

## **(IJ-04) How to Avoid the Top Five Academic Writing Issues in High Education**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This researcher identifies the top five writing issues from observing her students from five different universities she served during her past decade. Then, this researcher addresses and discusses how to address those five issues in students from higher educational institutions. At the end of this paper, this researcher concludes her findings and suggests future research recommendations. This paper not only identifies writing issues from students' academic writings, also analyzes reasonable and applicable solutions for how to avoid or conquer them. The impact of this paper is significant because it is a meaningful qualitative research paper based on an adjunct professor's past decade observations and educational industry firsthand experience. The goal of this paper is to share valuable and applicable teaching and grading experiences to benefit future academic writing instructors and bringing better educational experiences for younger generations.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Dr. Junqiao Xiao received her Master of Arts in Teaching in August 2010, Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and Management in July 2014, Juris Doctor in May 2019, and Doctor of Business Administration with a concentration in information and data science in December 2021. She is an adjunct professor teaching evening or online courses at various universities in addition to being a full-time lawyer. During her decade-long teaching career, she has observed and graded numerous academic papers from undergraduate and graduate students. Thus, she has a strong interest and passion for writing this paper to summarize and conclude the top five issues in academic papers from higher education students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative research paper based on Dr. Junqiao Xiao's decade-long observation of grading student academic papers from five different universities. Due to the lack of literature reviews on this topic, this paper is entirely based on Dr. Xiao's personal teaching experiences. This research is based on phenomenology and grounded theory of qualitative research. Phenomenology, a qualitative research method derived from existential philosophy, informs data analysis and discloses the essence of human experience (Hasselkus, 1995). Phenomenology seeks to use lived human experience to better understand the essential nature (Hasselkus, 1995). Furthermore, grounded theory explains social processes in complicated practical environments (Bytheway, 2018). Grounded theory is based on observation but requires the elimination of bias (Kriukow, 2021). Thus, this paper is a combination of phenomenology and grounded theory of qualitative research, so there is lack of literature reviews in the academia.

The purpose of this research paper is not only to identify the top five writing issues in higher education academic writings but also to analyze reasonable and applicable solutions for how to avoid and conquer these mistakes. Dr. Xiao divided this paper into five parts to discuss the most common errors students make in their academic papers, including: (1) indirectly

address the academic paper titles, (2) lack of clarity, (3) data collection difficulties, (4) American Psychological Association (APA) format errors, and (5) Artificial Intelligence (AI) misuse or overuse.

### **Indirectly Address Academic Paper Titles**

Among thousands of student papers Dr. Xiao has graded, many students do not directly address their paper titles. Their paper titles point in one direction, but their paper bodies veer off in different directions. In this subsection, Dr. Xiao will discuss three kinds of scenarios involving indirect title justification issues, which include: (1) opinion-based academic papers, (2) concept-related academic papers, and (3) comparison academic papers.

The most common scenario involves academic papers that articulate opinions. To effectively address such papers, students must first identify the title and clearly define the purpose of their writing. Subsequently, they should base their argument on their own research, the surrounding context, pertinent information, and/or current public policy. Scholarly literature reviews, qualitative research findings, and quantitative research data can significantly enhance the quality of these academic papers, provided that the research outcomes and analyses are pertinent to the paper's title. However, students are often "carried away" with discussion and analysis that are no longer relevant to the initial topic. Students should revisit the academic paper's topic, integrating literature reviews, qualitative findings, and quantitative data to reinforce their argument.

The second scenario often arises in academic examinations or conferences, where a specific concept must be addressed in the paper. In such cases, students should apply the relevant concepts and rules to their academic writing. They should utilize literature reviews, qualitative research findings, or quantitative research data to logically connect the elements of the concept with the associated rules. This approach enables a comprehensive explanation of each element of the concept and a deeper elucidation of the concept statements.

The last scenario presents a challenge due to the inherent complexities of writing

comparative study papers. To effectively address this type of paper, students must first identify the comparison ranges and focus on the specific choices to be compared. Subsequently, they should identify relevant literature reviews, qualitative research findings, or quantitative research data for both subjects if the study is a comparison of two subjects. The difficulty level increases significantly when comparing three or more subjects. After identifying the subjects of comparison, students should elucidate their rationale for undertaking comparative study, which may be grounded in academic experiences or public policy considerations. It is essential for students to articulate sentences that highlight the similarities and differences between the choices. Ultimately, they should reaffirm their comparison study choices in the conclusion of the paper.

After successfully addressing the paper title justification, students need to pay attention to the main body writing of the paper. The paper title should be direct to the paper contents. Clarity is the fundamental of academic paper writings.

### **Lack of Clarity**

After establishing the suitable title of the academic paper, students should prioritize the clarity of their writing. The academic paper writer assumes the role of a narrator and is responsible for all writing tasks; thus, students must recognize that the writer is not a participant in the narrative of the academic paper. Adopting an objective perspective is fundamental for crafting a compelling academic paper. At the outset of the writing process, students should read at least ten scholarly journal articles, academic books, or research papers. Following this, they should contemplate the type of academic paper they intend to write and develop a comprehensive outline.

In academic papers for a specific course, the outline should be based on the required rubric. Students must address the required review of literature and focus on course-related topics. They can use simple illustrations and examples to enhance clarity. It is not recommended for students to use three-syllable words if they do not deeply understand their meanings.

Without clarity, the content does not matter. Wydick (1978) asserted that trimming verbose word clusters is key to writing a clear paper. According to Wydick (1978), spotting bad constructions is significant for effective writing.

In academic papers for specific research, the outline should be based on the requirements of the research hypothesis. The objective of the academic paper is significant because it is related to the research hypothesis. The paper should address the research topic thoroughly. A prudent literature review is key to success.

If the academic paper is for an exam only, then the outline should be concentrated on exam points. The paper should be direct and to the point; otherwise, students will lose exam points. Students should use familiar concrete words in their writing because exam graders have limited time to grade the papers. If exam graders cannot understand the paper within a short period of time, there is no way to receive high scores. Students should avoid compound prepositions to make the paper as simple and easy to understand as possible.

Regardless of the type of academic paper students are writing, proofreading aloud is a highly effective method for identifying errors and enhancing clarity. If students encounter difficulties in reading their writing work aloud, various technological resources, such as the “read aloud” function in Microsoft Word, are available to assist. There are so many technology students can use to help them read aloud their papers, so picking up a favorite and useful one is key to write high quality academic papers.

Achieving clarity in academic writing is the baseline objective. Students should leverage technology to aid their learning process rather than allowing these tools to produce the content for them. While Grammarly is useful for identifying spelling errors and catching more grammar mistakes than standard word processors, students must still verify its suggestions. Additionally, students can utilize tools like ChatGPT or other AI resources to outline paper structures, as these tools offer broad perspectives on specific topics. Bibliography generators can also be employed, but students must meticulously review the

generated citations to ensure they conform to the proper APA format.

Thus, after addressing the clarity issues of the academic papers, the next step is to take consideration of data collection of the research. Not all papers contain a data collection section because some papers are purely based on literature reviews. However, successful data collections can increase the professionalism for your papers.

### **Data Collection Difficulties**

From Dr. Junqiao Xiao's observations from her past ten years teaching, many students had difficulties about collecting data for their academic papers, which caused low quality either qualitative research or quantitative research. Dr. Junqiao Xiao wrote two dissertations for her Doctor of Education and Doctor of Business Administration before, from her past experience, there are three applicable ways of data collection, which include: (1) post the survey link into the Facebook or social media survey exchange groups, (2) Email the survey link to friends directly, and (3) send the survey link to friends via social media.

For the first method of posting the survey link into the Facebook or social media survey exchange groups, students must join some survey exchange groups. To identify some survey group names, such as some Facebook survey groups with names like student survey exchange, the research survey exchange group, survey 4 survey, survey exchange, student survey swap, please do my survey, and so on. Some survey groups specific survey years and some specific survey types, such as dissertation. After joining those survey groups, students can post their surveys and wait for others to participate in their surveys and ask them to leave screenshots. Students also can finish others' surveys and reply to the surveys with the survey done screenshots.

From Dr. Junqiao Xiao's observations of around 20 survey groups, the most interesting survey should have four characteristics, which include: interesting research topics, easy understandable subject matters, plain sentences, and less options in choices. Interesting research topics can make participants open the surveys because no one wants to open a

survey with a less attractive topic. Easy understandable subject matters can make people understand the meaning of the research because no one wants to join a hard subject matter. Plain sentences can help participants to understand the concepts well because no one wants to read a survey with long and complicated sentences. Less options in choices can help participants make quicker decisions because no one wants to participate in a survey with so many long choices.

There are many quantitative research tools in the market for students to use, but there are not too many technological choices for qualitative research. Nvivo is one of the great tools for students to use for qualitative research, students can use it for literature reviews or interview transcripts organizations. There are many free instructional videos on YouTube for students to use.

Thus, after collecting enough data and analysis data, we need to discuss how to follow the APA format to write a professional academic paper. In the next section, we will discuss APA format issues. Many students lost points of their papers due to APA format issues, especially in the reference section.

### **APA Format Issues**

After justifying the title and writing the main body of the paper, students need to pay attention to the reference section, where most errors occur. If students use automated web services or AI-related software for the reference section, they must verify the citations and references afterward, as errors may still remain. Some web services or AI-related software may require additional payment; if students do not pay, the software may generate a few correct APA format references and leave the remaining ones in incorrect formats.

Students must follow the APA 7th edition guidelines for their paper, at least until 2025 when this paper is published. Students must keep at least three sentences per paragraph and avoid making paragraphs too long or too short. Additionally, they should maintain consistent formatting throughout the paper. This means not using different formats for the front page,

the abstract page (if it has one), the content page (if it has one), the main body of the paper, the reference page, and exhibits (if there are any). Students should include separate cover and reference pages for their papers. The entire paper, including the reference section, should be double-spaced. There is no need for a running head on the first page of the paper. The page number should be included in the upper right corner of all pages (APA, 2019). For dissertation-level writing, there is no need to include a page number in the upper right corner of the cover page, but students can keep the first page number for regular undergraduate and graduate assignment papers, unless specified otherwise by the university writing manual.

There are also many students who have difficulties with headings of their paper. According to APA (2019), level one heading should be bold in the center of the paper for the paper title or dissertation chapter or identifying the first topic after the introduction, level two heading should be bold in the right side of the paper to identify each subtopic of the section, level three heading should be bold and *Italic* in the right side to identify a subsection of the second subtopics, level four heading should be bold within the beginning of the paragraph, and level five heading should be bold and *Italic* within the beginning of the paragraph. However, there are some students confused about the heading's rules, which cause many confusing paper organization, especially misuse of level one and level two headings.

For the reference section, only the most common APA format errors will be discussed. Students only need to capitalize the first word of the journal article title or the book title and capitalize each word of the journal title. Students must italicize the book title, the journal title, and the volume number. Furthermore, students should indent the second and subsequent lines of each reference. Remember that there should be no "retrieved from" wording before the reference website link and no publisher's city and state before the publisher's name (APA, 2019). Only one space should be used after a period at the end of a sentence (APA, 2019). In-text citations should include the author's name and publication year when paraphrasing another author's sentences from their book (APA, 2019). In-text citations are shortened to the first author's last name followed by "et al." before the comma

and publication year (APA, 2019). The DOI link should be a real link, meaning it should take the reader to the correct reference page when clicked (APA, 2019). Students can use the singular “they” for gender-neutral pronouns, without always using “his or her” in their writings (APA, 2019). The age group and participants of surveys should be specific (APA, 2019).

For the appendix section, the appendix page should follow the reference section. Students should maintain consistent formatting throughout the paper, including the appendix sections. Students must leave an empty page that includes only the name of the appendix, with all materials starting on the next page (APA, 2019). The margins on both sides should be consistent with the previous pages, not too wide or too narrow.

Therefore, if students are unsure about their writing or formatting issues, they should use the tutoring services provided by their universities, which can greatly increase the quality of their writing in a short period of time. Consistently using university-provided writing services before submitting paper assignments will provide students with lifelong benefits. However, some students may consider to use AI to help their paper writing or APA format checking, so the last topic will discuss the AI misuse and overuse issues in academic writings.

### **Artificial Intelligence Misuse or Overuse**

From Dr. Xiao’s observations about how students use AI for academic writing, some student misuse or overuse AI tools in their academic writings. Some students may argue that they only use AI tools for grammar check and APA format check, not for academic paper contents. However, this argument is weak because AI tools can do more than that. If students can control themselves within the grammar check and APA format check, then the results are happy, but some students want AI tools to write the whole papers for them, which caused additional academic integrity issue. In this situation, some universities attach some AI identification related functions to catch up the use of AI of academic papers when students

submit their papers.

According to Neefischer (2025), AI writings caused originality, creativity, ethics, plagiarism, and fabrication concerns. In addition, Chakravorti (2024) mentioned that AI causes some trust problems, which include supercharged information, security and safety concerns, no transparency, ethics issues, bias, instability, and so on. Thus, when students use some AI tools to aid academic paper writings or paper outlines, such as ChatGPT or DeepSeek, students have to pay attention to the above issues and concerns.

Harker (2023) asserted that some science journals set up some new authorship guidelines for AI generated texts because researchers use AI for scientific writings causes ethical, dependable, and accountability questions. Furthermore, student academic papers have to same concerns of authorship because there are some an-AI software applications in the market to help students get out of the universities' catch up of the AI percentage recognition, which made the professors hard to distinguish the handwriting papers or AI papers.

Some universities or organizations also build AI committees to catch up on AI papers, on the other hand, some universities have some policies to allow students to use AI for paper outlines or grammar checks. For example, Culp (2023) asserted that ChatGPT revealed strong capabilities to help in research design in academia, so more and more researchers use or consider using new technologies to scientific writings. Thus, it is very hard to prohibit students from using AI on academic writings, so some writing rules and requirements may change in the future.

Eke (2023) mentioned that AI generated contents threatened academic integrity, so academia needs to take actionable steps to control this challenge. According to Ugwu et al. (2024), there are some ways to control AI tools in scientific writing, such as human must set up guidelines to ensure AI assists writings and not replace human writings, verify AI generated contents, prohibit crediting AI as co-authors, disclose the usage of AI tools to make sure the transparency, review and updated AI usage polices, and so on. Thus, there

are so many ways universities can control misuse or overuse AI tools in academic writing. Hopefully, we will have better solutions in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

The above information is based on Dr. Junqiao Xiao's personal opinions and teaching experiences. No identified research studies support her opinions, so please use her techniques and recommendations carefully. This paper is purely for general educational purposes, not for commercial use. The passion of publishing this paper is to collaborate and cooperate resources and knowledge together to help more educators better educate younger generations and grade student papers more effectively. There are some limitations to her research, such as geographic limitations, only a decade of observation, no research funding, lack of literature reviews of this topic, and no additional faculty help. Therefore, all phenomena described in this paper only apply within a limited decade scope of observations. If anyone wants to conduct in-depth research related to this topic, please let the author know.

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