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Epistemic Agency and Academic Writing in the Age of genAI

Why Writing Pedagogy Needs an Epistemic Reorientation from a Media-Pedagogical Perspective

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Abstract

In higher education, academic writing has long been a central practice through which knowledge is developed, negotiated, and communicated. Epistemic agency, understood as responsibility for judgement and justification, has thereby functioned as a largely implicit foundation of writing, with authorship and text forming a stable unit from which epistemic responsibility could be inferred. The emergence of generative AI (genAI) disrupts this configuration. While genAI can participate in the formulation, structuring, and evaluation of knowledge claims, it does not bear responsibility for them. At the same time, it becomes internal to writing processes, making epistemic agency less visible and no longer reliably inferable from textual products alone. This article argues for a reorientation of academic writing pedagogy toward the explicit cultivation of epistemic agency under conditions of AI mediation. It conceptualises epistemic agency along four interrelated principles: decision-making, positioning, evaluation, and justification. From a media-pedagogical perspective, these are understood as mediated practices in which responsibility, critique, and authorship must be actively developed. The analysis thus situates academic writing within broader transformations of knowledge practices and points to fundamental challenges for learning and assessment in higher education in the age of generative AI.

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Epistemische Handlungsfähigkeit und akademisches Schreiben im Zeitalter generativer KI. Epistemische Neuorientierungen der Schreibdidaktik aus medienpädagogischer Perspektive

Zusammenfassung

Im Hochschulbereich stellt das akademische Schreiben seit Langem eine zentrale epistemische Praxis dar, durch die Wissen erworben, entwickelt und verbreitet wird. Epistemische Handlungsfähigkeit, verstanden als Verantwortung für epistemisches Urteilsvermögen und Rechtfertigung, bildete dabei eine weitgehend implizite Grundlage akademischen Schreibens. Urheberschaft und Text galten als stabile Einheit, aus der epistemische Urteile abgeleitet werden konnten. Das Aufkommen der generativen KI (genAI) stört diese Ordnung in einer Weise, die nicht nur technologischer, sondern auch medienpädagogischer Natur ist. Während genAI an epistemisch relevanten Aspekten des Schreibens beteiligt sein kann, trägt sie keine epistemische Verantwortung und wird zugleich zu einem internen Bestandteil der Produktion und Bewertung von Wissensansprüchen. Epistemische Handlungsfähigkeit kann daher nicht mehr zuverlässig allein aus akademischen Texten erschlossen werden. Der Beitrag argumentiert vor diesem Hintergrund für eine Neuausrichtung der akademischen Schreibpädagogik hin zur expliziten Förderung epistemischer Handlungsfähigkeit im Kontext von KI. Diese wird entlang vier miteinander verbundener Prinzipien konzeptualisiert: epistemische Entscheidungsfindung, Positionierung, Bewertung und Rechtfertigung. Aus medienpädagogischer Perspektive werden diese Prinzipien als vermittelte epistemische Praxis verstanden, in der Verantwortung, Kritik und Urheberschaft aktiv entwickelt werden müssen. Die Analyse weist damit über das akademische Schreiben hinaus auf grundlegende Herausforderungen für Lernen und Leistungsbewertung im Hochschulbereich im Kontext von genAI.

1. Introduction

Academic writing has long been regarded as a central practice of knowledge production and acquisition in academia (e.g. Kruse and Jakobs 1999). Within higher education, writing is not merely a means of documenting results but a key epistemic activity through which understanding is developed, arguments are refined, and disciplinary knowledge is constructed.

Writing pedagogy has aimed to enable students' participation in academic knowledge practices, presupposing that epistemic responsibility remains anchored in the writing subject. This capacity to evaluate, position, and justify knowledge claims is captured by epistemic agency, as elaborated below.

The emergence of generative AI (genAI) fundamentally challenges this assumption (cf. Schiefner-Rohs and Grünberger 2025). GenAI systems are computational systems that generate text based on statistical patterns in large datasets rather than on epistemic understanding. They can perform core epistemic activities of academic writing, including structuring arguments, formulating and justifying claims, synthesising sources, and generating explanations (Weber-Wulff et al. 2023; Hicks et al. 2024). However, they do not bear responsibility for these processes or their outcomes. At the same time, writing pedagogy continues to assume that responsibility for knowledge claims ultimately remains within the human author (Buck 2025). As academic writing processes become increasingly mediated between human and machine, the enactment of epistemic responsibility becomes less visible so that epistemic agency can no longer be reliably inferred from textual products alone (Cress and Kimmerle 2023). This development cannot be addressed with writing pedagogy alone, but requires a media pedagogical perspective that accounts for the mediated conditions of writing and knowledge practices. In this article, media pedagogy is understood as a perspective for examining and shaping how such mediated conditions structure learning and epistemic practices. This aligns with recent attempts to position media pedagogy under post-digital conditions as a field concerned with the educational implications of digitally mediated environments (Tulodziecki 2025; Kerres 2025).

How these conditions can be pedagogically addressed in academic writing remains insufficiently specified. This article responds to this gap by developing an epistemic didactics of academic writing as a framework for engaging with AI-mediated writing practices in higher education.

The article proceeds in four steps. First, it revisits central assumptions of writing pedagogy prior to the emergence of genAI. Second, it analyses how genAI challenges these assumptions. Third, it introduces epistemic agency as a theoretical lens. Finally, it outlines key principles of this framework and discusses their implications.

2. Traditional Concepts of Writing Pedagogy and Their Implicit Epistemic Assumptions

«Wissenschaft ist ohne geschriebene Texte nicht denkbar» – scientific knowledge is inseparable from written forms of communication (Kruse and Jakobs 1999). Academic writing has therefore long been understood not merely as a means of recording results, but as a central practice through which knowledge is generated, stabilised, and made contestable within disciplinary communities (Pohl 2016).

In Anglo-American higher education, this understanding has been institutionally embedded, with writing conceived as a core curricular practice closely tied to thinking, learning, and knowledge construction (Carter et al. 2007; Russell et al. 2009). Initiatives such as Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines frame writing as a mediating activity through which disciplinary knowledge is developed and negotiated (Russell 1997; Applebee et al. 2017). Learning to write in disciplinary genres is thus inseparable from learning to think within disciplinary epistemologies. More broadly, writing has been conceptualised as an epistemological practice that supports processes of knowledge construction, justification, and evaluation across personal, disciplinary, as well as sociocultural dimensions (Chen 2019; Kruse et al. 2023).

At the same time, research in academic literacy has shown that the epistemic demands associated with academic writing are often articulated only indirectly, through broad evaluative descriptors such as analysis, evaluation or synthesis, which resist procedural specification and remain largely tacit, even for those who assess student texts (Lea and Street 1998). While writing pedagogy has made genre conventions (eg. Swales 2014; Weissberg and Buker 1990), writing processes, and formal conventions increasingly explicit, the epistemic dimensions of writing have largely remained implicit and are rarely addressed as objects of instruction (Lea and Street 1998; Kruse and Jakobs 1999; Pohl 2016).

In response, writing pedagogy has commonly operationalised academic writing through competence models that reflect the need for students to acquire discipline-specific writing abilities through participation in academic practices (Pohl 2016). In German-speaking writing research in particular, Kruse and Jakobs (1999) explicitly conceptualise academic writing as a competence-based practice, requiring systematic instruction in higher education. These competences include, among others, genre, rhetorical,

intertextual, and receptive dimensions, all of which articulate what it means to participate successfully in academic writing and have informed teaching and assessment practices. Underlying these models is the implicit assumption that learners are able to make and justify knowledge-related decisions within academic writing. Subsequent contributions have further elaborated these competence models (e.g., Pohl 2016; Frank et al. 2013). Yet, they largely leave unaddressed how such decision-making is developed or supported pedagogically.

3. Generative AI and the Redistribution of Epistemic Agency in Academic Writing

Building on the implicit epistemic premises identified in the preceding chapter, this section examines how these assumptions are challenged under conditions of genAI. To do so, it clarifies the concept of epistemic agency, analyses how genAI reconfigures epistemically relevant dimensions of academic writing, and discusses the implications of these developments for writing pedagogy.

Building on the understanding introduced above, epistemic agency can be conceptualised as the capacity of individuals to act as responsible knowers: to evaluate information, justify knowledge claims, and take ownership of epistemic decisions within shared knowledge practices (Olson 2015; Pearson 2024). Rather than referring to voluntary belief formation, epistemic agency concerns the ways in which individuals actively participate in processes of knowledge acquisition and justification within shared epistemic practices (Elgin 2013).

A process-oriented understanding of agency is provided by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), who conceptualise agency as a temporally embedded phenomenon constituted through the interplay of iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative dimensions. While their model does not explicitly address epistemic agency, it offers a productive framework for analysing how agency unfolds in temporally structured practices. Agency is thus not understood as a stable individual capacity, but as an emergent, relational achievement unfolding across time. In media-pedagogical research, this model has been further developed by Grabensteiner (2023), who situates these dimensions within processes of media action (Medienhandeln) and relational Bildung (cf. Jörissen 2011, 222 – 23), understood as the view that

the subject and its agency emerge in and through media practice itself, a position this article returns to in Table 1.

Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal model is particularly valuable for the present study, as it provides a conceptual link between media-pedagogical analyses of mediated action and writing pedagogy, allowing academic writing to be understood as a temporally structured and increasingly mediated practice.

Of particular relevance in AI-mediated writing contexts is the practical-evaluative dimension, that is, the situated capacity to make judgements and decisions in the present. This dimension is fundamentally reshaped by genAI systems, which intervene directly in ongoing evaluative and argumentative processes (e.g. Ferrario et al. 2024; Messeri and Crockett 2024). From an epistemic perspective, this suggests that genAI does not merely affect the products of writing but reconfigures the processes through which epistemic agency is enacted.

Against this conceptual background, writing pedagogy has traditionally assumed a close alignment between writing practices and human epistemic agency (Kruse 2013). Because authorship, epistemic judgement, and responsibility were tied to the act of writing itself, epistemic engagement was often treated as inferable from textual production and its outcomes, an assumption that has been problematised in academic literacies research (see also Lea and Street 1998).

While this alignment has never entirely been unproblematic, challenges such as plagiarism, ghost-writing, and contract cheating were historically treated as violations of academic integrity rather than as structural issues of writing pedagogy (Walker and Townley 2012; Christensen Hughes and Eaton 2022). These practices presupposed a stable normative distinction between legitimate authorship and illegitimate delegation, leaving the concept of epistemic agency itself largely intact and anchored in the human author.

GenAI, however, alters this configuration more fundamentally. Although current debates on so-called 'AI-giarism' often frame its use within existing categories of misconduct (Chan 2023), genAI does not merely support writing but actively contributes to the production of text, argumentation, and synthesis (Kleiman 2022; Ferrario et al. 2024). As a result, texts may display the surface features of academic competence while the epistemic

responsibility for claims, reasons, and interpretations becomes increasingly difficult to locate and assess.

From a media-pedagogical perspective, this shift is a reconfiguration of epistemic practices under conditions of socio-technical mediation. Knaus (2023) for example, conceptualises AI-supported writing as a form of collaborative knowledge construction, thereby foregrounding the distributed and relational nature of authorship in AI-mediated contexts. Such perspectives move beyond a logic of violation and instead point to a structural transformation: established ways of inferring epistemic responsibility from written products are called into question, requiring a reconceptualisation of epistemic agency in mediated writing practices. This article draws on the relational insights while maintaining that epistemic responsibility must remain reconstructible and attributable to the human writer, as summarised in Table 1 and further elaborated in 4.3.

Step	Aspect	Relational perspective	Position adopted in this article
Starting Point	Subject formation	Agency and competence emerge in and through media practice itself, not prior to it (Jörissen 2011; Grabensteiner 2023; Knaus 2023)	Accepted as a description of how AI-mediated writing unfolds
Manifestation	Human-AI boundary	Increasingly blurred, as computational systems participate directly in epistemic processes (see 4.3)	Accepted empirically, but not embraced as the aim of this article
Consequence	Epistemic responsibility	Becomes diffuse and difficult to locate once authorship is distributed across human and AI contributions	Must remain reconstructible and attributable to the human writer
Response	Pedagogical implication	Without intervention, this diffusion risks undermining novice writers' epistemic development	Motivates the epistemic didactics developed in this article

Tab. 1: Relational media pedagogy and the position adopted in this article, with a focus on writing pedagogy in higher education.

This redistribution manifests concretely in AI-mediated writing practices. GenAI does not simply contribute to writing processes, but actively shapes how epistemic decisions are made within them. In this sense, genAI is an epistemic technology that participates in processes by shaping how knowledge claims are formulated and evaluated, without itself bearing responsibility (cf. Alvarado 2023; Coeckelbergh 2026). This becomes particularly visible in the way AI-generated outputs can appear grounded and authoritative, potentially fostering what Messeri and Crockett (2024) describe as “illusions of understanding”, in which epistemic work is partially offloaded while maintaining a sense of comprehension (Ferrario et al. 2024).

This redistribution does not affect all learners equally. While experienced writers may be able to integrate genAI without fundamentally displacing epistemic responsibility, for novice writers epistemic agency is still in the process of being developed (Kessler and Michiels 2026). In such contexts, the availability of genAI introduces a particular vulnerability: central epistemic activities may be prematurely delegated to the system. This difference can be understood in light of the epistemic capacities that writing pedagogy aims to cultivate. Whereas experienced writers can draw on established practices of evaluating, structuring, and justifying knowledge within disciplinary contexts, for novice writers these capacities are still emerging and therefore more susceptible to being externalised.

This vulnerability can be further specified from a developmental perspective. Perry’s (1981, 1970) model of intellectual development describes how learners move from dualistic conceptions of knowledge, in which knowledge is perceived as certain and externally given, toward more relativistic and reflective understandings in which knowledge is recognised as constructed and requiring justification. In earlier stages of this development, learners are more likely to rely on perceived authorities as sources of correct answers. In AI-mediated writing contexts, genAI systems may assume precisely such a role, as their outputs often appear coherent, authoritative, and epistemically grounded. As a result, learners may accept AI-generated content without sufficient critical evaluation, reinforcing tendencies toward epistemic dependence rather than fostering the development of epistemic agency.

This dynamic can be understood in terms of cognitive offloading, that is, the delegation of cognitive processes to external tools (Risko and Gilbert 2016). In academic writing, however, such offloading extends beyond

cognitive effort to epistemic processes themselves. When learners rely on genAI for core decisions without critical engagement, cognitive offloading becomes epistemic offloading: a displacement of responsibility from the writer to the system. As a result, the development of epistemic agency may be hindered precisely in those phases where it is most crucial. This is supported by recent empirical research, which shows that frequent use of genAI is associated with reduced engagement in analytical and evaluative processes, mediated by mechanisms of cognitive offloading (Gerlich 2025).

Taken together, these dynamics point to a fundamental instability in the attribution of epistemic agency in academic writing, as epistemic decisions are increasingly shaped within a mediated environment while remaining ascribed to the human writer.

4. Towards an Epistemic Didactics of Academic Writing

Building on this analysis, academic writing under conditions of genAI requires an explicit pedagogical engagement with epistemic agency. From both a writing-didactic and a media-pedagogical perspective, this raises the question of how these processes can be fostered and sustained within socio-technical environments shaped by genAI.

In response, this section develops an epistemic didactics of academic writing as a complementary perspective that foregrounds agency and responsibility in AI-mediated writing contexts. Rather than redefining writing competence, this perspective adds an additional conceptual layer to established approaches by focusing on how learners assume responsibility for decisions within mediated writing processes. In particular, it emphasises the practical-evaluative dimension of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), that is, learners' situated capacity to make justified decisions in the moment of writing.

The four principles proposed in the following are not arbitrarily selected but derive from a deliberate synthesis of two complementary theoretical strands, introduced in Chapter 3 and brought together in Table 2: decision-making, evaluation, and justification are strongly grounded across established accounts of epistemic agency, while positioning extends this framework as an addendum suited to the temporally structured, mediated environment of academic writing, addressing a dimension that remains largely implicit in the epistemic agency literature discussed above.

Principle	Epistemic agency theory	Media-pedagogical perspective
Decision-making (4.2.1)	Pearson (2024) frames epistemic agency explicitly as responsible decision-making under uncertainty; Olson (2015) treats epistemic choices (e.g., which sources or claims to accept) as a core exercise of agency. Writers enact this whenever they decide whether to accept, modify, or reject genAI-generated content.	In AI-mediated writing, engagement with and selection of AI tools is embedded in socio-technical arrangements that shape what epistemic choices are available. This resonates with Baacke's (Baacke 2024 [1996]) notion of <i>Medien-nutzung</i> – the competent, purposeful use of media as part of the communicative repertoire (Knaus 2023, 2024), as well as with Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) practical evaluative dimension to make situative judgements.
Evaluation (4.2.3)	All three accounts (Elgin 2013; Olson 2015; Pearson 2024) treat evaluation as constitutive of epistemic agency: assessing the reliability, relevance, and validity of information or claims before they are incorporated into one's own reasoning. In genAI-mediated writing, this corresponds to critically appraising AI-generated content against disciplinary standards.	Critical assessment of digital content is constituted in and through media practice. This corresponds to Baacke's (2024 [1996]) <i>Medienkunde</i> – knowledge about media systems and their structures – extended to AI-mediated knowledge practices (Livingstone 2004, 2010; Buckingham 2010; Knaus 2024).
Justification (4.2.4)	Justification is treated as central across all three sources (Elgin 2013; Olson 2015; Pearson 2024) particularly by Elgin, for whom giving reasons for one's claims is the defining act of responsible knowing. In writing, this involves being able to account for why a claim, source, or formulation was adopted.	Justification is a dialogical, socially situated achievement that cannot be delegated to technological systems and must remain attributable to the human writer (Habermas 1991, 1995; Totter and Grabensteiner 2025)

Principle	Epistemic agency theory	Media-pedagogical perspective
Positioning (4.2.2)	Positioning is not a named category in the epistemic agency literature above but corresponds to the projective dimension of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998): the situated, forward-looking framing of one's stance toward a problem or claim. Positioning has long been integral to academic writing itself, as writers routinely situate their claims relative to existing literature and competing perspectives, independent of AI. Grabensteiner (2023) extends this to media action, making it directly applicable to how writers position themselves toward genAI-mediated knowledge production.	Reflexive, critical stance-taking toward AI-mediated content as <i>Medienkritik</i> — constituted relationally in and through media practice, not prior to it (Jörissen 2011; Grabensteiner 2023; Knaus 2024; Baacke 2024 [1996])

Tab. 2: The four principles of epistemic agency: a two-strand theoretical synthesis.

The following subsections address the epistemic vulnerability of learners in AI-mediated writing contexts and examine these principles of epistemic agency in academic writing. Figure 1 conceptualises their interrelation and serves as a basis for discussing their pedagogical implications under conditions of genAI.

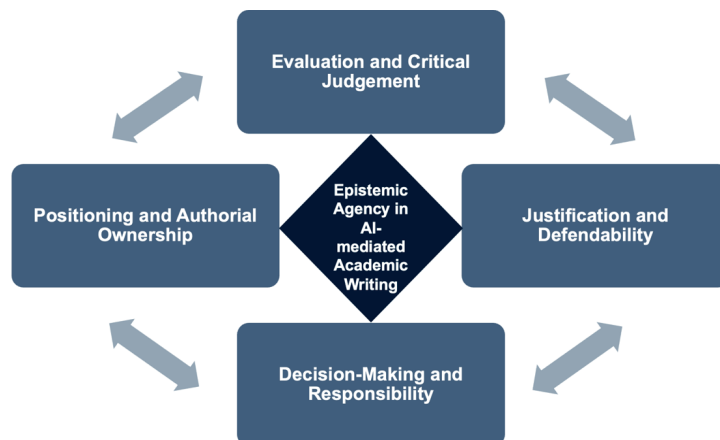


Fig. 1: Core principles of an epistemic didactics of academic writing in AI-mediated environments.

4.1 *Epistemic Vulnerability and Its Pedagogical Implications*

Building on the instability identified in Section 3, the use of genAI in academic writing introduces a specific pedagogical challenge: how can learners be guided to develop and exercise epistemic responsibility under these conditions?

Recent work suggests that this challenge is not merely theoretical but has concrete implications for learning. As discussed above, the increasing reliance on AI-generated contributions can foster forms of dependency, where central aspects of writing are no longer consistently enacted by the learner (Chirayath et al. 2025). From a writing pedagogical perspective, this raises questions about how responsibility for knowledge claims can be maintained when processes of text production are partially externalised (Buck 2025). At the same time, media-pedagogical perspectives emphasise that such shifts require forms of critical-reflective engagement with digital systems, as knowledge practices themselves are increasingly shaped by algorithmic environments (Knaus 2024).

Empirical studies further substantiate this challenge. As shown above Gerlich (2025) finds that frequent use of genAI is associated with reduced analytical and evaluative engagement. Similarly, Jose et al. (2025) and Ninghardjanti et al. (2025) emphasise that learning environments must be designed to require independent judgement, source verification, and critical engagement in order to prevent passive reliance on AI-generated content.

These developments have also led to initial pedagogical responses in higher education that seek to rethink learning environments under conditions of genAI. In particular, recent work highlights the central role of assessment in shaping how students relate to knowledge. Rather than merely evaluating performance, assessment practices position students as particular kinds of knowers, influencing whether they engage with knowledge as passive recipients or as active contributors (Nieminen and Ketonen 2024; Nieminen et al. 2025). This implies that pedagogical designs must create conditions in which students actively engage with, evaluate, and contribute to knowledge, rather than primarily reproducing it.

At the same time, writing pedagogy has begun to address genAI more directly by treating its use as an explicit object of instruction, providing structured guidance that links tool use to disciplinary expectations and to the learner's responsibility in engaging with AI-generated content (Buck 2025).

While these approaches highlight important directions, they remain focused on specific aspects of the problem, such as assessment design or the guidance of AI use in writing practice. What remains insufficiently specified is how the underlying processes through which learners engage with knowledge can be systematically addressed across AI-mediated writing practices.

To address this gap, the following section elaborates the four interrelated principles introduced above into concrete criteria for writing pedagogy.

4.2 Core Principles of an Epistemic Didactics of Academic Writing

These principles capture distinct ways in which learners engage with knowledge within academic writing and together form a heuristic for analysing and guiding such processes. As illustrated in Figure 1, they are best understood as overlapping and iterative rather than linear.

In AI-mediated contexts, each of these principles may be partially delegated to technological systems. The following subsections translate them into core principles for the design of writing instruction under conditions of genAI.

4.2.1 Epistemic Decision Making and Responsibility

The first principle concerns epistemic decision-making: learners must remain responsible for key choices, including what counts as a relevant problem, which sources are considered authoritative, and which claims are adopted or rejected in AI-mediated writing processes. While genAI systems may suggest research questions, methods, or sources, determining which of these are appropriate and warranted in a given context remains the responsibility of the human author.

Importantly, genAI does not merely support decision-making but shapes the space of possible options from which decisions are made. Responsibility therefore extends beyond selecting among given alternatives to critically relating these to one's own goals, argumentative direction, and disciplinary standards, including recognising when relevant perspectives or options may be missing.

Decision-making is closely intertwined with evaluation but constitutes a distinct principle insofar as it involves committing to and taking responsibility for a particular course of action.

From a didactic perspective, this calls for writing tasks and assessment formats in which such decisions are made explicit and visible. For instance, students may be required to document their use of genAI in a prompting journal, explaining which suggestions were adopted, modified, or rejected and why. In more situated tasks, this may involve asking students to justify in a short oral defence why a particular research question was selected and how the decision aligns with disciplinary standards.

This implies a reconfiguration of assessment formats that place greater emphasis on process-oriented evaluation. One example can be found in project-based engineering courses, in which students develop technical applications alongside communication products such as user manuals, product videos, or websites. As part of this process, students define and iteratively refine their own assessment criteria, including decisions about which aspects of the product to prioritise and how to address the needs of a specific audience. While genAI may support the initial drafting of such criteria, selecting, revising, and justifying them in response to feedback requires learners to actively engage in epistemic decision-making.

Figure 2 illustrates this shift from pre-genAI writing (left column), where agency is inferred from the final text, to an epistemic reorientation (right column), in which it is examined through visible writing processes. This may include reflective components, oral examinations, or coaching-based interactions in which learners articulate and justify their decisions. Such approaches point toward triangulated forms of assessment that combine textual products, process documentation, and interactive formats.

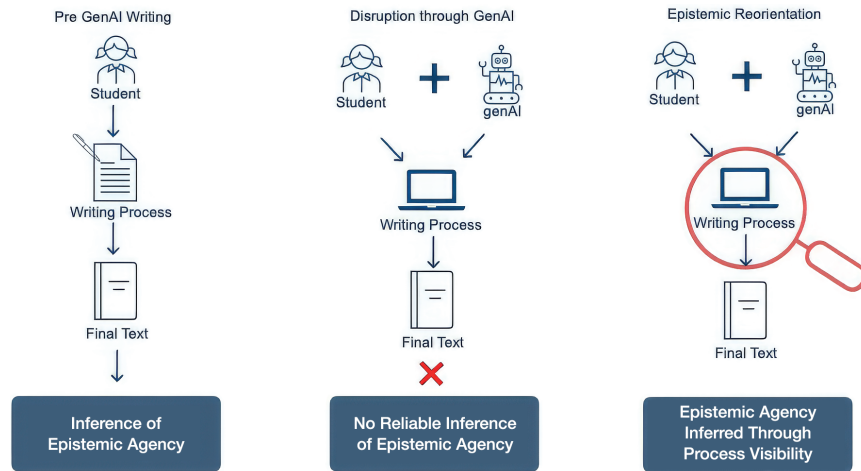


Fig. 2: From product-based inference to process-oriented epistemic reorientation: changing conditions for the visibility and assessment of epistemic agency in academic writing under genAI.

4.2.2 Epistemic Positioning and Authorial Ownership

While decision-making addresses which choices are made during the writing process and how responsibility for these choices is maintained, a second principle concerns positioning: the requirement that learners explicitly situate their claims in relation to existing disciplinary knowledge, competing perspectives, and AI-generated contributions, thereby assuming responsibility as authors.

From a media-pedagogical perspective, this resonates with Baacke's (1996, 2024 [1996]) concept of media competence, with a particular focus on media critique as central to responsible authorship and positioning toward mediated content¹, because critically interrogating AI-generated content is arguably the most important capacity for maintaining epistemic responsibility in AI-mediated writing (Gerlich 2025). More recent contributions extend this perspective to AI-mediated knowledge practices (e.g. Knaus 2024).

¹ Baacke distinguishes four dimensions of media competence: media knowledge, media use, media production, and media critique, which he emphasises as a central dimension; the text's 2024 republication in *MedienPädagogik* underscores its continued relevance to contemporary debates on media criticism (Baacke 2024 [1996]).

This emphasis on critical and reflective engagement is also reflected in international media literacy research, which highlights interpretation, evaluation, and reflexive positioning in relation to digital content (e.g. Livingstone 2004, 2010). In addition, media-didactic perspectives emphasise that learning with digital media is not limited to tool use but involves the design of participatory environments in which learners actively shape and reflect their knowledge practices under conditions of digitality (cf. Mayrberger 2025; Kerres 2025).

In AI-mediated writing contexts, positioning becomes particularly vulnerable because genAI intervenes directly in the formulation of claims, arguments, and explanations. When students adopt AI-generated text without critical appropriation, authorship risks becoming diffuse: it becomes unclear whether a claim is advanced by the learner or reproduced from AI-generated content. This blurring of authorial voice undermines a central function of academic writing, namely, to make visible who stands behind a claim. As recent research shows, generative systems blur the boundaries of authorship, making it increasingly difficult to attribute claims to a clearly identifiable subject (Mazzi 2024). For example, when a genAI system proposes an interpretation, summarises a source, or formulates a claim, the relevant question is not whether the formulation is linguistically appropriate, but how the learner positions themselves in relation to it. Do they adopt the claim, modify it, contrast it with alternative perspectives, or reject it? Without such positioning, a text may appear coherent while the author's stance remains indeterminate.

This requires that such positions are made explicit within the writing process, so that responsibility remains attributable. As agency can no longer be inferred from the final product alone, it must instead be made visible through process-oriented formats such as reflective documentation, prompting journals, or coaching interactions (see Figure 2).

Didactically, this implies that writing tasks and assessment formats must not only focus on the final text but require learners to indicate and justify their stance toward AI-generated contributions. For instance, coaching sessions based on draft texts can prompt learners to explain which claims were adopted or rejected and on what grounds. Prompting journals can support this process by documenting how AI-generated outputs are engaged with and reflected upon over time.

4.2.3 *Epistemic Evaluation and Critical Judgement*

At the core of academic writing lies the capacity for evaluation: the ability to critically assess evidence, plausibility, and competing claims in situations of uncertainty. While decision-making concerns which options are selected, and positioning refers to how claims are situated in relation to existing knowledge and competing perspectives, evaluation addresses how such options are assessed in the first place and provides the basis for subsequent decisions and justifications.

From a media-pedagogical perspective, evaluation constitutes a core dimension of media competence (Baacke 1996), referring to processes of assessing credibility, comparing perspectives, and reflecting on one's own judgement. More recent contributions extend this perspective to AI-mediated knowledge practices (eg. Knaus 2024).

This emphasis is also reflected by international discussions on media literacy. As Buckingham (2010, 62) argues, "informed users of media need to be able to evaluate the material they encounter, for example by assessing the motivations of those who created it and by comparing it with other sources, including their own direct experience."

In AI-mediated writing contexts, the objects of evaluation shift in important ways. Academic writers are no longer only assessing human-authored texts but must also evaluate knowledge claims produced by systems whose outputs are epistemically plausible while remaining opaque with respect to their grounds. As discussed earlier, genAI is an epistemic technology in that it manipulates content and performs operations such as analysis, prediction, and synthesis (Alvarado 2023). Yet precisely because such systems lack the capacity for evaluation and responsibility, they cannot themselves assess the warrant of the claims they generate.

For example, when genAI generates a summary or proposes an argument, the relevant task is not to accept its plausibility at face value but to examine underlying sources, compare alternative accounts, and assess the warrant of the claim.

This implies that evaluation cannot be delegated without loss. The presence of seemingly well-formed arguments and explanations increases the demand on learners to interrogate sources and verify claims. The pedagogical challenge is therefore not to prevent the use of genAI, but to ensure that evaluation remains an explicitly cultivated human practice. This requires tasks and learning environments that prompt learners to

interrogate sources, compare perspectives, and make their judgements explicit and accountable within the writing process. For instance, learners may be asked to present and critically compare two contrasting sources or positions on a given topic, explaining how they assess their credibility, underlying assumptions, and relevance. Such tasks require students not only to engage with competing claims but to make their evaluative criteria explicit and open to discussion.

Following Barzilai and Chinn (2018), who conceptualise the goal of epistemic education as the promotion of apt epistemic performance, such tasks foreground evaluation as a practice that must be actively exercised and regulated by learners.

At the level of assessment design this aligns with Nieminen et al. (2025), who emphasise a shift toward task and assessment designs that require learners to explicitly demonstrate how they evaluate sources, thereby making evaluative judgement a visible and assessable component of academic writing.

4.2.4 Epistemic Justification and Defendability

Epistemic justification is constitutive of academic writing: to write academically is to offer reasons for one's claims. In this sense, justification has always been a core function of academic texts, even when it is realized primarily through rhetorical and textual means rather than through explicit dialogue. As shown above, this presumption becomes unstable. The availability of externally generated reasons and arguments makes it increasingly difficult to determine whether the justification articulated in a text reflects the author's own reasoning or merely the formal presence of reasons supplied by a technological system.

From a communicative perspective, this problem becomes particularly salient. Habermas (1991, 1995) argues that the validity of knowledge claims does not rest on their formal articulation alone but depends on their potential to be justified in processes of intersubjective understanding and critique. Claims count as epistemically warranted not because they are well-formed, but because their authors are, in principle, able to give reasons for them and able to respond to critical challenges. In this sense, justification is not merely a textual property but a social and dialogical achievement.

Against this background, AI-mediated academic writing exposes a structural tension in assessment practices. When justificatory moves can be produced by generative systems without being grounded in the writers' own reasoning, the text no longer suffices as evidence of justificatory reasoning. What is at stake is not the formal presence of reasons but the author's capacity to appropriate, evaluate and defend these reasons on their own. In this context, the blurring of authorship in AI-generated writing further complicates the attribution of responsibility, as the presence of well-formed justifications no longer guarantees that the writer can account for them (cf. Mazzi 2024).

If justification is understood, following Habermas, as a social and dialogical achievement, it cannot be adequately assessed through the written product alone. This reorientation from product to process-oriented evidence is illustrated in Figure 2. Writing instruction must therefore create conditions under which justificatory reasoning becomes visible as a personally accountable practice, for instance when learners are required to explain why a particular claim was adopted, how alternative interpretations were considered and on what grounds AI-generated arguments were accepted.

4.3 *Situating the Framework within Mediated Knowledge Practices*

The proposed framework situates academic writing within broader transformations of mediated knowledge practices under conditions of genAI. Rather than treating writing as an individual activity, it foregrounds how epistemic processes are shaped within socio-technical arrangements that influence how knowledge is produced and assessed.

From this perspective, the challenges posed by genAI in academic writing are a specific manifestation of more general questions concerning mediation, epistemic authority, and responsibility.

As Totter and Grabensteiner (2025) argue, agency in such contexts cannot be understood as an individual capacity alone, but as the ability to act meaningfully and responsibly within mediated arrangements that shape possibilities for interpretation and action. This perspective resonates with communicative approaches to epistemic responsibility (Habermas 1991, 1995), which locate the validity of knowledge claims in socially situated processes of justification and critique, while also recalling critical-theoretical

concerns about the shaping of knowledge and reasoning by mediated systems (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1988).

At the same time, more recent media-pedagogical approaches conceptualise subjectivity and agency relationally within socio-technical arrangements (Jörissen 2011; Knaus 2024; e.g. Mayrberger 2025; Totter and Grabensteiner 2025; Berges et al. 2025), highlighting how computational systems increasingly participate in communicative and epistemic processes, thereby blurring the boundaries between human actors and technological systems (Leineweber 2024). As outlined in Table 2, this article accepts this relational insight empirically while maintaining a position that diverges from it: irrespective of how authorship and agency are relationally constituted, epistemic responsibility must remain reconstructible and attributable to the human writer. In this sense, the framework contributes to ongoing discussions in media pedagogy by specifying how epistemic agency can be conceptualised and realised within AI-mediated writing practices.

5. Conclusion

Academic writing remains a central practice through which knowledge is communicated, negotiated, and validated in higher education. With the emergence of genAI, however, this practice requires critical re-examination, as contributions to knowledge can no longer be straightforwardly attributed to the human author alone. Under these conditions, epistemic responsibility cannot be inferred from the final text but must be explicitly assumed and justified by the writer.

In response, the article argues for a reorientation of academic writing pedagogy that foregrounds epistemic agency as a central educational concern in AI-mediated contexts. Rather than treating writing as textual performance, this perspective conceptualises it as a responsibility-bearing practice. By foregrounding decision-making, positioning, evaluation, and justification, it redefines the educational value of academic writing under conditions of genAI.

These challenges extend beyond academic writing and point to a broader transformation of learning in higher education. As learners increasingly interact with systems that generate explanations, solutions, or artefacts, meaningful engagement is no longer ensured through task completion

alone. The central risk lies in the erosion of the practices through which understanding, judgement, and responsibility are developed.

Media pedagogy provides a crucial interpretive framework for this transformation, focusing on how agency, authority, and responsibility are constituted within socio-technical environments. In this sense, the challenges of AI-mediated academic writing exemplify broader concerns about agency, critique, and participation in digitally mediated learning. Mediation no longer operates at the margins of learning but becomes internal to knowledge practices, shaping how knowledge claims are formed and assessed.

Overall, academic writing offers an instructive case for understanding how genAI reshapes epistemic responsibility in higher education. By articulating a reorientation of writing pedagogy, the article shows how epistemic agency becomes integral to academic writing under AI-mediated conditions.

As a theoretical contribution, the framework remains limited in its empirical scope and calls for further investigation across diverse disciplinary contexts and learning settings. Initial work in this direction is already underway in design-based studies on genAI-supported academic writing (Schnatz and Bieri 2024, 2025; Schnatz et al. Forthcoming). These studies demonstrate how pedagogical formats such as prompting journals, structured coaching interactions, and process-oriented assessment make epistemic processes visible and support learners in articulating and reflecting on their decisions. Complementary work further shows how epistemic agency can be traced in student writing through triangulated data (Schnatz and Bieri Forthcoming).

Future work will investigate how epistemic agency can be systematically fostered and analysed across AI-mediated learning environments. Ongoing research extends the triangulated design by linking student texts across drafting stages with prompting journals, survey data, and coaching interactions in order to trace how epistemic agency develops over time.

In this sense, epistemic agency emerges as a central lens for understanding and shaping learning in higher education under conditions of genAI.

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Generative AI Reference

Generative AI systems were used as supportive tools in the writing process (e.g., for language revision, summarising passages, and testing alternative formulations, or shortening sections). The development of the theoretical framework, conceptual distinctions, and all argumentative decisions were carried out by the author, who assumes full epistemic responsibility for the content of this article.