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Challenges of Academic Writing in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria: Issues and Strategies for Improvement

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Abstract: Academic writing is an indispensable component of teaching, learning, research, and knowledge dissemination in tertiary institutions. It enhances students' critical thinking, communication skills, and research competence while contributing to institutional and national development. Despite its importance, academic writing in Nigerian tertiary institutions is confronted with numerous challenges that undermine the quality of scholarly outputs. This paper examines the major challenges of academic writing in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Specifically, it discusses inadequate academic writing skills, plagiarism and poor referencing practices, poor reading culture, limited access to scholarly resources, poor information and digital literacy, inadequate supervision and mentorship, and inadequate information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. The paper argues that these challenges have adversely affected the quality of students' projects, dissertations, theses, and scholarly publications. It concludes that strengthening academic writing instruction, improving library and ICT facilities, promoting academic integrity, enhancing supervision, and expanding access to digital scholarly resources are essential for improving academic writing standards in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Academic writing, tertiary institutions, plagiarism, scholarly communication, research writing, higher education.

1.0 Introduction

Academic writing is the foundation of higher education and scholarly communication. It is the primary means through which students, lecturers, and researchers generate, communicate, and preserve knowledge. In tertiary institutions, academic writing is required for assignments, seminar papers, laboratory reports, project reports, dissertations, theses, journal articles, conference papers, and research grants. Effective academic writing promotes critical thinking, logical reasoning, analytical ability, and evidence-based decision-making. It also contributes significantly to research productivity, institutional ranking, innovation, and national development.

In Nigeria, academic writing has become increasingly important due to the expansion of higher education, growing emphasis on research productivity, quality assurance requirements, and

internationalization of universities. Regulatory agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC), the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) require institutions to maintain high standards of teaching, learning, and research, all of which depend heavily on quality academic writing.

Despite these expectations, many students and some academics encounter considerable difficulties in producing quality academic manuscripts. Weak writing competence, plagiarism, poor reading habits, inadequate access to current scholarly literature, poor digital literacy, ineffective supervision, and inadequate ICT infrastructure continue to hinder effective academic writing in many Nigerian tertiary institutions. These challenges affect the quality of research outputs, delay students' graduation, reduce publication rates, and weaken institutional research performance. Given the strategic role of academic writing in knowledge creation and dissemination, there is a need to examine these challenges and propose practical strategies for improving academic writing in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Addressing these challenges will not only enhance students' academic performance but also strengthen research quality and global competitiveness of Nigerian higher education institutions.

2.0 Concept of Tertiary Education

According to UNESCO, (2012) tertiary education builds on secondary education and includes learning activities in specialized fields of education. It aims at learning at a high level of complexity and specialization and encompasses what is commonly understood as academic and advanced vocational education. This includes universities, polytechnics, colleges of education, and other post-secondary institutions. The World Bank (2002) defines tertiary education as all formal education that takes place after the completion of secondary schooling, including universities, colleges, polytechnics, and other institutions that provide academic and professional education leading to certificates, diplomas, and degrees.

The OECD (2019); Oweikpodor, Onafowope, and Ogunode, (2024) describes tertiary education as post-secondary education delivered by universities and other higher education institutions that provides advanced knowledge, professional competencies, and research skills leading to recognized qualifications. In this paper, tertiary education is seen as the highest level of formal education offered after secondary school through universities, polytechnics, colleges of education, and other higher institutions, with the primary aim of developing advanced knowledge, professional competence, research capability, innovation, and lifelong learning.

Academic in tertiary institutions are saddled with the responsibilities of writing academic papers for academic purposes and specifically for promotion and advance research findings dissemination. Academic writing is one of the core activities of tertiary education. Higher education institutions exist to generate, preserve, and disseminate knowledge through teaching, research, and community service, and academic writing is the principal medium for accomplishing these functions. Students engage in academic writing when preparing assignments, seminar papers, laboratory reports, project reports, dissertations, and theses. Likewise, lecturers and researchers rely on academic writing to publish journal articles, books, conference papers, grant proposals, and technical reports.

Academic writing also supports quality assurance, accreditation, curriculum development, and institutional planning by providing well-documented scholarly evidence. Furthermore, it develops students' critical thinking, analytical reasoning, communication, and research skills, which are essential outcomes of tertiary education. Consequently, the quality of teaching, research, innovation, and institutional reputation largely depends on the quality of academic writing produced within tertiary institutions.

2.1 Concept of Academic Writing

Handbook for International Students, academic writing (2018) defines it as a formal style of writing used in universities and scholarly publications to communicate ideas, present evidence, and engage with existing knowledge in a logical and objective manner. Oshima and Hogue (2007) defines academic writing as the kind of writing required in colleges and universities that emphasizes organization, clarity, accuracy, and the use of evidence to support arguments. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center explains that academic writing is clear, concise, focused, structured, and supported by evidence. Its purpose is to aid the reader's understanding through a formal and objective presentation of ideas. The University of Leeds describes academic writing as a formal style of writing used in higher education that requires critical thinking, evidence-based arguments, logical organization, and appropriate referencing to communicate knowledge effectively.

Academic writing supports quality assurance, accreditation, curriculum development, and institutional planning by providing well-documented scholarly evidence. Furthermore, it develops students' critical thinking, analytical reasoning, communication, and research skills, which are essential outcomes of tertiary education. Consequently, the quality of teaching, research, innovation, and institutional reputation largely depends on the quality of academic writing produced within tertiary institutions. In this paper, academic writing can be viewed as a formal, logical, evidence-based, and well-structured form of communication used by scholars, researchers, and students to present, analyze, and disseminate knowledge while adhering to accepted academic conventions, critical thinking, and ethical citation practices.

Components of Academic Writing

Academic writing is built on several essential components that ensure clarity, credibility, logical organization, and scholarly integrity. These components enable researchers and students to communicate ideas effectively while adhering to accepted academic standards.

Clear Purpose

Every academic writing has a specific purpose, such as informing, analyzing, evaluating, or persuading. The purpose guides the direction of the study and determines the research questions, objectives, and arguments.

Logical Organization

Academic writing follows a systematic structure. Ideas are presented in a logical sequence, beginning with an introduction, followed by the main body, and ending with a conclusion. Each paragraph develops one central idea and connects smoothly to the next.

Thesis Statement or Central Argument

A thesis statement presents the main idea or position of the writer. It serves as the foundation of the paper and provides readers with a clear understanding of what the study intends to discuss or prove.

Evidence-Based Arguments

Academic writing relies on credible evidence rather than personal opinions. Evidence may come from scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports, government publications, and empirical research findings.

Critical Analysis

Rather than merely describing information, academic writing requires critical thinking. Writers compare different viewpoints, evaluate evidence, identify strengths and weaknesses of previous studies, and develop informed conclusions.

Formal Language and Style

Academic writing uses formal, objective, and precise language. It avoids slang, contractions, emotional expressions, and informal vocabulary. Technical terms are used appropriately to maintain professionalism.

Objectivity

Academic writing is unbiased and fact-based. Claims are supported by evidence, and the writer avoids personal prejudice or unsupported assertions.

Coherence and Cohesion

Ideas should flow smoothly throughout the document. Transitional words and phrases such as *however*, *therefore*, *in addition*, and *consequently* help connect sentences and paragraphs, making the text easy to follow.

Proper Referencing and Citation

Academic writing acknowledges the work of other scholars through appropriate citation and referencing styles such as APA, MLA, Chicago, or Harvard. Proper referencing prevents plagiarism and enhances the credibility of the work.

Originality

Academic writing should contribute original ideas, interpretations, or findings. Even when building on previous research, writers are expected to present independent analysis and avoid plagiarism.

Accuracy and Precision

Information presented in academic writing should be accurate, specific, and supported by reliable evidence. Writers should use correct terminology, facts, figures, and statistics.

Importance of Academic Writing in Tertiary Institutions**Facilitates Knowledge Creation and Dissemination**

Academic writing is a primary means through which knowledge is created, documented, and shared in tertiary institutions. Through research papers, dissertations, theses, journal articles, conference papers, and books, scholars communicate new ideas, theories, and research findings to the academic community. This process promotes intellectual development and contributes to the advancement of knowledge across disciplines. It also enables researchers to build on previous studies, thereby fostering innovation and scholarly progress.

Enhances Critical Thinking and Analytical Skills

Academic writing develops students' ability to think critically and analyze information objectively. Before presenting an argument, students are required to review literature, evaluate evidence, compare different viewpoints, and draw logical conclusions. These activities strengthen reasoning, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, which are valuable not only in academic settings but also in professional and personal life.

Improves Communication Skills

Academic writing helps students develop effective written communication skills. It teaches them how to express ideas clearly, logically, and coherently using formal language and appropriate academic conventions. Strong communication skills enable students to write quality assignments, reports, research proposals, dissertations, and journal articles. These skills also prepare graduates for workplace communication, policy writing, and professional documentation.

Promotes Research Competence

Academic writing is closely linked to the research process. It enables students and researchers to formulate research problems, review relevant literature, collect and analyze data, present findings, and draw evidence-based conclusions. Through continuous engagement in academic writing, students acquire essential research skills that improve the quality of their scholarly work and prepare them for postgraduate studies and professional research careers.

Upholds Academic Integrity and Ethical Scholarship

Academic writing promotes honesty, accountability, and ethical conduct in scholarship. It requires writers to acknowledge the ideas and findings of other scholars through proper citation and referencing. This practice helps prevent plagiarism, respects intellectual property rights, and enhances the credibility of academic work. Consequently, academic writing contributes to maintaining high standards of integrity within tertiary institutions.

Supports Quality Assurance and Institutional Development

Quality academic writing contributes significantly to the overall quality of teaching, learning, research, and community service in tertiary institutions. Well-written research publications, project reports, accreditation documents, and institutional reports enhance the reputation, visibility, and ranking of universities. Academic writing also provides evidence for programme accreditation, policy formulation, institutional planning, and decision-making, thereby strengthening quality assurance mechanisms and supporting sustainable institutional development.

Challenges facing academic writing in tertiary institutions in Nigeria

Inadequate Academic Writing Skills

One of the greatest challenges of academic writing in Nigerian tertiary institutions is the inadequate academic writing competence among students. Many students enter universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education with weak foundations in grammar, sentence construction, paragraph development, critical thinking, academic vocabulary, and scholarly writing conventions. Consequently, they struggle to write coherent essays, seminar papers, project reports, dissertations, and theses. This challenge is aggravated by inadequate exposure to academic writing courses, limited opportunities for writing practice, and poor feedback from lecturers. Weak academic writing skills often result in poorly structured arguments, grammatical errors, and inability to communicate research findings effectively. Continuous training, writing workshops, and regular mentoring have been recommended to improve students' writing competence.

Plagiarism and Poor Referencing Skills

Plagiarism has become a major concern in Nigerian tertiary institutions and continues to undermine academic integrity. Many students have inadequate knowledge of proper citation styles such as APA, MLA, and Chicago, making it difficult for them to acknowledge the works of other scholars appropriately. Others deliberately engage in copy-and-paste practices due to pressure to meet deadlines or obtain high grades. Poor understanding of paraphrasing, summarising, and referencing techniques further contributes to plagiarism. In addition, inadequate enforcement of institutional policies on academic integrity encourages repeated violations. Universities are therefore encouraged to strengthen plagiarism detection mechanisms, adopt software such as Turnitin, and organize regular training on academic writing and research ethics.

Poor Reading Culture

Academic writing depends heavily on extensive reading of scholarly literature. Unfortunately, many students in Nigerian tertiary institutions exhibit poor reading habits and rely mainly on lecture notes, handouts, and examination guides. Limited reading reduces vocabulary development, critical thinking skills, analytical ability, and exposure to current scholarly debates. As a result, students find it difficult to develop convincing arguments, synthesize literature, and produce original academic work. Developing a strong reading culture through library orientation, book clubs, and improved access to scholarly resources can significantly enhance students' academic writing abilities.

Limited Access to Scholarly Resources

Many tertiary institutions in Nigeria experience shortages of current textbooks, scholarly journals, electronic databases, and digital library resources. Poor institutional funding, high subscription costs for international journals, and inadequate library development limit students' access to quality literature. Consequently, students often rely on outdated materials or non-academic internet sources, reducing the quality and credibility of their academic writing. Expanding digital libraries and increasing subscriptions to international databases would greatly improve research and writing quality.

Poor Information and Digital Literacy

Modern academic writing requires competence in searching electronic databases, evaluating information sources, managing references, and using digital research tools. However, many students lack adequate information and digital literacy skills. They often experience difficulties identifying credible sources, conducting systematic literature searches, downloading journal articles, and using reference management software such as Zotero, Mendeley, or EndNote. These deficiencies reduce the quality of literature reviews and increase dependence on unreliable online materials.

Inadequate Supervision and Mentorship

Effective academic writing requires continuous guidance from experienced supervisors and lecturers. However, many Nigerian tertiary institutions face shortages of qualified academic staff, resulting in high supervisor-student ratios. Supervisors are often overwhelmed with teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities, leaving limited time to provide detailed feedback on students' writing. Poor supervision contributes to delays in project completion, repeated corrections, weak research reports, and frustration among students. Strengthening mentorship programmes and reducing supervisor workload would improve the quality of academic writing.

Inadequate ICT Facilities and Unreliable Internet Access

The increasing digitalisation of higher education has made ICT facilities and internet connectivity essential for academic writing. Students require computers, stable electricity, reliable internet access, plagiarism detection software, and online databases to conduct quality research. However, inadequate ICT infrastructure, unstable electricity supply, poor internet connectivity, and limited access to computer laboratories remain major constraints in many Nigerian tertiary institutions. These challenges delay literature searches, online collaboration, manuscript preparation, and submission of academic work, thereby affecting the overall quality of scholarly writing.

Conclusion and recommendations

Academic writing remains one of the most important academic competencies required for effective teaching, learning, research, and knowledge dissemination in tertiary institutions. However, its effectiveness in Nigeria is constrained by inadequate writing skills, plagiarism, poor reading culture, inadequate access to scholarly resources, poor digital literacy, weak supervision and mentorship, and insufficient ICT infrastructure. These challenges continue to affect the quality of students' academic work and the research productivity of tertiary institutions. Based on these findings, the study recommends the following:

- 1) Tertiary institutions should make academic writing courses compulsory for all undergraduate and postgraduate students.
- 2) Universities should organize regular workshops, seminars, and academic writing clinics for students and academic staff.
- 3) Institutional libraries should subscribe to current electronic databases, digital libraries, and peer-reviewed journals.
- 4) Management should strengthen ICT infrastructure by providing reliable internet connectivity, computer laboratories, and stable electricity.
- 5) Academic integrity policies should be strictly enforced through plagiarism detection software and

continuous education on ethical research practices.

- 6) Lecturers and supervisors should provide timely, constructive, and detailed feedback to improve students' writing competence.
- 7) Students should be encouraged to cultivate strong reading habits by making effective use of library resources and scholarly publications.
- 8) Government should increase funding for tertiary education to support research development, library modernization, and ICT expansion.

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