Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) has published more than fifty works of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. This Canadian author uses her keen intellect and sharp wit to explore ideas about nature, science, the search for identity, social criticism, and human rights. Her award-winning novels include The Handmaid’s Tale, which was made into a movie, Cat’s Eye, Alias Grace, and Oryx and Crake.

My Life as a Bat

Short Story by Margaret Atwood

AS YOU READ Think about the narrator’s attitudes toward bats and toward humans. Pay attention to clues that show which species the narrator thinks is superior. Note any questions you have as you read.

1. Reincarnation

In my previous life I was a bat.

If you find previous lives amusing or unlikely, you are not a serious person. Consider: a great many people believe in them, and if sanity is a general consensus about the content of reality, who are you to disagree?

Consider also: previous lives have entered the world of commerce. Money can be made from them. You were Cleopatra,¹ you were a Flemish duke, you were a Druid priestess, and money changes hands. If the stock market exists, so must previous lives.

In the previous-life market, there is not such a great demand for Peruvian ditch-diggers as there is for Cleopatra; or for Indian latrine-cleaners, or for 1952 housewives living in California split-levels. Similarly, not many of us choose to remember our lives as vultures, spiders, or rodents, but some of us do. The fortunate few. Conventional wisdom has it that reincarnation as an animal is a consensus (kan-sén'sas) n. agreement.

¹ Cleopatra: Queen of Egypt in the first century B.C.
punishment for past sins, but perhaps it is a reward instead. At least a resting place. An interlude of grace.

Bats have a few things to put up with, but they do not inflict. When they kill, they kill without mercy, but without hate. They are immune from the curse of pity. They never gloat.

2. Nightmares

I have recurring nightmares.

In one of them, I am clinging to the ceiling of a summer cottage while a red-faced man in white shorts and a white V-necked T-shirt jumps up and down, hitting at me with a tennis racket. There are cedar rafters up here, and sticky flypapers attached with tacks, dangling like toxic seaweeds. I look down at the man’s face, foreshortened and sweating, the eyes bulging and blue, the mouth emitting furious noise, rising up like a marine float, sinking again, rising as if on a swell of air.

The air itself is muggy, the sun is sinking; there will be a thunderstorm. A woman is shrieking, “My hair! My hair!” and someone else is calling, “Anthea! Bring the stepladder!” All I want is to get out through the hole in the screen, but that will take some concentration and it’s hard in this din of voices, they interfere with my sonar. There is a smell of dirty bathmats—it’s his breath, the breath that comes out from every pore, the breath of the monster. I will be lucky to get out of this alive.

In another nightmare I am winging my way—fluttering, I suppose you’d call it—through the clean-washed demilight before dawn. This is a desert. The yuccas are in bloom, and I have been gorging myself on their juices and pollen. I’m heading to my home, to my home cave, where it will be cool during the burnout of day and there will be the sound of water trickling through limestone, coating the rock with a glistening hush, with the moistness of new mushrooms, and the other bats will chirp and rustle and doze until night unfurls again and makes the hot sky tender for us.

But when I reach the entrance to the cave, it is sealed over. It’s blocked in. Who can have done this?

I vibrate my wings, sniffing blind as a dazzled moth over the hard surface. In a short time the sun will rise like a balloon on fire and I will be blasted with its glare, shriveled to a few small bones.

Whoever said that light was life and darkness nothing?

For some of us, the mythologies are different.

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2. interlude: an intermission or time of rest.
3. sonar: a system for identifying objects with reflected sound.
3. Vampire Films

I became aware of the nature of my previous life gradually, not only through dreams but through scraps of memory, through hints, through odd moments of recognition.

There was my preference for the subtleties of dawn and dusk, as opposed to the vulgar blaring hour of high noon. There was my déjà vu experience in the Carlsbad Caverns—surely I had been there before, long before, before they put in the pastel spotlights and the cute names for stalactites and the underground restaurant where you can combine claustrophobia and indigestion and then take the elevator to get back out.

There was also my dislike for headfuls of human hair, so like nets or the tendrils of poisonous jellyfish: I feared entanglements. No real bat would ever suck the blood of necks. The neck is too near the hair. Even the vampire bat will target a hairless extremity—by choice a toe, resembling as it does the teat of a cow.

Vampire films have always seemed ludicrous to me, for this reason but also for the idiocy of their bats—huge rubbery bats, with red Christmas-light eyes and fangs like a sabertoothed tiger's, flown in on strings, their puppet wings flapped sluggishly like those of an overweight and degenerate bird. I screamed at these filmic moments, but not with fear; rather with outraged laughter, at the insult to bats.

O Dracula, unlikely hero! ... Why was it given to you by whoever stole your soul to transform yourself into bat and wolf, and only those? Why not a vampire chipmunk, a duck, a gerbil? Why not a vampire turtle? Now that would be a plot.

4. The Bat as Deadly Weapon

During the Second World War they did experiments with bats. Thousands of bats were to be released over German cities, at the hour of noon. Each was to have a small incendiary device strapped onto it, with a timer. The bats would have headed for darkness, as is their habit. They would have crawled into holes in walls, or secreted themselves under the eaves of houses, relieved to have found safety. At a preordained moment they would have exploded, and the cities would have gone up in flames.

That was the plan. Death by flaming bat. The bats too would have died, of course. Acceptable megadeaths.

The cities went up in flames anyway, but not with the aid of bats. The atom bomb had been invented, and the fiery bat was no longer thought necessary.

4 déja vu: a sense of having already experienced a present condition or event.
If the bats had been used after all, would there have been a war memorial to them? It isn't likely.

If you ask a human being what makes his flesh creep more, a bat or a bomb, he will say the bat. It is difficult to experience loathing for something merely metal, however ominous. We save these sensations for those with skin and flesh: a skin, a flesh, unlike our own.

5. Beauty

Perhaps it isn't my life as a bat that was the interlude. Perhaps it is this life. Perhaps I have been sent into human form as if on a dangerous mission, to save and redeem my own folk. When I have gained a small success, or died in the attempt—for failure, in such a task and against such odds, is more likely—I will be born again, back into that other form, that other world where I truly belong.

More and more, I think of this event with longing. The quickness of heartbeat, the vivid plunge into the nectars of crepuscular flowers, hovering in the infrared of night; the dank lazy half-sleep of daytime, with bodies rounded and soft as furred plums clustering around me, the mothers licking the tiny amazed faces of the newborn; the swift love of what will come next, the anticipations of the tongue and of the infurled, corrugated and scrolled nose, nose like a dead leaf, nose like a radiator grille, nose of a denizen of Pluto.

And in the evening, the supersonic hymn of praise to our Creator, the Creator of bats, who appears to us in the form of a bat and who gave us all things: water and the liquid stone of caves, the woody refuge of attics, petals and fruit and juicy insects, and the beauty of slippery wings and sharp white canines and shining eyes.

What do we pray for? We pray for food as all do, and for health and for the increase of our kind; and for deliverance from evil, which cannot be explained by us, which is hair-headed and walks in the night with a single white unseeing eye, and stinks of half-digested meat, and has two legs.

Goddess of caves and grottoes: bless your children.

collaborative discussion With a partner, discuss whether you do or do not agree with the narrator's views of bats and humans. Cite specific evidence from the text to support your answer.
Determine Figurative Meanings

Writers often make imaginative comparisons between two dissimilar things to create vivid images and to convey specific meanings. **Similes** are comparisons that use the word *like* or *as*; **metaphors** are comparisons that are implied, rather than stated. To analyze the figurative meanings of the comparisons that Margaret Atwood uses in "My Life as a Bat," form a mental image of the two things that are being compared. Then ask yourself questions such as the ones in the following examples.

- **Simile:** "flypapers . . . dangling like toxic seaweeds." In what way are the items being compared similar? What feeling does the word *toxic* convey?
- **Metaphor:** "his breath . . . the breath of the monster." Is the man really a monster? What does this comparison suggest about him or his likely actions? What is the narrator's **tone**, or attitude, toward him?

**Analyze Author's Choices: Text Structure**

Most stories follow a structure of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

In this story, Atwood dispenses with traditional narrative structure. Instead, she arranges events, conflicts, and reflections using an informative essay format, with numbered heads. Readers must piece together the narrative to determine the order and significance of events. As you read a story such as this one that uses an unusual narrative structure, consider the effect of the author's choices: How does the structure work to maintain reader interest and communicate theme?
Analyzing the Text

1. **Cite Evidence** What evidence does the narrator offer for believing in a past life as a bat? What device or method does the author use to provide this evidence?

2. **Analyze** Throughout the story, the author uses wry humor in the form of exaggeration and irony. Give an example of humor from the text. How does the humor develop the character of the narrator?

3. **Interpret** The narrator, as a bat, describes the sun rising "like a balloon on fire" (line 50). What meaning is conveyed by this simile in the context of the flashback?

4. **Compare** What are some of the main contrasts the narrator makes between humans and bats? Cite specific statements as well as stories that imply the differences. What theme about people is developed through these contrasts?

5. **Evaluate** Details that appeal to the senses can create positive or negative feelings. What sensory details does the narrator use to describe the bat's domain and tell what it feels like to be a bat? What tone toward bats do the sensory details create?

6. **Analyze** Some of Atwood's figurative language involves unexpected combinations of sensory images. For example, the narrator imagines water in a cave "coating the rock with a glistening hush" (line 44). Glistening means "shiny" and hush means "silence," appealing to both sight and hearing at once. Find other examples of this kind of figurative language in the text. What is the overall effect of these descriptions on readers?

7. **Evaluate** The last section of the story is called "Beauty." Why did the author choose to place this section last in the structure of the story? Would any other section have worked as well as the conclusion to the story?

**PERFORMANCE TASK**

**Speaking Activity: Research** "My Life as a Bat" includes many details about how bats live. Examine these details to determine whether the story details are factually accurate.

1. With a partner, list details about bats from the story, such as where they live, how they behave, what they eat, what they look like.

2. Research facts about these aspects of bats.

3. Create a chart or a Venn diagram to compare the story details with the facts.

4. Write and present your findings in a brief oral report in which you evaluate the author's use of factual material.
Critical Vocabulary

consensus  subtleties  incendiary  denizen

Practice and Apply  Answer the questions to demonstrate your understanding of each Critical Vocabulary word.

1. What consensus do humans hold about bats?
2. What are some of the subtleties of life inside a bat colony?
3. Why might military strategists choose to use bats as incendiary weapons?
4. What environments can a bat be considered a denizen of?

Vocabulary Strategy: Using Reference Sources

If you come across an unfamiliar word while reading, look first for a footnote on the page. If one is not provided, you can use the context—the words and sentences around the unfamiliar word—to help you determine the meaning. If context is not helpful, turn to a reference source, such as a glossary, dictionary, or thesaurus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glossary</th>
<th>Dictionary</th>
<th>Thesaurus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where it is found: at the back of the book in which the word is used</td>
<td>Where it is found: library; Internet; print and digital versions</td>
<td>Where it is found: library; Internet; print and digital versions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What it includes: pronunciation; definition as it is used in the text</td>
<td>What it includes: part of speech; syllable division; pronunciation; definitions; synonyms; etymology</td>
<td>What it includes: synonyms; shades of meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Practice and Apply  Use reference sources to find the specified information about each of the Critical Vocabulary words. Write your answers and explain which reference source you used and why.

1. Write three synonyms for consensus.
2. Write the pronunciation for subtleties.
3. Write the etymology, or origin, of the word incendiary.
4. Write the part of speech and syllable division for denizen.
Language and Style: Colons and Dashes

A writer's use of punctuation helps clarify meaning for the reader by showing places of emphasis or change of tone. In "My Life as a Bat," Margaret Atwood uses colons and dashes not only for meaning but also to create an engaging style.

Colons are used to introduce lists, as in the following passage from the story:

And in the evening, the supersonic hymn of praise to our Creator, the Creator of bats, who appears to us in the form of a bat and who gave us all things: water and the liquid stone of caves, the woody refuge of attics, petals and fruit and juicy insects, and the beauty of slippery wings and sharp white canines and shining eyes.

Colons can also be used to introduce direct quotations, as in this example:

Atwood suggests that humans could learn from animals’ lives: "When they kill, they kill without mercy, but without hate. They are immune from the curse of pity. They never gloat."

Just as readers naturally pause at a colon to prepare for what comes after it, they also pause at a dash. A dash or pair of dashes is used to set off or emphasize ideas. Here are some common uses of dashes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Example from the Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>set off a definition or explanation.</td>
<td>In another nightmare I am winging my way—fluttering, I suppose you’d call it—through the clean-washed demilight before dawn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>show a sudden break in thought in a sentence</td>
<td>When I have gained a small success, or died in the attempt—for failure, in such a task and against such odds, is more likely—I will be born again, back into that other form, that other world where I more truly belong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasize a word, a series of words, a phrase, or a clause</td>
<td>There is a smell of dirty bathmats—it’s his breath, the breath that comes out from every pore, the breath of the monster.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Practice and Apply  Look back at the presentation you created for this selection’s Performance Task. Revise your written presentation to include at least one colon and one dash or set of dashes. Then, discuss with a partner how each punctuation mark you added clarifies or enhances the meaning of your ideas.
Linda Hogan (b. 1947) grew up in Oklahoma and Colorado. A member of the Chickasaw Nation, Hogan has received many awards and honors for her writing. She is a strong advocate for preserving endangered species, and her work reflects her deep interest in environmental issues, native cultures, and spirituality. Hogan says of her writing: “It takes perseverance. I will do it over and over again until I get it right.” Her poetry collections include The Book of Medicines and Rounding the Human Corners. Her first novel, Mean Spirit, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

AS YOU READ Think about what the images in the poem reveal about the cycle of nature. Write down any questions you generate during reading.

From water’s broken mirror
we pulled it,
alive and shining,
gasping the painful other element of air.

5 It was not just fish.
There was more.
It was hawk, once wild with
hunger, sharp talons
locked into the dying twist
and scale of fish,
its long bones
trailing like a ghost
behind fins
through the dark, cold water.
It was beautiful, that water,
like a silver coin stretched thin
enough to feed us all,
smooth as skin before anyone knew
the undertow's\(^1\) rough hands
lived inside it, working everything down
to its absence,
and water is never lonely,
it holds so many.
It says, come close, you who want to swallow me;
already I am part of you.
Come near. I will shape myself around you
so soft, so calm
I will carry you
down to a world you never knew or dreamed,
I will gather you
into the hands of something stronger,
older, deeper.

**COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION**  What does the hawk's fate reflect
about nature, if anything? Discuss your ideas with a partner. Cite
specific evidence from the text to support your ideas.

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\(^1\) **undertow**: a strong current below the surface of water.
Support Inferences About Theme

The **theme** of a work is the message about life that the writer wants to communicate. Because readers make inferences to discover theme, a work may reveal different meanings to different readers. Your interpretation of theme will be valid if you base it on evidence from the text.

To determine themes in "Carry," look for clues in the poem's images and descriptive details, and think about the writer's use of symbols and repetition. Pay attention to how the writer uses details to shape and refine particular themes throughout the poem. This chart can help guide your analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Evidence to Consider</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Analysis and Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>metaphors that create strong images</td>
<td>&quot;water's broken mirror&quot;</td>
<td>• This image is attractive, but somewhat unsettling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Is water used as a symbol throughout the poem? If so, what might it represent?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>similes that create strong images</td>
<td>&quot;its long bones / trailing like a ghost / behind fins&quot;</td>
<td>• This striking image depicts the opposite of the expected predator/prey outcome.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What message is intended here? Do other images of death appear in the poem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>descriptive details that create a mood or feeling</td>
<td>&quot;like a silver coin stretched thin/ enough to feed us all&quot;</td>
<td>• This simile creates an image of water as nourishing force, counterbalancing the image of water as an agent of death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What broad idea does the water represent?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personification that conveys feelings or emotions</td>
<td>&quot;and water is never lonely&quot;</td>
<td>• Here, certain character traits are associated with water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What does this depiction of water add to its symbolic meaning within the context of the entire poem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>title</td>
<td>&quot;Carry&quot;</td>
<td>• The title is a clue to the writer's broader message about the force of nature.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To make sure you understand what the poet is saying explicitly, draft an objective summary that provides the basic facts of the poem. Your final step in determining theme will be to synthesize your summary and your analysis of text evidence into a theme statement that expresses the poet's message.
Analyzing the Text

Support your responses with evidence from the selection.

1. **Summarize**  Review what is stated explicitly in lines 1–14 and write a brief summary of what the speaker describes. How does the image created in these lines affect the mood, or emotion, of the poem?

2. **Infer**  Use clues from the text to infer what happened to the hawk. Why is this unexpected?

3. **Analyze**  Words and phrases that describe how things look, feel, sound, taste, or smell are called sensory details. Write down sensory details from lines 15–23. How do these details help engage readers in the poem?

4. **Interpret**  Explain what is meant by lines 22–23: “and water is never lonely, / it holds so many.” Support your interpretation with evidence from other lines.

5. **Analyze**  Review the water’s plea and promise at the end of the poem (lines 24–32). What does the water want? What does it offer?

6. **Interpret**  A symbol is something that stands for or represents something beyond itself. Review the descriptions of water in the poem. What does the water symbolize?

7. **Cite Evidence**  What theme about our connection with nature does this poem convey? Support your theme statement with evidence from the poem.

**PERFORMANCE TASK**

**Speaking Activity: Discussion** In “Carry,” descriptions of water are central to the poem’s meaning. Discuss the choices the poet made in her use of water imagery.

- Form a small group of three or four students to analyze the descriptions of water throughout the poem.
- For each image of water in the poem, ask questions about what feelings or ideas the author wanted to convey. For example, why did the poet choose to use a “broken mirror” as an image?
- Consider how the images of water develop throughout the poem, from an inanimate object to a powerful living force.
- Write a brief summary that includes the most important insights from the discussion.
Write a Research Report

The texts in this collection examine nature through a variety of viewpoints and genres. Choose three of the texts you have read, including the anchor text "Called Out," that illustrate ways in which humans interact with the natural world. Identify one aspect of the interaction between humans and nature represented in the three chosen texts, and conduct additional research about it. Write a report that develops your central finding about our relationship with nature.

Your research report should include

- a clear central idea, supported by examples from all three of the chosen texts and additional information from research
- an introduction, a logically structured body including transitions, and a conclusion
- smoothly integrated source information that avoids plagiarism, with correctly cited sources
- precise use of language with appropriate tone and style for a formal report

Analyze the Texts  Reread "Called Out," and identify how Barbara Kingsolver illustrates an interaction between humans and nature. Make notes about specific details and evidence from the text. Then, review your other two chosen texts and note any relevant details about interactions between humans and nature. Be sure to identify only one aspect of our relationship with nature that appears in all three texts. This will be the central idea in your research report.

Research  Once you have established your central idea and have sufficient evidence from the three texts, you will gather additional evidence to support this idea from other print or online resources.

- Locate information on your topic by searching in books, in magazines, or on the Internet. If you are using the Internet, be sure to use reliable resources such as well-known publications or government sites. Avoid personal websites or blogs, which may advocate a particular point of view.
• Make note of any important details or quotations on index cards. Include reference information on your card. You will need this later when you cite the text.

**Get Organized** Organize your details and evidence in an outline.

• Decide what organizational pattern you will use for your report. Will you support your central idea by presenting the evidence text by text? Or, will you provide reasons that support your thesis followed by specific references to your chosen texts and additional research?
• Decide which textual and research evidence most effectively supports and enhances the key points expressed in your central idea.
• Use your organizational pattern to sort your textual evidence and research information into a logical order.
• Select an interesting quotation or detail to introduce your research report.
• Jot down some ideas for your concluding section.

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**Draft Your Report** Write a draft of your report, following your outline.

• Introduce the topic of your central idea. You can begin your report with a broad statement and narrow the scope of your topic as you develop your report.
• Present your details, facts, quotations, and examples from the texts in logically ordered paragraphs. Include appropriate citations for any facts or quotations.
• Use headings to indicate a transition to a new section.
• Write a concluding section that summarizes your research findings. End your report with a universal closing statement about the relationship between humans and nature based on the information presented in your report.
• Create a reference page or Works Cited list. You will need to include each author's last and first name; the title of the book, magazine, or website; the year of publication; the publisher; and other details. Your teacher will guide you in organizing the information on the reference page.
**Improve Your Draft**  Revise your draft to make sure it is clear, coherent, and engaging. Use the chart on the following page to review the characteristics of an effective research report. Ask yourself these questions as you revise:

- Have I introduced my central idea clearly? Does my introduction engage the reader?
- Have I presented relevant evidence from the texts and outside resources to support the discrete points of my central idea?
- Is my report logically organized? Are facts and quotations relevant to the central idea? Do I need to incorporate additional transitions?
- Have I maintained a formal style, avoiding slang and nonstandard English?
- Does my conclusion follow logically from the body and provide a satisfying ending?

**Present Your Report**  When your final draft is completed, take turns sharing your reports in a small group. Take notes while your classmates are presenting, and be prepared to ask and respond to questions.
## Ideas and Evidence
- The introduction is compelling and informative; the controlling idea clearly identifies a research question.
- Sufficient, well-chosen evidence from the texts and from reliable sources provides strong support.
- The writer cites information from multiple authoritative sources.
- The concluding section effectively summarizes the answer to the research question and makes a thoughtful observation.

## Organization
- The introduction is adequate; the controlling idea identifies a research question.
- Evidence from the texts and reliable sources supports key points.
- Additional authoritative sources would strengthen the key ideas.
- The concluding section summarizes the answer to the research question.

## Language
- The writing has a formal style and a knowledgeable, objective tone.
- Precise language is skillfully used.
- Sentence beginnings, lengths, and structures vary and have a rhythmic flow.
- Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation are correct.
- Grammar and usage are correct.
- All sources are completely and correctly identified in a Works Cited list.

## Advanced
- The introduction provides a clear, focused research question.
- Evidence is drawn from a variety of reliable sources.
- Transition statements connect ideas.
- The conclusion summarizes the answer to the research question.

## Competent
- The introduction is clear and provides a research question.
- Evidence is drawn from a variety of reliable sources.
- Transition statements connect ideas.
- The conclusion summarizes the answer to the research question.

## Limited
- The introduction is clear but lacks focus.
- Evidence is drawn from a variety of reliable sources.
- Transition statements connect ideas.
- The conclusion summarizes the answer to the research question.

## Emerging
- The introduction is unclear or missing.
- Evidence is drawn from a variety of reliable sources.
- Transition statements connect ideas.
- The conclusion summarizes the answer to the research question.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas and Evidence</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The introduction is compelling and informative; the controlling idea clearly identifies a research question.</td>
<td>The organization of key points and supporting evidence is effective; ideas are arranged logically.</td>
<td>The writing has a formal style and a knowledgeable, objective tone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient, well-chosen evidence from the texts and from reliable sources provides strong support.</td>
<td>Varied, well-crafted transitions effectively connect ideas.</td>
<td>Precise language is skillfully used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The writer cites information from multiple authoritative sources.</td>
<td></td>
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## Advanced
- The introduction provides a clear, focused research question.
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