

How Should I Write a Research Paper?

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This article analyses the necessary techniques, skills, and procedures of writing an academic or a research paper. Further, the article examines the criteria, and essential components of a good research paper. By focusing on the contemporary debates and discussion on academic writing and publishing, this article acts as a platform to realise the challenges associated with this crucial endeavor in the academic arena. The article also reveals the need to teach academic writing to graduates, and postgraduate students. The author uses written sources to analyse and synthesize important skills and procedures required to write a good academic paper.

Keywords: Academic writing, academic paper, research paper

Overview

Writing is at the centre of any academic life, and thus its significance cannot be overemphasized. Any academician regardless of the background, nationality or academic affiliation, is required to write to enhance knowledge sharing, problem solving, and sharpening intellectual capacity. This is to say, academic writing is an industry for academic growth and maturity as it builds career, and develops a sense of belongingness and recognition into a specific academic field (Murray and Moore, 2006). Nevertheless, it is important to understand that academic writing is unique as compared to other forms of writing (Singh and Lukkarila, 2017). On the basis of such significances and uniqueness, this paper provides insights on academic paper writing, including aspects of qualities of a good academic paper, purpose of an academic paper, criteria for choosing a topic, and ways to work on the topic. The paper analyses further the composition, structure, and ways the writer receives responses or feedback from the reviewed academic paper. It is argued throughout this paper that academic writing should be learned in order to develop specific skills, and writing conventions that correspond to a particular discipline or a field of study.

Academic Writing and Academic Paper

In his explanation about academic writing, Sowton (2011) identifies academic writing as “a more complex” activity (p.11-12). The complexity of academic writing lies on its purpose, arguments, approach, formality, and specificity of language use (Sowton, 2011). Also, the complexity of academic writing is due to its structure, submission of evidences, nature of audience, and nature of presenting multifaceted ideas (Sowton, 2011; Singh and Lukkarila, 2017). It is in this way, academic writing appears to be a more skillful activity that requires not only knowledge but also particular skills, techniques, and experience. This form of writing adheres to the specific set of norms and traditions pertaining to a specific discipline or fields of study (Murray 2010; Singh and Lukkarila, 2017). Despite the notable academic writing differences between arts or humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, this paper contributes to all these fields of study. Of course, this is one of the reasons that necessitate academic writing to be taught and learnt by anyone in the academic field. Written documents categorised as academic writings include: books, chapters of edited books, monographs, research thesis or dissertation, project reports, and academic papers such as journal

articles, student classroom essays and term papers (Richards and Miller 2005; Monippally and Pawar, 2010; Belcher, 2019). The writing style, format, and requirement vary depending on the type of academic writing.

Academic paper writing too, varies with a field of study, the type of an academic paper, and individual skills; however, they can be categorised into two: empirical research papers, and conceptual research papers (Monippally and Pawar, 2010). Although this categorisation can be debatable, this paper cautiously uses these two types to explain ways to write a good academic paper. An empirical research paper on the one hand is that which is written from an actual field research, and therefore reveals procedures, data collection, and outcome of empirical research. The results of the empirical research conducted commonly are subjected to the set of hypothesis formulated. A conceptual research paper on the other hand is an academic paper revealing processes and results without dealing with “fresh empirical data” from the field (Monippally and Pawar, 2010; Mligo, 2012). For Monippally and Pawar (2010), a conceptual paper is more about new perspective(s) or theories, analysis, and a comprehensive summary or synthesis of ideas. However, there are general criteria used to judge or define what an academic paper is. In an attempt to analyse the criteria of an academic paper, Perneger and Hudelson (2004) judge it on the basis of how a paper responds to the objectives and research questions.

In a similar trend, the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (n.d), identifies an academic paper as a scholarly writing that “pass an academic quality assessment before it can be published in an academic journal” (Para. 1). This implies that, for an academic paper to be described as a good one, it should not only respond to the specific objectives, but also to the needs and expectations of the consumers. If a paper meets all the necessary and additional requirements of an academic paper, it can be regarded as a good academic paper. However, the judgment is not universal; it varies from field to field, sometimes from department to department and from one academic journal to another. In short, a good academic paper should attain the best in terms of proper focus, relevance, adherence to the audience, norms of the discipline and of the particular publishing organ. Other aspects may include clear purpose, a well stipulated problem, and outcomes, relevant methodology and theory. On top of that, a good academic paper should persuade readers, clarify its argument, and be informative in terms of its academic contribution (DEFSA, para. 4; Perneger and Hudelson, 2004; Sowton, 2011; Swales and Feak, 2012; Singh and Lukkarila, 2017). Also, a good paper should neither be too long nor too short. Instead, it should be logically structured to meet an explanatory adequacy (“How Not to Write a Scholarly Paper,” 1994). Nevertheless, it is worthy to remember that in most cases, publishers have a final decision on the length of the research article to be published.

Purpose of Academic Paper Writing

Writing scholarly academic papers is a product of one’s motivation, and purpose toward writing. But the motivation and the purpose of academic writing appears to be different in response to three interrelated factors such as: the nature of audience, individual, and professional motives (Murray, 2010). The purpose of writing for an individual depends on the intrinsic desire to express, contribute, and effectively participate in the academic world from which they have found the purpose of life (Andersen, 1963; Murray and Moore, 2006). At this level, a writer aims at expressing, sharing thoughts, and persuading others to buy his or her perception, and perspective on a particular subject. Scholars such as Andersen (1963), and Murray and Moore (2006) agree that a writer with these purposes enjoys academic writing. Hence, an individual writer enjoys for “becoming a regular, productive academic writer” (Murray and Moore (2006, p. 23). Intrinsic motivation towards writing for sharing knowledge or expressive purpose is a crucial spirit to students, and novice writers in their journey of becoming ‘productive academic writers’.

Among professionals, academic paper writing is mostly motivated by professional requirements.

Writing for professional career is an important way of acquiring recognition, belongingness, and participation into scholarly debates (Hart, 2014). Also, it is important to publish so as not to perish (Andersen, 1963; Lee, 2012; Abubakar, 2016; Murray and Moore, 2006). In that regard, academic papers are written as part of professional responsibility, or as tools to demonstrate knowledge and professionalism. Borrowing Hart's (2014) words regarding writing for career demands, is the opportunity to "inform, reform", and "argue" for the intention of being engaged among professionals, participating within the changing perspectives and approaches as well as engaging thoughts in the specific discipline (p.1604). It is important also to remember that professional purposes or motives are not very independent from intrinsic individual motives.

Moreover, the purpose of academic writing is also explained in response to the nature of the audience. The nature of audience sets the dimension, and the purpose of an academic paper regardless of the writer's individual, or professional motivation. For instance, if the audience is less knowledgeable about the topic, the purpose of writing is to instruct and guide the audience towards that topic (Swales and Feak, 2012). The academic paper in this context becomes instructional in purpose. On the contrary, if the audience is knowledgeable about the topic, the purpose of the writer is to exhibit awareness, expertise, knowledge, methodological departure, and report on how a research was conducted, clarifying and synthesizing ideas (Andersen, 1963; Murray, 2010; Swales and Feak, 2012; Bailey, 2015). Equally significant, writers ought to keep in mind that for the article to be published in a journal, consideration to the ideology and other necessary requirements of the publisher is imperative. The writer's focus for that matter will be to meet the identified requirements of the publishing organ. Therefore, for a well written academic paper to achieve the purpose of expressing, contributing new or adding knowledge to the already existing body of knowledge, has to meet the diversified interests.

Selection and Problematising the Topic

An academic or research paper must have a topic, but a good academic paper ought to have a well-crafted topic. Developing or choosing a topic which is attractive, clear, and presentable to the expected audience is not an easy task particularly for beginners in academic writing (Murray, 2010). An important question therefore is, how does a writer choose a good topic? Of course, it is even not choosing since there is not a readymade topic. The writer should investigate, and develop it. There are no general procedures for developing a research topic for a paper. Nevertheless, scholars share thoughts which are potential for formulating a topic. Scholars such as Banglione (2016), Gaste and Day (2016), and Booth et al. (2016) agree that, for selecting a good topic, one should focus on a subject of interest, something important, courses studied or taught, certain activities or a job undertaken, peer classroom discussion, career aspiration, and contemporary global and local discussions. Also, it is important to consider contemporary debates in journal articles, books and media in order to find a good topic.

In addition to that, Murray (2010) emphasizes that, a topic is developed from the known in the field of study. This is to say, developing a topic is "based on the body of knowledge that you currently have, the body of experience that you have, and the reading that you have already done." (Murray, 2010, p. 89). More or less the same approach is employed by a writer who has done major empirical research projects like a doctorate or a master's degree. Just like beginners, people with a written thesis or dissertation begin with what they already have. In most cases, they transform theses, dissertations, conference presentations, project reports, and reviews into publishable articles. In fact, writing from an original research is a common technique that is used to develop, and a generate topic(s) for an academic paper (Murray and Moore 2006).

When investigating or choosing a topic, reading different sources is crucial. According to Henning et al., (2010) "exploratory reading" is necessary when finding a topic for both experienced writers and beginners (p.3). The writer should review different but relevant sources of information such as books

in the libraries, and different online library databases, newspapers, and journal articles. For instance, journal articles are useful in sharpening the idea into a topic. Journal articles are also of great value in realising, and analysing trending debates about the topic, and finding out how the developed idea is important. Reading different sources is the only way to develop a good research topic characterised by being relevant, specific, clear, adequate, and reflective. (Booth et al., 2016; Gaste and Day, 2016).

In order to write a good article, composing relevant and thoughtful questions that reflect the topic is central. Relevant questions result into a research problem from which a clear central thesis is to be developed. Further, reading of different sources is also needed. Survey of literatures should be guided by established questions. Henning et al. (2010) emphasise that questions should start from simple, inquiring a descriptive analysis such as what, why, where, and which. It then moves to more complex questions which go beyond descriptions such as to what extent, in what manner, and any other question which demands qualitative responses (Banglione, 2016; Booth et al., 2016). This is what Henning et al (2010) calls “problematizing the topic” (p. 4). According to Henning et al., (ibid), thoughtful questioning helps to realise the known, and the unknown aspects of the topic. This enables selectivity and focused reading which directly corresponds to the problem and the study topic. In this way, a thoughtful question is a proper insight for developing the central theme of a paper (Henning et al., 2010, p. 6). Scholars such Banglione (2016) emphasise more to begin with a question even before writing a topic partly because a good question is a criteria for narrowing down scope of the topic, and wording of the title.

Reviewing of Literatures, Drafting, Revisiting and Editing

Preparing a well written draft is a skillful activity that requires intensive reading and a creative mind (Richards and Miller, 2005). It should be noted that drafting a paper is an organised attempt governed by an outline which is determined by research questions. The outline serves as the scheme for attaining the requirement of the topic (Ellison, 2010; Henning et al., 2010). But in order to accomplish writing, intensive reading is significant. Henning et al., (2010) point out that an in-depth reading and re-reading of different books and other sources enable the writer to develop strong arguments to justify the central thesis of the paper. Also, reading builds the ability to debate with other scholars, and justify the academic research gap which the paper addresses (Belcher, 2019). Henning et al., (2010) claim that writing is impossible without being fully immersed in different sources. But the assumption that reading and writing are in a linear mode is impractical. Reading and writing should go parallel. According to Murray (2010), writers who wish to finish reading before start writing, will never be able to write. Reading and writing are intertwined.

Drafting an academic paper also involves developing justified arguments which intends to qualify the main thesis of the paper. Arguments and evidence should be clearly presented depending on the tradition of that discipline (Singh and Lukkarila, 2017). This is what Murray and Moore (2006, p. 54) refer to as “disciplinarity in academic writing” in which arguments, evidences and citations of the sources consulted are organised to respond to communication norms of that discipline. Securing places in the discipline by abiding to certain a specific convention should not restrict the writer from finding his or her own place and identity in academic writing (Henning et al., 2010; Murray, 2010). In the course of writing, the writer should also exhibit personal awareness, perception and argumentation ability. In other words, the writer’s voice should be very particular and distinct from the rest of the borrowed arguments from other authors. Therefore, a responsive writing, both per particular discipline and audience should not enslave writer’s identity in academic writing.

Moreover, it is imperative to reserve time for crosschecking and re-reading a written draft. Ellison (2010) perceives this stage as a crucial one for shaping ideas and the narratives. Thus, writing an academic paper or any other essay is a cyclic and repetitive process. Murray and Moore (2006) name this process as “iterative and continuous nature of academic writing” (p.3). It is iterative in

two important ways. First, the process of developing good academic writing skills is continuous and a lifelong learning process (Singh and Lukkarila, 2017). Second, developing a good academic paper is a continuous and repetitive in nature. It involves revisiting, editing, and reviewing of different stages and phases of development of a paper (Booth et al., 2016; Murray and Moore, 2006; Henning et al., 2010). Therefore, developing a paper from the first draft to other drafts, and the best final one involves back and forward movement purposely done so as to achieve a logical flow, clarity of arguments, and formality in the construction of sentences and paragraphs of the paper (Booth et al., 2016; Gillett et al., 2009; Oshima and Hogue, 2007). Murray (2010) perceives this as a reflective phase because revising goes beyond a mere editing of grammatical error as it is commonly done.

Continuous and repetitive rethinking, revisiting and editing make the writing process achieve a proper quality, both in form and content. It should be noted that, the process of sharpening the quality of a research paper involves self-criticism, and peer comments (Monippally and Pawar, 2010). Peer comments are obtained through conversing, listening to others, and receiving opinions and comments from one committed critical reader, and a colleague whom you belong within the same discipline. This is termed as the use of writing groups which provides pre-peer review service. It is the use of the writing partner who becomes a critical reader, and a source of feedback and useful criticism that will help the writer to improve the quality of the paper (Murray, 2010; Lange, Pates, O'reilly, & Ward, 2017; Belcher, 2019). The writer ought to work on the comments from others. Critical readers serve as a sample of the expected audience who help the writer to overcome misunderstandings, confusions, and errors.

Furthermore, the role of writer's groups and pre-peer reviewers is to provide "insights that you may not have considered yourself" (Murray and Moore 2006, p. 37). Thus, it is important for the writer to realise the challenges and weaknesses, and be willing to redraft the paper. To achieve this, the writer should have a moment free from writing to regain a fresh mind: "retreating" (Murray and Moore, 2006; Henning et al., 2010). The retreating enables the writer to review the draft, and do both self-criticism on the work, and on the comments from peer groups. Just as it was for choosing the topic, and formulation of the research problem, this phase is also not linear but repetitive and cyclic until when the paper has achieved a large degree of quality. Moreover, feedback from peer reviews from the journal or a course instructor may restart the process of revisiting and editing until the final quality paper is obtained.

Structure of an Academic Paper

For a successful presentation of arguments in an academic paper, a clear and logical structure of the paper is necessary for the attainment of "coherence" and "cohesion" (Belcher, 2019, p. 258). The way academic papers are structured, makes this form of writing unique from the rest especially the non-academic writing. According to Singh and Lukkarila, (2017), the structure of the paper mirrors the thinking of the writer on the one hand, and of the audience on the other. Thus, for an academic paper to be considered the best by its audience, it should meet their expectations which in most cases will be how far the paper is clear, logical and orderly (Gillett et al., 2009; Singh and Lukkarila, 2017). A proper structured academic paper reduces confusion between the writer and the audience. However, it should be made clear that the structure and organization of academic papers varies not only across disciplines, but also by considering whether the paper is an empirical, conceptual or a student term paper. In certain cases, the structure is not clearly different because the categorisation of a paper being empirical or conceptual is also not universal. (Monippally and Pawar, 2010; Belcher 2019).

These types with their defined requirements determine how the paper should be structured. The structural arrangement of the academic paper into different sections is easily noticed. However, writing a good academic paper goes beyond structural arrangement. The writer should remember that coherence of arguments and evidences is needed. This means that, arguments within sentences,

paragraphs, and in different sections of the paper should be clear, logical and focused toward the central theme (“How Not To Write a Scholarly Paper,” 1994; Singh and Lukkarila, 2017). Sentences should be well constructed and properly written to enhance easier follow up for the readers. This is what scholars such as Belcher (2019), Singh and Lukkarila, (2017) refer to as arrangements at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels respectively. Therefore, the writer should take into account factors such as norms of the particular discipline, the type of academic paper written, the audience, and the type of the journal (for publishing academic papers) when writing an academic paper.

Sections of most empirical academic papers as pointed by Perneger and Hudelson (2004), Gastel and Day (2016) are in format of Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion (Abbreviated as IMRAD) or Abstract, Introduction, Hypothesis, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion and Reference (Monippally and Pawar, 2010). There are other related structures of empirical academic papers which include literature review, and adopt the structure of Introduction, Literature Review, Method, Result and Discussion abbreviated as ILMRAD (Gastel and Day, 2016). The purpose of this structure is to reveal processing, analysis, and findings of empirical data. Scholars such as Perneger and Hudelson (2004), Gaste and Day (2016) as well as Reis and Reis (2013) refer to this kind of academic paper as scientific academic papers. This structure provides room to the audience to critically reflect and asses the entire process of research, and test the validity of methods and findings. On the contrary, conceptual academic papers do not aim at presenting fresh empirical data from research. Therefore, in order to meet the need to synthesize, generate a different perspective, providing a comprehensive approach, contributing a conceptual and theoretical understanding, most of the conceptual papers are structured in a mode which includes Abstract, Introduction, Conceptual or Theoretical propositions, Discussion, Conclusion and References (Monippally and Pawar, 2010).

Citing Sources and Plagiarism

Acknowledging sources by citation plays an important role in defining academic writing, and for this context, a good academic paper. There are several grounds as to why writers are obliged to acknowledge sources. First, citing sources fulfill ethical requirements of academic writing (Monippally and Pawar, 2010; Booth et al., 2016). According to Monipally and Pawar (2010), citation of sources is an indication of “intellectual honest” (p. 176). Thus, failure to acknowledge sources accurately is understood as academic dishonest, an unethical practice or theft which is generally referred to as *plagiarism* (Bailey, 2006; Henning et al., 2010; Monippally and Pawar, 2010; Booth et al., 2016). Second, proper citation of sources assures intellectual credibility and authenticity. The readers judge the credibility, authenticity, and reliability of the information provided on the basis of the sources cited. Third, citations benefit readers who wish to explore more about the subject matter or topic (Monippally and Pawar, 2010). Nevertheless, a writer should always remember that citation of sources responds to the norms and convention of communication of the specific discipline they write for (Singh and Lukkarila, 2017). Therefore, the choice to use either Chicago, the Modern Language Association (MLA), or American Psychological Association (APA) style depends on the discipline, department, the type of journal if the paper is for publication, or a course instructor’s instructions, if it is a student course paper (Banglione, 2016; Booth et al., 2016; Monippally and Pawar, 2010; Singh and Lukkarila, 2017).

Obstacles and Challenges

Writers of academic papers, just like writers of any other forms of writing, encounter obstacles which impede their efforts. These obstacles are both intrinsic and extrinsic. Time is mentioned as one of the major inhibiting factors for academic paper writing (Richards and Miller2005; Murray, 2010; Singh and Lukkarila, 2017). Based on Murray (2010), Singh and Lukkarila (2017) understanding, time constraint is explained to be related to multiple social and academic responsibilities. However, it is psychologically agreed that there is always no enough time for anything which is intrinsically less valued. Andersen (1963) points out that the “value” and for that

case motivation attached to academic writing determines time allocation for the completion of the task. Regardless of other academic and non-academic duties, time for academic paper writing is slotted if one is strongly intrinsically motivated towards writing.

Difficulties to write a research paper, particularly to novice writers is also attributed to improper ways of learning skills of writing good and publishable research papers. There have been hardly guidance and training to student for academic research paper writing for publication (Murray, 2010). In certain cases where formal instructions are offered, students attach little value to lessons and teachings of academic writing assuming that they have enough knowledge. Likewise, there has been a wide range of misconceptions about writing an academic or research paper for publication. For instance, most of experienced academic writers when confronted to explain how they become prominent writers, they cannot clearly explain. Some would say, it was a trial and error. This is what is termed as learning academic writing through writing. It is however important to understand that writing skills are not naturally acquired. Writing skills develop through repetitive instructions, exposure to the field of study conventions, and feedback from both peers and instructors (Baglione, 2016; Rafik-Galea, Arumugam, & de Mello, 2012; Coffins, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis, & Swann, 2003). Therefore, there is a need to teach and to learn academic writing. Murray (2010) emphasises a “need for guidance and development in the demanding task of writing for academic journal particularly to new writers” (p.2).

Another obstacle is our attitudes and perceptions towards our writing skills and our approach towards academic writing (Richards and Miller, 2005). According to Richards and Miller (2010) writer’s fear of the paper being rejected, awarded lower grades or challenged by others impede the spirit towards academic writing. Also, worries about one’s writing ability, and other terrifying practices such as harsh criticism which sometimes attacks one’s personality are setbacks to academic paper writing. However, most of the named challenges are part of the academic growth if one perseveres. Other obstacles and challenges to academic writing sometimes are related to environment. Kana (2016) points out that the shortage of resources such as books; journals and internet access also command a significant inhibiting force for academic writing. Despite all the mentioned challenges, the important point to note is that writing a good academic paper is possible despite the mentioned obstacles and challenges. There is always an alternative to any obstacle or challenge if at all writing is intrinsically valued.

Conclusion

Writing a good academic paper entails multiple considerations which cannot be fully articulated in a single brief paper. This paper has endeavored to discuss, analyse and synthesize important insights and observations to be considered if one wants to write a good academic paper. The paper offered a brief summary on criteria, qualities, steps, procedures, and crucial elements of a scholarly paper. This article has touched several important components and ways of writing a good academic paper. Nevertheless, the author still urge and recommend both experienced and novice writers to consider some other components and ways which are significant and necessary in writing a research paper. For instance, knowledge on how to write a coherent literature review, how to write an abstract, a captive introduction, and sounding conclusion is crucial. Likewise, writers should be aware of the techniques and ways to search and read resources in order to write a good academic paper. Both experienced and novice writers are to equip themselves with proper skills of using different citation styles such MLA, APA, and Chicago, depending on the field of study, journal requirement or department from which they write. In a way of concluding, the technical know-how on the writing of a good research paper and academic writing in general is broad. This paper should therefore serve as a guiding instrument toward become a good and regular writer.

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