Rhetorical Moves and Steps in the Findings and Discussion Sections of EFL Undergraduates' Theses: An Analysis

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Abstract: The Findings and Discussion (F&D) sections in undergraduate theses play a crucial role in academic writing, as they present and interpret research results. However, EFL students often face challenges in organising their F&D sections effectively. This study examines the rhetorical moves and steps employed in the F&D sections of five EFL undergraduates' theses to identify common patterns and deviations from established academic writing conventions. Adopting a genre analysis approach, a corpus of undergraduate theses was analysed using Ruiying & Allison (2003) move-step framework. The findings reveal that while the students generally follow conventional rhetorical structures, variations exist in the sequencing and realisation of moves, particularly in the interpretation and evaluation of findings. Some students seemed to struggle with establishing clear connections between results and previous research, leading to less cohesive discussions. The study underscores the need for explicit instruction on rhetorical structuring in academic writing courses. These findings contribute to EAP pedagogy by offering insights into students' rhetorical challenges and suggesting targeted interventions to enhance their academic writing proficiency.

Keywords: EFL undergraduates' theses, genre analysis, rhetorical moves and steps

INTRODUCTION

Writing in academic disciplines, particularly in English, presents significant challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at all levels, especially those in higher education (Husin & Nurbayani, 2017). Undergraduate students are expected to structure and communicate their ideas clearly and coherently in writing. However, in practice, many struggle to produce well-organised, analytical academic texts that meet the required standards (Efendi, Rosiah, Susilawati, et al., 2021). As part of the degree requirements in higher education, students must develop academic writing that adheres to established conventions of English academic discourse.

One of the key academic writing requirements at the undergraduate level is the completion of a thesis (Pratiwi, Hermawan & Muniroh, 2021). An undergraduate thesis is a research-based document that typically consists of five main chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Research Methodology, Findings and Discussion, and Conclusion and Recommendations. Among these, the Findings and Discussion (F&D) section is particularly crucial as it presents and interprets research findings, connects them to previous studies, and contributes to scholarly discourse (Suherdi, Kurniawan & Lubis, 2020). This section not only communicates the research outcomes but also demonstrates students' critical engagement with their findings, their ability to construct logical arguments, and the implications of their study. The rhetorical structure of this section must, therefore, be carefully crafted to ensure coherence and clarity, as it serves as the foundation for further research and scholarly discussions.

In academic writing, rhetorical structure refers to the organised use of language to effectively convey meaning and persuade readers. A well-structured F&D section requires students to employ appropriate rhetorical moves and steps to ensure clarity and coherence. Rhetorical moves are strategic components of academic texts that guide the organisation of information, while steps are specific sub-components within these moves (Ruiying & Allison, 2003). The model proposed by Ruiying and Allison (2003) identifies several key rhetorical moves in this section, including providing background information, reporting and summarising results, commenting on findings, evaluating the study, and drawing conclusions. Understanding and applying these rhetorical moves can significantly improve students' academic writing, enabling them to construct well-structured arguments and communicate their research effectively.

Despite the importance of rhetorical structure in academic writing, many undergraduate students, particularly at STIT Muhammadiyah Tanjung Redeb, Kalimantan, Indonesia, where the current study was carried out, receive limited formal instruction on this aspect. Based on the researchers' experience and observation, undergraduate theses are often written under the close guidance of supervisors, and students primarily follow their supervisors' instructions without a clear understanding of rhetorical structure. Since no dedicated course on rhetorical structure in academic research writing is available at STIT Muhammadiyah Tanjung Redeb, students may struggle to apply appropriate rhetorical moves and steps, leading to inconsistencies in their academic writing.

While several studies have analysed the rhetorical structure of various sections of research papers, including abstracts (Suhadi, 2023; Gani, Kurniawan, Gunawan et al., 2021; Zubir, Suryani & Abdullah, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Tocalo, 2021) and introductions (Suryani & Rismiyanto, 2019; Sujiyani, 2022), research specifically examining the F&D sections of undergraduate theses remains scarce. In addition, most existing studies have focused on analysing the rhetorical moves and steps in journal articles (Ulya, 2022; Al-Shujairi, 2021; Putri & Astutik, 2023), leaving a gap in the literature concerning undergraduate theses, particularly in the Indonesian context. At STIT Muhammadiyah Tanjung Redeb, no prior research has been conducted on this topic, making this study the first to investigate the

rhetorical moves and steps in the F&D sections of EFL undergraduate theses.

Ergo, this study aims to fill the gap by analysing the rhetorical moves and steps in the F&D sections of undergraduate theses written by EFL students at STIT Muhammadiyah Tanjung Redeb. This can be expressed by the following research questions:

i. What rhetorical moves and steps are commonly employed in the Findings and Discussion sections of EFL undergraduate theses?

ii. How do EFL undergraduate writers structure and realise these rhetorical moves in their Findings and Discussion sections?

By identifying the common rhetorical patterns used in students' theses, the study seeks to provide insights into how students structure and present their research findings. The findings of this study could serve as a foundation for the university to consider offering a course that equips students with the necessary skills to write effective academic papers, particularly in structuring the F&D sections of their undergraduate theses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing a thesis is a rigorous academic endeavour that necessitates a deep understanding of research methodologies, data analysis, and the effective presentation of findings. An undergraduate thesis is typically structured into three key components; preliminaries, main contents, and end matters. Each component has several main sections as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Structure of a Thesis
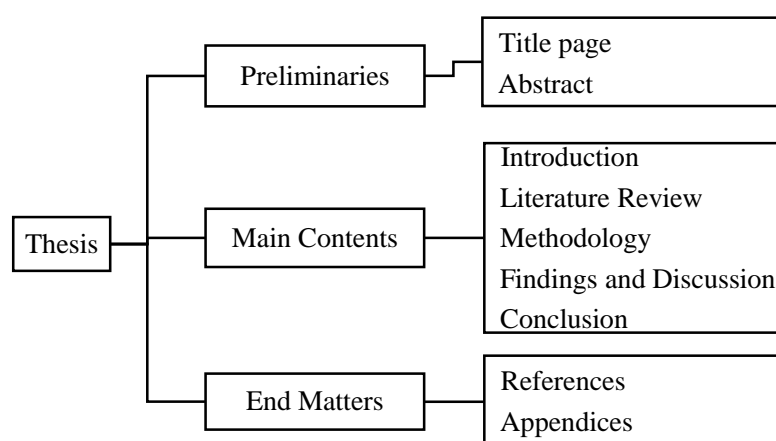
However, the current study only focuses on the F&D sections of undergraduate theses, analysing the rhetorical structure, including the moves and steps employed in their composition.

Findings and Discussion Sections of a Thesis

The Findings section presents the key results of a research study. It provides factual data, including experimental observations and qualitative or quantitative findings derived from data collection methods aligned with the research objectives. The findings respond directly to the research questions or hypotheses, offering an objective summary of the results (Quayson, 2021).

The Discussion section, on the other hand, interprets the research findings, highlighting their significance and placing them in the broader academic discourse. Unlike the Findings section, the Discussion does not simply restate results but instead evaluates and contextualises them within existing literature (Ferry, 2022). This section is crucial for demonstrating the relevance of the findings, explaining unexpected results, drawing comparisons with previous research, and offering implications for future studies (McCombes, 2019; Annesley, 2010; Vieira, Lima & Mizubati, 2019).

Rhetorical Structure

Rhetorical structure refers to the logical relationships between sentences and sections in a text. It is a framework that organises discourse to achieve specific communicative goals, particularly in academic writing (Ono, Sumita, Research et al., 1994; Mann & Thompson, 1988). The rhetorical structure of a thesis enables coherence and persuasive argumentation, ensuring that findings and discussions are clearly articulated and systematically developed.

In the context of academic writing, rhetorical structure encompasses the arrangement of ideas, persuasive techniques, and the flow of discourse. Effective rhetorical structuring involves careful consideration of audience, purpose, and context to achieve clarity and impact.

Several scholars have proposed models for analysing the rhetorical structure of the Findings and Discussion sections in academic writing. Table 1 summarises prominent rhetorical structure frameworks on moves:

Table 1: Theories of Rhetorical Structure in Findings and Discussion Section

Theory	Structure
Swales (1990)	M1 Background Information
	M2 Statement of Results
	M3 Unexpected Outcome
	M4 Reference to Previous Research
	M5 Explanation
	M6 Exemplification
	M7 Deduction and Hypothesis Testing
	M8 Recommendation
Holmes (1997)	M1 Background Information
	M2 Statement of Results
	M3 (Un)expected Outcome
	M4 Reference to Previous Research
	M5 Explanation of Unsatisfactory Results
	M6 Generalisation
	M7 Recommendation
	M8 Outlining Parallel or Subsequent Developments
Lewin, Fine, & Young (2001)	M1 Reporting Accomplishments
	M2 Evaluating Congruence of Findings
	M3 Offering Interpretation
	M4 Addressing Counterclaims
	M5 Stating Implications
Peacock (2002)	M1 Information
	M2 Statement of Results
	M3 Findings
	M4 Unexpected Outcome
	M5 Reference to Previous Research
	M6 Explanation

	M7 Claim
	M8 Limitation
	M9 Recommendation
Ruiying & Allison (2003)	M1 Background Information
	M2 Reporting Results
	M3 Summarising Results
	M4 Summarising the Study
	M5 Commenting on Results
	M6 Evaluating the Study
	M7 Deduction from the Study

Among these models, this study adopts Ruiying & Allison's (2003) framework due to its clarity and applicability in the context of EFL learners, who would benefit from a more structured and simplified approach to research writing.

Moves and Steps in Findings and Discussion Sections

Moves in rhetorical structure analysis refer to functional units within a text that serve specific communicative purposes. The rhetorical moves identified in the F&D sections can be described in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Rhetorical Moves in Finding and Discussion Sections

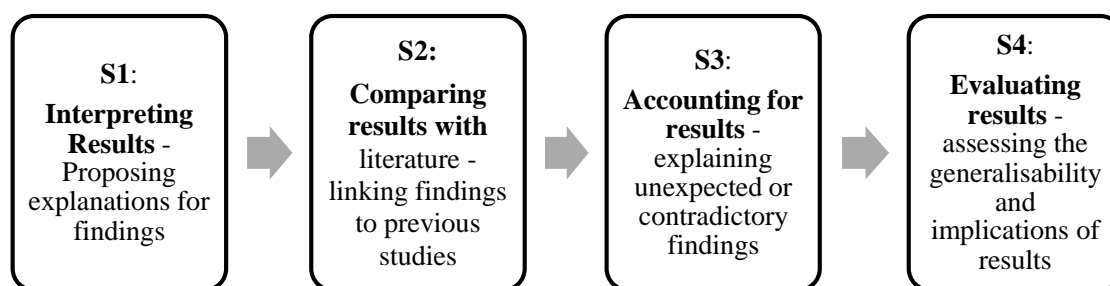| Move	Description	Example
M1 – Background Information	Provides details on data sources, research tools, methodologies, or frameworks employed	"The data is critically analyzed within the framework of CDA and based on van Dijk's (1999; 2006) Ideological Square Model, aided by NVIVO 12-Plus software." (Putri & Astutik, 2023)
M2 – Reporting Results	Presents the main findings, indicating whether results align with expectations.	"Figure 2 shows a word cloud of the most frequent words used to describe or talk about Emma and her de-hijabbing decision." (Putri & Astutik, 2023)
M3 – Summarising Results	Condenses key findings for clarity.	"From the data above, it can be concluded that dictogloss storytelling is effective in improving students' writing ability." (Suherdi et al., 2020)
M4 – Commenting on Results	Explains the significance of findings, comparing them with prior research and theoretical frameworks.	"According to the Ideological Square Model, this is an example of a disclaimer strategy with a combination of the overall macro strategies of positive self-representation and negative other representation." (Putri & Astutik, 2023)
M5 – Summarising the	Provides an overarching summary of research findings	"In a nutshell, the F&D sections play a crucial role in

Study	and their implications.	academic writing, requiring careful structuring to enhance clarity and argumentation."
M6 – Evaluating the Study	Discusses study limitations, methodological considerations, and practical significance.	"However, due to the small-scale nature of this research, only the five most frequently employed discursive strategies were analysed." (Putri & Astutik, 2023)
M7 – Deduction from the Research	Draws conclusions based on findings and provides recommendations for future research.	The study has highlighted significant gaps in the application of Moves and Steps in undergraduate theses. While some Moves and Steps were widely utilised, critical elements such as Commenting on Results and Evaluating the Study were largely absent.

Each move comprises several steps that further structure the discourse. Ruiying & Allison's Rhetorical Moves and Steps propose ten steps within the seven moves as shown in Table 3.
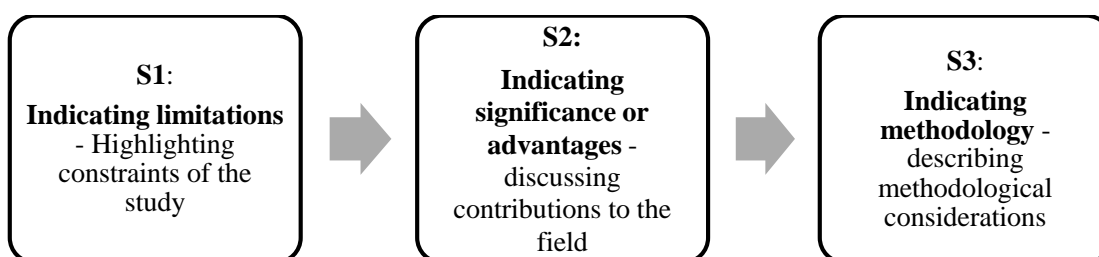
Table 3: Steps in Moves (Ruiying & Allison, 2003)

Moves	Steps
M1-Background Info	-
M2-Reporting Results	-
M3-Summarising Result	-
M4-Commenting on Results	S1-Interpreting Results
	S2-Comparing the Results with Literature
	S3-Accounting for Results
	S4-Evaluating Results
M5-Summarising the Study	-
M6-Evaluating the Study	S1-Indicating Limitations
	S2-Indicating Significance/Advantage
	S3-Evaluating Methodology
M7-Deductions from the Research	S1-Making Suggestions
	S2-Recommending Further Research
	S3-Drawing Pedagogic Implication

For instance, within M4 – Commenting on Results, the following steps are identified:

| **S1**: **Interpreting Results** - Proposing explanations for findings | → | **S2**: **Comparing results with** literature - linking findings to previous studies | → | **S3**: **Accounting for results** - explaining unexpected or contradictory findings | → | **S4**: **Evaluating results** - assessing the generalisability and implications of results |

Similarly, within M6 – Evaluating the Study, the steps may include:

| **S1**: **Indicating limitations** - Highlighting constraints of the study | → | **S2**: **Indicating significance or advantages** - discussing contributions to the field | → | **S3**: **Indicating methodology** - describing methodological considerations |

In a nutshell, the F&D sections play a crucial role in academic writing, requiring careful structuring to enhance clarity and argumentation. This review highlights various rhetorical structure models, particularly Ruiying & Allison's (2003) approach, as a suitable framework for analysing these sections in undergraduate theses. Understanding rhetorical moves and steps is essential for students and researchers aiming to improve the coherence and persuasiveness of their academic writing.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a genre analysis approach to examine the rhetorical moves in undergraduate theses. 30 undergraduate theses were completed in the English Department of STIT Muhammadiyah Tanjung Redeb in 2023. To determine the sample, the researchers selected one thesis per supervisor. Given that there were five undergraduate thesis supervisors, five theses were randomly chosen; one from each supervisor, using the $k=\underline{N}$ formula. The researchers decided to choose every 3rd thesis

$$n$$

listed by each supervisor. This sampling approach ensures that the study captures variations in rhetorical moves across different supervisors, acknowledging the collaborative nature of thesis writing between students and their supervisors. For analysis purpose, the theses were coded as UT1-UT5.

A checklist for identifying rhetorical moves and steps employed in the theses was drawn based on the moves and steps listed in the Ruiying and Allison's framework Table 3).

Table 3: Checklist to Identify Moves and Steps in the Theses

Thesis ID:			
Moves	**Frequency**	**Steps**	**Frequency**
M1		-	
M2		-	
M3		-	
M4		S1	
		S2	
		S3	
		S4	
M5		-	
M6		S1	
		S2	
		S3	
M7		S1	
		S2	
		S3	

The checklist provides a structured means of analysing rhetorical patterns within the theses. As put forward by Wilkinson & Birmingham (2003), research instruments serve as essential tools that facilitate data collection and enhance research outcomes.

The rhetorical moves and steps framework proposed by Ruiying & Allison (2003) was used to analyse the data. The rhetorical moves and steps in the F&D sections of the theses were identified and recorded in the checklist based on their presence and the frequency of occurrence. An inter-rater, an expert in the field of discourse analysis, assisted in validating the move analysis.

FINDINGS

Analysis of Moves and Steps

The analysis reveals that the writers did not fully apply all the Moves and Steps categories proposed by Ruiying and Allison (2003) in their theses. Specifically, only six out of the seven Moves were utilised in undergraduate theses, while only six out of the ten Steps were implemented. The distribution of these Moves across the examined undergraduate theses is summarised in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Moves Identified in the Theses

Move	Application in Thesis
M1 – Background Information	UT1, UT3, UT5
M2 – Reporting Results	UT1, UT2, UT3, UT4, UT5
M3 – Summarising Results	UT1, UT2, UT3, UT4, UT5
M4 – Commenting on Results	-
M5 – Summarising the Study	UT1, UT2, UT3, UT4, UT5
M6 – Evaluating the Study	UT1
M7 – Deduction from the Research	UT1

The analysis reveals that although the recommended Moves were acknowledged, not all were fully utilised. Notably, Move 2 (Reporting Results) and Move 3 (Summarising Results) were employed by all writers in their theses. This is expected, as reporting results is central to

addressing the research questions, while summarising results is essential for concluding the study's objectives. The findings also show that Move 4 (Commenting on Results) was entirely absent across all the undergraduate theses examined. Move 6 (Evaluating the Study) and Move 7 (Deduction from the Research) though present, were minimally applied.

Similarly, the analysis of Steps demonstrates that not all rhetorical categories were fulfilled. Table 5 outlines the Steps that were incorporated in the undergraduate theses:

Table 5: Steps Identified in the Theses

Move	Step	Application in Thesis
M4	S1 – Interpreting Results	UT1, UT2, UT3, UT4, UT5
M4	S2 – Comparing the Result with Literature	UT1, UT3
M4	S3 – Accounting for Results	UT1, UT3, UT4, UT5
M4	S4 – Evaluating Results	-
M6	S1 – Indicating Limitations	UT1, UT2
M6	S2 – Indicating Significance/Advantage	-
M6	S3 – Evaluating Methodology	-
M7	S1 – Making Suggestions	UT 1, UT5
M7	S2 – Recommending Further Research	-
M7	S3 – Drawing Pedagogic Implications	UT1, UT3

The analysis indicates that undergraduate theses did not meet all the rhetorical Step categories proposed by Ruiying & Allison (2003). As shown in Table 5, only Move 4/Step 1 (Interpreting Results) was applied in all the theses analysed. Move 4/Step 3 (Accounting for Results) was present in all but one thesis. While Move 4/Step 2 (Comparing Results with Literature), Move 6/Step 1 (Indicating Limitations), Move 7/Step 1 (Making Suggestions), and Move 7/Step 3 (Drawing Pedagogic Implications) were utilised, their occurrence in the F&D sections was minimal. Notably, Move 4/Step 4 (Evaluating Results), Move 6/Step 2 (Indicating Significance/Advantage), Move 6/Step 3 (Evaluating Methodology), and Move 7/Step 2 (Recommending Further Research) were entirely absent in all the theses. This suggests gaps in the depth of critical evaluation and discussion within the theses.

Frequency of Moves and Steps

A quantitative analysis further illustrates the frequency of Moves and Steps applied in the theses. Tables 6 and 7 show the detailed breakdown of their occurrence.

Table 6: Frequency of Moves in the Theses

Moves	Thesis	Frequency
M1 – Background Information	UT1, UT3, UT5	6
M2 – Reporting Results	UT1, UT2, UT3, UT4, UT5	46
M3 – Summarising Results	UT1, UT2, UT3, UT4, UT5	26
M5 – Summarising the Study	UT1, UT2, UT3, UT4, UT5	7
M7 – Deduction from Research	UT1	1
	TOTAL	**186**

The data indicate that Move 2 (Reporting Results) was the most frequently applied Move (46 instances), while Move 7 (Deduction from Research) was the least frequently applied, appearing only once. Markedly, Move 4 (Commenting on Results) and Move 6 (Evaluating the Study) were not applied at all.

Table 7: Frequency of Steps in the Theses

Moves	Thesis	Frequency
M4/S1 – Interpreting Results	UT1, UT2, UT3, UT4, UT5	54
M4/S2 – Comparing with Literature	UT1, UT3	2
M4/S3 – Accounting for Results	UT1, UT3, UT4, UT5	29
M6/S1 – Indicating Limitations	UT1, UT2	4
M7/S1 – Making Suggestions	UT1, UT5	7
M7/S3 – Drawing Pedagogic Implications	UT1, UT3	4
	TOTAL	100

As shown in Table 6, among the Steps, Move 4/Step 1 (Interpreting Results) was the most frequently applied in the theses, appearing 54 times. On the other hand, Move 4/Step 2 (Comparing with Literature) was the least applied, appearing only twice. Four steps (Move 4/Step 4, Move 6/Step 2, Move 6/Step 3, and Move 7/Step 2) were entirely absent from all undergraduate theses.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the students may not have fully grasped the importance of incorporating all the Moves and Steps as proposed by Ruiying and Allison (2003). Several factors could account for this, which could be explored further to enhance students' understanding of the importance of academic writing conventions in thesis writing.

First, the writers may lack familiarity with genre-specific structures as they had not received explicit instruction on the detailed structure of academic genres, especially the use of Moves and Steps in thesis writing. As Swales (1990) highlights, students often require specific guidance to understand the genre-specific conventions that govern academic writing. Without formal training, students are likely to focus on writing sections that are more immediately familiar, such as the introduction and data presentation sections. This lack of awareness may lead to the omission of critical components, such as Commenting on Results (M4) and Evaluating the Study (M6). Hyland (2009) also discusses how novices in academic writing may prioritise descriptive or data-heavy content without an understanding of the necessity for deeper interpretation and critical engagement. To mitigate this, educators could provide more focused instruction on the importance of each Move and Step within academic writing genres.

Along the same line, the writers may have focused on data presentation over interpretation. The findings indicate a strong focus on Moves such as Reporting Results (M2) and Summarising Results (M3), suggesting that students may prioritise presenting data over engaging in critical interpretation and discussion. This tendency towards data-centric writing can overshadow the essential academic processes of critical interpretation and evaluation. Nesi and Gardner (2012) explain how students often concentrate on presenting raw data and summarising results, sometimes neglecting the academic requirement to discuss the implications of those results. Encouraging students to balance their focus between the presentation of results and the critical discussion of those results could help improve their academic writing. Instruction could emphasise the role of Moves like Commenting on Results (M4) and Evaluating the Study (M6) in developing a holistic and critical approach to writing. As Flowerdew (2012) notes, academic writing requires a more balanced engagement with both data presentation and analysis to ensure a well-rounded argument.

Another possible explanation of the absence of some moves and steps in the theses is probably due to the students' limited engagement with literature. For example, the findings

show a low occurrence of Move 4/Step 2 (Comparing with Literature), which suggests that the students may not be engaging sufficiently with existing research to contextualise their results. Coffin et al. (2003) emphasise the importance of literature engagement in academic writing, arguing that comparing findings with existing research strengthens the depth and credibility of the discussion. Tse (2011) further supports this by noting that the absence of literature comparison limits the academic discussion and critical analysis. Without this engagement, students are unable to position their findings within broader theoretical frameworks or empirical studies, hence, reducing the overall quality of their thesis. Encouraging students to critically engage with literature throughout the writing process, not just in the introduction, would allow them to draw meaningful comparisons and contrasts with previous studies, enriching their academic discussions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study has highlighted significant gaps in the application of Moves and Steps in undergraduate theses. While some Moves and Steps were widely utilised, critical elements such as Commenting on Results and Evaluating the Study were largely absent. Addressing these gaps requires targeted interventions, including explicit instruction on genre-based writing, enhanced engagement with literature, and structured guidance on academic discourse. Future research could explore the underlying reasons for these omissions through qualitative inquiry, such as interviews with thesis writers and supervisors, to further understand the challenges in adopting a structured rhetorical framework.

In conclusion, the findings point to several areas where undergraduate thesis writing can be improved. By increasing awareness of genre-specific structures, encouraging balanced approaches to data presentation and interpretation, clarifying thesis guidelines, and fostering deeper engagement with existing literature, educators can help students produce more comprehensive, critical, and well-structured academic theses. This can lead to the understanding of the structural, interpretive, and analytical demands of academic writing.

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