

Writing Difficulties and Quality of Academic Essays of Senior High School Students

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Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

Vol. 6 No.4, 46-57

November 2018

P-ISSN 2350-7756

E-ISSN 2350-8442

www.apjmr.com

CHED Recognized Journal

ASEAN Citation Index

Date Received: March 11, 2018; Date Revised: August 17, 2018

Abstract – *This descriptive-qualitative research determined and analyzed the difficulties of Senior High School students in writing academic essays and the overall quality of the academic essays of the students. Further, it compared the quality of the academic essays of the students from public and private schools. Using the random sampling technique, the academic essays of the 227 Grade 11 Senior High School students in the Schools Division of Laoag City were selected and analyzed for the purpose of the study. To gather the needed data, the study used a researcher-made checklist patterned after the criteria set by Jacobs (1981) in evaluating academic essays and the Standardized Rubric in Evaluating Academic Essay of Jacobs (1981) enriched by Valdez (2016). Findings show that the students have difficulties in writing academic essays such as lack of variety of ideas in terms of content and ideas, lack of connectives in terms organization, incorrect word or idiom and word usage in terms vocabulary and word choice, poor sentence structures in terms of language use, use of first person pronoun in terms of formality and objectivity, and lack of citations in terms of referencing. Notably, the overall quality of the students' academic essays ranges from poor to fair. Further, the quality of the academic essays of the students from private schools is of better quality than students' academic essays from public schools.*

Keywords – *academic essays, writing difficulties, quality of academic essays, senior high school students*

INTRODUCTION

Writing has been given great emphasis in the Philippine educational system since the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) support the aim of enhancing the English competence of Filipino learners. Authorities agree that writing is one of the highest forms of academic skills for it reflects a person's level of language competence, concept development, and abstraction [1].

However, writing is a complicated process primarily because it requires a combination of skills. Writing relies on good fine motor functions, visual-motor planning, attention, sequencing, thinking, memory, and knowledge of grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary and the purpose of writing [2]. With this nature of writing, many are convinced that writing is a complex task. It is the most difficult of the language abilities to acquire; more so, if the language to be used is considered a second or a foreign language. Thus, students are faced with difficulties in writing that they try to avoid the task for they find it a struggle.

Writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired. Mastering written skills is a major challenge for learners [3]. Particularly, writing in English is considered a challenging task for students who learn English as a second language. Moreover, the social and cultural background of the ESL learners prevent them from writing subjects they consider taboo. Further, ESL learners may experience lexical, syntactical, and morphological difficulties as influenced by their native language.

Interestingly, good writing is much more than just correct writing. It does not simply mean writing that contains no errors of grammar, punctuation, or spelling but also responds to the interests of readers [4]. It should exhibit clearly defined purpose, should present a certain point, should be supported by specific and clearly connected and arranged pieces of information and should use appropriate words. Sentences are concise, emphatic and correct.

In this highly competitive Information Age, writing is not only a mere option but a necessity. The ability to write contributes to academic success. It has become a basic requirement in civic life and in the global community.

Indeed, writing in English is considered vital in the total development of literacy education and communicative skills among Filipino students [1]. Thus, the Department of Education (DepEd) has endeavored to improve the academic performance of Filipino students by implementing the K to 12 Program as prescribed by the Republic Act 10533 also known as the Enhanced Basic Education Act.

The Senior High School (SHS) curriculum of the K to 12 Program requires students to perform well academically. The subjects for SHS demands students to acquire certain standards in order to pass. These content and performance standards are indicated in the curriculum guides given by the DepEd. Such standards should be acquired by the students in order to graduate from SHS.

One of the indicators of academic success of SHS students is having effective and comprehensive academic writing skills. As a response, the SHS curriculum offers different subjects that seek to enhance language communication skills, such as academic writing. Some of these are English for Academic and Professional Purposes (EAPP), Creative Writing, Research in Daily Life, and Practical Research.

EAPP is a course that trains students on academic writing. This course is the foundation subject for other higher writing courses like Practical Research. Hence, it focuses on developing students' academic writing skills in the different disciplines. Moreover, the course introduces students to research writing skills so that they can later cope with research undertakings required in their respective disciplines.

One academic writing requirement students need to accomplish in the said course is the academic essay. An academic essay is document that has a defined structure – an introduction, a body and a conclusion [5]. In writing academic essay, students are required to present a thesis statement and support it with details and evidences. Further, the academic essay follows academic stylistic conventions such as formality, objectivity, explicitness, caution and structure.

However, despite the academic essay writing opportunities offered to students, it has been observed that students' academic writing performance remains to be deficient. SHS teachers continue to complain about students' poor quality essays as reflected in their

submitted written outputs. Such concerns are also true to the SHS students of the various schools in the Division of Laoag City despite the initiatives of enriching teaching practices employed by the teachers.

Such concerns were noted in the study of Wang [6] who said that teachers observe that students' compositions remain non-idiomatic, poorly organized, and grammatically awkward. Students do not follow the aspects of academic writing.

Thus, this prompted the researcher to pursue this study to find out the SHS students' difficulties in writing academic essays and the quality of their written output.

This study is anchored on the Cognitive Writing Theory of Flower and Hayes [7] and the concepts of Valdez [8] on writing for Academic Purposes.

Flower and Hayes [7] hypothesize a cognitive process theory of writing, which states that writing is a set of distinct processes. This explains that writers arrange and organize ideas while composing. The processes of writing are hierarchical, which is to say they are not linear, and they possess an embedded organization in which any process can be embedded in any other. To them, writing is goal-oriented. It is guided by the writer's own growing network of goals. Flower and Hayes [7] focus on research providing insight into the writing process, and are also committed to providing pedagogical advancements addressing difficulties.

Moreover, Flower and Hayes [7] believe that writing involves three major elements. These elements include: a) task environment; b) writer's long term memory, and c) writing processes. *Task environment* considers all things outside the writer, starting with the rhetorical problem and including the text itself. *Writer's long-term memory* includes the knowledge of the topic, audience, and various writing plans. *Writing processes*, on the other hand, specifically involves planning, translating, and reviewing.

Specifically, writing for Academic Purposes like Cognitive Writing Theory, involves a process [8]. Academic Writing is not just plain writing. Writing academic essay engages a writer to undertake distinct processes where he or she has to observe important characteristics.

An academic essay is a document that has a defined structure – an introduction, a body and a conclusion. It is a specific writing genre that functions within a set of norms, rules, and conventions [9]. Moreover, Bryne [5] identified a writing style of an academic essay. There are a number of academic stylistic conventions to be followed when writing. It uses Standard English avoiding American spellings. It makes use of the third

person unless otherwise directed. It avoids slang terms, clichés and colloquial expressions. It avoids gender bias and sexist language. It does not make use of emotive language. It is direct – use the active rather than the passive voice. Most importantly, it must be concise.

Inspired by the theory of Flower and Hayes [7] and the concepts of Valdez [8], this study conceptualizes that the academic essays of the SHS students are a product of a process-oriented skill. Thus, this study analyzes the students' academic essays based on the different areas of writing and determines their overall quality.

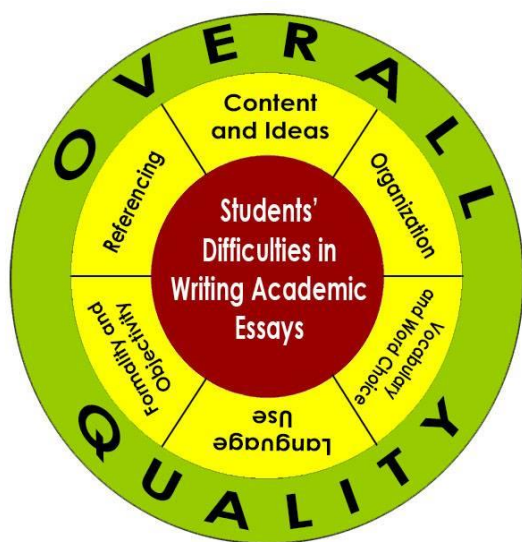


Figure 1. Research Paradigm.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the study. Based on the figure, the academic essays of the SHS students are the subjects of the study. The students' writing difficulties in writing academic essays are determined and described not to underestimate the students' writing skills nor the teachers' skills in teaching academic writing to the students but to help both to work on areas or processes where they are deficient. The difficulties of the students are identified and classified based on the different areas, which includes *content and ideas, organization, vocabulary and word choice, language use, formality and objectivity, and referencing*. The study also gives the overall quality of the academic essays of the Senior High School students as far as the different areas of academic essay writing are concerned.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to determine and analyze the difficulties of the SHS students in writing academic essays.

Specifically, it aimed to determine the difficulties of SHS students in the writing of academic essays along content and ideas, organization, vocabulary and word choice, language use, formality and objectivity, and referencing. Further, it sought to find out the overall quality of the students' academic essays. Lastly, it compared the quality of academic essays of the students from public and private high schools.

METHODS

This study used the descriptive-qualitative research design as it focused on identifying difficulties of Senior High School students in writing academic essays and determining the overall quality of the academic essays.

This study was conducted at the Division of Laoag City. The Division is composed of three public school districts, five public high schools, and a number of elementary and secondary private schools. The study covered three public secondary schools, two private secondary schools and one laboratory high school.

The academic essays were crafted by 525 Senior High School students from the six secondary schools who are enrolled in EAPP.

All of the students' outputs were considered in the study. Using the Slovin's formula with a margin of error of 0.05, the number of samples from each school was determined.

A total of 227 students from the population were considered in the study in which 38 are from School A, 13 are from School B, 22 are from School C, 30 are from School D, 47 are from School E, and 77 are from School F. Furthermore, the academic essays were randomly selected to be analyzed.

Procedure

The researcher sought permission to conduct the study from the Office of Superintendent of the City Schools Division of Laoag. Afterwards, the researcher identified the secondary schools which offer EAPP in the SHS. Then, the researcher sent letters to the principals and heads of the schools to ask permission to conduct the study. Consequently, the researcher discussed the study to the teachers of EAPP from the chosen schools. Afterwards, the researcher asked for sample academic essays of their students as subjects for scrutiny. The researcher randomly selected the written outputs from the writing portfolios of the students for the identification of their difficulties in writing academic essays and for the determination of the overall quality of the essays.

Before the students were asked to write their outputs, the criteria in evaluating their written works were

presented to them. They were aware of the different standards. Furthermore, the teachers were the ones who gave the topics to be written by the students. The study did not consider the number of words in selecting the academic essays for analysis.

The writings were evaluated using a researcher-made checklist to identify the students' writing difficulties in reference to a set of criteria. Further, the Standardized Analytic Rubric was used to determine the overall quality of the students' academic essays.

The researcher himself analyzed and evaluated the selected academic essays. Informal interview on students and teachers was conducted to find out the exposure of the students in academic writing.

Instrumentation

The study used a researcher-made checklist patterned from the standardized criteria set by Jacobs [10] to identify the writing difficulties of the SHS students. Moreover, the Standardized Analytic Rubrics in Evaluating Academic Writings of Jacobs [10] enriched by Valdez [8] was used to determine the overall quality of the students' written essays.

The researcher-made checklist has six criteria. Each criterion has set of descriptors that show difficulties in writing academic essay. These criteria include content/ideas, organization, vocabulary/word choice, language use, formality and objectivity and referencing. The criteria on *content/ ideas* looks into the treatment of the topic, variety of ideas, interpretation of the topic, relevance, accuracy of details and purpose of writing. *Organization* assesses the fluency of expression, statement and support of ideas, appropriate paragraphing, effective essay parts, coherence and cohesion. Moreover, *vocabulary and word choice* focuses on the range of vocabulary, accuracy of word choice and usage, and appropriateness of words to match register. Further, *formality and objectivity* check the avoidance of contracted verb forms, use of one-word verbs, use of abbreviations or colloquial words, correct use of personal pronouns and avoidance of rhetorical questions and emotive language. Lastly, *referencing* weighs the effective use of citations and correct way of writing such.

On the other hand, the Standardized Analytic Rubric of Jacobs [10] and improved by Valdez [8] was used in the evaluation of the overall quality of the academic essays contain four scales. Each scale has a corresponding point: a) very good to excellent (4 points); b) good to average (3 points); c) poor to fair (2 points); and d) very poor (1 point).

Data Analysis

This research used frequency and percentage distribution in identifying the difficulties of Senior High School students in writing academic essays.

Meanwhile, frequency and percentage distribution and mean were used to identify the overall quality of the students' academic essays. The mean scores with their descriptive interpretations are as follows: 3.25 – 4.00 (Very Good to Excellent); 2.50 – 3.24 (Good to Average); 1.75 – 2.49 (Poor to Fair); and 1.00 – 1.74 (Very Poor).

For the tests of difference, the *t*-test of scores was employed to determine the difference of the quality of academic essays of students from public and private schools.

In the tests of significance, the levels of significance were set at the .05 level of probability and .01 level of probability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Difficulties of SHS Students in Writing Academic Essays

The essays from School A are about the significant events of the year. The essays from School B focus on spending life wisely. Meanwhile, the essays of School C concentrate on school as training ground of future professionals and the importance of awareness of rice shortage. For School D, the essays revolve on various areas such as history, education, science and health, and culture. The essays of School E are about resolving environmental problems in schools. Lastly, the essays of School F focus on topics such as removal of "seen" feature in Facebook messenger, not giving of assignments on weekends, comparison of android phones and iPhones, and technology in the classroom.

Table 1 shows the different difficulties of Senior High School students in writing their academic essays based on content, organization, vocabulary, language use, formality and objectivity, and referencing.

Content or Ideas

In terms of content, it can be observed that the academic essays of the Senior High School students manifest *lack in variety of ideas and arguments* as indicated by the 103 (40%) recurrences.

One of the most frequent difficulties of students in writing academic essays is the inadequate variety of ideas or arguments. This difficulty is caused by the absence of a well-defined thesis statement [11].

Table 1. Difficulties of SHS students in writing academic essays.

Criteria /Area	Writing Difficulties	f	%
Content/ Ideas	No or little variety of ideas or arguments	103	40
	Inadequate treatment of topic or very broad topic	81	31
	Almost no useful detail or lacking of details	50	19
	Content irrelevant	20	8
	No purpose of writing	5	2
Total		259	100
Organization	Connectives not used or largely absent (cohesion)	114	19
	No sense of logical sequence (coherence)	113	18
	Ineffective introduction, weak support, and poor conclusion	112	18
	Poor Paragraphing	93	15
	Ideas are very difficult to follow	80	13
	Lacks fluent expression	74	12
	Little sense of organization	29	5
Total		615	100
Vocabulary/ Word Choice	Incorrect or uncomfortably frequent word/idiom choice and usage	126	66
	Limited or no range of vocabulary	37	20
	Inappropriate or no apparent sense of register	26	14
	Total		189
Language Use	Sentences and structures are poor	161	33
	Frequent errors on grammar	128	26
	Incomplete or awkward sentences	88	18
	Meaning often obscured	75	15
	Major problems with structures even the simple ones	38	8
Total		490	100
Formality and Objectivity	Evident use of first person pronouns	178	36
	Use of contracted forms	143	29
	Often use of rhetorical question	58	11
	Use of colloquial words	46	9
	Often use of emotive language	39	8
	Use of two-word verbs	26	5
	Evident use of abbreviations	11	2
Total		501	100
Referencing	No citations used	199	80
	Incorrect way of citing sources	49	20
Total		248	100

Hence, students have to write first a thesis statement so that they can further elaborate the topic and provide various ideas in order to produce an effective academic essay.

Problem on *inadequate treatment of topic* recurred 81 (31%) times. This means that the topics assigned to the students were not fully elaborated in their writings.

Such difficulty leads to lack of confidence in writing about the topic. Students feel that they are not as experts as those writers who are both experienced and intelligent. This implies that students need to be familiar with the topic first before they write their essays by reading written articles that deal with the same topic.

Another difficulty evident in the academic essays of the students is the *absence of useful details or lack of details*, as indicated by the 50 (19%) recurrences.

One problem in writing academic essays is knowing what to write and what to elaborate. Lack of details in the academic essay is caused by careless selection of topic. Students end up selecting a topic and then realize that they cannot write anything on it. Thus, their compositions have limited details [12].

From the table, the students manifest problems on *irrelevant content or ideas to the topic*, as reflected by 20 (8%) recurrences.

Such result adheres to the claim of Frank et al. [13] that students might be unfamiliar with the topic. Hence, they find it challenging to select the appropriate literature from the wealth of publications available. They tend to just place any pieces of information available without checking the relevance of these details in reference to the topic given.

Based on the same table, students have *no clear purpose of writing* as this recurred 5 (2%) times in writing their academic essays. Such difficulty is also observed by Dalsky [14] on his students' outputs at Kyoto University. Thus, he suggests that teachers have to guide their students in identifying and defining the purpose of the writing activity.

Organization

In terms of organization, it is evident in the table that the *absence of connectives* is frequently committed by the students, as this appeared 114 (19%) times in the students' writings. Thus, the said essays do not observe cohesion. Such difficulty has also appeared to a number of research papers in the Arab world that spotlighted students' coherence problems in writing English academic essays due to absence of connectives in their writings [13].

It can be also observed that the students' writings have *no sense of logical sequence of ideas and details*, as this difficulty recurred 113 (18%) times. Many of the students' essays disregard the rule of coherence.

Most students are aware of the importance of coherence in writing academic essays, yet they find it quite difficult to achieve [15]. It is then implied that in order for students to observe coherence in their essays, they have to prepare an outline to see the relationship of one paragraph to the next paragraph.

Further, it can be gleaned from the table that the students have incurred *ineffective essay parts*, as this is reflected by 112 (18%) recurrences. Hence, the students' academic essays exhibit difficulty in writing the essay parts — introduction, body, and conclusion. This difficulty experienced by the students affect the organization of their academic essays.

Students often complain that beginning the essay is a great challenge for them [14]. Providing strong support for their essays is also tough, especially when they have no enough idea about the topic. Likewise, writing a conclusion is also challenging for them because the last paragraph generalizes all the ideas they presented. Thus, it is recommended that in order to make an effective introduction, body, and conclusion of the essay, a writing outline must be prepared.

From the same table, *poor paragraphing* is another difficulty experienced by the students, as this appeared 93 (15%) times. Several essays of the students are weak in paragraphing.

Students have difficulty in structuring paragraphs, specifically on developing one main idea to which all the sentences are connected, stating the main idea in a topic sentence, and redundancy [14]. Indenting the first sentence of the paragraph is also a common mistake among students.

Likewise, the students' academic essays manifest *poor flow of ideas*. Ideas are very difficult to follow. This difficulty emerges 80 (13%) times in the students' writings. If students feel unconfident in expressing their ideas, this leads to poor flow of ideas for the readers, thus eventually leading to poor comprehension of the written output.

Another observable difficulty committed by the students is the *lack of fluent expression* in their academic essays, as reflected by 74 (12%) recurrences.

Finding the student's own individual voice among other writers' voices is another problem for some students [16]. This problem leads to lack of fluent expression when the students cannot find their writing voice. Some students claim that making a balance

between their own views and what they read is something hard to do. Notably, lack of fluent expression is affected by the incorrect structure of the sentences and the connection of the ideas expressed in the paragraph.

Having little sense of organization is the least difficulty of the students along the area of organization. This writing difficulty is observed 29 (5%) times in the students' essays.

Writing an academic essay must have a logical structure [14]. Sentences that express different ideas and details must have connection with each other. Hence, the ideas expressed in sentences must be related.

Vocabulary or Word Choice

As regards vocabulary or word choice, it is shown in Table 1 that *incorrect word or idiom choice usage* recurred 126 (66%) times.

One problem in academic writing is lexical difficulties, namely problems with words [17]. Thus, it is suggested that words have to be used in their correct form according to how they function in the sentence.

It is also observed from the writings that the students have *limited range of vocabulary*. They have difficulty in providing a wide range of vocabulary. Such writing difficulty of the students recurred 37 (20%) times.

This is observed in the overuse of lower-level vocabulary and failure to acquire more advanced-level vocabulary, as well as limited awareness of collocational usage required in writing academic essays. Writing academic essay requires appropriate academic vocabulary [18]. Specifically, academic essay writing necessitates lexical richness, or the ability to use an appropriate proportion of high frequency and academic words.

Further, it is shown in Table 1 that the students incurred *inappropriate sense of register* in their essays, as this recurred 26 (14%) times in their essays. The essays contain words that are considered informal in the context of academic writing. Hence, it is a challenge for teachers to remind their students of the sense of register they use in writing their essays, especially so that the vocabulary of students nowadays is affected by the rise of social media.

Language Use

With regard language use, most of the students' essays manifest *poor sentence construction*, as this recurred 161 (33%) times.

Low language proficiency may obstruct the writing of academic essay. Evidence of poor sentence construction includes congesting ideas in just one

sentence, non-usage of conjunctions, non-usage or incorrect use of punctuation marks, and incorrect grouping of words and clauses.

Based on Table 1, it is also shown in the students' essays that the students experience *frequent errors on grammar*, as this difficulty recurred 128 (26%) times. Generally, the grammatical errors committed by the students are on subject-verb agreement, incorrect number of nouns, incorrect verb tenses, inconsistent verb tenses, use of the *s*-form and the base form of the verbs, incorrect use of prepositions, incorrect pronoun-antecedent agreement, and use of the possessive forms of nouns.

Another difficulty that the students display in writing their academic essays is the construction of *incomplete or awkward sentences*, as evidenced by 88 (18%) recurrences from the 227 essays.

The second most commonly made mistake in academic essay writing occurs in the fragmentation of sentence structures [12]. The problem of sentence fragmentation arises when there is no verb and or subject present in the same sentence. This in turn causes the sentences to be totally incomplete or awkward.

Further, there are academic essays of the students that contain words and sentences which have *obscured meanings*. From the analyzed essays, problem on such appeared 75 (15%) times.

This difficulty conforms to the result of the study of Dalsky [14] where he found that students have trouble in writing their ideas clearly. They commented that they have difficulty in clarifying what they intend to say to the readers. Thus, this makes their intended meaning obscure.

Table 1 further shows that the students experience *major problems with sentence structures even the simple ones*, as this was observed 38 (8%) times in the students' essays.

Such finding is related to the work of Yasuda [16] where he found that major problems in simple structures are caused by grammatical errors, inappropriate choice of vocabulary, incorrect verbs, and incorrect punctuation and spelling. Other causes include first language interference, inadequacy of ideas, and unclear instructions of the task.

Formality and Objectivity

In terms of formality and objectivity, the most evident difficulty of the students as far as formality and objectivity are concerned is the *use of first and second person pronouns*, which is spotted 178 (36%) times, leading the students' papers very informal.

Writing academic essays requires an objective and third-person voice that fits the formality of the essay [11]. An academic essay must not contain first-person and second-person pronouns. The third-person voice reduces the conversational tone of the essay and helps avoid making subjective statements in the essay.

Also, Table 1 reveals that the students *use contracted forms of words*, particularly verbs, which recurred 143 (29%) times, thus, violating a rule in academic writing.

Contractions are used in speech and informal writing. They are not used in formal writings [19]. Contractions are very common in spoken English but not so common in written English. Contractions are not usually used in formal texts such as academic essays.

Another difficulty encountered by the students is the *use of rhetorical questions*, as this recurred 58 (11%) times. It is a common rule in academic writing that there should be no use of rhetorical questions to maintain the formality of the paper.

Oftentimes, a rhetorical question is used to emphasize a point or just to get the readers thinking [5]. In English writing, rhetorical questions are commonly used informally. These appear less frequently in academic discourse.

Also shown in Table 1, the students *use colloquial words* in their academic essays, as this recurred 46 (9%) times. Colloquial words include regional dialects, slangs, street language and urban words. It can be noted that in academic writing, which observes a formal tone of writing, the use of colloquial has to be avoided.

Another problem identified from the academic essays of the students is the *use of emotive language*, which refers to words used to persuade readers about a particular subject that appeal more to feelings rather than to reasoning. In the table, emotive language appears 39 (8%) times in the students' essays.

Emotive language is often used in informal English. In academic writing, emotionally charged words must be avoided. Emotive words do not help create a reasonable conclusion based on the evidence.

Further, students cannot avoid the *use of two-word verbs* in their essays, as this problem recurred 26 (5%) times. Two-word verbs or phrasal verbs are considered as informal features in academic writing because these are weak verbs. In fact, academic writers prefer strong verbs than phrasal verbs. Phrasal verbs are usually considered as an informal feature in English.

The least writing difficulty which the students commit along formality and objectivity is the *use of abbreviations*, as evidenced by 11 (2%) recurrences.

Saving space is not a sufficient reason to abbreviate; the abbreviation must also help the reader to comprehend the argument [5]. Thus, it is implied that students must spell out words in order to foster fluidity of text comprehension.

Referencing

As pertains referencing, most of the students' writings have *no citations*. They have not cited any references in their academic essays, as this observed 199 (80%) times from their academic essays. Several parts of the essays are adapted and copied and do not have any citations at all, leading the students to commit the act of plagiarism.

The huge challenge of 21st century writing is plagiarism [10]. It is a challenge for teachers to correctly guide their students in lifting and borrowing ideas and pieces of information in order to avoid plagiarism to avoid wrongful appropriation and publication of another author's language, thoughts, ideas or expressions, and the representation of them as one's own original work.

Lastly, it can be gleaned from the students' essays that the students incurred *incorrect way of citing sources*, which recurred 49 (20%) times. The students' academic essays contain ideas and details that are not properly cited.

One of the confusions of students in writing academic essays is the correct way of writing citations [11]. Documenting sources through in-text citations and works cited is an important convention of academic writing. Students who are not familiar with the different formats of documenting sources create the difficulty of incorrect citing of sources.

Overall Quality of the Academic Essays of SHS Students

Table 2 indicates the quality of the academic essays of the students in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, formality and objectivity, referencing, and their overall quality using the standardized rubric in evaluating academic essays developed by Jacobs [10].

As regards content and ideas, 100 (44%) of the students got a score of 4, which has a descriptive rating of *very good to excellent*, followed by 90 (40%) who obtained a score of 3, with a descriptive rating of *good to average*, and 19 (8%) were marked with a score of 2, with a descriptive rating of *poor to fair*.

Table 2. Overall quality of the academic essays of SHS students.

Criteria	Quality	F	%
Content and Ideas	4 – Very Good to Excellent	100	44
	3 – Good to Average	90	40
	2 – Poor to Fair	18	8
	1 – Very Poor	19	8
	Total	227	100
<i>\bar{X} = 3.19 (Good to Average)</i>			
Organization	4 – Very Good to Excellent	45	20
	3 – Good to Average	60	26
	2 – Poor to Fair	38	17
	1 – Very Poor	84	37
	Total	227	100
<i>\bar{X} = 2.29 (Poor to Fair)</i>			
Vocabulary and Word Choice	4 – Very Good to Excellent	91	40
	3 – Good to Average	83	37
	2 – Poor to Fair	17	7
	1 – Very Poor	36	16
	Total	227	100
<i>\bar{X} = 3.01 (Good to Average)</i>			
Language Use	4 – Very Good to Excellent	34	15
	3 – Good to Average	89	39
	2 – Poor to Fair	41	18
	1 – Very Poor	63	28
	Total	227	100
<i>\bar{X} = 2.41 (Poor to Fair)</i>			
Formality and Objectivity	4 – Very Good to Excellent	15	7
	3 – Good to Average	100	44
	2 – Poor to Fair	85	37
	1 – Very Poor	27	12
	Total	227	100
<i>\bar{X} = 2.45 (Poor to Fair)</i>			
Referencing	4 – Very Good to Excellent	6	3
	3 – Good to Average	3	1
	2 – Poor to Fair	46	20
	1 – Very Poor	172	76
	Total	227	100
<i>\bar{X} = 1.31 (Very Poor)</i>			
Overall Quality	3.25 – 4.00 (Very Good to Excellent)	24	10
	2.50 – 3.24 (Good to Average)	99	44
	1.75 – 2.49 (Poor to Fair)	64	28
	1.00 – 1.74 (Very Poor)	40	18
	Total	227	100
Overall Mean		2.44	Poor to Fair

Meanwhile, 18 (8%) of the students got a score of 1, which has a descriptive rating of *very poor*. Lastly, the mean rating of the academic essays of the students along

content is 3.19, which means that the overall quality of the academic essays in terms of content is from *good to average* level.

Students tend to parrot everything they know when writing academic essays [20]. They lack the understanding that they should engage critically in the writing process. Most of students' essays lack clear and complete explanations. This leads confusion among readers for they still have to think hard to understand ideas, logic, or organization.

In terms of organization, 84 (37%) students obtained a score of 1, which has a descriptive rating of *very poor*, followed by 60 (26%) who got a score of 3, with a descriptive rating of *good to average*, and 45 (20%) students were given a score of 4, which has a descriptive rating of *very good to excellent*. Further, 38 (17%) students got a score of 2, with a descriptive rating of *poor to fair*. The mean rating of the students' academic essays along organization is 2.29, which denotes that the overall quality of the academic essays in terms of organization is from *poor to fair* level. The details conveyed in the students' essays are difficult to follow due to poor logical sequencing of ideas. Also, most of the students' essays disregard the value of cohesion and coherence.

One of the most difficult parts about writing an essay is establishing the structure [4]. When an essay utilizes poor structure, the essay itself becomes incoherent and unreadable. The students' essays have poor structure because the students are not taught to organize their ideas using outlines leading their outputs to have little sense of organization.

Meanwhile, 91 (40%) students got a score of 4 in terms of vocabulary and word choice, which has a descriptive rating of *very good to excellent*; 83 (37%) obtained a score of 3, with a descriptive rating of *good to average*, and 36 (16%) were given 1 with a descriptive rating of *very poor*. Moreover, 17 (7%) students got a score of 2, with a descriptive rating of *poor to fair*. The mean rating of 3.01 along vocabulary and word choice which indicates the overall quality of the students' academic essays in terms of vocabulary and word choice falls within the *good to average* level. The students have wide range of vocabulary. They use words accurately and appropriately. Remarkably, they are aware of the guidelines on the use of words or vocabulary in academic writing.

According to Walters [21], most students use expressions that are too informal, unsophisticated, vague, exaggerated, or subjective, as well as those that are generally unnecessary or incorrect in academic writing. They use words that are not scholarly, use simple

terms that make the essay elementary, use of terms that are vague that makes the writing imprecise, and use of jargons, clichés, idioms, and slangs.

It can also be noted from the table that in terms of language use, 89 (39%) students gained a score of 3, with a descriptive rating of *good to average*, followed by 63 (28%) who got a score of 1, which has a descriptive rating of *very poor*. Moreover, 41 (18%) students were given a score of 2 having a descriptive rating of *poor to fair*, and 34 (15%) scored 4, which has a descriptive rating of *very good to excellent*. It can also be gleaned from the table that the mean rating of the students' academic essays along language use is 2.41, which means that the overall quality of the academic essays of the students in terms of the said area is from *poor to fair* level. The students have insufficient knowledge on sentence constructions. Hence, they commit sentences with poor construction. Likewise, they commit frequent errors on grammar particularly on subject-verb agreement. Further, the meaning expressed in their sentences is vague or sometimes obscured. Indeed, poor grammar is the major reason why students fail to write an effective academic essay [17].

Interestingly, Table 2 also indicates that in observing formality and objectivity, 100 (44%) students obtained a score of 3, which has a descriptive rating of *good to average*, followed by 85 (37%) who got a score of 2 with a descriptive rating of *poor to fair*. Further, 27 (12%) students were given a score of 1, which has a descriptive rating of *very poor*, and only 15 (7%) students got a score of 4, with a descriptive rating of *very good to excellent*. The mean rating of the students' academic essays along formality and objectivity is 2.45. Thus, the overall quality of the students' academic essays in terms of formality and objectivity is within the *poor to fair* level.

In writing academic essays, students use informal language, which violates the one of the principles of academic writing [20]. It is commonly observed that students use colloquial words, sub-headings, numbering and bullet-points in formal essays and asking questions. Furthermore, it is evident from the students' essays the use of first person pronouns.

In terms of referencing, it can be gleaned from the table that 172 (76%) students obtained a score of 1, with a descriptive rating of *very poor*, followed by 46 (20%) attained a score of 2, which has a descriptive rating of *poor to fair*. Only 6 (3%) students were given a score of 4, with a descriptive rating of *very good to excellent*, and 3 (1%) got a score of 2, which has a descriptive rating of *poor to fair*. The table further shows that the mean rating

of the students' academic essays along referencing is 1.31. The quality of the students' essays along this area falls within the *poor to fair* level.

Most common reason why students do not use citations is that they misunderstand the rules for proper referencing. Some students claim they were only required to reference limited types of sources like direct quotations but not paraphrases; statistical facts but not other people's ideas or words.

As a whole, 99 (44%) students belong to the *good to average* level; 64 (28%) students are under the *poor to fair* level; 40 (18%) students fall within the *very poor* level; and 24 (10%) students fall within the *very good to excellent* level. The overall mean of the students' academic essays is 2.44, which means that the overall quality of the academic essays of the students ranges from *poor to fair* level.

The result shows that most of the academic essays do not observe standards of academic writing. Generally, they reveal that the students lack knowledge of the subject matter, have casual writing style and poor grammar, have typographical and spelling mistakes, with careless choice of words, and guilty of plagiarism.

Difference between the Overall Quality of Academic Essays of SHS Students from Private and Public Schools

This study also compared the difference between the overall quality of the academic essays of the Senior High School students from private and public schools.

It is reflected on the table that in terms of content and ideas and organization, the quality of academic essays of students from private schools is significantly higher than that of the students' quality of academic essays from the public schools, as proven by the obtained *t*-values ranging from 1.993 to 2.025 with a probability ranging from 0.044 to .047, which is lower than the .05 level of significance. In terms of vocabulary and word choice, language use, formality and objectivity and referencing, the quality of students' academic essays from the private schools are significantly higher than that of the students' quality of academic essays from the public schools, as indicated by the obtained *t*-values ranging from 4.110 to 11.791 with probabilities of 0.000, which are all lower than the .01 level of significance.

This implies that the academic essays of the students from private schools are of better quality than the academic essays of public school students. This conforms to the claim of a teacher from a public school in an interview that students from public schools have poor quality of academic essays due to minimum

exposure in writing academic essays. Further, another teacher from a public school admitted that students do not have writing portfolios in their academic writing tasks, which the teacher believes affects the writing performance of the students for they cannot see and monitor the process in writing their academic essays. Meanwhile, a teacher from a private school disclosed in an interview that the students from the private schools produce better academic essays for they are given more academic essay writing tasks, specifically at least three academic essays.

Table 3. Results of the *t*-test of difference on the quality of the academic essays of SHS students in public and private schools.

Criteria/ Areas of Academic Essay Writing	School Type	N	Mean	Mean Diffe- rence	t- value	Prob.																																																								
Content and Ideas	Public	158	3.11	.26	2.025*	.044																																																								
	Private	69	3.37				Organization	Public	158	2.19	.33	1.993*	.047	Private	69	2.52	Vocabulary and Word Choice	Public	158	2.71	.99	7.161**	.000	Private	69	3.70	Language Use	Public	158	2.16	.82	5.797**	.000	Private	69	2.99	Formality and Objectivity	Public	158	2.31	.45	4.110**	.000	Private	69	2.77	Referencing	Public	158	1.05	.85	11.791**	.000	Private	69	1.90	Overall Mean Score	Public	158	2.26	.61	7.435**
Organization	Public	158	2.19	.33	1.993*	.047																																																								
	Private	69	2.52				Vocabulary and Word Choice	Public	158	2.71	.99	7.161**	.000	Private	69	3.70	Language Use	Public	158	2.16	.82	5.797**	.000	Private	69	2.99	Formality and Objectivity	Public	158	2.31	.45	4.110**	.000	Private	69	2.77	Referencing	Public	158	1.05	.85	11.791**	.000	Private	69	1.90	Overall Mean Score	Public	158	2.26	.61	7.435**	.000	Private	69	2.87						
Vocabulary and Word Choice	Public	158	2.71	.99	7.161**	.000																																																								
	Private	69	3.70				Language Use	Public	158	2.16	.82	5.797**	.000	Private	69	2.99	Formality and Objectivity	Public	158	2.31	.45	4.110**	.000	Private	69	2.77	Referencing	Public	158	1.05	.85	11.791**	.000	Private	69	1.90	Overall Mean Score	Public	158	2.26	.61	7.435**	.000	Private	69	2.87																
Language Use	Public	158	2.16	.82	5.797**	.000																																																								
	Private	69	2.99				Formality and Objectivity	Public	158	2.31	.45	4.110**	.000	Private	69	2.77	Referencing	Public	158	1.05	.85	11.791**	.000	Private	69	1.90	Overall Mean Score	Public	158	2.26	.61	7.435**	.000	Private	69	2.87																										
Formality and Objectivity	Public	158	2.31	.45	4.110**	.000																																																								
	Private	69	2.77				Referencing	Public	158	1.05	.85	11.791**	.000	Private	69	1.90	Overall Mean Score	Public	158	2.26	.61	7.435**	.000	Private	69	2.87																																				
Referencing	Public	158	1.05	.85	11.791**	.000																																																								
	Private	69	1.90				Overall Mean Score	Public	158	2.26	.61	7.435**	.000	Private	69	2.87																																														
Overall Mean Score	Public	158	2.26	.61	7.435**	.000																																																								
	Private	69	2.87																																																											

**Significant at the .01 probability level

*Significant at the .05 probability level

These claims conform to the findings of the study of Ismail [22] that one potential difference between the good and poor quality of academic essays written by students is the amount of time and exposure spent in academic writing. Students who have taken more writing tasks in the school have become more familiar to the general rules of academic writing and academic essay writing tasks, while those who have lesser amount of exposure to academic writing tend to require additional

time to adjust to academic writing. Thus, having more exposure in writing academic essay is a significant factor to writing better quality academic essay.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings, the study concludes that the Grade 11 SHS students in the Schools Division of Laoag City have difficulties in all areas in writing academic essays. The prevalent difficulty of the students in terms of content and ideas is the absence of variety of ideas, while for organization is the absence of connectives. For vocabulary and word choice, the students' most prevalent difficulty is the use of incorrect word and word usage, while for language use is the poor sentence structure. Meanwhile, the prevalent difficulty of the students along formality and objectivity is the evident use of first and second person pronouns, while for referencing is the lack of citations.

Moreover, the study concludes that the overall quality of the academic essays written by the students falls within the *poor to fair* level. Interestingly, the study concludes that more exposure to academic writing among students produce better quality academic essays.

Lastly, this study conforms to the Cognitive Writing Theory that writing academic essay is a process-oriented skill, which considers different writing categories such as content and ideas, organization, vocabulary and word choice, language use, formality and objectivity and referencing, which all contribute to its overall quality.

Based on the findings and drawn conclusions, several recommendations are offered.

Students should be provided with more academic writing activities to reduce their identified difficulties. They are encouraged to read sample academic essays, which they can use as guides in writing their own. It is recommended that students should have constant exposure to academic writing through various ways.

Teachers are encouraged to use variety of activities and offer constant academic writing practices and drills to the students to minimize the identified writing difficulties. Moreover, teachers should develop materials that will address the identified difficulties of the Senior High School students.

Schools offering SHS should regularly get feedback from students and teachers in order to offer appropriate interventions. School administrators should send teachers for trainings and seminars related to academic writing.

Curriculum developers should devise teaching strategies that will address the identified writing

difficulties of the students. These strategies should integrate more academic writing activities and exposure to English to enrich the learning experiences of the students.

Further, other research enthusiasts are encouraged to conduct a similar study on a wider scope to validate the results and findings of the present study. Also, more studies should be conducted to explore the difficulties of students not only in writing academic essays but also to the other academic writing categories such as writing a review paper, concept paper, position paper and technical writing.

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