

Navigating Research Formatting Dilemmas among College Students: Extent of Formal Instruction and Access to Resources Toward Ramified Research Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to determine the extent of formal instruction or guidance on research formatting among college students, as well as the availability of resources to assist them in addressing research formatting issues in a state university in the Philippines. The research intends to inform the development of standardised and effective research guidelines for higher education institutions.

Methodology – The study employed a descriptive qualitative design using semi-structured interviews. Fifteen (15) purposively selected student-researchers acting as leaders participated in the interview process. Stringent research protocols and ethical considerations were strictly followed. Data from the interview transcripts were analysed using Clarke and Braun's thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns and insights.

Findings – The results reveal that the degree of formal instruction on research formatting significantly influences students' ability to manage and complete their research projects, impacting both efficiency and quality. Identified challenges include limited guidance, inconsistent formatting standards, and resource constraints. Key strategies to overcome these challenges include faculty mentoring, accessible support systems, and standardised institutional policies.

Novelty – This study provides an in-depth exploration of research formatting challenges from the perspective of student research leaders—an often underrepresented group in academic discourse—highlighting the interplay between formal instruction, resource access, and research productivity.

Significance – The findings serve as a valuable reference for higher education administrators, faculty, and policymakers in crafting research guidelines that enhance students' efficiency, reduce anxiety, and foster innovation in research practices.

Keywords: Research formatting; Research instruction; Research policy; Research resources; State university; Student-researchers.

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1. Introduction

Undergraduate research programs develop critical thinking and communication skills, advancing the education of students, faculty, and universities. They provided valuable experiences that cannot typically be gained from traditional assessment tasks, increasing students' knowledge and ultimately improving their academic performance (Khan, 2023; Petrella & Jung, 2008). Student researchers were more likely to receive better GPAs, graduate sooner, and pursue graduate programs (Chamely-Wiik et al., 2023). Also, research programs stimulated students and helped to answer questions about their career (Hagel et al., 2009). Universities benefited from the enthusiasm of students and innovative perspectives that may all translate into faculty research (Erickson, 2001). Significantly, research-engaged learning enhanced students' research skills and capabilities, although the effectiveness of research-based learning was inconsistent in bachelor's and master's programs (Thiem et al., 2023).

In essence, it may not be surprising that writing a research paper was often one of the most challenging graduation requirements for students studying at universities, with many students struggling due to inadequate training in research skills, a limited understanding of the writing process, various ambiguities with resources, and lack of clarity of the methodologies involved (Altikriti, 2022). As many studies have indicated, research papers posed many challenges for college students. As it related to research writing, students found completing research papers difficult because of their understanding of research skills and report-writing skills required to know how to write each section of a research report such as an introduction, literature review, method, findings, and discussion that may be either useful or otherwise to initiate a line of research, or help identify research gaps (Sitompul & Anditasari, 2022).

These challenges, while challenging, will generally allow students to reflect on the many things learnt as a positive learning experience. These challenges, although demanding, were typically remembered as valuable learning experiences. One of the significant difficulties in the process was accurately citing sources and formatting correctly, because it was a common mistake that can have ramifications such as plagiarism. Rezeki (2018) said students often misapply citations as a result of misunderstandings that lead to eventual plagiarism. Studies showed that students frequently make errors in language and content in citations. Clear guidelines and strong warnings about plagiarism were necessary. Also, the study of Abdullah (2023) found that many postgraduate students made common mistakes, including selecting

inappropriate titles, unclear problem statements, irrelevant literature reviews, unsuitable methodologies, unclear referencing, and plagiarism issues.

Along with the challenges above, Javed (2019) indicated that many students may be able to write the research paper. Still, they got lost due to a lack of direction or unfamiliarity with the format and process. These challenges also translated into research proposals, as shown in Manchishi et al. (2015). Students faced difficulties such as a lack of standard formats, limited knowledge to help them locate pertinent literature, insufficient feedback, a short supply of literature on their topic, and a limited time to write the proposal. Moreover, writing proficiency could be complex. Low proficiency in writing was affected by factors such as grammatical errors or weaknesses, limited practice, lack of motivation, previous exposure to writing, and issues with terminology (Javid & Umer, 2014). As witnessed by Budjalemba and Listyani (2020), students felt apprehensive about writing in English because they have done lengthy preparation for writing in English. One of the most challenging components of writing was determining content and structure, while grammar was still a complex component that caused hesitation.

A deeper examination conducted by Al-Qaseri (2016) uncovered additional challenges facing undergraduate students, including academic weaknesses, mainly when English served as the medium of instruction, limited access to well-equipped libraries and online resources, and negative attitudes towards research projects. Moving beyond undergraduate studies, the research by Qasem and Zayid (2019) analysed many of the problems faced during research proposal and project writing, including choosing a topic, limited knowledge of research methods, not finding relevant references, disinterest in the research, and limited time.

Ngoc and Ngoc's (2021) project found many challenges faced by the participants, ranging from choosing research topics, searching for relevant materials, to understanding the meaning of the paper, selecting the correct theoretical framework, summarizing relevant previously done studies, using the proper level of citation, selecting the statistical tools, using the correct formulas for data analysis, interpreting the data correctly, and comparing it with related studies. These collective challenges demonstrated the complexity of research paper writing for college students, encompassing everything from formatting and citations to broader research-related issues and a general lack of guidance, ultimately influencing students' proficiency and the quality of their research experience.

As can be surmised from the sources presented, research formatting dilemmas are the problems or challenges encountered by students when they write scientific papers, where it is essential to cite works by the guidelines and norms developed by academic institutions, which lead to unintentional plagiarism (Rezeki, 2018). In addition, there exist dilemmas regarding topic selection, definition of the problem, literature review, and methodology (Abdullah, 2023). The quality of the overall work and its academic integrity remain questionable since there are no clear guidelines, and it appears that no prescribed formats have been experienced (Javed, 2019; Manchishi et al., 2015). In ASEAN countries, research formatting dilemmas are compounded by a lack

of prevalent research activities and knowledge sharing among librarians (Ramos-Eclevia et al., 2018).

As can be noted further, while students acknowledge the importance of research courses (Hussain et al., 2016; Kakupa & Xue, 2019; Wishkoski et al., 2022), many developed negative attitudes due to anxiety, stress, and the unfamiliarity of academic writing norms (Pecson, 2017; Rind, 2020). These attitudes significantly affected the approach of students to their research tasks, where positive attitudes facilitated solving problems, while negative attitudes hindered progress (Miandshti & Rezaei, 2013). Dealing with these attitudes was important, especially because research papers were typically part of courses in higher education and allowed students an opportunity to develop research and documentation skills (Miller, 2012).

However, students often struggled with acquiring research skills, and instructional effectiveness varies, necessitating new assessment methods (Meerah & Arsad, 2010). Additionally, students overestimated their research abilities (Molteni & Chan, 2015) and faced personal challenges like time and stress management (Bocar, 2009). Even with the described challenges, research activities developed students' knowledge, skills and literacy knowledge while providing an opportunity to develop knowledge about potential future careers and scientific development (National Research Council (NRC), 2012).

It was important to situate research so that its contextual relevance was understood across a variety of academic and affiliated disciplines (Brent, 2012; Hosier, 2019). There were several reasons why research was not taken up more widely in the mainstream. This was in part due to a variety of themes related to research, a non-unique approach (research impact), and contextual analysis was helpful to address this (Solans-Domènech et al., 2019). It was important to educate students on the contextual relevance of their studies through interpretation of and engagement with the research topic in a variety of fields, including writing studies or other scientific disciplines (Faix, 2014). Tran et al. (2023) noted further those students need to be taught research to generate positive attitudes and reduce negative views of research. It is also essential to teach student-researchers to increase their literacy in doing research through in-depth lesson study (Setiani et al., 2023), their learning styles and mathematic computation thinking abilities (Angraini et al., 2024; Angraini & Muhammad, 2023) and mathematical communication skills (Faridayanti et al., 2025) which are essential for analysis in research, their technological literacy skills using applications (Suripah & Hidayatul Muslim, 2025) which are pivotal for processing research data, their problem-solving and self-directed learning through peer tutoring (Hanafiani et al., 2023) which is important for research data collection and processing, and their reading comprehension (Lase et al., 2024) which is pivotal for understanding research problem and analysing research data.

The reviewed pieces of literature, in summary, depicted research writing as a non-simple task that involved challenges with formatting, citations, completing research-related tasks, support for engaging in research and developing a research proposal or draft. Additionally, they demonstrated the challenge of various factors (language competence, practice, motivation) on the students' competency in writing.

While these were challenges, they can also be an opportunity for higher educational institutions (HEIs) and college instructors to provide support and resources that help students build their capabilities in addressing their challenges. With such intention, the study primarily identified the extent of formal instruction or guidance on research formatting among college students and the resources available to assist them in resolving research formatting issues. The results from the study then served as a baseline for improving the research guidelines used in the university.

2. Methods

This section provides detailed on the research design, participants and sampling, instrument, data gathering procedure and ethical considerations, and data analysis used in gathering and treating the data gathered from the interviews.

2.1. Research Design

The study utilised the descriptive qualitative (exploratory study) design of qualitative research. This design described phenomena by focusing on research questions aimed at gaining insights into a poorly understood area, using semi-structured interviews (Ayton, 2023).

In the study, the descriptive qualitative design (see Figure 1) was employed to identify the research formatting dilemmas of college students in a state university in the Philippines using semi-structured interviews, aiming to gain insights for the proposal of a research policy to unify various formats utilised in the university and help address students' dilemmas in research formatting.

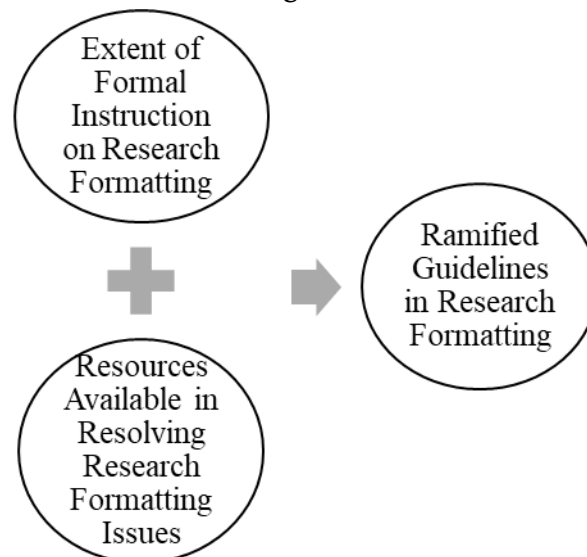


Figure 1. Paradigm of the Study

2.2. Participants

The study recruited college students from a state university in the Philippines, in various colleges, as the target population. This state university has a lot of colleges where no unified or standard research format is used; therefore, each professor uses their format in teaching various research courses. This uniformity in research formats and standard research guidelines confused students. The selected participants from the three colleges – College of Business and Accountancy, College of Education, and College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, were sought to have a complete and holistic manifestation of the

real prevalence of the problem studied. At the same time, the interview participants were selected using the purposive sampling procedure based on their knowledge and experience with completing research. For example, Nikolopoulou (2023) explained that purposive sampling is a non-random sampling procedure in which a researcher selects participants who are purposeful in meeting the study's goals.

Fifteen (15) student-researchers who acted as study leaders were purposively selected to participate in the interview. These 15 students had first-hand experience in the research process and with their research papers. The study inclusion criteria included: (i) the student-researchers were from the selected colleges of the state university; (ii) they had experience in conducting at least one research project on any of their research topics; and (iii) they acted as study leaders.

2.3. Instrument

The primary data collection instruments used in the study were the semi-structured interview guides for the interviews undertaken with the study leaders. This interview uses open-ended, predetermined questions, along with follow-up prompts to allow flexibility (George, 2023).

The semi-structured interview guide included open-ended questions along with follow-up questions on (i) the extent of formal instruction or guidance on research formatting among college students; and (ii) the resources available to assist them in resolving research formatting issues. The said instrument was validated by three experts in the field of research.

2.4. Data Gathering Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Permission was requested from the administration to conduct interviews or distribute surveys, and consent letters were provided for students to gather the desired information. The researchers ensured the anonymity of the participants' identities, the confidentiality of the data gathered from them, and the extent of their participation in the study. Technical assistance from research experts from the university has also been solicited to balance the ideas expressed by the participants before conducting member checking.

2.5. Data Analysis

The study utilised the thematic analysis (see Figure 2) proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This comprised six stages, namely: (i) familiarising oneself with the data; (ii) generating initial codes; (iii) generating initial themes; (iv) reviewing themes; (v) defining and naming the themes; and (vi) writing up.

In the first stage, the researchers transcribed and analysed the data gathered from the participants. In the second stage, the researchers identified key points in the transcripts by assigning codes to each participant, and then assigned a specific equivalent concept to each key response. In the third stage, the researchers identified themes related to the particular formatting difficulties and perceptions of college students on the importance of adhering to formatting guidelines by grouping concepts to create categories and subsequently grouping these categories to develop themes. In the fourth stage, the initial themes were reviewed by rescanning the transcripts multiple times. In the fifth stage, the themes were finalised and given descriptions aligned with the thoughts and ideas expressed by the participants in the transcripts. In the sixth and

final stage, the results were finalised and presented in tabular and narrative forms. Additionally, the researchers conducted member's checking, wherein the participants validated the authenticity of the themes and the overall discussion of the data gathered from them.

For the reflexive analysis, the researchers established rapport with the participants to build trust, connection, and confidence during the data gathering process, thereby reducing their own biases and preconceived assumptions about the participants. The researchers also reflected on themes multiple times by scanning through transcripts and using member checking to validate the transcription as reflecting the participant's views before finalising the data presentation.

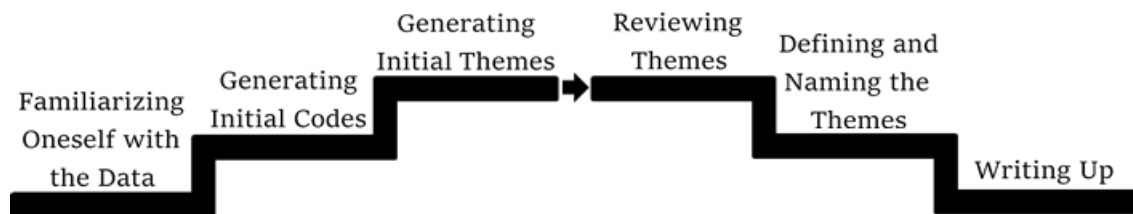


Figure 2. Six Stages of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1 Extent of Formal Instruction on Research Formatting

Figure 3 and Table 1 present the themes on the formal instruction in research formatting.

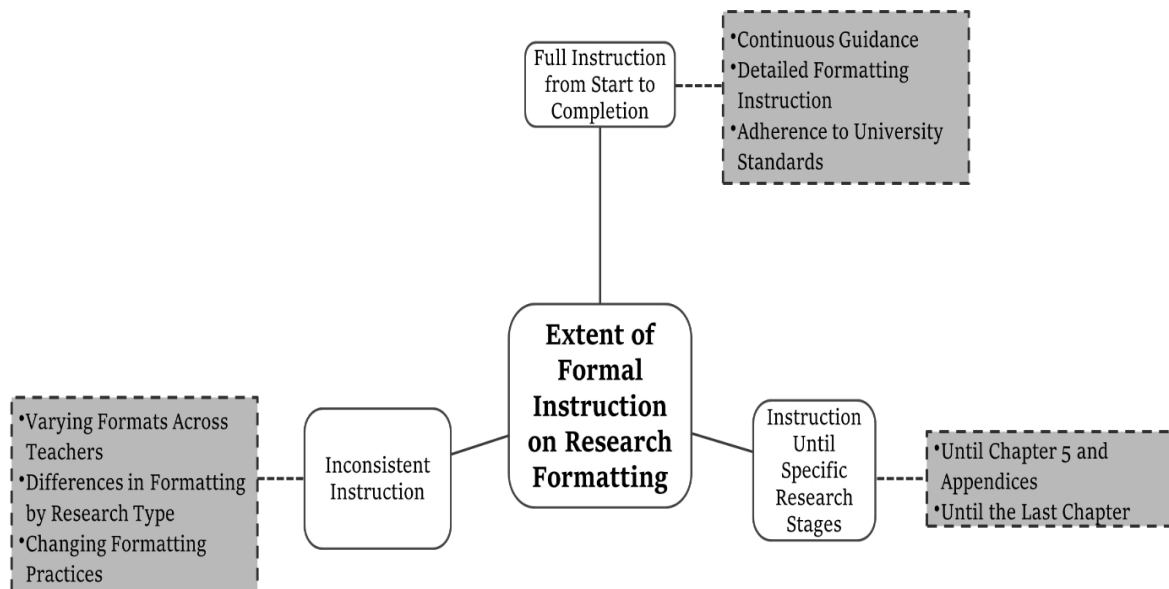


Figure 3. Diagrammatic Illustration of the Formal Instruction in Research Formatting

Table 1 - Thematic Analysis on Formal Instruction in Research Formatting

Themes	Categories	Concepts	Participant Key Responses
Full Instruction	Continuous Guidance	Learners receive structured	"Hanggang matapos ang aming research paper kami ay

Themes	Categories	Concepts	Participant Key Responses
from Start to Completion		guidance throughout the research process	<i>nakatanggap ng guidance hindi kami pinabayaan sa paggagawa."</i> (P2)
	Detailed Formatting Instruction	Step-by-step explanation of each part	<i>"Ang aming propesor ay organisado sa pagdedetalye ng tamang format para sa pananaliksik at kaming kanyang mga estudyante ay malaya at mabilis na nakapagtatanong tungkol sa aming mga katanungan tungkol sa tamang pag-format"</i> (P10)
	Adherence to University Standards	Following the BPSU research format	<i>"Mula noong senior high hanggang ngayon, pormat ng BPSU ang personal kong sinusunod dahil mas madali maunawaan."</i> (P14)
	Instruction Until Chapter 5 and Appendices	Formatting guidance provided up to the final chapter	<i>"Hanggang sa chapter 5 and appendices. Wala naman akong napansin."</i> (P9)
	Until the Last Chapter	Formal instructions continued throughout the research writing	<i>"I received formal instructions until the last chapter."</i> (P8)
Initial Instruction Only	Until Second Semester of the Third Year	Guidance extended throughout the academic term	<i>"Nakatanggap kami/ako ng pormal na pagtuturo hanggang sa matapos ang semestre 2 nung kami ay 3rd year. (P12)</i> <i>Wala naman po akong napansin sapagkat ang tanging hangad lamang nila na kami ay mapabuti at mapasaayos ang aming magiging pananaliksik."</i> (P13)
	Instruction Given at the Start	Formatting was taught before research groups were formed	<i>"Sa panahon po ng pag-aaral sa Educational Research at Language Research. Bago pa kami i-grupo at pagsimulain sa research ay itinuro po muna ang tamang research formatting at iba pa."</i> (P1)
	Early Formatting Introduction	Formatting instruction was given but not continuously reinforced	<i>"Sa simula lamang."</i> (P11)
Inconsistent Instruction	Varying Formats Across Teachers	Different instructors use different research formats	<i>"Hanggang ngayon, sa tatlong taon ko sa BPSU-BC marami na akong naging guro sa Research, pero lahat sila ay iba-iba ng format"</i>

Themes	Categories	Concepts	Participant Key Responses
			<i>pagdating sa pagsulat, sa mga parte, at higit sa lahat ay sa pagbuo ng kabuuang istraktura." (P3)</i>
	Differences in Formatting by Research Type	Formatting depends on whether the research is qualitative or quantitative	<i>"Meron po, kapag po ang research ay qualitative, marami pong maiiba sa format na hindi tulad sa quantitative." (P5)</i>
	Changing Formatting Practices	Research formatting has become more detailed over time	<i>"Margins, pati kung alin ang Bold, alin ang dapat naka-table, etc. In terms of pagkakaiba, I guess noon kasi mas malaya. Font, font size, at indentation lang usually yung format, pero ngayon mas comprehensive." (P15)</i>

The following are the key themes incurred from the interview transcripts of the participants on the extent of formal instruction given on research formatting:

3.1.1.1 Full Instructions from Start to Completion

Receiving continuous and structured guidance throughout the research process ensures that learners develop a strong understanding of research formatting. Participants highlighted the importance of sustained support from their instructors, which made research writing more manageable and less stressful. One participant shared,

"Until we finished our research paper, we received guidance; we were not left to struggle on our own." (P2)

Another emphasised how detailed formatting instructions significantly helped them:

"Our professor was organised in explaining the correct research formatting, and we, as learners, were free to ask questions." (P10)

Additionally, some learners followed the University's formatting guidelines because they found them straightforward. As one participant stated,

"Since senior high school until now, I have personally followed the BPSU format because it is easier to understand." (P14)

Standardised instruction ensures that learners are not confused by varying formats, allowing them to focus on content rather than formatting differences. However, for this level of instruction to be effective and sustainable, educators must be consistent and committed to providing clear, structured, and continuous support.

3.1.1.2 Instruction Until Specific Research Stages

Some learners reported receiving formal instruction only up to specific stages of their research writing. This means that while they were guided in earlier parts, they may have lacked support in finalising their papers. For example, one participant shared,

"Until Chapter 5 and appendices, I did not notice any issues." (P9)

Another confirmed receiving guidance throughout the writing process, stating,

"I received formal instructions until the last chapter." (P8)

Others highlighted that instruction was limited to a particular academic period, such as one participant who noted,

"We received formal instruction until the second semester of our third year." (P12)

Another participant added,

"I did not notice any inconsistencies because their only goal was to help us improve and refine our research." (P13)

While such instruction provides a solid foundation, it may not be enough for learners who need further guidance in revising and refining their work. Instructors should consider extending support beyond structured coursework to address final formatting, revisions, and defense preparation difficulties.

3.1.1.3 Initial Instruction Only

Some learners reported that research formatting was taught early in the research process but was not continuously reinforced. This approach may leave learners struggling when they reach more complex formatting requirements later in their research. One participant shared,

"During our Educational Research and Language Research courses, we were taught the correct research formatting before we were grouped and started our research." (P1)

The lack of continuous reinforcement in teaching research formatting, as reported by some learners, contrasts with constructivist learning principles that emphasise ongoing engagement and iterative reinforcement for deeper understanding and mastery, including the formation of collaborative groups to enhance learning through social interaction.

However, some learners felt that instruction ended too soon, leaving them to figure out the rest independently. As one participant put it,

"Only at the beginning." (P11)

While early instruction is crucial, it is not sufficient to ensure consistent application of formatting rules throughout the research process. This suggests a need for ongoing reinforcement and application-based learning, where learners actively practice formatting as they progress in their research rather than relying solely on initial lessons.

3.1.1.4 Inconsistent Instruction

A major challenge identified by learners was the lack of consistency in research formatting instruction. Some participants noted that different instructors taught different formatting styles, leading to confusion. One participant expressed frustration:

"For the past three years at BPSU-BC, I have had many research teachers, but they all have different formats when it comes to writing, structuring the parts, and, most importantly, the overall structure." (P3)

Another issue was that formatting varied depending on whether the research was qualitative or quantitative. One participant observed, *"If the research is qualitative, the format changes significantly compared to quantitative research." (P5)* This suggests that while formatting differences may be necessary for different methodologies, clearer

guidance is needed to ensure learners understand these variations and apply them correctly.

Additionally, some participants noted that research formatting has evolved, becoming more detailed and structured. One participant explained,

"Margins, what should be in bold, what should be in tables, etc. In terms of differences, I guess it was more flexible in the past. Before formatting, it was mainly focused on font, font size, and indentation, but now it is more comprehensive." (P15)

While more detailed formatting guidelines can help standardise research papers, learners need clear explanations and proper support to adapt to these evolving standards.

3.1.2 Access to Resources for Research Formatting

Figure 4 and Table 2 present the themes on the formal instruction in research formatting.

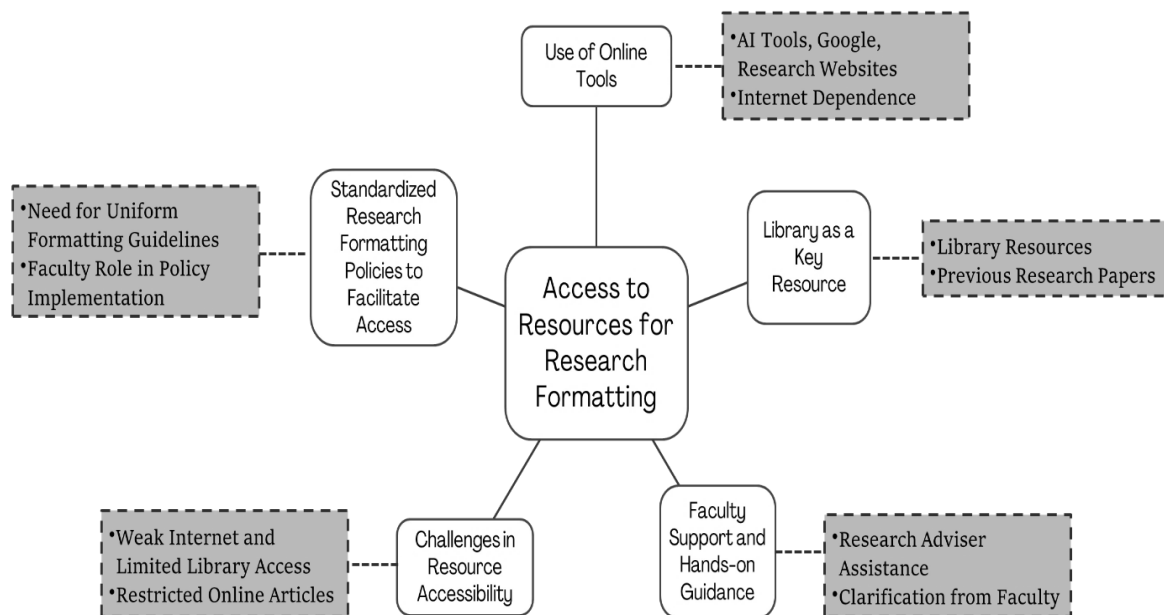


Figure 4. Diagrammatic Illustration of the Access to Resources for Research Formatting

Table 2 - Thematic Analysis on Access to Resources for Research Formatting

Themes	Categories	Concepts	Participant Key Responses
Use of Online Tools	AI Tools, Google, Research Websites	Online platforms provide quick access to research formatting guidelines	"Mostly po mas nakakatulong ang online websites dahil malawak po ito at dapat po laging may WiFi para po mabilis makalap mga info. Malaking tulong po ang AI, Google at iba pa pong websites sa paggawa ng research." (P6)
	Internet Dependence	Availability of research formatting resources depends	"Google is good in providing information I need. However, not everything is accessible." (P7)

Library as a Key Resource	Library Resources	on stable internet access The university library provides valuable materials for research formatting	"Napakalaking tulong po ng Campus Library sa research namin dahil totoong timely at mahuhusay ang mga nagdaang researchers at research na matatagpuan po doon." (P1)
	Previous Research Papers	Access to past research papers helps guide current learners in formatting	"Library po, at mga thesis ng previous batches. More on online/digital copy talaga kami." (P15)
Faculty Support and Hands-on Guidance	Research Adviser Assistance	Professors provide direct support in research formatting	"Nagagabayan kami ng maayos ng aming guro patungkol sa pagformat at kahit na malaya naming nagagamit ang internet para magsearch, mas mainam na ang actual na paggabay at hands-on na paggabay sa amin upang kami'y magkapare-pareho sa pagformat, be it in an online or face-to-face setting." (P10)
	Clarification from Faculty	Learners prefer direct explanations from faculty over online resources	"Yes po, dahil hindi lahat ng clarification ay kayang sagutin online kaya mahalaga po ang availability ng faculty support sa paglilinaw ng mga students tungkol sa standardised policy for research formatting." (P1)
Challenges in Resource Accessibility	Weak Internet and Limited Library Access	Difficulty accessing online and library resources due to connectivity issues	"It's very challenging to search online because the phone signals in campus and the free WiFi access are both weak." (P3)
	Restricted Online Articles	Some essential research materials require payment for access	"Opo, sa internet o makabagong pamamaraan po ng pagkalap ng impormasyon ay hindi po lahat ay basta mo lamang makukuha ang kasagutan dahil ang iba ay kailangan na may bayad upang makuha mo ang impormasyon na iyong ninanais." (P5)
Standardised Research Formatting Policies to Facilitate Access	Need for Uniform Formatting Guidelines	Learners want standardised formatting policies to avoid inconsistencies	"Opo. Maging standard na po sana ang format. Wala na sanang iba pang format." (P15)
	Faculty Role in Policy	Professors should provide structured	"Naniniwala ako. Ito ang pinakakailangan ng lahat ng

Implementa tion	formatting guidelines to improve research quality	<i>estudyante, ang suporta ng mga guro sa pagbuo ng pananaliksik hanggang sa matapos." (P4)</i>
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The following are the key themes incurred from the interview transcripts of the participants on their access to resources for research formatting:

3.1.2.1 Use of Online Tools.

This theme highlights the critical role of digital platforms such as AI tools, Google, and research websites in providing quick and extensive access to research formatting guidelines. Participants emphasised the convenience of these tools, especially when reliable internet access is available. Participant P6 noted,

"Online websites are mostly helpful because they are extensive, and you should always have WiFi to quickly gather information. AI, Google, and other websites are a great help in conducting research."

However, this convenience comes with a significant dependence on internet connectivity. Participant P7 pointed out,

"Google is good at providing the information I need. However, not everything is accessible."

This indicates that not all necessary information is readily available online. This underscores the need for robust internet infrastructure and highlights the limitations of relying solely on online resources.

3.1.2.2 Library as a Key Resource

This theme emphasises the enduring value of university libraries in supporting research formatting. Libraries offer a wealth of timely and high-quality materials, including previous research papers, which are invaluable guides for current learners. Participant P1 highlighted,

"The Campus Library is a great help in our research because the previous researchers and research found there are truly timely and excellent."

Participant P15 added,

"We rely on the library and theses from previous batches. We prefer online/digital copies."

This underscores the importance of maintaining and utilising library resources, mainly when online access may be limited or unreliable. Libraries provide a stable and credible source of information that can complement and verify online findings.

3.1.2.3 Faculty Support and Hands-on Guidance.

This theme highlights the faculty's crucial role in providing direct assistance and clarification for research formatting. Learners often prefer hands-on guidance from faculty over online resources, as it ensures consistency and addresses specific queries that online platforms may not cover. Participant P10 stated,

"Our teacher guides us well in formatting, and even though we use the internet to search, actual hands-on guidance is better to ensure consistency in formatting, whether online or face-to-face."

Participant P1 noted,

"Yes, because not all clarifications can be answered online, so the availability of faculty support is important for clarifying standardised policy for research formatting."

Faculty support provides a personalised and interactive learning experience that can significantly improve research outcomes.

3.1.2.4 Challenges in Resource Accessibility.

This theme reveals learners' significant obstacles in accessing online and library resources. Weak internet connectivity and limited library access hinder the research process, making it difficult to gather necessary information. Participant P3 mentioned,

"It's very challenging to search online because the phone signals and free WiFi access are both weak."

Additionally, some essential research materials are restricted behind paywalls, further complicating access. Participant P5 noted,

"Not all information can be obtained for free; some require payment to access the desired information."

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes investing in better internet connectivity, expanding library resources, and advocating for open-access publishing.

3.1.2.5 Standardised Research Formatting Policies to Facilitate Access

This theme highlights the learners' desire for uniform formatting guidelines to avoid inconsistencies and improve research quality. Participants emphasised the importance of faculty involvement in implementing these policies to provide structured guidance throughout the research process. Participant P15 mentioned,

"Yes, there should be a standard format. No other formats should be used."

Participant P4 stated,

"I believe this is what all students need—support from teachers in building research until completion."

Standardised policies can reduce confusion, promote efficiency, and ensure that research outputs meet high-quality standards.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1 Extent of Formal Instruction on Research Formatting

The thematic analysis of formal instruction in research formatting reveals strengths and gaps in the learning experience. Complete and continuous instruction benefits learners by providing structured guidance and clarity, while limited instruction at certain stages may leave learners struggling with later formatting. Early instruction is helpful but insufficient without reinforcement, and inconsistencies in teaching different formatting styles create confusion and frustration.

Turning to the analysis of explicit instruction around research formatting suggests a spectrum of learner experiences, stressing the importance of consistent and ongoing support to research education. Sustained and planned support throughout the research process has a profound impact on shaping the learner's understanding of research formatting strategies and using them effectively, thereby alleviating the burden placed on the learner and/or positively impacting the quality of work produced. When the instruction is limited to particular stages or provided to learners only at the beginning

of the process, it is more likely that the learners will experience difficulties in later stages, thus necessitating ongoing reinforcement or a holistic approach to support. Variations in formats and weaknesses in the formatting instruction were attributable to instructor styles, as well as formats that required both qualitative and quantitative differences, added additional complexity to the learning process, and highlighted the extent to which the significance of instruction using standard guidelines with clear communication is critical as part of the overall learning process. In general, the support for research formatting instruction is based on the continuity, clarity, and consistency of the support provided, ensuring that post-secondary environments take into account continuity, clarity, and consistency in training and supporting learners through the research process.

The interview transcripts and the literature emphasise the importance of rigorous and consistent instruction in research formatting to ensure credibility and effectiveness. The results of the study stress the critical need for an ongoing, consistent instruction program that is comprehensive (an example being basic research formatting) to provide cohesion to aspects that are highlighted in the literature. Disparate instructions, as Javed (2019) indicated in their study, cause students to become lost. This is also true regardless of standard formats and feedback, and indexing by Manchishi et al. (2015). Good sources of information and faculty instructions are required. Budjalemba and Listyani (2020) indicated that these are necessary to help with language barriers and structural issues in research processes. Nowell et al. (2017) also saw the need for standardised formatting policies to support their robust and thorough methodology for evaluating research trustworthiness and addressing issues such as authorship identification, plagiarism, and citation accuracy (Abdullah, 2023; Rezeki, 2018).

3.2.2 Access to Resources for Research Formatting

Themes around resource access for formatting research cover a lot of essential themes that inform the research experience for learners. Digital tools, including AI tools such as Google and research websites, are great for accessing research formatting guidelines quickly, but are not supportive if there is no internet service. The library is also a vital resource. There are deep and reliable resources included, allowing access to relevant past research papers. If this is done well, it is a guide for the current learner. Faculty support is also critical because when it is hands-on, there is a level of consistency, and they are also available to address more specific questions that are not covered on the relevant website or text. Accessing resources for their research was a real topic of a lot of discussion, and challenges such as weak internet signals, limited access to libraries, and paywalled articles. Student-researchers from various colleges of the university (e.g., College of Business and Accountancy, College of Education, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences) also mentioned their interest in all formatting research papers being standardised by policy, include distance education learners to help not have inconsistencies and quality of research papers, point to a structured format to follow, and a means for them to refer back to faculty to serve as a guide through the research process, since their research papers forms basing on thumbnail formats. The issues of access to resources and standardizing a format for formatting research can not only provide a learner with a better research experience. Still, they can also serve to deliver better outcomes for their research.

The interview transcripts and literature stress the need to create meaningful uses for online tools and to fully support research formatting and academic effectiveness. This study's findings illustrate the importance of reliable resources, faculty support, and standard policies for addressing research formatting issues. Of course, this is especially salient in the myriad of academic environments, each with its own set of challenges, in

which all parties are addressing and supporting students' research quality and efficiency. Since the results align with the current literature, and focus on reliable access to resources and/or academic or faculty-endorsed support, Rafiq et al. (2024) stated that digital tools exhibited increased student engagement and improved student performance among those who participated in their research. However, writing research papers remains a key challenge because of a lack of training in research skills, limited knowledge of the writing process, uncertainty about available resources, and unclear methodology (Altikriti, 2022). In addition to these challenges, Al-Qaseri (2016) identified weaknesses with being an undergraduate student, such as diminished access to resources and negative attitudes towards research. Moreover, Ngoc and Ngoc (2021) also described other research-related challenges, including topics, locating materials, interpreting research findings, and the applicability of citations (if any exist) and data analysis tools.

4. Conclusions

Varying levels of formal instruction on research formatting impact learners' abilities to manage and complete their research. This inconsistency can lead to differences in how well learners can access their research project, resulting in differences in efficiency and quality. Complete and continuous instruction is advantageous, while irregular guidance makes learning more difficult. Effective research formatting means having reliable access to resources, the advantage of faculty guidance, and the necessity for standardisation on policies that can assist with the practicalities of research formatting.

Reliable access to resources, faculty guidance, and standardisation policies for how to assist with research formatting issues is a prerequisite for addressing research formatting dilemmas, especially in diverse academic settings where consistent support could have a significant impact on enhancing research quality and efficiency.

The research findings show that different levels of formal instruction on research formatting have a direct impact on how learners manage and complete their research, which affects efficiency and quality. Continuous and thorough instructional practice will be advantageous; disjointed or inconsistent instruction may further hinder the learning process. To effectively execute research formatting, having reliable resources or guidance from faculty, and consistent institutional policies is best practice. Therefore, the ramified research guidelines are needed to utilise these results as a starting point for the University to provide continuous and thorough instructional opportunities regarding research formatting guidelines throughout the research process. Provisions for online tools, library materials, and faculty/student support systems, along with standardised and consistent institutional policies, should be used to support promising research formatting behaviors, and ongoing instructional support for students to obtain successful research practice.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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