How higher education students write their thesis: Preparation, difficulties, and obstacles

Sri Hapsari Wijayanti

Universitas Katolik Indonesia Atma Jaya. Jl. Jend. Sudirman No.51 Jakarta 12930, Indonesia
* Corresponding Author. E-mail: sri.hapsari@atmajaya.ac.id

Abstract: Writing a thesis is the ultimate goal of higher education. Before writing, all the courses taken in previous semesters are a stock of knowledge for writing a thesis. However, students still face many problems when writing a thesis. The purpose of this research is to describe the readiness of students to write a thesis, the difficulties in writing thesis components, and internal barriers to writing a thesis. The respondents of this research were 105 students of the Faculty of Economics and Business at one of the private universities in Jakarta. The research methods used are descriptive qualitative and quantitative. Data was collected using Google Forms and Focus Group Discussion. This study found that 63% of respondents have good skills in using Indonesian in formal writing, and 52% understand scientific writing techniques well enough. However, 61% have not yet utilized the Mendeley reference manager. As many as 29% of respondents have difficulty in compiling literature reviews, 27% in research methods, 25% in results and discussion (25%), and 14% in introduction (14%). In general, obstacles arise due to laziness and being stuck when working on a thesis.

Keywords: Higher Education; Thesis; Academic Writing

INTRODUCTION

Since college days, students in higher education are accustomed to writing scientific works, such as reports, papers, and proposals. Scientific knowledge and insights, scientific writing techniques, and even language aspects have been taught in previous semesters. Towards the end of the last semester, students must write a research report, namely a thesis, as a requirement to complete their studies in higher education. From writing a thesis, students' ability to think critically, creatively, analytically, and scientifically will be known (Helmi et al., 2023). During the thesis preparation, students are guided by a supervisor. The supervisor plays a very important role in completing the thesis (Rizman & Naas, 2022). Students who regularly consult and revise their thesis drafts will usually complete them on time.

Numerous studies have documented that undergraduate and postgraduate students encounter challenges composing their theses or dissertations, leading to delays in their graduation timelines. The factors hindering thesis completion are multifaceted, encompassing difficulties in conceptualizing ideas, utilizing statistical methods for data analysis, and effectively narrating research findings (Rismen, 2015). Moreover, students often perceive themselves inadequately prepared for thesis writing due to internal factors such as insufficient understanding of thesis writing guidelines, procrastination, and limited English proficiency. Additionally, external factors such as time management, the struggle between thesis supervision and work commitments, difficulty locating reference materials, and financial constraints hinder the completion process (Helmi et al., 2023).

Undergraduate English majors still face challenges in writing with proper grammar, lack of motivation, and struggle with composing research methodologies (Lestari, 2020). Fitriyah (2021)

affirms these findings, highlighting student difficulties in writing language structure, developing ideas, and selecting appropriate vocabulary. Syamsudin (2023) expands on these challenges, emphasizing structural issues and coherence between ideas, locating quality open-access resources, and identifying relevant sources aligned with the research topic (Syamsudin, 2023). In writing literature reviews, students' barriers are synthesizing, criticizing, and explaining literature (Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020).

In general, three main factors contribute to students' difficulties in writing their thesis: psychological, linguistic, and sociocultural factors (Dwihandini, 2013; Rizwan & Naas, 2022). Among the psychological factors, self-esteem is the most influential factor hindering students' thesis writing. Linguistic factors encompass students' challenges in diction and punctuation usage in English. Sociocultural factors, conversely, relate to the communication dynamics between students and their thesis supervisors (Rizwan & Naas, 2022). Previous researchers have also addressed the use of the Indonesian language in Indonesian-language theses (Ghufron, 2014; Riana & Setiadi, 2015).

A substantial body of research has been conducted on thesis writing, as evidenced by the findings of previous studies. This study extends upon prior research by examining students' readiness for thesis writing, their challenges in writing thesis components, and the internal barriers they encounter during the thesis writing process.

METHODS

The participants of this study were 105 active undergraduate students from the Faculty of Economics and Business at a private university in Jakarta. The majority of the respondents were students from the class of 2020 who were in the process of writing their thesis during the even semester of 2023-2024.

This study employed a mixed-methods research design. The researcher distributed an online questionnaire via Google Forms to undergraduate students. The questionnaire comprised questions regarding self-assessment of Indonesian written language proficiency, scientific writing techniques, and ability to utilize reference management software. Additional questions sought students' opinions on the most difficult and easiest aspects of thesis writing.

The author conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) with six randomly selected students (four males and two females) from 105 students who completed the Google Forms. The FGD was conducted semi-structured for one hour. The author employed FGD as a qualitative data collection technique to facilitate the simultaneous gathering of students. Subsequently, the author analyzed the Google Forms results using descriptive quantitative analysis, which was presented as percentages and visualized in pie charts. For the FGD results, the author employed thematic analysis. The analysis began with transcribing the FGD recordings, generating initial codes, identifying themes, defining and naming themes, and presenting a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' readiness to write a thesis

Quantitative data from the Google Forms results indicate that 63% of respondents have good written Indonesian language skills (Figure 1). The use of this language includes spelling, diction, logic, coherence, sentences, and paragraphs. Previous research has stated that students have an excellent language attitude. However, in their behavior, they are still less able to write scientific papers with excellent and correct Indonesian spelling and grammar (Riana & Setiadi,

2015). In this study, 63% of respondents stated that they were good at using Indonesian, which needs to be confirmed by observing their use of Indonesian in their thesis. Standard Indonesian language skills are a foundation that must be mastered by students who are about to write a thesis.

How is your written Indonesian language proficiency?
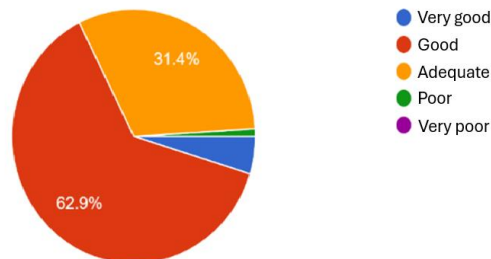105 responses

Figure 1. Indonesian Language Proficiency

In addition to the ability to express thoughts in fluent, proper, and correct Indonesian language, respondents need to have adequate knowledge of scientific writing techniques. As many as 52% of respondents stated that they were sufficiently skilled in scientific writing techniques, while 39% admitted to being proficient in applying them (Figure 2). This finding reveals that respondents do not consider scientific writing techniques difficult. Scientific writing techniques include writing scientific elements, such as creating titles, citations, introductions, literature reviews, methods, and closings (conclusions and suggestions), including reproducing texts, such as analyzing, reviewing, creating abstracts and syntheses (Wijayanti et al., 2014). Similar to the ability to use the Indonesian language, this finding also needs to be confirmed through further research on scientific writing techniques in theses.

How is your scientific writing techniques?
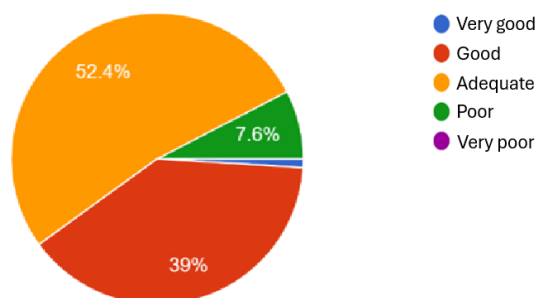105 responses

Figure 2. Ability to Apply Scientific Writing Techniques

Another crucial aspect of scientific writing preparation is mastering reference management tools like Mendeley. Employing a reference manager streamlines generating citations and reference lists automatically. This study revealed that 61% of respondents were unfamiliar with reference managers like Mendeley and Endnote. The remaining 39% acknowledged using such tools (Figure 3). This finding indicates that respondents were inadequately prepared for thesis writing, despite some efforts by the faculty in organizing workshops and training sessions on Mendeley usage to facilitate citation and reference list generation prior to thesis commencement. Mendeley simplifies the task, enhances productivity, improves work performance, and promotes effectiveness (Cahnia et al., 2021).

Do you master using a Reference Manager such as Mendeley/Endnote to write quotations and reference lists?
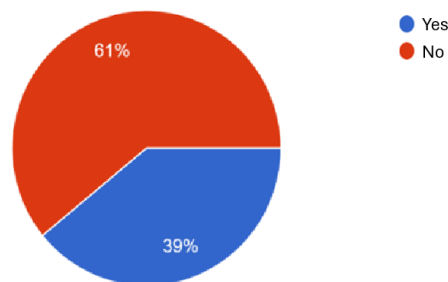105 responses

Figure 3. Reference Manager utilization

Student's difficulties in writing thesis

As scientific work, the thesis adheres to a rigid system, ranging from the background, research questions, research purposes, literature review, research methods, results and discussion, conclusions and recommendations. Although these components have been applied throughout the undergraduate experience, 29% of respondents acknowledged the difficulty in compiling the literature review, followed by difficulty in writing the research method (27%), results and discussion (25%), and introduction (14%) as shown in Figure 4.

Compiling a literature review involves reading and synthesizing many recent references relevant to the research topic. Respondents expressed challenges in compiling literature reviews, stating: "Literature reviews are difficult. Certain variables have shown positive effects in the past five years of journals. I still need to find variables that have negative effects, so I have to keep searching and reading" (A, female). These findings align with Syamsudin's research, which identified challenges in writing literature reviews. These challenges include determining content, meeting supervisors' expectations, establishing coherence between ideas, employing proper grammar in reporting literature, and locating literature sources, some of which may require payment or difficulty accessing (Syamsudin, 2023).

What part of the thesis or proposal that are considered difficult?
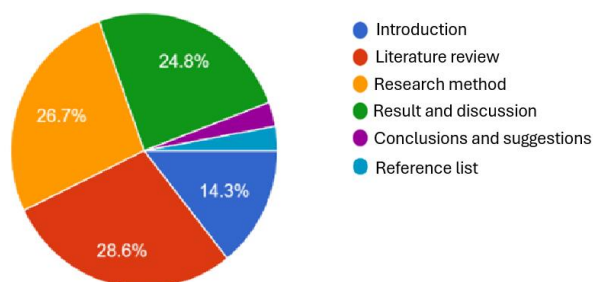105 responses

Figure 4. Parts of the Thesis That Are Considered Difficult

Students who faced difficulties writing their research papers' results and discussion sections expressed their challenges: "I was confused about how to process the data, especially when there were problematic data points" (J, male). Another respondent acknowledged the challenges in writing the introduction section, stating,"I had difficulties with first chapter, particularly in developing the background, identifying global phenomena, and narrowing it down based on various opinions to identify the urgency of the research problem. Then, I needed to connect all these elements" (I, male). A previous study also reported similar

difficulties in writing the introduction, literature review, methodology, and data analysis (Lestari, 2020). These findings suggest that the challenges extend beyond identifying literature sources and synthesizing ideas, encompassing the ability to write cohesively and coherently.

In contrast, respondents identified the introduction (38%) as the easiest section of the thesis to write, followed by the conclusion and recommendations (23%), and literature review (15%) as shown in Figure 5. While respondents perceived the introduction and literature review as straightforward tasks, the FGD revealed that they encountered difficulties in writing these sections. This discrepancy is evident in the responses of 14% of respondents who reported challenges in formulating the introduction and 29% who faced difficulties in the literature review (Figure 4). The questionnaire indicated that only 9% of thesis writers considered the research methodology to be an easy task, while it also appeared among the components identified as challenging (27%). The research methodology was also not exposed as difficult during the FGD. This might be attributed to the fact that four of the six FGD participants were in the early stages of their thesis writing, focusing on the introduction and literature review, while the remaining two participants did not encounter significant difficulties.

What part of the thesis or proposal that are considered easiest?

105 responses

Legend:
- Introduction
- Literature review
- Research method
- Result and discussion
- Conclusions and recommendations
- Reference list

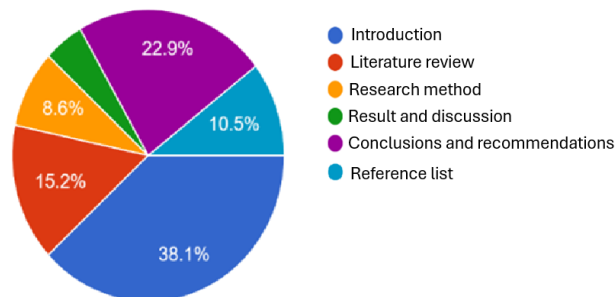Values shown: 22.9%, 10.5%, 8.6%, 15.2%, 38.1%

Figure 5. Parts of the Thesis that are Considered Easy

The abstract is the final section of a thesis and serves as a concise summary of the entire research work. It should be written in a brief, clear, and concise manner to convey the essence of the thesis to readers effectively. The findings revealed that 42% of respondents indicated the presence of a literature review in the abstract, while 29% responded to the contrary (Figure 6). This data suggests that proper academic writing techniques, particularly abstract writing, remain an area of improvement for undergraduate students. As thesis guidelines, the abstract should encompass the introduction, research objectives, methodology, findings, and conclusion. Therefore, the abstract should not be overly lengthy; instead, it should focus on incorporating these essential components within a limited word count (Ghufron, 2014).

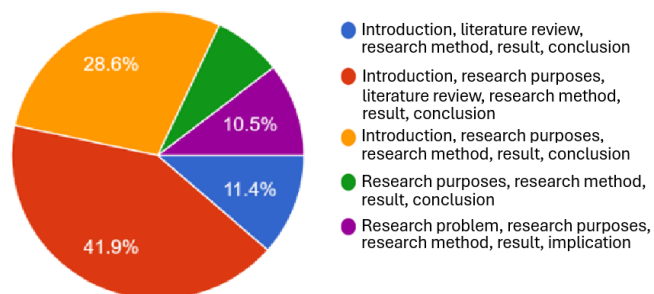**In your opinion, what parts should an abstract contain sequentially?**

105 responses

Legend:
- Introduction, literature review, research method, result, conclusion
- Introduction, research purposes, literature review, research method, result, conclusion
- Introduction, research purposes, research method, result, conclusion
- Research purposes, research method, result, conclusion
- Research problem, research purposes, research method, result, implication

Values shown: 28.6%, 10.5%, 11.4%, 41.9%

Figure 6. Abstract Writing

Obstacles

A comfortable and supportive atmosphere plays a crucial role in facilitating the completion of a thesis. Five out of six respondents opted to work on their thesis at home. Respondents expressed their preference: "It's more comfortable at home, and if I need sources, 90% of them are already available online, so it's easy to find them" (J, male); "I'm mostly at home, but if I get stuck and need sources, I go to the library or a cafe" (I, male). In contrast, respondents who lived in boarding houses or did not live with their parents preferred working outside the home: "I prefer to work outside, either at a cafe or the library, because at home I tend to lie down and get lazy. So, I'll put it off until later. At the library, people come to work on assignments, so it's like a study group, and the atmosphere is more focused" (T, female). These findings indicate that the library at campus is not a comfortable place for most students to write their thesis.

A common internal obstacle undergraduate students face during the thesis writing process is procrastination. This stems from the fact that students only take the thesis course, resulting in infrequent visits to campus. This sentiment is echoed by the respondents such as: "Reluctance, Ma'am, maybe because I'm just at home, the atmosphere might make me bored." (R, male); "When I'm stuck, the hardest part is, for instance, I've already formulated the words about the phenomenon for my background problem, but I'm confused about how to connect them and where to start. That's what's holding me back the most." (V, male); "I'm the same as the others, reluctance is the biggest hurdle. I also get stuck. I'm confused about how to continue with the first chapter." (A, female).

The enjoyable process of writing a thesis for three to four hours a day can abruptly come to a halt when students encounter obstacles. Only one student reported feeling more motivated due to having a friend with the same thesis supervisor, allowing them to assist one another: "My friend and I could collaborate since we happened to have the same thesis supervisor, just in different sectors. I would help him, and he would do the same for me." (J, male). Other obstacles were related to reading materials: "I was working on Chapter 2 yesterday and felt like I didn't have enough sources. I was starting to get worried, Ma'am, that if I looked for journals, I wouldn't find enough for the variables I was using, and I started to panic. What should I do? Should I ask my supervisor to change them or something?" (T, female).

The FGD findings revealed that laziness or lack of motivation is an internal obstacle faced by the respondents. This finding aligns with previous research that identified laziness and procrastination in completing a thesis as the primary barriers (Etika & Hasibuan, 2016; Janura, 2021; Wardani & Syah, 2022). Additionally, other internal obstacles include the writer getting stuck, such as feeling exhausted from searching for literature and the fear of inadequacy in the eyes of the supervisor, leading to discouragement, anxiety, and temporary recess of writing.

All respondents (100%) reported receiving full support from their parents, who consistently reminded and encouraged them to complete their thesis. Similarly, 100% of respondents did not experience any problems contacting their supervisors due to scheduling arrangements made from the start. Consequently, no external obstacles were evident in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study is an initial exploration into undergraduate students' readiness and writing process in composing their theses. While the participants in this study were equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills in their respective fields of study, they still encountered difficulties and obstacles during the writing process. These challenges were primarily related to writing techniques, literature search, and language, particularly in the cohesion of ideas.

Additionally, internal obstacles such as procrastination and writer's cessation further hindered the writing process.

The study acknowledges certain limitations. Firstly, the FGD involved only six respondents, lacking diversity in the academic year. Secondly, as most of the participants were from the class of 2020, with an average of 1-2 semesters of thesis preparation, the writing process was not yet complete, reaching only chapters 1, 2, and 3. These limitations provide opportunities for future research, suggesting the collection of more qualitative data from a more diverse range of academic years to gain a comprehensive understanding of the thesis writing process and challenges faced by undergraduate students.

The findings of this study have implications for teaching practices, emphasizing scientific writing techniques for components perceived as difficult by thesis writers, the appropriate use of the Indonesian language aligned with the specific goals of thesis writing, and the utilization of citation and reference management software. Furthermore, providing technical guidance or training could significantly minimize the difficulties encountered during thesis writing.

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