

# The Transition of Writing Researcher Identities: From a Self-Conscious Second Language Writer to a More Confident Graduate Student Writer and Researcher

Abantika Dhar

Abantika Dhar uses her newly acquired knowledge of concepts like antecedent knowledge and writing researcher identity to discuss the evolution of her learning as a second language writer. She uses examples of her writing from classes in Bangladesh and the US to explore how a rhetorical genre studies focus has helped her to understand the evolution and expansion of her translingual writing identity.

## Let's Talk about Writing

One of the most discussed terms in the Illinois State University (ISU) Writing Program is writing researcher identity. According to the ISU Writing Program, to become a successful writer one needs more than the conventional writing skills of putting a comma in the correct spot or writing a thesis statement. A successful writer should be able to use their knowledge “flexibly in different situations and must also be able to determine when new skills and knowledge are required” (Key terms & concepts, n.d.). Building a **writing researcher identity** means that you're able to do more than just acquire new writing skills. You also gain an understanding of how to use those skills to recognize what you “can and can't do as a writer.” As the result of my exposure to these ideas, I've come to believe that each writer possesses a separate and unique writing researcher identity. The journey to becoming a successful writer is a continuous process of learning how to write in every new situation or relevant context and understanding the balance between using one's previous knowledge and newly acquired skills in writing.

### Literate Activity

The ISU Writing Program’s newly updated website defines **literate activity** as “a way to describe the complex activity involved in people producing and using texts across spaces and times, in ways that are shaped by our histories, tools, social interactions, resources, bodies, emotions, and relationships with the world. When we talk about literate activity, we include reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking, and feeling—all social practices that influence how we make meaning and communicate” (Literate activity terms, n.d.).

Writing is an integral part of our lives and people write for many purposes. The forms of writing people engage in are varied and may include writing for school, writing a personal journal documenting regular activities, and writing to accomplish regular mundane tasks like making a grocery list. Writers engaged in these writing tasks use different kinds of genres to fulfill their **literate activity** goals. To understand this way of thinking about genre, we could use one of the definitions of genre provided by the ISU Writing Program: “**genre** is a kind of production that is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable” (Key terms & concepts, n.d.). Rhetorical genre studies researcher Anis

Bawarshi (2003) has compared genres to discursive sites (discourse places for productions, like texts) that “coordinate the acquisition and production of motives by maintaining specific relations between scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose” (p. 17). Bawarshi has further noted that “when writers begin to write in different genres, they participate within these different sets of relations, relations that motivate them, consciously or unconsciously, to invent both their texts and themselves” (p. 17). To me, these definitions point to the idea that genres are discourse spaces that provide humans the opportunity to create meaning for different people, in different places, and through different kinds of activities, contexts, and tools.

Genres are a part of writing as a complex activity system. According to *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* (GWRJ) author Brianna Zangara (2022), an **activity system** works towards achieving a goal which consists of cooperative interactions among people, tools, space, and genres. Zangara also mentions that “all activity systems come with genres or texts people use to achieve their goals” (p. 107). This view asks us to pay attention to all of the ways we use writing across different settings and for different purposes. However, I had a different attitude towards writing earlier in my life. I was unaware of the fact that I was involved in different activity systems, related to the phases of my education. These systems included various people, tools, ideas, and goals. For me, the idea of writing was limited to just one fixed genre of academic writing. All I knew was that I should strictly follow the five-paragraph essay format and use some so-called advanced English vocabulary in my writing to sound smart, which also provided me less time

and scope to think and work on the actual content and flow of my writing. However, focusing more closely on my own evolution as a writer has helped me to realize that even different academic writing genres have different features and genre conventions. For example, features of academic writing in the field of literature are different from academic writing for science and technology.

In this article, I want to focus on two particular features of my writing and consider how these practices changed as I moved through different activity systems in my schooling, especially in terms of how my antecedent knowledge impacted my uptake as I moved from one space to another, and how my evolving knowledge has shaped my writing identity. The two features of my writing that I will discuss are:

- Common phrases that I use at the beginning of different writing tasks
- My use of high-end words (advanced English vocabulary)

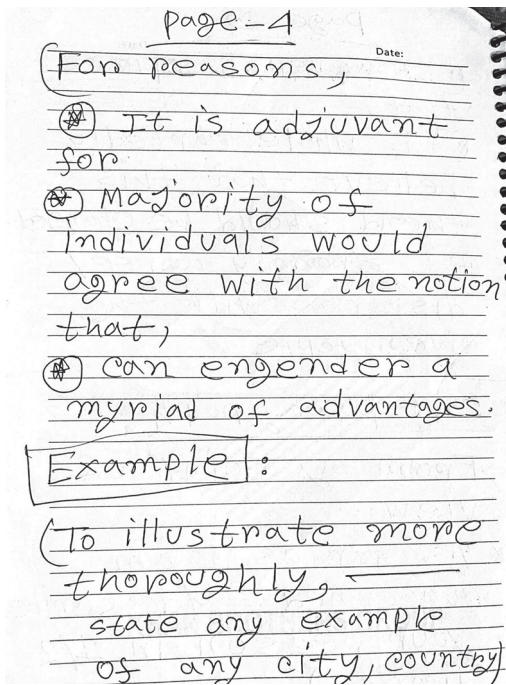
## Antecedent Knowledge of Writing

In thinking about the writing of this article, I've realized that my antecedent knowledge of writing was much different in the past. I used to perceive the idea of writing to be something that always follows the same structure—meaning that I felt that no matter what I was writing, I'd basically follow the same general rules for organizing and structuring my texts. The ISU Writing Program defines **antecedent knowledge** as all the knowledge that a person has that they bring into their understanding and choices when they encounter something new (Key terms and concepts, n.d.). For writers, this previous knowledge can have a big effect on new writing tasks. If someone is asked to write a certain type of essay and they have written similar types of essays before, they will use their antecedent knowledge of writing those essays in the new situation as well. But the use of antecedent knowledge can be tricky in the sense that “we're not always fully aware of all the knowledge we are using when we write, and sometimes we use knowledge and experience that are actually NOT useful in a situation” (Key terms and concepts, n.d.). For example, my antecedent knowledge of always writing a five-paragraph essay following strict academic format and using incomprehensible, out-of-context high-end words (advanced English words) was not useful for my writing as a graduate student in the US.

During my high school years, my writing voice was a lot more structured and sterner. I completed my schooling and undergraduate studies in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, schools generally follow three types of curricula:

1) Bengali Medium: The national curriculum in the Bengali language with English studied just as a subject; 2) English Version: The curriculum used in Bengali Medium schools is translated in English; and 3) English Medium: The curriculum is mostly based on the curriculum of Cambridge in the United Kingdom, which uses British English. I have completed my school from Bengali Medium schools. As a second language speaker of English, I only had the opportunity to learn writing in English for specific English classes, as the rest of the subjects were taught in Bengali. The English teachers at these schools expected that the students would memorize the prewritten notes of essays that follow certain rules of academic English (including five-paragraph essays) and regurgitate them during tests. Students who were able to write word for word from those prewritten notes of essays would get the highest grades in tests. On that account, writing for the school was a kind of activity system in which I was only allowed to write in a certain genre (academic writing) using similar kinds of tools like five-paragraph essay formats.

I always had my interest embedded in English language and literacy during my high school years. But I had difficulty memorizing those prewritten notes of essays, and as a result, I never got the opportunity to excel in my English writing classes. I would try to rewrite them in my own writing voice, which I now know is called paraphrasing, though I still had to follow the



**Figure 1:** My list of high-end words from IELTS writing samples.

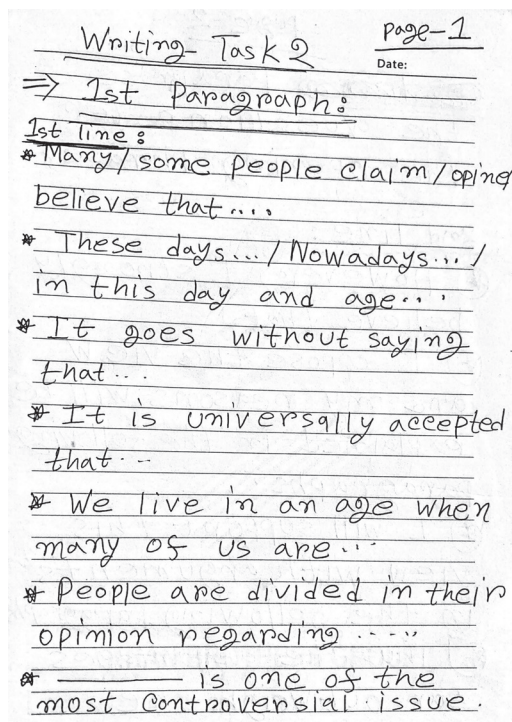
five-paragraph essay format to achieve at least a decent grade in writing tests. However, this experience affected my writing researcher identity in a manner that I developed into an extremely self-conscious writer—or perhaps I may say, a self-conscious second language writer. After graduating from high school, I chose English language and literature as my area of study for undergraduate and graduate degrees from Bangladesh. Unfortunately, even for Bangladesh students who major in English, writing revolves around memorizing prewritten notes from different books and online websites (like SparkNotes). During this time, I developed another habit of using unnecessary, high-end English words (Figure 1) in my writing because teachers would give higher grades if students used advanced vocabulary in their writing.

After completing my Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Bangladesh, I started preparing for my graduate studies in the US. To be able to study in English-speaking countries like the US, United Kingdom, or Australia, international students must get good scores in standardized English language tests like International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Though I didn't have to memorize answers for the writing sections of those tests, I still had to follow certain formats of writing to make my writing look academic enough to be able to get into grad school. To prepare for the writing tasks of IELTS, I went through the online study materials that were available on Google and YouTube. The study materials were mostly focused on analyzing successful writing samples that received good scores in previously held tests. All those writing samples used a very similar structure (five-paragraph essay format) and language (an academic tone with high-end vocabularies) for all different writing prompts and questions. Figure 1 is a list of phrases I created that were used to depict reasons in the arguments. However, you can see that I tried using high-end vocabularies like *adjuvant*, *engender*, *myriad*, and so on. So, studying for the English proficiency exams was the next activity system I was involved in, which revolved around achieving the goal of successfully preparing to write in another genre (IELTS writing tasks) to get a satisfactory score, which substantially affected my writing once again.

To succeed on this test, I decided to make my own notes to prepare for the IELTS writing tasks, following the suggested format of the successful writing samples. One of the writing habits I developed from following the writing samples for the IELTS writing task 2 was using common phrases at the beginning of argumentative essays. Figure 2 is a list of introductory phrases that I created after analyzing those successful samples for IELTS writing

### IELTS Writing Task 2

"IELTS Writing Task 2 is the second part of the writing test, where you are presented with a point of view, argument or problem and asked to write an essay in response" (IELTS writing task 2, 2022).



**Figure 2:** My common introductory phrases list from IELTS samples.

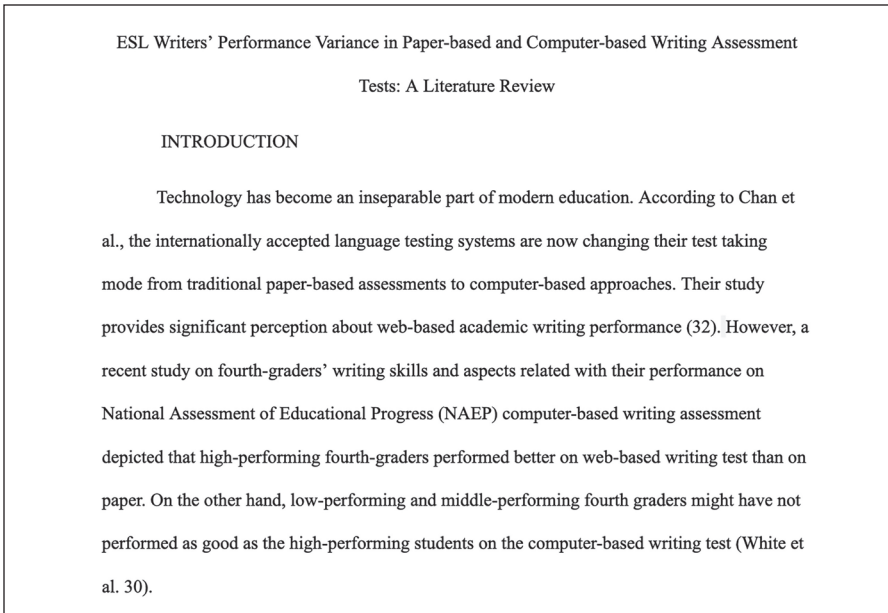
task 2. Usually, I would paraphrase the question after these opening phrases, as done in those samples.

## The Effect of Antecedent Knowledge on My Uptake

As mentioned by the ISU Writing Program, “**Uptake** is the process we go through to take up a new idea and think about it until it makes sense (if we get that far with it—sometimes we don’t!)” (Key terms and concepts, n.d.). Uptake is the process of learning any new information in the world, or engaging in new activities that cause us to have to learn new information. Now let’s rewind back to my story again! You must be wondering what happened to my IELTS test. Well, I managed to get a good enough score in that test, following the notes I made after analyzing successful sample answers, and that led me to the new chapter of my academic life as a graduate student in the US. However, the real struggle began when I started my Master’s studies in Applied Linguistics at Missouri State University. I had to write scholarly literature review-based research papers for my courses—a genre that was new to me. I quickly realized that the common phrases and high-end words I had used in order to score well on the IELTS exam were getting in my way when I started to learn to write in this and other ways.

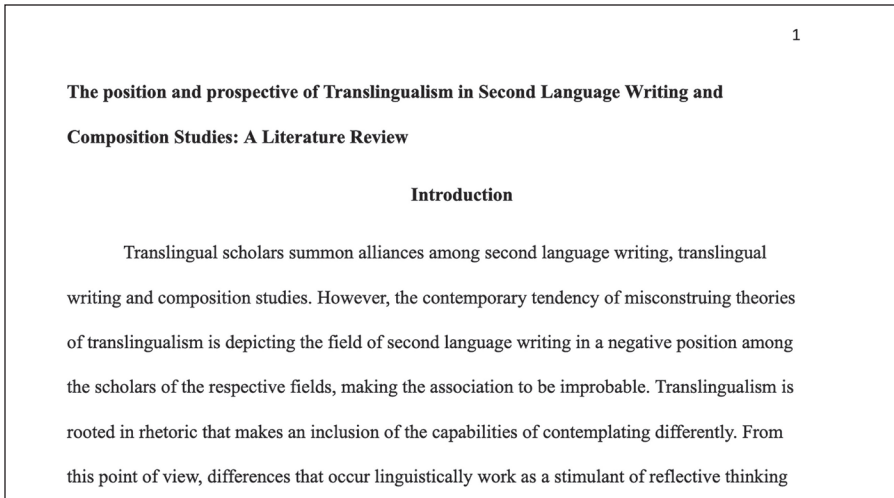
For those who aren’t familiar with this genre, “A literature review surveys books, scholarly articles, and any other sources relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory, and by so doing, provides a description, summary, and critical evaluation of these works in relation to the research problem being investigated” (5. The literature review, n.d.). Though I had the experience of writing research papers from my undergraduate and graduate classes in Bangladesh, the way literature review-based research papers are written for the area of Applied Linguistics in the US was completely different from all the prior experiences I had. I was especially unaware of the language and tone needed to write those papers. I discussed the matter with my professors, and they suggested that I read journal articles in my area of concentration in the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and Applied Linguistics to make myself familiar with the language and tone of writing in the field. This activity is called **genre research** by the ISU Writing Program and is, among other things, the process of searching out examples, explanations, and directions for writing specific kinds of texts that we, as writers, may want or need to learn (Key terms and concepts, n.d.).

However, my antecedent knowledge of writing according to a strict structure continued to follow me for quite a long time. When I decided to



**Figure 3:** An excerpt from a literature review-based paper I wrote during my first year of graduate school in the US.

write about my own writing practices for this GWRJ article, I decided to look back at the literature review papers I wrote during the first year of my Master's studies in the US. As you can see in Figure 3, I wrote this literature review-based paper comparing writers' performance in paper-based vs. computer-based writing assessment tests. I started the introduction paragraph with the sentence "Technology has become an inseparable part of modern education." This sentence is quite general and not closely related to the topic of the paper which is "paper-based vs computer-based writing assessment." I think my antecedent knowledge of writing common phrases in the beginning of introductory paragraphs hindered my uptake of writing relevant first lines. At this point in time, if I needed to write a paper on this topic all over again, I have more knowledge of this genre and would write something related to "paper-based vs computer-based writing assessment" in the first line of the introduction paragraph. I also continued using unnecessary and irrelevant high-end words like summon, misconstruing, etc., in my research papers, as you can see in Figure 4. I started receiving feedback from my professors stating that my writing was difficult to understand with all the irrelevant high-end words and the use of common phrases that made my writing seem out of context.



**Figure 4:** Excerpt from another paper I wrote during my first year of graduate studies.

## Light at the End of the Tunnel: The Development of My Confident Writing Researcher Identity and Understanding Translingual/Transcultural Writing

At this point in time, I realized that I needed to change my way of writing again. My antecedent knowledge of following just one structure for all kinds of academic writing was hindering my own writing voice. I needed help and someone to guide me to figure out my own writing researcher identity. I sought help from one of my professors. She pretty much had the same background as mine: she was from India, a South Asian country that shares a partial border with Bangladesh, as well as many similar educational practices. She could relate to my situation and told me she also went through similar kinds of experiences when she started graduate school in the US. She introduced me to the term “genre discourse” and explained how different genres have different writing features. She told me that, in Applied Linguistics, the language should be lucid and simple to understand with evidence to support any claim. She also mentioned how words and phrases should make sense idiomatically. For example, the phrase “summon alliances” that I wrote in Figure 4 does not fit to the meaning of the sentence. One probably cannot summon an alliance. One can summon a defendant to the courtroom, which is used in the genre of legal discourse. Her suggestions literally opened my eyes, and I could understand the root of my problems with writing. After that conversation with her, I started to learn that different kinds of genres and discourses have different features, including different tone, style, organization, citation styles, etc. I also specifically learned that my antecedent knowledge

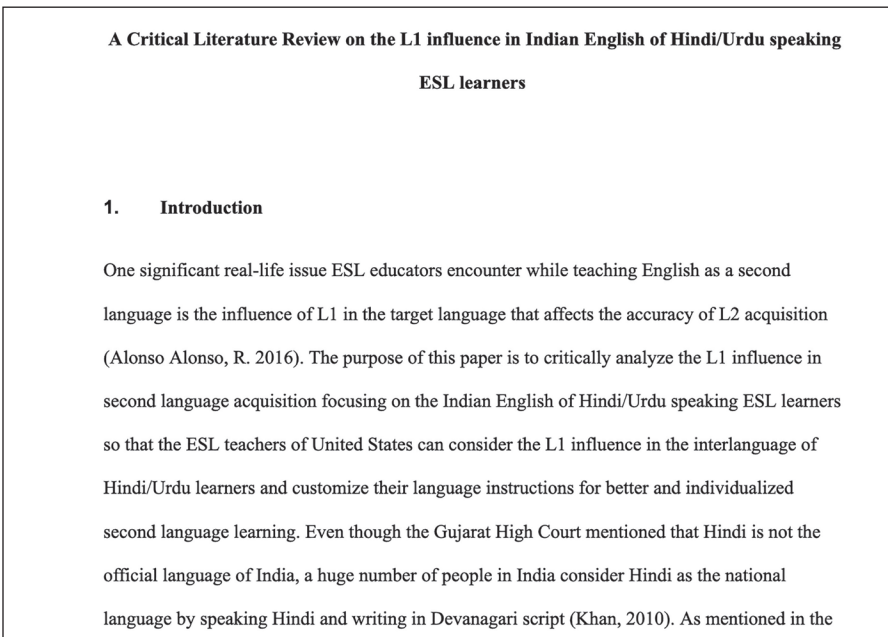


about one-style-fits-all organization and high-end word choices needed to change for my writing practices as a graduate student in the field of Applied Linguistics in order for me to flourish.

As you can see in Figure 5, which I wrote during the final semester of my Master's studies, I wrote a relevant first line for my introduction paragraph and there are hardly any high-end words that do not fit the context of the topic. I finally discovered my own writing researcher identity and writing voice, which made me a more confident graduate student writer and researcher.

I also realized that most writing tasks are shaped very much by the situations and settings we compose them for, and that means our writing will change as we begin following the features of different genres. For instance, to write an article for the GWRJ, I had to follow the writing conventions or features of GWRJ articles, like keeping an informal tone, using simple language, and using headings. I also came to gradually understand that genres evolve over time, and that people's uptake of new genres can include elements of other genres and activity systems they've previously worked with.

My writing experience is connected to the notion of **translingual and transcultural writing**, which are ways by which humans write, communicate, and think across languages, cultures, and societies (Key terms



**Figure 5:** Excerpt from a paper I wrote during the final semester of my Master's studies.

and concepts, n.d.). Before starting my graduate studies in the US, I only had the experience of writing in similar kinds of academic spaces following a particular standard writing structure and tone that was acceptable and welcomed by the people and academic culture surrounding me, which then became a comfort zone for my writing researcher identity. I was not ready to accept the reality, or in some sense even not aware of the fact, that writing in the world does not work in a singular way. The ways I wrote for my high school exams or the English proficiency tests were not incorrect or wrong. Rather, they were parts of certain activity systems that required different kinds of writing compared to how people write for other kinds of activity systems, like writing for graduate school in the US. When I moved to the US, I encountered an academic space with different language/writing practices where I was required to write for an activity system I had not experienced before.

## **My Present Writing Researcher Identity and Trying to Find a Conclusion**

So, have I learned writing perfectly? The answer is obviously no, as there is no way of learning how to write perfectly. As I started writing in different activities systems for different goals, I realized that I wrote in different education systems which were influenced by different cultural and linguistic norms. My writing varied and changed across those different linguistic settings and activity systems. However, though I learned that writing changes over time in different activity systems, I never changed my writing style or tone. Whichever situations I wrote for, my writing carried the linguistic norms I learned from my educational and cultural systems with a strong South Asian academic tone. For example, even as a PhD student in the US, whenever someone asks me to write in an informal way, I would rather choose to write in an academic tone (often using a lot of transition markers) and that is all right. That is how translingual and transcultural writing works, which is an important part of my writing researcher identity.

## **References**

5. The literature review. (n.d.). USC Libraries. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from <https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/literaturereview>
- Bawarshi, A. S. (2003). The genre function. In *Genre and the invention of the writer: Reconsidering the place of invention in composition* (pp. 16–48). University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt46nxp6.5>

IELTS writing task 2. (2022, September 30). IELTS Advantage. Retrieved October 13, 2022, from <https://www.ieltsadvantage.com/writing-task-2/>

Key terms & concepts. (n.d.) ISU Writing Program. Retrieved October 7, 2022, from <http://isuwriting.com/glossary/>

Literate activity terms. (n.d.). ISU Writing Program. Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://www.isuwriting.com/activity-terms>

Zangara, B. (2022). Food and family: Cookbooks as genre and activity, *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, 13(1), pp. 105–112.

**Abantika Dhar** is a PhD student and writing instructor in the Department of English at Illinois State University. She is originally from Bangladesh and loves exploring different languages, cultures, and cuisines.



# Notes