

CHAPTER 32.

AI CAN CLEAN UP FIRST-
YEAR WRITING ✦ *FIRST-YEAR
WRITING COURSES SHOULD
EMBRACE THE EPISTEMIC
“MESSINESS” OF WRITING*

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The arrival of large language generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) models has quickly changed the landscape of writing. It is already routine to see news service articles and blog posts announcing themselves as written in whole or in part by AI. AI assistance, however, is rarely detailed or justified. We have entered a world where the expediency of writing seems to matter more than its authority, accuracy, or craft. Given this, we are drawn to Michel Foucault’s infamous insight about how discourses function as theoretical guidance for this chapter. He writes, “People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does” (in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 187.) Thus, as Foucault might have observed, these AI author/prompts know what they are doing, and they know why they are doing it, but do they know what their doing does? Do we?

As first year writing (FYW) instructors and program directors in higher education, we view writing as a collaborative process where knowledge emerges and evolves through social dialogue and exchange of ideas. Unfortunately, AI has the potential to eviscerate writing pedagogies that focus on writing as a rhetorical and epistemic practice. When GenAI writing tools are used to prioritize “correctness,” speed, and output—aka, “linguistic hygiene”—over process and understanding, they fundamentally prevent students from experiencing writing as a way of learning, thinking, and participating in knowledge communities.

AI AND THE CLEANSING OF FIRST YEAR WRITING

There is no doubt that GenAI is changing the landscape of academia. In July 2024, *Inside Higher Ed* published an article on venture capitalist Mary Meeker. Meeker gained notice for her report, “AI and Universities,” in which she argues that universities must become leaders and partners in GenAI development and that GenAI can help “remake [universities] to help them succeed” (in Coffey, 2024). Notably, this remaking seems akin to market differentiation, allowing universities to rebrand and focus their purposes to better gain a survival share of the tuition market via student “customers.” The tacit proposal that universities shrink their purposes to grow their coffers is part of a larger trend that has been steadily shifting higher education away from its critical, epistemological, and civic missions to more direct workforce fidelity. This is most visible in public “access” schools serving working class, first generation, and historically underrepresented minorities—those for whom landing a “decent job” is presumed to be the single or, at least, most important reason to attend college. The insistent cry is that we must teach the new tools, even as we are just learning about them, or our students will be under-prepared for the workforce. Unfortunately, there seems to be no corollary cry insisting that marginalized students are equally entitled to experience the kinds of critical literacies that support non-vocational investments, like advocacy for self and others, or the search for meaning in one’s life.

The brave new world of GenAI and expedient writing also dovetails with institutional values long associated with the first-year writing requirement, threatening to make the course irrelevant. In her controversial *Inside Higher Ed* piece predicting the demise of FYW, Melissa Nicolas (2023) notes, “In its 125-plus-year history, the purpose of requiring students to take this course has been to ensure that they have the ‘proper’ writing skills to write well (read: to reproduce standard edited English) in their other subjects.” Observing that faculty across the university never seem satisfied with student writing despite the ministrations of FYW, nor do they want to teach it themselves, she cynically concludes that AI can now give the institution what FYW never has: sanitized, trouble-free student writing.

Unfortunately, such thin expectations for writing are institutionally encoded in FYW as learning outcomes—writing practices and conventions over which students should have control in order to produce prose for undertakings that others (e.g., future professors, employers) will present in the future. Within this framework, writing is a skill or a tool that transcribes thought or content—matter that is not a constituent part of writing and is not reliant on it. Writing studies has wrestled with this for decades, generally acceding to institutional “culture of assessment” demands, while insisting on more robust outcomes. The Council

of Writing Program Administrators, via the Outcomes Statement (2019), has provided national (and needed) leadership, insisting that writing needs to be taught as a rhetorical and epistemic activity. However, the nature of outcomes assessment demands that students display their knowledge in accessible ways. For most subjects, the question in curriculum and assessment committees is: what will students do to show what they *know*? For FYW, however, this question becomes: what will students write to show what they *can do*? Conceptual knowledge (rhetorical, discursive), that sometimes intuitive, sometimes explicit metacognitive background that sponsors independent, agentic writing typically goes unrecognized, unaddressed, unassessed, and untaught. This, we believe, is—or should be—the real subject of writing.

KEEPING IT LOCAL WITH COMMUNITY WRITING

Social epistemic scholars in the 1980s and 1990s such as Kenneth A. Bruffee (1984), David Bartholomae (1985), and Patricia Bizzell (1992) broke important theoretical ground to address an earlier version of the very problem that we are now facing. These scholars resisted the current traditional methods of teaching writing that strove to cleanse students' writerly "imperfections" in the pursuit of linguistic hygiene. More than that, they insisted that writing, as a subject, had a "there" there. They sought to teach students about language use as a *communal* ethical practice and a *shared* conceptual terrain, wherein how meaning is made, how identities shape and are shaped by interaction, how power circulates relationally, and how communities accomplish work might be appreciated. These approaches were tied to student empowerment, not purification.

In looking back to social epistemic rhetoric and ahead at the challenges of GenAI, we find that the learner's paradox, first, offers a foundational framework for writing pedagogy in the new age. The learner's paradox asks: How can we search for knowledge if we don't know what we're looking for? And, if we have no prior knowledge, how do we know what questions to ask? A student lacking subject knowledge has no reliable way to evaluate GenAI's outputs for accuracy or relevance. Likewise, a student who uses GenAI as an editing tool can't evaluate its output without some understanding of how language functions at the word and sentence level. We are returned to Bartholomae's (1985) "Inventing the University," writ 2.0., wherein entering college students are expected to approximate the discourse of a community they are not yet a part of. Now, however, with GenAI they have a tool that can help them do it more convincingly, but not more knowledgeably. The learner's paradox, then, argues for the importance of ensuring students have some evaluative ground to stand on in engaging knowledge making practices.

Second, as Emma Mechem (2024) and Shyam Sharma (2024), have both observed, GenAI knowledge is *Western* knowledge, scraped from mostly Western data sets and trained on largely Western ways of reasoning. These limited data sets exclude vast realms of human knowledge: printed texts, academic databases, global languages, and most crucially, embodied knowledge found in cultural practices, rituals, relationships, and unwritten community traditions. Echoing social epistemic rhetoric, Mechem recommends that writing teachers take inspiration from indigenous forms of knowledge making: “from the idea that knowledge is contextual, that it is formed, understood, and practiced within the embodiment of community, and that the identity of the knowledge user is in critical dialogue with the world around them.” By insisting on the value of local knowledge making, Mechem’s version of social epistemic rhetoric lessens the use value of GenAI for student writing.

Third, and building on this, we have both crafted our FYW courses around community-based inquiry. Within this framework, students try to understand their problem and work through potential responses to it. These projects, animated by student curiosity and need, combine ethnographic and other primary research methods with more traditional secondary research methods, and require writing in a variety of genres. The beauty of this approach is that students do not face the learner’s paradox alone and without context. By practicing knowledge-making in and about communities that are familiar to them and in which they have a stake, students can learn from more experienced members, observe how knowledge claims are evaluated and weighted, and how disagreements are negotiated. They also learn how more traditional research methods can add to the conversations they are constructing, connecting their “academic” and “real” worlds, in ways that might make them both real. Students thus contribute to the conventions and practices of discourse communities while retaining their agency and authentic expression.

To give just one example of what this looks like in action, Frank, a first-year student athlete at Bloomfield College investigated communication challenges among international players on his baseball team. Through ethnographic observation and interviews, he developed a community narrative project titled, “Swinging Past Words,” advocating for nonverbal communication strategies, inspired by MLB player Elly De La Cruz. Frank’s reflection reveals how this approach transformed *his* learner’s paradox: “I knew so much about the topic, so any article I found [about intercultural communication in baseball] I was really able to understand, and I would be able to analyze it well.” His experience transformed an individual philosophical problem into a process of community participation.

This approach does not cut GenAI out of our classrooms. But its allure and practical power is reduced when students are meaningfully situated in knowledge

making practices that GenAI cannot convincingly reproduce. To the extent that GenAI does enter our classrooms, it becomes a conversation and negotiation with students about how and why to use it: What is gained and what is diminished in using it for this or that purpose? How might it assist us in creating reliable knowledge? How will we evaluate what it produces? How should we acknowledge its role in our work? And, importantly, what can it *not* do? By organically introducing AI in our classes, we provide the means to explore this powerful and ubiquitous technology without turning the whole course over to it. In a sense, then, we resist the vocational drive to “teach the tool” while supporting students’ critical exploration of it in specific, limited, and scaffolded doses.

The stakes in resisting GenAI’s linguistic cleansing become clear when we revisit Foucault’s observation about understanding what our actions do. While GenAI can generate grammatically correct text at unprecedented speed, it cannot teach our students how to make reliable knowledge for themselves, nor can it replicate the vital processes that community-based problem-solving and knowledge-making offer. Rather than cleansing student writing, FYW should re-embrace our social epistemic roots and foster the possibilities in messy texts that allow students to explore and understand what their writing does as it shapes meaning and builds relationships.

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