

CHAPTER 35.

**GENERATIVE AI WILL MAKE THE
WRITING CENTER OBSOLETE**
✦ *WRITING CENTERS THRIVE BY
FOSTERING HUMAN CONNECTIONS*

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“Can’t you just turn ChatGPT off?” I heard a colleague ask our IT department while I was asking it for jokes about horses eating guacamole.

It was (sort of) an understandable request, as many faculty members were just beginning to grapple with the implications of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in education, particularly regarding its impact on student writing critical thinking. Mirroring what I saw on my campus, some broader national conversations centered around concerns like cheating while others focused on the great potential for GenAI, including its ability to democratize learning through personalized tutoring (Mollick & Mollick, 2023).

With the rapid emergence of GenAI-powered tutoring tools—or updates to established supports like Grammarly (2024) (“Responsible AI that ensures your writing and reputation shine,” it insists on its homepage) and Khan Academy (2024) (“Khanmigo is your always-available ... tutor ... writing coach ... essay reviewer,” its homepage states)—it’s easy to understand why some might believe that GenAI could make writing centers obsolete. Why, after all, would students seek out the experience of sharing their writing with a human tutor when they could turn to an AI that is available on demand? Why deal with human schedules and human feelings—particularly those of vulnerability—when a bot could help you out (and you don’t even have to leave your room)?

For those in higher education who wonder whether writing centers are still necessary in an era of GenAI, this belief overlooks the vital role writing centers play in fostering critical thinking, personalized learning, and ethical writing practices. Writing center directors and tutors know from experience that the human connection has always been at the heart of successful tutoring no matter what technological advancements or disruptions have been thrown our way (including, most recently, a collective quick shift to fully remote tutoring during the

COVID-19 pandemic). Why should GenAI be any different? By understanding these tools, writing centers can reinforce their relevance while continuing to educate students—and sometimes skeptical faculty—about the unique value of collaborative, human-driven learning.

Further, rather than seeing GenAI as a threat, writing centers have the opportunity to integrate these technologies to enhance their existing services and to educate students on their responsible use. For instance, tutors might model how GenAI can brainstorm essay topics or help refine thesis statements while facilitating conversations about its limitations and ethical implications. These nuanced discussions—rooted in empathy and the relational work of tutoring—highlight what GenAI cannot do: build trust, adapt intuitively to student needs, or laugh with a student over a poorly worded sentence. The human element in writing centers remains irreplaceable because it transforms writing from a transactional process into a deeply relational one. Therefore, this chapter argues that GenAI will not render writing centers obsolete; instead, it presents an opportunity for them to evolve and continue their work in new, learning-centered ways.

To unpack this bad idea, it is important to understand that writing centers have evolved alongside technological advancements for a long time and have not let these changes overshadow the fundamentals of what makes a writing tutorial effective. In the 1980s, some scholars began highlighting work on collaborative learning (see Bruffee, 1984), and the conversation-based approaches central to writing center philosophy have remained a cornerstone even as new tools have been integrated into tutoring practices. When email and online learning started to become more prevalent in the 1990s, writing centers did not become obsolete; instead, they evolved to include these kinds of technologies in their sessions (see Hobson, 1998). The technologies did not replace tutors but rather offered more methods for tutors to assist students. This adaptability underscores a fundamental truth: new tools can expand possibilities, but they do not replace the nuanced, human-driven learning processes at the heart of writing center work.

GenAI offers numerous opportunities to assist students in their learning, but tutors can also gently remind them of the potential downsides of relying solely on these tools for writing assistance. Students may miss out on developing critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills that are essential for academic and professional success. Additionally, tutors need to be reminded that an overreliance on GenAI could perpetuate issues related to academic integrity and other ethical concerns. Tutors who have been trained in these areas can help guide students in their GenAI usage in the same way they guide students through other critical and ethical ways to use the tools we have access to today. For example, a student may wonder how to cite their GenAI usage in an essay the same way they might have questions about citing any text in a particular style—surely

the answer exists somewhere, but sometimes it's just more productive (e.g., a better learning experience) to work with another person in order to understand it. Tutors can also help students understand the limitations of GenAI, recognize when GenAI-generated suggestions may be inappropriate, and ensure that students use these platforms in ways that enhance their learning rather than diminish it. Most importantly, perhaps, tutors can remind students to reread course policies found on syllabi, LMS platforms, and assignment prompts to ensure appropriate GenAI usage, which most likely differs from professor to professor or even assignment to assignment.

Contrary to those who believe “the college essay is dead” (Marche, 2022) or that we need to go back to bluebooks and in-class writing, the students I talk to about these issues don't want to use GenAI to cheat or plagiarize work that is not their own; however, they are curious about the potentials for these tools and would like instruction on how they might use them. Many schools offer a first-year composition program, which may or may not explicitly teach students about GenAI, but what happens when students don't have immediate access to a writing professor? Tutors can contextually model how students might use GenAI during various parts of the writing process: they might explain how to brainstorm topics with tools like ChatGPT; they might model searching for sources with their library's power search feature, Google Scholar, or newer GenAI-powered tools like Consensus or ResearchRabbit; they might slow students down who immediately want to accept advice from Grammarly. And they can discuss all of these choices in real time and help students understand what's gained and lost from speeding these processes up.

For example, tutors might demonstrate how GenAI tools can assist in conducting a literature review by identifying broad patterns or suggesting connections between sources. At the same time, these real-time conversations can help students critically reflect on what's gained—and what might be lost—through the use of such tools. While GenAI can quickly surface a wealth of relevant articles, students may miss the serendipity that often occurs when searching for sources themselves through library databases, Google Scholar, and—for those fortunate to have such things still on campus—library stacks: the unexpected discoveries, tangential connections, or deeper understanding that comes from a more exploratory process. By facilitating these discussions, tutors ensure that students remain active participants in their learning where they can consider the balance of efficiency with the intellectual growth that comes from engaging directly with the research process. As much as professors can explain this to their students, sometimes this kind of advice is simply better received when it comes from a peer or someone who can talk about the process but isn't grading the student.

In addition to such conversations and modeling around processes, there are potential ways tutors might incorporate these tools during a session. One more radical approach is to use GenAI to provide initial feedback on a student's draft, which can then be discussed and elaborated upon during the tutoring session. This method shifts the tutor's role from first responder to second reader, foregrounding metacognitive dialogue over initial assessment. On the surface, this method might save time, but it could also serve as a spark for deeper, more meaningful conversations about the student's writing (assuming, of course, students are ok with such a practice and not feeling coerced into using the technology). At my writing center, tutors have mainly reported using GenAI to help students formulate better thesis statements and paper titles. This step typically follows a collaborative discussion where tutors take notes on the students' ideas and then use a platform like Microsoft Copilot to generate options. Notably, GenAI rarely produces a perfect solution, but it often inspires the students to craft the best expression of their own ideas.

GenAI presents an opportunity for writing centers to showcase these chatbots as just another thinking partner—one that can enhance collaborative learning sessions without replacing the deeper, human-driven aspects of learning; one that can also be straight-up wrong and biased, not unlike human collaborators. My tutors and students are already using GenAI much like they would use Google or another search engine: sometimes to find a synonym or answer a quick question that helps them move forward.

While concerns about GenAI—such as its environmental impact and reliance on biased training data—deserve explicit attention at the curricular level and action at the societal level, writing centers can play a vital role in addressing these issues. Some writing centers might train their tutors to focus on reinforcing ethical questioning and encouraging critical evaluation of the implications of using GenAI. For instance, in this collection, Whitney Lew James highlights how the seeming accessibility of GenAI tools often conceals deeper harms, from data privacy violations and exploitative labor practices to environmental degradation. Lydia Wilkes, also in this collection, extends this critique by introducing the concept of “digital damage,” naming the ecological toll of AI infrastructure and its entanglement with systems of carbon capitalism and colonial extraction. Their chapters remind us that we need to be talking about such issues, and writing centers are positioned to have the kinds of critical conversations students need about GenAI usage including whether to use it, when to use it, and at what cost.

Other writing centers might prioritize practical guidance and help students integrate these tools effectively into their writing processes and expect tutors to demonstrate how these tools can complement the learning process, validate

thoughtful choices about when not to use them, and encourage a reflective approach to their application. With the help of tutors, writing centers can highlight new ways GenAI can support student learning and writing while keeping the focus on human interaction. Open dialogue amongst students is key, and writing centers remain some of the safest spaces on campuses to facilitate these essential conversations.

As Ethan Mollick and Lilach Mollick (2023) discuss, there is great potential for personalized learning through GenAI tutors when it comes to content-based topics; however, while GenAI platforms are presently good at mimicking conversation, the belief that they can fully substitute the nuanced, human interactions provided by writing center tutors, in particular, is premature. Even when guided by well-crafted prompts or programmed with follow-up questions, GenAI struggles to replicate the adaptive, relational, and context-sensitive work that human tutors perform as we know that effective writing sessions are about more than just offering feedback: they are about engaging students in dialogue that helps them develop their ideas, understand their audience, refine their arguments, reread texts, and revise first impressions. In addition to supporting the writing in front of them, tutors support the writers they meet with a full awareness of these students' lived context. GenAI won't be able to empathize with the student who got caught in a downpour on the way to the dining hall or reassure a student by saying, "Yeah, I struggled in this class, too." This process involves empathy, intuition, experience, and an understanding of context over mathematical probabilities of the next logical word—qualities that GenAI, despite its current advancements, cannot replicate.

By assuming that GenAI can replace writing centers, those of us in higher education risk undermining the holistic educational experiences that these centers provide. Writing centers are not just about correcting grammar or improving sentence structure; they are about fostering a deeper understanding of writing as a process and developing the writer as a whole. Writing centers have not only survived but thrived through significant technological shifts—from the introduction of computers and email to the rise of hypertext and the various digital literacies students engage with in their compositions—and they have consistently served as hubs for critical thinking inspired through actual human conversation. This adaptability positions writing centers to keep the conversation going, even in the era of GenAI, as long as we keep the focus on dialogue and shared understandings that come from maintaining the human element we know is crucial for effective learning and development.

As I often tell my students, you have to *be better than a robot*. And as I tell my writing consultants, you are engaging in *radically human* work—GenAI can't laugh or commiserate or take deep breaths with us. And it's still pretty bad at

humor not because it's unfunny but because it lacks the shared experience and human connection that make even bad jokes land between people.

KG: write a joke about horses eating guacamole

ChatGPT: Why don't horses eat guacamole? Because they can't stand the feeling of being "un-stable" after all those avocados!

KG: write a joke about AI and the Writing Center

ChatGPT: Why did the AI go to the Writing Center? To get some "byte-sized" advice on its syntax errors!

In writing centers, even our groan-worthy puns happen in context, and I feel confident we can count on writing centers to keep the conversation going because students deserve the kind of learning that still happens between people, no matter how "intelligent" the tools become.

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