Using Self-Monitoring and ChatGPT to Teach Students with Intellectual Disability Email Writing

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Abstract

The process of personal growth and development following a traumatic occurrence can serve as a catalyst for profound transformation, allowing individuals to unearth their inherent strength and resilience. The main aim of this study was to identify the factors that contribute to the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth. This paper presents a comprehensive examination of the scholarly literature pertaining to post-traumatic personal growth, focusing on publications released between the years 2003 and 2023. We found that many trauma survivors undergo a process of self-reflection, recovery, and regaining trust in themselves and others. We found that after a traumatic event, people may acquire new perspectives on life, develop coping mechanisms, and even discover latent talents or inclinations, all of which contribute to their overall personal growth. We concluded that emotional regulation, compassion for oneself and others, spirituality, resilience-related personality traits, hardiness, dispositional positive affectivity, dispositional gratitude, social support, and physical health are the most important factors that can contribute to post-traumatic personal growth. Insights from Syrian refugees were included.

Keywords: Trauma; Personal Growth; Resilience; Emotion regulation; Post-traumatic growth

Introduction

In today's digital age, using email to communicate effectively is an important, basic skill. Nearly everybody in a professional setting communicates via email with their colleagues and supervisors. Skilled email writers understand how to use email etiquette to convey their thoughts appropriately. Supported by such understanding, email writing is a crucial skill for students pursuing postsecondary education and employment, including those with disabilities [1]. Mastering the rules of writing a professional email will help students with disabilities to prepare for higher education and/or future employment. For instance, in postsecondary education settings, college students with disabilities have to disclose their disabilities in order to request accommodations [2]. After students request accommodations, university disability offices may email accommodation letters to instructors on behalf of the students. However, in many cases, students with disabilities are advised by disability offices to personally email their course instructors with requests for accommodations [3]. In such instances, students' proficiency in writing emails can significantly impact their learning experiences. In workplace settings, similar to postsecondary education environments, email communication can serve as a means for individuals with disabilities to advocate for themselves and request accommodations for their tasks. In addition, research has shown that email communication promotes social inclusion for individuals with disabilities [4,5]. Such individuals can connect with others and achieve greater inclusion in a community through email communication.

Individuals with intellectual disability may find writing-particularly organizing and expressing their thoughts clearly and concisely-challenging because of their limited use of speech in conversations [6,7]. Researchers have shown that individuals with intellectual disability struggle with functional skills in written expression [8]. To help individuals with intellectual disability to write professional emails, it is important to teach them the rules of email writing. Before designing an email-writing intervention for these individuals, instructors should consider some key

questions: Can they write concise messages that efficiently convey the main point of their email? Do they demonstrate good writing quality, including correct grammar and punctuation? Do they use email etiquette, such as beginning with a greeting and ending with a closing? Individuals with intellectual disability may be capable of sending emails, but the main points of their messages are frequently unclear. They often make mechanical mistakes, including typographical errors, use of incorrect grammar, and inappropriate use (or lack of use) of punctuation. They also tend to forget to add greetings and closings, which may lead to their being perceived as rude and unprofessional. A last but important question for instructors to consider: How can we support individuals with intellectual disability in independently writing professional emails? We aim to train these individuals to independently perform skills, decreasing their reliance on others. Having someone check their email writing might be a good idea, but it is not always possible to find someone to assist in this way. However, self-monitoring strategies have demonstrated effectiveness in supporting individuals with intellectual disability in gradually achieving greater task independence [9].

Research suggests the efficacy of incorporating self-monitoring into the writing process, particularly during the editing and revising stages [10]. Drawing on executive function theories such as Barkley's [11] hybrid model of executive function and the supervisory attention system proposed by Stuss et al. [12], the importance of monitoring function in individuals' learning has been emphasized by current literature. As individuals move toward their goals, the monitoring function ensures that they continue to work on the requisite actions to achieve their goals. Without this function, it is difficult for individuals to maintain goal-directed behavior. In special education, self-monitoring is a student-directed learning strategy [9], a pathway for students to develop self-regulation and self-determination [13].

For students with intellectual disability, self-monitoring can be used to increase on-task behaviors and skill acquisition. For example, Y.-F. Li et al. [14] developed a self-monitoring intervention to teach students with moderate intellectual disability to complete a clearing task independently. By following multiple steps, these students were able to observe and record their actions and successfully complete the entire task. Self-observing and self-recording occurrences of target behaviors are the two main steps of self-monitoring [15,16]. To perform these steps, individuals must be able to discriminate and identify target behaviors. Individuals with intellectual disability learn to discriminate target behaviors through the presentation of examples and non-examples [14]. Here, we aim to offer an example of how educators can use a self-monitoring strategy to meet the needs of students with intellectual disability who struggle with email writing. Through step-by-step scaffolding, these students can be taught to compose professional emails that include such essential components as a concise subject line and a greeting.

In addition to using self-monitoring to assist students in the email-writing process, we suggest incorporating ChatGPT to aid students in rectifying writing errors. Today's learners have access to a variety of writing-assistance programs [17]. For instance, some individuals with disabilities who struggle with spelling may use speech-to-text technology to input text. Other individuals with disabilities may use Grammarly, an artificial intelligence (AI) writing-support software, to edit and revise their writing. The editing and revising stage of the writing process can be particularly challenging as they require individuals to reflect on their writing, consistently identify errors, make corrections, and reread their work [10]. A combination of proven instructional strategies and an innovative technology can help students to edit and revise their written work and, ultimately, increase self-regulation [10,17]. The emerging AI technology tool ChatGPT features a chat-based function, generating human-like responses to prompts inputted by users [18]. Given its conversational nature, ChatGPT can provide personalized comments for students. Baidoo-Anu and Ansah [19] have explored the benefits of incorporating ChatGPT in teaching and learning, arguing that since ChatGPT operates as a conversational agent, it can be used to provide immediate feedback and create interactive learning experiences.

Although there are concerns about academic integrity with the use of ChatGPT [20], with appropriate guidance and policies, some educators are responding to the program by thinking about how it can be integrated into writing instruction to benefit their students [21,22]. Using ChatGPT to generate a composition, Yan [22] showed that students were able to enhance their skills in paraphrasing and editing certain phrases and sentences. J. Li et al. [21] have also articulated how ChatGPT can be used to enhance students' writing abilities. In their study, one group of students compared their writing drafts with ChatGPT's revised versions to improve coherence, logic, and overall clarity. Another group of students inputted their writing drafts into ChatGPT, which then provided revision feedback. Students revised their drafts on the basis of ChatGPT's feedback. Su et al. [23] explored the possibilities of using ChatGPT to assist students with writing tasks such as content revision and proofreading. They argued that although practicing writing with peers and teachers is ideal, it can be difficult and time-consuming to consistently find individuals to provide such assistance. Our goal here is to combine use of ChatGPT with a self-monitoring strategy to support the needs of students with intellectual disability who struggle with email writing. Used properly, ChatGPT can be a useful tool to help these students strengthen their writing of emails.

Steps of Teaching Self-Monitoring for Email Writing

Self-monitoring consists of two primary stages: self-observation and self-recording [24]. Self-observation involves distinguishing and identifying a target behavior. Self-recording involves accurately documenting the frequency of the target behavior's occurrence. Studies have identified the following

teaching steps for individuals to learn self-observation and self-recording: (a) goal setting, (b) identifying the target behavior, (c) modeling, (d) practice with feedback, and (e) practicing with delayed feedback [14,25,26]. We suggest using these steps to teach students with intellectual disability to write emails (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Steps of Teaching Self-Monitoring for Email Writing.
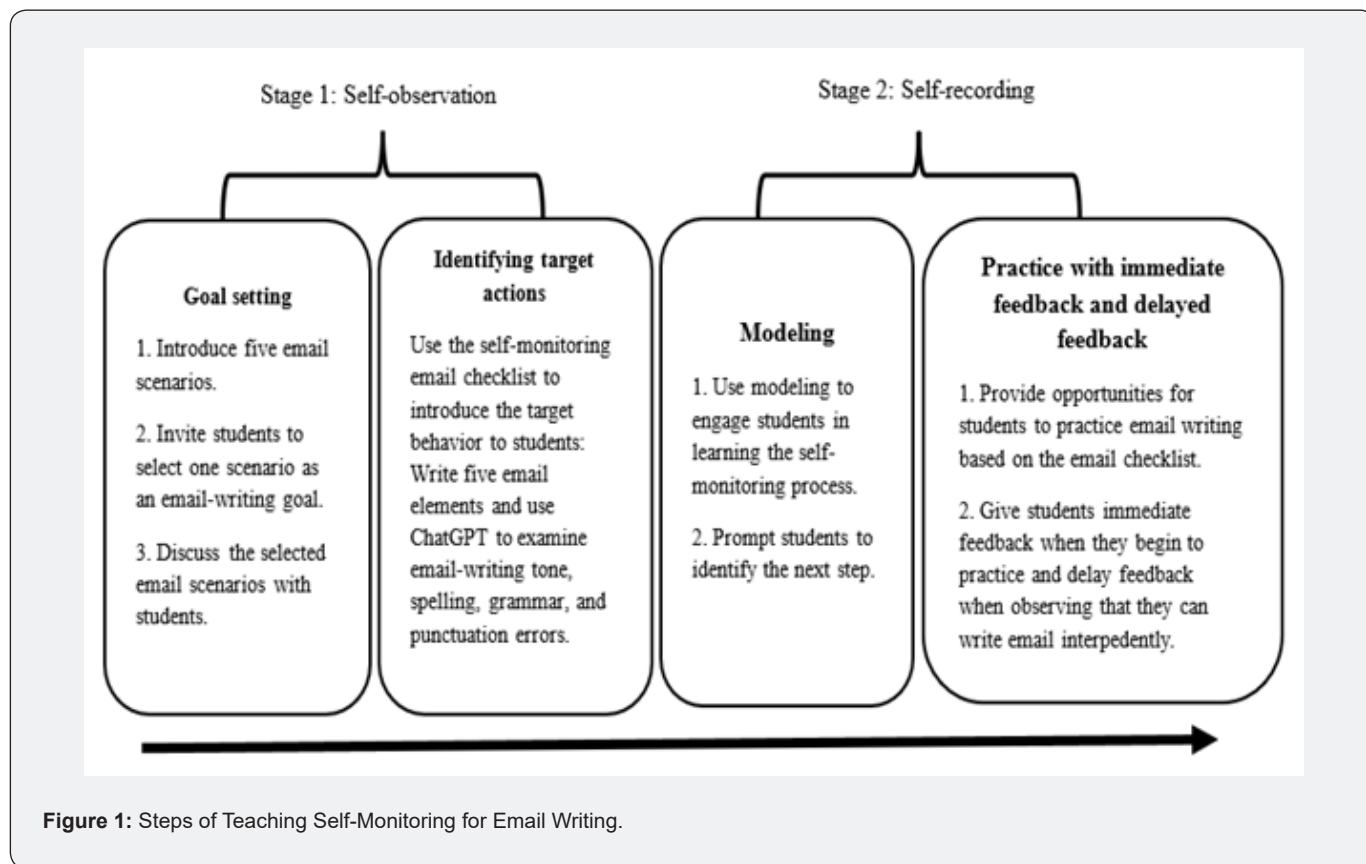
For self-observation - goal setting and identifying a target behavior - we have created five email scenarios, applicable in both postsecondary education settings and workplaces, from which students can choose: (a) asking to take a leave, (b) seeking help from a supervisor or instructor, (c) seeking assistance from a colleague or peer, (d) scheduling a meeting with a supervisor or instructor, and (e) seeking an extension for completion of an assignment. In the step of goal setting, it is important to ask students which email scenario they intend to write to. Students may have their own reasons for choosing a specific email scenario. Inviting students to choose and set a goal can motivate them to sustain focus on the goal [14]. After an email scenario has been chosen, instructors can ask students why they chose the scenario, when such a scenario might be applicable, and what elements should be included in an email based on that scenario.

In identifying the target behavior, students identify the elements that should be included in a professional email. A professional email requires the following five elements: (a) writing an email subject line, (b) writing the email recipient's name, (c) starting with an appropriate greeting, (d) writing an email message with a clear intention, and (e) adding a closing and the sender's name. In addition, email writers have to maintain a polite and professional tone throughout their message. Before sending an email to a recipient, email writers also need to double-check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors. To teach students to identify and complete all actions, we have created a self-monitoring email checklist (Figure 2). By using the checklist, students can learn to write emails that satisfy the five elements and can use ChatGPT to examine and revise, as needed, their writing tone, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Students should mark each step on the checklist as they complete it until all steps have been marked.

Self-recording involves modeling, practicing with immediate feedback, and practicing with delayed feedback. In the modeling step, instructors use the email-writing self-monitoring checklist to demonstrate the complete process of self-monitoring in email writing, specifically modeling the email-writing process and illustrating how to use ChatGPT to revise emails. We have created five lessons for five email scenarios to model the email-writing process (see Step 4: Guide Students to Write an Email through

Modeling). Using the five lessons, instructors can model email-writing practices that incorporate all essential email components and effectively articulate an intended message. Upon completion of an email, instructors will also assist students in inputting their email draft into ChatGPT and using prompts to generate feedback (see Step 5: Guide Students to Use ChatGPT to Revise Their

Emails). In modeling, it is crucial to read each step on the self-monitoring checklist aloud and to engage students. For instance, instructors can prompt students to identify what the next step is. This approach allows students to follow along with the steps and learn how to complete each one.
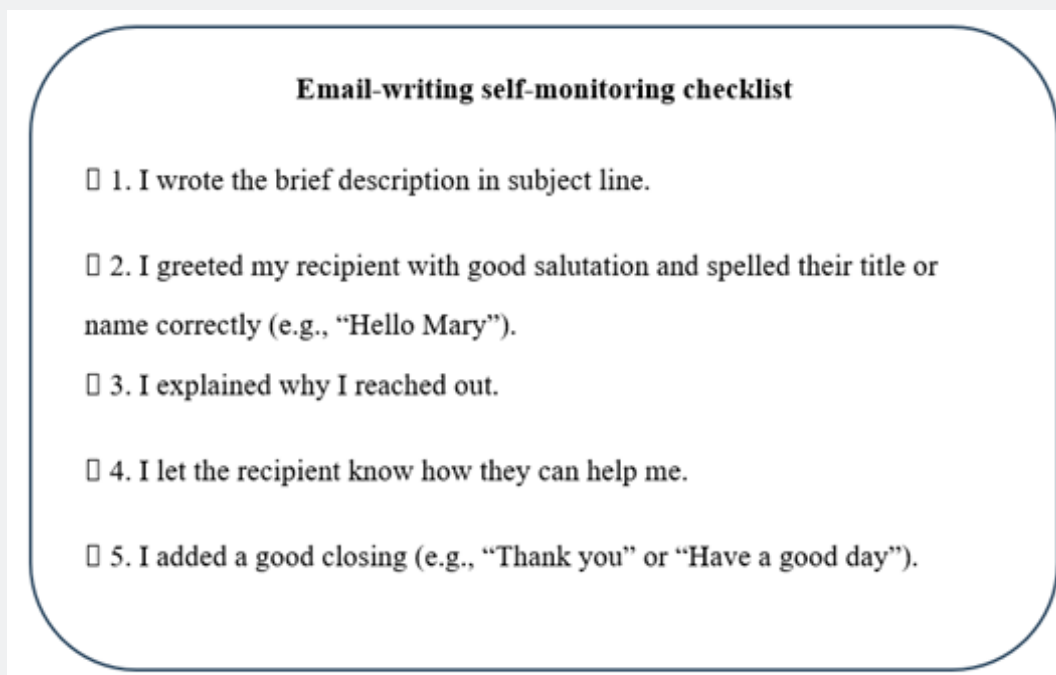

Email-writing self-monitoring checklist

☐ 1. I wrote the brief description in subject line.

☐ 2. I greeted my recipient with good salutation and spelled their title or name correctly (e.g., "Hello Mary").

☐ 3. I explained why I reached out.

☐ 4. I let the recipient know how they can help me.

☐ 5. I added a good closing (e.g., "Thank you" or "Have a good day").

Figure 2: Email-Writing Self-Monitoring Checklist.

After students have learned the self-monitoring process, they will practice email writing independently by using the email checklist. Instructors can provide immediate feedback when students begin to write emails. After observing that students are able to use the email checklist to write emails independently without making many mistakes, instructors can give students feedback after completion of the email-writing task.

Steps of Teaching Using ChatGPT to Revise Email Writing

Step 1: Test Prompts for ChatGPT

To interact with ChatGPT, users enter prompts to generate responses. Prompts are instructions or queries regarding what task users want ChatGPT to perform. Before teaching students to use ChatGPT to revise emails, we suggest that instructors try out prompts. A prompt is not a magic formula. Users should try out prompts to see if the responses they generate align with their expectations. In addition, since ChatGPT does not know what responses users expect, users should provide as much context as possible in prompts so that the responses from ChatGPT can better align with their expectations. In the case of teaching

students to use ChatGPT to revise email writing, we expect ChatGPT to serve as a feedback provider to help students improve their email-writing quality, not as an email writer. We first tested simple prompts without giving ChatGPT contexts, such as "Revise this email" and "Check grammar errors." We found that ChatGPT simply generated a revised version of the email in response to these prompts. However, students with intellectual disability can find it difficult to discern what changes have been made to a revised text without a corresponding list of feedback. Thus, we experimented with different prompts by adding more contexts for ChatGPT.

As shown in Table 1, we used the prompt "This is my email. Only list pieces of advice to improve my email." ChatGPT then listed several suggestions, such as adding a greeting and closing. With such a prompt, students with intellectual disability are able to revise their emails in a point-by-point fashion. While such a prompt can result in advice on overall email revision, some students may require additional support, such as assistance with grammar or spelling issues. To help students improve email-writing quality, we tested the prompt "This is my email. Only list my grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. Do not rewrite

or revise the email." With this prompt, ChatGPT not only listed several writing errors but also demonstrated how to fix them. Another challenge for students with intellectual disability when writing a professional email is articulating a request clearly. In other words, students with intellectual disability often struggle to write a clear message that effectively communicates their needs. For example, they may have difficulty asking a question to seek clarification on an assignment. In this case, we also tested

another prompt: "I do not know how to make this clear: 'I was wondering what you mean by doing a script for assignment 1.' Give me 3 examples." With this prompt, ChatGPT responded by providing three examples of how to inquire for clarification on an assignment. By experimenting with different prompts, users can refine the prompts on the basis of their needs. It is important to note that providing more contexts in prompts can help ChatGPT to generate responses that align more precisely with users' requests.

Table 1: Prompt-Testing Examples

Dear Mrs li, i was wondering what do you mean by doing a script or can you explain more to me? John	This is my email. Only list pieces of advice to improve my email.	1. Specify the context: Provide a brief context or background for why you're asking about the script. This will help the recipient understand your inquiry better. 2. Be polite: Consider adding a polite greeting at the beginning of your email, such as "Hello" or "Hi," followed by the recipient's name. 3. Clarify your question: Clearly state what you need clarification on regarding the script. This will help the recipient provide you with a more accurate and helpful response. 4. Request further explanation: Politely ask the recipient to elaborate or provide more details about what they mean by "doing a script." 5. End with a closing: Conclude your email with a courteous closing, such as "Thank you" or "Best regards," followed by your name.	Hello Mrs li, **(Be polite)** i was wondering what do you mean by doing a script for assignment 1. **(Specify the context).** Can you explain what you mean or provide more information? **(Clarify the question and request further explanation)** Thank you **(End with a closing)** John
Hello Mrs li, i was wondering what do you mean by doing a script for assignment 1. Can you explain what you mean or provide more information? Thank you John	This is my email. Only list my grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. Do not rewrite or revise the email.	1. "Mrs li" should be capitalized as "Mrs. Li." 2. "i" should be capitalized as "I." 3. "do you mean" should be "you mean." 4. "more information?" lacks a question mark. 5. "Thank you" should be followed by a comma.	Hello Mrs. **Li**, **I** was wondering what ~~do~~ you mean by doing a script for assignment 1. Can you explain what you mean or provide more information? Thank you**,** John
(No email input but enter prompt directly to follow up)	I do not know how to make this clear: "I was wondering what you mean by doing a script for assignment 1." Give me 3 examples.	1. "I'm unsure about the expectations for 'doing a script' in assignment 1. Could you elaborate?" 2. "Could you provide more details on what is meant by 'doing a script' for assignment 1?" 3. "I'm seeking clarification on the requirement to 'do a script' for assignment 1. Can you explain it further?"	Hello Mrs. Li, **I am seeking clarification on doing a script for assignment 1.** Can you explain what you mean or provide more information? Thank you, John

Step 2: Introduce and Discuss ChatGPT with Students

Since the release of ChatGPT in 2022, it has become a much talked about tool. Some students may have heard of ChatGPT, while others may not have. It is important for educators to teach students how to use AI tools such as ChatGPT and to demonstrate their proper use. When we introduced ChatGPT to students with disabilities, we were surprised to find that they had never heard of it. We discussed with them why they should learn how to use AI

tools such as ChatGPT. First, ChatGPT can be used as a language-assistance tool for email writing. Our students acknowledged that email writing was difficult for them. They had been told that their emails were not professional due to grammar and punctuation errors and that their tone in writing sometimes sounded impolite. Second, since ChatGPT can replicate human conversation, students can receive immediate feedback on the basis of the prompts they enter. In this way, students can reduce their reliance on people around them to check their email writing. After this introduction

and discussion, we demonstrated how to use ChatGPT to improve email writing by using a sample email. We entered this email into Chat GPT and asked the program to provide suggestions for improvement. Through this demonstration, our students could see how helpful ChatGPT can be.

Step 3: Navigate and Practice ChatGPT with Students

To help students navigate ChatGPT, we guided them through its access step by step. We first used an instructional PowerPoint to introduce the steps of accessing ChatGPT. Then we invited students to follow each step with us. First, students had to search for ChatGPT with Google. Second, we guided them to click on the ChatGPT website. Third, students had to create an account on ChatGPT. Since our students already had Gmail accounts, they used their Gmail accounts to register for ChatGPT. After students had created their ChatGPT accounts, we reminded them that every time they used ChatGPT, they had to log in to their account. Following the instruction, we asked students to close the window on their computer and redo the steps to ensure that they knew how to access ChatGPT. We also guided students to interact with ChatGPT. For example, they could ask ChatGPT questions like the following: "How is the weather today?" "Can you provide a recipe for a chocolate cookie?" "Can you give me suggestions for what I can do during vacation?" This interaction gave students practice in having a conversation with ChatGPT on the basis of the prompts they entered.

Step 4: Guide Students to Write an Email through Modeling

The second part of the training focused on modeling how to write a professional email. We created five lessons to provide demonstrations of email writing in five scenarios. In the five lessons, we modeled each step on the email-writing self-monitoring checklist (Figure 2). In particular, we discussed each email scenario with students and guided them to articulate their messages clearly. We also guided students through the process of writing all essential email components and then gave them the opportunity to practice independently. This practice continued until students could write an email incorporating all email components and a clear message. The lessons are outlined below.

1.1.1.**Lesson 1:** In Lesson 1, students learn how to write an email asking to take a leave. In the subject line, they write a concise subject, beginning with something like "Request for a day off" or "Leave application." They are also instructed to clearly specify the prospective leave date in the subject line. In the email, students should articulate their reason for requesting time off. We suggest discussing different reasons for taking a leave, such as caring for an ill family member or being sick.

1.1.2.**Lesson 2:** In Lesson 2, students learn how to write an email seeking help from a supervisor or instructor. In the subject line, they are instructed to specify their request for help clearly and concisely. In the email, students should articulate a difficulty regarding their work or their assignments and state why they need support from their supervisor or instructor in surmounting it. We suggest discussing with students, common work or assignment challenges they might encounter. For example, students may state that they often seek clarification on the requirements of an assignment or ask instructors for feedback on their assignments.

1.1.3.**Lesson 3:** In Lesson 3, students learn how to write an email seeking assistance from a colleague or a peer. As in Lesson 2, in the subject line they are instructed to specify their request for help clearly and concisely. They should also detail, in the body of the email, why they need help from a colleague or a peer. We suggest discussing conditions or situations in which students typically seek assistance from a colleague or a peer. For example, for students who have a part-time job, they may ask a colleague to cover a shift or to switch shifts with them. Another example would be seeking help from a peer on an assignment.

1.1.4.**Lesson 4:** In Lesson 4, the students learn how to write an email scheduling a meeting with a supervisor or instructor. They write a concise subject, such as "Request to set up a meeting," to state the email's purpose. In the email, students should describe why they are requesting a meeting. We suggest discussing with students if they have ever had a one-on-one meeting with their job supervisor or course instructor. Discussing one-on-one meeting situations may assist students in articulating the reasons why they might be requesting a meeting. Such reasons could include reviewing academic or job performance or seeking clarification on an assignment or job task.

1.1.5.**Lesson 5:** In Lesson 5, students learn how to write an email seeking an extension for completion of an assignment. They should write a concise subject, like "Request for an extension." We suggest prompting students to identify specific job tasks or course assignments for which they require more learning time. Extension for a job task or an assignment is a common accommodation in both workplace and academic settings for individuals with disabilities. Once students learn how to make such requests via email, they will be able to obtain an extended deadline for a job task or an assignment.

The foregoing five lessons, tailored for each email scenario, help students with intellectual disability to identify the situations they aim to articulate in their emails. Each email scenario presents a challenge that students with intellectual disability commonly encounter in both employment and postsecondary education settings. Drawing on discussion, students with intellectual disability will be able to reflect on scenarios within their daily lives. For example, they may consider the difficulties they face while completing assignments. They will also learn to advocate for themselves by requesting extensions. After discussing each email scenario, instructors can guide students in practicing writing an email on the basis of the scenario of their choice. Following identification of the email scenario, students practice email writing with the email-writing self-monitoring checklist.

Instructors then provide feedback until students are able to independently complete the email-writing process.

Step 5: Guide Students to Use ChatGPT to Revise Their Emails

This final step involves teaching students to enter prompts in ChatGPT and to read ChatGPT's responses. The prompts shown in Table 1 can be used to guide ChatGPT in generating a list of feedback for students. This will allow students to revise their emails point by point according to the feedback provided. It takes practice for students to read through the responses from ChatGPT. We suggest asking students to read responses aloud and discuss what they mean. For instance, if ChatGPT suggests to "specify the context" in an email, instructors can prompt students to clarify what is meant by "context" in the email. On the basis of each scenario, this context might relate to an assignment or to a job task. Instructors can then reinforce the importance of specifying the particular assignment or job task being referenced when emailing someone. After discussion, instructors can guide students in revising their emails using the feedback from ChatGPT. In addition, it is essential to support students in making informed decisions about whether or not to revise an email on the basis of ChatGPT's feedback. For example, if students have already specified which job task or assignment they are referring to in the email, and ChatGPT still suggests "specify the context," students can identify this feedback as superfluous and choose not to address it. Essentially, ChatGPT serves only as a feedback provider or assistant to help students to improve their email writing; students themselves are the authors of their emails.

Other Tips and Suggestions

Incorporating self-monitoring and ChatGPT in email-writing instruction can enhance students' ability to write emails. Here are some tips and suggestions for instructors to consider before implementing the strategy:

Using both the self-monitoring checklist and ChatGPT in email-writing instruction

The email-writing self-monitoring checklist and ChatGPT are equally important tools. The purpose of email-writing instruction is to assist students with intellectual disability in independently composing effective emails. Students first use the email-writing self-monitoring checklist to monitor their behavior step by step. Then, they use ChatGPT to edit emails. We suggest that teachers avoid overly emphasizing the use of ChatGPT. After all, students have to learn to write emails on their own.

Experimenting with prompts

Conversational in nature, ChatGPT generates responses on the basis of the prompts with which it is provided. However, we have observed that, even when the same prompts are used, ChatGPT may generate different responses over time. For example, when we initially entered the prompt "list suggestions to improve the email," ChatGPT responded with a list of advice on how to enhance the email. However, after some time, when we used the same prompt again, instead of providing a list of advice, ChatGPT automatically generated a revised email. We suggest that instructors not only experiment with prompts before instruction but also regularly test them during instruction to ensure that ChatGPT generates responses aligned with their (and their students') expectations.

Incorporating Other Assistive Software to Support Students with Intellectual Disability

A sufficient level of reading ability is required to read ChatGPT's responses and revise emails accordingly. However, individuals with intellectual disability may have less than optimal levels of development in reading skills [27]. Some individuals have a basic functional reading level, such as alphabetization, while others may have reached higher levels of reading skills, such as decoding. We suggest incorporating other assistive software to help these individuals read ChatGPT's responses. For example, speech-to-text software is a tool used by many individuals to send texts and/or write emails and could also be used by students who are writing emails. We suggest that instructors consider students' specific learning needs and integrate other tools appropriately [28].

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