

# General Attitudes and the Approach Towards Academic Writing Assignments of Students of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka

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GENERAL ATTITUDES AND THE APPROACH TOWARDS ACADEMIC WRITING  
ASSIGNMENTS OF STUDENTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE AT  
THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES IN RIJEKA

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## Table of Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Abstract</b> .....   | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>1. Introduction</b> .....                                    | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>2. Literature review</b> .....                               | <b>4</b>  |
| 2.1 What is academic writing? .....                             | 4         |
| 2.2 Academic writing process.....                               | 5         |
| 2.2.1 Planning.....   | 5         |
| 2.2.2 Prewriting.....   | 6         |
| 2.2.3 Writing.....  | 7         |
| 2.2.4 Postwriting.....  | 9         |
| i. Revision .....   | 9         |
| ii. Editing.....  | 10        |
| iii. Proofreading.....  | 10        |
| 2.3 Attitudes.....  | 12        |
| 2.3.1 Definition of attitudes .....                             | 12        |
| 2.3.2 Components and models of attitudes.....                   | 12        |
| 2.3.3 Attitudes and behavior .....                              | 13        |
| 2.4 Previous research on academic writing and attitudes .....   | 14        |
| <b>3. Aim</b> .....   | <b>17</b> |
| <b>4. The research</b> .....                                    | <b>17</b> |
| 4.1 Method and the research instrument.....                     | 17        |
| 4.2 Participants.....   | 18        |
| 4.3 Data analysis.....  | 18        |
| <b>5. Presentation of the data</b> .....                        | <b>19</b> |
| 5.1 Background questions .....                                  | 19        |
| 5.2 Attitudes towards written assignments.....                  | 23        |
| 5.3 Approach to writing .....                                   | 25        |
| <b>6. Discussion</b> .....                                      | <b>34</b> |
| <b>7. Conclusion and recommendation for further study</b> ..... | <b>45</b> |
| <b>8. Bibliography</b> .....                                    | <b>49</b> |
| <b>9. Appendix A</b> .....                                      | <b>54</b> |

## **Abstract**

The aim of this research was to explore the general attitudes and the approach towards academic writing assignments of students of English language and literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. The purpose of this research was to discover how students generally feel about academic writing, and how they feel about it regarding their writing skills. Moreover, this research aimed to find out how students approach their academic assignments in terms of steps they undertake in the process of writing. In order to set a valid base for this assessment, a summary of the main writing stages and underlying processes has been made. In this thesis, the writing process has been divided into four main stages: prewriting, planning, writing and postwriting, with the underlying steps of writing. This summary of the process is based on an analysis of available academic writing guidebooks and official instruction manuals of some higher education institutions.

Based on the analysis of the writing process, a semi-structured, pen and paper questionnaire was designed. It consisted of four main parts including information about the students, general questions on academic writing and statements related to students' attitudes and approach to writing. The research involved students of all five years of the English language and literature study programme, with a total of 84 participants. The data were collected at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka, and analyzed with the IBM SPSS programme for statistical analysis.

The data revealed that students have positive general attitudes towards academic writing. However, they generally lack motivation and interest for their academic writing assignments. Apart from positive remarks they made about writing, students still express having some serious trouble when it comes to writing, and express the need for academic writing instruction. Furthermore, it has been revealed that students invest quite a low number of hours into their writing process, and neglect some crucial steps of the writing process which, if implemented, would help to improve their writing skills as well as the quality of their written papers.

Having in mind students' problems, feelings, needs and actions, this thesis suggests an introduction of an academic writing course in the first semester of the study programme in order to teach students about academic writing style and improve their writing skills by helping them implement some important steps in their writing process.

**Key words: academic writing, attitudes, writing process**

## 1. Introduction

Writing academic papers is one of the main methods of student evaluation in higher education. Through written assignments students present their knowledge of a subject, discuss certain issues, form and express their ideas, and make arguments based on evidence. Aside from mastery of the content, the students of English language and literature also present their mastery of the English language. Although students may have a good mastery of language, as well as of topic, they may fail to successfully communicate their ideas through writing. Writing is generally a difficult skill to acquire, as it is not easy to put one's thoughts on paper and maintain a high degree of clarity. Additionally, writing in English for academic purposes may seem more difficult because students have to follow academic writing conventions. However, according to Öz, *“Writing is the written expression of thoughts, desires, emotions, and schemes; and this requires skill rather than knowledge”* (2006, in Asmari, 2013, p.130). Students’ writing skills depend on factors such as L1 and L2 proficiency, intrinsic tendency to write, received writing instruction at elementary and high school levels, experience in writing so far, and many other. Regardless of previous writing experience, writing for academic purposes greatly differs from writing done at lower educational stages, as well as from writing for personal purposes. Academic papers require composition of larger bodies of text in which students describe, explain, discuss, argue, analyze or generally cover a certain topic. In their academic discussions, students should use the academic writing style which defines the choice of words, grammar and sentence and paragraph structure. The problem occurs when freshmen students, who may not be familiar with academic writing styles or composition processes, and who may not know how to approach writing such long and demanding texts are given their first writing assignment. In addition, students usually do not receive any explicit instruction on the writing process or style requirements, but merely on the technical features of the final product such as font, text size and number of pages. For unskilled students, composition of written assignments might result in poor quality papers and low grades, which may affect their forming attitudes and overall approach towards writing.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 What is academic writing?

Academic writing is any kind of formal writing assignment done in the academic setting, from papers written for college courses, to different kinds of scientific publications (Aims Community College, n.d.). The types of academic writing can range from reports, articles, essays, seminars, projects, and other papers written for the purpose of higher education or academia. Although there is no official definition of academic writing, authors concerned with the topic strive to explain what the term implies and guide the readers, mostly students, towards achieving the academic tone and style. For example, University of Technology (2013, p. 9) points out that the academic writing investigates “*the state of an issue and presents your position based on the evidence*”, and emphasizes the role of a student as a writer who participates in academic debates based on available evidence and arguments. As previously stated, academic writing differs from the writing done at lower levels of education, as well as from other forms of writing such as books, articles, blogs, letters, and other. When writing for academia, students are expected to produce more than grammatically correct sentences in organized paragraphs. As Carroll (2002, in Irwin, 2010) explains, academic writing assignments require high levels of skills that include research, ability to read and understand more complex texts, and most importantly, ability to analyze, synthesize and critically respond to information. Finally, academic writing is the one which shows evidence of learning, which re-examines a subject in order to test and develop ideas, which observes a subject through different aspects and relations, and which is approached to with a sense of criticism (Royal Literary Fund, n.d.). It is a demonstration of one’s knowledge, and therefore includes “*high stakes writing tasks*”, which is why it should be more formal and professional in nature (Cilliers, 2012, p.1030).

Academic writing has many features which differentiate it from other types of writing and contribute to the formality required in an academic setting. It contains elements of comparisons, argument and discussion, cause and effect, problems and solutions. It includes definitions, examples and information based on numerical values (i.e. statistically expressed evidence) (Bailey, 2011). An academic paper should be linear (with one central argument, and supportive parts), informative, complex, formal, precise, objective, explicit and responsible (University of Technology Sydney, 2013). Furthermore, it should be characterized by clarity, conciseness, and rational arguments supported by facts and evidence presented in a coherent

manner. (Bennet, 2009). Finally, as in any other type of writing, it should be accurate in terms of writing, grammar and structure, which contributes to the academic tone and style.

## **2.2 Academic writing process**

Written assignments in higher education may be frustrating for unskilled students, especially if they do not receive any form of writing instruction prior to, or during their university courses. However, there are numerous guidebooks and on-line resources which can instruct students on how to produce academic writing. These guidebooks often include information on different types of written assignments (e.g. essays, reviews, case studies, etc.) and their structural requirements, describe the characteristics of the academic style and give advice on how to achieve academic accuracy. Furthermore, guidebooks inform students on how to integrate the elements of academic papers, for e.g. definitions, arguments, examples and data into the surrounding text. Moreover, they give instruction on how to achieve writing accuracy in terms of academic vocabulary (e.g. show vs. indicate; effect vs. affect), proper usage of sentence parts (e.g. articles or conjunctions), general grammar issues (e.g. singular vs. plural, passive vs. active voice) and other. These instructions are supported by examples which demonstrate how to compose words, sentences and bodies of text that improve the tone and style of writing. The guidebooks also warn about common language mistakes in writing, which make the student's writing unclear, inconcise and therefore less academic, and advise how to avoid such mistakes.

Apart from the aforementioned issues, guidebooks consider organization and the process of writing itself a top priority. This process is usually broken down into smaller steps, but, for the purpose of this thesis, these steps are grouped into four main stages: *planning*, *prewriting*, *writing* and *postwriting*. Although some steps of the writing process will be covered under certain stages, it is important to mention that writing is not a linear process, and that each step can be repeated in any stage during the writing process.

### **2.2.1 Planning**

According to guidebooks, making a plan of the writing process is an important and integral step, as it makes the later stages of writing easier. Organization and time management are given priority because “*writing is never a one-step action, it is an ongoing creative act*” (Oshima, Hogue, 2007, p. 15). Bailey (2003) reveals teachers' discontent with students' late and low-quality papers, especially when it is evident that the written assignments have been finished in a hurry. Therefore, he advises students to improve their time management to avoid

last-minute panic and successfully complete the writing assignment. Starkey (2004) suggests that one half of one's time should be spent on writing, and at least one quarter on prewriting and organizing, as well as revising and editing.

The student should always be aware of the time he has to properly complete his writing assignment. Therefore, the first step of planning the assignment is to make a schedule. It includes breaking down the assignment into smaller tasks, such as doing research, taking notes, outlining, writing drafts, revising, editing, and other. For each task, the student should allocate a sufficient amount of time, and specify when and for how long to work on each step (University of Leeds, n.d.). The second step in the planning process is to analyze and understand what is expected of students in their written assignment. Bailey (2003) suggests a three-step course of action:

(1) Analyzing title wording to identify the key words and directions in which the research and argumentation should be heading. It is important to interpret what the assignment requires, i.e. whether to discuss, review, do research or other, and to be aware of the aim and purpose of the writing task;

(2) Brainstorming about the topic to generate key words, ideas and arguments. It means to examine what the student already knows, and what he wants to learn or cover with his topic. Moreover, it helps the student to identify what sources of information he has, and what else he has to research (University of Leeds, n.d);

(3) Creating an initial outline of the paper in which the student organizes his thoughts on a given topic in the form of titles, subtitles, sentences, or any other form based on individual preferences. Almost every guidebook emphasizes the importance of outlining because it serves as a good starting point for writing. Making an outline helps the student to plan the content, point out major issues, to build sets of ideas and arguments, and most importantly, to ensure a coherent and logical flow of the paper. However, the outline can be further changed and improved to fit the topic more appropriately. The change of the initial outline is often a result of the learning process during research, and even writing, where students acquire new information, ideas and arguments.

### **2.2.2 Prewriting**

The initial step of planning and brainstorming should leave the student with a general idea of what the topic requires of him, what ideas and arguments he could cover and in which



logical order. As the first step of the prewriting stage, the student should engage in research to learn more about the topic, to find support or evidence for his argumentations, and to gain new ideas or perspectives about the issues in question. Bailey (2011, p. 11) criticizes that students often underestimate the importance of effective reading which is „*vital to be able to locate the most relevant and suitable sources*“. According to Massey University's guidebook (2007), a student should start his research by reading study guides, text books, and lecture notes to generate some ideas and key terms for further research. The actual research includes searching and reading books, articles, trustworthy publications and other reliable sources that can offer information, arguments and evidence concerned with the topic in question. Even though main sources of information should be found in libraries and different kinds of scientific journals, the student can complement these with on-line information sources, as long as they are able to recognize the validity of information. Research is, as much as writing, an on-going and lengthy process. Apart from initial research, where the student informs himself about the topic, this process often continues during writing in order to re-establish or find new ideas, arguments or evidence. These types of research are called broad and narrow reading. Broad reading gives an overview of the topic and helps the student take a position and put up an argument. Narrow reading is in-depth research of a topic which provides the student with more details and helps him to affirm or discard the position he has taken during broad reading (University of Sydney, 2013).

The second step of the prewriting process includes taking notes or writing short paragraphs which help the student to remember, understand and consider new information, ideas and arguments (Withaker, 2009). It is useful to note down anything that the student finds interesting or important for his topic, as even the most crucial ideas may be forgotten if they are not put to paper. Note-taking can also be useful during research in order to keep track of useful information. However, when noting down certain pieces of information, the student should write down the source of information as well. Writing down information or ideas without referring to the source may lead to potential plagiarism.

After initial research, the student should already have background knowledge or some more specific information about his topic, and be ready to start writing his assignment.

### **2.2.3 Writing**

Writing is the hardest and most extensive step in the process. It is often difficult to write from scratch, therefore the notes and outline made in step two should help the student to start

writing. Depending on the type of the written assignment (e.g. essay, review, report), the student should already have in mind the structure of his paper.

The most common outline of an academic paper follows the introduction-body-conclusion form, which can be complemented with other elements. The body of information can be arranged in many different ways (e.g. by importance, chronologically). However, both the structure and presentation of information depend on the type of the written assignment. Most guidebooks advise the student to go straight to the point and start writing the body first, and finish when he already knows how to “introduce“ and “conclude“ his topic. It may happen that the student does not know how to actually start writing, or that he experiences “writer’s block”. Therefore it is advised to just start writing down thoughts or ideas on the topic and “suspend the need to connect your writing to other readings or parts of the essay“ (Massey University, 2007). Guidebooks emphasize the fact that writing is a recursive process, meaning that each step can, and should be repeated and revised multiple times.

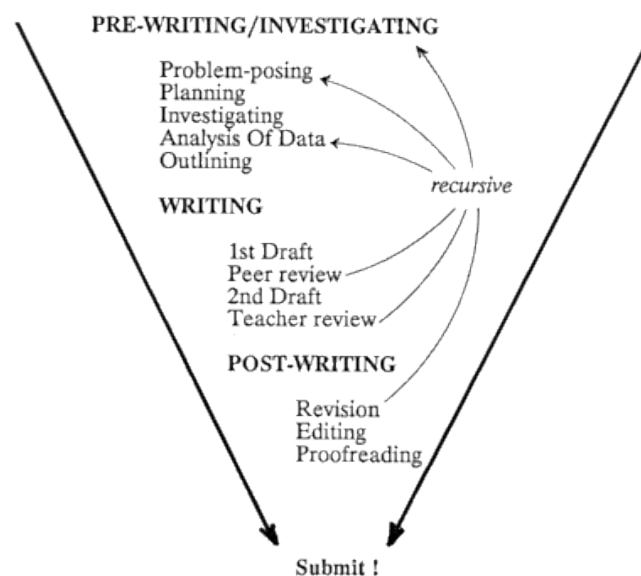


Image 1- Writing as a recursive process<sup>1</sup>

The student should start writing by noting down his ideas and arguments, and that is the exact purpose of the first draft. It serves to shape the student’s thoughts on the topic where yet no

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Center for applied English studies,  
<http://www4.caes.hku.hk/acadgrammar/essay/section1/recursive.htm>, retrieved 15.4.

particular order or excellence is needed, as “*you cannot see the overall picture since you are just starting out and your knowledge of the essay topic has not had sufficient time to develop*“ (Massey University, 2007, p. 32). However, the student should be careful during writing, and separate his own thoughts and ideas from the ones of other people. Whenever a piece of information or someone's idea is acknowledged, it is to be properly referenced, and the student should remember to keep track of the sources he uses in order to avoid plagiarism.

After composing a rough first draft which contains some initial thoughts and ideas, the student should continue to gradually shape his writing by adding new information and organizing it in logical order. Generally, it is expected that the first draft is never the final one because writing requires constant analysis and improvement of one's paper. One can add, remove or rearrange information based on the general idea and logical flow of the paper. It may take writing several drafts before the paper starts taking shape and becomes coherent, cohesive and logical. After a number of drafts, the student may give his paper to a peer or professor to review to receive feedback on which areas might need improvement. When the student is satisfied with the covered content, he should not hand in his paper immediately. The student should then engage in the final step of the writing process.

#### **2.2.4 Postwriting**

Although the student might be relieved that he has completed writing his paper, and believes that his assignment is finished, it is certain that his work can still be improved. Before handing in his assignment, the student should read through his paper two or three times in order to make sure it does not contain any errors. This postwriting step serves to make the final product more precise and easier to understand. This is to be achieved through the processes of revising, editing and proofreading. Each step focuses on a different level of the written text, and focuses on a different type of issues and errors.

##### **i. Revision**

The first level of postwriting is revision, where the student deals with larger issues such as structure, content and organization. The student should focus on whether his paper addresses the topic, whether his ideas and arguments are listed in a consistent manner and followed by adequate support. He should check his paper for unnecessary information and ensure that his paper has a nice flow and logical progression (Starkey, 2004). These larger issues can be resolved by erasing, adding, reorganizing and re-writing of words, sentences or complete paragraphs (Whitaker, 2009). This may be a complicated process because it is difficult to

change the ideas, arguments and their order, as they have become engraved in the student's thoughts. When large changes are made, a renewed body of text may "sound wrong" and require additional writing to accommodate the new organization of the content. However, this should be done for the sake of clarity, as the purpose of revising is to strengthen the content and contribute to the overall cohesion and coherence of the text.

## **ii. Editing**

The second stage of postwriting, editing, is focused on the sentence and word level. It requires reviewing the paper to see whether individual sentences have purpose, and if they are complete, clear and concise in English (Whitaker, 2009). Editing is concerned with issues such as sentence structure, repetition, wordiness, appropriate use of terms, and similar. Editing serves as a more in-depth improvement of the paper, where the student should pay attention to tenses, word order, style, and other (Bailey, 2004). The purpose of the editing process is to make sure that the text is precise and easy to understand, and that there are no mistakes that would confuse the reader.

## **iii. Proofreading**

The final level consists of proofreading which focuses on technical and word-level errors. Students usually neglect the abovementioned levels of postwriting, and focus mostly on word-level corrections. The student should examine his paper for correct use of words, spelling, punctuation and capitalization (Whitaker, 2009). Proofreading is usually done with the help of word-processing tools such as spelling or grammar check programs. However, such programs not only fail to identify abovementioned issues, but are unable to find all the word-level errors also (e.g. correct spelling but different meanings: lay-lie). Therefore, guidebooks recommend not to rely on the programs alone, but to proofread the paper manually. However slow the process may be, it is advised to use proofreading methods such as printing out the paper, reading it several times for each type of error, reading from end to beginning, and other methods that may help with searching for errors in an already familiarized content.

Even though some errors still go unnoticed, the process of detailed revising, editing and proofreading reduces the number of errors and leads to the overall improvement of the paper. Moreover, it is recommended that the student should leave his work aside for at least one day. That is because the student gets overfamiliar with the content he has written, so he may not perceive logical, grammatical, or other errors. Leaving the paper to "rest" for a day or two

makes the content less familiar and the student can read it with a new, fresh perspective. It increases the chances of spotting and correcting an error and results in an improved paper.

For scholars, and especially English major students, writing is an important skill and a means of communication. However, the student has to continually work on his communication skills, which is in this case writing. As previously mentioned, the student is faced with great challenges when he is given a writing assignment. This is because university-level writing requires more effort to achieve academic criteria, while at the same time there is little or no instruction on how to write academically, either in terms of the writing process or academic writing conventions and style. Rushidi (2012) emphasizes that students are not instructed on how to approach writing, or taught how to write in academic manner. She criticizes professors who are focused on the final product, and do not give instructions on meaning and language, but only on the mechanical features of the writing assignment. This may be problematic for the student, since “*writing is the medium through which one's work, learning and intellect is judged*” (Rushidi, 2012, p. 4).

The first step towards improving the quality of students' written assignments is to make them aware that writing is a process which includes the aforementioned steps, and that it is not a “one-step task”. When it comes to well-written papers, Graham, et al. (1993) found that “sophisticated” writers, who pay more attention to planning and revision produced better papers than the unskilled writers, who focused on “*surface-level features of writing such as neatness and spelling*” (Sarkhoush, 2013, p. 1126). The student may be a good writer, which may not be revealed if he is not aware of mistakes he makes during writing. Therefore, even a basic instruction on academic writing might help students with how to deal with their assignments. Additionally, the abovementioned procedures can be seen as a part of writing strategies, which may be enriched with other methods such as freewriting, mapping, or journal writing. According to the previous studies, “*teaching strategies for managing text production is an effective way of improving the writing of students*” (Asmari, 2013, p. 130). Moreover, it was found that the main difference between good and poor writers was the use of various strategies in planning, prewriting and revision stages, and that following the steps of the writing process can positively influence writing quality (Hayes and Flower, 1986; Cumming, in Asmari, 2013). Therefore, before there is any demand put on the student to produce an academic written assignment, he should be introduced to the strategies that help him deal with such a task in general, and to master the academic writing style.

## **2.3 Attitudes**

### **2.3.1 Definition of attitudes**

People use the term attitude on daily basis to describe their inner state or reaction to their environment. They express their general attitudes towards political situations, social issues, refer to one's behavior, or respond in a certain manner towards other people, objects or abstractions. Attitudes are the central focus of social psychology, and their definition has evolved through the years of research and development. Early on, Baldwin (1901, p. 126) simply defined them as "*readiness for attention or action of a definite sort*", which reports the function of attitudes as a certain, inner drive towards behavior. Chave (1928 p. 126) revised this definition by adding an affective component, thus explaining attitudes as a "*complex of feelings, desires, fears, convictions, prejudices, or other tendencies that have given a set or readiness to act*". A more detailed definition was given by Allport in 1935 (p. 22), who defined attitudes as a "*mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive of dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related*". (in Albarracin, Johnson, Zanna, 2005). Due to the complexity of the term, in more recent years attitudes have been explained with simpler and opposing terms, such as likes or dislikes, positive or negative. In 1993 Eagly and Chaiken defined attitudes as a "*psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor*" (in Albarracin, Johnson, Zanna, 2005, p. 22). The simplicity of explaining attitudes through duality is explained by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975, in Dernoun, 2015, p. 21), who point out that the results of instruments which measure attitude "*arrive at a single number designed to index the general evaluation or feeling of favorableness or unfavorableness toward the object in question*". Since attitudes are characterized by opposing values, they are used to predict and explain the possible direction of one's behavior. If one holds positive attitudes towards an object, it is reasonable to assume that one will act towards the object, and vice versa. To summarize, attitudes are an internal evaluation of an attitude object, which may range from positive to negative in different intensities. However, it is important to note that attitudes are not a certain type of behavior, but rather a tendency to behave.

### **2.3.2 Components and models of attitudes**

Attitudes consist of three components: emotional (affective), cognitive and behavioral. The emotional component describes one's emotions, i.e. positive or negative feelings towards

an attitude object, for example: “I like writing”. The cognitive component includes the ideas and beliefs about the object in question, for example: “Writing is an important skill”. The behavioral component refers to the way attitude influences one’s behavior as a tendency to act towards an attitude object, for example: “I write in my free time” (Oskamp, Schultz, 2004; Albarracin, Johnson, Zanna, 2005). Although researchers agree upon these components, there are some disputes whether they operate mutually or as separate entities.

The first theory, which is tripartite, holds the position that all three components coordinate the formation of attitudes towards the object, and they are seen as “*constituents that were the anatomy of an attitude*” (Smith, 1947, in Albarracin, Johnson, Zanna, 2005, p. 82). However, some researchers advocate the separate entity theory in which the three components may or may not be related, since the term attitude generally refers only to the affective dimension. The cognitive and behavioral components are seen as probability of particular characteristics or behaviors towards an attitude object. (Oskamp, Schultz, 2005). Moreover, the most recent view holds the position that attitude is a completely separate entity, and it is a “general evaluative summary of the information derived from these bases” (Cacioppo et al., 1989, Crites, Fabrigar & Petty, 1994; Zanna & Rempel, 1988, in Albarracin, Johnson, Zanna, 2005, p. 82).

### **2.3.3 Attitudes and behavior**

The general assumption in the field of sociology is that attitudes are accompanied by corresponding behaviors. One of the most widely accepted theories of this issue is Ajzen’s Theory of planned behavior, in which he explains how the abovementioned components affect the possibility of action towards the attitude object. The relationship between the attitudes and behavior is explained as a cyclical process in which the emotional component (likes or dislikes) is the result of the cognitive component (beliefs about the object). When the components are combined, they influence the possibility of a certain behavior. Moreover, Ajzen’s theory is based on expectancy-value formulation, meaning that the possibility of behavior depends on two factors: the possible outcome of that behavior, and evaluation of that outcome (Ajzen, I, 2001).

Attitudes are viewed as the summative value of one’s past experience, affective responses, beliefs and knowledge about his environment. These already formed ideas interact with the constant input of new information. Therefore, it is evident that attitudes are not one’s permanent state. They can depend on inferring knowledge, time, context evaluation, and other factors, and as such they are susceptible to change. This feature can be beneficial because it enables forming

more positive attitudes by adding new information and experience. For example, if a student does not like writing because he believes that he is a bad writer, he sees writing as a difficult process which makes him avoid such tasks as much as possible. If that student enrolls in an academic writing course, he can receive instruction on how to approach the writing tasks, and be introduced to writing strategies that will help him cope with his “bad writing”. As a result, he may take a different approach to writing, achieve better results, and change his negative attitudes towards writing into more positive ones (Petrić, 2002).

#### **2.4 Previous research on academic writing and attitudes**

In the field of second language acquisition, many studies focus on learning factors such as motivation, attitudes and other affective components. These factors usually influence the student’s achievement in his educational setting. The majority of studies show that “*attitudes have an indirect effect on achievement*” (Gardner and Macintyre, 1993, in Petrić, 2002, p. 10), where students may achieve better results in an encouraging, motivating and positive environment.

According to researchers who focus on academic writing issues, along with attitudes, the most important factors that affect the performance in writing are anxiety, writing apprehension and self-efficacy. A student who does not know how to approach a writing assignment, and continually receives poor results on his writing tasks may have increased anxiety levels. Apart from causing negative attitudes towards writing, writing related anxiety can also lead to an increase in writing apprehension, i.e. “*the tendency of a person to avoid the process of writing- particularly when the work is to be graded in some way*” (Daly and Miller, 1975, in Rushidi, 2012, p. 4). Research carried out by Daly and Miller revealed that students who scored high on their writing apprehension test (WAT) had lower-quality papers than those students who scored lower on the scale. The final term related to writing research is self-efficacy, defined as “*beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments*” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). It suggests that even though one is aware what skills and behaviors are required to complete the task, the accomplishment of the task depends on one’s ability to apply these skills and behaviors. Therefore, if the student has had some previous negative experiences with the process of writing, as well as with the outcome of his writing, he may have low levels of self-efficacy. That is, he might not be able to apply required skills and behaviors to reach higher levels of writing. On the other hand, if the student is aware of behaviors that lead to a desired outcome (e.g. procedures that will improve his writing assignments), and if he believes that he is able to perform these behaviors, he will



perform better on his writing tasks. Such a hypothesis was confirmed in a study conducted by McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer (1985, p. 468), in which they tested students' writing performance in correlation with the locus of control, anxiety, cognitive processing and perceived efficacy. The latter was shown to be "*significantly related to performance in writing*". Similarly, if the student has a low self-efficacy, i.e. does not see himself capable of completing the written assignment, he will invest much less effort and use fewer strategies during the process of writing.

In the early stages of higher education, i.e. freshmen years, lack of language proficiency and writing strategies, as well as unfamiliarity with the academic writing conventions may lead to poor-quality papers. For the students, these initial challenges of writing academic papers may appear daunting, and if not handled appropriately, may "*cripple early writing endeavors*" because even though they invest time and effort into their paper, they "*cannot seem to get it right*" (Cameron, Nairn, Higgins, 2009, in Saglamel, Kayaoglu, 2015, p. 39). If the student is unable to understand the writing process, or apply certain writing strategies, he may not reach a certain degree of quality in writing. This may result in negative attitudes which are followed by postponing, avoiding or investing less effort into the process of writing. Written assignments are common assignments at university. If the students' writing process is unproductive, it may increase the feelings of anxiety and writing apprehension, and lower the self-efficacy levels.

When it comes to research on writing skills, the abovementioned concepts of anxiety, writing apprehension and self-efficacy are the most represented, and there seems to be little research and few measuring instruments that are concerned with the attitudes towards writing. However scarce it might be, research concerned with attitudes reports a positive correlation between attitudes and the writing processes and the student's achievement. A study conducted by Rushidi (2012) examined students' perceptions and attitudes towards academic writing before and after Academic English courses. In the beginning, out of four language skills, writing was placed as the second most important language skill. Furthermore, it was placed last when the students were asked to self-evaluate their language skills. At the end of the course which involved continuous writing tasks followed by feedback and conferences, both the importance and performance of writing skills received more positive marks. Moreover, a positive correlation between attitudes and writing performance was found in research conducted by Sarkhoush (2013) who observed that students with positive attitudes towards writing achieved better results on writing tasks, as opposed to students with negative attitudes. Research carried out by Erkan and Saban (2011) revealed similar findings. In their study they found that a

positive relationship between writing and performance, self-efficacy and attitudes towards writing exists, as well as a negative relationship between writing performance and writing apprehension. Petrić (2002) conducted a study examining both students' attitudes towards writing, and the writing strategies that they use. Through a semi-structured interview, Petrić (2002) obtained a great variety of responses which included both positive and negative attitudes towards writing in general. Likewise, she noted students' experience with different writing strategies, such as outlining, proofreading and writing journals. Petrić found that students had different attitudes towards strategies introduced to them during writing instruction. However, she noted a certain mismatch between the attitudes and the use of strategies. More precisely, students' behavior had two different outcomes: On the one hand, students evaluated some strategies as positive, but were not using them, (e.g. a student found doing outlines useful, but she is not planning to use the strategy outside the writing course), and on the other hand, students used strategies which they evaluated as negative (Petrić, 2002). Even though such an outcome might seem strange, the author explained this discrepancy with the help of Ajzen's theory of planned behavior, and with the influence of various external factors. Based on the obtained data, Petrić (2002) concluded that both attitudes and strategies used depend on writing instruction, experience in writing, and on certain contextual factors. Moreover, she emphasizes that writing experience influences forming attitudes, as well as future writing behavior. Petrić (2002, p. 21) claims that *“positive writing experiences are essential for positive attitude formation or change”* and calls for implementation of such experiences in writing instruction. However, she advises taking into consideration students' attitudes as well as their individuality, and working towards strategies that suit them best. In addition to Petrić, many other authors recognize the need for good writing instruction. Rushidi (2002) emphasizes the importance of constructive and student-oriented writing classes and tasks. Powell (1984) suggests that the results gained from research into attitudes and other dimensions of affective reactions towards writing may help with the pedagogical aspects of writing instruction. He states that writing should be taught with the help of shaping attitudes and emotions students have about writing. When it comes to skilled and unskilled writers, the more successful ones were those who were motivated and invested a great amount of effort, who showed positive attitudes towards writing, and who were focused on conveying meaning, rather than mere physical features. Additionally, older students usually were more skilled than the younger ones, which could be due to more experience and exposure to feedback (Sarkhoush, 2013).

These findings emphasize the importance of students' attitudes and strategies used in the writing process when it comes to L2 writing achievement. They may serve as a basis for planning and implementing effective writing instructions in courses or seminars. Furthermore, considering the nature of the task in question - academic writing, one of the important factors is the feedback on students' papers and the way it is delivered. Providing the students with constructive feedback and helping them to effectively engage in the writing process may increase their efficacy levels and lead to an overall improvement of their writing skills.

### **3. Aim**

The aim of this study is to investigate the matter of academic writing among the English students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. More precisely, the aim is twofold: to investigate the general students' attitudes towards written assignments, and to investigate what steps they take when writing academic papers. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) Do students have positive attitudes towards writing and written assignments?
- 2) Do students undertake the steps of planning, prewriting and postwriting processes when doing their written assignments?

In addition, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- 1) Students do not have positive feelings about writing and written assignments.
- 2) Students follow the steps of planning, prewriting, writing and postwriting when doing their written assignments.

### **4. The research**

#### **4.1 Method and the research instrument**

For the purpose of this study, data were collected by a semi-structured, pen and paper questionnaire. The instrument was constructed solely for the purpose of this research. However, a fair number of questions were taken and adapted from the questionnaires constructed by Petrić and Czarl (2003), Lavelle and Bushrow (2012), and Saglamel and Kayaoglu (2015). The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section consisted of two questions on general information, where students had to note down their sex and year of study in order to gain a

better insight into the target population. The second section consisted of three types of questions: three “yes/no” questions, six open-ended, and one Likert scale question. This section was designed to collect background information on whether students have read any guides or instructions on how to write academically and whether they have attended any academic writing courses. They were asked whether they feel the need for writing instruction, and what they would like to be the focus of it. Moreover, they were asked to describe what gives them the most trouble when writing academic papers and how much time they invest in their assignments. Additionally, they were asked to provide information on how often they receive feedback on their papers, what the focus of that feedback is, and what they would like to be the focus of the feedback. The third section consisted of 15 Likert scale questions where students had to evaluate the statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), which were used to evaluate student’s general attitudes and feelings towards writing for academic purposes. The fourth section consisted of 39 Likert scale questions, which were used to determine which actions and processes students undertake when writing their papers. The questions in the fourth section were grouped under the four steps of writing: *planning*, *prewriting*, *writing* and *postwriting*, which are described in the third part of this thesis. The questionnaire which was used for this research can be found in Appendix A.

For the purpose of more efficient data collection, questionnaires were distributed at the Faculty of Humanities and Social sciences in Rijeka. In collaboration with the Faculty professors, questionnaires were distributed during the first 15 minutes of their classes.

## **4.2 Participants**

The participants of the study were students of English language and literature at the University of Rijeka. More specifically, the study includes students from the first (8), second (18), and third (29) year of B.A, and the first (13) and second (17) year of M.A studies. A total of 84 students participated in this study, including 27 male and 57 female students.

## **4.3 Data analysis**

The data collected with the help of the questionnaire were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics programme. It was used to calculate the number of participants, the percentage, mean value and standard deviation of answers for each question. For open ended questions, the most common answers were grouped into categories and summed up for easier calculation.

## 5. Presentation of the data

Data collected by the questionnaire will be presented and analyzed in detail in the following sections. For a better insight into the data, numerical values for each question will be shown in tables and the answers to the most significant questions will be presented in the form of graphs. The open-ended questions were analyzed manually, and the most frequent answers were grouped into categories in order to provide an approximate numeric value for this set of questions. Six main categories were derived from students' replies, and are going to be presented by frequency.

### 5.1 Background questions

This section was designed to collect more general information related to students' experience with academic writing. This data enabled further evaluation and insight into the answers provided in the rest of the questionnaire. This data revealed that 83.5% of the students tried to inform themselves about academic writing by reading academic writing guides or instructions, while 67% attended an academic writing course. Moreover, 76% of the students expressed that they feel the need for academic writing instructions. This implies that regardless of the availability of writing guides and instructions, students still feel insecure about their writing skills, and would like to improve them.

*Table 1-Writing guides/instructions and courses*

| Background questions                                   | Yes (%) | No (%) |
|--|---------|--------|
| Did you read any academic writing guides/instructions? | 83.5    | 16.5   |
| Did you attend any academic writing courses?           | 67.1    | 32.9   |
| Do you feel the need for academic writing instruction? | 76.2    | 23.8   |

To further elaborate their need for academic writing instruction, students were asked what gives them the most trouble when writing their academic papers. Approximately twenty students (23.8%) expressed that they find it difficult to find reliable sources, as well as use them in the form of citations and paraphrases. The same number of students expressed that they find it difficult to find appropriate academic vocabulary and phrases which would give their paper a more elevated, academic tone. With respect to vocabulary issues, approximately 19% of the

students expressed that they have trouble with forming arguments, expressing their thoughts, as well as putting them to paper. In addition, 16.6% of the students find it difficult to compose a coherent and cohesive text with a nice overall flow of the paper. Some other issues that students mentioned include time management, difficulties such as how to start writing at all, not knowing what is expected of them to deliver in terms of form, content, and depth of topic coverage, and other. When asked what they would like to be taught about academic writing, students' replies mostly matched the problems described above. More precisely, 35.7% of the students expressed that they would like to be instructed on how to find the right sources and use them in their written assignments in terms of citations and paraphrases. Next, 23.8% stated that they want to learn how to properly structure their paper and compose a cohesive and coherent text. Moreover, they want to be advised on how to clearly express their thoughts and arguments (14.2%) using appropriate academic vocabulary and style (13%). Finally, students want to learn how to achieve academic writing style (8%) and how to improve their overall writing skills (7%).

Table 2-Background questions: students' problems and needs

| <b>Q6) What do you feel that you need to be taught about academic writing?</b>                  | <b>%</b> | <b>Q7) What troubles you the most when writing an academic paper?</b>                           | <b>%</b> |
|---|----------|---|----------|
| How to find right sources and how to cite/paraphrase that sources                               | 35.7     | How to find right sources and how to cite/paraphrase that sources                               | 23.8     |
| How to structure the paper and achieve cohesion, coherence and a nice overall flow of the paper | 23.8     | How to find appropriate academic vocabulary/expressions/phrases                                 | 23.8     |
| How to clearly express their thoughts and arguments   | 14.2     | How to clearly express thoughts and arguments   | 19       |
| How to find appropriate academic vocabulary/expressions/phrases                                 | 13       | How to structure the paper and achieve cohesion, coherence and a nice overall flow of the paper | 16.6     |
| How to achieve academic writing style   | 8        | How to start writing  | 6        |
| How to improve writing overall  | 7        | How to achieve academic writing style   | 3.5      |

The abovementioned data revealed what troubles the students the most when writing, and what they would like to additionally learn about academic writing. The following questions served to discover how often, and what kind of feedback students receive on their written assignments. This information is used to analyze whether the feedback they receive corresponds with the needs they expressed. Even though the frequency of the feedback is dispersed along the scale, as much as 32.9% of the students stated that they sometimes receive feedback on their written papers (M=3.5; SD=.99466).

Table 3-Background questions:feedback frequency

| 10) How often do you receive feedback on your written papers? (%) |        |           |       |        |     |        |
|---|--------|-----------|-------|--------|-----|--------|
| Never   | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always | M   | SD     |
| 0   | 16.5   | 32.9      | 30.6  | 20     | 3.5 | ,99466 |

Most of the feedback on students' papers revolves around grammar (27.3%) and the content of the written assignments (23.8%), while 15% of the feedback refers to the style and tone of the paper. As much as 13% of the feedback refers to the general quality of the paper, where students receive only the overall grade. Less frequently (9%) they receive feedback on vocabulary they used, and spelling errors they have made. It can be assumed that students receive the abovementioned feedback in the form of error correction of their written papers, where the errors they have made are only pointed out. This can be reaffirmed with the students' commentary, where 23.8% stated that they want to be advised on how to improve their writing as a part of their feedback. In agreement to the responses to question 6 (*What do you feel that you need to be taught about academic writing?*), students expressed that they need advice on how to find appropriate academic vocabulary (9%) in order to achieve academic writing style (16.6%). Next, they are concerned about the quality of their overall flow of the paper (17.8%), and would like to receive feedback on the validity of arguments they express in their papers (14%).

Table 4-Background questions:feedback

| <b>Q11) What is the main focus of the feedback you receive</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>Q12) What would you like to be the focus of the feedback on your written papers?</b> | <b>%</b> |
|--|----------|---|----------|
| Grammar  | 27.3     | Advice on how to improve writing  | 23.8     |
| Content  | 23.8     | The structure and overall flow of the paper   | 17.8     |
| Style and tone   | 15.4     | Achievement of academic style   | 16.6     |
| General, overall quality of the paper (grade)                  | 13       | The validity of posed arguments   | 14       |
| Vocabulary and spelling  | 9        | Achievement of academic vocabulary  | 9        |

The final set of open-ended background questions was aimed at finding out how much time students spend on searching and reading sources, and actual writing of their academic papers. These questions were designed to complement the fourth section of the questionnaire to provide a deeper insight into students' approach towards written assignments. The results obtained on these questions are truly surprising, as students revealed that they invest an alarmingly low amount of time into research and writing. The majority of students spend 2-3 hours on research (35.7%) and writing (30.9%), while few of them invest up to six hours (7.1%; 9.5%). Around 15% of the students spend a day or two on writing and research, while those who spend four days to a week for writing and research make up less than 6% of the total number of participants.

Table 5-Background questions: Time investment

| <b>Q8) How much time do you invest into writing an assignment</b> | <b>(%)</b> | <b>Q9) How much time do you spend searching for and reading sources?</b> | <b>(%)</b> |
|---|------------|--|------------|
| 2-3 hrs.  | 30.9       | 2-3 hrs.   | 35.7       |
| 4-6 hrs.  | 7.1        | 4-6 hrs.   | 9.5        |
| 1-2 days  | 15.4       | 1-2 days   | 11.9       |
| 4 days to a week  | 5.9        | 4 days to a week   | 4.7        |



## 5.2 Attitudes towards written assignments

As seen from students' replies to the statements on attitudes towards written assignments, the overall impression is positive. More precisely, 56.5% of the students strongly agree that learning to write in English is an important skill for their academic study or a future job ( $M=4,4$ ;  $SD=,8891$ ), while 60% of the students agree that writing assignments are always learning experiences ( $M=3,8$ ;  $SD=,7791$ ). It can be concluded that students realize the importance of writing as a skill, which can also be linked to their desire for academic writing instruction. Even though a high number of students (44.7%) believes that they are good writers ( $M=3,4$ ;  $SD=,9306$ ), they are quite unsure whether they like their final written product ( $M=3,2$ ;  $SD=,9806$ ). Still, a high number of students disagrees with the statement that they feel lost when writing ( $M=2,3$ ;  $SD=1,0470$ ), as well as with the statement that their essays do not make sense ( $M=2,7$ ;  $SD=1,1800$ ).

When asked whether they put a lot of themselves into a written assignment, students' answers were quite diverse and dispersed along the scale ( $M=3,3$ ;  $SD=,9633$ ), which can be seen in the table below. Even though 37.6% of the students agreed with the statement, a lower degree of invested effort could be related with the lack of motivation for writing assignments ( $M=3$ ;  $SD=1,0176$ ) and interest for the topics ( $M=3,2$ ;  $SD=1,0280$ ). In addition, a higher number of students (28.6%) stated that they write only for the sake of completing the assignment ( $M=3,2$ ,  $SD=1,1288$ ). Taking into consideration the fact that students have to deal with obligatory writing assignments which they lack interest and motivation for, it is no surprise that students experience different levels of stress. Although students' answers are dispersed along the scale, as much as 35.3% of the students agreed that writing assignments are stressful for them ( $M=3,2$ ;  $SD=1,1731$ ).

Even though a higher percentage of students is indecisive (34.1%) or agrees that writing requires talent (30.6%), the most important finding is that they see writing as a skill that can be progressively improved with practice ( $M=4,4$ ;  $SD=,6099$ ). On a more positive note, 50% of the students stated that they do enjoy writing in English, and believe that they are familiar enough with the English writing conventions (41.7%).

Table 6: Attitudes towards written assignments

| Statements on attitudes  | Strongly disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Strongly agree (%) | M     | SD     |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|-------|--------|
| 1) I believe I am a good writer  | 3.5                   | 11.8         | 31.8        | 44.7      | 8.2                | 3,424 | ,9306  |
| 2) I do not enjoy writing in English because it is a very difficult skill for me       | 50                    | 31           | 8.3         | 10.7      | 0                  | 1,798 | ,9913  |
| 3) Learning to write in English is an important skill for my academic study/future job | 2.4                   | 3.5          | 2.4         | 35.3      | 56.5               | 4,400 | ,8891  |
| 4) I feel lost when writing  | 21.4                  | 42.9         | 16.7        | 17.9      | 1.2                | 2,345 | 1,0470 |
| 5) Writing is a skill that progressively improves with practice                        | 0                     | 0            | 5.9         | 38.8      | 55.3               | 4,494 | ,6099  |
| 6) I am motivated to do my written assignments   | 9.4                   | 17.6         | 40          | 28.2      | 4.7                | 3,012 | 1,0176 |
| 7) I do not think I am familiar enough with English writing conventions.               | 11.9                  | 41.7         | 25          | 17.9      | 3.6                | 2,595 | 1,0311 |
| 8) I usually like what I have written  | 5.9                   | 15.3         | 29.4        | 44.7      | 4.7                | 3,271 | ,9806  |
| 9) I put a lot of myself in my written assignments                                     | 2.4                   | 16.5         | 32.9        | 37.6      | 10.6               | 3,376 | ,9633  |
| 10) Writing is a talent that some people have and others do not                        | 4.7                   | 20           | 34.1        | 30.6      | 10.6               | 3,224 | 1,0394 |

|   |      |      |      |      |      |       |        |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|-------|--------|
| 11) I am afraid my essays do not make sense                             | 11.9 | 44   | 14.3 | 21.4 | 8.3  | 2,702 | 1,1800 |
| 12) Writing assignments are always learning experiences                 | 1.2  | 4.7  | 20   | 60   | 14.1 | 3,812 | ,7791  |
| 13) I do my writing only for the sake of completing the assignment      | 3.6  | 27.4 | 25   | 28.6 | 15.5 | 3,250 | 1,1288 |
| 14) Written assignments are stressful for me                            | 9.4  | 20   | 23.5 | 35.3 | 11.8 | 3,200 | 1,1731 |
| 15) Topics that I have to write about are usually not interesting to me | 0    | 8.2  | 30.6 | 27.1 | 14.1 | 3,271 | 1,0280 |

### 5.3 Approach to writing

For the purposes of this research, the writing process and the underlying steps were divided into four stages: planning, prewriting, writing and postwriting. Data collected with the questionnaire will be analyzed separately for each stage.

According to the data, the planning stage is negatively represented among students. The most positive responses were found for questions relating to the general steps of preparing for writing. For example, the majority of students revise the requirements of their assignments prior to the writing process ( $M=3,9$ ;  $SD=,7035$ ); however, this step is inevitable since they have to inform themselves about the task they have to deliver. Although 40% of the students agreed that they spend hours doing research for their topic ( $M=3,4$ ;  $SD=1,0648$ ), the results for question 9) revealed that students invest a surprisingly low number of hours into writing their assignments. On a more positive note, 42.4% of students initially brainstorm about the topic response ( $M=3,6$ ;  $SD=1,0641$ ), and even though they usually write down their ideas and notes during the process ( $M=3,4$ ;  $SD=1,2588$ ), students gave mixed responses regarding note taking. However, the most important steps in the planning stage are not represented to a satisfactory degree. Only 34.1% of students make an outline of their paper ( $M=3$ ,  $SD=1,1537$ ), while as much as 45.9% admitted that they never make a timetable for the writing process ( $M=1,8$ ;  $SD=1,0253$ ). The most problematic fact is that the majority of students (37.6%) do not plan

enough time for researching, writing and editing their paper ( $M=2,4$ ;  $SD=1,0629$ ), which is the most crucial step for successfully completing all stages of writing.

Table 7-Writing approach: Planning stage

| Writing approach  | Strongly disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Strongly agree (%) | M     | SD     |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|-------|--------|
| <b>Planning</b>   |                       |              |             |           |                    |       |        |
| 1. I spend hours doing research for a topic                                   | 3.5                   | 16.5         | 23.5        | 40        | 16.5               | 3,494 | 1,0648 |
| 2. I make a timetable for the writing process                                 | 45.9                  | 36.5         | 3.5         | 14.1      | 0                  | 1,859 | 1,0253 |
| 3. I plan enough time for researching, writing and editing my paper           | 20                    | 37.6         | 23.5        | 16.5      | 2.4                | 2,435 | 1,0629 |
| 4. Before I start writing I revise the requirements of the assignment         |                       | 4.7          | 14.1        | 64.7      | 16.5               | 3,929 | ,7035  |
| 5. I brainstorm about my responses to the topic                               | 4.7                   | 9.4          | 22.4        | 42.4      | 21.2               | 3,659 | 1,0641 |
| 6. I note down words, short notes or sentences related to the topic           | 8.2                   | 18.8         | 14.1        | 16.5      | 22.4               | 3,459 | 1,2588 |
| 7. I make an outline of my paper using titles, sentences, or short paragraphs | 9.4                   | 27.1         | 21.2        | 34.1      | 8.2                | 3,047 | 1,1537 |

Data on the prewriting step reveal some interesting results. Students revealed that while doing their research of the topic, most of them (55.3%) read only parts or chapters of their literature that are related to their topic ( $M=3,6$ ;  $SD=,9965$ ), and they do not usually carry out a broad literature research ( $M=2,9$ ;  $SD=1,0791$ ). One interesting piece of information is that the

majority of students (52.9%) do research on their topic and write their paper at the same time ( $M=3,6$ ;  $SD=, 9349$ ). When linked with the data on time investment spent on research (question 9), it can be concluded that students usually engage in broad reading strategies. However, since 45.9% of the students agree on taking notes, and 52.9% claim that they make changes to the initial outline during the research, it can be said that, regardless of their poor investment into literature research, they still manage to inform themselves about the topic and form or improve their initial viewpoints.

Table 8-Writing approach: Prewriting stage

| Writing approach   | Strongly disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Strongly agree (%) | M     | SD     |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|-------|--------|
| <b>Prewriting</b>  |                       |              |             |           |                    |       |        |
| 1. I read only parts/chapters that are related to my topic       | 4.7                   | 9.4          | 16.5        | 55.3      | 14.1               | 3,647 | ,9965  |
| 2. I carry out a broad literature research for my topic          | 8.2                   | 27.1         | 34.1        | 22.4      | 8.2                | 2,953 | 1,0791 |
| 3. I make changes to initial outline during research of my topic | 2.4                   | 2.4          | 23.5        | 52.9      | 18.8               | 3,835 | ,8430  |
| 4. I tend to make notes while reading resources                  | 3.5                   | 15.3         | 11.8        | 45.9      | 23.5               | 3,706 | 1,1000 |
| 5. I do research on my topic and write my paper simultaneously   | 1.2                   | 14.1         | 17.6        | 52.9      | 14.1               | 3,647 | ,9349  |

The collected data on students' approach to writing process revealed that students do not follow the steps which, according to guidebooks, characterize a good writer. Even though 34.1% of students discarded the statement that they start writing without having a plan ( $M=2,8$ ;  $SD=1,1993$ ), as many as 39.3% start writing their paper without a detailed outline ( $M=2,4$ ;  $SD=,8377$ ). Students' replies were more neutral regarding the statement number 7: *I plan, write*

*and revise all at the same time*” (M=3,2; SD=1,1665). Next, guidebooks highlighted the fact that it is difficult for every writer to begin to write, and recommend writing the main part of the paper, and leaving introductory part for last. As seen from question 7 in the Background questions section, most of the students revealed that writing the introduction causes them the most problems. However, a significant percentage of students (37.6%) still starts writing their papers from the introduction (M=3.6; SD=1,2007) even though it causes them a lot of trouble. When it comes to content issues and the organization of content, students admitted that they lack some skills in organization and achieving a nice flow of the paper. The majority of students revealed that they start writing without an outline, which means that, from the start, they do not have a set order of how they are going to introduce ideas or arguments. Furthermore, as much as 36.5% of the students state that they write what comes to their mind, and only reorganize the content later (M=3,2; SD=1,0829), and 37.6% of the students write their ideas in the order that they think of them (M=3,2; SD=1,0758). With this in mind, it is no surprise that students expressed that structure, flow, coherence and cohesion give them trouble when writing their papers. Furthermore, because of their nature, academic papers require clear and logical flow of the text, as well as coherence and cohesion between the ideas and supportive evidence. It is difficult to achieve such a flow without a previously set outline of the content, and with arguments given in the “order of thinking”. Therefore, the content of the paper should be reorganized and revised multiple times. What is worrisome is that even though students stay neutral about the statement on the first draft being a finished product (M=3; SD=1,1444), as much as 40% of the students do not write multiple drafts of their written assignment (M=2,3; SD=1,0121). Even more concerning is the fact that, not only do students not plan enough time for the writing process, but more than 34% of the students leave their assignments for “the last minute” (M=3,7; SD=1,1355).

Table 9-Writing approach: Writing stage

| Writing approach   | Strongly disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Strongly agree (%) | M     | SD     |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|-------|--------|
| <b>Writing</b>   |                       |              |             |           |                    |       |        |
| 1. I start writing without having a written or mental plan | 10.6                  | 34.1         | 23.5        | 20        | 11.8               | 2,882 | 1,1993 |

|  |      |      |      |      |      |       |        |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|-------|--------|
| 2. I write my paper starting from introduction                     | 7.1  | 11.8 | 16.5 | 37.6 | 27.1 | 3,659 | 1,2007 |
| 3. I start writing with a fairly detailed outline                  | 14.3 | 39.3 | 38.1 | 8.3  | 0    | 2,405 | ,8377  |
| 4. Often my first draft is my finished product                     | 6    | 32.1 | 23.8 | 16.2 | 11.9 | 3,060 | 1,1444 |
| 5. I write what comes to my mind, and reorganize the content later | 5.9  | 18.8 | 27.1 | 36.5 | 11.8 | 3,294 | 1,0892 |
| 6. I write several drafts of my paper                              | 22.4 | 40   | 24.7 | 10.6 | 2.4  | 2,306 | 1,0121 |
| 7. I plan, write and revise all at the same time                   | 8.2  | 17.6 | 29.4 | 29.4 | 15.3 | 3,259 | 1,1665 |
| 8. I do my assignments “the last minute”                           | 2.4  | 16.5 | 16.5 | 34.1 | 30.6 | 3,741 | 1,1355 |
| 9. I write about my ideas in the order that I think of them        | 5.9  | 18.8 | 27.1 | 37.6 | 10.6 | 3,282 | 1,0758 |

In the writing stage students build their content, put their thoughts to paper, and elaborate their topic through discussion and analysis of their arguments. This is the stage in which the majority of content and ideas are put together into a whole. It is a process which should take up most of the time of the writing process. Surprisingly, it has been revealed that students do not really allocate enough time for this particular step. In their responses to the second section of the questionnaire, students revealed an unpleasant piece of information that the majority of students invest approximately 2-5 hours in their written assignments, while the minority of students spend up to a day, or rarely, a week doing their written assignments. Even though a significant number of students agreed that they write their paper at one sitting (28.2%), the students’ replies are highly dispersed along the scale and come to the mean value  $M=3$  ( $SD=1,2483$ ). However low time investment into writing may be, the postwriting stage includes steps which enable strengthening the content and polishing the paper to improve the overall quality of the written assignment.

The students recognize the importance of the postwriting step, since 37.6% of the students denied handing in their paper without editing it ( $M=2,4$ ;  $SD=1,1991$ ). The rest of the data collected in this section of the questionnaire revealed even more interesting results. It can be seen that students are aware that they have to revise the content of their paper, and they do work towards improving it. Almost half of the students (51.8%) agreed that they add or remove information or change their order during revision of their paper ( $M=3,8$ ;  $SD=,9856$ ), but they disagreed (28.2%) with the statement regarding making changes in the content or ideas ( $M=2,8$ ;  $SD=,9563$ ). This can imply that they may remove excess, or fill in the missing information, but that they do not make major changes to their initially written content. This is confirmed by the following statement, where 37.6% of the students agreed that their revision strategy includes making major changes, or just “touching things up”. Moreover, the students can recognize the discontinuity in the content of their papers, and they usually take steps to strengthen the content of their paper. It is important to logically build the content with valid information, which requires reading multiple times through their papers during writing. Even though a high percentage of students (42.4%) disagrees that they read their paper only when they have finished writing it ( $M=2,6$ ;  $SD=1,1991$ ), as much as 34.1% of the students still agree that they revise their papers only post writing ( $M=3$ ;  $SD=1,1686$ ). However, highly dispersed answers for this statement imply that some students (21.2%) disagree with the statement, and revise their paper during the whole process of writing, meaning that they logically build their paper through the whole process. From the abovementioned data, as well as from the data analyzed from the second section of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that students invest a reasonable effort in composing the content of their papers. Students pay attention to the logical flow, coherence, and cohesion of their written paper, even though they state that they need further guidance. However, in terms of the postwriting processes of proofreading and editing, the data revealed that students do not invest enough time, and fail to complete the steps which guidebooks emphasize as the most vital for increasing the overall quality of a written assignment. Even though 32.9% of students disagreed with the statement that they cannot edit their writing because they cannot see their own errors ( $M=2,4$ ;  $SD=1,1298$ ), the data reveal some disappointing results when it comes to the processes of proofreading and editing. While proofreading, 45.9% of the students stated that they focus on every type of mistake (sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, spelling) ( $M=3,4$ ;  $SD=1,1610$ ), and it may be assumed that they focus on multiple types of errors at once. Students (41.2%) do admit that they proofread their papers more than once ( $M=3,1$ ;  $SD=1,1392$ ); however, it appears that they try to spot all types of errors in one reading. This can be confirmed by the statement, where a significant



percentage of students (28.2%) revealed that they do not read their paper multiple times in order to spot different types of errors (M=2,7; SD=1,2447). This puts into question the effectiveness of students' proofreading process, as they can hardly focus on each type of error at the same time, thus leaving a certain number of errors unnoticed. Moreover, even though 30.6% of the students disagreed on spell-checking their papers only in Word documents as a part of editing (M=2,6; SD=1,2382), they also strongly disagreed (31.8%) with using the method of printing and proofreading their papers manually (M=2,3; SD=1,2790). Students (32.9%) also denied turning to their colleagues for opinion on their papers (M=2,2; SD=1,1712), and even though it may not be crucial for improving their papers, it may have positive effects for both the writer and reader. The writer may receive some feedback on issues in their written assignment which they might not notice themselves, while being the reader helps practice error correction as well as critical thinking about what they have read. Finally, according to guidebooks, the most important step towards effective proofreading is leaving the text aside for a couple of days to gain a fresh perspective, as it improves the possibility of noticing flaws in the content, as well as language errors. However, a significant number of students disagreed with this statement, i.e. 32.9% of the students do not put their written assignment to "rest". Although worrisome, this information is not surprising because in the second section of the questionnaire, students revealed that they invest an alarmingly low number of hours into their written assignments and tend to do their writing assignments "the last minute". Therefore, with an approaching deadline, they might not have enough time to move away from their paper for a day or two, and go through the postwriting process thoroughly.

Table 10-Writing approach: Postwriting stage

| Writing approach  | Strongly disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Strongly agree (%) | M     | SD     |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|-------|--------|
| <b>Postwriting</b>  |                       |              |             |           |                    |       |        |
| 1. I write my paper at one sitting  | 11.8                  | 27.1         | 20          | 28.2      | 12.9               | 3,035 | 1,2483 |
| 2. When revising my paper, I often add/remove information or change the order in which it appears | 4.7                   | 4.7          | 17.6        | 51.8      | 21.2               | 3,800 | ,9856  |

|   |      |      |      |      |      |       |        |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|-------|--------|
| 3. Revision is a onetime process at the end   | 11.8 | 21.2 | 24.7 | 34.1 | 8.2  | 3,059 | 1,1686 |
| 4. My revision strategy is usually making minor changes, just touching up things  | 2.4  | 21.2 | 20   | 37.6 | 18.8 | 3,494 | 1,0979 |
| 5. I cannot edit my writing because I cannot see my own mistakes  | 21.2 | 32.9 | 28.2 | 11.8 | 5.9  | 2,482 | 1,1298 |
| 6. I read what I have written only when I have finished the whole paper   | 14.1 | 42.4 | 14.1 | 21.2 | 8.2  | 2,671 | 1,1991 |
| 7. I hand in my paper without doing much editing  | 14.1 | 37.6 | 17.6 | 22.4 | 8.2  | 2,729 | 1,1991 |
| 8. I reread my paper several times, each for different type of proofreading (sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, spelling..) | 18.8 | 28.2 | 23.5 | 20   | 9.4  | 2,729 | 1,2477 |
| 9. When revising, I usually make changes in the content or ideas  | 7.1  | 28.2 | 36.5 | 25.9 | 2.4  | 2,882 | ,9563  |
| 10. When proofreading, I focus on every type of mistakes (sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, spelling)                      | 10.6 | 7.1  | 21.2 | 45.9 | 15.3 | 3,482 | 1,1610 |
| 11. I leave the text aside for a couple of days and then re-read it for a new perspective   | 32.9 | 30.6 | 11.8 | 21.2 | 3.5  | 2,318 | 1,2365 |

|   |      |      |      |      |     |       |        |
|---|------|------|------|------|-----|-------|--------|
| 12. I show my paper to my colleague and ask for their opinion                   | 30.6 | 32.9 | 18.8 | 12.9 | 4.7 | 2,282 | 1,1712 |
| 13. I proofread my paper more than once   | 10.6 | 18.8 | 22.4 | 41.2 | 7.1 | 3,153 | 1,1392 |
| 14. When editing, I only do spell-check in Word documents when editing my paper | 20   | 30.6 | 18.8 | 23.5 | 7.1 | 2,671 | 1,2382 |
| 15. I print my paper and proofread it manually                                  | 31.8 | 31.8 | 12.9 | 16.5 | 7.1 | 2,353 | 1,2790 |

In order to gather some additional information related to academic writing, in the final part of the questionnaire students were asked to self-evaluate whether they can recognize a valid source of information and apply citation styles. Students' answers revealed a positive response, as 50.6% of the students claim that they can recognize valid sources of information ( $M=3.8$ ;  $SD=,7845$ ). Regarding citation styles, 36.5% of the students agreed that they know how to apply citation styles ( $M=3,6$ ;  $SD=1,1150$ ). However, students' answers were dispersed along the scale, and the answers received on question 7 of the Background questions (*What troubles you the most when writing an academic paper*), reveal that the most common issue in writing (23.8%) is in fact related to citation, as students expressed that they are not sure how to provide citations in their assignments.

Table 11-Sources and citations

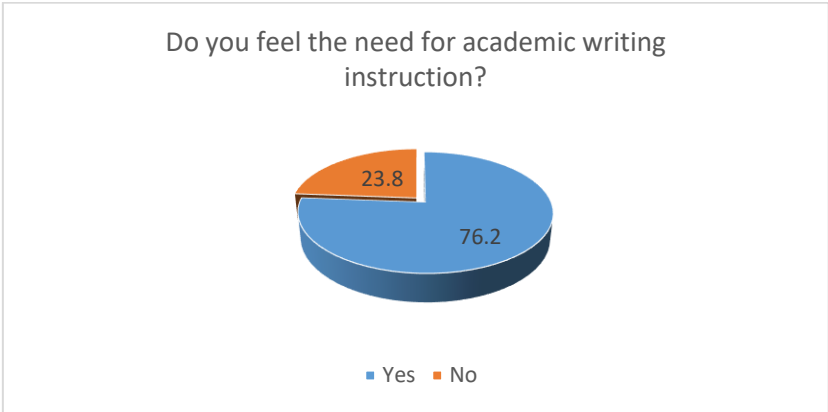
| Writing approach                                 | Strongly disagree (%) | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Strongly agree (%) | M     | SD     |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------|-------|--------|
| <b>Sources and citations</b>                     |                       |              |             |           |                    |       |        |
| 1. I can recognize a valid source of information | 0                     | 4.7          | 25.9        | 50.6      | 18.8               | 3,835 | ,7845  |
| 2. I know how to apply citation styles           | 4.7                   | 10.6         | 22.4        | 36.5      | 25.9               | 3,682 | 1,1150 |

## 6. Discussion

The data collected in this research revealed some interesting results which give a surface-level insight into the students' feelings and attitudes towards writing and their approach to written assignments. With the set of Background questions it was possible to collect additional information which enabled further elaboration of the collected data on students' attitudes and approach to writing. The analysis revealed that a great majority of students (83.5%) tried to inform themselves about academic writing by searching for and reading academic writing guides or instructions. This implies that students were not sure how to deliver a writing assignment, bringing into question the adequacy of the received instruction. As previously noted, the great majority of writing instruction refers to general requirements such as possible topics, number of pages, font size, and other. What students obviously need and search for is instruction and advice on how to work through their topic and how to compose a piece of writing the style and quality of which are in accordance with the required academic level. It was noted earlier that university-level writing requires that the academic criteria be met in terms of the content, vocabulary, style and tone. This might be a challenging task since students do not only have to write their assignment, but also learn on their own how to achieve an academic standard. Although self-study is a part of every improvement, this may be troublesome due to differences in guidebooks as well as professors' viewpoints on the academic standard. This calls for organization and implementation of an academic writing course, especially in the first semester of the B.A studies. Such an early instruction would help students with their early writing assignments, where they would be introduced to academic writing criteria and the process of writing itself. The analysis of the plan and programme of the English language and literature revealed that in the last five academic years (from 2012/13 to 2017/18), the five-year programme included three courses that are related to academic writing instruction. The first, obligatory course, *Critical thinking and writing* is available in the second semester of the B.A programme, while the second, elective course, *Academic writing I/II* is available not earlier than the first year of the M.A programme. This explains a significant percent of students (67.1%) who claimed to have attended academic writing courses. However, there are two problems related to the abovementioned courses. The first problem is timewise. Regardless of the fact that the *Critical thinking and writing* is a second semester course, the *Academic writing* appears rather late in the study programme, even though students are faced with written assignments from the first semester. In addition, as the Academic writing course is an elective one, students may have problems enrolling in the course due to overlapping class schedules.

The second issue is related to the content, because even though the descriptions of both courses emphasize improving academic writing skills, the realization of the course outcomes is questionable. This is confirmed by the results of this research, where a great majority of students still feel the need for academic writing instruction.

*Graph 1- The need for academic writing instruction*

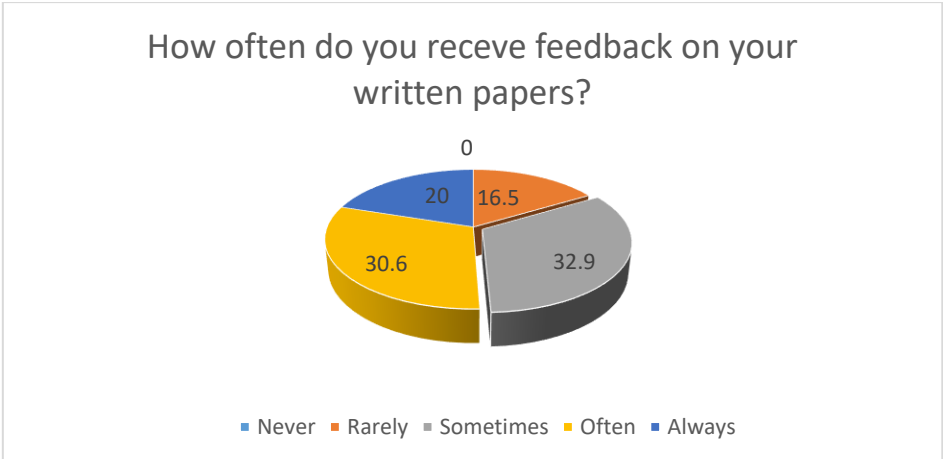


In order to further investigate the students’ need for academic writing instruction, they were asked what gives them the most trouble when writing, and what they want to be taught about academic writing. The students’ answers about their problems mostly matched the items for which they expressed the need for instruction. Since these questions were of an open-ended type, meaning that there were no offered options, it is interesting to see that students mentioned the essentials of academic writing, both in writing and need for instruction. As previously mentioned, the most common students’ answers were grouped into six categories. Students expressed that they have trouble finding and citing sources, finding appropriate academic vocabulary, expressing their thoughts and structuring them into a coherent whole. Their responses also included academic style, improvement of overall writing skills, and many other individual responses which did not fall under any category. Since the same items were mentioned when students were asked about what they want to be taught about academic writing, the outcome of the abovementioned courses is questionable.

Apart from the academic writing course, the next thing that can help improve students’ writing skills is the feedback they receive on their written assignments. The questions regarding feedback were aimed at discovering the focus of the received feedback, whether there is a link

between received and expected feedback, and whether the feedback overlaps with the previously mentioned students' problems and needs. Although the frequency of feedback comes to the mean value of 3.5, it should be taken into consideration that students' answers are dispersed along the scale.

*Graph 2- feedback frequency*

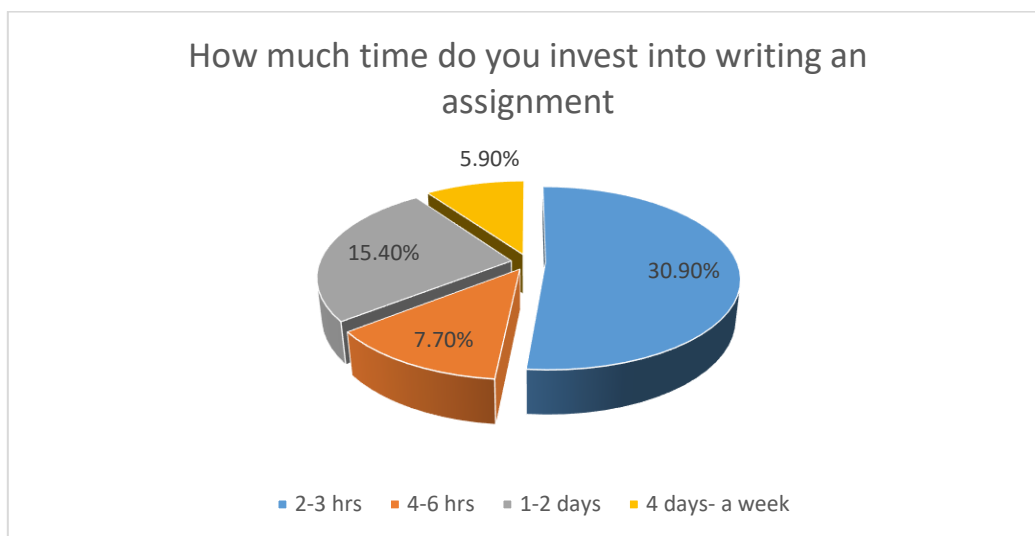


It can be seen that a significant percent of the students reported that they rarely (16.5%) or sometimes (32.9%) receive feedback. However, regardless of frequency, it is positive that they receive at least some feedback. When it comes to the items of received and expected feedback, there is a slight discrepancy between the two. The professors' feedback is mainly focused on grammar, content, style, vocabulary, and the overall quality of the paper. On the other hand, students expressed that they would like to receive advice on how to improve their writing, how to find appropriate academic vocabulary, achieve academic style, and properly structure their paper with a nice and logical flow. It can also be seen that the items of students' feedback expectancy overlap with the items for which they expressed the need for instruction. Therefore, it can be concluded that students want and need to be advised on their academic writing skills. However, it is important to keep in mind that university professors may not have enough time to go into great detail and refer to all types of errors, yet alone advise students when giving feedback. Although they can refer to areas that need improvement, they may not be able to allocate a lot of time for every student's feedback or instruct them how to approach their writing assignments.

Regardless of their desire for improvement, students seem to make some crucial mistakes which hinder the further growth of their writing skills. One such mistake is a

surprisingly low number of hours which students invest into their writing process. Writing is seen as a lengthy, recursive process, but the majority of students invest only 2-3 hours into their writing, during which they try to incorporate research, writing and editing. In such a short time, it is hardly possible to build a large body of a logical text and undertake all the postwriting steps to clear the text of errors, polish it to an academic level and carry out an assignment that meets the standard.

*Graph 3-Time investment*



This insufficient time investment can be linked to the question number 8 relating to the writing process, where students admit that they do their assignments „the last minute“ (34.1%). It is reasonable to assume that such a low time investment leaves no time for all the steps recommended by guidebooks, let alone the crucial steps of the poswriting process. This is a serious issue, because no guidebook or writing course can help students improve their writing skills if they do not invest their time and effort in writing.

One possible solution could be requesting the students to keep a public online discussion and a journal (e.g. via MudRi), where they could post their topic, ask for advice from their colleagues, and most importantly do weekly tasks regarding their written assignments. It could range from posting their list of sources, notes, outlines, drafts, finished papers, to their final version of the paper which has been revised, edited and proofread. This online journal could help the students with making a habit of time management, and ensure that they spend some time on the crucial steps in the writing process which lead to the improvement of their writing skills. Moreover, such an online journal with mutual feedback and discussions would resemble some sort of group

learning, as students could learn to recognize their mistakes in terms of illogical or ungrammatical sentences, unsuitable vocabulary, misspelled words, incorrect citation styles, and other. This would ensure practicing writing and postwriting skills, and the professor, as a mediator, could help out and address certain issues without spending much time on detailed individual feedback. Such an approach could be introduced in the first semester of the study programme, and more effectively, in combination with an academic writing course. This initial instruction and cooperative approach towards written assignments could lead to the formation of good writing habits, as well as more positive attitudes towards writing assignments.

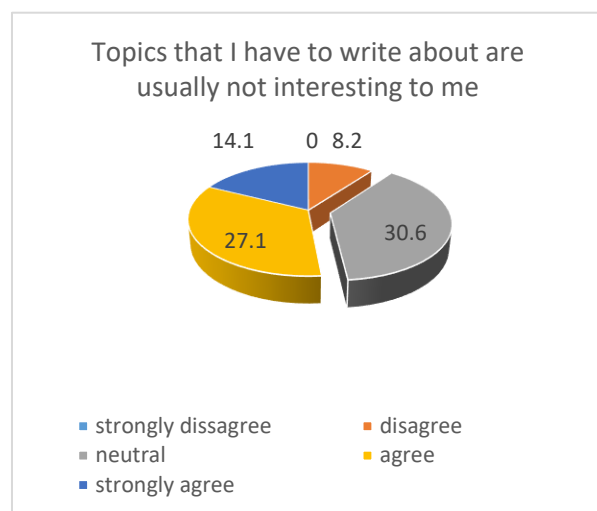
When it comes to students' attitudes towards academic writing, it could be said that they are mostly neutral, but moving towards the positive side of the scale. The most positive attitudes were related to the cognitive aspect which includes general beliefs about writing. The majority of students believe that learning to write in English is an important skill for their future (56.5%) and they see their written assignments as learning experiences (60%). Although a significant percent believes that writing requires talent (30.6%), they still strongly believe that it is a skill that can always be improved with practice (55.3%). Moreover, regardless of the problems they have mentioned, students believe that they are familiar enough with English writing conventions (41.7%) and that they are good writers (44.7%). It can be concluded that the cognitive aspect of attitudes is highly positive, as students consider writing as an important skill, and believe in the possibility of improving it. As stated earlier, such positive beliefs, if handled appropriately, can enhance positive feelings towards writing and raise their motivation levels which are important for their further improvement. That would be a challenging task since the data on the students' emotional aspect towards written assignments are slightly discouraging. Although they enjoy writing in English (50%), and usually like what they have written (44.7%), their motivation and interest levels are not satisfactory.



Graph 4-Motivation levels



Graph 5-Interest levels



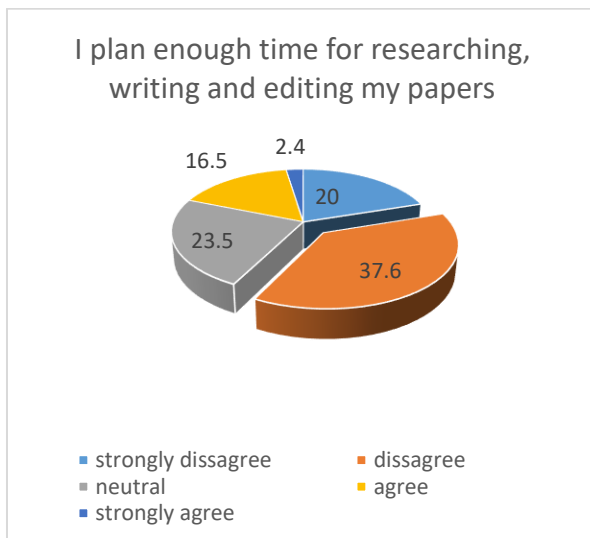
In addition, although students reported that they do not feel lost when writing (42.9%), or that they are afraid that their essays do not make sense (44%), a significant percent of students feel stressed out by their written assignments (35.3%). The feeling of stress may be related to the fact that students invest a significantly low number of hours into writing, and usually write their assignments „in the last minute“. This appears to negatively affect the behavioral aspects of attitudes towards the written assignments, because even though the majority of students claim that they put a lot of themselves into their written assignments (37.6%), a significant number of students revealed that they write only for the sake of completing the assignment (28.6%). In conclusion, although some aspects of students' attitudes appear to be positive, we should work on strengthening the existing, and building more positive attitudes towards academic writing

With regard to the students' writing approach, the obtained data revealed some interesting and worrisome results. As explained in the chapter four, writing is a recursive process which consists of numerous steps that are necessary to compose a high quality paper. For the purpose of this research the four main stages and underlying steps of the writing process were summarized. These stages were derived from the analysis of available writing guides and instruction manuals, and served as the basis for the research of the students' writing approach. The results relating to the four writing stages: planning, prewriting, writing and postwriting, revealed that the students do not follow most of the steps recommended by writing guides or instruction manuals, even though the majority of students (83.5%) reported reading them for some advice on writing.

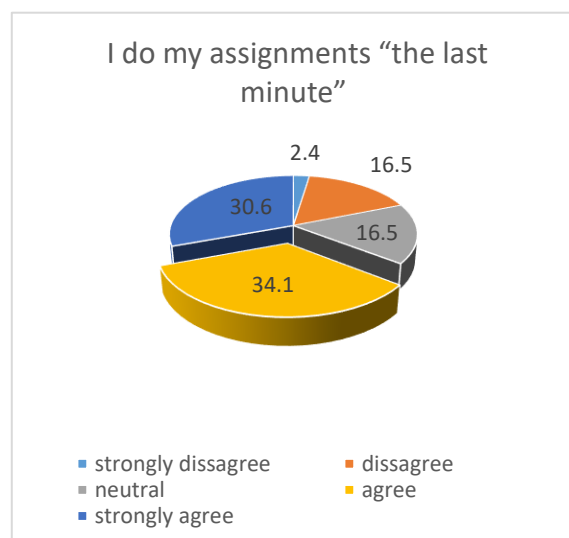
Planning is the first step of the writing process during which students have to think about the assignment they are given, prepare for it, and plan to realize the assignment within a certain time frame. As mentioned in the data analysis, students' positive responses were related to the steps such as revising the requirements (64.7%) and brainstorming about the topic response (42.4%). However, informing themselves about the requirements of the assignment, and thinking about possible responses goes more in favor of rationality than effort, because a student cannot start working on a task if he does not know what the task requirements are. Regarding the note taking, students hold a more neutral position as their answers were spread across the scale. Even though it may not be everyone's style, students should consider making a habit out of note taking because notes may serve as a good start for outlining or keeping track of good ideas and arguments.

With respect to the more significant steps in the planning stage, the students provided mostly negative responses. Making an outline of the paper is considered to be an important step because, according to guidebooks, it helps to organize the ideas and arguments in order to give the paper a nice and logical flow. As only 34% of the students make an outline, and only 8,3% start writing with a fairly detailed outline, it is not surprising that students have trouble with structuring their paper and achieving a cohesive flow of the paper, especially because a significant percent stated that they write down their ideas in order they think of them (37.6%). Finally, it can be noticed that students do not make a timetable (45.9%) in terms of scheduling when to start working on a certain step of the writing process, as Bailey suggested. The bigger problem is that they do not plan enough time for writing at all (37.6%). This issue of time management is confirmed by the analyzed data, such as surprisingly low time investment that students revealed (Graph 2), and with the statement that students do their assignments „the last minute“ (34.1%).

Graph 6- Time planning



Graph 7- "Last minute" assignments

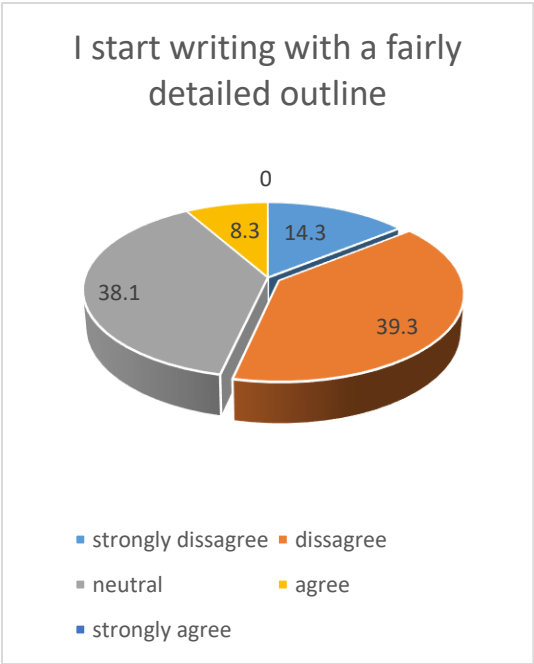


Similar negative responses can be observed for the prewriting step as well, where students admit that they read only parts or chapters of the literature that are related to their topic (55.3%), rather than carrying out a broad literature research (34%). Even more worrisome is the fact that 52.9% of the students do their research and write their paper simultaneously, which may imply that they skim through their literature just to “fill in” their papers. Moreover, students reported that they do not invest much more time into research than they do into writing, therefore it can be concluded that they mostly engage in the broad type of reading. As explained earlier, the University of Sydney (2013) defined broad reading as informative, which provides the student with an overview sufficient enough to come up with some arguments about the topic. Although such approach to research may not be appropriate for the academic level, it is evident that it still has some effect on learning, as students claim to change their initial outline or ideas about the assignment during their research process.

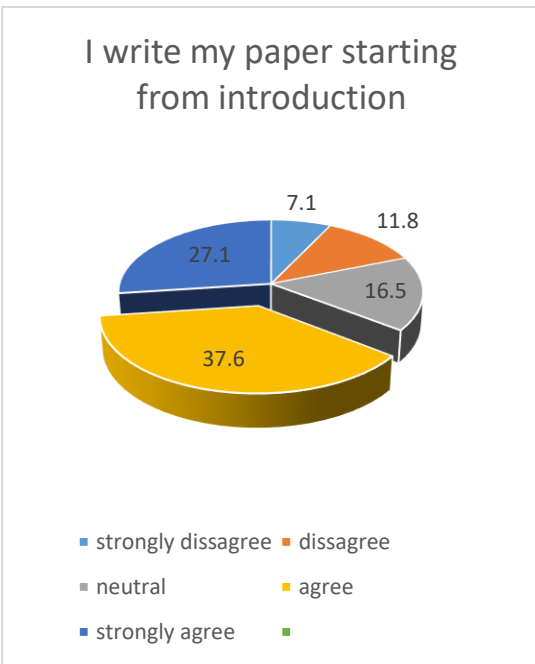
As far as the writing stage is concerned, the obtained results indicate that students do not have positive habits regarding writing. Poor implementation of the steps involved in the planning and prewriting stages have already been confirmed, as well as the fact that they have a negative outcome on the writing stage processes. So far, it has been confirmed that students start writing without a written plan, but they do agree on having some sort of a mental plan regarding what they are going to write about (34.1%). However, this mental plan can be seen as a form of a general idea, and not as something firmly worked out in detail. This may be confirmed by the statement that students write what comes to their mind and reorganize the content later (36.5%).

This may be the cause of the trouble the students have with the organization of their content, because they do not logically order their arguments in advance, but think of them from the top of their head. It can be difficult to reorganize such a text later in the process, as students may not notice the mistakes in the flow of their paper because they became overfamiliar with the content they have written. However, mental plans are not as effective as written plans, because it is difficult to retain a lot of different information for a long time, especially when it comes to details such as headlines, underlying arguments, and other details that may be important for the development of the paper content. Furthermore, mental plans can either easily be completely forgotten or it might not be easy to retrieve them. That may be due to the overflow or integration of various ideas that the student wanted to refer to, but did not take the time to work through in order to further develop the idea. That may leave the student with the “hint“ of something he wanted to say, but not with the concrete and elaborated idea. This might also lead to a writer's block. This phenomenon can also occur in the beginning of the writing process, which was also something that students expressed as a part of their problem when writing. As seen in Table 2 above, one of the most mentioned problems that the students experience is not knowing how to start writing (6%). Regarding the fact that a significant percentage of students start writing without an outline, and the majority start writing their paper starting from the introduction (37.6%), both of which guidebooks advise against, it is not surprising that students face certain difficulties during writing.

Graph 8-Outlining



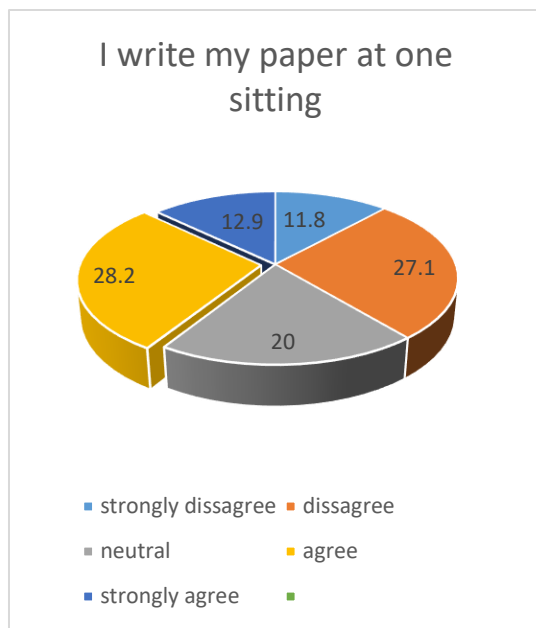
Graph 9-Introduction



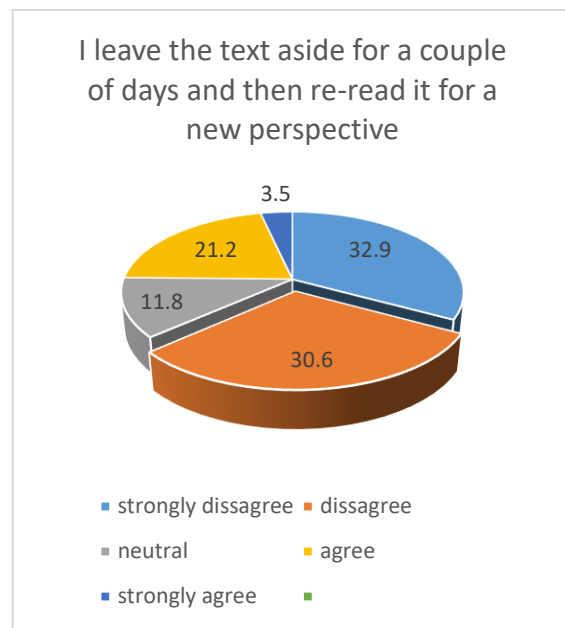
The above discussed students' approach towards writing reveals that the most crucial steps such as time management, research, planning and outlining have a great effect on the students' written paper in terms of structure, content and academic style. On the other hand, errors made during the writing process can be fixed, and the overall paper can be improved with the steps that should be carried out in the postwriting stage. However, students' responses with respect to the postwriting steps are somewhat contradictory. The first mistake is already noticed in regard to the number of drafts. Although a significant percent of students reported that their first draft is not their finished product (32.1%), the majority still reveal that they do not write several drafts of their paper (40%). Moreover, more than half of the students (51.8%) reported that they revise their paper by adding/removing information or changing their order, while at the same time, a significant number of students reported that they do not make major changes to their paper (37.6%). Therefore, the insight into the students' revision process is slightly vague. However, it can be concluded that students do make some minimum changes in the content of their paper. As stated earlier, making major changes to the paper would require restructuring of the whole composition for a better fit, which requires more time and effort for a detailed revision.

Regarding the proofreading and editing levels of postwriting, students reported that they can spot their own mistakes (32.9%), that they proofread their paper more than once (41.2%) and they do edit their paper to a certain level before handing it in (37.6%). Although students claim that a spell-check via Word processor is not their only method of editing (20.6%), it can be assumed that their postwriting methods remain at the surface level, which can be concluded from their responses to questions that deal with the problems they experience while writing and feedback they receive on their written assignments. Evidence for such a claim can be derived from other significant replies. For example, the majority of students (32.9%) never leave the text aside for a day or two in order to back away from their composition, even though doing so would reduce the effects of over familiarization with the text and enable them to spot the errors more easily.

Graph 10-Writing investment



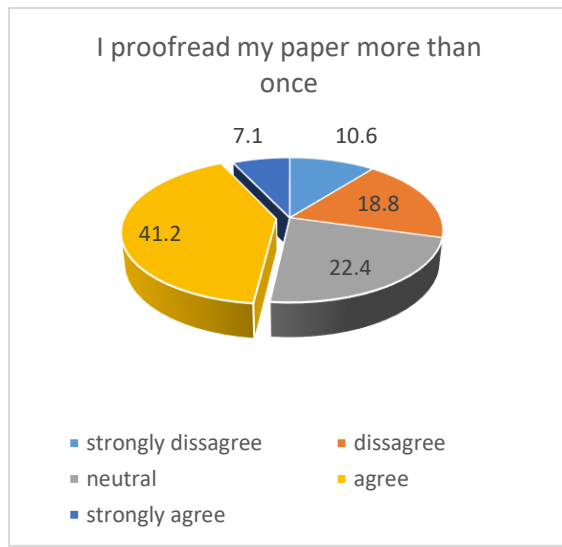
Graph 11-Leaving the text aside



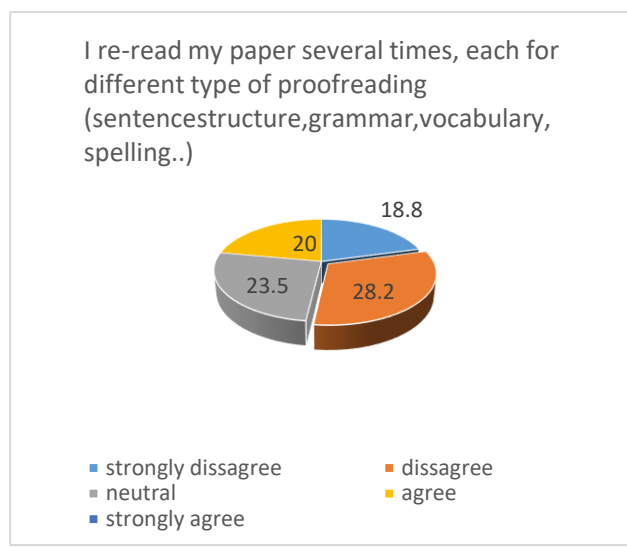
It can be concluded that the reason for that is the lack of time, because students admitted doing their assignments in the last minute. Furthermore, a significant percentage of students revealed that they write their paper at one sitting (28.2%), which could mean that they do all four stages of writing at once. Such approach to writing may not reflect positively on the students' grades, yet alone be effective for the improvement of students' writing skills.

Finally, another mistake students make is that they focus on every type of error when proofreading (45.9%), but the problem is they try to notice them all at once. The majority of students (28.2) do not take the time to read their paper several times so as to concentrate on one type of error only.

Graph 12-Proofreading



Graph 13-Re-reading for different types of errors



Taking into consideration the over familiarization with the content, and inability to focus on and spot all (the types) of errors at once, it may be concluded that students' postwriting processes are not as effective as they should be. As students already invest significant effort into re-reading their papers more than once (41.2%), they should consider focusing on each type of error separately. This could enhance the possibility of finding and correcting errors they have made in their writing. These last steps of the postwriting process can significantly improve the overall quality of the paper. However, it appears that students neglect some in-depth revision, editing and proofreading processes.

## 7. Conclusion and recommendation for further study

The aim of this research was to discover students' attitudes towards academic writing as well as their approach to the writing process. For that purpose, two research questions and underlying hypotheses were formulated.

The first research question asked whether students have positive attitudes towards writing and written assignments. As shown by the data, students do have positive attitudes towards writing as a skill. They are aware that writing is an important skill for their study and their future jobs, and they expressed the need for writing instruction in order to improve their writing skills. Although students think that good writing requires talent, they still believe that they can improve their writing skills with practice. On the other hand, students feel that they are not motivated enough and they express a certain level of disinterest when it comes to their

written assignments. This lack of motivation and interest may be the cause of the students' unsatisfactory approach to the writing process. Students revealed that they do not plan their time effectively when it comes to writing. They leave their assignments for "the last minute", and do not usually spend more than couple of hours on writing. Even if some external factors are taken into consideration, such as some personal obligations, having classes during the day, exams, some other tasks and deadlines, writing assignments are still a responsibility for which students should plan a sufficient timeframe. Poor time management is a serious issue because students are unable to devote enough time to implement some crucial steps during their writing process. Since one of the aims of this research was to explore students' approach to writing, the second research question addressed whether students undertake the steps of planning, prewriting and postwriting processes when doing their written assignments. The data revealed that students follow some steps during their writing process, such as research, mental planning of their paper, re-reading during writing, and editing. However, these are more general and surface-level actions which get the task done, but do not contribute to the quality of the overall performance in terms of the written product. The majority of students do not implement some more important steps in their writing process, such as planning enough time for the assignment, doing in-depth research, outlining their ideas on paper, and proofreading the paper in more detail. It is questionable whether the absence of some crucial steps in the students' writing approach is the result of low time investment, lack of motivation or knowledge.

With regard to the initially set research hypotheses, the data revealed an interesting outcome. The first hypothesis, *Students do not have positive feelings about writing and written assignments*, has been discarded. Regardless of the lack of motivation and general disinterest, the students' general attitudes appear to be positive. However, the second hypothesis, *Students do not follow the steps of planning, prewriting, writing and postwriting when doing their written assignments* has been confirmed as the data show that students' writing habits do not include some of the crucial steps of the writing process.

Taking into consideration the students' positive beliefs about writing, awareness of the problems they have regarding their writing and their will to learn, it seems to be a perfect foundation for implementation of activities or courses that would lead to the improvement of their writing skills. Students believe that they can improve their writing with practice, and they show a significant level of interest for some sort of writing instruction. This is a very positive fact because it shows that students are motivated, which, if handled appropriately, may be used to achieve positive results when it comes to the improvement of students' writing skills. This



information can serve as a basis for developing and introducing an academic writing course at the beginning of the English language and literature study programme. This course could teach the students how to approach the writing process in terms of some crucial steps, teach them about the requirements of academic writing style and how to reach that level of writing. The issues of style could be practiced with the help of writing exercises, such as noticing wordiness, rewriting sentences with S-V-O agreement errors, recognizing academic vocabulary and similar exercises which can be found in academic writing guidebooks. Students could be given a topic which they can brainstorm about together and try to make an outline, and be introduced to critical thinking and forming arguments through writing tasks. They could work on some “tips and tricks” for more effective writing, and learn how to proofread the text to spot errors. Introduction of an academic writing course in the first semester of the study would have significant effects. It can be assumed that freshmen students face academic-level writing for the first time, and that they have still not developed their own approach to writing. Apart from the obvious outcome where students are taught about the characteristics and criteria of the academic writing style, it could serve as a starting point for the development of good writing habits.

Although there is plenty of available material to plan such a writing course, it is important to further investigate students’ needs and desires. This could be done with the help of a more in-depth research of both the attitudes and approach to writing. As this research was based on a pen and paper questionnaire, it allowed us to collect only some surface-level information regarding how students feel about their writing assignments and how they approach them. Although it was possible to collect a large amount of information with the questionnaire, its disadvantage is a high percentage of neutral responses, and possible socially accepted answers. Moreover, there can always be issues with clarity of the questions and perceptions of the participants, which may not always be communicated. Furthermore, the questionnaire gave an insight into what actions students generally undertake when writing their assignments, but it does not give a complete insight into how they carry out these actions. This research revealed that there are certain problems when it comes to students and their writing habits. Therefore, the next step in the future research of students’ attitudes and approach towards writing is to conduct a semi-structured interview, where some of the questions from the questionnaire could be used as a guide to lead students towards the clarification of their responses. Interviews could enable a more in-depth exploration of how students feel, and how they actually approach their writing. They would have the chance to elaborate their answers in detail, give different perspectives, and address many issues that the researcher did not consider at first. These detailed

information could be used in the planning of a writing course, which would help to deal with most of the students' problems.

Finally, introducing an early writing course based on the collected information on students' needs and providing a positive writing experience could improve the students' overall writing skills and form more positive attitudes. More importantly, it would help the freshmen students build their confidence, motivate them for writing, and help them become competent writers in their academic field.

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Below are some statements on attitudes about academic writing. For each statement mark how they apply to you, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

| Statements on attitudes  | 1<br>(strongly disagree) | 2<br>(disagree) | 3<br>(neutral) | 4<br>(agree) | 5<br>(strongly agree) |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1) I believe I am a good writer  | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 2) I do not enjoy writing in English because it is a very difficult skill for me       | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 3) Learning to write in English is an important skill for my academic study/future job | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 4) I feel lost when writing  | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 5) Writing is a skill that progressively improves with practice                        | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 6) I am motivated to do my written assignments   | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 7) I do not think I am familiar enough with English writing conventions.               | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 8) I usually like what I have written  | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 9) I put a lot of myself in my written assignments                                     | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 10) Writing is a talent that some people have and others do not                        | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 11) I am afraid my essays do not make sense  | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 12) Writing assignments are always learning experiences                                | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 13) I do my writing only for the sake of completing the assignment                     | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 14) Written assignments are stressful for me   | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 15) Topics that I have to write about are usually not interesting to me                | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 16) I want to improve my writing, but I don't know how                                 | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |

| Writing approach   | 1<br>(strongly disagree) | 2<br>(disagree) | 3<br>(neutral) | 4<br>(agree) | 5<br>(strongly agree) |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 16. I spend hours doing research for a topic                                   | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 17. I make a timetable for the writing process                                 | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 18. I plan enough time for researching, writing and editing my paper           | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 19. Before I start writing I revise the requirements of the assignment         | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 20. I brainstorm about my responses to the topic                               | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 21. I note down words, short notes or sentences related to the topic           | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |
| 22. I make an outline of my paper using titles, sentences, or short paragraphs | 1                        | 2               | 3              | 4            | 5                     |

|  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 23. I read only parts/chapters that are related to my topic  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 24. I carry out a broad literature research for my topic   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 25. I make changes to initial outline during research of my topic  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 26. I tend to make notes while reading resources   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 27. I do research on my topic and write my paper simultaneously  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 28. I start writing without having a written or mental plan  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 29. I write my paper starting from introduction  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 30. I start writing with a fairly detailed outline   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 31. Often my first draft is my finished product  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 32. I write what comes to my mind, and reorganize the content later  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 33. I write several drafts of my paper   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 34. I plan, write and revise all at the same time  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 35. When I don't know how to continue, I do additional research for new ideas or additional support                                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 36. I do my assignments "the last minute"  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 37. I write about my ideas in the order that I think of them   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 38. I write my paper at one sitting  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 39. When revising my paper, I often add/remove information or change the order in which it appears                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 40. Revision is a onetime process at the end   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 41. My revision strategy is usually making minor changes, just touching up things  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 42. I cannot edit my writing because I cannot see my own mistakes  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 43. I read what I have written only when I have finished the whole paper   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 44. I hand in my paper without doing much editing  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 45. I reread my paper several times, each for different type of proofreading (sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, spelling..) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 46. When revising, I usually make changes in the content or ideas  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 47. When proofreading, I focus on every type of mistakes (sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, spelling)                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 48. I leave the text aside for a couple of days and then re-read it for a new perspective  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

|   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 49. I show my paper to my colleague and ask for their opinion                   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 50. I proofread my paper more than once   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 51. When editing, I only do spell-check in Word documents when editing my paper | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 52. I print my paper and proofread it manually                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 53. I can recognize a valid source of information                               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 54. I know how to apply citation styles   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |