



ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES: AN INTERACTIONAL ANALYSIS OF TUTOR-STUDENT TUTORIALS IN SELECTED UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA

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Abstract:

Academic writing is central to university learning, yet students' difficulties with academic writing extend beyond grammatical accuracy to conceptual, rhetorical, organisational, procedural, linguistic and source-use practices. While previous research in Kenya has documented students' academic writing challenges, limited attention has been given to the challenges students present and articulate during writing centre tutorial sessions. This study examines the writing challenges presented by first-year university students during writing centre tutorials in four selected Kenyan universities. Data were drawn from 12 audio-recorded tutorials involving 12 student writers and 11 tutors and supplemented by post-tutorial student interviews. The study employed a qualitative descriptive design and inductive thematic analysis. Descriptive frequency counts were used to make patterns in the qualitative data visible. The analysis identified 11 categories of writing challenges, with 76 coded occurrences across the tutorial corpus. APA citation, referencing and formatting was the most frequently occurring category (20 occurrences, 26.3%), followed by thesis statements and argumentation (12, 15.8%) and essay structure (8, 10.5%). The key finding was the interconnectedness of individual challenges. Topic

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narrowing was closely related to thesis development and organisation; textual engagement was linked to summary, paraphrase and source integration; and language concerns intersected with academic voice and argumentation. The study was anchored in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Gass and Mackey's interactional perspective. The findings demonstrate that tutorial session interactions make students' writing challenges visible as they negotiate writing decisions. The study contributes context-specific evidence from Kenyan university writing centres.

Keywords: academic writing; writing challenges; writing centres; tutorial session; interaction; first-year students; academic literacy; Kenya

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Academic writing is a fundamental component of university education because students use writing to demonstrate knowledge, communicate ideas, construct arguments, and participate in academic discourse. Assignments, examinations, research papers, reports and other forms of assessment require students to communicate their understanding through written language. Consequently, writing competence has implications not only for students' academic achievement but also for their development as critical thinkers and their preparation for professional and scholarly communication (Fadhel, 2019; Maimon *et al.*, 2010). Effective academic writing enables students to present ideas clearly, develop reasoned arguments, establish credibility and engage with the ideas of other scholars (AlMarwami, 2020; Chege & Njengere, 2018).

However, academic writing is more complex than the production of grammatically correct sentences. University writers are expected to make a series of interrelated linguistic, cognitive, rhetorical and organisational decisions. They must interpret an assignment, determine an appropriate focus, develop and organise ideas, formulate a thesis or argument, engage relevant sources, integrate evidence, observe disciplinary conventions and revise their work. Writing is therefore a recursive process in which planning, translating ideas into text and reviewing or revising the text interact with one another (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Kellogg, 2008). Difficulties at one stage can consequently affect other aspects of the writing process. For example, inadequate understanding of an assignment may result in an unfocused topic, which may subsequently affect thesis development, organisation and the selection of relevant evidence.

The complexity of academic writing is important in multilingual university contexts. In Kenya, English is the principal language of instruction in higher education, while university students come to tertiary education with varied linguistic backgrounds and experiences of academic literacy. Students therefore should negotiate not only the content of their academic disciplines but also the conventions through which academic knowledge is constructed and communicated in English. Research on Kenyan university

students has documented difficulties in areas such as content development, organisation and academic writing conventions. Mwangi (2016), for example, identified content- and structure-related difficulties in the writing of first-year university students, while Chege and Njengere (2018) reported broader concerns regarding the adequacy of conventional approaches to academic writing instruction in Kenyan universities. These concerns suggest that university students may require forms of writing support that extend beyond general classroom instruction.

Research demonstrates that university students experience difficulties across multiple dimensions of academic writing. Studies have identified challenges involving academic vocabulary, thesis development, organisation and coherence (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022). Planning and pre-writing may also present difficulties when students begin drafting before establishing a clear direction for their writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Kellogg, 2008). Source-based writing introduces additional demands because students must read and select relevant information, distinguish their own ideas from those of other writers, summarise and paraphrase appropriately, cite sources and integrate evidence into their arguments. Difficulties with citation and referencing may therefore reflect broader challenges with source comprehension, paraphrasing, synthesis and argumentation rather than simply a failure to follow a formatting rule (Chege & Njengere, 2018; Jamoom, 2021). Academic writing also requires students to develop an appropriate academic voice and position their claims in relation to evidence and disciplinary expectations (Pineteh, 2014).

The challenges associated with academic writing have contributed to the development of additional forms of institutional support for student writers. One such intervention is the writing centre. Writing centres emerged as spaces where students could receive individualised assistance with their writing and develop greater control over the writing process. The writing centre philosophy emphasises developing writers rather than merely correcting written products. North (1984) distinguished the goal of producing “*better writers*” from simply producing better papers, while Bruffee (1984), Harris (1985, 1995) and Gillespie and Lerner (2008) emphasised collaboration, dialogue and writer development as central features of writing centre pedagogy.

The writing centre tutorial is significant because it creates an opportunity for students to discuss their writing while they are engaged in the process of composing. Unlike a completed essay, which provides evidence of the final product, a tutorial conversation can reveal the reasoning, uncertainty and partial knowledge underlying a student's writing decisions. A student may, for instance, have difficulty narrowing a topic, determining what constitutes a thesis, selecting appropriate evidence or understanding how sources should be incorporated into an argument. Through dialogue with a tutor, such difficulties can be articulated, clarified and explored. The tutorial thus provides a space in which writing becomes an object of reflection and where the writer can receive individualised support (North, 1984; Gillespie & Lerner, 2008).

Writing centres have become established in many higher-education contexts internationally, although their structures, functions and pedagogical practices vary

across institutions. In Africa, writing centre provision has also expanded in South Africa, where writing centres have been incorporated into university academic-literacy initiatives. However, the development of writing centres in Kenya has been comparatively recent. Research on academic writing in Kenyan universities has recommended writing centre interventions as one means of responding to students' writing difficulties (Chege & Njengere, 2018; Kinuthia & Rutere, 2019; Kioko, 2009; Mwangi, 2017). At the time of the present study, only four Kenyan universities had functional writing centres. The emerging nature of writing centre provision in Kenya makes it important to generate empirical knowledge about how these centres operate and, more specifically, about what students bring to tutorials when they seek assistance with their academic writing.

The Kenyan writing centre context is also important because the tutorial represents a different site for investigating writing difficulties from the conventional classroom or analysis of completed student texts. In a classroom with many students, lecturers may have limited opportunity to observe the specific difficulties experienced by individual writers or to engage each student in extended discussion of the writing process. A one-to-one tutorial, by contrast, allows the writer and tutor to focus on writing decisions and enables the student to articulate uncertainties and difficulties as they arise. Writing centre scholarship therefore conceptualises tutoring as a collaborative interaction in which tutors respond to writers' needs while supporting the development of independent writing practices (Bruffee, 1984; North, 1984).

This interactional dimension is relevant to understanding writing challenges. A writing challenge is not necessarily equivalent to an observable error in a completed text. An error may involve a departure from a linguistic or formatting convention, whereas a writing challenge can involve the more complex process of making a conceptual, rhetorical, organisational, linguistic or textual decision (Bitchener, 2019; Hyland, 2015). For example, a student whose essay contains an unclear thesis may not simply have failed to follow a rule about thesis statements. The underlying difficulty may involve interpreting the assignment, narrowing the topic, selecting and prioritising ideas, or understanding the relationship between a claim and supporting evidence. Similarly, problems with citation may be connected to difficulties in reading, selecting, paraphrasing and integrating sources. Examining the interaction between students and tutors can therefore provide insight into the processes underlying the writing problems that become visible in students' texts.

Against this background, this article situates writing challenges within the interactional context of university writing centre tutorials. Rather than treating students' writing challenges as isolated grammatical or mechanical deficiencies, the study views academic writing as a multidimensional and interconnected activity involving conceptual, rhetorical, organisational, procedural, linguistic and documentation-related decisions. This perspective is relevant to first-year university students, who are negotiating new expectations concerning academic discourse and writing practices. By examining tutorial session interactions in selected Kenyan university writing centres, the

study sought to contribute context-specific evidence about the kinds of writing challenges students present when they seek individualised academic writing support.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Research has established that university students experience various challenges in academic writing. In Kenya, these challenges have been documented in relation to content, structure, grammar and other aspects of written academic communication (Mwangi, 2016). Similarly, Chege and Njengere (2018) found that the conventional provision of academic writing instruction in Kenyan universities is constrained by the breadth of communication skills courses and large class sizes, arguing that these arrangements are insufficient for developing the writing competencies required for academic discourse.

While these studies establish the existence of academic writing challenges, they provide limited insight into how such challenges are manifested and articulated when students seek individualised writing support. Much of the existing evidence in the Kenyan context has been derived from analyses of completed student texts or from broad investigations of how academic writing is taught. For example, Mwangi (2016) examined essays produced by first-year students and identified content and structure-related difficulties. Such studies are valuable for identifying features of students' written products, but a completed text provides only partial access to the writer's thinking, uncertainty and decision-making during the writing process.

This limitation is important in writing centre contexts. Writing centre pedagogy treats the tutorial as a collaborative space in which students and tutors talk through writing decisions rather than simply correcting the finished text (Bruffee, 1984; Gillespie & Lerner, 2008; North, 1984). A student may, for instance, produce an unfocused thesis, weak organisation or inappropriate source use in a written assignment, yet the underlying difficulty may involve uncertainty about the task, topic, purpose, audience, evidence or the relationship among ideas. These underlying difficulties may become more visible when students explain their thinking and negotiate writing decisions with tutors during a tutorial (North, 1984).

The gap here is the insufficient empirical evidence in the Kenyan context about the range and nature of writing challenges that students present during writing centre tutorials. This is an important gap because the tutorial provides a distinctive opportunity to observe writing difficulties as they are identified, explained and negotiated through interaction. Without such evidence, writing support may be informed primarily by the problems evident in completed texts or by general assumptions about students' writing needs, rather than by an understanding of the difficulties students bring to individual writing consultations.

The gap is pertinent in Kenya, where writing centre provision remains new and research on writing centre interaction is limited. Existing Kenyan research has called for stronger and more sustained approaches to academic writing support (Chege & Njengere, 2018), but there remains limited empirical knowledge of what students discuss

when they seek help in writing centre tutorials. The present study therefore addresses this gap by examining tutorial session interactions in four selected Kenyan university writing centres.

Specifically, the study investigates the writing challenges that first-year university students present during writing centre tutorials. It consequently provides empirical evidence of what students struggle with at the point at which they seek writing support, thereby contributing to a more contextually grounded understanding of academic writing needs in Kenyan university writing centres.

1.3 Research Objective

The study was guided by the following objective:

- To investigate the writing challenges students present at the writing centre.

1.4 Research Question

The study sought to answer the following question:

- What challenges do students present at the writing centre?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Literature Review

2.1.1 Academic Writing as a Multidimensional Academic Practice

Academic writing is not a single, transferable skill but a complex set of practices through which students learn to participate in disciplinary and institutional forms of knowledge-making. University writers are expected to interpret tasks, establish an appropriate focus, develop and organise ideas, formulate claims, engage sources, construct coherent arguments, use appropriate academic language and revise their texts. These activities require the coordination of linguistic, cognitive, rhetorical, organisational and textual knowledge (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Kellogg, 2008). Academic writing is therefore better understood as a process of decision-making than as the production of grammatically correct sentences.

Understanding writing as a process is relevant to source-based academic writing. University students must identify relevant sources, read selectively, distinguish source claims from their own claims, summarise and paraphrase information, integrate evidence and document sources according to disciplinary conventions. Challenges with citation and referencing may therefore reflect broader challenges in source engagement, rather than simply an inability to apply formatting rules (Doolan, 2023; Marttunen & Kiili, 2022). Source use is simultaneously a linguistic, cognitive and rhetorical practice because students must decide why particular evidence is relevant to their argument.

Academic writing also involves the development of an appropriate academic voice. Students need to position their own claims in relation to evidence and to recognise that academic writing involves expectations concerning stance, authority and engagement with other writers (Pineteh, 2014). For multilingual students, these

expectations may be complicated by differences between previous educational experiences and the discourse practices valued in university contexts. A recent meta-ethnographic synthesis of qualitative studies on English academic writing experiences similarly found that students' writing experiences are shaped by prior educational backgrounds, institutional contexts, perceived writing competence and access to academic and linguistic support (Li, 2024).

2.1.2 Academic Writing Challenges in Higher Education

Research across higher-education contexts has documented challenges involving grammar, vocabulary, organisation, coherence, argumentation, source use and academic conventions. Kenyan research has similarly identified difficulties among undergraduate writers. Mwangi (2016), for example, documented challenges in students' academic essays involving content, structure and linguistic accuracy, while Chege and Njengere (2018) argued that conventional approaches to academic writing instruction in Kenyan universities may provide insufficient sustained attention to the development of academic writing.

However, identifying writing difficulties from completed texts provides only partial access to the processes underlying those challenges. A finished essay can reveal an unclear thesis, weak paragraph organisation or inappropriate citation, but it cannot necessarily reveal why the student made the decision or what the student understood about the writing task at the time. The distinction between a writing error and a writing challenge is therefore important. An error may be identified as a departure from an expected linguistic or formatting convention, whereas a writing challenge may involve the more complex process of making a conceptual, rhetorical, organisational, linguistic or textual decision (Bitchener, 2019; Hyland, 2015).

2.1.3 Writing Centres and the Development of Student Writers

Writing centres emerged partly in response to the need for individualised writing support. Their pedagogical philosophy has distinguished writer development from the correction of individual texts. North's (1984) influential formulation positioned the writing centre as a place concerned with producing better writers rather than simply better papers. Bruffee (1984), Harris (1985, 1995), and Gillespie and Lerner (2008) subsequently emphasised dialogue, collaboration and writer development as central features of writing centre pedagogy.

The writing centre is therefore more appropriately understood as a learning environment than as a proofreading or editing service. Its purpose is to help writers develop greater awareness and control of the decisions involved in academic writing. Recent scholarship continues to reinforce this developmental conception. Namakula (2024), for example, found that South African writing centres can provide first-year students with academic-literacy support while also creating supportive environments in which students feel more secure as they negotiate unfamiliar university expectations. More recent work has also argued for recognising writing centres as intellectual and

developmental spaces rather than positioning them merely as remedial units (Nendauni, 2026). Examining what students bring to tutorials therefore provides evidence about the forms of academic writing support that they seek.

2.1.4 Tutorial Interaction and the Visibility of Writing Challenges

Writing centre tutorials provide a useful site for examining writing challenges because writing becomes an object of conversation. Rather than analysing only the final written product, researchers can examine how students articulate uncertainty, explain their choices, ask questions and negotiate alternatives with tutors.

Recent research has strengthened the argument that tutorial interaction is co-constructed rather than produced by tutors alone. Zhang and Zhao (2024), examining recorded tutorials in two Chinese university writing centres, found that tutor–writer interaction involved contributions from both tutors and student writers and highlighted the importance of student input in the construction of tutorial interaction. Their findings are relevant to the present study because they demonstrate the value of examining the interaction itself as evidence of students' writing knowledge and needs.

The interactional nature of writing centre work is also consistent with Gass's (1997) Interaction Approach, which emphasises the role of interaction, input, output and feedback in language development. Although the Interaction Approach originated in second-language research, its emphasis on interaction provides a useful lens for examining what becomes observable when students talk through writing with a tutor. In a writing centre tutorial, students are required to verbalise decisions that may otherwise remain implicit. Tutors' questions, prompts, explanations and feedback can consequently make areas of uncertainty more visible. The objective of this article, therefore, is to identify the writing challenges that became visible and were articulated as students and tutors discussed actual writing tasks.

2.1.5 Writing Centres in African and Kenyan Higher Education

Writing centre scholarship in Africa has increasingly addressed issues of academic literacy, student transition, multilingualism, inclusion and the role of tutors. South African research has been influential because writing centres have become established components of academic-literacy provision. Recent scholarship has examined first-year student support, multilingual pedagogies and tutor development (Namakula, 2024; Namakula *et al.*, 2025).

At the same time, writing centre contexts cannot simply be transferred from one national setting to another. Institutional structures, language practices, student populations and histories of academic-literacy provision differ across higher-education systems. Kenyan universities therefore require context-specific research into how writing centre's function and what students bring to them. This need is significant given evidence of persistent academic writing challenges in Kenyan universities (Chege & Njengere, 2018; Mwangi, 2016). However, much of the available Kenyan evidence has focused on students' written products or general approaches to academic writing instruction. Less is

known about the writing challenges that students themselves articulate during writing centre consultations.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory provides the principal account of writing development adopted in this study. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is mediated through interaction, language and culturally organised activity. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) describes the space between what a learner can accomplish independently and what the learner can accomplish with appropriate assistance. Writing centre tutorials can be understood as ZPD environments because students often bring tasks that they can partially perform but cannot yet manage confidently or independently.

2.2.2 Interaction Approach

Gass's (1997) interaction perspective, further developed with Mackey (Gass & Mackey, 2006), complements the sociocultural account by directing attention to what interaction makes possible. Interaction can make gaps or uncertainties noticeable, create opportunities for clarification and feedback, and encourage learners to modify their output. In a writing tutorial, a student's spoken explanation provides evidence about what the student understands, while tutor questioning can require the student to make an implied decision explicit.

The two perspectives serve different but complementary analytical purposes. Sociocultural Theory explains the developmental significance of assistance and mediation, whereas the interactional perspective helps explain how writing challenges become observable through questioning, clarification, reformulation and feedback. Together, they support the interpretation of tutorial talk as more than conversation surrounding writing: it is part of the activity through which writing knowledge can be made visible and developed.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate the writing challenges that first-year university students presented during writing centre tutorials. A qualitative descriptive approach was appropriate because the study sought to provide a detailed account of participants' experiences and tutorial session interactions without imposing a predetermined causal explanation on the data. The design was used to examine what writing challenges became visible when students discussed their academic writing with tutors. Descriptive frequency counts were subsequently used to make patterns within the qualitative data visible.

Data were collected in four university writing centres in Kenya, identified in this article as Centres A, B, C and D to protect institutional anonymity. The selection of four

centres was intended to provide contextual breadth rather than statistical representativeness. The findings consequently describe writing challenges within the participating writing centre contexts.

The participants comprised 12 first-year undergraduate student writers and 11 tutors who participated in 12 complete writing centre tutorial sessions. Four sessions were analysed from Centre A, three from Centre B, two from Centre C and three from Centre D. One tutor at Centre C conducted two of the analysed sessions and was assigned session specific identifiers for presentation purposes. Participants were selected purposively because they met the substantive requirements of the study: students were first-year undergraduates who had accessed the participating writing centres for assistance with academic writing, while tutors were the peer tutors conducting the relevant consultations.

The principal source of data was 12 audio-recorded writing centre tutorials. Students attended the sessions with current academic writing tasks, drafts, outlines or related writing materials. The recordings captured the interaction through which students and tutors discussed writing decisions and areas of difficulty. Following the tutorial sessions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 12 student writers. These interviews provided participants with an opportunity to explain their perceived writing challenges and to reflect on issues that had emerged during the tutorial. The interviews were used as a supplementary source of data. Where appropriate, student accounts were compared with evidence from the corresponding tutorial. Ethical considerations were put in place to ensure that all students and tutors gave their informed consent, and all the necessary permits were obtained before data collection.

The tutorial recordings were transcribed and analysed inductively using a thematic procedure informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis proceeded through several stages. First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to establish familiarity with the data. Second, episodes in which students articulated, questioned, displayed or negotiated a writing difficulty were identified. Third, initial codes were assigned to these episodes. Fourth, codes with conceptual similarities were grouped into broader categories. Finally, the categories were reviewed against the transcripts to assess their internal coherence and their distinction from one another.

The principal unit of analysis was the writing challenge episode rather than the isolated grammatical error. A coded occurrence represented an identifiable episode in which a writing challenge was raised, demonstrated or discussed as part of the tutorial interaction. Where a single interaction contained distinct challenges, these were coded separately. The categories were therefore intended to represent meaningful writing concerns rather than merely counts of individual linguistic errors.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Students' Academic Writing Challenges

Analysis of the 12 tutorial sessions generated 76 coded occurrences across 11 categories of writing challenge. The challenges extended across the academic writing process, from interpreting and narrowing a topic to developing arguments, organising an essay, engaging sources, applying citation conventions, managing language and developing an appropriate academic voice. Table 1 presents the frequency of coded writing challenges as presented by students in the tutorial sessions.

Table 1: Frequency of Coded Writing Challenges in Tutorial Interactions

Student Writing Challenges	Frequency	%
Topic development and narrowing focus	7	9.2
Clarifying purpose and audience in writing	1	1.3
Thesis statements and argumentation	12	15.8
Pre-writing and planning the essay	5	6.6
Essay structure	8	10.5
The writing process	2	2.6
Developing ideas	3	3.9
Referencing and APA formatting	20	26.3
Language transfer and grammar	6	7.9
Academic voice vs. personal experience	5	6.6
Summary writing and textual engagement	7	9.2
Total	76	100

The highest number of coded occurrences concerned APA citation, referencing and formatting (20, 26.3%), followed by thesis statements and argumentation (12, 15.8%) and essay structure (8, 10.5%). Topic development and narrowing focus and summary writing/textual engagement each accounted for seven occurrences (9.2%). Language transfer and grammar accounted for six occurrences (7.9%), while pre-writing/planning and academic voice/personal experience each accounted for five (6.6%). Developing ideas, understanding the writing process and purpose/audience occurred less frequently. The frequency patterns indicate how often a particular challenge became sufficiently explicit to be coded within the 12 observed tutorials.

The 11 categories were organised into four broader dimensions:

- conceptual and rhetorical challenges (topic development and narrowing focus, purpose and audience, thesis statement and argumentation),
- process and organisational challenges (pre-writing and planning, essay structure, understanding, the writing process and developing ideas),
- Use of sources and documentation challenges (APA citation, referencing and formatting, summary writing and textual engagement) and
- language and writer-identity challenges (language transfer and grammar, academic voice and personal experience).

The qualitative analysis below therefore gives greater attention to the nature and interrelationships of the challenges than to frequency alone.

4.2 Conceptual and Rhetorical Challenges

Students frequently struggled with the conceptual work required before and during argument construction. Topic development and narrowing focus accounted for seven occurrences (9.2%). Students identified broad interests but were uncertain about how far a topic could be narrowed without making the essay too limited. One student explained, *"the reason why I'm shying away from narrowing it down too much is that I think you can narrow it down to a point where you have narrowed your points for the essay a bit much"* (WCA-S01). Another asked, *"I'd like you to help me narrow down my sub-topics. My research question also"* (WCA-S03).

These exchanges indicate that topic selection was fundamentally a problem of judgment. Students were learning to evaluate scope in relation to available evidence, assignment requirements and the amount of material that could be developed. The tutorial session provided a space where tutors could guide students to think through their choices rather than simply select a topic for them.

Clarifying purpose and audience occurred only once (1.3%), but the episode was analytically important. A student explained, *"I have topics. But I don't know my audience. I don't know if I'll address the Maasai people or the public. So, I'd like you to help me on considering that"* (WCA-S03). The tutor's questions about whether the purpose was to create sensitivity, provide solutions or make recommendations made the rhetorical problem explicit. The low frequency of this category could imply that students are more likely to identify visible technical problems than abstract rhetorical ones.

Thesis statements and argumentation formed the second-largest category, with 12 occurrences (15.8%). Students asked whether a thesis was necessary, where it should appear, and how multiple ideas could be condensed into a focused claim. One student asked, *"Do I need a thesis statement?"* (WCD-S11). Another responded to the tutor's question about the thesis by saying, *"I don't know. The thesis statement which I have is within the introduction"* (WCC-S09). A further student explained that the difficulty was *"shortening my points, like making them brief"* (WCA-S02).

These examples suggest that thesis development was not primarily a sentence-level problem. Students often possessed many ideas but had difficulty deciding which ideas should constitute the central claim. Thesis development was therefore connected to topic narrowing and idea development. The interactional evidence is consistent with research identifying thesis construction and organisation as persistent academic writing difficulties (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022).

4.3 Writing Process and Organisational Challenges

Pre-writing and planning accounted for five occurrences (6.6%). Students asked whether an outline was necessary, what it should contain, whether there was a standard format and whether planning should precede drafting. One student asked, *"Do you have to, like,*

write the outline, and then start writing the essay?" (WCA-S01). Another asked whether there was "a set outline or criteria" for organising thoughts and information (WCC-S08).

These questions reveal procedural uncertainty rather than simple unwillingness to plan. Students recognised that planning was expected but were unsure how planning works. This distinction is important because teaching a fixed outline may provide temporary compliance without developing strategic control of writing. Consistent with Flower and Hayes (1981) and Kellogg (2008), the data support an understanding of planning as recursive: writers generate, select, organise and reorganise ideas as their understanding develops.

Essay structure accounted for eight occurrences (10.5%). Students expressed uncertainty about introductions, conclusions, paragraph sequencing and genre. One student asked whether an assignment was an opinion essay or a for-and-against essay (WCD-S12), while another said, *"I wanted more on structuring the paper"* (WCC-S09). The challenge here relates to genre, with students trying to understand what different parts of an academic text are expected to accomplish.

The writing process category appeared twice (2.6%). One student said, *"I want to be the best writer ever. I want to understand the process"* (WCB-S07). Another requested help that would improve *"especially the process of writing"* (WCD-S11). Although the occurrences were few, the comments express a developmental orientation: the student wants knowledge that can transfer beyond the immediate assignment. This aligns closely with the writing centre philosophy of developing writers rather than improving the paper.

Developing ideas accounted for three occurrences (3.9%). In one tutorial, a tutor asked a student discussing drug use among students, *"Apart from health-wise and how we do things, is there any other way drugs affect students?"* (WCB-T07). The prompt led the student to identify another dimension involving parents and access to money. The episode demonstrates how tutor questioning can stimulate students to extend an initial observation into a more analytically developed line of thought without supplying the final answer.

4.4 Use of Sources and Documentation Challenges

APA citation, referencing and formatting was the most visible category, with 20 occurrences (26.3%). Students raised concerns about in-text citations, reference lists, document formatting, headings and the integration of quotations and paraphrases. One student stated, *"I do have a challenge, you know, doing APA, right?... And then writing in-text citations and references"* (WCB-S06). Another said, *"I find referencing a challenge"* (WCA-S03).

The prominence of APA should not be reduced to a need to memorise punctuation and formatting rules. Students' accounts also revealed uncertainty about how to incorporate the ideas of other scholars into their own writing. One student described difficulty when attempting to quote or cite other scholars: *"I may read a broad area of ideas, I may read books, but now when it comes to capture, maybe to quote from other scholars, I do have*

a challenge... I normally don't do too well when it comes to in-text citations" (WCB-S06). Citation therefore appeared as the visible surface of a broader source-engagement problem involving reading, selecting, paraphrasing, attribution and argument.

Summary writing and textual engagement accounted for seven occurrences (9.2%). Students reported difficulty condensing source material and distinguishing summary from the reproduction of information. One student said, *"I find it difficult to summarize articles without adding my own opinions"* (WCC-S09), while another said, *"I can have the content itself, but when it comes to writing a summary, it becomes a problem for me"* (WCB-S05). The problem is both cognitive and linguistic: students must identify what matters in a source, compress it accurately, reformulate it and connect it to their own purpose.

4.5 Language and Writer Identity Challenges

Language transfer and grammar accounted for six occurrences (7.9%). Students raised concerns about spelling, word choice, sentence structure, articles, agreement and other aspects of academic English. One student asked about the difference between *"who"* and *"that"* (WCA-S011), while another reported, *"Sometimes I am confused because I think in French"* (WCD-S011). Such challenges are unsurprising in multilingual contexts, but they should not be interpreted as evidence of limited intellectual capacity. The data show that linguistic control is one component of a much broader writing task.

Academic voice and personal experience accounted for five occurrences (6.6%). One student explained, *"Most of the time when I'm writing pieces, I like to go off personal experience first... knowledge that I have, challenges that I've experienced"* (WCC-S08), and wondered whether this approach was appropriate for a term paper. The tutor responded, *"It's not a bad thing to start with a personal experience... and then grow it from there... keep your own voice... and now reinforce it"* (WCC-T08). This exchange illustrates a productive conception of academic voice whose goal is to teach the writer how to position experience in relation to evidence, genre and scholarly claims.

4.6 The Interconnectedness of Writing Challenges

The most important analytical finding is that the 11 categories did not operate as isolated problems. The tutorial episodes revealed recurring relationships among challenges. First, topic narrowing, thesis development and essay organisation were interconnected. Students who were uncertain about the scope of a topic also had trouble determining the central argument and deciding how the essay should be organised. The sequence can be understood as:

topic interpretation → topic narrowing → thesis/argument → organisation.

Secondly, source engagement, summary/paraphrase and citation were interconnected. Students' documentation challenges sometimes reflected difficulties in

identifying relevant information, representing source ideas, and connecting evidence to their own arguments. The pattern can therefore be represented as:

reading/textual engagement → summary/paraphrase → evidence integration → citation/referencing.

Additionally, language and academic voice intersected with argumentation. Students' choices of words and sentence structures were not independent of the ideas they were attempting to communicate. Linguistic uncertainty could affect the clarity and authority with which students presented their arguments. Further, planning and organisation were interconnected. Students' difficulties with pre-writing were related to subsequent decisions concerning paragraph structure and the sequencing of ideas. These relationships suggest that students' writing challenges are better understood as a network of related writing decisions than as a list of independent deficiencies.

5. Discussion

5.1 Writing Challenges Extend Beyond Surface-Level Error

The first important finding is that students' writing challenges extended well beyond grammar and other surface-level errors. Although language transfer and grammar accounted for 7.9% of coded occurrences, students also experienced difficulties with topic interpretation, rhetorical purpose, thesis development, planning, organisation, source engagement, academic voice and documentation.

This finding supports the argument that academic writing is a multidimensional activity requiring coordination of linguistic, cognitive and rhetorical resources (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Kellogg, 2008). It also resonates with recent research showing that university students' academic writing experiences are shaped by a combination of linguistic competence, prior educational experiences, institutional expectations and available academic support (Li, 2024).

5.2 Citation Challenges as a Source-Use Problem

APA citation, referencing and formatting was the most frequently coded category, accounting for 26.3% of the occurrences. At first sight, this finding might suggest that students primarily require instruction in citation rules. The qualitative analysis, however, indicates that documentation challenges may be connected to broader source-use practices.

Academic source use requires students to locate relevant information, understand source arguments, decide what information is relevant to their own purposes, represent that information accurately and connect it to their own claims. Consequently, citation cannot be reduced to the application of a formatting system. Research on source-based writing similarly demonstrates that successful academic writing depends on the

coordination of several dimensions of source use, including selecting, representing and integrating source material (Doolan, 2023; Marttunen & Kiili, 2022).

5.3 Thesis Development as a Central Organising Challenge

Thesis statements and argumentation formed the second-largest category, accounting for 15.8% of coded occurrences. This finding is important because thesis development links several other writing practices. A thesis provides direction for the development of ideas and contributes to decisions about paragraph organisation, evidence and conclusions.

The tutorial episodes suggest that students' difficulty with thesis development was about where a thesis should appear. Students were negotiating what their central claim should be and how a broad set of ideas could be transformed into a focused argument. This finding reinforces the need to distinguish between knowing the formal definition of a thesis statement and being able to construct one for a particular rhetorical situation.

5.4 The Tutorial Session as a Space of Visibility and Articulation

The writing challenges became visible as students talked about their writing with tutors. This finding is consistent with Zhang and Zhao's (2024) observation that writing centre interaction is co-constructed by tutors and student writers. Their study demonstrated the importance of attending to student writers' contributions rather than treating tutorial talk as something produced exclusively by tutors. This study extends this insight by showing that student talk provides important evidence about the nature of writing challenges themselves.

5.5 First-Year Writers and the Transition into Academic Discourse

The findings are also significant because the participants were first-year university students. First-year writers are not merely learning how to produce grammatically correct texts; they are learning how academic knowledge is organised, justified and communicated. This transition can be demanding, as students enter university with varied linguistic and educational experiences. Li's (2024) synthesis of qualitative research demonstrates that students' academic writing experiences are influenced by previous educational backgrounds and institutional contexts. Similarly, recent South African writing centre research highlights the importance of supportive environments for first-year students as they negotiate academic-literacy expectations (Namakula, 2024). The present findings suggest that writing centre support needs to address these transition-related demands. Students require opportunities to discuss why particular writing decisions are expected, not simply instructions concerning what form the final text should take.

5.6 Implications for Writing centre Practice

The findings have several implications for writing centre practice. First, tutors should be prepared to diagnose writing challenges at more than one level. A request concerning

citation, grammar or structure may provide an entry point for exploring a deeper difficulty involving source engagement, argumentation or rhetorical purpose. Also, tutor preparation should emphasise the relationships among writing practices. Tutors may need to help students move from identifying an immediate problem to understanding the broader writing process in which that problem occurs. In addition, writing centres should maintain a developmental rather than a corrective orientation. The role of writing centres in academic development and student agency as remedial spaces should be emphasised. (Namakula, 2024; Nendauni, 2026). The multilingual dimensions of student writing should be approached carefully. Recent African writing centre research demonstrates that students' multilingual repertoires can be pedagogically productive rather than simply treated as sources of interference (Namakula *et al.*, 2025). This is relevant to Kenyan universities, where students enter higher education with diverse linguistic experiences.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study examined the writing challenges that first-year university students presented during writing centre tutorials in four selected Kenyan universities. Analysis of 12 tutorial sessions generated 76 coded occurrences across 11 categories encompassing conceptual and rhetorical, process and organisational, source-use and documentation, and language and writer-identity dimensions of academic writing.

APA citation, referencing and formatting constituted the largest category, followed by thesis statements and argumentation and essay structure. The principal contribution of the study lies in demonstrating their interconnectedness. Students' difficulties with topic narrowing, thesis development and organisation were frequently related, while source engagement, summary and paraphrase, evidence integration and citation formed another interconnected cluster. Language difficulties likewise intersected with academic voice and the communication of arguments. The findings demonstrate the value of examining writing challenges within a tutorial interaction.

The value of the writing centre tutorial lies not simply in identifying what is wrong with a student's text, but in making visible the writing decisions with which the student is still learning to gain control. Understanding those challenges is an essential first step toward designing responsive, individualised and developmentally oriented writing support for university writers in Kenya.

6.2 Recommendations

Universities should strengthen writing centre provision as a sustained, process-oriented form of academic writing support for first-year students. Writing centre tutors should adopt a diagnostic approach that addresses the interconnected nature of students' writing challenges rather than treating problems such as citation, thesis development, organisation and language as isolated errors. Tutor preparation should therefore

emphasise strategies for identifying underlying difficulties and guiding students through planning, idea development, argument construction, source integration and revision. Academic writing programmes should also integrate use of sources, citation and referencing with critical reading, paraphrasing and argument development rather than presenting them as technical skills in isolation. Finally, writing centres should collaborate more closely with academic departments to ensure that writing support responds to the disciplinary writing demands students encounter. Such approaches would strengthen writing centre provision as a developmental space for building students' independence and control over academic writing.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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