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Why did I score 20-23 pts. on the TOEFL Writing Section?

Those aspiring to score higher than 24/30 pts. on the independent writing section of the TOEFL will need to demonstrate competency if they want to perform well. According to ETS's rubrics, students will score in 3.0/5.0 (20-23 points) if these writers have problems in one or more of the following areas.

Addresses the topic and task using somewhat developed explanations, exemplifications, and/or details

Displays unity, progression, and coherence, though connection of ideas may be occasionally obscured

May demonstrate inconsistent facility in sentence formation and word choice that may result in lack of clarity and occasionally obscure meaning

May display accurate but limited range of syntactic structures and vocabulary

In this article, I will explain each of these rubric points and give real student responses to illustrate what these problems look like and how to avoid them during the independent writing portion of the TOEFL exam.

"Using Somewhat Developed Explanations"

Students who score around 20-23 pts on the independent writing task typically respond well to the writing prompt, but they are not specific enough in the examples, explanations, and details that they give.

To illustrate, in the following paragraph, a student argues why he prefers smaller universities, but the examples of "financial aids," "recruiting," and "academic goals" are not developed enough to show depth and complexity of thought. Simply put, the student is trying to discuss too many points in the paragraph without developing each point sufficiently.

Insufficient development:

In conclusion, the small university is better than the big university for students academic staff attention to the student ,they can give more opportunity for financial aids or recruiting, and they can easily achieve academic goal since the professor can care more detail, and strengthen their relationship and other benefits useful to the student. Although the big university can give bigger campus with perfect facility, if the students cannot enjoy properly, it is useless.

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In contrast, read the revised version of this student's essay, particularly noticing how the paragraph is limited to two key ideas: getting better attention from staff and faculty. The previous paragraph was much too broad and consisted of only 74 words. However, the below paragraph is much more focused but contains 144 words--almost double the size of the previous paragraph.

Sufficient development:

In conclusion, the small university is better than the big university for students because they can get better attention from staff and faculty. For instance, students will find that they will have an easier time registering and entering a small university because the staff will pay sufficient attention to each student enrolling at the school. In addition, these students, once they begin taking courses, will find that the professors will be able to pay more attention to them. To illustrate, a student who is taking Economics 100, even though the class might be difficult, will be able to easily ask questions during class when the professor discusses conceptually dense material. Thus, students and professors will find it easier to attain goals since these instructors can provide more specific details to help students learn what is being taught. Therefore, I definitely prefer attending smaller institutions.

"Connection of Ideas May be Unclear"

Another reason students may score in the 20-23 points range is that the connection of their ideas may be unclear. While these students generally have a focused thesis and relevant topic sentences in the body paragraphs, I have noticed that many of their connection problems occur with the details that they may decide to use within one of the developmental paragraphs of their essays. To rephrase this, some of the examples that they choose to use may not connect to the topic sentence that frames that particular paragraph.

For instance, notice in the below paragraph how the topic sentence includes the key words "get more communication from native students" and "feel the native culture in their facilities which are supplied by big universities." Both of these points need to be developed in the paragraph to be sure, but none of the examples given shows how the native culture can be learned by attending smaller universities. In addition, it is not entirely clear how the "good facilities," "wonderful gym," and "the library" are connected to getting improved communication from native speakers.

Unclear connections among ideas:

Even though there are different advantages from big and small universities, I would rather choose the big university. Because I am an international student, I prefer to attend big universities so that I can get more communication from native students and so that I can feel the native culture in their facilities which are supplied by big universities. I am studying at CSUSB, which is a big university, and I enjoy their good facilities in the campus. I go to a wonderful gym and big library every day in that I love to do physical exercise, and the university supplies the facilities for students. The university has so many clubs on campus that I can choose to participate in, I can improve my English language and the ability to communicate. For these reasons, I enjoy larger universities.

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Clear connection of ideas:

Although big and small universities have different advantages, big universities offer me more chances to communicate with native students. For instance, I am studying at CSUSB, which is a big university, and I enjoy the writing center there which offers a weekly ESL Conversation Group at which a native speaker chooses a new topic each time we meet, and we discuss the topic for about 90 minutes. In addition, I joined the Chinese, skiing, and business clubs, all of which give me more chances to speak English with native speakers. Furthermore, despite the size of my school, some of my classes consist of only 20-25 students, which also gives me more practice talking to native speakers. These three examples illustrate how large universities give me chances to speak with native speakers, which is why I prefer larger schools.

Notice how the revised paragraph includes a topic sentence focusing only on how "big universities offer me more chances to communicate with native students." Then the writer uses the specific examples of the ESL Conversation Group, the three clubs, and the small class sizes to illustrate why he/she has more chances to communicate with native students at larger schools. Both paragraphs have about 137-138 words, but the revised paragraph clearly has better connection and development of ideas.

"Problems with Sentence Formation and Word Choice"

In addition to insufficient development of ideas and unclear organizations, writers who score 20-23 points on the independent writing task have problems with sentence formation and word choice. One common error with sentence formation is the comma splice, which is illustrated in the following sentence:

Comma splice:

The small university usually has small students and small professors, it means they have more chance to know each other than the big university.

Combining two independent clauses together with a comma, or a comma splice, is a sentence structure error which can be easily repaired and avoided:

Revised sentence:

Small universities have fewer students and professors, which means students will have more chances to know each other than those who study at the big universities.

In the revised version of the sentence, the second sentence is converted into an adjectival dependent clause using the subordinating conjunction "which." Instead of two sentences, the revised sentence is a complex sentence consisting of an independent and dependent clause.

Read the following paragraph which contains a number of errors, all of which will cause the essay to score below 24/30 pts.: comma splices, unclear pronoun referents, missing words, inappropriate word choice (less versus fewer), plural nouns, and so on.

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Sentence formation and word choice errors:

However small universities have disadvantages and advantages, first reason I prefer the small university is its cohesion. The small university usually has small students and small professors. It means they have more chance to know each other than the big university. It can strengthen their relationship. I also graduated from small university. When I graduated from the school, I could know almost students in my school. It helped a lot when I started my career even though I only know the alumni's name. Secondly, the small university professor teaches less students than big university's professor. It means, professor can easily concentrate each student; the professor can care each students individually. It is a lot of benefit for students and professor.

Revised paragraph:

Moreover, small universities have advantages in that they provide cohesion because they have a smaller number of students and faculty, which means students and faculty have more chances to know each other than those attending big universities. This type of close interaction can strengthen their relationships. Students graduating from small universities can know most students in the school. This social cohesiveness can help students a lot when they start their careers. In addition, small university professors teach fewer students than those teaching at big universities, which means that professors can easily concentrate on each student, thereby caring for each student individually. This personal teaching environment benefits students and professors alike.

"Limited Range of Sentence Structures and Vocabulary"

Similar to problems with sentence structure and word choice, the final nail to drive the coffin shut on students' writing scores relates to limitations that students may have with sentence structure and vocabulary. These limitations may also cause students to score lower than 24/30 pts. on the independent writing task.

To understand sentence structure, TOEFLers need to understand syntactic variety, writers' abilities to use a combination of simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. Moreover, understanding complex sentences requires students' knowledge of adjective, adverb, and noun clauses along with their respective subordinating conjunctions. Without competence with sentence structure and syntactic variety, TOEFL writers may write paragraphs that are choppy in that they use too many similarly constructed short, simple sentences. These types of developing writers may write a paragraph such as the following:

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Paragraph without syntactic variety:

The large universities depend on the density of the number of students and their large spaces. This has disadvantages and advantages. The big universities have the resources to help you improve your communication skills. You can learn new languages and improve your writing skills. You can even explore new technologies. The computer centers and classrooms are connected to the Internet to provide the latest information in the world. The flexibility offered by large institutions allows students to solve problems both as a team and individually. There are many opportunities for cooperatives, internships and research. There are disadvantages of the large number of students in the classroom. This leads to the lack of absorption of the student and also implicates the teacher in the delivery of information to all students, the difference of cultures among students and be vulnerable to problems because of the large number. It is also difficult for the administration to control it.

Notice how the above writer uses 9-10 simple sentences in a row without using compound or complex sentences. In addition, the absence of any transition words also makes it difficult to cohesively tie each sentence together. In contrast, in the paragraph below, the writer uses a combination of longer and shorter sentences and uses several transition words to help tie the ideas together.

Paragraph with syntactic variety:

The large universities depend on the density of the number of students and their large spaces, and this has disadvantages and advantages. On the one hand, the big universities have the resources to help students improve their communication skills, learn new languages, improve writing skills, and explore new technologies. Further, the computer centers and classrooms at these large schools are connected to the Internet to provide the latest information in the world. In addition, the flexibility offered by large institutions allows students to solve problems both as teams and individuals. In fact, there are many opportunities for collaboration, internships, and research. On the other hand, the large number of students in the classroom leads to the lack of absorption from students and also negatively implicates the teacher in the delivery of information. The cultural differences among students--most often found at large institutions--can create their own sorts of problems, and it may be difficult for the administration to control these issues.

Similarly, students may also have some vocabulary limitations, and these students typically will use very basic vocabulary or vocabulary that is not precise enough for what they are trying to say. Whatever the case may be, it is certain that these students will need to develop a higher command of vocabulary usage if they want to score higher than 24 on the independent writing section of the TOEFL exam. Read the following essay which uses mostly basic vocabulary, even repeating "supply" several times in the paragraph.

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Paragraph with vocabulary limitations:

*However, there are many advantages in big universities; the small universities are also popular for the students. First, small university has lower tuition than big university. Many of students can be affordable to the small universities' tuition. The small university **supplies** an opportunity to the students who are poverty. Second, the small universities **supply** some specific major for students. For example, the University of Redlands, which is a small university, **supply** some specific major in biology fields for students. The students who are interested in the major could choose the specific major only in small university.*

In a revised version of the above essay, the below paragraph has better control of its vocabulary usage. For example, after using "universities" in the first line, the writer uses synonyms "institutions" and "entities." Likewise, instead of using "major" repeatedly, the writer uses "academic fields," "specializations," and "concentrations" to rephrase the word. The writer also uses the words "supply," "provide," and "offers," all of which are similar in meaning. Furthermore, the writer uses precise words such as "grants," "loans," and "scholarships" as examples of financial opportunities. Finally, by using the words "specificity," "ample," and "allures," the writer demonstrates that he/she has some knowledge of college-level vocabulary.

Paragraph with a higher range of vocabulary:

*Although big universities have many advantages, the small universities are also popular for the students due to price and **specificity** of major. First, a small university has lower tuition than that of big **institutions**. Consequently, many students can afford the small universities' tuition. Small universities **supply ample** financial opportunities such as **grants, loans, and scholarships** to the **low-income** students. Second, that the small universities **provide** some specific **academic fields** not found at larger **entities** often **allures** students to attend those schools. For example, the University of Redlands, a small university, **offers** some specific **specializations** in biology fields for students. The students who are interested in these **concentrations** could choose those specific majors only at small universities.*

To sum up, students scoring below 24 pts. on the independent writing task of the TOEFL iBT should not be confused as to why they scored the way they did. If they scored 20-23 pts., their writing has one or more of the following writing deficiencies: inadequate development of ideas, unclear connections of ideas at times, problems with sentence structure and word choice, and limited range of sentence style and vocabulary. In most cases, taking a whole bunch of practice tests without feedback from a qualified TOEFL writing specialist, and simply re-taking the TOEFL exam repeatedly will not solve these writing deficiencies. It is also important to note that if students have these fundamental problems with an independent writing task, which is a very simple, unchallenging assignment, these writers' problems will only be magnified if they attempt to complete undergraduate or graduate analytically complex research projects that are often argumentative in nature. They will need to solve these writing problems before writing competently in academic and professional writing situations.

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The author of this article is Michael Buckhoff, who is the founder, owner, and materials writer of the Online TOEFL Course "The 7-Step System to Pass the TOEFL iBT." Buckhoff also has been teaching TOEFL preparation courses and first-year and upper division writing courses at California State University, San Bernardino since 1994.

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