

Preliminary study: Investigating the ability of first year students to write effective essays at the University of Papua New Guinea

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Abstract: This paper attempts to firstly discuss why first year students attending University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) are continuously committing errors in their Communication and Life Skills essays and secondly to identify the most common types of written errors these students are committing repeatedly so that practical suggestions can be made to rectify the problem. This preliminary study used error analysis of 12 first year students' essays as a sample, and we ranked and categorized their errors into four major categories: Category I, Word-level; Category II, Referencing; Category III, Sentence-level; and Category IV, Effective Principles of Writing. We discovered that the top four most common errors students are committing repeatedly are (1) Punctuation, especially comma splice; (2) In-text referencing, specifically with direct quotations; (3) Run on sentence – combining two sentences into one very long sentence; and (4) Lack of applying the principles of Revision and Support. We assume that many of these errors occur because of students' poor attitude, carelessness, ignorance, lack of time management, extensive reading, and research skills. However, we strongly believe that all of these errors can be minimized or otherwise fully remedied if CLS staff or UPNG come up with a clear Writing Guideline or Style Guide, and an Error Remedial Workbook. We concluded that the first year students at UPNG are lacking the ability to write effective essays at university level and this confirmed the two possible constraints that guided this study: One, first year students are not applying the Principles of Effective Writing; and two, they are not following the Writing Process. The questions we are now asking are: (1) Why are the first year students at UPNG committing these errors repeatedly?; (2) Whose fault is it? Is it the lecturers and tutors? Or is it the students themselves? Or is it the education system?; and (3) How can UPNG rectify this problem? To help us answer these questions, a thorough empirical research is needed, which we plan to carry out next year (2011) in semester 1 and we plan to apply text analysis.