

INTRODUCTION.

FROM FAULTY IDEAS TO PRODUCTIVE PRACTICES: WRITING AND LEARNING IN THE AGE OF AI

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In the book *Bad Ideas about Writing*, edited by Cheryl E. Ball and Drew M. Loewe (2017), editors and chapter contributors offered discussions of what writing is and how it works. In an open-access format meant to appeal to the general public, the book shared succinct, easy-to-understand perspectives to counter some of the most common misperceptions about writing in academia and society. As the book's editors put it:

This project is necessary because while scholars in writing studies (just as in any academic field) argue [about writing] to and against one another in scholarly journals, books, and conference talks, those forms of knowledge-making don't consistently find their way into the public's understanding of writing. Yet "the public" in all its manifestations—teachers, students, parents, administrators, lawmakers, news media—are important to how writing is conceptualized and taught. (p. 1)

Two points Ball and Loewe (2017) imply here are worth unpacking. First, a decades-long tradition of scholarship exists that is devoted to the teaching and practice of writing across contexts, about what writing is and what it isn't in first-year writing (FYW), across academic disciplines, in workplaces, within government organizations, and in the political arena. Writing is something people do and something people study (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015). Second, the public both needs and deserves to know something about writing based on that scholarship. Principled, productive, “good” ideas about writing stand to benefit citizens, organizations, industries, and communities because they empower people to exercise control over their words, and thus the processes of creating and applying their meanings.

We—the editors of this volume—were inspired by *Bad Ideas about Writing* for this reason: it offers a bridge between the academy and the wider world. With this book, we intend to reinforce that bridge—and keep it open—because the world of writing is in the midst of a seismic shift caused by the rumbling and eruption of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Much of what we know about writing from our scholarship can help the public make sense of GenAI and retain control over meaning-making. Some of what we know will need to be revised, some recontextualized, and some even jettisoned in the age of GenAI. But the work of making the research-informed understanding of, and education about, writing more accessible has become more important and urgent today than ever before. This volume, *Bad Ideas about AI and Writing*, aims to shore up that bridge between the study of writing and the practice of it so we can more widely share generative¹ ways of thinking about writing in the age of AI.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?

Following our predecessor, *Bad Ideas about Writing*, we offer this book to a broad, inclusive readership. We especially hope students, educators, and administrators arrive at a more nuanced understanding of “writing” that helps them understand why a world informed by GenAI now needs *more* attention to the complexities of writing, not less.

For educators, especially those who incorporate writing into their courses, this book offers evidence-based approaches for integrating GenAI considerations, discussions, and pedagogical uses while maintaining the integrity of your learning goals and fostering student agency. For administrators and policymakers who shape the future of higher education, this book can inform faculty support

1 Readers will likely notice the term “generative” repeated throughout the book; this is our attempt to reclaim that term for the domain of writing first, and for text automation only secondarily.

and shape the policies that impact how students engage with writing and technology. Understanding the good and bad ideas concerning GenAI will facilitate forward-thinking strategies that balance innovation with the preservation of academic rigor; ensure equitable access not only to digital tools but also to foundational writing knowledge; and address ethical concerns such as privacy, bias, and the potential devaluation of human intellectual effort. For students who will now inevitably encounter GenAI not only in academic contexts but embedded ubiquitously in tools and platforms everywhere, these chapters support decisions about when and how to use these tools (and when not), based on informed questions about ethics, productivity, and voice. With awareness of the shifts in writing practices and the ethical challenges posed by GenAI—such as questions of originality, integrity, and intellectual property—we can all more knowledgeably advocate for educational approaches that balance technological innovation with the preservation of critical skills like creativity and critical thinking.

A NEW TECHNOLOGICAL CONTEXT FOR BAD IDEAS ABOUT WRITING

In the rapidly evolving landscape of writing in the age of GenAI tools, we see a new need for a *Bad Ideas* book that can speak to constantly changing contexts. Examples described in the first *Bad Ideas* book either critiqued technology for failing on less basic tasks or acknowledged that it can help students learn. For example, in their chapter “Machines Can Evaluate Writing Well,” Chris M. Anson (also an author in this collection) and Les Perelman (2017) argued compellingly that “machines make lousy humans” (p. 279) and described how computers can’t understand meaning, judge writing by surface-level elements like sentence length, and have difficulty assessing longer pieces of writing. Meanwhile, Genesee M. Carter and Aurora Matzke (2017), the latter also a contributor to this book, acknowledged that digital technology can help students “engage in learning and writing in new and exciting ways” (pp. 322-323). Considering the enormous advancement in GenAI since that book was published, these ideas have become even more complicated. Across popular media and everyday life, we continue to see narrow and ill-applied ideas about what writing is, or what a writer is like. GenAI is both adding new myths and aggravating old ones:

- That writing is a simple linear process that is also worth doing only if it is easy, exciting, or profound—and now, GenAI can help writers skip any step that seems difficult, boring, or superficial;
- That writing assignments are a ritual that a sluggish academia practices with purposes that are no longer relevant—and now, we should get

rid of assignments like “essays” because dishonest students will have GenAI do them anyway;

- That it is hard for most people to recognize and reproduce complex linguistic patterns, to decode and encode complex ideas—and now, GenAI can do that by reading and writing for them;
- That writing is a skill that can be mastered once and for all—and now, we don’t have to learn it at all, because GenAI can do the “writing” part of learning and work;
- That writing is a transparent means of recording thoughts on paper or screen—and now, GenAI can do the “writing up” for us;
- That writing is a hurdle to be overcome, rather than a necessarily challenging process—and now, GenAI’s power to “generate” writing at speed removes that barrier for all;
- That writing involves a hierarchy of higher- and lower-order tasks, rather than tasks that may be uniquely worth the writer’s attention in different rhetorical contexts—and now, we can at least “offload” the always-lower-order tasks to GenAI;
- That writing is all about inventing and conveying content—and now, we can pass both on to GenAI because it knows everything and can deliver content better than us;
- That good writing is only about impressive style—and now, GenAI can write in any style we prompt it to write in;
- That good writing requires the natural gift of genius—and now that GenAI can write like geniuses for anyone, it essentially makes us all gifted writers;
- That all good writing sounds more or less the same—and now, GenAI can reach any threshold of sophistication for any writer with the tool;
- That humans are fallible or unreliable, biased or prejudiced—and now, GenAI can replace or correct humans with its objectivity and neutrality;
- That humans often fail at being moral and ethical—and now, GenAI can replace us where we have failed because it is (some go as far as arguing) inherently good.

These ideas are not evidence-based; they lack nuance; they misidentify the nature of a pedagogical problem, of writing, or of GenAI; they prioritize efficiency over other values; and they make opportunities for practice, feedback, learning, and growth seem unnecessary. Ultimately, they hurt students because they undermine student agency and confidence as learners, thinkers, and communicators.

These bad ideas have a longer history that writing scholars have explored. Take the idea that writing is a skill that is learned once and for all—ideally before entering higher education—and requires little ongoing development. In his

book *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History*, David R. Russell (1991) traced this myth back to the 1870s, when universities created the FYW requirement as a means of remediating a growing student body who would enter professions that increasingly relied on written texts. Educators at the time, and often to this day, assumed “that general-composition courses should teach students from any background to write correct and coherent expository prose for any purpose in any social or disciplinary context” (Russell, 1991, p. 8). In reality, writing is not a discrete skill that can be learned separately from disciplinary content. It is an integral, evolving part of disciplinary practice—hence the existence of the writing across the curriculum (WAC) movement. Writing varies widely across social contexts, disciplines and professions, and communicative purposes. Effective writing requires navigating varied rhetorical conventions, cultural differences, and increasingly multilingual and transnational communicative practices. Teaching and learning it require practice, feedback, time, and immersion in disciplinary, professional, and public communities. We know all this from decades of research in the discipline, but many of the old bad ideas about writing persist.

Now, the nature of GenAI is changing how writing is done by faculty, administrators, and the general public, who increasingly rely on the new GenAI tools. Faculty across disciplines have been experimenting with GenAI providing feedback on student writing, with some claiming doing so can “save time” and still provide effective feedback for students. Companies and industry leaders also use these tools for social media content creation and internal writing, like emails and messages. Our contributors identify the ways “bad ideas” have evolved alongside these uses, and they suggest that instructors should “figure out what they want their students to learn first and then determine what technology might help” (Carter & Matzke, 2017, p. 323).

This more generative idea rarely figures in the higher education press, where many “bad ideas” about AI and writing emerged in the wake of ChatGPT’s initial release. One of the earliest pieces, Stephen Marche’s (2022) *Atlantic* article, “The College Essay Is Dead,” set off a wave of panic among higher education faculty, including many of us who work in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies. Marche’s basic argument was that GPT technologies are so good at composing academic prose that the “tradition” of essayistic education as “the way we teach children how to research, think, and write ... is about to be disrupted from the ground up.” We do not disagree with the prospect of widespread disruption, but we do disagree that colleges and society should stop doing whatever new technology can seemingly do (see also Thomas Deans, this volume). After all, many of the contributions in this volume acknowledge the ongoing role of writing (with or without GenAI) as a means of teaching research processes and

critical thinking. It is possible and often still effective to use genres like the essay, which may seem “outdated,” to teach a wide variety of literacy, critical thinking, intellectual, and professional skills.

Insofar as disruption comes, it must be traced to a complex web of curricular, political, and economic forces, not solely to a tool that can generate polished prose. (Paul Cook’s chapter in this volume cautions us against this kind of technological determinism.) To focus on the product of writing instead of the learning that happens in the process of producing writing is to devalue the very mission of education: machines may progressively approximate or even exceed the quality of student writing as a product, but education is a process in which students learn knowledge, practice skills, struggle with complexity, and engage in transformative experiences. By analogy, humans didn’t stop walking or running just because “there are cars now,” and some of us would not stop learning to play music even if “computers start generating better music than us.” We use technological assistance as and when we wish to learn and do things.

And yet, the notion that GenAI can and should replace human effort persists. For example, Juan Manual Parrilla’s (2023) *Nature* article, “ChatGPT Use Shows that the Grant-Application System is Broken,” illustrated a persistent misconception that scientific writing is a chore to be completed after the real work of science, alongside a new misconception that GenAI should be used to complete some of the more mundane aspects of scientific grant writing. Two of us already penned a response to this piece (Basgier & Sharma, 2023). Here, we want to point out that scientists write all the time, including field notes, lab reports, slide decks, abstracts, technical specifications, experimental articles, and, yes, grants. Scientists may be able to use GenAI to complete some of these genres, as Parrilla suggested, but the technology does not absolve them of responsibility to the intellectual and ethical work of science nor of the rhetorical purpose of even the most mundane writing tasks.

Nor does the technology itself mean that FYW requirements should be eliminated, despite Melissa Nicolas’ (2023) claim to the contrary. She argued that GenAI can now “take care of students’ biggest writing problems” and handle formulaic writing tips: “the thesis statement should be the last sentence of the first paragraph, use ‘quote sandwiches,’ have eight to 10 academic sources, use a formal citation system, etc.” This may be true, but defining college writing education by picking the least of what we teach amounts to a straw man argument: students in most FYW courses learn much more about writing, including applying information literacy in research-focused or analytical writing, making complex and diverse rhetorical decisions, adapting processes to different genres and situations, honing skills for giving and receiving helpful feedback, and developing a writerly identity and communicative confidence. (See also Olejnik

[2023] for an extended response.) In other words, we see at least as much reason to keep FYW as to eliminate it, and several contributions to this collection elaborate on that point, including Fiona Harris-Ramsby and Mary R. Boland, Reda Mohammed and Khadidja Belhadi, and Marit MacArthur. (Kristi Girdharry also takes up the related question of the future of writing centers.) That said, just because we see good reason to retain FYW does not mean everyone will agree; for example, Roger Thompson's chapter suggests that the requirement may be eliminated not because of the technology itself, but because of larger social and economic forces that devalue writing and writing instruction.

We are seeing misconceptions like the above, and many more that authors in this book explore, arrive in our campuses and classrooms. Such misconceptions make students feel defeated as writers because they were told that they didn't have a natural gift for writing or because they think GenAI has more accuracy and agency and will automatically produce a better draft than they ever could. Our students deserve a chance to become able to communicate effectively in writing, with or without GenAI assistance (as life and careers will continue to require and reward). Efforts such as the MLA-CCCC Task Force on Writing and AI's (2024) *Student Guide to AI Literacy* are making strides in this direction.

Our students come to us with a wide array of prior knowledge and experiences, and many deeply seated misconceptions about writing tag along as well. Thus, we began developing this volume with the goal of exposing these bad ideas and righting these misconceptions about writing and GenAI. We also saw a need for a more positive, generative frame that will lead to new insights about teaching, learning, and writing that are GenAI-aware, and potentially GenAI-engaged.

Chapters in this collection demonstrate how GenAI tools might be able to offer some feedback on student writing, but they also argue that human feedback has inherent value (see Wood's contribution) and that "AI tutors" cannot actually be moral and ethical in the ways human writing center tutors are (see Kyle W. Thompson's chapter). Technology also might not always be the most ethical and effective thing to embrace, as Lydia Wilkes illustrates in her depiction of the very real drain on resources (water, power, etc.) that running GenAI tools requires. We thus need more dedicated attention to all the different ideas circulating around GenAI—and we need to advance ideas about writing that are more generative and conducive to learning. While GenAI technology rapidly evolves, the more foundational *human* aspects of writing and learning don't fundamentally change, and it is useful to ground the new reality on a firmer foundation of writing and learning.

This does not mean we are seeking a one-size-fits-all answer to the challenges posed to writers and writing instructors by GenAI. The tendency toward

polarization in discussions of GenAI and education means that we sometimes miss opportunities for productive and positive outcomes of sensitive discussions. Rather, we want readers to see where our contributors disagree or object and how they use those moments as a source of new mutual understanding and improved practices. We also recognize that, just as contexts of writing are shifting, so, too, are contexts of GenAI use. What seems “bad” now may seem fine in the future and vice versa. The landscape of writing in relation to critical issues like student agency, originality, and privacy has drastically changed since the advent of computers and especially with the internet and now AI becoming ubiquitous (Sharma, 2025). The pencil with an eraser was held up as an ideal writing tool a few decades ago, helping to highlight revision as part and parcel of “good” writing pedagogy and practice; that tool is at best a metaphor today for the importance of revision (Baron, 2009). But while the tools and techniques may change, it is also necessary to not throw the baby with the bathwater and argue or accept, for instance, that machines have made rethinking and revision by the human writer unnecessary. Some realities about writing are too human, social, and ethical to be supplanted by machines.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Whoever you are, feel free to read this book in many different ways, not just cover-to-cover. The chapters can stand alone, which makes them easy to reference in your own writing and assign in courses. You may wish to focus on one section most relevant to your personal, professional, or learning goals. Or you may want to start by reading one piece, and then read others that are cross-referenced in the chapter to get a sense of the connections and disagreements in the volume.

To help you decide how to read, we will explain the overall organization of the sections contained within this volume. Due to space constraints, we will not provide an overview of the individual chapters. Chapters in this collection are organized into eight broad areas where bad ideas about AI and writing surface. Titles for the chapters include both the bad idea and the more generative idea that the authors articulate.

- **Debunking the GenAI Hype.** The chapters in our opening section call into question the nearly mythical claims about GenAI’s capabilities that circulate in sales pitches and popular media. They remind us that the technology may not, in fact, make us more efficient and productive (Cook). Furthermore, GenAI does not have knowledge of languages, customs, and cultures across the globe (Sharma), a gap that can be resisted through counterstorytelling (Zulficar & Hum). They

also question the novelty of GenAI technologies (Bryan; Easterbrook; Lesh), bringing them down to earth as limited, conventional, even mundane—and therefore more open to mindful use and criticism so that we may “avoid being ignorant citizens and unwitting reproducers of injustices in the world” (Sharma, this volume, p. 26).

- **Gaining GenAI Literacy.** These chapters each highlight important features of GenAI literacy related to writing instruction. Authors discuss how to incorporate and cross-check AI tools in writing, reading, and research practices and also signal the importance of helping students understand these nuances. Lisa Bell and Joni K. Hayward Marcum affirm that GenAI is a learned literacy, and Amy Reed, Tiffany DeRe-wal, and Angela Laffen and Christopher Eaton remind us that teaching reading critically and rhetorically are also important pieces of this conversation.
- **The Social and Human Nature of Writing.** Chapters in this section all center the social nature of writing and highlight the vital importance humans still play in writing and learning to write. Authors debunk the myths that GenAI can do “all the writing” for us just because it generates plausible text, ignoring the social origin, function, and purposes of writing. They also highlight the emotional element in human writing, which only humans can engage in.
- **Ethical Impacts of GenAI Writing Technologies.** These chapters discuss ethical implications of using GenAI, from environmental concerns to data privacy to the issue of who is profiting from educational use of these tools. Whitney Lew James and Wilkes urge more consideration of ethics before we invite students to use GenAI, while Morgan C. Banville and Charles Woods suggest activities to raise student awareness of data rights. MacArthur critiques big GenAI companies’ attempts to profit from untested educational applications and calls for a teacher-led approach to shaping low-cost student access to GenAI.
- **How GenAI Impacts the Learning and Writing Process.** This section examines the learning-to-write process, with chapters detailing what it means to gain expertise, how specific populations of writers learn to write, and how students develop their own “voice” in writing. Authors expose faulty premises and false promises for learning that come from high expectations of GenAI technology, spurred by assumptions about the power of GenAI when it seems to beat human capacities for languaging (or, for computers, language processing).
- **Writing Programs and Writing Centers in an Age of GenAI.** These chapters discuss operations and implications specific to writing

programs and writing centers. Kim Pennesi and Emily Wierszewski lead the section by asking whether GenAI will in fact save administrators' time and labor. Several chapters then ask whether writing programs and centers will continue, and if so under what name. Rounding out the section, selections from K. Thompson and Rebecca Hallman Martini investigate the ethical and moral implications of GenAI for writing centers in particular.

- **How Writing Pedagogy/Assessment Are Affected by GenAI.** These chapters all question various assumptions folks might have about how writing is taught and assessed in the classroom in an age of GenAI, with authors examining the types of writing we should or shouldn't be assigning, how we might want to revise our writing assignments, and how students receive feedback. Core to each of these chapters are examples of how the authors have used GenAI tools in their writing pedagogy or related to student feedback. Chapters like Noël Ingram's urge us to resist the temptation to "GenAI-proof" our courses, while Wood reminds us how providing our own, non-AI feedback to our students might be "one of the few activities we get to meet with students individually."
- **Writing Instruction Policy and Academic Integrity.** These chapters explore ideas related to policy and academic integrity, examining how AI tools impact these matters and how writing instructors and programs should move forward and adapt. Zack K. De Piero argues that by using a combination of approaches cautiously, instructors can indeed determine if a student wrote an essay or not. Ariel M. Goldenthal and Courtney Adams Wooten call for support for instructors in developing their own understanding of and policies around GenAI, and Annika Hauser-Brydon et al. offer a model for a way to include students in policy formation. Laurie A. Pinkert and Jonathan Beever describe why teachers need to cultivate "sustained responsible engagement with the processes of writing and knowledge development" to counteract the ways AI research assistance can work against academic integrity in source citation.

While we have organized this collection around these eight broad areas, we—the editors—also want to name one significant bad idea that cuts across all of these areas but is not always addressed directly and robustly: the prevalent belief that technology is neutral, that it benefits everyone equally, and that its consequences do not disproportionately harm already vulnerable communities. This assumption obscures how GenAI is built on data practices and labor systems that often disadvantage Black and Brown communities, from biased policing algorithms

to exploitative mining and ghost work. Recognizing and challenging this myth is essential if we want to foster healthy discourses about and informed uses of GenAI toward a more equitable and just society.

While this collection is written for a broad audience who may be drawn to practical questions more than it is to nuanced academic discourse, we want to highlight that theorists and advocates can and should lead the way in identifying and dismantling the consequences hidden by the myth of harmless neutrality of AI. Scholars such as Safiya Umoja Noble (2018), Ruha Benjamin (2024), Catherine Knight Steele (2021), and Kate Crawford (2022) show us how systems of power and inequity shape the very foundations and applications of AI. Organizations like Data for Black Lives (D4BL) and the Distributed AI Research Institute (DAIR), led by Timnit Gebru, demonstrate how collective research and advocacy can resist discriminatory uses of data collection and application. Research by Adrienne Williams et al. (2022) and Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri (2019) documents the hidden labor practices and exploitation that sustain AI systems. Together, these thinkers and movements offer conceptual and ethical tools for reframing bad ideas about neutrality, objectivity, and equity toward more generative understandings and practices. Our hope is that readers will not only engage with the pragmatic strategies in this collection but also look to the vital voices, whose cutting-edge work helps us all think critically about how we imagine, design, and use technology in our daily writing practices.

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