CHAPTER 34.

WRITING INSTRUCTORS CAN'T BE REPLACED BY AI ✨ *RECOMMIT TO "COMPOSITION" AS A DISCIPLINARY AND CURRICULAR NAME*

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Among writing instructors, there remains an implacable belief that the teaching of writing requires human hands and minds to be effective. Writing pedagogy, the belief goes, is too distinctive—too reliant on the human-ness of communication and the creativity of the human imagination to express ideas—to be replaced by artificial intelligence technology. The editors of a recent volume on writing and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), however, suggest that "We need to be mindful of our investment in writing as we try to determine which parts of the writing process we might yield to GenAI—and to what extent we have a choice in the matter" (Laquintano et al., 2023).

Indeed, we may have little choice at all, and two important contexts suggest the possibility that writing faculty may be on the frontlines of workforce changes driven by GenAI. First, GenAI is being intentionally constructed to replace human labor. Indeed, it's being designed to replace very complex and traditional "white collar" work, not simply mundane or rote labor. Second, writing professionals' beliefs about teaching often remain unaligned with university administrators' notions. The realities of budgets, the looming "demographic cliff" (Vyse, 2025), and limited state or private resources present challenges for maintaining enrollment at our institutions and, in turn, a traditional academic workforce. Indeed, GenAI's reshaping of institutions means that many educational leaders are already rethinking how best to meet student demand. Writing instructors, who typically teach in low seat count classrooms and in courses not directly part of a major, may be at particular risk. It's a bad idea to believe that writing instructors can't be replaced by GenAI, even as writing faculty must continue to illustrate to institutional stakeholders how our work advances educational excellence and achievement. A generative idea is to focus once more on the idea of "composition" as the animating descriptor of our labor.

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Writing studies over the last four decades has been increasingly effective at articulating the nuanced, evidence-based reasons for its distinctive pedagogy. The process and metacognitive orientation of writing instruction has moved most writing programs away from the traditional—some would say outmoded, archaic, or even counter-productive—approaches to teaching "writing skills" such as mechanics, grammar, or simply genre adherence. Such work is, for some, "one of the worst ideas about writing" (Branson, 2017, p. 21). Yet, those pedagogies persist, and GenAI poses a significant threat to the job security of those who focus on them. GenAI already provides effective, efficient, and far cheaper capacities to teach these skills, and it presents a significant opportunity for institutions to reduce the cost of human labor by using AI to teach them.

A recent marketing campaign for Google's Gemini, Alphabet's AI assistant, illustrates this point. The campaign launched during the 2024 Olympics and featured an ad that emphasized GenAI's ability to write on behalf of humans. In it, a father helps his daughter "write" a fan letter to her favorite Olympic athlete by using Gemini, which drafts a letter that, at first blush, looks both professional and human, effective and endearing.

The ad received significant backlash, and Google was forced to pull it. As *The Verge* reports, "Google acknowledged the negative feedback but said that the commercial wasn't meant to imply Gemini could completely replace humans. The ad was meant to 'show how the Gemini app can provide a starting point, thought starter, or early draft for someone looking for ideas for their writing'" (Song, 2024). The term "replace" is striking, as it reveals both the anxiety of those resisting Gemini's capabilities and the potential for remaking the teaching of writing. Is writing a skill or capability that can be outsourced entirely to a chatbot or some similar new technology? Despite reassurance from Google, the ad sure seems to suggest it could.

Institutions are already experimenting with GenAI as a replacement for human instruction more generally. In 2023, Harvard pioneered an AI instructor for one its "most popular" coding courses with the aim of providing "a 1:1 teacher:student ratio" (Dupre, 2023). In London, a private boarding school has combined AI with virtual reality to offer "bespoke learning," apparently believing that "fallible" teachers can't "achieve [AI's] level of precision and accuracy, and also that of continuous evaluation" (Carroll, 2024). The United States Department of Education (2023), in offering guidance to United States institutions exploring GenAI in teaching, including the teaching of writing, which is explicitly identified early in their report, acknowledges that "AI may enable achieving educational priorities in better ways, at scale, and with lower costs," even as the report insists that,

> Improving teaching jobs is a priority, and via automated assistants or other tools, AI may provide teachers greater support.

> AI may also enable teachers to extend the support they offer to individual students … and AI may enable greater customizability of curricular resources to meet local needs. (p. 2)

While individual institutions grapple with how best to deploy GenAI, the DOE is already considering how it affects the labor of teaching—and whether that labor will persist in ways that are recognizable to us today.

In light of the disruptive cultural changes prompted by GenAI and its growing role in education, the field of writing studies needs to once again consider how our discipline talks about itself in educational contexts. It needs to once again consider how our field's name provides access to resources or limits it and how our self-descriptions advance the interests of instructors or constrain their growth. Our disciplinary identity as reflected in our name does not simply describe our intellectual traditions or aspirations; it is also a tool for navigating institutional contexts and the material circumstances of our labor—our classroom sizes, our remuneration, our involvement in decision-making at our universities. In this moment, its role as a tool for institutional security is more important than simply advancing a particular intellectual tradition that is legible to other scholars.

"Composition" as a term faded in its centrality to our field precisely because it was so widely associated with work that many of our intellectual peers see as less important; that is, the term composition was one that limited institutional prospects for the labor of writing instructors. The emergence of GenAI, however, provides an opportunity to rewrite that story, to emphasize what we have come to know about writing itself—that it's a practice of "composing ideas," even if also inventing them. The term composition provides what Peter Khost (2018) imagines to be a more capacious term than writing studies, one that reminds our institutional stakeholders that compositionists focus on the creation of new ideas through a process of investigating and composing with and through various media, research artifacts, and modes of expression.

While debates around the nature and name of our field surface regularly to tackle the intellectual and creative aspects of our work, I draw attention here to the ways that our disciplinary names impart—or limit—institutional power. As Doug Hesse and Peggy O'Neill (2019) have described, "The gravitational force of composition as merely a first-year requirement is strong, after all, and many thus see it as limiting" (p. 77). Prior to the advent of GenAI, such limitations had been fading to a secondary concern, but with GenAI and the increasing pressure of budgets on concrete issues such as seat counts, retention, and graduation rates, the need for naming our work in ways that address those concerns is especially important. Because the goals of most writing classrooms are already much more than simply the production of accurate and correct written texts, the

term "composition" or "composition studies" provides a rich restatement of our significance to university decision-makers.

Put simply, the term "composition" provides a hedge against GenAI's potential to replace the work of writing faculty. Hesse (2005), in his frequent advocacy for broader understandings of what writing means to our field, suggested long ago that composition includes digital expression and compilation, and indeed, he wondered if the word "writing" may frame our work in ways that aren't always desirable: "The term seems neutral enough, but it may well carry the sense of inscribing words on paper; that is, it may focus attention on the physical act of graphemic production, separate from thinking, with all the focus on correctness" (p. 345). He suggests that

> the richest programs of our futures feature writing in a welter of circumstances and genres, creative, journalistic, and professional, as well as civic and academic. They feature work in design-visual and aural as well as verbal. They fully imagine students in complicated worlds of school and work and politics, yes, but also passions, relationships, and art. (pp. 346-347)

His work follows, as he has himself acknowledges, the conception of composition as a "dappled discipline" first proposed by Janice Lauer (1984), and which was followed in turn by the WPA's own statement on composition outcomes (2014): "composing refers broadly to complex writing processes that are increasingly reliant on the use of digital technologies," and that "digital technologies are changing writers' relationships to their texts and audiences in evolving ways" (p. 144).

We may soon witness the final sunsetting of the teaching of mechanics, the memorization of forms and rules, and the time-honored teaching of grammar, but our collective knowledge of composing persists, as does the intellectual work that undergirds it, such as the process of invention, the serious work of meaningful research, and the collaboration that often escapes notice. The question we face, then, is not whether GenAI will replace writing instruction, but how composition (of ideas, of varied means of expression, of various technologies) effectively bridges our expertise and this new technological, intellectual, and social terrain in order to advance our work and secure the labor our students deserve. Our training in the craft of writing is likely being replaced, but our expertise in composing is as important as it has ever been.

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