

## **An Investigation into Students' Common Mistakes in Research Writing**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined common mistakes in research writing among post-graduate students in Faculty of Education, Delta State University, Abraka. It was aimed at identifying mistakes in research reports with specific reference to the first two chapters. Three research questions and one hypothesis guided the study. Descriptive survey design was used in the study. An estimated population of sixty lecturers from the Faculty of Education was used for the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to draw a sample of twenty-one lecturers from the 9 departments in the faculty. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation while the hypothesis was tested at .05 level of significance using independent samples t-test statistics. Among others, the study showed that students' common mistakes centred on poor language skill, sweeping statements, imbalance between in-text citations and reference list, presenting literature review like lecture notes and turning Background to the Study to literature review. There was no significant difference between male and female lecturers in the mean observation of students' common mistakes in research writing. It was recommended that students should (i) have their works proof-read by experts in English Language and (ii) attend departmental and faculty seminars where discussants explain practical ways of research writing.

**Key words:** Examination, students, common, mistakes, research, writing.

### **Introduction**

Research writing is a fundamental requirement in universities and tertiary institutions. In Delta State University, Abraka it is a condition for earning a diploma certificate, first degree, master's degree and doctorate degree.

The style of writing research reports vary from one institution to the other, and students need to be acquainted with what obtains in their institutions (Best & Kahn, 2007). Okorodudu (2013) reported that many universities, including Delta State University, Abraka adopt a five-chapter format for projects, dissertations and theses. According to Okorodudu, the first chapter is titled "INTRODUCTION" while the second chapter bears the title "REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE". While Chapter Three is "RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURE", Chapter Four and Chapter Five are respectively "PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION" and "SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS", the author added.

How well the presentation of these chapters in research reports is done depends on the skill and experience of the researcher/student. The unskilled researcher leaves his research report open to criticisms as a result of the numerous common mistakes. Manchishi, Ndhiovu and Nwanza (2015) and Caprette (2016) reported some common mistakes in students' research papers. Manchishi, et al. reported that students come up with broad and unclear topics, do not state the problem of the study, use wrong methods, do not understand research terminology, reference wrongly and plagiarise. According to Caprette, students' mistakes are wrong use of quotes, wrong use of verb tense, poor grammar incorrect spelling and wrong use of words or phrases. The authors observed that it is not possible for one research paper to address all the problems of a whole sector of education; hence, it is advisable to focus on a specific problem. Similarly, Egbert and Sanden (2015) pointed out students' mistakes in research such as introduction being too long or too broad, lack of focus and not stating the topic or problem clearly.

Most of the mistakes mentioned border on lack of planning and non-mastery of guidelines for writing research. Others are predicated on grammar and punctuations. Students who are not proficient in a language (English Language, to be precise) may be found wanting.

The inability of many students to handle the introductory part of a research report properly is re-echoed by Okorodudu (2013). The author cautioned students to guard against turning “Background to the Study” under “INTRODUCTION” to review of related literature. This present researcher has observed from experience in the supervision of undergraduate projects that a great deal of supervisees provide very many citations in the Background to the Study, thereby making the section look like review of related literature.

Other forms of common mistakes in research writing are found in the review of related literature. Nworgu (2006) reported, among others, reliance on secondary source materials, failure to adequately define one’s scope of review and being in a hurry to get started. Review of related literature is also associated with such mistakes as i) review of studies without relating them to the main aim of the study, (ii) presenting studies without showing their similarities or differences; (iii) poor citations; (iv) cut and paste, (v) plagiarism (<http://www.learningdomain.com>).

Obiunu (2016) noted the following mistakes during a defence at the departmental level: (i) Too many citations in Chapter One the, INTRODUCTION.

- (ii) Terms were not operationally defined.
- (iii) The language in Chapter One and Two was poor
- (iv) Review of related literature looked like lecture notes;
- (v) The gap to be covered by the study was not identified.
- (vi) There were sweeping statements
- (vii) There were discrepancies between names of authors cited in the text and the names of authors on the reference list.

The view of Obiunu (2016) concerning in-text citations and references supports Nworgu (2006) and Hume-Pratuch (2016). Nworgu and Hume-Pratuch opined that there must be a perfect agreement between in-text citations and the reference list. According to the authors, the two must be identical in spelling and year.

The mistakes that have been pointed out from the review are commonly found in chapters one and two of students’ research undertakings. A good documentation of Chapter One leads to successful presentation of Chapter Two. This study is focused on students’ common mistakes in these two chapters.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Academics who assess students’ projects in the Department of Guidance and Counselling, Delta State University, Abraka often complain of the poor presentation of research reports. Different forms of mistakes are discovered in all the project chapters. The mistakes are more common in the first and second chapters where a lot of writing is needed. This study seeks to find out some of these mistakes among post-graduate students in the Faculty of Education, Delta State University, Abraka.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study is to find out common mistakes in research writing among post-graduate students of Faculty of Education, Delta State University, Abraka. Specifically, the study will find out: (i) lecturers’ observations of students’ common mistakes in research writing (ii) male lecturers’ observations of students’ common mistakes in research writing (iii) female lecturers’ observations of students’ common mistakes in research writing (iv) the significant difference, by gender, in lecturers’ observations of students’ common mistakes in research writing.

### **Research Questions:**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are lecturers’ observations of students’ common mistakes in research writing?

- (2) What are male lecturers' observations of students' common mistakes in research writing?
- (3) What are female lecturers' observations of students' common mistakes in research writing?

**Hypothesis**

The following hypothesis was generated for the study:

Lecturers' mean observations of students' common mistakes in research writing do not differ significantly between male and female academics.

**Methodology:**

The study employed a descriptive survey design. Through the use of purposive sampling technique, a sample of twenty-one academics was drawn from an estimated population of sixty (60) lecturers. This comprised 6 female lecturers and 15 male lecturers. A 13-item questionnaire for data collection was validated by experts in the Department of Guidance and Counselling. The reliability of the instrument was established by using test-retest method. The instrument was administered two times to the same group of seventeen lecturers which were not part of the sample. The time interval was two weeks. The application of the Product Moment correlation statistics yielded an index of 0.63; thus, the instrument was a good measure of stability. Copies of this instrument were distributed directly to the respondents concerned. The three research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation. Any item with a mean score of 2.50 and above was regarded as a common mistake; an item with a mean score that is less than 2.50 was not regarded as a common mistake. The hypothesis was tested at .05 level of significance using independent samples t-test.

**Data Analysis**

Research Question One:

What are lecturers' observations of students' common mistakes in research writing?

**Table 1:** Mean and standard deviation of lecturers' responses to students' common mistakes in research writing.

S/N	Item	N= 21		Remark
		$\bar{X}$	SD	
<b>Most Students:</b>				
1.	Make sweeping statements on research writing	3.57	0.94	Agreed
2.	Turn "Background to the Study" to Literature Review	3.38	0.58	Agreed
3.	Are unable to relate the dependent variable and the independent variable	3.45	0.66	Agreed
4.	Cannot write "Significance of the Study	3.19	0.66	Agreed
5.	Disregard the Supervisor's instruction	3.19	0.66	Agreed
6.	Are unable to identify the gap to be covered in the study	3.24	0.61	Agreed
7.	Are confused with when to use conceptual framework and theoretical framework	3.52	0.50	Agreed
8.	Present Literature Review like lecture notes	3.33	0.64	Agreed
9.	Have poor language skill	3.29	0.55	Agreed
10.	Cite sources poorly	3.33	0.47	Agreed
11.	Are unable to relate empirical studies to the purpose of the research	3.33	0.47	Agreed
12.	Depend so much on secondary sources of materials	3.10	0.68	Agreed
13.	Fail to balance in-text citations with names on REFERENCES	3.19	0.59	Agreed

Table 1 shows that all the respondents agreed that all the items are possible areas where students make common mistakes in research writing. The mean responses are all above the mean benchmark of 2.50; the values of the standard deviations also show that there is little variation in the scores.

### Research Question Two:

What are male lecturers' observations of students' common mistakes in research writing?

**Table 2:** Mean and standard deviation of male lecturers' responses to students' common mistakes in research writing.

S/N	Item	N= 15		
		$\bar{X}$	SD	Remark
<b>Most Students:</b>				
1.	Make sweeping statements on research writing	3.47	0.50	Agreed
2.	Turn "Background to the Study" to Literature Review	3.40	0.49	Agreed
3.	Are unable to relate the dependent variable and the independent variable	3.27	0.68	Agreed
4.	Cannot write "Significance of the Study	3.33	0.60	Agreed
5.	Disregard the Supervisor's instruction	3.13	0.62	Agreed
6.	Are unable to identify the gap to be covered in the study	3.20	0.54	Agreed
7.	Are confused with when to use conceptual framework and theoretical framework	3.53	0.50	Agreed
8.	Present Literature Review like lecture notes	3.33	0.70	Agreed
9.	Have poor language skill	3.27	0.57	Agreed
10.	Cite sources poorly	3.00	0.44	Agreed
11.	Are unable to relate empirical studies to the purpose of the research	3.33	0.47	Agreed
12.	Depend so much on secondary sources of materials	3.07	0.57	Agreed
13.	Fail to balance in-text citations with names on REFERENCES	3.13	0.62	Agreed

Table 2 shows that all the male respondents agreed that all the items are possible areas of where students make common mistakes in research. The mean responses are all above the mean benchmark of 2.50; the standard deviations also show that the variation in the scores is small.

### Research Question Three:

What are students' common mistakes in research as identified by female lecturers?

**Table 3:** Mean and standard deviation of female lecturers' observations of students' common mistakes in research writing

S/N	Item	N=6		
		$\bar{X}$	SD	Remark
<b>Most Students:</b>				
1.	Make sweeping statements on research writing	3.83	0.37	Agreed
2.	Turn "Background to the Study" to Literature Review	3.33	0.75	Agreed
3.	Are unable to relate the dependent variable and the independent variable	3.83	0.37	Agreed
4.	Cannot write "Significance of the Study	2.83	0.69	Agreed
5.	Disregard the Supervisor's instruction	3.33	0.47	Agreed
6.	Are unable to identify the gap to be covered in the study	3.33	0.76	Agreed
7.	Are confused with when to use conceptual framework and theoretical framework	3.50	0.50	Agreed
8.	Present Literature Review like lecture notes	3.33	0.47	Agreed
9.	Have poor language skill	3.33	0.47	Agreed
10.	Cite sources poorly	3.50	0.50	Agreed
11.	Are unable to relate empirical studies to the purpose of the research	3.33	0.47	Agreed
12.	Depend so much on secondary sources of materials	3.17	0.90	Agreed
13.	Fail to balance in-text citations with names on REFERENCES	3.33	0.47	Agreed

Table 3 shows that all the female respondents agreed that all the items are possible areas where students make common mistakes in research. The mean responses are all above the mean benchmark of 2.50; the standard deviations also show that there is little variation in the scores.

**Hypothesis One:** Lecturers' mean observations of students' common mistakes in research writing do not differ significantly by gender.

Table 4: showing t-test analysis of lecturers' observations of students' common mistakes in research writing.

Variable	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Df	t-cal	t-cri	Decision
Male lecturers	15	42.2	4.48	19	.08	2.09	Not significant
Female lecturers	6	44	5				

P > .05

Table 4 shows that the t-calculated value of .08 is less than the t-critical value of 2.09 at .05 level of significance. This implies that lecturers' mean observations of students' common mistakes in research writing do not differ significantly by gender.

### **Summary of Findings**

From the analysis conducted, the following findings emerged from the study.

1. Items 1 to 13 inclusive are areas of students' possible common mistakes in research.
2. Lecturers' mean observations of students' common mistakes in research do not differ significantly by gender.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study has revealed that many students make sweeping statements in research, turn Background to the Study to Review of Related Literature, present Review of Related Literature like lecture notes, have poor language skills. These findings are in line with Okorodudu (2013), Caprette (2016) and Obiunu (2016). Obiunu reported that many students make sweeping statements in research. While Okorodudu cautioned students to guard against turning Background to the Study to Review of Related Literature, Caprette and Obiunu observed that many research writings are filled with poor grammar. Obiunu also showed that many students present Review of Related Literature like lecture notes. Apart from grammatical skill which depends on how well an individual has mastered the rules of grammar, this researcher feels that the other mistakes may be as a result of lack of focus. Egbert and Sanden (2015) reported that students lack focus or have too many foci in research, besides having lengthy introduction.

This study also showed that students' common mistakes in research border on disregard for supervisors' instructions, inability to identify the gap to be covered in a study, poor citations and imbalance between in-text citations and references. These are in consonance with Nworgu (2006), Hume-Pratuch (2016) Manchishi et al. (2015) and Obiunu (2016). These scholars stressed the need for agreement between in-text citations and reference list. They also observed that many students cite sources poorly and find it difficult to identify the gap to be covered in a study.

Other findings from the study showed that many students do not know how to write significance of the study, cannot relate the dependent and independent variables, cannot distinguish between conceptual framework and theoretical framework, cannot review empirical works properly, and depend too much on secondary sources of materials. These can be attributed to lack of focus on the part of the students (Egbert & Sanden, 2015) and failure to define one's scope of review as well as being in a hurry to start a research (Nworgu, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

Students' common mistakes in chapters one and two of students' dissertations or theses rest on non-mastery of the required concepts and poor grammar.

### **Recommendations:**

It is hereby recommended that students should be compelled to:

- (i) attend departmental and faculty seminars where discussants explain practical ways of writing research.
- (ii) have their works proof read by experts in English Language. Such experts should have a knowledge of research writing.
- (iii) have their citations and references cross-checked by experts in Library and Information Science.

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