

# ATHENA - Academic Thinking Environment for Aspirants: A writing centre model

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper throws light on the importance of a writing centre in an academic institution. The researcher has carried out a pilot study on the need to hone the writing skills of students through the writing centre model. Two experiments were carried out in the first year post-graduate class. An innovative model was formulated to cater to the needs of the students. The learners understood the importance of reading, writing, reviewing and rewriting. They recognised the value of teamwork and peer observation. Above all, the aspiring learners identified an academic thinking environment inspired by ATHENA.*

## Introduction

This paper highlights the significance of academic writing and the impact of a unique writing centre model called *ATHENA* through experimentation, observation and inference carried out among the first year postgraduate (M.A English Literature) students. *Athena* is the Greek goddess of wisdom, inspiration, courage and skill. Quite interestingly, the name coincides with an acronym “**a**cademic **t**hinking **e**nvironment for **a**spirants” where young learners are encouraged to hone their academic thinking and presentation skills.

## The Writing Centre Model

The writing centre model is based on an academic writing syllabus designed by the researcher. The objectives of the syllabus are:

- to help the students identify a toolkit approach to academic writing;
- to train the students gather, interpret, analyze and synthesize data or information;
- to introduce the essential characteristics, major trends and techniques in research through reading and writing;
- to facilitate a scientific approach to the research process, to write, rewrite, to document, edit, publish and present papers.

The five units of the syllabus are: information accession, documentation, composition, analysis of writing in academic journals and practice in research writing. Information Accession deals with the prewriting techniques such as note-making, note-taking, brainstorming and mind

mapping. Definition, analysis, interpretation and argument are identified as different stages of representing data or the management of information. The academic integrity is emphasized through the second unit on documentation. In order to avoid plagiarism the learners are taught to cite resources using parenthetical documentation, bibliography and annotated bibliography.

The third unit on composition focuses on the writing process or synthesizing of information. It includes ‘paragraphing’ underscoring coherence and cohesion; writing the topic sentence; explanation and expansion; illustration; introduction and conclusion. The use of vocabulary, register and mechanics of writing are also discussed in this unit. Unit four deals with the analysis of writing in academic journals where students are expected to read articles in academic journals and magazines and identify different components of research writing and offer commentary/critique on a) text structure b) argument c) Language and d) Content. Unit five includes practice in research writing. The learners are expected to choose the primary source (a text preferably published/ a theory introduced within the past five years) and the relevant secondary sources. They are expected to prepare a literary journal. The process includes: writing for publication; peer observation and editing/proof – reading.

A writing centre is a place/space where the academicians, both students and faculty

understand the importance of thinking skills and communication skills especially good writing. It provides space for reading, understanding and analytical thinking, creates a professional outlook to writing among students, facilitates peer-learning, enhances the teaching skills of the student instructors and motivates people to help one another on the professional level. Many universities across the world have writing centres.

The unique writing centre model called *ATHENA* helps the learners to explore their academic writing skills. The paradigm has four branches. They are reading, writing, reviewing and rewriting. Reading enhances writing. The more the scholar reads, the better s/he writes. Reading the primary and secondary sources help the learner to write scholarly articles. Writing is a skill which is honed only through practice. Once a scholar has written an article, s/he must give it for reviewing. Peer observation and scholarly interventions of the teacher will help the students to refine the article in terms of both content and structure. The next important stage in writing an article is rewriting. Writing several drafts will definitely improve the quality of the article.



## **Athena-Academic THinking ENvironment for Aspirants model envisioned by the researcher in this study**

The researcher conducted two experiments based on the proposed paradigm.

### **Experiment I**

In Experiment I, the academic writing students donned the role of the writing assistants for III BA English literature students. The learners were introduced to the various facets of academic writing in unit one, two and three. When the learners were confident of their theory it was time for praxis. The assignments of the III UG students were given to the I PG students for reviewing. The PG students reviewed the assignments using the techniques they learnt in the academic writing course. After the peer observation questionnaires were distributed to the III BA students and the I MA students. The questionnaire given to the I MA students had five questions. They were: what are the different components of academic writing did you check? What is your feedback on the assignment that you corrected? What did you learn from this writing centre model? Give your comments. Why do you think it is necessary to have a Writing Centre? Give your comments and any other suggestion. The answers provided by the students are summarized below:

The different components of academic writing the students identified were content, structure, coherence and cohesion of ideas; punctuation, grammar, spelling and syntax; documentation, paragraph development,

topic sentence; the guidelines in the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the MLA Handbook; introduction, conclusion and the argument; and so on.

The students' feedback on the assignments revealed their understanding of academic writing skills: writing assistant felt that his ward had a lot of ideas but they were not focussed; there was no clear distinction between creative and critical writing; students tend to summarize the text rather than analyzing the text; many students felt that their wards made careless mistakes in grammar, vocabulary and spelling.

*Athena* differs from the other writing centre models in the following ways: the writing assistants are thoroughly trained through workshop modules in the academic writing classrooms. *Athena* model helped the academic writing students to learn the following aspects: it helped them to put to praxis, the skills they learnt in the academic writing class; they enjoyed the role of a writing mentor to their juniors; they learnt to analyse articles and give suggestions; they became conscious of the common errors; they discovered a scientific approach to academic writing.

The students believe that a writing centre is necessary for the following reasons: helping the students with the basic knowledge of writing; for keeping track of the contemporary research scenario; helping the students to learn proper syntax and analytical skills; help the budding teachers to apply their understanding of the subject; identified as an indispensable part of academic and creative writing; helps mutual

learning among the writing assistants and their wards; it gives confidence in communicating one's ideas and so on.

The writing centre is visualised as a place where recent trends in research are discussed. It provides an ambience for academic discussions among the teachers, the students and the experts. It promotes new ideas, theories and techniques. It is an academic space that encourages deliberations on new areas of study.

The Questionnaire given to the III BA students included the different components of academic writing to be reviewed: spelling, grammar, punctuation, writing the thesis statement, paragraph development, sentence construction, cohesion and coherence, bibliography and methodology. The other questions are: what did you learn from the writing centre model? Give your comments; why do you think it is necessary to have a writing centre? Give your comments and any other suggestions.

The III year students explained that the writing centre model helped them to correct the common mistakes in writing. It was an eye-opener in the area of research. They learnt to write assignments in a systematic manner. It helped them to hone the writing skills with regard to content, structure, grammar and vocabulary.

## **Experiment II**

In Experiment II, the academic writing students (40 in number) were divided into five groups. The course teacher encouraged them to select topics/texts with

contemporary relevance. The students were expected to write articles and bring out a journal. The learners had several discussions in groups and identified broad areas of study. They were: Post-colonialism, Eco-criticism, Children's literature, Diasporic literature, Australian literature and Subaltern literature. Each group consisted of eight members and an editor/team leader.

The students rewrote their drafts several times to improve the quality of their articles. The rough drafts were reviewed by the course teacher and also by their peers. The five journals that were brought out by the students were titled: Roots- A Journal on post-colonialism and eco-criticism by post-graduate students, Quest- a Peer Group Journal on Diasporic literature, A Sojourn Down Under- a journal on Australian literature, Fantasia- a literary journal on children's literature and Aura- a journal on subaltern literature.

*ATHENA*, a writing centre model, facilitates workshop-type environment for the acquisition of academic writing skills. Some of the observations and findings of the experiments are:

1. At the outset, the students unlearn the cut-and-paste methods and give serious thought to written communication.
2. The learners get hands-on experience on exploring the various stages in the process of writing.
3. They learn to avoid plagiarism.

4. They show more interest in reading the primary sources and the secondary sources.
5. They learn techniques of editing.

*ATHENA* is a holistic approach to academic writing where the learners discover teamwork, leadership and win-win attitude towards life.

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## **ELTAI ESP SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP (SIG)**

Those who are interested in joining this Special Interest Group of ours are requested to contact

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