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WRITING AND PUBLISHING YOUR FIRST ACADEMIC PAPER

A starter guide for a postgraduate student preparing to move into teaching

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Read this once for the shape of it, then use the ninety-day plan at the end as your working calendar. It is a method, not a guarantee: publication depends on the quality of your work and on a stranger agreeing that it is worth printing. What this guide does is stop you wasting a year on the wrong things.

1. What actually gets you a lecturing role

Before the writing, be clear about what the writing is for.

- A Master's degree is the entry requirement for lecturer positions in most Nigerian universities and polytechnics; a doctorate is what moves you up the ladder.
- Beyond the degree, appointment and promotion panels weigh publications — and increasingly they weigh where you published, not just how many times.
- Conference papers and book chapters count when a full journal paper is not yet ready, and they are easier to be accepted at. Use them to build a record.
- Your advantage as a staff member is real: you can see the institution's actual problems, and you can usually get access and cooperation that an outsider cannot.
- The trap: papers in predatory journals are often discounted or queried by panels, and can damage you more than having nothing. Check every journal before you submit — section 6.

2. Choose your topic from where you already stand

Do not start from a blank page. Start from the work in front of you. Test any idea against these three questions:

- Can I actually get the data? (Records, respondents, permission, time.)
- Does it matter to somebody? (A department, an agency, a policy, a profession.)
- Has it been done to death? If yes, what would my study add — a new place, period, sector or method?

Five topic shapes that work for a first paper:

1. Take a known study and repeat it in your institution, city or industry.
2. Test the same variables in a different sector (the study was banks — you do a polytechnic).
3. A review of the last five years of literature on one narrow question.
4. A case study of a problem you can observe and document properly.
5. An evaluation of an intervention, policy or system already in use.

Title formula: what + where or who + how + period. For example, “Effect of X on Y among Z in Enugu State, 2019–2024”. Write your aim in one sentence before you read anything: “This paper asks whether ___ in ___.”

3. Read before you write — the part people skip

- Read 20 to 30 papers: roughly 15 recent international and 5 to 10 local or regional.
- Do not read them fully. Read the abstract, the method and the conclusion first, then the parts that matter to you.
- Log every paper into the literature matrix (Appendix A). One row per paper. This becomes your literature review and your reference list, and it stops you reading the same paper twice.
- Where to search: Google Scholar, Scopus, AJOL (African Journals Online), your institution's library and any databases it subscribes to.
- From the matrix, write your gap sentence. A gap is one of four kinds: a population nobody has studied, a context nobody has covered, a period nobody has updated, or a method nobody has applied.
- Pick your target journal's referencing style on day one and use it from the first note, so you never reformat 60 references later.

4. The blueprint — what each part of the paper must do

Almost every empirical paper follows the same order (IMRaD). Write in this order; write the abstract last.

Section	What it must do	What panels attack
Title	Under about 20 words, searchable, no hype, no question marks	Vague titles that promise more than the study delivers
Abstract	200–250 words in one paragraph: problem, method, findings, conclusion. Written last	Findings that do not match the paper, or an abstract with no conclusion
Introduction	Funnel: background → problem → gap → objectives and questions → significance. End with your roadmap paragraph	No stated problem, no gap, objectives that do not match the questions
Literature review	Theory first, then what is known, grouped by theme — not one paragraph per author. End with hypotheses	A list of summaries, no theory, hypotheses appearing from nowhere
Methodology	Design, population, sample and how you sized it, instrument, validity and reliability, ethics, analysis technique, model specification	Unjustified sample size, no reliability test, method not matching the hypotheses
Results	Tables and figures with short factual commentary only — no discussion here	Interpretation smuggled into results; tables that do not answer the questions
Discussion	Your findings against the literature: agreement, disagreement, why, and what it means in practice	Restating results, ignoring studies that contradict you
Conclusion	Only what the data supports, plus limitations and what should be studied next	Over-claiming, policy prescriptions the data cannot carry
References	One style, used consistently; 30–60 quality sources for an empirical paper	Outdated or predatory sources, inconsistent formatting, citations that

		do not exist
Appendices	Instrument, approval letters, key statistical output	Missing instrument; claims that cannot be checked

5. Method — where first papers are usually lost

- Sampling: define the population, calculate the sample size (Taro Yamane or Krejcie and Morgan), then choose the technique and say why — random, stratified, purposive.
- Instrument: sections that match your research questions, clear wording, a five-point Likert scale where appropriate, and a pilot with 10 to 20 respondents before the real thing.
- Reliability: report Cronbach's alpha (0.70 and above is the usual threshold). Validity: expert review of the instrument, and say who reviewed it.
- Analysis: descriptive statistics first, then the test that matches each hypothesis — t-test, ANOVA, correlation, regression or chi-square. Do not run tests that do not answer your questions.
- Software: Excel for basics, SPSS or Stata for the inferential work, or Python and R if you already use them. Whatever you use, keep the output files — reviewers may ask.
- Ethics: informed consent, anonymity of respondents, and institutional approval where your institution requires it.
- The line not to cross: never adjust, delete or invent data so that a hypothesis works. A rejected hypothesis honestly reported is a finding; altered data is misconduct.

6. Where to publish — and how to know a journal is real

This is the part that decides whether your paper helps your career or harms it. Being published in the wrong journal is worse than being unpublished.

First, find candidates: ask senior colleagues where they publish, search your topic plus the word DOAJ, and read the reference lists of the papers you already admire.

Then verify, in this order:

Check	Where to do it	What you are looking for
Open access	DOAJ (doaj.org)	The journal listed with its ISSN and review policy
Indexing	Scopus Source List; Web of Science Master Journal List	The journal actually listed — not a claim on its own website
Local and African	AJOL (ajol.info)	Widely accepted by Nigerian panels
Identifier	ISSN Portal	A real ISSN that matches the title
Process	The journal's own site	Stated peer review type, timelines, DOI, archiving, COPE membership
Fit	Its last two issues	Papers similar to yours, authors from more than one country

Walk away if you see two or more of these:

- An unsolicited email praising your “esteemed work” and inviting you to submit

- A promise of acceptance or publication within days
- A fee demanded before any review has happened
- An editorial board of people you cannot find, or from unrelated fields
- An invented impact factor — for example a high "Index Copernicus" score in a journal nobody cites
- No DOI, no real ISSN, or a website with one issue and no archive
- Deadlines that move the moment you ask a question

On fees: many legitimate journals charge an article processing fee, and that alone does not make them predatory — peer review and indexing are the test, not the invoice. Before paying out of pocket, ask your institution's Research or Sponsored Projects desk. For public institutions, TETFund supports staff development and institution-based research, and publication and conference support is usually handled through that desk — but eligibility, ceilings and cycles change, and the National Research Fund applies stricter rules of its own, so confirm with the desk rather than with hearsay.

7. The submission pack, and what happens after

- Cover letter: one page to the Editor-in-Chief — what the paper is, why it fits that journal, and confirmation that it is not under consideration anywhere else.
- Manuscript: formatted to the journal's own template, not to your department's.
- Title page: authors, affiliations, corresponding author and ORCID; keep author details out of the main file if the journal reviews blind.
- Statements: ethics, conflict of interest, funding, and data availability.
- Plagiarism: check your manuscript before you submit, and be ready to show the similarity report.
- Co-authors: agree the author order in writing at the start. Authorship means real contribution — designing, collecting, analysing or writing — not a favour or a fee.
- Never submit the same paper to two journals at once.

The process afterwards: editor screening → peer review → decision (accept, minor revision, major revision, reject) → revision with a point-by-point response letter → proofs → publication. A first decision can take two weeks at a fast local journal and six months at a good international one.

8. The ninety-day plan

Days	What you finish	Output
1–14	Topic locked; 25 papers read and logged	Gap sentence written in one paragraph
15–25	Introduction and literature review drafted	Two sections with references
26–45	Instrument built, piloted, data collected	Questionnaire plus completed responses
46–60	Analysis done, tables ready	Result tables that answer the questions
61–75	Full draft, then review by supervisor or a colleague	Feedback list to work through
76–90	Journal chosen and verified, formatting, similarity check, submission	Submission confirmation and cover letter

Write thirty minutes a day. A paper is thirty minutes a day for a few months — not a weekend. And expect a rejection: it is data about your writing, not a verdict on you.

9. Ten reasons first papers get rejected

6. No clear gap — the reader cannot see why the study was needed.
7. Method copied from a textbook without justifying it for this study.
8. Sample too small, or the sampling method is not described.
9. No theory, so the findings sit on nothing.
10. Results and discussion mixed together.
11. Conclusions claiming more than the data can carry.
12. English and typography that make the work hard to follow.
13. Submitted to the wrong journal — out of scope.
14. Weak, outdated or predatory references.
15. Doubts about the data or about ethics approval.

10. The lines not to cross

- No fabricated, borrowed or “adjusted” data.
- No buying authorship, and no adding a name to please someone.
- No submitting the same paper to two journals.
- No citing papers you have not at least read the abstract and findings of.
- No predatory journal for the sake of a line on a CV — panels are checking now.

Appendix A — Literature matrix

One row per paper. This becomes both your literature review and your reference list.

Author & year	Country / context	Method & sample	Main finding	Gap it leaves	Use in my paper

Appendix B — Journal verification checklist

Tick	Check	Notes
	Listed in DOAJ, Scopus Source List, Web of Science, or AJOL	
	ISSN exists in the ISSN Portal and matches the title	
	The journal states its peer review type and timeline	
	Its last two issues carry papers close to my topic	
	Editorial board members are findable and relevant	
	APC, if any, is published openly and charged after review	
	No unsolicited invitation email started this	
	Not on any predatory list I or my library can find	
	My institution's Research desk has no concern about it	

Appendix C — Where to look

- DOAJ — doaj.org (open access journals that meet published standards)
- Scopus Source List — sources.scopus.com (indexing status)
- Web of Science Master Journal List — mjl.clarivate.com
- AJOL — ajol.info (African journals, widely accepted locally)
- Think. Check. Submit. — thinkchecksubmit.org (the verification habit in one page)
- ICMJE — icmje.org (authorship criteria)
- ORCID — orcid.org (your permanent researcher identity — register before you submit)

- Google Scholar — for finding papers; check impact in Scopus or Web of Science instead

Appendix D — Where Mikkay Technologies can help

The work above is yours; these are the parts that can be handed over or shared:

- Sharpening the topic and writing the gap sentence so it holds up to a panel
- Building the literature matrix with you, and turning it into a proper review
- Designing the instrument and running the reliability and validity checks
- Data analysis in Excel, SPSS or Python, with tables that answer your hypotheses
- Referencing converted to your target journal's style, and a similarity check before you submit
- A plain-English edit that keeps your voice and removes what makes reviewers stumble

Fees are agreed at the meeting, in writing, before any work begins — and if your topic does not need help, I will say so and send you on your way.