

## **Academic Writing Skills Among First-Year Nursing and Midwifery Students: Challenges and Pedagogical Approaches**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores academic writing challenges and effective pedagogical approaches among first-year students of the College of Nursing and Midwifery, Damaturu, guided by sociocultural and constructivist learning theories. Using a descriptive design, data were collected from 240 students via a Google Form survey. Analysis revealed that while many students feel confident, challenges persist in areas such as vocabulary use, citation, and idea organization. Influencing factors include prior English exposure and first language. The study also found that students value instructor feedback, step-by-step guidance, and digital tools like Grammarly. Despite existing support systems, gaps remain in personalized and tech-enhanced instruction. The study recommends promoting reading and research habits, integrating frequent writing exercises, offering targeted feedback and mentorship, and organizing writing workshops. Emphasis on digital resources, critical thinking, and improved learning environments is also vital. Contextualized, interactive, and feedback-driven strategies are essential to strengthen academic writing skills in nursing and midwifery education.

*Keywords:* Academic Writing, Nursing Students, Pedagogical Approaches, Constructivism, Sociocultural Theory

### **Introduction**

Academic writing is a foundational competency in higher education, essential not only for students' academic progression but also for their future professional roles. In the health sciences, particularly in nursing and midwifery, the ability to communicate clearly and precisely through written texts is vital. Students are expected to produce clinical reports, reflective journals, research papers, and care plans with accuracy and clarity, aligning with institutional and disciplinary standards (Hyland, 2006; Nesi & Gardner, 2012). However, first-year students frequently

encounter difficulties adapting to the discourse expectations of academic writing, especially those from linguistically and educationally diverse backgrounds (Lillis & Scott, 2007).

In the context of nursing and midwifery education in Nigeria, many students enter college with limited exposure to formal academic writing conventions due to inconsistencies in their pre-tertiary education. For example, some may come from schools with poor English instruction or minimal writing practice, resulting in inadequate preparation for tertiary-level expectations (Tshotsho, 2013b; Adegbite, 2015b). Moreover, the challenges extend beyond grammar and vocabulary; students often lack the ability to generate coherent arguments, engage critically with texts, and structure essays in a logical and persuasive manner (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2012).

Despite the growing recognition of these issues, current teaching practices in some colleges and universities remain outdated. In many nursing institutions, teaching still relies on passive learning approaches such as note dictation and limited student interaction, with insufficient emphasis on process-oriented writing, peer collaboration, and formative feedback (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Leki, 2007).

Yet, there is limited empirical investigation of how these variables intersect within the Nigerian context—particularly among students in health-related disciplines. Furthermore, while many studies emphasize the value of feedback and peer review in writing development (Min, 2006; Cho & MacArthur, 2010), such practices are not always effectively implemented in Nigerian institutions due to staff shortages, large class sizes, or lack of training.

The novelty and scientific merit of this study lies in its integrative approach—combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore academic writing development in an under-researched context. This study not only aims to identify the writing challenges students face but also critically evaluates current pedagogical practices and offers data-driven recommendations for improvement. By addressing both institutional and individual factors, this research contributes to the broader discourse on academic literacy in nursing and midwifery education in sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are to investigate the key challenges that first-year students encounter in academic writing and to examine the various factors influencing their writing proficiency, such as prior educational experiences and language backgrounds. The study also aims to evaluate the effectiveness of current teaching methods used to develop academic writing skills and to explore how feedback, peer review, and digital tools contribute to improving student writing. Ultimately, the study seeks to recommend effective pedagogical approaches that can enhance academic writing proficiency among first-year students.

## **Literature Review**

Academic writing is a cornerstone of tertiary education, especially in professional programs such as nursing and midwifery. It serves not only as a medium for assessing student understanding but also as preparation for real-world documentation practices such as patient care reports, research dissemination, and interprofessional communication. Despite its importance, numerous studies have found that first-year students often struggle to meet academic writing standards, particularly in contexts where English is a second language and where writing pedagogy remains underdeveloped (Hyland, 2006; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Research consistently identifies multiple barriers faced by first-year students, including grammatical inaccuracy, limited vocabulary, lack of coherence, poor paragraphing, and challenges in organizing ideas logically (Leki, 1992; Wingate, 2012). These issues are especially pronounced among students in technical fields, such as nursing, who must master both disciplinary content and academic writing conventions simultaneously (Braine, 2002; Boshier & Smalkoski, 2002).

In the African context, Tshotsho (2013a) and Adegbite (2015a) report that Nigerian students frequently struggle with academic writing due to inadequate secondary school preparation, limited feedback mechanisms and minimal exposure to structured writing tasks. Moreover, students often receive conflicting or unclear expectations about what constitutes “good” academic writing (Lea & Street, 1998), which adds to their confusion.

Language background, prior schooling and academic preparedness significantly affect writing outcomes. ESL and EFL students often grapple with writing in a second language, where they face interference from mother-tongue grammar and struggle with academic vocabulary (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2003). In multilingual settings like Nigeria, where instruction may shift between English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages, this linguistic juggling adds further complexity to academic writing (Odebunmi, 2006).

Casanave (2004) and Tayo (2020) highlight that students from urban schools with access to trained English teachers tend to outperform students from rural schools in writing tasks. Similarly, Olayemi (2017) found that students' literacy development in primary and secondary school significantly predicts writing performance in tertiary institutions. These findings suggest a need for institutions to assess students' prior exposure and adapt writing instruction accordingly. The traditional approach to writing instruction in many Nigerian institutions is didactic and exam-oriented, focusing more on grammar rules than on writing as a process (Adeyanju, 2018). This has been criticised for neglecting students' need to develop critical thinking, coherence and an academic voice (Lillis & Turner, 2001). Instructors often resort to dictation or handing out PDF notes, with little engagement in writing workshops, scaffolding, or formative assessment.

Alternative approaches have shown more promise. For example, Badger & White (2000) recommend a hybrid approach combining product, process, and genre-based models. The process of writing (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing) enables students to engage with content more

deeply and reflectively (Tribble, 1996). Similarly, content-integrated writing instruction that embeds writing tasks into nursing or midwifery modules has proven effective in promoting transfer of writing skills to professional contexts (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002).

While feedback is essential to writing development, its implementation is often inconsistent or superficial. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) outline seven principles of effective feedback, emphasizing dialogue, timeliness, and specificity. In practice, however, students in large classes often receive generic or delayed comments, which do little to promote growth (Evans, 2013).

Peer review, when well-structured, has been shown to enhance both writing quality and learner autonomy. Min (2006) demonstrated that trained peer reviewers can offer effective revision suggestions, particularly in ESL contexts. Similarly, Cho and MacArthur (2010) argue that peer feedback benefits not only the recipients but also the reviewers themselves, especially when the process is scaffolded through the use of rubrics and structured guidelines.

Digital tools have emerged as valuable supplements to traditional instruction. Grammarly, Turnitin, and Google Docs facilitate real-time editing, citation support and collaborative writing (Zhu, 2012; Shermis & Burstein, 2013). However, in low-resource settings, access to these tools is limited by internet connectivity, cost and digital literacy. Adesanya (2021) found that while Nigerian students were open to using writing software, many lacked institutional support or training to use it effectively.

Scholars advocate several pedagogical frameworks for enhancing writing skills among first-year students. Genre-based pedagogy, rooted in systemic functional linguistics, helps students understand the structural expectations of academic genres across disciplines (Hyland, 2007). Writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the disciplines (WID) approaches also stress the importance of integrating writing into content courses to promote contextual learning (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006).

It has been observed that social-constructivist approaches encourage collaborative writing, reflective journals, and peer-assisted learning as means of fostering both skills and confidence. These models are particularly effective in nursing education, where teamwork and reflective practice are core components of the curriculum (Whitehead, 2007; Gerdeman et al., 2013).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and the Constructivist Learning Theory. Vygotsky highlights the importance of social interaction and guided support (ZPD), while Constructivist Theory emphasizes active, reflective learning. Both theories support student-centered, practice-based approaches to developing academic writing skills among first-year nursing and midwifery students.

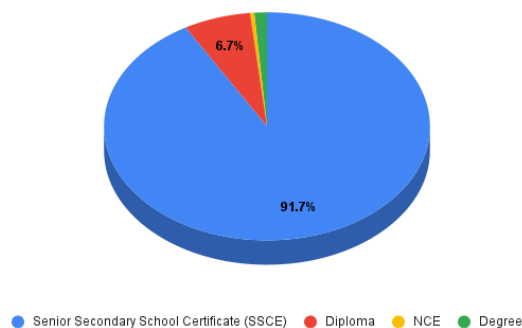
## Research Methods

This study used a descriptive research design to examine academic writing challenges and teaching approaches among first-year nursing and midwifery students. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a questionnaire. A convenience sampling method was used to select 240 students from a population of 600 at Shehu Sule College of Nursing Sciences, Damaturu, based on the formula developed by Taro Yamane (1967).

## Results and Discussions

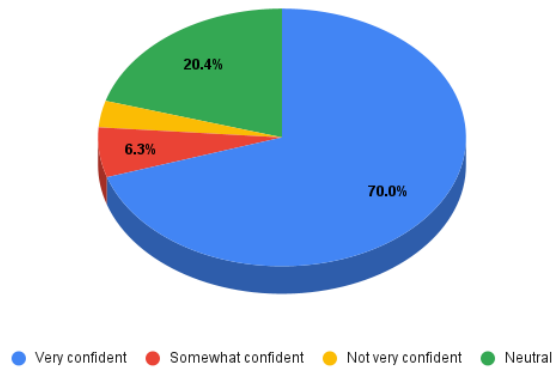
Figure 1 indicates that most respondents, representing 91.7%, hold the Senior Secondary School Certificate (SSCE), indicating they are largely secondary school graduates. While a smaller portion (6.7%) have a Diploma, only 1.0% and 0.6% hold an NCE and a Degree, respectively. This suggests that the participants are primarily at the early stages of their educational journey, which should be considered when interpreting the study's findings.

**Figure 1: The highest level of English education before entering this institution**



Seventy percent of the respondents, as shown in Figure 2, are *very confident* in their academic writing, aligning with findings of Casanave (2004); Tayo (2020) which suggest that students with stronger educational backgrounds or urban schooling often exhibit greater writing confidence. However, 20.4% of the respondents were neutral, and another 9.6% had low confidence rates. This reflects the challenges noted in the literature—such as limited secondary school preparation (Tshotsho, 2013a), unclear writing expectations (Lea & Street, 1998), and lack of structured writing support (Adeyanju, 2018). While the overall confidence appears high, the presence of uncertainty highlights the need for tailored pedagogical strategies, including feedback, peer review, and practice-oriented instruction (Hyland, 2003; Min, 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

**Figure 2: The confidence in writing academic essays or reports in English**



The result in Figure 3 indicates a balanced recognition of key academic writing skills, aligning with literature that emphasises writing as a multifaceted process (Tribble, 1996; Hyland, 2006). The top-ranked skills—academic vocabulary and formal tone, representing 15.4%, and proper citation, representing 15.2%, mirror concerns raised by Grabe & Kaplan (1996) and Hyland (2003), observing that ESL/EFL students often struggle with academic language and referencing conventions. The emphasis on logical organisation, representing 14.6%, and essay/report structure, representing 14% support the call for genre- and process-based instruction advocated by Badger & White (2000). Attention to technical accuracy, including punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure, collectively representing over 27%, aligns with the foundational challenges identified by Leki (1992) and Wingate (2012).

**Figure 3: The aspects of academic writing found most challenging**

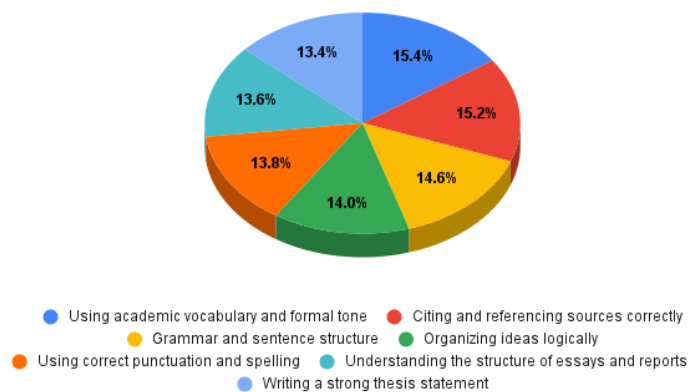


Figure 4 reveals varied opinions, with 51.7% agreeing and 36.7% disagreeing to experienced difficulty in writing academic assignments, while another 11.7% remain uncertain. This disparity aligns with the findings of Adegbite (2015a) and Lea & Street (1998), who report that Nigerian students often face conflicting expectations and unclear guidance in academic writing, leading to varied attitudes toward writing tasks or instructional methods. The considerable disagreement and hesitation highlight ongoing challenges in student confidence and engagement, emphasising the need for clearer, more supportive pedagogical strategies such as consistent feedback and scaffolded writing activities (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Badger & White, 2000).

**Figure 4: Experienced difficulty in writing academic assignments**

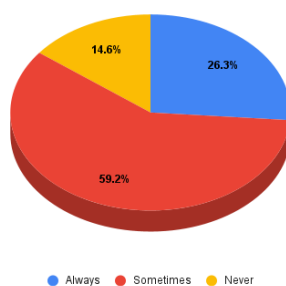
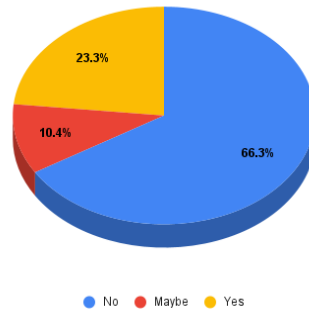


Figure 5 shows that a clear majority, representing 66.3%, expressed disagreement, with only 23.3% in agreement, while 10.4% of the respondents were uncertain. This predominant negative sentiment aligns with studies such as Adeyanju (2018) and Tshotsho (2013a), which highlight students' dissatisfaction with traditional, didactic writing instruction that often neglects process-oriented and interactive learning. The strong rejection may reflect frustrations over inadequate support, limited feedback or unclear expectations—barriers frequently reported in the literature (Evans, 2013; Lea & Street, 1998). The modest affirmative and uncertain responses suggest some openness to alternative methods, emphasising the need for pedagogical reform, incorporating scaffolding, peer collaboration and integrated writing tasks (Badger & White, 2000; Whitehead, 2007).

**Figure 5: Do you think your first language (mother tongue) affects your academic writing in English?**



The result in Figure 6 highlights a range of academic writing support experienced by respondents, with formal lectures, representing 34.3%, reflecting their widespread use as foundational instruction (Adeyanju, 2018). Personalised one-on-one guidance, representing 20.6% of the responses, underscores the value of tailored mentorship, which aligns with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick’s (2006) emphasis on specific, timely feedback for writing development. Peer review participation, representing 13.7%, supports social-constructivist approaches that promote collaborative learning and learner autonomy (Min, 2006; Whitehead, 2007). The use of online resources, representing 12%, indicates growing integration of digital tools, though access may be uneven in low-resource settings (Adesanya, 2021). Writing workshops, while less frequent at 9.8%, represent targeted skill-building opportunities (Badger & White, 2000). Another 9.5% indicates absence of support points to gaps that institutions should address to ensure equitable access to writing assistance.

**Figure 6: What type of academic writing support have you received in this institution?**

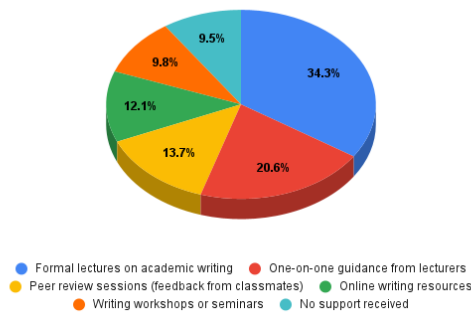


Figure 7 illustrates diverse methods of essay writing guidance, with step-by-step instruction leading at 33.8%, supporting process-oriented models that involve stages such as prewriting, drafting and revision (Tribble, 1996; Badger & White, 2000). Group discussions and collaborative writing, representing 23.4%, align with social-constructivist principles which emphasise peer interaction and shared learning (Whitehead, 2007; Gerdeman et al., 2013). Writing exercises with feedback, representing 17.9%, underscore the significance of formative assessment in writing development (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Model essay reading, representing 16.6%, reflects the influence of genre-based pedagogy (Hyland, 2007). The modest use of digital tools, representing 6.9%, indicates emerging but limited technological support due to digital literacy barriers (Zhu, 2012; Adesanya, 2021), while minimal peer editing, representing 1.4%, highlights the underuse of a proven strategy for improving writing and autonomy (Min, 2006; Cho & MacArthur, 2010).

**Figure 7: Which teaching methods help you improve your writing skills the most?**



Figure 8 demonstrates a pronounced consensus among respondents, with a substantial majority, representing 90.8%, affirming their agreement. Such an overwhelming affirmation suggests a shared perspective or strong approval of the item in question, which may reflect effective instructional strategies or positive learner experiences (Ajzen, 1991; Tinto, 1993). The small proportion of respondents who selected "Maybe" (6.7%) indicates a marginal presence of uncertainty or ambivalence, which is not uncommon in survey-based research where respondents may lack sufficient experience or confidence to commit fully (Dörnyei, 2003). Meanwhile, the minimal 2.5% who responded with "No" signifies very limited opposition or disagreement, pointing to a near-unanimous perception among the group.

Such distribution reflects what educational researchers often interpret as a strong indicator of program efficacy, shared values, or unified learner expectations (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The overwhelming positivity also suggests the potential for sustained engagement or motivation

in the area being assessed, aligning with theories of learner satisfaction and positive reinforcement (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Figure 8: Do you think feedback from lecturers helps improve your writing skills?**

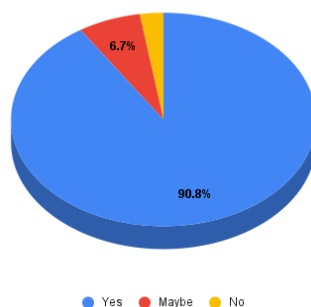


Figure 9 displays a distribution of participant responses that indicates a moderately divided stance on the issue under investigation. A slight majority of 51.7% selected “Yes,” signaling a generally affirmative or supportive orientation. This majority suggests a leaning toward agreement or approval, potentially reflecting a shared recognition of the item’s relevance or effectiveness among respondents (Ajzen, 1991). However, a considerable 36.7% of participants selected “No,” revealing a substantial level of disagreement or opposition, which suggests that the issue may be perceived differently across subgroups or contextual factors (Creswell, 2014).

Additionally, 11.7% of respondents selected “Maybe,” indicating a degree of ambivalence or lack of clarity, a common occurrence in attitudinal surveys when respondents are either undecided or lack sufficient information (Dörnyei, 2003). This mixed distribution reveals that, although there is a slight affirmative consensus, the presence of notable dissent and moderate uncertainty indicates a complex or nuanced subject matter. Such findings underscore the importance of further qualitative exploration or subgroup analysis to uncover the underlying factors influencing these varied perceptions (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

**Figure 9: Have you ever used digital tools (e.g., Grammarly, Turnitin) to improve your writing?**

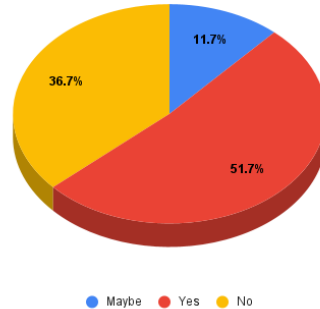


Figure 10 presents an overview of participants’ perceptions regarding the effectiveness of peer review in academic writing development. A substantial majority of respondents (71.3%) rated peer review as “Very helpful,” indicating a strong consensus on its efficacy as a pedagogical strategy. This aligns with scholarly literature which affirms that peer feedback fosters critical thinking, enhances revision quality, and encourages learner autonomy (Liu & Hansen, 2002; Topping, 2009). An additional 13.8% of participants found peer review to be “Somewhat helpful,” suggesting that while the benefits are acknowledged, they may vary based on implementation, peer competence, or task design (Rollinson, 2005). Notably, 10.4% of respondents indicated they had “never tried peer review,” highlighting a gap in exposure or instructional opportunity that may limit full engagement with collaborative learning approaches.

Conversely, a minority (4.6%) deemed peer review “Not helpful at all,” suggesting that some learners may encounter challenges such as ineffective feedback, lack of trust in peer assessments or insufficient training in providing constructive criticism (Nelson & Schunn, 2009).

**Figure 10: How helpful do you find peer review (getting feedback from classmates) in improving your writing?**

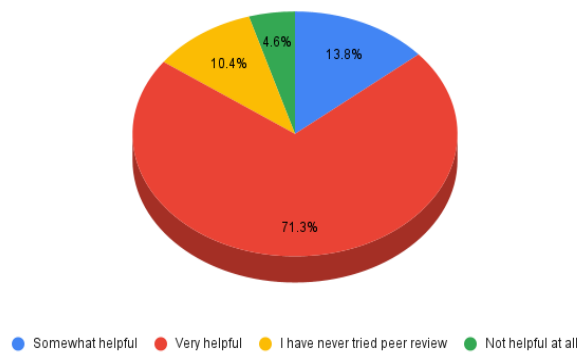


Figure 11, showing a dominant focus on grammar and sentence structure (72.5%), supports earlier findings by Leki (1992), Braine (2002), and Wingate (2012), and reflects the grammar-centric instruction critiqued by Adeyanju (2018) in the context of Nigerian pedagogy. The moderate attention given to writing style (15.4%) and organisation and coherence (9.6%) echoes secondary yet essential aspects highlighted by Lillis and Turner (2001) and Hyland (2003). However, the limited emphasis on these higher-order writing skills suggests a pedagogical gap, as previously identified by Hyland (2006) and Tribble (1996). The minimal attention paid to referencing (2.5%) aligns with observations by Tshotsho (2013a) and Adegbite (2015a), who noted the insufficient focus on citation practices in under-resourced settings—likely a result of limited access to academic tools such as Turnitin or Grammarly (Zhu, 2012; Adesanya, 2021).

**Figure 11: What type of feedback do you find most useful in improving your academic writing?**

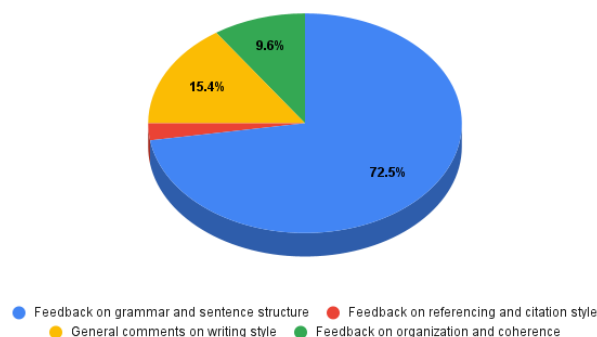


Figure 12 presents the practice-based writing exercises, representing 24.7%, which supports Tribble (1996) and Badger & White's (2000) advocacy for process-oriented and genre-based instruction through active drafting and revision. A strong preference for feedback on assignments, 23.0%, reflects Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) emphasis on feedback as dialogic and autonomy-enhancing, countering the traditional product-focused methods noted by Adeyanju (2018) and Evans (2013). Interest in writing workshops, representing 21.8%, supports the collaborative learning models of Gerdeman et al. (2013) and Lillis & Turner (2001), promoting peer interaction and reflection. One-on-one consultations, 19%, highlight the importance of tailored support, as emphasised by Casanave (2004) and Tayo (2020), in addressing diverse learner backgrounds and specific writing challenges. The 11.4% preference for online tools resonates with Zhu (2012) and Adesanya (2021), acknowledging the growing but still limited role of technology in writing development.

**Figure 12: What additional support do you think would improve your academic writing skills?**

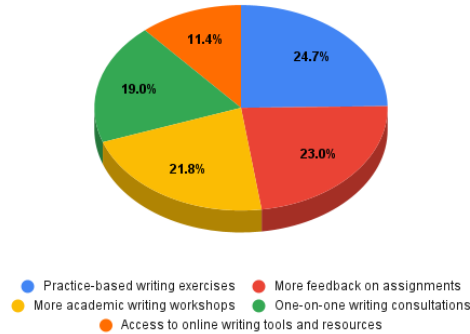
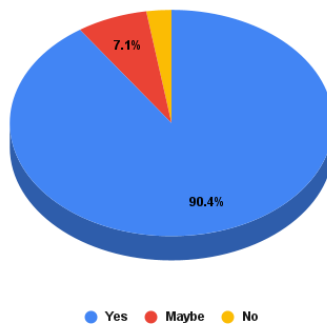


Figure 13 reveals overwhelming agreement among respondents (90.4%) on the importance of academic writing skills, affirming findings by Hyland (2006) and Lillis & Scott (2007) regarding students’ awareness of writing’s significance for academic and professional success. This is particularly relevant in disciplines such as nursing and midwifery, where effective communication is essential (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002). The smaller proportions of respondents selecting “Maybe” (7.1%) and “No” (2.5%) likely reflect challenges highlighted by Tshotsho (2013a) and Adegbite (2015a), including inadequate writing preparation and unclear academic expectations. Such reservations may also stem from limited access to quality instruction, constructive feedback, and language support, as discussed by Leki (1992) and Wingate (2012).

**Figure 13: Would you be interested in attending extra academic writing classes if offered?**



**Conclusion**

This study highlights the multifaceted challenges first-year nursing and midwifery students face in academic writing, emphasising the need for comprehensive, student-centred pedagogical approaches. Grounded in Sociocultural and Constructivist theories, the findings demonstrate that

learning is most effective when supported by mentorship, collaborative activities, and authentic tasks aligned with students' disciplinary contexts. While many students exhibit high levels of confidence, persistent difficulties with academic vocabulary, grammar, and referencing remain key obstacles. The research underscores the value of structured support—including formative feedback from lecturers, the use of digital tools, and guided writing tasks—as essential to overcoming these challenges. Consequently, educational institutions should prioritise the integration of feedback-rich instruction, peer collaboration, and digital literacy to better equip students for the academic and professional communication demands of healthcare professions.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the data and participants' insights, the following structured and actionable recommendations are proposed to enhance first-year students' academic writing skills:

**1. Promote Academic Reading and Research:**

Lecturers should actively encourage consistent reading and independent research; students should adopt these practices to build background knowledge and vocabulary.

**2. Design and Engage with Practical Writing Tasks:**

Instructors should develop authentic, field-relevant writing activities; students should complete these tasks critically and reflectively.

**3. Provide and Apply Constructive Feedback:**

Lecturers should deliver clear, actionable feedback and mentorship; students should implement this feedback to improve subsequent work.

**4. Foster Critical Thinking and Analysis:**

Educators should embed opportunities for critical engagement in lessons; students should participate meaningfully in these tasks.

**5. Focus on Academic Language Development:**

Language tutors should emphasise accurate grammar, vocabulary, and referencing conventions; students should make conscious efforts to improve their academic expression.

**6. Adopt Interactive and Inclusive Teaching Methods:**

Lecturers should employ participatory strategies such as group work and discussions; students should engage with these methods to deepen understanding.

**7. Ensure Resource Accessibility and Inclusive Learning Environments:**

Administrators should provide sufficient academic resources; lecturers should create inclusive, supportive classrooms; and students should take full advantage of available tools and support services.

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