

The process of essay writing in a literature course: the student's views and the tutor's feedback

Andrus Org^{a1}

^a Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu

Summary

Writing academic texts is an inevitable component of contemporary higher education; writing in a more specific sense is an indispensable method when teaching a particular subject (Blau, 2003). As a species of text, essay-form is an integral piece of writing in which one expresses in depth his/her opinions or feelings on a particular subject. In higher education teaching, essay-form has been used mainly as an individually graded writing task, which enables students to align their own subjective points of view to more general philosophical or scientific perspectives. For this type of academic or English style essay, it is common to have a rather personal discursive overall mood, critical and argumentative perspective, and stylistic comprehension. While the essay, in its traditional form, involves logic, dialectics, and rhetoric, it still enables students to put forward their own personal views as well as to interpret the variety of generic features of the essay-form in a more general manner.

Whilst essay writing is indeed a highly popular genre in higher education practises, it has not gained substantial prestige in the hierarchy of scientific texts, probably due to the fact that, as a genre, its limits and inner attributes are often unclear (Wingate, 2012). Writing a good quality essay demands both knowledge and experience, which fledgling writers often lack (Hounsell, 1997). Since students' views and expectations vary considerably from that of their tutors' in regards to the essay genre (Andrews, 2003; McEwan, 2017; Wingate, 2012), the task of academic essay writing should not be considered as obvious or self-explanatory in any university course but, instead, should be integrated to those disciplines, which expect and require academic text writing (Wingate et al., 2011). When enrolling in a new course, young students expect clearly laid out rules and precise tutor guidance (McEwan, 2017), which, as involving and supporting measures, should bring the whole writing process into focus and shape all writing competences integrally.

¹ Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu, Ülikooli 16, 51003 Tartu, Estonia; andrus.org@ut.ee

The aim of this article is to focus on the methodological problems arising from academic essay writing as a piece of discursive reasoning from the perspective of teaching writing. The article is based on action research conducted at the Cultural Institute of the University of Tartu. The research involves the BA course of Estonian literature, entitled “Analysing Prose” and its developmental work over the last four years (2015–2018), which was strongly motivated by the Good Teaching grant from the University of Tartu. The main problem that needed addressing with the “Analysing Prose” course had to do with the quality of essay writing as a specimen of academic text. Since the students experienced great methodological and subject driven difficulties in writing their essays, the teacher had to make several changes in the didactics of the subject. In addition, a variety of questions arose concerning teaching writing, to which we sought answers in this action research:

- 1) what are the main methodological problems in essay writing;
- 2) what particular subject didactic measures could help to support essay writing;
- 3) in what ways could we develop academic essay writing skills even further?

The aim of the action research was to establish ways in which university teachers could more effectively assist students in their essay writing and improve the quality of their supervision. This is unavoidable if we are determined to improve the academic writing skills and eliminate common shortcomings and mistakes in the writing process.

In order to get a more comprehensive overview, we had to cover both students’ and tutors’ perspectives in analysing the problems of essay writing. At first we examined the *tutor’s feedback* to 78 essays, and it became clear that the main difficulties in academic essay writing concern various text creation skills: a) choosing appropriate levels of analysis and method; b) overall construction of the text, structure and coherence of particular text segments; c) development of themes, finding arguments, building connections between ideas; d) citing and referencing primary sources, connecting them to one’s own ideas; e) phrasing ideas clearly; choosing appropriate and correct language skills.

After this stage, we gathered information from the students as to how they perceive the requirements of academic essay writing and what difficulties they have personally experienced in the essay writing process. In examining their replies, it became apparent that the students’ views on academic essay writing are relatively eclectic. The main gulf or dissonance between the tutors’ comments and students’ views surrounds the argumentation in the essay format: tutors’ feedback emphasises the central role of argumentation in the essay, where as students’ perspective does not stress this at all: they do not construe their writing predominantly as argument-based. The difficulties that students

have encountered in essay writing are, in their view, mainly to do with, a) creative skills of a writer, b) analysing and interpreting primary sources, c) limiting and developing the subject of the essay, d) choosing appropriate styles of form, expression and language use. In order to achieve a clear and mutually comprehensive view, the differences need to be discussed thoroughly in seminars and the methodological principles and requirements of essay writing repeatedly voiced.

In the development process of the course, we applied two didactic intervening methods, which support essay writing: 15 min. individual consultation/tutorial and written feedback to the first drafts of the essays. Both of these methods attempted to give an objective view of certain individual shortcomings and possibilities in order to improve the writing craft. Decisive action from tutors helped to strengthen the educational dialogue between teachers and students and, at the same time, shaped students as self-directed learners. This article directly discusses the positive impact and effectiveness of such intervening methods.

The *post-questionnaire* of student's views showed that both the above mentioned methods did indeed help students to understand the essay assessment criteria and the tutors' expectations of an academic essay. According to students, the verbal tutorials and written feedback to first drafts of the essays helped to form a clearer understanding of the requirements for specialist academic texts and improved writing skills in all areas and competences. These positive changes were also further confirmed in the *tutor's feedback to the last version of the essay*, which convinced us that all learners had, to a certain degree, taken into account the suggestions and corrections of their tutors and had been made aware of their progress. Students found that these two intervening measures improved the quality of the course and, in turn, had increased the median of their final grades for the course. The action research showed that individual writing should be approached at a more complex level taking into account, among other things, the students' previous writing experiences as well as their understanding of the requirements of the genre.

The article suggests several didactic approaches on how to make the academic essay writing process more effective. It is evident that the teaching process could be enhanced by dividing the subject into smaller phases, consisting of logically ordered actions. Importantly, the *phases of essay writing* should be thoroughly discussed with students. It is the tutor's task to *support the writing process*, and offer a sufficient and clear overview of the attributes and the requirements of the essay form. It goes without saying, that the *guidelines of the essays* and *criteria for assessment* must be discussed together in seminars in order to avoid misunderstandings and false expectations. In addition to the

guidelines, some of the core principles and stages of essay writing should be assisted by summarising *figures* and *schema*, which is particularly suitable for students prone to a more visual learning style. *Poster presentation* is also beneficial to this approach in which visual presentation is preferred to a verbal description.

In order to avoid certain anticipated problems, it is recommended to draw up and discuss together with students some *methodological test questions*, which help to bring attention to needed areas. Also, a *list of common mistakes* would be helpful for students, where each type of mistake is given a full description. In addition, different stages of essay writing could be, of course, practised with students by giving them *smaller writing tasks*. It also pays off to read and figuratively assess fellow students' essays in order to understand genre traditions and notice common mistakes. A *written reflection task*, i.e. an intermediary report to the tutor could also be incorporated into the essay writing process, which should give students an opportunity to reflect their experiences of writing while still in the process of writing their essays. Since writing is a social act requiring dialogue with an estranging thought and a relation to the expected reader, it may well be worthwhile attempting to *prepare essay writing in pairs*.

To sum up, it should be said that the necessary didactic changes in the course work, as well as tutor's more hands-on approach to guiding students, did indeed help to improve the academic essay writing skills of the students of Estonian literature and hopefully contributed to the overall prestige of the essay genre in higher education settings.

Keywords: action research, academic writing, teaching academic essay writing for undergraduates, tutor's feedback