

# USING PARAGRAPH FRAMES TO SCAFFOLD THE TEXT-BASED ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING EXPERIENCES OF LOW-PERFORMING EIGHTH-GRADE STUDENTS

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**Abstract** Revised curricular standards (Common Core) require students to engage in analytical writing (also known as text-based writing). This means that students have to read and comprehend a given stimulus and then write an essay based on evidence provided by the given stimulus. There is little current literature that documents effective writing instruction, which scaffolds middle school students' essay writing, based on a given stimulus. This study explored the use of paragraph frames as a tool for improving the argumentative essay-writing skills of low achieving middle school students. A total of 23 eighth-grade students received paragraph frame instruction over the course of 12 weeks from their Language Arts teacher. Students' writing performance was measured on the English Language Arts Text-based Writing Rubrics Grades 6–11: Argumentation. Analyses of the data revealed that students' overall writing performance increased significantly from pretest to posttest. Students also made significant gains across the pre- and posttest period in the following two domains (1) Purpose, Focus and Organization and (2) Evidence and Elaboration, but not in Conventions of Standard English. The article documents how one teacher scaffolded the text-based argumentative writing experiences of her low-achieving students.

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**Keywords:** analytical writing, argumentation, paragraph frames, scaffolding, teacher action research

## Introduction

Writing is an essential skill for academic, social, and career success. A key requirement for student success in the middle school is the development of proficient essay writing skills. Despite the need for skilled writing, a large number of eighth graders fail to write at the proficient level. Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2015 writing assessment indicate that only 24% of eighth graders scored at the proficient level [National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2012].

Revised curricular standards (Common Core) focus on preparing students for success in college, career, and life and thus emphasize more critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills. With this shift in curricular standards, students have to develop a new set of writing skills to meet the academic demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Traditionally, essay writing practices in K-12 classrooms relied heavily on students' life experiences and their personal opinions. Current standards require students to engage in analytical writing (also known as text-based writing). Students thus have to read and comprehend a given stimulus and then write an essay based on evidence provided by the given stimulus. To meet the demands of the revised standards, students are expected to proficiently produce evidenced-based literary, argumentative, and informative essays (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010).

There is little current literature that documents effective writing instruction to scaffold middle school students' essay writing, based on a given stimulus. Additionally, no studies have been found that documents the use of paragraph frames to scaffold middle school low achieving students' essay writing, based on a given stimulus. This action research is a direct response to the concern of the second author about her students' writing performance on the State Writing Assessment. The results of this study may help us understand how to better support adolescents in improving their argumentative essay writing skills and provide a framework for teachers about effective writing strategy instruction with middle school students to meet required the State Standards.

The purpose of this research was to examine the effectiveness of paragraph frames instruction on the argumentative essay writing skills of eighth graders as measured by one of the Florida State Assessment (FSA) writing rubrics (i.e., the English Language Arts Text-based Writing Rubrics Grades 6–11: Argumentation (FSA), henceforth referred to as ELA-TBWR). The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Will paragraph frames instruction improve middle school students' argumentative writing skills on each domain of the ELA-TBWR?
2. Will paragraph frames instruction improve middle school students' overall argumentative writing performance as measured by the ELA-TBWR?

## Literature Review

*The Need for Proficient Writing.* Proficient writing is an essential requirement for academic success (Graham & Perin, 2007). One of the main purposes of schools is to ensure the development of proficient writing skills. Moreover, the very nature by which students are assessed in schools requires them to be skilled writers. The ability to write at the proficient level also augments student learning, increases opportunity for employment, and facilitates economic success (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges [NCW], 2003); Langer & Applebee, 2011; Society for Human Resource Management, 2008). Despite this high need for proficient writing, results of the 2011 NAEP Report Card indicates that only 24% of eighth graders performed at the *Proficient* level in writing [National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2011].

*Argumentative Essay Writing.* Learning to write strong arguments helps students understand multiple perspectives and teaches them how to analyze and respond to the arguments of others. These essential skills are required well beyond graduation and are vital for participating in a democratic society (Gunning, 2010; Hillocks, 2011). According to Hillocks (2011), argument is the essence of critical thinking. Argument entails making a case to sustain a claim during the course of our daily lives (e.g., making claims about science, policy making, legal issues, technology, etc.). Engaging in argumentative reading and writing involve complex tasks that involves identification of a claim, supportive evidence, and assessment of warrants (Newell, Beach, Smith, & Vanderheide (2011).

Along with the complex tasks required for argumentative reading and writing, current standards for eighth-grade writing specifically requires students to (a) write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence, (b) have sound knowledge of claims, (c) use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion, (d) establish and maintain a formal style, and (e) provide a concluding statement that follows from and supports the argument presented (Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association, 2010). It is thus imperative that low-achieving middle school students are provided with effective writing instruction to help them succeed academically.

*Strategy Focused Instruction.* Writing instruction should help students meet the challenges of writing effectively for diverse audiences. One type of writing instruction, strategy-focused instruction, has been found to enhance students' writing skills. Strategy-focused instruction involves explicitly and systematically teaching students the steps necessary for undertaking specific writing tasks (Fitzgerald & Markham, 1987). Research overwhelmingly indicates that strategy-focused instruction is an essential component of writing instruction. Graham and Perin's (2007) meta-analysis identified 11 key elements of adolescent writing instruction with strategy-focused instruction identified as the most effective (effect size = 0.82).

A key feature of strategy-focused instruction involves explaining, teacher modeling and using think-alouds (De La Paz, 2007; Tompkins, 2006). With strategy-focused writing instruction, the teacher (1) identifies a strategy, (2) introduce the strategy to the students through teacher modeling and (3) allow the students to engage in guided practice with the strategy. The students finally achieve mastery through repeated practice and reinforcement (Collins, 1998).

*Explicit and Direct Instruction and Scaffolding.* Research indicates that effective teachers use explicit instruction to facilitate student learning (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002). Explicit instruction means showing students what to do and how to do and involves cognitive modeling, guided practice, and independent practice (Pearson, & Gallagher, 1983). With explicit instruction, teachers provide corrective feedback and reteach as necessary.

In addition to teaching writing explicitly and strategically, teachers should also provide sufficient instructional scaffolding. Instructional scaffolding refers to types of support provided by teachers (or peers) to help students accomplish a specific task that they are unable to accomplish on their own. According to Vygotsky (1986), children learn through meaningful social interactions in a supportive learning environment, accompanied by instructional scaffolding. Bruner (1986) describes scaffolding as the support that teachers provide to students to facilitate their learning and mastery of new tasks. As students gain knowledge, the scaffolding is gradually withdrawn so that students transition from social interaction to working independently. In writing, instructional scaffolding provides students the support they need to make sense of their writing and is gradually withdrawn as students' writing skills become internalized, resulting in independent and self-regulated writers.

*Peer Review.* Peer reviewing, also referred to as peer editing, is “[a]n instructional approach that is based on collaboration” (Piliappakos, 2017; p. 2). Peer review serves an important function in the writing process. During the peer review process, partners read each other’s writing and then provide feedback on each other’s writing. The feedback received from peers is then used to improve the written work. During the peer review process both the reader and the writer benefits; the writer receives feedback to improve his or her writing and the reader develops skills in critically evaluating the written work (Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016b). Peer reviewing also has a motivating aspect. Newell et al (2011) maintains that students may be more motivated to write for their peers than for their teacher.

*Paragraph Frames.* Gunning, (2012) contends that students who score below the basic level in writing need significant instruction and scaffolding. Paragraph frames, a writing strategy introduced by Nichols (1980), facilitate remediation for adolescents who are experiencing

writing difficulties. Paragraph frames are the most structured writing strategy and are most suitable for introducing new types of writing (like analytical writing) to struggling writers. Paragraph frames consist of an outline that includes the main ideas and transition words that students can build on. It essentially presents students with a structure they can use as they write paragraphs and essays (Gunning, 2012, Nichols, 1980). With paragraph frames, students are provided with sufficient scaffolding that aids them in constructing meaning and expressing their writing in a logical manner.

## Methodology

This study explored the use of paragraph frames as a tool for improving the argumentative essay-writing skills of low achieving middle school students and sought to answer the following two research questions:

1. Will paragraph frames instruction improve middle school students' argumentative writing skills on each domain of the ELA-TBWR?
2. Will paragraph frames instruction improve middle school students' overall argumentative writing performance as measured by the ELA-TBWR?

*Participants.* The study was conducted in a middle school in South Florida. The total school population was 1039 students and consisted of 58% Black/African American students, 23.8% Hispanic students, and 15.6% Caucasian students and 2.29% multiracial and Asian students. The majority of students (79.4%) were eligible for free and reduced lunch; higher than the state average of 61.9%. Convenience sampling was used. Mills, Gay, & Sperling (2016) describe convenience sampling as “[t]he process of including whoever happens to be available in a sample” (p. 656). The second author taught a total of 120 students. However, only 30 out of 120 (25%) of parents and students returned informed consent and student assent letters. A total of seven students either transferred to another school or failed to take the pretest or the posttest. The sample thus consisted of 23 eighth-grade students; eight boys and fifteen girls.

*Design.* The study used a one-group pretest-posttest design. According to Mills et al. (2016), the one-group pretest-posttest design involves a single group that is pretested, exposed to treatment, and then tested again. Pretest data was collected in October and posttest data at the end of January. Students received the paragraph frames instruction for approximately 12 weeks.

*Paragraph Frames Instruction.* The Implementation of the paragraph frames instruction is described in detail by the second author as follows:

The language arts teachers in our school, worked according to a monthly calendar created by the language arts department. All grade-level language arts teachers have

to teach the same topic on the same day. We used literature lessons as a reward, icebreaker, or buffer after arduous writing assignments. There were instances where students would receive writing lessons five days per week because they did not finish what we planned for, but generally, we planned for three writing days per week and one typing and editing day.

Every student had a writing folder where they housed the ELA-TBWR, handouts, notes, and writing samples (anchor papers). Students kept notes with the specific format of type of essay, transition words, and other relevant information. Additionally, there was a folder with a teacher-created argumentative paragraph frame and an informative paragraph frame on each student's desk (see Appendix A for paragraph frame). Although I taught both argumentative and informative essay writing to my students, this research documents the students' progress on their argumentative essay writing skills only.

Throughout implementation of the paragraph frames instruction, I used a PowerPoint to model the specific parts of an argumentative essay. Using think-alouds, I modeled what to do and how to do it. I provided opportunities for guided practice with corrective feedback. I started off with thesis statements and the formula for creating a thesis statement. Next I taught hooks. The lessons that followed focused on body paragraphs (topic sentences, text citation, and elaboration). Each week, I created a writing prompt based on current news events or topics of interest. As previously stated, current standards require students to read and comprehend a given stimulus and then write an essay based on evidence provided by the given stimulus. I therefore, located three sources of information about specific essay topics from local newspapers or other sources (including a live news report from one of the local broadcasting stations). I also used ideas archived from my previous years of teaching. These sources of information served as stimuli passages for the writing prompts.

The students and I always read the prompt together then discussed what type of essay (argumentative) we were working on, how to identify the type of essay and the key words to be used to restate the prompt in the students' thesis statements. We also read the three stimuli articles together and discussed the main ideas and supporting details while students would highlight, underline, or take notes. This was particularly helpful for the lowest students. Most of my students also had a reading class, and I collaborated with the reading teacher to have the students read the articles in her class and work with them to identify the main ideas.

At the beginning of the paragraph frames instruction, students also used a planning sheet to record the thesis statement, organize ideas to be used in the body paragraphs, and any supporting evidence from the text. The planning sheet made it easier for students to complete the paragraph frames. On the first day, the students wrote their thesis statements and used their notes to create planning sheets that map out the essay. Planning

took a full period. On the second day, they wrote the *Introduction* and *Body Paragraph #1*. I projected samples of some of the other students' work on the overhead projector, so that the rest of the class could see various samples of effective introductions and body paragraphs. These mentor texts served as a source of motivation, particularly because the students believed that since some of their peers could write good essays, they would also be able to write like that. On the third day, the students wrote *Body Paragraph #2* and the *Conclusion*. While they worked I rotated around the room and provided guided assistance, corrective feedback, and answered questions. The fourth day was a typing and editing day. After typing and editing, the students exchanged computers to do peer editing. The peer editing was used to scaffold revision of typed papers. Peers read the essays and provided feedback in terms of the quality of the argument and how to improve the argument. I also reviewed and edited drafts of each essay. I selected the best essays as mentor texts, and we discussed the salient features of those essays. Eventually, most students were able to plan on the computer and type their essays, using their notes.

By the beginning of January, we were moving into "crunch time" in preparation for the FSA. I no longer read the prompts and the three stimuli articles with the students (they read independently). I timed them while they read. They no longer created extensive planning sheets. They worked on the computers and I gave them timed writing drills as follows:

- five minutes to write a thesis
- five minutes to write a hook, and
- 20 minutes to write a body paragraph.

They hated the timed drills, but it was the only way to help them complete their essays within the required 2-hour timeframe, demanded by the FSA.

*Data Collection.* The ELA-TBWR, was used to collect the data. The total number of possible points a student can obtain on the ELA-TBWR is 10. The ELA-TBWR consists of the following three domains:

- Purpose, Focus, and Organization (four possible points)
- Evidence and Elaboration (four possible points)
- Conventions of Standard English (two possible points)

A pre-and posttest was administered before and after implementation of the paragraph frames instruction.

## Results

The study used a one-group pretest-posttest design. A within-subjects t-test (paired samples test) was used to analyze the data and to examine whether the writing

performance of eight-graders, instructed in paragraphs frames, differed significantly from pretest to posttest on measures of the ELA-TBWR. Paired samples tests are used for comparisons with a continuous dependent variable when there is one measurement variable and two nominal variables (McDonald, 2014). The dependent variable in this study was argumentative writing achievement as measured by the ELA-TBWR. The independent variable was type of instruction (paragraph frames).

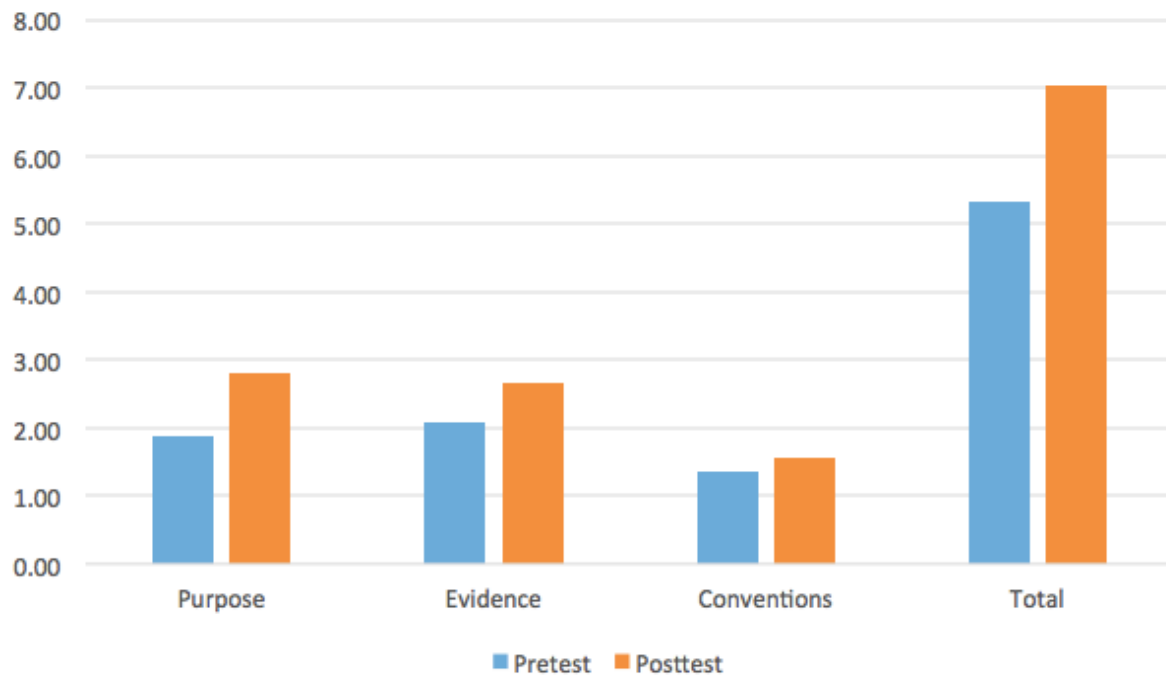
Research question one examined whether paragraph frames instruction will improve middle school students' argumentative writing performance on each domain of the ELA-TBWR. Analysis of the data suggests that students made significant gains across the pre- and posttest period in the following two domains of the ELA-TBWR (1) Purpose, Focus and Organization and (2) Evidence and Elaboration, but not in Conventions of Standard English. There was a significant difference in students' Purpose, Focus and Organization scores after the paragraph frames instruction ( $M=2.80$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) than before paragraph frames instruction ( $M=1.89$ ,  $SD 0.62$ );  $t(22) = -12.22$ ,  $p=0.00$ . There was also a significant difference in students' Evidence and Elaboration scores after paragraph frames instruction ( $M=2.67$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) than before paragraphs frames instruction ( $M=2.07$ ,  $SD 0.59$ );  $t(22) = -6.47$ ,  $p=0.00$ .

Research question two examined whether paragraph frames instruction will improve middle school students' overall argumentative writing performance as measured by the ELA-TBWR. Analyses of the data indicates a significant difference in students' overall scores after paragraph frames instruction ( $M=7.04$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) than before the paragraph frames instruction ( $M=5.30$ ,  $SD 1.35$ );  $t(22) = -9.958$ ,  $p=0.00$ . Results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that students made significant gains across the pre- and posttest period in their overall writing scores after paragraph frames instruction as well as in the Purpose, Focus, and Organization domain and in the Evidence and Elaboration domain, but not in the Conventions of Standard English domain.



Figure 1: Students' overall argumentative writing performance as measured by the ELA-TBWR



## Discussion

This study examined whether paragraph frames instruction will improve low achieving middle school students' argumentative writing performance. The results suggest that paragraph frames instruction can improve the writing performance of middle school students. Specifically, our results suggest that when students receive paragraph frames instruction their overall writing performance is enhanced. The students also showed increased performance on the Purpose, Focus, and Organization domain. This suggests that:

- some of the students' responses were somewhat sustained within the purpose, audience, and task but may have included loosely related or extraneous material and a claim with an inconsistent organizational structure, while
- other students' responses were adequately sustained and generally focused within the purpose, audience, and task and included a clear claim and distinct organizational structure with a sense of completeness

The students further showed increased performance on the Evidence and Elaboration domain, indicating that some students:

- provided uneven, cursory support/evidence for the writer's claim that includes partial use of sources, facts, and details, while

- other students provided adequate support, citing evidence for the writer's claim that includes the use of sources, facts, and details

Although none of the students achieved mastery (a score of 4) in the Purpose, Focus, and Organization domain and in the Evidence and Elaboration domain, as measured by the ELA-TBWR. , the study demonstrates that direct and explicit paragraph frames instruction, together with teacher scaffolding, can improve the writing performance of low-achieving middle school students. Furthermore, the use of peer samples as mentor text served as a powerful tool for motivating low-achieving students.

The students did not improve their scores on the Conventions of Standard English domain. The majority of the students in the study spoke a dialect or language other than Standard English in their everyday lives (i.e., African American English, Haitian Creole, or Spanish), an essential component of their identities. These students experience a variety of challenges in learning to read and write Standard English. This finding is similar to a study conducted by Campbell and Filimon (2017), who examined the effects of strategy-focused instruction on the argumentative writing of students in a linguistically diverse seventh grade classroom. These authors found that, despite the fact that the English Language Learners (ELLs) (1) received the same strategy-focused writing instruction within their mainstreamed classrooms and (2) their teachers scaffolded their writing experiences in the same way they did for the rest of the students, the writing scores of the ELLs did not indicate a significant difference. Based on their research that examined language ideologies, Godley, Carpenter, & Werner (2007) believe that literacy educators need to develop a grammar instructional approach that recognizes language variations and students' existing knowledge about language, to facilitate the reading and writing skills of students who speak a dialect other than Standard English. In order for students to become proficient writers that meet the requirements of the revised standards, teachers need to incorporate specific grammar instruction to accommodate the learning needs of the diverse student population in today's classrooms.

The students in this study were initially very intimidated by the fact that they had to read the stimulus and then respond to it in the form of an essay. However, consistent scaffolding, classroom discussions, peer editing and the sharing of mentor texts soon eliminated any trepidation they experienced. Mentor texts are an important component of writing instruction. In this study, the sharing of mentor text contributed significantly in encouraging and motivating the students to participate in the writing instruction, particularly the lowest performing students.

### **Limitations**

This action research study used a one-group pretest-posttest design. One limitation of this design is that it has almost no external validity. But, a key characteristic of action research is to assist teachers in becoming more efficient in the teaching and development of their students (Sagor, 2000). In this study, the second author was concerned about her students' poor writing skills and participated in the study to improve her teaching practices and her students' writing skills. Another limitation of the one group pretest-posttest design is *history* (this means that an event outside the experiment or participants may have affected the scores of the students). In this study, some of the students in the sample also had a reading class, and the teacher collaborated with the reading teacher who worked with them to identify the main ideas in the articles they read in the reading class. This additional instruction could have affected those students' posttest results. The paragraph frames instruction only lasted 12 weeks. A longer intervention that includes grammar instruction could produce improved results.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The study demonstrates that explicit and direct paragraph frames instruction is effective in improving the writing performance of low achieving middle school students. With the urgency to prepare the students for the state exam and the limited time to do so, not enough time was spent on teaching conventions. A replication of this study that includes explicit and direct instruction in conventions and that takes students' different dialects and unique knowledge of language into account is warranted. We also need to explore whether paragraph frames instruction influence students' attitude about writing. Furthermore, we need to examine teachers' reflections, pedagogical responses, and their experiences when teaching writing instruction to diverse students.

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## Appendix A: Paragraph Frame for Argumentative Writing

- Paragraph #1 (Introduction):

**Indent.** Write a **Hook**. Write a **Connector Sentence**. Write a full **thesis statement** (restate the prompt) with two **reason ideas**.

- Paragraph # 2 (1<sup>st</sup> Body Paragraph):

**Indent.** Write a **topic sentence** (Transition word- *Initially*, restate the prompt + because + reason idea #1.) Write a **Filler Sentence**. Write a **cited and paraphrased textual evidence sentence** (*Source 1 mentions that ...*) Write your **Elaboration** to explain the text citation. (*In other words...*). **Opposing Argument** (*Some may argue that ...*). **Counter Claim** (*On the other hand, ...*). **Elaborative sentence(s)** (*To clarify...*) **Close out sentence with a justifier** (*It is clear that ...* Mention the thesis and reason idea # 1 in another way.)

- Paragraph # 3 (2<sup>nd</sup> Body Paragraph):

**Indent.** Write **topic sentence** (Transition word- *As a final point*, restate the prompt + because + reason idea #2.) Write a **Filler Sentence**. Write a **cited and paraphrased textual evidence sentence** (*According to Source 2, ...*) Write your **Elaboration** to explain the text citation (*This means...*). **Opposing Argument** (*Critics claim that ...*) **Counter Claim** (*On the contrary ..*) **Elaborative sentence(s)** . (*In this case, ...*). **Close out sentence with a justifier** (Without a doubt, ...)

- Paragraph # 4 (Conclusion):

**Indent.** Transition word – *In conclusion*, **Restate the full thesis with the two reason ideas**. Ask a **thought- provoking question** about the topic. **Make a prediction** (*In the future,*)

- **Hook** – Anecdote (brief) with elaboration, quotation with elaboration, an intelligent question with elaboration, a shocking statement or fact with elaboration, imagine, a news report, or a definition.
- **Transitions for Topic Sentence**- *Initially*, *to commence*, *as a final point*, *moreover*.
- **Transitions for elaboration** – *In other words*, *this means*, *to clarify*, *for instance*, *for example*, *in this case*, *another key point*, *as an illustration*
- **Transitions for justifiers**- *clearly*, *without a doubt*, *evidently*, *unquestionably*, *all in all*
- **Counterclaim**- 1. *Although some people may argue that*, 2. *It is understandable that people may have this opinion, however*, 3. *It may be said that ...*, 4. *On the contrary*, 5. *On the other hand...*