

Students' Challenges In Academic Writing: A Phenomenological Study

Annisa Rifka Kirana¹, Dodi Siraj Muamar Zain²

¹English Language Education Study Program

²Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

DOI:

[10.30595/pssh.v30i.2268](https://doi.org/10.30595/pssh.v30i.2268)

Submitted:

April 15, 2026

Accepted:

Mei 20, 2026

Published:

July 24, 2026

Keywords:

Academic writing, students' challenges, writing strategies, phenomenological study, EFL students

ABSTRACT

Academic writing is one of the main challenges faced by students, especially in the context of English as a foreign language. This study aims to explore the challenges students face in completing academic writing and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. This research employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students who were completing their academic writing. The findings show that students experienced several challenges, including difficulties in developing ideas and paragraphs, linguistic issues such as grammar and vocabulary, lack of motivation, difficulty finding relevant references, problems related to supervisors, difficulty determining research topics, and limited understanding of academic writing structure. To overcome these challenges, students used several strategies, including using AI tools, reading more academic references, discussing with supervisors, setting personal deadlines, and building self-motivation. These findings indicate that students need both internal strategies and external support to complete academic writing effectively. This study provides insights for students, lecturers, and institutions in supporting the academic writing process.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



Corresponding Author:

Dodi Siraj Muamar Zain

English Language Education Study Program

Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto

KH. Ahmad Dahlan Street, Kembaran, Banyumas Regency, Central Java Province, Indonesia

Email: dodisiraj@ump.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is one of the essential academic responsibilities that university students must complete during their studies. It is not only a requirement for graduation but also a medium through which students demonstrate their ability to think critically, organize ideas, and present arguments systematically. Numan Khazaal (2019) defines academic writing as written work that presents arguments in a logical sequence and is supported by references from other authors in a particular field. Similarly, Subasman (2020) states that academic writing requires valid data to support arguments, meaning that writers cannot rely only on imagination. Therefore, academic writing requires students to express ideas clearly, construct logical sentences, and support their arguments with reliable sources.

However, completing academic writing is not an easy process for students, particularly for those who write in English as a foreign language. Students often experience difficulties in organizing paragraphs

and developing writing ideas. Hafrison (2020) and Fauzan et al. (2022) found that students frequently struggle to organize paragraphs properly and develop their ideas into coherent writing. These difficulties may occur because students have limited knowledge of writing rules, which makes their paragraph organization unclear. In addition, academic writing requires critical thinking skills because students need to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information from various sources (Wijaya, 2022). They are also expected to formulate logical arguments and avoid misinterpretation in their writing (Lestari, 2020; Wymann, 2021).

In addition to idea development and paragraph organization, language issues also become major challenges in academic writing. Students who write in English often face problems related to grammar, vocabulary, and diction. Hairul (2023) explains that students often struggle to write paragraphs using appropriate grammar and word choice. This condition becomes more challenging for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students because they need to transfer their ideas from their first language into English while maintaining grammatical accuracy, academic vocabulary, and coherence. As a result, linguistic problems may affect the clarity and quality of students' academic writing.

Several previous studies have examined students' challenges in completing academic writing. Mali (2023) investigated EFL students' challenges in academic writing from the supervisor's perspective and discussed possible solutions. Hermida (2024), using a quantitative approach, found that vocabulary use, language fluency, mechanical issues, and paragraph organization were among the challenges faced by students. Furthermore, Yanto and Sulistiyo (2019) identified two main challenges faced by students, namely difficulty in finding the correct structure of academic writing and lack of guidance in completing academic writing. Although these studies have discussed students' difficulties in academic writing, further exploration is still needed to understand students' lived experiences more deeply, especially from the perspective of students who are completing their thesis.

Based on this gap, the present study focuses on exploring the challenges faced by students in academic writing and the strategies they use to overcome those challenges. Unlike previous studies, this research applies a phenomenological approach to obtain more in-depth findings regarding students' experiences in completing academic writing. Therefore, this study is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the challenges students face in academic writing? and (2) What strategies do students use to overcome their challenges in academic writing?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research was used because this study aimed to explore students' lived experiences in facing challenges during the academic writing process. More specifically, the phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it allowed the researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding of the challenges experienced by students when completing academic writing. The participants of this study were selected using purposive sampling. The participants were students who were completing academic writing in the form of a thesis. From 81 students who were working on their final assignments, 15 students were selected based on several criteria: they were English Language Education students at a private university in Indonesia, they were completing their thesis, and they used Indonesian as their mother tongue. The number of participants was considered suitable for qualitative phenomenological research because it allowed the researcher to collect rich and detailed data from students' experiences. The main instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview. This instrument was chosen because it provided flexibility for the researcher to explore students' experiences more deeply. The interview questions focused on students' perceptions of academic writing, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to overcome those challenges. The framework of the interview questions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Framework of Interview Questions

Aspect of the Question	Question Number	Examples of the Questions
Significance of academic writing	1, 2	What are the benefits of academic writing for students? How important is academic writing for students?

Difficulties in academic writing	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9	What are the challenges you often face in academic writing?
Strategies to overcome the difficulties	10, 11	What strategies did you use to deal with the challenges you mentioned earlier? What are the factors that support the completion of academic writing?

The data collection procedure was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher identified potential participants by requesting data on students who were completing academic writing. After identifying students who met the criteria, the researcher contacted them and invited them to participate in the study. Second, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews based on the participants' availability. The interviews began on October 26, 2024. Each interview was conducted in Indonesian to help participants express their experiences more clearly. The interview process lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was recorded with the participants' permission. Third, the collected data were transcribed manually and electronically. The researcher also used Google Translate to assist the translation process, but the results were manually reviewed to ensure accuracy. After the transcription process was completed, the transcripts were returned to the participants for verification to ensure that the data matched what they had conveyed during the interviews.

The data were analyzed using coding and inductive thematic analysis. In the first cycle of coding, the researcher identified important words, phrases, and clauses related to the research focus. In the second cycle, the initial codes were reorganized and grouped into broader categories. After that, the researcher used inductive thematic analysis to identify themes that emerged from the data. Through this process, the data were classified into themes related to students' challenges in academic writing and the strategies used to overcome them.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher maintained accuracy during the data collection and analysis process. The researcher reread the interview transcripts carefully and asked the participants to confirm the information obtained from the interviews. This process was conducted to minimize bias and ensure that the findings accurately represented the participants' experiences.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

This section presents the findings and discussion of students' challenges in academic writing and the strategies they used to overcome those challenges. Based on the results of thematic analysis, five major themes were identified: developing ideas, linguistic issues, faculty support, limited resources, and motivation to succeed. These themes represent the main challenges experienced by students in completing academic writing.

The first challenge faced by students was developing ideas. The findings showed that students had difficulty expressing ideas into written form, even when they already understood the topic in their minds. Some students stated that they knew what they wanted to write, but they struggled to transform their ideas into clear sentences and coherent paragraphs. This difficulty was also related to limited knowledge of the research topic. When students did not have enough understanding of their topic, they found it hard to generate ideas, connect arguments, and determine what information should be included in their writing.

In addition, students experienced difficulties in maintaining coherence and cohesion in their academic writing. They needed to ensure that each sentence and paragraph was logically connected to the previous one. However, many students found it difficult to arrange their ideas systematically. They also struggled to combine their own ideas with information from previous studies. Another challenge related to idea development was paraphrasing. Several students reported that paraphrasing was difficult because they had to maintain the original meaning of the source while avoiding plagiarism. This condition made them feel uncertain when citing or restating ideas from previous research.

To overcome these challenges, students used several strategies. Many students read journal articles and previous studies to improve their understanding of the topic and gain more ideas. Reading academic

sources helped them understand how ideas were developed and organized in scholarly writing. In addition, students used AI tools such as ChatGPT, Perplexity AI, Gemini AI, DeepL, and QuillBot to help them brainstorm ideas, construct sentences, and paraphrase texts. Some students also discussed their ideas with friends and supervisors to obtain feedback and develop their writing more effectively.

The second challenge was related to linguistic issues. Since the students wrote their academic writing in English, they faced difficulties in grammar, translation, vocabulary, and punctuation. Grammar became one of the most common problems because students had to understand sentence structure, tense usage, and differences between Indonesian and English grammar. Some students stated that changing sentence forms from proposal writing to final thesis writing was confusing because they had to adjust the tense according to the research stage.

Translation was also a challenge because students often needed to translate their ideas from Indonesian into English. This process was not only about changing words from one language to another but also adjusting sentence structure and academic style. Students were concerned that inaccurate translation could cause grammatical errors or unclear meaning. Besides grammar and translation, students also had limited academic vocabulary. Some students felt that their vocabulary was too basic, monotonous, and less academic. This made their writing appear less formal and less professional. In addition, punctuation errors were also found, especially in complex sentences.

To deal with linguistic challenges, students relied on technology and academic reading. They used Grammarly to check grammar, spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary. DeepL, Google Translate, and Bing Translator were used to assist the translation process. QuillBot and ChatGPT were used to paraphrase sentences and improve sentence structure. In addition, some students used Thesaurus to find alternative words and make their vocabulary more varied. Reading journal articles also helped students learn academic vocabulary, sentence patterns, and formal writing styles.

The third theme was faculty support. The findings showed that supervisors played an important role in students' academic writing process. However, students also faced several challenges related to supervision. One of the main challenges was difficulty arranging meetings with supervisors. Students stated that supervisors were often busy, and meeting schedules were sometimes changed. This condition delayed the writing process because students needed approval and feedback before continuing to the next stage. Another challenge was short guidance time. Some students felt that the time given during consultation sessions was too limited, so they could not discuss their problems in detail. In addition, unclear feedback made students confused about how to revise their writing. Some students stated that feedback from supervisors was not detailed enough, while others experienced inconsistent feedback from one meeting to another. Students also faced challenges in choosing research topics because their proposed topics were sometimes rejected by supervisors. They had to find topics that were current, relevant, and suitable for their supervisors' expectations.

To overcome these challenges, students tried to become more active in communicating with supervisors. They contacted their supervisors regularly and adjusted their schedules to match the supervisors' availability. When students did not understand the feedback, they asked for clarification from their supervisors, discussed the problem with friends, or consulted other lecturers. For topic selection, students discussed their ideas with supervisors and revised their topics based on suggestions until they found a suitable research focus.

The fourth challenge was limited resources. Students had difficulty finding relevant references to support their academic writing. Some students stated that journals related to their research topics were difficult to access because they were locked, paid, or only partially available. In addition, some supervisors required students to use recent references, especially articles published within the last five years. This requirement made the process more difficult because students needed to find references that were both relevant and up-to-date. To solve this problem, students searched for alternative sources from other websites, online databases, and libraries. Some students used books when they could not access the journal articles they needed. Others used AI-based research tools such as ResearchRabbit, Connected Papers, and Consensus AI to find references related to their research topics. These tools helped students identify relevant articles and explore connected studies more efficiently.

The fifth theme was motivation to succeed. The findings showed that students often experienced low motivation, procrastination, and burnout during the academic writing process. Some students lost motivation because they felt overwhelmed by revisions, unclear feedback, or the large amount of work they had to complete. External factors such as an unsupportive environment, other responsibilities, and distractions also affected students' concentration and motivation. To overcome motivational challenges, students developed personal strategies. Some students forced themselves to continue writing even when they felt unmotivated. Others created personal deadlines to help them complete each part of their thesis on time. Students also built motivation by remembering their goals, such as graduating soon, getting a job, continuing their studies, and making their parents proud. These personal motivations helped them stay focused and continue working on their academic writing.

Table 2. Themes of Students' Challenges and Strategies in Academic Writing

No.	Themes	Challenges	Strategies
1	Developing ideas	Difficulty developing ideas, organizing paragraphs, maintaining coherence and cohesion, and paraphrasing sources	Reading academic articles, using AI tools, brainstorming, and discussing with peers or supervisors
2	Linguistic issues	Grammar problems, translation difficulties, limited vocabulary, and punctuation errors	Using Grammarly, DeepL, QuillBot, ChatGPT, Bing, and reading academic texts
3	Faculty support	Difficulty meeting supervisors, short guidance time, unclear feedback, inconsistent feedback, and difficulty determining research topics	Actively contacting supervisors, adjusting schedules, asking for clarification, and consulting peers or other lecturers
4	Limited resources	Difficulty finding relevant, recent, and accessible references	Searching alternative sources, using AI-based research tools, and consulting supervisors
5	Motivation to succeed	Lack of motivation, procrastination, burnout, external distractions, and unsupportive environment	Setting personal deadlines, building self-motivation, remembering personal goals, and developing responsibility

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that students' challenges in academic writing are complex and interconnected. The difficulty in developing ideas is one of the most dominant challenges. Students often struggled to transform their thoughts into coherent academic paragraphs. This finding is in line with Muhlisin and Imran (2023), who found that limited knowledge of the topic can hinder students from developing well-structured paragraphs. Similarly, Dewi et al. (2023) stated that students often experience problems in maintaining coherence and unity in their writing. Therefore, students need sufficient knowledge, critical thinking, and reading habits to develop their ideas effectively.

Linguistic issues also became a major challenge for students. Grammar, vocabulary, translation, and punctuation affected the quality of their academic writing. This finding supports Fitria (2022), who revealed that grammar is one of the main problems faced by EFL students in academic writing. Limited vocabulary also makes students' writing monotonous and less academic, as supported by Noori (2020) and Tukan (2024). Since the participants wrote their academic writing in English, they needed to master not only the content of their research but also the language features required in academic texts.

The findings also show that AI tools were frequently used by students to overcome writing challenges. ChatGPT helped students brainstorm ideas and organize sentences, while Grammarly helped them correct grammatical errors and improve vocabulary. DeepL and Google Translate supported translation, and QuillBot assisted paraphrasing. This finding is consistent with Imran and Almusharraf (2023), who stated that ChatGPT can function as a writing assistant in higher education. Similarly, Ghufon

and Rosyida (2018) explained that Grammarly can help students improve grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation. However, students still need to use AI critically because academic writing requires originality, understanding, and responsibility from the writer.

Supervisor-related challenges were also found in this study. Students experienced difficulties in meeting supervisors, understanding feedback, and dealing with inconsistent comments. This finding supports Alostath (2021), who found that students often struggle to communicate with supervisors during the thesis writing process. In addition, Zheng et al. (2020) argued that unclear feedback can make students uncertain about how to improve their writing. Therefore, effective communication between students and supervisors is important to support the completion of academic writing.

Limited access to references also became an obstacle for students. Students had difficulty finding relevant and recent sources because some journals were paid or inaccessible. This finding is in line with Dina (2021), who stated that students often struggle to find references for their literature review, especially when the articles are locked behind paywalls. In this study, students addressed this problem by searching alternative sources and using AI-based research tools such as ResearchRabbit, Consensus AI, and Connected Papers. These tools helped students discover relevant literature and improve the efficiency of their reference search. Motivation was another important factor in academic writing. Students experienced procrastination, burnout, and lack of motivation, especially when they received many revisions or unclear feedback. This finding is supported by Fitriah et al. (2016), who stated that procrastination can reduce students' motivation in completing their thesis. Amalia and Jaya (2023) also found that external factors, such as other responsibilities and unsupportive environments, can delay thesis completion. In this study, students tried to overcome this challenge by setting deadlines, forcing themselves to write, and remembering their personal goals.

Overall, the findings show that students' challenges in academic writing include cognitive, linguistic, institutional, resource-related, and motivational aspects. The strategies used by students also varied, including the use of AI tools, extensive reading, active discussion with supervisors, searching alternative references, and self-motivation. These strategies helped students manage the difficulties they faced and complete their academic writing more effectively

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored students' challenges in academic writing and the strategies they used to overcome them. The findings showed that students faced several challenges, including difficulties in developing ideas and paragraphs, linguistic problems related to grammar, vocabulary, translation, and punctuation, limited motivation, difficulty finding relevant and recent references, challenges in the supervision process, difficulty choosing research topics, and limited understanding of academic writing structure. These challenges indicate that academic writing is not only related to writing ability but also involves cognitive, linguistic, institutional, and motivational aspects.

To overcome these challenges, students applied various strategies. They used AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, DeepL, QuillBot, Consensus AI, Connected Papers, and ResearchRabbit to help develop ideas, improve language quality, paraphrase texts, translate sentences, and find references. In addition, students read more academic sources, discussed actively with supervisors, consulted peers or other lecturers, set personal deadlines, and built self-motivation to complete their writing. Therefore, the results of this study suggest that students need to combine technological assistance, academic reading habits, effective communication with supervisors, and strong personal motivation to complete academic writing successfully.

REFERENCES

- Amalia, N. N., & Jaya, H. P. (2023). Factors hindering the students in completing their undergraduate thesis: a study at an English education study program in Indonesia. *IJLECR (International Journal of Language Education and Cultural Review)*, 9(2), 24-36. <https://doi.org/10.21009/ijlecr.v9i2.37472>
- Dewi, A. N., Pratikno, H., & Silviany, I. Y. (2023). Integrated elements of paragraph in unisba student's writing. *KnE Social Sciences*, 1185–1201-1185–1201. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v8i18.14320>

- Dewi, D. (2016). Improving critical thinking in academic writing through portfolio in higher education. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2991/ICSE-15.2016.89>.
- Dina, Y. (2021). *EFL undergraduate students' difficulties in writing literature review of their thesis*. Universitas Jambi.
- Fauzan, U., Hasanah, N., & Hadijah, S. (2022). The undergraduate students' difficulties in writing. *Indonesian Journal of EFL and Linguistics*, 7(1), 175. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21462/ijefl.v7i1.515>
- Fitria, T. N. (2021). Grammarly as AI-powered English writing assistant: students' alternative for writing English. *Metathesis: Journal of English Language, Literature, and Teaching*, 5(1), 65-78. doi:<https://doi.org/10.31002/metathesis.v5i1.3519>
- Fitria, T. N. (2021). QuillBot as an online tool: Students' alternative in paraphrasing and rewriting of English writing. *English: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 9(1), 183-196. <http://dx.doi.org/10.22373/ej.v9i1.10233>
- Fitria, T. N. (2022). Analysis of EFL student's difficulties in writing and completing English thesis. *LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching*, 25(1), 295-309. <https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v25i1.3607>
- Fitriah, Z., Kurniawan, K., & Hartati, M. T. S. (2016). Faktor penyebab prokrastinasi akademik penyusunan skripsi pada mahasiswa FIP UNNES. *Indonesian Journal of Guidance and Counseling: Theory and Application*, 5(4), 46-51. <https://doi.org/10.15294/ijgc.v5i4.13522>
- Ghufron, M. A., & Rosyida, F. (2018). The role of Grammarly in assessing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing. *Lingua Cultura*, 12(4), 395-403. <https://doi.org/10.21512/lc.v12i4.4582>
- Hafrison, M. (2020). Student writers' academic essay writing problems: students' and teachers' responses. Paper presented at the The 3rd International Conference on Language, Literature, and Education (ICLLE 2020). <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.201109.043>
- Hairul. (2023). Writing effectively for English academic essays: an exploration of tertiary students' challenges. *Erudita: Journal of English Language Teaching*. <https://doi.org/10.28918/erudita.v3i1.6993>.
- Hermida, R. (2024). Student challenges in academic paragraph writing: A quantitative study. *ACCENTIA: Journal of English Language and Education*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.37598/accentia.v4i2.2270>
- Imran, M., & Almusharraf, N. (2023). Analyzing the role of ChatGPT as a writing assistant at higher education level: A systematic review of the literature. *Contemporary Educational*
- Mali, Y. C. G. (2023a). EFL students' challenges in writing research proposals. *LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching*, 26(1), 272-289. <https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v26i1.5296>
- Noori, A. (2020). An investigation of Afghan undergraduate English major students' academic writing difficulties. <https://doi.org/10.18196/ftl.5249>
- Numan Khazaal, E. (2019). Improving postgraduates' academic writing skills with summarizing strategy. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Volume*, 10. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3466042>
- Subasman, I. (2020). *Academic Writing: Buku Pendamping Pelatihan 20 Hari Menulis 5 Paragraf Ilmiah*. Jawa Barat: Perkumpulan Pusat Studi Pengembangan Mutu Pendidikan.
- Wijaya, K. (2022). English education master students' perceptions on developing critical thinking skills in academic writing. *SAGA: Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 3(2), 125-136. <https://doi.org/10.21460/saga.2022.32.116>
- Wymann, C. (2021). *Mind your writing: how to be a professional academic writer*: Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Yanto, Y., & Sulistiyo, U. (2019). Students' difficulties In Writing Their Thesis In English At English Education Study Program Jambi University. Paper presented at the International Seminar and Annual Meeting BKS-PTN Wilayah Barat.
- Zheng, Y., Yu, S., Wang, B., & Zhang, Y. (2020). Exploring student engagement with supervisor feedback on master's thesis: Insights from a case study. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2019.1617181>