

# Importance of academic literacy in the education of nursing students

Importancia de la lectoescritura académica en la formación de estudiantes de enfermería

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## Abstract

**Objective:** to interpret the experiences related to the acquisition of academic literacy competencies of nursing students in their final year at two public universities in Colombia and Ecuador. **Methodology:** this study employed an interpretive, qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach, with a cross-sectional design. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews until data saturation was achieved. The sample was intentionally selected. **Results:** the development of academic literacy competencies in nursing students occurs autonomously, through imitation, or by following the guidance provided by teachers. The greatest difficulties arise at the beginning of their studies due to a lack of understanding of disciplinary terminology, as well as academic writing without the use of colloquial language, leading to various feelings and experiences depending on the degree of acquisition of either generic competencies or those specific to nursing. **Conclusion:** Academic literacy is one of the first competencies to be developed in nursing students, with significant learning required to complete their degree without major difficulties when preparing their thesis work. It is important to revisit the students' voices based on their experiences, as it allows for the identification of suitable strategies to improve the process of acquiring academic literacy competencies.

**Keywords:** literacy, higher education, nursing education, nursing students, competency-based education

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** interpretar las experiencias relacionadas con la adquisición de competencias en lectoescritura académica de estudiantes de la carrera de enfermería que cursan el último año en dos universidades públicas de Colombia y Ecuador. **Metodología:** estudio con enfoque interpretativo, cualitativo, de tipo fenomenológico hermenéutico, de corte transversal. La recolección de datos fue mediante entrevista semiestructurada hasta la saturación de datos. La muestra fue seleccionada de forma intencional. **Resultados:** el desarrollo de competencias en lectoescritura académica de estudiantes en enfermería se realiza de forma autónoma, por imitación o tomando como guía lo enseñado por el docente. Las mayores dificultades se presentan a inicios de la carrera al no comprender la terminología disciplinar, así como la escritura académica sin usar el lenguaje coloquial, por lo que experimentan distintos sentimientos y experiencias según el grado de adquisición de competencias genéricas o de las específicas de enfermería. **Conclusión:** la lectoescritura académica es una de las primeras competencias por desarrollar en los estudiantes de enfermería, con un aprendizaje significativo para poder culminar sus estudios de grado sin mayores dificultades en el momento de elaborar sus trabajos de titulación. Es importante retomar las voces de los estudiantes a partir de sus vivencias, ya que permite buscar estrategias adecuadas para mejorar el proceso en la adquisición de competencias en lectoescritura académica.

**Palabras claves:** alfabetización; educación superior; educación en enfermería; estudiantes de enfermería; educación basada en competencias.

Academic literacy is a process that combines reading and writing skills, requiring students to explore and engage in discursive culture. In the realm of Higher Education

(HE), it's crucial for students to possess competencies in text production and analysis specific to their discipline<sup>1</sup>. A university student with optimal academic literacy competencies can communicate efficiently and assertively in a community where discourse is academic. This involves reading and evaluating information from a critical perspective, thus being capable of presenting, discussing, and creating knowledge through oral and written expression<sup>2</sup>.

The set of conventions, specificities, and discursive practices unique to each discipline distinguishes them from others, giving them the character of generic competencies in literacy and specific ones in the disciplinary field they belong to<sup>3</sup>. Hence, disciplines are understood as a rhetorical, conceptual, and social discursive space where the essence of knowledge is intrinsically linked to situated learning of literacy teaching. This promotes the appropriation of disciplinary contents and knowledge of the conventions of said profession<sup>1-4</sup>. In this case,

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the confluence is Nursing, a career of public and international interest, taught in various HE institutions with undergraduate and postgraduate training<sup>5</sup>. The nursing professional learns to perform in different roles ranging from education to research<sup>6</sup>, where "oral and written communication ability"<sup>7</sup> is necessary.

During nursing training, teaching-learning processes are complex, and academic literacy is no exception. Reading academic texts presents a constant challenge in terms of terms, structure, function, and content; thus, it could be assumed that writing is also seen as a challenge. If reading is complex, so is writing. This process would be approached from the student's experience of appropriating new knowledge and how they relate it to their prior knowledge, resulting in significant learning<sup>8</sup>.

Review of previous studies indicates that the teaching-learning process of academic literacy in Higher Education students is a relevant and current topic, with research revealing the need and importance of strengthening academic literacy teaching<sup>9-12</sup>. This aligns with the learning needs of nursing professionals who apply different pedagogical approaches with their discursive specificities of the profession, combined with the development of research competencies<sup>13-16</sup>.

Currently, the pedagogical approach should be student-centered and promote self-regulated learning<sup>17</sup> so students can develop soft skills such as oral and written communication ability; abstraction, analysis, and synthesis ability; learning capacity; skills to search, process, and analyze information from diverse sources, in addition to specific nursing competencies<sup>18</sup>.

This research was conducted considering the experiences of nursing students at two public Higher Education institutions with free admission and a competency-based educational approach: the University of Guayaquil in Ecuador and the University of Cundinamarca in Colombia.

The problem situation arises from a question generated from the reality of the researchers, who, as graduates and/or teachers of the nursing career, have identified a low interest in academic text writing within the program, especially regarding the development of literacy competencies.

Therefore, this research aims to interpret the experiences related to the acquisition of academic literacy competencies of nursing students in their final year at two public universities in Colombia and Ecuador.

The nursing program at the University of Cundinamarca includes the subject Communication I in the first semester, which aims to identify guidelines for the elaboration and use of general rules for presenting academic written works. However, issues regarding student interest and motivation in literacy still emerge.

Meanwhile, the nursing career at the University of Guayaquil offers subjects dedicated to developing disciplinary literacy competencies. Additionally, to qualify for a bachelor's degree in nursing, the student must conduct academic research condensed into a thesis, requiring soft literacy skills.

## Materials and methods

For the current study, an interpretive approach was employed, utilizing a qualitative research method of the phenomenological hermeneutic type. This was based on the concepts of the hermeneutic circle, pre-understanding, understanding, and interpretation, drawn from the literature of Martin Heidegger as a methodological reference<sup>19</sup>. As for the key informants of the study, it consisted of four nursing students chosen as representatives of their peers who decided to participate voluntarily, after signing informed consent. These students were in the final year of the Bachelor of Nursing program, two from the University of Cundinamarca in Colombia and two from the University of Guayaquil in Ecuador.

Data collection was conducted through phenomenological interviews with open-ended questions<sup>20</sup>. The instrument was a semi-structured guide with 4 guiding questions and the possibility of clarifying questions that guided the research with the aim of preventing deviation from the proposed objective and its methodological design<sup>19-20</sup>. The questions were: What feelings have you experienced during your professional training as a result of different reading or writing activities for academic and scientific papers in your nursing career? Do you believe yourself capable of understanding and writing academic and scientific nursing texts? What motivates or demotivates you to read or write about topics related to your career? What facilitates learning in these topics?

The interviews were conducted via Zoom, after coordinating the day and time according to the informants' availability. They lasted approximately 60 minutes and were carried out in the last academic period of 2021. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim for discourse analysis, allowing the inductive analysis process through line-by-line reading of each interview, leading to the identification of codes, subcategories, and emerging categories. The data collected in this manner represent symbolic information. These were conducted until data saturation, including methodological rigor criteria, credibility, confirmability, meaning in context, recurrent patterns, and transferability.

The interviews were coded to safeguard the identity and comply with ethical aspects. This research adheres to the Helsinki international norms on human research, respecting human autonomy and dignity, without causing mental or physical harm<sup>21</sup>.

## Results

Regarding the key informants, one male and three females, two of Colombian nationality and two Ecuadorians, with an average age between 20 and 23 years, all in the last year of the Nursing Bachelor's degree from public universities: two from Cundinamarca (Colombia) and two from Guayaquil (Ecuador). All four had experience in hospital and community institutions as interns.

From the discourse analysis, four general categories

emerged, developed by the researchers and identified through data of different types: verbal and non-verbal language as well as observable behaviors. Thus, difficulties were observed, each categorized with their respective subcategories and codes. The category with the highest representation was Soft Skills in Nursing for Reading and Writing, which contained 4 subcategories. Table 1 condenses the complete categorization:

#### Feelings and Experiences from Academic Reading and Writing

The process of reading and writing for nursing students entails a range of feelings, determined by personal trajectory. These can be positive or negative, vary according to each experience, and are conditioned by extrinsic and intrinsic

factors such as contexts, styles, support, and various contingencies related to reading and writing. These range from positive feelings like well-being, confidence, hope, and optimism to negative ones like exhaustion, confusion, frustration, worry, fear, and powerlessness.

Some student statements were:

*[...attending the first and second semester generated worry for me, because we have a culture shock, in addition to the academic shock that challenges us to read and write differently...]* (EC)

*[...in the first semester I felt lost, because there were many topics, many new things, but since I liked what I was reading it didn't feel so overwhelming, but it was difficult...]* (EE).

*[...at the beginning it was a bit tedious, they left many texts*

Table 1. Categorization of the literacy experiences of nursing students.

Categories	Subcategories	Codes
<b>Feelings and experiences from academic literacy.</b>	<b>Own experience</b>	<b>Personal experience - Personal interpretation</b> <b>Active listening skills - Adaptation to university life - Ability to learn</b>
	<b>Sentiments</b>	<b>Impotence - Welfare - Exhaustion - Confusion - Frustration - Worry - Fear - Hope - Optimism - Confidence</b>
	<b>Oral and written communication skills</b>	<b>Learning opportunity - Oral communication - Guided learning - Assertive communication - Academic reading - Academic literacy - Academic writing - Difficulty in written communication - Dependence on writing - Difficulty recognizing plagiarism - Difficulty in differentiating citation and referencing rules</b>
	<b>Ability to learn</b>	<b>Critical thinking - Identification of training needs - Directed reading - Responsiveness - Meaningful learning Metacognition</b>
<b>Soft nursing competencies in literacy.</b>	<b>Habilidades para buscar, procesar y analizar información procedente de fuentes diversas</b>	<b>Information processing - Critical analysis - Approach to reading - Internal and external motivation - Reading difficulty - Complex academic texts - Keyword technique - Academic search - ICTs - Scientific database</b>
	<b>Ability of abstraction, analysis and synthesis.</b>	<b>Content assimilation and appropriation - Reading interpretation - Content differentiation - Neutrality - Objectivity - Content selection - Comprehension technique - Self-regulated learning</b>
	<b>Empowerment of the profession</b>	<b>Professional identity - Interdisciplinary research - Nursing roles - Nursing research role</b> <b>Professional autonomy - Informed professional responsibility - Non-malfeasance</b>
<b>Specific nursing competencies</b>	<b>Feelings about handling scientific terminology</b>	<b>Ethics - Bioethics</b> <b>Frustration - Impotence - Fear</b> <b>Shame - Confusion</b>
<b>Aspects to improve the literacy experience</b>	<b>University support</b>	<b>Consulting</b> <b>Institutional Activities</b> <b>Teacher support and mentoring</b>

*to read in very little time, it was exhausting...]" (EE).*

*"...gradually, I'm finding meaning in what I read and so I can write better, I feel more capable...]" (EC).*

The feelings generated by the students from the reading and writing process, in their training, could be conditioning factors for their progress or slowdown in the university academic trajectory. In turn, their own experience converges since each student has personal experiences, an adaptation to university life, and different learning capabilities. Hence, the importance of revealing their experiences, lives, and feelings.

Thus, the experiences they develop, whether in the university classroom or in the institutions where they conduct their pre-professional practices related to reading and writing, allow the emergence of each personal interpretation, as well as the capacity for active listening, invoking the soft skills of nursing.

### Soft Skills in Nursing for Reading and Writing

Soft skills in nursing are necessary for the comprehensive training of future professionals to achieve competitive job insertion in all its dimensions and facilitate teamwork<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, academic reading and writing are taught explicitly in some universities from the first year of training. However, in Latin America, there might be institutions that require strengthening these competencies in students since mastery of academic reading and writing is indispensable.

The ability for oral and written communication plays an important role for nursing professionals, as effective communication facilitates comprehensive care and its follow-up<sup>23</sup>. Through this, nursing students solidify their training process starting from oral and written communication, due to the presence of guided learning.

In the process of academic literacy, nursing students start with the basic concepts of academic reading and writing. This results in encountering difficulties in the process. They reveal a heavy reliance on tutoring for academic writing, especially of a scientific type, in addition to difficulties in written communication and in recognizing authorship, often resulting in plagiarism. However, sometimes they can overcome these difficulties, but when using a citation standard, they have problems differentiating and identifying its basic elements.

Moreover, each student's learning capacity allows them to autonomously develop critical thinking, identify their formative and directed reading needs. Students with a positive receptivity to learning achieve significant learning and develop an optimal metacognitive process. In this sense, students are acquiring skills in the process of academic reading and writing at the university level.

Regarding the abilities to search, process, and analyze information from diverse sources, nursing students were found to have competencies for information processing, critical analysis of texts related to the profession, and an approach to reading to favor comprehension. However, despite having extrinsic and intrinsic motivation during their training, the difficulty of reading complex academic texts is present. Consequently, to overcome this difficulty, they implement their own strategies and techniques such as

searching for texts by keywords, as well as academic inquiry using basic web search engines and scientific databases<sup>24-25</sup>.

In this sense, the new technologies and resources accessible to nursing students facilitate communicative and informational processes regarding the learning of academic reading and writing, benefiting from their massive use in all areas of higher education<sup>26</sup>.

Following an autonomous search by the students, it was found that the capacity for abstraction, analysis, and synthesis coexist during the reading and writing process. As a result, they achieve assimilation and appropriation of knowledge, interpretation of readings, differentiation of content, objectivity, neutrality, utilization of comprehension techniques, and self-regulated learning.

Comments from the students on this matter included:

*"...Sometimes I disagree with being assigned to search for information...]" (EC).*

*"...I search in Google Scholar and on the university platform's virtual library, and I like being sent to research because then I can draw my own conclusions, open a debate with the teacher. Look, I found this; I researched this; I want to know if I'm on the right path, the correct way in working on x topic x research...]" (EE).*

*"...What I do like a lot is to research, any word that doesn't fit intrigues me, I quickly search on Google friend to remove ignorance, so next time I am asked, I already know what it is...]" (EC).*

*"...Finding information with scientific foundations was somewhat confusing at the beginning, it was quite complicated, there are many spam contents on the internet that are not useful or don't have real validity...]" (EE).*

### Specific Nursing Competencies

Specific nursing competencies encourage the acquisition of skills for caring for the individual, family, and community. These competencies enable empowerment in different learning spaces and in the future workplace, as well as facilitate the formation of a professional identity that contributes to the professionalization of nursing. Nursing, as a humanistic science<sup>27</sup>, bases its actions on qualities of vocation and service to provide care based on the vulnerability of the other, making it essential to possess competencies that demonstrate ethics, values, and moral commitment, qualities that are part of professional excellence.

One of the fundamental functions of nursing is disciplinary research in various fields of action, supporting care, academic, scientific, and administrative activities with autonomy and responsibility, generating a positive self-perception of the reading and writing process involved in researching<sup>28</sup>. Furthermore, researching allows acting always within the framework of respect for bioethical principles, such as non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and beneficence, supported by several authors and defined in nursing ethics codes<sup>29</sup>. Consequently, the complexity of providing care, comprising a series of procedures and techniques, can be enriched with methodically planned and organized research that supports

the performance of actions with caution for patient safety.

In professional practice, the socioemotional competencies of the nursing professional come into play, as they are necessary for performing procedures with logical reasoning, critical thinking<sup>30</sup>, ethical support, humanization, and specific knowledge, in order to foster greater problem-solving capacity for the benefit of those being cared for and those who provide care<sup>31</sup>. These competencies are also necessary for teamwork and a good collaborative environment. Therefore, it is crucial for nursing educators to provide optimal scaffolding to their students to understand and clearly differentiate the bioethical duties of nursing regarding patient safety.

Moreover, during the reading and writing processes and even when fulfilling their functions in curricular practices, students experience certain feelings due to handling scientific terminology, some negative such as frustration, helplessness, fear, shame, and even confusion. These arise according to their own learning experiences, considering that scientific terminology in health sciences allows for the expression of complex and precise concepts about user care. Therefore, the use of these terms evokes different emotions that impact the future nursing professional, but they also recognize the need to use them to provide interventions with professional foundations<sup>32</sup>. This expressed notion implies that higher education institutions could devise strategies to improve the reading and writing experience. Additionally, the tools that nursing students use in their training and during the handling of scientific terminologies will serve to materialize future improvement proposals to provide a humanistic foundation for the practice.

These were some statements:

*[...Medical nursing terms... are still very complicated for me, now at this time when I'm a step away from being a professional...]" (EC).*

*[...Truthfully, it is quite shocking to learn that nursing is not just about administering an injection, but knowing why, for what, when, how, where - that technical concept, that specific concept that forms everything to be a comprehensive nurse...]" (EC).*

*[...Many difficulties, normally one knows Spanish, but not academic Spanish, because nursing lends itself to that very complicated and very broad specific medical vocabulary...]" (Student from EE).*

### Aspects to Improve the Reading and Writing Experience

Aspects to improve the reading and writing experience for nursing students include university support with institutional activities of advising, support, and teacher mentorship. Additionally, leveling of generic competencies from the middle level to higher education level is necessary, to be gradual, as students report that it represents a drastic change for which they do not feel prepared.

Some ideas expressed by students:

*[...The hourly intensity one is accustomed to from secondary school is very different, as it's much softer. Coming here, you*

*find an hourly intensity that absorbs your life...]" (EE).*

*[...I don't want to overpraise, but the research guide teacher was always there, advising me on the doubts I had, her patience stood out, as I asked many questions...]" (EC).*

*[...I insist that the University must provide good support. There are very committed research teachers, and they are the ones who make you see that scientific writing is beautiful, and so one works with love...]" (EE).*

*[...We need more support from the teachers because high school doesn't prepare us for the real university, which is so hard, so difficult...]" (EC).*

*[...The research guide teacher was always there, advising me on the doubts I had, I highlight her patience since I have many questions...]" (EE).*

It is necessary to consider the educational journey that nursing students have had, which is generally heterogeneous; each one has experienced different formative and cultural situations. Therefore, it is essential to gradually and appropriately level the future nursing professional, in such a way that their growth is constant. This support must be explicit and provided from the beginning of their training and not wait until the graduation requirements such as final integrative projects, theses, or dissertations.

### Discussion

The nursing students' experience during academic literacy is valid for finding a significant interpretation of the investigated problem<sup>24</sup> and reinforcing higher education contexts in nursing based on scientific evidence contextualized to each region, as demonstrated by the present findings.

The process of reading and writing in nursing students leads to various feelings arising from their experiences. According to the revealed codes, these can be impotence, exhaustion, confusion, frustration, worry, fear, hope, optimism, well-being, or confidence. Consequently, feelings produce profound learning when these are considered positive<sup>25</sup>. In contrast, experiences that generate negative feelings create a distancing from the learning situation, leading to difficulties in the process of academic scientific writing<sup>33</sup>.

On the other hand, the current focus of higher education is competency-based<sup>7</sup>, and the universities involved in this study employ this approach for nursing education<sup>26</sup>. Soft skills generate cross-disciplinary knowledge, while specific competencies in nursing allow for the formation of highly skilled professionals with disciplinary expertise<sup>27</sup>. Both aim to provide nursing students with comprehensive training skills to produce professionals suitable for the context in which they will work.

Among the specific competencies in nursing is the indispensable and inseparable role of research from the profession<sup>28</sup>. For a research culture to exist, mastery of scientific terminologies specific to health is required, consistent with findings from this study.

Soft skills are "those capacities, dispositions, or abilities necessary for effective task execution that make a difference

in others when using a pleasant tone or producing a pleasant experience.<sup>29</sup> For this research, some related to literacy were considered, reflected in the subcategories: oral and written communication ability; ability to learn; skills to search, process, and analyze information from various sources; abstraction capability; analysis, and synthesis. Thus, competency-based scientific notions are strategies that favor meaningful learning<sup>30</sup> for one's development in professional and personal life.<sup>13</sup>

However, university students are recognized to have difficulties in writing, understanding, and reading academic texts<sup>31</sup>, evidenced in this study by the codes for difficulty in written communication, dependency on writing, and difficulty in reading complex academic texts. Consequently, the process of reading and writing could be accompanied by the social actors of the university institution, teachers, students, and even the university itself<sup>1-34</sup>.

In this sense, in line with the category aspects to improve the experience in literacy, to achieve an appropriate process of metacognition, analysis, and appropriation of content, it is necessary that teaching and learning processes be guided by teachers. This role is essential for training in higher education<sup>28</sup>, evidenced in many of the students' statements and available scientific evidence<sup>9,11,14,17,20</sup>. However, students must own the competency to learn to learn, so as not to create dependence on the tutor.

Furthermore, educational institutions at different levels have their responsibilities in the formation of basic literacy competencies. Secondary education plays a role, as its graduates spend between 5 to 7 years in training, which could be considered sufficient time to develop these competencies, being the practice of reading foreign to youngsters<sup>31</sup>. However, there is no significant difference in the experiences of literacy between both universities despite having different contexts and curricular plans.

Universities have a fundamental role in the teaching-learning process, as they manage human talent, material, and financial resources<sup>32</sup>. At the same time, they coordinate inter-institutional efforts with the government and health institutions<sup>5</sup>. But with the findings of this research, there is a certain level of misalignment between teaching plans and obtained results or experiences in literacy learning expressed from the students' experiences according to the codes:

Exhaustion; Confusion; Frustration; Difficulty in written communication; Dependency on writing; Difficulty in recognizing authorship; Difficulty in differentiating citation and reference standards; Reading difficulty; Frustration-Impotence; Fear; Shame.

Final considerations: Interpreting experiences related to the acquisition of competencies in academic literacy among nursing students in their final year from two public universities in Colombia and Ecuador allows obtaining essential scientific foundations to create, promote, and propose strategies to improve the development of soft skills in nursing. For instance, group meetings for reading and interpretation of texts linked to each curricular space, led by teachers or advanced students.

Additionally, considering the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations of nursing students themselves, experiences related to the academic writing process are varied, leading to different feelings that either favor or hinder the appropriation of this soft skill. Therefore, the experience of reading and writing at a higher level, specifically in the nursing discipline, can be perceived positively or negatively depending on each person's process of teaching and learning.

Considering the above, it is necessary that in the early years of health careers, students are guided in writing scientific academic texts, providing the essential elements for written production according to the demands of higher education. Likewise, teachers should encourage reading scientific academic texts specific to the training area. Every future nursing professional must acquire the necessary competencies to read, search, and analyze information based on critical thinking, giving meaning and response to what it means to link the act of caring in its different roles, whether clinical, educational, administrative, or research-oriented.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest

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