

IDENTIFYING ESSAY WRITING DIFFICULTIES AND INFLUENCING FACTORS AMONG SOPHOMORE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The ability to write essays is fundamental in academia, as it helps students articulate their thoughts, construct arguments, and apply critical thinking skills. Nevertheless, numerous second-semester students encounter challenges in mastering this skill, which can negatively affect their academic development. This research aims to examine the specific obstacles and contributing factors experienced by second-year students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang. Drawing on the frameworks proposed by Nenotek et al. (2022) and Alfaki (2015), this research adopts a qualitative approach. Sixteen participants were selected using homogeneous sampling, and data were gathered through interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results show that students faced multiple difficulties in essay writing, particularly in the areas of content, organization, discourse, and mechanics. These difficulties stemmed from various sources, including the complexity of the writing process, low student motivation, inadequate time allocation, infrequent writing practice, and delayed instructor feedback. The findings suggest that such difficulties significantly influence students' overall academic performance.

Keywords: *Contributing Factors, Essay Writing, Student Difficulties*

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing essays is a typical academic assignment that requires students to develop a focused piece on a specific topic. Oshima and Hogue (2006) define an essay as a structured text centered on one idea, organized into paragraphs with an introduction and conclusion. Bakhtiar (2023) adds that essays serve as a tool for improving language proficiency. Through the process of essay writing, students actively participate in academic

discussion by expressing their own ideas and opinions. In short, essays are important tools for enhancing students' language abilities through academic writing.

Writing essays helps students improve their use of language skills. Hossain (2015) adds that essay writing enhances students' ability to understand, analyze, and apply information, while Klimova (2015) emphasizes its role in developing grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and discourse. With practice, students better

grasp writing conventions. However, many students still struggle with essay writing. Febriyanti and Sundari (2016) note frequent errors in subject-verb agreement and verb tense, which Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) also identified as common issues. Despite its benefits, essay writing remains a challenge for many learners.

Investigating the difficulties students face in mastering essay writing is highly important. Proficient writing skills are crucial for effective communication through written texts (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). Addressing these difficulties can help improve students' academic writing and support their academic success (Al-Mukdad, 2019). Thus, this study is considered significant.

A preliminary informal interview with an Essay Writing lecturer and some sophomore students from the English Education program at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang revealed that many students struggle with essay elements. According to the lecturer, common issues include topic development, paragraphing, grammar, and word choice (Personal communication with WAR, November 16, 2023). Students also reported difficulties in maintaining paragraph coherence and identifying topic sentences (Personal communication with SRK, FN, & DA, October 10, 2023).

A number of researchers have investigated students' difficulties in writing academic essays across various educational contexts. Bulqiyah et al. (2021) examined challenges encountered by university students in the English Education Department at a private university in Jember, Indonesia. Their study focused on the surface-level linguistic and structural issues that hindered effective essay composition.

Pablo and Lasaten (2018) identified problems faced by senior high school students in the Philippines, and evaluated the overall quality of their academic essays. Nenotek et al. (2022) investigated the primary challenges students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Kristen Artha Wacana faced when producing academic essays in English. Likewise, Al-Mukdad (2019) studied the academic writing issues encountered by students enrolled in an Academic Writing course at Arab International University, with the aim of understanding their perspectives and offering possible solutions.

Although previous studies have provided useful insights into students' essay writing difficulties, many tend to emphasize the difficulties themselves without examining the underlying factors that contribute to them. Additionally, limited attention has been given to essay writing issues within the context of Indonesian state Islamic universities, leaving a gap in the current literature. Responding to this, the present study focuses on second-year students at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang to explore not only the types of essay writing difficulties they face, but also the factors that contribute to these difficulties. As research in this context is still scarce, especially within State Islamic Universities) environment, this study aims to expand the understanding of academic writing struggles among EFL learners and offer insights to improve writing instruction in similar settings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Components of Writing

Writing is essential for expressing ideas and information (Pakaya & Nabu, 2022). Brown (2015) outlines five key components: content, organization,

vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. Content involves relevant ideas (Hafidz, 2018), and organization ensures logical flow (Oshima & Hogue, 2006). Grammar and vocabulary enhance clarity and fluency (Wilson, 2022; Syarifudin et al., 2014), while mechanics focus on accuracy in punctuation and spelling (Brown, 2015).

2.2 Stages in the Writing Process

Writing is a structured process that develops through several stages, as explained by Oshima et al., (2014). It starts with prewriting, where ideas and details are generated (Wilson, 2022), followed by organizing, which outlines ideas logically (Zemach and Lisa, 2005). Drafting focuses on expressing thoughts freely (Oshima and Hogue, 2006), then revising improves content and structure (Hafidz, 2018). Editing and proofreading correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation (Oshima et al., 2014), and finalizing polishes the text for submission (Wilson, 2022).

2.3 Elements of Essay

An essay, a common academic writing form, consists of an introduction, body, and conclusion (Oshima & Hogue, 2006). The introductory paragraph presents the topic and thesis statement. The body paragraphs elaborate on supporting points using relevant evidence (Wilson, 2022), and the conclusion summarizes key ideas and reinforces the thesis (Hafidz, 2018; Zemach & Lisa, 2005).

2.4 Difficulties in Students' Essay Writing

Acquiring writing proficiency is a complex challenge for EFL learners. Jusmaya and Afriana (2019) state that mastering writing involves understanding its complexity and engaging in systematic, organized

thinking. Consequently, achieving proficiency requires significant effort and practice. Al-Yaseen (2018) highlights that academic writing is among the most difficult skills to master. EFL students commonly face essay writing difficulties in four areas: content, organization, discourse, and mechanics (Nenotek et al., 2022). In terms of content, many struggle to formulate clear thesis statements, generate ideas, and provide sufficient support (Ariyanti & Fitri, 2017; Pablo & Lasaten, 2018). Unfamiliarity with topics, lack of research, and poor prewriting habits further limit their ability to develop coherent arguments (Nenotek et al., 2022; Bakhtiar, 2023). These limitations frequently result in essays with weak focus, repetitive ideas, and inappropriate word choices (Pakaya & Nabu, 2022).

Organizational difficulties are also frequent, with many students struggling to structure their essays effectively. Issues like weak introductions, undeveloped paragraphs, missing conclusions, and poor idea sequencing affect clarity and flow (Nenotek et al., 2022; Pablo and Lasaten, 2018). Ariyanti and Fitri (2017) also noted that students often wrote overly long paragraphs that were hard to follow. Without clear structure, essays tend to appear disorganized and confusing.

Additionally, Students also experience discourse-related difficulties, such as maintaining unity, writing clear topic sentences, and using transitions (Brown, 2015). Nenotek et al. (2022) found that many struggled with key discourse elements, especially topic sentences. Learners often omit or misuse discourse markers and fail to connect ideas smoothly due to limited vocabulary and weak rhetorical understanding (Pablo and Lasaten,

2018; Bakhtiar, 2023). These issues reduce coherence and make writing feel disjointed.

Finally, mechanics-related issues like spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and citation formatting are common. Bakhtiar (2023) found spelling to be the most frequent grammatical error among students. Though basic, such errors impact readability and academic quality. Many students also struggle with citation rules like APA, causing consistent referencing mistakes (Yuliah et al., 2019; Nenotek et al., 2022; Pablo and Lasaten, 2018). These challenges reflect the complexity of essay writing and the range of skills students must develop to write effectively.

2.5 Contributing Factors to Writing Difficulties

In addition to writing-specific difficulties, various contributing factors exacerbate students' writing difficulties. Alfaki (2015) identified several factors that contribute to the difficulties students face in writing. These factors include the nature of the writing process, lack of motivation, insufficient time, limited practice, and insufficient teacher feedback.

First, the writing process itself is inherently complex, requiring a combination of cognitive and linguistic skills such as grammar, organization, lexical variety, and critical thinking (Byrne, 1988; Brown, 2015; Budjalemba). This complexity is especially heightened for students writing in a second language, who often struggle to present ideas clearly (Qasem & Zayid, 2019).

Another major factor is motivation. Students are more engaged and write better when they can choose topics they are interested in. Conversely, unfamiliar or forced topics often lead to low

motivation and weak writing outcomes (Febriani, 2022; Novariana et al., 2018). Byrne (1988) further highlights that writers tend to produce lower-quality work when required to write on topics that do not interest them. This lack of interest led to discomfort among students in class, causing a decline in their motivation.

Time constraints also affect writing performance. Limited classroom time reduces students' engagement in key stages like planning and revising, which lowers writing quality (Alfaki, 2015; Maysuroh et al., 2017). Novariana et al. (2018) noted that insufficient time is a major challenge for many students. Therefore, providing adequate time for each stage is essential for producing well-developed writing.

Furthermore, a lack of consistent writing practice makes it difficult for students to improve their fluency and organization, as writing proficiency develops over time through regular practice (Alfaki, 2015; Novariana et al., 2018). Furthermore, Maysuroh et al. (2017) found that students' ability to express their ideas in writing was hindered by a lack of regular writing practice and limited time devoted to writing at home. Hence, increased practice leads to greater proficiency in writing skills.

Finally, limited teacher feedback hinders students' ability to revise and learn from mistakes. Zamel (1985 as cited in Alfaki, 2015) found that such feedback was often unclear and lacked detail, offering minimal support for improving writing. It frequently targets surface-level issues over content and structure, reducing its impact (Febriani, 2022). This highlights the need for comprehensive feedback addressing both language accuracy and content depth to help students grow as writers.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore essay writing difficulties among second-year students in the English Education program at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang. Participants were purposefully selected using homogenous sampling, focusing on 16 students from classes PBI A–D (year 2022) who scored below 69.99 (grades C and D) in their essay writing course.

Data were collected through structured face-to-face interviews, guided by a predetermined set of questions to ensure consistency. The interview questions were based on theories proposed by Nenotek et al. (2022). Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, following Creswell's

(2012) six-step procedure: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, identifying and reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and writing the final report. To ensure the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the interview data and the researcher's interpretations.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 RESULT

Based on interviews with 16 second-year students from the English Education Study Program at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang, the researcher identified various difficulties and contributing factors that the students encountered while writing essays, as outlined in the table below:

Table 4.1 Theme and Code of the Students' Difficulties in Writing Essay

Themes	Sub Themes	Codes
1. Content-related issues	Thesis statement	a. All students struggled to clearly express the main idea or summarize their argument in a single, cohesive thesis that accurately represented the essay's content.
	Supporting ideas	a. Most students found it challenging to identify and select relevant points to support their main argument.
	Idea development	a. Most students had trouble elaborating on their points with suitable evidence and often felt stuck when trying to link their ideas back to the thesis.
	Use of description/cause effect/comparison and contrast	a. Over half of the students were unable to explain cause-and-effect relationships in a logical and coherent manner in their cause-and-effect essays. b. More than half had trouble in drawing balanced comparisons, often favoring one aspect over another in comparison-and-contrast essays. c. Most students struggled with organizing and sequencing steps clearly or providing detailed explanations in process essays. d. All students encountered issues in finding enough credible or persuasive evidence to support their claims in argumentative essays.
	Maintaining focus	a. Most students found it difficult to stay on topic, frequently including unrelated details that disrupted the clarity and direction of their essays.
2. Organization-related issues	Introduction effectiveness	a. All students had trouble crafting engaging introductions, often unsure of how to capture the reader's interest.
	Logical flow of	a. Most students found it hard to make smooth transitions,

	ideas	which affected the coherence and clarity of their writing.
	Concluding paragraph	a. Most students struggled to write effective conclusions, often repeating points or failing to summarize their arguments clearly.
	Essay length	a. Most students had difficulty meeting the required essay length due to a lack of ideas or uncertainty about how to expand on their content.
3. Discourse-related issues	Topic sentences	a. Most students had difficulty condensing the main idea into a clear and concise topic sentence, leading to confusion in paragraph structure.
	Paragraph unity	a. All students struggled with maintaining unity within paragraphs, frequently including off-topic sentences that disrupted the main idea.
	Use of transitions	a. Most students were confused about choosing appropriate transition words, which resulted in weak or awkward connections between ideas.
	Discourse markers	a. Most students had difficulty selecting suitable discourse markers that matched the context and contributed to the overall flow without sounding forced or unnatural.
4. Mechanics-related issues	Spelling	a. Most students had difficulty especially when encountering unfamiliar words or writing quickly without reviewing their work.
	Punctuation	a. Most students had trouble using punctuation correctly, particularly with comma and period placement in complex or lengthy sentences.
	Cititing references	a. Most students struggled with proper citation, particularly in following the guidelines of APA 7th edition formatting.

Table 4.2 Themes and Codes of Factors Affecting Students' Essay Writing Difficulties

Themes	Codes
1. Complexity of the writing process	Most students encountered difficulties at multiple stages of writing, finding the process difficult to navigate due to the complexity and interdependence of each stage.
2. Low student motivation	All students frequently reported a lack of motivation to write essays, often due to a lack of interest in the given topics and were overwhelmed with other coursework.
3. Inadequate time allocation	Over half of students felt that the time provided for planning, writing, and revising their essays was inadequate, leading them to rush and produce lower-quality work.
4. Infrequent writing practice	Over half of students mentioned that they only wrote essays when required by their lecturers, which limited their exposure and ability to improve through consistent practice.
5. Delayed instructor feedback	Over half of students felt that receiving feedback late disrupted their efforts to revise and make their essays better.

4.2 DISCUSSION

4.2.1 Essay Writing Difficulties

Among Sophomores

Thematic findings reveal four main areas of difficulty in students' essay writing: content, organization, discourse, and mechanics, as detailed below.

1) Content-Related Issues

The main issue students encountered in essay writing was related to content. Many had difficulty crafting clear and concise thesis statements, often due to unclear understanding of the topic, lack of focus, and limited vocabulary. This hindered the coherence of their essays, as noted by Nenotek et al. (2022) and

Ariyanti & Fitri (2017), who reported that vague or missing thesis statements disrupted the logical progression of ideas. Students also struggled to identify and organize relevant supporting points, frequently failing to select strong evidence to back their arguments. Their essays often lacked depth and cohesion, partly because of poor topic choice and insufficient background knowledge (Pablo & Lasaten, 2018). Weak thesis development contributed to disorganized content, with many students veering off-topic and weakening their claims (Nenotek et al., 2022). Additionally, students faced challenges in developing ideas and supporting them with evidence, often due to poor research skills, difficulty finding credible sources, and including irrelevant information (Bakhtiar, 2023; Pablo & Lasaten, 2018), which limited their ability to connect ideas effectively. They also struggled to use appropriate rhetorical strategies, such as cause-effect explanations, balanced comparisons, clear process descriptions, and evidence-based arguments, resulting in essays that lacked clarity and coherence. Maintaining consistent focus was another common problem, as students often added off-topic details that disrupted their arguments. Pakaya and Nabu (2022) also found that inconsistent word choice further affected the continuity and smoothness of students' writing.

2) Organization-Related Issues

The second issue students faced in essay writing was organization. They struggled to create engaging introductions, finding it hard to choose the right words, structure ideas, and craft a strong opening that smoothly connects to the main content. Nenotek et al. (2022) found that students' writing often showed abrupt shifts from

introduction to conclusion. They struggled to explain their claims, frequently lost focus by changing topics without clear links, and sometimes included excessive content in the introduction while omitting the thesis statement. In terms of organization, students struggled to maintain a logical flow of ideas. Many had trouble using transition words effectively, which disrupted the coherence and smoothness of their writing. Pablo and Lasaten (2018) found that students' writing often lacked a clear sequence of ideas and details, leading to disorganized and incoherent essays. While most students understand the importance of coherence, they frequently have difficulty applying it effectively. Students also struggled with writing conclusions. Many had difficulty summarizing main points clearly without repetition and failed to craft strong endings that restated their arguments. Nenotek et al. (2022) noted that many students omitted conclusions entirely, leaving their essays feeling unfinished and lacking a final, reinforcing statement. Students also struggled to meet essay length requirements. Many lacked ideas and supporting details, causing their essays to be too short. According to Ariyanti and Fitri (2017), some paragraphs were too long and hard to read, while Nenotek et al. (2022) found that some students exceeded the word limit, showing difficulties with both conciseness and idea development.

3) Discourse-Related Issues

The third issue students faced in essay writing was related to discourse. Many struggled to create clear, well-structured topic sentences, often finding it hard to summarize the main idea concisely. This led to confusion and weakened both the clarity and

coherence of their paragraphs. Nenotek et al. (2022) noted that many students omitted topic sentences, likely due to uncertainty about what to discuss and difficulty understanding and expanding on the essay topic. Students also struggled with paragraph unity, often including unrelated or irrelevant sentences that disrupted coherence and made their writing disorganized and hard to follow. This weakened the focus of their paragraphs and confused readers. Pablo and Lasaten (2018) found that students frequently insert information without assessing its relevance, struggling to select appropriate sources, which results in a lack of coherence and depth in their writing. When it comes to transitions, the majority of students found it difficult to use transition words correctly, often unsure which words to select. This caused their ideas to connect awkwardly, resulting in a lack of smooth flow and making their writing feel fragmented. According to Bakhtiar (2023), effective essay writing requires logical coherence and smooth transitions, but many students struggled most with choosing and using the right vocabulary. Additionally, most students struggle to select appropriate discourse markers that fit the context and ensure smooth flow in their writing. They often find it difficult to use these words naturally, which can make their writing feel either disconnected or awkward. Pablo and Lasaten (2018) note that students frequently omit connectives, leading to essays lacking cohesion. Similarly, Nenotek et al. (2022) found that many students relied heavily on simple connectors like "and," "but," and "or," while rarely using more effective transitions such as "however" and "therefore," resulting in limited variety and reduced clarity in their writing.

4) Mechanics-Related Issues

The fourth issue students faced in essay writing was related to mechanics. Many struggled with spelling, punctuation, and correctly citing references. Spelling, in particular, was a common issue, especially with unfamiliar words or when writing and typing quickly without careful attention. These errors often stemmed from limited word familiarity and rushing, which impacted the accuracy and clarity of their work. Bakhtiar (2023) noted that spelling was considered the most difficult grammatical error by respondents, who frequently made accidental typing mistakes. Similarly, Nenotek et al. (2022) found that many spelling errors were due to typos, as shown by the presence of correctly spelled similar words. When it comes to punctuation, most students struggled with placing commas and periods correctly, especially in longer or more complex sentences, due to uncertainty about punctuation rules. Nenotek et al. (2022) found that students made punctuation errors likely because they were unfamiliar with the rules or accidentally omitted punctuation marks. Additionally, Yuliah et al. (2019) identified punctuation as one of the most common mechanical errors, such as missing commas before coordinating conjunctions when joining independent clauses. When it comes to reference citation, most students struggled to accurately cite sources, especially following the APA 7th edition format. Many had difficulty applying the correct structure, punctuation, and style due to limited understanding of proper citation methods. Pablo and Lasaten (2018) reported that most students failed to include citations correctly, resulting in essays with unreferenced ideas and details. This often stemmed from unfamiliarity with various citation

formats. Similarly, Nenotek (2022) found that many students either omitted citations or made significant errors in in-text citation, such as incorrect author name presentation and punctuation misuse, reflecting a lack of grasp on APA guidelines.

4.2.2 Factors Affecting Students' Essay Writing Difficulties

The findings from thematic analysis revealed that students encounter various difficulties in essay writing, which are affected by several factors including complexity of the writing process, low student motivation, inadequate time allocation, infrequent writing practice and delayed instructor feedback, all of which will be explained in detail below.

1) Complexity of The Writing Process

The first factor contributing to students' essay writing difficulties is the complexity of the writing process. Many students struggled at various stages, as each step is interconnected and impacts the next. This made it difficult to progress smoothly, adding to their frustration. Qasem and Zayid (2019) highlight that writing in English as a second language is especially difficult, requiring strong cognitive skills to organize and express ideas clearly. Similarly, Budjalemba and Listyani (2020) found that academic writing is particularly demanding due to its structured format, reliance on credible sources, critical thinking requirements, and formal language. These complexities make academic writing a major challenge for students.

2) Low Student Motivation

The second factor affecting students' essay writing is a lack of motivation. Many students struggle to stay motivated, often due to disinterest in the assigned topic, making it hard to

engage with the writing process. The pressure of academic tasks can also leave them overwhelmed. As a result, they see essay writing as a burden. Febriani (2022) emphasizes the importance of motivation, while Maysuroh et al. (2017) found that students view writing as difficult, leading to low motivation. This lack of motivation and procrastination negatively impacts their performance.

3) Inadequate Time Allocation

The third factor contributing to students' essay writing difficulties is limited time. Nearly half of the students reported that time for planning, drafting, and revising was insufficient. As a result, they felt rushed, affecting essay quality. The lack of time made it hard to organize ideas, strengthen arguments, and revise. This supports Novariana et al. (2018), who noted students struggle with time constraints. Similarly, Maysuroh et al. (2017) and Alfaki (2015) emphasized that in process-based writing, time impacts writing quality. Therefore, providing adequate time for each stage is crucial.

4) Infrequent Writing Practice

The fourth factor contributing to students' essay writing difficulties is a lack of practice. Many students admitted they rarely wrote outside of assigned tasks and felt they didn't have enough opportunities to improve their skills. This limited practice hindered their writing fluency and made academic writing tasks more challenging. Novariana et al. (2018) also noted that insufficient practice is a key reason students struggle with writing. Similarly, Maysuroh et al. (2017) found that students rarely practiced writing on their own, which affected their ability to express ideas

clearly and effectively. **4.2.5 Delayed Instructor Feedback**

The final factor contributing to students' essay writing difficulties is delayed feedback. Many students reported that receiving feedback late limited their ability to revise and improve their work effectively. The reduced time for revisions often left them feeling rushed and under pressure, making it difficult to correct errors and strengthen their arguments. Febriani (2022) highlights the importance of advisor support in guiding and providing timely feedback. In contrast, Novariana et al. (2018) found that some students receive little to no feedback beyond scores or corrections, which further hinders their progress. Timely and constructive feedback is essential for helping students enhance the quality of their writing.

5. CONCLUSION

This research has identified the main difficulties faced by second-year students in the English Education Study Program at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang when writing essays. The results revealed four major areas of difficulty: difficulty in generating and developing content, difficulty in organizing ideas logically, difficulty in using appropriate discourse features, and difficulty in applying correct writing mechanics such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling. These issues were further influenced by various factors, including the complexity of the writing process, low student motivation, inadequate time allocation, infrequent writing practice, and delayed feedback from instructor.

Addressing these problems is essential to support students' development as academic writers. To improve student outcomes, educators should foster a supportive writing

environment, and offer timely, constructive feedback. Students should also take an active role in improving their writing by practicing regularly, reading academic texts, planning their work, and seek clarification when needed.

These findings carry important implications for EFL writing instruction, particularly within the context of Indonesian Islamic higher education. Understanding the multifaceted nature of students' essay writing difficulties can help educators design more effective pedagogical strategies and institutional interventions. Additionally, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on academic writing in EFL contexts by highlighting the specific difficulties faced by students in state Islamic universities, an area that has been underrepresented in previous research. Since this study is limited only to identifying the difficulties and contributing factors through interviews without analyzing actual written outputs or classroom practices, future research is recommended to involve broader student groups and include students' written texts or classroom observations to enrich the understanding of writing difficulties and inform effective teaching strategies.

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