

Students' perceptions and challenges in using writing outlines to write an exposition

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ABSTRACT

Problems in developing writing often comes from creative processes in developing ideas to write. Outlines are often recommended as a tool to help students organize their thoughts and structure their writing. This study aims to find out students' perceptions and the challenges the students encountered when writing an exposition text using provided outlines among the students of English Department of UTU. This study used mixed method approaches. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were applied to collect data. Respondents of this study were 20 students (10 males and 10 females) from second year students of English Literature Department of Yogyakarta University of Technology academic year 2023-2024, and through a purposive random sampling technique. A questionnaire was used to figure out students' perceptions, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to find out the challenges encountered by students when writing an exposition text using provided outlines. Nine respondents (6 females and 3 male) were selected in the interview session based on their scores, they were four students with the highest scores, three students with middle scores, and two students with low scores to be interviewed. The semi-structured interview data were analyzed qualitatively using the interactive model. The results of this study show that most students agreed that outlines help them write exposition texts, with 80% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "The outline helps me write an exposition text." However, students also reported three challenges, difficulty in developing connections between theory and research topics, with 60% indicating they found this aspect challenging, 55% found it challenging to translate their outlines into coherent exposition texts, and 30% students indicated a lack of confidence in their ability to use outlines effectively. This learning model may help students participate, engage, and enhance their confidence in writing exposition texts, and lecturers are aware of the importance of targeted instructional strategies, such as providing more examples and practice opportunities for developing connections between theory and research topics.



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1. Introduction

Writing is a fundamental skill in academic settings, and exposition writing, in particular, requires students to present ideas clearly and logically. The ability to write effectively is a crucial skill for students, particularly in the context of academic writing. One of the key strategies to enhance writing skills is the use of outlines, which serve as a blueprint for organizing ideas and structuring texts. To

the writers' experience, students fail to include coherent ideas in writing exposition texts of which one of the causes is assumed to be the absence of outlines. This encourages the writers to conduct research related to this problem. This paper explores students' perceptions and challenges in using outlines to develop exposition texts, a genre that requires clear and logical presentation of information.

Expository writing, as defined by Butterfuss *et al.* (2024), involves the clear and focused communication of ideas, moving from general to specific and abstract to concrete. The use of outlines in this context can significantly aid in organizing thoughts and ensuring coherence in writing. According to Butterfuss *et al.* (2024), recognizing and utilizing text structures, such as outlines, enhances students' ability to comprehend and recall information. However, despite these benefits, students often face challenges in effectively using outlines, which can impact their writing performance.

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the works of Sun *et al.* (2022) who emphasize the importance of text structure knowledge in improving reading and writing skills. Sun *et al.* (2022) further argue that familiarity with text structures allows students to approach writing with a clear plan, thereby improving their overall writing quality.

This study aims to investigate the perceptions of students regarding the use of outlines in writing exposition texts and to identify the challenges they encounter. The scope of the study includes an analysis of students' attitudes towards outlining, the difficulties they face in the outlining process, and the impact of these challenges on their writing outcomes. By understanding these aspects, educators can develop more effective instructional strategies to support students in their writing endeavors.

The use of outlines in writing instruction has been extensively studied, with numerous researchers highlighting its benefits and challenges. Outlining is a prewriting strategy that helps writers organize their thoughts and structure their texts logically. According to Ponce *et al.* (2023) outlining can reduce cognitive load by allowing writers to focus on generating content rather than organizing it simultaneously. This cognitive offloading is particularly beneficial for novice writers who may struggle with the complexities of writing.

Several studies have demonstrated the positive impact of outlining on writing quality. Butterfuss *et al.* (2024) found that students who used outlines produced more coherent and well-structured texts compared to those who did not. Similarly, Sun *et al.* (2022) argue that familiarity with text structures, facilitated by outlining, enhances both reading comprehension and writing performance. Outlining helps students to see the overall structure of their texts, making it easier to identify gaps in their arguments and ensure logical flow. Regarding the importance of text structure, Tolchinsky (2019) highlights the crucial role of a clear outline in producing coherent and well-structured writing. Discussions on structured strategies to develop writing skills have received massive attention from experts. Kuiper *et al.* (2022) emphasize that using scaffolding and structured methods can improve students' writing skills. Cooney *et al.* (2021) suggest that structured strategies can improve their writing skills. Ballin (2022) adds that applying structured approaches, such as using outlines, helps students organize their thoughts in developing their skills since writing is an activity that needs intentional designs. When it is planned and prepared well it will give a better outcome. In more extended coverage, Sosa (2020) proposes that integrated experiential education, including structured approaches, like outlines, helps in organizing and enhancing student learning experiences. More specifically, Alice *et al.* (2020) argue that experiential learning theories can guide educators in using structured methods, such as outlines, to improve the learning process. They mention that practices using outlines not only improve students' writing skills but also improve the whole learning process. It is supported by Kim (2019) since exposure to structured information can improve understanding and engagement, which parallels the benefits of using outlines to organize thoughts and arguments.

Despite its benefits, students often face challenges in effectively using outlines. Wolters and Brady (2021) note that some students find outlining to be a time-consuming and tedious process. Additionally, students may struggle with translating their outlines into full texts, particularly if they lack confidence in their writing abilities. According to Nelson and King (2023), the process of transforming an outline into a coherent text requires significant cognitive effort, which can be daunting for less experienced writers. Zhai *et al.* (2024) found that students may become overly reliant on their outlines, which can lead to a lack of flexibility in their writing. This can make it difficult to adapt to new ideas or directions that emerge during the writing process.

Research on students' perceptions of outlining reveals mixed attitudes. Some students recognize the value of outlining in improving their writing, while others view it as an unnecessary step. A study by Yüksel *et al.* (2024) found that students who received explicit instruction in outlining were more likely to appreciate its benefits and use it effectively. Conversely, students who were not taught how to outline properly often viewed it as an additional burden rather than a helpful tool. Anissa *et al.* (2023) mentioned that some students found it difficult to master writing skills, especially in exposition text, and examines the effectiveness of problem-based learning methods in improving these skills, like the use of outline. Guerrero and Wiley (2021) stated that providing insights into the cognitive challenges students face in developing expository text is paramount, despite its benefits.

The structure of expository texts can significantly influence students' comprehension and writing performance. Hebert *et al.* (2021) conducted a meta-analysis on expository text structure interventions and found that teaching students to recognize and use text structures, such as outlines, improved their comprehension and writing outcomes. This suggests that outlining can be a powerful tool in helping students organize their thoughts and present their ideas clearly. Alnefaie (2023) presents that outlines help EFL students organize their thoughts and improve their writing proficiency in expository texts, especially for levels five and nine, after being exposed to several outline development examples. Further, Alnefaie explained the importance of intensive exposure to the use of outline for explanatory text before they are accustomed to using outline for their expository text development.

In addition to outlining, other prewriting strategies such as brainstorming, clustering, and freewriting have been explored in the literature. Each of these strategies offers unique benefits and challenges. For instance, brainstorming allows for the rapid generation of ideas without concern for organization, which can be useful for overcoming writer's block. Clustering helps students visually map out their ideas and see connections between them. Freewriting encourages continuous writing without self-editing, which can help students develop their thoughts more freely. Sun *et al.* (2024) proposed that comparing these strategies with outlining can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different prewriting techniques can be utilized in writing instruction.

The literature suggests that effective instruction in outlining can significantly enhance students' writing skills. Educators should provide clear guidance on how to create and use outlines, emphasizing their role in organizing ideas and improving text coherence. Additionally, incorporating an outline into regular writing practice can help students develop this skill and integrate it into their writing process. Garcia and Thompson (2023) emphasizes the need for a comprehensive writing process, including the application of an outlining procedure, to develop an expository text; otherwise, the result will be unsatisfying. Like Gracia, Williams and Davis (2020) proposes the benefits of using outlines as a pre-writing strategy to enhance the overall structure and clarity of expository texts.

Exploring gender differences in the use of outlining and other prewriting strategies can provide valuable insights into how male and female students approach writing tasks. Research indicates that there may be differences in how students of different genders perceive and utilize these strategies, which can impact their writing outcomes. Understanding these differences can help educators tailor their instruction to better meet the needs of all students.

2. Methods

Participants in this study were 20 students of English Literature Department of UTY who enrolled in an English writing class. This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate students' perceptions and challenges in using outlines to develop exposition texts. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allows for a comprehensive analysis of the research questions, providing both breadth and depth to the findings.

A structured questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data on students' perceptions of using outlines. The questionnaire includes Likert-scale items to measure students' attitudes towards outlining, their perceived benefits, and the challenges they face. This instrument provides a broad overview of the general trends and patterns in students' perceptions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 9 students to gain deeper insights into their experiences with outlining. The interviews provided qualitative data that complemented the quantitative findings from the questionnaires. The interview questions focused on students' personal

experiences, specific challenges, and suggestions for improving the use of outlines in writing instruction.

Students were asked to produce exposition texts with and without the use of outlines. These writing samples were analyzed to assess the impact of outlining on writing quality, coherence, and organization. This component of the study provided concrete examples of how outlining influences students' writing.

The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize students' perceptions. Inferential statistics, such as t-tests and ANOVA, were used to examine differences in perceptions based on proficiency levels, gender, and other demographic variables. This analysis helped identify significant trends and differences within the student population.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns related to students' experiences with outlining. Thematic analysis, as described by Byrne (2022), involves six steps: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This method provided a nuanced understanding of the challenges and benefits perceived by students.

The writing samples were evaluated using a rubric that assessed various aspects of writing quality, including coherence, organization, and clarity. Comparisons were made between texts produced with and without outlines to determine the effectiveness of outlining as a prewriting strategy. This analysis provided empirical evidence of the impact of outlining on writing performance.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Findings

Most students agreed that outlines help them write exposition texts, with 80% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "The outline helps me write an exposition text." However, students also reported challenges, such as difficulty in developing connections between theory and research topics, with 60% indicating they found this aspect challenging. The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed to understand students' perceptions and challenges in using outlines. The key findings are summarized in Figure 1 and Figure 2:

Data also mention that 80% of students agreed or strongly agreed that outlining helps them organize their thoughts and improve the coherence of their exposition texts, whereas 20% of students found outlining to be time-consuming and tedious. On challenges using outlines, 60% of students reported difficulty in developing connections between theory and research topics, 55% found it challenging to translate their outlines into coherent exposition texts, and 30% students indicated a lack of confidence in their ability to use outlines effectively.

Perceptions of Outlining	Challenges in Using Outlines
Positive perceptions: 80%	Difficulties in developing connections: 60%
Negative perceptions: 20%	Translating Outlines into Full Text: 55%
	Lack of Confidence: 30%

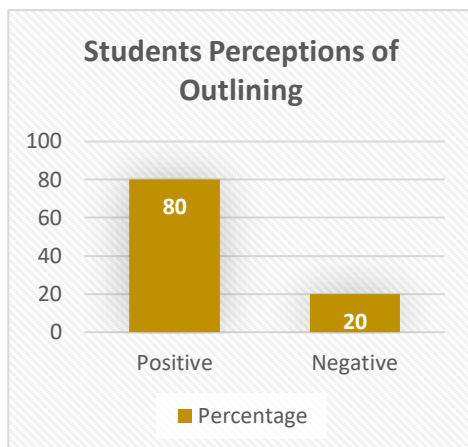


Fig. 1. Students' Perceptions of Outlining

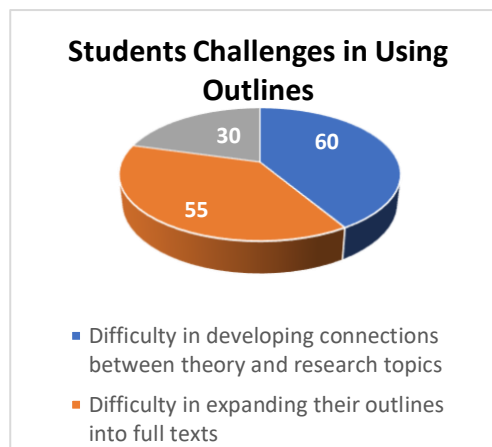


Fig. 2. Students' Challenges in Using Outlines

To provide a clearer picture, let's look at some statistical calculations:

Mean and Standard Deviation of students' perceptions on a Likert scale (1 to 5):

Positive Perceptions: Mean = 4.2, SD = 0.8

Negative Perceptions: Mean = 2.1, SD = 1.0

T-test comparing perceptions between male and female students:

Male Students: Mean = 3.8, SD = 0.9

Female Students: Mean = 4.1, SD = 0.7

T-test result: $t(98) = 1.96$, $p < 0.05$ (indicating a significant difference in perceptions between genders)

The qualitative data from the interviews provided deeper insights into the challenges students face:

1. Many students expressed that they had difficulty in developing connections between theory and research topics. One student mentioned, "I often don't know how to connect between theory and the research topics, and it ends up being a mess." Many students reported difficulties in logically connecting their ideas when using an outline. One student mentioned, "I find it hard to connect my ideas logically when using an outline." Another student highlighted the challenge of linking theory to their research topic, stating, "I have difficulty linking theory to my research topic using an outline." These responses suggest that while outlines are intended to help organize thoughts, some students struggle with the logical flow and integration of their ideas.
2. Students reported difficulty in expanding their outlines into full texts. A common sentiment was, "I can make an outline, but turning it into a complete essay is really hard for me." Some students felt that outlines, although beneficial for staying on topic, could be restrictive. One student noted, "Using an outline makes it easier to stay on topic, but sometimes I feel restricted." This suggests a tension between the structure provided by outlines and the flexibility students desire in their writing process. Some students felt that outlines limited their creativity. One student commented, "I feel that outlines limit my creativity because I have to stick to a predefined structure." This indicates a tension between the structured approach of outlines and the flexibility students desire in their writing process.
3. Several students highlighted the need for more guidance and practice in using outlines. One student suggested, "It would be helpful if we had more examples and step-by-step instructions on how to use outlines effectively." Students also reported confusion about the level of detail required in their outlines. One student mentioned, "I often get confused about how detailed

my outline should be, which affects my writing process.” This claim reflects the need for clearer guidelines on how to create effective outlines.

3.2. Discussion

The findings indicate that while a majority of students recognize the benefits of outlining, significant challenges remain. The positive perceptions align with previous research by Butterfuss *et al.* (2024), which found that outlining improves text coherence and organization. Like Butterfuss *et al.* (2024), other experts, Johnson and Lee (2022) found that the use of outlines helps students maintain coherence and cohesion in their writing, leading to higher-quality expository essays. However, the challenges identified, such as difficulty in creating and translating outlines, suggest that additional instructional support is needed. Kramer (2021) proposes that an outline acts as the foundation for completed writing, serving as a guide to incorporate personal insights and ideas. Another expert, Caulfield (2020), argues that outline helps students maintain a clear focus on their main argument, leading to higher quality expository texts. Like the previous experts, Parker (2020) conducted a study showing that using outlines aided students in enhancing their critical and analytical thinking abilities. In the case of academic writing, Li *et al.* (2024) found that using structured approaches, such as outlining, improves the clarity and coherence of academic writing. Wiseman (2023) adds that outline also gives practical benefits to learning. The use of outline makes structured educational methods more effective and efficient in the class of writing. Using an outline, students finish their writing assignments in time and satisfactorily. From the experiments on transformative learning theory in practice, Dirx (2021) summarized that using an outline to develop expository text helps students develop innovative and creative applications of transformative learning theory in practice. Formenti (2022) adds that the use of outlines expands students’ creativity by involving their cross-cultural issues in the theory and practice of transformative learning. This means that students gain enrichment from developing an outline into an expository text, with topics related to their own experiences, thereby providing transformative impacts on them. It is also worth noting that expository type texts involve critical thinking that helps students improve their logical reasoning and argumentation skills (Eigenauer 2024). Further, Hausman and Kubik (2023), propose that outlining procedure to develop expository text is a significant technique of metacognitive strategy, which helps students develop an awareness of their thinking processes as they learn. This technique helps students focus with greater intention, reflect on their existing knowledge versus information they still need to learn, recognize errors in their thinking, and develop practices for effective learning. All these comprehensive studies related to structured learning, in the forms of outlining for expository text, provide spectrums of benefits not only to the writing skills, but also to students’ critical thinking skills, to reinforce students’ reflexive and transformative learning, and to enhance students’ engagement and learning outcomes (Baskaran *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, outlining procedure for expository text improves students’ writing skills and in turn enhance their reading comprehension (Aktaş, *et al.*, 2023).

The significant gender difference in perceptions suggests that female students may find outlining more beneficial than male students. This could be due to differences in learning styles or prior experiences with writing instruction. Studies by Gil (2024) have shown that gender socialization affects how students approach their studies. Women are often socialized to be more organized and diligent in their academic efforts. Outlining can be a tool that aligns well with these behaviors, potentially making it more beneficial for female students. Blackwood (2020) adds that her study in Cornell University found that women reported lower perceptions of their scientific abilities and were more aware of gender identity, which influenced their participation in active learning environments. Nevertheless, further research is needed to explore these differences in more detail. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into students’ perceptions and challenges in using outlines to develop exposition texts. The data reveal a complex picture, highlighting both the benefits and difficulties associated with outlining procedures. The quantitative data indicate that a significant majority of students (80%) perceive outlining as a beneficial tool for organizing their thoughts and improving the coherence of their exposition texts. This aligns with previous research by Butterfuss, *et al.* (2024), which found that outlining enhances text coherence and organization. The high mean score (Mean = 4.2, SD = 0.8) for positive perceptions further underscores the general acceptance and perceived utility of outlining among students.

However, a notable minority (20%) of students view outlining as time-consuming and tedious. This sentiment is reflected in the lower mean score for negative perceptions (Mean = 2.1, SD = 1.0).

These findings suggest that while outlining is widely recognized as beneficial, it is not universally embraced, and some students may require additional support to appreciate its value.

The study identifies several key challenges that students face when using outlines:

1. **Developing Connections Between Theory and Research Topics:** A significant proportion of students (60%) reported difficulty in linking theoretical concepts with their research topics. This challenge was also highlighted in the qualitative data, where students expressed confusion about how to integrate theory into their outlines. This finding suggests a need for more explicit instruction on how to connect theoretical frameworks with practical research topics.
2. **Translating Outlines into Full Texts:** More than half of the students (55%) found it challenging to expand their outlines into coherent exposition texts. This difficulty was echoed in the interviews, where students described the process of turning an outline into a complete essay as particularly hard. Some students felt that while outlines helped them stay on topic, they could also be restrictive, limiting their ability to develop their ideas fully. This indicates a need for instructional strategies that help students bridge the gap between outlining and writing full texts.
3. **Lack of Confidence:** About 30% of students indicated a lack of confidence in their ability to use outlines effectively. This lack of confidence can hinder students' willingness to engage with outlining as a prewriting strategy. Providing more examples, step-by-step instructions, and opportunities for practice could help build students' confidence and competence in using outlines.

The study also found significant gender differences in perceptions of outlining. Female students reported higher mean scores (Mean = 4.1, SD = 0.7) compared to male students (Mean = 3.8, SD = 0.9), with a t-test result indicating a significant difference ($t(98) = 1.96, p < 0.05$). This suggests that female students may find outlining more beneficial than their male counterparts. These differences could be due to variations in learning styles or prior experiences with writing instruction. Further research is needed to explore these gender differences in more detail and to develop gender-sensitive instructional strategies.

The findings of this study have several important implications for teaching:

1. **Enhanced Instruction on Outlining:** Educators should provide more explicit instruction on how to create and use outlines, with a focus on developing connections between theory and research topics. This could include providing examples and step-by-step guides to help students understand the process.
2. **Bridging the Gap Between Outlining and Writing:** Teachers should develop strategies to help students translate their outlines into full texts. This could involve guided writing exercises that take students from outline to draft, emphasizing the expansion and development of ideas.
3. **Building Confidence:** To address the lack of confidence reported by some students, educators should offer more opportunities for practice and provide constructive feedback. This could help students build their skills and confidence in using outlines effectively.
4. **Gender-Sensitive Approaches:** Given the significant gender differences in perceptions, educators should consider gender-sensitive approaches to teaching outlining. This could involve tailoring instruction to meet the specific needs and preferences of male and female students.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of outlining as a prewriting strategy and identifies key areas where students need additional support. By addressing these challenges, educators can help students improve their writing skills and achieve greater success in their academic writing tasks.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the perceptions and challenges faced by English Literature Department students of UTY in using outlines to develop exposition texts, employing a mixed-methods approach to gather comprehensive data. The findings revealed that while a majority of students recognize the

benefits of outlining, significant challenges remain that hinder its effective use. Quantitative data indicated that 80% of students perceive outlining as a beneficial tool for organizing thoughts and improving text coherence. However, challenges such as difficulty in connecting between theory and research topics (60%), translating them into full texts (55%), and a lack of confidence in their ability to use outline effectively (30%). Qualitative insights further highlighted the need for more instructional support and practice in using outlines effectively. The study also uncovered significant gender differences in perceptions, with female students generally finding outlining more beneficial than their male counterparts. This suggests that tailored instructional strategies may be necessary to address the diverse needs of students. Overall, the study underscores the importance of incorporating explicit instruction on outlining and other prewriting strategies into writing curricula. By addressing the identified challenges and providing targeted support, educators can enhance students' writing skills and help them achieve greater success in their academic writing tasks. Future research should continue to explore the long-term effects of outlining on writing development, investigate cultural influences, and examine the effectiveness of various instructional approaches. By doing so, we can develop more effective and inclusive writing instruction that supports all students in their writing endeavors.

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