



## Essay Writing Strategies Employed by English-Majored Sophomores at a University in Vietnam

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**Abstract**

*This study investigates students' use of essay writing strategies in different stages of the writing process. The participants included 105 English-majored sophomores at Hanoi Law University who have completed two courses in paragraph and essay writing instruction. A 5-level Likert close-ended survey questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data regarding students' frequency of applying overall and specific writing strategies in pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing stages. The results revealed that while-writing strategies were used at high frequency by the participants while pre-writing and post-writing strategies were used at medium frequency. It is also found that, at the pre-writing stage, the students prefer reading sample essays; trying to understand the task requirements by either referring to their teacher's notes or discussing with their teachers and friends and having a mental, unwritten plan before writing. While writing, students have taken use of various strategies which can be grouped into strategies to deal with the structure of the essay, strategies to develop ideas, strategies to activate vocabulary use, and strategies to review their mechanics. The strategies in the post-writing stage are the least frequently used, which include reading the whole text silently, checking if the essay matches the requirements, and then making changes in the spelling and punctuation. Revising following their teacher's feedback and actively asking their teacher or classmates are also frequently applied techniques for essay writing revision.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The process approach has been influential in writing instruction for quite a long time. Over the years, research on the process approach in teaching writing across education levels and genres has resulted in many studies promoting more attention to writing strategies in teaching writing. Many studies have affirmed the significance of writing strategies in determining learners' success in a writing course (Kim, 2020; Mark et al., 2022; Bin & Barry, 2022)

Based on different stages, writing strategies can be grouped into prewriting, drafting, feedback, revising, and editing (Atkinson, 2018). According to Abas and Abd Aziz (2018), the participants used numerous strategies at each stage of the writing process. The writing process started at the prewriting stage in which outlining, listing, talk writing, and freewriting were used. The learners continued with the planning stages and applied strategies such as captivating the reader into concerns. Then, at the drafting stage, the writers started to draft their ideas into

a paragraph and used strategies such as linking the topic to previous experience. Next, the pausing and reading stage occurred when the learners silently read what they had written; in case of lacking ideas while writing, strategies such as seeking help and using online material were used at this stage. Finally, revising and editing occurred when writers paused and read; strategies such as adding and removing ideas are common ones at this stage (Abas and Abd Aziz, 2018).

The strategies in these stages help writers to generate ideas, organize points and refine their writing. Considering this role, it is understandable that writing strategies contribute to determining learners' writing performance. For example, it is found that better writers tend to apply better writing strategies and use writing strategies more frequently than less competent writers (Lei, 2016). Contrary to this recognition, however, most learners may not make good use of writing strategies or underestimate their role in improving their writing performance (Raofi et al., 2017). The logical solution to this issue would be to develop a writing instruction that fosters learners' use of writing strategies. Therefore, an analysis of learners' writing strategy use, along with their strengths and weaknesses, would be required in order to improve the effectiveness of writing instruction.

The current study aims to investigate English major sophomores' essay writing strategies used at different stages of their writing process. To achieve this aim, the study aims to answer two research questions as follows:

(1) At which stage of the writing process do English-majored sophomores employ more strategies?

(2) What are their preferred strategies at each writing stage?

The answers to these questions would be the basis for the enhancement of writing instruction at the researcher's institution, contributing to better writing performance among the students.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Definition of Key Terms**

#### **2.1.1. Writing process**

Hayes and Flower's (1981) writing process model, which consists of three phases, is one of the most highly recognized models. In the first stage, the writer plans his writing by generating ideas, organizing ideas, and goal setting. This phase also involves recalling the relevant information from long-term memory and the task environment, then using such recalled information to establish goals and to develop a text that meets such intended goals. Secondly, translating includes taking material from long-term memory in accordance with the writer's plans and goals, and formulating sentences with it. Thirdly, reviewing aims to improve the quality of the text produced during the translation process. This model provides a detailed frame of how the writing process takes place in mind and contributes to clustering different sub-skills of writers' strategies.

#### **2.1.2. Writing Strategy**

Since writing has been regarded as a difficult cognitive activity, strategies are often necessary to support the performance of the task in both a first (L1) and a second language (L2) (Nunan, 1989; Richards, 1990). Writing strategies are considered to be performed consciously by an individual writer to solve problems or achieve goals during the writing process. It is any of the actions or behaviours that are consciously followed by writers to produce efficient writing (Petric and Czar, 2003).

Writing strategies also refer to a set of mental processes that writers come across while engaged in writing. It explains how writers approach their writing process, and how they can generate texts. They also can be subsumed under the different broad types of writing strategies

such as metacognitive, effort regulation, cognitive, social and affective strategies. (Saied Raofi et al, 2017)

## **2.2.Previous studies**

Many researchers have tried to identify whether the writing strategies are applied differently by different groups of students in different contexts.

Peñuelas (2012) surveyed 231 American university students from different majors to investigate their employment of six subgroups of writing strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. It is found that highly proficient students (those with A or B grades in their English class) used cognitive, metacognitive and compensation strategies more than affective, memory and social strategies. These students also used the strategies significantly more frequently than their less proficient peers.

Abdul-Rahman (2011) explored the differences in writing strategies applied between native (NSE) and non-native speakers of English (NNSE). Three strategies applied differently across the two groups include an organization strategy at the planning stage, a content strategy, and a mechanics strategy at the revising and editing stage. NSE was found to pay more attention to the writing process than the NNSE who focus more on the writing product. This was evidenced by their using organisation strategies more frequently in the planning stage. Also, at the stage of revising, the NSE applied more strategies related to revising content and mechanics than the NNSE. The two groups of students were also found to approach the strategies differently. For example, outlining strategies for NSE students means generating ideas, while for NNSE students, this means framing their ideas.

In Asian, ESL/EFL teaching contexts, Mutar and Nimehchisalem (2017) investigated the writing strategies used by 132 Iraqi high school students. The findings revealed that the students used the strategies at a low frequency, and there was no significant difference between high and low-proficiency students in the use of the strategies. The only difference found was that female students use strategies more frequently than male students.

Abas and Aziz (2018) explored the writing strategies used by Indonesian EFL graduate students. However, they limited their sample only to proficient student writers. The findings showed that student writers applied a five-step writing process and used ten writing strategies.

Still in Indonesia, Budiharso (2014) found that high achievers EFL undergraduate students put more effort into every writing stage than their low achiever peers.

Recently, Ardila (2020) investigated the writing strategies applied by EFL university students in Indonesia across different proficiency and gender. The findings showed no differences between genders in the strategies used among higher proficient students, while less proficient students only differed in affective strategies. This study also found that female students used the strategies in all six categories more effectively than male students.

In Vietnam, a recent study conducted among 137 English major students by Nguyen, T. N (2023) discovered strategies mostly used by a high level proficiency students compared to those of low-level proficiency at different stages of writing. The findings of the study reveal that strategies play important roles in enhancing the academic writing performance of the students at Dai Nam University. Those who employ fewer strategies or apply inappropriate strategies before, while and after their writing often receive low achievements in academic writing at university. The high-level proficiency students often employ cognitive and meta-cognitive in their writing, while low-proficiency students spent more time to look for words in the dictionary while writing. These students also spent less time practising writing outside the classroom and in their free time.

The previous studies' results indicate that more studies investigating the writing strategies used by the students with different proficiencies will benefit the English writing teaching practice, especially for EFL/ESL students.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The participants of the study consisted of 105 English-major sophomores from Faculty of Legal Foreign Languages, Hanoi Law University. At the time this study was conducted, they had finished courses in Writing Skill Module 1 and Writing Skill Module 2. They would be expected to continue with the next courses namely Writing Skill Module 3 and Advanced Reading and Writing course in the following semesters. Therefore, an investigation of writing strategies currently applied by these students would help teachers understand learner's strategies use and thus can improve their less effectively used strategies for the upcoming courses.

Among 105 participants, 72% are female while 28% are male students, which is a typical pattern for social majors. When being asked to describe their writing competence, 15 students (accounting for 14.3%) rated themselves as "limited writers"; 60 students (equivalent to 57.1%) as "modest writers" and the rest 30 students (equals 28.6%) as "competent writers". None of the participants rated their level as either "good writer" or "expert writer".

#### **3.2. Data collection instruments**

This study employed a quantitative approach where the data was analyzed descriptively. The data used in this study were collected from 105 English-major sophomores in the third semester of their study. A questionnaire adapted from the Writing Strategies Inventory developed by B. Petric' & B. Cza'rl (Petric' & Cz'arl, 2003) was used to get the data needed.

The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part includes general questions related to students' background information (their gender, their self-rated writing competence) and the second part is related to the strategies that the students use for each stage in writing. There are 45 items which are divided into three dimensions focusing on prewriting strategies (10 items), while-writing strategies (17 items), and post-writing strategies (18 items).

#### **3.3. Data analysis**

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were employed to measure students' frequencies of the writing strategies used in different stages of writing the process. For ease of statistical analysis, participants' responses were grouped under five main categories corresponding to the frequency of applying: 1- never; 2- rarely; 3- sometimes; 4- often; 5- frequently. The data were then entered into SPSS for analysis to produce mean scores and interpreted as follows: 1.00 – 1.80: Vey low frequency; 1.81 – 2.60: Low frequency; 2.61 – 3.40: Medium frequency; 3.41 – 4.20: High frequency; 4.21 – 5.00: Very high frequency.

### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Following the principal purposes of the study, this section aims to present the results and discussion of learners' overall writing strategies use and their common strategies which are employed in each writing stage.

#### ***Research question 1: At what stage of the writing process do English-majored sophomores employ more strategies?***

Table 1 presents the mean score of the three stages of writing strategies employed by the participants. The table indicates that While Writing Strategies were the most employed

writing strategies (M=3.42), followed by Pre-Writing Strategies (M=3.31), and Post-Writing Strategies (M=3.10). In other words, while-writing strategies were applied at high frequency by English-majored sophomores while pre-writing and post-writing strategies were employed at medium frequency. This finding is in line with several previous studies that found the while writing strategies are the most used writing strategies compared to the other two strategies (Q. M. Mutar, 2019; Q. Mutar & Nimehchisalem, 2017, Retno Wulan Dari et al, 2022).

**Table 1: Students' Overall Writing Strategies Use**

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Interpretation
Pre-Writing Strategies Use	105	1.30	5.00	3.31	Medium
While-Writing Strategies Use	105	1.53	4.94	3.42	High
Post-Writing Strategies Use	105	1.33	4.72	3.10	Medium
<b>Overall Writing Strategies Use</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>1.39</b>	<b>4.89</b>	<b>3.28</b>	<b>Medium</b>

**Research question 2: What are English-majored sophomores' preferable strategies at each writing stage?**

**Pre-writing strategies**

To describe further the writing strategies most frequently used by students in each stage, a more detailed descriptive analysis was conducted. Regarding ten surveyed pre-writing strategies, interestingly, half of these are applied at high frequency whereas the other half are used at medium frequency. As can be seen from Table 2, "**Look at an example written by a native speaker or more proficient writer**" (M=3.95, SD= .903) is the most frequently used strategy in the Pre-Writing stage, followed by "**Revise the assignment requirements before writing.**" (M=3.90, SD= .976). Other strategies such as "**Review the class notes/handouts before writing**", "**Discuss what to write with other students or teacher**" and "**Think about what to write and have a plan in mind, but not on paper**" is also employed by students at high frequency, having Means scores at 3.48, 3.43 and 3.43 respectively.

The pre-Writing stage is a stage where the students start preparing themselves for writing and organizing the idea that they want to include in their writing (Bui & Van, 2018; Morris, 2012). This stage plays an important role in writing, particularly in keeping students motivated and creative (Mahnam & Nejadansari, 2012; O'Mealia, 2011). From the findings above, it can be concluded that most of the second-year students prioritize sample essays written by more competent writers. They try to understand the task requirements before writing by either referring to their teacher's notes or discussing them with their teachers and friends. However, although they do plan their writing, they do not tend to produce a written plan before writing.

**Table 2: Students' Pre-Writing Strategies Use**

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Interpretation
Make a timetable for the writing process	105	1.00	5.00	2.95	.955	Medium
Review the class notes/handouts before writing.	105	1.00	5.00	3.48	1.057	High
Revise the assignment requirements before writing.	105	2.00	5.00	3.90	.976	High
Discuss what to write with other students or teachers.	105	2.00	5.00	3.43	.908	High



### ***Essay Writing Strategies Employed by English-Majored Sophomores At a University in Vietnam***

Read a sample essay written by a more proficient writer.	105	1.00	5.00	3.95	.903	High
Write straight away without having an outline.	105	1.00	5.00	2.71	1.20 7	Medium
Think about what to write and have an unwritten plan in mind.	105	2.00	5.00	3.43	.960	High
Note down words.	105	1.00	5.00	2.86	1.13 0	Medium
Write an outline in English	105	1.00	5.00	3.14	.995	Medium
Write notes/an outline in native language.	105	1.00	5.00	3.24	1.07 0	Medium

### ***While-writing strategies***

At a while-writing stage, more strategies are used by students compared to the pre-writing stage and these strategies are also used at a higher frequency. Among 17 items listed regarding while-writing techniques, ten techniques are applied at high frequency, six are applied at medium frequency and one item is used at low frequency. As indicated in Table 3, the students' most frequently used strategies while writing are "***Write the introduction that includes a thesis statement***" (M=4.05, SD=.488), "***Use my background knowledge to elaborate my thoughts***" (M=3.86, SD=.642), and "***Check other online sources while writing.***" (M=3.81, SD=.856).

These three most popular strategies are followed by "***Check the mechanics after completing each paragraph***", "***Find a similar English word whenever unfamiliar words come up***" and "***Write based on the outline***" (their Mean scores are 3.71, 3.71 and 3.62 respectively).

The third most preferential techniques among student writers include "***Write paragraphs starting with a topic sentence***", "***Check the vocabulary after completing each paragraph***", "***Simplify what to write if it is difficult to express the ideas in English***" and "***Check the monolingual dictionary while writing***". Their mean scores equal 3.43, 3.43, 3.48 and 3.52 respectively.

These results suggest that the participants in this study were familiar with the While Writing strategies. They have made use of different strategies to help themselves overcome struggles during the writing process. These strategies can be further grouped into strategies to deal with the structure of the essay, strategies to develop ideas while writing, strategies to activate vocabulary use, and strategies to review their mechanics.

Firstly, to meet the requirements of the essay structure, students frequently write an introduction that includes a thesis statement, then write paragraphs starting with a topic sentence.

Secondly, students have been dependent on different sources to develop their ideas while writing. They both use their background knowledge and check other online sources while writing. They simplify their content if it is difficult to express their intended ideas in English. Although they do not often have a written outline for their essays, students tend to write based on their intended plans.

Finally, it can easily be seen that participants in this research pay more attention to their vocabulary use and the essay's mechanics during their writing process. They check the monolingual dictionary while writing and find a similar English word whenever unfamiliar words come up. They also check the vocabulary and other mechanical errors after completing each paragraph.

Table 3: Students' while-writing strategies

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Interpretation
Write an introduction that includes a thesis statement.	105	3.00	5.00	4.05	.488	High
Write paragraphs starting with a topic sentence.	105	1.00	4.00	3.43	.853	High
Stop after each sentence and read it before writing the next ones.	105	1.00	5.00	3.29	1.035	Medium
Apply my background knowledge to elaborate my thoughts	105	2.00	5.00	3.86	.642	High
Write based on the outline.	105	2.00	5.00	3.62	.903	High
Adapt the outline while writing.	105	2.00	5.00	3.10	.872	Medium
Write in my first language and translate the text into English later	105	1.00	5.00	2.90	1.024	Medium
Check grammatical errors after completing each paragraph.	105	2.00	5.00	3.10	.976	Medium
Check the vocabulary after completing each paragraph.	105	2.00	5.00	3.43	.795	High
Check the mechanics after completing each paragraph.	105	2.00	5.00	3.71	.703	High
Simplify what to write in case it is challenging to express the ideas in English.	105	1.00	5.00	3.48	.962	High
Write words in my first language and later try to find an appropriate English word	105	1.00	5.00	2.48	1.057	Low
Find a similar English word whenever unfamiliar words come up	105	1.00	5.00	3.71	.938	High
Check the monolingual dictionary while writing	105	1.00	5.00	3.52	1.144	High
Check the bilingual dictionary while writing	105	2.00	5.00	3.33	1.044	Medium
Ask the teacher or classmates to help out when problems arise while writing.	105	1.00	5.00	3.38	1.004	Medium
Check other online sources while writing.	105	1.00	5.00	3.81	.856	High

### Post-writing strategies

At a post-writing stage, among the eighteen items given, participants in this research apply five techniques at high frequency, two techniques at low frequency and the other eleven techniques at medium frequency. As can be seen in Table 4, "**Check if the essay matches the requirements**" (M=3.76, SD=.613) was their most favourite post-writing strategy, followed by "**Read the whole text silently**" (M=3.71, SD=.703).

Other strategies that the students are familiar with at this stage include "**Make changes in the spelling and punctuation**", "**Check the mistakes after the teacher gives the feedback**" and "**Ask teacher/classmates to explain whenever a comment in the feedback is difficult to understand.**" These strategies have their mean scores of 3.52, 3.52 and 3.57 respectively.

The post-writing stage is the last stage in the writing process. In this study, the strategies in the post-writing stage are found to be the least frequently used by the students. This finding is in line with some previous studies by Maarof & Murat, 2013; Syahriani & Madya, 2020. In this research, students are found to revise by reading the whole text silently, checking if the

essay matches the requirements, then making changes in the spelling and punctuation. Students also prefer revising following their teacher's feedback and actively ask their teacher or classmates whenever a comment in the feedback is difficult to understand.

**Table 4: Students' post-writing strategies**

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Interpretation
Read the whole text aloud.	105	1.00	4.00	2.10	1.024	Low
Read the whole text silently.	105	2.00	5.00	3.71	.703	High
Submit the essay immediately without revising	105	1.00	4.00	2.29	.938	Low
Make changes in vocabulary using the dictionary.	105	1.00	5.00	3.38	.903	Medium
Make changes in sentence structure.	105	1.00	4.00	3.29	.885	Medium
Make changes in the organization of the essay.	105	1.00	5.00	3.10	1.070	Medium
Make changes in the content or ideas.	105	1.00	5.00	3.05	.955	Medium
Make changes in the spelling and punctuation	105	2.00	5.00	3.52	.856	High
Focus on one thing at a time when revising (e.g., content, structure).	105	2.00	5.00	2.90	.872	Medium
Check if the essay matches the requirements.	105	3.00	5.00	3.76	.613	High
Drop the first draft and start writing again whenever the essay is not sufficient.	105	1.00	5.00	3.14	1.251	Medium
Leave the text aside for a couple of days to get a new perspective and rewrite later.	105	1.00	4.00	2.81	.856	Medium
Show the text to teacher/classmates and ask for their review.	105	1.00	4.00	2.71	.988	Medium
Compare the paper with the ones written by my friends on the same topic.	105	1.00	5.00	3.00	1.028	Medium
Give myself a reward for completing the task.	105	1.00	5.00	2.86	1.042	Medium
Check the mistakes after the teacher give the feedback.	105	1.00	5.00	3.52	1.057	High
Ask teacher/classmates to explain whenever a comment in the feedback is difficult to understand.	105	2.00	5.00	3.57	.795	High
Make notes or try to remember feedback for the next writing assignments.	105	1.00	5.00	3.14	1.042	Medium

## 5. CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to investigate English-majored sophomores' writing strategies use, particularly concerning the stages when they are most likely to be used. The findings revealed that the majority of the sophomores are medium users of the strategies. In terms of the writing stages, the While-Writing Strategies were the most employed ones while



the Post-Writing Strategies were the least employed ones. Furthermore, the strategies most frequently used by the English-majored sophomores in each stage of writing were also highlighted.

As aforementioned, the findings of this study can be used by writing instructors and learners as a basis for improving their latter writing courses that maintain students' preferable writing strategies and equip them with other less frequent ones. Additionally, based on the findings which indicate the students' high frequency use of while writing strategies, it is suggested that process approach should be applied in writing instruction rather than product approach. Diversified activities and materials should also be applied to activate the students' use of Pre-Writing and Post-Writing strategies.

This research, though, still has some limitations. First, due to the limited number of participants, the findings in this study cannot be generalized on a larger scale. Second, this study only employed descriptive quantitative approach to gather the data needed through one questionnaire; thus, it is impossible to conduct deeper investigation on students' reasons for using such strategies or their evaluation of strengths or weaknesses of each strategy. Thus, further studies should employ more research instruments or investigate a wider population of participants.

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