

# The Role of Developing Undergraduate EFL Students' Academic Writing Techniques and Strategies in Writing a Dissertation

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**Abstract:** Within the framework of EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes), academic writing is considered as one of the most challenging skills in language learning that has become an international requirement. It is an umbrella for all formal writing that is used in any educational field such as schools, universities, etc. Thus, academic writing has become indispensable particularly for undergraduate students, who are seeking through presenting different writing assignments to achieve specific academic needs such as writing a dissertation, which is one of the substantial issues in the teaching of academic writing. Writing a dissertation plays a crucial role for undergraduate students, as a mean of achieving students' academic studies as well as improving their academic writing. Moreover, writing a dissertation is perceived as a difficult task for EFL students to produce, especially for those who do not know how to construct its main methodological features "IMRAD" (Introduction, Methodology, Results, and Discussion) or to use its fundamental techniques and strategies of documenting or reporting findings from other sources. This paper aims at presenting the different difficulties that undergraduate students may face when writing a dissertation. Additionally, it aims to discuss the different academic characteristics "IMRAD" and the most important techniques of documenting and reporting findings from other sources when writing a dissertation.

**Keywords:** Academic Writing, Dissertation, English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP)

## Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a complicated combination of learning four main language skills which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Writing is one of the most difficult, sophisticated and fundamental skills for EFL students that needs substantial efforts and practice in order to be acquired at least its essential characteristics. It is considered as one of the most difficult macro-skills of language either for native or non-native learners (Nunan, 1989; Richards and Renandya, 2002). Many native and non-native English undergraduate students find different difficulties to produce an efficient academic piece of writing such as a dissertation because they lack or they are not sufficiently aware of the necessary parts (IMRAD), techniques and strategies (such as summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, tables, figures, graphs, etc) of documenting or reporting findings from other sources that characterize any academic written document (such as a dissertation) in order to avoid plagiarism and add credibility. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how can undergraduate EFL students manage the various academic writing techniques and strategies when writing a dissertation.

## I. Literature Review

### A. Academic writing

In language learning contexts, students are taught that writing is an important way to interact with people in different contexts. Gillett et al (2009) explain that the purpose behind people's writing relies upon their situation, relationship and events. People may produce different kinds of writing such as emailing, requesting, inviting, etc. All these styles can be classified into two main categories: informal or formal.

Academic writing is an umbrella term for all formal writing that is used in any educational field such as schools, universities, etc. Academic writing is a formal way of jotting down thoughts and ideas for a purpose in educational fields either for native or non-native speakers taking into consideration its essential aspects such as content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, etc. It is different from one's mother tongue academic writing. Yakhontova (2003) states that academic writing has several differences in its arrangement and debates, which are related to language and culture, but the writing fashion of a certain language and culture is neither superior nor inferior to another language. Thus, academic writing is a social behavior that is performed for a purpose and is related to its audience (readership) in order to judge that academic piece of writing. It differs from other types of writing in that it represents the formal style of writing when learners are able to produce it in an educational community taking into account the audience (readers), tone (serious style or expression) and purpose (Oshima & Hogue, 2006).

#### *1. The Purpose of teaching academic writing*

In order to learn a foreign or a second language, students all over the world (in any educational context) are asked to write different genres of assignments (essays, reports, research papers, dissertation, etc.) to achieve various purposes [as long as it is under the framework of an academic achievement].

According to Richards and Miller (2005), teachers usually at any educational setting explain the fundamental notions of academic writing to their students because it is important for students to understand how to write academically following those standards. Academic writing is, the, a means of communication either for students or teachers to express or explain their ideas and beliefs through specific academic writing assignments.

Academic writing for undergraduate, native or non-native students has several reasons to be learned. Bailey (2011) states that the common motives behind academic writings are to present a piece of research, to respond and confirm questions of an issue, to discuss and synthesize a topic (writer's original ideas) and prove its validity by referring to other sources having the same area of interest. Whitaker (2009) concludes that the objective of academic writing "is not to show off everything that you know about your topic, but rather to show that you understand and can think critically about your topic" (p. 2).

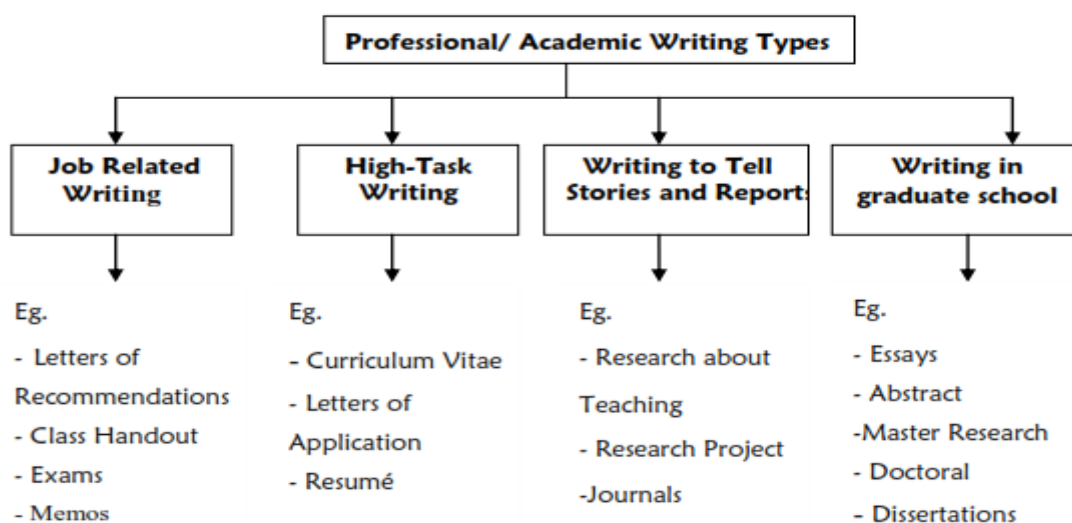
In addition, she (ibid) asserts that students while doing academic writing assignments, will improve their research skills, assess references, control, debate and gain many other advantages. Furthermore, academic writing is very important in educational communities because it helps not

only students to achieve their purposes, but also teachers to ascertain different advantages. According to Coffin et al (2003), teachers can evaluate students' level, communication skills, prepare future teachers, and widen students' capacities and critical thinking to write beyond the classroom.

**2. Types of academic writing**

In academic EFL contexts, learners, teachers, supervisors, etc are required to follow academic English standards in order to fulfill specific tasks. Academic writing in EFL classrooms requires from the writer to follow some criteria of acceptability which may differ from one genre to another. These criteria are related to the context and the purpose to achieve an intended objective and to get a positive feedback from the receiver. Therefore, distinguishing the appropriate type of academic writing for each genre is important for EFL learners. Richards and Miller (2005) state that undergraduate students meet different types of academic writing for the sake of realizing a framed program and completing their degrees.

There are different genres of academic writing students are required to produce during their academic study such as essay, research papers, reviews, CVs, letters, summaries, dissertations, reports, and many other types depending on the purpose and the audience. These types of academic writing can be classified according to different disciplines into diversified categories. Terryberry (2005) indicates that generally in academic writing, "you usually will write in either of two areas: to inform or to persuade" (p. 151). Students will categorize their academic writing assignments into one of these directions. In addition, study by Moor and Morton indicates that there are twelve classes of university writing assignments students at undergraduate or postgraduate level may encounter such as, "essay, review, literature review, experimental reports, case study report, research report, research proposal, summary, exercise, short summaries, written argument/case and others"( as cited in Bruce, 2008, p. 88). Furthermore, according to Richards and Miller (2005), "there are four branch categories of writing that participating educators must produce at one time or another" (p. 32). These categories are shown in (Figure1).



**Figure 1:** Types of Academic/ Professional Writing (Richards & Miller, 2005)

## **B. Dissertation Writing**

A dissertation is a formal piece of research, a specific type of investigation, a systematic process of collecting and analyzing data in order to learn an issue (Brown, 2006). This academic document is submitted by students during their academic career, generally at university in order to achieve an academic degree (Bachelor degree, Master degree, etc.).

Lovitts and Wert (2003) state that a dissertation is a shift point of students' position from the academic life into the professional one. It "is a unique, hybrid project—both a professional-level report on research and a crucial piece of evidence of your qualification for a credentia" (p. vii). They (ibid) see that a dissertation is the combination of both a process and a product. It is a process in the sense that it engages students to learn all what is necessary to write and produce a dissertation such as language skills, research techniques, collecting information, connecting ideas, etc. A dissertation as a product refers to the students' ability to master and control all that s/he has learned in an experienced manner, and presents the written product to be accepted in a professional and academic community. Moreover, Walliman indicates that a dissertation is the pinnacle endeavor of undergraduate students of mastering their academic requirements and presenting an issue in a formal written form (as cited in O'hara et al, 2011).

### ***1. The Purpose of Writing a Dissertation***

Along the studies for academic purposes, writing a dissertation is an imperative duty that students may face to fulfill a certified academic achievement. Although there are different types of academic written dissertations in several domains: economics, biology, psychology, etc, they all aim to realize the same common objectives. Dissertation is an extensive application which participates in categorizing grades and which presents the student's final achievements at university (McMillan & Weyers, 2008).

Although preparing a dissertation for students is an exhaustive and a time-consuming task, it contributes to the development of their professional careers. Thus, a dissertation is conducted to achieve a specific purpose with a certain audience. Lovitts and Wert (2009) emphasize that a dissertation is a means to get students to their professional life; it engages them to learn and acquire the abilities and skills and to prepare an authentic piece of research.

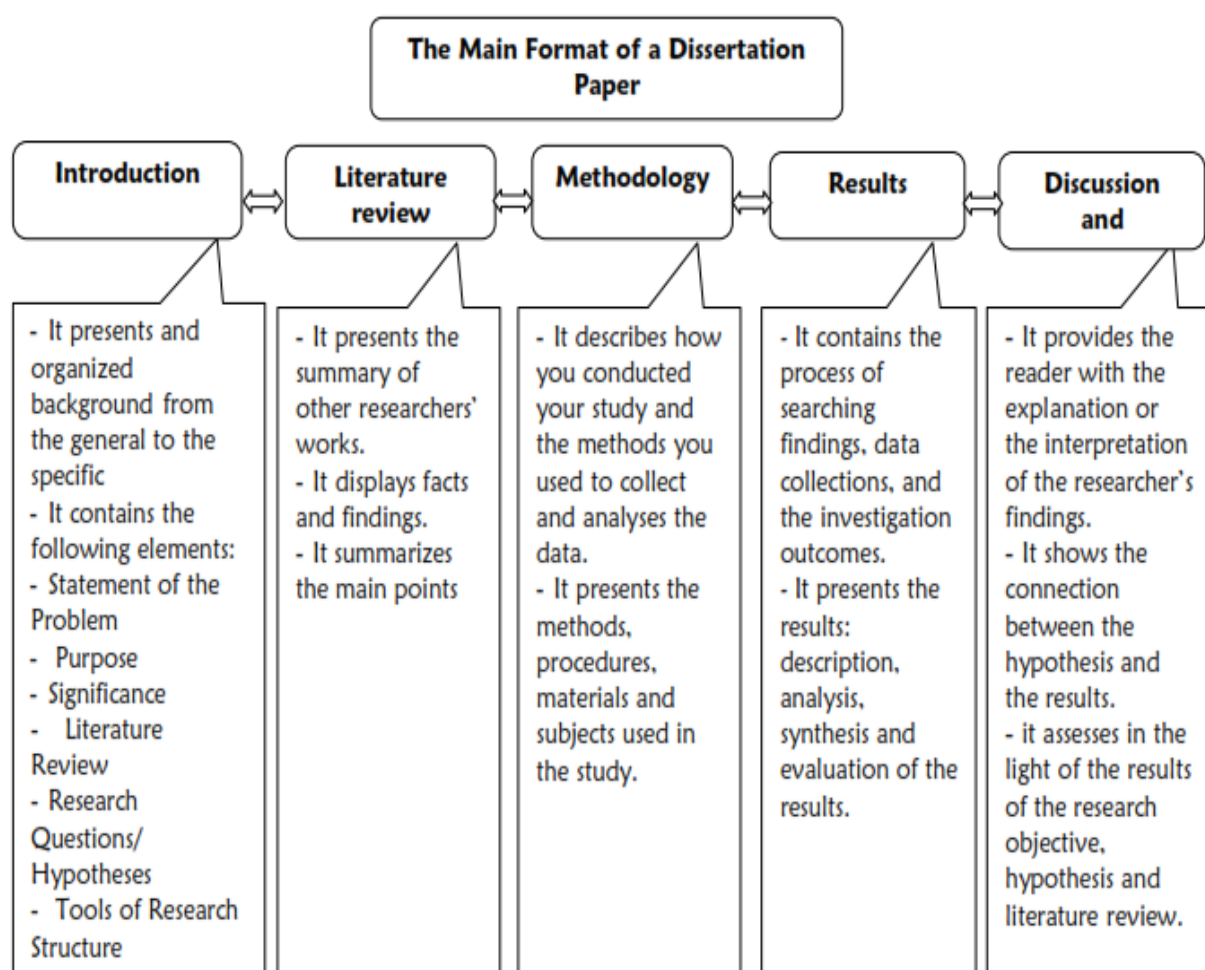
### ***2. Parts of a Dissertation***

According to Lyons and Doueck (2010), "the purpose of dissertation research is to learn more, not in a vague nonspecific way, but in a disciplined, rigorous, and purposeful way..., it is helpful to examine the nature of social work itself" (p. 9). Therefore, one can say that dissertation writing plays a crucial role in drawing the lineaments of students' academic and professional features

An academic dissertation is characterized by a set of common features. They are called the standard format of a dissertation: Introduction, Body and Conclusion, moving from the general to the specific and back to the general (McMillan and Weyers, 2008). The

traditional method includes Introduction, Review of Literature, Materials and Methods, Results, Discussion and Conclusion (Paltridge and Starfield, 2007).

Recently, the structure of a dissertation, especially in the field of language teaching and learning, has received much interest as regards its format in order to pave the way to the audience (readers) to learn easily as much as possible. Researchers shifted their attention towards a new tendency, which is the so-called IMRAD approach (Introduction, Methodology, Results, and Discussion). This approach was developed in 1972-1975 by the American National Standards Institute (Day and Gastel, 2011). It is “used to describe the conventional structure of a scientific paper” (Wager, 2011, p. 71). Despite the multiplicity of these structures, this does not mean that the researcher will ignore and prefer one type to another, as long as each type of these structures is in the service of the researcher and scientific research.



**3. Techniques of documenting and reporting information from other sources**

A dissertation that undergraduate students prepare is not a new study but it is a new presentation based on other researchers' work, with the writer's personal touch. It reflects students' proofreading of different sources, understanding and thinking and it is not just, “meant

to be simply a re-working of what you've read; neither is it meant to be 'your opinion' based only on your past experience and general knowledge" (Gaspar and Shepherd, 2011, p. 13). Referring to other sources is a very important process in a dissertation because it adds credibility and enables the reader to understand the original source of the borrowed ideas. Moreover, it enables the reader to find and read the source, to indicate that you have read and understood a certain text, to strengthen the discussed point and to avoid plagiarism (Gillett et al, 2009; Murray and Beglar, 2009).

Different techniques of documenting information can be used to refer to other relevant sources in academic writing assignments (including dissertations) such as summarizing, paraphrasing and quoting. The researcher has to follow a specific documentation style (the one required by the university) such as MLA (Modern Language Association), APA (American Psychological Association), Chicago, and other styles. And a variety of reporting finding techniques called visuals such as tables, figures, charts, etc. According to Murray and Hughes (2008), the researcher will choose the appropriate methods and present the results counting on the type of data whether it is quantitative or qualitative. Thus, using the graphic language in writing a dissertation is an assistant element that can serve both the researcher and the reader. It helps to attract the reader's attention and to make the results clearer, more comprehensible, and accessible. Also, it helps to explain, compare and present summaries.

#### **a. Summarizing**

Summarizing is the process of condensing and restructuring the original text, "to restate what the author has said in a concise format... [it is a] brief restatement that includes only important ideas and not trivial and minor details" (Cohen and Cowen, 2008, p. 198). Moreover, a summary is not only to reduce the number of words; it can be a sentence or a passage, depending on the writer's needs. Thus, according to Behrens and Rosen (2011) a summary has to be brief, complete and objective.

Summarizing is a significant process for students because it urges students to look for information and meaning, to read (books, articles, different sources), to learn how to reformulate sources using their own words, to be able to understand different concepts and achieve language- learning goals (Raimes, 1983). Furthermore, "it serves as a reminder of the main points discussed; it can help link what has been discussed to what is about to be discussed" (Murray & Beglar, *ibid*, p. 111). Researchers can summarize an original source (text, paragraph, book, etc.) using different forms, including writing or graphs. Thus, teachers in different areas have to teach students the various effective summarizing methods and graphic formats (graphs, charts, tables, enumeration, etc.) (Wormeli, 2005).

According to Yakhontova (2003), Gillett et al (2009) and Behrens and Rosen (2011) the researcher can follow certain steps or directions in order to produce a clear, comprehensible and effective summary. The following table presents the six main summarizing steps:

ORDER	STEPS
1	- Read the original source deliberately and try to understand the author's structure, purpose and ideas.
2	- Divide the text into parts and select (highlight) the most important ones you need.
3	- Write one sentence of each section (the highlighted ones) using synonyms mixed up with your own words.
4	- Write a thesis statement and link it with the summarized sentences using conjunctions, adverbs, and try to change the structure.
5	- Write your own passage (the summary), compare it with the original one and make some amendments if necessary (mechanics, grammar, spelling, etc.)
6	- Mention reference of the original source (author, year, page, etc.).

**Table 1: Summarizing Steps**  
(Yakhontova, 2003; Gillett et al, 2009; Behrens and Rosen, 2011)

#### b. Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is the process of understanding and rewriting an original text using one's own words, style and structure, provided that it keeps the original ideas and the same length. Migliaccio (2000) states that:

a paraphrase is a way to restate, reword, or rewrite sentences from a story to express an idea. The paraphrase must have the same meaning as the original sentences being paraphrased, but it should be expressed in a different way. If it is too much like the original, it is considered plagiarism. (p. 87)

This writing skill technique is a vital element in academic writing contexts because it prevents the student from falling into the trap of plagiarism. It enables him/her to build their writings on a strong basis and to stamp the writer's personal touch and reflect his/her understanding and thinking. According to Gillett et al (2009), Bailey (2011), Behrens and Rosen (2011) paraphrasing a written text can be produced effectively, if the writer follows the following steps:

ORDER	STEPS
1	- Read carefully the original text and understand its main ideas and purposes.
2	- Divide and highlight the text's basic ideas.
3	- Separate the selected sections from the original text
4	- Rewrite it by following these steps: - Change the original vocabulary (synonyms). - Change the structure and word order. - Alternate verbs into nouns, adjectives into adverbs and vice versa.
5	- Shorten long sentences and link the short sentences (that you have produced).
6	- Rewrite the new text and compare it with the original one, without forgetting to refer the source

**Table 2:** Paraphrasing Steps

(Gillett et al, 2009; Bailey, 2011; Behrens and Rosen, 2011)

### c. Quoting

Usually when students prepare an academic written assignment (such as a dissertation), they tend to use quotations. Quoting is the process of borrowing the author original passage. "To quote is to use certain words, phrases or sentences as they appear in the original... to support a point you are making in your writing" (Pak-tao Ng, 2003, p. 96). A quotation is placed in the text between quotation marks " " and the author's name, year, page are given (depending on the followed style).

Behrens and Rosen (2011) distinguish two different types of quoting: 'direct or indirect quotations'. The former is to write exactly the author's words, for example, Behrens and Rosen say "direct quotation is one in which you record precisely the language of the author". Whereas the latter is to report/ state without necessarily repeating exactly what the author says; for example, Behrens and Rosen say that direct quotation is one in which you record precisely the language of the author. The quoting process is an important element because it adds credibility and validity to the researcher's document, but it should not be over-used to avoid redundancy and, "try to use no more than three short quotes per page" (Gillette et al, 2009, P. 181). Behrens and Rosen (ibid) show that the writer can quote in a dissertation in the following cases:

- (1) The original passage is prominent and can add energy and attention to the written paper.
- (2) The original text is well recognized to the reader.
- (3) When it can be shorter than your summary.
- (4) You want to strengthen your work and help the reader to check and read the cited reference.



#### d. Tables

Leete et al (2004) state that “A table is a grid of rows and columns that creates cells where you can place text or numbers. Tables are an easy way to make complex data clear and they are easy to create” (p. 87). Tables in academic writing assignments are designed to explain numerical data and logical organization compare and contrast comprehend statistical relationships and present qualitative results. Thus, the function of tables is to enhance (ease of) understanding the dissertation’s content (Oliver, 2008). Moreover, it is preferable to use tables to display a large amount of data that cannot be all summarized (Behrens and Rosen, 2011). Tables have to be numbered (depending on the dissertation’s structure) and entitled in a way which reflects their content.

#### d. Figures

There are different types of figures such as graphs, charts, maps, photographs, etc (Kolin, 2010)

- **Graphs** : are used to interpret numerical data (in tables) into pictures (rising and falling arrows). They are used to express items that change repeatedly such as sales, profits, houses, temperatures, etc (Kolin, 2009). There are two important types of graphs

used in dissertations ‘Simple Line’ graphs and ‘Multiple Line’ graphs.

- **Charts**: A chart is a figure that can be used in dissertations, an element selected by means of Excel that contains objects such as titles and legends (Reding and Wermers, 2011). Charts are not the same as graphs. Graphs are more complex and present particular mathematical coordinates, whilst charts do not transfer accurate results. Alternatively, they show the general relationships pictures (Kolin, 2010).

There are several types of charts the researcher can use while writing his/her paper such as circles (pie), bars, organizational charts and flow charts (ibid).

- **Circle (Pie) Charts**

They are frequently used to: (1) present the connection between parts of the whole and vice versa, (2) present the percentage results (each segment of the circle has a percentage of the total 360°) and (3) permit the reader to understand easily the different rates (Murray and Hughes, 2008; Oliver, 2008; Kolin, 2009).

- **Bar Charts**

There are two formats of bar charts vertical and horizontal, which can be used to present the three types of bar charts ‘Segmented, Simple and Multiple’ (Guffey and Loewy, 2008). These types of figures can be used when the researcher wants to compare two objects or more or to attract the readers’ attention at the first glance.

- **Organizational Charts**

They are used to present the hierarchy of a certain process or place (company or agency), to present the relationships between the units (Kolin, 2010).

- **Flow Charts**

They are used to show the stages or steps of a certain procedure/process such as days, weeks, graduation, etc (Kolin, 2010).

## II. Implications

Due to the complexity of the Academic writing skill among the four language skills, undergraduate EFL students may face different difficulties when writing a dissertation. Writing a dissertation is one of the academic issues that undergraduate EFL students can write during their university study. Even if students deal with different academic writing genres, producing a dissertation remains the hardest task, even if their teachers guide them, they continue making various informal mistakes. Therefore, we think that the crux of these problems with this skill may be mainly due to the fact that students believe that producing an effective academic piece of writing is consequent to the use of good grammar, vocabulary, syntax, etc. and, students insist to learn these features and ignore the fundamental techniques and strategies that can help them to treat the different academic writing assignments during their academic study such as taking notes, summarizing paraphrasing, quoting. Throughout the above mentioned concepts that enlightened this paper we can recommend some points:

- Teachers should teach undergraduate EFL students – not only the academic writing characteristics such as grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, cautious writing and the like but also
- The main features that characterize any academic dissertation (which are called “IMRAD” Introduction, Methodology, Results and Discussion), the various efficient academic writing techniques of documenting information from other sources (such as summarizing, paraphrasing and quoting) and the different strategies of reporting findings from other sources (like: tables, figures, graphs, charts, etc) to overcome the difficulties that they may face when writing academically.
- Teachers should rise Undergraduate EFL Students awareness of the importance of writing an academic assignments in general and dissertation in particular through developing their academic written capacities from the beginning not only at the graduation stage.
- Foreign language syllabus must be more developed, and teachers should incorporate the fundamental academic writing features, part, techniques and strategies in their classes from the Bachelor's degree to the Master's degree.

## Conclusion

All in all, this paper attempts to shed light on the importance and predicaments of dissertation writing for undergraduate students within an EFL context. It is thought that such paper may help in providing university teachers and students with a comprehensible and efficient way that leads to enhance their competence in writing this academic genre. Teachers and especially those of “Written Expression” can raise their learners’ awareness to the process of dissertation writing and encourage them to proceed through the different features, techniques and strategies that likely lead to the development of their level in academic field in general and dissertation writing in particular.

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