

# A Study on Postgraduate Students' Academic Writing: Writing Skills, Attitude, Writing Experience and Self-confidence

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**Abstract:** This study investigates writing skills, writing attitude, writing expectation and self-confidence in the academic writing of 30 postgraduate students from Nottingham. Statistical results revealed that their attitude is relevant to their self-confidence and writing skills is related to their expectation. Additionally, gender affects their writing skills and expectation, at the meantime, the age just impacts the writing skills. This research mainly aims to discuss these four factors that previous research easily neglected.

**Keywords:** Academic writing; Correlation; Affect; Postgraduate students

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## Introduction

Asaad, H.Q.M and Shabdin, A.A.(2021)<sup>[1]</sup>. mentioned that writing skill is considered a kind of manner to make the conversion from authors' thoughts to context. Advanced education has attached high importance to students' acquisition of writing skills as well as the connection of each part of essays. Students lack the consciousness to make the academic writing integrate, but to make it an independent activity instead.

Esfandiari, R., Meihami, H. and Jahani, F. (2022)<sup>[3]</sup>. reported that due to the importance of the teaching toward to academic writing, some scholars just pay attention to how to teach it in the best way but ignore students' writing expectation themselves. People always consider that students cannot determine what they really need but teachers can decide the learning materials or manners instead. However, much earlier before, study in Zamel (1990)<sup>[5]</sup>. reported that students' belief, expectation and opinions will be helpful for curriculum makers to design their courses. Thus, students' writing expectation and experiences should be considered in writing curriculum. As Ferris and Hedgcock(1998)<sup>[4]</sup> demonstrated that teachers should consider students' background, experiences and expectation when selecting the learning materials and arrange the homework, which can be useful for people to learn about the courses development deeply. Nevertheless, it seems that students' actual writing needs and expectation are usually ignored by makers.

Bandura (1997)<sup>[2]</sup> explained that the thesis of contemporary study and motivation emphasizes that self-confidence plays an important role in students' writing. Higher confidence will promote students to make more efforts in their writing, formulate challenging goals and surpass their normal behaviors, while lower confidence can limit students to achieve better results.

Based on the importance of writing skills and the fact that writing expectation and self-confidence have been neglected but have a great impact on students' writing, this survey takes writing skills, writing expectation, self-confidence and writer's attitude as research variables to explore the influence of these four aspects on students' writing and the differences in age and gender.

## 1. Method

### 1.1 Participants

The study involves a total of 30 participants from different countries, all of whom are studying in Nottingham, UK for a

master's degree. Among the thirty, there are 12 Chinese, 11 British natives, 2 Spaniards, 2 South Americans and 3 Indians. In the 12 Chinese, 6 study applied linguistics, 3 study business, 2 study translation and 1 study midwife. Among the 11 locals, 4 are biology majors, 5 are architecture majors, 2 are psychology majors, as for the rest of people, 2 Spanish are translation majors, 2 South Americans are engineering majors, and the 3 Indians are digital business majors. Among the students, some come to study the master directly after bachelor graduating, while others have worked for a few years before continuing their studies. They range in age from 20 to 31, with an average age of 25.43.

## 1.2 Instruments

Our questionnaire contained 20 questions, aimed to measure four factors in academic writing, two of which are important, two of which are seldom mentioned and identified in previous research. The instrument included four variables: writing skills, attitude, writing expectation and self-confidence. The former two are prevalent factors and necessary to measure, because we want to know the opinion and attitude as well as writing foundation toward our participants while the other two are to supply the previous research.

The format of the questionnaire was a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree; 2= disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4= agree; 5 = strongly agree). Participants were asked to choose an option that they thought best suits their situation or idea.

## 1.3 Procedure

In the procedure of designing the questionnaire, we considered how to make the results more concise. We originally planned to divide the participants into several groups according to the countries, in this case, the comparison between groups could be much clearer and easier. However, due to the unequal number of people from different countries and the great differences in cultural backgrounds, countries were not the best choice for grouping. After the data was collected, we found that the age of the participants was different, to a large extent. It showed that the youngest is 20 years old and the oldest is 31 years old. Therefore, we decided to divide the participants into three groups according to their ages, group1, 20-23 years old, group 2, 24-27 years old and then group 3 from 28-31 years old. In this way, when analyzing the data, we could analyze whether the age has effect on these four variables and whether it will determine the impact on their writing.

## 1.4 Data Analysis ( All graphs please view the file of data presentation)

Data analysis can be various, here we just selected some particular aspects to discuss.

### 1.4.1 Descriptives of the table

In the output presented of the descriptive table, each of the variable is concluded. From the variable age we have information from 30 respondents, ranging in age from 20 to 31 years, with a mean of 25.43 and standard deviation of 3.14. As for the four multi-item scales, the statistics of writing skills, attitude and expectation are all from 1 to 5, except that of the scale of self-confidence is from 2 to 5. And the mean of each are 3.01, 2.88, 2.84 and 3.29 respectively with the standard deviation of them is .845, 1.05, 1.16 and 0.85.

### 1.4.2 Correlation

Correlation coefficient is important to consider in the output. In regard to the strength of correlation, there is a table from Cohen(1988, pp.79-81) which is cited in Julie(2020), it showed the following guidelines:

small	$r = .10$ to $.29$
medium	$r = .30$ to $.49$
large	$r = .50$ to $1.00$

Here are some examples toward the correlation between two variables

#### 1.4.2.1 Correlation between attitude and self-confidence

The relationship between attitude and self-confidence was investigated using a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. The table showed that the correlation was found to be significant,  $p = .017$ . At the meantime, there was a medium correlation between the two variables,  $r = .433$ ,  $n = 30$ , with positive levels of writing attitude associated with higher level of self-confidence.

#### 1.4.2.2 Correlation between writing skills and expectation

A correlation test was performed to check whether the writing skills of postgraduate students correlated with the writing

expectation. This correlation was found to be significant,  $r = .691$ ,  $p = .000$ , suggesting that students' writing skills was positively related to their writing expectation. The more skills they master, the higher expectation they have.

### 1.4.2.3 correlation between attitude and writing expectation

Another correlation test was run to explore the relationship between postgraduate students' attitude and writing expectation. This correlation was found to be non-significant,  $p = .799$ , which suggests that students' attitude was not related to their writing expectation.

### 1.4.3 T-Test

In this survey, Four independent-samples t-test were conducted to measure whether boys and girls differ on the four variables separately. The results showed below:

The scores of boys and girls for the variable of skills and expectation reached statistical significance. For the result of skills, it shows that  $t(28) = 2.28$ ,  $p = .012$ , which suggested that girls ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = .706$ ) mastered less writing skills than boys ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = .823$ ).

In regard to the result of expectation, it suggests that  $t(28) = 2.14$ ,  $p = .042$ , indicated that boys ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = .884$ ) have higher writing expectation than girls ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.263$ ).

As for the other two outputs, there were no significant difference in scores. About the variable of confidence, it shows that boys ( $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = .77$ ) and girls ( $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = .89$ ),  $t(28) = 1.5$ ,  $p = 1.5$ .

The t-test for attitude was also non-significant,  $t(28) = 1.4$ ,  $p = 1.7$  which indicated that for this variable the results of boys ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = .944$ ) and girls ( $M = 2.6$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) were similar to each other.

### 1.4.4 ANOVA

In the previous test, we used t-test to compare the scores of two different groups or conditions. Now we use ANOVA to compare the effectiveness of three different age groups on postgraduate students' skills, attitude, experience and confidence.

Four one-way between-groups analyses of variance were conducted to explore the impact of age on levels of writing skills. According to our survey, participants were divided into three groups based on their age (Group1: 20-23; Group2: 24-27; Group3: 28-31).

In terms of writing skills, there was a statistically significant difference in scores for the three groups:  $F(2, 27) = 3.19$ ,  $p = .05$ . Despite reaching statistically significance, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was quite small. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .02. Post-hoc comparisons using the Turkey HSD test indicated that the mean score for group 1 ( $M = 2.53$ ,  $SD = .75$ ) was significantly different from that of group 3 ( $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = .68$ ), showed that students in group 3 mastered more skills than group1. Group 2 ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = .91$ ) did not differ significantly from either group 1 or group 3.

The other three tests showed that there were no differences in attitude, writing expectation and self-confidence among different groups of students. For attitude,  $F(2, 27) = .99$ ,  $p = .42$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$  while  $F(2, 27) = 2.67$ ,  $p = .09$ ,  $\eta^2 = .16$  for expectation. Concerning the confidence, it showed that  $F(2, 27) = 1.27$ ,  $p = .30$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ . These meant that when it comes to attitude, expectation and confidence, all students behave similar scores regardless of which group they belonged to. Thus there is no need to run post-hoc tests.

## 2. limitation of the survey

However, this is just a small survey with only 30 participants, so there may be some bias in the data. For example, in the t-test study on gender and attitude, the significant is .166, indicated that there is no difference between male and female students on writing attitude, but the average value of male students' attitude is 3.2, while the score of female students is 2.6, which indicated that there are some differences between male and female students in writing attitude. Therefore, the validity and average value do not fully match, leading to the deviation of data.

So further research is needed to get more accurate data if we want to acquire more accurate data.

## 3. Conclusion

According to our study, we can conclude that the writing abilities differ from person to person, as well as the writing expectation. Thus, it proves that when teachers design the teaching materials, they should consider different students' back-

grounds and expectation. However, we just summary that such elements will affect academic writing, but how much these factors affect writing is still unknown. Therefore, further studies are still needed.

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