
Demystifying Academic Writing: A Guide for Novice Researchers and Aspiring Scholars

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Abstract

The academic writing, characterized as a complex, iterative and continuous process, resulting into a brief, logical, clear, and attractive piece of work, is often a challenging task for novice researchers as well as experienced scholars. Stimulated from an encounter with a PhD scholar's seminar paper lacking these characteristics, this paper aims at preparing basic guidelines for mastering academic writing adopting the conceptual research design. It assists emerging researchers and scholars in developing essential skills required for mastering academic writing, such as cohesive and coherent structuring of arguments and appropriate management of citation, particularly in the format of the American Psychological Association (APA), and thereby guiding them for the transition from the simple task of writing assignments to producing complicated scholarly writings. The arguments in this paper align with the writing format provided in the scholarly guidelines, including the 'Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association,' seventh edition. This paper provides insights into appropriately crafting each component of a research paper and putting them into a cohesive and coherent whole, reflecting the scholarly rigour and dedication.

Keywords: Academic writing, research methodology, research paper, research problem, novice researcher

Introduction

Academic research and writing is a complex, iterative, and continuous process "involving reflection, improvement, development, progress and fulfilment of various types and in varying measures" (Murray & Moore, 2006, p. 5) and demanding a well-formed approach to synthesizing and presenting arguments (Allen, 2004). In response to a PhD scholar's seminar paper revealing the lack of these qualities, I prepared a critical review of the paper, pointing out the gaps in both the content and format and suggesting the ways fulfill the gaps. Later, I thought it could be valuable even to other scholars struggling in the journey of academic research and writing. This article is the result of my effort to expand and refine the review paper in a greater detail including all the components of an article.

A number of scholarly discourses on academic research and writing process provide insights into its various aspects. However, very few are designed keeping in mind the emerging scholars' journey through it. For example, Bailey (2015) provides a comprehensive guide on academic writing covering the essential grammar, structure, and coherence. However, it addresses limited category of the readers, namely the international students learning to communicate in English rather than the specific challenges the novice researchers are struggling to tackle with. Such a limitation leaves a room for a more comprehensive guide that addresses the research-oriented journey from preparing a seminar paper to its publication. Similarly, Coffin et al.'s (2003) toolkit for teaching academic writing in higher education is useful for educators. But it lacks a step-by-step systematic approach to academic writing tailored to the novice researchers. Fang's (2021) book on academic writing genres, moves, and strategies gives insights into the dynamics of genre-based writing. What novice researchers need is a more accessible guide, delving into crafting each component of a research paper, such as title, abstract, introduction, and so on, in a clear and structured manner.

Broader guidelines like Gastel and Day's (2016) work on writing and publishing a scientific paper provides insights into crafting such a paper clearly and coherently. These works, however, often seem to reveal the assumption that the readers already have a certain level of familiarization with the writing process, which may not conform to the needs of novice researchers involving in writing initial drafts. Graff and Birkenstein (2014) provide 'They Say / I Say' framework for academic writing, emphasizing the author's rhetorical engagement with the existing literature on the related field(s). This framework, though crucial for persuasive argumentative writing, overlooks practical challenges that the beginners often encounter with, such as how to present their paper in an organized and systematic way aligning with the APA guidelines.

Some specific field-oriented works, such as Hewings and Hewings's (2001) work on anticipatory language in specific disciplines, overlooks the emerging researchers' needs for general guidelines applicable to papers across disciplines. Furthermore, Leki (1998) and Morley (2018) also regard academic writing strategies in very general terms without focusing on the details, such as organizing its components of an entire research paper in a particular writing format.

More recent works on academic writing by Sharma (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2024) focus on the use of reference management software for source management and citation accuracy. Such a technical focus on only one, though important, aspect of writing does not address the general issues of academic writing, such as structuring the arguments, achieving coherence, and aligning the overall write up with the APA formatting.

Though many sources provide some valuable guidelines on academic writing, their orientations tend to treat either more advanced writers or specific audiences like second language learners. They ignore the need for an accessible holistic guide tailored to the novice academic researchers and writers. There is a need for a holistic work that comprises both theoretical insights and practical guidelines on developing each component of a research paper and organizing them into a coherent whole, addressing the need of novice researchers transitioning from seminar papers to publishable academic works. The research problem, therefore, deals with resolving the question: How can a comprehensive, accessible guide to academic writing be prepared to support novice researchers in mastering basic skills such as structure, coherence, and proper citation, particularly in APA format, to ease their transition from simple assignments to complicated academic writing? By addressing this question, this paper contributes to the development of theoretical insights and practical skills essential for crafting a well-formed and credible research paper comprising all its components.

Methodology

This present study originated from a real-world academic context, particularly a PhD scholar's seminar paper, which served as a case that illustrates the challenges novice researchers face in

crafting academic writing. This context informed the need for developing a more accessible and coherent framework of academic writing to support novice researchers and writers.

Methodologically, the study employs a conceptual research design that does not assume the collection of primary empirical data to draw the results on. Instead, it makes way for generating new knowledge through the critical interpretation and synthesis of existing theories and literature as outlined by Jaakkola (2020). In this regard, this study draws largely on the existing related literature to develop a coherent and accessible framework of academic writing for novice researchers.

More specifically, this study is grounded in a “theory synthesis,” which involves seeking “to achieve conceptual integration across multiple theories or literature streams” (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 21). In the present study, the most influential and widely cited works related to metadiscourse in academic writing were cited as evidence for supporting the arguments put forward in the newly designed framework of academic writing.

The results were thematically presented in terms of the format, heading levels and constituent elements of a research paper, critically discussing them in relation to the existing literature, particularly the works that offer conceptually and pedagogically useful ideas, thereby contributing to the development of an overall framework of academic writing in general and that of a research paper in particular, aligning with the stand of Jaakkola (2020).

Results and Discussions

The results are presented and discussed in terms of the format, heading levels and elements of a research paper.

Format of a Research Paper

The format of a research paper discussed in this article includes the font and font size, line spacing, margins, paragraph alignment, and paragraph indentation. APA (2020) permits “a variety of font choices” (p. 44). Usually, the scholars who are supposed to follow APA use ‘12-point Times New Roman’ font. Upon choosing a font once, we have to “use the same font throughout the text of the paper” (APA, 2020, p. 44). Within a figure image, however, we can use a sans serif font, such as ‘arial’ “with a type size between 8 and 14 points” (APA, 2020, p. 44).

APA (2020) recommends double line space throughout “the entire paper, including the title page, abstract, text, headings, block quotations, reference list, table and figure notes, and appendices” (p. 45) with some exceptions. A remarkable exception is that the authors are allowed to use single-space, one-and-a-half-space, or double-space within “the table body (cells) and words within the image part of a figure,” for the effective presentation of the data ” (APA, 2020, p. 45).

The page margins recommended by APA (2020) for a research paper or article are one inch (or 2.54 cm) on all sides (top, bottom, left, and right) of the page. This is the default page margin in most word-processing programs. One-point-five-inch left margins are allowed for longer research reports like dissertations and theses if they are to be bound.

APA (2020) recommends left alignment leaving “the right margin uneven” (p. 45). Manual division or use of hyphen-break words at the ends of lines is not allowed. The breaks in long “DOIs or URLs applied automatically by a word-processing program are permissible” (APA, 2020, p. 45).

Paragraph indentation is another remarkable mechanics in academic writing. In APA style of writing, paragraph boundary is marked by 0.5 inch indentation except for the first paragraph in the abstract (APA, 2020, p. 38). Consider this convention. For maintaining consistency, you can use the tab key. However, to be more systematic and economical, “the automatic paragraph-formatting function of

your word-processing programme” can be used (APA, 2020, p. 45). That is to say, the consistent 0.5 indentation can be set by modifying the ‘Normal’ style so that each new paragraph will be automatically indented, as in this paper.

Heading Levels

APA (2020) recognizes five possible heading levels: level 1 to 5. The use of numbered and lettered headings and sub-headings deviates from the APA writing style. The formatting of different levels of heading in accordance with the APA 7th guidelines is given in Table 1.

Table 1

Format for the Five Levels Heading

Level	Format
1	Centered, Bold, Title Case Heading Text begins as a new paragraph.
2	Flush Left, Bold, Title Case Heading Text begins as a new paragraph.
3	<i>Flush Left, Bold Italic, Title Case Heading</i> Text begins as a new paragraph.
4	Indented, Bold, Title Case Heading, Ending With a Period. Text begins on the same line and continues as a regular paragraph.
5	<i>Indented, Bold Italic, Title Case Heading, Ending With a Period.</i> Text begins on the same line and continues as a regular paragraph.

(APA, 2020, p. 48)

Usually, in the APA style of academic writing, the title of a paper is treated as the first-level heading. It should be formatted in bold, title case, and centered (APA, 2020, p. 48). The subsequent level of headings, such as the abstract and its equivalents, are considered second level headings. The headings below these second level headings are categorized as third level headings, and so forth. While setting the headings, never use the buttons or Alt keys for Bold (B) and Italicize (I). The heading levels can be easily and systematically set from the Style Gallery in word-processing programme on your device. This also allows you to generate Table of Contents automatically in a longer research report, proposal or thesis.

It should be also noted that in writing process in a Word file, the terms, ‘Table 1,’ ‘Table 2,’ ‘Figure 1,’ ‘Figure 2,’ and so on preceding the table or figure titles are not manually typed, but inserted from ‘Insert Caption’ icon under ‘Reference’ on the toolbar of the Word file. This allows you to autogenerate List of Tables and Figures, which is required in a longer research report or thesis. Moreover, such an insertion ensures no repetition of table or figure numbers.

Elements of a Research Paper

The elements of a research paper discussed in this article include title, abstract, introduction, methodology, results and discussions, conclusion, and references.

Title: The title of a research paper with refined language and content makes it more attractive, informative and accurate in relation to the content of the paper (Hartley, 2008). An effective research title is supposed to be precise, accurate, and complete, reflecting the specific research design and correlated with the major goal of the research. For example, if the content of the research paper deals with the challenges and issues immersed in English language teacher training in the context of Nepal, can it be written as ‘Challenges and Issues in Pre- and In-Service English Language Teacher

Training in Nepal' instead of anything else such as, 'Exploring Challenges of Pre-Service and In-Service Teacher Training In Nepal' or so and so? Moreover, the title can be made longer to make it more reflective and comprehensive since "there is no prescribed limit for title length in APA Style" (APA, 2020, p. 31).

Additionally, it is important to recognize that while the APA 7th style does not specify a limit for title length, it does promote authors to maintain "focused and succinct" titles (APA, 2020, p. 31). Thus, it is crucial not to misinterpret this guideline with the previous APA 6th style, which imposed a twelve-word limit on titles (see APA, 2010, p. 241). However, some journals, in their author guidelines, have given the length limit of the title in terms of the number of characters in it. Therefore, conform your title with the concerned journal's author guidelines and make it as focused and concise as possible.

Abstract: The abstract is a brief summary of a research paper. It should be relevant to the topic or issue of the research and appropriate in length. Readers expect to see the objective/purpose of the study in the first or second sentence in the abstract (and in the first or second paragraph in the introduction section). Therefore, consider these things to make the abstract as such. An abstract includes: background sentence, objective(s) of the study, methodology, results, and conclusions (Hartley, 2008). Hartley (2008) has also maintained that you can change the words or phrases to refer to these elements in your abstract, but the meaning is not deviated. Finally, check whether your abstract is abstract like, that is, whether it beautifully summarizes the paper, and includes all the necessary elements mentioned above.

Furthermore, Hartley (2008) prescribes 150-word limit for abstract. However, the length of an abstract may vary depending on the journal in which you wish to publish your research paper. You are expected to follow the author guidelines of the journal.

Introduction: Have you noticed the pattern of introduction part in others' academic writing? People usually start the introduction of a research paper from one or more general beliefs, assumptions, or arguments about the issue of their concern or the theme of the study. What then? Backing up with "supporting arguments" dialoging with the existing literature in a logical sequence, with appropriate citations (Allen, 2004, p. 16). This is referred to as "they say" move in academic writing (Graff & Birkenstein, 2014). Then, the "they say" move is followed by the authors' argument(s), again in a logical sequence, which is referred to as "I say" move (Graff & Birkenstein, 2014). The 'I say' move is very often termed as the researcher's (or author's) "reflexivity" or "position(ality)" or "voice" or "self" (Holmes, 2020). You also need to show your existence throughout your research paper; do not miss yourself in your writing. It is also referred to as being critical in writing (The University of Western Australia, n.d.).

Most authors end or conclude the introductory section of their paper in such a way that the readers can predict what follows. This makes their paper coherent across sections. Such coherence (and cohesion) is maintained within and across other sections and paragraphs as well in academic writing (see Paudel, 2018, for detail). I maintain coherence in writing across sections or paragraphs in three ways: (1) giving clues at the end of a section about what it follows, or (2) referring to the previous section in the beginning of the following section, or (3) doing both.

Furthermore, the introduction of a research paper includes the rationale or possible significance of the study or paper, clearly stated research problem backing up with updated relevant literature, research objective(s), and research questions, implicitly or explicitly under different headings.

I have observed that identifying a real research problem and stating it with appropriate literature review is a challenging task. Merely identifying social problems does not automatically translate them into research problems (Peoples, 2021). A research problem is not merely a reflection of a social issue but rather a specific curiosity formulated within the mind of a researcher due to societal concerns, problems, or events they encounter with or know from literature. According to Bryman

(2012), a research problem is a specific issue, difficulty, contradiction, or gap in knowledge that a researcher aims to address or resolve through their study. It serves as the foundation for conducting research and guides the formulation of research questions, objectives, and hypotheses (if any). Identifying a clear and well-defined research problem is pertinent since it determines the further elements of a research project.

For example, if you choose the scenario of the lack of proper translation of teacher training into real classroom situations as your concern, it needs to be supported through your personal experience and observation or evidence from existing literature. This issue may pose a number of questions in the researcher's mind, such as Why does this situation exist? What sorts of factors prevent teachers from transforming their training knowledge into classroom situation? What is the content, methodology, structure or mode (e.g., virtual or physical, in-service or pre-service) of such trainings? Who bears the responsibility of this happening? What can be the measures for the solution?

All the queries above among many others concerning the issue can form the basis of your research problem. However, what is also to be noted that if the questions you pose exist in the literature, these cannot be the basis of the research problem (Bryman, 2012). Any question can be the basis of your research problem only if the existing literature has not addressed it or the existing solution is not adequate from a particular perspective or research methodology you intend to adopt in your research project. In such cases, identifying the research gap through a comprehensive review of existing literature becomes paramount in determining the genuine research problem (Booth et al., 2008).

Now, understanding the concepts of research problems, research objectives, and research questions can be initially perplexing. Following Creswell and Creswell (2018), "A research problem . . . is an issue or concern that needs to be addressed (e.g., the issue of racial discrimination)" (p. 57). Regarding the emergence of a research problem, they write:

The problem comes from a void in the literature, and conflict in research results in the literature, topics that have been neglected in the literature; a need to lift up the voice of marginalized participants; and "real-life" problems found in the workplace, the home, the community, and so forth. (p. 57)

Therefore, one can identify and articulate a research problem, either reviewing existing literature to identify gaps or observing and experiencing social issues or concerns firsthand. It is important to note, however, that a social issue does not inherently constitute a research problem (Peoples, 2021). The issue must be problematized. For instance, while gender discrimination is a recognized social issue, addressing it through research necessitates formulating a specific problem. This can be related to exploring the causal factors, current status, nature, or the degree of gender discrimination, or identifying the contexts or workplaces in which it occurs.

The research objectives and questions are essentially the same in meaning. The difference lies in the form of their articulation in a research paper. The research problem is stated accompanied with a meaningful research gap and briefly expressed in affirmative structure in a paragraph or more (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Research objectives emerge from the research problem although it can be vice versa sometimes. Research objectives are presented in the to-infinitive structure, often listed if multiple (Maxwell, 2013).

The research questions, in contrast, are typically structured in an interrogative form. The relationship between research objectives and questions can vary—it might be one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-one (Flick, 2009). When there is a direct correspondence between research objectives and questions, redundancy may arise, allowing one to be omitted from the paper. Conversely, if the relationship is inverse, both lists are included (Bryman, 2012). Sometimes, the research question is embedded within the research problem in a paper. A problem requires a solution and can always be phrased as a question, just as a question requires an answer and can always be phrased as a problem (Punch, 1998). For example, one might state that the research problem revolves around the question:

How do individuals derive meaning from their lived experiences of the 'Peoples' Movement, 2062' in Nepal? Here, even the objective is implicitly woven into the presentation, namely—to explore the peoples' interpretations of their lived experiences of the mentioned movement.

Additionally, the methodology used is mentioned and justified in the introduction section. The general approach or methodology may be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, depending on your research objectives and/or questions (Creswell, 2009). Quantitative research involves “Explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods” (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2002, as cited in Muijs, 2004, p. 1). Qualitative research utilizes non-numerical and unstructured data; it often begins with broad research questions and methods, which become more focused as the study progresses (Punch, 1998). Mixed methods research integrates “qualitative and quantitative research and data in a research study” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 51). The research objectives and/or questions also determine the more specific research designs under each broad methodology or approach. The quantitative approach to research includes survey, case study, experimental, quasi-experimental, action research, and correlational research designs (Cohen et al., 2018). The qualitative approach includes narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, and case study designs (Creswell, 2007). In the introduction section, you have to briefly mention and justify the methodology and research design used.

Overall, the introduction section gives a brief overview of the whole paper, including the issue(s) or problem raised, the research methodology and design used to address the issue or problem, and the justification for the selection of the design. It is essential to clearly identify and articulate the problem to frame the research effectively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The introduction should also provide a rationale for the study, highlighting the significance and potential impact of the research (Swales & Feak, 2012).

Methodology: Following the introduction, your paper should include a methodology section that details the research design. Since your study appears to be based on a qualitative research design, this section should encompass the participants and their selection procedure, the research site, data collection tools and methods, the data collection procedure, and the data analysis procedure (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, ethical considerations should be addressed, especially in longer research reports or proposals (Orb et al., 2001).

When you are adopting a quantitative research design the elements of methodology slightly differ. They include the population of the study, sample, sampling procedure, tools for data collection, data collection methods, data collection procedure, and data analysis procedure (Muijs, 2004). Ethical considerations should also be included, as in qualitative research, particularly in longer research proposals or reports (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Results and Discussions: In the Results and Discussions section of a research paper, the results or findings uncovered through the analysis of the data are mentioned, explained, and discussed including the researcher's position (i.e. I say) and the evidence from relevant literature and theory (i.e., they say) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Graff & Birkenstein, 2014). In this section, there is a harmonious amalgamation of the author's interpretations and existing scholarly discourse (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Conclusion: A well-expressed conclusion serves as more than a repetition that summarizes the findings. It projects the significance of the findings orienting towards their implications in practice and future research. The conclusion transforms from a retrospective to forward-looking perspective, addressing the question of 'so what?' This shift towards a prospective orientation allows for a deeper understanding of the implications of the study within its relevant field, thereby enriching the discourse and laying the groundwork for further research (Bourner & Greener, 2016; Swales & Feak, 2012).

References: The References section is kept at the end of a paper, consisting of the sources cited in the text, followed by appendices if any. APA (2020) in this regard, maintains:

Each work cited in the text must appear in the reference list, and each work in the reference list must be cited in the text. Ensure that the spelling of author names and the publication dates in the reference list entries match those in the in-text citations. (p. 257)

Furthermore, the task of citation should not be assumed as a final element in the writing process as citations stand as an important prerequisite for achieving a high-quality academic writing (Gustavii, 2016). There are two essential preliminary steps to be undertaken for this. They are: installing any reference management software such as EndNote and creating your personal EndNote library (Sherwin, 2020).

Gustavii (2016) emphasized that accurate citation practices enhance the credibility of academic work and facilitate the dissemination of knowledge within the scholarly community. Proper citation management tools like EndNote not only modernize the writing process but also ensure the meticulous organization of references. Moreover, the consistent use of citation management software can significantly reduce errors and improve the overall quality of academic papers (Lorenzetti & Ghali, 2013).

Conclusion

This article provides a comprehensive overview of the essential elements and structure of a research paper, guided by APA (2020) standards. The discussion emphasizes the importance of adhering to specific formatting guidelines, such as font choice, line spacing, margins, paragraph alignment, and indentation, which collectively enhance the readability and professional presentation of scholarly work. Heading levels are systematically emphasized to ensure clarity and organization, helping authors maintain consistency across various sections, from titles to sub-headings.

The article further emphasizes the role of key research paper elements: title, abstract, introduction, methodology, results and discussions, conclusion, and references. Each element serves a distinct function in presenting research coherently and effectively.

This article also emphasizes transparency about research design, participant selection, data collection, and ethical considerations. Clarity on format is vital in research, for interpretation, description, and explanatory approaches require thorough methodological articulation. Ultimately, this article not only guides novice researchers through the mechanics of APA formatting but also fosters an understanding of academic writing as a structured process. By adopting these guidelines, researchers can communicate their findings more effectively, contributing valuable insights to their respective fields.

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