



SOJALLE: Sumatran Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Education
Volume 1, Number 1, Pages 52-67

<https://sojalle.com/index.php/san/index>

Exploring University Students' Essays Writing Performance Using Canva-Based Assignments: Insights from a General English Course

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Publisher:

**The Sumatran Academic Network Foundation, Indonesia
2025**

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received

August 2, 2025

Revised

September 17, 2025

Accepted

September 18, 2025

Keywords:

Canva-Based Assignments

EFL students

English course

Essay writing

Writing performance

Conflict of interest:

None

Correspondence:

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, digital platforms have been increasingly integrated into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, but limited attention has been paid to their role in shaping students' writing performance in higher education, particularly in general English courses. Addressing this gap, the present study investigated university students' writing performance in Canva-based assignments, with a focus on both overall outcomes and performance across five key components: content, organization, vocabulary, mechanics, and communicative achievement. The study employed a descriptive quantitative design involving 48 students enrolled in a general English course during the 2024/2025 academic year. Students' essays were assessed by three independent raters using a standardized rubric, and the data were analyzed through descriptive statistics to capture mean scores, standard deviations, and distribution across

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performance categories. The results showed that most students performed at the *good* category, with fewer students reaching the Excellent category or falling into the Fair, Poor, and Very Poor categories. Among the five components, vocabulary demonstrated the highest mean score and the lowest variability. In contrast, content and communicative achievement recorded the lowest mean scores and greater variability, indicating challenges in idea development and fulfilling communicative purposes. These findings indicate that Canva supports lexical development in EFL writing but has a limited impact on higher-order skills such as coherence and communicative clarity. In summary, Canva-based assignments can serve as a valuable tool in enhancing certain dimensions of writing performance, but their effectiveness depends on integration with explicit instruction and scaffolding. Limitations of the study include the use of a single institution and a descriptive design, which restricts generalizability. Overall, the study contributes to digital-assisted EFL writing literature and guides educators in leveraging Canva in higher education.



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How to cite (APA Style):

Sepyanda, M., Mutiya, F. K., Putri, E. Y., Zahraa, S. A., & Efendi, N. (2025). Exploring university students' essay writing performance using Canva-based assignments: Insights from a general English course. *SOJALLE: Sumatran Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Education*, 1(1), 52-67. <https://sojalle.com/index.php/san/index>

1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, educational technology tools are increasingly being integrated into language teaching in the EFL context, particularly in essay writing. Visual and design-based media offer new possibilities for enhancing learner engagement, creativity, and multimodal literacy, which are critical in developing writing skills (Kartika et al., 2024). Among such tools, Canva has gained popularity as a platform that allows students to combine visual design with textual content, potentially facilitating idea generation, organization, and motivation. While platforms like Canva can support idea generation and motivation, writing itself remains a complex skill that requires more than visual or lexical enhancement (Bardatillah et al., 2023). Effective writing involves not only grammatical and lexical competence but also content development, organization, and clear communication (Fodil-Cherif, 2021)

Recent studies have begun to explore the effects of Canva in various writing contexts. For instance, Susilawati et al. (2024) conducted a quasi-experimental study comparing control and experimental groups of Indonesian EFL students, finding that Canva use significantly reduced writing errors and improved overall writing skill

compared to traditional media. Another relevant work by Hafidzin et al. (2024) examined the effectiveness of Canva across different learning styles, showing that Canva improved students' writing in recount texts for visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. In high school settings, Syarifah et al. (2024) found that digital posters based on Canva significantly improved students' narrative writing ability compared to conventional methods. These studies suggest positive outcomes of Canva in enhancing writing skills, particularly in aspects such as error reduction, organization, and engagement.

Beyond writing accuracy and performance, studies have also considered student perceptions and motivational effects of Canva-based learning. Utami and Djamdjuri (2024) reported that high school students held generally positive perceptions of using Canva in writing classes: they felt more motivated, found the tool helpful in organizing ideas, though some challenges, such as premium features and design time, emerged. Similarly, in a study on integrating Canva and similar digital design tools in ELT, Kartika et al. (2024) synthesised findings that Canva contributes to learner autonomy, creativity, and supports students to produce more visually appealing multimodal texts. However, these studies show that the effects of Canva are mediated by factors like access to technology, student digital literacy, and the amount of training or scaffolding provided.

Despite these promising findings, there remain significant gaps in the literature. First, much of the existing research has been conducted in secondary school settings rather than in higher education contexts, especially general English courses, which may have different learner profiles and demands. Second, while some studies have examined overall writing performance or error reduction, fewer have disaggregated performance across distinct writing components such as content, organization, language use, mechanics, and communicative achievement. Third, learning styles and perceptions have been considered, but other potential moderating factors (e.g., prior writing ability, amount of exposure to Canva, instructor scaffolding) are less understood.

In addition, many studies use pre-post designs without control groups or lack rigorous statistical analysis beyond basic t-tests, limiting the generalizability of their findings. Some studies also rely heavily on qualitative data (interviews, perceptions), which are valuable but do not always show quantitative evidence of effect sizes or detailed component analysis. For example, the study of Salsabila et al. (2024) used a quasi-experimental design to show a significant effect of Canva on narrative writing but focused mainly on overall writing ability rather than on separate writing components. Moreover, few studies have been conducted in Indonesian university general English courses during the specific semester(s), meaning temporal and institutional variation is underexplored.

Another underexplored area is the nature of assignments given via Canva. Previous research has often focused on specific genres across secondary schools, such as narrative texts, recount texts, or reports (e.g., Susilawati et al., 2024; Hafidzin et al.,

2024). Little attention has been given to more “everyday” or general English assignments (e.g., essays, reflections, summaries) typical in general courses, where students are not necessarily majoring in English or writing. Also, the role of assignment design—template use, visual scaffolding, and amount of freedom in design—on writing performance has not been fully investigated.

Furthermore, underexplored is the relationship between students' perceptions of using Canva (motivation, perceived usefulness, ease of use) and their actual writing performance, measured in quantifiable terms. Many studies report that students like Canva and feel more motivated (e.g., Utami & Djamdjuri, 2024; Kartika et al., 2024). But whether these positive perceptions correspond to measurable gains in specific writing components remains scarcely investigated in university general courses. Understanding that relation could help in refining assignment design to maximize benefit.

In response to these gaps, this study aims to quantitatively analyze the writing performance of university students in Canva-based EFL assignments within a general English (MKU) course during the odd semester 2025/2026. Specifically, the study will assess students' performance across several writing components (content, organization, vocabulary, mechanics, communicative achievement) when using Canva as media for assignments. The study will also examine whether students' perceptions of Canva (e.g., usefulness, ease, motivation) correlate with their writing performance.

By focusing on university students rather than secondary school students, and on general English courses (MKU) rather than skill or genre-specific courses, this research contributes data from higher education settings that are underrepresented in current literature. Moreover, by breaking down writing performance into components and measuring with a rigorous quantitative design (statistical comparisons), the study adds precision to claims about what aspects of writing are most influenced by Canva.

Theoretically, this research will contribute to understanding how multimodal design tools like Canva mediate writing competence in an EFL context, potentially linking with theories of multimodal learning, visual scaffolding, and communicative language teaching. Practically, results will inform instructors of general English courses how to better design Canva-based assignments to maximize student performance, including which components need more support. It will also shed light on students' perceptions and how these perceptions might moderate performance, which can guide pedagogical decisions and policy about integrating EdTech tools in university curricula.

Based on the above discussion, this study is designed to analyze the writing performance of university students in Canva-based EFL assignments within a general English course. The focus lies on examining their performance across the main components of academic writing, including content, organization, vocabulary, mechanics, and communicative achievement. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study are formulated as follows:

1. What is the level of writing performance demonstrated by university students enrolled in the General English course during the odd semester of the 2025/2026 academic year after completing Canva-based assignments?
2. Which writing components (content, organization, vocabulary/language use, mechanics, communicative achievement) are most strongly demonstrated in students' writing after completing Canva-based assignments?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to analyze university students' writing performance in descriptive essay writing using the Canva-based EFL assignments. Descriptive quantitative design is widely used to present systematic, factual, and accurate information about a population's characteristics or phenomena under investigation (Ary et al., 2019). It allows the researcher to focus on numerical data, presenting findings in the form of scores and statistical summaries. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), quantitative research is appropriate when the goal is to measure specific outcomes, such as students' writing performance, and to examine differences among components objectively. In this study, the design enabled the researcher to assess students' writing outcomes across key components, including content, organization, vocabulary/language use, mechanics, and communicative achievement.

Participants of the Study

The participants of this study were 48 students enrolled in the General English course during the odd semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The sample consisted of 12 male students and 36 female students, representing a typical class composition in general English courses. All participants were assigned Canva-based writing tasks as part of their course requirements.

Instruments and Procedures

The primary instrument used in this study was a writing performance rubric specifically designed for Canva-based assignments. The rubric was adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981), which remains widely used in writing research, and was further aligned with recent EFL writing assessment practices (Weigle, 2014; Brown, 2015). The rubric covered five key components of writing: (1) content, (2) organization, (3) vocabulary/language use, (4) mechanics, and (5) communicative achievement. Each component was rated on a scale of 1–5, with higher scores indicating better performance.

The procedures began with assigning students to complete a series of writing tasks through Canva. Students were required to design and submit written outputs (e.g., essays, reflections, or project reports) using Canva templates provided by the lecturer. These tasks were collected, scored, and analyzed by three independent raters

to ensure inter-rater reliability. The use of Canva allowed students to integrate textual and visual elements, but the evaluation focused strictly on writing quality as defined by the rubric.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected from the students' essay writing assignments, which were in the form of descriptive essays, were 3-5 paragraphs. They were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. First, descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the overall writing performance, including the mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, and distribution of scores across the five rubric components: content, organization, vocabulary/language use, mechanics, and communicative achievement. This analysis also included a categorical distribution (Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, Very Poor) to provide a clearer picture of students' performance levels (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Second, students' performance was further examined across five key aspects of writing. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed for each component to identify strengths and weaknesses in students' writing. Additionally, the distribution of student performance across proficiency categories (excellent, good, fair, poor, very poor) was analysed to provide pedagogical insights into the variation of student abilities.

Finally, the findings were interpreted based on the research questions, ensuring alignment between the data analysis and the objectives of the study. The statistical results are presented both in tabular form and through visual representations such as bar charts, which help to illustrate differences among writing components and performance categories more clearly (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Field, 2018).

FINDINGS

The results are presented based on the research questions that guided this study. First, descriptive statistics are provided to give an overview of the overall level of students' writing performance, including mean scores, standard deviations, and distribution across performance categories. Second, a comparative analysis is carried out to examine differences among the five writing components, such as content, organization, vocabulary/language use, mechanics, and communicative achievement to identify which aspects demonstrated relatively higher or lower performance.

General Writing Performance of Students

The descriptive analysis revealed that the overall writing performance of the 48 students fell within the "fair" category. The average total score across raters and components indicated that most students were able to meet the expected criteria of the writing rubric with an adequate degree of proficiency. The distribution analysis further demonstrated that 20 students (41.67%) achieved scores within the *Fair* category, while 6 students (12.50%) reached the *Excellent* category. A notable portion

of students (14 students or 29.17%) fell into the *Good* category, indicating moderate ability with certain weaknesses in areas such as organization or mechanics. In contrast, 6 students (12.50%) were classified as *Poor* and 2 students (4.17%) as *Very Poor*, showing limited control of language and underdeveloped ideas.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Students' Writing Performance Across Components

Category	Score Range	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Excellent	21 - 25	6	12.50
Good	16 - 20	14	29.17
Fair	11 - 15	20	41.67
Poor	6 - 10	6	12.50
Very Poor	0 - 5	2	4.17

The table above summarizes students' overall writing performance categories as assessed from Canva-based EFL assignments. The majority of students achieved the *Fair* category, followed by *Good*, while a smaller proportion attained *Excellent* or fell into *Poor* and *Very Poor* levels.

In other words, the results suggest that Canva-based assignments provided a platform that generally supported students' writing development, as evidenced by the large proportion of students achieving *Good* or higher levels. However, the presence of a considerable number of students in the *Fair* to *Poor* categories indicates variation in writing ability within the class. This variation may reflect differences in prior language exposure, digital literacy, or engagement with the assignment. Taken together, the findings highlight that while Canva can foster effective writing performance for many students, additional pedagogical interventions may be necessary to support those who struggle to reach higher proficiency levels. Simplified, it can be seen on the following chart.

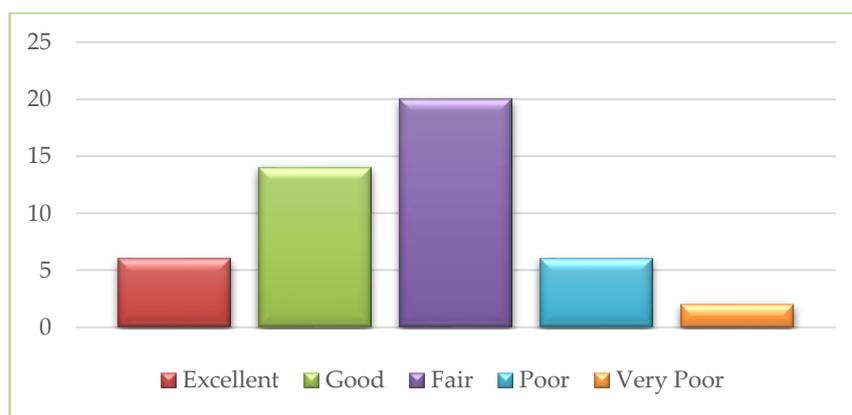


Figure 1. Students' Writing Performance Across Components

Performance across Writing Components

An analysis of the five writing components, such as content, organization, vocabulary, mechanics, and communicative achievement, shows variation in

students' strengths and weaknesses. Based on scores given by the three raters, the descriptive data obtained from the 48 students are presented as follows.

Table 2

Descriptive Data of Scores Given by the Raters

	Writing Components				
	C	O	M	V	CA
mean	2,92361	3,1597	2,9514	3,2778	2,9722
standard dev	1,29052	1,181	1,3101	1,1052	1,3259
minimum	1	1	1	1	1
maksimum	5	5	5	5	5

Among the components, vocabulary yielded the highest mean score (3.28), indicating that students performed best in this aspect. In contrast, content received the lowest mean score (2.92), highlighting an area where students require more support to develop ideas thoroughly. Organization (3.16), mechanics (3.27), and communicative achievement (2.97) all fell within a moderate range, showing balanced but improvable performance. These findings imply that while students were able to employ vocabulary effectively, they still encountered challenges in developing content and achieving coherence in their essays.

The following figure presents a histogram of the mean scores given by the three raters.

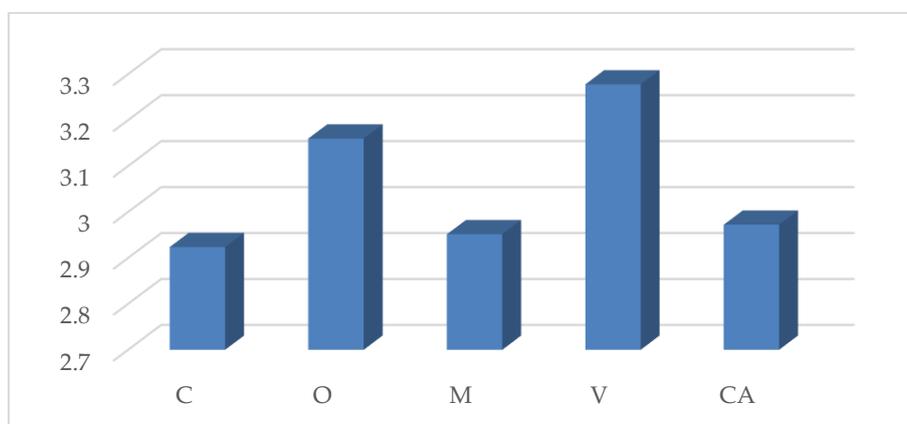


Figure 2. Average Scores of Students' Writing Performance

Variability of Student Performance

The standard deviation values ranged from 1.11 to 1.33, demonstrating a wide spread of scores among students. Vocabulary had the lowest standard deviation (1.11), suggesting that students' ability in this component was relatively consistent. In contrast, communicative achievement displayed the highest variability (1.33), which indicates diverse levels of performance in fulfilling the communicative purpose of writing tasks. This variability reflects the heterogeneity of students' writing proficiency, with some demonstrating strong performance and others struggling to meet expectations. The following figure presents a histogram of the standard deviation of the scores assigned by the three raters.

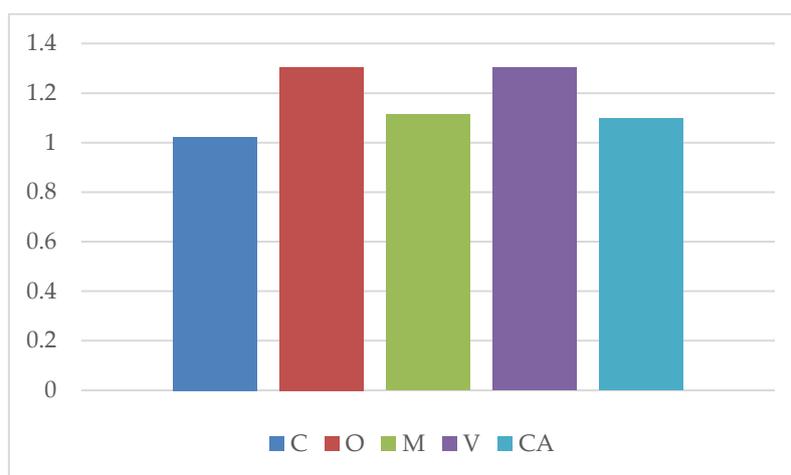


Figure 3. Standard Deviation Value

Distribution of Writing Performance Categories

The classification of students' writing test results by category, as defined in Table 1, is shown as follows.

Table 3

Distribution of Students across Performance Categories

Level Category	Total of Students
Excellent	6
Good	14
Fair	20
Poor	6
Very Poor	2
Grand Total	48

Based on the table above, the distribution of students' overall performance revealed that the majority fell within the *Good* category (20 students, 41.7%). A smaller group achieved *Excellent* performance (6 students, 12.5%), while 14 students (29.2%) were categorized as *Fair*. Additionally, 6 students (12.5%) fell into the *Poor* category, and 2 students (4.2%) were identified as *Very Poor*. This distribution demonstrates that while most students attained satisfactory levels of writing proficiency, a considerable proportion still require targeted instructional support to progress beyond the fair and poor levels.

Therefore, the analysis highlights both strengths and areas for improvement in students' writing performance. Vocabulary appeared as the strongest aspect, with students showing relative mastery and consistency. However, content and communicative achievement emerged as the weakest areas, reflecting challenges in idea development and communicative clarity. The categorical distribution further illustrates that while many students achieved a good level of performance, the presence of students in the poor and very poor categories underscores the need for differentiated support in writing instruction.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to analyze university students' writing performance in Canva-based EFL assignments, focusing on overall achievement and performance across five components: content, organization, vocabulary, mechanics, and communicative achievement. The findings revealed that most students achieved the *Good* category, with a smaller number attaining *Excellent* or falling into *Fair*, *Poor*, and *Very Poor* levels. Among the components, vocabulary received the highest mean score, while content and communicative achievement were identified as the weakest areas. These results indicate that Canva-based assignments supported students' writing development to a satisfactory level, but challenges in idea development and communicative clarity remain evident.

One major finding is that vocabulary appeared as the most consistent and strongest component of writing performance. This outcome may be explained by the affordances of Canva as a multimodal tool, which often exposes students to visual and lexical resources that stimulate language recall and usage (Kartika et al., 2024). Similar studies have shown that digital platforms such as Canva promote vocabulary retention by encouraging students to match visual input with textual output, thereby enhancing lexical accuracy and appropriacy (Susilawati et al., 2024).

Another important finding is that content and communicative achievement scored the lowest, indicating that students struggled with idea development and with fulfilling communicative purposes in their writing. This result may be attributed to limited experience in generating extended academic arguments, which remains a common challenge in EFL contexts (Hyland, 2019). Furthermore, while Canva encourages creativity in layout and design, it does not automatically enhance students' critical thinking or organizational skills in writing (Utami & Djamdjuri, 2024). This study suggests that Canva must be integrated with explicit instruction in content development and communicative strategies to maximize its pedagogical effectiveness.

When compared with previous studies, the findings of this study show both similarities and contrasts. For example, Hafidzinet al. (2024) reported that Canva improved students' recount writing across various learning styles, emphasizing its adaptability in different learning contexts. Likewise, Salsabila et al. (2024) found that Canva-based digital posters significantly enhanced narrative writing skills among high school students. While these studies confirm Canva's positive impact on writing, the present study adds to the literature by highlighting that certain aspects—particularly content and communicative achievement—may require additional instructional support even when Canva is employed. This finding extends the discussion by showing that Canva is not a “one-size-fits-all” solution for writing improvement but works best when complemented by targeted instruction.

The variability of student performance, as indicated by relatively high standard deviations, was also notable. This heterogeneity suggests that while some students

benefited substantially from Canva-based assignments, others struggled to achieve satisfactory levels. A possible explanation lies in students' prior exposure to English writing and their digital literacy skills. Those with higher digital competence might have leveraged Canva's affordances more effectively, while others may have been distracted by design features rather than focusing on writing quality (Yunus & Anggraini, 2021). This result underscores the importance of training students in both digital and academic literacies simultaneously.

Theoretically, the findings support multimodal learning perspectives, which argue that combining text, visuals, and design elements can enhance engagement and certain aspects of language learning (Jewitt et al., 2016). However, the present study also shows the limitations of relying solely on multimodal tools for improving complex skills such as content development and communicative effectiveness. Practically, the results imply that instructors should integrate Canva assignments with explicit scaffolding in idea generation, coherence building, and communicative purpose. Additionally, identifying students at lower performance levels is essential for differentiated instruction to ensure equitable learning outcomes.

In addressing the research gap identified in the Introduction, this study contributes by providing evidence from a higher education context, specifically general English courses, which have been underexplored in previous research dominated by secondary education settings. The findings confirm that Canva can enhance writing in certain dimensions, extend knowledge by highlighting persistent challenges in content and communicative achievement, and challenge overly optimistic views that digital tools alone guarantee comprehensive writing improvement. Thus, the study contributes to both the theoretical understanding of multimodal EFL writing and the practical implementation of Canva in university-level instruction.

CONCLUSION

This study examined university students' writing performance in descriptive essays by using Canva-based EFL assignments, focusing on overall outcomes and performance across five writing components. The findings indicate that the majority of students achieved the *Good* category, with vocabulary/language use emerging as the strongest aspect, while content and communicative achievement remained the most challenging areas. These results demonstrate that Canva has the potential to support students' writing development in higher education contexts, yet its effectiveness is uneven across different aspects of writing.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis was limited to descriptive statistics without exploring causal relationships or longitudinal effects. Second, the sample was restricted to a single institution and course, which may reduce the generalizability of the findings. Third, while inter-rater scoring ensured reliability, qualitative insights into students' experiences and perceptions were not included.

Future research could address these limitations by employing mixed-methods designs that combine quantitative analysis with qualitative interviews or classroom observations. Studies involving larger and more diverse samples across institutions would provide stronger generalizability. Furthermore, future work may explore instructional interventions that integrate Canva with explicit training in content development and communicative clarity, thereby offering a more comprehensive approach to improving EFL writing performance.

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APPENDIX 1. Writing Performance Scoring Rubric

Component	Score	Descriptor
Content	5 (Excellent)	Ideas are highly relevant, thorough, and fully developed. Demonstrates originality, depth, and clear purpose.
	4 (Good)	Ideas are relevant and adequately developed. Some supporting details present, though may lack depth.
	3 (Fair)	Ideas are partially relevant; development is uneven or limited. Some sections lack clarity or detail.
	2 (Poor)	Ideas are minimally developed; frequent irrelevance or repetition. Little evidence of critical thought.

	1 (Very Poor)	Content is unclear, irrelevant, or largely absent. Shows no meaningful development of ideas.
Organization	5 (Excellent)	Logical, well-structured writing with clear introduction, body, and conclusion. Smooth transitions enhance flow.
	4 (Good)	Generally well-organized; minor issues in sequencing or transitions. Structure is evident.
	3 (Fair)	Organization is somewhat clear but uneven. Transitions are limited; some ideas presented out of order.
	2 (Poor)	Organization is weak; ideas are disjointed or poorly connected. Lack of clear introduction/conclusion.
	1 (Very Poor)	Writing is chaotic or incoherent; no logical progression of ideas.
Vocabulary	5 (Excellent)	Wide range of vocabulary used accurately and effectively. Language is precise, appropriate, and stylistically varied.
	4 (Good)	Adequate vocabulary range; occasional inappropriate word choice, but meaning remains clear.
	3 (Fair)	Limited vocabulary; some repetitive or imprecise word choices. Errors sometimes obscure meaning.
	2 (Poor)	Very limited vocabulary; frequent errors reduce clarity and appropriacy.
	1 (Very Poor)	Vocabulary extremely restricted; pervasive errors make comprehension difficult.
Mechanics	5 (Excellent)	Writing is virtually free of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors.
	4 (Good)	Few minor errors in mechanics that do not affect readability.
	3 (Fair)	Noticeable errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar; some errors affect readability.
	2 (Poor)	Frequent errors in mechanics that make understanding difficult.
	1 (Very Poor)	Pervasive errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation severely hinder comprehension.
Communicative Achievement	5 (Excellent)	Writing fully achieves its communicative purpose (e.g., to explain, argue, narrate). Tone and style are appropriate for audience and task.

4 (Good)	Writing generally achieves communicative purpose; tone/style mostly appropriate.
3 (Fair)	Communicative purpose partly achieved; some mismatches in tone or register.
2 (Poor)	Communicative purpose largely unclear or inconsistent; inappropriate style or tone.
1 (Very Poor)	Communicative purpose not achieved; writing fails to address task requirements.
