



Strategies to Enhance the Academic Writing Skills of First-Year Students at a University in a Rural Setting: Role of Lecturers

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Abstract

This study explored how lecturers at a rural South African university integrate academic writing instruction into their teaching of first-year students, a population that continues to experience marked socio-economic and academic disadvantage. Using a qualitative, narrative inquiry design within an interpretivist paradigm, data were collected through qualitative questionnaires completed by lecturers teaching first-year modules across a range of disciplines, and analyzed thematically following the six-step procedure outlined by Naeem et al. (2023). The analysis, based on eight unique lecturer accounts, generated six interrelated themes: a widening foundational literacy gap traced to rural schooling; a lecturer role increasingly strained by unplanned remedial responsibilities; fragmented and inconsistently used institutional support; active but under-resourced classroom-level pedagogical responses; an unresolved debate over whether writing should be taught as a stand-alone or embedded skill; and a shared call for systemic, rather than individual, change. Together, the themes describe a cycle of constraint and response in which lecturers absorb, at real personal cost, a structural gap the institution has not yet resourced or coordinated a response to. The study recommends coordinated action at institutional, departmental and lecturer-development levels, and argues that first-year academic writing support at rural universities cannot rely on individual lecturers' goodwill alone.

Keywords: Academic writing, first-year students, rural university, lecturer perceptions, thematic analysis, higher education, South Africa.

Introduction

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of improving academic writing abilities for university students learning English as a Second Language (ESL), both in South Africa and internationally (Mdodana-Zidea & Mukuna, 2023). Students entering university for the first time often face difficulties with academic writing, largely because of their secondary school experiences (Ajani & Gamede, 2020). Consequently, many higher education institutions (HEIs) have established centers dedicated to supporting academic growth, increasing student achievement, and addressing the diverse linguistic and cultural needs found in higher education

(Bangani, 2025; Nendauni, 2026). These centers offer direct academic support, encourage academic literacy, work to ensure fair opportunities for students from disadvantaged and multilingual backgrounds, and partner with faculties to create inclusive curricula and assessment methods (Cekiso, 2024; Mosia et al., 2025). Operating against a backdrop of ongoing inequalities and systemic barriers, these centers' effectiveness is shaped by these broader challenges (Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2025). Research highlights both the critical role and the significant obstacles that writing centers encounter in promoting student retention, development, and achievement within South African universities (Slabbert, 2024).

First-year undergraduate students face various challenges in higher institutions across South Africa. These issues span socio-economic and academic difficulties, with rural universities experiencing even greater hardships. The National Development Plan (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2011) highlights that the university curriculum's learning experiences are not customized to align with learners' and community needs, thereby making it problematic to help students reach their full potential. These challenges contribute to poor academic performance among students, leading to governmental expenditure that is ultimately ineffective and stifling innovation (NPC, 2011). Higher education is the center of learning where students gain skills, knowledge, and values to become responsible citizens, thereby fostering societal development. The challenges faced by first-year undergraduate students fall into two main categories: socio-economic and academic (Ajani & Gamede, 2020).

Academic writing support has already been studied extensively (Schillings et al., 2023). Previous research on academic writing support ranges across, for example, the use of exemplars or worked examples (Carless & Chan, 2017; To & Carless, 2016; Yucel et al., 2014), the use of assessment criteria (Elander, 2002; Elander et al., 2006), the implementation of training or instruction (Taras, 2001, 2003), the use of different modes of feedback provision (McCarthy, 2017; Morris & Chikwa, 2016), the role of feedback in revision of writing products (Jonsson, 2013), the role of self- and/or peer assessment (Taras, 2001, 2003), and the importance of the writing process itself (Cloutier, 2016). Each research direction contributes to improved insight into the development of academic writing skills. However, one of the most powerful single influences on achievement is feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Still on academic writing, studies (Fareed et al., 2016; Huisman et al., 2018; Mallia, 2017; Puspita, 2019; Wischgoll, 2017) have explored various aspects of academic writing for students in HEIs. Recently, studies (e.g., Kim et al., 2025; Malik et al., 2023; Song & Song, 2023) have focused on different facets of academic writing, with some (e.g., Alkamel & Alwagieh, 2024; Dekker et al., 2020; Schmohl et al., 2020; Song & Song, 2023; Zulfa et al., 2023) examining how academic writing can be approached using artificial intelligence (AI).

From the above, it is evident that research on academic writing exists. However, a notable gap in the research is the lack of a comprehensive understanding of strategies to enhance the academic writing skills of first-time entering students (FTENS) at a rural university. Thus, both a population and a knowledge gap necessitate this study. In this study, we aim to uncover how lecturers at the university in question integrate academic writing skills into the modules they teach.

By embarking on this study, the researchers aim to employ a qualitative approach to explore the strategies first-year students at a rural university use to enhance their academic writing skills. The remainder of the article is organized as follows: the literature review examines research on academic writing support and identifies the gap this study addresses; the methodology outlines the qualitative approach and the thematic analysis procedure followed; the data presentation reports the lecturer questionnaire data, organized around six themes; the discussion considers these findings in relation to the existing literature; the recommendations set out implications for practice and policy; and the conclusion closes the study.

Literature Review

Students need academic skills to carry out academic tasks and prepare for lifelong learning (Schillings et al., 2023). One essential skill is communication, which includes writing skills such as essay and report writing and oral skills such as presentations (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2000; Wingate, 2006). According to Sultan (2013), “academic writing, especially in modern Western society, is a distinct style used by scholars and researchers, characterized by detached objectivity, critical analysis, and the presentation of well-structured, clear arguments grounded in evidence and reason” (p. 139). Therefore, academic writing is a vital form of communication (Lillis & Turner, 2001; Murray, 2001; Sultan, 2013; Zhu, 2004). Examples include essays, bibliographies, theses, and scientific papers (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004). However, developing academic writing skills can be difficult for students in higher education (Carless, 2006; Elander et al., 2006).

The literature outlines various methods for teaching academic writing (Lea & Street, 2006; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Many approaches focus on teaching academic writing outside the specific subject matter, often in extra-curricular ‘study skills’ courses. These generic or add-on methods assume that common features of academic writing can be taught separately (Etherington, 2008). However, research shows that such isolated methods are often ineffective (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004; Tribble & Wingate, 2013; Wingate, 2006, 2012). The core argument is that learning to study well at university cannot be separated from understanding the subject content and the process of learning. Additionally, many students start their studies with limited knowledge of the principles underpinning discipline-specific academic discourse, which are rarely explicitly taught by lecturers who often assume students understand what is expected (Elton, 2010; Hunter & Tse, 2013). Recognizing that learning to write well is difficult highlights the need for support in academic writing (Wingate, 2006, 2012, 2014). Developing disciplinary writing involves understanding a unique discourse related to subject knowledge and tacit writing conventions (Elton, 2010; Hunter & Tse, 2013; Wingate, 2006). Another concern is that increasing numbers of students from diverse educational backgrounds require alternative methods for learning complex academic writing skills (Boscolo et al., 2007; Lillis & Turner, 2001; Tribble & Wingate, 2013; Wingate, 2006). Consequently, researchers advocate for effective approaches that improve academic writing skills and support lifelong development. There is a call to incorporate student input into embedded, subject-specific discourse and instruction, known as the built-in approach, in contrast to generic, often extra-curricular, teaching (Hunter & Tse, 2013; Lillis, 2001; Wingate, 2006; Wingate et al., 2011).

Scholars (Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Jabali, 2018; Sujito et al., 2019; Toba & Noor, 2019) note that academic writing skills are crucial for the success of ESL students entering university. Pineteh (2014) adds that these skills are also important for socializing students into the discourse of university disciplines.

Language competence is essential as it underpins language proficiency. Therefore, it is vital to assess students’ writing at first-year level to ensure they develop the necessary skills (Suastra & Menggo, 2020). A lack of this foundation can lead to weak productive skills, which may adversely affect academic success across subjects and hinder students from reaching their academic and career potential. Early exposure to English outside of school and in everyday life is critical; without it, language proficiency may suffer, hampering progress throughout schooling. English learners should be introduced to the language as early as possible so that, by the end of Grade 12, they can speak, read, and write English well and be prepared for tertiary education. Küçüksüleymanoğlu (2025) concurs, emphasizing the importance of creating equitable access to educational opportunities through a fair system. Early exposure helps

address overt and covert challenges associated with the language of learning and teaching (LOLT).

Writing is a cognitively demanding task. It is therefore inaccurate to assume that fluency in speaking English automatically equates to good writing skills. Even native speakers need guidance in academic writing (Wingate, 2015). The process involves planning, which often begins with an outline using keywords related to the topic (taxonomy). Drafting involves putting ideas into writing, while revising focuses on checking the flow of arguments and improving word choice to strengthen the content. The final stage is editing, which entails reviewing grammar, spelling, and clarity to ensure the intended meaning is communicated explicitly and unambiguously.

Good academic writing emphasizes not only grammar but also content and style. Previous studies on academic writing have examined the root causes of students' lack of proficiency but have not proposed strategies to address these challenges. Hinkel (2006) argues that proficiency in writing requires explicit instruction in grammar and lexis. Grammar, as used by linguists, refers to both the structure of words and their arrangement in sentences (Suhrob & Vasila, 2022). Beyond basic grammatical rules, such as subject–verb agreement, the text must also convey meaning (Yusuf & Ali, 2025). Knowledge of grammar plays a crucial role in any language, especially in written work, where the writer must adhere to fundamental rules governing language use (Taye & Mengesha, 2024). Research indicates that explicitly teaching grammar and lexis does not necessarily enable students to write coherently (Odlin, 1989). To attain writing proficiency, students need to be guided through the entire writing process, from initial preparation to final production. Wingate (2015) challenges earlier research, asserting that academic literacy encompasses more than is commonly understood. Many studies suggest that second language learners predominantly struggle with academic discourse. However, Wingate contends that writing challenges occur across all student groups, not solely among those from underprivileged backgrounds or second language learners. She believes that literacy problems transcend race, which explains why these issues are encountered worldwide. Wingate (2015), like Corder (1967) and Yasuda (2025), diverges from the commonly held belief, as cited by Bui and Barrot (2025), that language fluency automatically equates to being a skilled writer.

As a result, the research objective of this study was to explore how lecturers at University A integrate the academic writing aspect of the writing process when they conduct lectures. This makes our question as follows: *How do lecturers at University A integrate the academic writing aspect of the writing process when they conduct lectures?*

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a narrative inquiry design to explore strategies for improving the academic writing skills of FTENS at a rural university. This approach provided theoretically sound information and helped gather rich, detailed data that revealed participants' underlying meanings and motivations (Alordiah & Oji, 2024). Consequently, we collected data from the in-depth descriptions provided by participants (Geertz, 1973). An interpretivist research paradigm was used to understand human perceptions of academic writing as a social phenomenon and to describe and interpret participants' experiences (Schurink et al., 2021). Data collection was carried out using a qualitative questionnaire comprising pre-prepared, open-ended questions, which allowed lecturers to describe their experiences and practices in their own words. Data were analyzed thematically and effectively applied within an educational context. The thematic analysis followed the six steps outlined by Naeem et al. (2023): (1) transcription, familiarization with the data and selection of quotations; (2) selection of keywords; (3) coding; (4) theme development; (5)

conceptualization through interpretation of keywords, codes and themes; and (6) development of a conceptual model. The conceptual model produced in the final step is presented in Figure 2.

We obtained informed consent from respondents before data collection (Mishi & Maredza, 2024). We informed respondents of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (Hume & Baumgardner-Zuzik, 2022), assured them of confidentiality and anonymity (Mishi & Maredza, 2024), and confirmed that no harm, physical or otherwise, was inflicted (Cannon & Delahoyde, 2023).

Data Presentation

Nine questionnaires were returned by lecturers teaching first-year modules across different disciplines at the university. On comparison, one questionnaire (Participant 9) proved to be a verbatim duplicate of another participant's response (Participant 1) and was treated as a repeat submission rather than an independent voice. The findings reported below are therefore based on eight unique lecturer accounts (P1–P8).

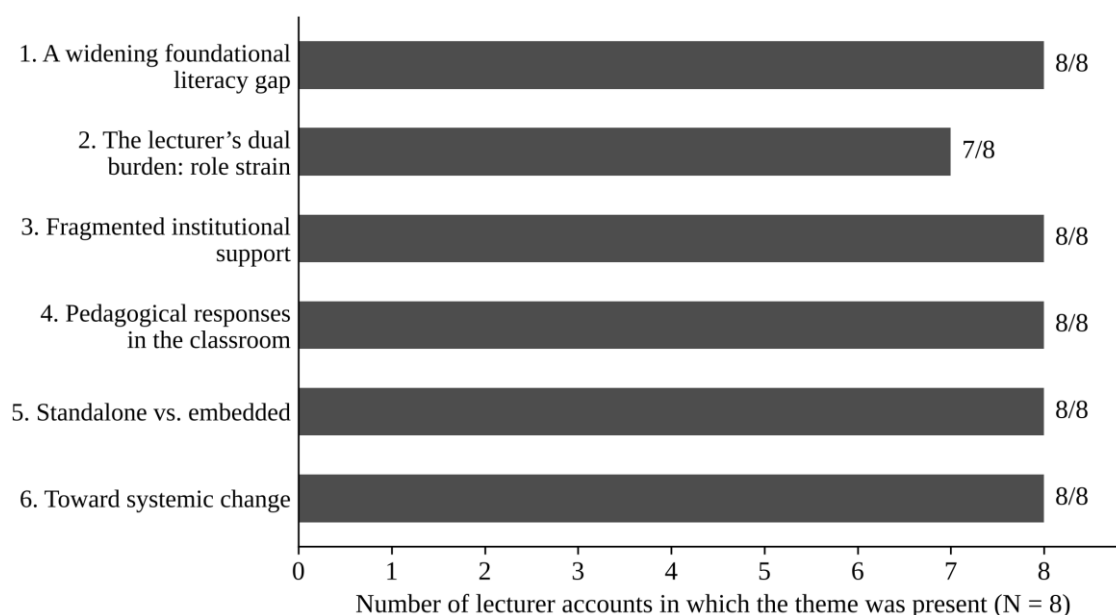
The questionnaire responses were analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis procedure of Naeem et al. (2023) described in the methodology. This process produced six interrelated themes, summarized in Table 1 and Figure 1 below and discussed individually thereafter.

Table 1

Overview of Themes, Sub-Themes and Their Prevalence Across Participants (N = 8)

No.	Theme	Key sub-themes	n/8
1	A widening foundational literacy gap	Weak core writing mechanics; referencing deficit; rural under-resourcing; language transition and code-switching; digital illiteracy and AI reliance	8/8
2	The lecturer's dual burden: Role strain	Role ambiguity ("remedial teacher"); emotional toll; time and class-size constraints	7/8
3	Fragmented institutional support	Absent or inadequate lecturer training; ambivalence toward writing centers; no policy or dedicated curriculum time	8/8
4	Pedagogical responses in the classroom	Scaffolding and modeling; feedback practices; peer/self-assessment (contested); embedding writing in lectures	8/8
5	Standalone vs. embedded: Contesting where writing belongs	Case for a stand-alone module; case for embedding; hybrid position with caveats	8/8
6	Toward systemic change	Compulsory literacy module; writing-center reform; digital literacy; lecturer capacity-building; policy and collaboration	8/8

Note. n/8 = number of the eight unique lecturer accounts (P1–P8) in which the theme was present.

Figure 1*Prevalence of the Six Themes Across the Eight Lecturer Accounts*

Note. Data are drawn from the eight unique lecturer questionnaires (P1–P8).

A Widening Foundational Literacy Gap

All eight lecturers linked first-year students' writing difficulties to a foundational gap that predates university entry. Difficulties were most often located at sentence and paragraph level rather than in higher-order argumentation: their writing "is not coherent because they lack writing skill" (P1), compounded by an absence of "topic, supporting and concluding sentences" (P1) and, for others, weak referencing conventions; students "either do not reference, or when they do, they do it incorrectly" (P3).

Lecturers consistently traced these difficulties back to the rural schooling system itself. Schools were described as under-resourced and lacking specialist language teachers, "lack of Language teachers in rural schools especially English language" (P1), with some students arriving having "never been taught the basics of a computer" (P2). One participant linked the gap to an emerging reliance on generative artificial intelligence: students "use an AI generator to create and submit an assessment task ... therefore, they don't engage in the academic writing system" (P8), a dimension of the literacy gap not yet visible in the literature reviewed above. The influence of the home language and code-switching, sanctioned by current language-in-education practice, was also raised (P1, P2), echoing Wingate's (2015) argument that writing difficulty is not confined to second-language speakers but is compounded by it in under-resourced settings.

The Lecturer's Dual Burden: Role Strain

Seven of the eight lecturers described their role in terms that extended well beyond disciplinary teaching. Several described a direct conflict between their disciplinary identity and an unplanned remedial one: "I feel caught between my job as a lecturer and a remedial English teacher" (P7); "To be frank, I feel more like a high school English teacher than a university lecturer ... It's overwhelming and often discouraging" (P6). Time and class size compounded this strain: "I have too many students and too little time" (P7). Even lecturers who avoided

such explicit language positioned themselves as occupying a dual role, seeing themselves as “both a content teacher and a writing mentor” (P4).

Fragmented Institutional Support

All eight participants pointed to gaps in institutional support. On training, seven of the eight reported receiving none of substance: “None whatsoever” (P6); “No formal training has been provided to lecturers” (P5)—the exception being P2, who answered simply “Yes” without elaboration. Views of writing centers were split: P1 valued them for the “individual attention” they provide, while the remaining seven qualified or rejected their usefulness: “understaffed, poorly advertised, and irrelevant to our specific disciplinary needs” (P6); “it feels like a tick-box exercise from the university” (P7). P8 pointed to the absence of any departmental document explaining “what academic writing is and how [students] are expected to write.” This pattern resonates with Ganobcsik-Williams’s (2004) and Wingate’s (2006) critique of generic, add-on writing support offered in isolation from disciplinary teaching.

Pedagogical Responses in the Classroom

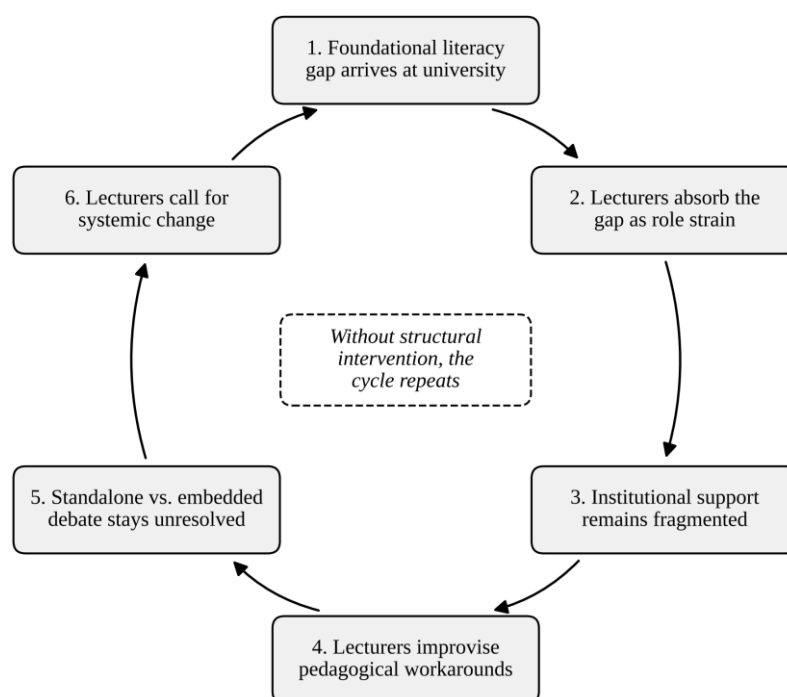
Despite these constraints, all eight lecturers described concrete classroom strategies: scaffolded, low-stakes writing tasks and templates (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8), modeling and exemplars, and individualized feedback ranging from marginal comments to “one-on-one consultation” (P2) and “annotated comments in digital submissions” (P5). Peer- and self-assessment divided opinion: used with enthusiasm by some, it “boosts their confidence” (P2), but treated cautiously by others, who felt “many students are not ready to assess others” (P6) and that it “ends up being more confusing than helpful” (P7). This mirrors the contested transfer of peer- and self-assessment practice (Taras, 2001, 2003) into a resource-constrained, rural first-year context.

Standalone vs. Embedded: Contesting Where Writing Belongs

Lecturers were themselves divided on the debate that runs through the literature reviewed above (Hunter & Tse, 2013; Lea & Street, 2006; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Three participants (P1, P2, P3) argued for a stand-alone, credit-bearing and assessed module, reasoning that “students will see its importance” only once it is formally assessed (P3). Three others (P4, P5, P7) argued that embedding writing within disciplinary teaching is more sustainable because students “immediately apply the skills within their subjects” (P5). The remaining two (P6, P8) called for both but flagged this as unrealistic without further investment: “even that assumes lecturers have the training and time, which we don’t” (P6). No consensus emerged among these eight lecturers, mirroring the unresolved state of the debate in the literature itself.

Toward Systemic Change

All eight lecturers closed their responses with structural, rather than individual, recommendations: a compulsory or dedicated academic-literacy module (P1, P2, P5, P6, P7, P8), reform and better integration of writing centers (P1, P3, P4, P8), lecturer capacity-building and smaller classes (P4, P5, P6, P7), and clearer policy, collaboration or accountability mechanisms (P2, P4, P5, P8). One participant summarized the stakes starkly: “we’re putting students through a system that sets them up to fail, and we’re left carrying the weight of that failure” (P7).

Figure 2*The Cycle of Constraint and Response: How the Six Themes Interlock*

Note. Conceptual model developed in the final step of the thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023).

Discussion of Findings

The research question guiding this study asked how lecturers at University A integrate the academic writing aspect of the writing process when they conduct lectures. The six themes generated above suggest that integration is happening, but almost entirely through individual, discretionary effort rather than through any coordinated institutional strategy, a pattern that can be read as a cycle of constraint and response (Figure 2).

The foundational literacy gap described by all eight lecturers (Theme 1) corroborates existing accounts of the socio-economic and academic disadvantages faced by first-year students from rural schooling backgrounds (Ajani & Gamede, 2020; NPC, 2011). What the questionnaire data add to this literature is the lecturers' own vantage point: several described the gap in terms of specific, observable deficits (vocabulary, paragraph structure, referencing, computer literacy) rather than as a generalized deficiency, and one participant (P8) identified an emerging complication in the growing use of generative AI tools as a substitute for the writing process itself. This is consistent with Wingate's (2015) contention that writing difficulty is not reducible to English-language proficiency alone, but is produced by the interaction of language, prior schooling and access to resources.

Theme 2, the lecturer's dual burden, is not explicitly anticipated in the literature reviewed above, which focuses largely on student-side interventions (feedback, exemplars, assessment criteria). The present data suggest that when writing support is not institutionalized, it is quietly absorbed into the workload and professional identity of individual lecturers, several

of whom described the resulting strain in emotive terms (“overwhelming,” “exhausting,” “burnt out”). Given that feedback is regarded as one of the most powerful single influences on achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), a lecturer cohort that is stretched this thin is poorly placed to deliver the sustained, high-quality feedback that the literature recommends.

Theme 3 (fragmented institutional support) and Theme 5 (the standalone-versus-embedded debate) are closely related and map directly onto a long-standing tension in the literature between generic, add-on writing support and a built-in, discipline-embedded approach (Hunter & Tse, 2013; Lillis, 2001; Wingate, 2006; Wingate et al., 2011). Tellingly, the lecturers in this study reproduced this same disagreement among themselves, with roughly equal numbers arguing for each position and two participants arguing for both while acknowledging that neither is achievable without additional time and training. This suggests that the standalone-versus-embedded debate is not merely theoretical: it is being fought out, unresolved, in the everyday decisions of individual lecturers at this university.

Theme 4 shows that lecturers are not passive in the face of these constraints. Scaffolding, exemplars, structured feedback and, for some, peer- and self-assessment were all reported as active, if under-resourced, responses, consistent with the broader literature on exemplars and worked examples (Carless & Chan, 2017), assessment criteria (Elander, 2002; Elander et al., 2006) and the role of self- and peer-assessment (Taras, 2001, 2003). However, the ambivalence expressed toward peer assessment by several participants, who doubted whether under-prepared students could meaningfully assess one another’s writing, suggests that these strategies cannot simply be transplanted into a rural, resource-constrained first-year context without adaptation.

Read together, the six themes suggest that the academic writing “support” currently available to first-year students at this rural university is real but precarious: it depends on the goodwill, time and personal initiative of individual lecturers rather than on a coordinated institutional policy. Theme 6, the lecturers’ own calls for a compulsory literacy module, better-integrated writing centers, digital-literacy provision and structured collaboration, can therefore be read less as a wish-list and more as a diagnosis of exactly where the current, informal system breaks down.

A methodological limitation should be noted. The sample comprised a small, purposive group of lecturers at a single rural university, one of whose returned questionnaires duplicated another and was excluded from the analysis; the findings are therefore analytically rich but not statistically generalizable. Future research could usefully triangulate these lecturer accounts with students’ own perceptions of the writing support they receive, and with direct observation of writing instruction in lectures, to test whether the cycle of constraint and response identified here also holds from the students’ side of the classroom.

Recommendations

The recommendations below follow directly from the six themes and the discussion above. They are organized by the level of the university system at which each would need to act, from institutional policy down to the individual classroom, because the data suggest that no single level can close the cycle of constraint and response (Figure 2) on its own.

Institutional and Policy Level

- Introduce a compulsory, credit-bearing academic-literacy module for all first-year students, rather than leaving writing support optional or dependent on individual lecturers’ initiative (raised in some form by P1, P2, P5, P6, P7 and P8).
- Develop a single, institution-wide policy and set of written guidelines on academic writing expectations, referencing conventions and assessment criteria, so requirements

are consistent across departments rather than left to each lecturer to define, as P8 observed was currently the case.

- Formally recognize writing-support work in lecturer workload models, so that the time lecturers already spend on remedial writing instruction (Theme 2) is resourced and counted, rather than absorbed as unpaid, invisible labor.
- Commission a student- and lecturer-informed review of the university's writing center(s) to understand the low attendance and mixed relevance reported by seven of the eight participants, and to test whether closer integration with disciplinary departments would improve both uptake and impact.

Departmental and Curriculum Level

- Embed short, structured writing activities directly within first-year disciplinary modules, following the built-in approach favored by several participants (P4, P5, P7), rather than relying solely on generic, extra-curricular writing-center sessions.
- Establish formal collaboration structures between content lecturers and language or writing specialists to co-design assignments, marking rubrics and scaffolded writing tasks, as recommended by P4, P5 and P8.
- Introduce early, low-stakes diagnostic writing assessments in the first weeks of first year to identify at-risk students before high-stakes assignments are due, as suggested by P5.
- Provide a foundational, credit-bearing digital- and computer-literacy component for students without prior exposure (P2, P4, P8), paired with explicit, discipline-specific guidance on the appropriate and inappropriate use of generative AI tools in academic writing (P8).

Lecturer Capacity-Building

- Provide regular, ideally paid, in-service training on writing pedagogy, feedback strategies and rubric design: seven of the eight participants reported receiving no formal training of this kind.
- Review class sizes in high-enrolment first-year modules where feasible, or provide tutor and teaching-assistant support, so that individualized feedback and peer-review activities (Theme 4) remain sustainable rather than symbolic.
- Develop and share bilingual or multilingual glossaries and resource materials to support ESL and code-switching students, building on the informal strategies some lecturers already use (P1, P4, P5).

Student Support and Institutional Culture

- Position academic writing as an everyday, valued institutional practice rather than a compliance exercise, for example through visible writing weeks, peer-writing groups and recognition of strong student writing, as P8 proposed.
- Track and incentivize attendance at existing writing-center and support sessions so that responsibility for engagement is shared between students, lecturers and support staff, addressing the accountability gap P2 described.

Table 2 maps each recommendation to the theme(s) it responds to and the level at which it would be implemented.

Table 2*Recommendations Mapped to the Themes They Respond To*

Recommendation area	Responds to theme(s)	Level
Compulsory academic-literacy module	1, 5, 6	Institutional
Institution-wide writing policy and guidelines	1, 3	Institutional
Workload recognition for writing support	2	Institutional
Writing-center review and integration	3	Institutional
Embedded discipline-specific writing tasks	3, 4, 5	Departmental
Lecturer–specialist collaboration	3, 4	Departmental
Early diagnostic writing assessment	1	Departmental
Digital literacy and AI-use guidance	1	Departmental
Paid lecturer training and workshops	2, 3	Lecturer
Class-size and tutor support review	2, 4	Lecturer
Bilingual resource development	1	Lecturer
Writing as everyday institutional culture	6	Student support
Attendance tracking for support sessions	3, 6	Student support

Note. Theme numbers correspond to the themes listed in Table 1.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how lecturers at University A integrate the academic writing aspect of the writing process when they conduct lectures, within a rural South African setting where first-year students carry a well-documented socio-economic and academic disadvantage. Drawing on eight unique lecturer accounts, a thematic analysis following Naeem et al. (2023) generated six interlocking themes: a widening foundational literacy gap, a lecturer role increasingly strained by unplanned remedial work, institutional support that remains fragmented and inconsistently used, a set of active but under-resourced pedagogical responses, an unresolved debate over whether writing belongs in a stand-alone module or embedded disciplinary teaching, and a shared call, from every participant, for systemic rather than individual change.

Together, these themes describe a cycle of constraint and response rather than a simple deficit: lecturers are not failing to support students' writing so much as absorbing, individually and at real personal cost, a structural gap that the institution has not yet resourced or coordinated a response to. The study's contribution lies less in identifying that first-year academic writing is difficult, which is well established in the literature, than in showing concretely how that difficulty is currently being managed, informally and unevenly, by the lecturers standing closest to it, and in surfacing a dimension, the growing use of generative AI as a substitute for the writing process, that existing frameworks have not yet had to account for.

The recommendations set out above are offered not as a wish-list but as a direct response to where the eight participants themselves located the points of breakdown. Addressing them would require coordinated action across institutional policy, departmental curriculum design and lecturer development; addressing only one level, the evidence suggests, would leave the cycle largely intact. As noted in the discussion, these findings are drawn from a small, purposive sample at a single institution and should be read as analytically rich rather

than statistically generalizable; triangulating them with first-year students' own accounts of the writing support they receive would be a natural and valuable next step.

Originality and Implications of the Study

Originality of the Study

Research on academic writing support has focused largely on student-side interventions, such as feedback, exemplars and assessment criteria, and on the difficulties students themselves experience. Far less is known about how lecturers at rural South African universities, who teach first-time entering students from under-resourced schools, integrate academic writing into their disciplinary teaching. This study addresses that population and knowledge gap by foregrounding lecturers' own accounts. Its originality lies in three findings not anticipated in the literature reviewed: the role strain lecturers experience when writing support is not institutionalized; the way the standalone-versus-embedded debate is enacted, unresolved, in lecturers' everyday teaching decisions; and the emergence of generative artificial intelligence as a substitute for, rather than an aid to, the writing process.

Implications of the Study

Theoretically, the study extends the academic literacies perspective (Lea & Street, 2006; Wingate, 2015) by showing that the gap between students' prior schooling and the conventions of disciplinary writing is mediated, unevenly, by institutional and lecturer-level responses. The cycle of constraint and response (Figure 2) offers a conceptual model that places lecturers, and not only students, within explanations of first-year writing outcomes.

Practically, the findings show that academic writing support cannot depend on the goodwill of individual lecturers. Universities serving rural students need to institutionalize this support through policy, workload recognition, lecturer training and closer collaboration between writing centers and disciplinary departments, as set out in the recommendations. Doing so could improve first-year success and retention and contribute to wider efforts to reduce educational inequality in South African higher education.

Further studies could triangulate lecturers' accounts with first-year students' perceptions and with observation of writing instruction in lectures, compare rural and urban institutions, and examine how generative artificial intelligence is reshaping first-year academic writing and its assessment.

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