CHAPTER 5.

AI IS COMPLETELY UNLIKE ANY OTHER WRITING SOFTWARE

✨ *AI IS STRANGE AND RHETORICAL JUST LIKE OTHER WRITING SOFTWARE*

Matthew D. Bryan
University of Central Florida

The first thing writers see when opening most word processing software is a blank white page. It appears as an empty space waiting to be filled in with words. The most common design trope for generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) interfaces, conversely, is a chat window. The illusion is one of dialogue with a pliant, anthropomorphized GenAI assistant. Users launching Microsoft Copilot are even invited to "Ask me anything." Interfaces aren't the only differences between GenAI and the kinds of software more familiar to writing classrooms. As Tyler Easterbrook notes in the preceding chapter, the popular discourse—and especially PR—about GenAI applications distinguishes them in terms of their potential "revolutionary" impact. Company missions focused on AI safety highlight the "danger" of these technologies. ChatGPT developer OpenAI, for example, describes their mission as "ensur[ing] that artificial general intelligence—AI systems that are generally smarter than humans—benefits all of humanity" (*OpenAI*, 2026). Such dramatic language may support favorable positions with shareholders and regulators, but it further obscures possible parallels that students can draw with more familiar-seeming software that have existed for far longer. After all, despite their differences, a core function unites word processing software and GenAI: they both produce digital text. It is a bad idea when students' learning about GenAI applications is siloed off from their learning about other kinds of writing software. Instead, teachers can draw upon students' sense of the newness of AI to highlight how strange, how powerful, and how little understood most of the digital tools they write with are.

All of these applications present carefully structured software environments that tend to conceal the actual processes that shape what users see and do. Just as there is no blank piece of paper behind the screen displaying Microsoft Word,

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there is no entity on the other side of the computer when using a chatbot. While the large language models undergirding GenAI products enhance this sense of dialogue to a remarkable degree, both illusions can be quite convincing. They also both undermine our ability to critically think about these various software tools as authored spaces. Recognizing pieces of software as designed artifacts opens them up to the same kind of scrutiny teachers and students have traditionally leveled at other kinds of texts. Who has created the software, and how does it reflect their values? What arguments does it present? Who benefits when it's used, and why? While writers might not be in conversation with an actual intelligence when using a GenAI chatbot, they are, at least metaphorically, in conversation with the human designers of *any* software they use. That recognition is itself not an endpoint: rather, when students realize this, they can begin to appreciate the agency they have in choosing and using their writing tools.

Fortunately, teachers have five decades of computers and writing scholarship they can draw on to help students pose these kinds of questions about software. This includes critical analyses of interfaces (Sano-Franchini, 2018; Selfe & Selfe, 1994), considerations of privacy (McKee, 2011), and explorations of procedurality (Arola, 2010; Bogost, 2007; Colby, 2014; Gallagher, 2020). Situating GenAI within larger conversations about software helps teachers and students alike connect their impressions of GenAI to a historical context of more than a just few years, one which, consequently, may prove more durable. Such scholarship has demonstrated that students can learn to ask questions about what a piece of software affords for their writing process, what it constrains, and what they give up when they use it. In this framing, GenAI is simply the latest addition to the kinds of software available to writers, and writing teachers have a responsibility to help students understand, evaluate, and best leverage all of their options.

Of course, the degree to which GenAI products can generate text certainly feels revolutionary. A few years ago, when ChatGPT was still new, I introduced it to a class of writing students by showing off its capability to produce human-sounding essays on command. I had hoped to spur a conversation about the potential and pitfalls of the tool, and especially how students seeking degrees in writing and communication might be able to defend their own abilities as superior to or at least distinct from GenAI. Instead, the first student to chime up was incredulous, asking "Why didn't anyone tell me about this before now? I could've been using this the whole time?" There's something seemingly magical about a program that can in seconds craft an essay that might take a human writer more than an hour. That feels different than writing as we've been accustomed to thinking about it. But it's not magic. It's instead an example of sophisticated software developed by people and built on top of powerful models trained on an enormous amount of human cultural production.

Older writing technologies can at times feel almost as magical as GenAI. In light of the current AI boom, some of these applications have even had the "AI" label applied to them retroactively. Is auto-complete AI? What about Grammarly, which quickly turned to promoting itself as an AI platform following the explosive launch of ChatGPT in late 2022? Or how about the automated alt-text generation built into Microsoft Office since at least 2016, which stealthily sends images and figures from individual documents to Microsoft's servers to be interpreted? While there are fundamental differences in how these tools work behind the scenes that distinguish them from GenAI products, these distinctions are not always legible to users. In terms of the functionality and use of such software, these differences are not especially meaningful either.

Increasingly, GenAI is now also seamlessly integrated into standalone word processing software. Microsoft now offers a version of Word with their Copilot AI embedded directly in the program (*Microsoft*, n.d.). Their standalone Copilot web app, too, has introduced a Notebook interface that looks more like a traditional digital document than a chatbot interface (*Microsoft*, 2024). And many Google Docs users, myself included, have been surprised to see a "Try out experimental AI features" pop-up appear out of nowhere while writing to promote Google's Gemini GenAI platform. Given the level of investment companies like Microsoft, Google, and others have been pouring into GenAI, it seems plausible that these tools will continue to come to us in this way rather than needing to be sought out. As that happens, deciding which writing software is AI and which software is not will become increasingly difficult. It also, I argue, doesn't much matter.

Rather than representing a new problem, the slipperiness of these labels instead highlights an opportunity to help writers better understand the inner workings and effects of all of the software they use to write, whether AI-enhanced or otherwise. In other words, the critical discourse around GenAI in the current moment can be used to call attention to how all writing software is, in fact, rhetorical. The aforementioned Gemini pop-up in Google Docs, for example, is both an advertisement that reflects Google's massive investment in GenAI as well as a reminder that even seemingly stable digital writing environments are never really neutral nor inevitable. They can and will change. We would do well to help students remember that.

Tim Lockridge and Derek Van Ittersum's (2020) concept of "writing workflows" suggests one way teachers can help students fold their understandings of GenAI together with more critical examinations of how they use writing technologies that might otherwise seem mundane. A writing workflow, they explain, "describes a process for completing a literate activity and the tools used in that process" (2020, Key Terms section, para. 5). Lockridge and Van Ittersum draw

on several case studies to demonstrate that practicing writers move between a variety of technologies and software at different stages of writing in ways that help them to intentionally structure their writing processes. They call their research method "workflow mapping," which also serves as self-reflective practice that, they argue, "foreground[s] the many embodied and affective practices at work [when writing], and it situates process within mediating technologies, histories, practices, and cultural contexts. It encourages metacognition, and in doing so it brings writing technologies to the foreground" (Lockridge & Van Ittersum, 2020, Chapter 6, para. 12). Even a basic understanding of writing workflows helps students build an awareness of how different writing software impact their writing processes at different points. That awareness, in turn, helps students be more intentional in choosing and using the software with which they write, including GenAI. Such an approach helps students recognize what Shyam Sharma earlier in this collection refers to as "the power dynamics [at work in software] that undermine knowledge flow and social justice."

Students will continue to encounter and use GenAI, both in and outside of writing classrooms. Better for them to be mindful of what they're trading and how it impacts them when they do. The novelty of GenAI may endure for a little while longer, but the uptake of past writing technologies suggests that writers (and writing educators) will eventually incorporate these tools into their practices in ways that will come to seem mundane. Here, the disruption wrought by personal computer-based word processors in the 1980s is instructive. These software applications opened up the possibilities of text design and distribution to a greater number of people than ever before. After less than a decade, however, they had receded into the backdrop of everyday life (Susser, 1998). It's tempting to draw a sharp line between word processing, which seems to *enable* writing, and AI, which seems to *do* the writing. But the full picture is more complicated. Recent research (e.g., Knowles, 2024) continues to demonstrate the importance of writers in shaping and iterating GenAI outputs in order to generate useful texts. There will likely continue to be contexts in which audiences resist AI-authored texts on principle (Sano-Franchini et al., 2024). And writers will continue to develop their own original arguments, either without or alongside GenAI. As has been the case with all writing technologies, GenAI enables offloading some of the labor of communicating one's ideas to a machine. Word processing software does the same, though these applications have become so naturalized that most of us no longer think about something like typesetting as part of the process of producing a nicely designed document. Instead of seeing GenAI as a break with previous generations of writing software, then, positioning GenAI as a continuation of these technologies points to how much more attention we might pay to all of our digital writing tools. For this reason, it is a bad idea to

treat GenAI as totally unlike any other writing software and, indeed, to instead remember that all writing software is rhetorical and worth scrutinizing.

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