

# Rethinking Student Writing the Gen Z Way

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**Abstract:** As education As concerns about AI-generated and plagiarized outputs grow, there is an urgent need to reimagine how writing is taught and assessed in higher education. This teacher-initiated study explores how university students in the Philippines perceive academic writing when expressed through video-based formats. The research responds to the call for more innovative, student-centered approaches that align with Gen Z's learning preferences and digital realities. In an academic writing course, students completed two major outputs: a traditional essay and a campaign video. While not formally labeled as a video essay, the campaign video invited students to engage in multimodal storytelling and message construction. At the end of the term, 95 students submitted open-ended reflections through a Google Form, offering advice to future learners and insights into their experiences. Findings revealed that students appreciated the opportunity to engage with writing in new ways—drawing on visuals, narration, and editing to enhance clarity and personal expression. They did not see the video as a shortcut but as an extension of writing that required planning, research, structure, and audience awareness. This aligns with existing research describing Gen Z learners as digital, mobile, visual, and socially connected (Ishak et al., 2022; Prensky, 2001; Saetang, 2024; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Students reported increased motivation, collaboration, and confidence in communicating ideas through multimodal outputs—traits essential for contemporary academic and professional life. By foregrounding student reflections, this study offers timely insights into how Gen Z learners reimagine academic writing through video. It argues that video-based assignments, when guided well, can enhance writing instruction by promoting authenticity, reducing plagiarism, and supporting more inclusive and future-ready pedagogies.

**Key Words:** video essays, digital literacy, generation Z

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As concerns about AI-generated and plagiarized outputs grow, there is an urgent need to reimagine how writing is taught and assessed in higher education. The increasing ease with which students can produce written tasks using AI tools challenges the authenticity of learning and demands more innovative and ethically sound approaches to academic writing. As a teacher of academic writing, I initiated this study to explore student responses to a different format—video-based writing—designed to better engage students while addressing issues of

originality and integrity. This teacher-initiated inquiry aims to understand how video essays might serve as a viable pedagogical response to Gen Z's learning styles and digital fluency.

The way students learn—and the way they demonstrate what they have learned—is evolving. Aligned with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, particularly Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 9, educators are encouraged to explore more inclusive, innovative, and future-ready approaches to teaching and assessment. SDG 4 focuses on providing quality education for all, while SDG 9 emphasizes the importance of innovation and digital infrastructure. The video essay, as an academic output, responds to

both goals by blending writing with multimedia tools to foster learning in a digital age.

Video essays integrate text, visuals, audio, and storytelling. For many students, especially those from Generation Z, this format feels more natural and intuitive. These learners have grown up navigating digital spaces and expressing themselves through multimedia. Extensive research shows that Gen Z students demonstrate a strong preference for multimodal, visual, and experiential learning (Ishak et al., 2022; Prensky, 2001; Saetang, 2024; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Ishak et al. (2022) reported a statistically significant preference for multimodal learning among Gen Z students, while Seemiller and Grace (2016) confirmed that Gen Z learners thrive in visually rich, technology-integrated environments.

Caratozzolo et al. (2022) demonstrated that video essays in engineering programs supported creative and critical thinking, both of which are essential in knowledge-based industries. Likewise, Truong and Zanzucchi (2012) found that video essays strengthened student engagement with writing, especially when students considered audience and structure more deeply. Redmond and Tai (2020) viewed the video essay as a way to challenge rigid classroom structures, allowing students to reflect more openly and explore complex ideas through multimodal formats. In Southeast Asia, Zainal et al. (2021) reported that students found video essays both demanding and fulfilling, especially when guided through collaborative, project-based work.

This study shares the perspectives of 95 Filipino university students who explored video essays in their writing courses. While issues such as access to technology were raised, many students recognized the potential of video essays to enhance creativity, develop digital literacy, and foster collaboration. Their experiences show how video essays can support both SDG 4 and SDG 9 by making education more inclusive, engaging, and future-ready.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design situated within a teacher-initiated classroom inquiry. The research was prompted by the instructor's concern over the increasing reliance on AI-generated outputs for traditional academic essays, prompting the need for more authentic, student-centered

alternatives. Conducted within an academic writing course at a private university in the Philippines, the study invited students to reflect on their experiences with two key outputs: a problem-solution essay and a campaign video. The aim was to explore how students perceived academic writing when reimagined through a multimodal, video-based format.

A total of 95 students enrolled in three sections of an undergraduate academic writing course participated in the study. The participants were selected through convenience sampling, based on their enrollment and willingness to participate. These students represented a mix of disciplines and came from various academic and linguistic backgrounds. Their shared experience in completing both traditional and video-based assignments provided a suitable basis for analyzing how they interpret and respond to different writing formats.

During the final synchronous class session, students were given a Google Docs file linked to their institutional emails. Each file contained an informed consent form aligned with De La Salle University Research Ethics Office (2021) guidelines, followed by a reflective, letter-style prompt from the instructor. The prompt asked students to provide "expert advice" on whether the teacher should include video essays in future academic writing courses, drawing on their experience completing both a problem-solution essay and a campaign video. Students wrote their responses directly in the Google Docs, which were later downloaded and archived for analysis.

The collected responses were subjected to thematic analysis. The researcher first conducted open coding, identifying recurring concepts across the texts. Codes were then grouped into broader themes such as engagement, creativity, and real-world relevance. The analysis was informed by literature on Gen Z learning preferences and multimodal composition, allowing for a grounded interpretation of how students reimagine writing through non-traditional formats.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reflections collected from students suggest a strong and growing interest in video essays as a meaningful direction for academic writing outputs. While not all 95 participants responded in the

same way, many shared thoughtful feedback that pointed to three recurring themes: engagement and accessibility, creative expression, and real-world relevance.

To begin with, several students described video essays as more engaging than traditional written essays. Visual and auditory elements helped them better understand tone, mood, and message. A number of respondents mentioned having short attention spans or being visual learners, which made video essays more effective for learning. This aligns with Ishak et al. (2022) and Saetang (2024), who found that Gen Z students prefer multimodal and visually driven formats. One student shared, *“Reading a lengthy traditional written essay may bore me... but with a video essay, I can just naturally pick up what they are trying to say in the video.”* Another echoed, *“Watching videos helps a lot better than reading a traditional written essay because of how short my attention span is. I am also a visual learner.”* This preference for dynamic content over static text was reinforced by another student who remarked, *“Personally, I find that a video essay would be easier to comprehend because videos effectively convey emotions and ideas. It upgrades the memorability of a message.”*

In addition, students emphasized how video essays allowed them to be more creative. Rather than relying solely on text, they used visuals, sound, facial expressions, and editing to express their ideas. The format encouraged experimentation and helped them develop skills in storytelling, media design, and performance. This observation is supported by Caratozzolo et al. (2022), who highlight the role of video essays in fostering critical thinking and artistic exploration. One student reflected, *“It taught me how to use different video editing platforms and it unlocked my inner creativity and artisticness.”* Another described the collaborative process of their campaign video, noting, *“We needed to create our own storyboard to convey information on our chosen NGO. We used our creative ways to capture and create content that was appropriate for a specific scene.”* For some, the format offered an expressive outlet that fit their learning style, as one student put it, *“Video essays can help a student be more creative with their expression of thoughts... being a visual expressionist improves my train of creative thought better.”*

Finally, students recognized the real-world relevance of video essays. They viewed the format as aligned with how people communicate today—visually, digitally, and interactively. Their reflections echo Seemiller and Grace’s (2016) assertion that Gen Z learners value practical outputs that develop personal and professional competencies. In the same vein, Zainal et al. (2021) argue that video-based formats build authentic communication skills. As one student noted, *“This format helps students in creating ways to further communicate to the audience that simple words cannot do.”* Another explained, *“The video essay is a more relevant format in terms of communication. With the boom of longform YouTube video essays, this format has a wider reach than the typical written essay outside of academia.”* The connection to broader digital communication was also captured in a comment that said, *“Living in this current generation, where people are more accessible to reach via visual communication... it may serve as the new bridge to reach wider audiences on different platforms.”*

In sum, while the traditional essay remains important, many students viewed the video essay as a dynamic, creative, and future-ready alternative that supports meaningful learning and communication. Their insights affirm the relevance of integrating multimodal formats in writing instruction, especially in light of today’s digital learning landscape and the preferences of Gen Z learners (Prensky, 2001).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study echo the broader literature on Gen Z learning preferences and multimodal engagement. The observed preference for video essays aligns with Ishak et al.’s (2022) and Saetang’s (2024) findings that Gen Z students favor visual, kinesthetic, and multimodal learning environments. These formats offer learners the opportunity to engage with material in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their lived digital realities. Moreover, Prensky’s (2001) concept of “Digital Natives” helps explain the ease and confidence students displayed in creating content using video, narration, and editing tools.

Similarly, Seemiller and Grace (2016) emphasized that Gen Z learners are motivated by real-world applications and value educational experiences

that develop both personal and professional competencies. Students' reflections on building digital literacy, communication skills, and creative expression directly support this characterization. These results also reinforce the findings of Caratozzolo et al. (2022) and Zainal et al. (2021), who advocate for video essays as tools that promote critical thinking, collaboration, and authentic engagement.

As a researcher and teacher of academic writing, I recognize that innovations in how students' work is evaluated must be continuously reviewed in light of Gen Z's learning styles and their advanced digital skills. The integration of multimodal formats such as video essays is one such innovation that responds to the evolving needs of today's learners.

The responses show that many students see video essays as more than just a new assignment—they view them as a relevant and meaningful way to express ideas in today's digital world. For visual learners and students with short attention spans, video essays offer a format that feels more engaging and easier to follow. The blend of visuals, sound, and performance helps bring messages to life in ways that written text alone sometimes cannot.

Students also valued the creative freedom video essays offer. Being able to tell a story using editing, music, tone, and visuals allowed them to explore their own voice and style. For some, it was a chance to discover new skills or interests they had not tapped into before.

Most importantly, students recognized that video essays help build real-world skills. From confidence in public speaking to comfort with digital tools, this format feels closely aligned with how people communicate outside the classroom.

This study offers practical and pedagogical insights that reinforce the call for rethinking writing instruction in the age of AI and media saturation. As educators, we are now challenged to respond not with fear or resistance, but with thoughtful innovation in how we design, teach, and evaluate academic writing. The rise of generative AI tools, growing concerns about plagiarism, and students' declining interest in traditional essay formats signal a crucial shift in the landscape of literacy and learning. Instead of simply warning students against these technologies, we must take an active role in helping them use such tools critically, responsibly, and creatively. It is no longer enough to uphold older models of writing instruction;

we must now engage with the realities of Gen Z learners who are digitally immersed and whose modes of communication are increasingly visual, interactive, and multimodal. Rather than viewing video essays and other multimodal outputs as replacements or threats to academic writing, educators can treat them as complementary formats—ones that cultivate academic integrity, digital fluency, and inclusive learning. In doing so, we not only address the practical challenges of contemporary writing instruction but also empower students to become reflective, ethical, and future-ready communicators.

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