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# Understanding University Students' Use of ChatGPT in the English Writing Process: A Qualitative Inquiry

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to investigate how university students use ChatGPT throughout the English writing process and how AI-assisted interaction influences their writing revisions. Using a qualitative inquiry, the study involved 30 university students who had used ChatGPT for English writing tasks at least three times. Data were collected asynchronously through pre- and post-ChatGPT writing drafts, structured reflection journals, prompt logs, and written follow-up responses from selected participants, and were analyzed thematically with triangulation to enhance trustworthiness. The findings revealed that students mainly used ChatGPT during the revising and editing stages rather than for idea generation. They engaged critically with AI-generated suggestions by selectively accepting or modifying them to preserve their own voice, examples, and contextual relevance. Draft comparisons showed an average increase of 14.3% in essay length, along with more developed sentences and conclusions, reflecting improvements in grammar, vocabulary, and organization. These findings suggest that ChatGPT functions as a supportive revision tool rather than a replacement for students' writing and provide implications for integrating generative AI into English writing instruction while promoting AI literacy and responsible AI use in higher education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence has rapidly transformed many aspects of higher education, particularly the way students develop academic writing skills. Among recent technological innovations, generative AI tools such as ChatGPT have become widely adopted because they assist users in generating ideas, organizing content, revising drafts, paraphrasing, and correcting grammar with immediate feedback (Kasneci et al., 2023; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2023). This development is important because academic writing remains one of the essential competencies

for university students, influencing learning outcomes, communication, and future professional performance. As digital technologies become embedded in educational practices, students increasingly combine their own knowledge with AI-generated assistance to complete writing tasks (Li et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). Consequently, understanding how students interact with ChatGPT during writing is important not only for improving writing instruction but also for ensuring that generative AI is integrated into higher education in a responsible, ethical, and pedagogically meaningful manner.

The increasing use of ChatGPT also reflects broader societal changes in how knowledge is produced and communicated in the digital era. Rather than functioning solely as an information retrieval tool, generative AI now acts as an interactive writing assistant capable of supporting planning, drafting, revising, and editing academic texts (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2023). Such capabilities provide opportunities to reduce linguistic barriers, particularly for students who write in English as an additional language, while simultaneously encouraging greater confidence in expressing academic ideas (Selim, 2024; Zou & Huang, 2023). However, these advantages are accompanied by concerns regarding factual inaccuracies, overreliance on AI-generated content, academic integrity, and the possible decline of independent writing ability (Malik et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). Therefore, society and educational institutions require empirical evidence explaining how students actually use ChatGPT so that policies and instructional practices can maximize its educational benefits while minimizing potential risks (Agus et al., 2025).

Despite its educational potential, the growing integration of ChatGPT into academic writing has introduced several challenges that justify further investigation. Existing discussions frequently focus on whether students should or should not use generative AI, whereas considerably less attention has been devoted to understanding how the technology is incorporated into the writing process itself (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023; Ravšelj et al., 2025). This issue is significant because writing is not a single activity but an iterative process involving planning, drafting, revising, editing, and reflection, with each stage requiring different cognitive strategies. Without understanding how ChatGPT supports or influences these stages, educators may struggle to develop appropriate instructional approaches and assessment policies (Lasut & Neman, 2025). Consequently, the central problem extends beyond AI adoption itself to the absence of detailed evidence regarding students' actual interactions with ChatGPT throughout the English writing process and how those interactions shape writing decisions and textual development.

This problem is increasingly reflected in everyday educational practice, where many university students rely on ChatGPT as a regular companion during English writing tasks. Students frequently consult the tool to improve grammar, expand vocabulary, reorganize paragraphs, generate alternative expressions, or strengthen the coherence of their essays before submission (Jacob et al., 2023;

Zhao et al., 2024). At the same time, their interactions with ChatGPT are often selective rather than automatic, as students may accept, revise, or reject AI-generated suggestions according to their own intentions and contextual needs (Gultom et al., 2024). These observable practices demonstrate that ChatGPT has become embedded within the writing process rather than functioning merely as an external editing application. Nevertheless, the complexity of these interactions remains insufficiently documented through qualitative evidence, highlighting the need to investigate authentic writing artifacts, prompt logs, and student reflections to better understand how AI-assisted writing actually occurs.

Previous studies have provided valuable insights into the educational use of ChatGPT, particularly regarding students' perceptions, acceptance, and perceived usefulness of the technology. Many researchers report that university students generally view ChatGPT as an effective tool for improving writing quality, increasing learning efficiency, and reducing the difficulty of composing academic texts in English (Al-Alami, 2024; Ravšelj et al., 2025). Other studies have highlighted its potential to support language learning by facilitating idea generation, vocabulary development, grammar correction, and organizational improvement (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2023; Selim, 2024). Although these findings demonstrate the educational value of generative AI, they are predominantly based on surveys, questionnaires, or self-reported experiences. Consequently, they provide only limited understanding of how ChatGPT is actually used throughout the writing process and how students make decisions when interacting with AI-generated suggestions during authentic writing activities.

A smaller number of qualitative studies have attempted to explore students' experiences with ChatGPT in academic writing, yet important gaps remain. Existing qualitative investigations often rely on interviews or reflective narratives without systematically examining the relationship between students' prompts, writing revisions, and the textual changes that occur across multiple drafts (Gultom et al., 2024; Jacob et al., 2023). Moreover, relatively few studies triangulate several forms of qualitative evidence to capture the complexity of AI-assisted writing practices (Chanpradit, 2025; Sanz-Tejeda et al., 2025). As a result, there is still insufficient evidence explaining how students negotiate AI-generated suggestions, preserve their own authorial voice, and integrate ChatGPT into different stages of the English writing process. Addressing this gap is essential because process-oriented evidence can provide a more comprehensive understanding of responsible AI use than studies focusing solely on perceptions or final writing products.

The novelty of this study lies in its process-oriented qualitative approach to examining ChatGPT-assisted English writing. Rather than evaluating students' attitudes or measuring writing performance through numerical outcomes alone, the study investigates how writing develops through

continuous interaction between students and generative AI. It integrates multiple sources of qualitative evidence, including writing drafts, prompt logs, reflective journals, and written follow-up responses, to reconstruct the sequence of students' writing decisions from drafting to revision. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of AI-assisted writing by revealing not only the outcomes of ChatGPT use but also the reasoning underlying students' acceptance, modification, or rejection of AI-generated suggestions. Such evidence offers a richer explanation of how generative AI functions as a writing companion while preserving students' agency throughout the composing process.

Based on the issues identified above, the present study addresses the need to understand how university students actually use ChatGPT during the English writing process. The study is guided by the assumption that students are active decision makers rather than passive recipients of AI-generated content. Their interactions with ChatGPT are expected to vary across different stages of writing, reflecting individual purposes, writing strategies, and judgments regarding the appropriateness of AI suggestions. By examining authentic writing artifacts together with students' reflections and prompt histories, this study seeks to explain the processes underlying AI-assisted writing in greater depth. Accordingly, the research is guided by the following question: How do university students use ChatGPT in the English writing process? The objective of the study is to investigate how university students use ChatGPT in the English writing process, thereby providing evidence to inform English writing pedagogy and the responsible integration of generative AI in higher education.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative inquiry design to explore how university students used ChatGPT throughout the English writing process. Qualitative inquiry was selected because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, writing practices, and decision-making in depth rather than to measure relationships statistically or generalize findings to a larger population (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2023; Shaheen et al., 2023). In this approach, the researcher served as the primary research instrument responsible for collecting, organizing, interpreting, and drawing meaning from the data (Jellema et al., 2023; Lim, 2025). The study was conducted entirely online because ChatGPT itself is accessed digitally, allowing participants to complete all research activities asynchronously without geographical constraints. This setting reflected the authentic environment in which students normally use ChatGPT for English

writing tasks and enabled flexible participation while ensuring that the collected data represented naturally occurring writing practices within participants' everyday academic activities.

Participants consisted of 30 university students selected through purposive sampling because they had used ChatGPT at least three times for English writing tasks, ensuring that each participant possessed sufficient experience to provide meaningful information relevant to the research objective. From these participants, eight students representing different study programs and varying levels of ChatGPT use were selected to provide richer explanations through written follow-up responses. Data were collected asynchronously from four complementary sources to strengthen the credibility of the findings through triangulation. The first source comprised pre- and post-ChatGPT writing drafts used to identify textual revisions. The second consisted of structured reflection journals distributed through Google Forms. The third included prompt logs documenting participants' interactions with ChatGPT and their responses to AI-generated suggestions. The fourth source was written follow-up questions completed by the selected participants to clarify their writing decisions and experiences (Casal & Kessler, 2023).

Data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis process involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Bingham, 2023; Monaro et al., 2022). During the data condensation stage, information obtained from reflection journals, prompt logs, writing drafts, and follow-up responses was organized, coded, and reduced to focus on patterns relevant to students' use of ChatGPT in the English writing process. The condensed data were subsequently presented through thematic categories and draft comparisons, including changes in word count, sentence count, and average sentence length to illustrate the influence of ChatGPT-assisted revision. Finally, conclusions were drawn by comparing themes across participants and continuously verified through cross-checking among the four data sources to ensure consistency and credibility. Trustworthiness was strengthened through methodological triangulation and an audit trail documenting coding decisions and analytical procedures throughout the research process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

### Overview of Participants and Data

This study involved 30 university students from five study programs (Management, Accounting, Communication Science, Public Administration, and English Education) who had used ChatGPT at least three times for English writing tasks. Twelve participants (40%) reported using ChatGPT between six

and ten times, ten participants (33%) reported using it three to five times, and eight participants (27%) had used ChatGPT more than ten times before participating in this study. From these 30 participants, eight were purposively selected to complete written follow-up responses representing variation in study program and level of ChatGPT experience. The findings reported in this section are based on the analysis of reflection journals, prompt logs, pre- and post-ChatGPT writing drafts, and written follow-up responses.

### Quantitative Findings: Participants' Perceptions of ChatGPT Use

The reflection journal included four Likert-scale statements (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) measuring participants' perceptions of ChatGPT use in English writing tasks. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Likert-Scale Items (n = 30)**

| Item | Statement | M | SD | Min–Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q3 | ChatGPT helped me generate ideas more easily | 4.20 | 0.61 | 3–5 |
| Q4 | ChatGPT helped me express ideas in English more confidently | 4.30 | 0.60 | 3–5 |
| Q5 | ChatGPT reduced my own thinking process | 2.40 | 0.56 | 2–4 |
| Q9 | I could tell my own writing style apart from ChatGPT-influenced parts | 4.00 | 0.59 | 3–5 |

Table 1 shows that the highest mean score was obtained for the statement that ChatGPT helped participants express ideas in English more confidently (M = 4.30), followed by helping them generate ideas more easily (M = 4.20). The lowest mean score was found for the statement indicating that ChatGPT reduced participants' own thinking process (M = 2.40). Participants also reported that they were generally able to distinguish their own writing style from the parts influenced by ChatGPT (M = 4.00).

Further analysis according to previous ChatGPT experience showed that participants who had used ChatGPT more than ten times reported the highest mean scores for idea generation (M = 4.88) and confidence in expressing ideas (M = 4.88), while recording the lowest mean score for the statement regarding reduced independent thinking (M = 2.00).

### Qualitative Findings: Patterns of ChatGPT Use in the Writing Process

The thematic analysis of reflection journals, prompt logs, and written follow-up responses identified five recurring patterns describing how university students used ChatGPT throughout the English writing process. Prompt log data indicated that ChatGPT was most frequently used during the revising stage (23 of 30 entries), followed by editing or proofreading (20 entries), drafting (18 entries), and planning or brainstorming (11 entries). Reflection journals further showed that grammar improvement was mentioned by all participants, followed

by improving organization and clarity (25 participants) and vocabulary enhancement (16 participants). Participants reported using ChatGPT primarily to improve existing drafts rather than to generate ideas from the beginning.

Analysis of prompt logs also showed that 15 of the 30 recorded interactions (50%) resulted in full acceptance of ChatGPT suggestions, whereas 13 interactions (43%) were partially modified and two interactions (7%) were rejected. When suggestions were modified or rejected, participants most frequently reported preserving personal examples or experiences and simplifying vocabulary or sentence structure to suit their own writing preferences and contexts.

Reflection journals and written follow-up responses further indicated that grammar correction and increased confidence in writing English were the most frequently reported benefits of ChatGPT use. Participants also mentioned time efficiency when revising their essays. At the same time, some participants reported concerns regarding unfamiliar or overly formal vocabulary, while others expressed concern about becoming overly dependent on ChatGPT during writing tasks.

Another recurring finding concerned participants' self-regulation strategies. Six of the eight participants completing the follow-up responses reported writing an initial draft independently before consulting ChatGPT and rereading the final version without AI assistance before submitting their assignments. This strategy appeared consistently across the follow-up responses and reflected participants' own approaches to managing ChatGPT use during the writing process.

**Triangulation of Findings**

Triangulation across reflection journals, prompt logs, written follow-up responses, and writing drafts showed consistent patterns across the four data sources. ChatGPT use was concentrated during the revising and editing stages rather than during planning or brainstorming. Participants generally accepted or modified ChatGPT suggestions instead of adopting them without revision. Concerns regarding excessive dependence appeared in both reflection journals and written follow-up responses. The independently drafting-first strategy identified in the follow-up responses was also consistent with the relatively low use of ChatGPT during the planning stage recorded in the prompt logs.

**Textual Evidence from Pre- and Post-ChatGPT Drafts**

To complement the qualitative findings, pre-ChatGPT and post-ChatGPT drafts from 31 essays were compared. Word count, sentence count, and average sentence length were calculated for each draft pair.

**Table 2. Draft-Level Comparison of Pre- and Post-ChatGPT Essays (n = 31)**

| Measure | Before | After | Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mean word count | 87.4 | 99.5 | +14.3% |
| Mean sentence length (words) | 12.7 | 16.4 | +29.1% |
| Essays with increased word count | – | – | 28/31 (90.3%) |

Table 2 shows that the average essay length increased from 87.4 words before ChatGPT-assisted revision to 99.5 words afterward, representing an average increase of 14.3%. Average sentence length also increased from 12.7 to 16.4 words, while 28 of the 31 essays (90.3%) showed an increase in total word count.

Comparison of the draft pairs further revealed three recurring textual changes. First, many informal expressions were replaced by more formal academic expressions. Second, simple sentences were combined into longer sentences using coordination and subordination. Third, concluding paragraphs became more elaborate by including additional explanations or supporting ideas. These textual changes were consistently observed across the majority of the revised essays.

**Summary of Findings in Relation to the Research Question**

Based on the combined analysis of reflection journals, prompt logs, written follow-up responses, and draft comparisons, university students primarily used ChatGPT as a supportive tool during the revising and editing stages of the English writing process. Participants selectively accepted, modified, or rejected ChatGPT suggestions according to their own writing intentions and contexts. Draft comparisons showed measurable changes in essay length, sentence complexity, and textual elaboration following ChatGPT-assisted revision. Overall, the findings indicate that participants integrated ChatGPT into their writing process while maintaining control over their own writing decisions.

**Discussion**

The findings demonstrate that university students primarily used ChatGPT during the revising and editing stages rather than for planning or generating ideas. This pattern suggests that participants regarded ChatGPT as a tool for refining existing drafts instead of replacing their own writing process. The finding aligns with Kasneci et al. (2023), who argue that generative AI is increasingly integrated into academic writing as a supportive technology for improving text quality, and with Li et al. (2024), who report that students commonly employ AI to strengthen language accuracy and coherence after developing their own ideas. Similarly, Zhao et al. (2024) found that ChatGPT was

frequently used to revise grammar, vocabulary, and organization instead of producing complete essays from the beginning. The present findings also support Ravšelj et al. (2025), who emphasized that students tend to perceive ChatGPT as an academic writing assistant rather than an author. From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the view that writing remains an iterative process in which digital tools function as scaffolding that supports revision while preserving learners' cognitive engagement.

Another important finding is that participants interacted critically with ChatGPT by selectively accepting, modifying, or rejecting its suggestions. Only half of the recorded interactions resulted in complete acceptance, while almost the same proportion involved revisions made by the students themselves to preserve their own voice, personal examples, or contextual relevance. This pattern supports the argument of Imran and Almusharraf (2023) that students do not necessarily become passive recipients of AI-generated content but often negotiate between machine-generated suggestions and their own intentions. Similar observations were reported by Jacob et al. (2023), who found that learners frequently evaluate AI-generated responses before incorporating them into their writing. The present findings extend those studies by providing direct evidence through prompt logs and writing artifacts that document how students make revision decisions throughout the writing process. This demonstrates that AI-assisted writing involves an active process of human judgment rather than simple dependence on automated text generation, thereby highlighting learners' agency during AI-supported writing activities.

Comparison of pre- and post-ChatGPT drafts further showed measurable improvements in essay length, sentence complexity, vocabulary choice, and conclusion development following AI-assisted revision. These textual changes correspond with participants' reflections that ChatGPT was mainly used to improve grammar, vocabulary, and organization instead of generating original ideas. Similar improvements have been reported by Michel-Villarreal et al. (2023), who found that generative AI supports students in producing clearer and more coherent academic texts. Likewise, Selim (2024) and Zou and Huang (2023) argue that AI-assisted feedback can reduce linguistic barriers for students writing in English as an additional language by facilitating more accurate expression of ideas. However, the relatively moderate increase in essay length observed in this study indicates that participants generally retained the structure and content of their original drafts while incorporating selected revisions. This finding suggests that ChatGPT primarily functioned as a language-support tool that enhanced textual quality without substantially replacing students' own authorship (Farrokhnia et al., 2024).

Participants also reported increased confidence and writing efficiency while simultaneously expressing concerns about excessive dependence and the possibility that AI-generated language might become overly formal or inconsistent with their personal writing style. These findings are consistent with Malik et al. (2024), who observed that students appreciate ChatGPT for improving productivity while remaining concerned about academic integrity and declining independent writing skills. Zhao et al. (2024) similarly reported that students recognize both the educational benefits and the limitations of generative AI, particularly regarding factual accuracy and overreliance. Ravšelj et al. (2025) likewise highlighted that students often perceive ChatGPT as beneficial when used responsibly but problematic when used without critical evaluation. Theoretically, these findings suggest that effective AI-assisted writing depends not only on technological capability but also on learners' metacognitive regulation and critical digital literacy (Meniado et al., 2024; Werdiningsih et al., 2024). Students who evaluate AI-generated suggestions before integrating them into their writing appear more likely to benefit from ChatGPT while maintaining ownership of their academic work.

The findings also have important practical implications for English language teaching in higher education. Rather than prohibiting ChatGPT, lecturers may consider integrating it into process-oriented writing instruction that emphasizes planning, drafting, revising, and reflection. Students should be encouraged to produce an initial draft independently before using ChatGPT to revise language accuracy, organization, or clarity, followed by critical evaluation of every AI-generated suggestion. Such instructional practices can promote responsible AI literacy while strengthening students' awareness of academic integrity and authorship. In addition, writing assessment may place greater emphasis on documenting the writing process through reflection journals, prompt logs, or draft comparisons rather than evaluating only the final product. These approaches allow educators to monitor how students interact with AI throughout writing activities and encourage meaningful engagement instead of uncritical acceptance of generated content.

This study offers several contributions to the growing literature on generative AI in language education. Previous studies have predominantly examined students' perceptions, acceptance, or general effectiveness of ChatGPT through surveys and quantitative approaches (Al-Alami, 2024; Ravšelj et al., 2025). In contrast, this study investigated the English writing process itself by combining writing artifacts, prompt logs, structured reflection journals, and written follow-up responses within a qualitative inquiry. This methodological combination provides richer evidence of how students actually interact with ChatGPT across different stages of writing and how those interactions influence

textual revision. The novelty of this study therefore lies in its process-oriented perspective, demonstrating that the educational value of ChatGPT depends not simply on whether students use the technology but on how they critically manage AI assistance while preserving their own ideas, writing voice, and decision-making throughout the English writing process.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that university students primarily used ChatGPT as a supportive tool for revising and editing English writing rather than as a replacement for independent thinking or idea generation. The most important finding is that students engaged critically with AI-generated suggestions by selectively accepting, modifying, or rejecting them according to their own intentions, writing style, and contextual needs, indicating that the educational value of ChatGPT depends on students' ability to regulate and evaluate AI assistance throughout the writing process. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on generative AI in language education by providing a process-oriented understanding of ChatGPT use through the integration of writing artifacts, prompt logs, reflection journals, and follow-up responses, thereby extending previous studies that have focused primarily on perceptions or learning outcomes. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its participants being drawn from a single university, the inclusion of follow-up responses from only eight participants, and the use of word count and sentence length as indicators of textual change. Future research is therefore encouraged to investigate AI-assisted writing across different institutional contexts, academic disciplines, and longer periods of observation while employing more comprehensive discourse and linguistic analyses to better understand how generative AI influences the development of academic writing.

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