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## **Developing writing skills of first-year English major students**

### **Розвиток навичок письма у студентів першого курсу спеціальності «Англійська мова та література»**

**Summary.** *This article explores effective methods for developing writing skills of first-year English major students. It has a twofold objective. First, it identifies effective teaching methods that can assist educators in improving their students' English writing skills. Second, it outlines a variety of practical learning methods to enhance students' writing abilities. The opening section highlights the importance of writing proficiency for first-year English majors. The authors emphasize that effective writing is the basis of academic success since it empowers students to express themselves clearly, organize their ideas, and develop critical thinking skills. The latter foster confidence in students, enabling them to actively participate in classroom discussions and effectively express themselves in written assignments. The methodology section details the study's reliance on general scientific methods of cognition and analysis of relevant academic literature. The authors employed a descriptive approach, utilizing methods of induction and deduction to achieve their objectives. Next, the authors present a list of thirteen effective teaching techniques gleaned from academic literature and their own extensive teaching experience. Additionally, the article emphasizes the importance of revision techniques, peer review processes, exposure to various writing styles and genres, and utilizing technology like grammar checkers and plagiarism detection software responsibly. In addition, the article offers thirteen practical learning tips for first-year students. Prioritized in order of*

importance, these tips range from active reading and note-taking for analytical skill development to proofreading by reading aloud for improved flow and clarity. The article highlights the significance of personalized feedback from instructors due to their expertise and ability to provide targeted guidance. In conclusion, by implementing the teaching methods and learning strategies outlined in the article, educators and students can work together to develop students' effective writing skills.

**Key words:** first-year English major students, English writing skills, teaching strategies and techniques, learning strategies, skills development, college.

**Анотація.** У статті розглядаються ефективні методи розвитку навичок письма у студентів-першокурсників спеціальності «Англійська мова та література». Ця стаття має подвійну мету. По-перше, вона визначає ефективні методи навчання, які можуть допомогти викладачам покращити навички письма англійською мовою своїх студентів. По-друге, вона розглядає різноманітні практичні методи навчання для розвитку навичок письма у студентів. У вступному розділі підкреслюється важливість навичок письма для першокурсників англійської спеціальності. Автори підкреслюють, що ефективне письмо є основою академічного успіху, оскільки воно розвиває у студентів здатність чітко висловлювати свої думки, організовувати їх та розвивати навички критичного мислення. Також, воно розвиває впевненість у собі, дозволяючи студентам брати активну участь у дискусіях в аудиторії та ефективно висловлювати свої думки під час виконання письмових завдань. У розділі «Методологія» висвітлено методологічні засади дослідження, які ґрунтуються на загальнонаукових методах пізнання та аналізі релевантної наукової літератури. Для досягнення поставлених цілей автори застосували описовий підхід, використовуючи методи індукції та дедукції. У статті також представлено список з тринадцяти ефективних методів навчання, почерпнутих з академічної літератури та власного досвіду викладачів авторів. Крім того, у статті підкреслюється важливість методів правки, процесів взаємного оцінювання, ознайомлення з різними стилями та жанрами письма, а також відповідального використання таких технологій, як перевірка правильності граматичних конструкцій та програмне забезпечення для виявлення плагіату. Також, у статті запропоновано тринадцять практичних порад для студентів-першокурсників. Ці поради, розташовані в порядку важливості, варіюються від активного читання і конспектування для розвитку аналітичних навичок до коректури шляхом читання вголос для ясності тексту. У статті підкреслюється важливість індивідуального зворотного зв'язку від викладача з огляду на його досвід і здатність надавати цілеспрямовані рекомендації. Насамкінець, впроваджуючи методи викладання та стратегії навчання, викладені в цій статті, викладачі та студенти можуть спільно працювати над розвитком ефективних навичок письма у студентів.

**Ключові слова:** студенти першого курсу спеціальності «Англійська мова», навички письма англійською мовою, стратегії та методи викладання, стратегії навчання, розвиток навичок письма, інститут.

**Introduction.** First-year English major students develop their knowledge of the language. Thus, proficiency in writing is fundamental for them, and educators implement various approaches to improve student performance. Developing first-year English major students' writing skills is crucial for several reasons. First, their ability to effectively express themselves through writing is necessary, because strong writing skills in the first year of higher education provide a solid foundation for analysing literature, crafting critical essays, and completing research projects in later years. Likewise, writing is a fundamental form of communication. Improving writing skills helps students effectively convey their ideas, thoughts, and arguments in a clear and organized manner. Second, proficient writing skills are essential for academic success. Students need to write essays, research papers, and reports throughout their academic years of study. As a result, strong writing skills can lead to higher grades and better understanding of course material. Furthermore, effective writing is a powerful tool for developing critical thinking skills. As students learn to organize ideas, arguments, and refine their language, they strengthen their ability to analyse information and communicate complex ideas clearly. Then, clear and concise writing is a transferable skill valuable across various disciplines and careers. English majors can use strong writing in fields like education, law, journalism, and even business communication. Next, the ability to write well fosters confidence in students. As first-year students develop their writing skills, they become more assured participants in classroom discussions and can express themselves effectively in written assignments. This can lead to greater academic success throughout their college studies and future careers. Finally, writing allows students to express themselves creatively. Developing writing skills empowers students to articulate their unique perspectives and creativity effectively. The objective of the present article is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to identify effective teaching methods that can assist tutors in improving their students' English writing skills. On the other hand, it aims at outlining a variety of practical learning methods to enhance students' writing abilities. Thus, the main tasks are based on the objective and are defined as to identify teaching methods and to outline learning methods to develop the writing skills of first-year English major students.

A variety of authors have dealt with the issue of developing productive language skills [2; 6; 7; 10; 14; 15; 16]. Kellogg and Rauelson [12] suggest that a student's success in freshman year coursework is most strongly linked to their ability to write well-developed texts. Maldonado García [14] analyses the English writing skills of university students in Pakistan. She states that out of the core language skills writing is considered the

most challenging. This is because effective writing demands a strong grasp of vocabulary, sentence structure (grammar), and organization in a second language [16].

Bilal, Tariq, Din, Latif and Anjum [1] explore the problems faced by the teachers in developing English writing skills. Based on their research findings obtained from teacher interviews, they have concluded that syllabi must be designed in a way that they promote writing competence of the students, and teachers should be adequately trained to be able to develop their students' writing skills. In addition, Bilal et al. [1] suggest that college writing courses offer additional classes to address students' weaknesses. These classes would focus on improving sentence structure, grammar, and spelling.

Whether they are beginners or more advanced, students struggle to compose clear sentences and structure them into a cohesive piece of writing. Developing the ability to write in both formal and informal styles is another difficulty that students face. However, writing is not an isolated skill as it relies on a combination of other skills that help students build their written work [3].

Ismail [8] investigated 64 university students about their perceptions of a writing course. He found that students were aware of their needs and the ESL writing requirements. Ismiati and Pebriantika [9] conducted a study with university students and teachers who were giving instructions in writing skills development with the aim to design new strategies for students' writing skills in which the main focus was the students' needs and problems in writing. More recently, with the advent and spread of use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), the role of AI-powered chatbots in students' writing skills development have been researched [15; 17].

**Methods and methodology of the study.** The study used general scientific methods of cognition. Insights into relevant foreign academic literature on the central topic have been provided. The descriptive method of analysis was used, together with the application of the methods of induction and deduction in order to complete the tasks that have been set.

**Results and discussion.** We agree with Kashinath and Raju who claim that to effectively develop the writing skills of English language learners, teachers should consider implementing new and imaginative instructional techniques [10]. Since 2020, when the educational process transitioned from on-campus to online format because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, our institution, the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education in Berehove has been implementing Google Classroom as a learning management system (LMS). It implies that every discipline or course taught at the college has its own Classroom where the tutors share learning materials with

their students, assign them tasks to perform, can set deadlines by which the tasks should be completed, as well as communicate the most vital information related to a certain course or discipline to students.

In the first year of their study at the college, our English major students have to do a compulsory course as the basic element of their training program. It is the discipline of “English Writing Skills Development”. Besides other useful training materials, two basic textbooks are applied in the course with our first-year English major students: *Successful writing. Intermediate* [4] and *Developing Writing Skills* [13]. While the first one is a general textbook for learners of English, the second one has been specifically compiled for college or university English major first-year students.

The book is a comprehensive guide to writing, designed to enhance a writer’s skills from foundational elements to advanced techniques. It begins by establishing a strong writing foundation through understanding purpose, audience, and structure. The text then progresses to explore various writing styles, including descriptive, narrative, persuasive, and expository writing. Practical exercises and examples are incorporated throughout to reinforce learning. Additional sections provide essential tools such as grammar and vocabulary resources, as well as opportunities for self-assessment. The manual also includes a list of literature used for further reading and reference, ensuring a well-rounded approach to developing writing skills.

A study conducted with our students during online teaching [5] found that a majority of participants (59%) reported that instructor feedback on written assignments in the Google Classroom positively impacted their writing development. Therefore, it is crucial that we provide detailed constructive critical written feedback on student assignments via the Google Classroom LMS, from which they can learn and improve their skills.

Based on the academic literature [2; 7; 9; 10; 12; 14; 16] and our own decades-long teaching experience, we have compiled a list of most effective and useful teaching techniques that tutors can apply during their work with first-year English major students when developing their writing skills. They are presented in Table 1.

All these strategies have been tested during our teaching experience. We firmly state that they can help create a dynamic learning environment that is supportive and engaging, and will empower first-year English majors to become confident and skilled writers, i.e. the development of their writing skills will be fostered.

Our further preferred strategies that we apply on a daily basis include the ones listed below:

Table 1

**Effective teaching techniques and strategies for students’ writings skills development**

No.	Name	Procedures
1	Manageable steps	Break down the writing process into manageable steps. Guide students through pre-writing activities like brainstorming, outlining, and thesis development. Provide templates and graphic organizers for structure and organization.
2	Grammar and mechanics	While creativity is important, a solid foundation in grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure is essential. Integrate grammar lessons with writing assignments, focusing on common errors specific to student work.
3	Vocabulary development	Expand students’ vocabulary toolbox. Introduce new words relevant to different writing tasks and literary analysis. Encourage students to actively incorporate these words into their writing.
4	Short writing tasks	Regular practice is essential. Incorporate low-stakes writing exercises like in-class journaling prompts, short analytical responses, or one-page reflections.
5	Revisions	Teach students the power of revision. Dedicate class time to revision techniques like strengthening arguments, improving flow, and editing for clarity. Consider peer review exercises where students provide constructive feedback for each other.
6	Multimodality	Incorporate elements beyond traditional essays. Consider multimedia presentations, blog posts, or creative writing prompts to cater to diverse learning styles and explore different forms of communication.
7	Model texts	Expose students to a variety of writing styles and genres. Choose diverse authors and analyse different writing techniques used in each text. This broadens their understanding of effective writing and inspires them to develop their own voice.
8	Across the curriculum	Connect writing to other aspects of the students’ English studies. Encourage students to analyse the writing style of literary works and discuss how writers use language to create meaning.
9	Technology on!	Utilize online tools like grammar checkers and plagiarism detection software. Encourage responsible use of these tools to aid in the revision process and develop awareness of proper citation practices.
10	Writing workshops	Conduct regular writing workshops where students can practise different types of writing, receive feedback, and revise their work. This hands-on approach helps students improve their writing skills through practice and guidance.
11	Peer review	Encourage peer review sessions where students exchange drafts and provide constructive feedback to their mates. Peer review helps students develop critical thinking skills and learn from each other’s writing styles.
12	Personalized feedback	Provide personalized feedback to students on their writing assignments. Highlight strengths and areas for improvement, and offer specific suggestions for enhancing their writing skills.
13	Finding inspiration	Encourage students to write about topics they are passionate about. It can ignite their creativity. Personal connections to the subject matter can lead to more engaging and well-developed essays.

- Narration (we utilize in-class writing exercises where students compose short narratives based on prompts or pictures; we usually encourage vivid descriptions).

- Argumentation (we encourage our students to hold debates on controversial topics in the classroom; students can then write persuasive essays arguing their position, analysing opposing viewpoints, and providing strong evidence).

- Analysis (we assign readings with complex themes, guide students through close reading activities, identifying key ideas and rhetorical devices; we ask students to write essays that can focus on analysing the author’s intent and the effectiveness of their writing).

- Letter types (we provide a “letter menu” with different letter types (e.g., complaint letter, thank you note, invitation, etc.); students can choose a type and create a letter on a specific topic).

- Juxtaposition (we present examples of the same message written in both formal and informal styles, then help students identify differences in vocabulary, sentence structure, and overall tone).

Instructors can incorporate these specific strategies, and make sure that their first-year English majors’ writing skills will develop. The combination of foundational knowledge, diverse writing exercises, and targeted strategies will equip them to write effectively across different forms and styles.

While knowing spelling, grammar, and structure is crucial, it is not enough for effective writing [11]. Students need training to develop the skills to apply their knowledge creatively during composition. This training can involve deliberate practice in writing courses and across different subjects in the curriculum. Without such training, students’ knowledge often remains unused when they actually have to write.

Based on our almost thirty-year-long teaching experience in higher education, we have collected thirteen useful practical tips for first-year English majors to develop their writing skills that we ourselves have been using with our students. They are presented in order of importance, i.e. we consider the first one to be the most crucial and effective to achieve the main goal.

1. Reading actively builds analytical skills that translate directly to writing. Taking notes and annotating helps develop a deeper understanding of text structures and styles.

2. Seeking personalized feedback from teachers/educators can provide valuable insights and targeted advice to improve specific writing challenges.

3. Actively participating in peer review helps the students learn from others’ writing and receive constructive feedback on their own work.

4. Forming a study group for sharing drafts and offering criticism encourages collaborative learning and consistent practice.

5. Proofreading by reading aloud helps identify errors and improve the flow and clarity of the student's writing.

6. Daily freewriting in a journal encourages exploration of ideas, practice of descriptive language, and experimentation with different styles.

7. Writing short timed responses perfects focus and develops the ability to write concisely and effectively under pressure.

8. Spending a few minutes brainstorming through freewriting can help overcome writer's block and generate ideas for formal drafts.

9. Using a mix of sentence lengths creates engaging rhythms and avoids monotony in the writing.

10. Actively learning and using new words enhances the students' ability to express ideas more precisely and diversely.

11. Engaging with online quizzes and games solidifies the understanding of grammar rules and punctuation, which are essential for clear writing.

12. Reading fiction, poetry, or journalism exposes students to diverse writing styles and broadens their perspective.

13. Immersing oneself in contemporary prose and poetry can inspire and elevate one's own writing style.

We should explain why we firmly believe that active reading and note-taking are the most effective first steps to writing skills development (Tip 1 above). First and foremost, active reading helps students build a strong foundation in understanding various writing styles, structures, and techniques. They will analyse how authors construct their arguments, use language, and engage readers, which insights they can apply to their own writing. In addition, through active reading, students develop critical thinking and analytical skills. These skills are crucial for evaluating sources, forming arguments, and organizing ideas effectively in their writing. Active reading also exposes students to new vocabulary and varied sentence structures, enriching their language use. This broader vocabulary can be directly applied to their writing, making it more sophisticated and expressive. Finally, reading extensively provides students with a wealth of knowledge on different subjects. This knowledge can serve as content for their writing, making their arguments more informed and persuasive. In summary, active reading lays the groundwork for effective writing by enhancing analytical skills, exposing students to quality writing, and enriching their language and content knowledge.

We also intend to justify why we find personalised feedback given by teachers or educators on students' written work (Tip 2) so crucial, more important than peer feedback (Tip 3) or participating in a study



group (Tip 4). It is evident that educators have extensive knowledge and experience in writing. They can provide expert feedback that is more informed and nuanced compared to peers. Moreover, expert feedback allows personalized guidance tailored to a student's specific strengths and weaknesses. This individualized attention can lead to more targeted and effective improvement. College or university tutors can also clarify assignment expectations, grading criteria, and academic standards. Understanding these elements directly from the source can help students better meet the requirements and improve their performance. In summary, while peer review and writing groups foster a supportive learning environment and provide diverse feedback, the individualized, expert guidance available from tutors is often more crucial for addressing specific challenges and achieving significant improvement in writing skills.

First-year English majors can develop good writing skills by consistently practising these tips. These skills will serve them well throughout their academic studies and beyond. It should be remembered that writing is a continuous process of learning and improvement, so students ought to be proud of their progress, and most importantly, enjoy the power of expressing themselves through the written word.

**Conclusions and perspectives.** It is of utmost importance that by prioritizing writing skill development in their first year, English majors build a solid foundation for academic excellence, intellectual growth, and future career success. Also, by focusing on developing the writing skills of first-year English major students, educators can help them succeed academically, professionally, and personally.

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