

Research Article

Challenges and Solutions in Saudi EFL Students' Process Writing of Argumentative Essays

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges encountered by Saudi EFL university students when composing argumentative essays, focusing on the three stages of the writing process: pre-writing, writing, and post-writing. A mixed-method explanatory sequential design was adopted, combining a survey of 150 first-year female medical students with follow-up semi-structured interviews of five participants. The survey, adapted from established writing criteria, measured difficulties across brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, and editing, while interviews provided deeper insights into the underlying causes of these challenges. Quantitative results revealed that outlining was the most difficult pre-writing task, with 71% of students reporting challenges in organizing ideas. During the writing stage, 73% struggled with constructing main body paragraphs and 79% had difficulty linking sentences smoothly, often due to limited knowledge of connectors and confusion about sentence boundaries. In the post-writing stage, 80% of participants found revising first drafts difficult, while 70% struggled with mechanics such as punctuation and capitalization, and nearly half reported problems with grammar editing. Qualitative findings confirmed that these difficulties stemmed from insufficient grammatical knowledge, lack of prior practice, and low motivation. Students frequently described argumentative writing as more complex than descriptive or reflective tasks, requiring critical thinking, persuasive reasoning, and extended content development. They also expressed limited confidence in peer review, perceiving it as ineffective compared to teacher feedback. To address these issues, students recommended continuous training, individualized teacher support, and exposure to clearer models and examples. They emphasized the importance of explicit instruction in outlining, grammar, and connectors, as well as increased opportunities for group discussions and collaborative editing to enhance idea generation and revision skills. Additionally, they highlighted the potential of innovative digital tools and creative activities to increase motivation and engagement. The study carries important implications for pedagogy and policy in Saudi higher education. Teacher training should focus on scaffolding each stage of the writing process and providing sustained formative feedback. Curriculum design should integrate sequenced argumentative writing tasks supported by explicit instruction in organization and critical thinking. Finally, technology can be leveraged to promote active learning, self-regulated revision, and greater student confidence.

Keywords

Writing Stages, Argumentative Essay, Challenges, Solutions, EFL Students

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Received: 1 September 2025; **Accepted:** 15 November 2025; **Published:** 4 December 2025



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1. Introduction

The importance of writing skills has been widely emphasized by researchers, who have examined writing difficulties from both process-oriented and product-oriented perspectives. Prior studies consistently identify language use, coherence, and cohesion as the most common challenges in student writing, alongside difficulties such as distinguishing between written and spoken forms, applying grammatical rules (including subject–verb agreement), and linking sentences to form cohesive paragraphs [19, 28, 55, 20].

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the challenges encountered during the writing process and explores how addressing these challenges can enhance students' overall writing proficiency. Specifically, the study seeks to address gaps in existing research by examining the obstacles faced by EFL students at each stage of composing argumentative texts: pre-writing, writing, and post-writing. The aim is to identify the underlying causes of these difficulties and propose effective strategies for overcoming them. By advancing current research on the writing process, this study deepens understanding of the factors influencing argumentative composition among EFL students and highlights approaches that may strengthen instructional practices. Ultimately, these insights can inform the development of pedagogical methods designed to enhance students' proficiency in academic writing.

Research Questions (RQ):

- 1) What are the main reasons for writing difficulties?
- 2) What are the main challenges encountered by medical students during their writing of argumentative essays?
- 3) How can students overcome these difficulties?

2. Literature Review

Writing is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners, with difficulties frequently reported in vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, organization, content, and style [55]. Farooq et al. observed that many students struggle with English composition due to limited vocabulary and recurring grammatical and mechanical errors [24]. Similarly, Anaktototy et al. emphasized that grammar represents a substantial challenge for EFL learners, undermining both fluency and clarity [9]. Students also experience difficulties at the early stages of paragraph construction, where organizing ideas into coherent structures proves daunting [37]. Alshakhi highlighted that writing is often considered the most demanding skill because it requires simultaneous attention to essay structure and grammatical accuracy [6]. Irawansyah further found that students tended to produce shorter sentences when developing paragraphs, which weakened coherence and unity [28]. Such challenges frequently erode students' confidence, further hindering their writing performance [47].

The process writing approach has been widely recognized

as a more effective alternative to the traditional product approach. Unlike the product approach, which emphasizes only the final text, the process approach emphasizes writing as a recursive and developmental activity, encouraging students to engage with the entire process rather than the end result [26]. Research has shown that this approach assists students in organizing thoughts into coherent and unified paragraphs [43], while also addressing learners' needs by teaching them how to construct texts and overcome writing challenges. Moreover, it fosters a collaborative and motivating environment for students from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds, while accounting for their individual needs, interests, and motivations [37, 34].

The process writing approach enables the systematic development of coherent texts through planning, drafting, revising, and editing [61]. This methodology supports idea generation, drafting, and iterative refinement [37], emphasizing logical flow, strategic planning, and structural organization in line with [41]. Jalaluddin argued that the approach facilitates ongoing revision toward a polished product, echoing the views of [3] and [1, 29]. Tustiawati & Marantika Similarly stressed that writing is a comprehensive and iterative process requiring multiple revisions, where changes may occur at any stage [57, 53]. Within this model, teachers provide continuous support rather than limiting intervention to the final submission, with evaluation embedded throughout the writing process [56, 12]. As Novia & Saptarina explains, writing is an ongoing cycle of drafting, revising, and enhancing quality [37]. Kurniasih et al. further contended that the process approach promotes active engagement, enabling students to participate fully in writing rather than focusing narrowly on the finished product [31].

Scholars have defined the writing process in slightly different ways. Onozawa outlined three stages: prewriting, drafting, and revising [38]. Seow identified four: planning, drafting, revising, and editing [46]. Others proposed five stages, including publishing [10, 21, 32, 51]. Despite these variations, the emphasis remains on the recursive nature of the process, where modifications at one stage may influence others. In practice, the writing process can be distilled into prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Prewriting involves generating ideas through brainstorming, outlining, listing, or free writing [50], while also engaging students in exploring and understanding the material [44]. At this stage, learners create rough sketches and receive feedback from peers and teachers. Drafting then focuses on constructing topic, supporting, and concluding sentences, with ongoing feedback to ensure alignment with intended goals. Revising involves reorganizing and refining ideas based on peer and teacher feedback [35], while editing addresses grammar, punctuation, spelling, and style [50].

EFL argumentative writing is a particularly demanding genre, requiring students to understand the topic, formulate a thesis,

structure coherent arguments, and express ideas in writing [40]. Despite its centrality in assessments such as TOEFL and IELTS, relatively few studies have examined the relationship between critical thinking and EFL writing proficiency. Wulandari argued that the process writing approach enhances both writing and critical thinking, enabling learners to engage with ideas and produce well-crafted argumentative texts [7, 58]. Sheir et al. added that this approach improves confidence, vocabulary, and grammar [48]. Avcı emphasized that process writing allows students to express their ideas and refine skills, while [36] found it fosters confidence and language proficiency [11]. Novia & Saptarina observed that engaging with process writing tasks helps learners assimilate knowledge and build stronger sentence structures [37]. However, limitations exist: the approach may neglect linguistic accuracy, reduce originality through frequent interventions, and place heavy time demands on teachers [50].

To address these gaps, Genre-Based Pedagogy (GBP) has gained attention as a complementary method. GBP is defined as “an approach to teaching that equips students with tools for understanding texts as genres, for analyzing those genres, and for utilizing this insight in their writing” [52]. It views writing as socially situated, helping learners connect linguistic features to communicative purposes [30]. GBP also provides visible pedagogy [27] and offers tools such as genre exploration, reflective tasks, and mixed-genre portfolios [30, 39]. Yasuda showed how genre-based writing tasks, such as email writing, promote genre awareness, linguistic competence, and writing skills [60]. Graham & Sandmel further demonstrated that process writing approaches play a central role in reforming writing instruction in several American contexts, with students receiving process-based instruction outperforming peers in traditional classrooms [25].

Beyond instructional approaches, several individual factors shape writing proficiency. Motivation has been identified as a critical determinant, with higher motivation linked to greater proficiency [9, 14]. Literacy, defined as reading and writing ability, also influences writing, as limited reading can constrain idea generation [8]. This relationship underscores the interdependence of reading and writing: exposure to diverse texts enriches structures, styles, and content knowledge. Cognitive processes—such as idea generation, organization, and synthesis—further affect students’ ability to craft arguments [9]. Language proficiency, particularly grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, shapes clarity, coherence, and persuasiveness [13, 22, 23, 8, 9]. Akhtar et al. emphasized grammar, coherence, and development as key linguistic challenges [2]. Siekmann Similarly found that German EFL learners struggled with structure and coherence, often omitting paragraph breaks and linking words, which undermined text comprehension [49]. Edmund et al. reported that Malay EFL learners faced challenges in vocabulary, idea development, and language-related issues [20]. Many Arab students also struggled with editing due to difficulties in error detection [5]. Farooqui identified three main obstacles among Saudi university stu-

dents: inadequate prior knowledge and creativity, overreliance on teacher feedback, and insufficient understanding of the writing process [23].

Taken together, previous research highlights gaps in writing curricula and teaching methods across contexts. The present study, therefore, investigates the multiple factors contributing to EFL students’ difficulties in argumentative essay writing across pre-writing, writing, and post-writing stages by employing both process writing and genre-based approaches, as well as student interviews. It aims to offer contextually relevant insights and practical strategies to strengthen argumentative writing instruction in Saudi higher education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a mixed-method, explanatory, sequential design, involving the collection and separate analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data through a web-based questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. A total of 150 first-year female medical students participated in the online survey, while five students engaged in individual interviews. Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide further clarification of the quantitative results.

3.2. Participants

A total of 150 female EFL students participated in the present study, all of whom were first-year university students in Saudi Arabia enrolled in the preparatory year program for medical colleges. The sample consisted exclusively of female students due to institutional enrollment patterns and access constraints. The students, whose first language was Arabic (L1) and second language was English (L2), took the Oxford Online Placement Test upon course enrolment, placing at the B1 (lower intermediate) level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Their ages ranged from 17 to 20 years ($M = 18.69$, $SD = 0.62$), and they began learning English at an average age of 10.50 years ($SD = 3.00$). The students were enrolled in a general English course with a weekly commitment of 16 hours.

The course lasts for ten weeks. The writing class was scheduled for two hours per week, employing a genre-based process approach to teach students how to write argumentative essays. This method involved presenting two models to help students practice and enhance their understanding of the schematic structure of argumentative essays. Subsequently, students were tasked with applying the practiced structure to write their individual argumentative essay (see Appendix I for more details).

3.3. Research Instruments

3.3.1. Survey

The survey questions were adapted from the criteria outlined in [18, 4] surveys, incorporating 15 key criteria. Students completed the survey after their English course to capture potential writing difficulties across the three main stages of writing. The items were presented in English with Arabic translations provided to accommodate any potential difficulties in understanding terminology. The survey was structured around the research questions and was organized according to the three primary stages of writing: pre-writing, writing, and post-writing. The first two items addressed pre-writing skills, the next seven items pertained to the writing stage, and the final six items focused on the post-writing stage.

A five-point frequency rating scale was employed (never, seldom, sometimes, often, usually). For instance, students were asked to rate how often they engage in brainstorming and note-taking at the beginning of their writing process. The survey was distributed to students at the English Language Institute of Saudi University via Google Forms. At the conclusion of the survey, students were given the option to express interest in participating in a follow-up interview by selecting a checkbox on the form. The full list of survey items is available in Appendix II.

To establish content validity, the survey was reviewed by two EAP instructors with expertise in academic writing. A pilot study was conducted with five students from a similar background to assess clarity, relevance, and design. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to improve item wording and structure. The survey's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.82, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

3.3.2. Interviews

In this research, the researchers conducted interviews to obtain in-depth information from each participant [15, 59]. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five medical students to find out the difficulties through the writing process and to uncover reasons behind these difficulties (For more details, see Appendix III). Separate sessions were held with each participant, lasting 30–45 minutes. The recorded interview sessions commenced with students' general view of writing as a skill (RQ1), followed by a detailed section about the difficulties of writing as a process. Students were asked

for an explanation of the identified difficulties from the survey (RQ2). Then, solutions were suggested for each writing stage difficulty (RQ3). To preserve anonymity, the five students were assigned codes ranging from St1 to St5.

3.4. Research Procedures

The data were collected after the completion of the writing course, which lasts for 10 weeks (about 2 and a half months). After obtaining participants' agreement, the researchers arranged appointments with the participants regarding the date, time, and location for conducting the interviews, which were conducted via *WhatsApp*. The interviews took place via *WebEx*. The study's purpose was explained at the beginning of the interview, and they were told that participation was voluntary.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using SPSS 20.0. Descriptive statistics were used to identify trends in students' responses across the three writing stages. The scoring mechanism was based on the five-point frequency scale, allowing for comparison of engagement levels with specific writing strategies.

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following [16] guidelines. NVivo 12 software was used to code and categorize responses into themes. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, a peer review process was conducted, where a second researcher independently reviewed the coded data to ensure consistency and agreement on emerging themes.

4. Results

4.1. RQ1: Students' Views About Writing as a Skill

Writing has been considered challenging for EFL students for decades [55, 24, 14, 9]. A number of factors were related to these difficulties [23, 13, 14, 8, 9]. Language-related factor was one of the main obstacles to EFL students [13, 22, 23, 8, 9]. Similarly, medical EFL Saudi students admitted that they found writing difficult for three main reasons, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Reasons for writing difficulties viewed by medical students in percentages.

I find writing difficult due to a lack of.	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1- correct use of grammatical rules	12%	25%	63 %
2- correct use of vocabulary	59%	22%	19%
3- correct use of coherence in paragraphs	53%	26%	21%

I find writing difficult due to a lack of.	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
4- motivation (feeling unconfident, anxious, and overwhelmed)	8%	32%	59%
5- enough knowledge of the type of writing (e.g., content of the topic)	15%	46%	39%
6- Previous writing practice	62%	10%	28%
7- reading skills (e.g., find information from various sources)	66%	44%	0
8- ability to organize ideas, write critically	73%	22%	5%

The survey results showed that more than 90% of the students lack interest and motivation in their writing. They also admitted that their lack of correct use of grammatical rules and their lack of sufficient knowledge of the writing task hindered their writing. However, more than 70% of the students admitted that they found organizing their ideas and writing critically easy were difficult. Meanwhile, more than 50% of students found that correct use of vocabulary and coherence, finding information from different sources, and previous writing practice were insufficient.

When interviewing the students, it was found that a lack of confidence was one of the obstacles faced by students. Students mentioned that they didn't find writing interesting. They lack motivation and fun in learning writing. They asked for new creative approaches in teaching writing to be motivated and engaged to change their views of writing, as suggested by St2:

It was good enough to make students to try and write, but the main problem is; if the student wants to write he will, but if they don't and find English itself a hard subject and they don't need to learn it, there is nothing the teacher can do to make the student love writing, until they change this idea in their mind first.

Moreover, students explained that they were not equipped with sufficient knowledge of grammatical rules. Students

struggled to use grammar rules correctly in their writing, as commented by St 1:

Maybe because some of them might, let's say, lack grammar knowledge, and the practice itself at writing could be a barrier to being able to do so in their own essay or writing.

St3 commented:

Even when I tried to use the grammar rules we covered in our book, I was not sure whether they were right or wrong.

Additionally, students commented on the difficulty of the writing task, specifically the argumentative essay. They all described it as complicated compared to other types of writing covered in previous semesters (descriptive and reflective writing) and found it challenging.

Yes, it was difficult. In the previous semesters, it was specified what you needed to write and was limited. This semester, we had to write more and express a lot of details, so it was more difficult. (St4).

4.2. RQ2: Writing Difficulties Encountered by Students at Different Writing Stages

To answer the second research question, the researchers calculated the frequency and corresponding percentages of responses, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentages of difficulties in writing criteria through three stages.

Criteria	Very easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	Very difficult
1-Brainstorming	33 %	28%	26%	13%	
2-Writing outline	10 %	13%	6%	26 %	45 %
3-Writing a topic sentence	35%	20%	20%	25 %	0
4-Writing complete grammatical sentences	47 %	13 %	13%	7 %	20%
5-Writing an introductory paragraph	21%	18%	33%	22%	6 %
6-Writing main paragraph	0	10%	17%	43%	30%
7-Writing concluding sentences	6%	34%	40%	20%	0
8-Linking sentences smoothly	12%	6%	13%	46%	33%
9-Editing and revising the first draft	0	15%	5%	44 %	36%

Criteria	Very easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	Very difficult
10–Peer reviewing	20%	27%	20%	33%	0
11–Check use of grammar	0	20%	33%	47%	0
12–Check the use of vocabulary	24%	20%	26 %	30 %	0
13–Use the proper mechanics	9%	21 %	0	26%	44%
14–Editing the final draft	13%	40%	33%	14%	0
15–Avoid plagiarism	18 %	16%	25%	26%	15%

The findings revealed that students faced various challenges at different stages of the writing process, as shown in Figure 1. During the pre-writing phase, 71% of respondents identified outlining as the most difficult task (criterion 2), whereas 61% found brainstorming to be relatively easy. In the writing phase, the most significant challenge was establishing effective sentence links, reported by 79% of students, followed closely by difficulties in constructing the main body paragraphs 73%. Other criteria, including 3, 4, 5, and 7, were

generally perceived as less problematic. In the post-writing phase, 80% of students reported difficulties with editing and revising their first drafts, while 70% encountered issues with proper mechanics, such as punctuation, and 47% reported struggles with grammar usage. In the following section, students elaborated on various reasons for the challenges they faced across the three stages of writing: pre-writing, writing, and post-writing.

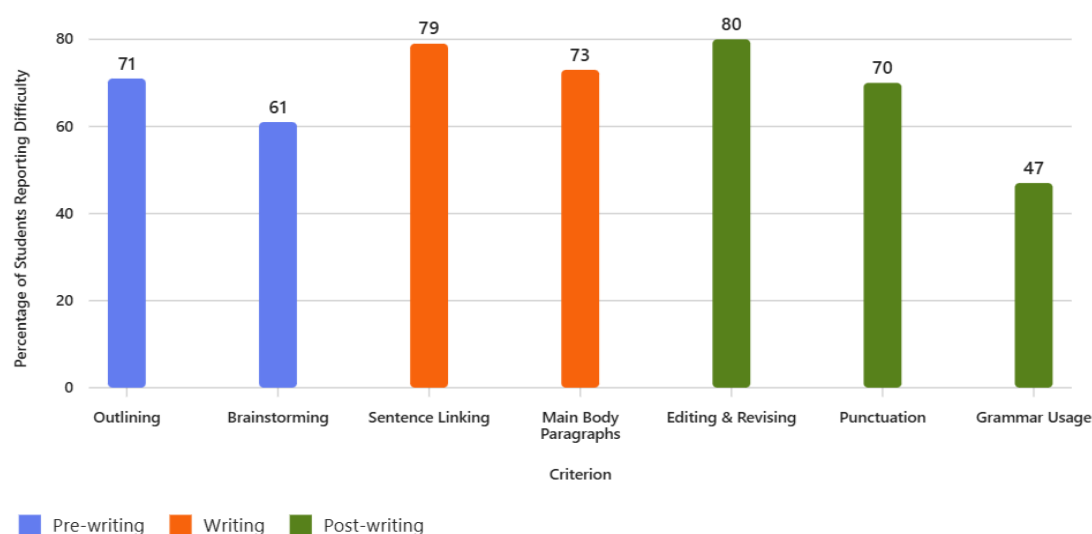


Figure 1. Students' Writing Challenges through Writing Stages.

4.2.1. Pre-writing Stage

The first main challenge when students start writing is the skill of writing outlines. All participants mentioned that the primary challenge stemmed from two main factors: the cognitive skills required to organize ideas and a lack of sufficient practice. Students were able to write down ideas, but struggled to organize them since they could not decide about the relevance and importance of ideas to the topic, as St2 said:

I can do it on my own, but it takes a lot of effort.... In a white paper I write all the ideas, all the details; the important and

not important details, so when I start writing I delete all the unimportant and unwanted details, and it takes too much effort because writing too much and try to discover more and more details it takes much time. (St2)

Because I was confused with the information, I already had them, but I couldn't write them down because they weren't organized. (St3)

Surprisingly, St1 found the skill very hard as she described how she faced difficulty in writing outlines both in group work and individual writing. Students tried to write their notes in a reverse technique:

Yes, I remember when we worked together... they kind of

think of what we might write and form this sentence they thought we can take the notes from the sentence. It's like we reverse the steps, we first write about the subject and then take notes about it. (Group Work) (St1)

To be honest this step was kind of hard for me, because I don't know what I'm going to write about, so when I'm taking notes about something, I need to let's say know what the whole paragraph is about and do take my notes about it. (Individual Work). (St1)

Another reason for this difficulty, as mentioned by Student 5, was the lack of sufficient explanation or examples provided by the teacher.

But my problem was to organize my ideas according to the structure, because I felt the structure was not so clear, maybe because some words were difficult, or we hadn't gone through many examples about this semester's writing. (St5)

4.2.2. Writing Stage

Two main criteria were identified as difficult by students: writing main paragraphs and linking sentences smoothly. Three students admitted that writing the main paragraphs was difficult for two main reasons. First, writing the main paragraphs of an argumentative essay needs time and effort since they need to think about convincing reasons and clear examples, as explained by St2& St3:

It was more difficult, because I had to connect between the two paragraphs, because I had to come up with two reasons and two explanations, and that, of course, took effort. (St2)

Because I must revise it several times, in contrast to the introductory paragraph, which was much easier, but these two paragraphs, I needed to read about the reasons first, so it took much effort. I already had reasons, but they weren't enough, unlike the introduction I wrote directly by myself. (St3)

St5 stated that the lack of sufficient practice was the main factor behind facing difficulty writing main paragraphs.

Because the structure model we were given had difficult words, so I couldn't understand it. In addition, we weren't really through a lot of examples that follow the same structure. (St5)

Four students agreed that linking sentences smoothly was challenging. Surprisingly, two students related the difficulty to not having enough knowledge about different types of linking words and their uses.

I usually write short sentences, so when I finish the sentence, I only put the full stop. When I need to use a comma, I often make mistakes. But in some sentences, like if we state a condition, I know that we need to use a comma, so if I did, I would write it. However, between normal sentences, when I need to use a comma and when I don't, I don't know. (St1) It was difficult. (Explain please why, said by the Interviewer), because I don't have the knowledge of a lot of linking words, but the thing that makes it easier to me, in this semester we learned some linking words that help me in my writing, and I can also search for other linking words if I want more. (St2)

Another reason was being unaware of how to connect ideas and construct a complete sentence. St5 admitted that her confusion between the use of a comma and a full stop was related to being unsure about the completion of ideas.

Yes, the complex ones, especially since we are asked to make the sentences as simple and as short as possible, I don't really know how to do this. I usually tend to combine the sentences, so this is my difficulty ...Yeah, I don't think it's really the most difficult part here, but maybe there are some ideas that I don't know whether I should end here, or start a new sentence, or is it just okay. It's about the idea itself, not really the structure and the grammatical side. (St5)

4.2.3. Post-writing Difficulties

Unlike previous stages, three main criteria were identified to be challenging in this stage: checking the use of grammar, checking the use of mechanisms, and editing and revising the first draft. St2 explained clearly that she couldn't spot her own grammar mistakes.

No, I needed help in this stage, (But whom did you ask for help, said the Interviewer). From you, you gave me the first draft. (Only the teacher? You didn't depend on any other sources? Said by the interviewer, No, I didn't like Grammarly for my grammar mistakes. (You just depend on your own? said the interviewer), Yes, but in the structure, I didn't use any other source for help; in the structure you helped me find my mistakes. (St2)

The reason behind the difficulty of the mechanism (e.g., use of punctuation marks and capitalization) was like the difficulty of linking sentences, which is a lack of knowledge of the uses of different types of punctuation marks.

Yes, it was difficult with the comma and period. I revised maybe three times just for this idea. (So, you spot your mistakes, or you couldn't? said by the interviewer), Yes, I could, but it was difficult. (St2)

Just in certain parts, like full stops, I can do it correctly, but with commas, I made a lot of mistakes after I revised the draft. So why did you have this problem with the comma? said the interviewer. Because sometimes after I use a comma, I put a capital letter in the next part or sentence, so it was harder than using full stops. —So you couldn't notice your mistakes with the comma? said the interviewer. No, I couldn't at the beginning, because I was confused between using commas and full stops. So, it needs more practice and revision until you master it. (St3)

Another reason was related to poor students' skill in checking their use of punctuation marks, as stated by St5.

My difficulty is knowing when to end a sentence, when to use a comma, and when to continue. -... Maybe the punctuation, the punctuation kind of, we are still not very skilled at using them, but the vocabulary is usually easy to check. (St5)

As a result, students acknowledged that revising and editing their first draft was challenging. They could not spot their grammar mistakes and writing mechanism, but they found checking their vocabulary use easy. Even when they were

asked about revising with their peers, most of them claimed that their peers' review was useless since they were at the same level, and they could not provide each other with any corrections. St 2 commented:

I don't have a wide knowledge of all the grammar rules and the linking words, so that is the thing that makes it difficult for me to find her mistakes. (St2)

Accordingly, two students agreed that peer review was useful only for editing punctuation marks, but not for grammar or connectors. They admitted that they did not recognize their own mistakes until they were provided with the teacher's feedback.

Honestly, it was difficult for me, and I couldn't spot my mistakes. (St5)

When I wrote the first paragraph, for example, in the main paragraphs, I used to check the book and videos and write them correctly according to my understanding, so when I revised them, I thought they were correct, and I didn't notice

any mistakes. When I revised it with the teacher, I got it and noticed my mistakes. (St3)

4.3. RQ3: Solutions Offered by Students

The survey results revealed a range of practical solutions to address their writing challenges, as shown in Figure 2. A majority of students (85%) emphasized the need for more instructional time and clearer examples to support their writing development. They specifically requested grammar explanations tailored to different essay types and the use of representative models.

Yes, I feel like we had more practice or more examples. I really learn through examples and copying examples, this helps me arrange my writing.... To have more examples of each thing, we are asked to write in the paragraph. (St5)

More practice is needed for the outlining skill, not only in writing classes, but also during other classes. (St1)

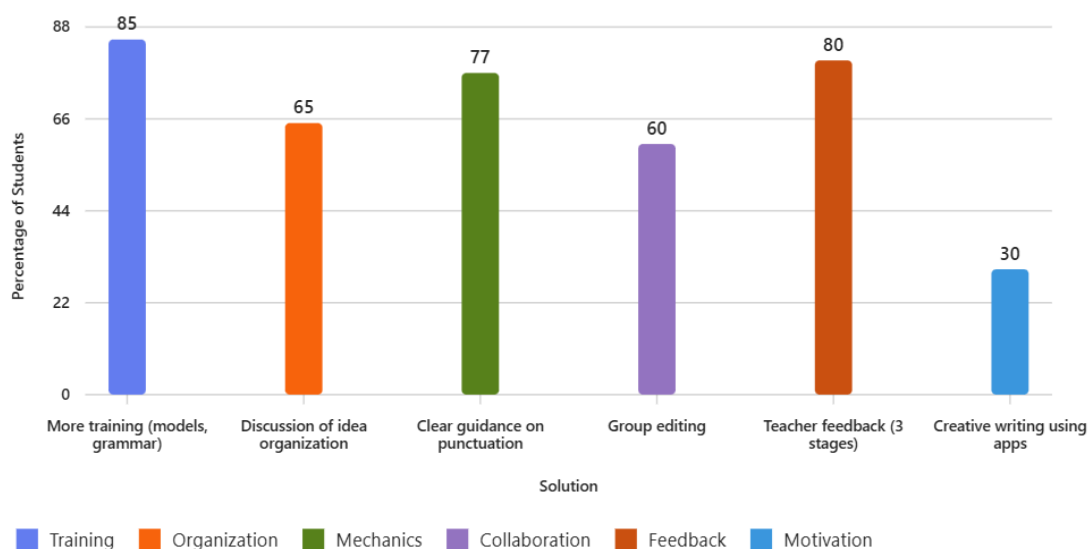


Figure 2. Students' Suggested Solutions.

Continuous teacher feedback was endorsed by 80% of students, who highlighted the importance of support during pre-writing, drafting, and post-writing stages. One-to-one sessions were particularly valued for personalized guidance, as commented:

I really benefit from the one- to -one session. I can check everything with my teacher grammar, vocab and understand my problems. (St 5)

For students, I guess they should ask for help if they need, they should not ignore it. For the teacher maybe try tone- to one session, so the teacher make sure that every student gets the idea and knows how to write the main paragraph. (St2)

Structured instruction on punctuation and connectors was requested by 77% of students. They expressed a need for clear classifications and patient teacher support to overcome persistent writing weaknesses 65% of students identified diffi-

culties in organizing ideas and structuring essays. They advocated for more practice in outlining, not only in writing classes but across the curriculum, and suggested applying reading discussion techniques to writing instruction, as St1 mentioned:

I think it's practicing. Like we do when we had reading, we sometimes think what's the whole point of the paragraphs, and what's the main idea. I think if we did the same thing, like what was the topic and what was the... what might be the notes that were needed to write this paragraph might help. (St1)

Group editing was proposed by 60% of students as a method to enhance revision and editing skills. Students viewed peer collaboration as a way to identify errors and reinforce learning through shared practice, as reported:

I think group work can help, I mean, make every group try

to spot the other group's mistake, and the students themselves may practice, practice makes perfect. (St2)

Although mentioned by a smaller portion (30%), the use of creative writing apps and engaging activities was seen as a way to boost motivation and retention. Students appreciated learning in enjoyable formats that made concepts more memorable, as highlighted:

Of course, practice makes perfect, so the more you practice, the easier it is to use them. I think there are a lot of tools too on the internet that help in this topic... because on the internet, maybe you learn in a fun way, so when you get the idea in a fun way, you won't forget it like a game or TV show. (St4)

5. Discussion

Regarding the first research question, students identified three main reasons for finding writing difficult: insufficient knowledge of grammatical rules, lack of motivation, and the complexity of the writing task. Limited grammatical knowledge often prevented them from constructing complete sentences or fully developed ideas. Strong language skills are essential for effective writing, as they enable adherence to grammatical rules, shape the flow of ideas, strengthen the persuasive impact of writing, and facilitate clear communication [33, 13, 22, 23, 9]. Conversely, a lack of such skills can hinder self-expression and the communication of ideas [42]. These findings align with [2, 55, 14, 20, 24], who reported that language-related challenges for EFL learners frequently involve grammar, coherence, and writing development. Interestingly, unlike [20], who found vocabulary limitations to be a major difficulty, vocabulary was not identified as a challenge for the medical students in this study. This may be attributed to their English proficiency at the B1 level, where vocabulary knowledge tends to be more developed.

Lack of motivation was also highlighted as a major barrier to writing. Students frequently described low interest and enjoyment as obstacles to developing writing skills. This finding supports [9], who emphasized motivation as a key factor in engaging students in writing tasks. Prior studies likewise show that motivated students produce stronger writing outcomes [62, 17]. EFL learners with high levels of motivation demonstrate greater proficiency [14, 37]. As a psychological factor, motivation plays a pivotal role in students' ability to engage with and improve their writing [9].

In addition, students reported that more advanced writing tasks contributed to their difficulties. They found argumentative essays significantly more challenging than earlier descriptive or reflective tasks. Constructing persuasive arguments required greater effort and time for idea generation and organization. This finding supports [9], who argue that argumentative writing requires students to employ critical thinking, content development strategies, and logical structuring. Similarly, [40] noted that EFL argumentative writing is a complex process involving topic comprehension, thesis formulation, discourse organization, and idea articulation.

With regard to the second research question, outlining emerged as the most difficult aspect of the pre-writing stage. Students struggled to arrange ideas logically, often due to insufficient training. This echoes [9, 40], who emphasized the importance of planning and critical thinking in essay writing. It also aligns with [20], who noted difficulties in idea generation. Poor planning often resulted in structural gaps and incomplete content [9]. These findings also concur with teachers' observations in [23], where students lacked the necessary skills to structure outlines due to limited prior instruction and practice. Consequently, many students perceived writing as a daunting task [37].

Students also identified difficulties in writing the main body paragraphs compared to the introductory and concluding sections. They struggled to provide convincing reasons and expand [9]. their arguments. This stage requires writers to develop and refine ideas, a task often linked to critical thinking and motivation. As [35] point out, main paragraphs demand focused development of the topic, supporting, and concluding sentences. Rusinovci also emphasized the importance of coherent paragraph structures [44]. The challenge may stem from cognitive and motivational limitations [9]. Moreover, writers are required to select discourse structures—argumentative, descriptive, expository, or narrative—based on cognitive strategies and writing goals [8, 54]. Edmund et al. similarly related these difficulties to a lack of interest and challenges in idea development [20].

Students further reported struggles in linking sentences effectively, often due to limited knowledge of connectors and confusion about idea completeness. This finding is consistent with [23], who observed that connector misuse impedes coherence. However, students expressed confidence in linking paragraphs, suggesting that the process-based approach supported them in producing coherent texts at the macro level [43].

In the post-writing stage, students reported greater difficulty revising first drafts than final drafts. Early drafts required attention to grammar, punctuation, spelling, and style [50]. During this stage, students relied heavily on teacher feedback, citing ineffective peer reviews. This dependence on teachers is consistent with [23]. Students also struggled to recognize their responsibilities in revision and peer review, such as drafting, polishing, and refining ideas [61, 37]. Because students were all at similar proficiency levels, they rarely identified peers' errors beyond vocabulary, and could not detect grammar or mechanics-related mistakes, such as punctuation use. As a result, their language-related weaknesses also hindered their editing skills. Interestingly, vocabulary did not pose significant challenges in editing, unlike grammar and mechanics. This finding supports [5], who reported that Arab university students often struggle to detect their errors during editing and revision. Such difficulties are linked to language proficiency, as writing requires the ability to articulate ideas using accurate vocabulary and grammar [13, 22, 8, 23, 9].

Addressing the third research question, students proposed

several solutions. Many emphasized the need for continuous training, teacher guidance, and constructive feedback. They also called for innovative and meaningful learning experiences to maintain motivation. These findings align with [8, 23], who advocate incorporating creative digital tools into writing instruction [45]. Students valued teacher feedback throughout the entire process—from outlining to final drafts—underscoring the importance of teacher support [23]. However, this approach requires significant teacher time and effort to monitor progress [50].

Another proposed solution was strengthening cognitive knowledge through group work, which helps students generate and organize their ideas. This approach fosters critical thinking by encouraging students to pose questions, articulate arguments, and engage in debates [40]. Such activities provide learners with a clearer understanding of the relationship between texts and contexts, supporting a visible pedagogy [27]. Within this framework, genre-based pedagogy provides learners with specific tools, including genre exploration, reflective practices, and portfolio work, to engage them [30, 39]. By combining these strategies, students can better identify main ideas, structure their outlines, and produce clearer argumentative essays [52].

6. Conclusion

The present study delved into the perceptions of EFL medical students about the challenges encountered during the three key stages of writing: pre-writing, writing, and post-writing, along with the underlying factors contributing to these challenges. Participants proffered diverse strategies to tackle the difficulties experienced at each stage. In the pre-writing stage, outlining emerged as the most challenging aspect. During the writing stage, the focus was primarily on constructing main paragraphs, integrating evidence, and ensuring coherence between sentences. In the post-writing stage, the emphasis was on editing and revising, highlighting the students' unfamiliarity with the editing process, making self-editing difficult for many. These challenges were attributed to factors such as insufficient knowledge, inadequate practice, and a lack of motivation. To address these challenges, students suggested interventions such as continuous writing training, teacher guidance, and the use of creative digital techniques to enhance awareness of the writing process.

The findings carry important implications for teacher training, curriculum design, and technology integration. For teacher training, they highlight the need to equip instructors with strategies for scaffolding each stage of the writing process, fostering motivation, and providing effective formative feedback. In terms of curriculum design, the results suggest incorporating explicit instruction in outlining, critical thinking, and argument construction, supported by sequenced writing tasks that gradually increase in complexity. Finally, technology integration can be leveraged to enhance engagement and self-regulation, for instance, through collaborative digital

platforms, automated feedback tools, and genre-based writing applications. By addressing these areas, institutions can create more supportive learning environments that not only improve students' writing proficiency but also develop their confidence and autonomy as writers.

6.1. Limitations

While the study has yielded valuable insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was restricted to female participants due to the gender-segregated nature of the institution, which limits the applicability of the findings to male students, who may experience different challenges in argumentative essay writing. Furthermore, the focus on medical students confines the outcomes to a single disciplinary context, where writing expectations and academic demands may differ considerably from those in other fields such as the humanities, social sciences, or engineering. In addition, the possibility of self-selection bias cannot be overlooked, as students who volunteered to participate may have had a stronger interest in or heightened awareness of writing challenges compared to their peers. These restrictions inevitably affect the generalizability of the findings, making them most relevant to female medical students within the studied context. Future research should therefore aim to incorporate both genders, a wider range of disciplines, and participants from diverse institutions to provide a more comprehensive and transferable understanding of Saudi tertiary students' experiences with argumentative essay writing.

6.2. Implications

This study provides important insights for enhancing writing instruction in Saudi higher education. The findings contribute to writing pedagogy by informing curriculum design, teacher practice, and educational policy. Integrating technology into writing instruction and adopting innovative approaches can help address students' difficulties while increasing engagement. Moreover, recognizing the variation in students' proficiency levels highlights the need for differentiated instruction and personalized feedback, enabling educators to better support individual strengths and challenges. Such targeted approaches have the potential to improve students' argumentative writing skills and foster more effective learning outcomes.

Abbreviations

EFL	English for Foreign Language
TOFEL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
GBP	Genre-Based Pedagogy
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
EAP	English for Academic Purposes

Author Contributions

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Seham Elashhab: Data curation, Investigation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix

Appendix I: Argumentative Writing Task Required from Students

Following the process that you studied during this semester (i.e., constructing mind-maps, outlines, drafting, peer-review, editing, redrafting). Write an argumentative essay (around 150-200 words) about any topic you are interested in (either for or against).

Appendix II: Survey Questions

Thanks for your help with this survey. I am conducting this

survey to discover the difficulties you encountered when writing English assignments. This survey is linked to the writing assignment you will write this semester. Your participation is appreciated. Participation is voluntary, and confidentiality of identity is maintained. Your name won't appear anywhere in the study report, and your responses will not be shared with anyone.

Click 'Next' when you are ready to start.

شكرا لمساعدتك في هذا الاستطلاع. أقوم بإجراء هذا الاستطلاع لمعرفة الصعوبات التي تواجهها عند كتابة مهام اللغة الإنجليزية. يرتبط هذا الاستطلاع بمهمة الكتابة التي ستكتبها هذا الفصل الدراسي. مشاركتك هي موضع تقدير حقا. المشاركة تطوعية ويتم تطبيق سرية الهوية. لن يظهر اسمك في أي مكان في تقرير الدراسة، ولن تتم مشاركة ردودك مع أي شخص. انقر فوق "التالي" عندما تكون مستعدا للبدء.

A. Personal Information

Age: -----

English Language Level

- 1) Beginner
- 2) Intermediate
- 3) Upper-Intermediate
- 4) Advanced

Writing Level

- 1) Beginner
- 2) Intermediate
- 3) Upper-intermediate
- 4) Advanced

B. Reasons for Writing Difficulty.

Table 3. Choose whether you agree or disagree with the following reasons which cause writing difficulties.

I find writing difficult due to a lack of.	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1- correct use of grammatical rules			
2- correct use of vocabulary			
3- correct use of coherence in paragraphs			
4- motivation (feeling unconfident, anxious, and overwhelmed)			
5- enough knowledge of the type of writing (e.g., content of the topic)			
6-Previous writing practice			
7- reading skills (e.g., find information from various sources)			
8- ability to organize ideas, write critically			

C. Difficulties of writing at different stages

Table 4. On a scale of 1(very easy) to 5 (very difficult), please indicate how easy or how difficult you think the following skills are for you.

Criteria	Very easy	Easy	neutral	difficult	Very difficult
Brainstorming					
Writing outline					

Criteria	Very easy	Easy	neutral	difficult	Very difficult
Writing a topic sentence					
Writing complete grammatical sentences					
Writing an introductory paragraph					
Writing the main paragraph					
Writing concluding sentences					
Linking sentences smoothly					
Editing and revising the first draft					
Peer reviewing					
Check the use of grammar.					
Check the use of vocabulary.					
Use a proper mechanism.					
Editing final draft					
Avoiding plagiarism					

D. Solutions

1-What solutions can be offered to help you overcome *pre-writing* difficulties?

2- What solutions can be offered to help you overcome *writing* difficulties?

3- What solutions can be offered to help you overcome *post-writing* difficulties?

Appendix III: Follow-up Interview (Reasons Behind Specified Difficulties)

Thanks for taking part in this study. The interview aims to explore the reasons behind writing difficulties at different writing stages. We will go through the selected criteria one by one.

Looking at the survey results, students identified the following criteria as difficult:

A-Pre-writing stage:

Why do they find outlining difficult? Are there any other factors that may cause this difficulty?

B- writing stage

Why do they find writing main paragraphs and linking sentences smoothly difficult? Are there any other factors that may cause this difficulty?

C- post-writing stage

Why do they find checking the use of grammar, checking the use of mechanisms, and editing and revising the first draft difficult? Are there any other factors that may cause this difficulty?

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