

CHAPTER 36.

WRITING CENTER TUTORS
SHOULD INTRODUCE AI INTO
SESSIONS ✦ *AI ASSISTANCE
IS NOT CONDUCTIVE TO
MOST WRITERS' PROCESSES,
LEARNING PREFERENCES,
AND AFFECTIVE NEEDS*¹

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In one of the earliest responses to generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in the writing center, Thomas Deans et al. (2023) published a blogpost that gave administrators concrete guidelines for practice. “We see no need to panic,” they write, offering seven scenarios for integrating GenAI into real writing center sessions. While they don’t call for GenAI to be integrated into every session, given the examples included in the piece, the authors imply that tutors *should* integrate GenAI when they can. While writing center studies so far has seemed interested in how to integrate GenAI into our practices (Coffill, 2023; Deans et al., 2023) and writing studies more generally has suggested that perhaps some students turn to GenAI because they believe they have nothing to learn or they will not need writing in their future (Davis & Taczak, 2023; Morrison, 2023), student writers suggested otherwise. Recent data from my own empirical project that asked over 500 students from a wide range of institutional backgrounds and types about their use of and opinions about GenAI and writing suggests that writers are not looking for GenAI integration when they visit their university writing center. Instead, they want a relational, affective, collaborative experience with human tutors. When tutors introduce GenAI into a writing center session, especially when the writer did not ask for it, they may be doing some writers

1 For a lengthier discussion of this research, see “ChatGPT is good at some stuff...but it’s not like it’s a person”: Student Writers Reflect on AI.” *Writing Centers and AI: Generating Early Conversations*. Eds. Elisabeth Buck and Joshua Botvin. WAC Clearinghouse, 2026.

a disservice. In alignment with the *Student Guide to AI Literacy* (MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI, 2024), written by participants of the Critical AI Literacy for Reading, Writing, and Languages Workshop, writing center directors and tutors should instead teach critical GenAI literacy through offering workshops about how to use GenAI for both academic and non-academic writing and by hosting critical conversations about GenAI with stakeholders across campus.

Before explaining why I think it's not a good idea to integrate tutor-initiated use of GenAI into sessions, let me first say how grateful I was for Deans et al.'s (2023) early blogpost: I assigned it to new and experienced tutors alike to open up conversation and to give them some strategies for visualizing how GenAI might work in the center. At that point, I wasn't sure what kind of policy we might have. My problem with the idea comes from what I've learned from student writers, especially those who come from under-represented backgrounds. Before drawing directly from interview data with over 50 writers, let me share who is *not* using AI: writers at minority serving institutions (81%; n=17), writers over 30 (73%; n=11), BIPOC writers (73%, n=22), writers with disabilities (73%, n=19), and queer identifying writers (67%; n=6). These writers are intentionally choosing not to use AI. Here are two primary reasons why:

REASON 1: UNDERREPRESENTED WRITERS BELIEVE GENAI IS CHEATING

Just over half of the writers (52%, n=13) who shared their perceptions of GenAI mentioned that they consider it to be a form of cheating.² While emotional responses varied from fear to temptation, to disgust, the connection to cheating remained constant. For instance, Astur³ spoke honestly about GenAI, which he does not use, explaining that, "it's a good software, but it's cheating, because AI is doing your work and not you ... it's kind of really lame in my opinion because ... you're claiming [it] and you're not improving." Despite its ability to help in some ways, Astur still considered its use dishonest, as well as not very good, as he noted both the mistakes that it makes as well as the obvious marker of its use: "the words don't have a soul to it, you can say."

Similarly, Zein⁴ does not use GenAI and admitted their fear around its use, expressing frustration with AI art specifically and the way that it "takes existing

2 Since most of my conversations with writers focused specifically on ChatGPT, I've kept that original language instead of changing it to AI.

3 Astur is a trilingual Somalian immigrant and sophomore undergraduate at Midwestern R1.

4 Zein is a bisexual, transgender, neurodivergent Hispanic graduate student in the humanities at a regional PNW college who works in the office for affirmative action.

[art] from real people doing real work and not getting the credit.” In this sense, they seemed concerned with stealing as a form of cheating. Still, Zein was concerned about GenAI in academic settings, asking: “what is it about writing, or our assignments or education that our students don’t feel that they can do on their own? ... Are we not giving our students the tools and the resources they need?”

Other writers found the connection between GenAI and cheating to be more nuanced, as they still used it. To illustrate, Marina⁵ admitted that she used GenAI to help her identify areas where she could eliminate words: “I try to be ethical about it because I never want to submit a piece of writing that I feel like I cheated on ... I don’t feel like I’m a strong writer and I really value that skill, so I’m working on it.” In this case, use of GenAI for word elimination rather than generation seems like a more acceptable use of the tool for Marina. She was clear about not wanting to feel like she cheated through using GenAI and that she valued learning how to become a better writer, a skill that she learned when she visited the writing center through conversation: “I think the writing center provides the outside perspective, again, having people who have seen other students’ writing is super helpful ... it’s just nice to be able to have a conversation with someone as well, ask them questions that come up in that moment.”

Comparing generative AI to fast food, Clay⁶ found GenAI to be a way of cheating through the writing process by skipping the early brainstorming stage: “I think the cognitive processes are important. I think ChatGPT disrupts that ... it’s like a cheat system for student writers to go over the next step rather than ... think about topics, that sort of brainstorming session ... it sort of gets rid of that and goes straight to the writing stage.” For Clay, a major issue with GenAI was not necessarily text generation but rather enabling writers to skip crucial parts of the writing process.

REASON 2: GENAI IS NOT HUMAN AND IT JUST ISN’T VERY GOOD

Alongside their perception of GenAI as a form of cheating, many of the writers also noted its lack of humanity (76%, n=19): Astur mentioned its lack of soul and Marina explained that she prefers to rely on “a real human being.” Other writers noted this too, such as Juan,⁷ who is a user of his center and a current tutor-in-training. Juan hesitated, admitting, “I have used ChatGPT, I won’t lie

5 Marina is a senior undergraduate Asian public health major at a regional PNW college.

6 Clay is a junior physical sciences major at a New England SLAC whose first language is Bisaya/Cebuano.

7 Juan is a sophomore undergraduate gay male student whose first language is Spanish and who identifies as an undocumented student at a small HSI in the West.

to you (laughs), but ... it cannot replace human emotions and a lot of times, the AI will be wrong.” Juan had much to say about the community within his center, which he describes as “comfortable,” “welcoming,” and full of “happy people.” Juan also spoke about the benefits of having bilingual sessions to work on personal scholarship essays, where he talked through ideas in Spanish and the bilingual consultant helped him translate. For Juan, this practice relied on human engagement and would not be possible with GenAI.

In addition to the preference for humans over GenAI, some writers mentioned that ChatGPT isn't very good in general (56%, n=14). Sabine⁸ explained how she used GenAI once with mixed feelings: “it was kind of cool because it was, like, done for me, but, it, like, it was *done* for me, you know?” She further described the experience as a “stress reliever,” yet still prefers the writing center since they “use my example, fix it, but then I needed to do the rest, so I actually learned ... you're not really learning with ChatGPT ... [the learning part] is super important ... this learning that I'm doing now applies to everything in my life.” Through learning about herself as a writer, Sabine realized that she is a visual learner, so she can tell her future employer that she needs to do things in a hands-on kind of way and take notes in the field. These are things she learned about herself through her experiences with the writing center and ones that would not be possible with GenAI. In this case, not only would use of GenAI be insufficient for supporting her preference for visual, hands-on learning, but also, the process of working on writing with a human helped her to develop metacognitive awareness and a better understanding of her own needs and preferences.

This aligned with Emma's⁹ perspective of GenAI as a less dynamic, one-dimensional imitator of human language. As a computer science major, Emma explained in depth both what GenAI is good at and what it's not good at: “It's not good for getting correct answers because it imitates human language and that's its first and foremost job.” Emma's emphasis on imitation spoke to both GenAI's strengths—which she noted are often at the end of the writing process when you need to find synonyms, consider alternative ways of organizing or “reorienting to the topics of your paper,” and presenting your ideas in different words—as well as its weaknesses—like coming up with new ideas, conducting research, and connecting to real sources.

While Emma does use GenAI as a tool, most of our interview focused instead on how her experience in the writing center, and with one consultant, supported her during a time of crisis. In descriptions of her work in the center,

8 Sabine is a white, 18–22-year-old female junior majoring in occupational therapy at a two-year college in the West with an anxiety disorder.

9 Emma is a senior, bilingual, biracial, undergraduate computer science major with ADHD and depression at a New England Small Liberal Arts College (SLAC).

she mentions love, kindness, and her struggle with writer's block. Yet, her tutor helped her "turn bullet points into paragraphs." Emma's college experience had been interrupted by COVID as well as the loss of her mother, which made returning to school and being productive even more grueling.

Like Emma, most of the writers who spoke about GenAI and their writing center experience emphasized not only the value of human interaction, but also the quality of human writing support, alongside perceptions of GenAI being "not very good" (at best) and "cheating" (at worst).

WHAT WRITING CENTERS AND TUTORS CAN OFFER: AGENCY, AFFECT, AND COLLABORATION

Instead of using GenAI, one-on-one sessions should centralize the kinds of work writing centers do best, the kinds of work writers say is memorable for them. To briefly reference the above-mentioned survey (n=535), writers shared in short answer questions that they value the center because it supports their agency, independence, and learning of new skills (26.8%, n=77). Writers also indicated that they value the affective dimension of tutorials, namely kindness (43.2%, n=124), validation/confidence (64.6%, n=95), and collaborative work during sessions (53.7%, n=50). These values align with those recognized by other contributors in this collection who recognize the meaningful human elements of writing center tutoring: connection (Girdharry, this volume), morality (K. Thompson, this volume), and attention to the multilingualism (Mohammed & Belhadi, this volume).

While these values are not new to writing centers, the fact that writers noticed them and valued them in our current political and technological moment is. And, somewhat to my surprise, the writers that did share their best uses of GenAI primarily talked about doing so for non-academic purposes, such as app content writing for a job, article and policy memo writing for an internship, award acceptance speech writing, and personal statement writing for medical school. In fact, 64% (n=9) of GenAI users did so only for workplace (not academic) writing. So, our critical GenAI literacy outreach efforts should not solely focus on academic writing, but also, and perhaps more so, on writing in the world, the workplace, and our lives beyond the institution. Critical GenAI literacy should also involve intentional, nuanced attention to the affordances, risks, strengths, and weaknesses of GenAI tools, as well as careful consideration of when and how to use the tools appropriately (audience and genre) and what is at stake (think environmental impact and human labor) for whom in using them.

While there may be times when bringing GenAI into a writing center session as a collaborator of sorts could be beneficial (like when it's explicitly part

of the writing assignment), we as writing center directors and tutors should not use GenAI as the default mode. In other words, for complex, student-driven reasons, with attention to the diverse body of students in this study, GenAI may not be the most useful tool in the tutor's belt. Some of these writers don't even consider GenAI a part of their personal writing toolbox at all. Yes, students are already using GenAI and many of them are savvy users of GenAI, but they would not come to the writing center if GenAI was already sufficient. For many students with whom I spoke, for those who are already using their university writing center as an invaluable resource: our physical spaces, our affect, our consultants, our kindness matters at least as much as our pedagogical interventions. Writing centers have long been spaces of and for difference. Spaces of and for writers. When it comes to preserving a space of human-to-human, affective collaboration around writing, I can't help but wonder, if not us, then who?

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