

# **A Brief Study of Master's Degree Students' Writing Skills Proficiency**

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## **Abstract**

The main objective of this paper was to examine the academic writing skills of master's degree students and equip them to write a research paper logically. The study was carried out to make the target groups feel the pivotal role of coherence and cohesion in writing. To analyze the writing skill, the qualitative approach was used as a major method although the quantitative approach was also used partially. One of the findings of the study was that the target groups pointed out the traditional methods of teaching. About fifty respondents pointed out that there are no practical writing classes. Most of them realized that a research paper is a good combination of ideas organized and a coherent presentation of the thesis statement and methodology. Coherence and cohesion are the major factors of a research paper. They found that research paper writing is a challenging job.

*Keywords:* coherence and cohesion, ideas, organization, research paper

## **Introduction**

Writing a scholarly research paper is a very challenging job. Jagadish Paudel (2022) clarifies that teachers' experiences prove that second language writing (L2 writing) is a challenging task (p. 70). The majority of the students both at the bachelor level and master level do not feel easy to write technically in the beginning though few are good at writing. The major problem with writing is because of the carelessness of both teachers and students, as writing is not highly encouraged or prioritized at the school level in Nepal. Nor is it sincerely conducted and instructed at the college level. Still, teachers in government-aided schools in Nepal are habituated to running the classes in traditional ways. Students are being taught using old methods of teaching which are oppressive and lethargic in nature (Jora, 2020). The old method means the grammar-translation method. There is a one-way traffic technique of teaching rather than making the class interactive. The teachers deliver the lecture and give

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some important notes to the students, and then the teaching is over. This technique is oppressive and lethargic or boring. There is no self-practice of writing in the class so the teachers facilitate. This culture has not been developed yet. Course accomplishment is the major concern of teachers. How can this foster the writing skills of the students?

Now there is an academic writing course introduced at the Master's level first semester and third semester just for a decade or so. There was not any writing course at the university level (T.U.), before. The students would self-practice. Writing means only writing exam papers. Some talented students would prepare notes. Except that, there was no writing culture. Most students do not have experience in writing practice. But in Britain, writing skills were taught at six or seven after reading skills had been acquired (Hiscock, 2015, p.146). It was the practice of the Renaissance period. Now it is the ultramodern age. By this age of children, some parents would withdraw their children from school for house works. Six or seven does not mean the class, it is their age. Still, this practice does not seem to have been prioritized in Nepal.

Formally, writing course is not in practice even in higher classes of schools and colleges. Adhikari (2022) notes that writing is a systematic process which follows a system of writing to develop a meaning-making text in a specific subject matter for a target group of readers (p. 77). This shows that writing means a systematic process of disseminating messages from scholarly figures to a target group of readers. This is a knowledge-sharing platform as well. Only reading the thousands of prescribed or non-prescribed books written by different authors may not accelerate or steer writing skills. The major concern of writing is knowing the writing structure like APA or MLA formats exactly. They may have good information and data, but when they have to disseminate the information or messages to the public through writing, they fail. Why? They do not have a good knowledge of structure and format. This paper focuses on how to equip and enhance the writing skills of master's students.

Writing a short story and writing a research paper is not the same. The study is about how to enhance the writing skills of students academically. Becoming a research writer is the most challenging job. The researcher always feels difficulty in finding the genuine issue, and appropriate topic, that is, relevant, worthy and informative. Sharma (2017) states that the difficulty lies not only in the task of selecting a topic or title but also in the whole process of writing a research proposal, carrying out the research, and writing a thesis (p. 224). The majority of students come to visit the professors after their writing examination is over for the thesis writing, with the proposal with infantile ideas of research techniques. Some of them do not have an idea of how to write a proposal. This is the burning problem. Similarly, Paudel (2022) argues that students face difficulty in writing when they do not know the rules of the "writing road" (cited in Paudel, p. 79). The writing road means a roadmap of writing. The study showed that the

reading culture in the modern age is decreasing for several reasons like crazy schedules. This is a common problem. Another problem is that most students do not study the MLA and APA handbooks and the guidelines of academic writing technically. How can writing culture be promoted? Sacks (2021) points out that students increasingly ignored the bookshelves, accessing what they needed with their computers (p. 250). The students' reading habits must be established for enhancing their writing skills. The students must follow the required techniques of writing without fail or writing is impossible. One foremost technique is combining ideas and details. Gurung (2022) opines that a good combination of ideas and details is called what academic writing is (p. 75). To disseminate the idea, it must be well supported by the details like reasons and explanations. Only a claim cannot make your writing readable. The claim is to be supported by the reasons and evidence, and they should be well explained with clarity. Organizing ideas in coherent ways is another unavoidable technique of writing. Moreover, Savage and Mayer (2015) express the view that writing your ideas on paper before you start to write a draft will help you organize and focus your essay (p. 36). A paper, here, is an essay, and every essay must have well-organized ideas. This type of writing disseminates the messages without fail.

### **Methods**

This paper employs document analysis methods, and it aims to equip the master's students for writing a research paper. Moreover, the study has used the qualitative approach to analyze the writing skills of M. A. students as a major method, although the qualitative approach has not been ignored. A slightly, quantitative method was adopted. The research was carried out by using the questionnaires distributed to about fifty M. A. students of Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus. Some busy students were orally interviewed and most of the students responded to the questionnaire formally. In addition, some teachers from the same campus, Trinity International College and Golden Gate College were randomly interviewed for the issue raised by the author. Twenty students were orally interviewed and twenty were given the questionnaire. But the teachers were just interviewed informally in the teachers' staff room during tea time. Although their experiences were recorded on the mobile, all the records were not incorporated into the study. In this way, the primary data were collected from the live experiences of the students and teachers. The secondary data were all collected from different book chapters, journal articles, online journals or websites, YouTube and E-books. The relevant information was collected and interpreted as well as analyzed according to the area of study. This study was also empirical in nature including the documents analysis technique.

## **Discussion and Result**

In this section, the researcher has discussed the results of the problems and difficulties in writing a research paper, especially, master's thesis. The paper focused on why students feel difficulty while writing theses. The study analyzed why thesis writing has been a challenging job. Thesis writing is the output of a highly intellectual effort and mental exercises of scholars. It means if the students do not have knowledge of MLA or APA styles, they cannot write any research paper properly. To write a research paper, they must study these handbooks for format in detail. After the detailed study of handbooks of formats, the researchers have to study the reading materials. Then writing research might be a bit easier. Writing a research paper is not just the collection of different materials written by different scholars according to the area of study, related to the issue, and putting them in one place. For writing, the students must have knowledge of the syntactic and semantic meanings as well as coherence and cohesion. Writing a research paper means drafting, organizing and revising the ideas coherently (Buaman 125).

Many students expressed their common voice of having the challenges of comprehending theoretical knowledge and logical organization. They also felt difficulty in analyzing and synthesizing the existing literature to incorporate into their research topics. This is a common problem among students. To have a theoretical knowledge of MLA and APA formats, logical organization and analyzing and synthesizing the existing literature about their research topic is not an easy task. For a research paper, there are some crucial factors. They are a topic, abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, results and discussion, the significance of the study, research gaps, objectives, statements of problem, implications, and research questions.

Generally, the topic should be catchy and interesting. It should not exceed more than twelve words although this is not strictly followed by the scholars. Savage & Mayer (2015) suggest, when you finish your essay, read each paragraph sentence by sentence. Make sure every sentence is related to the topic sentence and to the sentence that came before it (p. 51). To make writing effective, reading sentence by sentence in every paragraph is mandatory. Every sentence should relate to the topic sentence is a major requirement of writing. In addition, Bauman (2007) advises to, open your mind to see your topic as a process in time and space (p. 168). Most students get confused while thinking of a proper topic for his/her area of study. They get confused in selecting the appropriate topic for their research works.

So, most researchers get confused in the phase of topic choice. Prof. Dr Mana Prasad Wagley (Dangal, 2020a) says, "there are three things: what, how and where

in a topic. For example, "The Effect of Covid-19 on Household Economy: A Survey of Middle-Class People in Pokhara" (t. s. 5:06). He suggested that fresh researchers should include these things in a topic, so there will be no problem in directing the methodology. He further clarifies, as 'The Effect of Covid-19 on Household Economy', is 'what', 'A Survey of Middle-Class People' is 'how' and "in Pokhara" is 'where'. The topic should determine all the necessary components of a research paper. But there are fifteen words in this topic, 'The Effect . . .' which are not entertained well these days. The standard number for a topic is not more than twelve words. Anyway, what, how and where should be there in a topic.

The second most important thing is the abstract. The abstract should have findings, methodology, significance and objectives because the abstract is a basic kind of formulaic writing with a specific set of parameters (Weber-Fève, 2009). The abstract is rigid and prescribed, and it determines the standard of a research paper. Moreover, Ickes & Stephen (2011) state that abstracts are powerful 150- to 250-word "short stories" that are used as part of complete articles, grant proposals, conference presentations (papers and posters), theses, and dissertations (p. 493). Therefore, the abstract is one of the central pillars of the paper by means of which the body of the text is supported. After the abstract, keywords are presented, that are used in the main text. The number of keywords is 5-7 in general. Then the introduction section is there in which there is the major claim of the study. Then, the methodology, including theoretical frame and conceptual frame, research methods, research designs are to be included in the introduction section.

Third, the literature review is the major part of a research paper although it is not indicated by words in some papers but it is incorporated there. A review of the literature is the heartbeat of a research paper. While selecting the works and words, the researcher must acknowledge the difference between content words and function words in literature. Prof. Kafle (Dangal, 2020b) makes it clear that "there are two types of words, content words and function words. The content word has the theme and function word has the decoration of language but the function words are not very important for review" (t. s. 22:22). He suggests the content words for review. He gives the example of a rainy cloud and a non-rainy cloud. The rainy cloud makes the rainfall and the non-rainy cloud does not make rainfall. The rainy cloud and content word are considered as a matter of concern. What does a farmer choose? Rainy cloud or non-rainy cloud? Similarly, a researcher chooses the content words. The function words are decorative words that are to be left out while reviewing. For example, 'a very strict teacher shouted at the most arrogant students: Rojesh and Prasunna, as soon as he came in the class.' In the sentence, the underlined words are content words

and the rest are function words. Only the nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs as the content words are reviewed.

Fourth, research objectives and significance are other major parts of a paper. They are to be clarified before writing a paper. The readers should not get confused about the objectives. Who does the writer want to address? The objectives should be clear. Fifth is the statement of the problem. Writing a paper means problematizing a certain text or issue, and suggesting to correct it systematically. If a researcher is working on *Hamlet*, s/he should interpret and analyze the text for finding some lacking things. Sixth is research methodology. There is a difference between methods and methodology. A method is a certain tool, whereas methodology is based on philosophy. Writing a paper is a mixing of ‘method’ and ‘ology’, as professor Kafle (Dangal, 2020a) suggests. Here, ‘ology’ means philosophy and philosophy means theorizing and philosophizing. Without theorizing and philosophizing, there will not be a research article. Seventh is the conclusion. There are several trends of writing a paper as some write the introduction and conclusion after they have finished writing a paper. (Lipson, 2005) suggests the new researchers in this way. You will probably write the introduction and conclusion of your paper at last. The introduction is where you will initially state your argument. The conclusion is where you will return to evaluate it (p. 113). The introduction and conclusion bear the weight of a paper. The conclusion includes the major findings, methodology, points of departure, author's evaluation, and some suggestions and recommendation precisely. Last but not least is the ‘references list’. The reference list shows how many sources the researcher has consulted.

While incorporating all the above-mentioned components in a paper, the researcher has to organize all the paragraphs coherently. The coherent development of paragraphs is mandatory for a research work. Making the students know all these things is not easy because they do not sincerely pay attention in class while teaching writing skills. Most writing teachers do not feel comfortable while teaching writing in the classes. According to a live experience of a teacher, Harish had, is like this. Harish writes that he feels difficulty in teaching paragraph development, coherence, cohesion, and teaching writing with supporting details and arguments (Paudel, 2022). Teaching writing in undergraduate as well as in postgraduate classes cannot be interesting because the writing course is tough and confusing in comparison to literature sections. It does not motivate the students. All the teachers themselves are not interested in teaching writing. But if the students had been taught writing skills in the lower classes, they would have initiated and it would have been easier in the higher classes.

After the format, the researcher has to take care of using language. Both language and content play a crucial role to disseminate the message. More appropriately, if the

content is a vehicle, language is a road. The road must be in good condition so that idea flows well on it. So, language appropriateness is highly prioritized in this paper. There are other factors that the writer has to follow. They are as follows:

The assessment related to language appropriateness included 10 components using a 1 to 5 rating scale. They are (1) spelling and punctuation accuracy, (2) editorial clarity and readability, (3) accuracy of examples and illustrations, (4) suitability of language styles with the target students, (5) grammatical accuracy, (6) accuracy of word choice, (7) clarity of language of instruction, (8) language properness, (9) cohesion between sentences, and (10) coherence between paragraphs. (Nurhayati et al., 2022)

According to this text, a good research paper includes all these requirements for disseminating the messages to the target groups. In addition, Nurhayati et al. (2022) make it clear that these are unavoidable tools and methods. The impact of a paper depends on the nature of the issue as well as the expertise of the writer. Writing is incorporating the ideas taken from several sources, like print and electronic media, personal interviews, conferences like LAN and NELTA, workshop seminars, class lectures, TV, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and different programs conducted by the educationists. Singh (2016) states, due to a lack of organization and poor vocabulary skills, they were not able to put forth them properly and coherently. The mechanical aspect of their writing was found only satisfactory according to the level of students (p.159). One major problem of students is poor vocabulary skills and they are not able to put forth them properly and coherently. If coherence is ignored, writing cannot go ahead smoothly. Most students' writing performance is just satisfactory. Most students of English medium classes can perform writing satisfactorily. The otherwise medium students' writing performance might not be satisfactory. To be equipped, the researchers have to consult the sources like SCI-Hub, JSTOR, Tribhuwan University Central Library, NepJol, online journals, BASE (Bielefeld Academic Search Engine), DAOJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), and many more search engines including the books and journals to incorporate in a research paper. While incorporating them, they have to apply the principle of a one-paragraph-one-idea basis. All the paragraphs have to be linked to each other. Every paragraph has to be concluded with a hook or transition to link the next paragraph. Thus, coherence and cohesion have a vital role in every research paper.

There are few students who work hard and their writing proficiency is satisfactory though they are not very good. Several master-level students have little

knowledge of the APA and MLA formats. They make mistakes while placing the in-text citations and references. See the following piece of writing masters' students have produced:

In any event, for proficient authors, composing is difficult work. There are many occasions where they record something and totally dispose of it later. Scholars are known to compose numerous drafts and play out a few amendments before the convey the last piece. However composing can be made more straight forward by rehearsing and by learning alternate ways. Figuring out how to compose can measure up to figuring out how to play tennis or guitar or figuring out how to drive. It is hard to do those exercises toward the start and each time you move into the powerful it is pretty much as troublesome as the main when you began. Research shows that the best indicator of progress in school is exertion, no IQ, or your scores, age, sex, or race and you have some control over your own work (Bauman, 2006).

(Source: taken from the student's thesis proposal).

Let's see the sentence, 'It is hard to do . . . when you began'. What does this sentence mean? Vague. This is common in several students. Next, there is another student's writing. Consider the sentence, 'With Toulmin . . . a thesis statement.' What does this sentence mean? It is not clear.

In this paper I am going to explore Toulmin elements. Toulmin was looking for a method that accurately described the way people make convincing and reasonable arguments. With Toulmin method explained, it is much easier to structure paragraphs that build an essay that strongly defends a thesis statement.

(Source: student's paper)

Similarly, there is another student's paper:

Writing usually circulates within the academic world, but the writer may also find an audience outside via journalism, speeches, pamphlets, etc. Many individuals, particularly undergrads run over the necessity of writing to fulfill a requirement of a college or university.

This piece of writing does not disseminate the message clearly. Spelling mistake is considerable but the main message of the paper is vague. This is very common. These students are to be equipped.

Now the discussion goes to the way about the output of the paper. These days, the single-author paper seems to have been less prioritized in comparison to



the multi-authored writing paper because teamwork output is much stronger than the single-author output. Slowly and gradually, the trend of multiple author writing ambience is increasing. There are certain methods for writing academically. The MLA format and APA format help enhance academic writing technically. The researchers must acknowledge these formats for placing in-text citations, parenthetical texts in the body of a paper, and 'Works Cited' (MLA) or 'References' (APA) at the end. There are appendices to be mentioned after the works cited or references if any as well as acknowledgements, future scope etcetera. But the reality is alarming that some students are completely unknown to in-text citation, referencing, APA and MLA format (Paudel, 2022). The students do not pay attention even if their teachers make them aware of such formats.

### **Conclusion**

The study was carried out to equip the master's students with writing proficiency, a research paper, and especially a thesis paper. For this, the combination of clear organization, coherence and cohesion for writing a research paper is mandatory. This paper was prepared by collecting primary data and secondary data. For primary data, the master's degree students were given the questionnaire and some of them were orally interviewed because they were busy. Simultaneously, some English teachers and other teachers from R. R. Campus, and two private colleges were interviewed. Most of them responded that the teaching methods and course designers are responsible for having not-so-good quality of writing skills in Nepal. They claim that there are still traditional methods of teaching at schools and college levels as well as at the University level. Many master's students do not follow the rules of writing skills strictly. Most teachers have faced bitter experiences while supervising the theses of master's students. On the other hand, the syllabus has not been timely updated according to the demand of time and space.

The study was partly empirical and experimental as well as non-empirical research, as the researcher interviewed the master's students and some teachers for collecting the primary data, and studied the available journal articles and book chapters. The study adopted the documents analysis methods to analyze the texts. This is partly qualitative research. The researcher has applied maximum flexibility to make it neutral and impersonal without any prejudice while preparing this paper and has not imposed his judgments and personal knowledge by force. This paper will be helpful to those students and teachers who are interested in updating and upgrading their writing skills, especially the new beginners, some fresh teachers as well as the syllabus designers or planners of the curriculum development centre of both HSEB and TU.

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