Writing Instructors' Pedagogical Decisions About Generative AI

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Abstract. College-level writing instructors are under growing pressure to determine how, or if at all, to integrate generative AI tools into their curricula. While some theoretical scholarship promotes generative AI integration as a means of fostering AI literacy, empirical research on how writing instructors are approaching these tools remains limited. This study explores how college-level writing instructors are currently addressing generative AI in their classrooms, what pedagogical rationales and concerns shape decisions to integrate or avoid these tools, and how instructors evaluate the effectiveness of their own approaches. This study combines survey data from 79 college-level writing instructors across a range of institution types with follow-up semi-structured interviews using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. Survey results revealed a pronounced division among instructors, with respondents nearly evenly split between those who integrate generative AI in some form (43%) and those who avoid its use (57%). Interviews showed that instructors across both groups share similar concerns related to student learning, writing processes, and institutional expectations. Decisions about integration or refusal were strongly shaped by local teaching contexts, perceived pedagogical risks, and a lack of institutional guidance or support. This study aims to inform more confident and context-aware pedagogical decision-making about whether and how generative AI might be incorporated into college-level writing instruction.

Keywords: Generative AI · Writing instruction · Instructor perspectives.

1 Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) has become a central topic in conversations about writing instruction in higher education following the public release of large language model-based tools in 2022 [8, 9, 23, 31]. While scholars have raised concerns about plagiarism and over-reliance [6, 31], the field has simultaneously acknowledged that generative AI is here to stay [15] and may even need to be incorporated into writing curricula as a means to build AI literacy [9, 17].

Despite this growing consensus in theory, little is known about how generative AI is actually being used in writing classrooms. Existing studies report mixed and sometimes contradictory findings, providing little practical guidance

[1, 16]. At the same time, institutional policies and disciplinary norms remain inconsistent, leaving instructors to independently interpret how generative AI aligns with writing pedagogy [10]. Instructors must therefore navigate the competing pressures of supporting AI literacy while preserving writing as a process of learning without clear empirical guidance [8, 17].

This study examines how college-level writing instructors across institution contexts are responding to generative AI in practice. We combine survey and interview data to capture both the distribution of instructional approaches to generative AI and the pedagogical reasoning underlying them. The ultimate goal of this study is to inform more grounded, context-sensitive approaches to integrating generative AI in writing instruction.

The following research questions guide this study: (1) How are college-level writing instructors currently addressing generative AI in their classrooms (e.g., ignoring, acknowledging, or integrating it)? (2) What pedagogical rationales and concerns shape instructors' decisions to address, integrate, or refuse generative AI in their writing pedagogy? (3) How do instructors evaluate the effectiveness of their own approach to generative AI?

2 Generative AI and teaching college-level writing

A central tenet of college-level writing pedagogy is the prioritization of process over product [25]. Decades of scholarship in writing studies emphasize that learning occurs through the act of drafting, revising, and reflection rather than through the production of final text [11, 27]. Writing-to-learn pedagogies similarly depend on students' sustained engagement with writing as an iterative process [24, 27]. From this perspective, generative AI poses a challenge: when used primarily to generate written text, these tools risk allowing students to bypass the stages of writing most important for learning.

Early responses to generative AI often emphasized restriction or prohibition, reflecting fears that generative AI would enable plagiarism or undermine student learning [20, 29]. More recent scholarship, however, argues against outright rejection, instead calling for intentional integration aligned with writing pedagogy [9, 2, 15, 31, 9, 13, 32]. Some scholars suggest that, when carefully framed, generative AI may support recursive writing practices such as revision, feedback engagement, and audience awareness [15, 9].

Empirical research on generative AI in writing instruction remains limited and uneven. Studies in other disciplines suggest potential benefits for learning [19, 18, 12, 22], but writing-specific research is sparse and provides mixed findings. For example, Akiba and Garte [1] found that undergraduate students using generative AI for feedback reported positive perceptions and increased confidence in revision, while Hansen et al. [16] found that PhD students using an AI feedback coach produced lower-quality peer feedback and reported dissatisfaction. These contrasting results suggest that outcomes may depend on factors such as writer expertise, instructional scaffolding, and the role assigned to the AI.

At the same time, institutional guidance remains inconsistent [14, 30], contributing to uncertainty among instructors [10, 3]. While many instructors express interest in using generative AI, they report barriers such as limited training and lack of institutional support [10]. This gap is further complicated by increasing expectations that instructors foster students' AI literacy [21, 26, 17].

In sum, existing scholarship highlights a tension between process-based writing pedagogy, calls for intentional generative AI integration, limited empirical evidence, and uneven institutional support. As a result, writing instructors are often left to navigate generative AI adoption independently. There remains limited understanding of how writing instructors navigate these decisions in practice.

3 Methods

This study employed a two-phase, explanatory sequential mixed methods design [7] to examine how college-level writing instructors are responding to generative AI in their pedagogy. Survey data were used to identify patterns in instructional practices, and follow-up interviews were conducted to explore the pedagogical reasoning underlying these patterns,

3.1 Phase 1: Survey

We administered a short, adaptive online survey to writing instructors across multiple universities and writing programs, recruited via departmental mailing lists. The survey captured instructors' self-reported practices related to generative AI, their pedagogical rationales, and perceived effectiveness.

A total of 84 instructors initiated the survey, with 79 completing it (94% completion rate). Participants were recruited from U.S.-based institutions and represented a range of institution types, including public research universities ($n = 60$), private or liberal arts colleges ($n = 16$), and community or vocational colleges ($n = 3$). Participants ranged in age from 25 to 69 (distribution: 25–34, $n = 11$; 35–44, $n = 28$; 45–54, $n = 24$; 55–69, $n = 16$). Race/ethnicity data were collected via an open-ended question ($n = 84$ respondents), with the majority identifying as White ($n = 60$), followed by smaller numbers identifying as Black ($n = 5$), Asian ($n = 3$), South Asian ($n = 3$), Latino/a/x or Hispanic ($n = 4$ combined), Middle Eastern ($n = 1$), mixed race ($n = 1$), or N/A ($n = 2$).

The survey followed a branching structure. Participants were first asked whether and how they address generative AI in their courses, where *integration* was defined as structured instructional engagement (e.g., assignments, activities, or critical analysis), not delegation of authorship. Based on their responses, follow-up questions captured either (1) reasons for refusing or avoiding generative AI or (2) how generative AI was used, including tools, stages of writing (e.g., brainstorming, revision, feedback), and instructional purposes. Instructors also rated perceived effectiveness and described any concerns about student use.

3.2 Phase 2: Interviews

Instructors were invited to participate in an optional follow-up interview. Interviews explored instructors' pedagogical decision-making, including their strategies, challenges, and reflections on integrating or refusing generative AI.

Interviews were conducted between November 2025 and January 2026 using a semi-structured protocol [28]. All interviews were conducted via video call, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

3.3 Data analysis

We analyzed survey data descriptively using frequencies and cross-tabulations to identify patterns in pedagogical stances and perceived effectiveness. Open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis [5]. Analysis was conducted inductively, with themes developed through iterative engagement with the data to capture instructors' rationales, concerns, and pedagogical values.

4 Results

This section presents findings from survey and interview data on instructors' pedagogical decisions about generative AI. We first present survey results to establish patterns in instructional practices and perceived effectiveness, followed by qualitative findings that elaborate these patterns.

4.1 Survey results

Pedagogical stances and perceived effectiveness As shown in Table 1, survey responses ($N = 79$) revealed substantial variation in how instructors address generative AI. Forty-three percent ($n = 34$) reported intentionally integrating generative AI into their teaching, while 57% ($n = 45$) did not. Within the non-integrating group, most instructors ($n = 44$) acknowledged generative AI (e.g., via syllabus policies or discussion) without incorporating it into coursework; outright avoidance was rare ($n = 1$).

Table 1. Distribution of instructors' pedagogical stances toward generative AI and mean self-reported effectiveness ratings (1–5 scale).

Pedagogical Stance	***n* (%)**	**Mean effectiveness (*SD*)**
Avoidant	1 (1.27%)	—
Acknowledging only	44 (55.70%)	3.71 (1.10)
Integrating	34 (43.04%)	3.28 (0.77)

Pedagogical stance varied by institutional context. Instructors at research universities were more likely to integrate generative AI (19/28), whereas those at private liberal arts colleges were more likely to acknowledge without integrating (12/17). Community college representation was limited ($n = 4$).

As shown in Table 1, instructors who acknowledged but did not integrate generative AI reported slightly higher perceived effectiveness ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.10$) than those who integrated it ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.77$).

Shared commitments to writing-as-thinking across pedagogical stances Open-ended responses to the survey from instructors across pedagogical stances reveal highly similar commitments to writing as a cognitive, development, and meaning-making practice. Both integrators and non-integrators emphasized the importance of students engaging directly in the labor of writing.

Non-integrators frequently positioned writing as foundational to cognition and therefore not easily delegable, while integrators expressed concern that uncritical AI use could allow students to bypass key stages of the writing process. Despite differences in practice, both groups articulated similar underlying pedagogical commitments.

4.2 Interview Results

Interviews ($n = 14$) provided deeper insight into how instructors reason through generative AI decisions.

Integration in practice A majority of interviewees (10/14) reported integrating generative AI into their courses, typically framing it as an object of critique rather than a tool for content generation. Integrators generally described their practices as successful, emphasizing outcomes such as reduced blatant and uncritical use of generative AI by students, increased skepticism toward generative AI tools, and heightened awareness of generative AI's limitations as markers of success. As one interviewee explained, reductions in students' reliance on generative AI were viewed as a key indicator of effective integration:

> ...one of the things I think that's really successful is I had a student that was like, "I'm using AI less after I took this class," even though I showed them prompt engineering and we explore different tools, he was like "I'm not using it as much as I used to," and I was like, I actually love that.

Two interviewees integrated generative AI due to departmental or institutional policy mandates requiring instruction on AI technology. Despite initial resistance, both instructors reflected positively on the outcomes of this forced integration, describing unanticipated pedagogical benefits and increased students' critical engagement. As one interviewee reflected on this shift:

> There was definitely a lot of pushback from the instructors at first, all of which I understand. I would be curious to see how people feel now... because I feel like I've had, honestly, less people using AI than I did when I didn't engage with it as much as I am.

Instructors' limits of AI knowledge A majority of interviewees (10/14) described feeling uninformed or demonstrated misconceptions about AI capabilities. Eight instructors directly stated that insufficient understanding limited their ability to teach or address generative AI. Others (2/14) articulated beliefs about AI's limitations that contrasted with current technical realities. Instructors frequently identified this as a barrier to effective teaching and decision-making, and several called for more accurate, discipline-specific professional development.

> I think faculty need more information on what they [generative AI systems] can do and how they work. I hear a lot of people say, oh, they can't do this, and no, they can do that. Like, it can do that. You know, like, oh, it can't have a human-sounding voice. Yes, it can.

Importantly, instructors emphasized that trainings should be discipline-specific and non-promotional, expressing skepticism toward initiatives perceived as advancing pro-AI agendas rather than informed pedagogical reflection and agency.

Shared governance and communal policy-making A subset of interviewees (5/14) described adopting a communal approach to classroom AI policy, involving students directly in discussions about acceptable use, disclosure, and assessment expectations. Instructors articulated multiple rationales for this approach, including fostering student agency, reducing fear and confusion around AI policies, and alleviated high-stakes pressure that might prompt uncritical AI reliance. Interviewees consistently reported these approaches as effective, emphasizing the pedagogical value of co-constructing norms.

Detection as a pedagogical constraint rather than a solution Detection emerged as a dominant concern (11/14), though instructors varied in their trust of detection tools. Many viewed detection as unreliable or misaligned with pedagogical goals, while others cited the lack of reliable detection as a barrier to integration. Across perspectives, detection functioned less as a solution and more as a constraint shaping instructional decisions.

Assignment design as a mitigation strategy Several instructors (4/10) described designing assignments to mitigate AI use by emphasizing tasks less amenable to automation, such as assigning archival work or personal writing topics. These strategies were framed as reinforcing core pedagogical values, including originality, reflection, and engagement with writing as a process.

5 Discussion

This study examined how college-level writing instructors are responding to generative AI, the rationales shaping their pedagogical decisions, and how they evaluate effectiveness. The findings reveal a field divided in practice but aligned in underlying pedagogical values, with institutional context playing a decisive role in shaping outcomes.

5.1 Integration as demystification: Less AI use through critical engagement

Instructors who integrated generative AI generally evaluated their approaches as effective, often citing reduced uncritical use and increased student skepticism. Across interviews, instructors described students becoming more more attentive to generative AI limitations and more selective in their use.

Based on instructor perspectives, integration functioned as a process of demystification: structured engagement encouraged critical evaluation rather than reliance, reinforcing writing as a site of thinking and judgment. This finding aligns with prior calls for critical, pedagogically situated uses of generative AI in writing instruction [16, 9], but extends this work by suggesting that structured engagement may actively reduce uncritical reliance.

5.2 Barriers to integration

While some instructors declined integration on pedagogy grounds, many non-integrators expressed interest but identified practical constraints, including limited time, lack of training, and absence of institutional guidance.

These findings are consistent with prior research highlighting the role of institutional support and instructor preparedness in technology adoption [3, 10], suggesting that barriers to generative AI integration are often infrastructural rather than ideological. Instructors expressed a need for discipline-specific, non-promotional support that would enable pedagogically engagement without undermining existing commitments to writing instruction.

6 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, survey responses are self-reported and may not perfectly reflect actual classroom practices. Second, evaluations of effectiveness represent perceived rather than measured learning outcomes. Third, interview participants self-selected into the study, introducing potential bias [4]. Finally, findings reflect a rapidly evolving technological and institutional context and may shift over time.

7 Conclusion

This study examined how college-level writing instructors are addressing generative AI and evaluating their approaches. While practices diverge, instructors across contexts share commitments to writing as a process of thinking and learning. Instructors who integrated generative AI framed it as an object of critique and reflection rather than a substitute for writing, and generally perceived these practices as effective in fostering critical AI awareness.

As generative AI becomes increasingly embedded in higher education, future research should move beyond perception-based accounts to examine how instructional approaches influence student learning, writing development, and pedagogy over time.

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