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The Impact of Writing Strategies on Student Proficiency and Confidence Levels in an Advanced Placement Human Geography Course

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The Impact of Writing Strategies
on Student Proficiency and Confidence Levels
in an Advanced Placement Human Geography Course

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Abstract

This action research project investigated the impacts of writing strategy instruction on proficiency and confidence levels of students in an Advanced Placement (AP) Human Geography course. Participants included forty-eight 10th to 12th-grade AP Human Geography students in a rural, midwestern high school. Students utilized collaboration, peer feedback, and organizational tools. In the midst of teaching during various learning models (online, hybrid, and face-to-face) due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data was collected using a pre- and post-assessment, and questionnaires to gauge student confidence levels and writing proficiency. In addition, the researcher gathered observations, student feedback, and sample student responses. The data collected showed inconclusive results with regard to improving student writing proficiency. However, 60% of the students reported an increase in their overall confidence level. The data collected suggests that further research is needed and would benefit from being collected during a "traditional" school year when the education system is not responding to a global health crisis.

Keywords: writing strategies, secondary, proficiency, confidence, collaborative writing, peer feedback, organizational tools

I write many types of feedback notes on my Advanced Placement Human Geography (APHG) students' sample writing prompts such as "add more supporting details" and "give me an example." Since half of their AP exam includes three various Free-Response Questions (FRQ), I try to give meaningful feedback on every writing sample. Over the years, I noticed that I write this on almost every writing sample they complete for me. As the day approaches in the spring for their Advanced Placement (AP) exam, my anxiety rises, and I feel more nervous about their scores.

Through data collected on Advanced Placement Human Geography students, it is evident that my students perform better on the multiple-choice portion that they do on the written Free Response Questions (FRQ). For instance, during the 2017-2018 school year, on average, students scored 50% on the multiple-choice and 37.7% on the FRQ's. During the 2018-2019 school year, students score 48% on the multiple-choice and 36.5% on the FRQ's. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data from the 2019-2020 is not included as the AP exam was administered at home, without multiple-choice questions, and various combinations of FRQ's.

With a little self-reflection on my teaching practices, I realized I have expected them to know what to write, rather than teach them how to write their FRQs successfully. There are always a few students who have the background knowledge and ability to write a well-formatted response. Yet, some students still miss the mark. There may be a slight improvement with my feedback, but never enough to calm my nerves on the day they go to take their AP exam.

The data from past exams is not shocking when compared to the 2011 report card from the National Association for Educational Progress (NAEP) which found that 64% of eighth-grade students and 73% of twelfth-grade students perform below a proficient level on a writing assessment. These statistics are not shocking when research shows that secondary teachers do not

spend adequate time on writing in their classrooms (Graham, Harris, & Herbert, 2011; Graham et al., 2014; Hales, 2017). Due to this, I felt the need to make a change in my teaching practices.

Through research, I found three different writing strategies that I could efficiently and effectively implement into my AP Human Geography curriculum. The writing strategies I chose to teach included: graphic organizers, peer feedback, and collaborative writing. Overall, my goal in implementing these was for students to become more confident and comfortable in their writing.

I teach in a rural public secondary school, enrolling roughly 600 students, approximately 100 per graduating class. The Advanced Placement Human Geography course is offered to sophomores, juniors, and seniors. For many of my students, this is the first AP course they are offered. This year I had forty-eight students in two sections of this class: thirty-nine sophomores, five juniors, and four seniors.

Theoretical Framework

The research builds upon two main theories of writing. First, is the sociocultural theory of writing. According to Hodges (2017), the sociocultural theory of writing “emphasizes motivation, affect, and social influences as components of writing” (p. 141). Sociocultural theory builds on Vygotsky’s social development theory which identifies social interaction as essential to a child’s cognitive development. Also, Vygotsky identifies the importance of a learner having access to a more knowledgeable other (MKO). For many, this could be teachers or parents, but MKO can also be peers (Vygotsky as cited in Hodges, 2017).

With regard to writing instruction, the sociocultural theory applies when students collaborate (Hodges, 2017). In the past, Hodges (2017) notes, writing has been viewed as an

individual task, but by integrating collaborative writing and peer feedback students have the opportunity to improve their writing through peer interaction.

The research also builds upon self-efficacy as articulated in social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory with self-efficacy is rooted in Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura as cited in Hodges, 2017). Social learning theory involves students learning through the observations of peers' behavior, attitude, and outcomes of these observations (Bandura as cited in Hodges, 2017). When students improve their self-efficacy, through the implementation of writing instruction, they see improvements in writing outcomes (Hodges, 2017). Writing strategies that include social cognitive theory with self-efficacy involve class brainstorming sessions and student discussion about the writing prompt. Another method allows students to critique another writing sample to practice revising and editing (Hodges, 2017). This can be done through the use of examples and nonexamples in the classroom. Here, students compare two or more different writing samples of the same prompt to decipher which one fits the rubric best (Marzano, 2007). It is through writing strategies with social cognitive theory, focused on self-efficacy, that student outcomes in writing and confidence levels will be evaluated.

Review of Literature

Various studies have found a lack of writing instruction in non-English/Language Arts (ELA) secondary classrooms (Graham, Early, & Wilcox, 2014; Hales, 2017; Sielaff & Washburn, 2015). There are many potential causes, such as teachers worrying that incorporating writing strategies means sacrificing time meant for course-related content (Sielaff & Washburn, 2015). However, according to Sielaff & Washburn (2015), "Increasingly, students are being asked to write argument-based pieces using informational texts as evidence across grade levels and in content area classrooms" (p. 178). In addition, students who plan on attending post-

secondary education or jumping right into the workforce need to be able to write coherently (Graham et al., 2014; Huisman, Saab, van den Broek, & van Driel, 2019; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012).

This literature review will discuss reasons why there is a lack of writing instruction in non-ELA classrooms. Next, the benefits of changing these practices to include will be explored. Finally, the research will support the necessity of writing instruction in secondary classrooms through an examination of various writing strategies that teachers--especially those in non-ELA content areas--can incorporate into their classrooms.

Lack of Writing in Secondary Classrooms

Although students are tested in writing skills, such as Advanced Placement (AP) exams or college preparation exams (ACT or SAT), writing is not granted a high level of importance in non-ELA classrooms (Graham et al., 2014; Hales, 2017). In questioning 500 rural students, Hales (2017) discovered that most classes include writing, and student understanding is assessed through writing, yet there is very little specific instruction on writing itself in secondary schools.

A possible reason for this is many secondary teachers feel underprepared to include writing instruction in their classrooms. Some teachers do not feel they are responsible for teaching writing, claiming that the responsibility should solely be on the English/Language Arts teacher (Graham et al., 2014). Zumbrunn & Krause (2012) found that teachers who are confident in their writing skills bring this feeling into their classrooms. When teachers showcase their knowledge about a topic, in this case, writing, students can make more connections to the content (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012; Graham et al., 2014).

Moreover, conversations with educational leaders indicated that writing instruction is given less and less time in classrooms overall (Hales, 2017; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). Often,

writing instruction is pushed aside for teachers to focus more on reading or mathematics. On average, elementary teachers spend twenty minutes a day focused on writing skills (Graham as cited in Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). Regardless, an increasing amount of writing expectations still exist in non-ELA courses, such as Social Studies (Sielaff & Washburn, 2015).

Writing instruction is perceived to be a very lengthy and daunting task for non-ELA teachers to take on. Teachers are apprehensive when including writing instruction with the fear of not reaching content standards required for their course (Newman & Rosas, 2016; Sielaff & Washburn, 2015). This concern sits in tension with Common Core State Standards (2010) to increase the amount of writing necessary for non-ELA classrooms, such as Social Studies.

Need for Writing in Secondary Classrooms

Secondary teachers in Science and Social Studies need to teach writing (Common Core State Standards, 2010; Sielaff & Washburn, 2015). While daunting, students who are assessed on writing, and/or are writing more in class, show a deeper understanding of content (Newman & Rosas, 2016; Sielaff & Washburn, 2015). A study through the observations of 21 teachers and interviews of 24, from five schools, within three school districts, in the state of California, completed by McCormick, Hafner, & Saint-Germain (2013) found that when writing strategies are implemented in the classroom, 85% of teachers reported improvements in student learning. Individually, students that were taught writing strategies performed better on placement tests and analysis of texts as well as indicating higher confidence in their post-secondary preparation (McCormick et al., 2013; Newman & Rosas, 2016).

Furthermore, writing allows students to showcase their learning by building off previously taught content (Graham et al., 2014; Newman & Rosas, 2016; Sielaff & Washburn, 2015; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). When students begin to write cross-circularly, they get

more practice and, thus, learn more (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). Also, Graham et al. (2011) concluded that including writing opportunities led to higher scores on assessments.

Graham et al. (2014) state, “many students seeking a college education or jobs that pay a living wage do not have the literacy skills needed to be successful” (p. 969). Zumbrunn & Krause (2012) would consider writing to be an essential skill to possess when entering the workforce as many employers will consider writing ability in the hiring or promotion process. When analyzing the importance of writing in post-secondary education, it is evident that students are not prepared.

Potential Writing Strategies to Incorporate

In response to the lack of writing instruction in secondary classrooms, researchers have experimented with implementation of various strategies to increase the practice (Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Huisman et al., 2019; Morawski & Budke, 2019; Newman & Rosas, 2016; Sielaff & Washburn, 2015; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014). A beginning strategy is to ask students to use simple tools to organize their writing. By including graphic organizers or word clouds, students are able to visualize what they should include in their writing (Newman & Rosas, 2016; Sielaff & Washburn, 2015).

Sielaff & Washburn (2015) showcase an example of organizational skills called the Point Evidence Analysis or PEA Strategy. In this strategy, students break down the components of their writing into these three specific parts (point, evidence, and analysis) (Sielaff & Washburn, 2015). Through their eleven-week study of a ninth-grade Social Studies classroom, Sielaff & Washburn (2015) found the PEA strategy very useful, as documented below.

The integration of an organizational skill was also found useful in a study performed by Newman & Rosas (2016). Newman & Rosas (2016) incorporated word clouds into the secondary

Advanced Placement United States History course. While students read challenging texts, they would write out quick notes or tidbits of information they wanted to remember about their writing prompt. From here, class word clouds were created to show “the meaning of the paragraph” (Newman & Rosas, 2016, p. 57). Students then collaborated as a class to formulate a collective response to the prompt. This strategy was implemented throughout the year, with the goal of class collaboration through visual organizers (Newman & Rosas, 2016).

Both Sielaff & Washburn (2015) and Newman & Rosas (2016) found promising outcomes when teachers included instruction in organizational tools to shape students’ writing. Sielaff & Washburn (2015) found that students started to use the PEA strategy habitually, and 68% reported that they plan on using the PEA strategy in the future. Along with this, 71% said that the PEA strategy helped them with their writing (Sielaff & Washburn, 2015). Newman & Rosas (2016) found an increase in student confidence. Before students took their end-of-year Advanced Placement exam, many noted how confident they felt in their preparation. One student stated, "I feel that I can now better grasp and understand passages that I read. Instead of just reading a passage, I am now thinking deeper into it" (Newman & Rosas, 2016, p. 60). Overall, in both studies, it appears that teaching skills to help students organize their thoughts improved their writing confidence.

Another strategy secondary teachers can implement to improve student’s writing is collaborative writing. Collaborative writing is defined as students working with another peer or group while composing a response to a prompt (Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Storch, 2019). This practice has seen much success in elementary-level classrooms, however, it can also be very successful in secondary classrooms. Collaborative writing techniques are especially helpful at the secondary level when students are working on unfamiliar text to support a writing prompt or

with students learning English (Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014). A bonus of collaborative writing is that it can be easy to implement in non-ELA classrooms, especially Social Studies and Science (Gabriel & Dostal, 2015). Teachers can separate the class into groups or partners to analyze data, primary sources, or graphs/images. Together these groups/partners formulate a response to a prompt from the teacher.

Suwantarathip & Wichadee (2014) found higher scores on writing assessments when they used collaborative writing strategies. In this study, the 5,625 students who collaborated did so via Google Doc or face-to-face. Students in Suwantarathip & Wichadee (2014) reflected on the effectiveness of their collaborative group. On average, students felt collaborative writing fostered high or very high amounts of collaboration. Also, students felt good or very good about their specific group performance (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014). According to several studies, collaborative writing increased student motivation and effort, improved grammatical errors, and offered students new perspectives during the writing process (Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Storch, 2019; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014). Altogether, most students felt, and were, successful when completing work in a collaborative group.

When wanting to include more collaboration in the classroom, peer feedback is another writing strategy to consider. Peer feedback in secondary classrooms is defined as students, partners or groups, generally of the same writing ability, working together to review and analyze each other's work (Huisman et al., 2019; Morawski & Budke, 2019). Many times, peer feedback is given through a standardized set of questions. Examples of questions include, "Is there an opinion held in the text?" or "Is the opinion justified and supported by evidence?" (Morawski & Budke, 2019, p. 9). However, peer feedback can also include an analysis of grammar and syntax (Huisman et al., 2019; Morawski & Budke, 2019).

To increase the effectiveness of peer feedback, teachers can also allow more feedback to happen during class time and rotate students to allow for more perspectives on their writing samples (Huisman et al., 2019). Furthermore, improving writing skills and providing sought after opportunities for collaboration during the school day, such as, providing and using peer feedback, translates directly to the workforce (Huisman et al., 2019).

When students are allowed to collaborate and discuss their writing process, there are many improvements in their writing ability. Peer feedback improves overall student writing skills, such as grammar, quality of arguments/points, and use of supporting evidence (Huisman et al., 2019; Morawski & Budke, 2019). Along with increases in the writing process, students also gained confidence while talking through their writing with a peer or group (Huisman et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The implementation of instructional writing strategies in secondary classrooms--such as use of organizational tools, collaborative writing, or peer feedback improves student writing outcomes and academic confidence. Although there are challenges, the implementation of writing strategies in secondary classrooms is possible and allows for greater student success.

Based on the findings of this literature review I included instruction in the use of organizational tools, collaborative writing, and peer feedback into my Advanced Placement Human Geography course to better prepare my students for successful outcomes on the writing portion of their AP exam.

Methodology

The action research design of this study is experimental, seeking evidence of the effects on students' writing proficiency and confidence of providing time for and instruction in:

collaborative writing, use of organizational tools, and peer feedback. Action research is defined as research completed with the goal in improving practices within the classroom (Hendricks, 2017). Qualitative measures, including observations, student responses, and feedback, were obtained. Additionally, quantitative data was collected to gauge student confidence levels in their writing. Pre- and post-questionnaires (see Appendix A & B) were administered to compare student's beliefs about their writing proficiency and confidence levels throughout the research.

This research took place in a rural, public secondary school with approximately 600 students in grades 7-12. The sample size was 48 students, composed of 39 sophomores, five juniors, and four seniors. Of these students, 28 identify as female and 20 as male. There was one student with a 504 Plan and no students on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). In mid-September, the researcher reviewed and discussed the action research with the students. The researcher talked about the purpose and potential outcomes of this research. Also, students were allowed time to ask questions or bring up concerns they may have. If a student or parent/guardian preferred to opt-out of the research, it needed to be signed and returned by September 18, 2020; no students decided to opt-out of the action research.

At the time of the research, the researcher had taught one student previously; the other 38 students were new to the researcher as their teacher. This was the researcher's third year teaching AP Human Geography and fifth year overall teaching.

The pre-and post-questionnaires (Appendix A & B) were conducted to determine levels of writing proficiency and student confidence. The questionnaires allowed students to share their standard practices of writing, such as creating outlines or including main ideas and details. In addition, students recorded their writing confidence on a scale from 1 to 10. Furthermore, the researcher collected baseline data on students' overall reading comprehension and writing skills

using a multiple-choice pre-ACT practice assessment and sample writing prompt (Everett, 2017; *On To College*, 2020) (see Appendix C).

Collaborative writing was used to improve students' writing proficiency and confidence. The researcher allowed students to collaborate with a peer or small group during in-class writing prompts (Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Storch, 2019). Each prompt contained three to seven distinct parts (*The College Board*, 2007; *The College Board*, 2009). Students read, discussed, and responded to each part of the writing prompt with their partner or group. Students' responses were then assessed using a rubric for content and organization (see Appendix I). During the grading process, the researcher provided formative feedback on the group's response.

The use of organizational tools allowed students to break apart components of their response. Modeling aspects of the findings of Sielaff & Washburn's (2015) PEA Strategy, students were given graphic organizers to break apart a prompt's various elements prior to writing (see Appendix E & F). This organizer forced students to make sure they included enough content information, such as the main idea and key details. It also prompted students to include a meaningful example, if necessary.

Peer feedback was utilized for students to think critically about various pre-written samples. Students were given sample prompts already written and the corresponding rubric (*The College Board*, 2015; *The College Board*, 2014). Then, students acted as the teacher to provide relevant feedback and a grade on each sample.

Data was collected monthly between September and March. To begin, the researcher collected baseline data. This data gave the researcher vital information on student writing proficiency and confidence levels. In mid-September, students completed a pre-questionnaire titled Writing Attitude Scale (see Appendix A). In this, students answered five questions

describing their normal writing process and gave insight into their confidence levels. Students also completed a baseline practice multiple choice test taken from the *On to College* practice Pre-ACT test (*On to College*, 2020). Finally, students completed a baseline writing assessment using information from an article on Sustainability to respond to a writing prompt (Everett, 2017) (see Appendix C). Rubrics were used to determine the baseline writing score and overall conventions score (see Appendix C and L).

After pre-questionnaire and baseline data were collected, students began using the various strategies. At the beginning of the action research, strategies were practiced in the classroom. However, as the semester continued, some had to be practiced and completed at home. This change was due to a shift in learning models for the school district caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, students were flowing into and out of synchronous and asynchronous learning due to pandemic quarantines. In spite of these unexpected challenges, qualitative and quantitative data were collected throughout the implementation of strategies. The research took place across the study of six chapters. All items related to the strategies were posted within the schools' Learning Management System (LMS).

Collaborative Writing

The first strategy practiced was collaborative writing. The researcher implemented this twice during the action research process, both times students were in the classroom. This strategy required students to work collectively with a partner or small group to discuss and respond to Free-Response Questions (FRQs) with three parts (*The College Board*, 2009). As students worked together, the researcher moved around the classroom to listen to the discussion and take observational notes. Once students had completed their collective FRQ, they answered questions reflecting on the collaborative writing process. Questions included student responses on how

effective the strategy was, the strategy's steps, and a summary of the individual groups' writing process. Finally, a Likert scale was used to record students' overall confidence levels on their writing ability (see Appendix D). Scores for the collaborative FRQs were based on the corresponding rubric (*The College Board, 2009; The College Board, 2020*).

Organizational Tools

Graphic organizers were incorporated twice during the research. In each, students were given an FRQ with seven parts. Students used the graphic organizer to break apart their responses, explain and analyze their answer to the question, and to give an appropriate example, if necessary (see Appendix E & F). Once completed, students took all seven (A-G) parts of the FRQ to create one cohesive response. These responses were assessed based on the corresponding rubrics. Finally, students completed a questionnaire on the organizational skills strategy (see Appendix G). Like the questionnaire after collaborative writing, questions included student responses on the effectiveness of the strategy, the steps taken in the strategy, and a summary of the strategy. Also, students responded to a Likert scale on their overall confidence levels within their writing. This strategy was implemented as asynchronous work for students during a distance learning day.

Peer Feedback

The strategy of peer feedback was implemented twice during the action research. In this strategy, students utilized rubrics to review and grade various levels of pre-written sample FRQs (*The College Board, 2014; The College Board, 2015*). The researcher specifically chose three distinct levels: basic, moderate, and advanced. Students were to grade all three levels of FRQs using the rubric as if they were the teacher. Additionally, as they read and reviewed the FRQs, students gave feedback on specific aspects, such as overall content and organization (see

Appendix I). At the end of the strategy, students placed all three in the level (basic, moderate, and advanced) they felt they belonged. After completion, students responded to the questionnaire (see Appendix H). Questions included student responses on: the perceived effectiveness of the strategy, the steps taken in the strategy, and a summary of the strategy. Finally, a Likert scale was used to determine student's overall confidence in their own writing ability. This strategy was implemented as asynchronous work for students during a distance learning day.

After the incorporation of these strategies, students completed a post-assessment writing prompt and student questionnaire (see Appendix B & C). Like the pre-assessment, the post-assessment writing prompt was also scored based on a rubric grading student content and organization (see Appendix I). The post-questionnaire asked students to describe their writing process, if they noticed any changes throughout the research, and give insight on their confidence levels. Also, students ranked all three interventions based on their interest in and perceived effectiveness of the strategies. Students were also able to give qualitative feedback about the overall research process.

Data Analysis

This study aimed to identify the effects of specific instructional strategies on students' writing proficiency and confidence levels. The research design incorporated qualitative and quantitative data tools such as observations, writing samples, student survey responses, and student feedback. A pre- and post-questionnaire was administered to gain insight on student proficiency and confidence levels before and after the research (see Appendix A & B).

The students involved in the research were enrolled in a rural, secondary public school with approximately 600 students in grades 7-12. Of the 48 students involved in the research, 39 were sophomores, five were juniors, and four were seniors. Twenty-eight students identify as

female and 20 as male. There was one student with a 504 Plan and no students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The research took place six times over the course of fall and winter 2020-2021. Each strategy was practiced twice during this period. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the school year was held in a hybrid model, with students attending classes in person twice per week and doing asynchronous work the other three days of the week.

Writing Proficiency

Before the researcher began implementing the three strategies, students completed a pre-assessment. The pre-assessment asked students to respond to a sample Free Response Question (FRQ) based on an article the students had read in class during an asynchronous learning day (Everett, 2017). A rubric was used to evaluate students’ writing based on content knowledge demonstrated (see Appendix C). Figure 1 shows the baseline scores of the pre-assessment writing sample. Based on the data, the average score of the 42 students who completed the pre-assessment was a 7.9 out of 12.

Student Scores on Pre-Assessment

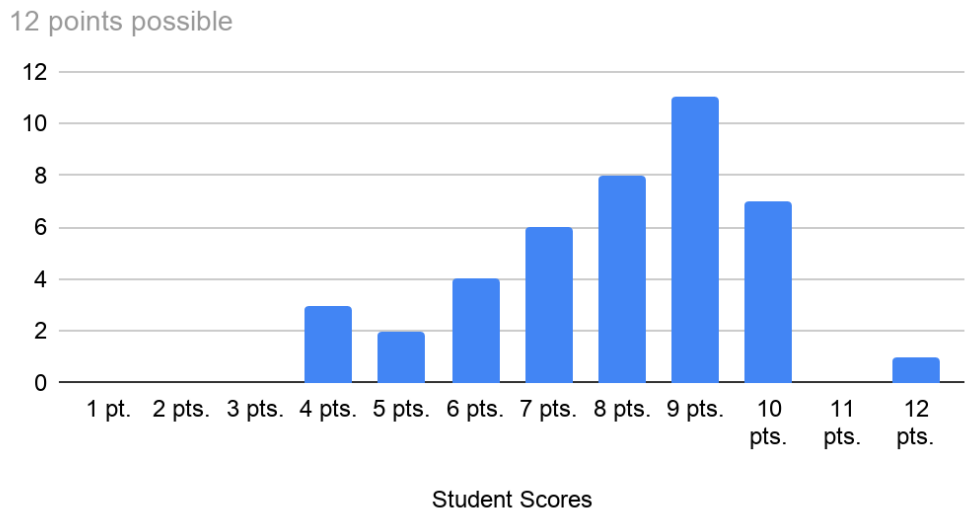


Figure 1 Student pre-assessment scores.

Once the research was completed, students responded to the same practice FRQ as used in the pre-assessment during an asynchronous school day (Everett, 2017) (see Appendix C).

Figure 2 below displays the post-assessment scores from the students. Of the 46 students who completed the post-assessment, the average score was a 9.6 out of 12.

Student Scores on Post-Assessment

12 points possible

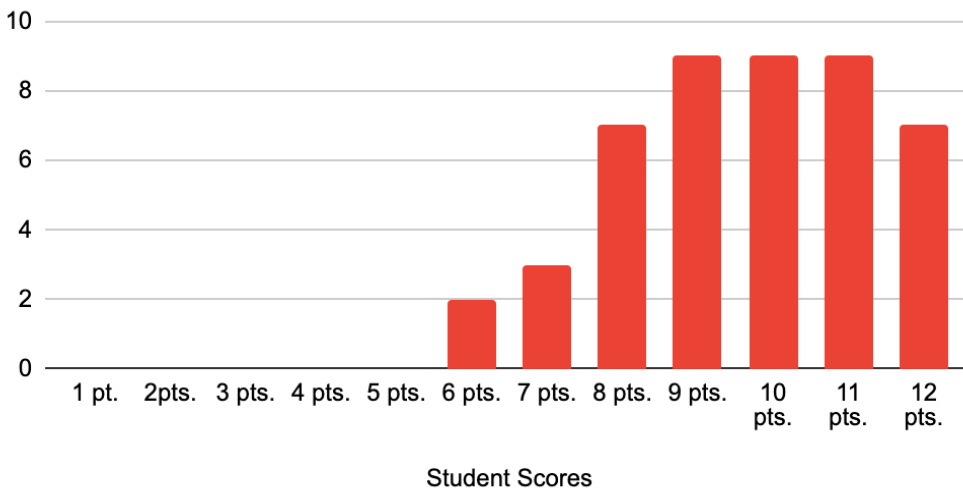


Figure 2 Student post-assessment scores.

While comparing the difference in scores, the data shows an average increase of 1.8 points in the students who completed both pre- and post-assessments. Figure 3 shows the aggregated difference in pre- to post- scores for all students who completed both assessments.

Difference in Pre- and Post-Assessment Scores

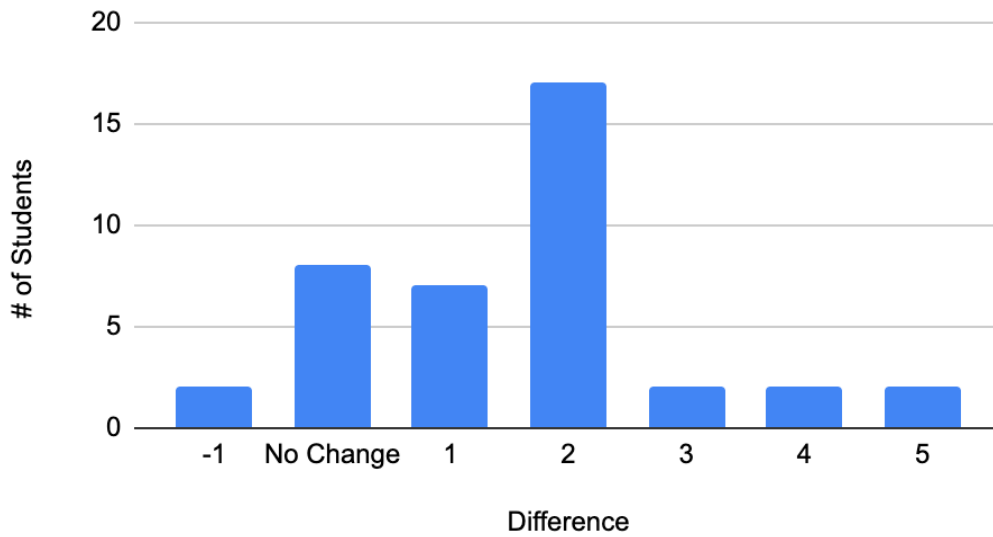


Figure 3 Aggregated difference in pre- and post-assessment scores.

According to *The College Board* (2021), when writing an FRQ, students should include content in an organized, labeled manner. Therefore, along with grading for content knowledge, the researcher tallied the number of students who organized their writing in a succinct manner (see Appendix I). Of the 42 students who completed the baseline pre-assessment for writing, 23 had it organized properly. In comparison, during the post-assessment writing sample, 42 of the 46 students who completed the post-assessment organized and labeled their FRQ as deemed preferred by AP exam readers.

In addition to analyzing the pre- and post-assessment, the researcher also analyzed average student scores on FRQs during unit exams. It is important to note that this is the researcher's third year teaching the course. In general, the effectiveness of teachers increases year after year. As Figure 4 displays, average FRQ scores have risen in the past three years, however, the growth from unit to unit remains constant year to year. For example, when comparing the

scores from Unit 2 to Unit 3 in the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, on average, scores rose 1%. In addition, from Unit 3 to Unit 4, on average, scores rose 5%.

Unit FRQ Assessment Scores

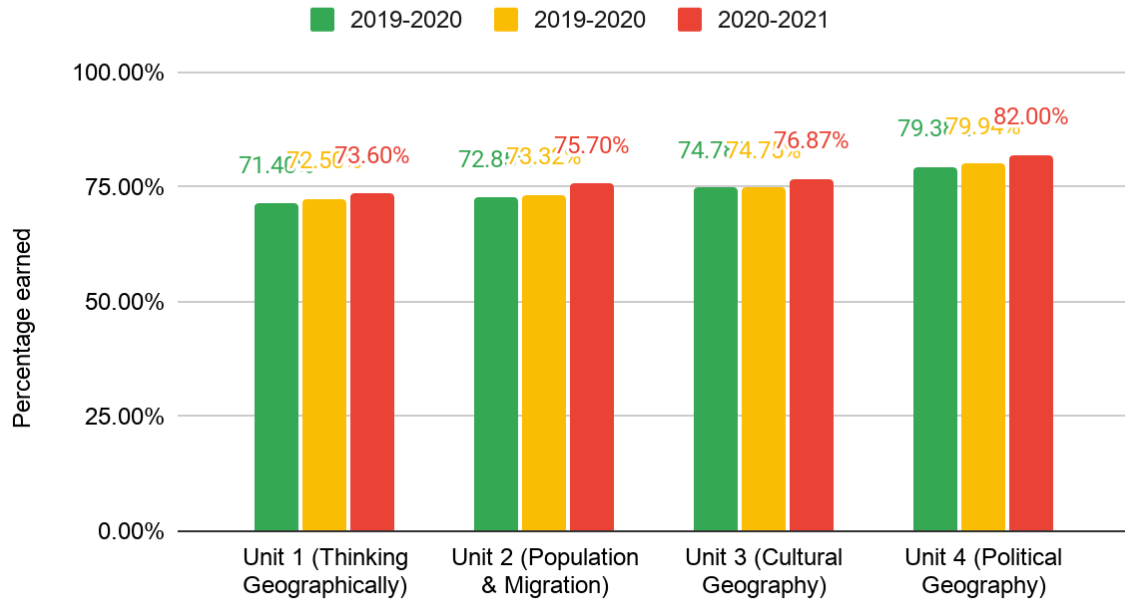


Figure 4 Student assessment scores by year and unit.

Research from the 2020-2021 school year was gathered through various learning methods, in person, synchronously at a distance, and asynchronous due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, it may be inconclusive as to the benefits of incorporating writing strategies into AP Human Geography.

Confidence Levels

Along with improving writing proficiency, data on student confidence levels was collected. During the pre- and post-questionnaires, students reflected on their overall writing confidence level (see Appendix A & B). Figure 5 below shows the difference in student responses to the question, “I am confident in my ability to write a well-organized paragraph.”

Difference of Student Confidence Levels in Writing a Well-Organized Paragraph

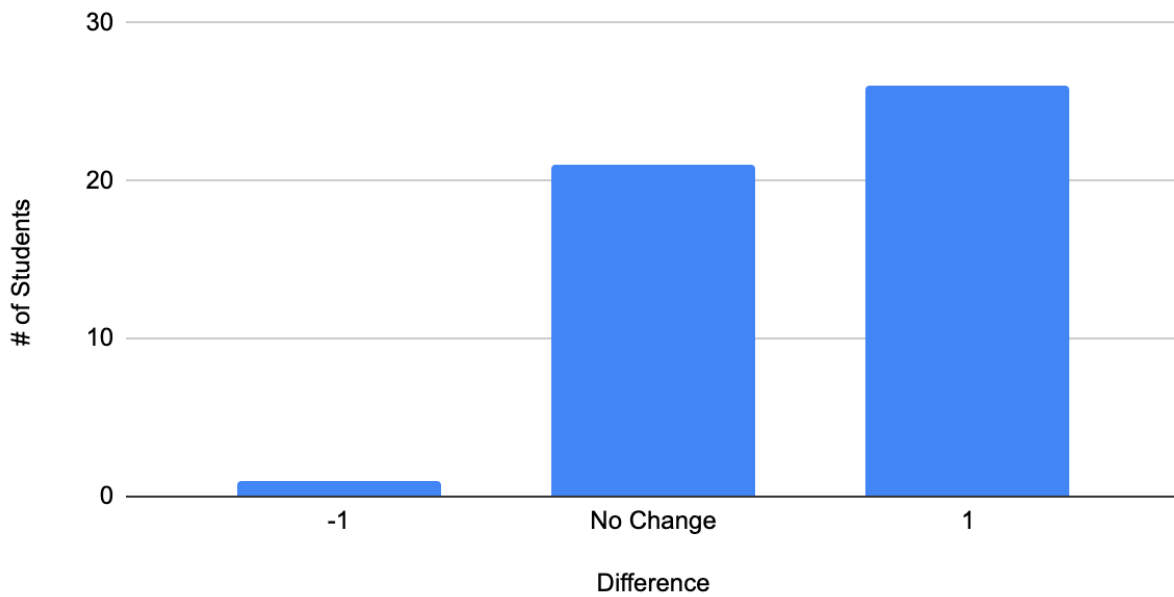


Figure 5 Difference between pre- and post-questionnaire data on student confidence levels in writing a well-organized paragraph.

Based on the data, more than half of the students involved in the research increased their confidence levels.

Students were also asked to respond to this prompt: “On a scale of 1-10, my overall confidence in my writing ability is a..?” Figure 6 showcases the results from the pre- and post-questionnaire.

Difference in Overall Student Confidence Levels

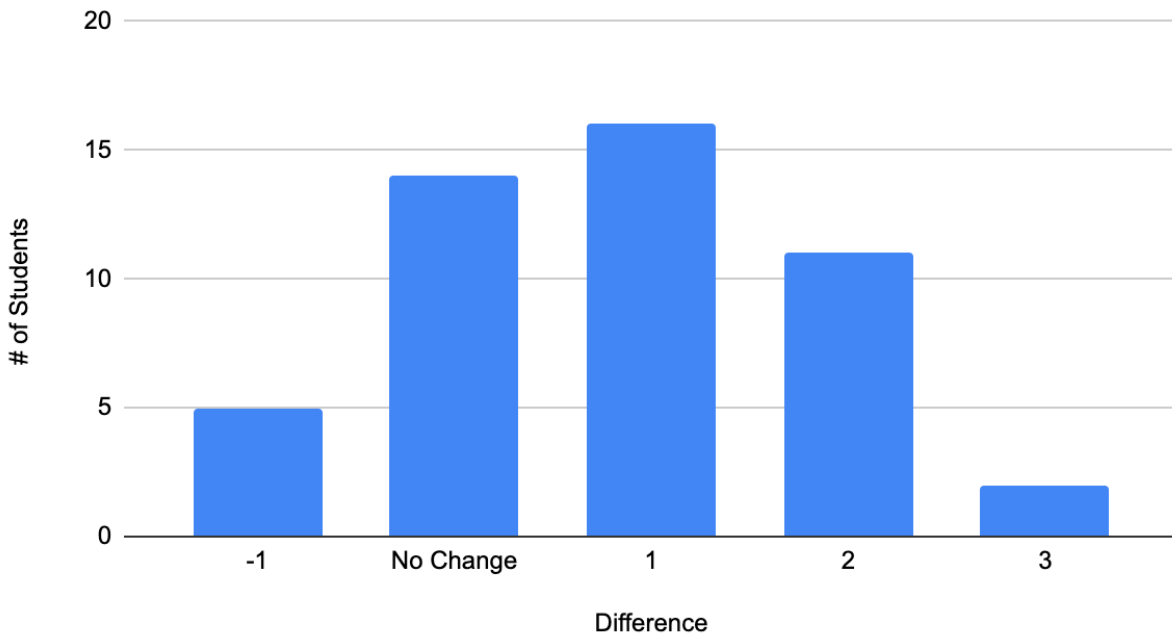


Figure 6 Difference between pre- and post-questionnaire data on overall student confidence levels.

Based on the data in Figure 6, it is apparent that most students increased their confidence levels.

In fact, overall student confidence levels rose from an average of 6.9 to 7.7.

Comparing Assessment Scores to Confidence Levels

The data was also analyzed to find any correlation between post-assessment scores and final overall confidence levels. Using a correlation coefficient, it is evident that there was moderate correlation between the two, $r(44) = .64$.

In addition, the researcher found some evidence that the intervention impacted students differently based on their gender. The correlation coefficient in males was $r(17) = .70$. In females, the correlation coefficient was $r(25) = .57$. Thus, there was a higher correlation between improved confidence and writing outcomes in males compared to females.

Student Feedback

Finally, the researcher asked for student input on the three strategies. First, students were to rank each strategy based on pure enjoyment. Figure 7 shows that of the 44 students present in class when asked, 28 of them enjoyed the collaborative writing strategy the most. However, the researcher did note that although students did prefer to work with their peers, many voiced their concerns on this strategy’s effectiveness.

Favorite Strategy

(ranked by students)

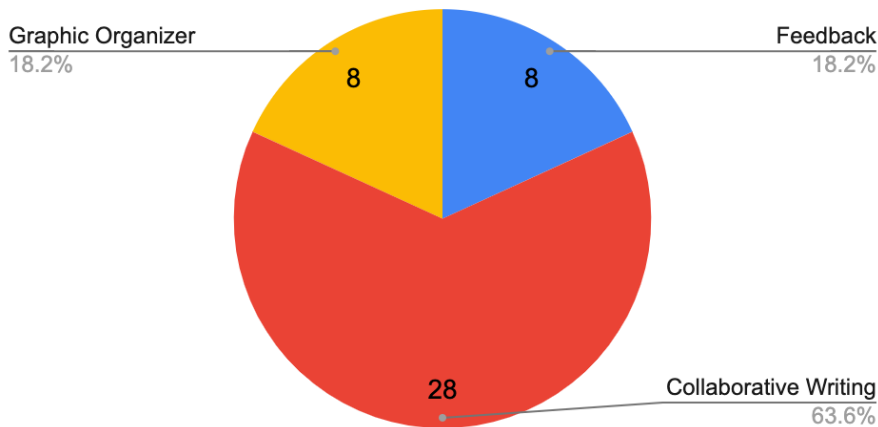


Figure 7 Favorite strategy, ranked by students.

One student stated, “Although it was nice to share ideas with my peers in class, this strategy does not set us up for success as we cannot work with one another on the final AP Human Geography exam in May.” Responses to the next question supported this claim. Students were asked to rank each strategy based on the level of benefit or effectiveness. Figure 8 outlines the findings of the 44 students who were present when asked.

Most Beneficial Strategy

(ranked by students)

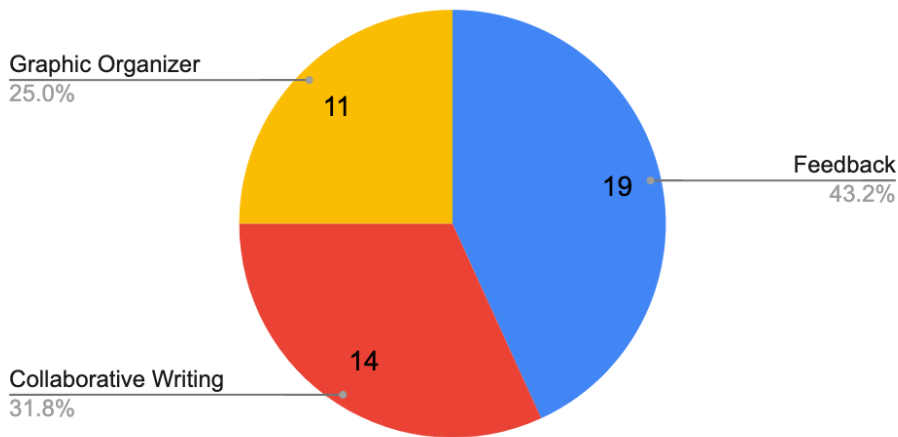


Figure 8 Most beneficial strategy, as ranked by students.

Therefore, students preferred to work with others collaboratively, but felt peer feedback was the most beneficial.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the impact of writing strategies on students' writing proficiency and confidence levels. From reflection on past student outcomes on the Advanced Placement exam, it was evident the researchers' students struggle more with FRQs than multiple-choice. Since higher scoring FRQs are dependent on a students' ability to write at a higher level, organizing content with background knowledge and vocabulary terms is imperative. Simply, expecting students to have this knowledge is not an effective teaching practice. Proving the need for a better organization of teaching writing in secondary Social Studies classrooms.

Thus, three writing strategies (collaborative writing, peer feedback, and organizational tools) were added to the curriculum. Student questionnaires allowed for the collection of qualitative data and the analysis of pre- and post-assessments and unit Free Response Questions (FRQ) scores gathered quantitative data. However, the quantitative data collected did not show

an overwhelming increase in student writing proficiency. On average, in the analysis of pre- and post-assessment scores, students increased 1.7 points, from 7.9 to 9.6 out of 12. One can argue this is successful, yet when comparing average scores on FRQs with the past two school years, 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, growth has remained constant. Thus, writing proficiency results gained from this particular intervention remain inconclusive.

In addition to writing proficiency, students were graded based on a conventions rubric (see Appendix I). When taking the AP exam in the spring, AP readers had a preferred method for organization (*The College Board, 2021*). It is as simple as labeling each specific part of the prompt to ensure all parts are accounted for. The number of students who properly organized their pre- and post-assessment rose from 23 to 42.

Overall confidence levels in writing rose 60%, or from 6.9 to 7.7 out of 10. In addition, students were asked to rank their ability to write a well-organized paragraph using a 5-point Likert scale. Average rankings rose from 3.6 to 4.1. Along with the mode of the data shifting from a 3 (somewhat confident) to a 4 (fairly confident).

Observations and student feedback also gave important insight into the effectiveness of the strategies. Students voiced their preference to utilize the collaborative writing strategy to work with one another. Of the 44 students asked, 28 choose collaborative writing as their favorite strategy practiced. On a post-strategy questionnaire, one student wrote, "I really liked that we were able to chat in small groups because I felt like I was able to view the response from a different perspective."

Finally, students were asked to choose the strategy they felt was the most effective or beneficial. Of the 44 students present, 19 stated peer feedback as the most effective or beneficial. Based on conversations with many students, it was evident they felt this was the most effective

because they got to act as the teacher to find the key terms and details in a peer's response. One student stated, "This was difficult to know what feedback to give, but it was fun to grade it and find evidence." Although the intervention was inconclusive in terms of gains in actual writing proficiency, the researcher feels satisfied that, even amidst the pandemic which caused significant disruptions and changes to teaching and learning, students' confidence, outcomes, and overall interest in using writing strategies improved during the study.

Limitations

The main limitation in this action research project was the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. This posed a significant change to the method of instruction. During the 2020-2021 school year, students were in a hybrid learning model for a majority of the year and had a two-week fully synchronous distance learning period in Fall 2020. Students were in the classroom two days per week and asynchronous learning for three days a week. In addition, many students were placed into COVID-19 quarantines as protocol due to close contact exposure.

Most of the strategies were completed during these asynchronous school days. The researcher did preview strategies with students before an asynchronous learning day and reminded students of the importance of messaging or emailing when a question arose. However, the researcher was dependent on student feedback from post-strategy questionnaires and informal discussions during the next in-class school day.

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, the hybrid learning model also posed a limitation to the study. Also, some students struggled to remain engaged during asynchronous learning. Besides the pre- and post-questionnaire, there was no other time where every student involved in the study completed a strategy. There are some instances where the researcher had 50% engagement with students in asynchronous learning. Since students were working from home, it

was easier to disengage from classwork. Leading the researcher to wonder if the results would have been different had all students been engaged in the classroom during the implementation of the strategies.

Action Plan

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the implementation of this action research. Although not ideal, the inclusion of peer feedback and use of organizational tools were simple strategies to use within the schools' Learning Management System (LMS). In the midst of hybrid and distance learning, an LMS was invaluable to this experience. However, the researcher would suggest one change when incorporating these strategies: more in-depth modeling of each strategy could have led to a more significant impact on student outcomes. Hybrid learning took away precious in-class time that could have been spent analyzing the effectiveness of these strategies.

Without this intervention it is also possible that students' outcomes would have fallen this year due to the disruptions of the pandemic. The researcher did find collaborative writing and peer feedback to be successful strategies to incorporate when wanting to improve student confidence in writing. During classroom observations, it was evident students enjoyed working with one another on FRQs. The researcher especially noted this as impactful and beneficial at the beginning of the school year when students did not have as much exposure to FRQ types of questions.

Going forward it would be compelling to add the two strategies together that students identified as the most enjoyable and most effective. For example, students would work in groups of three or four. As a group they would complete a sample FRQ. Then, groups would trade with each other to grade based on the corresponding rubric. This way, students are utilizing their

favorite strategy (collaborative writing) and the strategy they felt was the most beneficial (peer feedback).

In conclusion, writing strategies do impact students outcomes in writing proficiency and confidence levels. As an educator, it is important to reflect on the needs of the students in regard to their writing, ultimately setting students up for success. This study found research-support methods for improving writing proficiency and confidence levels of students in AP Human Geography. Based on the outcomes, the researcher suggests incorporating collaborative writing, with peer, or group, feedback into the classroom as there were positive gains from the students. These are simple and effective, especially during synchronous or asynchronous learning, strategies that ultimately benefit the students.

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Appendix A

Pre-Questionnaire

Writing Attitude Scale

Please read each statement and reflect on your feeling towards your writing ability. It is important for you to be honest in your responses.

Do you agree or disagree? How strong are these feelings?

****There are no right or wrong answers****

*** Required**

1. Email address *

2. Before I begin to write, I organize my thoughts into an outline. *

Mark only one oval.

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

3. I include a main point in my writing. *

Mark only one oval.

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Appendix B

Post-Questionnaire

Writing Attitude Scale

Please read each statement and reflect on your feeling towards your writing ability. It is important for you to be honest in your responses.

Do you agree or disagree? How strong are these feelings?

****There are no right or wrong answers****

*** Required**

1. Email address *

2. Before I begin to write, I organize my thoughts into an outline. *

Mark only one oval.

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

3. I include a main point in my writing. *

Mark only one oval.

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

4. I include evidence to support the main point. *

Mark only one oval.

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

5. Rank each strategy. 1 = favorite to 3 = least favorite.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Collaborative Writing	Feedback	Graphic Organizer
Number 1	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Number 2	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Number 3	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. Rank each strategy. 1 = most beneficial/impactful 3 = least beneficial/impactful.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Collaborative Writing	Feedback	Graphic Organizer
Number 1	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Number 2	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Number 3	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. I am confident in my ability to write a well organized paragraph. *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

8. On a scale of 1-10, my overall confidence in my writing ability is a... *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Appendix C

Pre- and Post-Assessment FRQ & Rubric

*Students were not given parameters/guidelines to follow in the pre-assessment.

Using the Newsela article, “What is sustainability?” answer the following three questions.

- A. What is sustainability?
- B. Using the three: economy, society, and environment, how can a nation implement sustainable options? Give 2 options.
- C. List and explain 3 challenges to sustainability.

A.	Sustainability is the capacity of the earth's natural systems and human cultural systems to survive, flourish and adapt to changing environmental conditions for many years into the future.	2 pt.
B.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Supporting farming communities ● Enforcing taxes on the use of nonrenewable energy sources ● Restrictions on the use of nonrenewable energy sources ● Crop rotation policies 	4 pts.
C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Poverty ● Urbanization ● Climate change 	6 pts.
TOTAL		12 pts.

Appendix D

Post-Collaborative Writing Questionnaire

Collaborative Writing

Please read each statement and reflect on your feeling towards your writing ability. It is important for you to be honest in your responses.

Do you agree or disagree? How strong are these feelings?

****There are no right or wrong answers****

*** Required**

1. Email address *

2. Name *

3. My writing will improve when I use today's strategy. *

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree

4. I will use today's strategy in the future. *

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree

5. On a scale of 1-10, my overall confidence in my writing ability is a... *

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. When practicing collaborative writing, we... (check all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- Discussed the question with my partner/group
- Planned out our response
- Included main points for each part (A-G) of the FRQ
- Added supporting evidence for our main points
- Reviewed and revised our FRQ

7. Summarize the practice of collaborative writing you used today. *

8. Please add any additional information Ms. Murphy needs to know about writing or today's strategy.

Appendix E

Graphic Organizer # 1 (*The College Board, 2013*)

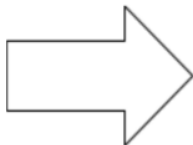
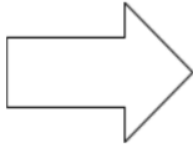
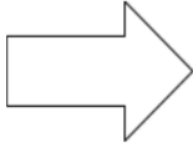
FRQ Practice: Aging Population

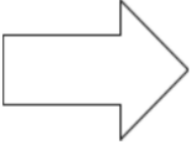
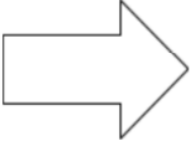
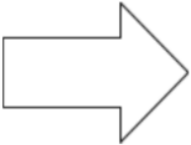
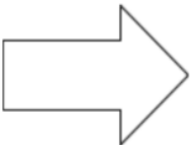
Step 1: Use the outline/organizer created to answer questions A-G.

POPULATION AGE 65 OR OLDER IN 2000 AND 2050 (in percent)

Country	Population Age 65 or Older, 2000 (percent)	Population Age 65 or Older, 2050 (percent)	Change in Proportion 65 Years or Older (percent)
Belgium	17	28	65
Denmark	15	24	59
Japan	17	32	86
Russian Federation	13	25	100
Ukraine	14	27	91
United Kingdom	16	25	56

In the boxes below, use bullet points and write notes.

<p>A. Identify the trend depicted in the chart above.</p>		<p>The chart above shows...</p>
<p>B. Identify one reason that the average population age is increasing in developed countries.</p>		<p>One reason the average population age is increasing in developed countries is...</p>
<p>C. Explain your reason (from B) why the average population age is increasing in developed countries.</p>		<p>----- has caused the average population age to increase because...</p>

<p>D. Explain one social consequence countries face as their population ages.</p>		<p>One social consequence countries will face with an aging population is...</p> <p>.</p>
<p>E. Explain one economic consequence countries face as their population ages.</p>		<p>One economic consequence countries will face with an aging population is...</p>
<p>F. Explain one pronatalist population policy a country has implemented in the developed world to address the issue of aging populations.</p>		<p>An example of a pronatalist policy a country has implemented is...</p> <p>This has made an impact by...</p>
<p>G. Discuss how immigration policies in the developed world have changed as a result of low birth rates and aging populations.</p>		<p>Because of aging populations, worldwide immigration policies have changed by...</p> <p>This impacts a countries population by...</p>

Step 2: Take your outlined responses and turn it into a well-written (and organized!) FRQ.

Appendix F

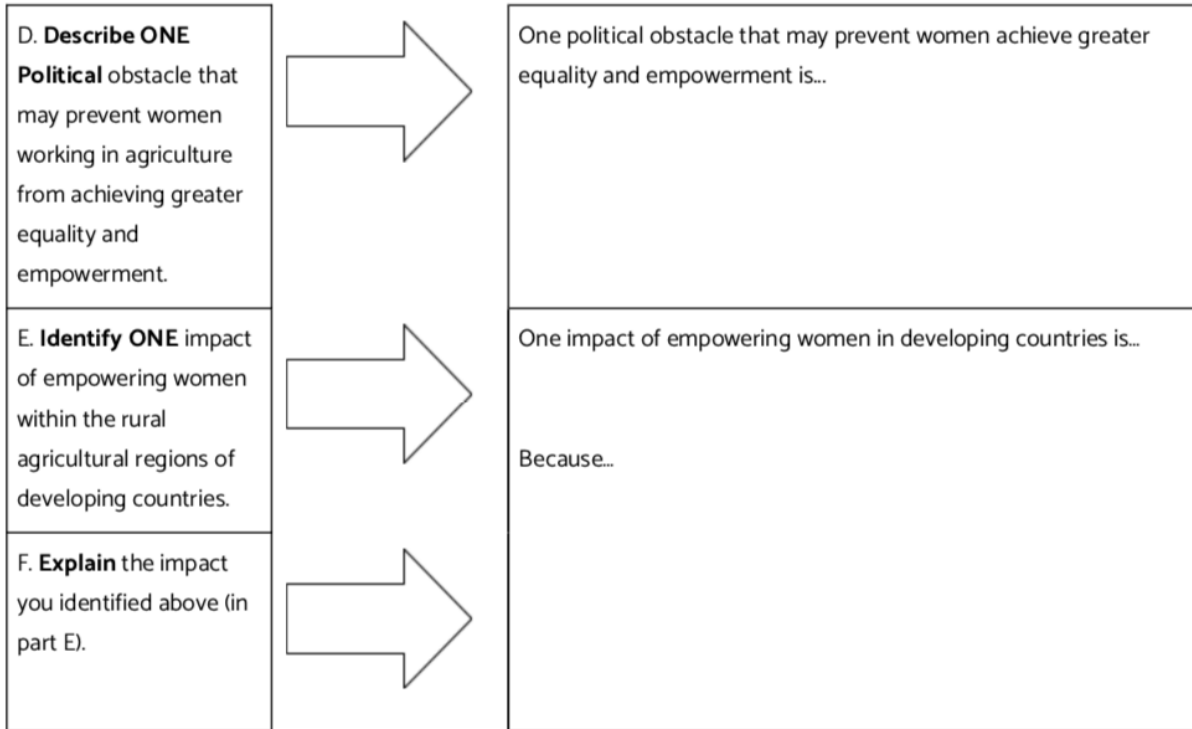
Graphic Organizer # 2 (*The College Board, 2018*)



Women compose between $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of all agricultural laborers in developing countries, and yet empowerment and gender equality have been difficult to achieve.

Step 1: In the boxes below, use bullet points and write notes.

<p>A. Identify a country where more than 75% of women in the labor force are active in agriculture.</p>		<p>One country shown on the map with more than 75% of women involved in agriculture is _____.</p> <p>**TRY TO NOT USE A MAP**</p>
<p>B. Describe ONE Economic obstacle that may prevent women working in agriculture from achieving greater equality and empowerment.</p>		<p>One economic obstacle that may prevent women achieve greater equality and empowerment is...</p>
<p>C. Describe ONE Cultural obstacle that may prevent women working in agriculture from achieving greater equality and empowerment.</p>		<p>One cultural obstacle that may prevent women achieve greater equality and empowerment is...</p>



Step 2: Take your outlined responses and turn them into a well-written (and organized!) FRQ.

4. When practicing organizational skills, I... (check all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- Used a graphic organizer
- Created an outline
- Incorporated main points for each part (A-G)
- Added additional information (evidence) to support my main point
- Reviewed and revised my FRQ

5. Summarize the practice of organizational skills you used today. *

6. On a scale of 1-10, my overall confidence in my writing ability is a... *

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. Please add any additional information Ms. Murphy needs to know about writing or today's strategy.

4. On a scale of 1-10, my overall confidence in my writing ability is a... *

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. When practicing peer-feedback, I... (check all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- Read through the entire FRQ
- Highlighted the main points of my peer's FRQ
- Underlined any supporting evidence
- Clarified any questions I had with my peer
- Gave a score based on the rubric
- Gave constructive feedback in a respectful manner

6. Summarize the practice of peer-feedback you used today. *

7. Please add any additional information Ms. Murphy needs to know about writing or today's strategy.

Appendix I

Writing Conventions Rubric

FRQ Conventions

	4 Advanced	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Basic
Labels & organization	All aspects of the FRQ are labeled (A-G) and organized appropriately.	Many attempts to label (A-G) or organize appropriately.	Few attempts to label (A-G) or organize appropriately.	No attempt to label (A-G) or organize appropriately.
Use of examples (when necessary)	Precise usage of examples from various units included in the response.	Some attempts at included examples from other units.	Few examples from other units included.	No examples from other units included.
Style	The writer creates consistent voice and tone that is appropriate for the reader.	The writer may or may not use consistent voice and tone that is appropriate for the reader.	The writer uses limited word choice that does not inhibit voice or tone.	The writer has minimal variety in word choice, with little voice or tone.
Conventions (grammar, spelling, mechanics)	Evident control of grammar, spelling, and mechanics.	Sufficient control of grammar, spelling, and mechanics.	Limited control of grammar, spelling, and mechanics.	Minimal control of grammar, spelling, and mechanics.