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From Topic Selection to Theoretical Framing: Insights for Curriculum Design in English Literature Education

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ABSTRACT

To investigate how undergraduate English Literature research proposals connect problems, questions, objectives, theory, and prior scholarship and to explore implications for research-writing instruction. This exploratory qualitative study examined five anonymized undergraduate research documents from an Indonesian university, restricted to their available Chapters I and II. A five-dimension analytical matrix supported within-case interpretation and cross-case comparison. All five documents identified research topics, questions, and objectives, but their conceptual connections varied. One document contained partly overlapping objectives; others called for clearer explanations of how analytical tasks, theories, and proposed textual evidence would support interpretation. Research-gap statements also needed stronger comparative justification. Across the cases, three interpretive concerns emerged: purpose explicitness, analytical explicitness, and contribution explicitness. The findings suggest possible problem-delimitation exercises, alignment mapping, theory-justification tasks, and comparative literature-review matrices. These strategies were neither implemented nor evaluated in this study. The study offers a bounded, document-based account of conceptual coherence in discipline-specific proposal writing, rather than an evaluation of completed theses or student achievement. The observations are restricted to the selected documents and cannot establish how widespread the patterns are or whether the proposed curriculum strategies improve learning outcomes.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Conceptual Coherence, English Literature Education, Research Proposals, Curriculum Design.

I. Introduction

Research proposal writing is a fundamental component of undergraduate education because it requires students to transform broad academic interests into coherent, theoretically informed, and researchable inquiries. In English Literature education, this process involves more than selecting a literary text, linguistic phenomenon, or cultural representation as an object of analysis. Students must identify a meaningful research problem, formulate appropriately bounded research questions, establish corresponding objectives, select relevant theoretical perspectives, and position their proposed investigations within existing scholarship. These activities are intellectually interconnected, and their effectiveness depends on the logical relationships established among the components of a research proposal. Hart and Annear (2020) emphasize that undergraduate research difficulties frequently arise from insufficient integration between successive stages of inquiry and the final written product. Consequently, the development of research-writing

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competence requires attention not only to individual components of academic writing but also to their conceptual and analytical coherence.

Academic writing has increasingly been understood as a disciplinary and socially situated practice rather than a collection of transferable linguistic skills. Lea and Street (1998) demonstrate that university writing involves disciplinary expectations, institutional conventions, and differing understandings of legitimate academic knowledge. Similarly, Hyland (2008) argues that academic genres reflect the communicative practices and epistemological expectations of particular disciplinary communities. Within this perspective, constructing a research proposal requires students to demonstrate how a scholarly problem emerges, why a particular theoretical framework is appropriate, and how the proposed investigation contributes to an established field of inquiry. Wingate (2012) further emphasizes the importance of discipline-specific, genre-based approaches to academic writing instruction, particularly through explicit engagement with authentic academic texts. These perspectives suggest that undergraduate proposal writing should be examined as a process of constructing disciplinary knowledge rather than merely fulfilling formal thesis-writing requirements.

Empirical research nevertheless indicates that developing such competence remains challenging for novice academic writers. Hart and Annear (2020) identify difficulties involving research planning, source selection, and integration across research activities among undergraduate students. More recently, Li (2024), through a meta-ethnographic synthesis of 26 qualitative studies, demonstrates that non-native English-speaking students' academic writing experiences are shaped by educational backgrounds, institutional learning environments, perceived writing capabilities, and available support mechanisms. These findings indicate that academic writing difficulties cannot be explained exclusively by grammatical proficiency or language competence. Instead, they involve a complex relationship between disciplinary understanding, research literacy, and the capacity to organize evidence into a coherent academic argument. For students preparing research proposals, these challenges become particularly significant when they must justify theoretical choices and establish relationships between research questions, analytical concepts, and anticipated evidence.

Research in Indonesian higher education provides further evidence of challenges in undergraduate research writing. Mali (2023), in a qualitative investigation involving Indonesian EFL undergraduates, identified difficulties associated with preparing the introduction, literature review, and methodological sections of research proposals. Similarly, Karnedi et al. (2025), examining proposal development among English Literature students, reported continuing difficulties in articulating research focus, distinguishing literature reviews from problem statements, and communicating research ideas through appropriate academic conventions. These studies highlight the importance of instructional support that addresses both academic expression and research conceptualization. However, understanding students' perceived difficulties or measuring their writing performance does not necessarily reveal how individual components of their written proposals are conceptually connected. Examining these relationships directly may therefore provide additional evidence for identifying more specific learning needs in research-writing instruction.

Another important dimension concerns the rhetorical construction of research problems and scholarly contributions. Kwan (2006) demonstrates that literature reviews constitute distinctive academic genres whose rhetorical organization contributes to establishing the significance and intellectual positioning of a study. More recently, Rahmawati and Dari (2025), analyzing research article introductions written by Indonesian undergraduate English Language Teaching students, found that research gaps were predominantly constructed through claims concerning the absence of previous research. Their findings suggest the importance of developing more varied and critically substantiated strategies for establishing a research niche. Although identifying an underexplored topic may provide an initial justification, a defensible research gap also requires systematic engagement with what previous studies have investigated, how they have approached their objects, and which analytical questions remain unresolved. This issue becomes particularly relevant in English Literature research, where differences in literary objects, interpretive perspectives, and theoretical approaches do not automatically establish a substantive scholarly contribution.

Earlier work in the same institutional context examined students' difficulties in preparing mini-research papers (Alwasilah, 2024), but it did not trace how problems, objectives, theories, and research gaps connect within individual thesis proposals. The present analysis therefore addresses a narrower question: how the internal reasoning of proposed inquiries is articulated in Chapters I and II. Taken together, the literature establishes the importance of disciplinary writing conventions, research literacy, rhetorical positioning, and instructional support. However, the studies reviewed provide comparatively limited direct evidence concerning how these dimensions are connected within individual undergraduate English Literature research

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proposals. Research on academic writing difficulties commonly emphasizes students' experiences or writing performance, while genre-oriented investigations frequently concentrate on rhetorical structures within particular sections of academic texts. A complementary perspective is therefore needed to examine how the components of a research proposal function together as an integrated research plan. Specifically, attention should be directed toward whether research questions are translated into distinct analytical objectives, whether theoretical concepts are assigned identifiable roles, and whether previous studies are synthesized to justify the proposed contribution. This investigation addresses that analytical need through a bounded, document-based comparison rather than claiming to establish the prevalence of proposal-writing difficulties across an entire academic program.

Against this background, the present study examines five anonymized undergraduate research documents from the English Literature program at Universitas Pasundan, Bandung, Indonesia. The documents represent different areas of literary, linguistic, and cultural inquiry, including persuasive language in promotional discourse, gender representation in fiction, intertextuality and visual narrative, narrative time and trauma, and characterization and existential reflection. This disciplinary variation provides an opportunity to investigate whether similar research-planning issues emerge across different analytical objects and theoretical traditions. The analysis is deliberately confined to the available Chapters I and II, which document the formulation and conceptual justification of the proposed inquiries. Consequently, the study does not evaluate completed thesis findings, implemented research procedures, or students' overall academic performance.

Using exploratory qualitative document analysis, the study investigates five interconnected dimensions: research problem formulation and scope, alignment between research questions and objectives, selection and integration of theoretical frameworks, synthesis of previous studies to establish research gaps, and clarity of the proposed analytical contribution. The analytical contribution lies in examining these dimensions relationally rather than treating them as isolated elements of proposal organization. The practical contribution consists of developing evidence-informed considerations for research-writing instruction, particularly activities involving problem formulation, research alignment, theoretical justification, and comparative literature reviewing. These contributions are intended to inform curriculum discussions without assuming that the five documents represent the wider student population or that the recommended instructional practices have already been empirically validated. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

a. How do five undergraduate English Literature research proposals translate their selected topics into research problems, research questions, and corresponding objectives?
b. How do the proposals select and integrate theoretical frameworks and previous studies to support their intended analytical inquiries?
c. What recurring patterns of alignment and conceptual organization within the five proposals offer exploratory insights for curriculum design in English Literature education?

II. Literature Review

2.1. Research Proposal Writing as a Disciplinary and Rhetorical Practice

From a genre-based perspective, research writing requires authors to demonstrate the significance of their investigations by situating them within existing scholarly conversations. Kwan (2006), in examining the rhetorical organization of doctoral literature reviews, demonstrates that literature-review structures serve important functions in establishing research contexts and positioning proposed contributions. Although these findings concern doctoral writing, the underlying rhetorical considerations provide a useful conceptual reference for undergraduate research proposal development. Students must move beyond presenting background information toward explaining how a specific research problem emerges from the relationship between an analytical object and existing scholarship. Genre studies of dissertation introductions also identify rhetorical choices across disciplinary contexts (Prasetyanti & Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2023); however, the present study concerns undergraduate proposals and their internal conceptual relationships. Wingate (2012) emphasizes the value of integrating academic literacy instruction into disciplinary learning rather than treating writing as an isolated technical competence. Such an approach is especially relevant to undergraduate research education, where students must simultaneously learn disciplinary concepts and

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demonstrate their application through academic writing. Therefore, examining the rhetorical organization of thesis proposals can provide insight into students' emerging ability to transform general academic interests into researchable investigations.

2.2. Research Problem Formulation and Internal Coherence of Research Design

The formulation of a research problem represents a critical transition from identifying an interesting topic to establishing a focused and analytically manageable investigation. Research questions play a central role in this transition because they determine the direction, boundaries, and intellectual priorities of a study. Agee (2009) explains that developing qualitative research questions involves an iterative and reflective process through which researchers clarify their purposes and identify appropriate directions for inquiry. Research questions are therefore not merely formal statements but conceptual instruments that help organize subsequent methodological and analytical decisions. Research design coherence also depends on the relationships established among research problems, questions, objectives, and analytical procedures. Hart and Annear (2020) identify insufficient integration among successive research activities as an important challenge in undergraduate research writing. Their research coherence framework emphasizes the importance of helping students understand how different stages of an investigation contribute to a consistent research process. This perspective is especially relevant to thesis proposal writing, in which the conceptual relationships among research components must be established before empirical or textual analysis is undertaken. A coherent research proposal should demonstrate that its research questions arise from a clearly bounded problem and that its objectives identify the intellectual tasks required to address those questions. However, such coherence does not necessarily require a rigid one-to-one correspondence between questions and objectives. Complex literary inquiries may involve sequential or complementary analytical tasks, including the identification of textual patterns, description of narrative structures, and interpretation of thematic meanings. The central requirement is that the relationship among these tasks should be understandable and analytically justified.

2.3. Theoretical Framework Selection and Integration in Literary Research

Theoretical frameworks provide the conceptual foundations through which researchers define analytical perspectives, identify relevant evidence, and develop interpretations. Collins and Stockton (2018) argue that theory occupies a central position in qualitative research because it informs the researcher's understanding of phenomena, methodological choices, and interpretation of evidence. Nevertheless, the presence of a theoretical framework does not automatically ensure conceptual coherence. The analytical value of a theory depends on how clearly its concepts are connected to the research questions and the evidence under investigation. However, theoretical integration should not be equated with the inclusion of numerous conceptual perspectives. Collins and Stockton (2018) caution that excessive reliance on predetermined theoretical assumptions may restrict researchers' engagement with emerging evidence. Thus, theoretical breadth should be accompanied by sufficient analytical focus and conceptual justification. Students need to distinguish between frameworks that identify textual phenomena and those that support interpretation, while recognizing that some frameworks may perform both functions. Within literary research, the relationship between textual evidence and theoretical interpretation is particularly important. A proposal addressing gender representation, for instance, should explain how selected narrative features provide evidence relevant to its interpretive concepts. Likewise, a study connecting non-linear narrative structures with trauma should avoid treating non-linearity itself as sufficient evidence of trauma representation. The interpretive relationship must be established through appropriate textual analysis and clearly explained theoretical reasoning.

2.4. Previous Studies, Research-Gap Construction, and Analytical Contribution

Establishing a research gap is a fundamental aspect of scholarly writing because it explains why an investigation is necessary in relation to existing knowledge. Nevertheless, the identification of a gap requires more than describing a topic as underexplored or claiming that previous research is limited. A convincing scholarly contribution must be supported through critical engagement with earlier studies, including their research objects, analytical questions, theoretical frameworks, methods, and findings. Kwan (2006) similarly demonstrates that literature reviews perform rhetorical functions through which writers establish the

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relevance and positioning of their studies. These functions indicate that research-gap construction should emerge from a structured assessment of the relationship between previous scholarship and the proposed investigation. A literature review organized exclusively around separate descriptions of individual studies may provide useful background information while offering limited explanation of how those studies collectively establish a research niche.

In undergraduate English Literature research, the construction of research gaps can be especially challenging because scholarly contributions are not necessarily defined by the discovery of a completely unexamined literary text. A study may provide a meaningful contribution by reconsidering an established object through a different theoretical perspective, examining relationships among previously separate analytical dimensions, or addressing an interpretive question insufficiently developed in earlier scholarship. However, such contributions require explicit justification through comparison with existing research. For the present study, research-gap quality is therefore approached through the visibility of comparative reasoning within proposal documents. Relevant indicators include whether previous studies are compared rather than merely summarized, whether the proposed analytical difference is specified, and whether the claimed contribution follows logically from the literature reviewed. The analysis does not attempt to establish whether a proposed research gap is objectively novel across the entire scholarly field. Instead, it examines whether the justification presented in each document is sufficiently explicit and internally defensible.

2.5. Constructive Alignment and Implications for Research-Writing Curriculum Design

The relationship between proposal-writing competence and curriculum development can be understood through constructive alignment, which emphasizes consistency among intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment practices. Biggs (1996) argues that effective curriculum design requires learning activities and assessment tasks to support the forms of understanding represented in educational objectives. This principle provides an appropriate foundation for considering how undergraduate students might be supported in developing coherent research proposals. The assessment dimension is equally important. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that formative assessment and effective feedback can support students' capacity to regulate and improve their learning. Tai et al. (2018) further emphasize evaluative judgment, understood as students' capacity to make informed decisions about the quality of their own work and that of others. These perspectives suggest that research-writing instruction may benefit from learning tasks that encourage students to examine the consistency and adequacy of their proposals before proceeding to full-scale research. Nevertheless, the present study does not investigate the implementation or effectiveness of these instructional strategies. Its contribution is more limited and exploratory: identifying observable patterns within existing proposal documents that may inform the development of research-writing learning activities and assessment criteria. Constructive alignment therefore serves as an interpretive principle for deriving curriculum implications, not as an outcome variable or an established explanation of students' observed proposal-writing performance.

2.6. Integrated Analytical Framework and Development of Working Propositions

The literature reviewed above indicates that undergraduate research proposal writing can be understood through three complementary theoretical perspectives: disciplinary and rhetorical positioning, internal research-design coherence, and constructive alignment in curriculum development. The first perspective explains how proposals establish scholarly purposes and anticipated contributions. The second examines whether research problems, questions, objectives, theories, and evidence form an intelligible analytical structure. The third provides a pedagogical basis for translating observed patterns into potential learning and assessment activities. Together, these perspectives support an integrated analytical framework comprising five dimensions: (1) research problem formulation and scope, (2) alignment between research questions and objectives, (3) theoretical framework selection and integration, (4) comparative use of previous studies to establish research gaps, and (5) clarity of the proposed analytical contribution. These dimensions are treated as interconnected characteristics of research documents rather than independent variables in a causal model.

Given the exploratory qualitative design and the bounded corpus of five undergraduate documents, the study develops working propositions to guide document analysis and cross-case interpretation. These propositions represent theoretically informed analytical expectations rather than statistical hypotheses. They

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are not intended to predict population-level outcomes, and the evidence may support, qualify, or challenge them.

P1: Research Problem Formulation and Scope

Research proposals that explicitly delimit their objects of inquiry and research problems are expected to display more clearly specified relationships among selected topics, research questions, and objectives.

P2: Research Question–Objective Alignment

Research proposals that differentiate the analytical purposes of their research questions are expected to demonstrate clearer correspondence between questions and objectives, with less conceptual overlap among stated research tasks.

P3: Theoretical Framework Integration

In proposals employing multiple theoretical perspectives, conceptual coherence is expected to be more evident when the analytical function of each framework is differentiated and explicitly connected to relevant textual evidence.

P4: Research-Gap Construction

Research-gap claims are expected to be more explicitly substantiated when proposals compare previous studies in terms of research objects, analytical questions, theoretical perspectives, and findings rather than presenting previous research as disconnected summaries.

P5: Curriculum-Relevant Patterns

Recurring patterns of conceptual alignment and misalignment across the five documents may identify research-writing practices that warrant explicit instructional attention. This proposition guides the cautious translation of documentary observations into possible curriculum activities and assessment criteria; it does not imply that such activities have been implemented or evaluated. Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual orientation of the study. Disciplinary and rhetorical perspectives and internal research-design coherence inform five qualitative dimensions: problem formulation, question–objective alignment, theoretical integration, research-gap construction, and proposed analytical contribution. These dimensions guide within-case examination and cross-case comparison. Recurring patterns are subsequently interpreted through constructive alignment, embedded academic literacy, and evaluative judgment to generate exploratory curriculum implications (Biggs, 1996; Wingate, 2012; Tai et al., 2018). The framework is an interpretive guide, not a causal model or psychometric scale. P1–P4 orient analysis of document content, whereas P5 guides the conditional discussion of teaching and assessment implications. The recommendations have not been implemented or evaluated.

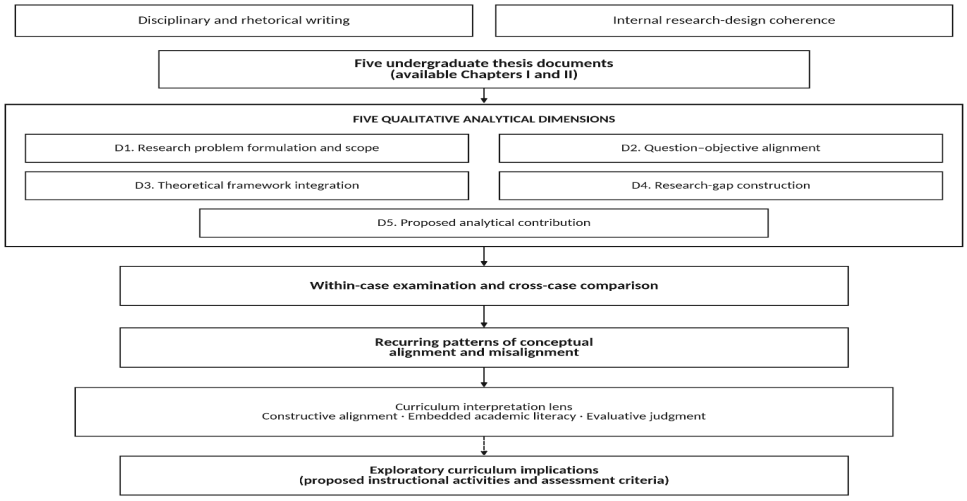


Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Framework for Qualitative Analysis of Undergraduate Research Proposals and Exploratory Curriculum Interpretation.

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III. Research Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design using document analysis to examine the conceptual coherence of undergraduate research proposals in English Literature education. The approach was selected because the research sought to understand how students articulate and connect research problems, research questions, objectives, theoretical frameworks, previous studies, and anticipated analytical contributions within written academic documents. Rather than measuring writing proficiency or testing causal relationships among predetermined variables, the investigation focused on identifying and interpreting relationships among the components of early-stage research planning. The analytical orientation was primarily descriptive and interpretive. Descriptive analysis identified the research components explicitly presented in each document, whereas interpretive analysis examined how those components were connected and justified. The distinction was maintained to avoid treating the researcher's interpretation as equivalent to direct documentary evidence. The investigation therefore aimed to develop a contextualized understanding of proposal-writing practices within the selected corpus rather than generate statistical estimates or population-level conclusions.

3.2. Research Setting, Corpus, and Document Selection

The study was situated in the undergraduate English Literature program at Universitas Pasundan, Bandung, Indonesia. The research corpus comprised five anonymized undergraduate research documents made available for qualitative examination. These documents represented varied areas of literary, linguistic, and cultural inquiry, providing a bounded set of cases through which relationships among research-planning components could be compared. The corpus was defined by the documents available for analysis rather than by a probability-based sampling procedure. Accordingly, the five documents were not assumed to represent the full population of undergraduate thesis proposals produced by the program. The number of documents was treated as a boundary of the exploratory investigation rather than as evidence of thematic saturation or statistical adequacy. The documentary scope was restricted to Chapters I and II of each research document. These chapters contained the materials relevant to the formulation and conceptual justification of the proposed investigations, including research backgrounds, problem statements, research questions, objectives, theoretical frameworks, and discussions of previous studies. The available materials were therefore appropriate for analyzing research-planning coherence but insufficient for evaluating the implementation of research methods, completed analyses, or final thesis outcomes. For confidentiality and consistency in reporting, the documents were identified as Document 1, Document 2, Document 3, Document 4, and Document 5. Student names and specific thesis titles were excluded from the analytical presentation. Each document was examined within the boundaries of its available content, without inferring information from missing chapters or assuming that the proposal represented the final version of the student's research.

3.3. Units of Analysis and Analytical Framework

The primary unit of analysis was the individual undergraduate research document. Within each document, the relevant units of examination consisted of textual statements and passages addressing the research background, research problem, research questions, objectives, theoretical perspectives, previous studies, and anticipated contribution. The analytical framework was developed from the research questions and the conceptual perspectives discussed in the literature review, particularly disciplinary research writing, internal research-design coherence, and constructive alignment. Five predefined analytical dimensions provided a common structure for examining the documents. These dimensions were used as qualitative categories rather than numerical measurement variables.

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Table 1. Analytical dimensions and operational indicators for qualitative document analysis

Analytical dimension	Operational focus	Documentary evidence
D1. Research problem formulation and scope	Clarity of the research focus, delimitation of the problem, and relationship between the selected topic and proposed investigation	Research background, problem statement, scope and delimitation
D2. Research question–objective alignment	Correspondence between research questions and objectives, distinction among analytical tasks, and consistency of the proposed inquiry	Research questions, research objectives
D3. Theoretical framework selection and integration	Relevance of selected theoretical concepts, clarity of their analytical functions, and relationships between theoretical perspectives and proposed evidence	Theoretical framework, conceptual explanations, anticipated textual analysis
D4. Research-gap construction	Comparative engagement with previous studies and justification of the proposed research niche	Previous studies, literature synthesis, research-gap statements
D5. Proposed analytical contribution	Clarity of the expected analytical contribution and its logical relationship to the research problem, theoretical framework, and previous scholarship	Research rationale, significance statements, anticipated contribution

3.4. Document Examination and Cross-Case Analysis

The analysis followed a structured process of within-case examination and cross-case comparison. This organization was informed by document analysis procedures described by Bowen (2009) and the matrix-based approach to qualitative data organization discussed by Gale et al. (2013). The analytical framework enabled comparable observations to be organized across the five documents while retaining the distinct research focus of each case. The second stage involved organizing the relevant documentary evidence according to the five predefined analytical dimensions. Statements concerning research problems and scope were considered in relation to the clarity of the proposed inquiry. Research questions and objectives were examined to identify their correspondence and any apparent overlap among analytical tasks. Theoretical framework sections were reviewed to determine how selected concepts were connected to the research questions and intended textual evidence. Previous-studies sections were examined to identify whether research-gap claims were supported through comparison with relevant scholarship. The proposed analytical contribution was considered in relation to the overall coherence of the research plan.

The fourth stage involved cross-case comparison using a common coding matrix. Observations from the five documents were organized according to the same analytical dimensions to identify recurring characteristics and case-specific differences. The comparison considered examples of explicit conceptual alignment, partially developed analytical relationships, overlapping research objectives, and theoretical or research-gap statements requiring further justification. The final stage involved synthesizing the cross-case observations in relation to the research questions and their potential implications for curriculum design. Patterns concerning problem formulation, research alignment, theoretical justification, and literature-review synthesis were interpreted as possible areas for instructional attention. These implications were developed from the documentary observations rather than from an evaluation of existing teaching practices or an intervention study. The coding matrix functioned as an organizational and interpretive instrument. It did not generate numerical scores, comparative rankings, or statistical measures of proposal quality. The analysis therefore emphasized the clarity of documentary evidence and the reasoning connecting that evidence to the reported findings.

3.5. Analytical Trustworthiness and Transparency

The trustworthiness of qualitative document analysis depends on the transparency of analytical decisions, the relationship between interpretations and their supporting evidence, and the clarity with which the boundaries of the inquiry are reported. Elo et al. (2014) emphasize that credibility and dependability should be considered throughout the preparation, organization, and reporting of qualitative analysis.

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Similarly, Nowell et al. (2017) argue that methodological transparency is essential for enabling readers to evaluate the credibility of qualitative findings. The interpretation of proposal coherence was grounded in the relationships visible within the documents. For example, the presence of multiple theoretical frameworks was not automatically classified as a weakness; attention was directed toward whether their analytical functions were adequately explained. Similarly, a research-gap statement was examined in terms of its supporting comparison with previous scholarship rather than its conformity to a predetermined formula. This approach reduced the risk of imposing a single preferred proposal structure on studies with different disciplinary and theoretical orientations. The reporting strategy also distinguished between empirical observations and pedagogical implications. Findings concerning the five documents were treated as evidence of the characteristics of those documents, whereas curriculum recommendations were identified as interpretive implications derived from the patterns observed. This distinction is consistent with the emphasis on explicit methodological reporting advocated by O'Brien et al. (2014).

3.6. Confidentiality, Scope of Inference, and Methodological Limitations

Confidentiality was addressed in the analytical presentation through the use of anonymized case identifiers and the exclusion of student names and specific thesis titles. The analysis focused on research-writing features relevant to the research questions rather than the identification or evaluation of individual students. These boundaries delimit the claims made from a small, non-probability documentary corpus: the analysis concerns the available proposals, not the causes of writing choices, the quality of completed theses, or measured curriculum effects.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

a. Overview of the Research Documents and Cross-Case Analytical Patterns

The qualitative document analysis revealed that all five undergraduate English Literature research documents presented identifiable research objects and articulated research questions and objectives. Nevertheless, the extent to which these components formed an explicitly connected analytical structure varied across the cases. The central finding was therefore not the absence of conventional proposal components but the different degrees of clarity with which students explained the relationships among their selected topics, research questions, objectives, theoretical frameworks, previous scholarship, and proposed analytical contributions. The documents represented diverse disciplinary orientations. Document 1 focused on persuasive language and strategies in promotional discourse, whereas Document 2 investigated gender representation through narrative techniques in fiction. Document 3 addressed intertextuality and visual narrative within a music video, while Document 4 examined narrative time and trauma in a literary work. Document 5 considered characterization and existential reflection in contemporary fiction. These differences provided a basis for examining proposal coherence across varied research objects without imposing a single theoretical or methodological template.

Across the five documents, two distinguishable patterns emerged. The first concerned the articulation of research questions and corresponding objectives. In several cases, these components were explicitly connected and represented distinguishable analytical tasks. However, one proposal contained partially overlapping objectives, while another would benefit from a clearer explanation of how successive analytical tasks contributed to the overall investigation. The second pattern concerned the transition from conceptual selection to analytical application. Although the theoretical perspectives identified in the documents were broadly relevant to their respective research objects, their specific functions were not always explained with sufficient precision. Similar issues appeared in the use of previous studies, where potentially meaningful research niches were identified but the comparative reasoning supporting their significance could be strengthened. Table 2 synthesizes the principal observations across the five documents.

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Table 2. Cross-Case Synthesis of Research Proposal Coherence

Document and research focus	Question–objective relationship	Theoretical integration	Principal analytical consideration
Document 1: Persuasive language and promotional discourse	Two questions address identifiable and corresponding analytical tasks	Persuasive-language concepts are relevant to the selected content	Specify textual indicators and strengthen comparisons with previous advertising studies
Document 2: Gender representation and narrative technique	Questions and objectives correspond closely	Formal narrative analysis and gender interpretation are potentially complementary	Explain how narrative evidence supports gender-related interpretation
Document 3: Intertextuality and visual narrative	Some objectives overlap; a question concerning significance requires clearer evidential grounding	Several theoretical approaches are introduced, with a need for a clearer analytical hierarchy	Differentiate analytical tasks, theoretical functions, and evidence for interpretive claims
Document 4: Narrative time and trauma	Formal-analytical and interpretive questions are distinguishable and reflected in the objectives	Narrative-time concepts provide a potential basis for trauma-related interpretation	Clarify the evidence required to connect temporal structures with thematic interpretation
Document 5: Characterization and existential reflection	Questions and objectives correspond, but the sequence among tasks could be clearer	Characterization and existential philosophy serve potentially different analytical functions	Explain the progression from characterization evidence to philosophical interpretation

b. From Research Topic Identification to Research Problem Formulation

The first analytical dimension concerned how students transformed their selected topics into bounded research problems. Across the corpus, the documents demonstrated an initial capacity to identify recognizable objects of scholarly inquiry. Each proposal selected a phenomenon that could reasonably be approached through literary, linguistic, or cultural analysis. However, the subsequent development of a researchable problem required different forms of conceptual clarification. Document 1 provides an example of relatively explicit research orientation. Its questions distinguish between identifying categories of persuasive language and examining the application of persuasive strategies. This distinction provides a recognizable analytical progression from classification toward examination of language use. Nevertheless, the proposed investigation would become more operationally precise if the categories were accompanied by clearer textual indicators and boundaries defining the promotional materials to be examined.

Document 2 similarly identifies an analytical direction involving narrative technique and gender representation. The proposed relationship is conceptually recognizable because formal narrative analysis can provide textual observations that inform interpretations of representation. However, the research problem would be more sharply articulated if the proposal specified which narrative features are most relevant to its representational inquiry and why examining their relationship offers a meaningful contribution. Document 3 presents a more complex research-planning challenge. Its focus on intertextuality and visual narrative provides a potentially productive object of investigation, particularly because a music video can involve interactions among visual, verbal, and cultural elements. However, the coexistence of multiple analytical elements creates a need to distinguish the central research problem from the broader range of interesting features associated with the object. The proposal would benefit from identifying which specific relationships are essential to its inquiry and what evidence is required to investigate them.

Documents 4 and 5 demonstrate related issues from different theoretical directions. Document 4 connects narrative time with trauma, establishing a recognizable relationship between formal structure and thematic interpretation. Document 5 links characterization to existential questions concerning meaning, freedom, and responsibility. In both cases, the research topics offer plausible foundations for investigation,

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but their analytical precision depends on defining the relationship between observable textual characteristics and broader interpretive concepts. These examples suggest that a recognizable topic is not sufficient evidence of a sharply delimited research problem. P1 is used here as an interpretive expectation; this document-based comparison does not independently validate it.

c. Research Question–Objective Alignment: Clarity, Differentiation, and Analytical Progression

In Document 1, the two research questions distinguish the identification of persuasive-language categories from the examination of persuasive strategies. The corresponding objectives reflect these tasks, establishing an understandable relationship between the proposed questions and the activities required to answer them. A similar pattern appears in Document 2, where questions concerning narrative technique and gender representation are accompanied by objectives addressing the same analytical areas. Document 4 provides a particularly instructive example of differentiated analytical purposes. One question concerns the construction of narrative time through specified analytical categories, while another addresses how those structures contribute to thematic interpretation. The objectives correspond to these two directions. This arrangement illustrates how a proposal can accommodate both formal analysis and interpretation without necessarily combining them into an indistinguishable research task.

By contrast, Document 3 reveals a point at which conceptual differentiation could be improved. Two objectives appear to overlap in their concern with identifying analytical elements and explaining their contribution to narrative construction. The difficulty is not the inclusion of multiple objectives but the insufficient distinction between what each objective is expected to accomplish. Furthermore, a research question concerning the significance of particular elements for narrative meaning and audience interpretation requires clarification of the evidence that would support such an interpretation. The reference to audience interpretation is especially important because claims about textual meaning and claims about actual audience responses are not methodologically equivalent. The former may be investigated through textual interpretation, whereas the latter may require evidence of audience reception. Unless the proposal explicitly defines audience interpretation as an anticipated interpretive possibility rather than an empirically observed response, the relationship between the research question and the available evidence remains uncertain.

Document 5 presents a different issue. Its questions and objectives correspond to characterization, the protagonist's negotiation of life's meaning, and existential interpretation. These analytical tasks are distinguishable but would benefit from a clearer explanation of their sequence. For instance, characterization may establish textual evidence relevant to decisions and actions, which can subsequently be interpreted through existential concepts. Making this progression explicit would strengthen the proposal without requiring the objectives to follow a mechanical one-question–one-objective formula. The contrast informs P2 without treating it as a statistically tested hypothesis: alignment involves both correspondence and a clear distinction among analytical tasks.

d. Theoretical Framework Selection and the Challenge of Analytical Integration

Document 1 employed persuasive-language analysis in relation to promotional discourse. The theoretical orientation was relevant to the proposed object, but greater precision would be achieved by specifying how each persuasive-language category could be identified within the selected materials. This would provide a clearer connection between theoretical concepts and the evidence to be examined. Documents 2, 4, and 5 illustrate the challenge of combining formal analytical approaches with additional interpretive perspectives. In Document 2, narrative analysis and a gender-oriented framework may serve complementary functions. Formal analysis can describe particular features of narrative construction, while gender-related concepts may inform interpretations of representation. The potential strength of this combination depends on showing how observations from the first analytical perspective support conclusions developed through the second.

Document 4 similarly combines narrative-time analysis with trauma theory. Its formal analytical categories are relatively explicit, offering a basis for examining temporal organization. Nevertheless, the proposal needs to establish how particular narrative arrangements provide evidence relevant to a trauma-related interpretation. A non-linear narrative structure, for example, should not automatically be treated as evidence of trauma without further textual and conceptual justification. In Document 5, characterization and existential philosophy provide another potentially complementary relationship. Characterization can establish textual evidence concerning the protagonist's actions, decisions, and responses to circumstances. Existential concepts may then provide a framework for interpreting those observations in relation to freedom,

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responsibility, and the construction of meaning. The central analytical requirement is to articulate how the interpretation follows from the textual evidence. Document 3 differs from these cases because it introduces a comparatively broad range of theoretical approaches. Such breadth can be appropriate for analyzing an object involving multiple semiotic and narrative dimensions. However, the proposal would benefit from establishing a clearer hierarchy among the selected frameworks. Without an explicit allocation of analytical functions, the frameworks risk appearing as a collection of relevant ideas rather than a coordinated approach to investigating the research questions. These observations are consistent with the interpretive expectation in P3, while leaving open alternative readings of each document's theoretical choices.

e. Research-Gap Construction and the Use of Previous Studies

The fourth analytical dimension examined how previous scholarship was used to justify the proposed investigations. Across the five documents, research-gap statements were associated with recognizable differences in research objects, theoretical orientations, or analytical focus. Nevertheless, the comparative basis for establishing these gaps was not consistently developed. Document 1 positioned its investigation in relation to earlier research on advertising and persuasive language. Its proposed focus was identifiable, but the justification could be strengthened through a more explicit comparison of the materials, research questions, and analytical strategies examined in previous studies. Document 2 similarly connected its intended contribution to the relationship between narrative form and gender representation. The proposed combination provides an intelligible direction for inquiry, although its distinct contribution would be more defensible if earlier studies were synthesized according to their treatment of narrative technique, representation, and theoretical interpretation.

In Document 3, the intertextual and multimodal orientation offered a possible basis for distinguishing the study from previous investigations. However, the need for further analysis was not sufficiently established through a systematic comparison of existing scholarship. The presence of several theoretical perspectives did not, by itself, demonstrate that a corresponding research gap existed. Document 4 framed its inquiry through the relationship between narrative structure and trauma. This focus provides a potentially meaningful research niche, particularly where previous studies may have addressed narrative form and thematic interpretation in different ways. Nevertheless, a stronger justification would require explicit comparison of the relevant research objects, conceptual frameworks, and analytical findings. Document 5 positioned its existential interpretation in relation to other readings of characterization and meaning-making. As in the other documents, the potential contribution depended on how convincingly the proposal explained what its interpretation would add to existing scholarship rather than merely identifying a different conceptual perspective. An important distinction emerged between identifying a difference and establishing a research gap. Differences in research object, setting, or theoretical perspective may provide opportunities for further investigation, but they do not independently demonstrate the scholarly importance of a proposed study. The argumentative value of a research gap depends on whether the identified difference addresses a meaningful limitation, unresolved question, or interpretive issue in previous scholarship. The pattern is interpreted in relation to P4. This analysis examines the internal justification of research-gap claims; it does not independently establish novelty across the entire field.

f. Integrated Findings: From Structural Completeness to Conceptual Coherence

However, the extent to which those intentions were developed into traceable analytical relationships varied. Document 3 illustrated the consequences of partially overlapping objectives and broadly distributed theoretical functions. Document 5 demonstrated the need to explain how multiple analytical tasks build upon one another. Documents 2 and 4 showed that relevant combinations of formal and interpretive frameworks still require clear explanations of the evidential relationships connecting them. The cross-case synthesis therefore suggests that internal proposal coherence may be examined through three interconnected forms of explicitness. First, purpose explicitness concerns whether the proposal explains what each research question and objective contributes to the investigation. Second, analytical explicitness concerns whether the selected theoretical concepts are assigned recognizable functions and connected to appropriate evidence. Third, contribution explicitness concerns whether the proposed research niche is justified through comparison with existing scholarship. These cross-case patterns inform P5 as preliminary teaching priorities rather than evidence that particular teaching strategies are effective.

4.2. Discussion

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a. Research Proposal Coherence as an Integrated Academic Writing Competence

The findings suggest that a central challenge in early-stage undergraduate research writing concerns the transition from completing individual proposal sections to constructing a coherent scholarly inquiry. Across the five documents, research topics, questions, objectives, and theoretical perspectives were identifiable, yet their relationships were not always developed with equal analytical precision. This distinction advances the discussion beyond formal compliance with proposal-writing conventions toward the intellectual work required to connect research components. The finding is broadly consistent with Hart and Annear (2020), who identified insufficient integration among research stages as an important challenge in undergraduate scholarly writing. Their research coherence framework emphasizes the need to connect research activities with the organization and development of the final scholarly product. The present analysis offers a complementary, document-based perspective by illustrating how this issue can be observed within the conceptual architecture of undergraduate English Literature proposals.

The findings also extend the relevance of Mali's (2023) investigation of Indonesian EFL students' challenges in writing research proposals. While Mali examined students' reported experiences and coping strategies, the present study focuses on the written relationships among proposal components. These perspectives are complementary rather than interchangeable. Students' perceptions can reveal difficulties experienced during proposal development, whereas document analysis can identify the conceptual relationships actually represented in the resulting texts. A related comparison can be made with Rustipa et al. (2023), who examined rhetorical structures, strategies, and linguistic characteristics in undergraduate research problem statements. Their findings demonstrate that the formal organization of research problems remains an important concern in academic writing instruction. The present analysis adds a relational perspective by considering how problem statements connect with objectives, theoretical frameworks, and previous studies. Within this interpretation, conceptual coherence is not an additional proposal component to be inserted into the document. Rather, it represents a quality of the relationships among existing components. A research question becomes analytically meaningful when it identifies an investigable task; an objective becomes useful when it explains the work needed to address that task; and a theoretical framework becomes relevant when its concepts can be connected to appropriate evidence.

b. Theoretical Integration as a Movement from Description to Interpretation

This finding corresponds with Rocco and Plakhotnik's (2009) distinction among literature reviews, theoretical frameworks, and conceptual frameworks. Their work emphasizes that these components have different functions within research design, even though they operate in relation to one another. The present findings illustrate how a lack of clearly differentiated functions may become visible within undergraduate proposals that adopt more than one theoretical perspective. Collins and Stockton (2018) similarly argue that theory plays a central role in qualitative research by shaping the researcher's orientation toward inquiry and interpretation. They also caution against an excessive reliance on predetermined theory that restricts engagement with evidence. This perspective is especially relevant to Document 3, where the breadth of theoretical approaches creates a need for a more explicit analytical hierarchy. The present findings suggest that theoretical integration can be strengthened through what may be described as evidence-mediated interpretation. In this proposed analytical principle, textual observations provide the basis for engaging theoretical concepts, and the resulting interpretation must remain defensible in relation to both the evidence and the research questions.

The distinction is particularly important for analyses involving potentially complex interpretive claims. Narrative fragmentation should not automatically be equated with trauma, just as a character's decision should not independently establish a particular existential meaning. Such claims require interpretive reasoning grounded in the text and the relevant theoretical perspective. From a curriculum-development standpoint, this finding suggests the value of moving theory instruction beyond the identification of influential scholars and established conceptual definitions. Students may benefit from exercises that require them to demonstrate the analytical function of each selected concept, specify the evidence to which it applies, and explain the interpretive conclusions that can reasonably be developed from that evidence.

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c. Research-Gap Construction as Comparative Scholarly Reasoning

This pattern can be interpreted through Kwan's (2006) analysis of the rhetorical organization of literature reviews. Kwan demonstrates that literature reviewing involves the construction of a scholarly context and the positioning of research contributions rather than simply the accumulation of source descriptions. From this perspective, the value of a literature review depends partly on how it organizes previous scholarship to justify the direction of a new inquiry. The findings also resonate with Boote and Beile (2005), who emphasize the centrality of sophisticated literature reviewing in research preparation. Their argument highlights the importance of synthesis, scholarly evaluation, and conceptual understanding for developing meaningful research contributions. Although their research concerns doctoral education, its emphasis on critical engagement with previous scholarship provides a relevant conceptual comparison for undergraduate research-writing instruction.

More directly related to the Indonesian context, Rahmawati and Dari (2025) analyzed 24 research article introductions written by Indonesian undergraduate English Language Teaching students. Their study found that research-gap statements relied heavily on claims concerning the absence of previous studies. This evidence is relevant to the present investigation because it demonstrates the limitations of treating research gaps primarily as unexamined topics or contexts. A useful distinction can therefore be made between topic differentiation and contribution justification. Topic differentiation identifies how a proposed investigation differs from previous work. Contribution justification explains why that difference matters for understanding a literary, linguistic, or cultural phenomenon. The curriculum implication is that literature-review instruction should encourage comparative scholarly reasoning. Students should learn to organize previous research according to analytical questions, theoretical approaches, methods, and findings before constructing claims about what remains unresolved. This approach may also help students avoid overstating novelty when their proposed contributions involve differences that have not yet been critically justified.

d. From Document-Based Patterns to Constructively Aligned Curriculum Design

These areas can be interpreted through Biggs's (1996) principle of constructive alignment, which emphasizes coherence among intended learning outcomes, instructional activities, and assessment practices. Applied to undergraduate English Literature research education, this principle suggests that learning activities should provide opportunities to demonstrate the same kinds of reasoning expected in a well-developed research proposal. The findings also support the relevance of discipline-embedded academic literacy instruction. Wingate (2012) argues for integrating academic writing development into disciplinary learning rather than treating it as a set of disconnected generic skills. The present study suggests that this principle can be operationalized through activities addressing authentic decisions encountered during literary research planning. The first involves problem-formulation exercises, in which students transform broad research interests into bounded analytical questions. Rather than beginning with the production of a complete introduction, students could be required to identify the specific phenomenon, the problem requiring investigation, the relevant scholarly context, and the evidence through which the proposed inquiry could be pursued.

The second concerns research alignment mapping. Students could organize their research questions, objectives, theoretical concepts, and anticipated evidence within a common analytical display. This activity would make overlapping research tasks visible and help students assess whether each proposed question has an identifiable analytical purpose. The third involves theoretical justification tasks, particularly for projects employing multiple interpretive perspectives. Students could explain which concepts are essential to the investigation, how each contributes to answering the research questions, and how conceptual interpretation will be grounded in textual evidence. The fourth concerns comparative literature-review matrices, which would require students to synthesize previous studies according to research objects, questions, frameworks, methods, and findings. Such activities could support a transition from descriptive source reporting toward critical research-gap construction. Table 3 presents a proposed alignment among the identified research-writing needs, possible learning activities, and corresponding assessment evidence.

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Table 3. Proposed Curriculum Alignment for Undergraduate Research Proposal Writing

Identified analytical need	Proposed learning activity	Intended learning outcome	Suggested assessment evidence
Research problem delimitation	Topic-to-problem formulation workshop	Formulate a specific, bounded research problem	Revised problem statement with explicit analytical scope
Research question–objective coherence	Question–objective alignment mapping	Differentiate and justify analytical tasks	Alignment map showing relationships among questions and objectives
Theoretical framework integration	Theory-justification and evidence-mapping exercise	Explain how selected concepts support analysis	Concept–question–evidence justification matrix
Research-gap substantiation	Comparative literature-review workshop	Synthesize scholarship to establish a defensible research niche	Literature comparison matrix and synthesized gap statement
Integrated proposal coherence	Peer review and guided proposal revision	Evaluate and improve the internal logic of a research plan	Revised proposal accompanied by a rationale for conceptual revisions

The proposed activities can also be understood through the concept of evaluative judgment. Tai et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of developing students' capacity to assess the quality of their own work and that of others. Applied to research proposal writing, this suggests that students may benefit from learning activities in which they critically examine proposal coherence using explicit criteria and comparative examples. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) similarly argue that formative assessment can contribute to students' self-regulated learning when feedback processes help learners monitor and improve their own work. These perspectives provide a rationale for incorporating guided self-assessment, peer review, and structured proposal revision into research-writing instruction. However, a recent systematic review by Bassett and Macnaught (2025) underscores the importance of distinguishing instructional practices from evidence of their educational impact. Their analysis identifies limitations in the evidence used to substantiate the effectiveness of embedded academic literacy interventions. This consideration is directly relevant to the present study: the proposed instructional activities are theoretically informed and connected to documented patterns, but their effectiveness has not been established.

e. Theoretical Contributions and Implications for English Literature Education

First, the study highlights the analytical importance of distinguishing structural completeness from conceptual coherence. This distinction builds upon research coherence perspectives by showing how the presence of conventional proposal components may coexist with partially developed relationships among analytical tasks, theoretical concepts, and scholarly contributions. Within the examined corpus, the issue was not simply whether students included the required components but how convincingly those components formed an integrated inquiry. Second, the study proposes purpose explicitness, analytical explicitness, and contribution explicitness as an interpretive synthesis of the five analytical dimensions. These categories provide a way to describe the relationships among research problems, objectives, theoretical frameworks, and literature reviews. They should be understood as provisional interpretive categories derived from a small document corpus, not as validated dimensions of a standardized research-writing instrument. An additional implication concerns the disciplinary diversity of literary research. The five documents demonstrate that coherence can be examined across different theoretical traditions without requiring uniformity in analytical methods. Narratological, linguistic, multimodal, gender-oriented, and philosophical investigations may follow different analytical pathways while sharing a need to justify relationships among research questions, concepts, and evidence.

f. Interpretation of the Working Propositions and Research Limitations

The five working propositions developed in the literature review provide a useful structure for interpreting the findings, although they do not function as statistically testable hypotheses in the present study. P1 concerns problem delimitation; P2 concerns the distinction and correspondence of analytical tasks; P3 addresses the function of theoretical frameworks; P4 concerns comparative research-gap justification; and

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P5 guides the derivation of tentative curriculum implications. Consistency between findings and these propositions does not constitute independent confirmation, because the propositions also informed the coding framework. The interpretations should therefore remain open to competing explanations and case-specific differences; none of the five propositions was subjected to statistical hypothesis testing. Future investigations could address these limitations through a larger and more diverse corpus, comparisons across academic cohorts, and analyses of successive proposal drafts. Interviews with students and supervisors could provide additional insight into the processes underlying research-writing decisions. Classroom-based intervention studies could subsequently examine whether structured alignment mapping, theory-justification exercises, and comparative literature-review activities contribute to observable improvements in research-proposal coherence.

V. Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study examined how five undergraduate English Literature proposal documents connect research problems, questions, objectives, theoretical perspectives, prior studies, and anticipated contributions. All five contained identifiable research topics, questions, and objectives, but the relationships among these components differed in clarity. The main analytical concerns involved overlapping objectives, incompletely differentiated theoretical functions, links between textual evidence and interpretation, and the comparative justification of research gaps. The study distinguishes structural completeness from conceptual coherence and proposes three provisional interpretive categories: purpose explicitness, analytical explicitness, and contribution explicitness. These categories describe relationships visible in this bounded corpus; they are neither psychometric constructs nor a universal standard for research-writing quality. Potential curriculum responses include problem-formulation exercises, question–objective alignment maps, theory-justification activities, and comparative literature-review matrices, together with formative feedback. These practices are suggested by documentary findings and pedagogical theory, but their effectiveness was not tested. The conclusions are limited to five documents from one program and to their available Chapters I and II. They cannot establish the quality of completed theses or the influence of supervision, institutional practices, or prior instruction. Future research should examine larger and more diverse corpora, multiple proposal drafts, students' and supervisors' perspectives, and intervention outcomes before making stronger curriculum-effectiveness claims.

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