

CHAPTER 44.

AI GIVES GOOD FEEDBACK ON
STUDENT WRITING ✦ GOOD
FEEDBACK DEMONSTRATES
KNOWLEDGE OF THE WRITER AND
THEIR PURPOSE FOR WRITING

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ChatGPT, MyEssayFeedback, Writable, Microsoft Copilot, and Claude can provide responses on writing, generate end or summary comments, identify strengths and weaknesses, use rubrics, and assign a score. The issue isn't that generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) doesn't have the ability or capacity to generate feedback. The issue is that GenAI isn't a *real reader* that has knowledge of the student (yet) in the same ways as a teacher. Text generators make predictions from existing text data, they mimic human communication, but these technologies aren't real readers with knowledge of the writer and their purpose for writing. As Rebecca Hallman Martini (2026) reminds us, GenAI is not human and cannot replace human emotion.

One issue with using GenAI to provide feedback on student writing, then, is that it outsources *reading* and *response*, making them nonhuman-centered activities, which seems almost contradictory to core values in composition studies. Writing itself is a social activity that “establishes social relationships [and] designed to communicate among people” (Bazerman, 2016, p. 11). For decades composition studies has examined the relationship between reading and writing and the value of reading instruction in writing classrooms (Carillo, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2017). Likewise, composition studies has extensively explored how response might be the most important activity in the teaching of writing (O'Neill & Fife, 1999; Sommers, 1982). Using GenAI to respond to student writing might be counterproductive to pedagogical beliefs and practices. For example, culturally sustaining pedagogies rely on centering students' cultural and linguistic identities and lived experiences, which helps build and sustain community in the classroom. If we outsource reading and response to GenAI,

how are we showing students that their cultural ways of being, writing, language, and voice matter?

That's not to say GenAI can't be used to develop knowledge about writing or it can't be used as a means for collaboration and engagement. Lisa Sperber (this volume, p. 328) offers several affordances and limitations of GenAI feedback and how it can be used alongside peer feedback earlier in this collection. Several others in this book have demonstrated how GenAI can be used as a means to develop knowledge and support human engagement (see Basgier & Olejnik; Pinkert & Beever, this volume). In this chapter, I would like to suggest that *good* feedback on student writing requires demonstrating knowledge of the writer and their purpose for writing. Good feedback doesn't just make visible a reader: it makes visible an intentionally cultivated classroom community and relationship between a teacher and student.

PRE-MANUFACTURED FEEDBACK FROM COMPUTERS (AND HUMANS)

Providing feedback that feels algorithmic or pre-manufactured isn't new to composition studies. It isn't the byproduct of emerging technologies either. It's not uncommon, for example, that teachers find themselves writing the same kind of comment over and over on student writing. That's because teachers read with certain expectations. One of those expectations is that students will demonstrate engagement with the assignment. In other words, students will address the assignment and meet at least some of its objectives. In addition to reading with expectations, comments are informed by criteria (e.g., rubric) that communicate what's valued in the assignment. This criteria often helps guide what the teacher chooses to respond to.

Sometimes teachers need to slow down when they read and respond to student writing. This would help teachers make sure they aren't saying the same thing over and over and over to different students. In 1982, Nancy Sommers encourages teachers to think about their response practices in this way. Her study indicates that feedback doesn't always help students engage in the writing process and feedback doesn't always complement values established in the classroom. She explains how classroom activities and comments should be connected and how "comments need to be an extension of the teacher's voice" (p. 155). One of the most important findings from her study is that most teachers' comments are not text-specific. Instead, teachers' comments can be interchanged and moved from text to text.

Generic feedback loses sight of students and their purpose for writing. Whether produced by humans or text generators (algorithms trained by humans), generic feedback—feedback that isn't text-specific or student-specific—is ineffective. One

of the main purposes for response is to demonstrate intentionality and understanding of the writer and what they're trying to communicate. Since comments should be an extension of the classroom, teacher feedback is more than just words on a page. Writing teachers spend a lot of time getting to know students in the classroom and building community and a sense of belonging. Those comments in the margins or at the end of student writing should demonstrate real knowledge of the student, who they are, where they're coming from, what they want to learn about writing, and how they want to grow and develop as writers.

If comments are an extension of the classroom and reflective of a relationship between a teacher and student, what makes GenAI feedback appealing? Efficiency and convenience. GenAI offers an immediate response in seconds with the click of a button. GenAI is an optical illusion of a real reader that sounds human but orients feedback in the wrong direction by making it about *the writing instead of the writer*.

RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING TAKES TIME BUT IT'S WORTH IT

Greek philosopher Theophrastus, a student of Plato and Aristotle, is attributed with saying, "Time is the most valuable thing a man can spend" (Laërtius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*). All good things take time. Relationships take time. Writing takes time. Learning to play an instrument takes time. Gardening takes time. Responding to student writing takes time, too. Teacher feedback has never been about efficiency. Sommers writes in 1982, "More than any other enterprise in the teaching of writing, responding to and commenting on student writing consumes the largest proportion of our time" (p. 148). In 2006, almost twenty-five years after Sommers, Carmen Kynard writes, "Responding to students' work is an excruciating task that takes an inordinate amount of time" (p. 383). Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt and Dodie Forrest add in 2013, "Teachers invest so much time and energy in our responses to papers" (p. 230). It might be safe to say that 1.) teacher response takes time, and 2.) using GenAI to generate feedback potentially saves time.

Saving time might feel more desirable than ever given the current landscape of higher ed. Faculty have high teaching loads and demanding departmental, university, and national service commitments. Faculty burnout rates continue to rise. The adjunctification of labor continues to increase. State-level policies are affecting programs and curriculum, impacting overall morale. Teachers are now being asked to address GenAI and develop critical GenAI literacies in the classroom. These larger systemic issues are overwhelming and exhausting. GenAI offers some relief to a time-consuming activity (e.g., feedback).

There's no denying that reading and responding to student writing is time and labor-intensive. Research on response has acknowledged that (see Sommers, Kynard, Calhoun-Dillahunt, and Forrest above). To my knowledge, though, there hasn't been evidence that says writing teachers *shouldn't* spend time responding to student writing or that a teacher responding to student writing *isn't* important to writing instruction and the writing classroom.

Sindija Franzetti and Amy Wanyu Ou write in an earlier chapter that the core of good writing is meaningful engagement with ideas. This is embodied through reading and responding to writing. Feedback is a collaborative activity that represents writing-as-process and centers metacognition. What's important to remember is that responding to student writing is never just about writing. It's about students and demonstrating knowledge of the writer and their purpose for writing. Sometimes we have to set aside expectations we bring to a text as readers, sometimes we have to abandon desires of efficiency and convenience, so we can actually listen to students and help them meet their aims. At its very best, reading and responding to student writing is a human-centered activity that can do transformative things, like instilling confidence, building trust and assurance, changing the way a student sees themselves as a writer.

Teacher response is also an extension of foundational concepts in writing studies. Writing is socially-situated and contextual (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015). What better way to show that than through responding to student writing. Our feedback can model how there's no such thing as "writing in general" (Wardle, 2017, p. 30). Additionally, comments show how writing functions "as a means of displaying our identities" (Roozen, 2016, p. 51). Teachers can engage in conversations with students about how response is culturally, socially, and materially situated—feedback, like writing, is shaped by these realities. Furthermore, teachers can use feedback as a site for students to engage in reflective writing. Metacognition is essential to writing knowledge development and transfer (Taczak & Robertson, 2017). Responding to student writing takes time but it's worth it.

MAKING SPACE IN THE MARGINS FOR GENAI

Scholarship on response shows the importance of responding to students during the writing process, using response to promote student agency, using response to complement and reinforce classroom pedagogies and values, and how response should be informed by local contexts, curriculum, and outcomes. Response is where a teacher can meet each student one-on-one on the page and create a sense of belonging. It's a human-centered, relationally-driven activity.

So, what does it look like to make space for GenAI in the margins? There might be times when a writer chooses to use GenAI to generate global feedback

(e.g., overall structure and ideas) or local feedback (e.g., word choice, sentence structure) on their writing. In those situations, as Chris M. Anson and Kristi Cole remind us earlier in this collection, GenAI still requires human expertise and revision. Instead of providing a step-by-step guide, I'll share suggestions that might help us navigate GenAI and feedback together. Think of these as notes at the end meant to inspire and initiate more detailed conversations.

- **Optional, not required:** Given the ever-evolving nature of GenAI and research on GenAI, it seems important to evaluate the affordances and limitations of using GenAI for feedback. Instead of having a requirement for teachers or students to use GenAI to generate feedback, even in the most intentional ways, it seems more appropriate to engage in conversations that invite teachers and students to share their experiences, perspectives, and concerns with GenAI feedback. These conversations could also reveal how students see and understand teacher feedback and peer feedback. This could offer insight as to how students use human feedback and whether they feel GenAI feedback would offer anything in addition to that.
- **Protecting privacy, data security, attribution, and transparency:** Conversations related to privacy, data security, and surveillance should be at the forefront of conversations around using AI to generate feedback. Understanding how GenAI technologies record and store information, as well as how to properly attribute and cite GenAI use, is important to modeling ethical-driven research practices. Teachers and students should consent to GenAI use before writing gets copied and pasted in an GenAI tool for feedback. This goes for text-generators (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude) and detection technologies (e.g., Turnitin, Grammarly). If a teacher or student uses one of these technologies, it should prompt reflection as to how and why GenAI was used and what was learned about reading and writing from this nonhuman-centered process.
- **Ensuring equity and complementing, not replacing, human feedback:** Technologies are never neutral. GenAI tools can reproduce linguistic biases and cultural stereotypes. Teachers and students should critically examine how GenAI reinforces a linguistic hierarchy (e.g., standard English), and they could have conversations around how GenAI approaches language and writing instruction (e.g., product vs. process, prescriptive vs. descriptive). It's also important to investigate assumptions and consider who has access to GenAI technologies. We need to acknowledge how these technologies often need to raise capital, attract investors, and benefit stakeholders, thus, impacting participation.

Many offer subscription plans with premium access, for example, which shapes who can or cannot participate. Teachers and students can have conversations about how human feedback models writing as a social activity and complements other core disciplinary values and classroom pedagogies. Human feedback shouldn't be replaced in the writing process.

CONCLUSION

In 2024, John Warner writes in an *Inside Higher Ed* article that GenAI can't provide meaningful feedback because these technologies lack the ability to "think, feel, or communicate with intention." It seems that the prerequisite for meaningful feedback is a *real reader* with emotional intelligence and an ability to communicate feelings and ideas that are text-specific and writer-specific. Notes in the margins—a teacher's voice on the page—is a reflection of a classroom community and relationship between a teacher and student. Comments and revisions are indicative of trust, whether a student feels agency and a sense of belonging. Good feedback starts a conversation. The reader *knows* the writer. The writer *knows* the reader. Aside from one-on-one conferences, teacher feedback might be one of the few activities to meet with students individually. It's in that space teachers get the chance to carefully listen and intentionally speak into students' lives.

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