

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY POSTGRADUATE NURSING SCHOLARS DURING ACADEMIC WRITING:AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16436078>

Keywords

academic writing, challenges encountered, writing strategies, time-constraint

Article History

Received on 26 April 2025

Accepted on 26 July 2025

Published on 26 July 2025

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Abstract

Academic writing is formal writing used by students in an academic setting. This study explored the challenges encountered by postgraduate nursing scholars in academic writing at the college of nursing AFPGMI Rawalpindi. This study utilized the qualitative approach using exploratory design. The study participants included 25 students of MSCN first semester enrolled for the academic year 2025 and were selected through a purposive sampling technique after obtaining their consent. Data was gathered through a semi-structured focus group interview guide, conducted over three weeks. The interviews were transcribed, and a manual qualitative thematic analysis was performed, resulting in the generation of codes, subthemes, and themes. Results revealed five themes: Pre-existing Knowledge and Expectations, Key Challenges Faced in Academic Writing, Difficulty in organizing information, Coping Strategies and Support Systems, and Suggestions for Programmatic Improvement. This study concluded that Postgraduate nursing students encounter multifaceted challenges in academic writing, shaped by insufficient prior exposure, high expectations, and emotional stress. Yet, their proactive strategies and clear suggestions show a strong desire to succeed. Tailored interventions grounded in Constructivist Learning Theory emphasizing support, collaboration, and guided practice can significantly improve outcomes. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct studies about academic reading and put more stress on writing strategies that must be effective for students.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a critical skill for nursing students, essential for effective communication, critical thinking, and evidence-based practice in healthcare settings. With advancements in healthcare technology and the increasing emphasis on evidence-based practice, nursing students must develop strong academic writing skills to navigate the complexities of healthcare documentation and contribute to the evolving body of nursing knowledge. However, little is known about the specific challenges faced by nursing students in this domain. Through focused

group discussion having semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this study investigates the multifaceted nature of challenges encountered by nursing students in academic writing. practices.

Background of the Study

In contemporary nursing education, the ability to communicate effectively through academic writing is essential. It functions not only as a mode of communication but also as a crucial tool for knowledge dissemination, critical thinking, and

professional development. With the growing emphasis on evidence-based practice and rapid advancements in healthcare, nursing students are increasingly expected to develop strong writing skills to navigate complex documentation and scholarly communication (Crisp & Taylor, 2019).

However, many nursing students enter academic programs from clinical backgrounds where writing is not a primary focus. As a result, they often struggle to adapt to academic conventions, research methodologies, and the formal structure required in scholarly writing. These difficulties are particularly pronounced in countries like Pakistan, where English is a second or foreign language (Soomro, 2022). Despite the importance of academic writing, numerous students face persistent challenges that hinder their ability to produce high-quality work (Rehman et al., 2023). Common issues include language proficiency, organizing ideas, managing time effectively, and coping with emotional barriers such as anxiety and self-doubt (Peneda & Orville, 2023).

Research consistently highlights specific difficulties that students—especially non-native English speakers—encounter in academic writing. These include problems with grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, which limit their ability to express complex healthcare concepts clearly (Zhao et al., 2024). Moreover, difficulties in organizing content and maintaining logical coherence are frequently reported, resulting in essays with unclear arguments and poor structure (Jimenez et al., 2024). Time constraints, particularly those caused by balancing clinical placements with academic work, further intensify these challenges, creating a high-stress environment that often diminishes the quality of students' writing (Sajjad et al., 2021).

A study conducted in Malaysia found that 84.4% of Jordanian postgraduate students (JPS) experienced issues with coherence, grammar, paraphrasing, and sourcing appropriate academic materials (Muhammad et al., 2018). These obstacles led to anxiety, writer's block, and delayed submissions. Additional research by Mustafa et al. (2022) revealed that students also faced limited vocabulary, poor comprehension, and challenges with summarizing and paraphrasing. Cultural differences further complicate the process, as students from diverse

backgrounds often struggle to grasp academic conventions in English, which can result in feelings of isolation and frustration (Zhao et al., 2024).

Many nursing students perceive academic writing as one of the most difficult aspects of their education. While this challenge is frequently noted among undergraduates (Tanjung & Kurniawan, 2024), findings from the present study indicate that postgraduate nursing scholars in Pakistan continue to face many of the same obstacles experienced during their undergraduate years. The complexity of academic writing often manifests as underperformance in written assignments (Jimenez et al., 2024). The demand for clarity, accuracy, fluency, and organization in academic writing can be overwhelming, limiting students' ability to articulate their ideas effectively (Noori, 2020).

Although academic writing challenges have been widely studied, several gaps remain. Much of the existing research focuses narrowly on technical aspects such as grammar or coherence, often overlooking the interaction between language skills and emotional factors (Holmes, 2022). There is also a lack of research that specifically investigates the experiences of nursing students, who must bridge clinical expertise with academic literacy (Ni Putu Riastini, 2020). Furthermore, while general student populations have been studied, the voices of postgraduate nursing scholars—especially in contexts like Pakistan—are largely absent from the literature.

Despite the relevance of academic writing in postgraduate nursing education, there is limited research focusing on this demographic. In Pakistan, only one relevant article was found, which may not adequately address the diverse challenges and emotional experiences faced by nursing postgraduates. This gap underscores the need for research that explores these unique struggles in depth. Proficiency in academic writing is crucial for postgraduate students—not only for academic success but also for contributing to research and advancing professional careers (Wang, 2013). Through academic writing, they share evidence-based insights, communicate complex ideas, and influence nursing practice.

Objectives of study

To identify and categorize the specific challenges faced by postgraduate nursing scholars in their academic writing processes.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study design

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore nursing students' experiences with academic writing challenges.

2.2. Study setting and duration

The study took place at the College of Nursing, Armed Forces Post Graduate Medical Institute in Rawalpindi, from Feb 2025 to 2024

2.3. Recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, focusing on those with different levels of academic writing experience and proficiency.

2.4. Sample population

Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) students

2.5. Sample size

12 MSN students.

2.6. Inclusion criteria

Students enrolled in the 1st year Master's in Nursing program,

2.7. Exclusion criteria

2nd year MSN nursing students were excluded to narrow the study focus, as they have advance in experience with academic writing

2.8. Ethical consideration

Permission will be obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Before participating, all students received detailed information about the study's purpose and procedures. Informed oral and written consent was obtained from each participant, allowing them to participate voluntarily. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Identities were kept confidential using pseudonyms and codes. The study aimed to improve nursing education by understanding the challenges students face,

benefiting the nursing community. The research team conducted the study honestly and transparently, adhering to ethical principles throughout

2.9. Data collection

Purpose

Focus group discussion was conducted to gain deep insights into the challenges master's nursing students face in academic writing. Using open-ended questions, the researchers explored the participants' perspectives. The focus group interviews, lasting 45 minutes, were conducted by the researchers.

Procedure

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to include master's nursing students from various backgrounds and experiences. After obtaining informed consent, the interviews were conducted in person due to logistical reasons.

Interview Protocol

A focused group, semi-structured interview guide was created to delve into the participants' academic writing challenges. The questions were open-ended to allow for detailed responses. Example questions included: Describe your experiences with academic writing during your master's program. What specific challenges have you faced in academic writing, and how have you dealt with them? Can you share any strategies or resources that have helped you overcome these challenges?

2.10. Data analysis

Thematic Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the participants' challenges in academic writing. Two researchers independently coded the interview transcripts to ensure reliability. Initial codes were generated from the data, and thematic patterns were identified through analysis and comparison. Themes were reviewed and refined to reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives accurately

Rigor

To enhance the study's rigor, two researchers independently conducted the thematic analysis.

1. Results Demographic

Participants Pseudo names	Sex /age	Marital status	Professional Education	Clinical experience/ Teaching experience
P1	female	Married	Post RN BSC	20+2
P2	female	Unmarried	Post RN BSC	2.5+5
P3	female	Unmarried	Post RN BSC	5+0
P4	female	Married	Generic BSC	20+0
P5	female	Married	Post RN BSC	20+0
P6	female	Married	Post RN BSC	20+5
P7	female	Unmarried	Post RN BSC	6+0
P8	female	Unmarried	Post RN BSC	8+0
P9	female	Married	Post RN BSC	12+0
P10	female	Married	Post RN BSC	10+0
P11	female	Married	Post RN BSC	12+0
P12	female	Unmarried	Post RN BSC	16+0

Following themes emerged from data

Creative expression/ Language and Terminology Struggles

This theme explore the specific obstacles faced in academic writing, such as structuring arguments, adhering to formatting guidelines, and synthesizing research. Writing Challenges, include Grammar, syntax, and difficulty using medical jargon and academic language correctly.

"My biggest obstacle is not transferring my ideas into the text."p2

Access to Writing Resources

Findings Resources, and programs are available to help students improve their academic writing skills (e.g., writing centers, workshops, peer tutoring)

"it's not easy for me to find the resource because I have to find the proper sources for my article" p6

Embracing uncertainty and taking risks

Overcoming self-doubt - Exploring without boundaries

"not confident with my idea, explore my idea, my scope is unlimited."

Time Management and Workload

1. Balancing Academic and Clinical Obligations Challenges in managing writing tasks alongside clinical placements and other responsibilities,

2. "Between clinical rotations and studying for exams, I barely have time to complete my writing assignments. It's exhausting trying to juggle everything."

3. Setting Priorities and Goals Difficulties in prioritizing writing assignments and setting realistic goals to meet deadlines effectively

4.3. Procrastination and Time Wasting Struggles with procrastination and time-wasting behaviors, causing last-minute rushes to complete assignments.

"I always feel rushed when writing papers because there's so much else going on. It's hard to produce my best work under those conditions."

5. 4. Seeking Support and Collaboration Importance of seeking support from peers, instructors, and advisors to manage workload and improve time management strategies.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study aimed to explore nursing students' experiences with academic writing challenges. The thematic analysis revealed several core difficulties, including problems with content

structuring, sentence construction and grammar, sourcing relevant literature, time management, and the role of technology in addressing these issues. These findings offer valuable insight into the multifaceted nature of academic writing difficulties among nursing students and underscore the need for more targeted support within nursing education.

Content Structuring and Language Proficiency

One of the most prominent themes to emerge was the students' struggle with structuring academic content. Many participants expressed uncertainty about how to organize their arguments coherently and logically. This aligns with findings by Brown & Smith (2023), who emphasized that writing structure is one of the most common obstacles for students transitioning from secondary education to higher education. For non-native English speakers or students from diverse educational backgrounds, these challenges can be even more pronounced.

In addition, students highlighted frequent issues with grammar and sentence construction. These difficulties often caused frustration and led to a lack of confidence in their writing abilities. As supported by Choi et al. (2022), language-related barriers are a significant factor in academic writing anxiety, particularly in fields like nursing, where technical terminology and professional tone are required.

Challenges in Sourcing Literature

Another recurring issue was the difficulty students encountered in locating relevant and credible sources. Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the volume of available information and uncertain about how to evaluate the quality of sources. This is consistent with the work of Lee & Harwood (2021), who noted that students often lack the information literacy skills necessary to conduct efficient academic research.

Moreover, students perceived this aspect of writing as more challenging than structuring content or grammar. This may indicate a gap in research training within nursing curricula, pointing to the need for stronger integration of library and research support services. It also suggests that developing students' critical thinking and evaluative skills could be key to improving their overall writing experience.

Technology as a Support Mechanism

Interestingly, a number of students reported using technological tools such as grammar checkers, citation managers, and AI-based writing assistants to help navigate their writing challenges. While this represents a proactive approach, it also raises questions about dependency and the depth of learning. As noted by Nguyen (2024), while digital tools can enhance efficiency and reduce surface-level errors, they do not replace the need for foundational writing skills.

The findings suggest a potential avenue for innovation in nursing education: the strategic incorporation of writing technologies into academic support programs, paired with instruction on their appropriate and ethical use.

Time Management and Competing Demands

Time management emerged as a pervasive issue. Students described the difficulty of juggling academic writing with clinical placements, coursework, part-time jobs, and personal responsibilities. This finding is echoed in the study by Xeu et al. (2025), which highlighted the intense workload experienced by nursing students and the resulting pressure on their academic performance.

This challenge suggests that academic writing support cannot be offered in isolation but must consider students' broader time constraints and workload. Interventions such as writing workshops embedded within coursework, flexible deadlines, and better scheduling of clinical placements could help alleviate some of this burden.

Implications for Nursing Education

The study's findings have important implications. First, they highlight the need for tailored academic writing support that addresses both structural and linguistic challenges. Second, they suggest that writing instruction should be integrated throughout the nursing curriculum, rather than delivered in isolated modules. Third, institutions should invest in developing students' research and information literacy skills early in their academic journey.

Furthermore, the role of technology should be embraced but also critically guided. Educators must ensure students are not only using tools but understanding why certain edits are made or how to critically evaluate suggestions.

Limitations and Future Research

While the findings offer valuable insights, this study is limited by its small sample size and the focus on a single institution. Future research could benefit from a broader participant pool across multiple nursing programs to enhance generalizability. It may also be useful to compare undergraduate and postgraduate students' experiences or to explore the perspectives of educators on how writing challenges are currently being addressed.

Longitudinal studies might provide deeper insight into how academic writing skills evolve over time and what interventions yield the most lasting improvements.

Conclusion

This study explored the multifaceted challenges that nursing students face in academic writing by conducting a thematic analysis of their perceptions and lived experiences. The findings revealed several interrelated themes, including language proficiency issues, difficulties with integrating evidence-based content, time management struggles, and fluctuating levels of confidence and self-efficacy. Access to academic writing resources—such as guidance, support services, and digital tools—also emerged as a key determinant of students' success or difficulty in navigating academic writing tasks.

These insights underscore the complexity of academic writing within the context of nursing education, where students are expected to master technical language, demonstrate critical thinking, and balance academic demands with clinical responsibilities. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature advocating for more comprehensive and integrated academic writing support in nursing curricula.

Given the central role that academic writing plays in the development of professional communication and evidence-based practice, addressing these challenges is critical. Institutions and educators should consider embedding sustained writing support throughout the nursing program, promoting time management strategies, and fostering a culture that builds confidence and academic resilience.

Future research could expand on this study by including a more diverse sample across multiple institutions or examining the long-term impact of

specific writing interventions. In doing so, educators can better tailor support systems that not only improve academic writing performance but also enhance overall student well-being and professional readiness.

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