

## To Write or not to Write: The Art of Writing a Research Paper

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Writing a research paper is more of procrastination, speculation, hesitation than execution. I do not say this in any negative sense, but in reality this is what happens to all of us. We do not sit at the computer and start keying in our papers impulsively, a lot of thinking, introspection, revision, discussion (within self or with others) has happened before something can appear on the paper.

Research by definition is *re-search*. We are not finding out something new, inventing nothing, but making ourselves aware of what has been around us for a long time, and giving it a reason for people to believe. If you look at several of the concepts put forth in the field of ELT, you will become more than aware of this fact. We are reminded of what we have been doing in the class as a good method with reasons to prove that it is good. e.g. We have been teaching our learners to use language by making them repeat what we have said or make alterations to come out with their own sentences. Using language is the best means to learn it was well practised before it was

said in most obvious terms.

Any good research paper should begin with a commitment. A sense of faith and belief in the work we are doing. Why am I taking up this research? Is this a genuine problem? Do my friends have a similar problem? An answer to these questions leads us to think and arrive at a problem (tentative or confirmed) which can be stated crisply. The title of a research paper should not read like the title of a thesis. Here is an example: 'Teaching writing to Undergraduates' is good enough for a paper, while in a thesis it would be "Developing Writing Skills among Undergraduate Students Using Communicative Strategies in the state of Telangana". Perhaps, the research problem in both these cases remains the same, but the scope may change.

Having arrived at the title, it is necessary to reason out what the focus of the paper is on. In this case, we may have students whose writing is weak because of weak competence in language, weak vocabulary, unorganized thought processes as manifest in disjointed sentences or any other reasons. A research paper cannot focus on all these aspects. The author has to pick one of these, which appears to be most important (prioritize) and pick that up and formulate a strategy (action research) to help the learner overcome the weakness. This can be stated as a problem or a hypothesis. A hypothesis is a conditional statement that can either be proved and accepted or

rejected. (Rejecting the hypothesis is not a reflection on the scholar's weakness or failure.)

The Hypothesis when stated e.g. 'If learners are exposed to good literary pieces, their organization skills in writing can improve.' (do not take this seriously) can help the researcher plan strategies of teaching or remedying. In this case we have a hypothesis that needs to be established. The learners are undergraduate learners. Their textbooks have literary pieces. Can we analyse these pieces and look for their relevance in terms of their lexical, syntactic and conceptual load and replace them with appropriate alternatives. The paper should delineate what criteria are used of selecting these pieces and how these can be analysed for their organization.

Some graphics (e.g. flowcharts, web charts, outlines etc) can be used to help the learners understand the structure of a paragraph which basically has a topic sentence (obvious or apparent) and how this is supported by other sentences. The graphic can show the linkers that bring about the unity among the sentences and how these can be made obvious to the learner. The paper should also suggest how much time is required for the teacher to teach these materials. Perhaps, six to eight teaching hours and how these can be divided rationally and what strategies of teaching are employed. e.g. analysis of the text, brain storming, developing web-diagrams, flow charts, discussing with others, using mother tongue as a support to understanding etc.)

The teaching in the classes followed by assignments written by the students forms the data for analysis. The data has to be presented in tabular forms or in the form

charts using simple percentages where complex statistical analysis is not essential. Data organization in a systematic manner facilitates analysis. Analysis for a simple research paper can restrict itself to generalizing using percentages, or analysis of variance to establish significance of the experiment.

Once the analysis is over, an honest conclusion should be written suggesting to the reader why the author thinks the experiment has either been a success or a failure. Failures let us remember are the stepping stones to success. Let us not shy away for them.

One last word! While writing this paper, you would have relied heavily on earlier research. You would have gathered ideas from a variety of sources through your reading, discussion etc. If you have used these ideas, remember to acknowledge them faithfully. There are accepted ways of acknowledging, and these days, your computer helps you organize your bibliography properly. Beware of plagiarism. This is taken very seriously these days.

These are a few stray thoughts I have put together on how to write a research paper. This delineates some of the features which can be listed as:

- a. Choose a genuine problem that bothers you.
- b. Crystallize it in the form of a title.
- c. Define your hypothesis – research problem/questions.
- d. Plan your action and describe it.
- e. Provide data and its analysis.
- f. Give your conclusion.
- g. Acknowledge the sources you have used.

Happy writing!

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