

# Problems with Rhetorical Problems among Academic Writers

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## ABSTRACT

Past studies have reported varying reasons for difficulties in academic writing. There have been reported studies revealing academic writing problems stem from lack of background knowledge in the content area. Some studies reported that some writer have to deal with their fear of writing. One of the major problems in writing is not lack of linguistic competence of the writer. The source of difficulty is the lack of competence in composing. Recall the way we were taught writing- we spent much time thinking of “what” to write” but when it comes to the process of writing, we are alone. This qualitative study looks into the problems that writers face in their composing process. Three writers comprising of one undergraduate, one postgraduate (masters) and one postgraduate (doctorate) were asked about what their writing problems were. Data will be coded into specific categories to reveal different categories of difficulty faced by these writers. Findings bear interesting pedagogical implications to both teachers of writing and writers.

**Keywords:** *Writing, Problems, Composing process, Undergraduate, Postgraduate.*

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### **Highlights of this paper**

- This qualitative paper explores the problems writers face when they compose.
- Three writers reported on their writing problems.
- Codes data revealed interesting categories for problems writers face.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### *1.1. Background of Study*

There are many past studies to show the similarities between writing in the first (L1) and writing in the second (L2) language. According to [Maznun \*et al.\* \(2017\)](#) the teaching of writing need to focus more on composing rather than on language. When it comes to the composing strategies of L2 learners, the source of difficulty was the lack of competence in composing rather than lack of linguistic competence.

This study has two important significance; (a) for research and (b) for teaching. Firstly, the probe into writers' problems will expose the creativity of the writers. Writing is creating- writers are constantly faced with new problems as they write and this caused a ripple effect of being creative to solve the writing-related problems. Next, the investigation of writing problems will trigger more research into and about writing among different types of writers writing different genres.

### *1.2. Research Objective and Research Questions*

The main objective of this study is to explore the problems in essay writing among ESL writers. Specifically, this study looks at the perception of writers' towards their rhetorical situation as well as their perception on their own writing goals. This study is done to answer the following research questions:

- (a) How does rhetorical situation influence undergraduate and postgraduate writers' perception on writing problem?
- (b) How does writers' own goals influence undergraduate and postgraduate writers' perception of writing problem?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *2.1. Introduction*

This section discusses some issues in academic writing, past studies as well as the theoretical frame work of the study.

### *2.2. Problems in Academic Writing*

The problems that make writing difficult can be divided into three categories. The first is Linguistic Difficulty. Linguistics aspect like grammar, vocabulary, language use and choice of sentence in writing must have fully monitoring. The second is Physiology Difficulty, which more focuses on the writer's difficulty because there aren't direct interaction and feedback from the reader when they are writing. This difficulty more focuses on difficulty in develop written material or content of composition. The third is cognitive difficulty. Writing has to be thought through formal instruction like spelling, punctuation, capitalization and paragraphing.

[Maznun \*et al.\* \(2017\)](#) found that undergraduate students had problems writing the introduction, the background of the study, and also the theoretical framework. However, [Al-Mukdad \(2019\)](#) listed several problems students faced in academic writing. The problems are linguistic competence of the writers. Next, the writers' lack of vocabulary can pose as a problem in their academic writing. Writers need a vast amount of vocabulary in order to "reach out "to the readers and to be able to make readers feel what they wanted them (the readers) to feel when they

read the text. Writers also faced problems with the use of structure and grammar, referencing skills as well as paraphrasing and summarising skills. The students also had difficulty with the planning of the essay.

Next, [Singh \(2016\)](#) reported that postgraduate students do face challenges in academic writing. Among some of the challenges are academic writing techniques, English language proficiency, of writers, influence of prior academic culture of the writers and feedback (or lack of it) from lecturers. Specifically, postgraduate students face challenges such as:

- (a) Academic writing process. The challenges highlighted by the respondents were identifying what to write, expressing ideas, linking ideas, sequencing, organizing the assignment and the issue of clarity in their writing.
- (b) Various parts of an academic piece. They had problems with the title, introduction, initiating the writing, they lacked knowledge in writing techniques, they lacked writing methodology skills, literature review skills as well as referencing skills.
- (c) Lack of explicitness in the academic writing's requirement, expectations from lecturers.
- (d) English language proficiency.
- (e) Content knowledge.
- (f) Lack of feedback for teachers.

[Ankawi \(2015\)](#) reported that academic writers lacked vocabulary especially academic writing vocabulary. They faced problems in the use of formal language. They also face difficulties in academic writing style. They needed knowledge on paraphrasing and summarizing skills, as well as skills on referencing. They also faced problems in choosing appropriate articles to support their writing. This is also supported by [Fadda \(2012\)](#) who found that English as a second language (ESL) students face many difficulties and stresses in their academic writing, such as difficulty distinguishing between spoken and written English, making an outline before writing a draft, identifying the skills needed for successful writing, and avoiding plague words and phrases.

[Rahmat et al. \(2018\)](#) audience awareness strategies in writing such as interactive and interactional discourse. Interactive discourse are used by the writers to improve on the content of the text. Interactional discourse is used so that the writer can focus on communicating with the reader. Writers who are aware of their audience make careful considerations of the audience's level of understanding as they write. [Bereiter and Scardamalia \(2014\)](#) used the term "psychological constructivism", to indicate that learners build their own knowledge and this can be done through writing. Writers communicate with their audience through their essays. Readers reading the message will form their meaning through cues from the content and strategies used by the writer. According to [Hyland \(2009\)](#) the idea of audience is made clear through discourse studies. Discourse analysis helps researchers explore the notion that the audience gave the writer a sense of direction. This direction helps make the communication between the writer and reader more effective.

### *2.3. Past Studies*

#### *2.3.1. Undergraduate Students*

A study was done by [Pratiwi \(2016\)](#) to investigate students' difficulties in writing English at the third semester students. The sample for the research was 79 students at third semester in University of Bengkulu. The data of this research were obtained by using the test of writing a composition, which was scored by using ESL Composition Profile. Writing difficulties at the third semester varied in the result of the students' score. The writing difficulty related to the linguistics difficulty (language use and vocabulary aspects) was most difficult one compare to the Cognitive Difficulty (organization and mechanics aspects) and Physiology Difficulty (content aspect).

Another study by [Ariyanti and Fitriana \(2017\)](#) was aimed to investigate the difficulties faced by EFL students in essay writing. The study also explored students' learning needs to have better quality of English composition. Examining essays and administering open-ended questionnaires were done to 33 students of English Department at Widya Gama Mahakam University, Indonesia. In addition to that, a semi-structured interview to the writing lecturer was also conducted to investigate his perception related to challenging matters about teaching essay writing. The findings showed that students have major difficulties in grammatical, cohesion and coherence terms. Moreover, minor aspects also had been revealed regarding to students' writing, namely paragraph organization, dictions, and vocabulary misspelling. The lecturer admitted that limited time and big number of students in one class became his great barriers to improve the quality of the students' essay.

### *2.3.2. Postgraduate Students*

A qualitative study was carried out by [Singh \(2016\)](#). The study focuses on academic writing difficulties faced by the non-native English speaking international graduate students while pursuing their Master's degree at a public university in Malaysia. Focus group interview was used on 70 international graduate students. The main objective of the focus group interviews was to analyze how the students negotiated academic writing from an emic perspective. Through this approach, the students were able to share their own experiences of struggling with academic writing practices in higher education. The findings indicate that non-native English speaking international graduate students faced difficulties coping with academic writing especially in English as a medium of instruction setting.

Next, [Cennetkuşu \(2017\)](#) examined the needs, means and successful practices of academic writing through a comprehensive survey, in-depth interviews, and samples of academic writing. Participants of this study are 1) international graduate students who are enrolled in an education or social sciences graduate program and 2) course instructors who teach international graduate students at a prominent US university. Findings indicated that if parties in higher education (students, professors, and instructors) become conscious of each other's expectations and practices, higher education through second/foreign language would most likely produce successful writers. While the students think that their biggest obstacle is vocabulary –either having less rich vocabulary and expressions or field-related terminology-, their professors believe that the most serious problem is about grammar and presenting ideas clearly and smoothly. Having a rich vocabulary enables the writer to choose appropriate word to portray the tone of the voice of the writer. The students and professor also differed in their belief about effects of native language in academic writing and the assistance/feedback provided.

### *2.4. Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework of this study is rooted from [Flower and Hayes \(1980\)](#) representation of rhetorical problems [Figure 1](#).

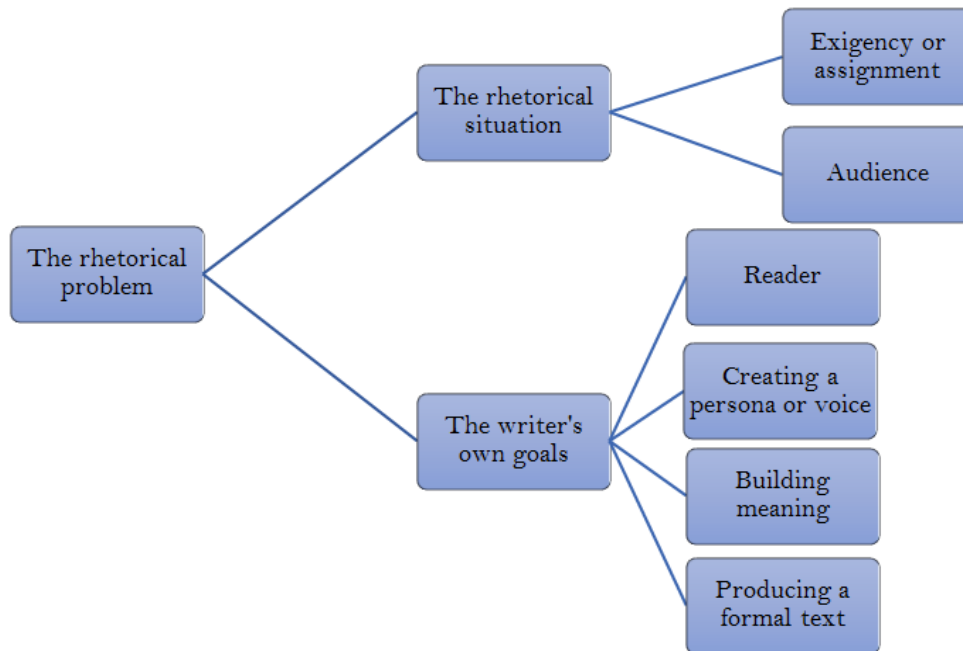


Figure-1. Model of rhetorical problem Flower and Hayes (1980).

According to Flower and Hayes (1980) when writers write, they are faced with a rhetorical problem. This rhetorical problem stems from two main issues; (a) the rhetorical situation and (b) the writer's own goals.

#### 2.4.1. The Rhetorical Situation

##### 2.4.1.1. Exigency or Assignment

This refers to how the writer perceives the title of the essay. Does the writer find the title easy or difficult?

##### 2.4.1.2. Audience

This refers to how the writer plans to make the audience understand their essay.

#### 2.4.2. The Writer's Own Goals

##### 2.4.2.1. Readers

This refers to the effect that the writer wishes the reader to have.

##### 2.4.2.2. Creating a Personal Or Voice

This involves the relationship the writer wishes to have with the reader.

This includes the voice the writer wishes to create, as well as the tone used.

##### 2.4.2.3. Building Meaning

This refers to the writer's attempt to build a coherent network of ideas, to create meaning. This also includes sentencing skills.

##### 2.4.2.4. Producing a Formal Text

This includes the formal or conventional features of a written text. It also includes the conventions of writing.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### *3.1. Introduction*

This section discuss the research design. Population, sample, instrument, method of data collection and analysis.

#### *3.2. Research Design*

This qualitative case study explored students' difficulties in writing. This case study aims to comprehend students' difficulties in essay writing which occurred in natural events, i.e. teaching and learning process in the classroom. Therefore, the researcher administered open ended questionnaire results in order to reveal students' problems in essay writing.

#### *3.3. Population and Sample*

The population of this study is academic writers from different levels of study. Purposeful sample was done on three writers; undergraduate, postgraduate pursuing a master programme and postgraduate pursuing a doctoral programme.

#### *3.4. Instrument*

The instrument used for this study is a set of open-ended questions. There are six questions and the questions are constructed to mirror the main components in [Flower and Hayes \(1980\)](#) rhetorical problem.

#### *3.5. Method of Data Collection*

Data is collected from the students' written responses in the open-ended questions.

#### *3.6. Method of Data Analysis*

The responses will be categorized into six themes; assignment, audience, reader, persona, meaning and text. In addition to that, data presented is categorized into problems in writing faced by (a) undergraduate, (b)postgraduate-masters and (c) postgraduate-doctoral students.

### **4. FINDINGS**

#### *4.1. Introduction*

This section discusses the findings based on the two research questions presented. Data is presented according to the level of the writers (undergraduate, postgraduate-masters and postgraduate- doctoral). The data is also sub-categorised based on the six themes.

#### *4.2. Rhetorical Situation*

RQ1: How does rhetorical situation influence undergraduate and postgraduate writers' perception on writing problems?

Table-1. Problems with assignment.

Assignment	
Category of student	Writing problem
Undergraduate	The writer focuses on the “topic”, “meaning of the topic” and then proceed to “search for articles” for the content.
Postgraduate-Masters	Look for materials.
Postgraduate-Doctoral	“what” to write, think of potential ideas, “planning”, plan “objective of writing”, “significance”.

Table 1 presents the problems that students face with “assignment”. The undergraduate student focused on the topic at the initial stage. Both the undergraduate and postgraduate -masters’ students focused on looking for materials. However, the postgraduate-doctoral student chose to approach the assignment from a bird’s eye view. She preferred to make plans about the assignment from the beginning.

Table-2. Problems with audience.

Audience	
Category of student	Writing problem
Undergraduate	The writer uses “attention grabber”
Postgraduate-Masters	be neutral when writing
Postgraduate-Doctoral	Be creative, focus on how to expand idea, use simple and easy language

A summary of problems with audience by all the three writers is portrayed in Table 2. Both the undergraduate and postgraduate-doctoral writers used creativity to capture the attention of their audience. However, postgraduate writers chose simple and neutral use of language.

#### 4.3. Writers’ Own Goals

RQ2: How does writers’ own goals influence undergraduate and postgraduate writers’ perception of writing problem?

Table-3. Problems related to reader.

Reader	
Category of student	Writing Problem
Undergraduate	To avoid using “words that are too heavy or complicated”, shorten sentences
Postgraduate-Masters	Making thesis statement clear
Postgraduate-Doctoral	Have proper “plan”, sketch ideas, for reader to understand-clear-cut introduction

When the writers were asked what they did in their writing to consider their reader Table 3 the undergraduate writer focused on using less complicated words ad shorter sentences. The postgraduate -masters writer focused on making the thesis statement clear; while the postgraduate-doctoral preferred to make a “proper plan”.

Table-4. Problems related to persona.

Persona	
Category of student	Writing Problem
Undergraduate	When faced with difficulty to use accurate words, writer will consult friends, or the Thesaurus, and also online
Postgraduate-Masters	Use words synonym to represent intended word, properly define the word
Postgraduate-Doctoral	Problem to choose relevant words, to solve-look for synonym, refer to related text as reference (scaffolding)

Table 4 presents the findings about problems related to persona. All three writers found that the main problem was finding the relevant words. They preferred to look for synonym of the words.

Table-5. Problems related to meaning.

Meaning	
Category of student	Writing problem
Undergraduate	Focus on writing clear thesis statement and conclusion
Postgraduate-Masters	By stating point of view, elaborate each point
Postgraduate-Doctoral	Proper planning helps, be mindful about language and sentence structures, arrangement of ideas

When asked what the writers did to get meaning across Table 5 the undergraduate writer focused on improving aspects of the writing-for example the thesis statement and conclusion. The postgraduate-masters focused on elaboration of the points while the postgraduate-doctoral writer focused on language and sentencing skills as well as arrangement of ideas.

Table-6. Problems related to the text.

Text	
Category of student	Writing problem
Undergraduate	Group discussion, get different perspectives from peers, use more credible articles
Postgraduate-Masters	Use citation, add conclusion based on previous studies
Postgraduate-Doctoral	Refer to several references, valid reasons, before writing read articles or text beforehand so that it is easier to align the ideas and come up with a good one

The three writers were asked about problems related to the text. Findings Table 6 revealed that the undergraduate writer chose to solve the problem by having group discussion with his/her peers. This is to allow him/her to gain different perspectives. Both postgraduate-masters and postgraduate-doctoral chose to refer to relevant references to make sure the content is appropriate to their text.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1. Summary of Findings and Discussion

#### 5.1.1. Rhetorical Situation

Rhetorical situation deals with two main aspects. The first aspect of rhetorical situation is how the writer views the issue and the second aspect of rhetorical situation is how the audience views the issue.

##### 5.1.1.1. Assignment

One main difference between the different types of writers is the way the writers perceive the writing assignment. While the focus for the undergraduate writer is more localized (thinking of the content), the focus for postgraduate writers is a bird's eye view of the assignment. Maznun *et al.* (2017) also found that undergraduates faced problems when they wanted to write the introduction. Their research found that undergraduate writers faced problems with the rhetorical structure of the introduction. So, the problem is not only what to put into the essay, but also how to write the contents.



#### *5.1.1.2. Audience*

All the writers in this study focus on capturing the attention of the reader in their writing. Writers can use a variety of devices in their writing to capture the audience's attention. It was reported by [Rahmat et al. \(2018\)](#) that writers often use audience awareness strategies in writing such as interactive and interactional discourse. Interactive discourse are used by the writers to improve on the content of the text. Interactional discourse is used so that the writer can focus on communicating with the reader. In this study, undergraduate writers chose interactive discourse while postgraduate students chose interactional discourse in their writing.

#### *5.1.2. Writer's Own Goal*

Writer's own goal can be reflected in the way the writers communicate with the reader, the way writers use persona, the way writers convey meaning, and the way writers focus on the text.

#### *5.1.2.1. Reader*

Writers need to have a vast amount of vocabulary in order to use appropriate words to make the readers feel the same effect as the writer. In this study, the undergraduate writer chose to use less complicated words. According to [Al-Mukdad \(2019\)](#) writers often "reach out" to readers with their (writers) choice of words.

#### *5.1.2.2. Persona*

Writers sometimes have problems in portraying the correct voice , or tone. Creating the correct persona in writing becomes even more challenging if the writer does not have the necessary vocabulary. The study by [Cennetkuşu \(2017\)](#) reported that the biggest obstacle for academic writers is vocabulary.

#### *5.1.2.3. Meaning*

Another difficult challenge among academic writers is the ability to get meaning across to the reader. Portraying meaning involves sentencing skills. This is also agreed by [Al-Mukdad \(2019\)](#) who put the emphasis on writers' grammar. The study by [Ariyanti and Fitriana \(2017\)](#) also coherence, cohesion.

#### *5.1.2.4. Text*

Teachers teaching academic writing will understand the pains of teaching the conventions of writing. Students either (a) do not take it (conventions of writing) seriously-they assumed conventions of writing are not important in academic writing. On the other hand, some students may find (b) learning the conventions a difficult and confusing task. The study by [Al-Mukdad \(2019\)](#) reported that writers found referencing skills a challenging task in academic writing. In addition to that, [Pratiwi \(2016\)](#) added that besides referencing skills, writers also found it challenging to master organization skills and mechanics in writing.

### *5.2. Pedagogical Implications*

The teaching of writing can be more focused on the writing process. The teaching of writing can be focused on (a) teaching how to get the most appropriate content for writing, (b) what to do with what students have accumulated as far as the content is concerned, (c) how to plan writing , (d) what to do throughout the writing process and how to review a written assignment.

### *5.3. Suggestion for Future Research*

Future researchers could focus on investigating the writing process of writers through think aloud protocol. There should also be further research to compare the challenges faced by different categories of writers.

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