

THE ACADEMIC LITERACY GAP: FROM KNOWLEDGE REPRODUCTION TO KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION IN STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The transition from secondary school to university frequently exposes disparities between the literacy practices cultivated in school contexts and those required for success in higher education. This study examines how secondary school writing preparation shapes students' transition to university writing, with particular attention to the extent to which prior learning experiences equip students for the academic literacy demands of higher education. Drawing on an exploratory mixed-methods design, data were collected from 137 first-year university students through a survey comprising quantitative and qualitative responses. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were subjected to inductive thematic analysis. The findings were subsequently integrated to generate a comprehensive understanding of students' writing preparedness and transition experiences. The results reveal that students entered university with a foundational understanding of general writing practices, including essay structure, paragraph development, formal language use, and the organisation of ideas. However, significant gaps emerged in areas central to academic literacy, particularly referencing, in-text citation, source integration, plagiarism avoidance, and independent research. Qualitative findings further indicate that students perceived university writing as fundamentally different from the writing practices emphasised in secondary schooling. While school writing was commonly characterised as guided, structured, and focused on knowledge reproduction, university writing required greater independence, critical engagement, and participation in disciplinary knowledge construction. Referencing emerged as the most significant point of discontinuity, functioning as both a technical challenge and a marker of unfamiliar academic conventions. Additionally, limited digital literacy amplified writing-related challenges for some students, highlighting the interconnected nature of academic and technological competencies in contemporary higher education. The study argues that students' difficulties with university writing are best understood as manifestations of an academic literacy gap arising from a structural misalignment between secondary-school writing preparation and university expectations. By illuminating how this gap shapes students' transition experiences, the study contributes to ongoing debates on academic literacy development, educational articulation, and student success in higher education. The findings underscore the need for stronger alignment between secondary-school writing instruction and the academic literacy demands of university study.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is central to student participation and success in higher education. As higher education systems continue to expand and diversify, concerns regarding students' preparedness for university-level writing have attracted increasing attention among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners (Bean & Melzer, 2021). These concerns are particularly pronounced in contexts characterised by widening participation, where students enter university with diverse educational, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Although expanded access has created new opportunities for participation in higher education, it has also raised important questions regarding the extent to which prior educational experiences adequately prepare students for the literacy demands of university study (Sim, 2021).

Academic writing extends beyond the mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and textual organisation (Barasa, 2024). Participation in higher education requires students to engage with disciplinary ways of constructing, evaluating, and communicating knowledge (McConlogue, 2020). In this regard, university writing differs from many school-based writing practices. While secondary-school writing often emphasises the reproduction and demonstration of knowledge, university writing increasingly requires students to construct knowledge through analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and argumentation. Consequently, students entering higher education are expected not only to write effectively but also to navigate academic conventions relating to evidence, argumentation, source integration, and scholarly communication.

The transition from secondary school to university can therefore present significant challenges. First-year students often experience difficulties with academic writing despite having prior experience of formal writing in school (Mudau et al., 2025). While secondary education may provide important foundations in essay writing, paragraph development, and language use, students frequently report challenges relating to referencing, academic integrity, critical engagement with sources, independent research, and disciplinary argumentation. These challenges may not simply reflect deficiencies in writing ability but rather a mismatch between the literacy practices cultivated in secondary education and those expected in higher education. The transition to university writing thus involves more than an increase in complexity; it requires students to adapt to new assumptions about knowledge, authority, evidence, and participation in academic discourse (McCarthy, 2020). Despite growing research on academic literacy and educational transitions, relatively little attention has been

paid to how students experience the shift from secondary-school writing practices centred on knowledge reproduction to university writing practices requiring knowledge construction. Existing research has frequently focused on students' writing difficulties after they have entered higher education, often examining specific aspects of preparedness such as language proficiency, referencing, or academic integrity in isolation. Consequently, less is known about how students themselves understand the relationship between their prior writing experiences and the epistemological demands of university writing, or how academic literacy gaps emerge during this transition.

Against this background, the present study examines the academic literacy gap that emerges as students transition from secondary-school writing practices centred on knowledge reproduction to university writing practices that require knowledge construction. Drawing on the experiences of first-year undergraduate students, the study explores how students perceive the relationship between their secondary-school writing preparation and the academic writing demands of higher education. Using an exploratory mixed-methods approach, the study seeks to understand how students experience this transition and the academic literacy challenges that arise during the shift from knowledge reproduction to knowledge construction.

The study contributes to scholarship on academic literacy and educational transitions by illuminating students' experiences of moving between differing writing cultures and epistemological expectations. By foregrounding students' perspectives, it provides insight into how academic literacy gaps are experienced during the transition to higher education and offers evidence that may inform curriculum development and academic literacy support initiatives aimed at strengthening alignment between secondary and university education. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question:

- How do first-year university students experience the shift from knowledge reproduction in secondary-school writing to knowledge construction in university writing?

To situate the study within existing scholarship, the next section reviews literature on academic literacy in higher education, academic writing expectations, and students' transition from secondary school to university. Particular attention is given to the distinction between knowledge reproduction and knowledge construction, the role of secondary-school writing instruction in preparing students for university writing, and the academic literacy gaps that may emerge during this transition. The review highlights the need for empirical research that examines how students themselves experience and interpret these challenges during their first year of university study.

2. LITERATURE

2.1 Academic Literacy in Higher Education

Academic literacy is widely recognised as a critical determinant of student participation and success in higher education (Talwar et al., 2023, Murray, 2022). Although early conceptualisations often portrayed academic literacy as a collection of transferable skills associated with reading, writing, and language proficiency, contemporary scholarship increasingly challenges such narrow interpretations (Molinari, 2022, Sulaiman, 2025). Academic literacy is now understood as a socially situated practice through which students engage with the conventions, values, and knowledge systems of academic communities (Li, 2022). From this perspective, literacy extends beyond technical competence to include the ability to interpret, construct, and communicate knowledge in ways that are recognised and valued within particular disciplinary contexts. Academic literacy therefore encompasses both the visible features of writing and the less visible assumptions that shape how knowledge is produced and evaluated in higher education. This broader understanding has shifted attention from what students can write to how they participate in academic meaning-making processes.

The social nature of academic literacy is particularly evident within disciplinary communities, where knowledge is communicated through distinctive forms of language, argumentation, and evidence (Galloway et al., 2020). Universities are not homogeneous literacy environments but comprise multiple discourse communities, each characterised by specific expectations regarding scholarly communication. To participate successfully in these communities, students must learn not only disciplinary content but also the conventions governing how knowledge is organised, justified, and presented. Academic writing consequently functions as a gateway to disciplinary participation, enabling students to demonstrate both intellectual engagement and membership within scholarly communities (French, 2020). However, many of these conventions remain implicit, creating challenges for students who are unfamiliar with the expectations of university discourse. As a result, students often encounter academic writing as a fundamentally different form of literacy from that experienced during their prior educational journeys.

Academic literacy is therefore best understood as a multidimensional and developmental process rather than a fixed set of competencies. Effective participation in higher education requires students to integrate a range of interconnected practices, including critical reading, argument construction, source evaluation, information literacy, and academic writing (Mammadova, 2023). Importantly, students do not necessarily develop these competencies at the same rate or to the same degree. Consequently, learners may demonstrate confidence in some dimensions of literacy while experiencing difficulty in others, particularly during the transition into higher education. This unevenness has important implications for understanding preparedness because it suggests that students enter university with differing

levels of familiarity with academic literacy practices. Such variations highlight the need to examine more closely the writing expectations that students encounter within higher education and the challenges these expectations present during the transition from secondary education..

2.2 Academic Writing Expectations in Higher Education

Academic writing occupies a central position within higher education because it serves as the principal means through which students demonstrate learning, engage with disciplinary knowledge, and participate in scholarly discourse. Unlike many forms of writing encountered during secondary education, university writing requires students to move beyond the reproduction of information towards the analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of ideas (Sternglass, 2017). Students are expected to construct coherent arguments, engage critically with evidence, and communicate their perspectives in ways that reflect disciplinary conventions. Consequently, academic writing functions not only as a mode of assessment but also as a mechanism through which students develop intellectual independence and disciplinary competence (Inouye and McAlpine, 2019). The ability to write effectively is therefore closely associated with broader processes of knowledge construction and academic participation. These expectations often represent a significant adjustment for students entering higher education, particularly where prior writing experiences have emphasised content recall rather than critical engagement.

A defining characteristic of university writing is its emphasis on evidence-based argumentation and engagement with existing scholarship (Morris et al., 2024). Students are expected to locate, evaluate, and integrate sources into their writing while simultaneously developing original and defensible positions. This requires competence in a range of academic practices, including referencing, citation, source synthesis, and the ethical use of information. In addition, students must learn to establish an appropriate academic voice that demonstrates both critical engagement and scholarly credibility (Gray, 2017). These demands extend beyond technical writing proficiency and require students to understand the conventions through which academic communities construct and validate knowledge. For many first-year students, such expectations represent unfamiliar forms of literacy that require substantial adaptation and learning.

The complexity of academic writing is further compounded by the fact that literacy expectations vary across disciplines and institutional contexts (Bailey, 2018). Different fields of study employ distinctive approaches to argumentation, evidence, and scholarly communication, requiring students to navigate multiple and sometimes competing conventions (Shanahan and Shanahan, 2017). As a result, academic writing cannot be understood as a single, uniform practice but rather as a collection of discipline-specific

literacy practices. Students entering higher education must therefore learn not only how to write academically but also how to respond to the expectations of particular academic communities. However, difficulties often emerge in areas such as critical argumentation, source integration, referencing, and engagement with scholarly literature, suggesting that these dimensions of academic literacy present particular challenges during the transition to university study (Mohamed Amar and Mohamed Amar, 2024). Understanding these expectations is essential for examining how students experience the move from secondary-school writing to university writing and how they evaluate their preparedness for these demands.

2.3 Student Transition from Secondary School to Higher Education

The transition from secondary school to higher education represents a significant academic adjustment that extends beyond changes in educational setting. Entering university requires students to adapt to new expectations regarding learning, knowledge construction, and academic participation. Higher education places greater emphasis on independent learning, critical inquiry, and self-regulation, often requiring students to assume greater responsibility for managing their academic progress (Ghanizadeh, 2017). Therefore, for many students, the first year of study may be characterised by a process of adjustment in which established learning practices are re-evaluated in response to unfamiliar institutional demands. The success of this transition has important implications for academic performance, persistence, and student engagement. Consequently, understanding how students experience the move from school to university remains a central concern within higher education research.

Nevertheless, students do not enter higher education as blank slates but bring with them educational experiences, expectations, and learning practices developed through prior schooling. These experiences shape how students interpret and respond to the demands of university study. However, the transition is often complicated by differences between school and university environments, particularly in relation to academic writing and knowledge engagement (McGhie, 2017). Whereas secondary-school learning is frequently characterised by structured guidance and clearly defined expectations, university learning often requires students to navigate ambiguity, exercise independent judgement, and engage more critically with information (Aston, 2024). Students' perceptions of preparedness are therefore influenced not only by the competencies they possess but also by the extent to which those competencies align with the expectations encountered in higher education. This suggests that preparedness is as much a matter of educational alignment as it is of individual capability.

Research further indicates that students experience transition unevenly, with some adapting more readily than others to the demands of university learning (Li and Lee, 2025). Variations in schooling quality, access to educational resources, language background, and prior

exposure to academic forms of writing can influence how students experience the transition process (Li and Lee, 2025). Importantly, students may feel prepared in certain aspects of academic work while simultaneously experiencing difficulties in others. Such challenges simplistic distinctions between prepared and unprepared students and point instead to varying levels of preparedness across different dimensions of academic literacy. Examining students' experiences of transition is therefore essential for understanding how academic literacy challenges emerge and how students interpret the relationship between their prior educational experiences and university expectations. This provides a foundation for exploring the role of secondary-school writing instruction in preparing students for the demands of higher education.

2.4 Secondary-School Writing Instruction and Preparation for University

Secondary-school writing instruction plays a fundamental role in shaping students' readiness for higher education. Through formal writing activities, learners are introduced to key competencies such as organising ideas, constructing paragraphs, developing essays, and using appropriate language conventions (Seo and Kim, 2020). These experiences provide an important foundation for future academic engagement and are intended to equip students with the literacy skills required for further study. Writing instruction at school level also contributes to the development of communication, reasoning, and critical thinking abilities that are widely regarded as essential for academic success (Tilahun et al., 2022). However, questions persist regarding the extent to which these experiences adequately prepare students for the literacy demands encountered in higher education. Increasingly, researchers have argued that while secondary education may establish foundational writing competencies, it does not always provide sufficient preparation for the specialised forms of academic writing required at university (Graham, 2019).

This body of literature demonstrate that there is a distinction between school-based writing practices and university academic writing expectations. Secondary-school writing frequently emphasises demonstrating subject knowledge, responding to structured tasks, and adhering to prescribed formats (Miller et al., 2018). By contrast, university writing requires students to engage critically with ideas, synthesise information from multiple sources, construct evidence-based arguments, and participate in scholarly debates (Uzun, 2024). Higher education also places greater emphasis on academic integrity, referencing conventions, source evaluation, and independent inquiry (Fazilatfar et al., 2018). These differences suggest that the transition to university writing involves more than the application of previously acquired skills; it often requires students to adapt to new literacy practices and unfamiliar expectations regarding knowledge production and communication. Consequently, students may enter higher education feeling confident in their general writing abilities while simultaneously experiencing difficulties with aspects of writing that were not explicitly

developed during their secondary education. The effectiveness of secondary-school preparation is further influenced by broader contextual factors, including curriculum design, instructional approaches, educational resources, and variations in schooling quality (Foster, 2017). Students from different educational backgrounds may therefore arrive at university with markedly different experiences of writing instruction and differing levels of exposure to academic forms of literacy. Therefore, perceptions of preparedness are often shaped by these prior experiences, with students frequently reporting confidence in foundational writing skills but uncertainty regarding the conventions and expectations of university writing. Such assumptions suggest that preparedness should not be viewed as a uniform outcome of schooling but rather as a continuum influenced by the nature and quality of prior educational experiences. Understanding how secondary-school writing instruction prepares students for university is therefore critical for identifying areas of alignment and discontinuity between educational sectors. This issue is central to debates concerning academic literacy gaps and provides the basis for examining how such gaps emerge during students' transition to higher education.

2.5 Academic Literacy Gaps Between Secondary School and University

The concept of an academic literacy gap has become an important framework for understanding the challenges students encounter during the transition from secondary education to higher education. Academic literacy gaps refer to discontinuities between the literacy practices, knowledge, and expectations developed through prior schooling and those required for successful participation in university learning (Wahleithner, 2020). These gaps do not necessarily arise because students lack literacy abilities; rather, they emerge when students encounter unfamiliar forms of reading, writing, and knowledge engagement that differ from their previous educational experiences. Such discontinuities are frequently evident in areas such as critical argumentation, source integration, referencing, academic integrity, and participation in disciplinary discourse (Marsh and Campion, 2018). As universities continue to enrol increasingly diverse student populations, understanding the nature of these literacy gaps has become a significant concern within higher education research. The concept therefore provides a useful lens through which to examine how students experience the transition from school-based literacy practices to university academic discourse.

Research consistently indicates that students enter higher education with varying levels of preparedness for academic writing and learning (Wollscheid et al., 2021). While many possess foundational competencies in written communication, they often report difficulties adapting to the specialised literacy practices required at university (Liu and Read, 2020). These challenges commonly include engaging critically with sources, constructing evidence-based arguments, interpreting academic texts, and navigating disciplinary conventions

(Mudau et al., 2025). Importantly, preparedness is rarely experienced as either complete readiness or complete deficiency. Instead, students often demonstrate competence in some dimensions of academic literacy while experiencing difficulties in others. This suggests that academic literacy gaps are multidimensional in nature and reflect uneven development across different literacy practices rather than a simple absence of skill or knowledge (Fu and Wang, 2022).

The literature increasingly therefore, challenges deficit-oriented interpretations of student preparedness by emphasising the importance of educational alignment and academic socialisation. From this perspective, difficulties encountered during the transition to higher education reflect the extent to which students' prior literacy experiences correspond with university expectations rather than deficiencies in their abilities. Students may therefore enter university as capable writers while remaining unfamiliar with the conventions through which academic knowledge is constructed, communicated, and evaluated. This understanding highlights the multidimensional nature of academic literacy gaps and draws attention to the influence of educational context on students' preparedness for university writing. In contexts characterised by educational inequality, resource constraints, large class sizes, and limited opportunities for sustained writing instruction, the transition from knowledge reproduction to knowledge construction may present particular challenges. Addressing these issues is especially important in the South African context, where persistent disparities in schooling continue to shape students' educational trajectories. The present study responds to this concern by examining how first-year students experience and interpret the transition from secondary-school writing to university writing. The following section outlines the conceptual and theoretical framework that informs this investigation.

3. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examines how first-year university students experience the shift from knowledge reproduction in secondary-school writing to knowledge construction in university writing. Understanding this transition requires a perspective that views literacy not as a neutral set of technical skills but as a socially situated practice shaped by particular educational contexts. The study therefore draws on New Literacy Studies (NLS) and the Academic Literacies Framework. Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for understanding how academic literacy is developed, how literacy practices differ across educational settings, and how academic literacy gaps emerge during the transition to higher education.

3.1 New Literacy Studies

New Literacy Studies (NLS) emerged in response to traditional approaches that conceptualised literacy as a universal and transferable set of skills. Instead, NLS views

literacy as a social practice embedded within particular cultural, institutional, and historical contexts (Andrews et al., 2020; Noreen & Iqbal, 2025). From this perspective, reading and writing are not neutral activities but forms of participation through which individuals engage with the values, expectations, and knowledge practices of specific communities.

A key insight of NLS is that literacy practices vary across contexts. What counts as effective writing in one setting may not necessarily satisfy the expectations of another. The transition from secondary school to university can therefore be understood as movement between different literacy contexts, each characterised by distinct assumptions about knowledge, learning, and communication. Students entering higher education may possess literacy practices that were effective within school settings yet encounter difficulties when expected to participate in unfamiliar forms of academic discourse.

NLS is particularly relevant to the present study because it challenges deficit-oriented interpretations of student writing difficulties. Academic literacy gaps are understood not as evidence of an absence of literacy abilities but as discontinuities between the literacy practices developed through prior schooling and those expected within higher education. This perspective shifts attention from individual deficiencies to the relationship between educational contexts and literacy demands, providing a foundation for understanding students' experiences of transition.

3.2 Academic Literacies Framework

While NLS provides a broad understanding of literacy as social practice, the Academic Literacies Framework offers a more specific lens for examining literacy within higher education. Developed in response to skills-based approaches to academic writing, the framework conceptualises academic literacy as a complex social practice involving meaning-making, identity, institutional expectations, and disciplinary knowledge construction (Hilsdon et al., 2019; Tuck, 2022; Saxena, 2025).

Central to the framework is the recognition that academic writing involves more than mastering technical conventions. Students must learn how knowledge is produced, evaluated, and communicated within academic communities. Academic writing therefore requires participation in disciplinary forms of reasoning, argumentation, evidence use, and scholarly communication. Difficulties with academic writing are consequently understood as challenges of academic socialisation rather than simply deficiencies in writing ability.

The framework is particularly useful for interpreting the transition examined in this study. Whereas secondary-school writing often emphasises the reproduction and demonstration of knowledge, university writing increasingly requires students to construct knowledge through

analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and argumentation. Academic literacy gaps emerge when students encounter unfamiliar expectations regarding how knowledge should be produced, justified, and communicated. The Academic Literacies Framework therefore provides a lens for understanding how students experience and negotiate the shift from knowledge reproduction to knowledge construction during their transition to university writing.

3.3 Conceptual Positioning of the Study

Drawing on NLS and the Academic Literacies Framework, this study conceptualises academic literacy as a socially situated and developmental process that extends beyond technical writing skills. The transition from secondary school to university is understood as a movement between different literacy contexts and epistemological expectations. In this transition, students are required to move from writing practices that primarily emphasise knowledge reproduction towards practices that require knowledge construction and participation in academic discourse.

The study conceptualises academic literacy gaps as discontinuities between the literacy practices cultivated through secondary-school education and those expected within higher education. These gaps are viewed not as indicators of student deficit but as manifestations of varying degrees of alignment between prior educational experiences and university literacy demands. Students' preparedness for university writing is therefore understood as multidimensional, reflecting their exposure to different literacy practices, academic conventions, and opportunities for engagement with knowledge construction.

Guided by this conceptualisation, the study investigates how first-year students experience and interpret the shift from knowledge reproduction in secondary-school writing to knowledge construction in university writing, and how academic literacy gaps emerge during this transition.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an exploratory mixed-methods research design to investigate how secondary-school writing preparation shapes students' transition to university-level academic writing. A mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because academic literacy is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing both measurable perceptions of preparedness and students' subjective experiences of educational transition. The study was situated within a pragmatic research paradigm, which recognises the value of combining quantitative and qualitative forms of evidence to address complex educational questions. By integrating numerical and narrative data, the study sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of how first-year students experience the shift from secondary-school writing practices to

university academic writing. The study was conducted at a South African university and focused on first-year undergraduate students. First-year students were selected because they occupy a transitional position between secondary and higher education and are therefore well placed to reflect on the relationship between their prior educational experiences and the literacy demands encountered at university. The institution serves a substantial proportion of students from rural and historically disadvantaged communities, many of whom have attended under-resourced schools. This context provides a valuable setting for examining how prior educational experiences shape students' transition from secondary-school writing to university academic writing. Data were collected from 137 students through an online survey using a non-probability convenience sampling strategy. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The survey incorporated both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The quantitative component examined students' perceptions of preparedness across several dimensions of academic writing, including assignment structure, paragraph development, formal language use, argument construction, plagiarism awareness, referencing practices, citation skills, and familiarity with academic writing conventions. The qualitative component invited participants to reflect on their experiences of transitioning from secondary-school writing to university writing, their perceptions of preparedness, and any factors they believed influenced their ability to engage with academic writing in higher education. This design enabled participants to identify challenges and experiences that may not have been anticipated by the researcher.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, means, and rankings, to identify patterns in students' perceptions of preparedness across different dimensions of academic writing. Given the exploratory nature of the study, descriptive statistics were considered appropriate for identifying areas in which students perceived themselves as relatively well prepared or insufficiently prepared for university writing.

Qualitative data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach informed by the study's conceptual framework. Responses were read repeatedly to facilitate familiarisation with the dataset, after which recurring ideas, experiences, and perceptions were coded and grouped into broader categories. Through an iterative process of comparison and refinement, these categories were developed into themes that captured key dimensions of students' transition experiences. While the analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts, interpretation was informed by concepts derived from New Literacy Studies and the Academic Literacies Framework, particularly the notions of literacy as social practice, academic literacy gaps, and the transition from knowledge reproduction to knowledge construction. The quantitative and qualitative findings were subsequently integrated through triangulation and comparative

interpretation to identify areas of convergence and divergence across the two datasets. This process enabled statistical patterns to be contextualised and elaborated through participants' narratives, thereby providing a richer understanding of how academic literacy gaps are experienced during the transition to higher education. To enhance the credibility of the findings, methodological triangulation, systematic coding procedures, and attention to divergent perspectives were employed throughout the analysis.

The study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical principles governing educational research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. To minimise potential coercion, students were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that their decision to participate or not participate would have no bearing on their academic standing, assessment outcomes, or relationship with the researcher. Data were reported in aggregate form, and no personally identifying information was collected.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Uneven Academic Writing Preparedness: Evidence of a Structural Literacy Gap

The findings reveal a complex picture of students' preparedness for university-level academic writing. Contrary to assumptions that students enter higher education without writing competencies, the evidence suggests that respondents possessed a foundational repertoire of writing skills acquired during secondary schooling. However, these competencies were unevenly distributed across different dimensions of academic literacy. While students generally expressed confidence in conventional writing practices, they reported considerably lower levels of preparedness in relation to the specialised conventions that characterise academic writing in higher education.

To contextualise these findings, Table 1 presents the respondent profile and selected indicators of prior writing experience.

Table 1: Respondent Profile and Perceptions of Academic Writing Preparation (N = 137)

Indicator	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Attended public school	132	96.4
Received written assignments often/very often	79	57.7
Believe academic writing should be taught in high school	123	89.8
Familiar with UK English conventions	48	35.0
Familiar with other English conventions	54	39.4
Unsure of English conventions used	32	23.4

The data indicate that most respondents had considerable exposure to written assignments during secondary schooling. However, the finding that 89.8 per cent believed academic writing should be explicitly taught at school level suggests a widespread perception that existing preparation was insufficient for the literacy demands encountered at university. This finding is significant because it points to a perceived disconnect between school-based writing experiences and university expectations.

A clearer picture emerges when specific dimensions of academic writing preparedness are examined. Table 2 presents respondents' self-reported levels of preparedness across selected academic writing competencies.

Table 2: Self-Reported Preparedness Across Academic Writing Competencies

Competency	Mean Score
Understanding assignment structure	3.77
Using formal language	3.64
Avoiding slang and informal expressions	3.59
Writing coherent paragraphs	3.55
Expressing ideas clearly	3.49
Understanding plagiarism	2.85
Referencing sources correctly	2.61
Using in-text citations	2.43
Familiarity with Harvard referencing	2.24

The distribution of scores reveals a notable distinction between foundational writing competencies and source-based academic practices. Respondents reported relatively high levels of confidence in assignment structure, formal language use, paragraph development, and clarity of expression. In contrast, considerably lower levels of preparedness were reported in relation to plagiarism awareness, referencing practices, in-text citation, and familiarity with Harvard referencing. These findings suggest that secondary schooling provides students with a foundation in writing as communication but offers less preparation for writing as a scholarly practice requiring engagement with sources and academic conventions.

The qualitative findings reinforce this pattern. One participant explained that secondary schooling provided instruction in “grammar, paragraph structure, and essay writing” but offered limited exposure to “independent research and academic integrity” (P18). Another participant noted that school writing focused primarily on basic structure, whereas university assignments required more advanced engagement with information and evidence (P40). Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that students entered university with what may be described as partial academic literacy preparedness, possessing

many of the visible features of competent writing while lacking familiarity with important conventions of academic knowledge production.

5.2 From Guided Writing to Independent Knowledge Construction

A second major finding concerns the changing nature of intellectual engagement required as students move from secondary school to higher education. Across the dataset, respondents consistently described university writing as requiring greater independence, critical thinking, and analytical engagement than they had previously experienced. These accounts suggest that the transition to university involves more than adapting to new writing formats; it requires students to adopt different ways of engaging with knowledge.

Participants frequently contrasted the structured nature of school writing with the more demanding expectations associated with university assignments. One respondent observed that university writing required students to become “more independent” in their writing practices (P3). Another explained that while school assignments were often highly structured, university writing required “critical thinking, analysing information, and forming your own arguments” (P22). Similar observations were evident across numerous responses, indicating that many students perceived a substantial shift in the intellectual demands associated with writing.

These findings suggest that preparedness for academic writing extends beyond technical competence and includes the ability to evaluate evidence, engage critically with information, and construct defensible arguments. This helps explain why some respondents who reported confidence in basic writing skills nevertheless experienced difficulties with university assignments. The challenge was not necessarily producing grammatically correct text but adapting to a different conception of what academic writing is intended to accomplish.

5.3 Referencing as a Critical Area of Academic Adjustment

Among all dimensions of academic writing preparedness, referencing emerged as the most significant area of difficulty. The quantitative findings revealed particularly low levels of preparedness in relation to citation practices, with familiarity with Harvard referencing, in-text citation, and source referencing recording the lowest scores across all competencies measured. These results indicate that a substantial proportion of students entered university with limited prior exposure to one of the most fundamental conventions of academic writing. The qualitative data provide further insight into these difficulties. Several participants described encountering formal referencing practices for the first time at university. One respondent stated, “This part of using Harvard reference style and citations ... I had no clue on how to use that or apply it to my assignments” (P26). Similarly, another participant

explained, “It was my first time doing it when writing assignments” (P11). These responses suggest that students’ challenges extended beyond technical difficulties and reflected a broader unfamiliarity with the conventions governing academic work.

The prominence of referencing difficulties throughout the dataset highlights a significant discontinuity between secondary-school and university literacy practices. While school writing often emphasises content presentation and textual organisation, university writing requires students to engage with scholarly sources, acknowledge intellectual contributions, and position their arguments within existing academic conversations. Referencing therefore emerged as a key point at which students encountered the distinct expectations of higher education academic discourse.

5.4 Digital Literacy as an Emerging Dimension of Academic Preparedness

Although less prominent than referencing and critical writing, digital literacy emerged as an important factor shaping students’ academic writing experiences. Several respondents reported difficulties associated with typing, document formatting, online learning platforms, and electronic assignment submission. These challenges were particularly evident among students with limited prior exposure to computers and educational technologies.

One participant reported struggling with both citation practices and computer use because of limited experience working digitally (P6). Another described difficulties using Moodle for assignment submission due to limited technological familiarity (P13). These responses suggest that students’ preparedness for academic writing is increasingly influenced by their ability to navigate technologically mediated learning environments.

While discussions of academic writing preparedness frequently focus on language, structure, and argumentation, the findings indicate that digital competence constitutes an important component of contemporary academic literacy. Students who lack familiarity with digital technologies may therefore encounter additional challenges during the transition to higher education, particularly as academic communication and assessment become increasingly technology dependent.

5.5 Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the findings reveal a structural misalignment between the literacy practices cultivated in secondary schooling and those expected within higher education. Students generally entered university with foundational competencies relating to writing structure, organisation, and formal expression. However, these strengths were not accompanied by equivalent preparation in referencing, source integration, academic integrity, critical

argumentation, and independent research. The findings therefore suggest that preparedness for university writing should not be understood as a binary distinction between prepared and unprepared students. Rather, preparedness exists across multiple dimensions, with students demonstrating varying levels of competence across different aspects of academic literacy. The most significant challenges identified in the study were associated not with basic writing ability but with the specialised literacy practices through which academic knowledge is constructed, evaluated, and communicated within higher education. Collectively, the evidence points to a process of academic adjustment in which students must learn not only how to write, but also how to participate effectively in the intellectual and procedural conventions of university life.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Reframing the Academic Literacy Gap: From Deficit to Partial Preparedness

A central contribution of this study is its reconceptualisation of the academic literacy gap. Academic writing difficulties are frequently interpreted as evidence that students lack the skills required for successful participation in higher education. However, the findings challenge this assumption by demonstrating that respondents entered university with a range of foundational writing competencies acquired through secondary schooling. Students reported confidence in areas such as essay structure, paragraph development, formal language use, and the organisation of ideas, suggesting that many possessed established writing practices prior to entering higher education.

The difficulties experienced by respondents therefore appear to stem not from an absence of writing ability but from a mismatch between the literacy practices cultivated in secondary education and those expected within university contexts. This finding supports perspectives that conceptualise literacy as a socially situated practice rather than a purely technical skill. Academic writing requires students to engage with institutional conventions, disciplinary expectations, and knowledge practices that may differ substantially from those encountered during schooling. The academic literacy gap identified in this study is consequently better understood as a gap in socialisation into academic discourse than as a deficiency in students' writing abilities.

The findings further suggest that preparedness for university writing exists along a continuum rather than as a binary distinction between prepared and unprepared students. Respondents demonstrated competence in the visible features of writing, including structure, grammar, and formal expression, yet reported difficulties with less visible aspects of academic literacy such as referencing, source integration, plagiarism avoidance, and independent research. This pattern points towards a condition of partial preparedness, in which students possess important literacy foundations but lack familiarity with some of the specialised practices

associated with higher education. Preparedness should therefore be viewed as dynamic and developmental, evolving through participation in academic communities and engagement with disciplinary literacy practices.

6.2 Academic Socialisation and the Challenge of University Writing

The findings indicate that students' transition to university writing is fundamentally a process of academic socialisation. This was most evident in relation to referencing, which emerged as the area of greatest difficulty across the dataset. Although referencing is often treated as a technical skill, the findings suggest that it functions as a mechanism through which students learn how knowledge is constructed, attributed, and legitimised within academic communities. Respondents consistently reported limited prior exposure to citation practices and source integration, indicating that many encountered these conventions for the first time at university. The significance of this finding extends beyond referencing itself. Through engagement with citation practices, students are required to acknowledge intellectual authority, position their arguments within existing scholarship, and participate in broader academic conversations. Difficulties with referencing therefore reflect a broader challenge associated with entry into unfamiliar knowledge practices. The findings suggest that many students were not only learning how to reference but were simultaneously learning the underlying assumptions and values that govern academic discourse. This highlights a discontinuity between secondary-school writing instruction and the literacy expectations of higher education.

A similar pattern emerged in respondents' descriptions of the shift from guided writing to independent knowledge construction. Participants frequently contrasted the structured nature of school writing with the greater independence demanded by university assignments. While secondary-school writing was often associated with content reproduction and adherence to prescribed formats, university writing required critical engagement with evidence, argument development, and independent reasoning. The transition to university writing therefore involved not only new conventions but also new ways of thinking about knowledge and learning. This helps explain why confidence in general writing skills did not necessarily translate into confidence in academic writing. Students were required to move from demonstrating what they knew to demonstrating how they evaluated, interpreted, and constructed knowledge.

6.3 Digital Literacy and Contemporary Academic Participation

A further finding concerns the role of digital literacy in shaping students' academic writing experiences. Although digital challenges were less frequently reported than referencing and critical writing difficulties, they nevertheless emerged as a meaningful aspect of the transition to higher education. Respondents described challenges associated with typing, formatting,

online learning platforms, and electronic assignment submission, indicating that academic writing increasingly occurs within technologically mediated environments. This finding extends conventional understandings of academic literacy by drawing attention to the technological dimensions of academic participation. Universities often assume that students possess the digital competencies necessary to navigate learning management systems, word-processing software, online research tools, and electronic submission platforms. However, the experiences reported by respondents suggest that such assumptions may not always be warranted. For students with limited prior exposure to digital technologies, difficulties associated with technology may compound existing challenges related to writing and academic adjustment.

The increasing digitalisation of higher education means that academic literacy can no longer be understood solely in terms of reading and writing practices. Participation in contemporary academic environments requires competence in both traditional literacy practices and the technological systems through which academic work is produced, communicated, and assessed. The findings therefore suggest that digital literacy should be recognised as an integral component of academic literacy preparedness and student transition within higher education.

7. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have important implications for academic literacy scholarship and educational practice. Theoretically, the study challenges deficit-oriented interpretations of students' writing difficulties by demonstrating that first-year students enter higher education with unevenly developed literacy competencies rather than an absence of writing ability. The findings support academic literacy perspectives that conceptualise writing as a socially situated practice and suggest that preparedness for university writing is best understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing textual, procedural, epistemological, and technological dimensions. This perspective extends conventional understandings of academic readiness by highlighting the importance of academic socialisation and participation in disciplinary knowledge practices.

The study further advances the concept of partial preparedness by illustrating that students may demonstrate competence in foundational writing practices while simultaneously experiencing difficulties with referencing, source integration, academic integrity, and critical engagement with knowledge. Preparedness should therefore be viewed as a developmental process rather than a fixed state. This insight contributes to scholarship on educational transitions by emphasising that students' adjustment to higher education involves more than the acquisition of technical writing skills; it requires adaptation to new ways of constructing, evaluating, and communicating knowledge. From a practical perspective, the findings

highlight the need for greater alignment between secondary-school writing instruction and university academic literacy expectations. Secondary-school curricula should provide learners with opportunities to engage with evidence-based argumentation, source evaluation, academic integrity, and referencing practices before entering higher education. Such exposure would not require schools to replicate university curricula but would facilitate familiarity with the conventions underpinning academic knowledge production and reduce discontinuities between educational sectors.

The findings also underscore the importance of developmental academic literacy support within higher education institutions. Universities should avoid assuming that students possess prior knowledge of academic conventions and instead provide structured opportunities for academic socialisation through first-year literacy programmes, writing centres, foundation modules, and orientation initiatives. Particular attention should be given to referencing practices and digital literacy, both of which emerged as significant areas of challenge. Supporting these dimensions of academic literacy may contribute to more equitable transition experiences and strengthen students' capacity to participate successfully in contemporary academic environments.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was conducted at a single South African university, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other institutional contexts. Students' experiences of academic literacy transitions are shaped by local educational, social, and institutional conditions, and these may differ across universities and student populations. Second, the study relied on students' self-reported perceptions of preparedness and transition experiences rather than direct assessments of academic writing performance. Consequently, the findings reflect how students understood and interpreted their experiences rather than objective measures of academic literacy competence. Third, the use of a non-probability convenience sampling strategy limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the broader population of first-year university students.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into how students from diverse and often under-resourced educational backgrounds experience the transition from secondary-school writing to university writing. By foregrounding students' perspectives, the study contributes to understanding the academic literacy challenges associated with the shift from knowledge reproduction to knowledge construction and highlights areas requiring further investigation across different higher education contexts.

9. CONCLUSION

This study examined how secondary-school writing preparation shapes students' transition to university writing and explored the academic literacy challenges encountered during this process. The findings indicate that students enter higher education with important foundational writing competencies but experience difficulties when confronted with the specialised literacy practices that characterise academic discourse. Challenges associated with referencing, source integration, academic integrity, critical argumentation, independent research, and digital engagement emerged as particularly significant during the transition to university study.

A key contribution of the study is its challenge to deficit-oriented interpretations of student writing difficulties. Rather than depicting students as either prepared or unprepared for university writing, the findings suggest that preparedness is unevenly distributed across multiple dimensions of academic literacy. Students entered higher education with established writing practices but often lacked familiarity with the conventions, knowledge practices, and forms of participation required within academic communities. The transition to university writing is therefore best understood as a process of academic socialisation rather than simply the acquisition of additional writing skills.

The study further demonstrates that academic literacy preparedness is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing textual, procedural, epistemological, and technological dimensions. Successful participation in higher education depends not only on competence in writing mechanics but also on students' ability to engage with academic conventions, disciplinary knowledge practices, and digitally mediated learning environments. These findings reinforce the importance of conceptualising academic writing as a social and epistemological practice through which students learn to participate in scholarly communities. Ultimately, the study suggests that many of the challenges associated with university writing originate from discontinuities between the literacy practices cultivated in secondary schooling and those expected within higher education. Strengthening students' transition experiences therefore requires greater alignment between educational sectors and a broader understanding of how academic literacy develops across educational contexts. Addressing this challenge is essential for promoting equitable participation, supporting student success, and enabling meaningful engagement with the intellectual demands of contemporary higher education.

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