

# Consistent Use of Academic Writing Conventions among Post Graduate Students: A Case Study of Kisii University, Kenya

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Received June 15, 2019; Revised August 10, 2019; Accepted August 20, 2019

**Abstract** Citing sources in the body of your paper and providing a list of references as either footnotes or endnotes is a very important aspect of academic writing. It is essential to always acknowledge the source of any ideas, research findings, data, or quoted text that you have used in your paper as a defence against allegations of plagiarism. Equally important, the scholarly convention of citing sources allow readers to identify if students resources you used in writing your paper so they can independently verify and assess the quality of findings and conclusions based on your review of the literature. The study sought to establish if students use the ampersand and et al in relation to joining two or more cited source authors. The study employed a descriptive survey design to analyse how graduate students employ three conventions—and, ampersand sign and et al. Twenty-four Masters theses submitted to Kisii University for the award of degrees were analysed. The selected theses were from the faculties of business studies and education for the period 2015 and 2018. The study observed various incorrect in-text application of the ‘and, or ampersand’ conventions in crediting two source authors by graduate students in Kisii university. The most common incorrect in-text usage of the ampersand was when citing two source authors in the author prominent style and in parenthesis. The study observed that one, most documents analysed employed the et al., convention sparingly.

**Keywords:** *ampersand, et al, convention, academic, writing, thesis*

**Cite This Article:** Callen Nyamwange, “Consistent Use of Academic Writing Conventions among Post Graduate Students: A Case Study of Kisii University, Kenya.” *World Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2019): 120-125. doi: 10.12691/wjssh-5-3-1.

## 1. Background

In academic settings, the wider audience expect anyone communicating research ideas, concepts and theories to do so via written text and employing the academic genre. Unlike in informal discussions or emails to acquaintances, academic writing requires one to be concise and precise, literal and well structured [1]. It needs to follow a specific plan, resulting in highly structured documents [2] at all levels, regardless of whether the structure is made explicit using section labels or other visible cues or not. This practice shapes how writing is constructed within various disciplines, institutions, and interrelated systems; and, how it influences all aspects of social structure and life.

Although, different elements consisting the works may be structured variously, they all aim at convincing or persuading readers [3], in the body of the article, while reserving the conclusion section to the restatement of the main point so as not to leave readers confused about the research problem. Therefore, writers must do everything humanly possible to adhere to the rules and requirements set by the institution and the discipline. Un-fortunately,

many of these rules are not only strict, but often unstated [1]. Some of these rules have requirements that are demanding or even trivial; yet, poor organization, bad style, and bad grammar make it extremely difficult for one to communicate clearly any ideas they might be having in a professional manner. As a result, the implications are ominous and include limiting one’s academic and professional advancement, taking longer to complete a study programme, and wasting time, money as well as effort in the event one is discontinued. To avoid any likelihood of being misunderstood, writers must always be alive to the fact that the audience comes from diverse disciplines, backgrounds and persuasions, hence, clarity is paramount.

An important difference between academic and other writing genres is the use of citations and referencing [4] of published works – a pivotal tenet to academic writing. For example, scholars come to a conclusion about a phenomenon only after examining the position taken by prior scholars. Scholars are required to quote what earlier scholars said and how one’s findings differ or agree with the position taken by previous scholars. This goes a long way to demonstrate that the scholar made a background check, understood the concepts, and synthesized the issues

from varying perspectives into one's own writing. The importance scholars attach on citing other authors in academic writing is reflected in the elaborate referencing conventions developed within different disciplines, such as the Modern Language Association (MLA) formatting for the humanities or the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing system employed in psychology, education, and other social sciences [5].

One simple, yet very important convention, in academic writing is the correct formatting of sources by two or more authors. Although, this may look like a straight forward matter, in practice it is not. First, it depends on the location of the citation and the style employed. Usually, writers locate citation in the body of discussions (in-text) and provide further details on how to locate the cited sources at the end of the works (Reference list). In grammar the conjunction 'and' is used to connect two or more source authors. However, in academic writing, this takes three different operations—use of the term "and", the ampersand (&) – also known as the 27<sup>th</sup> letter of the alphabet, and 'et al.',—the short form for et alia, the Latin phrase for "and others." In fact, 'and' and the ampersand were adopted from the English and Latin systems [6].

In academic settings, the 'and' as well as the ampersand, are used as synonyms. However, et al. is used like the plural of the two. This technically means, et al., is used to connect more than two authors and never two authors. For the APA referencing system, the word 'and' is always used in-text to connect two authors but without parenthesis; and never in the reference list. However, the ampersand sign, when located in-text, it must always be in parenthesis unlike, when used in the reference list—never in parenthesis. When used in-text, et al., follows two traditions; first, for three and five authors, all of them must be cited initially and when required to cite them subsequently, then et al., is used. Second, et al., is employed in-text without initially citing the authors, on condition that there are six or more source authors. However, in the reference section, the writer must cite names of source authors unless they exceed seven. In case the source authors are more than, the writer can use et al., even at the reference list. All these conditions put together, tend to confuse even experienced writers. The objective for this study done in April, 2019 therefore, was to examine whether graduate students at Kisii University apply 'and', the ampersand sign, and 'et al.', consistently throughout their writings. The study also examined whether there are improvements in the usage of these simple yet significant conventions.

## 2. Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey design to analyse how graduate students employ three conventions—and, ampersand sign and et al. Twenty-four Masters theses submitted to Kisii University for the award of degrees were analysed. The selected theses were from the faculties of business studies and education for the period 2015 and 2018. The two faculties were chosen because both employ the APA referencing system for their academic discourse. The study employed two Phd students as enumerators to locate and count the total

number of times the word 'and, the ampersand and et al.', were used in relation to joining two or more cited source authors. This was done purposely, to expose, mentor and familiarise them on the usage of these conventions as well as determine whether the usage was improving with time. Each thesis was examined by each enumerator. After locating the particular convention, the enumerator was required to record whether it was correctly applied or not.

Three theses per year covering the period under study were sampled using the stratified sampling strategy meant to ensure that the sample included thesis from each faculty and for each year of study. In total, 24 theses were selected for examination. Each faculty contributed 50% of the selected theses. By employing a simple recording tool, the enumerators recorded the results of their independent finding which were submitted to the research assistant (a Lecturer at Kisii University). Where, the two reports differed, the research assistant re-examine the thesis in question and made the final decision. Analysis of the data was done via simple percentages applied to determine whether or not there was improvement in the usage of conventions.

Prior to the start of the exercise, enumerators and the research assist attended a two-days intensive training on how to locate the conventions and use the recording tool. The training dealt with rules governing usage of the conventions, what to consider in deciding incidences of right or wrong usage of the conventions; how to record the usage of conventions and how to record missing connections. It was facilitated by the authors. The data was sorted according to faculties and percentages were calculated for the in-text and in-reference incorrectly used conventions.

## 3. Results

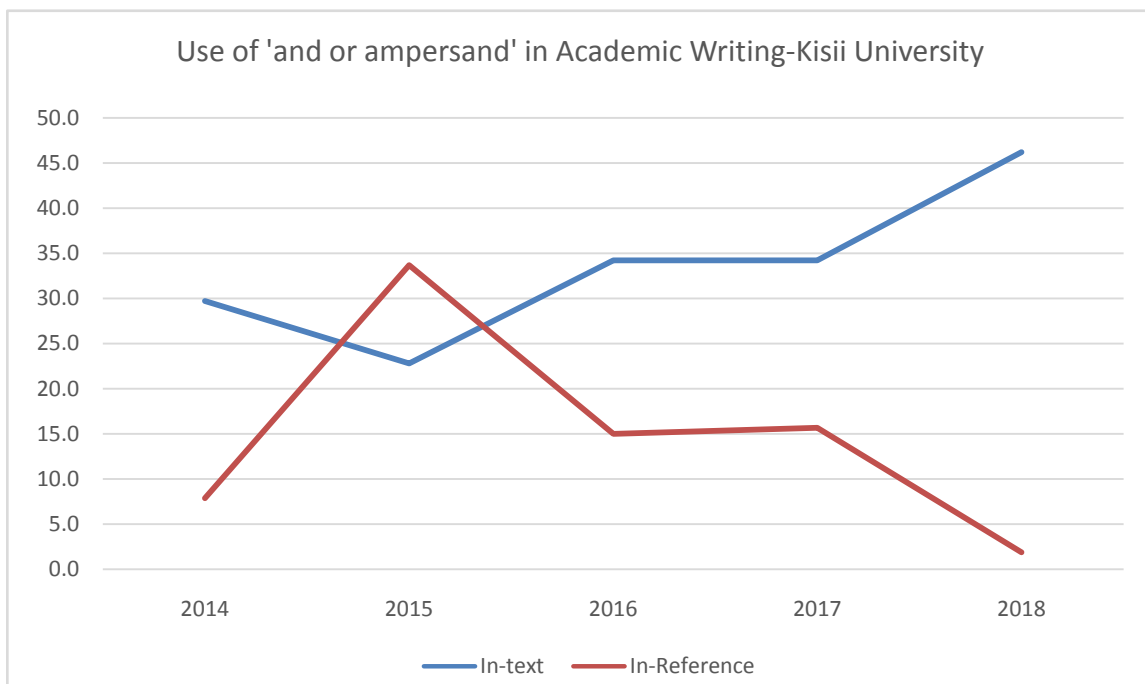
Table 1 summarises the observed use and misuse of the 'and' or 'ampersand' in joining two source authors by Kisii university graduate students.

The study observed various incorrect in-text application of the 'and, or ampersand' conventions in crediting two source authors by graduate students in Kisii university. The most common incorrect in-text usage of the ampersand was when citing two source authors in the author prominent style and in parenthesis. It seemed to us that most students were unable to distinguish clearly when to use 'and' or 'ampersand'. Secondly, students tended to commit more in-text mistakes than they did in-references. Thirdly, compared to students in the faculty of education, students in the faculty of Business studies tended to commit more mistakes both in in-text and in-reference. Figure 1 shows the trend of incorrect uses of the 'and' and the 'ampersand' by graduate students.

Generally, for in-text uses, the trend in percentage terms seems to have worsened over time despite the actual number of mistakes made being few. The in-text incorrect usage declined after the first year, from 30% in 2014 to 22% in 2015. Then the incorrect usage of the conventions increased and stabilized for one year at 34% in 2016 and 2017. After that, the trend again rose to over 45%. In 2018. For in-reference incorrect usage, the rate increased from about 8% to a high 34% and then has since been on the decline hitting about 1.9% in 2018.

**Table 1. Use and Misuse of the word ‘and’ or Ampersand in linking two source authors**

S/No.	Year	Faculty	In-Text		In-Reference		
			Total times used	No. times incorrect	Number Consulted	No. times right	No. times incorrect
1	2014	Edu	12	5	72	14	4
2	2014	Edu	30	11	68	16	1
3	2014	Edu	32	6	99	28	0
4	2015	Edu	29	2	77	15	3
5	2015	Edu	3	3	34	6	3
6	2015	Edu	15	2	62	9	8
7	2015	MBA	38	18	112	60	41
8	2015	MBA	11	4	70	13	11
9	2015	MBA	49	4	81	27	0
10	2016	Edu	39	8	79	61	8
11	2016	Edu	32	0	77	19	1
12	2016	Edu	48	11	92	52	1
13	2016	MBA	71	29	87	51	18
14	2016	MBA	39	22	71	45	0
15	2016	MBA	46	24	86	45	20
16	2017	Edu	20	1	91	26	6
17	2017	Edu	18	8	84	15	4
18	2017	Edu	26	4	98	20	0
19	2017	MBA	114	29	106	56	4
20	2017	MBA	21	12	39	14	9
21	2017	MBA	18	16	93	22	2
22	2017	MBA	50	22	112	19	7
23	2018	MBA			61	9	0
24	2018	MBA	11	4	72	27	0
25	2018	MBA	2	2	25	15	1



**Figure 1.** Trend of incorrect uses of the ‘and’ and the ‘ampersand’ by graduate students

Table 2 shows total number of use of et al., meant to join three or more source authors in crediting the source.

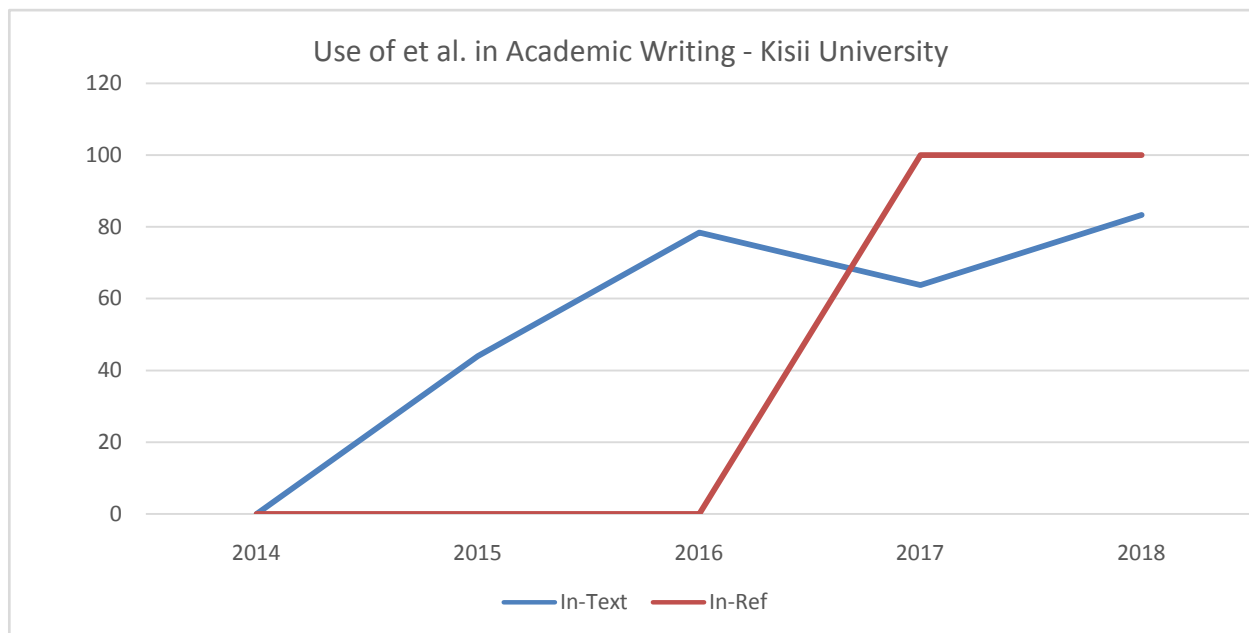
The table observed the use of the convention depending on where it was located—In-Text or In-Reference.

**Table 2. Use and Misuse of et al. in linking three or more source authors**

S/No.	Year	Faculty	In-text		In Reference		
			Total times used	Number times wrongly used	Total in-Reference	Total times used	Number times used wrongly
1	2014	Edu	1	0	0	0	0
2	2014	Edu	1	0	0	0	0
3	2014	Edu	1	0	0	0	0
4	2015	Edu	0	0	0	0	0
5	2015	Edu	0	0	0	0	0
6	2015	Edu	0	0	0	0	0
7	2015	MBA	14	10	0	0	0
8	2015	MBA	6	1	0	0	0
9	2015	MBA	5		0	0	0
10	2015	Edu	4	3	0	0	0
11	2015	Edu	5	2	0	0	0
12	2015	Edu	0	0	0	0	0
13	2016	MBA	9	9	0	0	0
14	2016	MBA	4	4	0	0	0
15	2016	MBA	15	11	0	0	0
16	2017	Edu	3	2	0	0	0
17	2017	Edu	1	1	0	0	0
18	2017	Edu	10	1	0	0	0
19	2017	MBA	16	13	0	0	0
20	2017	MBA	24	18	1	1	1
21	2017	MBA	4	2	2	0	0
22	2017	MBA	15	6	0	0	0
23	2018	MBA	6	5	0	0	0
24	2018	MBA	0	0	0	0	0
25	2018	MBA	0	0	1	0	1

Table shows that majority of the et al., convention usage was located at In-Text as compared to In-Reference. Note: in some instances, (e.g., 4 times in 2015), the usage of et al., one could not determine whether

it was wrongly used or not for the reason that ..... The other common mistake was the omission of et al., from the Reference list—4 times in 2015 and 2 times in 2017.



**Figure 2.** Trend in the usage of the et al., convention to credit three or more source authors

The study observed that one, most documents analysed employed the et al., convention sparingly. Two, it would seem in most instances students employed the et al., convention, the students got it wrong. Whereas the trend has been on the increase, students do not seem to have learnt their correct usage since the percentage of the wrong application has been on the rise.

## 4. Discussions

In academic writing, the conventions 'and' or the ampersand (&) sign are employed to join between two and five source authors while crediting them. It is important that their usage is done well so as to give confidence to the audience that the writer understands what he or she is communicating since it is done in the familiar language of the discipline 'community'. Misuse of the rules lowers the writer's esteem within the discipline community. Postgraduate students are the upcoming members of their respective discipline communities and are expected to learn the way their respective academic communities communicate.

The study observed that students have a hard time distinguishing when to employ 'and' or the ampersand. The rule is simple, In-Text, 'and' is employed only when using the author prominent style [7], as in: *According to Obabo and Ojalla (2015), or Obabo and Ojalla (2015) assert that .....We need to note that 'and' only joins source authors in an author prominent style, In-Text. Here, the authors are given prominence and therefore the year of publication is put in bracket. The concern for the writer is who said what was said. If in the opinion of the writer, what was said is what matters most, then the information can be rendered in an information prominent style, as in: Mental health problems in the general population frequently start in adolescence (Obabo&Ojalla, 2015).* Notice, in this type of sentence construction, it is the information which is placed at a prominent place, while the authors though important are placed in parenthesis and at the end of the sentence. Also notice that the ampersand sign is used to connect the source authors instead of 'and' [8]. This is import for both the writer and the reader.

In the referencing section, joining two source authors is treated differently. First, 'and' is never used at the In-References section; two, the authors are never placed in parenthesis; and three, the ampersand sign is used to connect two source authors [9]. Lastly, 'and' or the ampersand are used to join two source authors only. Otherwise, if there are more than two source authors to be joined, that requires a different treatment. Next, the study observed that students tended to commit more mistakes at In-Text in the use conventions of than they did at the In-References section.

As already explained, rules in the use of 'and' or ampersand sign change depending on the emphasis put on either author or information. The change in style is what makes communication meaningful. Also, writers normally employ 'and' or 'the ampersand (&) sign' more in the In-Text while discussing the subject compared to In-Reference while listing the references consulted. This is because in discussing writers, there is a higher likelihood of quoting the same author more than once unlike while listing the consulted sources. Therefore, Table 2 tends to

suggest that some students listed sources that may have been consulted but not cited. This is against, the academic procedure that requires only sources cited to be listed.

In addition, the study observed that students made some mistakes, which could not be captured within the two tables. Examples of the mistakes noted were the use of 'and' in place of a separator between sources as in: *(Obabo and Ojalla (2015) and Osoro (2016).* Certainly, there are two correct ways of capturing this, depending on the style employed. If, the style preferred is information prominent, the correct way of stating it is: *(Obabo&Ojalla, 2015; Osoro, 2016);* placed after quoting the author's words or ideas. However, if the style adopted is author prominent, the correct way of saying it is: *According to Obabo and Ojalla (2015) and Osoro (2016).....* Notice, when citing a source co-authored by two to five individuals, you require the use of the ampersand sign In-Text, if the style is information prominent or when listing the source In-Reference.

While analysing the use of et al., two important observations were made. First, that most documents analysed employed the et al., convention sparingly. We doubt whether this was coincidence or tactical. We doubt the coincidence as current practice shows that most studies are authored by many individuals. Whatever may be the case, instructors should encourage variety to allow students gain appropriate skills.

The second observation that the study made in relation to the use of et al., in academic writing was that seemed that in most of the instances that students employed the et al., convention, they got it wrong.

## 5. Conclusions

It should be clear that rules in the use of 'and' or ampersand sign change depending on the emphasis put on either author or information. The change in style is what makes communication meaningful.

The study observed that students have a hard time distinguishing when to employ 'and' or the ampersand. The rule is simple, In-Text, 'and' is employed only when using the author prominent style.

Many students tended to commit more in-text mistakes than they did in-references.

## 6. Recommendations

The faculty members need to take student through this area of conventional writing in writing their works of research.

The students should do thorough practice on how to use the ampersand and et al consistently. More practice to be committed in conventional writing as many students tended to commit more in-text mistakes than they did in-references.

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