CHAPTER 28.

OUTLINING IDEAS IS A WRITING PROCESS UNWORTHY OF PRACTICE (THAT STUDENTS SHOULD OUTSOURCE TO AI)

✨ *LEARNING TO WRITE INVOLVES DISSECTING, ASSEMBLING, AND UNDERSTANDING STRUCTURE*

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A bad idea about generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and writing claims that "AI generates original ideas like humans." Many instructors and administrators argue that students should use GenAI to generate outlines to structure their papers but should not generate text to copy and paste. However, part of the creative process is lost when using GenAI to generate an outline rather than considering the thought behind it oneself. Outlining *is* writing. It's a creative task. An outline isn't simply structure; it sets the agenda. Instructors and administrators should consider the skills society would like future leaders to possess and base GenAI policy on these principles. This calls for appreciating outlining as part of the creative writing process.

It can be tempting to think that GenAI can save writers time by generating ideas and the order to present those ideas in outlines as a blueprint for students' papers. GenAI can aid students (like Google or *Wikipedia*) but it shouldn't guide them. Students should not lose sight of their agency. There is something of value that is gained by going through the process of outlining. Generating ideas and outlining inform each other as the writer is brainstorming. When the writer thinks about what is important (and should be included in the outline), the writer is setting the agenda by deciding what aspects of an issue are important. While there are many things that one could write about any given topic, the human decision about what to reveal or conceal is a rhetorical act that shapes the paper written by the author and the thought process that readers of the work will

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engage with. Ideas and outlining are inextricably linked because ideas about a topic help the writer decide if it should be included or not. This invites the writer to think about how various points in the outline could be related, generating new ideas and ways of understanding.

As a graduate student instructor (GSI) at Michigan Technological University teaching composition and public speaking, I had been having conversations with fellow GSIs about how to handle GenAI. Should GenAI be banned, embraced, or something in between? Some GSIs said that, while they strictly ban AI to generate text to be copied and pasted, they encourage students to create outlines for research papers in class. However, while many people assume that outlining is not an important process and, therefore, it is a task that is appropriate for GenAI, outlining is a vital skill because writing is all about making micro-decisions about what to include or disclude and how to narrate points in a logical order when the world around us is not narrative but things exist simultaneously. To be able to select what to talk about and the order in which to present that information is crucial. Therefore, we should not outsource outlining to AI.

By outsourcing the task of outlining to GenAI, students might not learn to think in a way in which they conceive of a bigger picture and set an agenda. But figuring out what to cover is much more important than grammar. If anything, GenAI should generate text but leave the big-picture ideas to people. Outlining can only be properly performed by a sentient being. Outlining demands conceiving of the situational context and how the writer wants to intervene in a conversation. It also requires being able to draw on experience to determine what is important background knowledge to inform the context of the situation and the writer's intervention. While AI can generate ideas for an outline, we need humans to determine if those ideas are applicable, negligibly relevant, or not germane to a conversation.

To find more generative ideas for AI and writing, it is important to understand what GenAI can do well and what GenAI's deficiencies are and then to teach students to refine and better craft prompts for GenAI. A more fruitful approach to outlining could be students creating an outline on their own, then using GenAI, and finally comparing the outlines to see if GenAI identified subtopics students had not considered but wanted to add to their paper. GenAI providing feedback on an outline would allow the author to see if they overlooked a point without being swayed in a direction before thoughtfully considering what they wanted to say about a topic. GenAI can augment the research and writing process, but critical thinking by the writer should remain central to the process of learning. The writer can integrate some happy accidents that GenAI suggests resulting from strategic inputs, but the writer ultimately should always be in charge of the process and product of writing.

USING GENAI FOR OUTLINES DEPRIVES WRITERS OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Many instructors and administrators argue that students should use ChatGPT to generate outlines that provide the content and order for a project, but that students should not use AI to generate text. For example, in a 2023 article "Exploring ChatGPT's Potential" by The School Superintendents Association (AASA), the piece points out the potential for ChatGPT to create outlines for students. In the 2023 *New York Times* article "Don't Ban ChatGPT in Schools. Teach With It," a high school English teacher asks students to use ChatGPT to create outlines that compare novels and then students must write their own content based on the outlines (Roose, 2023). However, form is content; so, students forfeit the opportunity to devise a rhetorical argument—a crucial skill worthy of development. An outline isn't simply structure. It sets the agenda. If we want to teach future leaders critical thinking skills, then learning how to set an agenda should be prioritized. We should not allow GenAI to generate the goals of a paper without also emphasizing that GenAI can come up with an assortment of previous ideas but that the student should ultimately make the call for what is important to include in their paper.

While students should not rely on GenAI even if it worked ideally, GenAI does not in fact work perfectly. GenAI's dataset excludes knowledge and perspectives beyond the dominant mainstream, typically excluding marginalized groups' knowledge and perspectives. This has been well documented by scholars, including in Safiya Umoja Noble's (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression* and Massimo's (2022) *Machine Habitus*. Yet, even if GenAI's datasets were neutral, using GenAI rather than cultivating the skills to outline would still be the student's loss.

Sano-Franchini et al. (2024) write, "[W]e must recognize the harms that will result when writing is primarily treated as a tool to transcribe answers, including its implications for critical thinking, democratic decision-making, and linguistic variation and expression." Indeed, there are tasks that GenAI does well, but there are also myriad limitations to GenAI that are often unquestioned. That is, GenAI can be useful but also serve as a foil to illuminate the human aspects of writing that demand a sentient writer to think critically, make decisions, and employ expressive linguistic variation that might not be represented in training data but be the most appropriate linguistic variation for expressing a thought.

HANDS-ON EXPERIENCES TO UNDERSTAND GENAI'S DRAWBACKS AND POSSIBILITIES

So, how can this misuse of technology be avoided in order to improve students' writing skills, not diminish them? A more generative approach to GenAI is to

teach students how GenAI works and what its (dis)advantages are. That way students can use the technology to their advantage while being critical of it so that they avoid GenAI's pitfalls.

Students should understand how GenAI generates ideas and organizes them because it often draws on data that is incomplete and biased due to asymmetries in power. If GenAI is used for a topic and there is a point that consistently gets ignored or mischaracterized, it can affect how that topic is understood. When I was in Palestine in 2017, Google's GPS indicated that I was in Israel because those in power side with Israel—even though the land is disputed—which gets reflected in the technology (Haddad & Zeidan, 2020). If I am researching and want to generate an outline, if data are all labeled as Israel, that means that my outline will leave out information about Palestine's existence. Likewise, another example of data created asymmetrically is that training data for GenAI regarding neighborhoods to police was based on a racist policy (Smith, 2022). Because crime was detected in a community of color when the police were in charge, the training data used that insight to continue to look for crime disproportionately in neighborhoods of color. If I want to create an outline about crime, AI would list information about neighborhoods of color but would not list information on white neighborhoods because they would simply not be in the training data. In these scenarios, we cannot rely on a machine but instead need humans to understand the situation and history.

GENERATIVE CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES FOR OUTLINING

For a classroom activity that grapples with these issues of data inequality, instructors can have students pick a hot topic in the news and then ask ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini to generate outlines using the same prompt. Ask students: What do the outlines have in common? How are they different? What do the outlines emphasize? What do they leave out? What perspective are the outlines coming from? Based on the answers to those questions, students can modify the prompts to exercise more control over the narrative. For example, I prompted GenAI with the phrase "Outline for a paper on Trump expanding the U.S.-Mexico border." The outputs focused on a United States governmental policy perspective. Missing was the perspective of the whole Mexican population. Gemini suggests to "[b]riefly describe the history of the United States-Mexico border wall and previous efforts to expand it" in the paper's introduction. While Gemini includes suggestions to address that the wall was controversial and there were concerns about human rights violations, starting with a history of wall construction normalizes the argument that the wall should be expanded while obscuring views that protest its construction. "Increasing surveillance and

enforcement along the border" from Claude assumed a United States perspective by not naming who was being surveilled and who was doing the surveilling. The power relationship becomes invisible by the absence of actors named. The closest to acknowledging another perspective was "Resistance from border communities and stakeholders" by Claude. Additionally, "Impact on U.S.-Mexico relations, regional security, and domestic politics" by ChatGPT frames it more as an obstacle to dominant political moves. ChatGPT did have a "Long-Term Implications" section where it mentioned "Changes in the dynamics of border communities and local economies." This is a good start, but frames the situation in reaction to wall expansion rather than questioning the whole enterprise. This illustrates how GenAI can suggest items to address in a paper but cannot synthesize the information in terms of an ethical framework. Additionally, it shows students that a slight difference in their input can radically change the results that they receive from GenAI.

To take this activity a step further, students might rewrite GenAI's texts from varying perspectives and for multiple audiences and purposes. For example, students could research and write about the wall from the perspective of someone living in Mexico. This exercise can reveal what GenAI does not address as students think outside of the GenAI box. This prompt shares similarities to poetry revision exercises that ask the poet to rewrite a piece in another tense to see if it works better. These exercises emphasize to students the importance of revision even when a text appears superficially complete.

For a second part of this classroom activity, instructors could ask students to request outlines on topics that students are familiar with. This exercise can show students how GenAI is good at finding predictive language patterns but less effective at locating information. That way, when students research topics that they are less familiar with, they are able to recall that they need to remain critical and use GenAI as a tool but not the final word.

Another classroom activity idea is to tell the same story but to use different details and to arrange the information in a different order. Then have students critique: What is gained/lost in each iteration of the story? Which examples are most effective at doing what task and why? To augment this activity, students could watch the experimental documentary *Eno* (Hustwit, 2024). The film about musician Brian Eno uses programmed GenAI to select video clips and sound so that each iteration of the film screening is unique, with 75 percent of the material differing in each screening of the film. Students could watch two film versions and compare them. In the documentary part of the activity, students take someone else's work and critique its effectiveness; and in the storytelling part of the activity, the students are the creators. These activities get at the heart of the goals of writing and the skills of being able to dissect, assemble, and

understand structure. This helps students build a solid foundation to become the creators of ideas and structure those ideas into a narrative that effectively communicates those ideas to an audience.

CONCLUSION

Aurora Matzke and Nora K. Rivera (2026) ask not *what* GenAI can write but *why*. The "why" is key and it can only be answered meaningfully by humans. Christopher Basgier and Mandy Olejnik (2026) state that "writing requires situated expertise" (this volume). While GenAI can provide facts, it cannot situate the information it provides. This is something that students must learn through the practice of writing. "ChatGPT can't participate in the discipline for you," Basgier and Olejnik write. While GenAI can assist, ultimately, the writer is the one in the sentient conversation. That is a student's task at school and beyond; and that requires creativity.

The MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI (TF) stated in "Working Paper 1" (2023) that "the primary work of educators is to support students' intellectual and social development and to foster exploration and creativity." The TF also notes that "[c]ritical AI literacy is now part of digital literacy, and students and teachers should be made aware of bias and inaccuracy in model outputs." In the spirit of fostering exploration and creativity as well as digital literacy, the focus on GenAI should not be on restricting GenAI but on showing students how to best utilize GenAI to reach their goals. This likely calls for students to use GenAI more minimally; that is, students should be encouraged to strategically use tools at their disposal, including GenAI, to augment their work, while they should be discouraged from relying on GenAI such that its output is viewed as easy and good enough to the detriment of accuracy, creativity, perspective, and the agency of the writer, losing sight of their point of view and what they want to convey to an audience.

Ultimately, this essay calls for instructors, administrators, and students to consider the skills we would like our next generation of future leaders, in the field of writing studies and beyond, to possess and base our AI policy and writing instruction on achieving those goals.

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