

Aligning English for Academic Purposes with College Writing Expectations: Insights from One Canadian College

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Abstract

Canadian colleges and universities vary drastically in the nature of their academic offerings. Universities typically provide academic programs spanning undergraduate, graduate, and professional domains. In contrast, colleges predominately deliver applied and technical programs leading to certificates, diplomas, apprenticeships, and associate degrees, as well as some select undergraduate degrees. While numerous studies have investigated writing requirements at the university level, there is a dearth of research focusing on the Canadian college context. This study aimed to fill this gap by investigating the types of writing assignments commonly used at the college level, as well as the skills necessary to complete these assignments. The ultimate goal was to use the findings to better align our college-based English for academic purposes (EAP) program with the specific writing demands encountered in college programs. Data for this study were collected through two main methods: document analysis and interviews with lecturers. The document analysis entailed a review of course outlines from first-year communication courses across all schools within the college, while the interviews were conducted with seven faculty members who taught these courses. The results of our small-scale qualitative case study demonstrate that the college learning environment requires a distinctive type of writing that integrates both industry-specific and academic elements, a phenomenon we term *applied academic writing*. This finding not only holds implications for the refinement of the EAP curriculum at our own institution but also holds valuable insights for EAP practitioners in applied learning environments.

Introduction

Within the field of English for academic purposes (EAP), one of the fundamental challenges resides in determining what skills to prioritize so that students can be effectively prepared for their chosen fields of study. In their inception, many EAP programs were primarily tailored to specific subjects and were commonly referred to as English for specific purposes (Benesch, 2001); however, the burgeoning landscape of international education, coupled with budget cuts and other financial constraints, has compelled numerous colleges and universities to adopt a more interdisciplinary approach (Bruce, 2022; Guardado & Light, 2020). This shift allows for the amalgamation of students from diverse departments and faculties into a shared learning environment, thereby redirecting the focus of EAP instruction from discipline-specific language to more broadly applicable academic competencies. In the Canadian context, research suggests

that such programs are particularly effective in promoting student wellbeing due to their emphasis on study strategies, academic acculturation, and social integration—competencies that are relevant across disciplines (Marshall, 2024). However, it remains essential for these programs to equip students with the skills needed to navigate the demands of their specific fields of study, raising questions about which academic language skills to prioritize in the classroom.

The question of what ought to be taught in EAP programs has sparked extensive research efforts within the field. Scholars have sought to discern the educational needs of EAP students through rigorous needs analyses (Cheng et al., 2004; Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Johns et al., 2001). Additionally, genre studies (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Gardner & Nesi, 2013; Horowitz, 1986; Jackson et al., 2006; Keller-Cohen & Wolfe, 1987; Swales, 1990) have sought to identify prevalent academic assignments within target post-secondary programs, thereby facilitating the emulation of these assignments within EAP curricula. While these investigations have proven valuable, a thorough examination of the existing literature reveals a noticeable focus on university contexts, leaving a notable gap in understanding the requirements of students in college settings.

In the Canadian context, colleges and universities diverge significantly in their educational programming. Universities offer undergraduate and graduate degrees and professional programs, whereas colleges offer certificate programs, diplomas, apprenticeships, and a limited number of degrees (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2023). Between 2013 and 2023, the number of international students enrolled in Canadian colleges increased fourfold, from 54,738 to 205,242. While universities generally account for a majority of international student enrolment (53.2%), colleges, at the time of writing this paper, still hosted a substantial proportion (37.6%) (Statistics Canada, 2024). Both institutional contexts host EAP programs for international students and newcomers whose English proficiency does not yet meet program entry requirements or who require additional academic language support. In Canada, when this work was undertaken, there were around 164 post-secondary EAP programs—87 at universities and 77 at colleges (Corcoran et al., 2022). Given the substantial role that colleges play in the delivery of EAP programs, they should be recognized as critical sites for English as an additional language (EAL) teaching, and therefore, warrant greater scholarly attention within EAP research.

With these points in mind, as writing professors within an EAP college program, our objective in this research was to determine what kinds of writing assignments are common across a broad array of college programs, and what academic skills students need to successfully complete these assignments. To fulfill our research objective, we conducted a small-scale qualitative study which involved an analysis of first-year communication course outlines, and interviews with communication professors from various faculties at a mid-sized college in Ontario. The purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the writing requirements faced by college students in order to inform and refine our EAP curriculum, aligning it more closely with the writing tasks students would encounter in their chosen programs of study. It should be noted that this research was the first phase of a larger mixed-methods research study that included a survey and interviews with former EAP students. While broader results have been published elsewhere (Smith, et al., 2025; Windle et al., 2024), we highlight here the perspectives of professors, an essential yet often overlooked voice in the field.

The results of our research shed light on the type of writing demanded of college students, which we have labeled as applied academic writing. We believe this finding is not only useful in our own context, but that it will also facilitate EAP practitioners better understanding the unique requirements of students in applied and vocational learning programs. It will further facilitate the development of targeted tools for EAP college students, with the aim of optimizing their learning experiences.

Literature Review

In understanding the influences that have shaped EAP curriculum, it is useful to commence with a discussion of the work of John Swales (1990) whose seminal book, *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*, has exerted a substantial influence on the progression of EAP program development in many contexts. In his book, Swales provided a theoretical justification for genre-based approaches to academic language teaching, noting that for EAL learners to effectively participate in their respective discourse communities, they need to immerse themselves in the academic genres of their chosen fields so that they can build their communicative competence in relation to those fields. In this context, Swales advocated a pedagogical approach that focuses on the proficient composition and evaluation of genres inherent to diverse fields of study. Flowerdew (2015) observed that this shift towards genre-based language instruction, as initially popularized by Swales, marked a significant departure from conventional teaching methods at the time that focused solely on general and broad-based writing skills such as error identification, grammar, vocabulary organization, and process writing. This genre-based framework for language learning has since become an important standard in some contexts for EAP materials and program development (Flowerdew, 2015). As such, it is prevalent within a number of EAP programs, wherein students are exposed to an array of genres, affording them opportunities to engage with different types of academic writing.

Considering the prominence of genre-based approaches, numerous studies have sought to determine which genres, texts, and assignments should be given prevalence in EAP classrooms (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Gardner & Nesi, 2013; Horowitz, 1986; Jackson et al., 2006; Keller-Cohen & Wolfe, 1987). For example, Graves et al. (2010) reviewed the syllabi of 179 courses at a Canadian university. The researchers found that the most common assignment was a research paper, although the authors also highlighted that there were clear differences in the frequency and learning goals of such assignments across disciplines. This finding echoes earlier research from Bridgeman and Carlson (1984), who surveyed 190 departments at 34 universities across the United States and Canada. Their research also revealed the prominence of research papers (50% of all departments in their study required them), but the authors also noted that there was variability in these assignments across departments.

While such genre-based analyses have been useful in identifying common assignments in post-secondary programs, some researchers have pointed out that caution is necessary when applying the findings to EAP program development, given that diverse academic fields hold different conceptions of assignment characteristics (Feng et al., 2019). Moreover, Johns (2015) has noted that it is difficult to identify which genres and writing tasks to prioritize in EAP, due to the diversity of target situations that students will face in their studies. For instance, in English for specific purposes (ESP) programs, wherein the curriculum is prepared for a homogeneous

discourse community, the task of identifying pertinent genres is greatly simplified. As explained by Liu et al. (2011), ESP courses are designed with specific disciplines in mind, thus facilitating the identification of the communicative contexts and genres worthy of focus. However, in EAP programs, where students from various disciplinary backgrounds are placed in the same classroom, the task of determining which genres hold relevance across different disciplines becomes considerably more challenging, especially given the variation in how assignments are defined. The importance of accomplishing this goal successfully cannot be overstated though, as EAP courses have frequently encountered criticism for inadequately addressing the needs of students (Dooey, 2010; Leki & Carson, 1994). For instance, Evans and Green (2007) conducted a large-scale investigation into the perceptions of students who had undergone EAP instruction. Numerous students felt ill-prepared for their English-medium courses, with writing presenting one of the most formidable challenges. Similarly, Keefe and Shi (2017) found that although EAP instruction helped some students to increase their speaking and writing confidence, many continued to struggle in their first year of university with complex and discipline-specific writing tasks. Another Canadian study of former EAP students echoed these concerns, with some participants reporting a perceived disconnect between the writing practices emphasized in EAP and those required in undergraduate programs, especially in the sciences (Douglas et al., 2022).

Gardner and Nesi (2013) have provided some insight into why some EAP courses might not be sufficiently preparing students for the writing demands of their target disciplines. In their exploration of assignment frequency at a university in the United Kingdom, they found that essays constituted the most extensive genre family (accounting for more than 40% of the 2,000 assignments that they collected from across disciplines). However, this prevalence was not uniform across disciplines, as certain fields require a more diverse range of writing forms. For instance, history students predominately engaged in essay writing and critiques, while engineering students were required to master at least 15 distinct genres. Likewise, life and physical sciences demanded a broader array of genres compared to the arts and humanities. These findings were echoed in a comprehensive study conducted by Graves and White (2016) at eleven Canadian universities. Their analysis of writing tasks also showed that essays were the most prominent genre in the humanities, while engineering required more diverse forms of writing such as proposals and reports. Unfortunately, despite the evident diversity in assignment types across academic fields, research has indicated a disproportionate emphasis on essay writing within many EAP programs and standardized assessments (Connor & Ene, 2019).

Scholars have suggested that the overemphasis on essay writing in EAP programs may stem from the academic backgrounds of EAP professionals, many of whom are rooted in the humanities (Gardner & Nesi, 2013; Horowitz, 1986). Flowerdew (2019) has further argued that the focus on generic tasks, such as essay writing, which cater to a broad student demographic and demand less specialized instruction, aligns with the neoliberal imperatives of post-secondary institutions. These institutions often perceive EAP programs as mechanisms to increase international student enrolment and, by extension, generate revenue. Critics contend that this disproportionate focus on essay writing within EAP curricula can stifle students' creative expression and neglect the diverse writing forms required for specific contexts (Connor & Ene, 2019). Supporting this view, Helmer's (2013) research at an American university demonstrated that students' writing goals were driven not only by academic requirements but also by career aspirations, highlighting the importance of vocational writing forms. Similarly, a survey of 900

Taiwanese university students revealed that their learning needs were motivated by both academic and career-oriented goals (Liu et al., 2011).

While the types of assignments emphasized in EAP programs are crucial, other scholars have turned their attention to the specific skills that should be cultivated to ensure student success in post-secondary education. Several of these investigations have acknowledged the enduring importance of traditional writing skills, including precision, vocabulary, and grammatical proficiency in facilitating effective academic writing across various disciplinary domains (Green, 2015; James, 2010; Shrestha, 2017). Johns (1981) has underscored the significance of skill development, advocating for the inclusion of skills directly applicable to students' target situations. Specifically, this research revealed that, from the perspective of educators, listening and note-taking rank among the most pivotal skills for success in academic work. In relation to writing, the work of Leki and Carson (1994) showed that students highly value what they refer to as *task management skills*, including the planning of texts through techniques such as brainstorming and outlining, the management of sources through practices like summarizing and synthesizing, and the handling of research through robust library and research competencies. Montgomery and Pearsall (1999) have suggested that it would be greatly advantageous to compile a comprehensive collection of insights from professors across diverse academic fields, elucidating the specific proficiencies deemed essential for students. This comprehensive input could serve as a basis for EAP educators to tailor their curricula to align with the skill requirements of different disciplines.

In summary, this review of the literature highlights some of influences shaping EAP programming in many contexts, including genre-based studies, analysis of key texts within target programs, needs assessments with students, and an understanding of essential writing skills. While this previous research has yielded valuable insights, it is imperative to recognize its predominant focus on university-level students, thus revealing a significant gap in addressing the unique needs of college-level learners. Given the diversity of assignments observed across different academic disciplines, it is reasonable to expect variations in assignments, expectations, and definitions across academic contexts, including colleges and universities. In fact, noteworthy studies have underscored the need for further research in diverse educational settings beyond the university, as this will enhance a more nuanced understanding of the varying demands experienced by learners in distinct institutional environments (Liu et al, 2011). This study aims to extend existing research by exploring the types of assignments commonly used in college programs of study and the academic skills needed to successfully complete these assignments, thereby addressing the identified gap in the literature. By delving into the college context, this research contributes to filling this important void within the field and expands the comprehension of EAP requirements in a broader educational landscape.

Research Questions

Primary Question

In response to the gap in the literature and the need to better understand college-level academic contexts, the primary question for this study is as follows: What types of writing assignments and

skills would effectively align an EAP program at an Ontario college with the writing competencies necessary for students to successfully complete an Ontario College program?

Secondary Question

The primary question is supported by two secondary questions: What types of writing assignments are typical at the college across disciplines? What types of skills are typically required for the successful completion of writing assignments?

Study Methodology

This study was carried out at a mid-sized college located in Ontario, Canada, with an approximate student population of 18,000. The educational institution is structured into four distinct schools: the School of Advanced Technology; the School of Wellness, Public Safety and Community Studies; the School of Media and Design; and the School of Business and Hospitality. To answer the research questions noted above, this study utilized a qualitative research design that involved both a document analysis of course outlines from each school and a series of focus group interviews with professors from across the college.

Document Analysis

To understand the writing skills required of college students, we began our research by examining the writing demands across various schools within the college. In Ontario, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities mandates that all Certificate, Diploma, and Advanced Diploma programs incorporate Essential Employability Skills (EES) in six areas: communication, numeracy, critical thinking and problem solving, information management, interpersonal skills, and personal skills. While institutions have flexibility in how they implement these skills, nearly all Ontario colleges have mandated communication courses to meet the communication requirement. These courses are designed to prepare students for vocational tasks and develop the academic skills needed for their respective programs of study (Government of Ontario, 2022). Most college programs in Ontario require at least one foundational communication course, with some fields requiring up to four courses throughout the program (Government of Ontario, 2022). Given that communication courses include the writing requirements mandated by the Ministry, we focused our research on these courses. This focus is based on the assumption that communication courses provide valuable insights into the broad writing competencies necessary for college-level success.

Our document analysis concentrated on the course outlines for introductory communication courses at the college, given that most students are mandated to complete such a course. It is important to note that each school within the college offers their own first-year communication courses specifically tailored to the needs of its students. We examined all first-year course outlines ($n=11$) to identify commonalities in skills and assignments across schools that could inform the development of EAP programming. Course outlines were anonymized and assigned numerical identifiers (C1–C11). We employed the document analysis methodology outlined by Bowen (2009), which involves three stages: skimming the documents for significant passages, conducting a thorough reading to discern relevant data, and re-reading the data to

identify themes and categories. Our analysis focused on course descriptions, Essential Employability Skills mandated by the Ministry, Course Learning Requirements (outcomes or objectives of each course set at the college level), and the Embedded Knowledge and Skills (specific competencies used to achieve each learning requirement).

Focus Groups

In order to gain more insight into how the standards outlined in the course outlines were implemented across the college, we conducted three focus groups involving a cohort of college professors ($n=7$). In contrast to previous needs analyses that have utilized quantitative approaches to determine the frequency and typologies of assignments, we decided to use a qualitative approach because it was more apt to uncovering nuances in the expectations and skills integral to college writing. Moreover, as indicated by Horowitz (1986), the most fundamental problem with research that aims to quantify skills and genres is that it starts with preconceived notions about what skills and genres should be included in a questionnaire. Consequently, such research endeavours impose specific conceptual frameworks on participants. Given the scarcity of research conducted within the college context, the identification of suitable survey content would have been a formidable challenge subject to a great deal of researcher bias. Thus, we opted for focus groups as a primary method of inquiry (in addition to a pilot interview, see below), given their capacity to foster open and exploratory discussions, potentially paving the way for future quantitative research.

Participants

Our EAP program is intended for a broad audience in that it does not cater to any specific program, but instead aims to incorporate broad academic skills that could be applicable across disciplines. We therefore used purposeful sampling and ensured that professors from all four schools were represented in our study so that we could identify commonalities that could potentially benefit a broad disciplinary spectrum. It is noteworthy that some of these professors possess experience teaching in multiple schools, contributing to their perspectives being more multifaceted. This aspect of our research method aligned with our research objectives, which aimed to identify commonalities rather than focusing exclusively on a singular discipline. Each participant in our study was denoted with the designation “F” to signify faculty, followed by a unique numerical identifier to distinguish their respective contributions. The school affiliation of each faculty member is depicted in Table 1 for reference (see next page).

Materials

The research instrument for the focus groups was a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit comprehensive insights from professors regarding common writing assignments and skills required for success in the college context. The formulation of these questions was informed by a comprehensive review of pertinent literature, an analysis of course outlines from the document analysis, and the collective expertise garnered from our institutional experiences at the college. Before conducting the focus groups, we carried out a pilot interview with one participant to test the efficacy of our questions. After this interview, minor refinements were made to the questionnaire to include questions about how participants would define college writing. Given

the relatively low number of participants in our study, primarily arising from recruitment challenges, the data collected during the pilot interview were integrated into our analysis.

Table 1

Participant Affiliation by School

Participant	School
F1	School of Business & Hospitality; School of Wellness, Public Safety, & Community Studies
F2	School of Media & Design
F3	School of Advanced Technology
F4	School of Business & Hospitality; School of Media & Design
F5	School of Advanced Technology
F6	School of Advanced Technology
F7	School of Wellness, Public Safety & Community Studies

Data Collection

Each focus group was comprised of two professors, a deliberate choice aimed at creating an environment conducive to interactive and detailed discussions (Litosseliti, 2003). To facilitate participation and overcome geographical and logistical constraints, the pilot interview and the focus groups were conducted virtually using the ZOOM platform. This choice also enabled the recording of sessions for subsequent transcription and analysis, including the capture of non-verbal cues and body language. During these sessions, two researchers took turns in posing questions and guiding the discussion, while a third researcher took notes, managed the chat box for written questions, and addressed any technical issues that arose. The interviews lasted between 60–90 minutes.

Analytical Procedures

The primary data source for this study consisted of audio transcripts acquired through the Zoom platform. Prior to the commencement of transcript analysis, the researchers meticulously cross-referenced each transcript with its corresponding audio recording to ensure the accuracy of the textual transcripts. Following this transcription, an extensive thematic content analysis was conducted by the research team, drawing upon the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). The initial stage of this analytical process, known as familiarization, involved a review of the interview transcripts by the researchers. This step was instrumental in affording the research team the opportunity to develop initial impressions of the data. In the second phase, the lead researcher coded the data. This required a thorough review of the interview transcripts, with an emphasis on identifying and assigning descriptive codes to significant words or phrases within the text (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The adoption of an open coding approach allowed for the flexible categorization of data elements. In the final phase of the study, a process of data synthesis was executed. This process entailed the consolidation of descriptive codes, derived from the preceding phase, into overarching categories. Throughout this process, all three researchers actively engaged in reviewing the coded data and held ongoing discussions to

collaboratively explore potential categories, validate interpretations, and resolve any coding ambiguities. This collaborative approach played a pivotal role in ensuring the consistent categorization of coded data and augmenting the overall analytical rigour.

Themes from focus group interviews were compared with course outline data to identify consistencies and discrepancies. This triangulation highlighted both the skills emphasized in practice and those formally documented, offering a comprehensive understanding of first-year writing expectations. For example, skills emphasized by instructors but absent in course outlines may indicate implicit priorities, while skills present in outlines but rarely discussed during the focus groups may reflect underexplored instructional intentions. Combining instructor perspectives with formal documentation allowed for a robust multi-faceted analysis of college writing expectations informed by institutional standards and teaching practices.

Findings

Vocational Orientation

An initial review of course outlines revealed that communication courses across schools consistently emphasize the development of communication skills for both “education and workplace” contexts. In the course description, all outlines frame writing not only as an academic task but also as direct preparation for professional practice. This *vocation-oriented* approach positions writing instruction as serving dual purposes: academic progression and immediate workplace applicability.

This emphasis was strongly echoed in the focus group interviews. Professors reported that their assignments were deliberately designed to mirror professional writing tasks. As one participant explained, communication courses are “workplace and vocationally focused...for the majority, it’s more vocational” (F2). Similarly, another noted that “the majority of work...is workplace focused” and that assignments are deliberately geared toward “things that [students] might actually have to be writing” (F5). Others emphasized that an “industry” focus is often used to foster student engagement, particularly in technical fields (F6). In one example, students practised email writing and proposal development on the basis that “at work you’re going to have to email your co-workers and your clients, or write a business proposal because one day, you wish to open up a business and get a bank loan” (F1). Such comments illustrate the close alignment between classroom tasks and anticipated workplace demands.

Workplace Inspired Assignments

The course outlines referenced a variety of academic and workplace genres within the Embedded Knowledge and Skills sections (see Table 2). Considerable variation was evident across courses in terms of the genres specified. Reports were the most frequently cited assignment (55%), followed by short documents (45%), routine correspondences (45%), essays (45%), and paragraphs (45%). While these outlines provide insight into the types of texts that students may be expected to produce, it is important to note that many of the assignments are presented as optional. As a result, instructors are afforded substantial latitude in determining which genres to emphasize in practice. For example, an Embedded Knowledge and Skills description might state

that students are expected to produce short documents such as “memos, letters, and/or summaries.” The use of such tentative language was common across outlines, suggesting that while the Embedded Knowledge and Skills sections highlight potential genres, they do not fully capture the range or frequency of assignments actually implemented in classrooms. As shown in Table 2, the course outlines reference both traditional academic genres (e.g., essays, paragraphs, and opinion writing) and workplace-oriented assignments (e.g., reports, emails, letters, memos, and technical descriptions).

Table 2

Types of Texts in Course Outlines (n=11)

Type of Text/Assignment	% of Courses (n=11)	Courses (C1-C11)
Reports	55%	C1, C2, C5, C8, C9, C11
Short Documents	45%	C1, C7, C8, C9, C11
Routine Correspondences	45%	C1, C7, C8, C9, C11
Essays	45%	C2, C5, C8, C9, C11
Paragraphs	45%	C2, C8, C9, C10, C11
Emails	36%	C1, C3, C4, C7
Letters	27%	C3, C7, C9
Memos	27%	C3, C7, C9
Technical Descriptions	18%	C4, C9
Descriptions	9%	C1
Short Business Documents	9%	C3
Reflections	9%	C4
Opinion Writing	9%	C4
Research Documents	9%	C4
Infographics	9%	C1

The focus group interviews provided insight into how assignments were interpreted and enacted at the classroom level. Interestingly, the professors reported placing greater emphasis on vocationally oriented genres, with participants consistently identifying reports, résumés, proposals, letters, meeting minutes, and memos as central writing tasks. This was surprising given that some of the most common tasks in the course outlines, such as essays, paragraphs and short documents, might be viewed as more traditional academic genres. Even when academic assignments were mentioned in the focus group interviews, they were frequently reframed in applied terms. For instance, students were asked to summarize organizational activities, such as “summariz[ing]...their social media presence” (F5), or to complete comparative analyses with direct practical relevance, such as evaluating the merits of different truck models for purchase (F3).

Among the genres discussed, report writing emerged as the most prominent. Instructors described reports as integral across disciplinary contexts, though they varied in content, tone, and purpose. One participant noted that students are introduced to “seven different types of reports...business reports, formal reports, persuasive reports” (F1). Others emphasized the integration of reports into broader assignments, such as combining a literature review with a

formal report (F2) or producing inspection reports based on field observations (F5). In technology programs, reports were often structured according to professional models, sometimes explicitly referencing standards established by the Ontario Association of Certified Engineering Technicians and Technologists (F6). Another participant highlighted that students in these programs engage in “more advanced writing like report writing...[but] avoid calling it an essay” (F7). Taken together, these findings suggest that the report operates as a highly adaptable genre, encompassing persuasive, informative, and analytical functions, while simultaneously displacing the traditional essay as the dominant extended writing form.

The focus group interviews also suggested a limited role for essay writing in some college communication courses, particularly within technical and vocational programs. As one instructor noted, “In Tech and Trades we do not do essays. We never teach essays. We don’t find benefit...we stick to the report” (F6). Similarly, another explained that while genres such as memos, emails, and letters are commonly assigned, “we wouldn’t do essays for a diploma program, but it’s required for the degree programs” (F4). F7 articulated that, in the context of technology-related disciplines, there is a tendency to prioritize advanced writing forms such as “reports” and “discussion papers,” but she would consciously “avoid calling it an essay,” suggesting that this genre would not be well received by the students. These perspectives stand in contrast to the course outlines, which identified essays as the second most frequently assigned genre. This discrepancy suggests a potential bias among instructors toward vocationally oriented genres, privileging forms such as reports over more traditional academic assignments. It is plausible that motivational factors play a significant role, with workplace assignments strategically employed to enhance the development of writing skills. This perspective is supported by Participant F6, who notes that communication instructors often adopt an “industry” focus to foster “buy-in” from students, particularly those in technical fields.

Writing Skills

In addition to discipline-specific learning outcomes, all college courses in Ontario are required to address a set of Essential Employability Skills, which are considered foundational for academic, and professional, success. These skills, which cut across program areas, reflect the capacity to communicate clearly, concisely, and correctly in written, spoken, and visual forms that fulfill a specific purpose and meet the needs of diverse audiences. They further require students to respond appropriately and effectively to written, spoken, or visual messages in ways that ensure mutual understanding and engagement. These skills are the same across all schools (see Table 3 on the next page).

Complementing the Essential Employability Skills are a set of Course Learning Requirements that are central to the development of academic and professional literacy. While there was some degree of variability in wording of the Course Learning Requirements sections of the course outlines, for the most part, all course outlines focused on the same seven skills: (1) the writing process, (2) audience analysis, (3) paraphrasing information, (4) summarizing information, (5) integrating sources, (6) documenting sources, and (7) using technology to support communication. Collectively, these writing skills not only reinforce the broader employability framework but also provide the means through which students demonstrate learning, engage critically with disciplinary knowledge, and contribute effectively to academic

and workplace discourse. The focus group interviews illuminated how instructors prioritize these competencies and translate them into classroom practice.

Table 3

Essential Employability Skills Included in Level 1 Communication Courses

Number	Essential Employability Skill Mandated by Ministry
EES1	Communicate clearly, concisely and correctly in the written, spoken, and visual form that fulfills the purpose and meets the needs of the audience.
EES2	Respond to written, spoken, or visual messages in a manner that ensures effective communication.
EES6	Locate, select, organize, and document information using appropriate technology and information systems.
EES7	Analyze, evaluate, and apply relevant information from a variety of sources.

Concise Writing

When faculty were asked about the writing skills that they emphasize in their classes, conciseness emerged as a central theme in the interviews. One professor stressed the “four pillars” of technical writing: “clear, complete, concise, accessible” (F5). She described requiring students to rigorously edit their work against these criteria. Similarly, another participant underscored the value of brevity in workplace writing: “Just chop out the non-contributing phrases...plain, simple language, accessible sentences that don’t waste anybody’s time” (F4). For technical programs, clarity was framed as especially important when explaining specialized concepts to a general audience. As one instructor explained, “they also have to write it as if their audience member doesn’t know much about their industry” (F3). Yet, participants also observed that students often struggle with conciseness, particularly those accustomed to essay-based writing. One participant attributed these difficulties to the “essay and other fluffy writing” students had previously encountered, which encouraged verbosity. EAL students, she added, frequently equated complex, convoluted prose with sophistication, though in practice such writing “hinders overall clarity” (F3).

Research Skills

Another prominent theme from the interviews was the centrality of secondary research in student writing. Faculty emphasized that students must learn to integrate research into their work, with one noting the importance of “pulling research into their writing” (F6) and another highlighting the skill of “how to use the library and do research and get articles from the library” (F7). These comments suggest that professors regard the reintegration of research into assignments as a key academic competency, consistent with Horowitz’s (1986) observation that English-language universities often design writing tasks to develop this skill. This emphasis was further reflected in ten of the eleven course outlines, which explicitly required students to incorporate sources into their writing.

An interesting intersection between vocational and academic elements was evident in how these tasks were framed. Although assignments were often workplace-oriented, students were nonetheless required to follow American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines and use credible research to support their arguments. As one faculty member explained, students complete “workplace [writing] following academic structures,” where “following APA, following good writing skills...is applicable anywhere” and “research to support your points...is with the end goal of being able to write this particular task for your particular workplace” (F1). Another professor similarly described research as both an academic and vocational tool, noting that “we are teaching students how to go out, how to collect, how to assess sources, and to use credible sources...to add credibility to their own writing. So, to me that is a workplace assignment, but it has definitely an academic tone” (F5).

The focus group interviews also highlighted ongoing debates about what kinds of sources are appropriate for college-level research. While peer-reviewed articles remain the gold standard in university contexts, several professors emphasized the importance of accessible resources for their students. One referred to the materials she assigns as “less academic” (F2), while another noted that sources “do not have to be peer-reviewed” since students’ reading proficiency may not align with the demands of dense research articles (F3). Other participants pointed to internet-based materials (F4) and trade or technology journals and professional magazines, which they considered credible but not necessarily peer-reviewed (F5).

What remained consistent, however, was the expectation that students critically evaluate their sources. One professor explained that she requires students to apply the CRAAP test—Currency, Reliability, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose—when selecting resources (F4). Another described assigning students a set of materials and asking them to “do a CRAAP assessment and tell me if this is a valid source to use for such and such topic” (F3). Similarly, in technical report writing, students were required to evaluate a source’s credibility before inclusion (F5). For us as EAP instructors, these findings underscore the importance of resource evaluation in the college context. In settings where peer-reviewed sources are less emphasized, the act of assessing authority, reliability, and purpose takes on heightened importance. This challenge may be particularly significant for international students, who not only face linguistic demands but also must navigate cultural differences in evaluating authority, political perspectives, and the scholarly credibility of diverse publications.

Citations

A final theme that emerged from the focus group interviews concerned citation skills, particularly in relation to plagiarism. Faculty emphasized that citation instruction was closely tied to helping students avoid academic misconduct. One professor explained that she teaches citations to ensure students are “making sure that they’re avoiding plagiarism and that they’re acknowledging where they got sourcing from” (F6). Another stressed the legal consequences of copying online content, noting, “you don’t want to be caught plagiarizing others or copyrighted content anywhere on the web” (F4). She further highlighted the challenge for “students coming from international territories where copyright legislation is lacking, or just different from what we see here in North America” (F4).

The link between plagiarism and international students was a recurring theme. One participant observed that the issue was particularly evident among “South Asian students” where “copying and pasting is encouraged, and it becomes a big surprise...when they’re told they cannot do that for writing assignments” (F4). Another described having to explain to students that purchasing essays online “doesn’t make it yours, you know, like in their culture” (F2). More broadly, faculty perceived plagiarism as a challenge faced disproportionately by EAL and international students, as reflected in the comment that “every single plagiarism case currently on my desk this semester is an ESL [EAL] student or an international student who has misunderstood the requirements of documenting research properly” (F5).

The focus group interviews also shed light on disciplinary variation in citation styles. One professor noted that she teaches the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) style, which is “new to everybody, which I think is why there are such problems with plagiarism, because they don’t know how to do it” (F3). Another explained that styles differ across programs, with “entirely APA for the School of Business and IEEE for tech and trades” (F4). Similarly, one faculty member suggested that while “the standard is probably APA,” incorporating IEEE into EAP would be beneficial since “it is new to domestic and international alike” (F2). Others emphasized the transferability of citation skills, with one noting that EAP students excel at applying APA in her program, suggesting that such competencies can be carried over to disciplinary contexts (F1). The importance of citation was also reinforced at the curricular level. Ten out of eleven course outlines explicitly referenced crediting work and documenting sources as a core learning requirement, underscoring the institutional value placed on this aspect of academic literacy.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

Viewed comprehensively, the data presented in this study depict a form of college writing characterized by a dual nature. This form of writing is both practical, as it predominantly centres on task types that have real-world vocational applications, and scholarly, as it necessitates the application of academic competencies such as research, source integration, and citation. We have designated this form of writing as applied academic writing owing to its amalgamation of applied and academic proficiencies. Delving into the specifics of this writing style, our focus group interviews indicate that it often mirrors routine workplace communication, encompassing documents like memos, letters, emails, agendas, instructions, and minutes, while concurrently drawing upon essential academic skills. The research component appears to place emphasis on non-academic sources, and the writing itself is expected to be clear, concise, and direct. Another noteworthy aspect of college writing is the ubiquitous employment of the report format for the expansion of ideas across various programs. However, the exact nature of these reports can diverge significantly from one task to another in terms of length and content. Variations range from the integration of external sources to the presentation of personal reflections, projects, primary research findings, and the like.

Implications

The essence of applied academic writing carries several implications for our EAP college program, and we posit that these findings also merit consideration for other EAP practitioners operating in more vocationally or technically oriented settings. To begin, our findings prompt a re-evaluation of the genres currently incorporated into our program in order to allocate more space for the inclusion of genres that are more closely associated with workplace communication. Implicit in this assertion are foundational and epistemological questions regarding the definition of academic tasks within the purview of an academic English program. We suspect that numerous practitioners may refrain from categorizing workplace assignments as inherently academic tasks. Nevertheless, our findings unmistakably demonstrate that, within our college context, such assignments constitute academic endeavours expected of students. Purves (1986) contended some years ago that educational instruction within a given discipline serves as a mechanism for individuals to assimilate into the specific rhetorical norms and conventions intrinsic to that discipline. Building upon this premise, one can assert that the acclimatization process within EAP programs should encompass exposure to the genres that students will use in the target programs.

Within our own EAP program and, potentially in other institutions, considerable emphasis is placed on the pedagogy of paragraph writing, diverse forms of essay composition, and the cultivation of research skills. While our results lead us to believe that we may be placing too much emphasis on the essay, we do not mean to suggest that essays are not a useful genre nor that they do not have a place in EAP programs. Essays provide a context for imparting a multitude of vital skills such as summarization, research proficiency, and citation practices—all of which were highlighted in the course outlines and focus group interviews. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that essays are not the exclusive means for developing these competencies, leading us to contemplate whether the inclusion of alternative genres would offer advantages to students in vocational settings, thereby better preparing them for their respective discourse communities.

Our recent endeavours to incorporate report writing into our program have revealed a noticeable dearth of EAP resources available for instructing this genre. This lack of resources is unsurprising given that research has found the content of commercial EAP textbooks to be inadequate and often not informed by research and the needs of practitioners (Harwood, 2005). The lack of report writing materials may be attributed to the limited extent of research devoted to elucidating the characteristics of this genre at the post-secondary level. Unlike essays, which adhere to stringent conventions, it appears that reports exhibit a greater degree of variability in their characteristics. Consequently, we advocate for a more concerted research effort to discern the defining attributes and diverse stylistic variations of reports, thereby fostering a deeper comprehension both for educators and students. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for additional instructional materials that seamlessly integrate vocational tasks and reports with scholarly competencies.

An additional aspect to consider pertains to the pedagogical approach employed for teaching research within EAP college-level programs. In our own department, we have had extensive debates regarding the necessity of mandating the use of peer-reviewed sources in

student research. We regularly require students at the advanced level to use academic journal articles as support in their writing. While this requirement is undoubtedly beneficial and contributes to a deeper comprehension of scholarly forms of writing, we have concerns regarding whether we have set an excessively high standard. In numerous institutions, success in an EAP program serves as a condition for entry into specialized academic programs, and consequently, student grades determine their readiness to progress into these programs of study. The views articulated by our focus group interviewees, notably that they do not require the use of peer-reviewed sources because they are too challenging for some college-level students, leads us to question whether we are imposing standards on our EAP students that are higher than those of the contexts they are entering.

Limitations & Future Research

We acknowledge that the small-scale nature of this study, conducted within a single college context, limits the generalizability of its findings. The relatively small sample size further underscores the need for future research involving multi-site and multi-institutional studies with larger participant cohorts, as well as faculty from a wider range of disciplines beyond communication. We also recognize that because this study was situated within the Ontario post-secondary context, the results may not be equally applicable to other provinces. For example, in British Columbia, many institutions use the Articulation Guide for English as an Additional Language Programs in the British Columbia Post-Secondary Transfer System (BCCAT, 2023) to standardize their EAP course outlines and learning outcomes. The presence of such a provincial framework may leave instructors with less flexibility in determining assignment types within EAP classrooms. Future research could therefore examine how standardized frameworks mediate instructional decision-making and to what extent these frameworks meet the needs of diverse institutional contexts, including EAP programs in community colleges. In addition, because this research was undertaken prior to the rapid expansion of AI in language teaching and learning, subsequent studies should address the implications of AI for the writing process in college programs. Accordingly, this study is best understood as an initial exploration that provides a foundation for more extensive investigations into the complexities of college-level writing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has highlighted some of the fundamental attributes of college-level writing, demonstrating its integration of both academic and professional dimensions. This form of writing requires academic skills such as research, citation, and source integration, alongside a proficiency in workplace genres such as reports, memos, emails, and other occupational forms of communication. This finding contributes to the advancement of our comprehension of the intricacies of writing within the framework of Canadian colleges, while concurrently stimulating further academic inquiry and discourse pertaining to the writing prerequisites of students in EAP college programs. Our hope is that it will serve as a catalyst for the proliferation of broader deliberations concerning the college as an important site of investigation for EAP research in general and applied academic writing more specifically.

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Statements and Declarations

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT in order to enhance the readability of this paper. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication. ChatGPT was not used for any subsequent drafts of this work after submission to the journal.

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