

Academic writing performance paradox: students' negotiation during the inventing stage

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Abstract

Many university students continue to struggle with academic writing, albeit they have passed the supporting courses of language content and skills. Such a condition becomes paradoxical as the subjects of this research, the 7th-semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Salatiga in the academic year 2025, experience similar phenomena. The students encounter issues in all stages of academic writing, especially during the inventing stage, in which they have to understand the topic, brainstorm ideas, and develop an outline before continuing to the next stages of drafting, revising, and editing. The inventing stage becomes the focus, as it defines and directs the global aspect in writing before they can develop their ideas. This research tries to understand the students' challenges during the inventing stage of academic writing, and simultaneously concludes their strategies in negotiating those issues. From the Focus Group Discussion with 144 students, the researcher found that students encounter several challenges during the process of writing in the inventing stages in the areas of self-efficacy and motivation, understanding assignments and topics, brainstorming and idea generation, and developing an outline and forming a working thesis. To respond those challenges, the students develop strategies such as formulating motivation and support, finding reference, free listing ideas, and making a mind map. This analysis can contribute to the practical knowledge for further discussion and support the improvement of academic writing in higher education.

Keywords: academic writing, inventing, pre-writing, idea-invention, challenge strategies

INTRODUCTION

As the cornerstone of scholarly communication across disciplines, academic writing is an essential skill in higher education. The structured presentation of concepts, arguments, and research findings for an academic audience is included in this formal writing style, which is used in academic settings (Woloshyn et al., 2024; Leon, 2023). In higher education, academic writing is crucial for career advancement, academic success, and participation in knowledge creation (Dall'Igna & Moritz, 2019). According to Lee et al. (2015), students' capacity to express themselves succinctly and clearly demonstrates their comprehension of the material and makes a substantial contribution to the academic community.

Many university students still struggle greatly with academic writing even after completing foundational courses meant to improve their language proficiency. This phenomenon is an example of what is commonly known as the "academic writing performance paradox." Although they have some language skills when they start college, students struggle with writing assignments that call for higher-order thinking and the application of specialized knowledge (Alasbali et al., 2023; French, 2016). Since numerous studies indicate that students continue to struggle with organizing arguments, incorporating sources, and using academic conventions, this paradox calls into question how well current educational practices prepare students for the demands of academic writing (Gul et al., 2023). These challenges imply that students may not be sufficiently prepared for the complex requirements of academic writing in higher education by simply passing language courses (Cad & Carrera, 2023).

With an emphasis on their difficulties and coping mechanisms, this article attempts to examine the nuances of students' experiences during the inventing phase of academic writing. An essential part of the writing process, the inventing stage entails brainstorming, idea organization, and creating a

cogent approach to academic subjects (Leon, 2023). Teachers must comprehend this stage in order to pinpoint the underlying reasons behind students' difficulties and carry out focused interventions that can improve writing skills (French, 2016; Gavina & Ibay-Pamo, 2024). We hope to offer insights that can result in better teaching methods and writing support systems in higher education by looking at the difficulties that students encounter at this point, such as problems with academic literacy and critical thinking, as well as their creative coping mechanisms (Castillo-Martínez & Soledad, 2021).

Literature Review

Inventing, drafting, revising, and editing are some of the many unique steps that make up the intricate process of academic writing. Every step is essential to creating writing that is both effective and cohesive, especially in academic settings. Before ideas are fully developed into text, they must first be generated and organized during the inventing stage, which is frequently regarded as the most foundational stage. It lays the foundation for drafting, which is the first stage of writing, revising, which is the process of reorganizing and improving the written material, and editing, which is the process of fixing grammar mistakes and making sure formatting guidelines are followed (Crossley et al., 2016; Rahmat et al., 2022). This step-by-step procedure emphasizes how meticulously moving through each step is necessary for producing quality academic writing.

Several techniques can be used to help students develop their ideas during the inventing stage. Understanding the task and subject at hand should come first. Students' overall effectiveness in academic writing is greatly increased when they understand the requirements of their writing assignments and align their ideas accordingly (Alemu, 2020). After that, brainstorming methods like clustering or free-writing can help produce a large number of ideas without the need to assess them right away, which is crucial for imaginative and expansive thinking (Alemu, 2020), Bui & Van, 2018). After that, creating an outline and a working thesis aids students in organizing their ideas logically, guaranteeing coherence and clarity when the actual drafting stage starts (Alemu, 2020), Bui & Van, 2018). These strategies not only make writing easier, but they also lessen hesitancy and anxiety, enabling students to freely express their creativity.

Students' academic writing performance is also influenced by intrinsic factors such as motivation and self-efficacy. According to Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, people who have a strong sense of their own abilities are more likely to take on difficult tasks and persevere through challenges (Chen & Li, 2024). Students who believe they are good writers are more likely to participate completely in the writing process when it comes to academic writing. Furthermore, either internal or external motivation is essential for encouraging students to start writing assignments and maintain their effort throughout (Alenezi et al., 2024). Students may struggle at different stages, especially during the inventing phase, where idea generation is crucial, if they lack sufficient motivation and self-belief (Wijaya, 2022).

Students' academic writing skills and experiences can be enhanced by incorporating strategies into the inventing phase. For instance, establishing a favorable atmosphere for brainstorming sessions encourages peers to generate ideas collaboratively, which in turn promotes creativity (Kempenaar & Murray, 2018). Furthermore, using resources like concept maps, visual aids, or writing prompts at this point promotes a more thorough investigation of the subject and aids students in better expressing their ideas (Alemu, 2020). Prior studies have demonstrated that students' capacity to translate their ideas into structured writing improves dramatically when they participate in pre-writing activities, such as talking about their ideas with teachers or peers (Ead et al., 2023). Additionally, incorporating reflective practices helps students assess their writing development, which improves their self-efficacy and comprehension of the writing process (Alenezi et al., 2024).

The academic writing performance paradox is still a relevant issue because many students still struggle even after being exposed to a variety of writing resources. By concentrating on efficient teaching techniques that take into account the inventing stage, it is crucial to close the gap between

theory and practice. Because academic writing is complex and involves cognitive challenges, educators must actively create environments where motivation and self-efficacy are valued alongside the development of writing strategies (Clark & Yu, 2022). Institutions can better prepare students for the complex and frequently intimidating world of academic writing by doing this.

Improving students' writing skills requires an understanding of the phases of academic writing, especially the inventing phase. Teachers can help students overcome the difficulties they encounter in academic writing by emphasizing the value of idea generation, the use of successful strategies, and the development of self-efficacy and motivation. In addition to assisting students in meeting the requirements of academic writing, this all-encompassing method gives them the confidence and clarity to articulate their thoughts.

METHODS

In order to better understand the difficulties students encounter in the early phases of the academic writing process, a qualitative approach was used in the research of "Academic Writing Performance Paradox: Students' Negotiation During the Inventing Stage." Because qualitative research is especially well-suited for comprehending participants' experiences, perceptions, and motivations in context, this methodology choice is consistent with the exploratory nature of the study (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2016). The choice to use a qualitative research design enables a detailed investigation of the different facets of students' writing processes, successfully encapsulating the difficulties associated with navigating their ideas while inventing.

A descriptive qualitative approach was chosen within the qualitative framework. In order to give a clear account of participants' experiences, descriptive qualitative research frequently emphasizes direct language and subject-matter expertise (Kim et al., 2016; Kennedy & Davis, 2017). By presenting the results in the participants' own words, this methodological approach promotes reliability and authenticity. Additionally, it keeps the emphasis on the students' experiential realities, letting their opinions and voices influence the results without resorting to overly abstract or theoretical thinking (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024; Villamin et al., 2024).

Research Subject

144 seventh-semester students from UIN Salatiga's English Education Department in the academic year 2025 make up the study's population. Since these students are almost finished with their undergraduate degrees and have probably encountered a variety of academic writing assignments during their education, this group is especially pertinent. Choosing a population at this point in their academic career provides information about their past experiences and present writing difficulties, especially when they are inventing (Miraj et al., 2021). According to Boddy (2016), sample size considerations indicate that this number is appropriate for delivering rich, significant data while maintaining manageability for in-depth qualitative analysis.

Instrument

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to gather primary data for this study. FGDs create a cooperative environment in which participants can converse, exchange stories, and consider their academic writing difficulties as a group (Handberg et al., 2024). Compared to individual interviews, this approach enables researchers to collect a variety of viewpoints while promoting interaction among participants, which may result in deeper insights and more lively discussions. Additionally, the interactive nature of FGDs can assist in identifying difficulties that students may encounter but may be reluctant to discuss in a private setting. By using this approach, the study hopes to develop a thorough grasp of students' experiences and thought processes in relation to their academic writing projects.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis is the qualitative data analysis method used in this study. By methodically highlighting students' difficulties and coping mechanisms as they navigate their writing assignments, this approach is appropriate for clarifying patterns and themes in the data obtained from focus group discussions (FGDs) (Snelson, 2016). Researchers can code the data inductively or deductively using thematic analysis, which offers a flexible approach based on research questions or themes that emerge from the discourse itself (Chafe, 2017). This method places a strong emphasis on comprehending the context and importance of the data, offering insights into how students think about their writing processes and the techniques they use to get past the inventing stage. The analysis attempts to contextualize the participants' responses within the larger educational discourse on academic writing while presenting their perspectives holistically through meticulous coding and theme extraction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of this study relates to four aspects in the inventing stages of academic writing that challenge students in developing their ideas. Those aspects involve self-efficacy and motivation, understanding assignments and topics, brainstorming and idea generation, developing an outline and forming a working thesis. While students' strategies to cope with challenges on those aspects are exposed simultaneously during the FGD.

Challenges in developing ideas during the inventing stages

Lack of Self-efficacy and motivation

The intrinsic aspect of self-efficacy and motivation firstly rise as a prompt in the FGD. Students state that they experience fear and anxiety when they have to start to write. The mix up feeling is due to their perception of their lack of vocabulary and mastery in academic writing. The term of academic writing reduces students' confidence as this type of writing requires higher standards than casual writing. However, students gain more confidence when they start the process of writing in the inventing stage and make some progress. It means students experience this challenge at the initial stage of writing but they will recover after starting the activity.

"...I usually feel a mixture of excitement and nervousness. I'm excited because it's an opportunity to hone my writing skills, but I also feel anxious about whether my writing meets academic standards. Sometimes I worry that my ideas are too simple or not in-depth..." Excerpt from informant 2

"Firstly, I felt less confident and less able to do the work, I felt that way because I lacked vocabulary mastery and knowledge of academic writing" Excerpt from informant 3.

Difficulties in understanding assignments and topics

For students, this aspect is relatively challenging. Students find difficulties in understanding the assignment and the writing topic if they are not familiar with. They even get confused on how to start writing when they do not understand with the topic discussion. It takes sometime to gather information from different resources as they have no background information in their mind. On the contrary, students can easily understand the assignment and topic if they have related experience or knowledge. They can describe the topic and define the key points for the development of the outline and draft.

"I found understanding the assignment or topic during the Invention phase wasn't always easy. Sometimes, if the topic was clear and close to my experience, it felt easier to develop ideas. But if the topic was abstract or unfamiliar, I often felt confused about where to start. ..." Excerpt from informant 9

“To understand the assignments or topics in the invention phase of academic writing, I feel like I am in the middle, that is, sometimes I find it easy and sometimes I find it difficult, but for the most part,”
Excerpt from informant 7

Brainstorming and idea generation

Most student perceive that the activity of brainstorming and idea generation is somewhat difficult. It closely relates to students' familiarity of the topic of discussion. When the students consider the topic is relatively new and they have never heard of it previously, it will hinder them brainstorming the related key points and generating idea around the topics. Moreover, students mention interest as the trigger to motivate them in this activity. They find or perceive that the topic is easy as they have interest or related prior knowledge.

"I find brainstorming and generating ideas during the Invention phase quite challenging. Sometimes I find it easy when the topic aligns with my interests or something I've already studied. Ideas flow immediately and I just need to organize them. However, it can also be challenging, especially if the topic is new or unfamiliar to me. ..." Excerpt from informant 1

"It depends on the topic I'm going to write about, but considering I'm already used to academic writing, I don't think brainstorming and idea generation are difficult for me." Excerpt from informant 7

Developing an outline and forming a working thesis

In this activity, students find the most challenge. They have to spend more time in deciding the most important and relevant key points that they have in the previous activities. They convince when they complete the outline, it will guide them to write and develop the paragraphs. In addition, writing thesis statement is another challenge. They are uncertain whether the ideas in working thesis are connected or meets the cohesiveness and coherence. Understanding the specific rules of academic writing into practice becomes an issue for novice writer. On consequence, they are reluctant to start their first draft as they are fear of unable fulfilling the standards and requirements for academic writing.

"Creating an outline and working thesis is quite challenging for me, as I have to ensure that the ideas connect well with each other. Sometimes I struggle to formulate a thesis that's specific but not too narrow. However, I realize that this stage is crucial because it lays the foundation for the entire paper." Excerpt from informant 9

Strategies in negotiating the issues in the inventing stages*Formulating motivation and support*

Students start to be confident as they realise the importance of writing mastery and get external support from their lecturers, classmates, and technology. Students feel motivated because they get opportunity to develop their writing skills. By joining the academic writing class, they can practice writing with the support of their lecturers and classmates. When students find issues on their work, they can consult and simultaneously acquire encouragement from their lecturers. With classmates, they can discuss, share and exchange ideas with their peers. Moreover, they can get direct feedback from their peers inside and outside the classes. Some students states that they ask for help by using technology such as mobile phone, AI (artificial intelligent) to get the idea for their writing. The strong internal motivation for writing master and supportive external factors help students to be confident in navigating their mind into the first stage of academic writing.

Finding reference

Students admit that the inventing stages is relatively difficult when they have to encounter unfamiliar topic of discussion. To respond such situation, students need to activate their mind by inputting new information from related references. They try to find references such as students' articles, journal articles, digital books, etc that discuss the topic. In this regard, students begin to understand and the insights from those references are used as the initial information to brainstorm and generate ideas. From the samples and references, students also learn how to write sentences academically. The standards, vocabulary, requirements, styles can be replicate into their own writing. This strategy is

beneficial as the students have to set up outline and working thesis statements during the inventing stage of academic writing.

Free listing ideas

This strategy works well in the activity of brainstorming and generating ideas. During the brainstorming, students make a list of related terms or ideas that may be used as the starter for an outline. There is no judgment about the ideas as the list is random and absurd. From this activity, the key points appear and students can use them as keywords to find related references or directly develop into outline and writing drafts.

"When I'm having trouble brainstorming and coming up with ideas, my most common strategy is to write down everything that comes to mind without overthinking whether it's right or wrong. By this way, I have a list of raw ideas to choose from or develop later. I also usually read articles, journals, or even short news stories related to the topic to stimulate my brain. Sometimes I also try small discussions with friends to exchange ideas, because often a simple comment can open the way for a new idea. With this combination of methods, even if I'm stuck at first, I can gradually find the right direction and material to write about."
Excerpt from informant 6

Making a mind map

The ideas are in the format of a mind map or a simple framework as it helps students think orderly. In this sense, students think better and later they can codify and categorize their ideas based on certain themes. This strategy makes students decisive to prioritize the most related theme for their work.

"...I usually try to calm myself by creating a simple outline. By so doing, I don't immediately write long sentences, but rather map out the main ideas I want to write about. ..." Excerpt from informant 5.
"...I also create small mind maps to help organize my thoughts. I also discuss ideas with classmates to build confidence in the direction of my writing. This way, I feel calmer and more motivated to start writing." Excerpt from informant 3

Discussion

Students frequently face a number of complex obstacles that have a big influence on their performance when it comes to academic writing, especially when they are in the inventing stage. Motivation and self-efficacy are two of the main problems. Due in large part to a perceived lack of vocabulary and proficiency with academic writing conventions, many students experience elevated levels of fear and anxiety when they begin the writing process. This impression not only makes them feel less confident, but it might also make them lose interest in starting the writing assignment in the first place. According to research by Wijaya and Mbato, graduate students who have strong self-efficacy are more resilient when faced with writing difficulties, which improves their performance in academic settings (Wijaya & Mbato, 2020). Similarly, Lee et al. discovered a positive correlation between writing efficacy and motivation; students who demonstrate greater proficiency tend to be more engaged and motivated when writing (Lee et al., 2017). Furthermore, students' self-efficacy is further enhanced by perceived social support, which influences academic motivation (Mohamed et al., 2021; Shrestha & Tuladhar, 2021).

It can be especially difficult to comprehend assignments and the subjects they cover, which makes writing even more difficult. Feelings of frustration and inadequacy can result from students' inability to understand the expectations and subtleties inherent in their assignments. Since it frequently affects the caliber of the students' outputs, it is crucial that comprehension and assignment objectives line up. Additionally, a number of studies highlight how important guidance is in improving students' understanding of assignments and assisting them as they progress through the writing process (Shofiah et al., 2023; Cook & Artino, 2016).

Students' struggles with idea generation and brainstorming are another significant obstacle during the inventing stage. These activities overwhelm a lot of students, who frequently view them as pointless or unproductive. Sumarsono and Mbato claim that students usually struggle to create organized outlines and a distinct working thesis, which causes them to spend a great deal of time figuring out what topics to include in their writing (Sumarsono & Mbato, 2021). This emphasizes the necessity of teaching methods that support creativity and boost motivation in the face of cognitive difficulties (Ding et al., 2025).

Students may use a variety of coping mechanisms to better manage the inventing stage. Fostering motivation through outside support networks is a crucial tactic that can increase self-efficacy and boost confidence when writing. According to Mohamed et al., students' academic motivation is greatly impacted by their perceptions of social support from peers and teachers (Mohamed et al., 2021). Additionally, brainstorming exercises that promote creativity and spontaneity, like a free-listing of ideas without passing judgment, help students identify important points for their drafts (Sumarsono & Mbato, 2021). Students are able to produce ideas more freely thanks to this non-evaluative method, which turns what seems like chaos into organized ideas.

During the invention phase, locating pertinent references is also essential. Unfamiliar subjects frequently overwhelm students, but reading relevant literature can help them think more creatively. Reading academic journals, articles, and the work of other students can offer crucial perspectives and support for creating a substantial thesis (Sumarsono & Mbato, 2021; Bråten et al., 2023). This is consistent with research by Graham et al. that shows a positive correlation between writing performance and the efficient use of reference materials (Graham et al., 2018).

Additionally, using strategies like mind mapping can greatly help students arrange their ideas and thoughts in a logical manner. According to Yunus and Chien (2016), mind mapping forces students to focus and meaningfully classify their ideas in addition to encouraging critical thinking. By encouraging students to rank important themes, this technique helps them create a logical outline that forms the basis of their written work.

The difficulties in developing ideas and the methods employed to overcome these difficulties demonstrate the paradox surrounding academic writing performance during the inventing stage. Students face a variety of challenges, including fear based on self-efficacy, trouble comprehending assignments, and the intricacies of brainstorming. However, students can improve their writing skills and confidence by combining the use of relevant resources, encouraging outside assistance, and employing organizational strategies like mind mapping. In order to create interventions that enable students to thrive in their academic writing endeavors, educators must acknowledge these dynamics.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the paradox surrounding academic writing performance frequently stems from a number of difficulties that students encounter when they are inventing. The most significant of these difficulties is that students' motivation and self-efficacy can be severely undermined when they believe that their writing and vocabulary skills are inadequate. When they start writing assignments, this lack of confidence usually causes them to feel nervous and uneasy. This difficulty is further compounded by the fact that many students find it difficult to understand the complexities and expectations of complex assignments and topics. As a result, brainstorming and idea generation exercises become too much to handle, highlighting the need for practical ways to help students overcome these obstacles.

Students can use a number of tactical techniques to lessen these difficulties and improve their academic writing skills. It has been demonstrated that creating motivation with outside assistance, like peer interactions and instructor guidance, increases self-efficacy and confidence. Additionally, a crucial part of the ideation process is navigating new subjects through in-depth research and reference gathering. Students can improve their comprehension and come up with ideas for their writing by interacting with a variety of resources, such as journals, articles, and digital texts. Students can

effectively organize their thoughts and prioritize important points by using creative idea generation techniques like mind mapping and free listing. These techniques help reduce the anxiety related to the inventing stage in addition to promoting an organized framework for writing.

All things considered, resolving the academic writing performance paradox necessitates acknowledging and comprehending the complex difficulties that students encounter when inventing. Teachers can help students improve their academic writing abilities and navigate the challenges of this crucial component of their education by implementing research-informed strategic interventions.

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