

UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS: INVESTIGATING EFL STUDENTS' ANXIETY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Writing anxiety is a continual obstacle that can impede academic performance, writing quality, and language acquisition among students learning English as a foreign language; nevertheless, most research has concentrated on undergraduate populations or contexts outside of Indonesia. This study examines academic writing anxiety experienced by graduate EFL learners in Yogyakarta to address this gap. The aim was to investigate the levels, types, and causes of anxiety in academic writing through a descriptive quantitative methodology with 32 participants. Data were gathered utilizing the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) and the Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI). The results reveal significant levels of writing anxiety ($M = 74$), with cognitive anxiety being the predominant type ($M = 26.22$), followed by somatic anxiety ($M = 24.72$) and avoidance behavior ($M = 23.06$). Regarding its causes, writing anxiety was primarily attributed to the fear of the lecturer's negative comments, time pressure, and pressure for perfect work. These findings demonstrate that writing anxiety constitutes a significant barrier that may impede academic success and limit students' ability to produce high-quality academic writing. This study offers empirical novelty by situating the investigation within a localized Indonesian graduate context, thereby extending the literature beyond commonly studied undergraduate populations. Furthermore, the findings contribute to pedagogical practices by emphasizing the importance of constructive feedback, effective time management, and a learning environment that supports continuous development in academic writing. In conclusion, targeted interventions are essential to reduce anxiety, strengthen students' writing confidence, and enhance academic achievement and writing outcomes.

Keywords: Anxiety ,EFL Students, Writing Academic

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a method of communication that conveys messages and expresses the writer's thoughts, emotions, and viewpoints via organized phrases and systematic approaches (Mertosono & Erniwati, 2023). Within higher education, writing is a key academic competency that highlights students' skills in conveying ideas, structuring arguments, and applying analytical thinking to synthesize and evaluate diverse perspectives (Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024). It requires students to master academic discourse patterns and genres, frequently building ideas from an expert's point of view, making strong English writing skills crucial for qualified professionals (Çelik & Razi, 2023; Uzun, 2024). Furthermore, writing abilities are integral to academic activities since they are essential skills students must acquire. However, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners may face difficulties and anxiety when tasked with academic writing, since they must conform to the

conventions of English academic writing style (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020; Fatemi & Saito, 2020). The issue results in a significant situation known as writing anxiety.

Writing is an enjoyable pursuit for some pupils, who find it a captivating endeavor to articulate their ideas and thoughts on paper (L. J. Zhang et al., 2025). Learners who have difficulty expressing their thoughts in writing may regularly find the writing activity unpleasant and even anxiety-provoking anytime they are faced with a written work (Taye & Mengesha, 2024). Writing anxiety may arise in students when they encounter challenges in their writing assignments (Arindra & Ardi, 2020). Writing anxiety arises from a deficiency of essential information or comprehension needed to complete a writing assignment, in accordance with the student's perception that writing is difficult (Naufina & Putro, 2025). Writing anxiety is a condition characterized by a range of emotions, thoughts, or behaviors that impede an individual's ability to initiate, advance, or finalize a writing task for which they possess the requisite academic skills (Vleeschauwer, 2023).

Writing anxiety in second language acquisition is categorized into three distinct types: somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behavior (Cheng, 2004). Somatic anxiety pertains to physical sensations that arise due to anxiety, such as gastrointestinal discomfort, excessive sweating, migraines, irregular heartbeat, and rapid breathing (Cheng, 2004; Papi & Khajavy, 2023). These symptoms often emerge when students experience pressure in generating ideas within a limited timeframe, particularly in writing tasks (Quvanch & Kew, 2022). Meanwhile, cognitive anxiety relates to adverse expectations, excessive concern regarding personal performance, and apprehension about being judged by others (Rasool et al., 2023; Schoen & Holtzer, 2017). This condition reflects the mental state of students who are filled with anxiety and pessimism about the results that will be achieved (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). On the other hand, avoidant behavior refers to the tendency to stay away from writing activities as a form of response to anxiety (Cheng, 2004). This phenomenon is common in EFL students, where they are reluctant to write or engage in writing-related activities (Sabti et al., 2024; Ulya et al., 2025). As a result, they become easily distracted, restless, and have difficulty understanding and completing academic tasks optimally.

The Cause of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) is a standardized tool designed to pinpoint the underlying factors of writing anxiousness (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). Writing anxiety arises from various sources, as indicated by several previous studies. Contributing factors to this anxiety include concern about negative assessment, insufficient experience or practice in writing, ineffective writing strategies, limited comprehension of the subject matter, language barriers, pressure to achieve perfection, time limitations, lack of confidence, and numerous assignments to complete. Students often experience anxiety when their writing fails to align with their teachers' expectations, which can lead to poor evaluations. Regular practice is essential to develop writing skills and alleviate anxiety. Essentially, students' writing anxiety stems from two primary factors: self-confidence issues and external environmental pressure.

EFL students may encounter several difficulties as a result of the anxiety that arises while writing academic compositions. These issues may include challenges in initiating writing assignments, generating nonsensical or unfinished writing, and encountering cognitive obstacles that impede the progression of ideas. As a result, the experience of feeling anxious about writing may adversely affect students' academic achievement and reduce their confidence in their writing skills (Sabti et al., 2019). Addressing these issues is essential to facilitate students' academic advancement and to help them to articulate their knowledge and ideas effectively in writing.

Research on writing anxiety among EFL learners has been widely explored in previous studies. Quvanch and Kew (2022) discovered that 113 EFL students in Afghanistan exhibited moderate anxiety levels, predominantly characterized by cognitive anxiety. The primary contributing factors encompassed linguistic challenges, time constraints, perfectionistic tendencies, and apprehension regarding unfavorable assessment. Syarifudin (2020) also found that writing anxiety was quite high, particularly cognitive anxiety, which stemmed from language challenges, insufficient topic knowledge, and inadequate writing skills. Despite extensive research on writing anxiety, studies specifically addressing academic writing anxiety among graduate students remain limited. This limitation underscores the need for the present study, which introduces a novel focus on graduate EFL students

in Yogyakarta who engage in academic writing, a population and context that have not been widely examined in previous research.

This study makes a distinctive contribution by exploring the level, types, and main sources of writing anxiety encountered by this group, thereby offering new insights into how advanced learners experience anxiety when producing academic texts. This context-specific focus extends previous research, which has largely centered on undergraduate students or non-Indonesian settings, and therefore provides a unique addition to the realm of second language writing. This research seeks to examine the levels, types, and causes of academic writing anxiety among graduate EFL learners, while also providing insights that might enhance teaching methods and instructional tactics in higher education. Two central questions guide the investigation: (1) What levels and types of anxiety do students experience in academic writing? (2) What are the primary factors that cause anxiety in academic writing tasks?

RESEARCH METHOD

This research applied a descriptive quantitative research methodology. Quantitative research involves the use of descriptive quantitative data to describe, explain, predict, or regulate the phenomenon being investigated, which focuses on statistical or numerical data (Gay et al., 2012). The study adopted this approach to investigate the extent of writing anxiety, its categories, as well as the factors influencing it, allowing the phenomenon to be examined across a broader sample and quantified through measurable indicators. The use of descriptive statistics provided a systematic means of summarizing the prevalence, distribution, and patterns of writing anxiety, ensuring that the findings reflect the actual conditions experienced by participants in a clear, objective, and reliable manner. In line with this methodological framework, this study involved 32 EFL graduate students at one of the universities in Yogyakarta who experienced anxiety when writing academic compositions.

In this research, two validated instruments were utilized to gather data: the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), designed by Cheng (2004), and the Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) formulated by Rezaei and Jafari (2014). The SLWAI was applied to assess both the intensity and categories of writing anxiety experienced by EFL learners, offering a multidimensional

evaluation of writing anxiety. This instrument comprises 22 items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and is categorized into three dimensions: Cognitive Anxiety (items 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, and 21), Somatic Anxiety (items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, and 19), and Avoidance Behavior (items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, and 22). The SLWAI was selected due to its widespread use in EFL research and its established reliability and validity, making it appropriate for assessing both the level and dimensions of writing anxiety (Cheng, 2004). In contrast, the CWAI was employed to examine the factors underlying writing anxiety, thereby complementing the SLWAI by linking observed anxiety levels to their potential sources; this instrument was chosen for its focus on identifying key contributing factors. The combined use of SLWAI and CWAI enables a more comprehensive understanding of academic writing anxiety by capturing both its dimensions and the factors that contribute to its development.

RESULTS

Level of Writing Anxiety

This study sought to investigate the level of academic writing anxiety among graduate students learning English as a foreign language. Data were obtained using the SLWAI, a 22-item instrument measured on a five-point Likert scale. To ensure correct computation of the total anxiety score, five negatively worded items were reverse-coded. Cheng (2004) states writing anxiety levels are classified as low (scores below 50), moderate (50–65), and high (above 65). The findings related to students' anxiety levels are presented in the following section.

Table 1. Statistical Analysis of Writing Anxiety Levels among Students

	N	Mean	SD	Range	Min	Max
Students'						
Writing Anxiety Level	32	74	4.318	16	65	81

Table 1 reveals that the students' mean score was 74, which is classified as high anxiety. This result reflects a relatively considerable level of writing anxiety among the EFL graduate students involved in the study. Such elevated anxiety implies that academic writing assignments are perceived as challenging and

stressful, which may influence students' confidence, performance, and engagement in writing activities. This discovery corresponds with other studies by Syarifudin (2020) and Wahyuni and Umam (2017), which also recognized elevated levels of writing anxiety in EFL students. In contrast to the current results, Omar and Ismail Chaqmaqchee (2023) and Quvanch and Kew (2022) discovered that their participants had a moderate degree of writing anxiety. The higher anxiety observed in this study may be explained by the demanding academic expectations placed on graduate EFL students, including expectations for linguistic accuracy, coherence, and critical argumentation in academic writing. Additionally, writing using a second language requires simultaneous control of content, structure, and language form, which may intensify cognitive load and increase anxiety. These pressures are likely compounded by concerns about evaluation and academic standards at the graduate level. The discrepancy between this study and previous research is the role of contextual factors—such as the educational setting, academic expectations, and learners' backgrounds—in shaping students' writing anxiety. Comprehending these contextual factors is crucial for formulating focused instructional strategies to reduce anxiety and enhance academic writing performance.

Types of Writing Anxiety

The investigation focused on examining students' writing anxiety types through Cheng's (2004) SLWAI framework. Mean scores for each category were used to determine the most prevalent type of anxiety, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The Mean Score for Every Type of Writing Anxiety

	Number of students	Total Score	Mean
Cognitive Anxiety		839	26.22
Somatic Anxiety	32	791	24.72
Avoidance Behavior		738	23.06
Total		2368	74

Table 2 demonstrates that cognitive anxiety was identified as the predominant kind of writing anxiety among students, shown by a total score of 839 and a mean of 26.22. This dimension reflects unfavorable thought, heightened

concern about writing performance, and fear of evaluation. Its predominance suggests that students were particularly worried about their academic writing quality, including issues related to accuracy, organization, and the possibility of being given unfavorable evaluations by instructors. This finding may be explained by the rigorous requirements of graduate-level scholarly writing, where students are expected to demonstrate critical thinking, coherence, and linguistic accuracy in a second language. Such expectations may heighten self-doubt and fear of making errors, thereby intensifying cognitive anxiety.

Somatic anxiety occupied the second position in terms of prevalence, with a total score of 791 and a mean score of 24.72. This form of anxiety is reflected in physiological reactions such as sweating, trembling, and a rapid heartbeat during writing activities. The presence of somatic symptoms indicates that students' concerns about writing performance were accompanied by physical tension, which may interfere with concentration and hinder the writing process.

The lowest level of writing anxiety was observed in avoidance behavior, with a total score of 738 and a mean score of 23.06. This result suggests that although some learners tended to postpone or avoid writing tasks as a coping strategy, most students continued to engage in academic writing despite experiencing anxiety. This may be explained by the academic demands and writing requirements faced by graduate students, where writing tasks are compulsory and closely tied to course completion and academic progression. The prominence of cognitive anxiety highlights the need for instructional practices that address students' negative perceptions, fear of evaluation, and confidence in academic writing within EFL graduate contexts.

Cognitive anxiety has been consistently reported as the most prominent form of writing anxiety in prior research (Afdalia et al., 2023; Quvanch & Kew, 2022; Syarifudin, 2020; Wern & Rahmat, 2021), which is also reflected in the findings of the present study. The results demonstrate that writing anxiety among EFL learners is complex, impacting their cognitive processes, physical health, and behavioral reactions. It is important to consider these different aspects of anxiety when creating complete support systems and treatments to assist students in overcoming psychological obstacles and enhancing their academic writing abilities.

Cause of Writing Anxiety

This research employed the CWAI questionnaire, created by Rezaei and Jafari (2014), to evaluate the source of writing anxiety. The survey consisted of 10 questions. The percentage calculation of the outcomes for CWAI is shown below.

Table 3. The Percentage Distribution of CWAI Items

No	Cause of Writing Anxiety	Total	Percentage
1	Fear of the lecturer's negative comments	140	11%
2	Fear of writing tests	120	10%
3	Insufficient writing practice	126	10%
4	Insufficient writing technique	88	7%
5	Problems with topic choice	107	9%
6	Linguistic difficulties	123	11%
7	Pressure for perfect work	128	10%
8	High frequency of writing assignments	124	10%
9	Time pressure	138	11%
10	Low self-confidence in writing	127	10%
Total		1221	100%

According to Table 3 above, the primary contributor to students' anxiety was the fear of the lecturer's negative comments, as indicated by a total of 140 responses. This emphasizes the crucial significance of feedback in students' psychological health since the expectation of criticism may greatly impede their writing process. They experience increased anxiety due to the anticipation of criticism or unfavorable judgments from lecturers since they are afraid that their efforts will not meet the expectations or standards established by their instructors. This anxiety may paralyze students, causing them to doubt their writing skills and preventing them from being open to trying new things or exploring other writing styles, thus inhibiting their creativity and hindering their learning process.

The second most often mentioned factor was time pressure, with a total of 138 responses. This indicates that deadlines and difficulties in managing time significantly contribute to their anxiety. The pressure of meeting strict deadlines may worsen students' sense of incompetence and overwhelm them, further

hindering their capacity to generate high-quality work. The tension is intensified when students must juggle writing tasks with other academic obligations and personal commitments, resulting in a constant feeling of being hurried and unable to provide enough time for each task. The constant battle to beat the time limit might lead to rushed output, increasing their worry, and establishing a pattern of stress and subpar performance. Furthermore, 128 students reported feeling pressure to create perfect work, which is another significant aspect contributing to their anxiety. Learners are greatly pressured by the stringent requirements and self-imposed pressure to create flawless writing. The pressure stems from the assumption that only flawless work is acceptable, influenced by personal desire, external expectations, as well as the competitive nature within the academic environment. Excessive amounts of time spent rewriting and polishing writing by students might result in burnout and reduce the pleasure and satisfaction gained from the writing process. The unwavering desire for perfection may make the act of writing seem overwhelming and impossible, intensifying feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

To sum up, students' writing anxiety is mostly driven by their dread of receiving negative criticism from lecturers, time restrictions, and the pressure to create excellent work. Rezaei and Jafari (2014) reported that writing anxiety was mainly influenced by fear of instructor feedback, insufficient self-confidence, and weak language proficiency, which contrasts with this study's findings.

DISCUSSION

The results reveal that EFL graduate students encounter significant academic writing anxiety, while cognitive anxiety is recognized as the predominant form, with key contributing factors encompassing fear of the lecturer's negative comments, time pressure, and pressure for perfect work. This suggests that academic writing is perceived as a demanding and stressful task, particularly in a second-language context, where learners must cope with high academic expectations. This result aligns with prior research indicating that elevated foreign language writing anxiety might adversely impact students' writing ability (Li, 2022). These findings differ from studies reporting moderate levels of writing anxiety (Omar & Ismail Chaqmaqchee, 2023; Quvanch & Kew, 2022; Yu & Zhou, 2022). This variation suggests that differences in academic expectations,

institutional context, and learner characteristics may shape anxiety levels in EFL settings.

The predominance of cognitive anxiety indicates that students' writing anxiety is mostly linked to the fear the lecturer's negative comments and pressure for perfect work. This finding is in line with Cheng's (2004) conceptualization of writing anxiety and is further supported by recent evidence demonstrating that fear of evaluation and feedback significantly shapes students' anxiety during the writing process (Sun et al., 2024). Graduate-level academic writing requires students to manage complex cognitive demands, including idea development, organization, and linguistic accuracy, which may intensify self-doubt when composing in a second language. Somatic anxiety indicates that these psychological pressures are accompanied by physical tension that can interfere with concentration and writing fluency, as reported in process-oriented writing studies (Kadmiry, 2022). Although avoidance behavior was the least dominant type, its occurrence suggests that some learners deal with anxiety by delaying or avoiding writing tasks, a pattern shown to be closely related to academic procrastination quality (C. Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

An investigation of factors related to writing anxiety emphasizes the important role of instructional and academic contexts. The concern of receiving unfavorable evaluations from instructors emerged as the primary source of anxiety, supporting previous findings that evaluative or judgment-oriented feedback can heighten writing anxiety and undermine students' confidence (Sun et al., 2024; Wang & Han, 2022). Time constraints also contributed substantially to anxiety, as strict deadlines and heavy workloads limit opportunities for revision and reflection. In addition, perfectionism intensified students' anxiety by fostering excessive self-criticism and fear of producing imperfect work, a relationship that has been consistently reported in recent EFL writing anxiety research (Khosravi et al., 2023). These results suggest that, in graduate EFL contexts, psychological and academic pressures may outweigh purely linguistic challenges. Therefore, reducing writing anxiety requires pedagogical approaches that emphasize constructive feedback, realistic time management, and a writing approach that prioritizes the development and organization of ideas rather than perfection.

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence on the degrees, forms, and contributing to academic writing anxiety between Indonesian graduate EFL learners, a population that has received limited scholarly attention. The results indicate that writing anxiety is shown to be more than a general emotional reaction; instead, it reflects a complex construct made up of cognitive, somatic, and avoidance dimensions, each contributing differently to students' academic writing processes. Cognitive anxiety is the primary type, suggesting that students' anxiety is significantly influenced by cognitive issues that could hinder idea creation and critical expression. Somatic anxiety reflects the presence of psychological pressure accompanied by physical tension that can impair concentration and writing fluency, while avoidance behavior indicates a tendency among students to delay writing tasks, potentially affecting productivity and learning continuity. In addition, the identification of fear of negative evaluation, time constraints, and perfectionistic expectations as the primary causes of anxiety highlights the central role of instructional practices and academic demands in shaping students' writing experiences. This study offers a novel contribution by offering an integrative perspective on writing anxiety, encompassing its levels, types, alongside underlying causes within a graduate EFL context, thereby generating practical pedagogical insights. Accordingly, the research emphasizes the necessity of implementing targeted interventions, including constructive and supportive feedback practices, explicit guidance on time management, and a writing approach that supports the systematic development and clear organization of ideas, with the aim of reducing anxiety, strengthening learners' writing confidence, and enhancing academic performance.

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