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Investigating Academic Writing: Exploring English Department Students' Perceptions of Challenges

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Abstract

Academic writing is a crucial component of university education, yet it remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL students. This study investigates the perceptions of English Department students at IAIN Kerinci regarding the challenges they face in academic writing. Using a mixed-method approach, the research involved four undergraduate students who had completed academic writing courses in previous semester. Data were collected through writing performance tests and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative findings indicate that students performed well in content (average score: 7.5) but struggled significantly with writing coherence (4.5). vocabulary and grammar showed standard capability (6.875 and 6.25). The qualitative results revealed deeper challenges, including difficulties in constructing coherent paragraphs, selecting appropriate vocabulary, applying complex grammar structures, and managing writing anxiety. Contributing factors included lack of motivation, limited reading habits, and insufficient exposure to academic texts. Furthermore, students emphasized the importance of feedback from lecturers and self-reflection as key strategies for development. The findings suggest that while students may be confident in generating ideas, they require more support in expressing those ideas effectively through structured, cohesive academic writing. This study contributes to the field by highlighting the need for integrating linguistic, motivational, and strategic instruction in EFL academic writing contexts.

Keywords: *Academic writing, student's perception, academic writing anxiety, academic writing challenges, EFL Students*

Introduction

Academic writing is a crucial component of university education, especially for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Despite its importance, many EFL students find academic writing to be one of the most challenging skills to master. In Indonesia, these challenges are often intensified by linguistic differences, limited access to academic resources, and a lack of writing practice in earlier stages of education (Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024; Ratnawati et al., 2018). As a result, students frequently struggle to produce writing that is coherent, logically structured, and aligned with formal academic standards.

The difficulty for EFL learners goes beyond translating ideas into English. Academic writing involves more than grammar and vocabulary; it requires the ability to build logical arguments, engage with scholarly sources, and use appropriate rhetorical strategies. According to Hyland (2022), successful academic writing depends on the writer's ability to participate in academic discourse communities, which involves adopting a suitable tone, structure, and citation style. Similarly, Swales and Feak (Huebner, 2019) highlight the importance of understanding disciplinary conventions and positioning oneself within a scholarly conversation.

One major barrier faced by Indonesian EFL students is the structural difference between English and Bahasa Indonesia. While English relies heavily on grammatical rules such as tense consistency, subject-verb agreement, and complex sentence construction, Bahasa Indonesia allows for more flexible and implicit expression (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022). These differences make it difficult for students to transition into academic writing in English, often resulting in disorganized texts, unclear meaning, and poor logical flow (Duah & McGivern, 2024). Furthermore, limited academic vocabulary restricts students' ability to convey abstract or complex ideas effectively (Akhtar et al., 2019).

In addition to linguistic barriers, many students hold misconceptions about the nature of writing. Academic writing is often seen as a one-step product rather than a recursive process involving planning, drafting, revising, and editing. As Flower and Hayes (1981) explain, writing is a cognitive process that benefits from multiple stages of development. However, this understanding is not always conveyed in classroom instruction. As a result, many students write simply to complete assignments without reflecting on their ideas or revising their drafts, leading to underdeveloped content and limited clarity (Alhojailan, 2021).

Psychological factors also contribute to students' academic writing difficulties. Feelings of anxiety, fear of judgment, and lack of self-confidence are common among EFL writers (Khati, 2024). Some students believe that writing ability is a fixed talent rather than a skill that can be developed, which discourages them from practicing or seeking feedback (Al-Zubaidi, 2012). This mindset not only hampers progress but also reinforces avoidance behavior when faced with writing tasks.

A lack of regular reading habits further exacerbates these problems. Students who do not frequently engage with academic texts are less familiar with how arguments are structured, how sources are integrated, and how academic tone is maintained. According to Nenotek (2022), students who regularly read scholarly materials tend to perform better in terms of coherence, vocabulary usage, and rhetorical awareness. Reading, therefore, serves not only as a means of acquiring knowledge but also as a model for academic writing practice.

Another challenge lies in students' limited awareness of genre conventions. Each academic discipline has specific expectations regarding structure, tone, and formatting. Without proper instruction or exposure to model texts, students may mix informal and formal language or fail to follow academic formatting guidelines (Huebner, 2019). Genre-based pedagogical approaches, which involve analyzing and emulating sample academic texts, have been shown to improve students' understanding of disciplinary expectations and rhetorical structure.

Feedback also plays a crucial role in developing academic writing skills. While many students depend on teachers to identify and correct their mistakes, the effectiveness of feedback depends largely on how it is delivered and received. Scaffolded feedback—step-by-step guidance tailored to specific areas of improvement—has proven more beneficial than vague comments such as "improve grammar" (Akhtar et al., 2019). Moreover, feedback often reveals issues that students themselves may not recognize, such as problems with cohesion or argument development (Duah & McGivern, 2024). Nevertheless, students' ability to interpret and apply feedback meaningfully is influenced by their confidence and motivation to improve.

Recent data from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (2023) indicate that over 65% of undergraduate EFL students in rural areas report struggling with academic writing, particularly in terms of coherence, argumentation, and vocabulary. In institutions such as IAIN Kerinci—a small Islamic university located in a remote region of Indonesia—these challenges are compounded by limited access to academic support, insufficient exposure to English-medium texts, and a lack of writing culture outside the classroom. Compared to students in larger or urban universities, those at peripheral institutions often receive less targeted writing instruction, which hinders the development of their academic literacy skills.

While similar academic writing issues have been reported in other EFL contexts, such as in Saudi Arabia and Nepal (Al-Mukdad, 2019; Khati, 2024), few studies have focused on students in Indonesia's smaller Islamic universities. Most existing research targets general university populations or postgraduate students, leaving a gap in our understanding of how undergraduate students in under-resourced regions perceive their academic writing challenges and how those perceptions align with actual performance. This gap is significant because

students' beliefs about their writing abilities influence their learning strategies, motivation, and willingness to seek help.

This study aims to address that gap by exploring the academic writing challenges experienced by English department students at IAIN Kerinci. It adopts a mixed-method approach to examine the relationship between students' perceptions of their writing difficulties and the patterns observed in their actual written work. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What academic writing challenges do English department students at IAIN Kerinci perceive themselves to have?
2. To what extent do these perceptions align with the actual challenges identified in their writing?
3. What pedagogical implications can be drawn to support EFL academic writing instruction in similar educational contexts?

This research is grounded in two key theoretical frameworks: the process-oriented approach to writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981), which views writing as a recursive and cognitive process, and the genre-based approach (Hyland, 2004), which emphasizes the role of context, audience, and textual models in learning academic writing. These frameworks support a deeper understanding of both student experiences and their written performance.

The findings of this study are expected to inform the development of more effective academic writing instruction in EFL contexts, particularly in non-metropolitan and resource-limited institutions. By highlighting the gap between perceived and actual writing challenges, the research offers valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers aiming to enhance academic writing proficiency among EFL students. In doing so, it contributes not only to local educational improvement but also to the broader conversation on supporting academic literacy in global EFL settings.

Method

Research Design

This study applied a mixed-method approach to investigate the perceptions of English Department students at IAIN Kerinci toward challenges in academic writing. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed the researcher to examine both the actual writing performance and the students' personal experiences (Creswell, 2018).

The subject of this research has four students of the English Department of IAIN Kerinci who took the Academic Writing courses. Purposive sampling was used to select these individuals, as they have enough experience in this area of academic writing. Focusing on students already exposed to formal instruction, this study

aims to collect data regarding the challenges they face as well as their perception of their writing ability.

Ethical clearance was granted by the institution. All participants signed informed consent forms and were assured of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used. No pilot testing was conducted due to the small sample size.

Quantitative data were collected through a writing performance test. Students were instructed to write a 300-word academic essay in 60 minutes. The essays were assessed based on a rubric covering content (30%), vocabulary (25%), grammar (25%), and mechanics (20%), with scores ranging from 1 to 4. Qualitative data came from individual semi-structured interviews lasting 25–30 minutes, conducted in a quiet classroom. Interview questions covered personal experiences, linguistic challenges, emotions, and writing strategies.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, average) to analyze variations among demographic characteristics such as academic background and writing capability. The data were processed in Microsoft Excel and subsequently validated through manual cross-checking. For qualitative data were coded thematically by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Inter-rater reliability was ensured by having two independent raters assess the writing using the same rubric.

Results

This section presents findings from both the quantitative student capability score and qualitative semi-structural interview, analyzed to investigate English Department students' skill and perspective toward academic writing issues. Descriptive statistics are reported using measures of central tendency (frequency, average), followed by thematic analysis from qualitative responses to investigate student perspective and ensure credibility of results.

Table 1. Statistic for Academic Writing Test

No	Sample	Indicator				
		Content	Vocabulary	Grammar	Coherence	Total
1	D.F	3	3	3	2	28
2	A. Z	3	2	3	2	25,5
3	M	3	4	3	3	32,5
4	L.J	1	2	1	2	14,5
Total		30	27,5	25	18	
Average		7,5	6,875	6,25	4,5	

Table 1 presents the descriptive results from academic writing test. The findings reflect an overall positive grade, 3 of 4 samples showed good capability. Content scored highest (average = 7.5), indicating strong conceptual reasoning to generate their ideas and excellent implementation. Coherence had the lowest score (average = 4.5) indicating a powerful lack of organizing the ideas in any academic issues. Vocabulary and grammar levels were consistenly on standard (average = 6.875 and 6.25), pointing to their balance understanding about backgourd setting of the issues.

From demographic insights, a cross-tabulation analysis revealed the following trend:

1. Gender: Male participants (D.F, M) showed good capability to interpreted on academic issues than female participant (A.Z).

From 4 indicators of interview list, a total of 40 answer were analyzed and grouped into four main themes:

1. Challenges in Academic Writing
   This theme revealed various linguistic and structural difficulties faced by the students in academic writing which categorized into three points:

   a. *Grammatical accuracy*

      Participants commonly mentioned difficulties in using correct grammar, particularly in understanding sentence structure, appropriate tenses, and applying formal grammatical rules in context. In general cases, students felt difficult to forming complex yet clear sentences and still confuse to applying proper grammatical rules especially intense usage.

      "Using proper grammar... I get confused choosing the right words to express ideas clearly and professionally."

   b. *Diction use*

      Participants reported difficulties with academic vocabulary. Some found it hard to transition from informal everyday language to precise, formal, and discipline-specific terminology. some participant mentioned that their unfamiliar with academic words and some anxiety toward inappropriate word.

      "Many terms are not used in everyday conversation... so I have to find more academic synonyms."

c. Systematic organization

One of the key challenge's students face in academic writing is maintaining paragraph coherence and ensuring a logical flow of ideas. Many struggle to organize their thoughts cohesively, often finding it difficult to connect one paragraph or sentence to the next in a smooth and meaningful way. As a result, their writing may appear disjointed, with ideas that seem mixed up or poorly structured.

"Organizing my ideas... there are still many things I don't fully understand."

2. Experiences in Academic Writing

Participants revealed varying levels of engagement with academic writing outside of mandatory coursework. Some reported writing very rarely, limiting their practice mainly to assignments, while others engaged more regularly in different forms of academic writing, such as group reports, article summaries, or academic discussions. This variation reflects differing degrees of initiative and familiarity with academic writing norms. Notably, those who practiced more frequently expressed greater confidence and deeper understanding of academic writing conventions. These responses highlight how consistent practice contributes to stronger academic writing skills.

"Rarely, outside of coursework, I rarely write in an academic context..."

"I write quite often... writing group reports, article summaries, or academic discussion opinions... it is important for deepening understanding."

3. Factors Influencing Challenges in Academic Writing

Participants identified several external factors that hinder their academic writing performance. A prominent issue was the limited exposure to academic texts and inconsistent writing practice, which restricts familiarity with academic language and conventions. Weak vocabulary and grammar skills were frequently mentioned as significant challenges, compounded by insufficient reading habits that limit the acquisition of academic input. Additionally, many participants expressed difficulty in balancing clarity and formality, particularly when conveying complex ideas, which often led to either overly complicated or unclear sentences.

"Lack of exposure to academic texts and insufficient consistent practice. The main factor is laziness in reading."

"Balancing clear and formal writing with the need to express complex ideas… it's hard not to be wordy."

Emotional and cognitive factors also played a significant role in impeding academic writing. Participants reported feelings of anxiety, fear of not meeting academic standards, and a lack of self-confidence, which negatively impacted their motivation and productivity. These psychological barriers often manifested as hesitation to begin writing, mental blocks, and reduced focus, further exacerbating their writing difficulties.

"Sometimes, I feel afraid that my writing is not good enough or does not meet academic standards."

These findings reveal that both external skill-based factors and internal psychological barriers must be addressed to support students in overcoming challenges in academic writing. Effective interventions should therefore focus not only on developing language skills but also on building students' confidence and reducing writing anxiety.

4. Support for academic writing development

Participants emphasized several key strategies that they find helpful in developing their academic writing abilities such as:

1) *Regular and consistent writing practice*
2) *Reading academic texts*
3) *Feedback from peers and instructors the*
4) *Experienced writers through collaboration or mentorship.*

"Consistent practice, reading more academic texts, and receiving feedback from lecturers or peers"

Participants also offered constructive suggestions to enhance academic writing instruction. A prominent recommendation was to increase the integration of digital writing tools such as Mendeley for citation management and Grammarly for grammar checking, which could streamline the writing process and improve accuracy. Additionally, participants called for a stronger focus on writing as a process rather than solely on the final product, emphasizing the value of iterative practice and revision. More interactive and collaborative learning methods, including group discussions and peer review sessions, were seen as beneficial for deeper engagement and learning. However, some participants acknowledged that the effectiveness of these supports ultimately depends

on individual motivation and effort.

"More practice using academic tools like Mendeley and Grammarly."

"There were no specific expectations... whether it is useful or not depends on the person."

These findings suggest that a combination of sustained individual effort, guided practice, and the use of supportive tools and collaborative learning environments can significantly enhance students' academic writing skills. Incorporating these elements into academic writing instruction may help address students' diverse needs and promote more effective learning outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of students' academic writing capabilities, challenges, and perceptions of support mechanisms, drawing from both quantitative and qualitative data. Table 1's descriptive statistics revealed an overall positive performance in the academic writing test, with three out of four participants demonstrating commendable proficiency. Notably, the highest average score was observed in content, suggesting that participants possess strong conceptual reasoning skills and the ability to effectively develop and articulate ideas. Conversely, coherence registered the lowest average score, underscoring a significant deficit in organizing ideas logically and maintaining fluid transitions—core elements of academic writing that are critical for readability and argument strength. Vocabulary and grammar scores indicate a moderate yet consistent grasp of linguistic conventions, reflecting participants' adequate understanding of disciplinary language norms but also signaling room for improvement, particularly in linguistic precision and formal expression.

Qualitative insights, drawn from thematic analysis of interview data, shed light on four principal themes that collectively illuminate the complexities of students' academic writing experiences. The first theme, Challenges in Academic Writing, revealed multifaceted linguistic and structural barriers. Participants frequently reported difficulties with grammatical accuracy, particularly in mastering complex sentence structures and applying formal grammatical rules consistently—an issue well documented in writing literature (Hyland, 2022). This struggle is compounded by challenges in diction, where participants expressed discomfort transitioning from colloquial to academic vocabulary, a phenomenon linked to limited exposure to discipline-specific lexicon and anxiety over lexical appropriateness.

The most pronounced challenge emerged in systematic organization, where participants struggled to maintain paragraph coherence and logical progression of ideas, resulting in fragmented and disjointed texts. This finding resonates with previous studies highlighting organizational skills as a pivotal hurdle for novice academic writers (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022).

The second theme, Experiences in Academic Writing, revealed variability in engagement levels with academic writing beyond formal assignments. Participants' self-reported frequencies ranged from sporadic writing limited to coursework to more frequent involvement in writing group reports, article summaries, and academic discussions. This disparity suggests differences in intrinsic motivation and familiarity with academic conventions, echoing Graham and Hebert's (2011) argument that writing proficiency is strongly correlated with regular practice and exposure. Participants who engaged in writing more consistently demonstrated greater confidence and a more sophisticated understanding of academic norms, emphasizing the critical role of sustained practice in skill development.

The third theme, Factors Influencing Challenges, elucidated both external skill-based impediments and internal psychological barriers. Limited exposure to academic texts and inconsistent writing practice restricted participants' acquisition of academic language conventions, while weak vocabulary and grammar proficiency further hampered their writing development. Additionally, many participants grappled with balancing clarity and formal complexity—a tension intrinsic to academic discourse that requires nuanced rhetorical judgment (Huebner, 2019). Psychological factors such as anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-efficacy were pervasive, often manifesting as procrastination, cognitive blocks, and diminished motivation. These findings align with prior research underscoring the profound impact of affective variables on writing performance (Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024). Addressing both linguistic competence and psychological well-being emerges as essential for comprehensive academic writing support.

Finally, the theme of Support for Academic Writing Development highlighted effective strategies and student-driven suggestions for pedagogical improvement. Participants unanimously endorsed consistent practice and extensive reading of academic texts as foundational methods for improving writing skills. Feedback from peers and instructors was valued as a critical mechanism for reflection and refinement, supporting sociocultural theories that emphasize the role of social interaction in writing development (Akhtar, et al., 2019).

Moreover, collaborative learning and mentorship by more experienced writers were identified as beneficial. Notably, participants advocated for greater integration of digital tools such as Mendeley and Grammarly to enhance citation management and grammatical accuracy, reflecting contemporary shifts toward technology-enhanced writing instruction (Nenotek, et al., 2022). They also called

for more process-oriented assignments, interactive pedagogies such as peer review and group discussions, and opportunities to focus on writing as an iterative process rather than solely on the final product. These recommendations underscore a desire for learner-centered, formative instructional approaches that scaffold writing development while fostering engagement.

Interestingly, a minority expressed a neutral stance on instructional improvements, emphasizing that individual effort ultimately determines writing success. While this viewpoint acknowledges personal agency, it also highlights the necessity of cultivating intrinsic motivation alongside providing structural support.

The interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors revealed in this study suggests that academic writing instruction must be multifaceted. Educators should design curricula that integrate explicit grammar and vocabulary teaching with practice in organizing ideas and maintaining coherence. Embedding reading activities targeting academic texts can enrich students' lexical resources and genre awareness. Importantly, instructional designs must address affective dimensions by incorporating confidence-building activities and strategies to mitigate writing anxiety.

Furthermore, the adoption of technological tools should be prioritized to facilitate writing accuracy and efficiency. Structured peer review and collaborative writing tasks can foster social learning and provide diverse feedback, which in turn enhances writing quality. Future research could investigate the longitudinal effects of such integrative instructional designs and the impact of gender and other demographic variables on writing development.

Conclusion

This study concludes that while English Department students at IAIN Kerinci show confidence in generating ideas and applying basic grammar, they continue to struggle with vocabulary use, textual coherence, and writing mechanics. These challenges are often underrecognized by the students themselves, suggesting a gap between perceived and actual writing competence.

One limitation of this study is its small sample size, which may not fully capture the broader range of student experiences. The research was also limited to a single institutional context, which affects the generalizability of the findings.

Further research could explore how specific instructional strategies—such as scaffolded feedback, genre-based writing instruction, or academic reading interventions—can support EFL students in overcoming writing difficulties. Including a larger and more diverse participant base across institutions may also offer a more comprehensive understanding of academic writing challenges in similar contexts.

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