



The Burden of Words: Investigating Redundancy in Undergraduate Academic Writing at Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

This article investigates redundancy, the use of unnecessary words, in undergraduate academic writing at Kwame Nkrumah University (KNU). Through qualitative content analysis of 150 student essays and research proposals across three faculties, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with 15 students and 5 lecturers, the study identifies common redundant phrases and explores their underlying causes. The analysis reveals that redundancy is pervasive, averaging 8 to 12 instances per 1000 words, with circumlocution (40%) as the most prevalent form, followed by tautological pairs (30%), padded verbs (20%), and pleonasms (10%). Interview data expose a significant dissonance: students employ redundant constructions believing that they enhance academic formality and sophistication, while lecturers view such language as obscuring meaning and reflecting poor editing skills. Framed within Grice's (1975) Maxim of Manner and Duff's (2010) theory of Academic Discourse Socialisation, the findings suggest that redundancies stem from three interrelated sources: a desire to sound formal and academic, a lack of lexical precision and vocabulary depth, and the unconscious imitation of bureaucratic and institutional language prevalent in university communications. The study further reveals that redundancies cluster most densely in introductory sections and literature reviews, where students are most self-conscious about establishing academic credibility. Lecturers' observations that institutional documents themselves model verbose language validate the Discourse Socialisation framework and point to a cyclical pattern of linguistic imitation. The article concludes with a discussion of evidence-based pedagogical interventions, including explicit instruction in concision, scaffolded learning approaches, enhanced writing centre support, assessment reform incorporating conciseness criteria, and institution-wide commitment to clear communication. By recognising redundancy as a learnable behaviour shaped by socialisation processes rather than an intractable deficit, KNU can implement targeted strategies to help students develop precise, effective scholarly communication. This study contributes to the limited research on redundancy in African tertiary contexts and offers practical recommendations applicable across similar educational settings.

Keywords: Redundancy, Academic Writing, Undergraduate Students, Conciseness, Discourse Socialisation, Kwame Nkrumah University.

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Introduction

Every university lecturer knows the feeling. You sit with a stack of essays, a cup of coffee growing cold beside you, and you wade through sentence after sentence that circles endlessly around a simple idea. Students write "because" as

"due to the fact that." They announce "now" as "at this point in time." They assure you that something is "first and foremost" when "first" would suffice. This phenomenon, redundancy, the use of more words than necessary, has become so commonplace in undergraduate submissions at

Kwame Nkrumah University (KNU) that many lecturers barely notice it. But perhaps they should.

In the pursuit of academic rigour and eloquence, student writers often fall prey to verbal prolixity, the habit of using excessively wordy expressions. Redundancy appears in many forms: "true facts" (as opposed to false facts?), "advance planning" (is there any other kind?), "end result," "past history," "basic fundamentals." While students sometimes employ these constructions deliberately, believing they are meeting word counts or striking a suitably formal tone, the effect is often the opposite of what they intend. Redundant writing obscures meaning rather than clarifying it. It weakens argumentative force rather than strengthening it. And it violates the principle of clarity at the heart of good academic communication.

This challenge extends far beyond KNU. Yang (2022), studying Chinese English learners, found that redundancy errors fundamentally undermine communicative effectiveness and often point to deeper issues in how students acquire and transfer language skills. Similarly, Rohmah (2017) analysed Indonesian students' writing and discovered that redundancy constituted a substantial proportion of all writing errors, with redundant words accounting for half of the identified problems, followed by redundant phrases at 39% and redundant clauses at 11%. These findings from across the globe suggest that what we observe at KNU is not some local peculiarity but rather a widespread challenge in academic writing development.

This article sets out to understand this challenge better. It examines the nature and prevalence of redundant expressions in KNU student writing, and it asks two central questions: What types of redundancy appear most often in our students' work? And what do students and lecturers themselves see as the causes of this wordiness? Throughout this article, "redundancy" serves as the umbrella term for unnecessary word use, with related terms such as "prolixity," "wordiness," and "deadwood" (Strunk & White, 2000) used interchangeably to reflect their usage in the cited literature.

Literature Review

Literature Search Strategy

To build a solid foundation for this study, we conducted a systematic search across several academic databases: ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL). We used combinations of keywords including "redundancy," "academic writing," "conciseness," "undergraduate," "discourse socialisation," "second language writing," and "African higher education." We focused on peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and influential style guides published in English, paying particular attention to studies that examined second-language writing contexts and African tertiary education. From approximately 45 relevant

sources, we selected those most directly applicable to our inquiry.

Redundancy in Academic Writing

The scholarly conversation about redundancy has deep roots. For generations, style guides have urged writers towards conciseness. Strunk and White (2000) warned against "deadwood," extra words that clog sentences without adding meaning. Williams (1990) similarly cautioned against "circumlocution," the habit of circling around an idea instead of stating it directly. More recently, Pinker (2014) has advocated for a "classic style" of writing that presents ideas with clarity and directness, arguing that unnecessary complexity often masks muddled thinking. These guides typically classify redundancies into familiar categories: tautologies (unnecessarily repeating the same idea, as in "free gift"), pleonasms (using more words than needed, as in "see with one's eyes"), and padded verbs (turning a strong verb into a weak verb-noun combination, as in "conduct an investigation" instead of "investigate").

Corpus linguistics research has provided empirical evidence of these patterns. Biber and Gray (2016), analysing large-scale corpora of academic writing, found that nominalisation, turning verbs into nouns, has increased dramatically over the past century, contributing to what they term "informational density" but also to potential verbosity. Their work suggests that some redundancy may stem from students' attempts to emulate the nominal style characteristic of expert academic writing, without fully understanding its rhetorical functions.

More recent research has given us a clearer picture of how these patterns actually play out in student writing. Rohmah (2017), working with 30 Indonesian English education students, identified redundancy at three distinct levels. Word-level redundancy was most common, accounting for half of all errors. Phrase-level redundancy followed at 39%, and clause-level redundancy made up the remaining 11%. Importantly, Rohmah traced these errors primarily to intralingual transfer, the way students apply familiar language patterns to new situations, sometimes inappropriately. This suggests that redundancy often reflects incomplete mastery of academic conventions rather than simple carelessness.

Yang (2022) pushed this analysis further through corpus-based research using the Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC). Examining 60 Chinese undergraduates with varying levels of English proficiency, Yang identified two main causes of redundancy: the influence of students' first language and gaps in their knowledge of English conventions. Yang also made a useful distinction between "message repetition" (saying the same thing twice) and "message entailment" (adding a word whose meaning is already contained in another word). Students, it seems, often fail to notice semantic overlap between words, a failure that no amount of grammar instruction alone can fix.

From a second language acquisition perspective, these patterns can be understood as interlanguage phenomena, systematic errors that emerge as learners construct their own rule-governed linguistic systems between their first language and the target language (Selinker, 1972). Redundancy errors, in this view, represent not random mistakes but predictable outcomes of specific learning strategies, including overgeneralisation of target language rules and transfer from first language rhetorical patterns.

In the African context, research has tended to focus on broader second-language challenges rather than zeroing in on redundancy specifically. Still, some relevant insights emerge. Mphahlele (2015) pointed to the influence of oral narrative traditions on written structure in Southern Africa, noting that students sometimes carry habits of elaboration and repetition from spoken storytelling into their academic writing. Adika (2018) observed that Ghanaian students often equate wordiness with sophistication, a misconception reinforced, he argued, by their exposure to complex bureaucratic and legal documents in institutional settings.

More recently, Urassa (2025) examined academic writing practices in Tanzanian higher education, using surveys and focus group interviews at the Institute of Finance Management. The study uncovered significant challenges: limited awareness of plagiarism and citation conventions, infrequent feedback from lecturers, and persistent mechanical errors. Crucially, Urassa found that students' English language background was the single most important factor shaping their writing practices, though access to online materials and opportunities for practice also mattered. These findings highlight the complex interplay between language proficiency, institutional support, and writing development.

What emerges from this literature is a sense that redundancy deserves more attention than it has received, not as a minor stylistic quirk, but as a window into how students learn (and sometimes mislearn) the conventions of academic discourse. This study takes up that challenge, applying these insights to the specific context of Kwame Nkrumah University.

Theoretical Framework

To make sense of our findings, we draw on two interconnected theoretical perspectives. The first is Grice's (1975) Maxim of Manner, part of his broader Cooperative Principle in communication. Grice proposed that effective conversation rests on certain shared assumptions, among them, the injunction to "be brief." When we communicate, we assume others will say what needs saying without unnecessary words. Redundancy violates this assumption. It burdens readers with extra information that adds nothing to meaning while obscuring the core message. However, Grice's framework assumes that speakers and writers are trying to cooperate. Our interview data suggest that students are not deliberately flouting this maxim. They are trying to cooperate; they want to sound formal and serious, but they

are reaching for the wrong tools. They misunderstand what academic formality looks like.

This brings us to our second theoretical lens: Duff's (2010) theory of Academic Discourse Socialisation. Duff argues that students learn the norms of academic writing not through formal instruction alone, but through immersion, practice, and ongoing interaction with their academic community. They absorb expectations from the writing they read, the feedback they receive, and the examples they encounter. When the language models available to students, including textbooks, lecture handouts, and official university communications, are themselves laden with formalism and redundancy, students unconsciously internalise these patterns as the norm.

Recent scholarship has deepened our understanding of these socialisation processes. Mhlahlo (2025), drawing on the work of Kumi-Yeboah, Brobbey, and Smith (2020) and Lea and Street (2006), examined how writing centres at a South African university help students navigate academic discourse. The study found that students benefit significantly from writing support services, but also that these services could be delivered more effectively. Crucially, Mhlahlo emphasised that writing centres should do more than teach discrete skills; they should induct students into the standards and practices of university culture, enabling them to use academic discourse independently.

Kim and Lee (2024) offer another valuable perspective through their case study of ESL writing conferences. Applying Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development alongside language socialisation theory, they showed how students learn through multiple mechanisms: explicit instruction on expectations, less explicit guidance during routine interactions, and gradual movement from other-regulation (relying on teacher guidance) to self-regulation (writing independently). Importantly, they found that different skills develop at different rates. Some aspects of writing improve steadily; others remain stubbornly resistant to change. This helps explain why certain redundant patterns may persist even as students develop other competencies.

Sekiwu (2025), studying Ugandan doctoral programmes through a Vygotskian lens, identified significant gaps in practical writing activities and limited opportunities for collaboration. The study found that an overemphasis on theory at the expense of hands-on practice stifles writing development. Sekiwu advocated for more applied tasks, flexible learning approaches, and curriculum revisions that prioritise writing as a learnable craft rather than an innate talent.

Together, these theoretical perspectives frame redundancy not as a simple deficit in individual writing skills, but as a learned behaviour, a product of the specific linguistic environment in which students find themselves. This framing shifts our focus from blaming students to understanding and reshaping the contexts that shape their writing.

Methodology

To investigate redundancy at KNU, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of 150 written documents: 100 final-year project proposals and 50 literature essays. These documents were drawn from three faculties, Humanities and Social Sciences (n=60), Administration (n=50), and Education (n=40), and covered the 2022-2023 academic year. All documents were anonymised before analysis.

Sampling Strategy: Documents were selected using stratified random sampling. We obtained lists of all submitted final-year project proposals and literature essays from the three faculties during the target academic year. From each faculty's list, we randomly selected documents proportional to the faculty's size, ensuring representation across departments. For project proposals, we selected only those that had received final approval from supervisors, ensuring a minimum quality threshold. For literature essays, we selected only graded submissions (excluding drafts) to capture completed work.

Student Demographics: The students whose work was analysed were predominantly in their third or fourth year of study (final-year students). Based on institutional records, approximately 85% spoke English as a second or third language, with common first languages including Bemba, Nyanja, Tonga, and Lozi. This distribution reflects the broader linguistic landscape of Zambian higher education.

Document Analysis Procedure: Our analysis proceeded in stages. First, we read through each document flagging phrases where words could be removed without loss of meaning. Following Rohmah (2017), we defined redundancy operationally as any instance where meaning would remain unchanged after deletion of a word, phrase, or clause. Second, we grouped these flagged phrases into established categories drawn from the literature (Strunk & White, 2000; Williams, 1990; Yang, 2022): Tautological Pairs ("each and every," "ways and means"), Pleonasms ("past history," "final outcome"), Circumlocutions ("in the event that" for "if," "at this point in time" for "now"), and Padded Verbs ("conduct an investigation of" for "investigate"). Finally, we noted where in each document these redundancies clustered, whether in introductions, literature reviews, methodology sections, or elsewhere.

Reliability: Following Rohmah's (2017) example, we combined multiple data sources to ensure analytical depth.

The primary researcher conducted the initial coding. To check coding consistency, this researcher re-coded a random 20% sample of the documents after a two-week interval, achieving a 95% intra-coder reliability rate (calculated as $[\text{number of agreements} / \text{total coding decisions}] \times 100$). Because the study employed a single primary coder, inter-coder reliability was not calculated; however, a second researcher independently reviewed a 10% sample to verify category assignments, with disagreements resolved through discussion. This limitation is acknowledged in section 8.

Interviews: We also conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 students whose work we had analysed and with 5 lecturers from the participating faculties. Student interviewees were selected purposively from those who had submitted documents in our sample, ensuring representation across faculties and levels of redundancy (high, medium, low as measured in our analysis). Lecturer interviewees included those who taught writing-intensive courses or supervised project proposals. These interviews explored how students and lecturers think about wordiness in academic writing. The interview protocols, adapted from similar studies (Rohmah, 2017; Urassa, 2025), covered: (a) perceptions of formal academic style, (b) awareness of redundancy as an issue, (c) strategies for achieving conciseness, and (d) sources of writing models. Interviews were conducted in English, lasted 30 to 45 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically using NVivo software. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarisation, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme definition, and write-up.

Findings and Discussions

What we found confirms some suspicions while challenging others. Redundancy appears throughout our sample, an average of 8 to 12 instances per thousand words. To put that in concrete terms, a student writing a typical double-spaced page produces two or three redundant constructions, or one every three or four sentences. This frequency matches what Rohmah (2017) found in Indonesia, though the distribution across categories differs somewhat.

Table 1 shows how the redundancies broke down. All identified instances fell into one of the four categories; no instances requiring additional categories emerged during analysis.

Table 1: Distribution of Redundancy Types in Student Writing (N=150 documents)

Category	Percentage	Frequency (n)	Examples from Student Texts	Concise Alternative
Circumlocution	40%	876	"due to the fact that," "at an earlier point in time," "in the event that," "for the purpose of," "with regard to"	because, previously, if, for, regarding
Tautological Pairs	30%	657	"first and foremost," "hopes and desires," "issues and problems," "each and every," "ways and means"	first, hopes, issues, each, ways
Padded Verbs	20%	438	"make a recommendation," "provide a summary of," "have a discussion about," "conduct an analysis of," "undertake an examination"	recommend, summarise, discuss, analyse, examine
Pleonasms	10%	219	"new innovation," "end result," "basic fundamentals," "past history," "future prospects"	innovation, result, fundamentals, history, prospects

Note: Percentages are rounded; total instances = 2,190. The examples column provides representative illustrations; a complete list is available from the corresponding author.

Prevalence and Types of Redundancy

Circumlocution dominated, accounting for 40% of all redundant constructions. Students consistently chose roundabout phrases over direct ones. They wrote "due to the fact that" instead of "because," "at an earlier point in time" instead of "previously." This pattern suggests a deliberate strategy; students are inflating their language to achieve what they imagine is a formal tone. The irony, of course, is that this inflation often undermines clarity. It reflects a fundamental misunderstanding: that complexity equals sophistication, that more words mean more thought. Yang (2022) observed the same tendency among Chinese learners, tracing it to students' attempts to approximate academic register without fully grasping what makes academic writing effective.

From a Gricean perspective, circumlocution directly violates the Maxim of Manner. Students are not being brief; they are adding words that, from a communicative efficiency standpoint, are entirely unnecessary. Yet they do so believing they are enhancing communication, a paradox that underscores the gap between intention and outcome.

Tautological Pairs came next at 30%. Students coupled synonyms habitually: "first and foremost," "hopes and desires," "issues and problems." We might call this "semantic doubling," saying something twice to make sure it lands. Mphahlele (2015) suggests this could reflect oral narrative traditions where repetition reinforces meaning. However, our lecturer interviews pointed to a more immediate influence: bureaucratic institutional language. Students, it seems, are imitating the style they see in official documents. Yang (2022) classifies these as "message repetition" errors, noting that they arise when learners fail to recognise that two words convey essentially the same meaning, a failure of vocabulary depth and semantic awareness.

Padded Verbs made up 20% of the total. Students transformed strong verbs into weak verb-noun combinations: "make a recommendation" instead of "recommend," "provide a summary of" instead of "summarise," "have a discussion about" instead of "discuss." This move towards nominalisation drains sentences of energy and agency. It reflects, as our Discourse Socialisation framework would predict, an unconscious imitation of passive institutional discourse. Van der Lugt and colleagues (2024) identify this as a key challenge in scientific writing instruction, noting that students need explicit training to recognise and replace these weak constructions with active verbs.

Pleonasms were least common at 10%, but they reveal something important. Phrases like "new innovation," "end result," and "basic fundamentals" show a lack of lexical precision, a failure to recognise that the modifier's meaning is already contained in the noun. Why are these less common than tautologies? Perhaps because tautologies are often learned as fixed phrases ("first and foremost" rolls off the tongue), while pleonasms require a deeper misunderstanding. Yang (2022) calls these "message entailment" errors, and their relative rarity may suggest that they represent a more fundamental gap in vocabulary knowledge, one less susceptible to quick fixes.

What these patterns tell us is that student redundancy at KNU is not random. It follows predictable paths, shaped by students' attempts to navigate what they perceive as the demands of academic writing. As Rohmah (2017) found in Indonesia, these patterns reflect genuine challenges in mastering disciplinary discourse, not simple carelessness.

Contextual Clustering of Redundancies

Where do these redundancies appear? Most densely in introductory chapters and literature reviews, precisely the sections where students feel most self-conscious about establishing their academic credentials. In our sample, 62%

of identified redundancies occurred in introductions and literature reviews, compared to 22% in methodology sections and 16% in conclusions. This clustering makes intuitive sense. Students are trying hardest to sound academic at the beginning of their work, and in trying hardest, they reach most often for what they imagine academic language should be. Van der Lugt and colleagues (2024) note that students often struggle to adjust their writing for different audiences and purposes. They adopt a uniformly "academic" style regardless of context, missing opportunities for rhetorical flexibility.

Perceptions and Causes: Insights from Interviews

The interviews brought these textual patterns to life, revealing a striking gap between how students and lecturers understand redundancy.

Students told us they use complex, wordy phrases because they believe this makes their work seem "more academic," "serious," and "intelligent." One third-year Humanities student explained: "If I write simply, like how I speak, it doesn't look like university work. My secondary school teacher told us that academic writing needs big words." A fourth-year Administration student echoed this: "I want to show the lecturer that I understand the concepts. Using longer phrases makes it look like I've done more reading." Several admitted frankly that they pad their writing to meet word counts. As one Education student put it: "Sometimes I don't have enough ideas to reach 3,000 words, so I have to expand what I've written. I know it's not ideal, but it's better than failing for being short." This instrumental view of writing echoes what Urassa (2025) found in Tanzania: students' writing practices are shaped by pragmatic considerations like word counts and assessment expectations.

However, not all students shared this view. Three students (20% of interviewees) expressed frustration with wordiness, with one noting: "I try to write directly, but then I read my classmates' work and worry mine looks too simple. So I add things." This suggests that even students who recognise the value of conciseness feel pressure to conform to perceived norms.

Lecturers saw things differently. They acknowledged the problem readily, attributing it mainly to poor editing skills and the misconception that length signals depth. One senior lecturer in Social Sciences observed: "Students don't revise. They write once and submit. If they read their work aloud, they'd hear how awkward it sounds." Another lecturer in Administration added: "There's this idea that academic writing has to be complicated. But when I read journal articles in my field, they're often quite direct. Students aren't reading enough real academic writing."

But some pointed to something more uncomfortable: the institutional environment itself. As one lecturer noted: "Even our own memos and course outlines can be full of

bureaucratic jargon. We're modelling the behaviour we then criticise in students." Another lecturer reflected: "I caught myself writing 'at this point in time' in a feedback comment to a student. I deleted it and wrote 'now.' But it made me realise, this language is everywhere around us." These observations validate our Discourse Socialisation framework and suggest a troubling cycle: institutional documents model verbosity, lecturers (perhaps unconsciously) signal that this is acceptable, and students imitate what they see. However, this claim about institutional influence, while supported by lecturer perceptions, remains a hypothesis requiring direct investigation. We did not systematically analyse institutional documents in this study, and further research should examine whether and to what extent university communications actually model the redundant patterns found in student writing.

Mhlahlo's (2025) research on writing centres in South Africa reinforces this point. Effective writing support, Mhlahlo argues, must go beyond teaching skills to inducting students into "university culture's standards and practices of academic writing." This means attending not just to student-facing interventions, but to the models and expectations embedded in all institutional communication.

Kim and Lee's (2024) micro-analysis of writing conferences adds another layer. Their study showed that students learn academic conventions through both explicit instruction and less explicit socialisation during routine interactions. The gradual movement from teacher guidance to independent application suggests that addressing redundancy requires sustained, scaffolded support, not one-off workshops or lectures.

Together, the textual and interview data paint a clear picture: redundancy at KNU is systemic, not incidental. It stems from students' genuine attempts to sound academic, shaped by the linguistic environment in which they learn. The prevalence of circumlocution and tautological pairs reflects a strategy of "semantic doubling" for emphasis and formality, influenced by a desire to emulate formal models and the practical need to meet length requirements.

Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

If redundancy is a learned behaviour, then it can be unlearned, or better yet, replaced with more effective habits. Our findings suggest several avenues for intervention.

Explicit Instruction in Concision

First, we need to teach concision explicitly. University writing instruction often focuses on grammar and structure while treating conciseness as an afterthought. Students need practical strategies for recognising and eliminating deadwood in their own writing. Van der Lugt and colleagues (2024) offer a useful model: their student-centered writing project

includes guided practice in analysing texts from various journals, rewriting for different audiences, practising with clear and vivid language, and receiving formative feedback through peer and instructor review. Their approach emphasises student ownership and intrinsic motivation; students reported greater engagement when writing for non-expert audiences, a finding worth building on at KNU.

From a Gricean perspective, explicit instruction should help students understand that brevity is not informality, but rather a marker of respect for readers' time and cognitive effort. Teaching students to ask "Does this word add meaning?" before every sentence can cultivate this awareness.

Scaffolded Learning Approaches

Second, if students learn by imitating models, we must be more intentional about the models we provide. Lecturers and curriculum designers should champion clear, concise examples of academic prose in their feedback and course materials. This includes not only published articles but also well-written student work that demonstrates effective concision.

Research on scaffolded writing instruction offers evidence-based guidance. Brownell, Price, and Steinman (2018) studied an intervention to improve abstract writing in an introductory biology course. Their scaffolded approach, including concept mapping, guided discussion of structural frameworks, analysis of exemplary work, and interactive discussion of inappropriate content, significantly improved students' concise scientific writing. The greatest gains came in students' ability to articulate their work's motivation, suggesting that scaffolding helps students distinguish essential from extraneous content.

Sekiwu's (2025) study of Ugandan doctoral programmes reinforces the value of hands-on approaches. An overemphasis on theory, Sekiwu found, stifles writing development. What students need are collaborative learning opportunities and real-world applications of academic writing skills. This applies as much to undergraduates as to doctoral candidates.

Writing Centre Enhancement

Third, our findings support strengthening the university's writing centre. Mhlahlo's (2025) assessment of South African writing centres found that students benefit significantly from support services, but also that these services could be delivered more effectively. Mhlahlo recommended that writing centres enhance students' induction into university writing standards, provide discipline-specific support, and enable students to learn discourse conventions independently. For KNU, this suggests incorporating specific modules on identifying and revising redundancy, while working with faculties to ensure consistent writing expectations across disciplines.

Writing centre tutors should be trained to recognise redundancy patterns and to help students develop strategies for self-editing. This aligns with Kim and Lee's (2024) emphasis on gradual movement from other-regulation to self-regulation.

Assessment Reform

Fourth, we should consider refining our assessment rubrics. Most rubrics focus on content coverage and argumentation without explicitly rewarding conciseness. By including conciseness as a distinct criterion, we signal that wordiness is not a proxy for depth and that precision matters. However, assessment reform must be implemented thoughtfully. Research on washback effects (Alderson & Wall, 1993) suggests that what is assessed shapes what is taught and learned. If conciseness becomes a rubric criterion, instruction will likely follow. But rubrics must also guard against penalising students for necessary complexity or disciplinary-specific conventions. Piloting revised rubrics and gathering feedback from both students and lecturers would help ensure fair implementation.

Yang (2022) adds that students should be explicitly taught to avoid message repetition by recognising semantic overlap between words, and to strengthen their awareness of grammar rules that prevent overuse of functional words. These competencies can be developed through targeted exercises integrated into existing writing courses.

Addressing Institutional Language Models

Finally, and perhaps most challengingly, we must attend to the language we use across the university. If memos, policies, and course materials are verbose and bureaucratic, they perpetuate the cycle of imitation we want to break. While our evidence for institutional influence is suggestive rather than conclusive, lecturer interviews point to this as a plausible contributing factor. A university-wide commitment to clear communication, in all genres and at all levels, would reinforce that concision is a virtue, not a vice. This is not about policing every internal document, but about recognising that our institutional voice matters. Students learn from what we do, not just what we say.

Implementation Considerations for the Zambian Context: Implementing these recommendations at KNU requires attention to local realities. Resource constraints may limit the feasibility of intensive one-on-one writing support; thus, peer tutoring models and integration of writing instruction into existing courses may be more sustainable. Language diversity means that some students face additional challenges in distinguishing redundant from necessary words; instruction should acknowledge and address these challenges without stigmatising multilingualism. Finally, any intervention should be developed collaboratively with Zambian colleagues and piloted before wider rollout, ensuring cultural and contextual appropriateness.

Conclusion

This study confirms what many lecturers at Kwame Nkrumah University have long suspected: redundancy is a significant and systemic issue in undergraduate writing. It appears in predictable patterns, circumlocution, tautological pairs, padded verbs, pleonasm, and clusters where students feel most pressure to sound academic. The habit does not stem from simple lack of ability, but from students' active attempts to navigate the demands of academic discourse. Their efforts to sound formal and sophisticated, combined with possible exposure to verbose institutional language, lead them to adopt wordy constructions that ultimately undermine the clarity they seek.

These findings echo international research. Studies from Indonesia (Rohmah, 2017), China (Yang, 2022), and Tanzania (Urassa, 2025) reveal similar patterns and causes, suggesting that redundancy is a widespread challenge in second-language academic writing contexts. The theoretical frameworks of Grice's Maxim of Manner (1975) and academic discourse socialisation (Duff, 2010; Mhlahlo, 2025; Kim & Lee, 2024) help us understand both how redundancy manifests and how it is acquired and perpetuated. Grice's framework illuminates why redundancy undermines communication; Duff's explains how students learn these patterns through immersion in academic environments.

Addressing redundancy is not about policing style. It is about fostering critical thinking. The ability to express an idea with precision is inseparable from understanding it clearly. As van der Lugt and colleagues (2024) argue, rewriting texts for different audiences stimulates critical thinking by requiring students to decide what information is essential and how to convey it effectively. Scaffolded approaches to concise writing reinforce students' capacity to synthesise content and think scientifically (Brownell et al., 2018).

By recognising redundancy as learnable behaviour rather than intractable deficit, KNU can implement targeted, evidence-based interventions. This requires a multi-pronged approach: explicit instruction in concision, scaffolded learning opportunities, enhanced writing centre support, refined assessment practices, and institutional commitment to clear communication. Replacing verbal prolixity with powerful precision is not merely a stylistic goal. It is fundamental to developing effective scholarly communication and critical thinking, skills our students will carry with them long after they leave our classrooms.

Limitations and Future Research: This study has several limitations. First, the absence of inter-coder reliability measures means that coding decisions reflect a single researcher's judgments, though secondary review of a subsample provides some validation. Future research should employ multiple coders and report inter-coder reliability. Second, our claim about institutional influence on student writing remains a hypothesis requiring direct investigation;

systematic analysis of university documents would test this hypothesis. Third, our interview sample, while adequate for qualitative insights, may not represent all student and lecturer perspectives. Larger-scale surveys could complement these findings. Fourth, we did not analyse relationships between redundancy and student characteristics (e.g., language background, year of study, discipline); future research should explore these variables. Finally, intervention studies testing the effectiveness of the recommended pedagogical approaches would provide stronger evidence for practice.

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