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AI ABUSE BREAKS THE STRONG BELIEF IN THE POWER OF CRITICAL THINKING: THE PHENOMENON AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on students' critical thinking and ethical awareness in academic writing through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). The rapid adoption of AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quillbot has significantly transformed writing practices in higher education. While AI enhances efficiency, organization, and language accuracy, it also introduces serious concerns regarding overreliance, reduced cognitive engagement, and academic dishonesty. A total of selected studies published between 2023 and 2025 were systematically reviewed and analyzed using a theory-driven approach, incorporating Critical Thinking Theory, Cognitive Load Theory, and Bloom's Taxonomy. The findings reveal a paradoxical impact: AI facilitates writing performance but simultaneously weakens higher-order thinking skills, including analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Furthermore, ethical challenges such as plagiarism, lack of originality, and data privacy risks emerge as significant issues. This study concludes that AI abuse contributes to diminishing students' belief in their own critical thinking abilities. Therefore, higher education institutions must establish clear guidelines, promote AI literacy, and redesign assessment practices to ensure responsible AI integration.
Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Academic Writing, Critical Thinking, Ethics, Higher Education, SLR

1. INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence has increasingly become an integral component of modern educational technology and has moved beyond its initial skepticism to an active integration of the technology in the learning and teaching activities. Educators and education researchers have turned their perspective into a critical, yet curious standpoint, amid the growing interest and widespread adoption of AI (Belkina et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2025). The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly reshaped educational practices worldwide, particularly in higher education. Academic writing course receives particular attention as it is immediately affected by the advancement of this fast-growing technology, which eventually leads to a more critical impact on the research dissemination practices in academia (Al-Sofi, 2024; Baek et al., 2024; van Niekerk et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024). This is especially the case in the higher education context, given that many academic writers begin their comprehensive training in higher education. In universities and colleges, their writing skills are developed either from a course dedicated to academic writing, or to an extent, multiple other courses as higher education inherently incorporates academic writing in the learning activities, then this presents an opportunity for intervention, to prepare prospective researchers and writers with potential (Adriyanty et al., 2025)

Artificial intelligence is defined as computer systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, including reasoning, learning, and natural language processing (Russell & Norvig, 2021). In educational contexts, AI tools are increasingly used to assist students in academic writing, literature review preparation, and idea generation. AI-based technologies such as automated writing assistants, language correction tools, and generative text systems have become widely accessible to university students. These tools offer various advantages, including faster information retrieval, improved writing structure, and enhanced language accuracy. In Indonesia, the use of AI technologies among university students has increased dramatically in recent years. Studies have shown that AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, Quillbot, and Perplexity are widely used by students to assist their academic writing activities. For example, a study involving Indonesian university students identified at least nine different AI tools frequently used in writing tasks, including ChatGPT, Grammarly, Quillbot, Humata AI, and DeepL (Suryani & Fithriani, 2024). Another study examining students' perceptions of AI-assisted writing found that over 90% of students reported using ChatGPT to assist in completing academic assignments, particularly for generating ideas, improving grammar, and organizing essays (Purnomo & Andriani, 2024).

However, the rapid integration of AI into academic writing has also generated serious debates regarding its potential impact on students' intellectual development. While these technologies offer significant benefits in terms of efficiency and accessibility, scholars have raised concerns regarding the phenomenon of AI overreliance in academic learning. Research conducted in Indonesian universities indicates that AI tools are frequently used not only for language editing but also for generating ideas, refining prompts, and constructing arguments in academic writing (Agustin et al., 2025). A growing number of studies on the use of AI in academic writing, particularly generative AI, have addressed the many benefits and challenges of AI utilization for developing writers. Generative

AI has been reported to be valuable in idea-generation and brainstorming, streamlining the writing process, acting as research assistance, improving the tone, style, or quality of writing in general (Bedington et al., 2024; Jin et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2025; Salih et al., 2025; Khalifa & Albadawy, 2024), and even aspects less readily apparent to writing such as reducing cognitive load and anxiety (Liu et al., 2024; Mei et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024; Wang & Wang, 2025). With opportunities and benefits, however, concerns and criticisms emerge. Ethical issues like plagiarism and threats to academic integrity (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025; Eke, 2023), inaccuracy and unreliability (Altmae et al., 2023; Chan & Hu, 2023; Garg et al., 2024), bias, stereotyping, and inequity (Colby, 2025; Dang & Wang, 2024; Sun & Lan, 2025), as well as security, data privacy, and confidentiality (Chan & Hu, 2023;Kostopolus, 2025; Pretorius et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024) are often associated with the use of AI in academic writing. Beyond ethical issues, challenges related to overreliance and diminished critical thinking, creativity, and learning skills (Al-Sofi, 2024; Huang & Wu, 2025 Marzuki et al., 2023) are further causes for concern as they reflect the very opposite of what was initially expected from AI in learning academic writing.

These phenomena have created a new challenge for higher education institutions: students may gradually depend on AI-generated explanations rather than engaging in their own critical thinking processes. As noted by several scholars, the excessive reliance on AI tools in academic writing may reduce authenticity, creativity, and independent reasoning among students (Suwandi & Wahyuni, 2025). From a broader educational perspective, this trend raises fundamental questions about the role of technology in critical thinking development. According to Facione (2015), critical thinking is defined as *"purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference."* Critical thinking has long been considered a fundamental objective of higher education. Universities aim to develop graduates who can evaluate information critically, construct logical arguments, and solve complex problems, then these cognitive abilities are expected to be cultivated through academic activities such as thesis writing. According to Ennis (2011), critical thinking can be defined as *"reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do."* These definitions highlight that critical thinking involves both analytical reasoning and reflective judgment. Similarly, Brookfield (2012) emphasizes that critical thinking requires individuals to question assumptions, examine evidence, and consider alternative perspectives. These abilities are essential for academic research because scholars must evaluate existing knowledge before contributing new insights. Furthermore, from the perspective of Bloom's Taxonomy, higher education aims to develop higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. However, when AI systems generate structured explanations automatically, students may remain at lower cognitive levels such as remembering and understanding.

Furthermore, the crucial impact when students rely heavily on AI-generated content, the cognitive engagement required for critical thinking may diminish. This issue becomes particularly concerning during the thesis-writing process, which is intended to develop students' abilities to analyze literature, construct arguments, and interpret research findings independently. In Indonesia, anecdotal observations from lecturers and academic supervisors indicate that many students increasingly rely on AI tools to generate theoretical explanations, literature reviews, and even research arguments during thesis preparation. While AI tools may function as useful academic

assistants, their misuse may weaken students' confidence in their own intellectual abilities. Due to this problem, the more students use these tools, the bigger the risk that critical thinking, creativity and the ability to solve problems will be diminished [Zanetti, Margot, *et al.2019*]. Furthermore, AI-created content could destroy the principles of original thought and academic honesty through its unlimited capabilities in contract cheating, academic dishonesty and plagiarism [Mohammad Karimi, Ebrahim, 2023].

Therefore, the opportunities and limitations of AI use in academic writing must be considered in an academic setting. Both students and practitioners should be aware of the policy on AI integration in higher education, when they should reasonably use it, understand its limitations, avoid plagiarism, and ensure academic integrity to maintain and cultivate critical thinking. Moreover, there are serious ethical issues with the application of AI in EFL. AI systems are educated on datasets, t can contain biases that reinforce inequality or preconceptions in the classroom (Pikhart, Marcel et al., 2025; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2023). For instance, writing tools driven by AI may produce content that perpetuates negative cultural biases (Kohnke et al., 2023) or gender stereotypes (Javier & Moorhouse, 2023). Concerns regarding Cybersecurity challenges, privacy, and the exploitation of personal information are also raised by the fact that using AI tools entails the collection and processing of student data (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2024).

Related to those issues, there is a clear gap in studies on the ethics of using AI in the education sector. We explore what exists and address what does not exist. For Pedró et al. (2019), the major challenges are related to personalization, inclusion and equity, powered education, quality, and transparency. The issues of equity and personalization are detailed by Chine et al. (2022), namely in the case of experience learning gaps due to lack of access or economic disadvantages. On the other hand, Jiang and Pardos (2021) give special attention to fairness and bias in artificial intelligence and graduation prediction. Regarding ChatGPT specifically (Debby, 2023), it opens new difficulties of detecting and preventing academic dishonesty. An update of plagiarism detection tools and controlling cheating proctoring tools is necessary. The output from ChatGPT does not include proper referencing, while academic writing is expected to accurately include citations and references. ChatGPT has raised security and privacy issues, namely because there is no minimum age requirement to use ChatGPT. Also, it is not clear that personal data analysis is done in respect to GDPR (EU General Data Protection Regulation). In addition, copyright law generally applies to original works of authorship created by human authors, and not to works created by machines or algorithms. Artificial intelligence cannot receive congratulations or experience emotions in the same way that humans do. Yet, doesn't have feelings, so doesn't experience tiredness. However, like all technologies, smart digital devices bring unintended, collateral, and disproportionate effects. It is known that smartphones and laptops provide students with access to communication and information, but they also contribute to distraction, social conflict, bullying, and many other problems. Even more, emerging smart small wearable devices like smartwatches and hearables. How should educators respond when problems like these inevitably occur? (Krutka, Pleasants & Nichols, 2023).

To anticipate the severe risks of AI abuse in academic writing, academic practitioners should make a strong agreement on how to use AI wisely and to find out some legalities for its integration in

academic settings, particularly higher education. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to highlight the emerging concerns in the field of academic management in the face of artificial intelligence, and to frame the role of the teacher and the students in the analysis of this problem from an ethical point of view. It also considers the freedom or limitation of use by students and the care to be taken in academic writing.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as the primary research design to comprehensively investigate the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on academic writing, with a particular focus on students' critical thinking and ethical awareness in higher education. A systematic literature review is a structured, transparent, and replicable approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research evidence related to a specific research problem (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). Through this approach, the study systematically maps the current body of knowledge, identifies patterns, inconsistencies, and research gaps, and provides a critical synthesis of findings across multiple studies. In this case, the literature search was conducted using academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, and ERIC. These selected studies were analyzed using thematic synthesis and categorized into three main themes. They are: AI benefits in writing, Impact on critical thinking, and Ethical implications. By consolidating related empirical and theoretical studies, this approach allows for a deeper understanding of how AI tools reshape students' engagement in higher-order thinking processes and their awareness of academic integrity.

In particular, the integration of a theory-driven perspective allows this study to critically examine whether AI use supports or undermines higher-order cognitive processes, such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis, which are central to critical thinking. At the same time, it enables an exploration of how AI influences students' moral cognition, including their ability to recognize ethical dilemmas, make responsible decisions, and maintain academic integrity. This dual analytical focus is crucial, as the use of AI in academic writing is not merely a technological issue but also a cognitive and ethical phenomenon that reshapes how students think, learn, and act within academic environments.

Moreover, by employing a systematic and theory-informed approach, this study aims to contribute to the development of a more holistic understanding of AI integration in higher education, particularly in relation to the balance between technological assistance and human intellectual autonomy. The methodology is therefore designed not only to synthesize existing knowledge but also to provide a critical foundation for future research and policy development regarding the responsible and ethical use of AI in academic writing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of selected studies is summarized in Table 1, which presents the relationship between AI usage, critical thinking, and ethical implications in academic writing.

Tabel 1. The synthesis of the selected studies

No	Author(s) & Year	Context / Sample	AI Tools	Focus of Study	Key Findings	Implication
1	Al-Sofi (2024)	University students	ChatGPT	Academic writing support	AI improves writing efficiency and structure	Risk of reduced independent thinking
2	Baek et al. (2024)	Higher education	Generative AI	Writing quality	AI enhances coherence and organization	May limit deep cognitive engagement
3	Wang et al. (2024)	University learners	AI writing tools	Learning performance	AI reduces cognitive load	Overreliance weakens critical thinking
4	Suryani & Fithriani (2024)	Indonesian students	ChatGPT, Grammarly, Quillbot	AI usage behavior	Students use multiple AI tools in writing	Indicates dependency trend
5	Purnomo & Andriani (2024)	Indonesian universities	ChatGPT	Student perception	>90% students use AI for assignments	AI becomes primary writing assistant
6	Agustin et al. (2025)	Higher education	Generative AI	Writing process	AI used for idea generation & arguments	Reduces originality
7	Bedington et al. (2024)	Academic writers	AI systems	Writing development	AI supports brainstorming & drafting	Useful but may replace thinking
8	Liu et al. (2024)	Students	AI tools	Cognitive load	AI reduces anxiety in writing	Risk of passive learning
9	Eke (2023)	Academic context	ChatGPT	Ethics	AI raises plagiarism issues	Threat to academic integrity

10	Chan & Hu (2023)	Higher education	AI tools	Reliability & ethics	AI outputs can be inaccurate	Students must critically evaluate
11	Huang & Wu (2025)	University students	AI writing tools	Critical thinking	Overuse reduces analytical skills	Decline in higher-order thinking
12	Suwandi & Wahyuni (2025)	Indonesian context	AI tools	Academic behavior	AI reduces authenticity	Weakens intellectual autonomy
13	Colby (2025)	Educational AI	AI systems	Bias	AI reflects social bias	Ethical concern in content
14	Dang & Wang (2024)	AI in education	Generative AI	Fairness	AI may reinforce inequality	Need ethical regulation
15	Pretorius et al. (2025)	Digital learning	AI systems	Data privacy	AI raises privacy risks	Requires policy control

Based on the systematic literature review process, a total of selected studies were analyzed to examine the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on academic writing, particularly in relation to students' critical thinking and ethical awareness. The reviewed studies consist of empirical research and theoretical discussions published between 2023 and 2025, reflecting the rapid development of generative AI in higher education.

The findings show that university students widely use AI tools, especially for tasks like idea generation, grammar checking, paraphrasing, and structuring arguments. Tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quillbot are preferred since they are easy to access and efficient (Garcia et al., 2025). In the studies, over 80–90% of students reported using AI to complete writing assignments, indicating a major change in learning habits. Despite its widespread use, studies consistently point out a dual effect of AI: while it improves writing speed and productivity, it also raises concerns about cognitive engagement and ethical issues.

The SLR findings reveal that AI significantly improves students' writing performance. Previous studies indicate that AI tools enhance grammatical accuracy, coherence, and overall writing quality (Ding & Kohnke, 2025). These tools assist students in generating ideas, drafting content, and overcoming writer's block by actively supporting the writing process (Yao & Fan, 2025). In addition, AI improves vocabulary use and logical connections between ideas through automated feedback mechanisms. It also facilitates the organization of academic writing by enhancing clarity and structure (Mekheimer, 2025). Furthermore, AI reduces cognitive load by managing lower-level writing tasks, enabling students to focus on higher-order thinking. Importantly, the use of AI has also been associated with reduced writing anxiety and increased confidence among learners.

From the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory, AI reduces extraneous cognitive load, allowing students to focus on task completion (Baghbadorani, 2026). This is particularly beneficial for EFL learners who often struggle with language accuracy. Additionally, AI contributes to increased productivity and confidence in writing (Shao, 2025). However, while these benefits are evident, they tend to support lower-order cognitive processes such as remembering and understanding rather than higher-order thinking skills.

A major finding across the reviewed literature is the growing phenomenon of AI overreliance, which negatively impacts students' critical thinking abilities. Many studies indicate that students increasingly depend on AI-generated content without critically evaluating the output. From the perspective of Bloom's Taxonomy, this trend suggests a regression from higher-order thinking skills (analysis, evaluation, synthesis) to lower-order skills. Instead of constructing arguments independently, students tend to accept AI-generated responses as authoritative. This overdependence leads to several cognitive consequences. They are reduced analytical thinking and argument development, a decline in originality and creativity, limited engagement in deep learning processes, and a weakening of problem-solving skills. Furthermore, students' belief in their own intellectual abilities appears to diminish. As AI becomes a primary source of knowledge construction, students may lose confidence in their capacity to think critically and independently. This phenomenon supports the argument that AI abuse breaks the strong belief in the power of critical thinking, as highlighted in the title of this study.

Another important theme identified in the SLR is the emergence of ethical challenges associated with AI use in academic writing. The reviewed studies consistently report concerns related to plagiarism and academic dishonesty, a lack of proper citation in AI-generated content, contract cheating, ghostwriting practices, and data privacy and security risks. From an Ethical Awareness framework, many students demonstrate limited understanding of the ethical boundaries of AI use. While AI is often perceived as a supportive tool, its misuse leads to violations of academic integrity. Moreover, AI-generated content often lacks transparency and accountability, making it difficult for educators to detect originality. This creates new challenges for academic institutions in maintaining fair assessment practices.

The synthesis of findings highlights a fundamental tension between technological efficiency and human intellectual autonomy. On one hand, AI provides significant advantages in terms of speed, accessibility, and writing quality. On the other hand, excessive reliance undermines the core objectives of higher education, particularly the development of critical thinking.This tension can be explained through Critical Thinking Theory, which emphasizes active, reflective, and independent reasoning. AI, when misused, shifts students from active thinkers to passive consumers of information. Thus, the issue is not the presence of AI itself, but the lack of regulated and critical use. When students use AI without reflection, the technology becomes a substitute for thinking rather than a tool to support it.

The findings of this SLR suggest several important implications for higher education institutions. First, there is a need for clear AI usage policies, as universities must establish guidelines to regulate the ethical use of AI in academic writing (Cotton et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023). Second, AI literacy should be integrated into the curriculum to ensure that students are able not only to use AI tools but also to critically evaluate their outputs (Zhai, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Third, assessment methods need to be redesigned to minimize AI misuse and promote authentic learning experiences (Dawson, 2023; QAA, 2023). Finally, critical thinking pedagogy must be strengthened by designing learning activities that require analysis, reflection, and argumentation beyond AI-generated responses (Kasneci et al., 2023; Selwyn, 2019). Overall, the findings confirm that AI has transformed academic writing practices among university students. While it offers undeniable benefits, its misuse poses significant risks to critical thinking and ethical behavior.

This study argues that the phenomenon of AI abuse not only affects students' performance but also reshapes their epistemological beliefs, particularly their trust in their own thinking abilities. When students rely excessively on AI, they may gradually perceive critical thinking as less necessary, thereby weakening one of the fundamental goals of higher education. Therefore, a balanced approach is required. AI should be positioned as a supportive cognitive tool, not a replacement for human reasoning. The responsibility lies not only with students but also with educators and institutions to create an environment where technology enhances, rather than diminishes, intellectual development.

Conclusion

This study highlights that the integration of AI in academic writing presents both opportunities and challenges. While AI enhances efficiency and accessibility, its misuse leads to overreliance, reduced critical thinking, and ethical concerns. The findings suggest that AI abuse not only affects students' performance but also weakens their confidence in their own intellectual abilities. Therefore, higher education institutions must promote responsible AI use by integrating ethical guidelines, enhancing critical thinking instruction, and redesigning assessment strategies. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to examine the long-term cognitive impact of AI use.

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