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Augmentation, Not Replacement: Defining the Role of AI in Student Writing

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ABSTRACT

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education raises concerns regarding academic integrity, student skill atrophy, and equity. This academic essay proposes a pedagogical policy restricting AI use to initial brainstorming and planning, requiring final drafts to be human-authored. By positioning AI as a conceptual catalyst, this framework mitigates cognitive anchoring and shallow engagement. Operationalizing this framework requires shifting to process-oriented assessments, such as multi-stage portfolios featuring AI outlines, human-authored iterations, and reflective transparency logs. Furthermore, AI can serve as an educational equalizer for second-language learners and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, provided institutions ensure universal access to high-quality tools. Ultimately, this approach keeps students at the center of the creative process, transforming AI into a tool for scaffolded critical thinking. Future longitudinal research may evaluate the long-term cognitive impacts of this collaborative model.

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence has become a growing concern in education, and its presence is everywhere as students begin to use it for a variety of tasks, from brainstorming ideas to correcting grammar. However, teachers become apprehensive as they fear that students may not develop critical thinking or writing skills without assistance. We propose that schools allow students to use AI for initial brainstorming and planning, but require them to write the final drafts. This approach is equitable and fosters creativity without compromising academic integrity or skill development.

It is evident that AI can be most helpful in the initial stages of an assignment. Many students simply cannot get started, whether it's structuring thoughts or selecting a topic. From my reading, tools such as generative AI provide topic or outline suggestions that foster deeper thinking (Kasneci et al., 2023). For example, if a student is interested in climate change, AI can provide background information and potential areas of focus, allowing them to refine their inquiry. Its purpose is not to do the work, but to foster confidence and engagement with the subject. This encouragement is essential for preventing writer's block and maintaining engagement.

However, implementing a policy that permits AI only for brainstorming requires a shift in assessment practices. A significant challenge in AI-integrated classrooms is verifying whether a student truly authored the final submission. To address this, educators can adopt a process-oriented assessment approach, requiring students to submit portfolios that include initial AI-generated outlines, subsequent human-authored drafts, and reflective logs (Kadwa, 2025; Singh et al., 2026). These reflective logs act as "transparency reports" in which students explain why they accepted or rejected specific AI suggestions, thereby making their critical thinking visible to evaluators (Singh et al., 2026). Such an approach transforms assessment from a focus on the final product to an evaluation of the writing process itself.

A related concern is "cognitive anchoring," in which students may accept AI-generated ideas without sufficient critical engagement, potentially diminishing originality. Studies indicate that students often engage in shallow agreement with AI suggestions when they lack strong domain knowledge (Lee et al., 2023). To mitigate this, assignments can be structured around a four-stage learner-AI collaborative model (Choi, 2026). In this framework, the AI-generated outline serves only as a first stage; students must then reorganize, refine, and provide original evidence for each point. This ensures that the student remains the "driver" of the creative process, using AI as a sounding board rather than a primary source of thought (Escalante et al., 2023). Consequently, the risk of anchoring is reduced without abandoning the benefits of AI-assisted planning.

Beyond pedagogy, the equity argument also deserves careful attention. The digital divide remains a critical factor in debates over AI use in higher education. While some argue that AI tools could widen the gap between students who can afford premium versions and those who cannot, others highlight AI's potential as an "equalizer." For second-language learners, generative AI provides essential scaffolded linguistic support, helping them overcome the initial barrier of a blank page during brainstorming (Singh et al., 2026). However, institutions must ensure universal access to high-quality AI tools to prevent new forms of educational inequality (Eden et al., 2024; Familoni & Onyebuchi, 2024). By formalizing AI use for brainstorming, schools can teach all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, how to use these tools ethically and effectively.

Nevertheless, students still need to develop their own writing habits. Writing has been cited as an effective way to learn grammar and structure and even to develop critical thinking (Graham & Perin, 2007). Children may lose the motivation to improve their ideas if AI completes the entire task. It is important that individuals communicate clearly in examinations or professional settings without

relying on automated tools. It is prudent to maintain these skills for future real-world situations, fostering self-reliance. The distinction between AI as a tool for "augmentation" versus "replacement" is therefore fundamental to academic integrity. Brainstorming and outlining are classified as augmentation because they support the human writer's agency and help organize complex thoughts (Jensen et al., 2024). In contrast, using AI to generate full paragraphs or final drafts without significant human revision constitutes a replacement of the fundamental skill of writing. Maintaining this boundary ensures that the act of "meaning-making" and synthesis remains a human endeavor, thereby preserving the educational objectives of critical writing (Barrett & Pack, 2023; Jensen et al., 2024).

AI will be integral to future employment and higher education, so institutions cannot simply ignore it. Research indicates that it integrates quickly into professional and daily life contexts (Holmes & Miao, 2023; Holmes et al., 2019). It is an outdated notion to completely prohibit its use, as if students would not learn to utilize technology effectively otherwise. It is better to teach the use of AI to support thinking rather than replace it, particularly during brainstorming or feedback (Kasneci et al., 2023). In this way, students will also understand its limitations and develop ethical engagement with it.

Lastly, the future of academic writing lies not in prohibition but in controlled and transparent integration. Credible assessment now requires a move toward transparent draft-and-revise cycles where the evolution of a student's ideas is documented from inception to completion (Singh et al., 2026). By mandating disclosure of AI assistance during the brainstorming phase and emphasizing human-led development of those ideas, educators can foster responsible digital citizenship (Kadwa, 2025). This approach reduces creative blocks and boosts creativity while maintaining honesty and skill development. Some may say it is still difficult to implement, but it is paramount to prepare for the evolving role of technology. By combining technological support with independent learning, schools can maintain both innovation and educational integrity.

2. Conclusion

Integrating generative AI into higher education requires shifting from prohibition to structured collaboration. Restricting AI to the initial brainstorming stage mitigates the risks of cognitive anchoring and skill atrophy, keeping the student firmly in the driver's seat. When paired with process-oriented assessments and universal tool access, this approach preserves academic integrity, safeguards equity for diverse learners, and transforms AI into a catalyst for genuine critical thinking rather than a replacement for it. To operationalize this framework, institutions may adopt process-oriented grading by requiring students to submit multi-stage portfolios, including the initial AI outline, subsequent human drafts, and a reflective transparency log, while explicitly teaching collaborative frameworks to prevent cognitive anchoring. Furthermore, universities may provide institutional access to high-quality AI tools to ensure equity for second-language and low-income learners, supported by formalized syllabus guidelines that clearly define the acceptable boundaries for AI-assisted ideation. Finally, future researchers may conduct empirical, longitudinal studies to measure the long-term impact of this collaborative model on students' actual critical thinking development, while also investigating the psychological factors that cause students to accept or reject specific AI suggestions during the writing process.

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