CHAPTER 4.

AI IS REVOLUTIONARY
✨ *AI IS CONVENTIONAL*

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You are beckoned to "enhance every aspect of your writing journey" (Squibler, n.d.). You are offered "better writing, better results" from a company "transforming how the world communicates" (Grammarly, n.d.). You are promised "a world where anyone can write without limits" (QuillBot, n.d.). These quotations, pulled from promotional websites for generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) writing tools, advertise their products on the basis of a widely shared premise: the idea that GenAI is revolutionary. Each advertisement jostling for your attention draws from the belief that GenAI brings unprecedented changes to your writing process, an assumption about GenAI so pervasive in public discourse as to be almost unnoticeable. Yet, despite its popularity, believing that GenAI is revolutionary is a fundamentally bad idea, one that muddles our ability to think clearly about the proper role of GenAI as a writing tool. In this chapter, I argue that we should instead see GenAI as *conventional*. This reframing, drawn from key insights in rhetoric and writing studies, allows us to have more productive conversations about appropriate usage of GenAI in our writing (including, of course, not using it at all). My hope is that readers will see GenAI's professed revolutionary edge for what it is—advertising slogan, not sociotechnical fact—and approach social debates about GenAI accordingly.

Thinking that GenAI is revolutionary is a bad idea because it rests on faulty assumptions about GenAI's history and Silicon Valley's politics. The quickest way to untangle these assumptions is with a simple question: what does it mean to call something "revolutionary"? The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* (2010) entry for "revolutionary" gives the following definition for the adjective, which has been in use since 1694: "Relating to, characterized by, or of the nature of political revolution; involving or constituting radical change. Also (frequently with capital initial): relating to a particular revolution" (*OED,* 2010). In other words, to say that something is revolutionary is to say that it will bring about a significant political shift, a historical rupture from the status quo. Perhaps the word "revolutionary" makes you think of historic battles like the American Revolutionary War or more recent campaigns for racial justice like Black Lives

DOI: https://doi.org/1010.37514/PER-B.2026.2777.2.04

Matter, a phenomenon of word/concept association linguists call "lexical-conceptual fields" (Fahnestock, 2011, p. 62). AI firms clearly exploit those linguistic associations in advertising their products. To take a recent example, a Fall 2024 ad from Microsoft ends with the line, "A powerful AI computer is not for everyone, but if you're trying to change the world, even if just your own, we built one for you" (Windows, 2024). (As you will probably agree, the "revolutionary" framing in that quotation is so glaring as to erase the need for analysis.) The problem here is that when it comes to GenAI writing tools, we find neither a rupture from the past nor radical political change.

Artificial intelligence is surely fascinating, but it is decidedly not new. On the contrary, AI research dates back several decades; in the United States, its origins derive from postwar military funding and a field-defining workshop held at Dartmouth in 1956 (Mitchell, 2019). If we expand our frame of reference beyond AI as a discrete academic field, the historical roots stretch back much further. Indeed, in a recent book AI historian Matteo Pasquinelli maintains that the "inner code of AI" (2023, p. 2) unfolds from the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, particularly its key shifts in how technology mediated labor relations. This longer historical lineage holds even if we restrict our attention to GenAI writing tools specifically. You might be surprised to learn, for instance, that the earliest experiments with "automated writing" emerged no later than the 1600s (Laquintano et al., 2023, para. 7), and the first text-generation computer program, which wrote "campy, over-the-top love letters," was developed by computer scientist Christopher Strachey in 1952 (Laquintano et al., 2023, para. 9). I mention these historical examples to dispel the illusion that AI writing tools are revolutionary breaks from the past. We should acknowledge that GenAI vastly changes the scale of writing automation and prompts us to ask new questions about its use, but we should also keep AI's larger historical context in mind as a counterweight to the narratives sold by tech firms, which consistently position their products as totally unlike anything that has come before.

If to be "revolutionary" is to bring about "radical [political] change," then that is something the tech industry also cannot provide. Other contributors to this book illustrate some of the ways GenAI propagates harmful ideologies with long histories: among others, Western epistemologies that exclude knowledge from the Global South (Sharma, this volume) and a professed "neutrality" in linguistic tone and content that masks its whiteness (Zulfiqar & Hum, this volume). My argument in this chapter builds on these critiques by showing how the revolutionary rhetoric around GenAI belies its decidedly unrevolutionary politics. Simply put, GenAI tools cannot disrupt the status quo that they themselves represent. For decades, Silicon Valley corporations have operated under what scholars have dubbed the "Californian Ideology," a mix of technocracy and free market dogma

proclaiming "that increasing the adoption of computer technologies brings positive social consequences, that the technology industry is where the best and brightest thrive, and that an unfettered free market is the best way to ensure prosperity for all" (Marwick, 2013, p. 23). One needs only recall the utopian claims made about social media in the late 2000s and early 2010s to recognize how poorly such bombast has aged. And yet, as demonstrated by the examples that opened this chapter, we once again see Silicon Valley firms positioning their products as the vanguard. When QuillBot advertises GenAI as "the future of writing" (n.d.), for instance, it taps into what John Cheney-Lippold (2025) has recently termed "the silicon future," an ideological contortion of time where "silicon futurists believe the rest of the world is destined to enter a future they already live in" (p. 4165). Hyperbolic claims about GenAI's radical potential will probably suffer the same fate as those previously made about social media, but in any case, we should reject such revolutionary framing because, paradoxically enough, it forecloses our political possibilities. It limits social discourse about GenAI by putting critics on the defensive. When we accept that GenAI is *revolutionary*, we set ourselves up to be *reactionary*, making any criticism of GenAI writing tools seem anachronistic. In turn, it becomes harder to distinguish sophisticated critiques of writing with GenAI from those that are genuinely archaic.

Believing that GenAI is revolutionary is clearly a bad idea. Instead, I contend that a more generative idea is to believe that GenAI is *conventional*. I use that adjective deliberately for the rich possibilities it offers us for more nuanced thinking about GenAI's role in our writing process. The *OED* entry for "conventional" showcases this potential. "Conventional" is an even older word than "revolutionary," with its earliest usage dating from around 1475. For its oldest meaning, the *OED* gives the following definition: "Relating to, or of the nature of, a formal agreement or compact; settled by an agreement or compact between parties" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023). Notions of social agreement recur in related meanings of the word "conventional," such as in circa 1647's "Of, relating to, or of the nature of an assembly or meeting" or in circa 1783's "Established by, or originating in, practice, custom, or usage; established by general agreement; (also) artificially or arbitrarily determined" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023). Taken together, these *OED* definitions describe communal processes—formal or otherwise—for building a shared understanding of how something fits into social life. It is precisely these social qualities that make the statement "GenAI is conventional" a better idea for thinking about GenAI and writing.

Seeing GenAI as conventional aligns with what scholars in rhetoric and writing studies have long known: that writing has always been a deeply social act mediated by technology, culture, and politics—even thousands of years before we wrote with typewriters, let alone with GenAI. As Kevin Roozen (2015) put

it, "the social nature of writing goes beyond the people writers draw upon and think about. It also encompasses the countless people who have shaped the genres, tools, artifacts, technologies, and places writers act with as they address the needs of their audiences" (p. 18). It might seem like a simple point, but this distinction sharply undercuts the flawed reasoning tech companies use to convince us that GenAI is revolutionary. The history *of* writing is a history of negotiating new technologies *for* writing and then developing social norms for their proper use. Far before ChatGPT came onto the scene, humans developed writing conventions for how to cite sources on the internet, how to use computers in the writing process, how to teach students to type rather than write by hand, and so on, stretching back millennia to the first debates Plato had in ancient Greece about whether we should write down anything at all.

We ought to situate GenAI within the long history of writing technologies we have developed conventions around using (or not). So much of the patter about GenAI relies on mystification, on what communications scholar Vincent Mosco (2004) once termed the "digital sublime": selling consumers visions of a technological future mysteriously severed from its technological past. The more mundane but accurate truth is that humans have already been writing with AI for several years if not decades via autocomplete, spelling/grammar checkers, and other digital composing tools that we have normalized as part of our writing process (see Matthew D. Bryan, this volume, for more on this point); GenAI technologies likewise appear in everyday tasks we often take for granted, from recommendation algorithms on Netflix or Spotify to GPS-based navigation apps like Google Maps (Mitchell, 2019). GenAI simply loses its revolutionary edge when we acknowledge how ordinary it now is.

When we realize that GenAI is conventional, we can begin to ask better questions about what conventions we ought to establish around using GenAI—or not—in our writing. Documents like the *Student Guide to AI Literacy* (MLA-CCCC Task Force on Writing and AI, 2024) and "Refusing GenAI in Writing Studies: A Quickstart Guide" (Sano-Franchini et al., 2024) provide useful starting points for having conversations with students, colleagues, and friends about GenAI as a writing tool. Among the questions we should pose about GenAI conventions, what does responsible use of GenAI writing tools look like, and how do those norms shift based on genre, audience, purpose, and other rhetorical factors? At what point does automation turn GenAI from a writing tool into an author, and what are the consequences of that shift? Given GenAI's voracious appetite for natural resources and massive data sets extracted without human consent, what ethical limitations should we place on GenAI usage? These are just some of the many questions we might ask about AI writing conventions, and none of them are easy to answer. The critical thing to note is that how we use

GenAI is a sociopolitical matter requiring human dialogue, policy frameworks, and collective accountability. Technology alone never dictates the social norms we develop around it, despite what AI firms mislead us to believe.

I am not a soothsayer. I cannot say how these conversations will go or what conventions we will establish for writing with GenAI. No one can predict the future, not even Silicon Valley, and it would be foolhardy for me to try. But what I can say with confidence is that we *will* establish conventions for writing with GenAI, just as we have for every other writing technology that has preceded it. As we develop those norms, I hope we will remember that GenAI is not revolutionary; it is neither historical novelty nor political radical. What is actually revolutionary are humans reading, writing, and thinking together—with or without GenAI—and formulating ideas about how we ought to shape the future. Just as you might be doing now, of course, as you finish reading this sentence.

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