Rethinking acknowledgement writing in postgraduate medical theses

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To the Editor,

The acknowledgements section of a postgraduate thesis is typically the last part written and the first part read, yet it is among the least taught components of academic writing. It is one of the few spaces where trainees are expected to express a personal voice, but supervisors rarely offer guidance, and no rubric assesses its clarity or sincerity. The resulting uniformity is not trivial: it offers a window into how trainees learn academic identity, and reaches into the hidden curriculum that shapes writing long before it shapes clinical behaviour.[1]

We describe a simple, no-cost intervention in the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery at a government medical college in northern India, in which all 28 trainees submitting theses in one academic cycle took part. Before writing acknowledgements, we introduced three constraints: a one-page limit, a restriction to one adjective per person thanked, and a single 30-minute peer discussion in which trainees shared what they genuinely valued about their guides and colleagues before writing. The rationale was straightforward — length limits force prioritization, adjective limits prevent formulaic stacking, and discussion surfaces authentic experience.

Changes were immediate. Acknowledgements shortened from an average of three pages to one, and the writing became more direct. Where trainees had previously stacked superlatives such as "extraordinary, brilliant, unparalleled," they now chose single, specific adjectives: "patient," "available," "consistent." Peer discussion surfaced themes largely absent from prior cohorts — supervisor availability, willingness to admit uncertainty, consistency of feedback. One trainee remarked that the limit forced a decision about acknowledging who actually *mattered* rather than who they were supposed to thank.

Formulaic acknowledgement writing is not merely a stylistic habit. Trainees learn through immersion in earlier theses that effusive, hierarchically-appropriate praise is safe while originality carries social risk, and many writing in a second or third language borrow established phrasing where authorial confidence is limited.[2] Textual convergence is, under these conditions, predictable rather than a matter of misconduct. Our intervention disrupted this default without adding teaching burden, illustrating three points: constraints can enable authenticity, reflection benefits from brief social articulation,[3] and peripheral texts offer low-risk opportunities for teaching reflective writing.[4]

This was a single-institution, single-cycle experience without a control group, validated instruments, or follow-up, and observations were qualitative. Yet for educators — particularly in low-resource settings where no faculty time, materials, or curricular change are needed — it suggests that even overlooked aspects of training can support reflective practice and the development of sound academic voice.[5]

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