

The Journey from a Single Sentence to a Well-Written Essay

Atem Deng¹

Writing across the University of Alberta, 2023²
Volume 4, pp. 17-20
Published December 2023
DOI: 10.29173/writingacrossuofa61

Introduction

In WRS 101 Exploring Writing, students were encouraged to include their own identity and culture in their writing. Their first assignment called for a story about writing, and Atem Deng answered this call with a story about how he overcame language barriers in his native South Sudan through diligent work and perseverance.

Keywords: literacy sponsor, literacy narrative, Insha, Kenya, Sudan, Swahili



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¹ Atem Deng is a 2-year, Economics major, student at the University of Alberta, who comes from South Sudan.

² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

“As iron sharpens iron, and so one man sharpens another” is a Biblical quote emphasizing the importance of helping each other grow and improve in our tasks. In this writing, I will narrate my experience learning to write my Insha, an equivalent of essays in Swahili, and the role one teacher played in helping me improve.

As a new student in Kenya, one of my nightmares of settling into their academic system was Kiswahili, a mandatory language course for all students. Like English tests, which have grammar and writing sections, Swahili tests have Sarufi and Insha, respectively. The Sarufi part consisted of only multiple-choice questions; therefore, it was easier than Insha. The multiple-choice section reminded me of a childhood game where we drew a circle, and all the participants stayed within it; somebody would throw a toy ball into the air, and whoever it landed on was eliminated. The Insha section, however, gave me sleepless nights mainly because I couldn't speak the language, let alone write and read. I remember my first ever Insha was a single sentence written in English instead of Swahili. To be precise, my exact words were, “I don't know Swahili.”

Even when I had a chance to learn Swahili, I couldn't care less about the language because, as a South Sudanese, it isn't a requirement in any office or anywhere in my country. “It will never be required in any office in my country” is an ignorant saying I picked up from my senior relatives who opposed learning it. Despite the negative impact on my academic performance, I failed to address the problem, and its consequences gradually became apparent over time. The low scores caused an immense imbalance in my overall grade. Moreover, I couldn't compete with the top students, even when I desired to. When I did my last primary school exam, I had the same problem; as expected, my performance in Swahili was so poor. It also tainted my overall performance and ruined my chance of admission to the high school of my dreams. I wished to repeat that class to redeem myself, but the school and my parents couldn't allow it. I had to go to the school my grade afforded but with a promise to myself.

The promise was to graduate from high school with an outstanding grade in the course. Was this achieved? The answer is yes. And your question could be, “What tools did I use to hit the target?” My first commitment was to converse in Swahili, no matter how broken, as that was the best way to pick up the language and improve my speaking skills. I also bought several Insha books with tons of samples and writing tips from top students. This technique helped me gain knowledge of the different writing styles and structures other people use. The third resolution was to write an Insha on any given topic at least once a week and hand it to my teacher, who would then mark and give me constructive feedback. Regular writing

helped me develop an appetite for writing and was an effective way of practicing different styles. I did this for my four years in high school, and it was impactful. I achieved my target by moving from a D+ to a B+ in Swahili and having a well-balanced overall grade. It was a joyous moment in my life. If I hadn't worked on that weakness, I wouldn't have performed better to secure a scholarship to study at the University of Alberta, which is a story for another day.

Writing requires our drive and willpower to succeed like any other challenge. It was after I came to this realization that I took the challenge and paid attention to the right tools and techniques. The effort I put into it, such as conversing in Swahili, buying revision books, writing regularly, and seeking feedback, was all inspired by my commitment to mitigate the problem, which paid off well in the long run. Despite my initial reluctance, developing the drive and seeking help from relevant people like teachers and students pushed me to sharpen my writing skills.

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