

# CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN WRITING AN ACADEMIC PAPER

R. MICLAUS<sup>1</sup> L. L. ONISAI<sup>1</sup>  
L. DIMA<sup>1</sup> M.-E. COCUZ<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Every year the students and teachers experience the same problems in writing academic papers and dissertation thesis, even these work require to follow the same reproducible steps and stages: choosing a subject, collecting of scientific material, analyzing, interpreting, comparing of information and then writing, editing, identifying the mistakes and inadvertences, changing and correcting, finalizing the paper, preparing the oral presentation. The paper is a detailed analyse focused on designing a web site aimed to improve the process of academic writing, students' self-assessment and teachers' objective evaluation, and to increase the quality of teaching act.*

*Developing an institutional repository with all the papers and academic work (license diplomas, master dissertations and doctoral dissertations) could represent to coagulate all efforts with the specific target of quality improving. In the same time using intranet and university platform for managing the development of thesis could be a good opportunity for increasing the quality of teaching system in university, including the analyses of plagiarism possibility.*

**Key words:** *academic writing, evaluation, teaching quality, study, research, plagiarism.*

## 1. Introduction

Every year the students experience the same problems in conceiving and writing their bachelor degree thesis or master dissertation thesis. It is a repeated history and is following the same reproducible steps and stages of difficulty in choosing a subject, collecting of scientific material, analyzing, interpreting, comparing of information and then writing, editing, identifying the mistakes and inadvertences, changing and correcting, finalizing the paper, preparing the oral presentation and finally, convincing the Academic

committee (Commission) of the importance of their subject, of the hard work and consistency of their thesis, of the originality and self contribution to the study and research. Self control during the oral presentation and strong argumentation of their thesis as being very good documented, motivated and hard worked are the final steps of fulfilling a very good academic work and a dissertation thesis.

The authors of this paper are facing every year the same challenges, being tutors of many students, claiming the same "problems" in documented, conducting and finalizing a research and then in

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<sup>1</sup> Transilvania" University, Faculty of Medicine, Braşov, Romania.

writing down on a paper their work and results. This is a repeatable experience for a teacher supervising a study or tutoring a student in writing a paper, even if for every student is a unique experience marking the stage of completion of his/her studies.

## 2. Problem formulation

In Medicine and Health Sciences' faculties the students are facing every year some challenging realities: choosing a new subject, collecting information from data bases in hospitals or Public Health Authorities, having support and tutoring of a teacher being a specialist in the subject. Choosing of "a new subject" is limited by the relative constant number of diseases and the low access to information in case of rare diseases or information protected by law, medical ethics or confidentiality (for example the organ transplantation, HIV patients, etc.). In these cases, the practical part of the thesis, the research study and statistic study is threatened not to be completed.

Cismas C. underlines in her writing that "the issue of educating academic writing skills (...) is a current challenge nowadays, for both professors and learners. (...) Didactic efforts must be accompanied by students' practice, as writing is not only expression of meaning, but also self-expression, involving all individual skills and transferable abilities, alongside with an intense effort in the area of objectivity and self-assessment, in order to avoid field and regional/cultural frame-works that might distort the key meaning".[2]

Writing a paper represents a challenge and always represents a problem because of a sum of factors. The most important is to know them, early recognize them and quickly find solutions to deal with and solve them. A paper could be concluding

in an inferior work and it not acquires the basic requests for an academic paper. The international literature specifies that failure in concluding a thesis is caused by the next possible events, included in diagram 1. [5]

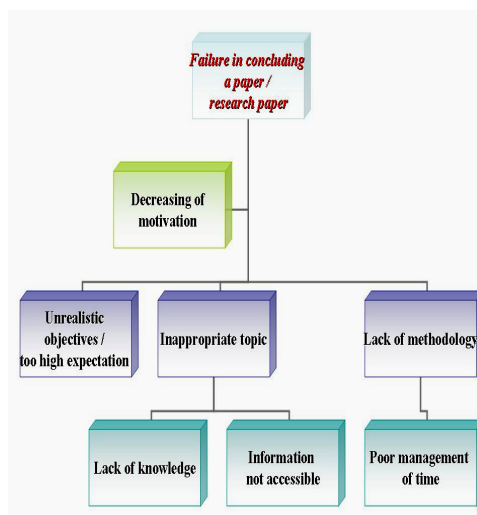


Diagram 1. *Failure in concluding a thesis*

Nevertheless, plagiarism phenomenon is a real issue in present days and internet is an instrument offering a lot of information for study. It is a reality also, the use of information and material protected by copyright without the author consent or citation as referral. [11, 13]

Cismas C. consider "within academic, plagiarism by students, professors, or researchers is considered academic dishonesty/fraud and offenders are subject to academic censure, up to, and including, expulsion. It is a breach of ethics, and the ones caught plagiarizing face disciplinary measures ranging from suspension to termination of employment." So far there are not efficient tools for quickly identification of fraud and also measures applied against students' fraud.[1]

### 3. Objectives

We tried to create a system to accomplish all the tasks a tutor is doing repetitively, each year with each student tutoring activity:

- to teach students how to write an academic paper,
- to monitor the development of documentation, study, collecting data, interpreting, comparing the information,
- to supervise the editing and writing the paper,
- to have a standard system to evaluate the consistency, completion and value of student work,
- to differentiate the value of different papers, based on objective criteria.

### 4. Material and methods

A study developed last academic year 2010-2011 in Medicine Faculty, Nursing program, showed that students experienced challenges in finalizing their academic papers from a various reasons. The contingent of students were 200 bachelor students (fourth year of study) in Nursing, having the task of preparing their license degree paper. They had two special meeting sessions for presenting the objectives and tasks of the work, detailed with examples, oral lectures and power point presentations of model of writing papers and oral presentations of their colleagues (General Nursing license in the last year - 2009). The first meeting was in October 2009 and the second in December 2009. The students had also two deadlines for their work analyze, the first in March 2010 (completion of theoretical part, collecting of scientific data from literature, clarifying their tasks and aims) and the second in June 2010 (completion of practical study, research study, defining their challenges, difficulties and final actions imposed in leading to completion of their thesis just in time).

### 5. Results

Only 46% of students attend the first meeting, the others not realizing the importance of a teacher guiding or motivating the lack of time. The second meeting was a success, because of 85% attendance, 55% of them being present to both meeting and having questions for the tutor and simulates concrete situations of challenges during their work, asking advice in solving them.

Writing a paper represents a challenge and always represents a problem because of a sum of factors. The most important is to know them, early recognize them and quickly find solutions to deal with and solve them.

Our study identified the factors perceived by students as “Problems”, decelerating the process of study, research and writing a paper. A contingent of 56 students of 200 (28%) faced at least one challenging situation represented in the next figure (Figure 1) during their work making the writing very slow, hard or difficult.

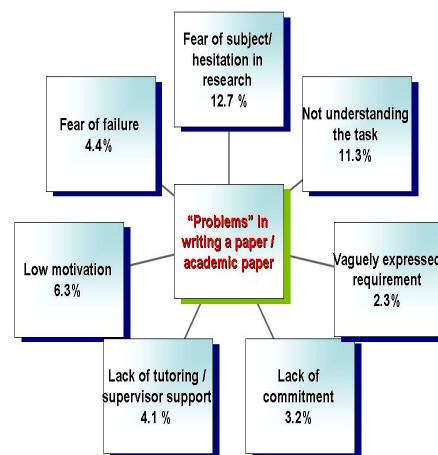


Fig. 1. *The main factors decelerating the writing of an academic paper*

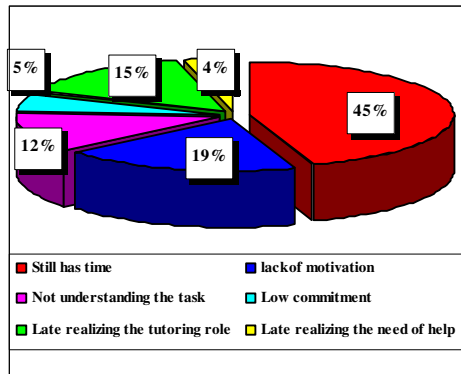
27 students declared they faced at least two problems and 5 students were complained of cumulating three of the listed problem.

At first deadline (the beginning of spring semester) the students' reasons for not being in schedule are:

- "Still has time", meaning bad management of time (45%);
- Inferior work caused by lack of motivation or not realizing the importance of the task (19%);
- Not understanding the task (12%);
- Low commitment in collecting data, literature study, reference consulting (5%);

Late realizing the tutoring and supervising importance and role (15%).

Late realizing the need of help in choosing, conceiving and designing the subject (4%).



Graph 1. *Students' reasons for not being in schedule – at first deadline*

A large contingent of students thought to change their subject from several reasons:

- Realize they are not familiar with the subject (3%);
- Don't have access to data base (patient's information) in that subject (1.5%);
- Realize is easier to cheat and take an old paper and "change it", adapting to

the subject ("cosmetic work") or "to use a model" from a colleague and change only the data (4.5%);

- Realize cannot do it, the task is too hard for him/her, ask for "an easier subject" (2%).

Two of the subjects were changed after the first deadline teachers' analyze and counselling as per no access to hospitals' data base (patient's information protected). One student was asked to change the subject as per fraud tentative, even the students were informed from the beginning that their work has to follow the ethical rules and should be original and personal effort result and also, were informed that using an old paper is easy to be catch in a data base tracing system and will be punished as per law.

23% of students overpass the second deadline, some of them taking the chance to use only the last occasion of teachers' verifying at the final deadline in September 1st.

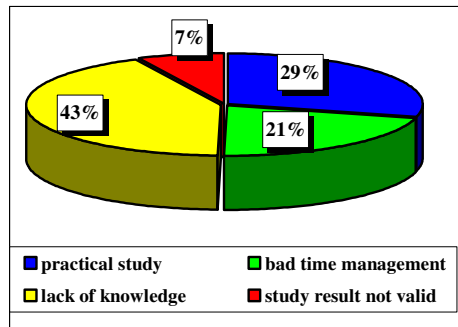
The causes of over passing the second deadline or abandon the subject are presented in the next figure. The following data are counted after teachers' evaluation and some students claimed more than one reasons of failure, as following: 127 students (63.5% of all contingent) were challenged by at least one of the next issues (the group of students with reasons of over passing deadline or abandon the subject will be considered 100%)

Practical study, statistics delayed or stacked were claimed as a principal reason by 37 students; 29.13%)

Bad time management (not all of them are aware they had a time management problem) (27 students; 21.26%)

Lack of knowledge in writing and editing (54 students; 42.52%)

Study results are not concluding or valid (9 students; 7.09%)



Graph 2. *Students’ reasons for not being in schedule – at second deadline*

**6. Discussion**

“A reform agenda for improving the quality of European higher education was promoted at Lisbon: pushing for excellence in research & innovation, concentration & selectivity regarding European area of research - ERA (2000).” [10, 12]

Transilvania University’s perspective of reformation in education includes:

The integrated development of three cycles of study: licence, master, doctorate and long life learning system

Building a quality criteria system for admission in a superior cycle of study

Attention focused on student: ECTS used to measure the students’ scientific development not only as method of knowledge recognition;

Development of a system to assure the quality based on both internal and external evaluation; [3, 6, 10]

All these arguments plead for a standard preparation and advanced designed of a theoretical model of “how to do” and follow standards steps and fulfil deadlines in the field of writing an academic paper. [7, 8] On the other hand we need a very clear system of evaluation on students’ In particular, there is an objective need each year to have an accessible model in learning to create a license thesis for bachelor degree graduation and a dissertation for master and doctoral

studies, fulfilling all academic requests and exigencies

Remeny D. and Money A. specified very clear the differences between a Master degree and a Doctoral degree as perceived by university and named the examination criteria that students must prove that they accomplished when evaluate the academic paper [5].

Table 1  
*Examination criteria for Master degree vs. Doctoral degree*

Master degree criteria	Doctoral degree criteria
Understand particular problem in the field of study	Clear evidence of originality and creative thinking and problem solving
Able to analyze and set it out logically	
Able to reach logical conclusions or diagnosis	Make a real contribution in solving a particular problem
Able to make proposal for the improvement or the elimination of the problem	

It is obvious that creation of a theoretical model of design and complete an academic paper following specific criteria for each level of education is definitely helpful as well for students and teachers. This model should be thought in the aim to be used by each student in bachelor, master or doctoral program during their preparation to create an original work finalized with a valuable project and a dissertation paper. The theoretical model will be used also, to evaluate the success and eligibility of a project being a result of a specific level of study.

The communication between students and teachers (tutors) will be assured by Transilvania University web platform, creating a 24 hours/7 days connection. Each student could access the information, have updated information on time and be informed about the present status of his work, his colleagues’ work, tasks, questions, etc. Also, they will be informed

about the deadlines, meetings, evaluation system, activities, communication sessions, etc.

A website containing general information on academic research and academic writing is probably the best model which could accomplish all targets and should include practical themes orientated on skills development of composing, designing a scientific paper, processing of information, writing and editing a paper on academic level or a research study. This website should include exercises for students, interactive preparation and finally, a simulation of writing and presenting the license thesis and a master degree dissertation. [9, 11] Topics included should be as following:



Diagram no.3

The evaluation criteria system for a licence diploma final paper should include clear deadlines (6 months advanced appointment) and scores for each task accomplishment:

	period	points	
sending the theoretical part	1.10.2009 1.03.2010		📄
Validation of theoretical part of the paper		3	📄 📄 📄 ✓
Sending the applicative part of the paper (practical, cases' studies, statistic study, etc), final conclusions and references, on line into the University system and score	1.05.2011 1.07.2011		📄
Validation of applicative part of the paper		3	📄 📄 📄 ✓
final conclusions 1	1.05.2011 1.07.2011	2	📄 ✓
References		2	📄 ✓
Supplementary points for oral communication or/and papers publishing with data and materials from their academic work and paper, with the same subject of study:		national 2, international 4	✓

📄 receive the paper 📄 verify 📄 need changes ✓ is OK

Diagram no.4

According to this criteria system each paper should add minimum 12 points to be considered fit for being a licence diploma paper.

The appraisal of a master dissertation paper should add points for specific criteria accomplishment (for example making proposal for the improvement or the elimination of the problem, 2-6 points)

A doctoral final paper should gain supplementary points into the criteria system for clear evidence of originality and creative thinking and problem solving and real contribution in solving a particular problem (4-10 points)

Designing a system of creating, writing and completing as well as evaluating an academic study (at different levels of preparation, exigency and requests) is the first condition in improving the teaching and evaluation system in university, being a certain possibility to increase the teaching system quality and transparency.

## 5. Conclusion

A theoretical model of design and complete an academic paper following specific criteria will help as well students and teachers in bachelor, master or

doctoral program. The model will be used also, to evaluate the success and eligibility of a project being a result of a specific level of study and will make more objective and transparent the academic appraisal of each work.

Internet is use more and more for communication, educational or research activities. Developing an institutional repository with all the papers and academic work (license diplomas, master dissertations and doctoral dissertations) could represent a way to improve their quality. In the same time using intranet and university platform for managing the development of thesis (following compulsory tasks, steps and deadlines) could be a good opportunity for increasing the quality of teaching system in university and a final objective evaluation of the main paper synthesising professional work when finalising the studies.

Ethical standards, cultural pluralism and democracy are value which must be respect [4]. Even if ethical issues related to development of this system doesn't seem to become an obstacle, the problems connected with the possibility of plagiarism must be always considered and analyse.

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