CHAPTER 18.

GENERATIVE AI CAN WRITE BETTER THAN ME

✨ *EMBODIED EXPERIENCE IS VITAL FOR WRITING (WITH AND WITHOUT GENERATIVE AI)*

J Palmeri
Georgetown University

I start with a confession: ChatGPT and other generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) technologies can produce grammatically standardized text on many topics more quickly (though not more accurately) than any human writer. So, it's understandable that many people have begun to wonder if taking the time to engage in and learn about the human act of writing is still worth it. If we think about writing merely as an insignificant chore to be completed as efficiently as possible, then trying to outsource it entirely to AI makes sense; however, I argue here that writing (at its best) is a meaningful activity that enables humans to reflect on our experiences of the world and share those experiences with those who matter most to us. Specifically, I demonstrate that learning to draw upon personal embodied knowledge in writing is a crucial skill for all writers to hone—whether they choose to collaborate with GenAI or not.

Writing is ultimately a form of thinking, and it's important to remember that "human minds are not brains in bottles. Minds are parts of bodies that move in the world" (Bazerman, this volume). At crucial points in our lives, we write to tell people we love them, we write to reflect on the life experiences that have shaped us, we write to imagine futures we'd like to inhabit, and we write to figure out what we think and feel about the questions that most vex us. When I first tried out ChatGPT, I was amazed at how it provided speedy responses, but my astonishment soon faded when I started asking it to write about my personal experiences and passions. When I prompted ChatGPT to write a narrative of my life journey as a queer, nonbinary person, it crafted a story so boringly positive and devoid of desire that I couldn't see myself in it. When I asked ChatGPT to write a love letter to my cat, The General, it couldn't even begin to capture my

DOI: https://doi.org/1010.37514/PER-B.2026.2777.2.18

deep affection for him—and my cheeky deference to his authori-tay—in a way that felt true to our relationship. When I asked ChatGPT to write about one of my academic passions (digital writing instruction), I found that it provided a bland summary of key concepts that lacked nuance and voice because it did not have access to my embodied experiences of teaching digital writing nor to the many in-person conversations I have had with other digital writing scholars over the years. In other words, I found that ChatGPT lacked the "situated expertise" (Basgier & Olejnik, *this volume*) of digital writing pedagogy that I have developed through embodied interaction with other experts in that field.

Because GenAI can develop ideas so quickly, it can make us worry that we have nothing new to say; however, it's important to recognize that all writing—whether human or machine-generated—builds on the ideas and words of others. As Audre Lorde reminds us, "there are no new ideas … there are only old and forgotten ones, new extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves" (1984, p. 38). For Lorde, although we may not be able to generate wholly new ideas, we can find "new ways of making them felt" (p. 39). Lorde was writing about poetry (not GenAI), but I think her insight explains why GenAI can never wholly replace human writers. Even if we could develop a GenAI tool that had access to all ideas ever written down, it would fail to show us what those ideas feel like when situated in particular bodies, places, and moments in time. And, for Lorde, this process of making ideas felt from her embodied position as a "Black [lesbian] woman warrior poet" (p. 42) was how she imagined and powerfully argued for a more just future—perhaps the most important rhetorical purpose a writer can pursue.

To me, Lorde's conceptualization of the importance of making ideas felt through writing resonates with Sondra Perl's (1980; 2004) research on the role of "felt sense" in the writing process. Perl's theory of felt sense describes the often wordless bodily emotions that guide us as writers. Giving an example of felt sense, Perl explains,

> when the emerging words do not *feel* right, we squirm. We feel uncomfortable…. If we learn how to pause here and wait, to attend to the wordless discomfort, often the right words can and do come. Felt sense, then, is the physical place where we locate what the body knows. (2004, p. 4)

Felt sense is vital to human writers, but it's something that GenAI cannot directly access. Whether we're writing on our own or collaborating with a GenAI tool, it's vital to pay attention to those moments when the words on the screen just don't feel right—to take the time to pause and listen to what our bodies know about what we most need to say.

I understand how tempting (and at times helpful) it can be to turn to GenAI when we feel discomfort in writing. In fact, when I was stuck during my early drafting of this essay, I asked ChatGPT for help fleshing out the rough abstract I initially submitted. Although it had some decent ideas, I didn't end up incorporating any of the exact words it generated because they just didn't feel like me—nor did they feel like something I'd enjoy reading. Nevertheless, my disappointment with the text generated by ChatGPT usefully gave me the impetus I needed to keep pondering and playing with language—trusting that my embodied "felt sense" would lead me to the words I needed to write.

While ChatGPT may not have been able to generate words that "felt like me" for this personal reflective essay, it could be argued that it is better suited for more routine, everyday kinds of workplace writing. For example, I attended a workshop with a GenAI consultant who suggested that professors could increase their efficiency by using ChatGPT to write student recommendation letters—since these letters can be quite formulaic. And, the GenAI consultant had a point. Like most letter writers, I rely in part on stock positive phrases that I often repeat, but I also include specific examples in my letters, such as elaborating a creative argument a student made in an essay or recounting a moment I noticed a student thoughtfully encouraging a quieter peer to speak. So, while GenAI might usefully assist me with coming up with new enthusiastic adjectives to praise students, it wouldn't be able to help me add the most meaningful details to that letter that only I could know.

At this point, you might be inclined to agree that GenAI is not better than you in writing about personal embodied experiences, but still believe GenAI is better at the more technical aspects of writing—grammar and style—than you are. After all, at the outset of this essay, I admitted that GenAI is better at producing "grammatically standardized" writing than human writers; however, I would argue that GenAI's emphasis on standardization is more a limitation than a benefit. Let me explain why. Scholars of language and writing instruction have long recognized that there are many forms of English that have their own equally valid grammatical structures and stylistic conventions (Baker-Bell, 2020; Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974; Young, 2010). So-called standard English—or "white mainstream English" (Baker-Bell, 2020)—has only traditionally been deemed "correct" because it aligns with common language habits of white, class-privileged people; as such, valuing and celebrating the use of many language varieties is vital for challenging racism. Not only does GenAI generate "white mainstream English" by default, but it often fails spectacularly when prompted to deviate from that "standard" because it lacks embodied knowledge of spoken language use in specific communities. For example, Carmen Kynard has documented her frustrating attempts to

prompt ChatGPT to write about hip hop using the grammatical and stylistic conventions of Black Language—wittily comparing the AI's failed attempts at Black language use to the cringey stylings of 1990s white rapper, "Vanilla Ice" (Kynard, 2024).

In other words, GenAI's tendency to adhere steadfastly to standard English conventions limits its ability to be used to generate powerful, engaging, and inclusive writing (Byrd, 2023; Gruber, this volume; Sano-Franchini et al., 2024). Unlike GenAI, almost all humans violate standard language conventions at least some of the time, and for good reason because life would be dreadfully dull if we didn't! Although I'm a white person who grew up speaking mostly "white mainstream English," I regularly and consciously violate some of the grammatical and stylistic "rules" that many GenAI tools take to be default—though, importantly, I do not experience linguistic racism when I do so. For example, I've recently been trying out Grammarly and have found it helpful for locating inadvertent typos in my emails; however, I was perturbed that Grammarly admonished me to reduce my use of emphatic adjectives and exclamation points. It also red-lined my non-standard grammatical choice—inspired by literary authors I admire—to add unnecessary "ands" when enumerating ideas to convey excitement! I've chosen (at times) to resist Grammarly's advice because its edits just didn't feel like me. If you'd worked with me as a student or colleague, you'd know that quirky queer enthusiasm is an apt descriptor for my embodied style of giving a presentation, teaching a class, or chatting with a student about a writing idea; if I were to accept all Grammarly's edits, my writing would no longer align with how I strive to show up in the world as a queer writing teacher-scholar.

As I reflect on why I find so much GenAI-produced text dreadfully dull to read, I'm reminded of my mentor and friend, Kate Ronald, who once confessed that she preferred to read "writing 'where somebody's home' as opposed to writing that is technically correct but where there's 'nobody home,' no life" (Ronald, 2003, p. 197). I wholeheartedly agree with Ronald, and I have yet to read any entirely AI-generated text that gives me that cozy "somebody's home" feeling. To extend Ronald's metaphor, I've come to think that a GenAI tool might be able to give you a blueprint for a house—it might even be able to build you a house you could inhabit—but that house will never feel like a home unless you take the time to live in it and transform it alongside all the other humans, animals, and objects that make you so delightfully, quirkily, astoundingly yourself.

Drawing on the work of Lorde, Perl, and Ronald, the good idea I want to leave you with is this: take care to listen to what your body knows about writing and GenAI. Whenever you ask GenAI to generate text for you, slowly read aloud a paragraph or two of the GenAI output, pause to take a few deep breaths, and then ask yourself two questions: 1) How can I make these ideas

felt in relation to my embodied life experiences? 2) How can I transform these words to make myself feel at home in this writing? If you can begin to answer those two questions, you'll be well on your way to meaningfully deciding when to accept GenAI-produced text, when to modify it, when to reject it, and when to start again with a blank page. Nobody else—human or machine—can make those choices for you because only you know what it takes to make yourself feel at home among the words in which you dwell.

REFERENCES

Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy*. Routledge.

Basgier, C., & Olejnik, M. (2026). AI can write like an expert in any discipline: AI can help you understand how experts use writing. In C. Basgier, A. Mills, M. Olejnik, M. Rodak, & S. Sharma (Eds.), *Bad ideas about AI and writing: Generative practices for teaching, learning, and communication*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2026.2777.2.26

Bazerman, C. (2026). 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. In C. Basgier, A. Mills, M. Olejnik, M. Rodak, & S. Sharma (Eds.), *Bad ideas about AI and writing: Generative practices for teaching, learning, and communication*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2026.2777.2.16

Byrd, A. (2023). Truth-telling: Critical inquiries on LLMs and the corpus texts that train them. *Composition Studies, 51*(1), 135–142. https://tinyurl.com/yaw54pun

Conference on College Composition and Communication (1974). Students' right to their own language. *College Composition and Communication, 25*(3), 1–32.

Gruber, A. (2026). AI will empower non-native English writers to master "standard academic English": AI that reflects global Englishes usage and language diversity can support students' writing. In C. Basgier, A. Mills, M. Olejnik, M. Rodak, & S. Sharma (Eds.), *Bad ideas about AI and writing: Generative practices for teaching, learning, and communication*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2026.2777.2.27

Kynard, C. (2024). When robots come home roost: The differing fates of Black language, hyper-standardization, and white robotic school writing (yes, ChatGPT and his AI cousins). *The Sandbox, 1*(1), 34-40.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches.* Crossing Paths.

Perl, S. (1980). Understanding composing. *College Composition and Communication, 31*(4), 363–369.

Perl, S. (2004). *Felt sense*: *Writing with the body*. Boynton/Cook Heinemann.

Ronald, K. (2003). Style: The hidden agenda in composition classes or one reader's confession. (3rd ed.). In W. Bishop (Ed.), *The subject is writing: Essays by teachers and students (pp. 169–183).* Boynton/Cook Heinemann.

Sano-Franchini, J., McIntyre, M., & Fernandes, M. (2024). Refusing GenAI in writing studies: A quickstart guide. *Refusing Generative AI in Writing Studies*. https://refusinggenai.wordpress.com/

Young, V. A. (2010) Should writers use they own English? *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies, 12*(1), 110–117. https://doi.org/10.17077/2168-569x.1095