

# EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF GENERATING IDEAS IN ACADEMIC WRITING AMONG EFL STUDENTS AT UIN SIBER SYEKH NURJATI CIREBON

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the challenges faced by English Language Education (ELT) study program students in generating ideas when academic writing and strategies that support students in overcoming the challenges. This study used a qualitative approach that included a study of documents and in-depth interviews with five final semester ELT Department students who were conducting research in higher education. The results showed that students experienced various difficulties, including lack of interest in the topic, difficulty starting the introduction, too much information, limited academic vocabulary, writer's block, lack of confidence, and time pressure. To overcome these challenges, several strategies were implemented, such as relating the topic to personal experiences or current issues, creating a conducive learning environment, and the use of brainstorming, mind mapping, and group work techniques. These strategies proved to help students generate ideas, organize their writing in a structured way, and build confidence in writing. The findings are expected to be a reference for educators in designing writing lessons that are more effective and support the development of students' critical thinking skills and creativity.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing can be a daunting task, especially when it comes to generating ideas. The main writing exercise is academic writing, which is a challenging task for students (Kadek et al., 2024). Because of academic writing will be crucial in the academic world, there are some students who may not understand the importance of academic writing and how it can affect their success in their studies and careers in the future. Improving students' academic writing skills is a concern for higher education institutions, even in English-speaking countries (AlMarwani, 2020, p. 115). Academic writing is a very important skill for anyone in the academic world. However, in certain instances, the students receive little to no specific instruction in academic writing to accomplish this successfully.

Generating ideas is a crucial skill in various contexts, whether for academic writing, creative projects, problem-solving, or brainstorming sessions. Generating ideas is a systematic process of creating and capturing ideas according to predefined requirements and includes elements related to

creativity and details to support the process (Monticolo & Gabriel, 2016 as cited by Alwaasi, 2022). The challenges faced by students in academic writing include finding a topic or idea to write about. There are frequent difficulties for students in organizing their ideas in a logical manner, connecting disparate concepts, and evaluating strong arguments (Bram & Angelina, 2022 as cited by Kadek et al., 2024). To increase effectiveness in idea generation, various strategies such as brainstorming, mind mapping, and free writing can be used, each of which provides a unique approach to stimulating creative thinking.

Experts have extensively researched various aspects of academic writing challenges faced by EFL students. Previous research concerns exploring academic writing needs in student EFL and investigates students' needs emerging in academic writing (Maros & Juniar, 2016, Ratnawati et al., 2018). Another concern is that EFL students face several difficulties in research writing, including general skills, language problems, limited ideas, and difficulties in developing writing structure and vocabulary (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2018, Wahyuni & Inayati, 2020, Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). Then, explores students' perspectives and difficulties in writing English academic writing challenges (Nenotek et al., 2022, AlMarwani, 2020). The last concern is to explore the importance of idea generation and the challenges of academic writing and essays (Georgiev & Milara, 2018, Pratiwi & Julianti, 2022, Brittain, 2019).

In the 10 journals described above, there are no similar things researched in these journals. The first criticism for this journal is that no one explains the process of generating ideas in academic writing. By knowing how the idea generation process occurs when writing academically, one can become more creative and create new ideas. Ideas are vital to organisations as they are a source of innovation and in turn an endless source of competitive advantage (Dorow et al., 2015, p. 51). Therefore, this study will explain how the idea generation process for academic writing works.

## **2. METHODS**

This researcher used qualitative methods. This is because this method is very appropriate to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of students in exploring the challenges of generating ideas. Tracy (2020, p. 7) states that qualitative research can uncover important issues that can later be researched using more structured methods. Five students from final semester students of EFL were involved as respondents in this study through interviews. The interviews were conducted to explore the views of students regarding the challenges faced by students in generating ideas of academic writing. Respondents were selected based on criteria determined by the researcher, including students with students who are writing a thesis. Data analysis used three elements: data reduction, data display, and verification or conclusion.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter explores the various challenges encountered by students in generating ideas during academic writing, as well as the strategies they employ to overcome these difficulties.

### **3.1 The Challenges of Generating Ideas in Academic Writing**

Researchers have identified several challenges faced by students in generating ideas of academic writing. These findings were obtained through interviews with final semester students. These challenges will be described in more detail in this section.

#### **3.1.1 Lack of interest in the topic**

Based on the interview results, students admitted that their lack of interest in the topic. In research or academic writing, a topic is needed as the basic and direction of

research. However, in practice not everyone finds it easy to find suitable topic ideas, so when faced with inappropriate topics many have difficulty in coming up with ideas and making arguments.

Student A: "I often find myself having to write about topics that I'm not good at or that I'm not interested in."

Student B: "Getting started with writing such as finding the initial idea or topic is the most difficult for me."

Student C: "My biggest challenge is finding a relevant and original topic."

Student D: "... because the topic chosen is too broad, I am confused about where to start."

Based on the above explanation, it can be concluded that interest in the topic has an important role in the smooth process of academic writing. This is in line with the study of Silaswati (2020) who stated that writing activities are impossible to do without topics. Therefore, the first activity that must be done in the pre-writing stage is to choose a topic. Such topics can motivate the author to continuously seek useful data in discussing the problems faced and motivate the author to solve the problems of his scientific work properly. For readers, such topics contain an interest in reading them. When someone is asked to write about a topic that is not of interest, the process of finding an idea becomes more difficult due to the lack of interest. On the other hand, choosing a topic that suits your personal interests can make it easier to explore ideas and develop your writing in a more natural and targeted way.

### **3.1.2 Confusion in Designing the Initial Structure of Writing**

When a person starts writing then the main idea is not yet clearly formed, the writer feels doubtful about where to start writing, what to be informed, and how to relate it to the purpose of writing. This doubt makes writing feel very difficult to write because the writer does not have a strong concept or framework for writing.

Student A: "Without a clear structure, our arguments can be messy and difficult for readers to understand. However, what is more challenging is to keep us consistent to complete the writing."

Student B: "The biggest challenge for me is getting started, especially when I'm not sure about the idea."

Student C: "... part of making an argument. It's like playing a puzzle, it's fun to match the ideas so that they connect. Sometimes it's really hard to consistently keep the flow of writing focused and not wandering off."

Difficulties in starting academic writing are often caused by confusion in determining the main idea, point of view, or direction of the writing. When ideas are not clearly formed, writers hesitate to start writing because they do not know where to start, what to say, and how to connect it with the purpose of writing. This is in line with study Wardani et al (2020) which states that the complexity of writing lies in the demands of the ability to organize and arrange ideas coherently and logically, and present them in a variety of written language and other writing rules. This is reinforced by students' statements highlighting that the main challenge lies in the process of generating logical, critical and structured ideas. In addition, keeping the flow of writing focused and not deviating is also a challenge.

### **3.1.3 Lack of confidence in their ideas**

Many students are not confident and anxious when writing. Students doubt whether the ideas they have are good enough, relevant, or feasible to be developed in academic

writing. This doubt makes them tend to delay starting, and it is not uncommon to experience writer's block.

Student A: "I'm not confident in my own ideas because they feel too ordinary and out of touch".

Student D: "Regular writing practice can reduce inhibitions as it improves skills and confidence".

According to the findings of the interviews, some students continue to challenges with generating ideas for their writing. This challenge is more a result of their lack of confidence in their own ideas than it is of their ignorance. Students often question whether their ideas are viable, pertinent, or good enough to be developed in academic writing. This uncertainty frequently causes individuals to put off writing, and writer's block is a common occurrence. When someone struggles to start, continue, or finish a piece of writing, it's known as writer's block. Many writers often experience this problem, even when writing for academic readers. Writer's block arises as a result of internal factors such as lack of interest in reading and lack of confidence in writing. In addition to lack of ideas, psychological issues such as stress, perfectionism, fear of making mistakes, or lack of confidence in one's ideas can also contribute to writer's block (Unpas, 2023). However, they agree that as they practice writing more often, their confidence in their ideas will increase. Regular writing practice not only improves technical skills, but also builds confidence in developing ideas.

#### **3.1.4 Limited vocabulary or academic language style**

In the interview results, some mentioned that the challenge in generating ideas when writing academics is the limited vocabulary or academic language style.

Student A: "Sometimes it is also difficult to stay consistent with the academic language style."

Student E: "An interesting writing style makes people from various fields more interested in reading".

The interview results showed that although the participants recognized the importance of using an engaging and consistent academic language style, they often faced difficulties maintaining it, especially when under time pressure or vocabulary limitations. In addition, the tension between writing attractively and still meeting formal academic standards seems to be a common challenge for novice writers. When it comes to communicating in writing, the brain searches, selects, sorts, formulates, organizes, connects, and combines ideas so that others can understand them (Nurhadi, 2019). The above description makes it clear why writing is difficult for beginning writers. It reflects a broader challenge in academic writing: balancing clarity, structure and reader engagement, while still following formal conventions.

#### **3.1.5 Time constraints to write**

One of the main challenges that writers often face, especially in generating ideas of academic contexts, is time constraints in writing. Time pressure not only affects the quality of writing, but it can also interfere with the consistency of academic style that should be maintained in each section of the paper.

Student B: "My biggest challenge is managing time".

Student E: "Sometimes the writing style can change, especially when writing at separate times if in a rush".

Time constraints are one of the most common challenges faced by academic writers, especially students and researchers who are still in the early stages of their careers.

Final semester students are faced with the enormous responsibility of completing a final project, thesis, or thesis to a high academic standard. This is often compounded by tight deadlines, which trigger stress for fear of failure or delayed graduation (Gisela et al., 2025). The pressure to meet deadlines often forces writers to prioritize speed over quality, which in turn can negatively impact the clarity, structure, and consistency of the writing. In academic writing, where formal style, coherence, and precision are crucial, a lack of sufficient time can lead to rushed sentences, inconsistent tone, and underdeveloped ideas. Therefore, time management needs to be recognized as a key factor in successful academic writing, and it is important to provide strategies and support to writers, especially those in the developmental stage, to improve their writing.

### **3.2 Strategies that Support Students in Overcoming Challenges in Generating Ideas for Academic Writing**

Solutions in dealing with the difficulties of generating ideas in academic writing according to the findings of experiences conducted by students are create an outline or initial draft, regular writing practice with a gradual flow, read a lot for reference and insight, relate ideas to personal experiences or current issues, conducive learning environment, brainstorming or mind mapping and study group collaboration and discussion.

#### **3.2.1 Create an outline or initial draft**

Based on the interview results, one of the strategies presented by students to overcome difficulties in generating ideas in academic writing is to make an outline or draft first. By making an outline, students can determine the main topic, supporting ideas, and the logical flow of the writing that will be developed.

Student A : "... create an outline of the writing, write an initial draft, and crosscheck for grammar."

Student B: "So I address this by creating a draft or writing outline to connect with my topic."

Student E: "I use an outline so that the initial ideas can be neatly arranged."

Writing in an academic context is often a challenge for students, especially when they face difficulties in developing relevant and structured ideas. One of the strategies used based on the data above is to create an outline or draft before starting to write. Writers of scientific papers can create a concise outline, which contains only the main ideas as part of a topic that has been limited (Mukhlis et al., 2023). Making an outline or draft serves as a guide in the writing process so as not to get off topic and minimize confusion when developing paragraphs. Students who use this strategy claim to feel more confident and directed because they already have a clear framework from the start. Therefore, using an outline or initial draft is an important step in the academic writing process, especially for those who have difficulty in finding and developing ideas directly.

#### **3.2.2 Regular writing practice with a gradual flow**

Based on the interview results, one of the strategies presented by students to overcome difficulties in generating ideas in academic writing is to regular writing practice with a gradual flow. By with frequent writing exercises in stages, this will improve writing.

Student A: "That's right. The more we write, the more fluent and confident we become with our writing."

Student C: "Very true. The more we write, the more we get used to facing various kinds of challenges in writing"

Student D: “Regular writing practice can reduce obstacles because it can increase ability and confidence”

Regular writing practice with a gradual flow refers to a consistent and gradual writing strategy that aims to improve students' academic writing skills. This strategy not only emphasizes on the frequency of writing, but also on the process that takes place slowly and continuously - starting from simple exercises to produce complex and well-structured writing. This is in line with study by Stefani (2019) which states that writing skills will improve if you are diligent in writing. One of them is academic writing. The habit of writing with the rules of academic writing will make these difficulties disappear by getting used to students making organized papers so that they become effective.

### **3.2.3 Read a lot for reference and insight**

Based on the interview results, one of the strategies presented by students to overcome difficulties in generating ideas in academic writing is to reading a lot for reference and insight.

Student A: “The more you read, the richer your references and perspectives will be. This can help you come up with fresh new ideas.”

Student B: “The habit of reading can improve the ability to generate ideas because it can expand knowledge and inspiration.”

Student C: “If we read a lot, our brains become richer in ideas. There is also more material for thinking and writing.”

The most mentioned strategy to overcome difficulties in generating ideas is to read a lot to add insight and references. This is supported by a research study from Eveline & Chaterin (2019), one of the effective strategies used by students to overcome difficulties in generating ideas when academic writing is to read a lot as a reference and source of insight. Reading before writing is a crucial first step because it allows students to equip themselves with various information, points of view, and writing styles that can enrich ideas. By reading, students not only get inspiration, but also understand the structure and logic of a good argument, which they can adapt in their written work. The information gained from reading can be a starting point for building an argument, creating an outline, and finding a suitable approach to the topic. Reading can also trigger connections between ideas, so students don't get stuck in thought or feel short of material to write about. Thus, reading before writing is not just a passive activity, but an active process in building the foundation of thinking and pouring ideas systematically in academic writing.

### **3.2.4 Relate ideas to personal experiences or current issues**

Based on the interview results, one of the strategies presented by students to overcome difficulties in generating ideas in academic writing is to relate ideas to personal experiences or current issues.

Student B: “Ideas can come from research, discussions, and personal experiences.”

Student C: “...sometimes from daily experiences as well.”

Student E: “I try to address this with my personal experiences or interests.”

One effective strategy to overcome difficulties in generating ideas in writing is to relate the writing topic to personal experiences or current issues. This strategy is proven to help students develop ideas more smoothly and improve the creativity and coherence of their writing. As revealed by Ningsih & Mahmud (2021), students who are able to connect writing topics with personal experiences or current issues tend to experience fewer obstacles in generating ideas, as well as showing an increase in the creativity and

coherence of their writing. This approach allows students to write more authentically because they do not only rely on outside information, but also explore their personal experiences, views, and emotions as a source of ideas.

### **3.2.5 Conducive learning environment**

Based on the interview results, one of the strategies presented by students to overcome difficulties in generating ideas in academic writing is to conducive learning environment.

Student A: "A positive and responsive environment can provide resources, feedback, and encouragement to keep writing."

Student B: "The learning environment can help students by providing needed resources and support."

A conducive learning environment is one of the key factors in supporting the success of the learning process. A supportive environment not only provides physical comfort, but also creates a positive psychological atmosphere for students to grow and develop. According to Listyani (2021), a conducive learning environment will encourage students to perform better, which in turn will increase their self-esteem. When students feel valued, supported and given space to try, they tend to have higher self-confidence and develop the "I can" principle in facing various learning challenges. This suggests that emotional factors in the learning environment play an important role in shaping students' character and motivation.

### **3.2.6 Brainstorming or mind mapping**

Based on the interview results, one of the strategies presented by students to overcome difficulties in generating ideas in academic writing is to brainstorming or mind mapping. This strategy helps them to express various ideas freely first, then organize them systematically.

Student C: "Yes, I usually make a mind map and then use it as an outline, so that the ideas are more focused."

Student E: "I usually do brainstorming, mind mapping, or reread lecture notes and relevant references."

Another strategy said to be effective in helping students overcome difficulties in generating ideas in academic writing is through prewriting activities such as brainstorming and mind mapping, which are proven to stimulate creative thinking and enrich ideas. Karim Abd et al. (2020) emphasize that brainstorming is one of the main ways to help students overcome the various problems they face in writing tasks. Through brainstorming, students are invited to pour out all the ideas that come up without having to immediately assess or filter them. This process provides freedom of thought that can trigger the emergence of new ideas that may have been previously buried. With a criticism-free atmosphere, students are more comfortable in expressing their ideas, thus creating a wide exploration space in the early stages of writing.

### **3.1.7 Study group collaboration and discussion**

Based on the interview results, one of the strategies presented by students to overcome difficulties in generating ideas in academic writing is to study group collaboration and discussion. Engaging in discussions with peers allows students to exchange perspectives, clarify concepts, and gain new insights that they might not have considered on their own.

Student A: "Take a break from stress. If necessary, discuss with friends or lecturers to get feedback and motivation to perfect our ideas."

Student C: "... discussions with friends often bring up ideas that we hadn't thought of before."

Collaborative learning strategy and group discussion or group work is one of the collaborative learning strategies that has been proven effective in improving students' writing skills while reducing the psychological pressure that often arises when facing individual writing tasks. In a study conducted by Ramauli et al. (2024), it was explained that group work helps students to learn collaboratively, so they feel more supported and less burdened in the writing process. This collaboration allows for the sharing of responsibilities, discussion of ideas, and emotional support between group members which can significantly reduce anxiety and increase students' confidence in writing.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to determine the challenges EFL students encounter while generating with ideas for academic writing. According to the findings, students face a number of challenges, including a lack of interest for the topic, trouble launching the introduction or becoming confused while organizing their writing, a lack of confidence in their ideas, a lack of academic language, and time constraints. The fluency, coherence, and caliber of students' academic writing can be greatly impacted by these issues, which are frequently connected. This study comes to the conclusion that generating ideas for academic writing is a challenging process that is impacted by both affective and cognitive variables.

Students stated that in order to overcome these challenges, they used a various of techniques that improved their ability to come up with and arrange ideas. Some strategies can be used to get beyond the challenges, include making the writing topic more relevant and engaging for students by relating it to personal experiences or contemporary topics. Building confidence and lowering anxiety also require a supportive learning environment. Additionally, group work promotes motivation, cooperation, and idea sharing, while brainstorming and mind mapping strategies assist students in methodically organizing their thoughts. These techniques work well together and can be applied in a variety of ways to help students become better writers overall.

This study comes to the conclusion that generating ideas for academic writing is a challenging process that is impacted by both affective and cognitive variables. However, students can overcome these challenges if they have the proper guidance, strategies, and learning environment. The strategies found in this study are not only useful but also readily adjustable, and they may be included into writing lessons to assist students in developing their academic writing proficiency in greater detail.

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