

STUDENTS' WRITING STRATEGIES IN PRODUCING ACADEMIC TEXT

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Abstract: This study investigates the writing strategies employed by undergraduate students in producing academic texts. Using a qualitative approach, this research explored the experiences of 10 students at the Department of English Education, Universitas Katolik Santu Paulus Ruteng. Data were gathered through observation, documentation and in-depth interviews. The interview consists of five open-ended questions covering pre-writing, idea organization, academic language maintenance, source integration, and revision strategies. The findings reveal that students employ a range of metacognitive and cognitive strategies when approaching academic writing tasks; however, significant challenges persist in three key areas: maintaining consistent academic formality in an EFL context, moving beyond direct quotation toward critical source synthesis, and engaging in deep-level rather than surface-level revision. Specifically, all participants reported using mind-mapping and brainstorming during the pre-writing stage, while structured outlining served as their primary tool for managing idea organization. Although students demonstrated awareness of academic register, they struggled to apply formal language conventions consistently across their drafts. These findings point to the need for more systematic writing instruction at the tertiary level, particularly targeting deep-level revision strategies and critical source integration skills.

Keywords: academic writing, writing strategies, EFL students, semi-structured interview

INTRODUCTION

The capacity to produce coherent, well-argued, and formally appropriate written texts represents one of the most consequential competencies demanded of undergraduate students in higher education (Cumming, 2016). Scholarly writing serves as the primary medium through which students demonstrate critical thinking, disciplinary knowledge, and intellectual engagement with existing research (Graham & Perin, 2007). Yet despite its centrality to tertiary education, research consistently documents that a substantial proportion of undergraduates struggle with the demands of formal written composition particularly in constructing sustained arguments, integrating sources critically, and adhering to the conventions of academic register (Cumming et al., 2016). These difficulties are considerably more acute among students composing in a second or foreign language, where cognitive load is compounded by the simultaneous management of linguistic accuracy, rhetorical organization, and disciplinary norms.

The concept of writing strategies has received substantial scholarly attention, particularly within the field of second language (L2) writing. Strategies are broadly understood as the conscious or semi-conscious actions writers employ to manage the cognitive and rhetorical demands of text production (Oxford, 2017). Researchers have proposed various taxonomies of writing strategies, distinguishing between cognitive strategies such as planning and drafting; metacognitive strategies such as self-monitoring and evaluation; and social-affective strategies involving peer collaboration and emotional regulation (Rose et al., 2018). In practice, students' strategic behaviors are shaped by institutional demands, task requirements, and sociocultural factors that taxonomic models frequently overlook. A more contextually grounded investigation of how students actually deploy these strategies rather than simply which strategies they report knowing is therefore necessary.

In the Indonesian higher education context, the production of English-medium scholarly texts presents particular challenges for students whose educational and linguistic background is rooted in Bahasa Indonesia and many regional languages. Students are routinely expected to compose essays, research reports, and academic papers in English, yet systematic instruction in formal written composition remains inconsistently embedded across university programs (Cahyono & Widiati, 2015).

Previous research has consistently shown that students employ a range of strategies when producing academic texts, particularly during the planning, drafting, and revising stages. Dari et al. (2022) found that Indonesian university students used various writing strategies and emphasized the importance of strategy development in process-oriented academic writing instruction. Similarly, Sundari and Febriyanti (2022) reported that EFL university students preparing argumentative essays used strategies such as understanding task requirements, identifying essay organization, searching for appropriate references, and avoiding plagiarism. Fajrina et al. (2023), involving 135 Indonesian EFL students, further found that students used writing strategies at a moderate level, with only 15 of 38 strategies being used frequently. Their findings also indicated differences between Indonesian EFL students and English L1 writers in the writing process.

More recent studies have connected writing strategies with students' academic writing performance and the ways they cope with writing difficulties. Ren and Zhu (2023) demonstrated that a Chinese undergraduate employed artefact-, rule-, community-, and role-mediated strategies when writing a graduation thesis. In Indonesia, Asnas and Hidayanti (2024) found that EFL students experienced difficulties with grammar, structure, vocabulary, and idea development and employed both manual and digital strategies to overcome these problems. Oussou et al. (2024) also found a significant positive relationship between EFL students' use of writing strategies and their argumentative writing

achievement. Meanwhile, Xu and Jumaat (2024) highlighted the emerging role of ChatGPT in supporting academic writing strategies, particularly in addressing language, organization, and critical-thinking challenges.

Although previous studies have examined students' writing strategies in EFL contexts, several gaps remain. Existing research has mainly focused on the frequency and types of strategies used by students (Dari et al., 2022; Fajrina et al., 2023), strategies for preparing particular genres such as argumentative essays (Sundari & Febriyanti, 2022), or strategies for overcoming specific academic writing difficulties (Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024). Other studies have examined individual cases of thesis writing (Ren & Zhu, 2023), the relationship between strategy use and writing achievement (Oussou et al., 2024), and the emerging use of ChatGPT (Xu & Jumaat, 2024). However, relatively limited attention has been given to how students integrate different strategies throughout the actual process of producing academic texts, particularly how they plan, generate ideas, organize information, draft, revise, and edit their texts. The Department of English Education at the Indonesian Catholic University of Saint Paul Ruteng represents a context that remains largely absent from the academic writing research literature, despite the distinct linguistic, pedagogical, and institutional conditions that characterize it. Therefore, a more comprehensive investigation of students' writing strategies in producing academic texts is needed.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the writing strategies employed by students in producing academic texts. Specifically, it seeks to identify the strategies students use during the different stages of academic writing, examine how frequently and purposefully these strategies are employed, and explore how students use the strategies to address challenges encountered during the writing process. The study is expected to provide a more detailed understanding of students' strategic writing behavior and contribute to the development of writing instruction that explicitly supports effective academic writing strategies.

METHOD

Research Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the writing strategies used by undergraduate students in producing academic texts. Qualitative research is well-suited to this inquiry as it enables the researcher to capture the richness, complexity, and contextuality of human experience and meaning-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More specifically, this study employed a phenomenological approach, which aims to describe and interpret the lived experiences of participants regarding a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 2016). This design enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of students' strategic writing behaviors as they described them in their own words.

The participants in this study were 10 undergraduate students enrolled in the fourth semester of the English Education Department at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met the following criteria: (1) currently enrolled in at least one academic writing course, (2) had experience producing academic papers such as essays or literature reviews, and (3) were willing to participate voluntarily in an interview.

Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. The guide was designed to elicit detailed, reflective accounts of participants' writing strategies across five key dimensions of the academic writing process: pre-writing, idea organization, academic language and formality, source integration, and revision. The questions were formulated based on a systematic review of relevant literature on L2 writing strategies and academic writing instruction. Prior to data collection, the interview guide was submitted for expert validation to ensure content validity,

linguistic clarity, and alignment with the study's research objectives.

The semi-structured format was selected because it allows the researcher to maintain consistency across interviews while preserving the flexibility to probe, clarify, and follow up on participants' responses in real time. This format is particularly well-suited to exploratory qualitative research concerned with understanding participants' lived experiences and strategic decision-making processes.

The finalized interview guide consisted of five open-ended questions, each targeting a specific stage or dimension of the academic writing process. All questions were posed in the same order to each of the five participants to ensure consistency and comparability of data. The interview questions were as follows: (1) What strategies do you use before starting to write an academic text? (2) How do you manage difficulties in developing and organizing your ideas when writing academic papers? (3) What strategies do you use to maintain academic language and formality in your writing? (4) How do you use sources and references to support your arguments in academic writing? (5) How do you revise and evaluate your writing before final submission?

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data were collected through observation, documentation and semi-structured interviews, which allowed for systematic inquiry while also providing flexibility to explore emergent themes and follow up on participants' responses. Data collection was carried out over a period of three weeks during the second semester of the academic year. Each participant was interviewed individually in a quiet and private setting to minimize distractions and encourage open, honest responses.

After each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data. Member checking was conducted by sharing the

transcripts with the respective participants to verify that their responses had been accurately represented.

Data analysis in this study was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis followed the six-phase which includes familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The researcher began by reading and re-reading all interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the data, then systematically coded segments of text that were relevant to the research questions. Coding was done manually using color-coded annotations, and initial codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories that formed the basis for theme development.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of semi-structured interviews conducted with fourth-semester English Education students at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng. The interviews explored the strategies participants employ when producing academic texts across five dimensions: pre-writing practices, idea organization, language formality, source integration, and revision. Responses are synthesized thematically below, with representative quotations included to illustrate key patterns. Each theme directly addresses one of the study's core research focuses.

Theme 1: Pre-Writing Strategies as a Foundation for Organized Academic Writing

All participants reported employing systematic pre-writing strategies before drafting, including reading relevant sources, brainstorming, mind mapping, and outlining. Engaging with sources prior to writing allowed participants to build a conceptual framework and identify key ideas, while brainstorming and outlining helped them structure arguments logically and maintain directional focus throughout drafting. Participants who skipped

these preparatory stages reported losing coherence midway through their writing. The following are the participants interview responses:

"I always brainstorm first and make a mind map so my ideas are organized before I start typing." (P1)

"Without an outline, I tend to lose my direction midway through writing, so I always prepare one. (P4)

Several participants also incorporated peer discussion as part of their pre-writing process. Talking through initial ideas with classmates enabled them to refine arguments and anticipate gaps before committing to a draft.

Theme 2: Managing Difficulties in Developing and Organizing Ideas

All participants reported difficulties in structuring arguments coherently, identifying this as one of the most persistent challenges in their writing process. To manage these difficulties, students drew on both self-regulatory and externally supported strategies. Self-regulatory approaches included repeated reading of drafts to detect logical inconsistencies and reverse outlining to evaluate argument flow after drafting. External support primarily lecturer feedback and academic writing resources helped students identify structural weaknesses they had difficulty recognizing independently. The following are some of the participants' responses:

"I write freely first, then I make an outline from what I've written to see where the gaps are." (P2)

"The hardest part for me is making sure every paragraph really contributes to my thesis statement." (P3)

Theme 3: Strategies for Maintaining Academic Language and Formality

Maintaining formal academic language presented a consistent challenge for all participants, particularly given that

English is not their first language. Students adopted two broad categories of strategies: independent and collaborative. Independent strategies included consulting academic wordlists, using grammar-checking tools, and reading published scholarly articles to internalize formal language patterns. Collaborative strategies involved exchanging drafts with peers and specifically targeting informal expressions for revision.

Notably, participants did not treat formality as a passive outcome of exposure; rather, they approached it as a skill requiring deliberate and ongoing practice.

"Imitating the style of published articles has really helped me understand what academic writing should sound like." (P6)

"My classmate and I exchange drafts and we specifically mark any informal words or expressions we find." (P9)

Theme 4: Strategies for Using Sources and References

The participants recognized credible sources as essential for constructing persuasive academic arguments, though their approaches to source integration varied. The most consistent pattern was a preference for paraphrasing over direct quotation, which participants associated with demonstrating genuine comprehension of source material. Several participants also described a deliberate practice of consulting multiple sources before formulating arguments, reflecting an understanding that single-source reliance weakens scholarly credibility.

While students demonstrated sound awareness of why source integration matters, their accounts suggested that synthesis across sources rather than sequential citation remained a less developed skill. The following are some of the participants' responses:

"I prefer paraphrasing over direct quotes because it shows that I really understood the source, not just copied it." (P10)

"Using only one source makes the argument weak, so I always try to find at least three different perspectives." (P7)

Theme 5: Revision Strategies in Academic Writing

The study found that revision emerged as a multi-stage and reflective practice for all participants, rather than a final proofreading step. Participants described structured approaches that addressed both content-level and language-level concerns. P1, for instance, applied a two-step process: first evaluating argument logic and idea accuracy, then attending to grammar and style. P5 used a lecturer-provided rubric as a revision checklist to ensure alignment with academic criteria.

To enhance objectivity, participants also employed strategies such as reading aloud to detect incoherence, taking deliberate breaks before re-reading their drafts, and involving peers in structured feedback sessions using prepared checklists. These practices indicate that participants conceptualize revision as a critical and layered process, though the extent to which deep-level restructuring as opposed to local correction was systematically practiced varied across individuals.

"When I read my paper aloud, I can immediately hear if something sounds wrong or doesn't flow well." (P2)

"I always take at least one day off before revising so that I can read my own writing more objectively." (P3)

Taken together, the interview data reveal that participants employ a diverse and deliberate set of strategies across all stages of the writing process. Common patterns include the use of structured planning tools, reliance on peer collaboration and external feedback, and multi-stage revision practices. Individual variation was most evident in source integration, where synthesis across multiple sources remained less consistent than paraphrasing from single sources.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that pre-writing is an important foundation for producing organized academic texts. All participants reported using brainstorming, mind mapping, reading, and outlining before drafting, while some also discussed their ideas with peers. These strategies helped students generate ideas, establish relationships among concepts, and maintain the direction of their arguments. This finding is consistent with Sundari and Febriyanti (2022), who found that EFL university students used preparatory strategies to develop and organize ideas before drafting argumentative texts. Similarly, Dari et al. (2022) reported that Indonesian EFL students employed planning and other writing strategies to facilitate the writing process. The present findings extend these studies by showing that students did not rely on a single preparatory technique; rather, they combined individual strategies such as mind mapping and outlining with socially mediated strategies such as peer discussion.

The second finding concerns students' difficulties in developing and organizing ideas and their use of self-regulatory and external strategies to address these difficulties. Participants reported that maintaining a logical relationship between paragraphs and the thesis statement was particularly challenging. They responded by rereading drafts, using reverse outlining, and seeking feedback from lecturers and consulting academic writing resources. This finding supports Fajrina et al. (2023), who found that Indonesian EFL students employed various strategies throughout the writing process and that their writing involved continuous interaction between planning, composing, and evaluating. It is also consistent with Asnas and Hidayanti (2024), who found that Indonesian EFL students experienced difficulties in developing ideas and organizing academic texts and employed different coping strategies to overcome these problems. The present study particularly highlights the reflective dimension of these strategies: students did not simply identify problems after

receiving external feedback but also developed independent procedures, such as reverse outlining and repeated reading, to monitor the coherence of their own arguments. This indicates the development of self-regulated writing behavior among the participants.

The findings further show that maintaining academic language and formality requires deliberate and sustained strategic effort. Participants used academic wordlists, grammar-checking tools, published articles, and peer review to improve the formal quality of their writing. Their use of published articles as models is particularly important because students learned academic language not only through explicit instruction but also by observing how experienced writers construct scholarly texts. This finding is supported by Dari et al. (2022), whose study demonstrated that Indonesian EFL students employed multiple strategies to improve their writing performance, including strategies related to language use and revision. It is also consistent with Xu and Jumaat (2024), who found that EFL students used digital tools, including ChatGPT, to address linguistic and organizational challenges in academic writing. However, the current findings suggest that digital tools were not viewed as substitutes for learning academic language. Instead, participants combined technological assistance with exposure to published academic texts and peer collaboration.

Another significant finding concerns students' strategies for integrating sources into academic arguments. Participants showed a clear preference for paraphrasing rather than direct quotation because they regarded paraphrasing as evidence that they had understood the source material. They also recognized the importance of consulting several sources rather than depending on a single reference. This finding is consistent with Sundari and Febriyanti (2022), who found that EFL university students used strategies involving the selection and preparation of relevant information when developing academic arguments. It is also supported by Ren and Zhu (2023), who demonstrated that EFL

students' thesis writing involves multiple strategies for managing academic resources, rules, and scholarly expectations. Nevertheless, the present study reveals an important limitation: although students were aware of the importance of using multiple sources, they were less consistent in synthesizing information across those sources. Their strategy tended to involve collecting and paraphrasing individual sources rather than integrating several perspectives into a coherent conceptual argument. This suggests that students may have developed source-use awareness without fully mastering the higher-order skill of synthesis, which is central to effective academic writing.

Revision emerged as a complex, reflective, and multi-stage strategy rather than merely a final proofreading activity. Participants distinguished between revising ideas and arguments and subsequently correcting grammar and style. They also used reading aloud, delayed revision, peer feedback, and lecturer-provided rubrics to evaluate their texts from different perspectives. This finding is consistent with Fajrina et al. (2023), who showed that writing strategies among Indonesian EFL students extend across different stages of the writing process rather than being limited to the initial production of a text. Similarly, Oussou et al. (2024) found a positive relationship between students' use of writing strategies and their writing achievement, highlighting the importance of strategic engagement in improving writing performance. The participants' use of deliberate breaks and reading aloud is particularly indicative of metacognitive awareness because these practices enabled them to distance themselves from their initial drafts and identify problems that might otherwise remain unnoticed. However, variation in the depth of revision suggests that while participants generally understood revision as an important process, not all students consistently engaged in substantial restructuring of arguments.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that fourth-semester English Education students employ diverse and deliberate strategies when producing academic texts. Their strategies extend across the major stages of the writing process, including pre-writing, idea organization, academic language use, source integration, and revision. Students commonly use brainstorming, mind mapping, outlining, peer discussion, repeated reading, academic resources, grammar-checking tools, paraphrasing, and multi-stage revision. These practices indicate that students view academic writing as a recursive and reflective process rather than a single act of producing a final text.

Despite their strategic awareness, several challenges remain, particularly in organizing arguments coherently, maintaining academic formality, synthesizing information from multiple sources, and conducting deeper-level revision. The findings therefore suggest that academic writing instruction should move beyond teaching textual conventions and provide explicit guidance in strategic writing practices, especially source synthesis, argument development, and substantive revision. Greater integration of peer collaboration, lecturer feedback, writing models, and reflective self-assessment may help students develop more independent and effective academic writing practices.

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