

Formalizing Creativity: Academic Writing in Early College Years



Suresh C. Joshi, Jaishree Naik, Dhruv Aggarwal

Abstract: *The transition from high school to college can easily be deemed to be one of the biggest changes in a student's life. However, due to its dramatic nature, one may fail to fully consider the intricacies of this change. In college, the criteria for evaluating students' academic standing shifts from simple examinations to a blend of assignments and exams. Multiple assignments need the students to write authentic pieces of academic writing. This perspective article aims at providing a conceptual description, and analysis, of academic writing during early college years. We evaluate the structure and components of various stages in academic writing. The outcomes of the paper provide a thorough analysis of dichotomies that exist in students' experiences using two models of literacy: The Autonomous Model, and The Ideological Model. To further reemphasize how crucial early college years are, a contrast has been made between what academic writing is and should be in high school; and what academic writing is in college. This contrast is exemplified using the Central Board of Secondary Education, which is India's primary board for education. This article also explores the academic and cognitive dimensions of academic writing. Taking the current status quo and the recent transformation of the academic world into consideration, the outcome also highlights the challenges and limitations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and provides recommendations to tackle the same. The article also introduces and appraises the idea of students in today's world, who majorly identify as "digital natives." It subsequently analyses how this identity impacts their academic life in a pandemic-struck online system of education. A brief yet elaborate account of the Indian context, and its structural realities were the key focus while making inferences. Finally, the article presents limitations and challenges faced by students in three ways, reiterating the contrast between high school and college in terms of academic instruction, briefly analyzing the social environment in college along with its possible implications, and commenting upon the ambiguity in academic expectations.*

Keywords: Academic writing, COVID-19, digital natives, models of literacy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Early college years are a transitional period between high school and a student's academic or professional career. This may be seen as their final stage of growth from childhood to adulthood and therefore, anything learnt during this period is

utilized through most, if not all their professional and academic journey. For the first time in their lives, students are expected to establish independence and build the foundation for achieving their future goals and aspirations. One of the first few skills taught to students pursuing higher education is academic writing. Most colleges often hold workshops and have elective or mandatory courses that introduce students to the same. But what is academic writing? Simply put, it is a formal style of writing commonly employed in the scholarly spheres. It is structured, clear, concise, focused on a specific topic or theme, and backed up by evidence (University of Leeds Library, 2021). It may come in various forms – as a journal article, a thesis, an essay, and many more. Its purpose is to either persuade, analyze, or inform the reader about the topic in question.

II. ACADEMIC WRITING DURING EARLY COLLEGE YEARS

Each student comes from a different social, educational, and economic context, and therefore, their experiences concerning the academic world are just as unique as they are. Therefore, their perception of academic writing also differs. While some students may excel at it, others may not. Previous educational experiences have a lasting impact on students' reasoning, analytical, comprehension, and writing skills. As per a survey conducted by The Chronicle of Higher Education (2006), 61 per cent of high school teachers say that their students have never written a paper longer than 5 pages. This indicates that many students lack skills that are essential to the practice of academic writing. Apart from this, students may also have certain "bad habits" that they may have adopted during their high school years. Said habits can be understood through various examples such as using redundant words and phrases. To add to these pre-existing issues, the impact of Covid-19 on the academic world is undeniable and has contributed in many ways to increasing the dichotomy between various students. Thus, academic institutions and instructors must make the experience of academic writing as uniform as possible, especially during students' early college years, when they are most susceptible to change.

III. MODELS OF LITERACY

One needs to keep in mind that the experience of academic writing during early college years is new to many students. No two students are alike; each student has had a different experience in terms of education and literacy. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), literacy is "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" (Montoya, 2018).

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* Correspondence Author

Suresh C. Joshi*, School of Psychology and Counselling, O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India. Email: contactscjoshi@gmail.com

Jaishree Naik, School of Psychology and Counselling, O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India. Email: naikjaishree@gmail.com

Dhruv Aggarwal, School of Psychology and Counselling, O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India. Email: dhruvagggarwal028@gmail.com

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Said “difference” in academic experiences can be primarily understood through the two main models of literacy, namely, the autonomous model and the ideological model.

The autonomous model views literacy as a set of defined skills that must be mastered, while the ideological model argues that literacy is a social practice that is learnt through social context and is situationally dependent (Horn, 2016). Most schools focus on the autonomous model of literacy assuming it helps students prepare for standardized testing. This does not readily transfer to the pursuit of higher education or real-world situations.

The ideological model of literacy, on the other hand, is much more realistic and understands that people are influenced by their social surroundings. This implies that literacy is learnt through varying social contexts, which indicates literacy is unique and malleable. Thus, each student’s perception of academic writing is different. Since early college years are a transitional period between high school and higher education and subsequently, a transition from the autonomous model to the ideological model, there are some obvious differences in writing that students must cope with. Two main differences between writing in school and college are: (1) the formalization of creativity, and (2) the agency of thought.

IV. WRITING IN HIGH SCHOOL VERSUS WRITING IN COLLEGE

Human beings have the innate capacity to create or be creative – the way this creativity is harnessed is different in schools as compared to colleges. Schools tend to set barriers to creative expression and “train” students to write only what they have been told. To illustrate, one can take the example of the Central Board of Secondary Education in India. As a part of its curriculum, students must adhere to strict guidelines to receive a good grade. They must write only what has been taught within the confines of the classroom. In contrast, academic writing in colleges and universities makes very different demands from the students – they are expected to be creative, albeit maintain a formal tone while expressing their thoughts, opinions, or ideas.

The second difference between academic writing in schools and colleges is the agency of thought. For most of their lives, students are told that their thoughts must be limited to what is formal or expected from them. Their expression is supposed to fit the criteria for marking. Students are often expected to follow a certain “template” not just for the structure of their writing but also for content. Straying away from this template is commonly penalized with a deduction in marks. However, in college, although students are expected to express their thoughts formally, they have greater agency of thought. They are allowed to think more freely, explore their ideas more vigorously, and challenge their thoughts.

V. THE INDIAN CONTEXT AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

While some can cope with these differences readily and easily, others may struggle to do so. In recent times, students struggle with new challenges as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Students in their early college years during the pandemic face greater hardships in constructing a proper understanding of academic writing. The most evident reason

for the same is the transition from offline to online teaching. The classroom setting is a far more conducive environment for learning in comparison to the online mode of teaching. Since course instructors are unable to interact with students directly, there is a negative impact on students’ ability to adopt and practice essential skills for academic writing. Additionally, the kind of hands-on experience a student gains in a classroom or on campus cannot be replicated online. As a result of the same, students cannot access resources that they otherwise would be able to make full use of.

In a country like India, where CBSE and ICSE are the two primary boards of education, students often get stuck in a monotonous cycle of education which relies on rote learning. The curriculum of CBSE is largely criticized for putting greater emphasis on memorizing instead of learning. A student who writes answers in his own language ideally fails to compete with a student who writes sentences as they were in the book. This system is suffocating as it does not leave room for creativity. ICSE students, on the other hand, engage in various academic writing activities. An internal divide exists between the students in India, the ones who study in CBSE affiliated schools, the ones who study in ICSE affiliated schools and the ones who study in school under the control of state boards. ICSE is a private board and thus, schools affiliated with it usually charge a higher fee than CBSE schools. In a country that accommodates more than 50% of the world’s absolutely poor population, not a lot of people can afford enrolling their child in a private board. Furthermore, ICSE has a relatively limited number of schools affiliated with it.

The ideological model of literacy can be reviewed in order to better understand the Indian academic situation since the Indian subcontinent is highly diverse. As discussed previously, the model lays emphasis on how one’s social surroundings and social context influence the way one learns. Writing an academic piece requires employing creative thought and a person’s creative abilities are directly influenced by their social context. One’s social surroundings shape the way a person thinks and molds their thought process. Not only does it impact the way an individual comes to understand concepts but also the values one attributes to them. For example: an individual coming from a society which deems itself to be “modern” and “urban,” it is easier for the individual to come up with creative ways to write about capitalism. However, as an individual coming from a largely agricultural society, it is difficult for them to write about the concept of capitalism.

Varying experiences with regards to literacy coupled with the transition as well as the pandemic have created large dichotomies between the skills students possess. Some students also lack the meta-cognitive skills needed to recognize areas in which their prior knowledge and skills are insufficient. Beyond workshops or mandatory courses on academic writing in higher education institutions, changes must be made such that students are adequately prepared to write. Early college years are much like a person’s formative years – what students learn during this period in-turn affects their future academic and professional ventures. The experience of academic writing during this time is utilized by students throughout their academic careers.



VI. LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES TO ACADEMIC WRITING IN EARLY COLLEGE YEARS

Through research and review of available literature, it has been inferred that student studying academic writing during their early college years face multiple limitations and challenges. In school, students are prepared by teachers to write in a certain way. However, in college, professors simply provide guidance rather than answer itself. This change can be rather abrupt for students, causing difficulties in adjusting to a new way of learning and writing. For an average student, the meaning of academic writing changes completely as they step into college. From simple questions in a term-exam to academic papers which account for a certain percentage of their grade – a student who initially spoon-fed formats and content from sample papers is now expected to be creative and structurally organize their ideas into a formal academic document. This change can often be frightening and without adequate practice, one may struggle to adjust. Furthermore, academic, and social environments are very different in school as compared to college. The environment at college requires students to be independent and assertive, which may be a difficult task to accomplish for many. College also has relatively competitive peer groups, which can cause unnecessary pressure or stress. This may further discourage the student from taking a very crucial step, getting a peer review. A prominent limitation faced by students studying academic writing during their early college years is the lack of clarity regarding the expectations of course instructors. This may cause students to become overly critical of their work or more prone to making mistakes, subsequently internalizing a negative attitude towards the subject. It creates a vicious cycle of self-doubt which can in-turn become a major obstacle to growth and improvement. As discussed previously, Covid-19 has also interfered with students' ability to make use of resources and absorb the information taught to them efficiently.

VII. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To combat the above-mentioned challenges and limitations, all educational institutions need to recognize that students have some prior knowledge that differs in some way or the other, and the only way to create uniformity in students' understanding is to not only bridge the gaps but also make structural changes at various levels. Providing students with an early introduction to academic writing in high school, encouraging peer and classroom reviews, and promoting creativity form a great basis for eradicating the lack of uniformity between students' understanding of academic writing. While it is important for changes to be made in high schools, it is equally important for academic writing courses in higher education institutions to become more inclusive, adaptable, and efficient. First and foremost, institutions must acknowledge that cultural differences have an impact on the student's ability to write in an academic setting. For instance, Japanese speakers are often more inclined to argue both, for and against an issue, while Arabic speakers tend to develop their argument by restating their position rather than mentioning the rationale (Carnegie Mellon University, 2021). Instructors should share useful strategies with students, regardless of how obvious they may seem. What may seem obvious to some may not be obvious to all. Providing students with a detailed scoring guide, adequate examples, designing assignments that promote practice and creating

milestones for students to accomplish during the writing process are some ways through which instructors can ensure their students fully understand the process, components, and skills involved in academic writing.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, academic writing is a quintessential skill which comes in handy throughout the course of one's life. As one advances through the course of life, the nature of academic writing they engage in changes. This makes it imperative to understand the same through three different perspectives – (1) A student, (2) an academician, and (3) a digital native. From the perspective of a student, especially one that is in their early college years, academic writing can seem rather perplexing initially. For someone who is essentially unfamiliar with the practice of producing, expanding upon, authenticating and formalizing ideas into a compact document, the process seems problematic and tiring. But after one is fairly acquainted with the writing process and essential features of academic writing, organizing, and expressing one's thoughts becomes easier. While certain questions do arise now and then, academic writing allows one to structure their opinions, ideas or arguments in a way that is clear, concise, and comprehensible.

From the perspective of an academician, the task of making students navigate through the intricacies of academic writing can be a challenging one. Not only does it require going back to the basics of writing, but also requires a certain degree of flexibility in order to encourage creativity. An academician also has the duty of encouraging their students to indulge in the practice of reading since it is quintessential for one to have sufficient knowledge about a subject before they can write about it.

Efficiently analyzing the perspective of a digital native can be somewhat difficult. According to Helsper E J & Eynon (2010), a digital native can be understood as "someone who multi-tasks, has access to a range of new technologies, is confident in their use of technologies, uses the internet as a first port of call for information and uses the internet for learning as well as other activities." This definition is applicable to nearly every student in their early college years in today's world. However, this definition supposedly falsifies the argument suggesting the "challenging" nature of online teaching. It is not unreasonable to wonder how a person who has mastered the use of technology possibly suffers in a digitalized world. We must consider how human psychology and the concept of conditioning come into play. The three components of education – the teacher, the student, and an environment suitable for study, do not exist or function in isolation. It may be easier for the native to type and rectify errors over a computer however, the comfort of one's home can never possibly match the setting of a classroom. Similarly, a tiny desktop screen can never compare to an in-person student-teacher interaction. Learning and practicing the art of academic writing requires the student to be in an environment free of any and all kinds of distraction, supplemented by adequate guidance and timely correction. In an online world, the native has access to virtually limitless resources and is yet robbed of convenience in getting the guidance necessary.

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Overall, academic writing during the early college years can be summarized as the most important experience for a student. This experience is often different for different students and therefore must be handled accordingly by educational institutions and instructors alike. In today's world, Covid-19 has contributed to the limitations and challenges faced by students, hence making it imperative for institutions to devise a framework to combat the same.

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Authors SCJ, JN, and DA contributed equally to all the components of the article including conceptualization, design, development, and writing.

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AUTHORS PROFILE



Suresh C. Joshi is an Assistant Professor in the School of Psychology and Counselling at Jindal Global University, Sonipat. He has completed his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology with a focus on Developmental Sciences from Texas A&M University, USA. He acquired two master's degrees, one in Physics and the other in Education Technology. Dr. Joshi has 23 years of experience of teaching and research both at the high school and university level in India as well as in the US. He has taught various courses at graduate as well as at undergraduate levels, centered on Educational Psychology, Techniques of Research, Learning Theories, and Child Development for Educators. His research interests include sleep quality, cell phone use, psychological arousal, well-being, self-regulation, adolescent cognitive development, and leadership in crisis. He is a Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program Fellow.



Jaitsshree Naik is an undergraduate student in her first year, studying B.A. (Hons.) in Psychology from the Jindal School of Psychology and Counselling at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat. Her research interests include morality, gender psychology, deviant behavior, and victim rehabilitation. She is also especially intrigued by the field of forensic psychology and wishes to pursue a career within the same field. She is naturally inquisitive, with a hunger for learning new information and increasing her knowledge about a variety of subjects. She has recently started writing for journals relating to her ideas and perspectives about the concepts of psychology.



Dhruv Aggarwal is an undergraduate student in his first year, studying B.A. (Hons.) in Psychology from the Jindal School of Psychology and Counselling at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat. His research interests include, but are not limited to cognitive neuroscience, psychoanalysis, and criminal behavior. More specifically, he is intrigued by split-brain research and its implications on social behavior. He hopes to pursue a career in research and development within the field of cognitive neuroscience. He is pragmatic, organized, critical and analytical. He is quick to pick up on minute details and understand their significance with reference to the larger picture

