FROM THE FOUNDER

Teaching Writing in the Age of AI

Acellus Writing Tutor Gold Edition arrives December 1. Here is how it works, why it works, and how it keeps every student's writing their own.

By Dr. Roger Billings
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Many parents, teachers, and students have written to me with concerns about the Acellus Writing Tutor. I want to answer those concerns directly and tell you what is coming.

A few years ago, Acellus Writing Tutor was considered one of the best on the market. Then AI arrived, and almost overnight it stopped working. A student could paste the instructions for a writing assignment into an AI tool, the tool would generate a polished essay, and the student would paste that essay into Writing Tutor. Our old scoring engine could also be fooled by surface tricks; in one case, adding an unnecessary colon raised a student's score. The result was a high grade with no learning. The document was good. The learning was zero.

This is not an Acellus problem alone. In a Pew Research Center survey conducted in the fall of 2025, 54 percent of teens said they had used AI chatbots to help with schoolwork, and one in ten said they do all or most of their schoolwork that way. Students need to learn how to use AI, but they also need to master the ability to write, and to write powerfully. School leaders everywhere are struggling with the same question: how do we get students to do their own writing in the age of AI? I believe it is one of the biggest challenges education has ever faced.

Why writing matters more now, not less

AI can produce polished sentences and impressive vocabulary. What it cannot do is decide what is worth saying. The ideas, the reasoning, and the judgment have to come from a person. A big part of effective writing is effective thinking, and a student who cannot organize a thought and put it into words will not be able to direct AI effectively either. Employers are already asking for exactly this: people who can think, organize an argument, write an effective prompt, and judge what AI hands them.

I consider it our urgent duty as Acellus educators to prepare our students not only to succeed, but to succeed big in this exciting, challenging new world.

> *"AI can produce polished sentences and impressive vocabulary. What it cannot do is decide what is worth saying."*

What we did about it

Just over a year ago, I assembled a team of our very best Acellus teachers, programmers, and security experts and gave them one challenge: create the very best tool in the world to help students master the skill of writing. That team has built Acellus Writing Tutor Gold Edition. It is scheduled for release on **December 1, 2026**, and students will have access to the new version as soon as it is released.

Based on our experience with students during testing, Gold Edition will be a complete game changer for the experience students see when they move to the new system.

The breakthrough: teach the process

The goal of teaching students to write in a world of AI was almost obvious. Figuring out how to do it was another matter. The breakthrough came when we stopped grading only the finished product and started teaching the process that produces it, step by step. If a finished essay can be produced without learning, then the learning has to happen, and be seen, in how the essay is built. Figure 1 shows the path every Gold Edition assignment follows.

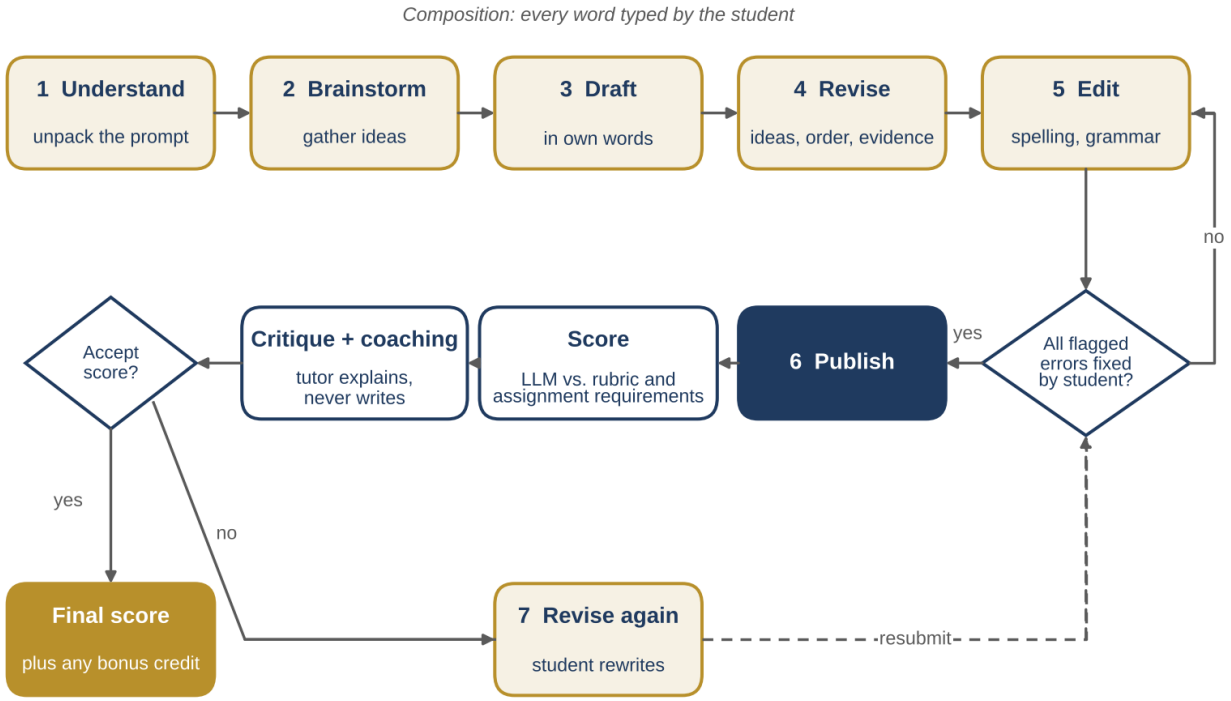


Figure 1. The Gold Edition workflow. In steps 1 to 5 every word is typed by the student. The system will not accept the writing until the student has corrected each flagged error. After publishing, the AI scores the writing and coaches the next revision; the student can accept the score or revise and resubmit, earning bonus credit for continued revision.

What students will experience

Teaching the writing process is the approach with the strongest research behind it. The U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse gives its highest rating, "strong evidence," to teaching students to use the writing process. Here is what students will do at each step.

1. **Understand.** Strong writers do not start with the first sentence. Students first unpack the assignment: What is the task? Who is my audience? What do I actually think?

2. **Brainstorm.** Students gather their ideas before writing a word.
3. **Draft.** Students write it out in their own words. It can start out clumsily; what matters is capturing their thoughts.
4. **Revise.** Students go back over what they have written and rework the ideas, organization, and evidence.
5. **Edit.** The system highlights spelling and grammar errors, and the student must fix each one before the writing is accepted. A dictionary is available, but nothing is corrected automatically. Students look up the word and correct it themselves. That is how we learn.
6. **Publish.** The writing is scored by an AI that reads for meaning. It judges how well the student met the assignment's requirements and the overall level of the writing. The old tricks no longer work: an unnecessary colon now lowers the score instead of raising it.
7. **Revise again.** This is where the real magic happens. The student receives a critique with specific suggestions and can take the grade or revise. With each round the writing improves and the score rises, and a student who keeps working can raise the score above 100 percent, earning bonus credit for every round of revision. In testing, that possibility has been a powerful motivator. Here, additional effort equals additional learning. Best of all, students earn gold credits working on Writing Tutor.

A thinking partner, not a ghostwriter

The tutor never writes the essay. What it does is what a good writing teacher does when she pulls up a chair beside a student: it explains the score, sparks new ideas, helps the student see how to organize their thinking, and shows how to strengthen style and word choice. Then the student does the writing.

This boundary is the most important design decision we made, and the research shows why. In a 2025 study of nearly 1,000 high school students, those given unrestricted access to a chatbot did better on practice problems, but once the chatbot was taken away they did 17 percent worse than students who never had it. Students who used a tutoring version that gave hints instead of answers did not suffer that loss. AI that does the work for students harms learning. AI that coaches students to do the work helps.

> *"The tutor never writes the essay. The finished piece is the student's own work, every time."*

Keeping the work the student's own

Many schools have turned to AI detectors. They do not work well. In an independent test of 14 detection tools, none was more than 80 percent accurate, and another study found that detectors wrongly labeled more than half of the essays written by non-native English speakers as AI-generated. We will not accuse students on the word of a tool like that.

Our approach is different: make the honest path the easiest one, and make dishonest work hard to hide. Gold Edition does this in several layers.

- **Help at every step.** When help is always available inside Acellus, outside help is less tempting.

- **Work happens only in the Acellus app.** Writing can be done only inside the Acellus application, so every word of a submission is entered where the process can be supported and seen.
- **Paste is turned off.** Students cannot copy text from a chatbot or a website and paste it into their writing.
- **Verified devices.** The app uses the security features built into Android and Apple devices to confirm that work comes from the genuine Acellus app on a real device, and each installation signs its activity with its own secure key. Scripts and fake requests are rejected.
- **A pattern of how each student works.** Every student has a recognizable rhythm: when they usually work, how long their sessions last, how quickly they move through material, and which devices they use. The system also notes whether work is being done on the student's own computer and from the student's usual location. A sudden change can mean someone else is doing the work; machine-like timing can mean automation. Research on online courses shows that patterns like these reveal cheating that is invisible in the answers alone.
- **A scorer that reads for meaning.** Because the AI scorer judges what the writing says, padding and punctuation tricks no longer raise a grade.

Two principles guide how we use these signals. First, privacy: the system records summaries of activity, not the content of students' keystrokes; it counts attempts to paste but does not record what was pasted; and the use of accessibility tools never counts against a student. Second, fairness: no single signal is treated as proof of unoriginal work.

Our research points to the next layer: a record of how each piece of writing was actually typed. Composing an essay leaves a different trail from retyping one, with pauses at the ends of sentences, revisions to earlier passages, and words and phrases deleted and rewritten. In one study with paste disabled, as it is in Gold Edition, computer models told original essays apart from retyped copies with 96 to 99 percent accuracy. A record like this lets a teacher see how a piece was built, which is the fairest evidence of authorship there is.

What parents and teachers will be able to see

Parents and teachers will be amazed by the progress in writing ability their students achieve. That insight provides a powerful opportunity to praise and encourage the student for their achievement. Taking an interest in a student's writing success greatly increases their willingness to put in the effort on the next assignment as well, and this step of encouragement is an important part of the effectiveness of the system. In a perfect world, every writing assignment would be reviewed by a parent or teacher, with their praise, comments, and instruction becoming an added benefit to the learning process.

What to expect

Acellus Writing Tutor Gold Edition will change the student experience in Acellus perhaps more than any other new offering we have made this year. It is in final testing now and will be released on December 1, 2026, and students will have access to it as soon as it is released.

To the parents, teachers, and students who told me plainly that the Writing Tutor needed to be better: thank you. You were right, and that candor is part of why Gold Edition exists. I think you, and your students, are going to like what is coming.

READ THE FULL PAPER

School leaders and readers who want the complete research basis, the full description of the authorship safeguards, and our plan for evaluating results can read the definitive paper in the Journal of the International Academy of Science:

Billings, R. *Acellus Writing Tutor Gold Edition: A Process-Based, AI-Coached System for Teaching Writing and Assuring Authorship in the Age of Generative AI.*

https://journal.science.edu/journal/publications/SIS00025/1

Dr. Roger Billings is the founder and president of the International Academy of Science, the nonprofit behind the Acellus Learning System.