

CHAPTER 1.

GENERATIVE AI WILL MAKE KNOWLEDGE WORK EASIER, MORE PRODUCTIVE, AND FASTER ✦ *CRITICALLY EXAMINE GENERATIVE AI FROM ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL FRAMEWORKS*

Paul Cook

Indiana University Kokomo

The historical record is littered with technologies that were supposed to make our work lives easier but failed to deliver on their utopian visions. In 1930, John Maynard Keynes famously predicted that in a century people in developed countries would work no more than fifteen hours per week, with their most pressing concern being figuring out how to fill their leisure time. So far, the hype cycle around large language models (LLMs) and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has followed this familiar pattern. Figures like Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates and Chase CEO Jamie Dimon opined that AI would usher in a three-day work week because, as Gates claims, “machines can make all the food and stuff” (Murphy, 2023). But history shows us that the narrative of “timesaving” technology is often a mirage, one that overlooks the larger systems in which such innovations are deployed.

Since ChatGPT debuted on November 30, 2022, there has been a surge of excited interest (and no shortage of doomsaying) among the media, tech companies, and academics about how GenAI will transform work and leisure—and pretty much everything else about modern life. The pronouncements have been especially robust around GenAI’s capacity to perform labor-intensive tasks traditionally associated with knowledge or creative work: writing content, generating images, and composing music or film. GenAI, we are told, will kill the college essay (Marche, 2022), writing (Hsu, 2025), and even Google (Das, 2023). But this grand narrative is flawed. The breathless boosterism surrounding OpenAI’s ChatGPT and DALL-E, Google’s Gemini, Anthropic’s Claude, and many others

glosses over an inconvenient truth: technologies never fulfill their promises in isolation from the economic and cultural systems in which they are embedded.

In other words, the underlying premise that technologies inherently lead to progress or leisure is not merely naïve; it ignores how technological advances function to reinforce capitalist imperatives to work harder, faster, and longer, rather than smarter or more humanely.

The key assumption underlying many of these claims about GenAI is *technological determinism*: the idea that technology determines cultural and societal change, rather than being shaped by human choices or systems. This belief is seductive and has the lure of common sense but is problematic to say the least. As Thorstein Veblen argued, technology's effects are always mediated by its social, economic, and political contexts. GenAI is no different. While it does have remarkable capabilities, the narrative that GenAI will inevitably redefine whole industries, creative processes, and even human interaction—all while revolutionizing knowledge work—betrays a reductive view of how technology operates in the global context of late-stage capitalism. It is also worth noting that while the concept of technological determinism has been debated and mercilessly picked apart for much of the last seventy-five years, it seems to be gaining momentum in the age of AI (Héder, 2021).

Take the 40-hour work week. This structure persists not because it's inherently efficient or optimal for human labor, but because of historical and cultural inertia—and perhaps a heavy dash of “that's-just-the-way-it's-always-been,” an attitude that also pervades higher education. Similarly, even the timesaving potential of email—another much-heralded technology that is now mostly an annoyance—has tethered us to our devices and created new forms of work that didn't exist in an email-less world. GenAI, too, is unlikely to deliver the leisure time it promises because any efficiencies it generates are more likely to be repurposed to meet capital's insatiable and ever-expanding demands for productivity and consumption rather than fostering anything close to genuine leisure, especially for the toiling masses (Srnicek, 2016).

Because here's the rub: new technologies don't follow some inscrutable, autonomous logic of “progress” toward an imagined state of perfect technological plenitude. Futurists and other prognosticators, in fact, often exhibit a paradoxical mindset when it comes to new technology. They tout the convenience and time-saving potential of new technologies like digital payments or self-driving cars, while warning of the risks of falling behind if one resists adopting these tools. This dual narrative reveals a deeper tension: while the initial promise highlights individual benefits, the underlying pressure suggests irrelevance and even risks for those who don't adopt and adapt. This contradiction is rooted in humanity's adaptability, which normalizes technological changes, and in global

capitalism—driven as it is by relentless expansion and acceleration. Even when individuals believe a new technology will save them time, systemic forces often convert these efficiencies into increased production and consumption (e.g., email makes communication faster, but suddenly there’s a lot more of it and—oh yeah—now you’re supposed to check it around the clock). Consequently, the time we hope to reclaim rarely translates into leisure. Instead, it perpetuates a vicious cycle of heightened productivity, fragmentation of attention, and reduced patience in a “new normal” that demands ever more of us. These dynamics inevitably spill over into education, including the teaching of writing.

All this has critical implications for higher education, of course, where writing has long functioned as *the* cornerstone technology for learning and assessment across the disciplines. The idea that GenAI will “save” students from rote writing tasks or “rescue” instructors from grading or assessment assumes a narrow view of what writing pedagogy (and learning) are really all about. Rather than framing GenAI as a means of circumventing writing, educators and other knowledge workers should emphasize its role in augmenting human creativity and critical thinking. Ethan Mollick (2024) has written persuasively about the capacity for GenAI to become a *co-intelligence*: in other words, a thinking partner capable of providing dynamic, just-in-time feedback; generating novel ideas; automating repetitive or “boilerplate” writing tasks; and facilitating the exploration of complex issues and discourses, thereby extending our capacity as humans to achieve deeper insights into the creative process. Just think of the various ways that models like ChatGPT can facilitate the revision process or model specific rhetorical strategies, but they cannot supplant the writer’s intellectual and creative labor—or the unmistakably human feeling of pride and accomplishment that comes from discovering a new idea in the midst of revising a passage or essay (a process writing across the curriculum [WAC] scholars call “writing to learn”).

So, the question for us humans becomes this: how do we ensure that GenAI enhances rather than diminishes the value of writing in education? At the institutional level, policies must address the ethical and pedagogical implications of GenAI use, such as the GenAI Ethics of Practice statement, developed by myself and other colleagues at Indiana University (Hodgson et al., 2023). This includes setting clear guidelines for students on how to use GenAI in coursework and creating opportunities for faculty development around integrating GenAI into writing pedagogy. Much of this work is already being done.

Equally important is reframing how writing is taught. In keeping with critical insights from both process and post-process pedagogies (Dobrin et al., 2011; Kent, 1993; Sanchez, 2005), rather than treating writing as a product to be produced, writing teachers should emphasize writing’s role as a technology for exploration and discovery—and *learning*. Incorporating GenAI into this

process—as a collaborative tool for brainstorming or revision—can help students better understand its affordances and limitations, as well as how GenAI shapes our thinking (and how we in turn shape it). For example, many savvy instructors are asking students to critique AI-generated text or use it as a starting point for their writing to foster critical engagement with both technology and rhetorical practices. In my own teaching, I’ve found that introducing GenAI as a collaborative tool helps students better understand both its affordances and limitations. These activities encourage students to see GenAI not as a threat to their creativity but as a tool that, when used intentionally and mindfully, can expand it.

The promise of GenAI as a labor-saving device must be tempered by a recognition of the systemic forces that shape its deployment. This includes macro-level economic forces like global capitalism, but also extends to cultural micro-forces, such as the peculiarly masculine ethos of Silicon Valley (Bernard, 2023) or the capitalist imperatives of “hustle culture,” where pervasive societal expectations to always be productive, which tend to be especially pronounced in online and gig economies, are amplified by social media platforms like LinkedIn (Hutchins, 2024).

Writing educators, perhaps more than anyone else in the contemporary academy, have a unique opportunity in the AI era to challenge deterministic narratives surrounding all technologies, and demonstrate how technology can (and often does) perpetuate inequities and biases (Noble, 2018). By grounding the use of GenAI in pedagogical principles that prioritize equity, critical thinking, and collaboration, educators can ensure that the “progress” promised by GenAI aligns with the values of higher education, as well as what we all aspire to give our students.

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