

## **“WRITING MADE EASY”: INTRODUCING KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC WRITING TO STUDENTS OF ENGLISH EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

This community service activity was conducted in the form of a public lecture on keys to successful academic writing with the English Language Education Study Programme of Universitas Kristen Indonesia (UKI) Toraja being the partner of the community service programme. The public lecture was conducted on-site at the main hall of UKI Toraja Campus 1, lasted for a total of three hours and was attended by 191 students and several lecturers. Among the key contents of the lecture was the reminder to ensure that each paragraph only contains one main idea and to resist the desire to put too many ideas in one paragraph. Furthermore, the lecture also introduced the concept of sandwich paragraph structure and several Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to help the participants organise their writing. From the online questionnaire distributed at the end of the session, it was found that the duration of their study did not significantly impact their foreign/second language (L2) writing proficiency. Despite the possible limitations, the community service activity was a success and some aspects to improve are identified for the improved quality of future programmes.

**Keywords:** Community service, academic writing, L2 writing, sandwich paragraphs, artificial intelligence (AI)

### **INTRODUCTION**

Academic writing is vital for English Language Education students to become proficient in the language, to comprehend areas where English is the language of instruction, and to meet their academic needs (Alharbi, 2019; Ratnawati et al., 2018). Also, academic writing is a prominent component in an academic discourse taking up various forms such as papers, essays, project reports, assignments, lecture notes, and theses with which students need to keep up to meet their academic needs (Aunurrahman et al., 2017; Husin & Nurbayani, 2017; Poel & Gasiorek, 2012; Ratnawati et al., 2018). Previous studies focusing on academic writing for tertiary students in English as a second/foreign language (L2) context have shown that students need to develop good writing skills to participate in writing research work, make oral presentations in academic conferences, and publish an academic article for the completion of their studies (Cai, 2017; Zhang, 2018). Similarly, Giridharan (2012) argued that academic writing success is essential for academic success. Poor academic writing skills are frequently described as a primary detrimental factor for academic achievement. Therefore, students' proficiency in academic writing skills plays an essential role in their academic success.

Even though academic writing is crucial for achieving academic success, many students still struggle with it. Previous studies have attempted to explore the challenges encountered by students in academic writing (Alharbi, 2019; Cai, 2017; Giridharan, 2012; Husin & Nurbayani, 2017; Poel & Gasiorek, 2012; Ratnawati et al., 2018; Sağlamel & Mustafa N. K., 2015). Alharbi (2019) reported that in Saudi Arabia, the school curriculum did not provide students with enough exposure and practice in writing before they entered university. As a result, most of them found difficulties in expressing their ideas using appropriate sentence structures and

vocabulary when writing. Likewise, Giridharan (2012) reported that Malaysian students experienced difficulties in the mechanics of writing. They felt unconfident about their sentence structures and word choices when writing. Cai (2017) reported that students in China encountered problems in the process of writing such as brainstorming ideas, drafting, revising, and editing. In Indonesia, Husin and Nurbayani (2017) reported that Indonesian undergraduate students experienced difficulties in expressing their ideas in writing due to a lack of vocabulary mastery, inability to organise their ideas in a logical sequence, and inability to apply correct grammar and language structure. Similarly, studies contemplating Indonesian English Language Education students' L2 writing mastery found among others that grammar seemed to be a major issue for these students (Subekti, 2017, 2018).

For the aforementioned reasons, conducting a community service activity facilitating these teacher candidates to understand key principles of second/foreign language (L2) academic writing is deemed necessary. Besides, conducting such programmes is in line with the core values of Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW), at which institution the authors of this article work. The value is "Service to the World" (Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana, 2017). In this respect, UKDW lecturers should use their expertise to benefit the people around them. Previously, community service programmes by the authors of this article mainly targeted English teachers at secondary schools (Subekti, Winardi, et al., 2022; Subekti & Kurniawati, 2020; Subekti & Susyetina, 2019, 2020), High School students (Subekti et al., 2021; Subekti, Ermerawati, et al., 2022; Subekti & Wati, 2019), and business industry (Ermerawati et al., 2022; Subekti, Susyetina, et al., 2023; Subekti, Wati, et al., 2023). A community service activity partnering with an English Language Education department was a rather rare opportunity. From this activity, it was hoped that the prospective participants who are future English teachers could be facilitated to have good L2 writing skills, eventually able to help their future students in their learning as well.

## **METHODS**

The English Language Education Study Programme (ELESP) of Universitas Kristen Indonesia (UKI) Toraja became the partner of this community service activity. The cooperation between the ELESP of UKI Toraja and the English Language Education Department (ELED) of UKDW started in 2021 through Student Exchange programmes. In the second year of the collaboration, the two departments agreed to widen the range of cooperation not only in the student exchange programmes but also in community service activities. Hence, it was agreed that the lecturers of ELED UKDW, the authors of this article, would be resource persons at a public lecture conducted on-site at the UKI Toraja campus when these lecturers visited UKI Toraja in October 2022 as the supervisors of the ELED students who did exchange programmes.

The public lecture was held on Saturday, 22 October 2022 at the Main Hall of UKI Toraja campus 1 in Makale, Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi. The event was titled "Writing Made Easy". Before the event, the partner advertised the event through social media platforms. The online promotional poster can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The Promotional Poster

As can also be observed in Figure 1, the event started at 09.00 and ended at 12.00 local time. On the day of the event, 191 students and several lecturers of the ELESP of UKI Toraja attended the public lecture. The public lecture was divided into two main agendas, lecture on academic writing tips and the use of technological tools to support writing, as well as questions and answer sessions. At the end of the programme, a *Google Form* questionnaire link was distributed to the participants on how high they rated their L2 proficiency and the evaluation of the programme.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before the lecture started, the resource persons were warmly welcomed by the partner through a Torajan welcoming dance, suggesting not only the high regard Torajan people gave to their guests but also the meticulous preparation for the event on the partner's part. This can be seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Torajan Welcoming Dance

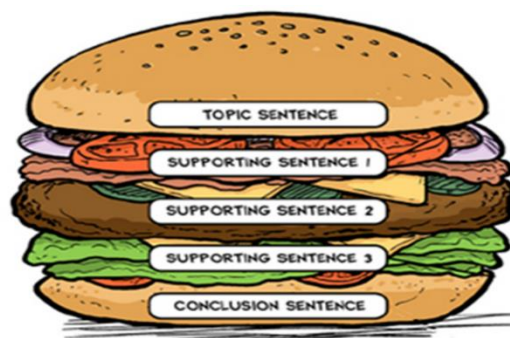
The first session was a lecture on academic writing tips and the use of technological tools to support L2 writing. The session was opened with brainstorming on what came into the

participants' minds when they heard the word "writing". This brainstorming activity was intended to direct the participants' focus to the task at hand and facilitate them to be in the right frame of mind to learn the topic (Estalkhbijari & Khodareza, 2012). Various responses popped up such as "difficult" and "complicated", suggesting that writing did pose a challenge even for learners from English majors.

Next, they were facilitated to realise one common 'temptation' in writing, "wanting to include so many ideas in one paragraph", to which statements many participants expressed their agreement. When a writer includes too many ideas in his or her paragraph, the paragraph would be bound to have several problems. First, the paragraph would likely lack focus. Second, in the case of essay writing, such paragraph would likely not contribute to the progression of ideas. Finally, because the participants were L2 learners of English in the development stage, it was likely that the more they write, the higher chance of making grammatical mistakes, which hampered intelligibility and further hampered the quality of the writing. This suggestion was in line with previous studies suggesting that grammar still became one of the spectres for English Education Department students in L2 writing (Subekti, 2018). To tackle the 'desire' to include too many ideas in writing, the participants were suggested to remember that "In writing, quantity does not guarantee quality", meaning that writing longer was not necessarily better than writing shorter but with better quality.

To start, the participants were reminded of several keys to remember. First, they needed to resist the temptation of wanting to include so many ideas in one paragraph. Second, they should not be too ambitious in writing. They should not be obsessed with quantity without paying attention to quality. Next, they needed to make sure that each paragraph in their essay only had one focused idea. Furthermore, depending on their level, they could start with a short paragraph containing five to seven sentences only. They were also reminded that they needed not to be ashamed of writing "only" five to seven sentences because their writing ability would gradually progress as long as they familiarised themselves with maintaining their writing quality on a smaller scale.

Further in this session, the participants were introduced to sandwich paragraphs. It is a paragraph consisting of one topic sentence, several supporting sentences, and one conclusion sentence restating the idea of the topic sentence with additional details from the supporting sentences (Savage & Shafiei, 2007; Well, 2013). The structure of sandwich paragraphs, it was conveyed, allows for a focused idea within a paragraph and ensures that all sentences written within the paragraph support the main idea conveyed in the topic sentence, which is the first sentence of the paragraph. The visual of a sandwich paragraph as explained in the lecture can be seen in Figure 3.



**Figure 3. Sandwich Paragraph Structure**

Furthermore, the participants were also facilitated to write a fitting title for a paragraph. A suitable title, it was conveyed, normally is the noun phrase version of the topic sentence, thus ensuring the alignment between the title and the contents of the paragraph. For example, for a paragraph with "My hometown, Makale, is a good place to live in." as the topic sentence, "Makale: A Good Place to Reside" could be a suitable title.

After the materials on several tips and techniques of writing were conveyed, the lecture continued with explanations of several supporting technological tools that the participants could use to improve their writing quality. The second session focused on the exploration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to facilitate the writing process and specifically to enhance students' linguistic writing abilities (Fageeh, 2013).

The second session was opened with the definitions of AI to introduce and familiarise the participants with the concept of AI in general. When asked what AI is, it seemed that most participants were not familiar with it as was shown by the no-response of the participants. Then, they were introduced with the definition of AI as the intelligence of a machine that enables it to imitate human actions (Kanade, 2022). It was explained that the concept of AI can be applied in various fields including in writing.

The participants were then introduced to more AI tools for writing and their specialities. The first AI tool that was introduced was *Grammarly*. *Grammarly* is a website-based AI tool for writing to help students check spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The participants were informed that *Grammarly* is the simplest and easiest AI tool to use as it does not require an account to set up. The second was *Pro Writing Aid*. Similar to *Grammarly*, this AI tool provides some features such as a spelling checker, grammar checker, and style improvement. The first two features are more likely the same as the ones in *Grammarly*. The last feature provides students with some language styles to improve the clarity and stylistic of their writing. The next AI introduced was *Personal Tutor*. This AI tool provides a spelling and grammar checker as well as a thesaurus. The thesaurus provides some synonyms and related words that might help the students look up different words with the same meaning. The next AI tool introduced to the participants, *QuillBot*, is different from the previous three tools. *QuillBot* is an AI tool to help students paraphrase sentences. The participants were informed that *QuillBot* can be used to help them rewrite sentences and avoid similarities to sentences. The last AI tool introduced to the participants was *Virtual Writing Tutor*. *Virtual Writing Tutor* is an automated essay evaluation tool that helps students give feedback on their writing and allow them to revise based on the feedback. After all the AI tools were comprehensively explained and simulated, the lecture continued with the question and answer session.

In the question and answer session, several questions popped up. For example, "What are the tips for writing a research-based journal article?", "How do we restrain ourselves from writing too many ideas in our essays or paragraphs?", and "How can we make ourselves love writing?" The answer to the first question was for them to read a lot of relevant previous studies or theories (Ecarnot et al., 2015). It should be noted that at times the time spent reading may be much more than the time spent writing. The answer to the second question was that they needed to position themselves from the readers' viewpoints and asked questions like "Would they understand what I write or what I mean?" By positioning themselves in readers' viewpoints, they would realise the need to step-by-step guide readers to follow the flow of their ideas in their writing. Furthermore to the question of how the participants could make themselves love writing despite the difficulty and complexity, the response was to familiarise themselves with free writing or writing in a non-evaluative environment (Park, 2020). For example, they could

start with journal writing where they could freely write whatever they wanted without any judgment of right or wrong. At the end of the lecture, group photos were taken in front of the campus. This can be seen in Figure 4.



**Figure 4. Photo Session with All the Participants**

Furthermore, at the end of the lecture, 150 participants filled out the *Google Form* questionnaire and various data were collected related to their L2 writing proficiency as well as the evaluation of the programme. Of these 150 respondents, 130 (86.7%) were females whilst 20 (13.3%) were males, perhaps in line with the gender composition at the ELESP of UKI Toraja dominated by female students. The data on the respondents' semesters at the ELESP, furthermore, can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1. The Respondents' Semesters of Their Study**

No	Semesters	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Semester 1	33	22.0%
2.	Semester 3	43	28.7%
3.	Semester 5	17	11.3%
4.	Semester 7	57	38.0%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

As seen in Table 1, of the 150 participants filling out the online questionnaire, 33 (22%) were from the first semester, 43 (28.7%) from the third semester, 17 (11.3%) from the fifth semester, and 57 (38%) from the seventh semester of their study.

As for how high they rated themselves in L2 academic writing in the range of 1 up to 10 the obtained results can be seen in Figure 5.

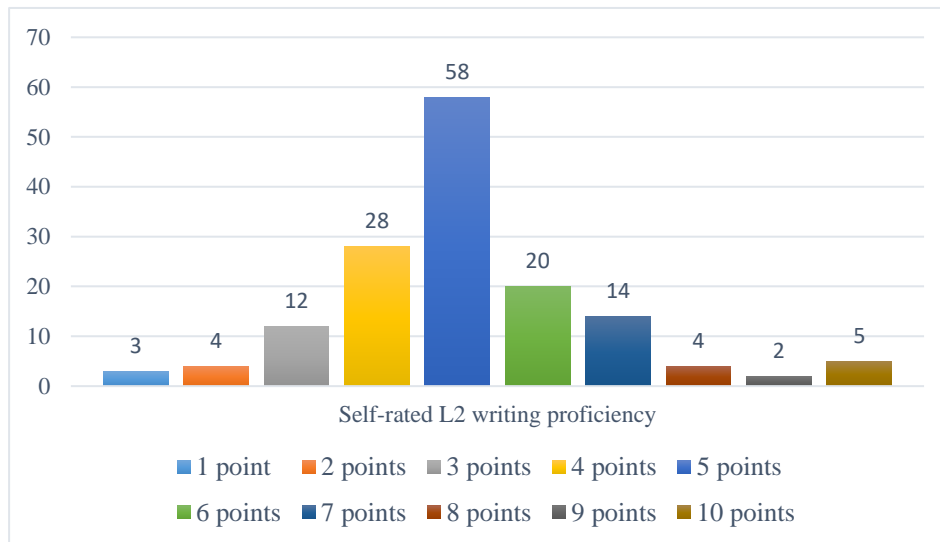


Figure 5. The Respondents' Self-rated L2 Writing Proficiency

As seen in Figure 5, three respondents (2%) rated themselves 1/10, four respondents (2.7%) 4/10, twelve respondents (8%) 3/10, 28 respondents (18.7%) 4/10, 58 respondents (38.7%) 5/10, twenty respondents (13.3%) 6/10, fourteen respondents (9.3%) 7/10, four respondents (2.7%) 8/10, two respondents (1.3%) 9/10, and five respondents (3.3%) 10/10. The mean of the self-rated L2 writing proficiency was 5.11 ( $SD=1.69$ ), indicating that the respondents generally considered themselves lacking in L2 writing.

Furthermore, to see whether there was a significant difference in self-rated L2 writing proficiency as seen from the semesters of their study, a chi-square test of independence was employed. It was found that there was a statistically non-significant difference in self-rated L2 writing proficiency among respondents across semesters,  $X^2(27, 150) = 24.50, p > .05$ . In other words, the duration of their study did not significantly impact their perceived L2 writing proficiency.

Regarding these particular findings, several possible factors may be at play. First, because the participants studied English Education, they may have a high expectations about their English competence. As they may have felt that there was a discrepancy between their current competence (current self) and their ideal self (expectation), they rated their L2 competence low, perhaps despite their actual competence. Second, this may also be related to how they perceived the L2 writing instructions they had obtained thus far at the department, for example, whether they thought that they had been sufficiently facilitated to write in L2 well. This finding was not very surprising, overall, considering that previous studies in Indonesia also suggested that English major students also struggle with L2 writing (Dwihandini et al., 2013; Jawas, 2019).

Furthermore, through the online questionnaire, quantitative data on the participants' satisfaction were also obtained. 144 respondents (96%) reported their satisfaction with only six respondents (4%) indicating they were not very satisfied with the programme. These data can be observed in Table 2.

**Table 2. The Participants' Satisfaction with the Programme**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Not Very Satisfied	6	4.0%
Satisfied	89	59.3%
Very satisfied	55	36.7%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Furthermore, some qualitative feedback was also obtained on whether the community service activity had been useful for the participants. The majority of the feedback given was generally positive. They generally considered the materials helpful in facilitating them to write better. Some examples can be observed in the following entries.

“I am impressed because the materials are very relevant and interesting, for example, about applications that we use in writing.” (Translated, 6<sup>th</sup> respondent)

“The expert lecture is very beneficial for us (informing us) about writing techniques and applications to help improve the quality of our writing and grammar” (translated, 11<sup>th</sup> respondent)

“I get new knowledge on how to write, what to do when writing an essay or a story, as well as (knowing) supporting applications.” (Translated, 110<sup>th</sup> respondent)

“The public lecture is helping me in writing my thesis because the materials about the techniques and the technology are easy to understand. (Translated, 113<sup>th</sup> respondent)

Nevertheless, there was a couple of feedback on aspects to improve, for example, the materials on the slides were barely visible from afar and the use of full English during the lecture made some student participants have difficulty fully understanding what was conveyed. This feedback can be observed in the following entries.

"The materials in the slides were too small (not visible from a distant), so we (participants sitting) at the back could not see them clearly." (Translated, 29<sup>th</sup> respondent)

“I suggest the resource persons mix the languages (Indonesian and English) instead of using full English because I have difficulty understanding the lecture in full English. (Translated, 129<sup>th</sup> respondent)

The aforementioned feedback warrants further comments. First, the many participants attending the lecture making some sit at the very back rows coupled with the fact that the resource persons had not visited the venue beforehand made it difficult to estimate the visibility of the materials presented in the slides. Secondly, some participants who were still in the first semester of their study may find it difficult to understand lectures conveyed in full English.



Regarding this, some authors argued that the use of the mother tongue or first language could potentially enhance understanding (Algazo, 2023; DiCamilla & Anton, 2012) and reduce learners' anxiety (Subekti, 2020a). This can be a reminder for better future programmes involving participants of approximately the same characteristics.

Several community service activities on improving participants' writing abilities have been recently conducted (Arifin & Harida, 2022; Emaliana et al., 2020; Khairunas et al., 2023; Sari, 2020; Subekti, 2020b; Sudewi et al., 2022; Surayya & Prasetyaningrum, 2023; Wiyaka et al., 2021). They generally reported benefits of conducting such community service activities empowering participants to be able to write English better. However, some of them also reported challenges noting that improving the participants' writing skills need process. For example, Emaliana et al. (2020) conducted a five-session programme to facilitate English teachers to write scientific papers and could only help them up to abstract writing stage. Another author also reported that scientific writing was challenging even for Indonesian in-service English teachers in her community service activity (Subekti, 2020b), let alone pre-service English teachers in the current programme. That being said, writing capabilities need to be sharpen step-by-step by the participants and it can more be optimally achieved through regular facilitation in various development programmes within the curriculum and beyond.

## CONCLUSION

The following are the conclusions of this community service activity. The participants were enthusiastic throughout the session seen from their attentiveness and the many thought-provoking questions they asked after the lecture session. The participants were facilitated to learn basic principles of L2 academic writing and several technological tools that could help them write better. In this respect, the materials conveyed may not be extensive. However, this had been optimal considering the limited duration of the activity. Besides, the materials were more like general guidelines which could be implemented and employed by the participants in a wide range of L2 academic writing situations.

The following are several recommendations informed by the results of this community service activity. As this community service activity was conducted by English Language Education lecturers and partnered with a fellow English Language Education department, future programmes may be conducted in a Visiting Professor scheme. This would allow students from both institutions to obtain enriched materials from both institutions more sustainably and extensively. Secondly, as the participants of this community service activity were prospective English teachers, it is important that they sharpen their writing skills. Lecturers could involve them in community service programmes necessitating them to teach writing, for instance, to high school learners. This way, they can learn writing better by actually teaching it. Furthermore, community service activities conducted with the same departments from different regions or islands in Indonesia can be promoted. That is to facilitate exchange of knowledge, experience, as well as insights on relevant issues in the same field. Finally, it could also be strategic to conduct joint community service programmes involving these same departments to empower wider society.

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