

# English Composition Writing and Academic Performance Among Public Senior Secondary School Students in Lagos State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

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*The study assessed Lagos State public senior secondary school students' English composition writing, established their academic performances, and the relationships among the students' academic performances in content, organisation, expression, mechanical accuracy as well as in letter and essay writing. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. Descriptive survey and correlational research designs were adopted. The population comprised all public senior secondary two students in Lagos State. The multi-stage sampling technique was used to select 540 students from three educational districts in the state. Two composition writing tests (letter and essay writing) were used for the data collection. Data were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. Results that at least 97.3% of the students failed the test in letter and essay writing, at least 92% of the students failed in terms of content, organization and expression, and not even one student passed the test in terms of mechanical accuracy. Also, there were strong positive significant relationships among the students' academic performances in letter and essay writing, as well as in all the assessment variables, except in mechanical accuracy where the positive significant relationships were very weak. Hence, it was recommended among others that teachers and parents/guardians of public senior secondary school students in Lagos State, Nigeria should pay special attention to their students/children/wards academic performances in English composition writing and engage them with frequent exercises with prompt feedback for improved academic performance.*

**Keywords:** academic performance, content, English composition writing, mechanical accuracy, Organisation

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## Introduction

Academic performance of students is of immeasurable importance to all educational stakeholders: educator, parents and the society at large. This is because students' academic performance could to a reasonable extent, determine their future career. Academic performance is the level of success students have attained in their academic endeavours which includes test grades and scores. Hence, it is of utmost importance to any individual entrusted with the responsibility of selecting students for any advanced training to accurately, validly and reliably diagnose the student's ability and ascertain probably the extent to which such a student will succeed or fail.

One of the most important subjects that is studied and assessed in senior secondary schools in Lagos State is English Language. This is because of its role in satisfying man's desire

for communication across borders. English Language occupies a central position in Nigeria. Hardin and Nta (1992) as cited in Chinyere (2013) posit that apart from being used by many as a tool in our everyday lives, English Language is the official language in Nigeria. It is used as a means of communication at both national and international levels. It is the language of formal education even from the primary school level. Throughout the nation, its role in the post primary institutions is of central and indisputable importance. Thus, there is a fundamental need for high quality in teaching and learning of English Language: the medium of instruction and the medium through which Nigerian students communicate their ideas in speech and in writing, irrespective of their areas of specialisation.

National Policy on Education in 2014 made the English Language a compulsory

subject in the secondary school system (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). Students must receive a credit in English language from the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) to be admitted to the nation's postsecondary education system. Even when a student has the basic university requirement of five credits at one or two sittings, without a credit pass in English Language, that admission is lost. According to Chinyere (2013), proficiency in English Language calls for competency in both speech and writing, with special attention in students having correct knowledge of and appropriate skills in content, organisation, expression and mechanical accuracy which ensures communicative competence advocated for by the National Policy on Education (NPE). The researcher emphasised that irrespective of the dissatisfactions expressed on other aspects of the language, that involving written expression has elicited more attention.

According to the West African Examinations Council (2018), the purpose of the test on English composition writing given to senior secondary school students is to test their proficiency/literacy levels. The test is designed to examine students' abilities to express themselves with clarity and coherence in a manner appropriate to the audience, purpose, topic and situation. It also tests students' competence in grammar, good paragraphing, proper use of formal features, presentation of ideas, correct spelling, appropriate punctuation and the skillful use of rich vocabularies and idioms with sufficient details. It covers a wide variety of writing skills such as argument, narration, exposition, description and imagination. Besides, the topics are carefully selected to fall within the students' literacy experiences or knowledge acquired either firsthand or through reading and other multimedia literacy practices. In other words, students who cannot exhibit these are tagged illiterates in the aspect of writing. To certify a

student competent or literate in composition writing in English Language, the student's expertise in the following variables must be considered: content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy (WAEC, 2021).

While content is concerned with the central theme and its development- the ideas developed in an essay and their relevance to the subject matter or topic on which a student is writing, organization deals with the careful arrangement of ideas in paragraphs from the beginning of the essay to the end. It involves chronological arrangement of sentences to form paragraphs and to make up a complete passage or essay in an orderly, unified, clear and concise way where each paragraph contains only one idea with relevant details. WAEC (2023) explains that students' writing must be judged as whatever it is intended to be: an article, a speech, an argument, a narration, a description, an exposition, an informal letter or a formal letter. Also to be considered are suitable opening, adequate development of points, good paragraphing, balance, coherence and suitable conclusion. Expression deals with the writer showing his/her meaning, ideas, feelings or wishes in a clear and understandable manner. In expression, consciousness of the context at hand and clarity are the key factors. It involves the use of simple language and unambiguous words. In other words, correct and meaningful expression is required from every English composition writer. To achieve this, there must be clarity and general appropriateness of style, variation of sentence structure and style, judicious use of figurative languages, and skillful and sophisticated use of punctuations (WAEC, 2023). Mechanical accuracy considers writing compositions devoid of errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

According to Fakeye and Ohia (2016), English composition writing is of various types which includes the development of the art of

writing letters, articles for publications, reports and speeches. Others include description of various things, situations and experiences, narrations or accounts of happenings and presentation of reasoned persuasive thoughts. All these skills are needed not only for better academic achievement in school, but also to navigate successfully through the word of work and the entire human existence. According to Fakeye and Ohia (2016), essay writing requires conscious efforts and practice in composing, developing and analysing ideas. It involves such practices as garnering content materials; organizing the materials into logical order (paragraphing); using appropriate expression in terms of appropriate vocabulary and sentence construction and mechanics: punctuation, capitalization, spelling and grammar (Fakeye & Ohia, 2016).

In their study, Bakare and Obi (2021) investigated candidates' academic achievement in English Language from 2009 to 2020 and found out that part of candidates' poor performance in the subject was in connection with their poor academic achievement in English composition writing. Candidates' English composition writing scripts were bedeviled with many weaknesses, including ignorance of the basic rules of English grammar; wrong use of punctuation marks, poor spelling; wrong amalgamation; indiscriminate insertion/omission of punctuation marks; indiscriminate use of capital letters; use of text message abbreviations “dat” for “that”, “c” for “see”, “u” for “you” “d” for “the”, “ur” for “your” etc. writing of essays that fell short of the required length; inability to construct meaningful sentences; poor paragraphing; inability to construct simple and correct sentences; poor vocabulary and organization of thoughts; writing below the required number of words on the essay topics; illegible handwriting; spelling errors; poor expression as a result of

lack of appropriate vocabulary to convey ideas; faulty analogy and concord; incorrect tenses, conjunction, preposition, and article; poor paragraphing resulting in illogical and unbalanced presentation of ideas especially in essay writing and letter writing; use of long, uncontrolled and ambiguous sentences; among others. The researchers attributed these weaknesses to poor syllabus coverage, students' negative attitude to English Language especially writing composition, non-provision of teaching and learning materials, and English Language phobia, among others. Also, WAEC (2012) related candidates' poor performance in composition writing in English Language to their ill preparation by teachers and parents.

Unfortunately, Bakare and Obi's study was like given medicine to a dead patient. This is because the candidates that formed the population of the study had exited the secondary school level with such weaknesses before they were discovered. There is therefore the need to diagnose students' writing proficiency needs while they are in school and provide appropriate remediation in time to mitigate the numerous consequences attributed to poor academic performance in English composition writing at this level. This study therefore assessed English composition writing and academic performance among public senior secondary school students in Lagos State, Nigeria for timely intervention.

### **Statement of the Problem**

English Language is a very important subject for every student in Nigeria mainly because of its role as the country's official language, language of mass communication, and language of education through which the students are taught and assessed even in the other subjects. However, many students' performance in the subject has been very discouraging, owing to their deficiencies in English composition writing. Previous studies focused more on intervention to improve students' performance in

English composition writing than on the relationships among students' academic performances in content, organisation, expression and mechanical accuracy as well as in letter and essay writing, which is the focus of this study.

### Objectives of the Study

The study set out to:

- (1) Assess students' academic performance in English composition writing in terms of the assessment variables (content, organisation, expression and mechanical accuracy).
- (2) Assess students' academic performance in English composition writing in terms of composition types (letter and essay writing).
- (3) To establish the relationship between students' academic performance in the assessment variables in terms of content and organisation.
- (4) To establish the relationship between students' academic performance in letter and essay writing.

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- (1) What are the Lagos State English Language public senior secondary school students' academic performance in English composition writing in terms of assessment variables (content, organisation, expression and mechanical accuracy)?
- (2) What are the Lagos State English Language public senior secondary school students' academic performance in English composition writing in terms of type of composition (letter and essay writing)?

### Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05

level of significance.

- (1) There is no significant relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school students' academic performance in content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy.
- (2) There is no significant relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school students' academic performance in letters and essays writing.

### Methodology

The study employed the correlational research designs. The population of the study comprised all the 87,991 senior secondary two (SS2) students from the 326 public senior secondary schools in Lagos State. The multi-stage sampling technique was adopted. Firstly, the 87,991 SS2 students in public senior secondary schools in Lagos State was already clustered into six educational districts (Districts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). From the six clustered educational districts, three (3) educational districts were purposively selected for proximity reasons. From each of the three educational districts selected, three publicly owned senior secondary schools were randomly selected. Thereafter, 60 SS2 students were randomly selected from each school making 180 students. The English Composition Writing Tests which is a standardized test was used in data collection. Data were analysed using the descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlation at 0.05 level of significance.

### Results and Discussion

**Research Question 1:** What are the Lagos State English Language public senior secondary school students' academic performance in English composition writing in terms of type of composition (letter and essay writing)?

Lagos State public senior secondary school students' academic performance in essay and letter writing are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 1:** Students' academic performance in English composition writing in terms of composition type (letter and essay)

Score	Total Letter		Total Essay	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
0	0	(0.0)	1	(0.2)
1	7	(1.4)	16	(3.3)
2	6	(1.2)	43	(8.8)
3	12	(2.5)	27	(5.5)
4	58	(11.9)	82	(16.8)
5	12	(2.5)	29	(5.9)
6	20	(4.1)	25	(5.1)
7	41	(8.4)	20	(4.1)
8	61	(12.5)	48	(9.8)
9	23	(4.7)	18	(3.7)
10	13	(2.7)	18	(3.7)
11	35	(7.2)	21	(4.3)
12	45	(9.2)	31	(6.3)
13	14	(2.9)	8	(1.6)
14	15	(3.1)	8	(1.6)
15	17	(3.5)	7	(1.4)
16	28	(5.7)	24	(4.9)
17	9	(1.8)	8	(1.6)
18	14	(2.9)	9	(1.8)
19	5	(1.0)	8	(1.6)
20	19	(3.9)	10	(2.0)
21	6	(1.2)	4	(0.8)
22	8	(1.6)	5	(1.0)
23	5	(1.0)	5	(1.0)
24	3	(0.6)	2	(0.4)
25	8	(1.6)	8	(1.6)
26	0	(0.0)	2	(0.4)
27	4	(0.8)	2	(0.4)
28	1	(0.2)	0	(0.0)
Total	489	100.0	489	100.0
Mean	10.8466		8.7791	
SD	5.86381		6.16377	

*Note: SD means standard deviation; N means frequency; and (%) is percentages. Note: Figures in brackets are in percentages.*

**Table 2:** The number of students who had at least a pass mark in English composition writing in terms of letter and essay writing

	Letter	Essay
No of Pass	13	12
% of Pass	(2.7)	(2.5)
No of Fail	476	477
% of Fail	(97.3)	(97.5)
Total	489	489
	(100)	(100)

*Note: Figures in brackets are in percentages.*

Table 2 displays public senior secondary school students' academic performance (different ability levels) in composition writing in terms of letter writing and essay writing. The table indicates that the students performed very poorly in both letter writing and essay writing. It was evident on Table 3 that a candidate scored zero (0) out of the 50 marks allotted to essay writing. Also, 7 (1.4 %) and 16 (3.3%) of the 489 students scored one out of the 50 marks, while 6 (1.2%) and 16 (3.3%) of the respondents scored only two marks for letter and essay writing respectively. A good number of students, 58 (11.9%) and 82 (16.8%), among others scored only four marks in letter and essay writing respectively. It was evident in Table 3 that no student scored more than 28 marks in letter; and none got more than 27 marks in essay writing.

Table 2 reveal that only 13(2.7%) and 12(2.5%) of the students passed the English composition writing tests in terms of letter and essay writing respectively. It was expected that student who scored at least 25 (50%) out of the 50 marks allotted to each of the written composition tests passed the test. The implication of this is that only 2.7% of public senior secondary school students in Lagos State who participated in the study, was proficient in letter writing, and not more than 2.5 % of the respondents could write good essays. This implies that majority of the public senior secondary school students in Lagos State, Nigeria failed the test in English composition writing, letter or essay notwithstanding. It could also be deduced that almost all the public senior secondary school students in Lagos State, Nigeria were not proficient in English

composition writing (letter and essay writing). These results were buttressed with the grand mean of 10.85 and standard deviation scores of 5.864 for letter writing; and 8.78 and 6.164 for essay writing show that generally, on average the Lagos State English Language public senior secondary school students' academic performance in letter and essay writing was very poor. The standard deviation scores indicated that the students' scores were clustered around the mean.

To certify a student literate in English composition writing, WAEC (2021) emphasised that the student must exhibit expertise in content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy. In the same vein, Fakeye and Ohia (2016) critically observed that English composition writing involves such practices as garnering content materials for the essay or letter; organizing the materials into logical order (paragraphing); using appropriate expression in terms of appropriate vocabulary and sentence construction; and mechanics: punctuation, capitalization, spelling and grammar. Invariably, candidates who are careless, lack content development and sentence constructions priorities, unmindful of the spelling errors and mechanics are bound to have poor academic performance in English composition writing (letter or essay notwithstanding). This means that Lagos State public senior secondary school students' poor academic performance in letter and essay writing could have been negatively influenced by their poor academic performance in the English composition writing assessment variables.

### Hypotheses

**Research Hypothesis 1:** There is no significant relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school students' academic performance in content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy.

To test hypothesis one, Pearson's

Product-Moment Correlation analysis was conducted between Lagos State public senior secondary school students' academic performance in English composition writing in terms of content, organisation, expression and mechanical accuracy. The result is presented in Table 5.

**Table 3:** Relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school students' academic performance in English composition writing in terms of content, organisation, expression and mechanical accuracy

		Content	Organisation	Expression	Mechanical accuracy
Content	Pearson Correlation	1			
	Sig.(2tailed)				
	N				
Organisation	Pearson Correlation	.983**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000			
	N	489			
Expression	Pearson Correlation	.893**	.893**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		
	N	489	489		
Mechanical accuracy	Pearson Correlation	.124**	.121**	.127**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.007	.005	
	N	489	489	489	489

Table 3 shows that there is a positive and very strong significant relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school academic performance in English composition writing in terms of content and organization ( $r = .98$ ); content and expression ( $r = .89$ ); but very weak positive significant relationship between content and mechanical accuracy ( $r = .12$ ). Also, there was a positive and very strong significant relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school academic performance in English composition writing in terms of organization and expression ( $r = .89$ ); but very weak positive significant relationship between organization and mechanical accuracy ( $r = .12$ ), and expression and mechanical accuracy ( $r = .13$ ). Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This means that there is significant relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school students' academic performance in content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy.

This finding implies that an increase in

the students' academic performance in one assessment variable, led to a corresponding increase in the other assessment variables. Invariably, an increase in students' academic performance in content, for instance, led to an increase in their performance in organisation and vice versa. These findings corroborate WAEC (2021) which emphasised that students must be proficient in content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy before they are considered competent in English composition writing. Invariably, with the significant relationship among the variables, students with good grasp if content development for instance, but deficient in the other assessment variables will not do well in the English composition writing test. Students must have good knowledge of all the variables for better academic performance in English composition writing.

In addition, among all the English composition writing assessment variables disclosed in Table 3, there was very strong

positive significant relationship except in the relationship involving mechanical accuracy. This was evident in the earlier findings that despite that some students scores high marks on content, organisation and expression, no one had a pass mark in mechanical accuracy. Hence, more attention should be paid to the teaching and learning of mechanical accuracy in public senior secondary schools in Lagoa State, Nigeria.

**Hypothesis 2:** There is no significant relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school students’ academic performance in letters and essays writing.

For hypothesis four, Pearson’s Product-Moment Correlation analysis was conducted between Lagos State public senior secondary school students’ levels of exposure to the home and school multimedia literacy practices and their academic performance in English composition writing in terms of composition types (letter and essay). The students’ responses to the home and school multimedia literacy practices were computed, and subsequently used as a single variable to correlate their academic performance in English composition writing in terms of composition types (letter and essay). The result is presented in Table 6.

**Table 4:** Relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school students’ levels of exposure to the home and school multimedia literacy practices and their academic performance in English composition writing in terms of composition types (letter and essay)

		Letter	Essay
Letter	Pearson correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	489	
Essay	Pearson correlation	.609**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	489	489

Table 5 shows that there is a positive and strong significant relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school academic performance in English composition writing in terms of letter and essay ( $r = .61$ ). Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This means that there is significant relationship between Lagos State public senior secondary school students’ academic performance in letters and essays writing. This implies that an increase in the students’ academic performance in letter writing, led to an increase in the academic performance in essay writing, while a decrease in students’ academic performance in letter writing led to a decrease in their performance in essay writing.

This finding corroborates Fakeye and Ohia (2016) who established that English composition writing involves such practices as

gathering content materials for the essay; organizing the materials into logical order (paragraphing); using appropriate expression in terms of appropriate vocabulary and sentence construction; and mechanics: punctuation, capitalization, spelling and grammar. Invariably, candidates who are careless, lack content development and sentence constructions priorities, unmindful of the spelling errors and mechanics are bound to have poor academic performance in English composition writing (letter or essay writing notwithstanding). To Chinyere (2013), proficiency in English Language calls for competency in both speech and different types of writing, with special attention to correct knowledge of and appropriate skills in content, organisation, expression and mechanical accuracy which ensures communicative competence advocated

for by the National Policy on Education. In other words, students with exceptionally good academic performance in essay writing, but with poor performance in letter writing cannot be certified competent in English composition writing if all things being equal.

### Conclusion

The study assessed Lagos State public senior secondary school students' English composition writing and established the relationships among students' academic performances in content, organisation, expression and mechanical accuracy as well as in letter and essay writing. The study established that Lagos State public senior secondary school students performed very poorly in the English composition writing tests in terms of both the assessment variables and the composition types (essay and letter writing). With these, public senior secondary schools in Lagos State need to pay serious attention to the teaching and learning of English composition writing in their schools for a better change in their students' academic performance in English Language which is presently the medium of instruction and assessment in Nigeria, especially at the senior secondary education level. Also, the strong positive significant relationships among the students' academic performances in letter and essay writing, as well as all the assessment variables, except in mechanical accuracy where the positive significant relationships were very weak, was not surprising because the students' performances were poor in all the composition assessment variables, especially in mechanical accuracy where the performance was woeful. This foregrounded the need to intentionally expose the students to the assessment variable with constant practice. This is because no student can achieve better academic performance in letter and essay writing without good understanding of the assessment variables.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

- (1) Parents/guardians and teachers should intentionally expose the students to the rudiments of the assessment variables to enhance their academic performances in English composition writing.
- (2) Parents/guardians and teachers should constantly assess their children/students' English composition writing scripts taking cognisance of each of the assessment variables as it is done in their externally standardised English composition writing examinations to keep them abreast of the standard practice.
- (3) Lagos State public senior secondary school students, their parents and teachers should leverage on WASSCE and NECO chief examiners' reports to identify their children/students weaknesses in English composition writing and provide the appropriate guide for them.
- (4) Teachers and parents/guardians of public senior secondary school students in Lagos State, Nigeria should pay special attention to their children/wards whose academic performances in English composition writing seem too poor and engage them with frequent exercises with prompt feedback on their performance.
- (5) Lagos State public senior secondary school English Language teachers who have never participated in the coordination and marking exercise for WASSCE or NECO should endeavour to do so to be abreast of the English composition writing assessment variables and provide the appropriate guide for their children.

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