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# Students' Difficulties in Writing Argumentative Text at SMPN 8 Medan

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to analyze the types of difficulties faced by eighth-grade students at SMP N 8 Medan in writing argumentative texts and to identify the factors causing those difficulties. The research applied a descriptive qualitative method, with participants involved 22 students. The data were collected through a documentation technique and a questionnaire, and analyzed using data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that students experience three major types of difficulties: linguistic, cognitive, and psychological. From the three types of difficulties, the linguistic difficulties is the most dominant. First, the linguistic difficulties are dominated by errors in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and text structure. The second, cognitive difficulties include problems in developing ideas, organizing arguments, and maintaining coherence. And the last, psychological difficulties involve lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and low motivation. On the other hand, these difficulties are caused by lack of proficiency, lack of knowledge, and lack of effective writing strategies, which significantly hinder students' ability to produce well-structured argumentative texts.

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely recognized as a fundamental productive skill in English language learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. It functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a tool for developing critical thinking and academic competence. Latulipe (1992, as cited in Yulansari, 2019) defines writing as the ability to express ideas systematically through written symbols, while Nunan (1989, as cited in Uba & Souidi, 2020) emphasizes that writing involves organizing ideas into coherent texts for specific audiences. In this sense, writing is both a cognitive and communicative activity that requires learners to manage multiple components simultaneously.

However, writing is often considered one of the most difficult skills for EFL learners. Students must deal with idea generation, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics at the same time (Saputra et al., 2021). This complexity becomes more apparent because writing does not provide immediate feedback, requiring students to ensure clarity and accuracy independently. As a result, many learners struggle to produce well-structured and meaningful texts, especially in more demanding genres. Among various types of writing, argumentative writing is regarded as one of the most complex. It requires students to present a clear stance, support their arguments with logical reasoning and evidence, and respond to opposing viewpoints (Ananda et al., 2024; Situmorang et al., 2020). This type of writing involves higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis, which are often not fully developed among junior high school students (Isnawati & Novitasari, 2025).

Previous studies indicate that students experience multidimensional difficulties in writing argumentative texts. These difficulties are generally categorized into cognitive, linguistic, and psychological aspects (Saputra et al., 2021). Cognitive difficulties include problems in generating ideas, organizing arguments, and understanding the generic structure of argumentative texts (Ananda et al., 2024; Uba & Souidi, 2020). Linguistic difficulties involve errors in grammar, limited vocabulary, and problems with mechanics, which hinder clarity and coherence (Isnawati & Novitasari, 2025; Situmorang et al., 2020). Meanwhile, psychological difficulties such as writing anxiety, low confidence, and lack of motivation also negatively affect students' performance (Saputra et al., 2021).

These difficulties are further influenced by several underlying factors. According to Graham and Harris (as cited in Glynn, 2006; Ismayanti & Kholiq, 2020), students' writing problems are mainly caused by lack of proficiency, lack of knowledge, and lack of effective strategies. Lack of proficiency affects students' mastery of basic writing skills, lack of knowledge limits their ability to generate and develop ideas, and lack of strategies hinders their ability to plan, draft, and revise their writing effectively. Despite the growing body of research on argumentative writing, most previous studies have focused on senior high school or university students (Ananda et al., 2024; Isnawati & Novitasari, 2025; Sari et al., 2023). This creates a research gap, as limited attention has been given to junior high school students, particularly eighth graders, who are at a critical stage of learning argumentative writing. At this level, students are newly introduced to argumentative text structures and are expected to develop foundational writing skills.

Preliminary observations at SMP N 8 Medan reveal that students' ability in writing argumentative texts remains low. The majority of students fail to meet the minimum competency standard and demonstrate difficulties in developing ideas, organizing texts, and using appropriate language features. Many students produce short and underdeveloped paragraphs, and some even rely on their first language. These findings indicate that students experience not only linguistic difficulties but also cognitive and psychological challenges.

This condition highlights the need for a more specific and contextual analysis of students' difficulties in writing argumentative texts. Therefore, this study addresses two main problems: (1) what types of difficulties students experience in writing argumentative texts and (2) why these difficulties occur. To answer the first problem, this study adopts the theory of writing aspects proposed by Jacobs (1981, as cited in Putri & Trisusana, 2022), which includes content, organization, vocabulary, language use (grammar), and mechanics, as well as the categorization of difficulties into cognitive, linguistic, and psychological aspects (Byrne, 1988; Saputra et al., 2021). These frameworks are used to systematically identify and classify the specific difficulties faced by students.

To answer the second problem, this study applies the theory of causal factors in writing difficulties proposed by Graham and Harris (as cited in Glynn, 2006; Ismayanti & Kholiq, 2020), which includes lack of proficiency, lack of knowledge, and lack of effective strategies. These factors provide a conceptual basis for analyzing the underlying causes of students' difficulties in writing argumentative texts. In addition, writing is viewed as a recursive process involving planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Harmer, 2004; Brown, 2001), and difficulties at any stage of this process may contribute to students' overall writing problems.

Based on the theoretical and empirical considerations above, this study aims to identify the types of students' difficulties and examine the factors

that cause these difficulties in writing argumentative texts. By integrating theories of writing aspects, writing processes, and causal factors, this research is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' challenges. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective teaching strategies, particularly for improving argumentative writing skills among junior high school students.

## METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to analyze students' difficulties in writing argumentative texts and the factors causing these difficulties. The research was conducted at SMP N 8 Medan. The participants of this study were eighth-grade students, particularly one class consisting of 22 students. The data were collected through documentation analysis and questionnaire distribution. First, students' writing portfolios were analyzed, focusing on their argumentative texts produced during learning activities. These texts served as the primary data to assess students' writing abilities, particularly their difficulties in linguistic aspects (grammar and vocabulary) and cognitive aspects (organization and argument development) and pshsiology aspects. Second, a questionnaire, as defined by Sugiyono (2014), was distributed to identify the types and factors of students' difficulties in writing argumentative texts. The questionnaire explored cognitive and physiological difficulties, as well as influencing factors such as lack of motivation, confidence, and knowledge. It was distributed to all students and completed individually.

After collecting the data, the researcher analyzed them using the model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. First, data condensation was carried out by identifying, selecting, and classifying relevant data. The researcher organized the data obtained from students' writing and questionnaires, checked their completeness, and categorized them based on types of difficulties and influencing factors. Second, data display involved presenting the organized data in tables and descriptive explanations to facilitate understanding. Finally, conclusion drawing was conducted by interpreting the data to identify patterns, relationships, and meanings. The conclusions were then drawn to answer the research questions regarding students' difficulties in writing argumentative texts.

## FINDINGS

As mentioned above, this study analyzes students' argumentative texts and identifies what difficulties are frequently recurring and what are the possible causes of such difficulties. The data were collected from 22 students

at SMPN 8 Medan through student portfolios and questionnaires. We will now present the results of both textual analysis and questionnaires.

a. The types of Students' Difficulties in Writing Argumentative Text

1. Linguistic Difficulties

The first aspect examined in this study is linguistic difficulties, which include grammar, punctuation, generic structure, and capitalization. Table 1 presents the distribution of linguistic errors found in students' argumentative texts.

**Table 1. Linguistic Difficulty**

| No. | Aspects | Total Students Error | Total Errors of Writing Text | The example from the data | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Student | Text |
| 1. | Grammar | 22 | 95 | VSH | "homework are necessary" |
| 2. | Punctuation | 20 | 48 | S, M, B | "yes homework necessary because we can learn more." |
| 3. | Generic Structure | 18 | 42 | ZFH, VMS | "Yes. homework is necessary" - no elaboration |
| 4. | Capitalization | 16 | 67 | M | "yes because we can..." |

Table 1 shows that grammar errors emerged as the most pervasive linguistic difficulty, with all 22 students (100%) producing grammatical inaccuracies totaling 95 errors. This aspect dominated the linguistic difficulties, accounting for more than one-third of all identified errors. The most frequent grammatical issues included subject-verb agreement errors.

Data 1: ″homework are necessary″

The students' sentence in Data 1 above is incorrect. It belongs to subject-verb agreement errors within the grammar category. The noun "homework" is an uncountable noun in English, which grammatically functions as a singular subject. Therefore, it must be followed by the singular verb "is" instead of the plural verb "are" to maintain grammatical concord, making the accurate form "homework is necessary."

Punctuation mistakes affected 20 out of 22 students (90.9%), with 48 errors identified across the portfolio samples. The most common punctuation issues included missing full stops at the end of sentences and inappropriate comma usage.

Data 2: ″yes is neccasany it because we don't set punismnet from teacher″

The students' sentence in Data 2 above is incorrect. It belongs to punctuation errors, specifically the absence of terminal marks and improper clause separation. The student merges a conversational opener, a main clause, and a subordinate clause without using periods or commas to delineate syntactic boundaries, resulting in a run-on sentence that obscures meaning and disrupts textual readability.

While the generic structure difficulties were found in 18 students (81.8%), accumulating 42 errors. Many texts contained only a brief thesis followed by one or two underdeveloped arguments, with no conclusion or elaboration.

Data 3: "Yes. homework is important to me″

The students' text in Data 3 above is structurally incomplete. It belongs to generic structure errors, as it fails to fulfill the required framework of an argumentative text. While the student successfully states a clear thesis, the excerpt abruptly ends without providing supporting arguments, elaboration, evidence, or a concluding reiteration, thereby violating the standard thesis–argument–conclusion organizational pattern.

Capitalization mistakes were found in 16 students (72.7%), totaling 67 errors, with common mistakes including failing to capitalize the first letter of sentences.

Data 4: ″yes because we can…″

The students' phrase in Data 4 above is incorrect. It belongs to capitalization errors in writing mechanics. The sentence begins with a lowercase letter ("yes"), which violates the fundamental orthographic rule that the first word of every complete sentence must be capitalized. Correcting it to "Yes" is necessary to signal the start of a new thought and adhere to standard English mechanical conventions.

2. Cognitive Difficulties

The second aspect examined is cognitive difficulties, which include idea development, paragraph coherence, and retention & planning. Table 2 presents the findings.

**Table 2. Cognitive Difficulty**

| No. | Cognitive Aspect | Students Affected | Percentage | Representative from Students' Portfolio |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Idea Development | 20 | 90.9% | "Yes. homework is important" (No elaboration, no concrete example, argument stops at a general claim) |
| 2. | Paragraph Coherence | 18 | 81.8% | "homework is important because we can get score and we don't get punishment from teacher" (Abrupt topic shift, no linking words, ideas |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | presented in isolation) |
| 3. | Retention & Planning | 17 | 77.3% | "Apakah PR itu penting? karena bisa melatih pikiran... (in Indonesian)" (No clear structural roadmap, retrieval gaps force L1 reliance, ending lacks rhetorical closure) |

Table 2 shows that idea development emerges as the most prominent cognitive barrier, affecting 90.9% of the students. Most students struggle to move beyond surface-level assertions.

Data 5: ″Yes. homework is important to me″

The students' statement in Data 5 above reflects a cognitive weakness. It belongs to idea development difficulties, as the text presents a bare assertion without analytical elaboration. The student identifies a stance but fails to explain why homework matters, provide concrete examples, or connect the claim to broader academic benefits, resulting in an argument that remains superficial and lacks persuasive depth.

Paragraph coherence presents another significant challenge, observed in 81.8% of the portfolios. Many submissions consist of isolated sentences strung together without transitional markers like "furthermore," "however," or "therefore."

Data 6: ‘‘homework is important because we can get score and we don’t get punishment from teacher’’

The students' sentence in Data 6 above is disjointed. It belongs to paragraph coherence issues, as it lacks appropriate cohesive devices and logical transitions. The student shifts from a general claim to specific consequences without using linking words (e.g., "furthermore," "for instance," or "consequently") to guide the reader, forcing implicit connections that weaken the logical flow and rhetorical clarity of the paragraph.

Retention and planning difficulties affect 77.3% of students, manifesting primarily in pre-writing confusion, lack of outlining, and strategic fallbacks like L1 code-mixing.

Data 7: *PR itu penting bagi untuk anak- anak untuk tambah belajar dan tambah pintar’’*

The students' excerpt in Data 7 above indicates a strategic breakdown. It belongs to retention and planning difficulties, as evidenced by the reliance on the first language (L1) instead of English. This code-mixing suggests a failure to retrieve L2 vocabulary and syntactic structures during composition, likely due to inadequate pre-writing outlining or cognitive overload, which disrupts textual continuity and demonstrates insufficient strategic preparation for L2 argumentative writing.

3. Psychological Difficulties

The third aspect examined is psychological difficulties, which include students' confidence, fear of making mistakes, and motivation. Table 3 presents the questionnaire results.

**Table 3. Psysiology Difficulty**

| No. | Statement | SA (5) | A (4) | N (3) | D (2) | SD (1) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I feel unconfident when writing in English. | 13 (59.1%) | 6 (27.3%) | 2 (9.1%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (4.5%) |
| 2. | I am afraid of making mistakes when writing. | 9 (40,9%) | 11 (50%) | 1 (4.5%) | 0 (0 %) | 1 (4.5%) |
| 3. | I feel less motivated to write argumentative texts. | 9 (40,9%) | 9 (40,9%) | 2 (9.1%) | 1 (4.5%) | 1 (4.5%) |

*SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree*

Table 3 shows that 19 students (86.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel unconfident when writing in English, with 13 students (59.1%) strongly agreeing. This indicates that lack of confidence is the most dominant affective barrier. Additionally, 19 students (86.4%) expressed anxiety about making errors when writing, and 18 students (81.9%) reported feeling less motivated to write argumentative texts.

**b. Factors Causing Students' Difficulties**

**1. Lack of Proficiency**

The first factor examined is lack of proficiency, which refers to students' limited ability in basic writing skills. Table 4 presents the findings.

**Table 4. Lack of Proficiency**

| No | Statement | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Total Responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I often make mistakes in grammar when writing argumentative texts. | 13 (59.1%) | 6 (27.3%) | 1 (4,5%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (9.1%) | 22 (100%) |
| 2. | I have difficulty using correct punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. | 13 (59.1%) | 6 (27,5%) | 1 (4,5%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (9.1%) | 22 (100%) |
| 3. | I find it difficult to write correct sentences in English. | 9 (40,9%) | 10 (45.5%) | 1 (4.5%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (9.1%) | 22 (100%) |
| 4. | I do not get enough practice in writing | 8 (36,4%) | 4 (18.2%) | 9 (40,9%) | 0 (0%) 1 (4.5%) | 1 (4.5%) | 22 (100%) |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | argumentative texts. | | | | | | |

Table 4 shows that the most dominant difficulty is frequent grammar mistakes, with 86.4% of students (59.1% strongly agree, 27.3% agree) acknowledging they often make grammatical errors. Similarly, 86.4% of students reported difficulty using correct punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Additionally, 86.4% find it difficult to write correct sentences in English, and 54.6% feel they do not get enough practice in writing argumentative texts.

2. Lack of Knowledge

The second factor is lack of knowledge, related to students' insufficient understanding of the subject matter and writing process. Table 5 presents the findings.

**Table 5. Lack of Knowledge**

| No. | Statement | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Total Responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I have difficulty understanding the structure of argumentative text (thesis, arguments, conclusion). | 15 (68.2%) | 3 (13.6%) | 1 (4.5%) | 0 (0%) | 3 (13.6%) | 22 (100%) |
| 2. | I find it difficult to develop ideas based on the given topic. | 11 (50%) | 5 (22.7%) | 4 (18.2%) | 1 (4.5%) | 1 (4.5%) | 22 (100%) |
| 3. | I find it hard to provide supporting evidence for my arguments. | 13 (59.1%) | 6 (27.3%) | 1 (4.5%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (9.1%) | 22 (100%) |
| 4. | The teacher's explanation about argumentative text is difficult to understand. | 9 (40.9%) | 11 (50.0%) | 1 (4.5%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (4.5%) | 22 (100%) |

Table 5 shows that the most dominant difficulty is inability to understand the structure of argumentative text, with 81.8% of students (68.2% strongly agree, 13.6% agree) experiencing this problem. Additionally, 86.4% of students find it hard to provide supporting evidence for their arguments, 72.7% struggle to develop ideas based on the given topic, and 90.9% feel that the teacher's explanation about argumentative text is difficult to understand.

3. Lack of Strategies

The third factor is lack of strategies, referring to students' limited use of appropriate writing strategies such as planning, drafting, and revising. Table 6 presents the findings.

**Table 6. Lack of Strategies**

| No. | Statement | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Total Responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I feel confused about how to start writing an argumentative text. | 14 (63.6%) | 5 (22.7%) | 2 (9.1%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (4.5%) | 22 (100%) |
| 2. | I do not revise or check my writing after finishing it. | 8 (36,4%) | 7 (31.8%) | 5 (22.7%) | 1 (4.5%) | 1 (4.5%) | 22 (100%) |
| 3. | I rarely plan (make an outline) before writing. | 4 (18.2%) | 4 (18.2%) | 10 (45.5%) | 3 (13.6%) | 1 (4.5%) | 22 (100%) |

Table 6 shows that the most dominant difficulty is confusion about how to start writing, with 86.3% of students (63.6% strongly agree, 22.7% agree) experiencing "writer's block" or initiation anxiety. Additionally, 68.2% of students admit they do not revise or check their writing after finishing it, and 36.4% rarely plan or make an outline before writing, with 45.5% remaining neutral about this practice.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study confirm that eighth-grade students at SMP N 8 Medan encounter multifaceted difficulties in writing argumentative texts, categorized into linguistic, cognitive, and psychological dimensions, consistent with Byrne's (1988) theoretical framework. These results align with prior studies (Isnawati & Novitasari, 2025; Situmorang et al., 2020; Sari et al., 2023; Ippun et al., 2023) that similarly identify grammatical inaccuracies, limited idea development, and affective barriers as central challenges in academic writing.

Specifically, linguistic difficulties emerged as the most dominant, characterized by persistent errors in subject-verb agreement, punctuation, capitalization, and failure to apply the generic structure of argumentative texts (thesis–arguments–reiteration). Cognitively, students struggled to formulate clear thesis statements, develop coherent arguments with supporting evidence, and maintain logical flow between paragraphs. Psychologically, low self-confidence, fear of making errors, and diminished motivation contributed to avoidance behaviors, resulting in underdeveloped and overly brief texts.

These challenges are primarily attributed to three root causes based on Graham and Harris's model: (a) lack of proficiency, reflected in recurring grammatical and mechanical errors due to insufficient structured practice; (b) lack of knowledge, evident in students' limited understanding of

argumentative text structure and evidence-based reasoning; and (c) lack of effective writing strategies, where students rarely engage in pre-writing planning, drafting, or revision, treating writing as a one-step product rather than a recursive process.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that instruction in argumentative writing should move beyond product-oriented approaches. Teachers are encouraged to integrate cognitive scaffolding (e.g., graphic organizers, argument mapping), contextualized language practice, and explicit instruction in process-based writing (*planning–drafting–revising*) to reduce cognitive load and gradually build students' confidence and competence.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that eighth-grade students at SMP N 8 Medan encounter three interrelated types of difficulties in writing argumentative texts, with linguistic difficulties emerging as the most dominant. Linguistic challenges are primarily manifested in persistent grammatical errors, particularly in subject-verb agreement, auxiliary verb usage, and verb forms, as well as inconsistencies in punctuation, capitalization, and the application of generic text structure. These linguistic gaps significantly hinder students' ability to produce accurate and coherent argumentative texts. Cognitively, students struggle with idea development, paragraph coherence, and strategic planning, often producing superficial claims without sufficient elaboration, logical sequencing, or evidence-based support. Psychologically, affective barriers such as low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and diminished motivation contribute to avoidance behaviors, resulting in underdeveloped and overly brief written outputs. These difficulties are fundamentally rooted in three causal factors: (a) lack of proficiency, reflected in students' limited mastery of grammatical and mechanical conventions due to insufficient structured practice; (b) lack of knowledge, evident in students' incomplete understanding of argumentative text structure and the requirements for developing thesis-driven, evidence-supported arguments; and (c) lack of effective writing strategies, where students rarely engage in pre-writing planning, drafting, or revision, treating writing as a one-step product rather than a recursive process. Overall, the findings underscore the necessity for holistic pedagogical interventions that simultaneously strengthen linguistic competence through targeted grammar and mechanics instruction, explicitly model argumentative text structure and reasoning, scaffold process-oriented writing strategies, and foster a supportive classroom environment to enhance students' motivation and self-efficacy in academic writing.

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