

## LECTURE ONE

### ACADEMIC WRITING: AN INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Objectives

By the end of this lecture, you should be able to:

- a) Explain what scholarly and academic writing are
- b) Describe who an academic writer is
- c) List types of academic audiences
- d) Appreciate the importance of meeting deadlines

#### 1.1 What is Scholarly Communication?

The University of California's Berkeley Library defines scholarly communication as the system through which research and scholarship is created, evaluated, distributed, and preserved. It's a system that involves formal publications such as scholarly journal articles, scholarly chapters and conference proceedings.

The University of Cambridge also carries a similar definition: "Scholarly communication is the process of academics, scholars and researchers sharing and publishing their research findings so that they are available to the wider academic community and beyond."

As an undergraduate student, do not think of yourself as not having attained that academic level yet. As long as you are enrolled for a degree course, you have already embarked on a journey that will take you through interactions with scholarly communication. You will be required to hand in brief class assignments as well as longer term papers and research reports. While scholarly communication focuses on journal and book publications, the foundation of this type of communication is established when you study academic writing.

#### 1.2 What is Academic Writing?

Every course that you or a postgraduate student takes in a university contains assignments. Academic writing, therefore, is writing by a student for university courses. For you to successfully fulfil your academic requirements, you must not only sit for examinations or complete your projects in all the courses, but also complete different types of assignments. These assignments go by different names such as essays, paper, term paper, research paper, position paper, argumentative essay, analysis paper, reaction paper, informative essay and even a research proposal and report. All these papers must be written using specific language (formal), style, content and structure.

In most of these assignments, some investigation or research is required. This gives you the opportunity to explore knowledge in the area of research and come up with conclusions based on your research findings.

There is no fixed standard or formula for academic writing. However, care must be taken to write above the novel or newspaper language. You must be objective and accurate in your

presentations. Langan (1995) advises that you keep a journal as a daily practice towards good academic writing.

Peter (1994) states that academic writing is a body of literature which includes the following: objective reporting of controlled research; term paper; thesis/dissertation/project report; research paper; article for publication and a book.

### **1.3 The importance of academic writing**

The relevance of this course cannot be overemphasized. Some students fail their courses due to failure to observe certain rules, some of which are contained in academic writing. For instance, one of the issues addressed in academic writing is plagiarism (passing off someone else's work as your own and without acknowledging the author). Doctoral students who plagiarize other people's work may have their degrees recalled. This means their titles of 'doctor' are stripped away, in effect signifying that they never even started on their degrees.

You must also take great care to produce assignments that are scholarly and befitting their status. Even though things like grammar may appear unimportant to some students, in actual fact, they are. No instructor wants to spend time figuring out what you meant. Your meaning should be crystal clear through observance of mechanics, grammar and other academic writing tools.

Bailey (2011) advises writers to be clear about why they are writing. He suggests the following reasons for engaging in academic writing:

- a) to report on a piece of research the writer has conducted
- b) to answer a question the writer has been given or chosen
- c) to discuss a subject of common interest and give the writer's view
- d) to synthesize research done by others on a topic

Let's expound a little on the four reasons above.

#### ***Research Report***

In a mass communication class, you could be asked to investigate the demographics and preferences of radio audiences who tune into particular radio stations. You may decide to use qualitative or quantitative means depending on your research questions. For example, a questionnaire that requires respondents to tick an appropriate answer. You will then need to write down your findings in the form of a dissertation or report. In this case, you will be reporting on your findings on demographics and preferences.

#### ***Answer a Question***

Oftentimes, your instructor may require you to respond to a question as homework after a lecture. For instance, after studying the law of defamation, the instructor may ask you to answer the following question:

*Find a case of defamation that was concluded in court. Describe the case and give your opinion of the verdict reached.*

### ***Subject of Common Interest***

There are subjects that draw emotive responses from a cross-section of community members. Debates and discussions may be held in classes where you are allowed to offer your opinion. In order to teach students the importance of having divergent views or opinions, instructors may require the following question to be answered in the form of an essay:

*Take a position on the view that Kenya should legalize the production and manufacture of cannabis.*

### ***Synthesizing Literature***

Although synthesizing literature may be undertaken by higher level students at masters and doctoral level, it is equally important for undergraduate students to engage in synthesis of literature. Some courses will require you to submit a research proposal and dissertation at the end of the course. Many students make the mistake of simply lifting off passages and pasting them in their copy. To synthesize in literature is to combine the views of two or more authors to form a whole. So rather than just report what so and so said, you can write this synthesis:

*Much of the literature claims that Kenyan youth today no longer actively seek to read newspapers (Oswayo, 2017; Mumbua, 2015; Mwaura, 2011; Valentine, 2016; Zawadi, 2019).*

At the undergraduate level, your instructors will often assign you research and term papers. A research paper refers to any essay presentation of the results of a research project by either students or researchers (Kavulya, 2007). The following is the purpose of a research and term paper according to Kavulya (2007):

- a) To deepen the student's understanding of a topic
- b) To orientate the students into scholarly academic research and writing
- c) To enable students demonstrate their capacity to carry out independent research.

## **1.4 Principles of Academic Writing**

The following principles by Whitaker (2009) are meant to assist you understand what qualifies to be a good paper:

a) *Clear purpose*: The most common purposes in academic writing are to persuade, analyze/synthesize and inform. Persuasive writing aims to pull the reader to your point of view and includes arguments and taking a position. Analytical academic writing evaluates, examines, assesses, finds relationships or analyses arguments. Synthesizing means coming up with one answer after analyzing several materials. Informative academic writing seeks to give readers new information about the topic.

b) *Audience engagement*. Every form of writing is written for a specific audience. You should understand that your primary audience are fellow students and instructors. Those who write academic papers to be published in journals do so for the wider academic audience of

fellow researchers, policy makers, students and so on. Every audience needs to be engaged with the writer's ideas and style. This way, audience interest is maintained.

c) *Clear point of view.* A clear point of view is usually summarized in the thesis statement. You are expected to have an original idea about the question and can use other people's ideas to buttress your point of view.

d) *Single focus.* A clear point of view will definitely lead to a single focus. Paragraphs and sentences should be written with this in mind. Every sentence and word should serve a clear purpose. Every information presented must agree with the thesis statement and therefore topic sentence of each paragraph. For example, if you are writing about the loss of serious journalism on Kenyan radio, every sentence and paragraph should address just that. Sneaking in newspapers, the internet and books in an arbitrary manner may not augur well for the paper unless you are offering a contrasting viewpoint.

e) *Logical organization.* There generally is a prescribed way of ordering and structuring a piece of academic writing. For instance, for essays and papers, the work is structured into introduction, body and conclusion. Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence followed by support sentences. At the end of that paragraph is a concluding sentence. Then each paragraph must be related to the thesis statement. Everything must be related to something else in the essay.

f) *Clear and complete explanations.* The reader should not have to think hard to understand the ideas, logic, or organization of the piece of writing.

g) *Effective use of research.* A good paper must make good use of a variety of references. It is advisable that you consult current, good quality, professional and academic sources. For instance, if it's journal articles, use only reputable and trustworthy sources. You will need to understand what such terms as 'top tier journals' 'high impact factor journals' 'Scopus journals' etc mean. This is because there are certain journals that are known as 'predatory' that have questionable substance in them. These are journals that exist for the sake of profit and have little credible research components in them. Also, you must learn to integrate other people's research findings into your own original findings. That means introducing, analyzing, explaining and then citing.

h) *Correct citing and referencing style.* Find out which citation and referencing guidelines your university follows. For instance, in most universities, the American Psychological Association is used in the social sciences.

i) *Writing Style.* You are advised to write in a natural style to avoid boring the reader. You need not use jargon and difficult vocabulary to impress. Remember your main task is to inform or persuade the reader. Be clear, concise and observe grammatical rules.

j) *Always follow your instructor's directions.*

### **1.5 Who is an academic writer?**

Having defined and expounded on academic writing, it is easier to explain who an academic writer is. An academic writer is anyone who engages in academic writing. There are generally three types of academic writers:

a) *Students undertaking post-secondary education.* The students could be at various levels of study such as tertiary, undergraduate, masters and doctoral. A lot of the writing these students engage in often has to do with grading in the interest of passing examinations or successfully completing a course. The academic writer here will be involved in research and coming up with findings which are then reported in the form of an essay, report, dissertation, thesis and so on.

b) *Research scholars across all disciplines.* Scholars engage in research to come up with solutions to societal problems. Some of these scholars are masters and doctoral students who must conduct research and publish their findings in a reputable journal. For example, media management scholars can publish their findings in the *International Journal on Media Management*, a peer-reviewed Scopus journal. Journals are ranked to set apart the genuine journals from the predatory ones. Besides postgraduate students, other researchers include lecturers who want to contribute to the body of knowledge in their fields. Oftentimes, their job promotions are based on the number of publications they have, and these publications may include academic books and journal articles. Others include research organizations, private companies, government entities, non-governmental organizations, media enterprises and so on.

c) The third group of academic writers may be *scholars or generally people who write books for academic consumption.* These are textbooks that students use in class or for reference. For instance, some journalists have penned books when they are neither researchers nor students.

## 1.6 Types of Academic Audiences and Context

You need to analyze your audience to write effectively. Colorado State University (2020) offers this advice on how to determine your audience type:

- **Who** they are (age, sex, education, economic status, political/social/religious beliefs);
- **What level of information** they have about the subject (novice, general reader, specialist or expert);
- The **context** in which they will be reading a piece of writing (in a newspaper, textbook, popular magazine, specialized journal, on the Internet, and so forth).

As concerns academic writing, there are two broad categories of audiences: **academic** and **nonacademic**. An audience is defined as a group of people who will consume your writing. Nonacademic audiences read your work purely for the sake of it. They are not there to evaluate or grade you. Academic audiences, however, read your work and carry out some form of evaluation or grading. For instance, an instructor who issues an assignment will use a given scale to determine who passes and who fails. A doctoral student who reads a journal article may evaluate it as being relevant or irrelevant to his/her research questions.

Knowing your audience is the most important part of the academic writing process. Imagine you are preparing for a dancing competition and you know who the judges are. Won't you do a background check on the judges to increase your chances of success? Their likes and dislikes? How they have judged in the past? The kind of comments they usually issue? Who or what influenced them to become dancers? And so on.

Hence, if your audience is your course instructor, you need to find out a lot about them. Some instructors for instance, have zero tolerance for silly typographical errors. Once you have your answers concerning what type of audience you are dealing with, you will be able to tailor your work towards writing an excellent paper. This is not to say that you should aim for mediocrity if your instructor is lenient. Just strive to inform with evidence of seriousness, professionalism and intelligence in your writing.

Those writing articles to be published in journals also need to ask themselves who their audiences will be. Journal audiences are of many types. There are the editors and reviewers of the journal who will be the first to read and either dismiss or accept the articles. After that will be the serious community of scientific scholars who expect nothing but the best. The editors and reviewers will be looking for conformity to their house style guides and whether the work is professional and relevant. Your writing needs to be so clear as to be understood by the target audience.

### **1.7 Importance of Deadlines and Meeting them**

Deadlines are important. Not meeting them can set off a chain of events that may end in disaster such as losing valuable marks leading to failure. Imagine a journalist who occupies a weekly health column in a local daily. In any given month, only 1-2 articles appear because he always hands them in way too late, forcing the editor to fill his space with something for that week. Sooner than later the newspaper will have to let him go. This journalist will leave yes, but with a bad reputation.

As a student, you will have to hand in many assignments before you graduate. Thus, establishing a culture of always handing in your assignment late is detrimental to your academic journey. You will always get stressed, which is not good for your health. Your professor also has his deadlines hence, you not turning in your work early only disorganizes him. It's the reason most professors don't tolerate lateness.

#### **How to Keep Deadlines**

Here is some advice on how to keep deadlines:

- a) Keep a record of all your assignments for the semester including due date.
- b) Avoid a last-minute rush. If possible, embark on your assignments as quickly as possible.
- c) Break down a heavy assignment into smaller manageable units and deal with each unit at a time.

### **1.8 Conclusion**

Academic writing need not be a boring, stiff activity. With a lot of guidance, you will find the tasks manageable and enjoyable. Remember, academic writing sets you up for more serious academic engagements in future.

**1.9 Further Reading:** Peter (1994) Pg 1-20

## References

Bailey, S. (2011). *Academic writing: A handbook for international students*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). New York: Routledge.

Barkeley Library, University of California. (2019). What is scholarly communication?  
Retrieved from  
<https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/scholarlycommunication/about/what-is-scholarly-communication>

Colorado State University. (2020). Adapting to your audience. Retrieved from  
<https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/writing/guides/audience/>

Kavulya, J. M. (2007). *How to write research and term papers*. Kenya: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation.

Langan, J. (1995). *English skills with readings*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw Hill, Inc.

University of California

Peter, C. B. (1994). *A guide o academic writing*. Kenya: Zapf Chancery.

Whitaker, A. (2009). *Academic writing guide*. Retrieved from  
<http://www.vsm.sk/Curriculum/academicupport/academicwritingguide.pdf>

Langan, J. (2010). *College Writing Skills with Readings*. (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw Hill, Inc.