

The WRITEWISE as a Pedagogical Innovation: Improving Essay Performance in Higher Education Assessments

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ABSTRACT

Essay-based examinations remain a fundamental component of academic assessment in higher education. Despite possessing sufficient subject knowledge, many students underperform in these assessments due to poor essay structure, limited elaboration, and weak argument development. These issues are not unique to a specific institution; they are well-documented challenges in academic writing across various educational contexts (Wingate, 2012). In Malaysia, research highlights that undergraduate students, particularly those in public universities such as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), frequently exhibit writing deficiencies, including grammatical inaccuracies, disorganised content, and inadequate elaboration of key points (Siti Hajar Halili, Nor Fariza Mohd Nor, & Jusoff, 2009; Zawani & Isa, 2021). WRITEWISE: Mastering Essay Techniques for Exam Success is an innovative writing strategy to address these persistent challenges. The WRITEWISE method introduces a four-step framework that guides students through constructing effective essay responses. These steps include (1) identifying the main point, (2) defining the main point, (3) elaborating on the definition, and (4) providing a relevant example. This structured approach is designed to enhance clarity, logical flow, and the depth of written arguments. By supporting the development of essential academic writing skills, WRITEWISE improves student performance in written assessments and fosters stronger written communication. The framework has the potential to be integrated into existing curricula or writing support programs, serving as a practical tool to advance writing proficiency in tertiary education.

Keywords: (Academic Writing, Essay Writing Techniques, Exam Performance Improvement, Higher Education Assessment, Writing Skills Development)

INTRODUCTION

Essay-based examinations are a widely used assessment method in higher education, designed to evaluate students' comprehension, analytical thinking, and writing ability. Essay-based methods are widely used to measure student performance, especially in the non-science and technology (S&T) disciplines. However, a recurring concern is that many students struggle to structure and elaborate their ideas effectively during exams despite adequate content knowledge. Wingate (2012) emphasised that poor writing performance in exams is often linked not to a lack of knowledge but to an absence of instruction in academic writing strategies. Similarly, Zawani and Isa (2021) found that students frequently produce underdeveloped essays due to weak elaboration, disorganisation, and limited control over academic writing conventions. A study by Siti Hajar Halili et al. (2009) highlighted that ESL students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) encountered significant difficulties expressing their ideas in written English, especially in time-constrained exam settings. Supporting this, a recent survey conducted among 125 Semester 2 Diploma in Corporate Administration students at UiTM revealed that 78.4% agreed on the need for a structured technique to guide them in writing

effective exam essays. Many students shared that although they could identify the main points, they lacked the skills to elaborate or organise them into solid arguments, resulting in disappointing exam results.

The core problem lies in lacking a structured essay-writing approach that students can apply to produce a good essay answer that impacts their academic performance. Therefore, the WRITEWISE technique was developed to address this gap. It is a practical and strategic writing tool aimed at helping students produce well-structured, content-rich essays in examination conditions. The main objectives of this project are to identify the challenges students face when answering essay questions in exams, develop and introduce WRITEWISE as a guided writing strategy, improve students' ability to elaborate and organise ideas clearly and boost their confidence and academic performance. WRITEWISE offers a four-step approach, which are Identify, Define, Elaborate, and Provide Examples. This technique is to help students transform basic ideas into complete, well-clear essays with clarity and depth. Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to identify the students challenges when answering essay questions, to introduce WRITEWISE as a guided writing strategy for structured essay development and to examine students' perceptions of the usefulness and applicability of WRITEWISE in improving exam performance. Based on these objectives, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges do students encounter when constructing essay-based answers in examinations?
2. What is the level of need for structured essay-writing techniques such as WRITEWISE among students?
3. How do students perceive the usefulness and applicability of WRITEWISE in supporting their academic writing during exams?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews several past studies related to students' performance and challenges in essay based examinations and the instructional techniques developed to support effective academic writing. This section provide a significant evidence about the need of essay writing technique for students.

Students' Performance and Challenges In Answering Essay Based Examination Questions

Students' performance in essay-based examinations has been widely studied by many researchers, they are highlighting recurring difficulties in producing coherent and well structured essays under timed conditions. Jelani, Abd Aziz, and Hassan (2023) examined Malaysian Higher School Certificate (STPM) students' performance in biology essay questions and found that many struggled not only with content expression but also with language clarity and organisation. These findings align with international research showing that students often possess subject knowledge but fail to transform it into logically developed arguments within examination settings (Richards & Miller, 2019). Such limitations not only hinder their performance but also undermine the ability of essay based examinations to accurately assess higher order cognitive skills.

Similarly, Ramli, Abdul Kadar, and Rafek (2024) reported that ESL foundation students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) encountered difficulties in generating ideas, organising arguments, and applying essay structures effectively, particularly in online assessments. Akhtar, Hassan, Saidalvi, and Hussain (2019) conducted a systematic review and concluded that poor elaboration, weak organisation, and limited language proficiency consistently hinder student essay writing. Similarly, Abdullah, Osman, Sarudin, Mohamed Redzwan, and Werdiningsih (2022) highlighted that pre-university students frequently lacked mastery of essay writing conventions, suggesting the use of guided tools such as thinking maps to scaffold the writing process. At the school level, Austrus, Mahamod, and Adnan (2024) also noted that non native learners of Malay as a second language experienced parallel challenges in vocabulary use, idea development, and sentence organisation, which hindered their ability to write coherent essays.

The Instructional Techniques Developed To Support Effective Academic Writing

In response to students' recurring difficulties in essay based assessments, various instructional techniques have been developed to support effective academic writing. As mentioned by Richards & Miller (2019) the traditional approaches such as explicit instruction in thesis development, paragraph structuring, and the use of cohesive devices, remain foundational in improving writing outcomes. Beyond these, more innovative approaches such as graphic organizers, writing frameworks, and guided scaffolding have been shown to assist students in developing clarity and logical flow in their essays. Abdullah et al. (2022) found that the use of thinking maps provided students with visual tools to structure their ideas and significantly improving coherence also elaboration in written tasks. Such approaches highlight that when students are given structured strategies their performance in examinations improves not only in terms of content delivery but also in confidence and efficiency under time constraints.

Other studies emphasize the value of strategy based instruction in equipping learners with transferable writing skills. Ramli et al. (2024) observed that ESL students benefited from step-by-step guidance, particularly in generating and elaborating points, which reduced the common tendency to produce underdeveloped essays. Instructional frameworks that encourage critical engagement with conten such as the claim-evidence-reasoning model or guided peer feedback have also been associated with enhanced academic writing performance (Akhtar et al., 2019). These methods are especially effective in examination settings where students must quickly organize ideas into coherent responses. By offering systematic techniques, educators can help students bridge the gap between knowledge acquisition and effective written expression. Overall, past research demonstrates that instructional involvements play a dynamic role in improving students' academic writing performance. However, many of these approaches have been classroom-oriented and less tailored for the unique demands of time pressured essay examinations.

Below is the comparison of previous technique and the WRITEWISE:

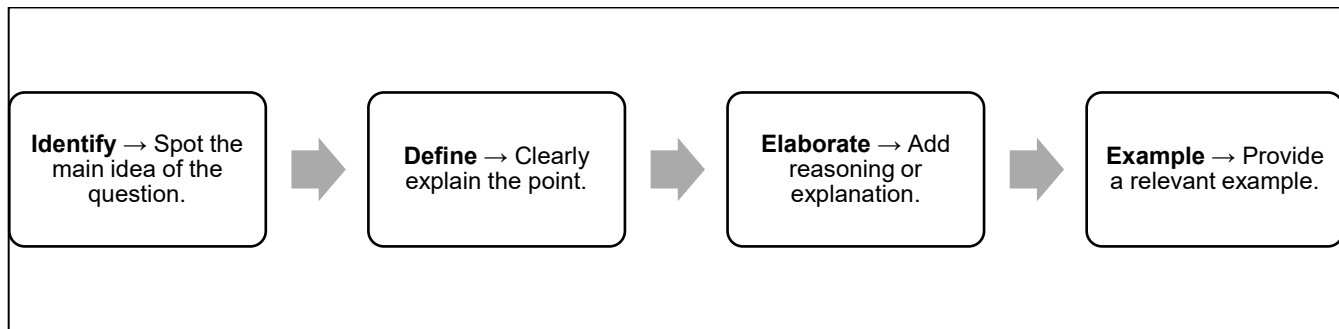
Table 1: The comparison of previous technique and the WRITEWISE

Technique	Key Features	Strengths
Explicit Writing Instruction	Teaching thesis statements, paragraphing, cohesion devices	Improves foundational writing knowledge (Richards & Miller, 2019)
Graphic Organizers such as Thinking Maps	Visual representation of ideas and argument flow	Enhances idea organisation and coherence (Abdullah et al., 2022)
Step-by-Step Writing Guidance	Breaking essay writing into smaller stages (planning, drafting, elaborating)	Supports weaker writers; builds confidence (Ramli et al., 2024)
Strategy Based Models such as CER, peer feedback	Encourages critical thinking and evidence-based reasoning	Improves depth of argumentation and critical engagement (Akhtar et al., 2019)
WRITEWISE (Proposed Technique)	Four-step framework: Identify, Define, Elaborate, Provide Examples	Practical, easy to apply in exam conditions; bridges content knowledge and structured expression

The WRITEWISE Framework

This is the WRITEWISE framework that has been develop to assist student in answering their exam questions.

Figure 1: The WRITEWISE Framework



The framework consists of four main components: Identify, Define, Elaborate, and Example. First is to identify.

Students required to spot and understand the main idea of the examination question. By correctly identifying the central theme or keyword, students establish a clear focus for their essay and reduce the risk of digressing from the question. Second is define. Students are encouraged to clearly explain the identified point by providing a definition or description ensures that the essay has a solid foundation and demonstrates comprehension of the topic. Third is elaborate. Student is to emphasises to adding reasoning, supporting details, or further explanation to strengthen the argument. Students are guided to expand their points logically, ensuring depth and coherence in their essay responses. Finally is example where students are prompted to provide a relevant and specific example to illustrate their point. This step helps to demonstrate practical understanding, reinforce the argument, and make the essay more persuasive.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed method approach consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data collection to explore students' challenges in essay writing and to evaluate the effectiveness of the WRITEWISE technique. The research was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the main challenges faced by students in answering essay-based examination questions?
- RQ2: What is the level of need for structured essay-writing techniques, such as WRITEWISE, among students?
- RQ3: What are students' perceptions of the usefulness and applicability of WRITEWISE in exam settings?

In line with these questions, the following hypotheses were formulated for the quantitative component of the study:

- H1 (Alternative Hypothesis): The WRITEWISE technique will lead to significant improvement in students' ability to organise and elaborate essay responses.
- H0 (Null Hypothesis): The WRITEWISE technique will not lead to significant improvement in students' ability to organise and elaborate essay responses.

The research was conducted in two distinct phases. In the first phase, a survey was distributed to 125 Diploma in Corporate Administration students in their second semester at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). A purposive sampling technique was applied, as this group was directly involved in essay-based examinations and considered suitable for exploring the research objectives. The survey aimed to identify common difficulties students face when answering essay questions in examinations. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended Likert-scale items and open-ended questions designed to gather both numerical data and student reflections. Quantitative data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics to determine the percentage of students encountering specific writing challenges. To provide stronger statistical evidence, inferential analysis such as paired-samples t-tests and chi-square tests were also employed to evaluate changes in student confidence and differences across demographic groups. Meanwhile, qualitative responses were

reviewed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to writing structure, elaboration, and stress during exams. Qualitative responses were reviewed to identify recurring themes related to writing structure, elaboration, and stress during exams. The WRITEWISE technique was developed based on these findings to address the observed gaps. The technique consists of four key steps which are identifying the main point, defining the main point, elaborating the definition, and providing a relevant example.

In the second phase of the study, the WRITEWISE method was introduced to the same group of students through a hands-on writing workshop. During the session, students were guided step by step through the WRITEWISE process and given practice exercises to apply the technique in developing essay responses. After the workshop, a follow-up survey was conducted to assess students' perceptions of the technique's usefulness. The results of this second survey were used to evaluate the impact and acceptance of WRITEWISE as a structured academic writing aid. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, student anonymity was maintained, and approval for data collection was obtained from the faculty.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings For Demographic Profile

A total of 125 Diploma in Corporate Administration students from UiTM Seremban 3 successfully participated in the survey, with responses collected via Google Form. The demographic profile of the respondents is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Profile	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	36	28.8
Female	89	71.2
Age		
18 - 20 years	121	96.8
21 years and above	4	3.2

The demographic data shows that the majority of participants were female (71.2%), compared to 28.8% male. In terms of age, almost all respondents were within the 18–20 years range (96.8%), which is consistent with the typical age group of diploma students in Malaysia. Only a small proportion (3.2%) were aged 21 and above, reflecting non-traditional or slightly delayed entry into higher education. This demographic highlights that WRITEWISE was tested within a relatively homogenous age group but across both genders, making the results relevant for the mainstream student population.

FINDINGS

Phase 1: The need of writing essay technique

RO1: Determine the students challenges when answering essay questions

RQ1: What are the main challenges faced by students in answering essay-based examination questions?

Table 3: Results on Student Essay Writing Challenges (n = 125)

Survey Item	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Struggle to elaborate on essay points	2.4	4.8	14.4	52.8	25.6
Have good ideas but lack structure	1.6	6.4	18.4	53.6	20.0
Feel stressed during essay exams	3.2	5.6	12.8	48.8	29.6

A significant proportion of students reported struggling to elaborate on essay points, with 52.8% agreeing and 25.6% strongly agreeing. This suggests that while students often understand the subject matter, they face challenges in developing and expanding their arguments effectively. This finding aligns with Jelani, Abd Aziz, and Hassan (2023), who found that Malaysian STPM students struggled with content expression and language organisation in biology essay questions. International studies also confirm that students may possess subject knowledge but fail to transform it into logically developed arguments under examination conditions (Richards & Miller, 2019). The survey also revealed that 53.6% of students agreed and 20% strongly agreed that they have good ideas but lack proper structure in their essays. This highlights the importance of teaching organisational and planning skills. Ramli, Abdul Kadar, and Rafek (2024) similarly reported that ESL foundation students at UiTM struggled with generating ideas and applying essay structures, particularly in online assessments. Akhtar, Hassan, Saidalvi, and Hussain (2019) also found that weak organisation and limited elaboration consistently hinder student essay writing. These findings collectively suggest that structural guidance is critical for students to communicate their ideas clearly and coherently.

In addition, 48.8% of students agreed and 29.6% strongly agreed that they feel stressed during essay examinations. High stress levels can impair cognitive functioning, reducing students' ability to organise and elaborate on ideas effectively. Abdullah, Osman, Sarudin, Mohamed Redzwan, and Werdiningsih (2022) recommend using guided tools, such as thinking maps, to scaffold essay writing and alleviate difficulties related to structure and idea development. At the school level, Austrus, Mahamod, and Adnan (2024) similarly noted that non-native learners of Malay experienced challenges in vocabulary, idea development, and sentence organisation, limiting their ability to write coherent essays.

RO2: Introduce WRITEWISE as a guided writing strategy for structured essay development

RQ2: What is the level of need for structured essay-writing techniques such as WRITEWISE among students?

Table 4: Level of need for structured essay-writing techniques such as WRITEWISE among students

Variable	Mean Value	Interpretation
Want a structured essay technique	4.022	High Need

Table 4 shows that students expressed a high level of need for structured essay-writing techniques, such as WRITEWISE, with a mean value of 4.022. This finding indicates that students are not only aware of their challenges in essay writing but are also receptive to interventions that can guide them in idea elaboration, essay structuring, and stress management. When compared to past studies, the result aligns with Jelani, Abd Aziz, and Hassan (2023), who found that Malaysian STPM students struggled to organise and express ideas clearly in essay examinations. Similarly, Ramli, Abdul Kadar, and Rafek (2024) reported that ESL foundation students

at UiTM faced difficulties generating ideas and applying proper essay structures, particularly in online assessments. Akhtar et al. (2019) highlighted that poor organisation and limited elaboration consistently hindered essay performance, while Abdullah et al. (2022) suggested the use of guided tools, such as thinking maps, to scaffold writing.

Overall, the findings from Phase 1 confirm that students face recurrent challenges in essay writing, including elaboration, organisation, and stress management. These challenges are consistent with prior research and indicate a need for targeted interventions, such as structured guidance, practice exercises, and supportive tools, to improve essay writing competence and confidence in examination settings.

Phase 2: Survey after use The WRITEWISE

RO3: To examine students' perceptions of the usefulness and applicability of writewise in improving exam performance

RQ3: What are students' perceptions of the usefulness and applicability of WRITEWISE in exam settings?

Table 5: Students' perceptions of the usefulness and applicability of writewise in improving exam performance

Gender	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Mean Score	Interpretation
Male	40	60	4.6	Highly Positive
Female	35	65	4.65	Highly Positive

Following the WRITEWISE workshop, students were asked to rate the statement: "WRITEWISE is a good technique for students to write a good essay." The results revealed unanimous agreement, with 36% selecting Agree and 64% selecting Strongly Agree (Table 5), indicating that WRITEWISE is perceived as highly useful and applicable in exam settings. These findings align with past research emphasizing the value of structured and scaffolded writing interventions. Richards and Miller (2019) noted that traditional approaches, such as explicit instruction in thesis development, paragraph structuring, and cohesive devices, remain foundational in improving writing outcomes. Beyond these, innovative techniques including graphic organizers, writing frameworks, and guided scaffolding that have been shown to enhance clarity, coherence, and elaboration in student essays. Abdullah et al. (2022) demonstrated that thinking maps help students organise ideas visually, improving both coherence and elaboration. Similarly, Ramli et al. (2024) found that step-by-step guidance assists ESL students in generating and expanding ideas, reducing underdeveloped essays, while Akhtar et al. (2019) highlighted that frameworks like claim-evidence-reasoning or guided peer feedback enhance academic writing performance, particularly in timed examination contexts.

Hypothesis analysis

To evaluate the effectiveness of the WRITEWISE technique, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H_1 (Alternative Hypothesis): The WRITEWISE technique will lead to significant improvement in students' ability to organise and elaborate essay responses.
- H_0 (Null Hypothesis): The WRITEWISE technique will not lead to significant improvement in students' ability to organise and elaborate essay responses.

Table 6: t-Test Analysis

Measure	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	t	df	p-value	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Essay Organisation	3.42 (0.68)	4.15 (0.53)	8.25	124	<0.001	0.74

Essay Elaboration	3.28 (0.71)	4.08 (0.57)	7.93	124	<0.001	0.71
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A paired-samples t-test was conducted to examine whether the WRITEWISE technique led to improvements in students' essay-writing performance. Results showed a significant increase in both essay organisation (pre-test $M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.68$; post-test $M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.53$), $t(124) = 8.25$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.74$, and essay elaboration (pre-test $M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.71$; post-test $M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.57$), $t(124) = 7.93$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.71$, indicating that the WRITEWISE technique significantly enhanced students' ability to structure and elaborate their essays. These results provide strong support for H_1 , indicating that the WRITEWISE technique significantly enhanced students' ability to structure and elaborate their essays.

These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the benefits of structured writing interventions. Richards and Miller (2019) emphasised that explicit guidance in essay organisation and paragraph development improves clarity and coherence. Abdullah et al. (2022) reported that visual tools such as thinking maps scaffold idea elaboration and enhance writing performance, while Ramli et al. (2024) found that stepwise instruction assists ESL students in generating and expanding points effectively. The WRITEWISE technique reflects these approaches by providing a systematic step which are identifying the main point, defining it, elaborating, and giving examples. This is addressing common student challenges in timed examinations. The large effect sizes observed in this study suggest that structured instructional techniques like WRITEWISE not only improve essay quality but also enhance students' confidence and efficiency under examination conditions.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate a clear need for structured essay-writing support among students in higher education, particularly those facing examination pressures. The introduction of the WRITEWISE technique, a step-by-step method involving identifying, defining, elaborating, and exemplifying main points, successfully addressed common challenges such as lack of structure, difficulty in elaboration, and exam-related writing anxiety. Survey data collected after the implementation of WRITEWISE showed unanimous student agreement (100%) on the effectiveness of the technique in improving essay writing. This overwhelmingly positive response indicates that WRITEWISE not only supports content organisation and clarity but also enhances student confidence during high stakes assessments. Given these outcomes, WRITEWISE has strong potential to be integrated into academic writing courses or exam preparation workshops across higher education institutions. Its simplicity, adaptability, and high acceptance among students make it a valuable educational innovation for improving writing performance in academic contexts.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. This study was conducted with respondents drawn only from a single faculty and limited to one academic programme. The findings, therefore, may not fully represent the diversity of student writing challenges across disciplines. Moreover, this limitation is partly due to the fact that WRITEWISE is still in its first phase of implementation. Wider generalisation will require subsequent testing across multiple programmes and faculties. For future directions, the next phase of this innovation project will extend WRITEWISE implementation to a broader pool of students from various programmes within the faculty. This expansion will provide comparative insights into its effectiveness across different disciplines and writing contexts. Further refinements may also include digital integration such as embedding WRITEWISE into a mobile or web-based platform which to provide students with on demand framework for essay preparation. In addition, longitudinal studies could assess whether WRITEWISE not only improves immediate examination performance but also contributes to long term academic writing development.

In sum, WRITEWISE represents a promising and scalable innovation for enhancing students' essay-writing abilities. By addressing both organisational and elaboration skills, it lays the foundation for improved academic outcomes. With further testing and expansion, WRITEWISE has the potential to become an established instructional tool in higher education.

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