CHAPTER 9. "I NEEDED HELP": GENERATIVE AI AS WRITING TUTOR

Matthew Fledderjohann and Emily C. Perkins
Le Moyne College

An undergraduate studying in a STEM field said he used generative AI (GenAI) often for his academic work. He'd used it to explain concepts; develop introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions which he then revised; and check grammar. ChatGPT and Grammarly helped him write literary analyses, annotated bibliographies, research papers, and lab reports. He explained:

> I … think that [it's] hard for a student not to use [AI] as deadline[s] infringe on everyday life[,] and the stress of being a student can easily be fixed by an automatic essay generator…. Simply put[,] when you have 3 essays and 2 tests this week[,] why not lose more than half your work by having a very talented instant writer do it for you[?]

Implied within this student's rationalization of his GenAI use are the interrelated realities that writing is difficult and writers need help. The multifaceted cognitive and linguistic activities writing requires are challenging for everyone—especially developing writers. It is an established fact that writers need help because writing is a difficult, time-consuming, varied activity. Writers know they need help (Bond). We, as writing program administrators (WPAs), know they need help (Davies; Rose). And writing centers have long existed to respond to these needs (Harris). However, the proliferation of GenAI has given writers access to a powerful, readily available tool that responds immediately to writing assistance needs. As a result, what does it mean for writing centers when students start turning to large language models (LLMs) to mitigate writing's difficulties? How does students' use of this technology reposition the role of peer writing tutors? Through an Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved study, we surveyed 357 students enrolled at a small, liberal arts college about their experiences with and perceptions of GenAI. In what follows, we closely analyze data from the 171 respondents who reported using GenAI because they needed writing help. We examine who these students are, how they report using GenAI, and what

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they feel about this technology. Our findings highlight what challenges writers identify needing help with and how writers' attitudes about GenAI converge with their reasons for using it. Understanding writers' motivations for using GenAI helps writing centers position and advance the assistance we can provide in contrast to and in connection with what LLMs offer. Our focus on how GenAI informs students' academic writing relates to wider scholarly interest in the costs and benefits of students' interactions with writing-support computer applications ranging from online thesauruses (Gero and Chilton) to Grammarly (Koltovskaia). Much of the research on students' use of Grammarly, in particular, has focused on how it can be an effective tool to help students' writing development (Zinkevich and Ledeneva)—especially multilingual students who are learning English (Alotaibi). Several scholars have drawn attention to the way both in-person tutoring services and Grammarly's analytical tools can complement each other to promote students' development as writers (O'Neill and Russell; Zhang et al.). But, of course, the editing recommendations Grammarly provided prior to 2022 are very different from what GenAI is capable of today. Given this, much recent research has already been devoted to this question of how students are using GenAI. Scholars conclude that many college students have generally favorable opinions about ChatGPT (Das and Madhusudan; Shoufan; Thi Thuy) that is tempered by students' concerns about academic integrity issues (Zhou et al.). This merging of positive perspectives with ethical uncertainty appears in Wang's research. One of his case study subjects rationalized her GenAI use by relating it to seeking writing center assistance: "Now I don't have to physically go to the writing center at 11 PM, waiting for the previous visitor to finish their session" (12). This possibility that GenAI can help students with their writing has led Bedington et al. to encourage WPAs to prepare for administrators to ask, "If ChatGPT can be a 24h tutor, why do we need so many human tutors in the writing center?" (11). This question can be best answered if we know more about which student populations are using GenAI for help with academic writing.

METHODOLOGY

To that end, we designed an IRB-approved study in which we anonymously surveyed currently matriculated undergraduate and graduate students at the small, private liberal arts college in the Northeastern United States where we work as writing center directors. The survey included multiple-choice, check-all, and short-answer questions, covering demographics and participants' usage and attitudes towards GenAI. We elicited feedback about who the respondents were, if they have used GenAI for their academic work, what GenAI tools users

have engaged with, what kinds of academic assignments they have used those tools for, and how and why they used them. Additionally, the survey's 5-point Likert scale questions elicited feedback on participants' experience using GenAI in the classroom, views on GenAI in relation to academic integrity, and overall perceptions on how GenAI tools may influence their futures. All survey questions were optional. Table 9.1 provides survey participant demographic information for the whole participant population (n=357) and the participants who self-reported using GenAI because they needed help (n=171). We've included all demographic data fields here in order to offer the clearest possible picture of our participant pool.

Table 9.1. An Overview of Participant Demographics

Category	**Sub-Category**	**Full Population (357)**		**"I needed help" Population (171)**	
		Frequency (n)	**Percent (%)**	**Frequency (n)**	**Percent (%)**
Gender	Male	99	27.8	47	27.5
	Female	248	69.7	121	70.8
	Non-Binary	9	2.5	3	1.8
Ethnicity	Caucasian	269	75.6	127	74.3
	Black/African	24	6.7	10	5.8
	Latinx or Hispanic	24	6.7	13	7.6
	Asia	11	3.1	6	3.5
	Multiracial	15	4.2	6	3.5
	Other	13	3.6	6	3.5
Standing	First-year	83	23.3	36	21.1
	Sophomore	75	21	43	25.1
	Junior	76	21.3	38	22.2
	Senior	84	23.5	43	25.1
	Graduate student	37	10.4	10	5.8
Reported GPA	3.7-4.0 (A- to A+)	163	45.7	63	36.8
	2.7-3.69 (B- to B+)	171	47.9	99	57.9
	1.7-2.69 (C- to C+)	20	5.6	8	4.7
	0.0-1.69 (F to D)	2	0.56	1	0.58

We distributed the survey via the campus' digital newsletter, bulletin boards across campus, and through faculty members' in-class promotions and virtual survey distributions. Then, we used descriptive statistics and compared distributions, correlations, and means to identify connections between factors relating to students' use of and attitudes towards GenAI. For open-ended responses, we used thematic coding to identify and summarize whether participants' perceptions towards GenAI were positive, negative, or ambiguous.

RESULTS

Students use GenAI for a variety of reasons. However, the large number of students reporting use of GenAI to seek help is compelling (n=171, 47.8% of 357 total respondents, 72.8% of 235 GenAI users). Of the 235 respondents who said they'd used GenAI for academic work, their top reason given was "needed help" (Table 9.2).

Table 9.2. Respondents' Reasons for Using GenAI

"Why have you used GenAI for academic work?"	GenAI Users (235)	
	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
I needed help.	171	72.8
I was curious.	112	47.7
It saved me time.	108	45.96
My instructor encouraged me to.	70	29.8
My instructor required me to.	22	9.4

Since this question about motivation was a multi-selection question, many students provided multiple reasons for why they used GenAI. However, the single highest response for using GenAI for academic work was, "I needed help" (n=35, 14.9% of 235). Table 9.3 displays the five most frequently occurring combinations of selected reasons, which together represent 133 students (56.6% of all GenAI users). Notably, "I needed help" appears in all five of these most common response combinations, indicating that it functioned as a central or underlying motivation that often accompanied other reasons such as curiosity, time savings, or instructor encouragement.

Additionally, GenAI users who reported needing help used GenAI at significantly different rates than those who used GenAI for reasons other than "I needed help", $\chi^2(3, 234) = 15.35$, $p = .002$ (Figure 9.1). More specifically, the students who reported needing help tended to use GenAI more frequently ("often" or "all or almost all the time"), 22.2 percent (n=38 overall compared to only 7.9 percent (n=5) in the group that did not report using GenAI because they needed help.

Table 9.3. Top 5 Distributed Reasons for Using GenAI

No. of GenAI users (133 of 235)	I needed help. (133 of 171)	I was curious. (69 of 112)	It saved time. (59 of 108)	My instructor encouraged me. (11 of 70)	My instructor required me. (0 of 22)
35 (14.9%)	X				
30 (12.7%)	X	X	X		
29 (12.3%)	X		X		
28 (11.9%)	X	X			
11 (4.7%)	X	X		X	

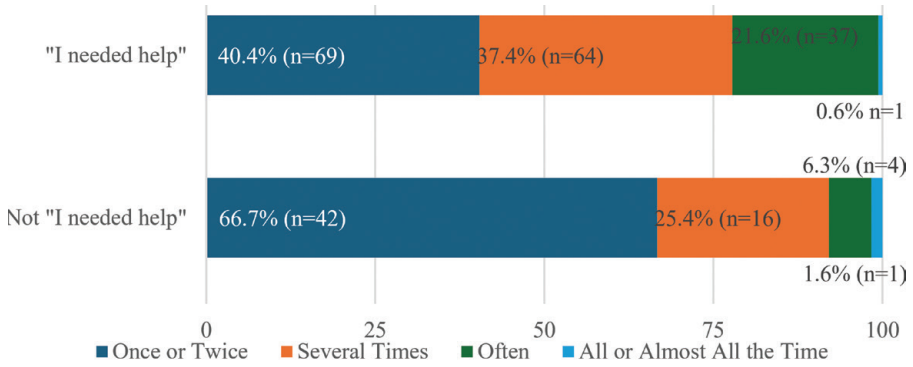

Figure 9.1. Frequency of GenAI use.

Examining how GenAI users who reported needing help used GenAI tools allows us to better understand where in the writing process students seek assistance the most. A high percentage of students reported using GenAI tools for assistance with pre-writing tasks including "brainstorm ideas" (n=191, 81.3%) and "explain concepts" (n=142, 60.4%) as well as revision tasks like "check my grammar" (n=140, 59.6%) and "give me feedback on my writing" (n=100, 42.6%) (Table 9.4). In regard to those invention activities, 89 percent (n=209) of GenAI-using respondents selected either "brainstorming," "explaining concepts," or both of these options to describe how they've used GenAI. Among the population of respondents who'd said they used GenAI at least in part because they needed help, these numbers were higher; 87.7 percent (n=150) used GenAI for brainstorming, 66.7 percent (n=114) selected "explain concepts," and 93.6 percent (n=160) selected at least one of the two.

Table 9.4. Distribution of How GenAI Users Use GenAI

"When using generative AI for academic assignments, how have you used it?"	GenAI Users (235)		"I needed help" Population (171)	
	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Brainstorm ideas	191	81.3	150	87.7
Explain concepts	142	60.4	114	66.7
Check my grammar	140	59.6	111	65
Give me feedback on my writing	100	42.6	82	48
Develop an introduction	57	24.3	49	28.7
Develop a conclusion	47	20	41	24
Develop body paragraphs	40	17	37	21.6
Synthesize sources	27	11.5	25	14.6
Draft an assignment that I then revised	26	11.1	25	14.6
Write a full assignment	8	3.4	6	3.5

There was a statistically significant difference between how many different kinds of assignment types (e.g., research paper, lab report, discussion post) the GenAI users who selected "I needed help" reported using GenAI for and the number of assignment types that GenAI users who hadn't identified needing help said they'd used GenAI for (Table 9.5). The number of assignment types for which GenAI users who were at least sometimes motivated by needing help used GenAI tools for (M=3.5, SD=2.24) was significantly more than the number of assignment types for which GenAI users who never reported needing additional help used GenAI for (M=2.6, SD=2.19) ($t(232)$=2.65, p.009). Across this data, people who used GenAI because they needed help used it more frequently (Figure 9.1) and for more types of assignments (Table 9.5) than people who used it for other reasons.

Table 9.5. Number of Different Kinds of Assignment Types GenAI Users Used GenAI On

	GenAI Users Who Selected "I needed help"	GenAI Users Who *Didn't* Select "I needed help"
How many different types of assignments respondents used GenAI on	Mean: 3.5, n=170	Mean: 2.6, n=63

Finally, we were struck by how much more positively the students who used GenAI because they needed help felt about this technology than the students who used it for other reasons (Figure 9.2). The rate at which the "I needed help" population of GenAI users felt differently about the value of GenAI than the population of GenAI users who hadn't used it because they needed help was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, 191) = 6.20$, $p = .04$. This is additionally notable given how GenAI users had such different opinions about GenAI than the population of respondents who reported not having used GenAI (Figure 9.3), $\chi^2(2, 287) = 67.51$, $p < .00001$. Students who used GenAI thought about it more positively than students who didn't, and more students who used it because they needed help perceived it positively than those who used it for other reasons (Figure 9.3).

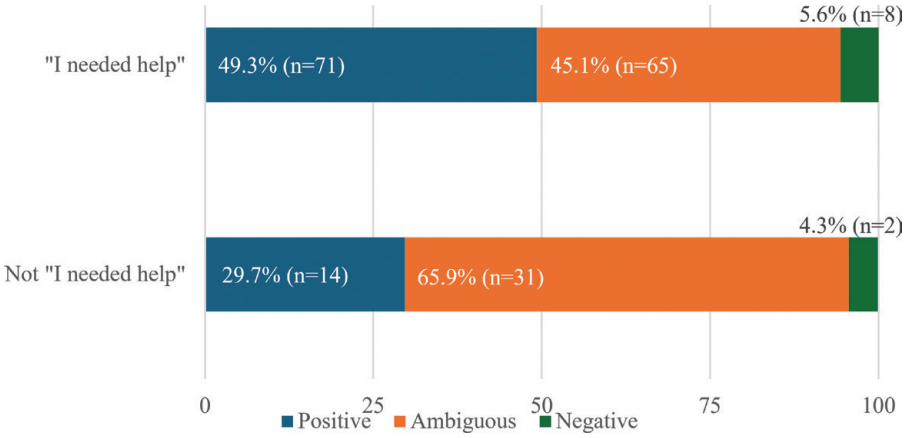

Figure 9.2. GenAI users' motivation and attitudes towards GenAI.

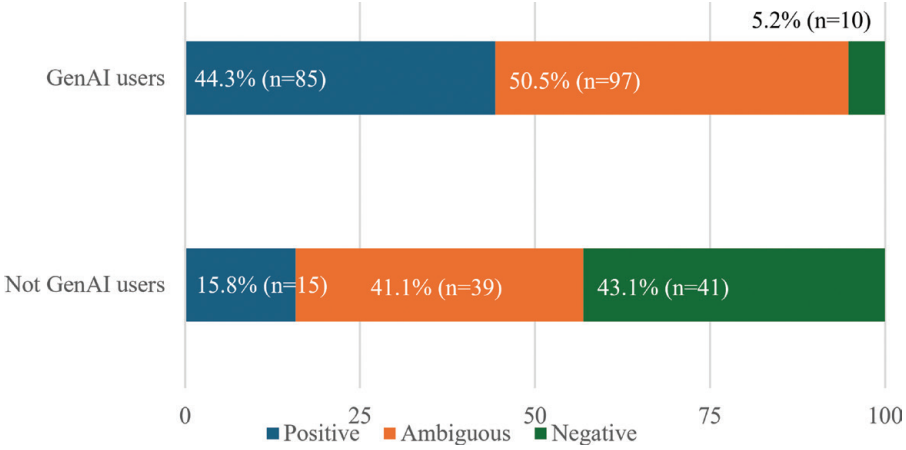

Figure 9.3 Respondents' attitudes towards GenAI.

While we believe our research productively informs our subsequent discussion of how GenAI is influencing the future of writing centers, our study's design is subject to limitations. First, respondents who reported they used GenAI because they needed help did not necessarily seek help every time they used GenAI. For example, one student reported using the tool several times because it saved her time, she was curious about the tool, and she needed help. It's possible that she only used GenAI once for help and then additional times out of curiosity and to save time. Furthermore, our study relied on convenience sampling and self-reported data, so we cannot make generalizations from our sample to the larger population of GenAI student users or guarantee the accuracy of the responses. We received responses from participants who were easiest to contact and recruit, thereby not capturing the perspectives or objective behavior of all students at our institution. The non-representative nature of our findings is particularly notable when considering how many of our survey respondents self-reported maintaining an A or B grade point average (GPA) (n=334, 93.5%).

DISCUSSION

Our survey's findings have direct implications for how writing centers function and understand themselves in conversation with GenAI. Specifically, what we learned about the kind of writing-related assistance students seek from GenAI can guide how we contribute to and train our tutors to help during early invention stages. Furthermore, what we learned about GenAI users' positive attitudes about this technology can point us towards how GenAI needs to be addressed and not dismissed within our writing centers and composition pedagogy practices.

Brainstorming

While 235 respondents had dozens of different responses to the survey's questions about how they've used GenAI, as previously identified, the most common use was "brainstorming." This trend has been found across other studies about students' use of GenAI (Bleakney et al., this volume; Essid and Cummins). We found that, after "brainstorming," the next most commonly cited reason for using GenAI was "explaining concepts." These two activities were even more commonly selected among the respondents who said they'd used GenAI because they needed help.

Of course, writing centers are eager to help students through the invention stage of the writing process. And while generalist tutors can't be accountable to explain all concepts, they are consistently ready to ask insightful questions that can advance content knowledge. Our tutoring handbooks devote paragraphs,

sections, and chapters to prewriting techniques (e.g., Bishop, 82; Clark, 31-42; Fitzgerald and Ianetta, 198, 204; Ryan and Zimmerelli, 31-35). However, although we know writing centers can be excellent places for writers to generate, understand, and refine new ideas, the writers at our institutions might not know this. In his review of 250 tutoring session logs, John Kneisley found that only 6 percent of sessions focused on invention or brainstorming tasks. The distance between our enthusiasm for helping writers through the invention process and the extent to which writers may not make appointments to brainstorm may be related to gaps in students' knowledge about the purpose and function of writing centers (Cheatle and Bullerjahn). However, knowing how many students are turning to GenAI for prewriting purposes elicits important questions. Should we prioritize connecting with students where they are by teaching them how to brainstorm effectively with GenAI? Is there a fundamental difference between the quality of a piece of writing depending on if its prewriting stage was accomplished by two people having a conversation or by one person prompting an algorithm? Is outsourcing brainstorming to machines a bad thing? And if so, why? The insight our study provides regarding how many students view GenAI as a productive tool in their prewriting process has motivated us as administrators to continue encouraging our tutors to discuss brainstorming techniques with students. We created a brainstorming handout for tutors to use during sessions to introduce various brainstorming strategies, such as freewriting, mind mapping, outlining, and asking questions. These types of practical tools can be used to guide conversations and help students recognize the value in working through the challenges of the invention process. We hope our study's findings will compel WPAs to further explore this phenomenon and position writing centers as actively engaging with and responding to the pre-writing assistance students are receiving through GenAI.

Increased Use and Positive Perceptions

Our research also reveals that students who turn to GenAI because they need writing help are using it across more genres and expressing a heightened level of positivity toward the technology compared to students who are using GenAI for other reasons or not at all. This suggests a growing acceptance of and reliance on GenAI tools as valuable aids in the writing process across academic contexts. These findings highlight the evolving landscape of writing support services and the increasingly significant role that GenAI tools are playing in helping students navigate their writing endeavors.

The fact that positive perceptions increase with use, especially among students who have turned to GenAI for help, suggests that writing centers must

find ways to respond to GenAI without dismissing it. Many students perceive it as a good thing. Instead of trying to persuade them otherwise, we would do best to face its disruption directly and reimagine what the writing process (and especially the revision process) looks like when a machine can efficiently generate ideas, summarize content, and churn out copy in seconds. Students recognize they need help with writing, and many see GenAI as a good thing. As such, perhaps writing centers can become places where students are guided toward how to critically evaluate and use all of the writing resources available to them—including GenAI. In her 1987 article about computers in the writing center, Jeanne Luchte used Corbett's assertion that authors are "heralds of the new age" to enjoin WPAs to embrace computers in their efforts to teach "the new literacy with a process approach from an ideal situation" (18). GenAI has brought us to a similar moment—an opportunity to work with student writers as they learn about the strengths and weaknesses of this new technology.

CONCLUSION

Several respondents among the 171 who used GenAI for help mentioned how valuable these tools can be if used "correctly." One specified, "Students should be taught how to use AI without losing the ability to work independently of it." Writing centers are uniquely positioned in the higher education landscape to help bridge the gap between convenient use and effective learning. Many students want to learn and know they need help. When it comes to writing, the invention stage, in particular, poses challenges for them. And, as students use GenAI for help, they have increasingly positive perceptions about it. What we know about students' use of GenAI must influence how writing centers function. We should be actively spreading the word across our campuses that writing centers can provide the kind of individualized, specific recommendations available through ChatGPT—with the added benefit of coming from a relatable peer who can explain a writer's thought process and sympathize with the writer. Additionally, writing tutors' advice can fill the responsibility gap GenAI has created (Capps), and they can be guided to ethically navigate the plagiarism and academic integrity concerns GenAI raises (Roustio). Writing centers can provide the help writers are seeking from GenAI. But the choice between meeting with a writing center tutor or plugging in a GenAI prompt is a false dichotomy. We also need to train our tutors to talk to writers about GenAI and perhaps even (depending on campus policies) use GenAI in tutorial sessions. We must embrace rather than resist the inevitable influence of GenAI by acknowledging its resources and limitations, collaborating with it, and teaching through and about it to continue helping student writers gain more rhetorical skills and apply compositional knowledge.

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