

# Challenges and Solutions in Assessing Writing Skills at a University in Hanoi in the Digital Age

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**Abstract:** The digital age has transformed how writing skills are assessed in higher education, presenting new challenges and opportunities. This study explores the impact of digital tools, particularly AI-powered writing assistants, on the assessment of student writing at a university in Hanoi. The findings offer valuable insights for educators and policymakers at the university and similar institutions, highlighting the need for a balanced approach that leverages digital tools without compromising the quality of education.

**Keywords:** Writing assessment, Digital tools, AI, Academic integrity, Higher education.

## 1. Introduction

The digital age has brought about significant transformations in educational practices, fundamentally altering how knowledge is acquired, disseminated, and evaluated. One of the areas most affected by this technological shift is the assessment of writing skills in higher education. Traditionally, writing assignments have been a critical tool for evaluating students' ability to articulate complex ideas, demonstrate critical thinking, and engage with course material on a deep level. However, with the advent of digital resources and AI-powered tools, such as Quillbot and ChatGPT, the landscape of writing and its assessment has changed dramatically.

The objective of this study is to explore the challenges of assessing writing skills in the digital age, with a specific focus on the aforementioned university. By understanding the extent of students' reliance on digital tools and the impact this has on their learning outcomes, the study aims to identify the gaps in current assessment practices and propose practical solutions. These solutions will be designed to uphold academic integrity while embracing the advantages of digital tools in a way that enhances the educational experience.

This research is significant not only for educators and administrators at this university but also for the broader academic community. As educational institutions worldwide grapple with the implications of digital technology, the findings from this study will offer valuable insights into how writing assessments can be adapted to meet the needs of contemporary students. The goal is to develop assessment practices that are robust, equitable, and capable of promoting

genuine learning, thereby preparing students to meet the demands of their future professional roles.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Digital Tools and Writing Skills

The rise of digital tools, particularly AI-driven writing assistants like Quillbot and ChatGPT, has transformed how students approach writing assignments. These tools offer a range of functionalities, from basic grammar and spelling checks to more advanced capabilities such as paraphrasing and content generation. According to Stetter (2012), while digital tools can enhance the writing process by providing instant feedback and suggestions, they also encourage overreliance, leading to a potential decline in students' critical thinking and writing skills. This sentiment is echoed by Sutherland-Smith (2018), who emphasizes the need for educators to critically assess the impact of these tools on learning outcomes.

### 2.2. Challenges in Writing Assessment

The widespread use of digital tools in writing has raised significant concerns about academic integrity. Rogerson (2017) points out that AI tools, while designed to assist in the learning process, can be misused to bypass the intellectual effort required in writing, resulting in work that lacks originality. This challenge is particularly acute in higher education, where the ability to produce original, thoughtful work is a key learning objective. The ease of access to online resources and AI tools has also led to an increase in plagiarism, as highlighted by Scanlon and Neumann (2002). They argue that the digital age has made it easier for students to find and use pre-written content, often without proper attribution, thereby

undermining the educational process.

### 2.3. Strategies for Addressing the Challenges

To address the challenges posed by digital tools, several strategies have been proposed in the literature. Jocoy and DiBiase (2006) suggest that the integration of anti-plagiarism software is crucial in detecting copied content and maintaining academic integrity. However, they also note that such tools should be part of a broader strategy that includes educating students about the ethical use of digital resources and fostering a culture of academic honesty.

Another proposed solution is the shift towards formative assessment practices. Buckingham (2019) advocates for assessment methods that focus on the learning process rather than the final product. Formative assessments, such as drafts, peer reviews, and reflective writing, can encourage students to engage more deeply with the material and reduce their reliance on digital aids. This approach is supported by Bailey and Garner (2010), who argue that formative assessment can provide more meaningful feedback and promote continuous learning, thus mitigating the negative impact of digital tools on student writing.

### 2.4. The Role of Feedback in the Digital Context

Effective feedback is a critical component of writing assessment, yet it is increasingly challenging to provide in a digital context. Ferris (2014) and Bitchener and Knoch (2009) highlight the importance of personalized feedback in helping students improve their writing skills. However, the use of AI tools can obscure the true understanding and engagement of students, making it difficult for educators to provide feedback that addresses the specific needs of each student. This calls for innovative approaches to feedback that consider the unique challenges posed by digital tools, such as incorporating digital literacy into the curriculum and using technology to enhance, rather than replace, the traditional feedback process.

## 3. Research methodology

### 3.1. Research approach

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the challenges and solutions associated with assessing writing skills in the digital age at a university in Hanoi.

### 3.2. Research Design

On the one hand, a survey was administered to a randomized sample of students and faculty members to quantify the extent of the challenges identified, including the prevalence of AI tool usage and online resources in writing assignments and their

perceived impact on academic integrity and learning outcomes. On the other hand, in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposefully selected sample of faculty members and students. These interviews aimed to delve deeper into the nuances of the issues, exploring the reasons behind students' reliance on digital aids, the implications for their learning, and the effectiveness of current assessment practices.

### 3.3. Participants

The participants in this study included a total of 50 students and 10 faculty members from the university.

**Students:** The quantitative survey was administered to a randomized sample of 50 students from various academic levels and disciplines within the university. Additionally, 10 students from this group were purposefully selected for qualitative interviews to gain deeper insights into their experiences, motivations for using digital tools, and their views on feedback and assessment practices.

**Faculty members:** 10 faculty members participated in the quantitative survey, representing different departments within the university. A subset of these faculty members also took part in the qualitative interviews, where they shared their experiences and strategies for assessing student writing in the digital age, maintaining academic integrity, and providing meaningful feedback.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The data from both the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews were integrated to provide a comprehensive view of the research findings. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to produce descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify key themes related to the research objectives.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

The study revealed significant insights into the use of digital tools in writing assignments among students and the challenges faced by faculty in maintaining academic integrity and providing effective assessments.

Table 1. Students' insights into the use of digital tools in writing assignments

	N	Mean
I frequently use online resources or AI tools (like Quillbot and Chat GPT) for assistance in my writing assignments.	50	4.00
I often use these tools to paraphrase or create entire essays.	50	3.58

I feel the use of these tools helps my understanding of the course material.	50	3.86
I find the feedback and assessment provided by my instructors helpful.	50	2.68

Quantitative data showed that the majority of students regularly use AI tools and online resources for their writing assignments, with a mean score of 4.0 out of 5, indicating frequent reliance on these resources. Many students specifically use these tools for paraphrasing or generating entire essays, as reflected by a mean score of 3.58. Despite this high usage, students expressed some concerns about their reliance on these technologies. The mean score of 3.86 suggests that while they find these tools somewhat helpful for understanding course material, they are not entirely confident in their efficacy. Additionally, the quality of feedback and assessment from instructors received a mean score of 2.68, indicating a need for more detailed and constructive feedback to better support student learning.

Qualitative findings provided deeper insights into these issues. Interviews with students revealed that 7 out of 10 participants use AI tools primarily to structure their thoughts and avoid plagiarism. However, 6 out of 10 students admitted that their reliance on these tools might be compromising their understanding of the material. Furthermore, 8 out of 10 students felt that the feedback they received from instructors was often vague and lacked clear suggestions for improvement. On the faculty side, all interviewed instructors expressed difficulty in discerning whether a well-written assignment was genuinely the student's own work or the result of AI assistance. They also voiced concerns that students' overreliance on AI tools was leading to a detachment from critical thinking and personal engagement with the material.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of balancing the benefits of digital tools with the need to maintain academic integrity and promote deep, critical engagement with learning. The findings suggest a need for further research to explore the ethical use of AI tools in education and to develop strategies that integrate these technologies into teaching and assessment without compromising educational quality.

## V. Conclusion and recommendations for further studies

This study has highlighted the significant impact

of digital tools, particularly AI-powered writing assistants, on the assessment of writing skills in higher education. The findings reveal that while these tools offer substantial benefits in aiding students with their writing tasks, they also pose challenges related to academic integrity, originality, and the overall quality of learning. Both students and faculty recognize the potential drawbacks of excessive reliance on AI tools, particularly in diminishing critical thinking and personal engagement with the material.

To address these challenges, the study recommends several strategies, including incorporating more in-class writing assignments, utilizing monitoring software during assignments, and providing more personalized and constructive feedback tailored to the digital learning environment. These measures can help maintain the integrity of assessments and enhance students' understanding and engagement with course content.

For further studies, it is recommended to explore the ethical implications of AI tool usage in education more deeply.

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