

# Academic Writing in a Russian University Setting: Challenges and Perspectives



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**Abstract** Competence in academic writing among university undergraduates has been a key area of research for over the last 30 years. However, the dominant status of English as the lingua franca of the global academic community has led to substantial changes in the academic language landscape of non-Anglophone countries. In particular, local traditions and practices of L1 academic writing within a university context tend to be under-supported while L2 (English) academic writing experience is treated as a top teaching priority.

The present study, carried out with the help of the LIDHUM project team, reports results on the current role of academic writing in L1 vs. L2 in Russia. A questionnaire was developed for first- and third-year undergraduates of a leading national research university to answer such questions as: whether academic writing plays an important role in the university, whether L1 writing is supported, which L1 and L2 written genres students use, how much time students spend on classroom-based vs. home-based writing, whether written tasks require critical thinking competence, whether academic writing is supported, and how writing skills are developed.

The chapter focuses on L1/L2 similarities and differences as well as on first-year undergraduates' (i.e., entry-level) writing competence vs. third-year students' perceptions of writing skills. The study likewise reflects on developmental needs, which are also relevant for the European context.

**Keywords** Academic writing · Writing competence · Writing survey

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## 1 Introduction

Academic writing competence among university undergraduates has been a key area of research for the last 30 years. The Anglophone countries, in particular the US and the UK, have been the main contributors to research in this field (see also chapter “[A European Model for Writing Support](#)”). These English-speaking countries have produced the main stream of research in the field of writing, which means that most studies have been related to writing in English (both by native and non-native speakers).

The dominant status of English as the lingua franca of the global academic community has led to substantial changes in the academic language landscape of non-Anglophone countries. English is increasingly regarded as the primary medium of university instruction and the core language of academic communication among scholars. As a result, local traditions and practices of native language (L1) academic writing within a university context tend to change while English (L2) academic writing experience continues to be seen as the top teaching priority.

Two key factors, Anglophone research in writing/teaching writing and the dominance of the English language, have directed the main strands of research into academic writing across various levels such as genre analysis, text ethnography, linguistics, and teaching perspectives. However, despite the existence of scientifically robust and widely applied approaches to developing writing competence, the field of academic writing research is only just emerging in some non-Anglophone periphery countries, including Russia, where writing has traditionally been under-researched and belongs primarily to studies in linguistics.

This chapter suggests that an examination of periphery geographical contexts can bring fresh insights to the field of global writing research. The main aim of the study is to investigate whether writing competence is seen as a key skill that students should acquire during their university education in Russia and whether they receive sufficient support in terms of their writing skills development within the university setting.

The main research questions are as follows:

- Does academic writing play an important role in the university?
- What written genres do students need and use?
- Is writing competence supported in the university context?
- How are writing skills developed in the university?

We also aimed to ascertain students’ perceptions of the kind of assistance that might be given to them by the university to develop their writing skills.

The chapter primarily highlights the importance of writing competence by reviewing theories of academic literacies, especially those developed by UK scholars, and American approaches to writing competence. It then focuses on studies into the role of writing competence in a number of Eastern European countries, which share a similar historical background with Russia. Finally, the chapter presents a case study of teaching and learning practices and attitudes related to writing at a

Russian university, the National Research University Higher School of Economics. It then draws a number of conclusions and identifies some implications for further research in the field of academic writing.

## 2 The UK Perspective: Academic Literacies Approach to Writing Competence

The UK has taken the leading role in defining not only the concept of literacy, but also academic literacy/literacies. Although the term *academic literacy* continues to be debated and re-evaluated, its key features remain constant.

Literacy can be defined as sufficient control of a secondary discourse (Gee 1989), which is related to all types of institutions with the exception of one's home and goes beyond the family and peer group (Gee 1989). When students enter a university, they need to be prepared to be active participants of a secondary discourse at a more sophisticated level. This means they should be taught to speak, write, and develop arguments as well as do research at the higher educational level.

Academic literacy is related to a wide variety of competencies and social and academic characteristics, which together lead to students' academic progress and success in their studies. Researchers adopt different methods in defining the academic literacy concept. It can be related to behaviors and practices which maximize successful interaction and self-fulfillment in a particular social context (Freire 1989). Lea and Street (1998) highlight the importance of study skills within a particular discipline as a central element of academic literacy. Bartholomae (1985) considers the concept in relation to students who are just entering higher education and explains that students need to be taught to speak the language of the new discourse and to appropriate its conventions.

Despite a wide variety of approaches to defining the notion of academic literacy, writing competence is often claimed to be its common characteristic within the higher education framework and academic community (Bartholomae 1985; Bizzell 1982; Lea and Street 1998). This skill of written communication forms the basis of interaction among peer students, teaching, and administrative staff and is related to the ability to become educated rather than to the content of education (enhancing academic literacy).

As a result, a great deal of attention has been given to supporting the writing skills of students at a pre-university level when all students (including foreign students) are required to undertake preparatory courses in academic writing (Murray 2010). At higher levels, nowadays, students have access to the support of academic writing centers where they can receive advice on developing their writing skills, proofreading, or help with writing a particular genre (e.g., master's thesis, report) in the language of instruction. Overall, writing competence is seen as a critical skill, and its development at university is well supported.

### 3 The US Perspective: Writing Skills in WAC and WID Approaches

Writing has been widely incorporated into teaching and learning in the educational framework of the US (see also chapter “[A European Model for Writing Support](#)”). The idea that thinking skills are closely interconnected with writing skills is reflected in the writing-to-learn approach (as opposed to writing to produce), which seems to be the main tool to develop discipline-specific knowledge and skills (Delcambre and Donahue 2012; MacLeod 1987; Russell et al. 2009; Tynjälä et al. 2001). This approach means that students become active participants and meaning-makers in the educational process (Boscolo and Mason 2001).

Writing has become a central focus at the university level as new knowledge and new critical competencies can be developed by exposing students to substantial writing experience (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al. 2011). As a result, apart from traditional first-year writing (composition) courses aimed at learning how to produce academic and disciplinary genres, students are increasingly engaged in writing activities within Writing Across Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in Disciplines (WID) approaches (Russell et al. 2009).

WAC is an approach to university teaching where writing competence is seen as a tool to acquire new knowledge. Its key principles can be integrated naturally into the teaching of any discipline and provide undergraduates with the opportunity to analyze and think critically about what and how they learn. Research shows that writing to learn activates students’ metacognition substantially if they have an extended period of writing experience (Delcambre and Donahue 2012).

Unlike WAC, WID actively employs writing within a particular discipline. Students acquire new disciplinary knowledge and learn thinking patterns within the discipline as well as its key genres and writing traditions. Writing activities include producing particular genres (all characteristics of a disciplinary text) with a particular focus on writing as a process (MacLeod 1987). This approach can be implemented by either teachers of academic writing or teachers of the discipline, who can work independently or in collaboration in teaching academic genres and disciplinary thinking (MacLeod 1987). MacLeod (1987) emphasizes that, despite the fact that WAC and WID approaches prove to be beneficial, they face common challenges. She identifies two key elements that hinder teaching success: students’ unpreparedness for extensive writing experience and subject teachers’ lack of relevant competences and knowledge in integrating the key writing principles.

Both approaches have led to significant changes in the higher school curriculum design and teaching staff qualifications. The switch from writing to produce to writing to learn requires the re-evaluation and restructuring of the instructional framework, knowledge assessment approach, and the set of key competences that should be developed at the given stage of education. Moreover, teachers also need to possess certain knowledge and skills to integrate writing components into their courses.

## 4 Academic Writing Competence in Eastern Europe and Russia

Traditionally, the concept of literacy in Russian scholarship has been mostly limited to primary and secondary school students' abilities in reading, writing, and mathematics (numeracy) (Tumeneva and Kuzmina 2013). Numerous studies have focused on measuring these skills and assessing the overall literacy level of children entering primary, secondary, and high school. However, little research has been conducted into the measurement of literacy levels among Russian university undergraduates (Korotkina 2009).

According to research into writing traditions by Harbord (2010), there were similar education systems in many Eastern European countries prior to the collapse of the USSR. In general, writing competence was not regarded as a key skill and was not treated as a goal in teaching and learning (Harbord 2010). Writing was also rarely used in knowledge assessment and academic progress measurement. A key genre traditionally produced by university students was lecture note-taking or literature review notes. Written papers (often referred to as "reports") primarily sought to measure how much a student had read in a subject and were limited to a summary of the relevant literature. Harbord concludes that the ability of students to write was related to their knowledge of the subject and its content and facts rather than to their writing skills.

Kruse (2013) similarly reaches the conclusion that within the context of Eastern Europe there has been no systematic teaching of writing as a particular competence that should be developed. Writing was commonly linked to thinking abilities, and, as a result, students were taught to think critically rather than to write, i.e., to use the language of instruction to communicate their thoughts (Kruse 2013).

Although there has recently been a shift in Russian Higher Education from a culture of oral assessment (widespread in Soviet times when the majority of exams were oral) to written exams, there has been no systematic teaching of writing. In most educational settings in modern Russia, writing to produce is still the dominant approach, which means that the majority of teachers prioritize the quality of the written product. They tend to neglect the importance of the process of writing itself as a productive activity that allows for the fostering of critical thinking skills. As a result, students are not offered special courses in writing (Shchemeleva and Smirnova 2014).

The only exception is academic writing courses in English (L2) that are given to students in many Russian universities. As a result, local traditions and practices of L1 academic writing within a university context tend to be under-supported, while L2 academic writing experience is seen as a top teaching priority. This situation, in which academic writing is taught primarily through English while teaching of writing in L1 is neglected, is typical of other Eastern European countries (Harbord 2010).

Only recently has the role of writing competence and teaching writing in the language of instruction received the attention of the research community. A key

concept at the last European Association of Teaching Academic Writing (EATAW) conference in 2013 (<http://www.asszisztencia.hu/eataw2013>) was multilingualism (Chitez and Kruse 2012). This means that students have to master academic skills (including writing competence) in different languages of instruction. Along with that trend, instruction in native languages is increasingly being overtaken by instruction in English as the lingua franca. As a result, students have to learn to deal with two discourse realities: one in their native language and the second (most commonly English) in another language.

The first successful example of a multilingual approach to teaching can be seen at the Center for English Academic Writing at the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine. This center aims to develop academic skills in both English and Ukrainian, and the native language is seen as the primary basis for academic skills development.

Substantial research has been carried out by the project Literacy Development in the Humanities (see chapter “[Studying and Developing Local Writing Cultures: An Institutional Partnership Project Supporting Transition in Eastern Europe’s Higher Education](#)”): Creating Competence Centres for the Enhancement of Reading and Writing Skills as Part of University Teaching. This example of a shared effort in transforming higher education and fostering an academic literacies approach involves universities in multiple countries such as the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje (Republic of Macedonia), Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (Ukraine), Kyiv Mohyla Academy (Ukraine), West University of Timișoara (Romania), and Zurich University of Applied Sciences (Switzerland). The result of this successful and productive collaboration was the first Conference on Academic Writing in Eastern Europe (AWEAST), organized by the Centre for Academic and Professional Writing at the Faculty of Letters, History, and Theology of West University of Timișoara, Romania, which marked the establishment of the writing center as a result of the LIDHUM project (<http://csap.uvt.ro/aweast>).

These few yet successful examples of local and international collaboration in fostering academic skills show that although Eastern European countries vary in their institutional and educational frameworks, academic literacy, including its key critical component of writing, requires further research.

## 5 Case Study

This study was conducted at St. Petersburg campus of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (NRU HSE), which was chosen for the following reasons: It sets high educational standards, employs highly qualified staff, and has demanding entry-level requirements. Importantly, the institutional standards of higher education developed by the university identify students’ ability to write as one of the key competences (Smirnova and Shchemeleva 2015). All these factors make the NRU HSE a good site for research as they allow for the investigation of best local practices of fostering the development of students’ writing skills in higher education.

The present study is in line with as well as under permission of the Eastern European project Literacy Development in the Humanities: Creating Competence Centres for the Enhancement of Reading and Writing Skills as Part of University Teaching.

## ***5.1 Participants and Procedures***

Two questionnaires were developed for first-year (269 undergraduates) and third-year (162 undergraduates) Bachelor of Arts (BA) students majoring in economics, management, sociology, and law. The key goal was to compare and contrast the experiences of students at the university entry stage with the experiences of those in their third year of study. The first-year students were given a questionnaire during their first week at the university, i.e., before they were exposed to any writing requirements in a new educational institution. The first-year questionnaire aimed to investigate the writing experience the students had been exposed to at school as well as their perceptions of writing skills at the university entry level. The response rate was 39.6%. Similarly, the third-year students were given a questionnaire to examine the writing practices of students who had already undergone 2 years of university study. The response rate was 39.2%.

All questionnaires were anonymous, and the participants were informed of the research framework and agreed to participate. The data collection and processing was carried out by a team of researchers in the Department of Foreign Languages.

## ***5.2 Methods***

### **Data Collection**

Two LIDHUM project-based questionnaires were developed for first- and third year students. The original LIDHUM questionnaire was adapted to better reflect the research context. The majority of questions originated from the LIDHUM survey, and only the genres in question were substantially modified. In the original version there were 14 options, to which we then added eight more genres that are common in Russian educational institutions. The English-medium original questionnaire was translated into Russian.

### **Third-Year Students' Questionnaire**

The questionnaire for third-year students contained eight sections:

1. Personal data
2. General questions on writing in your study program
3. The process of writing and feedback

4. Text genres and writing practices
5. Self-evaluation of the competences in academic writing
6. “Good writing”
7. Study competences
8. Writing support

The main aims of the questions were to identify how much the students write at the university, what genres they produce, and how they assess their abilities in writing. The questions also aimed at determining the students’ understanding of what good academic writing is and their attitudes towards possible types of writing support that is currently or could potentially be provided by the university in the future.

### **First-Year Students’ Questionnaire**

The main aim of the first-year students’ questionnaire was to study their writing skills at the university entry level, so the sections from the third-year students’ questionnaire devoted to writing practices at the university level were removed. Thus a shorter version of the questionnaire was created, containing five sections (personal data, general questions on writing at school, text genres and writing practices, “good writing,” and writing support) that aimed, first and foremost, to identify what writing practices had been used by students at school. For this purpose, some of the questions were reformulated. Therefore, the question from the third-year students’ questionnaire, “Which of these genres do you write in your classes?” was changed to “Which of these genres did you write in your classes at school?” while all the options in both questions were identical.

### **Data Analysis**

The questionnaires from both groups of students were collected in September 2013 and were processed using SPSS statistics software.

## **6 Results and Discussions**

### ***6.1 Writing Component across the University Curriculum***

To assess the importance of writing skills at the university level, it was necessary to find out what percentage of university courses include a writing component. To answer this question, third-year students’ responses were analyzed. The results suggest that writing does play an important role in the Russian university education:



More than half of the university disciplines require students to produce written texts that are graded (about 80% of students said that in 75% of courses their texts are graded). The majority of courses (75–100%) include a writing component: either writing in class or written homework assignments. Eighty percent of the respondents spend 3–9 h per week on writing tasks.

## 6.2 *Written Genres*

To identify what key genres students can produce at the entry level and to learn what new academic genres they have to master at university, a comparative analysis of the two groups' questionnaires was carried out.

It appears that students are exposed to a number of similar genres at both school and university. These genres are (1) academic summaries of different academic sources, or *referat*; (2) written reports on a subject; (3) notes during classes; (4) summary of a previously read text; and (5) written in-class exams.

The first two genres are examples of genres that were widespread in the Soviet educational system and, as our results show, are still used today. They both require students to write on a certain academic topic and to summarize the content of different sources without making their own judgments about either the topic or the read sources. Academic summaries are longer than written reports on a subject.

It is important to note that the first four genres in the list imply the reproduction of information and do not normally require either analyses of the material or the writer's own conclusions. All these genres originate from the Soviet system of education in which the only approach to writing was "writing to produce," which demanded that students demonstrate new knowledge and which focused solely on content. The fact that these genres are common today, both at school and university, may suggest that this approach is still used in the Russian educational system.

This analysis has also revealed another group of academic genres that are only common at the university level: (1) notes for seminars, (2) notes during lectures, (3) term papers (course papers), and (3) written texts for oral presentation.

The most commonly used genre in this group, notes for seminar, is another example of reproductive writing that does not imply any analysis of information. Students usually take written notes summarizing the theoretical works they read in preparation for seminars in order to be able to reproduce its content in class.

The comparison of first- and third-year students' responses suggests that the four genres included in this group are unknown to the students at the beginning of their time at university; therefore, it is possible to conclude that in the process of university studies, particular attention should be given to assisting students in mastering these genres (which does not mean neglecting instruction on the more familiar ones).

### **6.3 Writing Instruction and Feedback**

The next point in the research was to discover what kinds of writing skills support, if any, students receive at the university. For this purpose, we focused on the third-year students' answers to the questions about writing instructions and feedback, which are two key components in fostering the development of writing.

While instructions for writing tasks are more commonly given in written form, about 38% of students said that oral instructions are often given. This means that while fulfilling written tasks, the students have no chance to read the task. They can only rely on their memory or their notes, and the only source they can refer to for assistance is other students.

The results show that teachers do discuss with students how a particular type of assignment should be fulfilled (about 60% chose the variants "often" or "always" when asked about the frequency of such discussions with teachers). Nevertheless, it is mainly their peers whom students ask for help with a writing task (78% chose the option "often" or "always"). These answers signal that in many cases students lack both instructions and explanations from teachers.

The analysis of questions relating to feedback indicates that students rarely receive any written or extended feedback on their texts. In most cases, feedback is only made up of teachers' notes on the final draft or brief oral feedback. It is clear from the questionnaire results that students mostly receive a final score, which, as a rule, simply indicates the level of students' performance without explaining the results or providing ideas on how to improve their writing.

Overall, two issues related to feedback might be identified here: First, in many cases feedback is insufficient, and, second, it is aimed at grading the paper rather than improving and developing students' writing skills.

### **6.4 Students' Perception of Good Writing**

To analyze the final question in our research (How are writing skills developed in the university?), the questionnaire responses from both groups of students were compared. Our aim was not to evaluate how correct or incorrect students' perceptions of "good academic writing" are, but to identify the differences in the perceptions of the two groups of students. Our hypothesis was that if third-year students' understanding of the norms and conventions of academic writing differs from that of first-year students', it might suggest that students receive some training in writing at the university. Surprisingly, the responses from both groups were very similar in 9 out of 12 cases when asked about the importance of different characteristics of "good academic writing" (Table 1).

The perception of a number of characteristics, such "terminological accuracy," where there is a less than 1% variation in all three options, is almost identical in both groups. In some cases the difference is more obvious. Closer examination of the figures for "objectivity" reveals a somewhat surprising difference: the percentage of

**Table 1** Perceptions of good academic writing: First- and third-year students

Characteristics of good academic writing	Very important		Important		Average importance	
	1st year students (%)	3rd year students (%)	1st year students (%)	3rd year students (%)	1st year students (%)	3rd year students (%)
Elegant language	40.2	33.8	40.2	39.4	17.4	20.6
Terminological accuracy	60.8	59.4	31.3	31.3	7.2	7.5
Supporting arguments with evidence	72.2	69.0	22.6	21.5	4.8	5.7
Convincing arguments	68.5	58.1	27.1	31.9	3.7	6.3
Critical thinking	55.3	59.4	31.9	27.5	10.3	9.4
Clear thematic structure	42.0	43.1	31.5	28.8	18.5	20.0
Basing the text on sources	28.8	31.3	36.7	38.8	25.2	19.4
Objectivity	58.5	47.8	29.2	39.0	9.0	9.4
Figurative language	40.5	35.0	22.3	18.8	8.8	5.0

third-year students who consider this a very important characteristic of academic writing is lower than that of first-year students. This may suggest that the perception of this characteristic changes with time, but not in the desired direction, provided that students receive training in academic writing skills.

The characteristics of “good academic writing” that are perceived differently by the two groups have been identified, although the difference is not substantial. They include (1) avoiding the use of the first person singular; (2) simple, comprehensible language; and (3) creative ideas. Thus, more first-year students consider creative ideas, as well as simple comprehensible language, to be important in academic writing while more third-year students believe that it is important to avoid the first person singular pronoun.

One possible explanation for the fairly similar perceptions of “good academic writing” might be that the ability of students to write well is not given enough attention at the university. This conclusion supports the idea that students’ needs in developing academic writing skills tend to be under-supported in the Russian system of higher education. As a result, students are expected to complete written assignments and demonstrate their excellence in writing their ideas and critical thoughts, although the university fails to provide support or teach them how to do so effectively.

## 6.5 Writing Support at University

To find out what kind of writing support might be offered at the university, third-year students were asked how instructions for writing during their studies could be improved.

From the students' point of view, the most effective ways to improve writing skills are getting more feedback on their texts (86% consider this option either "rather helpful" or "very helpful") and better writing instruction in existing courses (79%) provided by academic lecturers. More than half of the students (65.69%) believed that online support in the form of additional materials, instructions, models of good papers, and special training in writing to improve powers of expression might also prove helpful.

Students do not consider professional tutoring from a writing center very effective: Only 53% of students considered this option "rather helpful" or "very helpful." However, it is hard to interpret the value of writing center support, because Russian universities have no such centers for academic writing, and it is still not clear why over half of the students were positive about the writing assistance they can get from such centers.

## **7 Future Research Implications and Limitations**

This study contributes to the investigation of the complex nature of teaching academic writing at the university level and also stresses the importance of developing academic writing skills in L1, although it is limited to only one Russian university. A larger-scale investigation and longitudinal comparative study (including collaboration with academic writing researchers both at the local and international levels) that includes a number of universities across different regions may provide more insights into the particular geopolitical space in the field of academic writing.

## **8 Conclusions**

This study confirms that developing academic literacies, particularly academic writing skills, has been one of the key priorities in university education in the US and the UK for many years, with some European countries following suit. In many Eastern European universities, including Russian universities, the development of L1 writing skills is still not an objective of higher education. This finding signals that in times of increasing academic mobility and educational globalization, the Russian system of higher education should find a way to better itself. It should be fair and achieve a good balance between teachers' expectations and demands as well as teaching and support in order to prepare students to meet these high standards.

The results of this study have shown that despite the fact that writing is an important component of the curriculum, Russian students do not have special support in writing skills development. At the university level, students' ability to write is very often viewed as something that naturally develops and does not require any training. The discrepancy between the demand to produce written texts and the lack of instruction on how to do it should be addressed by university authorities as well as by professors and instructors working with students.

These research results are consistent with the conclusions drawn by Harbord (2010) about the prevalence in the educational systems of former Soviet states of written genres that require reproduction of the sources students have read. They call for a revision of the general approaches to student assessment and a restructuring of the framework for writing instruction.

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