

Originality in Academic Writing – Revisiting Critical Thinking in the Age of AI

Nicoleta Manlup

<https://doi.org/10.24193/LLC.2025.1.10>

This topic investigates the way in which academic writing could benefit from AI tools. Academic writing can often be perceived by students as time-consuming, in both reading for producing a text and actual writing. Even though this might be true, it is still important not to neglect three levels of operating in (academic) writing and to make sure to always cover them precisely to build originality. The levels could be considered the following: (i) micro level – for grammatical structures and style; (ii) meso level – for structural coherence and organization; (iii) macro level – for goals, literature review, research question, etc., depending on the purpose of the text. For this presentation, I did not collect any empirical data from my students, as the proposal focuses on a theoretical framework. Thus, this paper proposes a series of AI-based tools (such as ChatGPT, Elicit, Grammarly) that can help students refine each of these levels.

Artificial intelligence; academic writing; immersive learning; originality; critical thinking.

1. Introduction

1.1. Aim

The present paper investigates the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in academic writing and the way in which it might affect originality and critical thinking. It is widely known that AI has become a tool that is frequently used by more and more people, especially students. If so, it is educators' duty to make students understand the importance of critical thinking in such times, making them differentiate between random information brought together and information that creates sense. Moreover, the originality issues should be addressed as plagiarism could be easily overlooked while using AI tools.

At the same time, through this topic, the aim would also be to build a replica of these theoretical frameworks that can be addressed to empirical data collection and analyses. They can be replicated in both in-class teaching and individual learning. The key

aspect of using these tools is to understand how to use them accordingly and how to retrieve information in order to train critical thinking and avoid plagiarism.

1.2. Methodology

The paper focuses on a theoretical approach and it does not collect any empirical data from my students. It focuses on presenting the main pedagogical uses of these AI-based tools, such as ChatGPT, Elicit or Grammarly. Even so, there are a few limitations that should be discussed, usually within the pedagogical framework and the ethical implications that might arise while using AI-based tools in teaching and learning: privacy policy of data, plagiarism or doctrinal impact.

1.3. Building the background

Using AI tools in education has become a trend that many educators and students prefer to adopt and adapt to their needs. However, an important aspect is that all the skills would originate from a general basis, for which the technical industry does not only apply computer science principles, but also linguistic, psychological, neurological, mathematical approaches. It is important to understand that when we write, we make use of a series of skills from various areas that help us build a context, understand the facts/ information behind it, conceptualize and exemplify with it etc., all of these contributing to our critical thinking.

When it comes to academic writing, it has been often stated, even before the age of AI, that it is a ‘vehicle of generating new knowledge’ (Ondrusek, 2012, p. 178), which is still a valid consideration of our times, but the question that might arise in the digital age refers to originality. While a considerable number of people are pursuing academic degrees and eventually careers, it is difficult to find original topics that have never been discussed before. Many students might have this perception that they always have to discuss or write about a totally new topic, however, it is important to reshape the understanding of ‘originality’ in the digital world. It is crucial to make students understand that there are many fields in which crafting a brand-new topic is very difficult and, sometimes, in academic contexts, we might just need some new corpora, new perspectives and approaches, new methodology etc. to an already existing topic. This should not affect their originality as long as they have a clear understanding of the topic, a clean style of writing, promoting ideas that belong to them, yet using modern tools that can refine some of the skills. Using these kinds of methods are always adaptive, because a recurrent question that adapts to each generation is ‘to what extent are these activities really “new”?’ (Colpaert, 2006, p. 477). What we have to understand is that, through the use of AI, the methods adapted to the actual needs and to the amount of work the modern world implies. It also implies a way of incorporating AI in our lives, making sure to simplify it (Alfredo et al., 2024), making us switch from studying about AI to studying with the help of AI (Son, Ružić & Philpott, 2023 *apud* Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2020). Many of these methods have been, perhaps, replicated from previous stages in which students had to use a combination

of computer-based and human-based communication in tasks such as the ones proposed by Bañados (2006), where students have to work in groups in order to solve a computer-based activity. This method can be easily replicated in an AI-based environment, where students can test their decision-making capabilities individually (non-assisted by an AI) vs. in group (+ AI-assisted).

Alongside originality, Ondrusek (2012, p. 179 *apud* Bynum & Ferguson, 1981; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Koncel & Carney, 1992; Jones et al., 1995; Caffarella & Bennett, 1997; Shawn, 1999; Rose & McClafferty, 2001; Linder, Murphy, Wingenbach & Kelsey, 2004; Lavell & Bushrow, 2007) summarised that a few other important skills and competences needed in academic writing would be (i) organization, (ii) argument, (iii) grammar, (iv) conceptualization, (v) accuracy and expression, (vi) sources, and (vii) critique, among others. Another key component is the ‘common sense’ and the way in which we build our arguments in accordance with the actual state of affair in the world, in accordance with history and other beliefs. Johnson, Insley, Motwani & Zbib (1993) considered that even though students are writing in a business-related environment or a technical one, the information still needs to be processed through the personal critical filter and question the validity of the information, i.e. it makes sense. This represents a switch from the so-called obsession on form (Hillocks, Jr., 2005) to considering the content and all the related issues (political, ideological, religious etc. concerns), making a shift from what Hutton & Gibson (2019, p. 94) call in one of their subchapters “You Have to Write Like That” to a more creative way in writing, a skill that should not be extremely rigid, making students more prone to such activities. Educators must make students aware of the importance of writing for developing related skills, not only to write for the sake of writing, and train their ‘translation maturity’ (O’Rourke, Connelly & Barnett, 2018, p. 17), in other words, to gradually invest in including real issues in their statements, not only to write to fulfill a task or complete an assignment. All these together could be separated into three categories through which we can operate when we talk about teaching academic writing, and those are (i) micro level (it incorporates grammar and style), (ii) meso level (it includes structural coherence and organization), and (iii) macro level (it refers to accuracy and expression i.e. the final ‘look’ of the text that reflects the type of writing we want to transmit).

2. Areas of improvement

Writing can be easily categorized as a time-consuming activity, be it an in-class or at-home assignment. It often includes more steps, the so-called pedagogical structures, of pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing, but they are not always included in each and every activity or while preparing for a competence exam. The focus in this paper is more towards pre-writing and while-writing activities, as the post-writing could be the subject of discussion in relation to speaking as well. If we are to consider the main concepts listed

above, they can be further summarised in these three core areas of improvement, namely: (i) micro level, (ii) meso level, and (iii) macro level.

2.1. Grammar and style

At the micro level, we can mostly consider the grammatical structures and style. As grammar plays a crucial role in writing, we have to make sure that students consider practicing it individually, for diverse topics, before having an actual draft of their essay. Even though essay writing usually implies a set of guidelines to be considered, they do not necessarily propose separate classes for grammatical discussion only. It is educators' duty to make sure students are constantly improving grammar in order to build trustworthy arguments, strong evidence, and clear style of writing. At the same time, the style of writing is also important as it mostly dictates the way in which the text can be interpreted by the readers. One common misconception is that using a formal counterpart of linking words, verbs or nouns is enough to have a formal piece of writing, but it is usually neglected the way in which we integrate those formal words within the overall syntactic structure of the paragraphs.

2.2. Paragraphs

Usually, the meso level implies structural coherence and organization. It refers to the way in which we build paragraphs, the flow of argumentation, the use of connectors, and the overall coherence of the text. This level is usually overlooked as we lack structural awareness. It is not enough to brainstorm ideas and put them in a draft, but students have to be aware of the fact that the meso level is the basic foundation of their essays in terms of argumentation.

2.3. Purpose

Lastly, the macro level refers to the sole purpose of the text as we see it as a whole. In this area, we must pay closer attention to the finest details that can make the difference between a research type of text and an argumentative one, for example. Students must understand the difference between different types of writing, based on the requirements they meet throughout different classes.

2.4. Overcoming the problem

As we might have identified a series of issues when it comes to academic writing, the point is to address the root cause and overcome it. In the digital age, solutions can be diverse, starting with traditional methods such as task-based or project-based learning, but we can also adapt to the fast-paced learning style of our students and include AI-based learning methods in our classes. For that, some examples of applications or websites (not all of them AI-based) that might show results are included in the following list: ChatGPT

(preferably 4.0 and above), Elicit, Grammarly, Hemingway Editor, Linguix, DeepL Write, ProWritingAid, Writefull, Jasper AI, QuillBot, Wordtune, Connected Papers, Research Rabbit, Scholarcy, Scite, iThenticate. As this domain is constantly evolving, the list is open to more applications and websites (see Vera, 2023) that might be useful in the long run.

An important aspect in relation to using AI-based models is the prompting system. The idea of choosing the right prompts is not an emerging concept. It has its roots in teaching and learning in a traditional ‘pen and paper’ manner as well, where students were advised to build their own prompting system when summarizing or analysing a text in order to write a text of one’s own: writing prompts before reading, while reading and post-reading (Pritchard, 1993). This idea has been adapted to the digital age as writing prompts to any LLM (Large Language Model) is crucial in making the difference between felicitous results or not.

3. Applying methods

Writing represents a complex process that implies reading (pre-writing activities), researching the issue, understanding it, mapping it in a comprehensible manner, and then putting it into words. For that, it implies different levels of operation, starting from the base of grammatical structures, spelling of the words, vocabulary choice, and formal style at the micro level of the text. Further, the paragraphs should follow a certain logical structure, making sure students train their reasoning abilities and understanding the flow of their argumentation. For this reason, we can talk about the meso level, where the focus is on structural coherence, text organization, but in a close relation to the micro level, where we integrate the connectors accordingly. Lastly, the macro level gives the final touch of the text, where we formulate its main purpose, the sections we want to integrate in the text. At the same time, it comes with a certain degree of originality building as we are trying to define the theme in such a way that has not been researched before or has not been debated before. At this level, it is worth noting that students usually get the ‘text maturity’ they need in order to convey research questions, to propose debate themes, and to bring evidence into discussion.

While applying these methods to either in-class or at-home assignments, educators should always prioritize the aspects related to originality and critical thinking. They can closely manage how students use any AI tool in order to complete a task by paying closer attention to the three levels of discussion mentioned above, the familiarity of the students towards the topics, and certain tasks usually performed before, while or after the writing process through research or critical inquiries on the essay or the text written by the students. Ideally, students can track these indices in the following manner: (i) before writing – if they use AI, to keep track of their prompting system and the suggestions they accepted or rejected; (ii) while writing – to adapt a concept to a new situation, showing their reasoning system or having an interdisciplinary approach; (iii) after writing – to have oral presentations based on their argumentation, also bringing new examples into account as

well as spontaneously argue on their topic. Even though, at first, there might be some communication anxiety regarding the post-writing tasks, however, they are relevant for maintaining a critical environment and an originality within their reasoning system.

3.1. Micro level

One of the main issues at the micro level has to do with the lack of grammatical knowledge or even practice. The most common mistakes I have observed during classes are the spelling ones, the use of tenses or the use of double subjects/ lack of pronominal subjects where needed. Even though the message is easily perceived by English speakers (native or non-native), for academic writing, there is indeed a need of refining grammatical mistakes. In order to make sure that the message we want to transmit is clear and there is no place for misinterpretation, educators should enhance the grammatical structures in such a way it does not become a standard text only but a flexible way of transmitting a message. For that, some tools suitable for this aspect can be found in Grammarly, Linguix or Writefull. Further on, some other tools might focus more on the style of writing, suggesting particular paraphrases and refinements as to have a formal text or at least neutral style, adapting it to the academic requirements mentioned. A list could consist of ProWritingAid and DeepL Write; however, this kind of task is also available in ChatGPT or any other LLM (for example, Grok, Claude, Perplexity, Jenni, LanguagePro or Gemini).

3.2. Meso level

At this point, the focus is on organizing the text in a coherent manner, working on the internal structure of the paragraphs but also extending to the overall flow. In this section, the general tendency is not to have one whole paragraph that incorporates all the main aspects of the essay/ text, but there is still needed to ensure a series of refinements (what to properly include in each paragraph, what connectors to use in accordance with the purpose of the paragraph, the argumentation flow etc.). For all of these, we can consider a series of applications such as Jasper AI, ChatGPT, QuillBot, Wordtune or Connected Papers. They mostly include restructuring information based on a prompt or a given text. This encourages the idea of originality on a topic that students have already chosen and it can be easily controlled by teachers/ professors by checking the amount of details included in the text. In general, the AI-based tools might have a tendency of overseeing some aspects or overgeneralizing them.

3.3. Macro level

The macro level usually comes as a final touch even though it is an aspect that should be considered from the beginning of the writing process. As it covers the main purpose of the text and it dictates the overall structure in accordance with its objective, the macro level can still make the difference between a research type of text, a descriptive one,

an argumentative one and so on. At this point, we can also tackle the plagiarism aspects, the bibliographical accuracy, and interdisciplinary issues. The main applications in this section are Elicit and Scholarey (for summaries), Research Rabbit (for making interdisciplinary connections), Scite and iThenticate (for references and plagiarism).

4. Limitations

Working with AI comes with a series of limitations of different kinds, such as privacy policy of data, leading to plagiarism, creating false expectations or biasing responses based on the Natural Language Processing (NLP) counterpart of these applications or websites.

The digital age poses a series of challenges when it comes to privacy data. They are often exposed through iterative interactions, showing certain predilections of the user, things that might not be wanted by everyone using those interfaces. Moreover, the biased responses could also lead to a huge doctrinal impact, making it harder to obtain a neutral response while using the AI tool, especially when generating ideas. Of course, it is limited when it comes to refinements, but there are still cases when students might generate texts and use them for studying and learning.

More than that, the false expectations could be easily built while using LLMs as they might seem to be ‘perfect’ in the eye of the user, but they are constantly evolving, adding new capabilities and the analyses are always limited to the present time. In the future, most probably advanced features will be added to them and it will be impossible to set a limit.

Lastly, the limitations could also easily lead to plagiarism. Unfortunately, there are still many students who lack the necessary knowledge of avoiding plagiarism, the information that could pass as general knowledge and not marked as cited information or simply the proper way of marking the in-text citation or the references list. Luckily, once with the AI, more and more guidelines are available to the large public, but it is still educators’ duty to closely monitor the writing process in schools and universities.

5. Conclusions

Summing everything up, it can be mentioned that the age of AI is bringing more and more challenges to the educational system, incorporating concepts such as originality in writing, the use of critical thinking while shaping an opinion or applying the ethical considerations of plagiarism as the AI interactions might make it difficult to distinguish between AI-written or non-AI written texts, an example being proposed by Dehouche (2021) with the use of GPT-3.

To do so, educators should not ban the use of AI in classes but to make students understand how LLMs work and how to responsibly use them while completing their tasks,

irrespective of the skill they want to enhance. As long as the students are capable of critically arguing their prompting system choice, their responses to the AI in the whole process of researching for the theme, and their own implication in the system, the interface between artificial and human intelligence is a safe place. As such, the suggestions we could address refer to three levels of actions, namely (i) the micro level for grammar and structure; (ii) the meso level for paragraphs; and (iii) the meso level for overall coherence.

6. Further inquiries

The further research section could include a series of proposals for the post-writing side of the process, especially for young learners or young adult learners. We can propose a series of follow-up tasks such as transforming the written text (depending on its type, but even the research texts can benefit from this type of transformation, especially for making it a more accessible way of studying the issue) into a story in pictures or any other visual representation with the help of AI, podcasts (they can be generated with the use of AI), games or songs. The proposal is not an emergent one as it has been discussed even since the 1985 by Balajthy as a conceptualization in accordance with the possibilities of the time (for example, Eliza). Another realisation could be through the use of art, proposed by Davidson & Jones (2024). However, further on, these ideas can be easily tested in a group project throughout the semester, helping students get familiar with the topic and AI usage as well.

On another light, an obvious follow-up activity would be to test the students' performance on online AI-based environment vs. a face-to-face non-AI-based environment adapting to Frantzen's methodology (2014) and updating to the current trends in AI. At the same time, it can be widely spread across students that we might not need to learn a new language in the digital age. For that, a further section can be based on Godwin-Jones' perspective (2019).

Lastly, another limitation would be in regard to the educational system. A proposal comes from Ministry of National Education [MONE] (2024) in Turkey and one of the findings refer to a perspective that some teachers might have in relation to it, namely a possible rigidity the educational system might acquire if constant AI exposure is considered. It is indeed an important aspect to be considered, for which we can consider a local replica of the above-mentioned study, applying the questionnaire to Romanian students and teacher alike.

References

- Alfredo, R., Echeverria, V., Jin, Y., Yan, L., Swiecki, Z., Gašević, D. & Martinez-Maldonado, R. (2024). Human-centered learning analytics and AI in education: A systematic literature review. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* 6.
- Balajthy, E. (1985). Artificial Intelligence and the Teaching of reading and Writing by Computers. *Journal of Reading* 29(1), 23-32

- Bañados, E. (2006). A Blended-learning Pedagogical Model for Teaching and Learning EFL Successfully Through an Online Interactive Multimedia Environment. *CALICO Journal* 23(3), *Special Issue: What does it take to teach online? Towards a Pedagogy for Online Teaching and Learning*, 533-550.
- Colpaert, J. (2006). Pedagogy-Driven Design for Online Teaching and Learning. *CALICO Journal* 23(3), *Special Issue: What does it take to teach online? Towards a Pedagogy for Online Teaching and Learning*, 477-497.
- Davidson, M. & Jones K. A. Q. (2024). "Artistic Intelligence": Engaging English Learners by Using Art and AI in Teaching Descriptive Writing. *TESOL Writing Papers Series* 22, 106-111.
- Dehouche, N. (2021). Plagiarism in the age of massive Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPT-3). *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics* 21, 17-23.
- Frantzen, D. (2014). Is Technology a One-Size-Fits-All Solution to Improving Student Performance? A Comparison of Online, Hybrid and Face-to-Face Courses. *Journal of Public Affairs Education* 20(4), 565-578.
- Godwin-Jones, R. (2019). In a World of SMART Technology, Why Learn Another Language?. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 22(2), 4-13.
- Hillocks, Jr., G. (2005). At Last: The Focus on Form vs. Content in Teaching Writing. *Research in the Teaching of English* 40(2), 238-248.
- Hutton, L. & Gibson, G. (2019). "Kinds of Writing": Student Conceptions of Academic and Creative Forms of Writing Development". In Gere (Ed.), *Developing Writers in Higher Education. A Longitudinal Study* (pp. 89-112). University of Michigan Press.
- Johnson, J. L., Insley, R., Motwani, J., & Zbib, I. (1993). Writing Performance and Reasoning in Business Education?. *Journal of Business Ethics* 12(5), 397-406.
- Ministry of National Education. (2024). *Teachers' perspectives on artificial intelligence in education*. Eskisehir: Turkey: Derya Ugyun.
- O'Rourke, L., Connelly, V. & Barnett, A. (2018). Understanding Writing Difficulties through a Model of the Cognitive Processes Involved in Writing. In Miller, McCardle & Connelly (Eds.), *Writing Development in Struggling Learners. Understanding the Needs of Writers across the Lifecourse* (pp. 11-28), Brill.
- Ondrusek, L. A. (2012). What the Research Reveals about Graduate Students' Writing Skills: A Literature Review. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 53(3), 176-188.
- Pritchard, R. J. (1993). Developing Writing Prompts for Reading Response and Analysis. *The English Journal* 82(3), pp. 24-32.
- Son, J-B., Ružić, N. K. & Philpott, A. (2023). Artificial intelligence technologies and applications for language learning and teaching. *Journal of China Computer-Assisted Language Learning*, 5(1), 94-112.
- Vera, F. (2023). Integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the EFL Classroom: Benefits and Challenges. *Revista Electronica Transformar* 4(2), 66-77.

PhD student Nicoleta Manlup. She is a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Linguistic and Literary Studies within the Faculty of Letters of Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Her main areas of interest are generative grammar and lexical semantics. (nicoleta.manlup@ubbcluj.ro)