EXPLORING ANXIETY IN WRITING UNDERGRADUATE THESIS EXPERIENCED BY EFL STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITAS PGRI RONGGOLAWE TUBAN

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ABSTRACT

Writing anxiety is a psychological barrier that affects students' ability to write effectively, especially in academic writing such as undergraduate theses. This study aims to explore the types, causes, and coping strategies of writing anxiety among EFL students at the English Education Study Program of UNIROW Tuban. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected from sixteen students of the 2020 class through the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), the Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI), and student interviews. The findings revealed that students experienced cognitive, somatic, and avoidance anxiety, with cognitive anxiety being the most dominant. Based on CWAI, students experienced writing anxiety due to ten major factors, among these, time pressure was reported as the most common cause of anxiety. Despite these challenges, students used various coping strategies, such as preparation, information gathering, consistent writing practice, writing techniques, reflecting on writing topic, self-evaluation, digital tools, feedback seeking, modifying their environment, motivation strengthening, self-calming, and supervisor communication. These strategies helped students manage their anxiety and continue progressing in their thesis writing.

Keywords: EFL students; writing anxiety; undergraduate thesis; academic writing

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a challenging process that requires both dedication and proficiency to produce high-quality work (Duha 2022). Writing in a foreign language is naturally more complex than in first language (Pardede 2024). To become an excellent academic writer in English, it is imperative to have a solid basic knowledge of academic writing (Chauhan 2022). Academic writing is one of the skills that undergraduates must master in university, and it is an important way to shape students' thinking and expression (Mlundi 2024). Universities expect students to quickly adjust to the demands of academic writing through the various discourses of disciplines offered. The belief is that students will acquire this prospective skill as they navigate the various systems within universities (Zide & Mafugu, 2023).

In the academic world, students are required to write a thesis (Khasanah et al. 2023) especially in Indonesia's higher education. Writing a thesis aims to explore and solve scientific problems related to the field studied. It tends to be an individual learning experience in which a student goes through several sequential activities which comprise choosing the topic, making the research proposal, doing the research, and completing the thesis writing (Kurniawati and Atmojo 2022). Students should prepare themselves in writing thesis, because it does not exclude the possibility that students may face some challenges during the process of writing the thesis (Safitri et al. 2021). If students can't adapt to the challenges, they may feel frustrated, constantly think negative things, and be filled with prolonged worries (Faiz 2024). From this viewpoint, students are likely to face various challenges throughout the process, one of which is the psychological factor known as writing anxiety (Rohmah & Muslim, 2021).

Writing anxiety is the feeling of apprehension that arises from the creation of written content and that interferes with one's ability to write well (Mudra, 2023). According to Purnama (2024), writing anxiety can be caused by various factors, including a lack of knowledge of the subject matter and spelling rules and a fear of not being appreciated. Furthermore, writing ability encompasses multiple areas, such as vocabulary, grammar, phonetics, and semantics, which can cause students to

experience writing anxiety. Anxiety is absolutely having negative impacts for those who experiences it (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2021) especially in English writing activities. English writing anxiety has various impacts on learners' academic performance and mental well-being. Such as decreased writing quality and confidence, lowered grades and poor expression and social impairment and career limitations (Yan, 2024).

Cheng (2004) defined a multidimensional understanding of anxiety and its effects on language learners. His three-dimensional analysis of writing anxiety included cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety and avoidance behaviour. The mental conditions where writers are preoccupied with negative assumptions about the effectiveness of their performance and about the perceptions of others are the results of cognitive anxiety. Somatic anxiety manifests in physiological facets of anxiety including faster heart beats, higher nervousness or an upset stomach. Lastly, avoidance behaviour is the behavioural reflection of anxiety referring to avoiding the act of writing. Hence, it affects one's ability to write well.

There are several studies focused on writing anxiety, particularly in the context of academic writing. The research consistently showed that students face various challenges during the writing process, (Kawengian & Subekti, 2024; Kurd et al., 2023; Nawawi et al., 2024; Pravita & Kuswandono, 2022; Talasee & Poopatwiboon, 2025; Yanping, 2023). Common causes of anxiety include linguistic challenges, particularly the difficulty in expressing ideas clearly in English (Kurniawati & Atmojo, 2022; Talasee & Poopatwiboon, 2025), fear of evaluation or negative feedback (Kurd et al. 2023; Kawengian and Subekti 2024; Nawawi et al. 2024), often resulting in procrastination and writing paralysis (Pravita and Kuswandono 2022), lack of writing experience and low language proficiency and time pressure (Kurd et al. 2023; Nawawi et al. 2024), and also gender differences, with female students reportedly experiencing higher levels of anxiety (Yanping, 2023). In order to manage their anxiety, students employed several coping strategies, such as self-regulation techniques, including goal setting, planning, and seeking help (Pravita and Kuswandono 2022), reading journal articles to enhance topic understanding and academic support tools, like grammar checkers and artificial intelligence tools to assist in language production (Kawengian and Subekti 2024), psychological strategies like positive self-talk, relaxation techniques, and goal setting were also widely used (Talasee and Poopatwiboon 2025), also collaborative and technological strategies, including group discussions, instructional media the use of technology in writing (Nawawi et al. 2024).

Unlike most previous studies that tended to focus only on one aspect of writing anxiety, this study integrates three dimensions; types, causes, and coping strategies within the specific context of undergraduate thesis writing among Indonesian EFL students. This comprehensive perspective is still underexplored, especially in the Indonesian EFL context, where undergraduate thesis writing is a major academic requirement. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its holistic approach to investigating writing anxiety, which is expected to provide deeper insights and practical contributions for both students and academic institutions in supporting the undergraduate thesis writing process. To address the objectives, the research question of this study are:

1. What types of writing anxiety do EFL students experience in writing undergraduate thesis?
2. What are the factors caused writing anxiety experienced by EFL students in writing undergraduate thesis?
3. What are the coping strategies in writing anxiety used by EFL students in writing undergraduate thesis?

RESEARCH METHOD
Research Design
The researcher utilized a descriptive qualitative research method using a case study design to collect and analyze the data. A case study was chosen because this research involved several participants and aimed to provide in-depth information about writing anxiety through two data collection methods: a closed-ended questionnaire and interviews. Descriptive method in qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Although the questionnaire produced numerical data, the researcher treated it as supporting information, and both the questionnaire and

interview results were analyzed qualitatively to explore the types, causes, and coping strategies related to writing anxiety during the undergraduate thesis writing process.

To ensure the validity of the qualitative data, this study applied triangulation, which refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014). In this research, triangulation was used by combining a questionnaire and interviews. The convergence of these methods allowed the researcher to cross-check and confirm the findings, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the data.

Research Participants

The participants of this study were sixteen students from 2020 class at English Language Education Study Program of UNIROW Tuban who had graduated in the 2023/2024 academic year. All participants were EFL students who had completed and successfully defended their undergraduate thesis written in English. They were selected purposively based on their direct experience with the undergraduate thesis writing process, which made them appropriate and relevant sources of information for the study.

Research Instruments

This study used two instruments: a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire was adapted from the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) by Cheng (2004) and the Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) by Rezaei and Jafari (2014), with some modifications to fit the context of undergraduate thesis writing. The SLWAI consisted of 22 items divided into three categories: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behaviour. The CWAI consisted of 10 items identifying the causes of writing anxiety. Both questionnaires used a 5-point Likert scale with *Strongly Agree* (5), *Agree* (4), *Uncertain* (3), *Disagree* (2), and *Strongly Disagree* (1) and were distributed online via Google Forms. In addition, interviews were conducted with all participants to confirm the questionnaire results and explore the coping strategies they used to deal with writing anxiety. The interview questions were developed based on the questionnaire items and carried out online.

Data Analysis

To identify the types of writing anxiety, data from the SLWAI questionnaire were analyzed by calculating the mean scores for each category. As previously explained in the research instrument section, the SLWAI consists of three categories: Cognitive Anxiety (items 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, 21), Avoidance Behaviour (items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, 22), and Somatic Anxiety (items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 19), in SLWAl that were worded negatively and needed contrary scoring before being summarized to gain the whole scores for three categories. Meanwhile, to explore the causes of students' writing anxiety, the CWAI questionnaire results were ranked based on the frequency of student responses, then converted into percentages. In addition, the interview data were analyzed qualitatively by transcribing the audio recordings, verifying their accuracy, reducing the data by identifying, grouping, and coding them into emerging themes related to coping strategies, followed by description, interpretation, and drawing conclusions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Types of Writing Anxiety Experienced by EFL Students in Writing Undergraduate Thesis

This analysis was conducted based on the data obtained through the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) questionnaire developed by Cheng (2004), which includes three main categories of writing anxiety, namely Cognitive Anxiety, Somatic Anxiety, and Avoidance Behaviour. These three categories were used as a reference to identify the forms of psychological pressure felt by students when facing the undergraduate thesis writing process.

Tabel 1. Types of Writing Anxiety

Types of Writing Anxiety	Number of Students	Mean
Cognitive Anxiety	16	3.28
Somatic Anxiety	16	2.94
Avoidance Behaviour	16	2.88

The table 1 showed, cognitive anxiety was the most dominant type with the mean score of 3.38, indicating that many students experienced worry, fear of failure, and self-doubt during undergraduate thesis writing. Somatic anxiety followed with the mean score of 2.94, showing physical symptoms like nervousness or fatigue in some students. Avoidance behaviour was the least common with had the mean score of 2.88, reflecting students' tendencies to delay or avoid writing undergraduate thesis due to lack of motivation or overwhelming pressure.

Factor Causes Writing Anxiety Experienced by EFL Students in Writing Undergraduate Thesis

Based on the analysis of the data obtained from 16 research participants, it was found that the anxiety of writing a thesis in English was influenced by various interrelated factors. The researcher employed the Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) by Rezaei and Jafari (2014) to identify it.

Table 2. Factors Caused Writing Anxiety

No.	Factor Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Fear of lecturer's negative comments	10	9,62%
2.	Fear of writing undergraduate thesis	8	7,69%
3.	Insufficient writing practice	11	10,58%
4.	Insufficient writing technique	11	10,58%
5.	Problems with topic choice	7	6,73%
6.	Linguistic difficulties	12	11,54%
7.	Pressure for perfect work	10	6,62%
8.	High frequency of writing assignments	10	9,62%
9.	Time pressure	14	13,46%
10.	Low self-confidence in writing	11	10,58%
	Total	104	100%

The findings showed that the most dominant factor was 'time pressure', which was reported by 14 respondents (13,46%), indicating that time constraints in completing thesis writing triggered high anxiety. This was followed by 'linguistic difficulties' as reported by 12 respondents (11,54%), which included barriers in English grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. Furthermore, 'insufficient writing practice', 'insufficient writing technique', and 'low self-confidence in writing' were each reported by 11 respondents (10,58%), suggesting that a lack of experience and technical proficiency were major causes of anxiety. Other factors that stood out included 'pressure for perfect work', 'high frequency of writing assignments', and 'fear of negative comments from lecturers', each of these was reported by 10 respondents (9,62%). In contrast, 'fear of writing an undergraduate thesis' (7,69%) and 'problems with choosing a topic' (6,73%) ranked lowest with lower percentages. This finding confirms that undergraduate thesis writing anxiety in university students does not stem from a single factor, but is the result of the interaction between time pressure, linguistic, psychological, and academic factors as described by Rezaei and Jafari (2014).

Coping Strategies to Reduce Writing Anxiety Experienced by EFL Students in Writing Undergraduate Thesis

The information presented was obtained via interviews. The data indicated that the participants employed a variety of strategies to cope with their writing anxiety during the undergraduate thesis writing process.

Table 3. Coping Strategies Used to Reduce Writing Anxiety

No.	Coping Strategy	Student Statements
1.	Pre-writing Preparation	**Student 4:** *" From the beginning, I tried to choose a topic that I felt capable of handling, both in terms of knowledge and mental readiness. That way, I felt more prepared when it came to writing the undergraduate thesis."*
2.	Gathering Information from Multiple Sources	**Student 2:** "*The method that helped me the most was document study, like reading a lot of references, especially journals or academic papers. I feel that by feeding my mind with enough information, I have material to work with.*"
3.	Engaging in Frequent Writing Practice	**Student 5:** "*Through the experience of writing articles, I've come to understand what the research and academic writing process is like—starting from the background all the way to the conclusion.*"
4.	Reflecting on the Writing Topic	**Student 8:** "*From my experience, I would note and mark the parts I didn't understand. Then I searched for references, especially from journals online. If I still couldn't understand, I'd ask my supervisor.*"
5.	Applying Writing Strategies and Techniques	**Student 3:** "*I often jot down small ideas in the form of short notes, whether I'm working on my undergraduate thesis in front of the laptop or doing other activities.*" **Student 8:** "*I usually create an outline first to keep my writing more structured, and then I read and analyse literature that aligns with my topic.*" **Student 10:** "*I make a mind map. Once I have the mind map, the writing just follows it, so it doesn't go off track.*"
6.	Self-Evaluation	**Student 9:** "*Sometimes I evaluate my own thesis writing to identify its weaknesses and shortcomings, so I can improve the quality of the writing and analysis.*"
7.	Using Tools	**Student 1:** "*I feel quite supported by today's technological advancements. I make good use of AI to assist in the undergraduate thesis writing process, and it really helps reduce the pressure.*" **Student 4:** "*I once used QuillBot to paraphrase some sentences that I found difficult to write on my own. It was quite helpful in reducing my anxiety about having a high plagiarism score.*"

8.	Seeking Feedback	**Student 12:** *"Sometimes I ask for others' opinions, because by listening to different perspectives, I can compare and find the right solutions for my thesis writing."*
9.	Effective Communication with Supervisor	**Student 2:** *"I feel fortunate to have a supervisor who is communicative and gives reminders in a considerate way. Her positive responses make me feel mentally lighter during consultations."*
10.	Modifying the Writing Environment	**Student 13:** *"I can focus better when it's quiet, so I usually write in my room alone to avoid getting distracted."* **Student 16:** *"I actually prefer writing outside, like in a coffee shop, so I don't get bored easily like when I stay at home."*
11.	Self-Calming	**Student 5:** *"Getting enough sleep or at least lying down—is important for me, because I need to save my energy."*
12.	Strengthening Motivation	**Student 1:** *"Continuously fostering motivation and providing positive self-affirmations."*

The study found that students employed various strategies to manage their writing anxiety during the undergraduate thesis writing process. These strategies were personal, academic, and social in nature.

One common approach was pre-writing preparation, such as choosing familiar and manageable topics. This helped students feel more confident and emotionally ready. Another essential strategy was gathering information from multiple sources like journals and academic references. This reduced the fear of lacking content or understanding and gave them a sense of control. Related to this was frequent writing practice, which made students more comfortable with academic language and structure through previous experience such as article writing or class assignments. To stay mentally focused, students also engaged in reflecting on writing topic—reviewing what they did not understand and seeking explanations, either through readings or by asking their supervisors. Students also relied on writing strategies and techniques, such as outlines, mind maps, and note-taking. These techniques allowed them to break down complex ideas, organize thoughts, and reduce cognitive overload during the drafting process. Self-evaluation also helped students feel more prepared when submitting their work, as they were able to identify and correct weaknesses in their writing beforehand. In addition, many students made use of digital tools like AI, grammar checkers and paraphrasing software. These tools helped ease technical anxieties, especially related to plagiarism, structure, and language use.

Social strategies also played a key role. Students often seeking for feedback from peers or supervisors to ensure that their ideas were on track and to gain reassurance. Supportive and responsive communication with supervisors also helped reduce fear of negative judgment and gave students clarity on academic expectations. Environmental adjustments were used by students to improve their focus and reduce distractions; some preferred quiet rooms, while others were more productive in relaxed settings like coffee shops. These preferences reflected students' efforts to build a space that supports their concentration and mental comfort. To stay emotionally balanced, students practiced self-calming by taking breaks, watching videos, resting, or enjoying small pleasures like food or music. Though these did not directly advance writing, they were important in maintaining emotional stability and avoiding burnout. Additionally, maintaining motivation was a central theme. Whether driven by personal goals, or graduation deadlines, students used both intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation to push through moments of anxiety and keep progressing in their undergraduate thesis writing.

These findings show that coping with writing anxiety is a dynamic and individualized process. Students did not rely on a single method but rather a combination of strategies tailored to their needs, personalities, and academic conditions.

Discussion

This study found that sixteen EFL students from 2020 class at English Education Study Program of UNIROW Tuban who had graduated during the 2023/2024 academic year faced different kinds of writing anxiety while working on their undergraduate thesis. Based on Cheng's (2004) SLWAI framework, cognitive anxiety was found to be the most dominant (M=3.28), this indicates the psychological stressors, followed by somatic anxiety (M=2.94), reflecting the presence of physical symptoms related to stress. Meanwhile, avoidance anxiety had the lowest average (M=2.88), suggesting that while some students tended to avoid writing undergraduate thesis, this behaviour was less prominent compared to the other types of anxiety. This supports earlier research by Yanping (2023) and Talasee & Poopatwiboon (2025) which also noted cognitive anxiety as the main issue.

To explore what caused these anxieties, the study used Rezaei and Jafari (2014) Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI). Among the ten factors, time pressure stood out as the most significant, showing that strict deadlines increased students' stress levels. Other major causes included language barriers, lack of writing practice, insufficient knowledge of writing norms, and low self-esteem. Students also expressed worries about negative feedback from supervisors, the pressure to produce perfect work, high workloads, anxiety about the thesis itself, and challenges in choosing a suitable topic. These connected factors intensified students' stress and confusion throughout the writing process. While earlier studies by Kawengian and Subekti (2024), Nawawi et al. (2024), and Kurd et al. (2023) noted similar causes, such as fear of evaluation and language-related issues, they did not categories the causes as thoroughly as this study did, which utilized the CWAI for a clearer understanding.

Despite these obstacles, students showed determination by applying various strategies to reduce their anxiety. They organized their writing process by making adequate preparations before starting their undergraduate thesis, gathered information from multiple sources to broaden their perspectives and strengthen the content, and practiced writing regularly to build confidence. They also reflected on their chosen topics, applied different strategies and techniques to support their writing process, and conducted self-evaluation to identifying their own weaknesses before submitting drafts to supervisors. In addition, students adjusted their writing environments and utilized digital tools such as AI, grammar checkers, and past theses to assist with their work. This reflects a shift in coping patterns, in which digital tools are not only perceived as technical aids but also as psychological supports that help reduce anxiety and enhance confidence during thesis writing. Furthermore, many students actively sought constructive feedback from peers and supervisors, with regular and open communication with supervisors proving vital in easing anxiety and fostering both academic and emotional growth. Some students also practiced relaxation techniques and repeated positive affirmations to manage stress and maintain motivation throughout the writing process. These findings match previous research from Pravita and Kuswandono (2022), Yanping (2023), Nawawi et al. (2024), and Talasee & Poopatwiboon (2025), which also highlighted the importance of motivation, preparation, and support systems in handling writing anxiety. However, this study provides deeper insights into how students specifically apply these coping methods during the undergraduate thesis writing process.

Overall, this study confirms that writing anxiety is a common and complex problem among EFL students, especially during undergraduate thesis writing. Similar to previous studies, it found that fear of evaluation, time pressure, and language difficulties were the main causes of anxiety. What makes this study different is its focus on students who had already completed their undergraduate thesis, giving a more detailed picture of both the challenges and the ways they managed them. Unlike earlier studies that mostly described anxiety levels or general patterns, this research shows the practical coping strategies students used, such as preparation, regular writing practice, use of digital tools, and communication with supervisors. In this way, the study not only supports but also adds to existing research by giving a more complete and student-centered view of writing anxiety in the EFL context.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that EFL students at UNIROW experienced varying degrees of writing anxiety while completing their undergraduate thesis, with cognitive anxiety being the most dominant type, followed by somatic and avoidance anxiety. The main causes included time pressure, language difficulties, lack of writing practice, low self-confidence, and fear of supervisor feedback. Despite these challenges, students used various coping strategies, such as preparation, gathering information from multiple sources, regular writing practice, reflecting on the writing topic, applying writing strategies and techniques, self-evaluation, and seeking help from peers and supervisors. Students also relied on digital writing tools such as grammar checkers and AI, adjusted their writing environments to improve focus, strengthened motivation, self-calming, and effective communication with their supervisor.

This study lies in its focus on the specific context of EFL students at UNIROW who encounter writing anxiety during undergraduate thesis writing. Unlike most previous studies that emphasize academic writing in general, this research highlights the dominant types and main causes of anxiety while also uncovering unique coping strategies, particularly the reliance on digital writing tools and communication with supervisors, which have rarely been addressed in earlier studies.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that lecturers provide more supportive, structured, and anxiety-aware academic guidance. Students are encouraged to recognize their anxiety triggers and apply suitable coping strategies. Future research is suggested to involve a larger and more diverse sample, and to explore additional factors such as EFL students' backgrounds and academic levels, to better understand the complexity of writing anxiety in academic settings.

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