

CHAPTER 16.

WRITING MEANS PRODUCING  
WRITTEN WORDS THAT LOOK  
LIKE THEY ARE FROM EDUCATED  
HUMANS ✦ *HUMAN WRITERS  
CAN REVISE AI OUTPUT AS  
THEY THINK ABOUT PURPOSE,  
AUDIENCE, AND CONTEXT*

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The bad idea that machine-produced text that has all the appearance of human polished text is the same as (or an adequate replacement for) human writing misses the point of writing. Writing accomplishes intentional interpersonal work by influencing the contents, emotions, perceptions, and/or reasoning of other people's minds. The written words are only the vehicle to make this happen.

There are many good uses for generative artificial intelligence (GenAI)—all initiated and monitored by humans for human defined purposes. We have long had machine-generated texts, such as templated reports of automatically generated sensed data, such as geological and meteorological events, or market data (see Easterbook, this volume). GenAI expands the range of more complex reports by drawing on multiple (often large numbers of) sources. Currently, humans need to monitor these syntheses for hallucinations, fabrications, faux citations, and other errors. AI can also provide phrasing and proofreading help, especially for people writing in a non-native language. Indeed, for over a decade, such GenAI tools have been used by translators for preliminary drafts which they then monitor and improve. Now such translation tools are commonly available for general users.

The results of both synthetic texts and GenAI translations have the appearance of human texts and are intelligible to human readers. Indeed, they can even meet high standards of clarity and correctness, as they are trained on human produced texts. Current GenAIs only collect, remix, and statistically string together

existing words produced by many different writers to influence many different readers for many different purposes in many different situations. Even if GenAI does this synthetic task flawlessly, creating a text with no errors of language, fact, coherence, reasoning, or ambiguities (all currently still challenges) it has not communicated from one mind to another (see Palmeri, this volume). Written words, however, are only marks on some medium unless they are invested with intent and meaning by the producer to influence a person who later looks upon and interprets those marks as having meaning and intent.

Human minds are not brains in bottles. Minds are parts of bodies that move in the world—sensing and interpreting the world around them, making inquiries, carrying out activities, and learning from experiences, reading, and observing over many years—and doing all of these things in the presence of and with the cooperation of others. Current GenAIs, however, are little more than brains and bottles, extended through the resources of the training texts, repeatedly scanned for word sequences. So let us call them brains in bottles with large disorganized memories, divorced from knowledge structures, contexts, activities, and situations—except when prompted or when the outputs are selected by humans. GenAIs draw on all that has been said previously on a topic, statistically homogenizing the texts and erasing the situations that gave rise to them. What they produce is agnostic as to writer’s or reader’s intentions or the desire of one mind to influence another (see Allison et al., this volume). Even the encyclopedia writer has some sense of the typical users and the needs for their articles, selecting content, sequences, level of detail and technicality based on audience-focused judgments of knowledgeability, importance, relevance, coherence, and conflicting views.

Wayne Booth, over sixty years ago, long before GenAIs, called GenAI’s stance “the pedant’s stance; it consists of ignoring or underplaying the personal relationship of speaker and audience and depending entirely on statements about a subject—that is, the notion of a job to be done for a particular audience is left out” (1963, p. 141). This need for writing’s situational purposiveness leaves the task of writing education exactly as Booth identified it years ago, to focus on helping “the student discover ... a desire to say something to somebody and learn ... to control his diction for a purpose” (1963, p. 142). Decades before Booth, writing instructors were helping students discover and work through their thoughts as they developed and communicated their ideas to those around them. Theodore Baird’s pedagogy from the 1940s at Amherst College, for example, offered semester-long sequences of inquiry assignments eliciting and developing students’ points of views in contending discussions with their classmates (Varnum, 1996). Other long-standing pedagogic practices also help students develop ideas prior to their drafts: group discussions and

private conferences prior to writing, brainstorming, concept mapping, discovery sketches, among others help students locate key ideas to develop in their essays.

These familiar elements of writing instruction to help students identify, explore, and elaborate their ideas can excite them in the power of what they are discovering. None of these change with GenAI. GenAI can, however, provide some background knowledge or common opinions for students to react against to sharpen their own thinking and communicative desires, much in the way assigned readings have long been used in writing classes. Then as student writers become more reflective and confident in what they have to say, teachers can help students evaluate and use GenAI support wisely, by fostering critical criteria to evaluate whether GenAI suggestions actually realize authorial intentions, or provide viable options for addressing issues of elaboration, specification, sequencing of reasoning and thought, phrasing, and word choice. Yet the judgment about which expressive choices will reach and affect readers in the way writers intend can only be made by the writers.

The help offered by GenAI is no different in kind, though greatly increased in power, than that offered by earlier aides, whether dictionaries and thesauruses, phrase and style books, text templates, models of preferred authors, or even use of prior sources—as well as more recent automated spelling, grammar, and style checkers. Long-standing educational practices have helped students evaluate choices offered by these various aides, and incorporating preferred choices into texts even as writers maintain the control of the authorial voice. Formulating evaluation criteria, revision practices, instructor and peer commentary on drafts, class and individual conference discussions of text strategy and development, and discussion of ethical use of work of others and author responsibility for voice, are all familiar and well-developed parts of writing pedagogy and need only be directed to the challenges presented by GenAI.

Educators fear, however, that students may substitute machine-produced work for the learning, choice-making, and evaluation they should be doing as part of the educational process; that is, students won't be thinking—about the content and subject, about the logic and evidence for their claims, about their intentions, about their word choices, or about their audiences and communicative situations (see Ingram, this volume). This form of cheating, however, is no different in kind from earlier educational plagiarism where students resubmit texts, wholesale, from other sources, previous students, or ghost writers, removing the writer's intentions and purposes, the relevance to the immediate communicative situations, and the writer's task-built forming of language.

The teacher's role in limiting such cheating is the same as we have developed over years to address plagiarism (see De Piero, this volume). First of all, assignments and classroom practices that require fresh thought and responsiveness rather

than inviting the pedant's stance. Insofar as assignments draw students into issues and situations they see as immediately relevant and consequential, they are likely to gain energy and inspiration, bringing personal contents and understanding to bear. Such assignments, as well, make texts not produced for the specific tasks more readily identifiable. Second, instructors can provide practice and guidance with positive ways GenAI can provide support at various moments within the process of idea exploration and text production. Student discussions of the implications and limitations of the choices offered by GenAI tools can help students use the new tools intelligently and maintain agency over their texts. Third, teachers can engage with students at all parts of the process, helping them think through the problems they are solving and tasks they are addressing. This engagement makes it more likely that students understand the work expected from them and are actually doing it; even more, it expands students' sense of what is possible at the exact place where learning and development happen, where information is most practical in solving problems and producing successful work. Support provided at the moment where it is needed, is most likely to be used, and most likely to be incorporated into the student's long-term repertoire. Finally teaching can recognize and encourage the students' emerging thoughts. Nothing is as inspiring to students as recognizing how smart they are.

Cheating is not new nor is it likely to vanish; it is just that the tools for cheating are more powerful. Most students, however, do not and will not cheat once they know the guidelines and have enough understanding and confidence to do the work that is expected of them. They are there to learn, particularly in higher education where their presence is voluntary and they are old enough to understand the consequences for their futures.

The real answer to cheating lies in the students' motivations, their confidence in themselves as writers, their desire to learn, their abilities to evaluate and use the currently available tools wisely, and their recognition of the power of writing to make them better thinkers and participants. Restricting access to the new tools will only keep students from learning how to use these tools to help them write effectively in the world beyond schooling, maintaining their voices and control of their communicative intentions. Restriction and fear of the new technologies are counter-productive, creating a vicious cycle of disempowerment (see, for example, Coffey, 2024). The answer is helping students become real writers instead of rewarding only the appearance of writing.

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