

## A Graduate Student's Thesis Writing Process

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### ABSTRACT

A thesis is a challenging scholarly writing task at the university level. Previous studies showed that an effective writing process is necessary to complete writing tasks. Therefore, it is assumed that effective process is also necessary to complete thesis writing well. This qualitative research applied a case study design to explore the writing process of a proficient graduate student in writing a thesis. The participant of this study was a graduate student from a private university with cum laude predicate. The interview was used as the main data source with document analysis as a data source for triangulation. Models of writing processes from the process-genre approach were used as the main theory to discuss the findings. This research revealed that the student went through stages of writing well with various activities. In the pre-writing stage, the student reflected on her surrounding to find the problem to solve, read numerous references and discussed the topic with the experts to gain a deeper understanding. In the drafting stage, the student always provided a specific time for writing and simultaneously integrated her reading into her writing. In the revision stage, the student got feedback from many experts, then she selected the feedback before applying them to her writing. During the revision, the student also simultaneously edited her writing. She also published her thesis several times. The student gained many benefits from each stage of writing, such as improving academic writing skills and changing mindset in perceiving writing specifically and perceiving life in general. However, she also faced challenges during the writing process, such as feeling bored with the tedious process and dealing with her perfectionist to stay realistic. From this research, it can be seen that proficient students recursively went through each stage of the writing process, which resulted in a quality thesis.

**Keywords:** number of keywords consist 3-5 words or phrases.

### INTRODUCTION

Writing as a part of 21st century literacy skills has become prominent skill to master. In global literate communities, the skill to develop ideas in written form has significantly increased (Brown, 2018).

Writing in English for non-native speakers might be even more challenging due to the language barriers and writing structures. Micro-skills (vocabulary, collocation, and grammar) and macro-skills (the organization of ideas, cohesive and rhetorical forms) are some aspects in EFL writing (Brown, 2018). However, writing skill is necessary, not only necessary in real life, but it is also necessary in academic world, especially in higher level of education where students are demanded to produce high-quality texts (Newfields, 2003).

One of the scholarly writings required at the university level is thesis writing. A thesis is a manuscript written by the graduate students (Chandrasekhar, 2002) as evidence of the students' capacities to independently conduct research and report the significant written form results (Sadeghi & Khajepasha, 2015). Thomas and Brubaker (2000) mentioned two purposes of thesis writing; provide students with the practice to conduct and present research and to contribute to the world's knowledge with the findings from the research. As stated in Permenristekdikti Nomor 44 Tahun 2015 (Kementerian Riset, Teknologi, dan Pendidikan Tinggi, 2015), to maintain the quality and the standard of education in Indonesia, the university students have to conduct the research and publish its results as a part of learning. Bitchener and Batsturkmen (2006) revealed that the students face several challenges in thesis writing such as difficulties in sentence structure level, confusion in the use of preposition to elaborate the topic, lack of understanding of writing goals and readers' expectations, and limited knowledge of thesis structures.

To help students in writing, various approaches emerged with the hope of increasing students' writing skills and students' writing quality. One of the teaching writing approaches that has been applied widely is process approach. This approach believes that writing is a productive skill that requires a long process which cannot be done only in one session. Process approach was firstly initiated by Graves (1982) from his research by conducting regular writing workshop to teach students writing. Graves stated that writing process was defined as operational series that lead to solutions of problems that the writers go through from finding a topic to publishing their writing. Graves (1983) proposed that students as writers go through five stages of process: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Other experts (Rosário, Högemann, Núñez, Vallejo, Cunha, Rodriguez, and Fuentes, 2019; Flower & Hayes, 1981) mentioned that the writing at least consists of three stages: planning (pre-writing), execution (in-writing), and evaluation (post-writing). However, the aforementioned stages are not linear process (Flower & Hayes, 1981), and are not rigid developmental processes (Sharp, 2016). The previous studies have shown the positive effects of process approach in writing instruction for the wide range of ages (Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham & Sandmel, 2011). Although process approach has been popular and proven to be helpful, it is rarely

exclusively used the only approach in writing class (Wyse, 1998).

Another widely-applied teaching writing approach is genre approach. This approach believes that writing is a social activity (Hyland, 2004) that needs to be taught explicitly (Gibbons, 2003) and provided scaffolding by the teachers (Emilia, 2011). Genre approach is emerged from Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) theory which sees language learning as social activity (Feez & Joyce, 1998) that involves text and context (Eggin, 2004). Therefore, the basic principles of genre believe that writing is a social activity, writing requires explicit teaching of grammar, and writing needs the scaffolding process (Emilia, 2011). There are many models of genre approach, but this study focuses on the model proposed by Martin (2010) which consists of: building knowledge of the field (BKoF), modelling, joint construction, and independent construction. All steps in genre approach model are not linear and can be adjusted based on students' needs and situation (Emilia, 2011). Previous research on genre approach showed that it brings positive effects to students' text quality, students' writing skills, and students' choice of phrases (Cai, 2016; Haryanti & Sari, 2019). As another popular and widely-applied approach, genre approach proved to be effective to help students in writing.

Despite their popularity, just like any other approaches, process and genre approaches have limitation and criticism, Badger and White (2000) stated that process approach focuses less on the social aspects of a text and provides inadequate feedback especially in linguistic features. On the other hand, Badger and White also stated that genre approach disregards the writing skills in producing text and involves students mostly in passive manner. To gain the advantages of both approaches, process-genre approach was emerged. Kim and Kim (2005) explained that process genre involves language knowledge, context knowledge, and writing skills to achieve the purpose of writing. The model of process genre primarily involves building social context to achieve the purpose of the text before going through each process of writing from planning to publishing (Badger & White, 2000). The aforementioned approaches do not only refer to teaching writing, but also refer to proficient writers' process. The importance of effective process in writing has been shown in the previous research. Sasaki (2000) found that the expert writers allocate more time in the planning and reviewing process, while the poor writers spend most of the time in the text formulation. Research conducted by Wingate and Harper (2020) showed that the successful academic writer adopted the effective writing process, while the less successful academic writer felt uncertain about the writing task and tended to write spontaneously without planning. Other previous studies also showed that effective writing process brings positive effects to students' writing (Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Sandmel, 2011; Marchisan & Alber, 2001). It can be concluded, thesis writing, as one of challenging writing tasks, also requires an extended and effective writing process.

Although effective writing process is an important aspect and consideration for the successful writing task, there has been lack of research exploring this topic in the setting of tertiary education. Less literature is available on how students develop their academic text and engage in the writing process (Wingate & Harper, 2020). To fill the gap, this research aims to explore the writing process of a graduate student in thesis writing. As one of the challenging academic writing tasks, thesis writing requires a rigorous writing process. From the lens of process genre approach, this research attempts to see the writing process applied by a graduate student with cum laude predicate in a state university in Indonesia. Theoretically, the results of this research bring insight about writing process of certain academic task, thesis writing. Practically, the results of this research can be the guidance of the graduate students in writing thesis effectively.

## **METHOD**

This research aimed to explore thesis writing process of a proficient graduate student with case study design. The use of case study in this research corroborates with Merriam and Tisdell (2016) who explained that case study is an analysis of phenomenon in a bounded system with in-depth description. The bounded system in this study is the writing process in a specific academic writing task.

The participant of this study is a graduate student with cum laude predicate from a private university in Jogjakarta majored in English Language Teaching. The participant was chosen for her ability to write thesis well which can be indicated from her cum laude predicate. Besides that, the university where she studied is well-known as a research-based university which requires the students to have good writing skills. Therefore, exploring the participant's writing process in writing thesis can bring enlightenment how to write thesis effectively.

The data in this study were collected through in-depth interview and document analysis. The multiple sources of data are encouraged by Creswell (2014) in a case study. The participant was interviewed through WhatsApp. After the interview, the related documents such as; thesis drafts, experts' feedbacks, revisions, and final thesis were collected to be analysed further. The data from two sources were analysed through the steps proposed by Merriam (2009). First, the transcript from the interview was open coded and axial coded. Second, the categories were emerged and selected to tease relevant themes to answer research questions. Third, the relevant themes from the interview were then triangulated in aforementioned documents.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the interview and document analysis several central themes were emerged; process stages and benefits. In process stage theme, the activities and steps that the student in each stage are explained. Another theme covers the explanation about benefits that the student gain from each process stage.

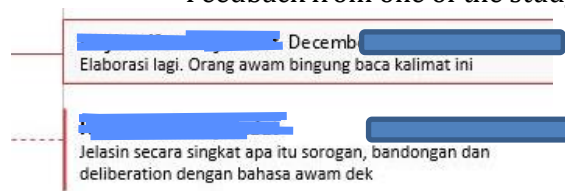
### Process Stages

From the interview it was found that the student went through five stages of writing process in her thesis writing namely; pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. In pre-writing stage, the student built the topic of her research by reflecting on the problems she found in the society. After she found the problems, she tried to narrow them down and find the main topic of her research. Once she found it, she attempted to understand the topic deeper by reading numerous journal articles related to her research focus. From her readings, she created the annotated bibliography to help her understand the research articles better.

*I started by reading theories in many books and articles, then I created annotated bibliography from my reading.*

Besides reading, she also discussed with many experts to understand more about her research topic. She had a regular discussion session with her thesis supervisor and study circles from various study disciplines such as philosophy and anthropology. Discussing about her research topic helped her to gain wider perspectives. Since her university is a research-based university where students are demanded to produce research article, she was familiar with academic text structure prior to her thesis writing. Therefore, she did not have much problems with the text structure. The pre-writing activities such as writing annotated bibliography and discussing with many study circles were also reflected in the documents.

Picture 1.  
Feedback from one of the study circles



The student began her writing by reflecting on society and found the problems from the reflection with the purpose to solve the problem with her research. This pre-writing activity corroborates the process in process-genre approach. Badger and White (2000) stated that embedding writing in social situation is important to achieve the particular purpose of the text. Language learning, including writing, is considered as a social process which involves social contexts, relationships, and culture (Halliday, 1985). Other activities that the student did such as reading, discussing, and writing annotated bibliography are some of the activities in pre-writing stage before starting the first draft (Williams, 2003). In genre approach, the aforementioned activities are included in the Building Knowledge of the Field cycle where the activities are intended to build student's background knowledge about the topic they are about to write (Feez, 2002). The long process of pre-writing seems to help the student in overall process of thesis writing. This finding is with the research finding from Sasaki (2000) where proficient writers spent longer time to prepare and plan their writing compared to the less proficient writers. According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996) constructive planning in pre-writing activities were built through the consistent practice to build the automaticity. It was proven in this study that the student has had consistent practice of academic writing from her university. Therefore, rigorous planning has become her habit before writing.

In the drafting stage, she always provided specific time for writing by minimizing any distractions that could hinder the writing. During this stage, the rereading, revising, and editing also happen simultaneously while she integrated the results of her reading to her writing by paraphrasing the conceptions, theories, and information she got from her reading into her writing. However, she also admitted that she sometimes put direct quotations in her writing.

I did both paraphrasing and direct quoting, but I mostly paraphrased. I usually direct quoted when I want to emphasize something, for example emphasizing the content from my interview.

From the document analysis, it was found that the student mostly paraphrased in her writing. The simultaneous process of editing during the drafting could also be seen in the drafts of her writing, because the drafts have already been edited following the template from the early drafts she wrote.

The rereading, revising, and editing that happened during the drafting corroborates the conception that writing process is not linear. Flower and Hayes (1981) explained that in writing, the process might overlap and occur anytime. According to Williams (2003), rereading during writing is the activity done by the good writers because reading and writing are interrelated. The recursiveness of writing found in this research is in accordance with the research findings by Larios, Manchón, Murphy, and



Marin (2008) where the composition process could be activated anytime in any composing stage.

In the revision stage, she stated that she got the feedback from various sources. For the writing content, she discussed it with her thesis supervisor, for theory enrichment in literature review she discussed it with her study groups, and for the grammar she discussed it with her proficient classmates. Once she got the feedback, she selected them based on the research plan that she intended. She stated that she was the one who understood her research the most. Therefore, selecting feedback was important. After that, she modified and applied the feedback into her writing. Although she did not apply all feedback she got, she admitted that feedback had been really helpful and constructive.

I didn't accept all feedback, that's the first thing. Because I am the one who knows my writing the best. If I think the feedback is suitable, I'll consider it to be modified and applied in my writing.

During the revision she also edited the file following the template from the university. She stated that she could not edit only at the end of the revision, because there would be too many things to check. Therefore, she gradually edited her writing to increase the readability and the appearance of her writing.

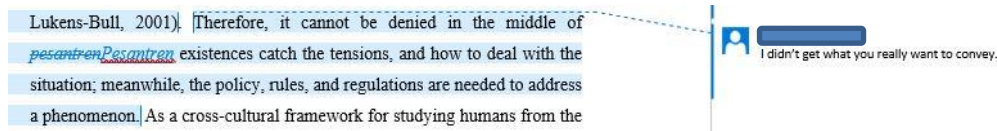
The student created different file after she finished revising and editing the drafts. The revision could be seen in the documents, and the changes made in the writing were based on the feedback in the previous files. Having multiples revised files could help the student trace the changes and revision of her writing.

Picture 2.  
Revision and editing processes happened simultaneously

On the other hand, some *pesantrens* are found to demonstrate progressive *viewsgrowth* in terms of gender equality and democratic ideals, like Pondok Gontor, Tebu Ireng, Jombang (R. Lukens-Bull, 2008; Busyairi-As, 2010; Ma'arif, Dardiri, & Suryo, 2015). Both the learning materials and the methodology also adopt various developments in accordance with a well-informed approach and learning with psychology-*ete-*.

The tradition of *pesantrenPesantren* education has very strong cultural roots, with a very long *tradition-duration-on-the-one-hand*. A case in point, the *Jombang* area itself is known for its tradition of Islamic boarding school education. In this area, there are four large Islamic boarding schools,

### Picture 3. Revision and editing processes happened simultaneously



Revision refers to the activity of making changes to the writing based on what the writer thinks is important (Graves, 1982), and it most likely always involves other people's suggestion/feedback (Williams, 2003). Teacher's feedback during revision is essential for students to improve their writing and to encourage them in revising and editing (Hyland, 2004). In this research, the student got feedback from various parties which help her to improve both her writing skills and also her writing quality.

The student had multiple publications of her writing before finally made a final submission for the thesis defense. She stated that she got the research grant from her university which required her to present her thesis prior to the final thesis submission. From the seminars that she joined, she got many feedback that she used to revise her writing.

Before I submitted my thesis to my campus, there were many things I had to do, every 3 months I had to have semi thesis defense. So, I didn't write from chapter 1, 2, and 3, then the presentation. What I did was writing chapter 1-5, after I finished, then I had the defense, after that I revised my writing. After revising, I became a speaker (in seminars) for my thesis topic.

The last stage of the thesis writing is the publication when the student submitted the thesis to the campus. Publication means sharing the finished text with intended audience (Williams, 2003), and in this study the student had multiple publications in the seminars before final publication. In fact, the student was benefited from the multiple publications she had, especially in the follow-up feedback she got from the seminars.

From the stages of the writing process that the student went through in this study, it can be concluded that the proficient writer allocated more time in the pre-writing stage to prepare for the topic, goals, and purpose of the writing. This result is supported by the research results from Graham and Sandmel (2011), Larios, J. R., Manchón, R., Murphy, L., & Marín, J. (2008); and Wingate and Harper (2020) which found that successful writers adopted effective writing process while the less successful writers felt uncertain about the task and wrote without planning.

### Benefits

Going through each stage of writing process brought many benefits to the student's writing quality, writing skills, and logical reasoning. For the pre-writing stage, she stated that reading numerous references helped her



to build her mindset and research paradigm. By reading a lot, she could learn to solve the problems she found in the society. Besides that, reading many references also helped her during her writing, especially in writing the thesis statement. The discussion with her thesis supervisor and study groups during pre-writing stage helped her to get the idea and topic for her future research. The discussion also helped her to gain new insight and point of view.

I think it brings changes and influence to my mindset. And that also influences my writing, it is really useful when I'm writing my thesis statement.

Research conducted by Emilia, Hermawan and Tati (2008) found that the less comprehensive activities during building knowledge in the pre-writing stage could lead to the mistake that could be avoided with the sufficient pre-writing activities. The benefits that the student felt with all activities in pre-writing stage were supported by Acevedo and Rose (2007) who stated that students could write well once they were well prepared.

During the drafting, the discussion brought different benefits. The discussion with study groups helped her to get more references and insight for her theories in the literature review. Since her thesis topic was not related to English teaching, she needed to discuss with various groups of experts for a better understanding of her research topic.

In the revision stage, she was benefited from the feedback she got from her thesis supervisor, study groups, and classmates. Her thesis supervisor required her to revise the writing on the spot during the consultation session. Therefore, she always made sure that she had prepared herself before the consultation session began. Most of the feedback she got from her thesis supervisor dealt with the content which could help her to improve the content of her thesis. She also learned about teaching passion and dedication from her thesis supervisor because he always provided time to guide her. The feedback from her study groups helped her to build the theoretical framework, similar to the drafting stage. For the grammar of her writing, she got help from her classmates who got high score in IELTS test.

I learned about being all out, about passionate teaching and dedication of educating people from him (her thesis supervisor). Those three aspects that felt and learned authentically from him. I could also learn to implement them to my process of becoming a student and a teacher.

The editing process happened simultaneously during the revision stage. By editing gradually, she could edit the writing better because was also rereading what she had revised and edited. She mentioned that she could not edit at the end of her writing because she could not stand the mees in her writing.

I could not edit in the last minute, because if it (her writing) looks illegible, it hurts my eyes.

The finding in this research about the benefits of feedback were supported by previous research from Bayat (2014). She found that feedback in the process of writing helped students reduce their anxiety during writing because they knew they would be given feedback before submitting their final work. Therefore, the writing results of the students in her research showed significant improvement from continuous evaluations.

Having multiple publications prior to the final thesis submission helped her during the presentation for her thesis defense. She could also anticipate what might be asked during her thesis defense because of the feedback and questions she got from the seminars. Benade (2021) advised the emerging scholars to also take roles in the world of academic by publishing their research works as one of the possible contributions. Therefore, joining seminars before submitting the thesis brought benefits not only for her but also for the scholarly communities.

## CONCLUSION

Thesis writing as an academic writing task in a university level requires effective writing process for its successful composition. The results from this research found that the proficient student went through every stage of the writing process; pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publication. As what previous studies have shown, this study also found that the proficient student spent more time in pre-writing stage to prepare their writing well. The processes also happened simultaneously as what the theories suggest. Another result from this research also found that the activities done in each stage brought benefits for student's writing skills and also thesis final product. Graduate students can use the results this study as a reference to write thesis efficiently.

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