific example of video chat and the general idea of technological changes improving my life.

And of course, transition words (such as "for example," and "for instance") and referencing your previous sentences (such as "That change in technology") are very, very important for writing smoothly. Be sure to link your thoughts together!

Common Writing Difficulties

Let's look at some of the problems I see frequently in student essays. I hope that you'll be able to look out for these pitfalls in your own essays so you don't make the same mistakes!

Basic Punctuation Rules

The basics can cause trouble if they're not correct. Names and the first words in sentences begin with a capital letter; very few other words do. Don't capitalize words that aren't names. "I" has to be capitalized, of course, but other pronouns do not. All sentences end with either a question mark, a period, or an exclamation point. Although these are some of the first facts we learn when we study writing, it's easy to forget about them when working on a high-stakes essay. And while it's true that a few small typos aren't likely to affect your score, consistently ignoring basic rules of mechanics can. So take extra care when proofreading your essay to be sure that you're following all the little rules.

Slow Typing

You could write three practice essays every day for a month (disclaimer: writing three essays every day is probably not the best use of your study time) and still have trouble on the TOEFL writing section if you're not comfortable with a QWERTY keyboard. It seems sensible to spend all of your study time improving your English, but all the English knowledge in the world won't help you if you can't get your essay typed and edited within the time limit. So if you already know how to touch-type in your native language, then start practicing with an English keyboard. If you don't type well in any language, find a self-study program and start practicing regularly, without looking at the keyboard. Just practicing for 5 or 10 minutes a day will put you in a much better position on test day.

Using Incomplete Sentences

I've written about [how to make a sentence](#) and how not to make a sentence ([part 1](#) and [part 2](#)) before. Writing sentence fragments and run-on sentences are some of the most common problems in TOEFL practice essays. Using ungrammatical sentences confuses the reader, slows him/her down, and makes it much harder to understand your argument. If what makes a complete sentence is different in English than in your native language, it's a great idea to do a lot of reading to become more used to how sentences in English really work. Grammar books are a great aid, of course, but nothing is a better teacher than real world experience. Keep reading!

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an essential part of the essay planning process. It can help you pick a topic to write about, choose which side to support in a persuasive essay, and come up with supporting details for that side. You may think of brainstorming as a group of people, such as TV script writers, sitting around a table, bouncing ideas around. And while brainstorming in a group is a great way to open all the doors and possibilities you have, brainstorming on paper by yourself can also get your creativity flowing.

There are a couple of rules to remember when brainstorming. First and most importantly, there are no bad ideas. You should at least consider everything that pops into your head, even if it doesn't support the side you plan to take or doesn't seem like a strong example. If it seems like something you could write a paragraph about, write it down, because it keeps your mind moving forward rather than stagnating. Second, keep your brainstorming topic broad. Don't choose your opinion at this point; consider every angle and possible argument. You can choose your side later, when you start to actually plan your essay. For now, you just want to generate as many ideas as possible, putting the most interesting ones on paper.

Practicing Brainstorming

I recommend that you practice brainstorming in what I call an ideal-conditions essay. Instead of sticking to the 20-30 minute time limit of the TOEFL, give yourself as much time as you need. Spend two or three minutes brainstorming, then five or ten minutes planning, then write for half an hour or so, then reread, edit, and refine until the essay is as good as you think it can get. Although timed practice is essential, writing in ideal conditions will help cement proper grammar and mechanics and will help you see what you're really capable of. Below I've written about a couple of brainstorming techniques you may find useful. I recommend you try all of them at least once so that you can see

which one works best for you. It may be that different brainstorming styles work best for certain types of essays, and this is a great thing to know as you practice. So grab a stack of blank paper, and get started!

Mind Map

If you're a visual learner, [mind mapping](#) will probably be a great brainstorming technique for you. Draw a circle in the middle of your paper and write your prompt in it. Then draw lines coming out of the circle, like a sun. At the end of each line, write a statement or argument that relates to the central prompt. Draw lines coming off of each of these statements, and write supporting details and examples on those lines. Continue doing this until you've exhausted all the possibilities you can think of for the topic.

Free-writing

Free-writing is a great technique if you draw a blank—that is, if you have no idea what to write about. Even in the middle of writing practice essays, a mini-free-writing session can help you recover from writer's block. To free-write, write your prompt or central question in a document, then start writing whatever you think about. Keep typing at all times—if you don't know what to write, then write about how you don't know what to write. If your mind wanders, then write that your mind has wandered, then try to get back on track. It will probably feel stupid and unproductive at first, but there's a reason that some teachers call free-writing "writing the mind alive": after a few minutes of free-writing, you'll find that your ideas are much clearer, it's easier for you to focus on the topic, and you'll have at least a couple of solid arguments and examples written down, which, for the TOEFL, is all you need.

In Your Head

On your actual TOEFL essays, you won't want to spend time brainstorming *then* planning as two separate stages. Instead, it's better to combine them. There are two ways to do that. First, you might simply spend ~30 seconds or a minute thinking about the topic

before you write down a plan. Imagine this like a free-writing exercise without the writing: you want to think as freely and as randomly as possible.

The other way to do this is to start writing immediately as you brainstorm, then cross off (or erase) the ideas that you aren't going to use. In that method, the crossing off is the "planning" step.

Planning Your Essay

Assuming you spend the first few moments brainstorming mentally, you'll need to spend some time writing a plan for what content you actually want to include. The goal of planning is to narrow down your focus, choose the strongest arguments, and decide how to structure your essay so that once you start writing, the words and ideas will flow naturally.

On the TOEFL, you'll probably use about two minutes to plan your essay. That's not much time, so it's a good idea to practice both untimed and timed essay planning. The former will refine your skills (like the ideal-condition brainstorming) so that good essay planning will become an automatic process; the latter will help you learn how much you really need to plan in order to create an effective essay so you don't waste time.

Essay Structure

Most essays have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Typically, there is one paragraph each for the introduction and conclusion, and a minimum of three paragraphs in the body. On the TOEFL, however, you probably won't have time for a five-paragraph essay unless you have superhuman writing skills. We highly recommend using two body paragraphs for the independent essay (for a total of four paragraphs) and one or two body paragraphs for the integrated essay, possibly skipping the conclusion, too (for a total of two or three paragraphs).

The Planning Stage

Now that you've decided on the basic structure of your essay, let's talk about planning what you're actually going to write. First, pick the best ideas from your brainstorm. You'll want two: one for each body paragraph. They will both relate to the same main idea (which you'll write about in the introduction paragraph). On the computer—not on your note paper—write your thesis and arguments quickly. They don't have to be full, perfect

sentences; just write the ideas as quickly as you can. Include any background information and details that you can think of at the same time.

After you have two main ideas and a some small details or thoughts, you should have enough of a framework to start writing! Above the notes, start your actual writing, using full sentences and careful grammar.

Using Transitions and Structure

Even a well thought out essay with great arguments and support can score low if it lacks “flow.” You need to connect your ideas in a way that guides the reader through your essay. In addition to making your argument seem stronger to the reader, good use of transitions and structure will just make your essay more pleasant to read. Let’s talk about how you can use structure and transitions to make your essay as convincing as possible.

Structure

Your essay should begin by engaging the reader (making them care about what you have to say) and stating your thesis. After that, you need to support your thesis with specific examples, details, and information intended to inform and/or convince the reader. Finally, you need to restate your thesis and tell the reader why it matters. On the paragraph level, transitions can be used to smooth your writing out and make the jump from one paragraph to the next less jarring.

Transitions

To decide what transition to use in a given situation, first look at your essay as a whole. How is it organized? If you present arguments that build on each other, use transitions listed under “Similarity” below. Or maybe you present one idea and then the opposite opinion. If so, you will find that transition words of contrast help. And if you list your examples, transition words of sequence will make this relationship clear.

Common Transitions

SIMILARITY: similarly, like, as, likewise, in the same way, in addition, plus

CONTRAST: nevertheless, yet, still, on the other hand, despite, although

TIME/LISTING: First, second, etc...; next, then; at first; after that; currently; simultaneously

EMPHASIS: actually, even, indeed, especially, in fact

CONCLUSION: In conclusion, finally, therefore, thus

Different Grammatical Structures

Although two words/phrases from any one category above might have similar meanings, they are not all the same grammatically. You must learn *how* each word or phrase is used. [A good dictionary with example sentences](#) will help.

Practice

You can practice some of these words by combining each pair of sentences below; you can change the order of the sentences or rephrase them slightly if you want. How many different transitions can you use for each pair? How does the choice of transition affect the meaning of the sentence?

- My family has always lived in the same house. We travel often.
- Most people who have pets prefer either dogs or cats. I have a pet elephant.
- I study anthropology. My sister is interested in anthropology.
- We built a raft. We went on an adventure.

Varying Sentence Types

All sentences are made up of clauses. In fact, a **clause** might be an entire sentence by itself. There are two types of clauses: dependent and independent. The difference is simple: independent clauses have a subject and a verb, and they express a complete thought. Dependent clauses don't express a complete thought. Often, dependent clauses begin with a subordinating conjunction, which is a word that makes the sentence not a complete thought. Let's look at some examples.

Here are some independent clauses:

- The dog chased the elephant.
- Nothing could be better than this!

And here are some dependent clauses:

- If the dog catches the elephant
- Because I heard this exciting news

As you can see, the dependent clauses are incomplete; they cannot stand alone as sentences, whereas independent clauses can.

Why Do Clauses Matter?

English sentences come in four basic structures. We categorize them based on how they use dependent and independent clauses. In order to understand the structures, we must understand the pieces. Clauses are the most important pieces.

Simple Sentences

A simple sentence is exactly one independent clause. So the sentences I wrote as examples of independent clauses are also perfect examples of simple sentences:

- The dog chased the elephant.

- Nothing could be better than this!

Compound Sentences

A compound sentence combines two independent clauses, so it will have at least two subjects and two verbs. The two clauses must be joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction. Coordinating conjunctions include “and,” “but,” “or,” “nor,” and “so.”

Examples:

- The elephant was minding its own business, **and** the dog decided to chase it.

(The elephant was minding its own business. The dog decided to chase it.)

- The elephant was much larger, **but** it ran away.

(The elephant was much larger. It ran away.)

- The dog knew that the elephant was weak, **so** he decided to see how far the elephant could run.

(The dog knew that the elephant was weak. He decided to see how far the elephant could run.)

Complex Sentences

A complex sentence is created by combining an independent clause with a dependent clause. You can do this using a subordinating conjunction (*after, although, because, while, when, if, until, whether*, etc.). In the following examples, I’ve marked the dependent clause with (DC) and the independent clause with (IC).

- **As** the elephant grew tired (DC), the dog became more excited (IC).
- I went outside to investigate (IC) **after** I heard terrible noises in the yard (DC).

Compound-Complex sentences

Compound-complex sentences, as you might have guessed, contain at least two independent clauses and one dependent clause.

- Imagine my surprise (IC) **when** I stepped outside (DC) and I saw my beloved pet elephant acting scared of a tiny dog (IC)!

(Note that the second independent clause is actually a PART of the dependent starting with "when." It is compound, but acts as one dependent clause.)

- **Although** I thought it was a bit funny (DC), I wanted to help the elephant (IC), but **when** my dog bit me (DC), I gave up and went back inside (IC).
- *(In this case, the second independent clause that starts with "but" also contains a dependent clause that starts with "when." Meanwhile, the first independent clause starting with "I wanted" has a dependent clause attached to it, starting with "although." Similar to how a dependent clause can contain an independent clause, the reverse is also possible: an independent clause can contain a dependent clause.)*

Why This Matters

Part of your score on the TOEFL will be based on your use of a variety of language. Not only will varying your sentences demonstrate your command of advanced grammar, but it will also make your essay much more interesting to read. So practice breaking complicated sentences into simple ones and combining simple sentences into complex, compound, and compound-complex sentences. Once you've mastered the mechanics of how each sentence type is formed, you can use them to give your essays a boost.

Pacing Strategies

Free Your Mind Up

It can be tricky to think of something to write about when you're under a lot of pressure. But on the TOEFL, you really do need to think fast. Generally, the most important part is to decide on an answer quickly, and then consider every thought you have. Even if an idea seems ridiculous at first, don't reject it. At least, don't reject it immediately. A ridiculous idea can often turn into a very good one if given a little bit of time and thought. Welcome any idea, and brainstorm as freely as possible. Don't get stuck on one path, looking for one idea or reason that you can't find. Explore all paths.

This can seem time consuming at first, but if you brainstorm well in the beginning you'll have a better basis to write your essay on, and that will save you time in total.

Have a Formula Prepared

The essays on the TOEFL are pretty predictable. Although it's not a good idea to use exactly the same format with no regard to the natural flow of your argument, it's very possible to slightly adapt the essay format to suit your question. So during your practice sessions, spend some time learning a few essay formats and practice manipulating them. When you get to the test, you'll be so experienced at writing short essays in this way that you won't have to stop and think about what to say next.

Study Synonyms and Multiple Ways of Expressing the Same Idea

You can lose a lot of time trying to think of the exact word or phrase that you want. It's a terrible feeling to need "the perfect word" and not be able to remember it, but it's important to keep moving. Avoid falling into this trap by learning new vocabulary through synonyms and equivalent expressions. You'll remember synonyms most easily if you collect them gradually, as you encounter them in life, but sometimes there isn't time for this. In that case, you can check out a thesaurus to get more ideas for words to learn.

Be aware, though, that thesauruses are easy to abuse. Don't copy and learn every single word in a list, since some of them will carry specific meanings that you don't intend or will be for very different contexts. Instead, when writing, use the thesaurus to find words that you recognize but couldn't remember. If you decide to learn totally new words from a thesaurus, be sure that you look them up to get exact definitions and example sentences.

Stick to Your Guidelines

Break your essay down into several parts and give each part a time limit. For instance, you may spend 2 minutes planning your independent essay, 24 minutes writing it, and 4 minutes revising it. Of course, you don't have to follow these guidelines precisely—if you finish planning early or need 30 extra seconds to complete your last thought, then feel free to do so. Just be sure that the advantage you gain is worth the time it takes. Don't sacrifice all of your editing time for a third body paragraph that you don't need, for example.

How to Improve Your Writing Skills

For a lot of people, writing is the least rewarding skill to study. Unlike reading and listening, it's not easy to track your progress, and the way that we practice writing tends to be pretty dry and boring. I'm going to try to correct this by offering some ways on how to practice writing for the TOEFL, and how to make this practice more rewarding, and hopefully even enjoyable.

Read Other People's Essays

You're probably already reading a lot of nonfiction to prepare for the reading section of the test. Unfortunately, the material you're probably reading for that may not be the most helpful material from which to study writing. After all, if you can already write like a professional, why are you even reading this post? You can get a better feel for what the TOEFL requires—and also get inside the test scorers' heads—by reading other student work. The [ETS Official Guide](#) is a great resource: it not only includes sample essays, but also grades them and tells you why each essay received the grade that it did.

Learn to Pre-write

You won't have time to create a full-fledged outline during the test itself, but it's definitely a good idea to spend a few minutes sketching out the structure of your essay before you start writing. I suggest that you practice outlining in two ways: first of all, find a writing topic and outline it *instead of* writing a full essay. This is a skill you can perfect through repetition. Don't write the essay—just move on and plan the next prompt! You can also take existing essays or articles and use them to create an outline. Then you can look at how the author structured their work, and decide what you like or dislike about it.

Summarize Everything

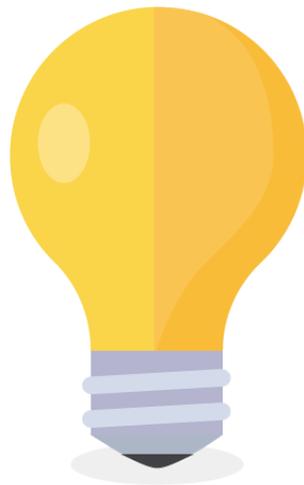
Okay, so maybe you won't actually summarize *everything* that you hear or read, but you should do this as often as possible. In order to improve your reading and listening skills,

you should be reading in English and listening to native speakers (in lectures, podcasts, documentaries, etc.) regularly. If you're at home or by a computer, take about ten minutes afterward to summarize what you read or heard. If you wrote an outline, too, that's even better—you're practicing several different TOEFL skills all in one exercise.

No tutor? No problem!

One of the major barriers to practicing writing is that you can't really assess your own writing. Some people solve this problem by hiring a private tutor, but there are other solutions if that's not your style. Do you have friends who are studying your native language? If so, see if they're interested in a language swap. Not only will this allow you both to get help from a native speaker (and one that you like talking to!), but also you can help each other stay on track by encouraging each other to write a set number of essays each week. If you don't have that kind of resource, try using a website like [lang-8.com](https://www.lang-8.com), which provides a network for language learners and native speakers to correct each other's writing.

Additional Resources



Study Plans

Whether you're planning to study for a long time, or you've waited until the last minute, it helps to add some structure to your TOEFL study plan to keep you organized and on track. Planning out a study schedule is the key first step in scoring well on the TOEFL.

To help take the guesswork out of all of this, we've created some schedules to help you get started.

- [Two-Week Study Schedule](#)
- [One Month Study Schedule](#)
- [Preparing for the TOEFL in 20-30 Minutes per Day](#)



Pro-tip: Before getting started with your study plan, we recommend reading our top tips for [making the most of your TOEFL study schedule](#).

Free eBooks

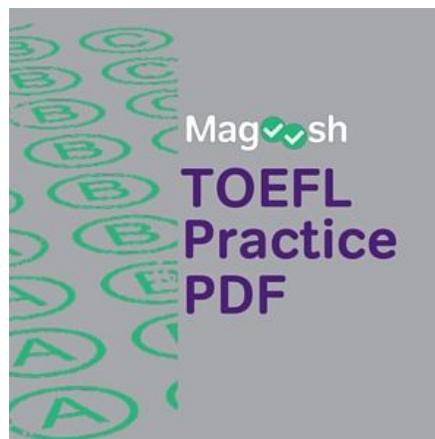
[Guide to the TOEFL iBT](#)

This 150-page eBook covers all aspects of your TOEFL iBT preparation.



[TOEFL Practice Questions](#)

This 75-page PDF contains practice questions for every section of the exam, as well as detailed explanations for each question.



Vocabulary Resources

Learning vocabulary helps with every aspect of the exam - speaking, reading, listening, and writing! So, you should make some time in your schedule to work on your vocabulary. Here are some resources to help!

[Free Vocabulary Flashcards](#)

Use these free flashcards to master the 200 most important words on the exam.



[\[eBook\] TOEFL Vocabulary Comics](#)

In this eBook, we help you memorize and review vocabulary words with the help of mnemonic devices. To make these words more fun and memorable, these mnemonics are illustrated with entertaining comics, like this one:



Infographics

Here at Magoosh, we *love* to make infographics -- they're both fun and educational! Here are our two TOEFL infographics:

[TOEFL Scores for Top Universities](#)

What score do you need on the exam? In this graphic, we provide the required scores for many of the top universities in the US. See the entire infographic [here](#).



[TOEFL Speaking](#)

If you need more help figuring out the speaking section, be sure to check this one out!



Book Reviews

There are many TOEFL review books on the market that promise to give you “the key” to acing the TOEFL. That’s a big promise!

And while it’s true that many of these books provide excellent strategies and tips for TOEFL success, the real “key” to acing the TOEFL is experience with English learned through repeated practice.

So, which books provide the best resources, the best strategies, and the best practice? Check out our book reviews and find the books that are right for you.

To make your life a little bit easier, we’ve organized our reviews in order from most to least highly recommended. Click on each link for more detailed reviews!

Recommended

- [The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test \(4th Edition\)](#)
- [Official TOEFL iBT Tests](#)
- [The Complete Guide to the TOEFL Test](#)
- [Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL Test](#)

Okay

- [Barron’s TOEFL iBT](#)
- [Delta’s Key to the TOEFL iBT Advanced Skill Practice](#)
- [Oxford TOEFL](#)

Not Recommended

- [Kaplan TOEFL iBT Premier 2014](#)
- [The Princeton Review’s Cracking the TOEFL iBT \(2014\)](#)

The end.

If you liked this eBook, sign up for [Magoosh TOEFL](#). Prep smart, go far. Enjoy the ride.

Happy studying!