

Transforming Text into Argument: A Review of Reading-to-Write Processes in Academic Writing Development

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Abstract

This paper reviews how students transform ideas from source texts into written arguments in academic writing. Tasks such as argumentative essays and literature reviews require this transformation, yet the reading–writing literature mostly shows that the two skills are correlated, not how a reader turns source content into an original argument. The review contrasts two accounts of the connection: discourse synthesis, which locates it in the operations of selecting, organizing, and connecting source content, and the componential account of Kim’s Direct and Indirect Effects Model of Writing (DIEW) and Interactive Dynamic Literacy (IDL) model, which locates it in shared skills such as oral language, transcription, and cognition. It then examines process studies of recursivity and reading-to-write stages, a computational study of source integration, instructional interventions in argumentative synthesis, and first- and second-language (L1/L2) comparisons. The evidence indicates that shared skills explain much of the reading–writing correlation in beginning writers, that moving back and forth between sources and draft is associated with stronger syntheses, that explicit instruction improves synthesis in ways other supports do not, and that source-use strategies carry across languages but must be re-enacted in each. No study has tested the two accounts against each other. The paper concludes by highlighting implications for teaching practice and outlining directions for future research.

Keywords: reading-to-write; discourse synthesis; source-based writing; argumentative synthesis; reading–writing relations; academic writing

1. Introduction

In academic writing, higher-secondary and postsecondary students are routinely asked to generate ideas from texts. Most higher-order writing tasks—argumentative essays, literature reviews, response papers, synthesis assignments—require students to read one or more source texts and then produce a new piece of writing that reflects, argues with, or builds on those sources. Writing from sources is a frequent requirement across educational levels (Marttunen & Kiili, 2022), and it has been described as a hybrid activity that sits between reading and writing rather than belonging cleanly to either, making it one of the more cognitively demanding forms of literacy work students are asked to perform (Spivey & King, 1989; Vandermeulen et al., 2023).

Yet the research most often invoked to explain this activity—the broad “reading–writing relationship” literature—tends to treat reading and writing as correlated or interacting skills rather than as stages in a

single transformational process. Foundational work frames the connection largely in terms of shared outcomes and mutual influence (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). Useful as this literature is for establishing that reading and writing are connected, it stops short of explaining how a student takes an idea encountered in a text and reshapes it into a claim, a piece of evidence, or a line of argument in their own writing. Correlation is not a mechanism.

A more precise lens is the discourse synthesis, or reading-to-write, tradition, which treats the move from source to argument as an explicit transformation rather than a byproduct of general literacy skill. It grew from the recognition that some reading tasks entail reading in order to write—using textual sources to produce a new text with one's own communicative intent (Flower, 1990). In this framework, writers do not simply transfer information from source to page; they select which content matters, organize it, and connect it into a structure suited to their own purpose (Spivey, 1990; Spivey & King, 1989).

This review adopts that transformational framing. Rather than asking whether reading and writing skills are related, it asks how students convert ideas encountered in texts into the arguments that constitute their academic response, treating this conversion as a distinct, teachable, and researchable process. Section 2 traces the arc from relational models to discourse synthesis and sets out two competing accounts of the reading–writing connection. Section 3 examines the componential account in detail. Sections 4 to 6 review process, instructional, and cross-linguistic evidence. Section 7 integrates the findings, and Section 8 draws implications for teaching and research.

2. Theoretical Foundations: From Relationship to Transformation

To understand how students convert source material into argument, it helps to trace a conceptual arc across three positions: an early view that reading and writing are related skills, a transitional view that treats them as transacting processes that shape one another, and a more recent view that treats reading-to-write as an act of transformation.

2.1 Relational Models

The earliest and most durable account treats reading and writing as correlated or mutually reinforcing. Tierney and Shanahan's (1991) influential review framed the connection in terms of interactions and shared outcomes. Earlier work had found a positive relationship in which reading influences writing and writing influences reading (Shanahan & Lomax, 1986), and had proposed that reading and composing are essentially similar processes of meaning construction (Tierney & Pearson, 1983). This framing persists. A recent proposal for a literature-based EAP writing syllabus argues that reading and writing share structural similarities—genre knowledge, phoneme-level connections, and comparable sentence-level complexity—and that some researchers treat the two as functionally the same process of meaning construction (Perkins & Jiang, 2020). The same source invokes Tierney and Shanahan's conclusion that combining reading and writing activities pushes learners through a wider range of reasoning operations than either skill alone, or than reading paired with unrelated tasks. What this tradition leaves open is what a reader actually does to a particular source text on the way to a new text.

2.2 The Discourse Synthesis Turn

Discourse synthesis makes a stronger claim than the relational tradition: when a person reads a source text in order to write about it, the boundary between reading and writing effectively dissolves. Spivey (1990) argued that composing from sources is not a two-step procedure—read, then write—because the writing task in progress changes how the source is read in the first place. A social historian searching for a causal explanation reads a primary source differently than a browsing student does; the task determines what

counts as relevant before a word is drafted. In Spivey's formulation, comprehending is also composing: the organizing, selecting, and connecting that readers do to understand a text are the same three operations writers perform to build one, aimed in two directions from the same act.

This reframes what "transformation" means. It is not that a writer edits or repackages source content after reading it. The reader-writer draws on two simultaneous sources of material—the source text and what the writer already knows from long-term memory—and organizing, selecting, and connecting are the operations by which the two are interwoven into something neither contained on its own (Spivey, 1990). The founding empirical study asked 60 students in Grades 6, 8, and 10 to write informational reports from three encyclopedia articles on one topic; how students selected content and connected ideas differed with both reading ability and grade level, and how they organized their reports differed with reading ability (Spivey & King, 1989). Nelson and King (2023) later reviewed the development of this research tradition and its account of how writers transform source texts.

2.3 Two Accounts of the Reading–Writing Connection

A second account has developed largely outside the discourse synthesis tradition. The Direct and Indirect Effects Model of Writing (DIEW) attributes the reading–writing connection to shared underlying skills—oral language, transcription, and higher-order cognition—that feed both reading comprehension and written composition (Kim & Graham, 2022). This componential work sits within the broader "Science of Reading" conversation. Kim and Snow (2021) argued that the science of reading must be complemented by a science of teaching reading, and Kim and Zagata (2024) extended the logic to the integrated teaching of reading and writing.

The two traditions agree that reading and writing are connected; they disagree about what kind of thing that connection is. Discourse synthesis locates it in what a writer does with a specific source text at a specific moment—an intentional, rhetorical act of organizing, selecting, and connecting. The componential account locates it in shared skills that develop together and predict both reading and writing, largely independent of whether "transformation" is ever taught as a skill of its own. One account treats transformation as something a writer learns to do; the other treats it as something that largely follows from other skills developing normally.

The two answer different questions. DIEW asks why reading ability and writing ability rise and fall together across a population; discourse synthesis asks what a single reader-writer does, moment to moment, to convert one text into another. A writer with excellent oral language and transcription skills could still fail to transform a source into an argument if they never learn to organize, select, and connect, because those are operations performed on text content rather than general-purpose resources sitting behind it. A full account of reading-to-write arguably needs both. Because the two literatures have rarely been placed in direct conversation, whether transformation is a teachable strategy or a developmental byproduct remains open, and it is the question the rest of this review pursues.

3. The Componential Account: Kim's DIEW and IDL Framework

3.1 Structure of the Model

DIEW does not model written composition as a single skill or a flat list of predictors; it models it as a layered process. Kim and Graham (2022) describe four stacked levels: domain-general executive function (working memory, inhibitory and attentional control) at the base; component skills and knowledge above it (topic knowledge, discourse knowledge, reading, language, and the sublexical skills of phonology, orthography, and morphology feeding into spelling and handwriting or keyboarding); a writing-processes

layer—idea generation, translation, and transcription, with evaluation running across all three as a continuous checking function; and socio-emotional regulation (motivation, affect, goal-setting) at the top, feeding back into the writing processes.

This matters for the review's central claim. DIEW does model a process with stages, but “translation” in DIEW means converting a mental representation into linguistic form in general, not the specific operation of organizing, selecting, and connecting content drawn from an external source text. The model contains no distinct representation of what a writer draws from a text versus generates from stored knowledge, and no operation for dismantling a source's structure and reconfiguring it. The IDL model makes the shared architecture explicit: reading comprehension and written composition are directly and bidirectionally linked, and both rest on the same two pillars—lexical-level literacy and transcription skills, and discourse-level oral language and oral composition—which in turn rest on domain-general executive function (Kim, 2020; Kim & Graham, 2022). Reading and writing are thus modeled as two outcomes sharing an engine, not as one text being transformed into another.

3.2 Dynamic Relations

“Dynamic” in Kim's framework means that the strength of the reading–writing relation changes systematically with linguistic grain size, developmental phase, and measurement. A meta-analysis found reading comprehension and written composition moderately related ($r = .44$), whereas word reading and spelling—a smaller linguistic grain—were strongly related ($r = .82$, rising to $.92$ when only high-reliability measures were included; Kim et al., 2024). This is a claim about which level of language is measured, not about a writer's moment-to-moment rhetorical goals.

Kim and Graham's (2022) own findings add a further wrinkle. When component skills are entered into the model, reading comprehension's direct path to writing quality drops toward zero, while its direct path to writing productivity (how much a person writes) is negative ($\beta = -.27$)—a sign reversal rather than a simple attenuation. Once shared component skills are controlled, stronger reading comprehension is associated with lower writing output. This looks less like “shared skills explain the correlation” and more like a suppression or trade-off effect that the shared-skills account alone does not obviously predict, and it shows that “dynamic” can mean outcome-dependent direction reversals.

3.3 What Kim (2026) Tests—and What It Does Not

Kim's (2026) longitudinal study followed 261–262 English-speaking students from kindergarten through Grade 2 and tested the shared-skills hypothesis directly. Three findings matter here. First, a confirmatory factor analysis showed that a two-factor model, treating reading comprehension and written composition as related but dissociable, fit better than a one-factor model. Even the componential tradition's best-fitting model therefore treats the two as separate constructs, leaving room in principle for something to distinguish them beyond shared skills.

Second, in the Grade 2 sample the raw correlation between reading comprehension and writing quality was $.82$, well above the $.44$ reported in the meta-analysis, which Kim attributes to a younger sample and the use of latent variables that reduce measurement error. When oral discourse, lexical literacy, and handwriting fluency were added, the correlation fell to $.11$ ($p = .60$); dropping handwriting fluency, which IDL predicts to be writing-specific, reduced it to $.04$ ($p = .84$). For these beginning readers and writers, nearly the entire correlation was accounted for by three shared skills.

Third, the design contains no task, measure, or variable capturing whether a student draws on, reorganizes, or selectively integrates a specific source text while composing. The one source-based prompt asked students to write “details about what beavers do and how they do it” after reading a passage and was scored

with general ideas and organization ratings, not with any measure of source transformation. Kim (2026) thus shows that shared component skills explain nearly all of the reading–writing correlation in beginning writers; it was not built to show whether transforming a source into an argument is trainable independently of those skills.

4. The Process of Transformation: How Students Do It

Sections 2 and 3 set out two theoretical accounts. This section turns to process-level evidence: what happens when researchers watch, log, or computationally analyze students converting sources into arguments.

4.1 Recursive Movement Between Reading and Writing

Source-based writing is not a linear read-then-write sequence. Tarchi et al. (2024) asked 43 Italian graduate students to read four conflicting sources while thinking aloud and then write argumentative syntheses while keystroke logging recorded every switch between sources and draft. Recursivity peaked in the middle of the writing process. When writers were split at the median on recursivity, high-recursive writers read more strategically—voicing opinions, expressing doubts, and comparing texts—identified the theme connecting the sources and proposed integrative solutions more often, and recalled more valid inferences a week later; the two groups did not differ on argument–counterargument integration. Earlier studies likewise linked more recursive patterns to better synthesis products (Du & List, 2020; Solé et al., 2013), and Vandermeulen et al. (2020) found that recursivity concentrated in the middle of the process, with early recursivity positively and late recursivity negatively associated with text quality.

A behavioral pattern of this kind is more readily read as evidence of an active, monitored, strategic process than as a direct readout of component skills. None of these studies, however, measured component skills alongside recursivity, and Tarchi et al.’s median split and modest sample call for caution.

4.2 Stage Models of Reading-to-Write

Wu (2025) collected reflective journals from 36 Chinese university students, and interviews from 12 of them, after a response-writing task. Three main phases emerged: pre-reading, reading for writing, and writing from reading. Planning and rereading recurred and were embedded within one another across the phases, bridging reading and writing, and learners exercised agency throughout. The resulting model gives reading and writing equal weight and treats the boundary between them as porous. Earlier L2 work had identified monitoring and language-difficulty processes in addition to Spivey’s three operations (Plakans, 2009, as cited in Wu, 2025).

Taken together, these findings suggest that in L2 contexts transformation is entangled with metacognitive regulation—planning, rereading, monitoring—and with language-level difficulty, in ways that neither discourse synthesis nor DIEW/IDL foregrounds. The data are retrospective and the groups small, but they imply that the teachable-strategy versus developmental-byproduct framing may be incomplete: learner-regulated planning and rereading may constitute a third factor outside both camps.

4.3 Computational Evidence

Crossley et al. (2023) approached the question from a different angle. Rather than observing the process, they used natural language processing to examine how source-inclusion features of synthesis essays related to human ratings of argumentation quality and overall essay quality. This offers a large-scale, quantifiable link between the way source material surfaces in a text and the quality of the argument that process-logging and interview studies cannot provide.

Recursive switching, planning and rereading, and source inclusion are all behaviors that componential models do not represent. Yet none of these studies tested a componential model against a discourse synthesis model, so they cannot show that these behaviors explain variance beyond shared skills.

5. From Process to Product: Argumentative Synthesis in Instructional Contexts

Intervention programs designed to teach argumentative synthesis (Casado-Ledesma et al., 2021; Granado-Peinado et al., 2023; Luna et al., 2023; Mateos et al., 2018) typically draw on Nussbaum and Schraw's (2007) framework of strategies for integrating arguments and counterarguments (see Tarchi et al., 2024). This section considers what instruction does and does not target.

5.1 Integrated Reading–Writing Instruction

Kim and Zagata (2024) take the IDL framework and ask a classroom-facing question: given that reading and writing are related, how should instruction be sequenced? They propose three principles—using assessment data to inform integrated instruction, developing lower-order skills while also supporting higher-order skills, and making reading–writing connections visible—with illustrations focused on primary-grade students. Component skills become levers a teacher can pull at different points in a lesson rather than predictors to be measured. In a piece explicitly about instructional design, however, organizing, selecting, and connecting source content is not a named instructional target, and the illustrations concern foundational skills rather than argumentative synthesis.

5.2 Teaching Synthesis Explicitly

Casado-Ledesma et al. (2021) provide the clearest test case for the teachable-strategy side. In a quasi-experimental study with 186 Spanish ninth-graders, they compared four instructional conditions built from two components—explicit instruction through video modeling, and a written guide—layered onto a constant: deliberative dialogue, in which students with conflicting sources work through the disagreement before writing. Outcomes were argumentative coverage (how many source arguments reached the synthesis) and integration (how well those arguments were woven together rather than merely listed). Explicit instruction paired with dialogue improved integration; the guide paired with dialogue improved coverage. If transformation were simply a byproduct of general skill growth, there is no obvious reason two instructional treatments would move two synthesis sub-skills independently.

A companion study with the same design asked whether the programs also supported content learning (Casado-Ledesma et al., 2023). All students gained socio-scientific knowledge, but instructional condition had no direct effect on it; explicit instruction had an indirect effect, operating through gains in the integration of the students' syntheses, which in turn were related to knowledge gains. Learning to synthesize and learning content were therefore linked, not merely parallel.

5.3 Synthesis as the Most Demanding Source-Based Task

Akinkugbe (2025) supplies a conceptual bridge. Comparing knowledge-telling and knowledge-transforming in doctoral candidacy essays, the study draws on Grabe and Zhang's characterization of synthesis as a more demanding reading-to-write task than quotation, paraphrase, or summary because it requires evaluating relevance across sources and linking ideas across texts rather than reproducing them (Grabe & Zhang, 2013, as cited in Akinkugbe, 2025). Read together, Sections 5.1 to 5.3 suggest a pedagogy gap rather than a theory gap: integrated-instruction frameworks say when to sequence component-skill teaching, intervention evidence indicates that organizing and integrating operations respond to targeted instruction, but no framework reviewed tells teachers how to teach the transformation operation itself, as opposed to teaching around it.

6. The L1/L2 Lens: Does Transformation Work the Same Way Across Languages?

6.1 The Test

If organizing, selecting, and connecting source material is a genuine strategic operation, a writer's source-use behavior should show some consistency across that writer's languages. If it were purely a byproduct of language-specific proficiency, L2 behavior should look like a scaled-down version of L1 behavior, tied to L2 proficiency. Within-writer designs, which compare the same people across languages, are best placed to test this.

6.2 EFL Integrated Writing Processes

Ye and Liu (2023) used grounded theory analysis of EFL learners' think-aloud protocols during a source-based continuation task and identified an interactive process involving source reading, comprehension monitoring, planning, language monitoring, narration monitoring, and continuity evaluation. These processes did not operate independently: source comprehension significantly influenced how students monitored their own writing, and skill integration emerged as a distinct constructed factor rather than a simple sum of reading and writing scores.

6.3 Cross-Linguistic Evidence

Van Weijen et al. (2019) compared the same writers' L1 and L2 argumentative texts written from sources. Writers' L1 and L2 writing competencies appeared related, and L2 proficiency did not moderate any of the relations between source-use behavior and text quality. Source-use behavior did differ somewhat between languages, but strong correlations among source-use features suggested that this reflected a person effect more than a language effect. The authors read the results as support for Cummins's (1980) linguistic interdependence hypothesis: a common underlying source of writing-related knowledge that writers apply across languages.

Zhu et al. (2026) examined 239 Chinese university English majors who completed integrated writing tasks in Chinese (L1) and English (L2) and reported their strategy use. Strategy use in the two languages was related but distinguishable (a model forcing one construct fit poorly). L1 strategy use predicted L2 strategy use, L1 writing performance predicted L2 writing performance, and L1 strategy use influenced L2 performance indirectly, through L2 strategy use. The strategies measured included discourse synthesis (organizing and connecting), self-regulation, and test-wiseness.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that source-use strategies are not tied to a single language but must be re-enacted in each: strategic knowledge carries across languages, and its effect on L2 performance runs through L2 strategy use. Because the linguistic interdependence hypothesis is itself a shared-resources account, however, cross-linguistic evidence does not by itself adjudicate between discourse synthesis and the componential account. The strategy data are also self-reported and cover a single language pair.

7. Discussion: Toward a Model of Text-to-Argument Transformation

7.1 What the Evidence Supports and What Remains Unresolved

Three conclusions are reasonably supported. First, shared component skills account for much of the reading-writing correlation in beginning readers and writers (Section 3). Second, across several studies, more recursive movement between sources and draft is associated with better synthesis products on some dimensions (Section 4). Third, explicit instruction in organizing and integrating source content improves synthesis outcomes in ways that differ from other instructional supports (Section 5).

Two questions remain open. The first is whether explicit instruction teaches a genuinely new cognitive operation or accelerates a process that would develop anyway; none of the intervention studies reviewed

includes a no-instruction, skill-growth-only comparison over an equivalent period, which is the design that would settle it. The second is how much of the cross-linguistic transfer pattern reflects a transferable synthesis strategy and how much a transferable general-language strategy that happens to apply to synthesis among other tasks.

7.2 Where the Two Accounts Could Be Integrated

The clearest integration point is Kim and Zagata's (2024) reframing of IDL as a sequencing tool rather than a static predictor set. If organizing, selecting, and connecting were added to DIEW's architecture as a distinct component—alongside, not subsumed by, oral language, transcription, and higher-order cognition—the model could in principle predict the dissociation Casado-Ledesma et al. (2021) observed: two instructional treatments moving two synthesis sub-skills independently because they target different nodes in the same layered structure. This is a proposal for testing, not an established model.

7.3 Gaps

Process-level evidence for the teachable-strategy side is mostly qualitative or small-sample: think-aloud protocols, interviews, and keystroke logs from a few dozen participants. The large-scale, well-replicated evidence for the componential side does not treat argument transformation as a variable at all. That asymmetry—detailed small-scale process evidence on one side, large-scale structural evidence on the other, and no study designed to pit the two against each other in the same sample—is the central gap this review identifies. As a narrative review, its selection of studies is purposive rather than exhaustive.

8. Implications for Instruction and Future Research

8.1 Teaching Source-Based Argumentative Writing

- Component-skill instruction remains necessary, but on the evidence reviewed it is not sufficient: synthesis-specific instruction targets operations that component instruction does not.
- Deliberative dialogue paired with explicit modeling or with a written guide is the most directly tested classroom approach; the pairing can be chosen according to whether integration or coverage of source arguments is the weaker skill (Casado-Ledesma et al., 2021).
- Because recursivity is associated with stronger syntheses and is not spontaneous in many students, teachers can prompt students to return to their sources while drafting; critical-question prompts improved text quality and, in some students, recursivity in a randomized trial with university students (Tarchi & Villalón, 2022).
- In L2/EFL classrooms, students' L1 source-use strategies can be built on, but L1 strategy knowledge appears to influence L2 performance through L2 strategy use, so the strategies should be made explicit and practiced in the L2 (Zhu et al., 2026).

8.2 Future Research

- A study pitting componential growth against explicit transformation instruction, ideally with a no-instruction control tracked over the same developmental window, to separate teachable-strategy effects from maturation.
- Combining NLP-based analysis of source use (Crossley et al., 2023) with Kim's dynamic-relations framework, to obtain large-sample, quantifiable process data in place of the current split between small-sample process studies and large-sample structural ones.
- Within-writer L1/L2 designs (van Weijen et al., 2019) extended to intervention studies, to test whether synthesis instruction in one language transfers to synthesis performance in the writer's other language.

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