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# The Struggle to Write: Understanding and Overcoming Academic Writing Challenges in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Academic writing is a fundamental competency in higher education; however, many university students, particularly those learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), continue to experience persistent difficulties in mastering this skill. Despite the growing body of research on academic writing challenges, limited attention has been given to students' perceptions of institutional and instructional support in Indonesian higher education contexts. This study aims to explore the main challenges faced by undergraduate students in academic writing and to examine how they perceive the support provided by lecturers, peers, and academic resources. Employing a qualitative descriptive research design, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 30 undergraduate students from the English Language Education Department at UHN I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar. The questionnaire addressed linguistic challenges, writing strategies, affective factors, and perceived academic support. The data were analyzed descriptively using SPSS to identify dominant patterns and tendencies. The findings indicate that students commonly struggle with organizing ideas, using appropriate academic vocabulary, managing time effectively, and applying grammar and referencing conventions accurately. While lecturer guidance and peer feedback were generally perceived as supportive, access to institutional writing resources such as writing centers and workshops was considered limited or unclear by many students. These results suggest that academic writing difficulties are multidimensional, involving linguistic, cognitive, affective, and institutional factors. The study highlights the importance of structured writing instruction, continuous formative feedback, and enhanced institutional support systems to improve students' academic writing competence. The findings contribute to the ongoing discussion on EFL academic writing pedagogy and provide practical implications for lecturers and higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** Academic Writing, Writing Challenges, EFL Learners, Higher Education

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## Introduction

Academic writing is an essential skill for success in higher education, as it enables students to demonstrate critical thinking, engage with scholarly discourse, and communicate ideas systematically. However, many university students, especially English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, experience ongoing difficulties in producing effective academic texts. These difficulties arise from the complex demands of academic writing,

which require linguistic accuracy, rhetorical awareness, and cognitive maturity (Hyland, 2016; Bai, 2019).

Previous studies have identified linguistic challenges—such as limited academic vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and weak cohesion—as major obstacles for EFL students. Indonesian learners, in particular, often struggle to express ideas precisely due to restricted exposure to academic discourse (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2016; Al Fadda, 2019). In addition, ineffective writing strategies, including poor planning and limited revision practices, further hinder students' writing development (Zhang, 2020; Lim & Chew, 2023).

Beyond linguistic and strategic issues, affective factors such as writing anxiety and low self-efficacy significantly influence students' academic writing performance. Research shows that students with high anxiety tend to avoid revision and feedback, resulting in lower writing quality (Sa'adan et al., 2024; Bai & Wang, 2021). Moreover, the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in academic writing presents both opportunities and challenges, as these tools may support language accuracy while simultaneously raising concerns about originality and academic integrity (Zhou & Yeo, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Although numerous studies have examined academic writing difficulties among EFL learners, most focus primarily on linguistic errors or instructional techniques. There remains a lack of research that simultaneously investigates students' writing challenges and their perceptions of academic support systems—particularly within Indonesian higher education institutions. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of how institutional, instructional, and peer support interact with students' writing development.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the main academic writing challenges faced by undergraduate students and to explore how they perceive the support provided by lecturers, peers, and institutional resources. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to EFL writing research and practically to the improvement of academic writing instruction, curriculum design, and student support services in higher education.

The research question posed in this study is:

1. "What are the main challenges faced by university students in academic writing?"
2. "How do students perceive the support they receive in developing their academic writing skills?"

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore undergraduate students' academic writing challenges and perceptions of support. This approach was chosen to capture participants' experiences and viewpoints in a natural educational context, allowing for a nuanced understanding of writing difficulties beyond numerical trends (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The participants consisted of 30 undergraduate students from the English Language Education Department at UHN I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar. Convenience sampling was applied, with participants selected based on their completion of at least one academic writing course to ensure relevant experience.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from previous validated studies (Al Fadda, 2019; Bai & Wang, 2021). The instrument covered linguistic challenges,

writing strategies, affective factors, and perceptions of academic support. Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms after obtaining informed consent. Data collection occurred over two weeks during the 2024–2025 academic year. Data were analyzed descriptively using SPSS version 26 to identify dominant patterns. Methodological rigor was ensured through clear operationalization of variables, consistency of instruments, and alignment with established research frameworks, supporting the validity and reliability of findings.

### Participants

The participants were 30 undergraduate students majoring in English Language Education Department at UHN I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, focusing on students who had taken at least one academic writing course. The sample included students from various academic years to ensure a range of writing experiences.

### Instrument

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire developed and adapted from previous studies on writing challenges (Al Fadda, 2019; Bai & Wang, 2021). The questionnaire consisted of two parts:

1. Academic Writing Challenges – 5 items measuring difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, organization, coherence, and referencing.
2. Affective Factors – 5 items measuring writing anxiety and self-efficacy.

Items were measured using a 5-point Ordinal, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

### Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided informed consent. Data was collected over the course of two weeks in the fourth semester of the 2024–2025 academic year.

### Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. The questionnaire consisted of multiple items measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

### Result and Discussion

#### I often struggle to organize my ideas clearly in academic writing

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. I often struggle to organize my ideas	1	3,2	3,2	3,2

clearly in academic writing.

Agree	15	48,4	48,4	51,6
Disagree	3	9,7	9,7	61,3
Neutral	9	29,0	29,0	90,3
Strongly Agree	1	3,2	3,2	93,5
Strongly Disagree	2	6,5	6,5	100,0
Total	31	100,0	100,0	

Agree (48.4%) and Strongly Agree (3.2%) responses indicate that more than half of the students (51.6%) face challenges in organizing their thoughts. Only 9.7% disagreed, and 6.5% strongly disagreed.

This suggests that coherence and logical flow in writing is a common difficulty. Students might know what they want to say but lack the skills to structure it clearly. This points to a need for explicit teaching on planning and outlining before writing, using methods such as mind-mapping or paragraph organization models.

#### **I find it difficult to use appropriate academic vocabulary and expressions.**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2. I find it difficult to use appropriate academic vocabulary and expressions.	1	3,2	3,2	3,2
	Agree	13	41,9	41,9	45,2
	Disagree	5	16,1	16,1	61,3
	Neutral	9	29,0	29,0	90,3
	Strongly agree	2	6,5	6,5	96,8
	Strongly Disagree	1	3,2	3,2	100,0
	Total	31	100,0	100,0	

Around 48.4% of the students (Agree + Strongly Agree) admitted they struggle with academic vocabulary. Nearly a third (29%) were neutral, suggesting uncertainty or inconsistency in their usage.

This indicates that vocabulary remains a barrier to producing formal, academic tone. Students may rely on everyday or informal words due to lack of exposure or instruction on academic expressions. Targeted vocabulary lists, genre-based writing, and academic phrase banks can be helpful tools here.

### **Grammar and sentence structure are major obstacles when I write academic papers.**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3. Grammar and sentence structure are major obstacles when I write academic papers.	1	3,2	3,2	3,2
	Agree	12	38,7	38,7	41,9
	Disagree	2	6,5	6,5	48,4
	Neutral	14	45,2	45,2	93,5
	Strongly Agree	2	6,5	6,5	100,0
	Total	31	100,0	100,0	

38.7% agreed and 6.5% strongly agreed that grammar is a challenge. A large portion (45.2%) were neutral, which may indicate that while grammar isn't their biggest problem, it's still not a strength.

While not the top concern for all students, grammar and syntax still pose a barrier for a substantial portion of respondents. Neutral responses suggest students might not be confident about their grammar skills or might not recognize grammatical errors in their writing. Writing workshops focused on sentence structure, transitions, and subject-verb agreement could improve this.

### **I lack confidence in citing and referencing sources correctly (e.g., APA style).**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	4. I lack confidence in citing and referencing sources correctly (e.g., APA style).	1	3,2	3,2	3,2
	Agree	11	35,5	35,5	38,7
	Disagree	3	9,7	9,7	48,4
	Neutral	12	38,7	38,7	87,1
	Strongly Agree	2	6,5	6,5	93,5
	Strongly Disagree	2	6,5	6,5	100,0
	Total	31	100,0	100,0	

42% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they struggle with citation. 38.7% were neutral, and only 16.2% expressed disagreement.

Students may have been introduced to referencing, but still feel uncertain or undertrained, especially in consistent citation practices like APA formatting. This calls for more practical exercises, citation tools (like Zotero or Mendeley), and feedback focused on referencing.

### **Time management is a challenge for me when completing academic writing assignments.**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	5. Time management is a challenge for me when completing academic writing assignments.	1	3,2	3,2	3,2
	Agree	14	45,2	45,2	48,4
	Disagree	5	16,1	16,1	64,5
	Neutral	5	16,1	16,1	80,6
	Strongly Agree	6	19,4	19,4	100,0
	Total	31	100,0	100,0	

Over 64.6% (Agree + Strongly Agree) acknowledged time management as a difficulty. Only 16.1% were neutral or disagreed.

This is one of the most common challenges. It indicates that while students may understand writing conventions, they struggle with planning their work, balancing deadlines, and avoiding procrastination. Time management strategies, such as progress checklists, writing schedules, and staged submissions (drafts, revisions), could support student success.

### **I receive adequate guidance from my lecturers on how to improve my academic writing**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	6. I receive adequate guidance from my lecturers on how to improve my academic writing.	1	3,2	3,2	3,2
	Agree	13	41,9	41,9	45,2
	Disagree	2	6,5	6,5	51,6
	Neutral	13	41,9	41,9	93,5
	Strongly Agree	2	6,5	6,5	100,0
	Total	31	100,0	100,0	

41.9% agreed, 6.5% strongly agreed, and another 41.9% were neutral. Only 6.5% disagreed.

Lecturer support is generally perceived as adequate, but the large neutral response indicates that not all students are benefiting equally. Some might need more individualized feedback or one-on-one consultation to feel confident in their progress.

### **The feedback I get on my writing assignments helps me become a better writer.**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	7. The feedback I get on my writing assignments helps me become a better writer.	1	3,2	3,2	3,2

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Agree	14	45,2	45,2	48,4
Disagree	2	6,5	6,5	54,8
Neutral	6	19,4	19,4	74,2
Strongly Agree	7	22,6	22,6	96,8
Strongly Disagree	1	3,2	3,2	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

A large percentage of students (67.8%) found feedback helpful (Agree + Strongly Agree). Only 9.7% disagreed, and 19.4% remained neutral.

Feedback is seen as a crucial tool for development, confirming that students value constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement. This highlights the importance of timely, detailed, and formative feedback that focuses on both strengths and areas to improve.

#### **I feel that academic writing courses in my department are effective and helpful.**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	8. I feel that academic writing courses in my department are effective and helpful.	1	3,2	3,2	3,2
	Agree	12	38,7	38,7	41,9
	Disagree	3	9,7	9,7	51,6
	Neutral	10	32,3	32,3	83,9
	Strongly Agree	5	16,1	16,1	100,0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

38.7% agreed, 16.1% strongly agreed. 32.3% neutral and only 9.7% disagreed.

Most students recognize the value of writing courses, but some remain unsure of their effectiveness. This may relate to teaching methods, course content, or lack of follow-up practice. Curriculum improvements, such as practical applications and writing across the curriculum (WAC), could enhance course outcomes.

#### **I have access to writing resources such as writing centers, workshops, or tutors.**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	9. I have access to writing resources such as writing centers, workshops, or tutors.	1	3,2	3,2	3,2
	Agree	11	35,5	35,5	38,7
	Disagree	5	16,1	16,1	54,8
	Neutral	13	41,9	41,9	96,8
	Strongly Agree	1	3,2	3,2	100,0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

Only 38.7% confirmed access (Agree + Strongly Agree). A large 41.9% were neutral, and 16.1% disagreed.

This reflects either limited availability of writing support or lack of awareness about existing resources. Academic institutions should better promote these services and possibly integrate them directly into course activities

### **I feel supported by my peers (classmates) when working on academic writing tasks.**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	10. I feel supported by my peers (classmates) when working on academic writing tasks.	1	3,2	3,2	3,2
	Agree	14	45,2	45,2	48,4
	Disagree	3	9,7	9,7	58,1
	Neutral	8	25,8	25,8	83,9
	Strongly Agree	5	16,1	16,1	100,0
	Total	31	100,0	100,0	

61.3% agreed or strongly agreed they feel peer support. Only 9.7% disagreed, and 25.8% were neutral.

Peer collaboration is seen positively, indicating that group work, peer reviews, and writing circles are effective. Encouraging more structured peer interaction can boost writing motivation and learning.

The findings indicate that idea organization, academic vocabulary, time management, and referencing skills are the most prominent challenges faced by students. These results align with Hyland's (2016) theory that academic writing requires mastery of genre conventions and rhetorical structure. Difficulties in organization reflect limited genre awareness and planning strategies (Zhang, 2020).

Vocabulary and grammar challenges support previous findings that EFL learners often lack sufficient exposure to academic language input (Bai, 2019; Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2016). Neutral responses regarding grammar suggest limited metalinguistic awareness, which may hinder self-editing abilities.

From a sociocultural perspective, lecturer feedback and peer support play a significant role in students' writing development. The positive perception of feedback aligns with Vygotskian notions of learning through social interaction and scaffolding (Lim & Chew, 2023). However, limited access to institutional writing resources indicates a structural gap that may restrict students' independent writing development.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that academic writing challenges among undergraduate EFL students are multidimensional, encompassing linguistic, cognitive, affective, and institutional factors. While students generally perceive lecturer guidance and peer feedback

positively, persistent difficulties in organization, vocabulary, time management, and referencing remain evident.

The findings imply that higher education institutions should strengthen academic writing instruction through explicit strategy training, sustained formative feedback, and increased access to writing support services. Future research is recommended to involve larger samples, mixed-method designs, or experimental interventions to examine the effectiveness of specific writing support programs and emerging digital tools.

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