

CHAPTER 39.

TEACHERS SHOULD ABANDON  
LONGSTANDING ASSIGNMENTS  
THAT STUDENTS CAN NOW  
DO WITH AI ✦ *TEACHERS  
SHOULD REVISE ASSIGNMENTS  
TO ACCOUNT FOR AI AND  
EMPHASIZE WRITING TO LEARN*

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I routinely work with instructors on designing and teaching writing-intensive courses across a range of disciplines. I give advice on assigning informal writing in tandem with formal writing, structuring in stages of revision, and applying a range of other strategies gleaned from fifty years of progress in writing across the curriculum (Palmquist et al., 2020). Now I also routinely urge instructors to plug their assignments into ChatGPT, plus at least one other generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) application, just to see how those tools handle them. Many who do so are impressed with what the applications generate; they're also disheartened because they think that now they must scrap the assignment and replace it with a new, more GenAI-proof one.

Discarding longstanding assignments is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, that may be a good idea, particularly if they lack rhetorical complexity, have little sense of audience beyond the teacher, or ask students to rehearse received knowledge, as Dan Melzer's study of more than 2000 assignments from a range of disciplines suggests is the case with most current college writing assignments (Melzer, 2014). But what if a teacher has a favorite assignment that doesn't fall into those traps and has worked great in the past, but GenAI does it adequately well or even very well? One need not abandon it or resort to the problematic regime of GenAI-detection. A better idea is to revise the assignment in light of both longstanding WAC principles and emerging GenAI realities (Association for Writing Across the Curriculum, 2023). We can do so in ways that honor the original learning objectives

and involve all student writers in authentic learning. Here I propose three ways of doing that, illustrated with scenarios from two courses.

Here's a recent case in which I revised a favorite assignment. For more than twenty years, I have been asking students in service-learning and technical communication courses do some form of genre analysis (Deans, 2006), either as preparation for composing in that new (to them) genre later in the course or as part of a broader investigation of writing in a specific profession that they aspire to enter later in life. Students must find and share at least three examples of their target genre; identify common structural, design, and linguistic conventions; name intended audiences; analyze the purpose(s), with particular attention to how the genre performs social action; list some of the explicit and implicit values of the genre (for most, this is the hardest part); map relations to associated genres; and discuss the degree of uniformity and variation among their examples. They often do this in anticipation of having to compose in that genre in the near future, although sometimes it is a stand-alone assignment intended to explore a genre that they will encounter in a future career. Either way, I want them to learn that composing in a new genre involves more than simply following a format or formula (even if it may include some of that).

I don't want to give up this assignment, but I also realize that this is just the kind of task that GenAI handles well, both because there are lots of genre analyses in their training data (it's a reasonably common school assignment) and because it calls for knowledge that is conventional, indeed generic (even if new to that particular student). If you prompt ChatGPT, "Write a 1000-word genre analysis of white papers" or "Do a genre analysis of SOAP notes for physical therapy," the results are impressive. Not stellar. Not sufficient to meet all elements of my assignment. But pretty good. GenAI will provide a serviceable description of the purpose (though usually little or nothing about audience); it will describe the structure and sections, including their typical content; it will summarize three to five linguistic and stylistic features; it will likely include a section on contextual considerations; and it will conclude with a one-paragraph summary. All this will be accurate (I've seen little hallucinating because it is not typically needing to cite specific sources) and newcomers to the genre will glean valuable information. The output will not include a section on values, nor refer to related genres, nor reference any specific examples (though it will do all of these when prompted to, at which point some hallucination becomes more likely).

I am not abandoning this assignment, but I have revised it in two major ways: integrating meta-conversation about the affordances and constraints of GenAI, and flipping the role of the examples. After students collect their examples, I require that everyone use GenAI to generate a draft, and we have small-group and whole-class conversations about that process. What application did they

use, and what did it produce? How did they phrase their prompt? Indeed, how much do they know about prompt engineering and iteration? (Typically very little.) Did different GenAI applications produce different results? How might one address missing elements of the assignment through iteration? (Telling GenAI to “Add a section on the explicit and implicit values of the genre” works pretty well, though rarely gets them all the way there.) We also reflect on the conventions and ethics of crediting machine writing in workplaces versus academic venues, and I stress that while documentation conventions differ, neither context allows sneakiness or dishonesty (Mangan, 2023).

We have further discussions about why GenAI handles this kind of assignment pretty well but will not do nearly as well with, say, their upcoming micro-proposal assignment (for which they propose to change a specific practice or policy in a school or work context they know well, addressed to a specific person with the agency to act on the proposal). They have to confront the idea that while GenAI may be good at many conventional writing tasks that involve convergent learning (that is, where everyone is angling toward the same answer), it struggles with local context, the nuances of specific audiences, and rhetorical complexity. Most come to see that GenAI cannot do it all (Anson & Cole and Lesh, this volume).

I also revised how students must use the examples. In the old model, I required them to build their analysis empirically from the examples; then, in the final product, they would cite the examples to support their claims. In practice, this meant that references to examples would take up 10-20% of the whole text, often appearing in the form of perfunctory statements like “This [feature of the genre they have just named or analyzed] can be seen in examples A and B.” The revised assignment now explicitly requires them to devote at least 50% of their final submission to detailed discussion of the examples. Specific examples often depart from genre norms. We turn to the examples to assess the veracity and completeness of the GenAI output. How do the examples confirm (or not) the GenAI claims about the genre? What is left out? What is in the output but not evident in the examples? For instance, when students gather examples of the white paper genre, they can get frustrated when they find that some are 20 pages and some 150 pages. So how long should mine be? They may also observe that some look like slick, full-color marketing materials and others like boring, black-and-white scientific reports. So, which should mine look like, they wonder? Examining variations in real examples raises questions of context, audience, and purpose for those specific white papers, and I encourage students to reflect on such rhetorical matters even as they include some generalizable conclusions about their genre from the GenAI output, which they can include in their final products, documented as machine-generated with signal phrases or other methods. This shift to specifics helps students confront the complexities and contradictions that GenAI often flattens and assures me that

they can apply what they have learned from GenAI. I also require a final section in which they must speculate about near-future applications of what they have just learned—for example, for my upcoming service-learning project for a nonprofit, what elements of the generic GenAI advice and/or the examples should I follow, and why? By critically introducing students to the new realities of GenAI-assisted writing while ensuring that they can actively apply knowledge—even when that knowledge comes from GenAI—this revised version of the assignment opens more opportunities for introducing the kinds of AI literacy principles outlined by Lisa Bell and Joni K. Hayward Marcum (2026) and Sindija Franzetti and Amy Wanyu Ou (2026).

My second case hinges not on supplementing what GenAI does relatively well, like describing the typical features of a genre, but on revealing what it does poorly, like connecting personal experience to intellectual inquiry. For five years, I've been teaching a travel writing course that enrolls a wide range of students, some quite motivated and others, well, just looking to fulfill a requirement. Four of the five major writing assignments ask students to craft creative non-fiction essays based on past travels, new experiences, or microradventures (Humphries, 2015). Students are rarely inclined to turn to GenAI for those creative essays, but they can be for the one critical essay assignment on the ethics of representation. Following a unit on the long history of travel writing and a set of readings by the likes of Jane Hamilton and Jamaica Kincaid, this assignment has traditionally asked students to identify one ethical issue in travel writing raised in the lectures and/or course readings and then use that as a lens to analyze at least one other course reading. Even though I thought that confining texts to the course ecosystem would discourage shortcuts, those few determined to use GenAI found that they could do so—with some crafty prompting—because analytical essays about colonialism or the ethics of representation in travel writing are informed by a common history, and the issues tend to be rendered in fairly conventional ways. To disrupt such essay writing and boost motivation (this tended to be the least engaging essay for students, even if one I didn't want to abandon), I pivoted to the personal. I decided to revise the assignment, and I now direct students to reference at least one of the unit's course lectures and one of the readings but to center how *their own* experiences, identity, or culture inform their travel or travel writing, including its ethics. We look at some examples that blend personal narrative and critical analysis, such as a Molly McCully Brown (2019) essay on how a disability shapes her encounters with new places. Students have written, for example, on how being a student from China going to college in the United States shapes what counts as travel and on how their appearance, accent, gender, size, shyness, family history, military uniform, anxiety, economic status, friendships, or privilege inflects how they move through new places. Compared to past sets of student essays for this

assignment, the most recent sets have evinced more complexly embodied narratives (see Palmeri, this volume). The more recent essays have also included less of what Aimé Morrison (2023) describes as the “correct, mild-mannered, balanced, objective prose” (p. 158) that the technologies of both schooling and GenAI produce and more of the “surprising and joyous and confounding and allusive and elusive and annoying and impossible” (p. 155) claims and language that humans, when invested, can write. They have exhibited more perplexity (how much a word or phrase departs from what the training data would predict) and burstiness (how predictable elements of prose are with respect to length, structure, and tempo of sentences), the very measures that GenAI-detectors use to determine the likelihood that a text is human-generated (UNLV Libraries, 2024). The old Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) strategy of inviting in the personal—whether in the formative or final stages of composing—takes on renewed relevance in our GenAI times. I might add that those who insist that their disciplinary discourse has no room for subjective narrative can still leverage the personal, doing so by having students include informal reflections along with their formal deliverables. Again, a tried-and-true WAC strategy, one that captures some of the humane, relational, and developmental aspects of learning to write and writing to learn.

While there are no doubt many other fruitful ways to make assignments more AI-enhanced or AI-proof, the three AI revision tactics I outline here offer a good start. If GenAI can do significant parts of the task reasonably well, acknowledge that, use it in class, and ask, *How can I make explicit and critical reflection on the utility and ethics of these tools part of the writing process?* To expose the limits of GenAI and ensure that novices can actively apply new-to-them knowledge, especially when it comes from GenAI, ask, *How can I shift the emphasis from synthesizing general knowledge to applying it to specific, socially situated examples or scenarios?* And if responses to an assignment are trending toward flattened conventional thinking and language, ask, *How might I enliven both motivation and originality by requiring student writers to weave the personal with the intellectual?*

When I lead a faculty workshops on designing assignments, I usually title it “You Get What You Ask For” because I want to stress how instructors, through their assignment prompts, bear real responsibility for what students produce. In this moment when we’re still figuring out how to write with machines, it’s a good idea to reconsider what we’re asking for.

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