

EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF AI WRITING ASSISTANTS IN SUPPORTING ACADEMIC WRITING STRUCTURE AND COHERENCE**Asyilla Agustina Mustika Janwar¹, Eva Devi Sofyawati², Pipih Setiawati³**Institut Pendidikan Indonesia^{1,2,3}e-mail: asyillaamj@gmail.com

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ABSTRAK

Perkembangan pesat *Artificial Intelligence* (AI) telah mendorong meluasnya adopsi *AI Writing Assistants* dalam praktik penulisan akademik di perguruan tinggi. Meskipun teknologi ini menawarkan kemudahan teknis, persepsi mahasiswa mengenai perannya dalam menopang aspek tingkat tinggi penulisan akademik, khususnya struktur teks dan koherensi, masih memerlukan kajian empiris yang mendalam. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi dan pengalaman nyata mahasiswa *English as a Foreign Language* (EFL) dalam memanfaatkan *AI Writing Assistants* guna mengembangkan struktur dan koherensi tulisan akademik. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi deskriptif yang melibatkan sepuluh mahasiswa tingkat akhir Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Garut yang berpengalaman menggunakan alat bantu berbasis AI. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur mendalam secara daring dengan instrumen berupa pedoman wawancara 25 butir pertanyaan terbuka, serta dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña yang mencakup reduksi data, penyajian data, dan verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *AI Writing Assistants* memberikan manfaat nyata dalam membantu pemetaan ide, penyusunan kerangka karangan, penyelarasan koherensi antarparagraf, pemberian umpan balik formatif, dan fasilitasi proses draf penulisan. Kendati demikian, mahasiswa menghadapi tantangan teknis berupa tuntutan literasi *prompt*, risiko keluaran teks yang tidak akurat (*hallucination*), kecenderungan ketergantungan kognitif (*overreliance*), serta perlunya verifikasi kritis terhadap sumber rujukan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa *AI Writing Assistants* efektif menjadi mitra penopang (*scaffolding partner*) dalam memfasilitasi struktur dan koherensi penulisan akademik apabila diimbangi oleh regulasi metakognitif dan evaluasi kritis dari mahasiswa.

Kata Kunci: *AI Writing Assistants, koherensi, penulisan akademik, persepsi mahasiswa, struktur penulisan*

ABSTRACT

The rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has led to the increasing use of AI Writing Assistants in tertiary academic writing practices. Although these tools offer considerable technical support, students' perceptions of their actual role in supporting higher-order writing dimensions—specifically organizational structure and textual coherence—warrant rigorous empirical investigation. This study aims to explore EFL students' perceptions and lived experiences regarding the use of AI Writing Assistants in developing academic writing structure and coherence. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, this inquiry engaged ten final-year English Education undergraduates at a university in Garut who had completed Academic Writing coursework and routinely utilized AI-powered platforms. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured online interviews guided by a 25-item open-ended protocol and systematically examined using the interactive qualitative analysis model of Miles,

Huberman, and Saldaña, which encompasses data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The findings reveal that AI Writing Assistants provide substantial benefits by facilitating idea mapping, structural outlining, paragraph coherence enhancement, formative revision feedback, and drafting support. Nevertheless, participants encountered critical operational challenges, including the necessity of sophisticated prompt formulation, occasional factual inaccuracies, cognitive dependency, and the imperative for critical manual verification. The study concludes that AI Writing Assistants function effectively as scaffolding partners in fostering academic writing structure and coherence when deployed with active metacognitive regulation and rigorous critical evaluation.

Keywords: *academic writing, AI Writing Assistants, coherence, students' perceptions, writing structure*

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing constitutes one of the most vital yet intellectually demanding competencies that tertiary students must master in higher education. Mastery of this genre requires students to communicate complex propositions systematically, substantiate analytical claims, and exhibit disciplined critical thinking. Producing high-caliber academic manuscripts requires far more than surface-level grammatical accuracy and lexical variation; it fundamentally demands a coherent organizational architecture and logically cohesive transitions between clauses and paragraphs (Bailey, 2015). However, empirical realities across university writing classrooms indicate that many undergraduate learners persistently experience acute difficulties in structuring essays logically and sustaining rhetorical coherence. Within the Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, these setbacks are frequently compounded by native-language interference, limited academic vocabulary repertoires, and unfamiliarity with Western rhetorical conventions (Bram & Angelina, 2022). As documented by Salim (2024), Indonesian EFL learners consistently struggle to organize thematic outlines independently, frequently producing disconnected paragraphs that obscure the central thesis of their academic papers.

The rapid development and proliferation of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) have introduced transformative paradigms for supporting tertiary students throughout the academic writing continuum. AI Writing Assistants, such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and related generative platforms, have become omnipresent digital resources utilized by university students to brainstorm topics, formulate outlines, polish drafts, and refine communicative clarity. Unlike traditional rule-based spellcheckers that operate exclusively on mechanical syntax, contemporary generative AI models possess advanced contextual processing capabilities that provide actionable suggestions for paragraph progression, organizational unity, and transitional phrasing. Consequently, educational researchers and language practitioners have increasingly directed their attention toward AI tools as innovative pedagogical media capable of augmenting learner writing performance.

A burgeoning body of empirical scholarship has highlighted the tangible affordances offered by AI Writing Assistants within academic writing contexts. For example, Rahman et al. (2024) observed that interacting with ChatGPT effectively guided EFL students in formulating comprehensive rhetorical frameworks and harmonizing cohesive ties between disparate propositions. Immediate formative feedback supplied by AI writing tools has also been shown to accelerate drafting efficiency, assist novice authors in overcoming cognitive blockages, and promote systematic text organization (Ahmed et al., 2024; Khalifa & Albadawy, 2024). Furthermore, experimental evidence demonstrates that structured integration of AI-powered

writing environments positively impacts students' self-revision behaviors and structural awareness (Maqbool & Bilal, 2025). These findings collectively imply that generative AI holds substantial promise for facilitating not only lower-order mechanics but also higher-order writing dimensions.

Notwithstanding these documented benefits, the pedagogical integration of AI Writing Assistants remains a subject of rigorous educational contention. While tertiary students routinely express enthusiasm regarding the time-saving utility of generative tools, serious concerns have emerged regarding the epistemic accuracy, rhetorical depth, and originality of AI-generated content (Fošner, 2024). Empirical studies caution that automated language models frequently generate generic arguments, formulate ungrounded propositions, and simulate authoritative responses that lack contextual nuance. Moreover, unregulated exposure and premature reliance on automated text generators risk eroding students' learner autonomy, critical reasoning, and independent compositional capacities (Bibi & Atta, 2024; Salim, 2024). These divergent perspectives underscore the urgent necessity to scrutinize student interactions with AI tools, particularly from the qualitative viewpoints of the learners themselves as active users.

Although numerous studies have examined AI-assisted writing, the vast majority of existing inquiries have focused primarily on lower-order linguistic gains, such as lexical acquisition, syntactic accuracy, and overall score differentials. Comparatively few investigations have focused specifically on how undergraduate EFL learners perceive and navigate the higher-order dimensions of writing structure and coherence through AI mediation. Additionally, scarce qualitative research in Indonesia has simultaneously juxtaposed the perceived scaffolding benefits alongside the operational and cognitive challenges experienced by students during the writing process. To address this empirical void, this study explores EFL undergraduates' perceptions of utilizing AI Writing Assistants to support academic writing structure and coherence at a teacher education institute in Garut, West Java. Rather than assessing quantitative score increases or benchmarking specific software applications, this inquiry illuminates students' lived experiences, reflective strategies, and cognitive negotiations. The resulting empirical insights are intended to inform pedagogical frameworks for implementing AI writing technologies responsibly, ethically, and meaningfully within EFL academic curricula.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to capture rich, situated accounts of students' subjective perceptions and authentic experiences regarding AI Writing Assistants in academic composition. A descriptive qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret educational technologies within naturalistic instructional contexts. The research was conducted at the English Education Department of an educational institute located in Garut, West Java, Indonesia (*Institut Pendidikan Indonesia*).

The participants comprised ten final-year undergraduate students (designated as P1 through P10) purposively selected from the English Education Department. Purposive sampling was deployed based on two explicit inclusion criteria: (1) successful completion of the advanced Academic Writing course, and (2) verified regular use of generative AI Writing Assistants (such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, or QuillBot) in composing academic papers for at least two academic semesters. These criteria ensured that all participants possessed

foundational knowledge of academic conventions and had accumulated sufficient reflective experience to evaluate the utility and limitations of AI writing tools critically.

Primary data were gathered through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews administered online via WhatsApp voice calls and text-based interactive follow-ups at mutually agreed times. The interview protocol consisted of 25 open-ended questions adapted from established writing perception frameworks, organized into four conceptual clusters: (1) patterns of AI usage across writing stages, (2) perceived scaffolding for structural organization and logical flow, (3) perceived contributions to textual coherence and transitional cohesion, and (4) practical challenges and ethical negotiations encountered. The interviews were conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia* to eliminate language barriers and enable participants to express complex cognitive and emotional reflections naturally. Each interview session lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the explicit written informed consent of the participants. The recorded interactions were transcribed verbatim, and illustrative excerpts were translated into English and verified through back-translation protocols.

The qualitative interview transcripts were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), which encompasses three continuous, concurrent streams of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data condensation phase, raw transcripts were reviewed, inductively coded, and filtered to isolate statements specifically addressing structural scaffolding, coherence development, prompt interactions, and cognitive dilemmas. In the data display phase, the coded segments were organized into thematic matrices and descriptive tables to establish thematic patterns and cross-participant comparisons. Finally, in the conclusion drawing and verification phase, emerging conceptual themes were contextualized with theoretical literature to formulate grounded interpretations. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, member checking was executed by returning translated transcripts and thematic summaries to the participants for communicative validation, while source triangulation was maintained by cross-examining recurring narratives across all ten interviewees.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The qualitative findings provide a holistic representation of participants' experiences, revealing both the substantial affordances and the prominent challenges encountered when deploying AI Writing Assistants for academic writing structure and coherence.

Perceived Benefits in Supporting Structure and Coherence

All ten participants acknowledged that AI Writing Assistants provided multifaceted instructional scaffolding that enhanced their management of academic writing architecture. The qualitative evidence regarding these benefits is synthesized in Table 1.

Table 1. Perceived Benefits of AI Writing Assistants in Academic Writing Structure and Coherence

No	Thematic Benefit	Core Functional Affordances	Participant Endorsement
1	Idea Mapping and Outlining	Facilitating logical sequencing of headings, subheadings, and macro-level essay structures	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10
2	Paragraph Structuring	Generating model topic sentences, supporting evidence arrangements, and concluding transitions	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10

3	Textual Coherence Optimization	Suggesting cohesive conjunctions, resolving rhetorical ruptures, and linking arguments smoothly	P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10
4	Formative Feedback and Revision	Detecting redundant phrases, flagging structural imbalances, and proposing organizational edits	P1, P2, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10
5	Writing Process Scaffolding	Overcoming writer's block, accelerating drafting momentum, and building compositional confidence	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10

The data in Table 1 demonstrate that participants experienced substantial structural scaffolding across both macro- and micro-textual levels. In terms of macro-structure, nine out of ten participants indicated that AI tools effectively transformed disorganized thoughts into structured outlines. Participant P4 noted, *"When I have a broad topic, ChatGPT helps me break it down into an introduction, thematic body paragraphs, and a logical conclusion, which keeps my writing trajectory organized."* Similarly, regarding paragraph coherence, participants emphasized that generative models suggested precise discourse markers and varied transition signals. As Participant P7 observed, *"Grammarly and ChatGPT point out abrupt jumps between my sentences, providing transitional words that make my paragraphs flow seamlessly."* Consequently, the tools functioned as interactive scaffolds that clarified rhetorical continuity throughout the drafting process.

Challenges and Operational Dilemmas

Alongside the recognized benefits, the participants identified several operational and cognitive challenges that complicated their engagement with AI Writing Assistants. The thematic analysis identified four primary challenges: prompt formulation barriers, AI response inaccuracy, cognitive dependency, and concerns regarding academic trustworthiness.

Prompt Formulation Barriers

A recurring issue reported by the participants was the critical dependency of AI performance on the quality of input prompts. Participants frequently struggled to compose prompts that were sufficiently specific, which often led to vague, formulaic, or misaligned structural recommendations. As Participant P2 explained:

"Getting a helpful outline from AI is not as simple as typing a generic question. If my prompt lacks specific contextual constraints, the generated structure is extremely shallow and unsuitable for an academic paper, forcing me to rephrase my prompts repeatedly."

This finding highlights that maximizing the organizational potential of AI writing tools requires a high degree of prompt engineering literacy, an ability that many novice EFL writers must develop through extensive trial and error.

AI Response Inaccuracy and Superficiality

Participants frequently reported instances in which AI-generated paragraphs lacked scholarly depth or misinterpreted academic arguments. Several interviewees observed that although the generated text appeared grammatically flawless, the underlying logical progression was sometimes superficial or disconnected from their intended research claims. Participant P6 stated:

"ChatGPT often produces paragraphs that sound very academic on the surface, but when I read them closely, the content is repetitive and fails to address my specific research context. I cannot simply copy what it gives me; I have to manually rewrite it to ensure authentic arguments."

This limitation required students to exercise continuous evaluative scrutiny rather than accepting AI outputs uncritically.

Cognitive Dependency and Reduced Writing Autonomy

Another significant concern raised by the participants was the gradual development of cognitive overreliance on automated writing assistance. Some students acknowledged that the ease of generating structural templates reduced their motivation to brainstorm and organize outlines independently. Participant P1 admitted:

"Because the AI can organize my ideas in seconds, I noticed that I started waiting for its outline before doing any thinking myself. It definitely speeds up drafting, but I feel my independent ability to organize an essay from scratch is becoming weaker."

This self-reported dependency highlights the pedagogical risk that unmonitored AI usage may supplant the cognitive effort necessary to cultivate independent writing competencies.

Trustworthiness and Citation Hallucination

Finally, participants expressed apprehension regarding the empirical validity of AI-generated claims and bibliographic references. Several students encountered instances of "hallucinated" citations and fabricated scholarly evidence generated by conversational models. Participant P9 remarked:

"I once asked for references to support a paragraph structure, and the AI generated convincing author names and journal titles that turned out to be completely non-existent. Since then, I never trust its claims without independently checking academic databases."

Consequently, participants recognized that AI Writing Assistants must be treated strictly as auxiliary drafting aids rather than authoritative academic sources.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that EFL undergraduate students perceive AI Writing Assistants as beneficial scaffolding tools for developing academic writing structure and coherence, while remaining aware of significant operational limitations. The perceived contributions to structural outlining, paragraph coherence, and transitional fluency align with established genre-based writing pedagogy. According to Bailey (2015), effective academic discourse requires clear hierarchical organization and logical transitions between propositions. By providing model topic sentences, cohesive conjunctions, and balanced organizational structures, AI writing tools offer instructional scaffolding that assists novice EFL writers in navigating the complex demands of academic writing. However, these students maintain a cautious stance toward AI, exercising agency by critically evaluating suggestions to preserve their authorial intent and avoid compromising the authenticity of their academic voice (Ardiyansah & Batubara, 2026; Kim et al., 2025; Wang, 2024; Wong et al., 2026).

These empirical insights corroborate previous research on AI-mediated academic writing. The findings support the conclusions of Khalifa and Albadawy (2024), who observed that generative AI platforms enhance students' abilities to organize research manuscripts and maintain thematic continuity across sections. Similarly, the structural improvements reported by the participants echo the findings of Ahmed et al. (2024), who documented that automated revision feedback enabled academic writers to restructure prose efficiently. Furthermore, these results align with the experimental findings of Maqbool and Bilal (2025), which demonstrated that sustained interaction with AI writing assistants supported structural organization, cohesive sentence linking, and self-directed revision strategies among undergraduate essay writers. Within the Indonesian higher education context, these findings expand on Salim (2024), illustrating that AI writing assistants can scaffold structural outlining and foster learner autonomy when students actively regulate their engagement with the technology.

The participants' adoption patterns and evaluative reflections can be interpreted through the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), particularly regarding perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. According to TAM, user acceptance and technological integration are driven by the belief that a system enhances performance within a given task. In this study, students' positive perceptions of AI tools were driven by their practical utility across multiple writing stages such as formulating outlines, generating transitional phrases, and evaluating text cohesion. However, the qualitative data also indicate that technological acceptance is not uncritical. Rather, it is mediated by students' awareness of the platform's limitations, including prompt sensitivity, factual inaccuracy, and structural superficiality. This judicious approach to AI integration reflects a developing "Critical AI Literacy," where students purposefully discern which writing tasks benefit from machine assistance and which necessitate independent cognitive engagement (Chen et al., 2025; Mona, 2025; Murekian & Sudarshan, 2026; Rahim & Gregory, 2025; Stanko et al., 2026).

The challenges documented in this study specifically prompt formulation barriers, AI inaccuracies, and cognitive dependency highlight important instructional considerations for writing pedagogy. The difficulty participants experienced in eliciting relevant structural models indicates that prompt formulation has emerged as an essential digital literacy skill in AI-augmented learning environments. Furthermore, the presence of superficial outputs and fabricated citations confirms Fošner's (2024) observation that large language models often generate syntactically convincing yet factually unreliable text. Consequently, the findings support the warnings articulated by Bibi and Atta (2024) and Salim (2024), who caution that uncritical reliance on AI shortcuts can diminish opportunities for students to develop independent reasoning and critical thinking. To mitigate these risks, educators should implement pedagogical strategies that bridge structured AI-assisted guidance with independent practice, ensuring that technology serves as a temporary scaffold rather than a replacement for cognitive engagement (Banerjee & Pathak, 2026; Buntaran et al., 2026; Lee & Otani, 2025; Ramos-Benitez et al., 2026; Riwayatiningsih et al., 2026; Singh et al., 2025; Zhai et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings indicate that AI Writing Assistants do not automatically improve writing quality on their own; rather, their pedagogical value depends on the user's critical engagement and metacognitive regulation. When students treat AI tools as conversational scaffolding partners using them to visualize outlines and test transitions while independently verifying claims the technology effectively supports the acquisition of academic writing skills. Conversely, passive delegation of drafting tasks compromises both authorial voice and academic integrity. Therefore, effective integration of AI into academic writing instruction requires an intentional pedagogical framework that balances the technical affordances of AI with the cultivation of critical thinking, prompt literacy, and independent compositional autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This study explored EFL undergraduate students' perceptions and lived experiences regarding the use of AI Writing Assistants to support academic writing structure and coherence. The findings indicate that students view AI tools as beneficial scaffolding instruments that aid in idea mapping, paragraph outlining, cohesive signaling, and iterative revision. These functional affordances help novice academic writers overcome cognitive bottlenecks and conceptualize the macro- and micro-structures of academic texts. However, students also encountered substantial challenges, including prompt formulation barriers, AI response inaccuracies, potential cognitive dependency, and ungrounded citation outputs. Importantly,

participants demonstrated an awareness that AI Writing Assistants cannot replace human intellectual labor, positioning the technology as a complementary support tool that demands continuous evaluative scrutiny.

These conclusions carry practical implications for higher education institutions and EFL writing instructors. Academic writing curricula should move beyond binary policies of uncritical adoption or outright prohibition, focusing instead on cultivating critical AI literacy. Writing programs should provide explicit instruction in prompt formulation, automated feedback evaluation, and source verification strategies. Furthermore, instructional writing tasks should be designed to prioritize process-oriented learning, requiring students to document independent pre-writing outlines and critically justify any structural revisions suggested by AI platforms.

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. The inquiry involved a qualitative sample of ten undergraduate students at a single institution, relying on self-reported interview accounts rather than direct textual analysis of student writing. Future research would benefit from mixed-methods designs that triangulate students' reflective perceptions with textual analyses of essay drafts, detailed prompt-interaction logs, and longitudinal assessments of writing development across diverse institutional settings.

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