

# TOEFL iBT Writing: 20 Tips

Free Resource • Updated for TOEFL iBT 2026



Covers:

**Tips for Each TOEFL Writing Question Type**

*with advice from the experts at Magoosh*



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## Introduction

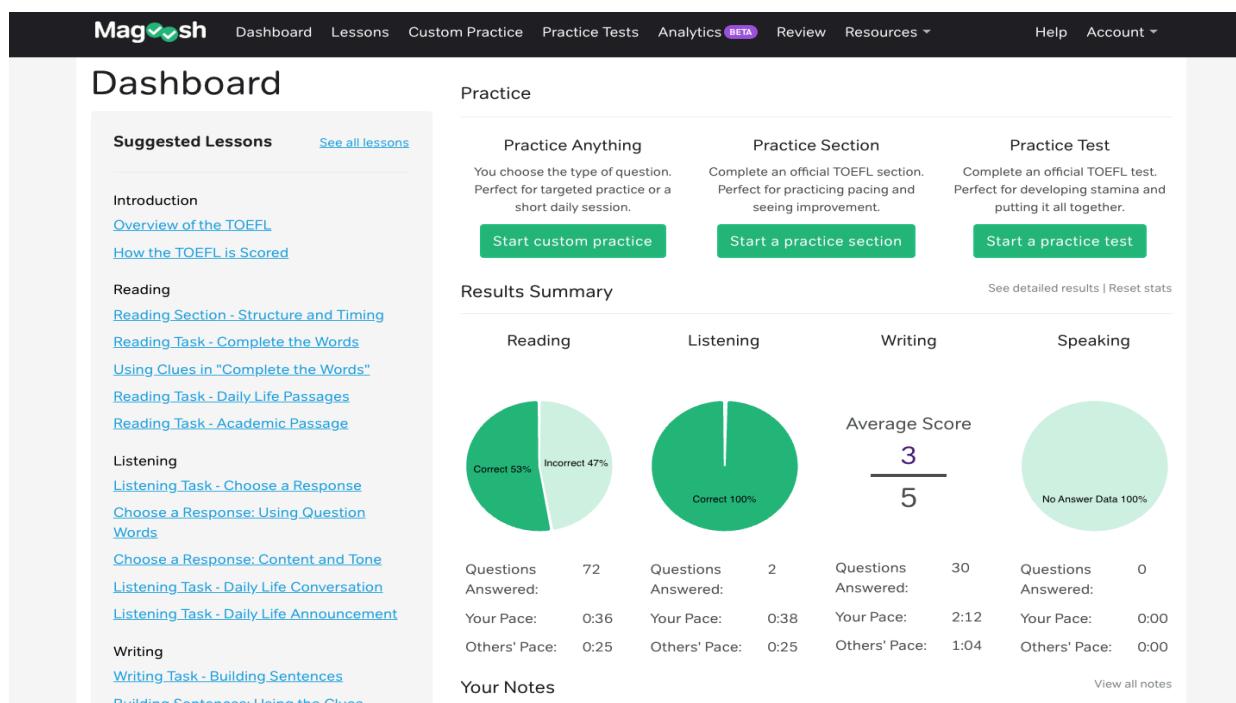
This eBook is meant to serve as a roadmap that provides a comprehensive overview of the TOEFL Writing Section, combining crucial information on test structure and question types and providing essential strategies and tips for doing the best you can on test day. The information in this eBook is a synthesis of some of the best content on the [Magoosh TOEFL blog](#). 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:

- expert video lessons for every section
- over 1300 *official* practice questions with explanations
- 4 *official* ETS full-length practice tests
- +4 point score increase guarantee
- graded writing and speaking tasks
- built-in AI tutor to explain questions and concepts
- personalized statistics based on performance
- access anytime, anywhere from an internet-connected device



The screenshot shows the Magoosh TOEFL dashboard. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Dashboard, Lessons, Custom Practice, Practice Tests, Analytics (BETA), Review, Resources, Help, and Account. The main area is titled "Dashboard". On the left, there is a sidebar with "Suggested Lessons" and links for Introduction, Overview of the TOEFL, and How the TOEFL is Scored. Below that are sections for Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking, each with a list of lessons. The main content area is titled "Practice" and contains three sections: "Practice Anything", "Practice Section", and "Practice Test". Each section has a description and a "Start" button. Below this is a "Results Summary" section with four pie charts: Reading (Correct 53%, Incorrect 47%), Listening (Correct 100%), Writing (Average Score 3/5), and Speaking (No Answer Data 100%). Below the charts are tables for Questions Answered and Pace for Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking. At the bottom, there is a "Your Notes" section and a "View all notes" link.

## Featured in:

**Mashable** **San Francisco Chronicle** **Xconomy** **wired** **academic**

**The Telegraph** **KTUU** **THE WALL STREET JOURNAL** **The Boston Globe**

## 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.

## How the TOEFL Writing Section Works

The TOEFL iBT Writing section is 23 minutes long and is designed to test how clearly and effectively you can communicate in English in realistic situations. Instead of writing long essays, you'll complete **three short writing tasks**, each focused on a different skill.

Across all tasks, you are not being evaluated on how creative your ideas are or whether your experiences are real. You are being evaluated on whether your writing is:

- Clear
- Organized
- Appropriate for the situation
- Easy to understand

You do not need perfect grammar or advanced vocabulary to score well. What matters most is **clear communication**.

## The Tasks

- **Build a Sentence (10 tasks):**

You will answer multiple Build a Sentence questions. These are short, grammar-focused tasks that require careful attention to word order and agreement.

- **Write an Email (1 task):**

You will complete **one email-writing task**, based on a realistic situation with three bullet points you must address.

- **Academic Discussion (1 task):**

You will complete **one discussion response**, where you add your own response to a conversation on an academic topic.

## Scoring

Your Writing responses are scored as part of your **overall TOEFL Writing score**, which is reported on a **1–6 scale**.

When your writing is evaluated, scorers focus on whether your responses are:

- Clear and easy to understand
- Well organized
- Appropriate for the task
- Grammatically accurate enough to communicate meaning

You are **not required to write perfectly** to earn a strong score. Occasional grammar or word-choice errors are acceptable as long as they do not interfere with understanding.

## What matters most for a high score

Across all Writing tasks, strong responses share the same core qualities:

- They directly answer the question
- They follow clear structure
- They use appropriate tone for the situation
- They include enough detail to explain ideas clearly

Length and advanced vocabulary matter less than **clarity and completeness**. That said, to give a complete answer, length does have an impact—an answer that is too short will also feel incomplete.

## How this guide will help you

This guide walks through each Writing task step by step. You'll learn:

- What each task is testing
- Common patterns and strategies that work
- How to avoid frequent mistakes
- What strong, realistic responses look like

Before diving into the specific question types, it's helpful to understand a few **general writing principles** that apply to *all* TOEFL Writing tasks.

## Five General Writing Tips for TOEFL

These five tips come directly from the strategies taught in Magoosh TOEFL Writing lessons. Keeping them in mind will help you feel more confident on **all three writing tasks**.

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### Tip 1: Clarity matters more than complexity

The TOEFL is not testing how advanced or creative your ideas are. It is testing how clearly you can communicate in English.

Clear writing means:

- Complete sentences
- Logical organization
- Ideas that are easy to follow

Simple, clear language will score better than complex language with frequent mistakes.

---

### Tip 2: Structure comes before meaning

On the TOEFL, grammar and structure guide your writing decisions.

Before focusing on *what* you want to say, pay attention to:

- Sentence structure
- Word order
- Organization

This is especially important for **Build a Sentence** questions, but it also helps with longer responses like emails and academic discussions.

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### Tip 3: Specific details make your writing stronger

You are allowed—and often expected—to **invent details** on the TOEFL.

Specific details:

- Make your writing sound more natural
- Help explain ideas more clearly
- Give you more language to work with

The details do not need to be true. They only need to make sense in the situation and support your message.

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### Tip 4: Organization is one of the easiest skills to improve

Even if your grammar or vocabulary is not perfect, you can still score well by organizing your ideas clearly.

A useful pattern is:

- Start with a general idea
- Add specific details or examples
- Return briefly to a general point

You'll see this approach used again in the **Write an Email** and **Academic Discussion** tasks.

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## Tip 5: Writing improves through a process, not shortcuts

Strong writing develops over time through a simple cycle:

1. Read in English regularly
2. Write short responses
3. Edit your writing
4. Revisit your writing later

Improvement comes from noticing patterns, fixing repeated mistakes, and reusing language that works—not from memorizing templates.

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### What's Next

Now that you understand the general principles behind TOEFL Writing, we'll look at **each writing task one by one** and show you how to apply these ideas in specific situations.

We'll start with the shortest—and most grammar-focused—task.

## Five “Build a Sentence” Tips

In “Build a Sentence” tasks, your goal is to arrange words into one complete, grammatically correct sentence. As you learned earlier, **structure comes before meaning** on the TOEFL. These questions reward careful attention to grammar and word order—not creative ideas.

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### Tip 1: Identify the subject and the verb first

Every correct English sentence follows a **subject–verb order**. Even when phrases are long, the basic structure does not change.

Before placing any words, scan the options and ask:

- Which word (or phrase) could be the subject?
- Which word could be the main verb?

Starting with structure makes the rest of the sentence easier to build.

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### Tip 2: Check the punctuation before placing words

The punctuation at the end of the sentence is often your **most important clue**.

- A **period** means you are building a statement.
- A **question mark** means you are building a question.

If the sentence is a question, helper verbs will usually appear **before** the subject. This reinforces the idea that **structure guides your decisions** in grammar-focused tasks.

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### Tip 3: Watch for helper verbs in questions

Many Build a Sentence questions are **questions**, not statements.

In questions:

- Helper verbs like *do*, *did*, *can*, *will*, and *may* come **before** the subject.
- The main verb comes later.

However, if a question appears **inside a longer sentence** (a noun clause), the word order switches back to normal subject–verb order.

*Example:*

“Do you know where her office **is**?”

NOT: “Do you know where **is** her office?”

---

### Tip 4: Use word agreement to eliminate options

Grammar rules actively limit what you can build.

Pay close attention to:

- Singular vs. plural subjects
- Matching verb forms

- Pronouns that refer back to nouns

Using agreement rules this way helps keep your writing **clear and accurate**, which is one of the core goals of TOEFL Writing.

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### Tip 5: Reread the full sentence before submitting

Once all words are placed, read the entire sentence carefully.

Ask yourself:

- Does the word order match the sentence type?
- Did any helper verbs move to the wrong position?

A quick reread can catch small but costly mistakes.

#### Sample Question



We went out for dinner to celebrate my birthday yesterday.



\_\_\_\_\_ ?

where ate you the very expensive restaurant was

## Sample Response



We went out for dinner to celebrate my birthday yesterday.



Was the restaurant where you ate very expensive ?

The correct sentence is:

**Was the restaurant where you ate very expensive?**

### Explanation:

Because the sentence ends with a **question mark**, we know the response must be a question, a natural follow-up question one might ask when someone says that they went to a restaurant.

This is a **yes/no question**, so it follows this basic English pattern:

**helper verb → subject → verb → description**

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### Step 1: Start with the helper verb

The sentence talks about the **past**, so we use the helper verb **was**.

- **was** = helper verb (used to form past-tense questions)
-

## Step 2: Identify the subject

The subject is the thing we are asking about:

- **the restaurant** = noun phrase (article **the** + noun **restaurant**)

So far, we have:

- **Was the restaurant ...**
- 

## Step 3: Add the relative clause

The phrase **where you ate** gives **more information** about the restaurant.

- **where** = relative word (connects extra information)
- **you** = subject pronoun
- **ate** = past-tense verb

This clause answers the question *Which restaurant?*

So it must come **right after** the noun **restaurant**.

Now we have:

- **Was the restaurant where you ate ...**
- 

## Step 4: Add the description

The words **very expensive** describe the restaurant.

- **very** = adverb (modifies an adjective)

- **expensive** = adjective (describes the noun)

Adjectives and adjective phrases usually come **after the verb** in sentences with *be* verbs like *was*.

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### Final structure:

- **Was** (helper verb)
- **the restaurant** (subject)
- **where you ate** (relative clause)
- **very expensive** (adjective phrase)

Putting the pieces together in the correct order gives a natural and grammatical response to Speaker One's statement.

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### Tip:

When building questions in English, first find the **helper verb**, then the **subject**, and then add extra information (like relative clauses and descriptions) **after** the subject. This keeps your sentence clear and natural.

## Five “Write an Email” Tips

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In the “Write an Email” task, you will respond to a short, realistic situation—often related to school or daily life. This task applies several of the general writing principles you saw earlier, especially **clarity, organization**, and **appropriate detail**.

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### Tip 1: Use the bullet points as your outline

Each email task includes **three bullet points**, and each one must be addressed.

A simple approach:

- One paragraph per bullet point
- At least two full sentences per paragraph

Following the bullet points is one of the easiest ways to keep your writing **organized**, even if your grammar is not perfect.

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### Tip 2: State your purpose clearly at the beginning

Your reader should understand **why you are writing** within the first one or two sentences.

Avoid vague openings. Be polite, but direct.

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### Tip 3: Match the tone to the situation

TOEFL email tasks usually require a **neutral, professional tone**.

That means:

- Polite and friendly
- Not too casual
- Not overly formal

Avoid slang, emojis, abbreviations, and text-message language.

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### Tip 4: Invent reasonable details to strengthen your response

As mentioned earlier, the TOEFL allows you to invent details because **specific information makes writing clearer and more natural**.

Inventing details helps you:

- Expand your ideas
  - Sound more realistic
  - Reach an appropriate length naturally
- 

### Tip 5: Manage your time strategically

You have **7 minutes** for this task.

A good plan:

- 1 minute to read the prompt
- 4–5 minutes to write
- 1 minute to proofread

Managing your time well helps you focus on **clear communication**, not perfection.

## Sample Question

Type your essay into the provided editor.

**M<sup>AI</sup>** The Magoosh AI Tutor can automatically grade your answer. This can take a minute or two. [Request Grading](#)

You attended a film festival organized by a student club on your campus. The event was run by the club's leader, Alex. It featured several international films, but attendance was lower than expected.

Write an email to Alex. In your email, do the following:

Thank the club leader for organizing the film festival.

Comment on the low attendance at the event.

Suggest ways the club could attract more students to similar events in the future.

Write as much as you can and in complete sentences.

**Your Response:**

**To:** Alex  
**Subject:** Film Festival

### Here the's text of the passage for easier viewing:

You attended a film festival organized by a student club on your campus. The event featured several international films, but attendance was lower than expected.

Write an email to the leader of the club. In your email, do the following:

- Thank the club leader for organizing the film festival.
- Comment on the low attendance at the event.
- Suggest ways the club could attract more students to similar events in the future.

Write as much as you can and in complete sentences.

### Sample Response

*Hi Alex,*

*Thank you for organizing the film festival last weekend. I really enjoyed the selection of movies, especially the international films, which I do not usually get a chance to see on campus.*

*I did notice that attendance seemed lower than expected. When I arrived on Friday evening, there were only a few people in the audience, even though the films were high quality.*

*For future events, it might help to advertise earlier and use more channels, such as the campus radio station or social media. I think many students would be interested if they knew about it in advance.*

*Thank you again for your hard work.*

*Best regards,*

*Soira*

## Why it's an effective response

This response is effective because it follows the key strategies for the **Write an Email** task.

### 1. It addresses all three bullet points clearly

Each required point from the prompt appears in its own paragraph:

- The first paragraph thanks the organizer.
- The second paragraph comments on the low attendance.
- The third paragraph offers suggestions for improving future events.

Because no bullet point is skipped, the response fully completes the task.

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### 2. The purpose is clear from the beginning

The opening sentences make it immediately clear why the email was written. The writer thanks Alex and mentions the event right away, so the reader does not have to guess the purpose of the email.

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### 3. The tone is appropriate and professional

The language is polite, friendly, and natural. It is not too casual, but it also does not sound overly formal. This matches the neutral tone expected for TOEFL email tasks.

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### 4. Specific details strengthen the message

The writer includes concrete details, such as *international films* and *Friday evening*

*attendance*. These details are invented, but they make the email sound realistic and help explain the writer's ideas more clearly.

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### **5. The email is well organized and easy to read**

Each paragraph focuses on one main idea, and sentences flow logically from one to the next. This clear organization makes the response easy to follow, even with simple language.

This response shows that you do not need advanced vocabulary or perfect grammar to do well on the **Write an Email** task. By following the bullet points, using clear organization, adding reasonable details, and keeping a polite tone, you can write an effective TOEFL email response.

## **Five “Academic Discussion” Tips**

In the “Academic Discussion” task, you respond to an academic prompt and/or classmates’ comments by adding your own idea to the discussion. This task builds directly on two earlier principles: **clear main ideas** and the **general → specific → general** organization pattern.

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### **Tip 1: Start with a clear main idea**

Begin your response by clearly stating your opinion or contribution. Do not repeat the prompt or summarize what others have said.

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## Tip 2: Use a general → specific → general structure

Start with a general idea, support it with specific details or examples, and then return briefly to a general point.

This structure helps your response feel organized and connected.

---

## Tip 3: Support your idea with specific details

One strong example or explanation is better than several vague ones. Specific details help show control of written English.

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## Tip 4: Use transitions to connect ideas

Transition words help guide the reader and show logical flow.

Examples include:

- *For example*
  - *However*
  - *In addition*
  - *As a result*
-

## Tip 5: Stay focused on the topic

As with all TOEFL Writing tasks, **clarity matters more than length**. Every sentence should support your main idea. Longer responses do usually score better, but making a response longer by adding unrelated details will hurt more than help.

### Sample Question

Type your essay into the provided editor.

**M<sup>AI</sup>** The Magoosh AI Tutor can automatically grade your answer. This can take a minute or two.

[Request Grading](#)

Your professor is teaching a class on education.  
Write a post responding to the professor's question.

**In your response, you should do the following:**

- Express and support your opinion.
- Make a contribution to the discussion in your own words.

An effective response will be at least **100 words**.



Kelly

I believe group projects can improve learning because they allow students to share ideas and learn from one another. When students work together, they can explain concepts in different ways and help each other understand difficult material.



Dr. Martinez



Paul

In my opinion, group projects are often inefficient. Some students end up doing most of the work, while others contribute very little. This can make group projects frustrating and unfair.

We have been discussing the effectiveness of different teaching methods. One common method used in schools and universities is group work, where students complete projects together rather than working alone.

Do you think group projects are an effective way to improve student learning? Why or why not?

## Sample Response

*I agree that group projects can improve learning when they are structured well. Working with others allows students to hear different perspectives and explain ideas in their own words, which can deepen understanding. When students discuss concepts together, they often notice gaps in their knowledge and learn how to express their ideas more clearly.*

*For example, one student may understand the theory behind a topic, while another is better at applying it to real situations. By working together, both students can benefit and learn more effectively. However, this approach only works when everyone participates and responsibilities are shared fairly.*

*Overall, group projects can be useful learning tools, but teachers need to design them carefully to ensure that all students stay engaged and contribute equally.*

## Why it's an effective response

This response is effective because it follows the key writing principles that apply to all TOEFL Writing tasks.

First, the main idea is clear from the beginning. The writer states an opinion in the opening sentence and stays focused on that idea throughout the response. This shows **clarity**, which is more important than complex language.

Second, the response is well organized. It follows a **general → specific → general** structure by starting with a broad opinion, supporting it with an example, and ending with a clear conclusion. This makes the writing easy to follow.

Third, the writer includes **specific details**, such as differences between students who understand theory and those who apply ideas. These details help explain the opinion more clearly, even though they are invented.

Finally, the language is simple and natural. The writer uses complete sentences and clear grammar, showing that **clear communication matters more than advanced vocabulary**.

Together, these features show how applying the five writing tips leads to a strong TOEFL Academic Discussion response.

## Improvement Takes Time

Improving your writing takes time, but the process is simple.

Strong writing develops when you:

- Read English regularly
- Write short responses
- Edit your writing
- Return to it later and revise

Pay attention to repeated mistakes, and reuse words and sentence structures that work well. Writing improves through practice and reflection—not shortcuts.

## What to Focus on to Become a Better Writer

### Transitions

Pay attention to how transitions are used in a given situation. How are they organized? If arguments are presented that build on each other, they will likely use transitions listed under “Similarity” below. Or maybe one idea is presented and then the opposite opinion follows. If that’s the case, you’ll likely find one or more transition words of contrast were

used. And if you encounter examples, transition words of sequence will most certainly be included to make the relationship clear. The more familiar you are with the various types of transitions and when to use them in your writing, the more clear and cohesive your organization will be.

### **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 response on, and that will save you time in total.

## Have a Formula Prepared

The written responses on the TOEFL are pretty predictable. So during your practice sessions, spend some time learning a few response formats and practice manipulating them. When you get to the test, you'll be so experienced at writing short responses 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.

## Final Encouragement

You do not need perfect grammar to succeed on the TOEFL Writing section. Focus on **clear ideas, reasonable structure, and complete responses**. With practice, confidence comes naturally.

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## About Magoosh

Magoosh helps students around the world prepare for standardized tests through high-quality lessons, practice questions, and expert explanations. Our TOEFL resources are designed to help you build real skills and feel confident on test day.

**The end.**

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smart, go far. Enjoy the ride.

**Happy studying!**