

# CHAPTER 23. HBCU WRITING CENTERS CONFRONTING THE “CANONIZED CORPUS”

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As four current and former Howard University writing center coaches who have observed our students’ rapid adoption of GenAI technologies to assist with—and, let’s be honest, write—their writing assignments, we wanted to know *what’s all the fuss?*<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we conducted a mini-experiment by asking two generative AI (GenAI) platforms, ChatGPT-3 and Claude 3.5, on ten separate occasions: “What are the best works of American literature?” We chose “best” rather than “most important” because “best” includes an implied judgment on the value of a literary work. In each response, ChatGPT-3 mentioned that “best” was subjective before providing a list of ten texts, while Claude 3.5 simply provided a list of ten texts without preamble. Across the responses, the GenAI platforms mentioned thirteen different books:

- *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850)
- *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville (1851)
- *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain (1876)
- *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1884)
- *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner (1929)
- *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)
- *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck (1939)
- *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger (1951)
- *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952)
- *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac (1957)
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960)
- *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison (1977)
- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987)

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1 All authors are first authors and contributed equally to the writing and research of this chapter.

These texts are defined by their homogeneity: 10 of the 13 writers are white, 10 of the 13 writers are male, all works were published between 1850-1987, and they are all considered “canonical” works of American literature. While all thirteen literary works are certainly influential, it is extremely troubling that these GenAI platforms provide such a limited understanding of the allegedly “best” works of American literature because these texts are neither a good representation of the types of books that many students read nor the most relevant books in contemporary literary scholarship. Yet, these are the texts that GenAI define as the “best.”

We offer the term the “canonized corpus” as an example of how GenAI rely on already established normative knowledge when generating content. We define the canonized corpus as a body of texts that GenAI constantly identify as key for the literary tradition, and while these texts have narrative and aesthetic value, they are also informed by dominant systematic and sociocultural values such as western-ness, whiteness, maleness, ableism, and heteronormativity. The canonized corpus adheres to the literary canon, which historically excludes writers from marginalized groups. Since GenAI relies on already privileged texts to inform their output, GenAI inherits these problematic systems embedded within canon formation. We remain extremely concerned about the canonized corpus within GenAI because many students are engaging with these products without knowledge of the ideals embedded within their responses. Further, the canonized corpus goes beyond merely content and includes the vocabulary, linguistic style, and the discourses and literary genres that GenAI privileges in their output. The canonized corpus is also a practice where dominant forms of knowledge are privileged, and “the widespread adoption of GenAI tools has the potential to reproduce hegemonic and colonial discourse as the writing process is radically disrupted” (Gebers et al.).

Writing centers play a pivotal role in helping students understand that GenAI remains informed by the canonized corpus. Furthermore, since historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) foreground Black perspectives, HBCU writing centers are uniquely suited to confront the racial, sociocultural, and political biases embedded in the canonized corpus informing these emerging technologies. Drawing on our experiences as writing center coaches at Howard University, this chapter first explores the substantive role that writing centers play in addressing the use of GenAI by students. Next, we look at the unique role of HBCU writing centers and argue they are well-positioned as thought leaders contending with GenAI use in higher education. Finally, we offer four sample scenarios for how writing center coaches can ethically work with students when using GenAI while helping students refuse the canonized corpus.

## NAVIGATING THE TECHNOSCAPE

GenAI—defined as “technology that (i) leverages deep learning models to (ii) generate human-like content (e.g., images, words) in response to (iii) complex and varied prompts (e.g., languages, instructions, questions)” (Lim et al. 2)—is a clear source of collective anxiety for higher education. Over the past two years, many have expressed particular concerns about how GenAI creates new challenges for writing pedagogy, with Inara Scott writing in the magazine *Inside Higher Ed* that “yes, we are in a chatgpt crisis,” and Lisa Lieberman pronouncing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that AI signals “the death of student writing.” While some scholars and pundits argue that GenAI will fundamentally alter the college writing experience, technophobia has always confronted any new technology; yet, emerging technologies like writing, the internet, and the personal computer ultimately did not doom the work of educators. However, the adoption of these technologies *did* change how we teach and how our students learn. As such, we must recognize GenAI as increasingly ubiquitous products influencing writing, and higher education must respond and adapt to this rising technology.

This does not, however, mean we should uncritically embrace GenAI because there are numerous concerns about these products, from plagiarism (Morrone) to intellectual property theft (Vincent and Li) to gender bias (Stokel-Walker) to racial bias (Hanna et al.). Concerns about racial bias emerge regarding the content of GenAI’s output as well as the vocabulary they use to generate human-like responses, i.e., “standard English” vs. Haitian Creole/other historically marginalized language cultures (Franklin and Falvey, this collection). Further, as numerous chapters in this volume show, the larger culture around GenAI reflects our lived reality: accusations of AI plagiarism can themselves be fraught with racial bias (Botvin, this collection) while GenAI can be a powerful tool to support students with disabilities (Violini, this collection). As current and former writing center coaches at Howard University, one of the nation’s largest HBCUs, we are especially concerned with the substantial quantitative and qualitative evidence that the most popular GenAI platforms are propagating racially discriminatory attitudes and further embedding biases (Hanna et al.; Choudhary). Throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the success of new technologies like the internet, search functions, and social media are constantly fraught with extending racial bias and discriminatory practices, and the history of technology has consistently shown that communities of color will be exploited, excluded, or otherwise marginalized as new technologies become increasingly ubiquitous. To ensure that GenAI does not become the latest iteration of what Ruha Benjamin calls “the New Jim code,” universities have a moral obligation to contend with

systemic racial bias in GenAI, and universities must collaborate with a variety of stakeholders across the university to create their AI policies, enforce these standards, and ensure that students are given the proper context to contend with and use GenAI.

## **HOWARD UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER AND HBCUS**

HBCUs are betting big on AI as many are embracing the benefits of using GenAI on their campuses. AI literacy offers opportunities to gain new skill sets, explore different career pathways, and bridge racial wealth gaps for Black communities. Per the McKinsey Institute for Black Economic Mobility, “By 2045, skewed distribution of annual GenAI wealth creation could cost Black households in the United States \$43 billion each year” (Brown et al.). The implementation of campus-wide GenAI initiatives and policies at HBCUs, such as Howard University (“Initial Howard University Guidelines”), are necessary to help guide marginalized students at HBCUs to develop and apply their GenAI skills in support of their academic and professional goals. Students at HBCUs across the United States are being encouraged to use GenAI in ethical ways that do not go against university plagiarism policies or that deem these GenAI all-knowing and all-encompassing. Some examples are: Howard University’s Artificial Intelligence (AI) initiative and the inauguration of the President’s Artificial Intelligence Advisory Council (AIAC) as outlined in a June 2024 announcement (Vinson III and Wutoh ); Morehouse College’s July 2024 announcement on the college’s use of AI teaching assistants for the fall 2024 semester (Nobles III); and Spelman College’s Spelman SPEAR (Security Plan, Education, Assessment and Remediation) initiative funded by Google’s Cybersecurity Clinics Fund to support building student’s cybersecurity and AI skills (“Spelman College Receives”). These and other initiatives are just some examples of the strides HBCUs are making to encourage their students and faculty to understand and use GenAI. HBCUs are not alone in pushing these large initiatives, as universities of all stripes are actively encouraging students to use GenAI. Unfortunately, many of these initiatives do nothing to dislodge the canonized corpus. As such, we end up with more and more students using GenAI, inheriting the problems of canonicity, and then reproducing these problems in their own writings. This must be refused, and it can be done so if these initiatives collaborate with their writing center to challenge the canonized corpus.

Before writing centers can become leaders in academia’s adoption of GenAI, they must consider the ways in which they are capable of perpetuating discriminatory academic practices on varying student populations. These practices often fail to acknowledge or make accommodations for students from marginalized

and underrepresented communities. Research has shown that writing center tutors might make assumptions about a student’s academic exposure/intellect, and writing centers can show a systemic lack of support for populations like first-generation college students (Bond), working-class students (Denny et al.), and students with seen or unseen disabilities (Moroski-Rigney). Most of this research is conducted with predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in mind, and a switch to HBCUs tends to yield more specific observations. Calls to decolonize writing centers by applying unique writing center pedagogies (Keaton Jackson and Hand), employing social justice ethics (Mitchell and Randolph Jr.), utilizing different practices (Greenfield), and centering the practices of HBCUs (DiCesare and Miklaucic), as well as Hispanic-serving and tribal colleges and universities.

Writing centers at HBCUs offer invaluable academic writing support to students who come from predominantly marginalized backgrounds. The one-on-one interaction between students seeking writing support and writing center coaches, who commonly share the students’ backgrounds, cultivates an environment of collaboration, constructive criticism, and empathy, transforming the writing center into a communal space. We must be “careful not to homogenize Black colleges because they are no more monolithic than Black people, or any people for that matter” (Mitchell 23), and we recognize that our experiences as writing coaches at Howard University are not representative of a monolithic experience at all HBCUs. Rather, we pull from this distinct learning environment to reveal how it has informed our understanding of the canonized corpus and provides opportunities to engage with GenAI with racial equity and ethical academic practices in mind. Drawing on Kendra L. Mitchell’s reading of HBCU writing centers as a space “always in the process of becoming through co-creation via shared cultural values” (28), we view our work as a process of cultural co-creation that is crucial and inevitable in supporting students in the HBCU writing center.

It is crucial to recognize that HBCUs are still colonially saturated, even if they curate resistant knowledge production. For example, while in some assignments students may see themselves represented, other assignments ask students to write about their racial traumas or address prompts that center whiteness. As such, it is perhaps understandable that some students would turn to GenAI for inspiration or to alleviate the often tedious, unenjoyable, triggering, or tiresome brainstorming process. Further, as Cara Violini notes in this volume, GenAI can be a necessary tool for students with disabilities, offering yet another reason why students might use GenAI. Yet, in passing their writing through GenAI, students at HBCUs risk reifying the canonized corpus and sacrificing their own writing voice. This, according to Joni Hayward Marcum and Lisa Bell, is why

AI literacy is so vital, and promoting informed uses of GenAI in writing centers can encourage ethical practices for the future (398). In thoughtful collaboration with a writing center tutor, students can be encouraged to experiment with GenAI in their writing, just not at the expense of their own creativity and critical thinking.

## BEST PRACTICES

We now turn to our personal experiences as writing center coaches at Howard University to offer the following four example scenarios for how writing center coaches can help students develop a creative and ethical relationship with GenAI while actively refusing to adhere to the canonized corpus. In our experience, most students come to the writing center during the prewriting and content development stages to discuss and share their assignment prompts, generate ideas about the topic, craft a potential thesis, and/or create supporting details to support their analysis. The following scenarios are based on our experiences with Howard undergraduate students to offer strategies for how writing center coaches can ethically and creatively utilize GenAI with students while also making them aware of potential biases embedded within these technologies. We use the hypothetical example of a student who was asked to write an essay on “The Impact of American Civil War on Latina/o/x Communities” and offer four examples of how a writing center coach can interact with this student while using GenAI.

### SCENARIO 1: USING GENAI AS PREWRITING AND SEARCH ENGINE TOOLS

**Example:** A student comes into the writing center after being asked to write a paper on “The Impact of American Civil War on Latina/o/x Communities.” The student is searching for guidance on how to best brainstorm ideas for the essay.

**Response:** The writing center coach can redirect students from asking a GenAI to write essays to instead prompting it based on their already conceived ideas. Instead of asking the GenAI to “*Write a 5-paragraph essay on ‘The Impact of American Civil War on Latina/o/x Communities,’*” the writing center coach can encourage the student to ask the GenAI, “*How many traceable historical records exist on the disruption of traditional trade routes for Latina/o/x communities during the American Civil War?*”

**Evaluation:** Using such specific prompts rephrases the conversation from having students copy the GenAI responses to encouraging further research based on preconceived ideas and questions. This approach also promotes effective use of

time, hence streamlining the research process in one conversation, and avoiding the internet rabbit-hole phase that discourages many early researchers. Finally, the writing center coach must be aware that GenAI are pulling data from the “canonized corpus” online, so the GenAI’s response may be missing important historical and/or cultural context.

## SCENARIO 2: GENAI AS WRITING PARTNERS/STRATEGISTS

**Example:** Upon realizing the level of work required for this project, the writing center coach understands that this assignment might require multiple visits. Effective as this is, writing center coaches may be overbooked at certain peak periods during the semester, such that repeat or new students are unable to secure a tutoring session when they need it the most.

**Response:** We propose that writing center coaches can help students plan their essay writing schedule and strategies, including targeted check-in sessions during initial sessions using GenAI. The following is a sample prompt given to a GenAI program: *I am writing an 8-page term paper on “The Impact of American Civil War on Latinalo/x Communities” and would like to focus on traceable historical records on the disruption of traditional trade routes for Latinalo/x communities during the war. The essay is due on December 5, 2025, and I would like to dedicate 2 hours a week to this paper. Provide an effective research and writing strategy for me.* The GenAI responded by providing an 18-week strategy, drawing on the academic essay outline format and aligning it with the student’s proposed timeline.

**Evaluation:** Consequently, writing center coaches and students can schedule their check-in sessions during certain weeks, therefore, keeping students on track, providing a continued writing and coaching process for both parties, and maintaining a sustained relationship between students and their coaches. This also allows students to adopt healthy accountability practices in regard to writing and other academic requirements.

## SCENARIO 3: USING GENAI TO IDENTIFY GAPS IN SCHOLARSHIP

**Example:** The student asks a GenAI program to list the most important figures during the Civil War. The GenAI responded with 13 names—11 were White men, and two were Black individuals (one man and one woman). Of the 13 people, only three were women.

**Response:** The writing center coach can discuss these disparities with the student, identifying the gap in scholarship as a reflection of the canonized corpus with which the GenAI have been trained. Coaches can then effectively prompt

their students to dive deeper into the research writing process.

**Evaluation:** Trained on a vast amount of what we have called the canonized corpus, GenAI are essentially subsumed in ethnocentric ideas and are reflective of the canon, hence providing responses that usually exclude minority voices. Among many other methods, the need for an inclusive corpus will be fulfilled when students and researchers at large are able to detect the ways in which the canon continually infiltrates the education system and new technologies. The relationship between students, coaches, and GenAI can yield inclusive, cutting-edge research if properly managed.

#### **SCENARIO 4: DISCUSSING THE ETHICAL USE OF GENAI**

**Example:** Upon completing the required steps and meeting with their writing coach over the course of the semester, the student has completed their assignment. GenAI has been used in various stages of this assignment and should be cited as a source.

**Response:** Writing center coach will guide students to resources that provide formatting for proper citations when using GenAI.

**Evaluation:** With GenAI gaining ground, it is almost inevitable that students will use these platforms. It is then paramount to encourage students to disclose AI content when used. This will encourage students to align themselves with the citation requirements for their colleges, classrooms, and potentially, future professions.

## **CONCLUSION**

As the chapters across this volume attest, GenAI is not a fad, and students are rapidly adopting these technologies. It is clear that higher education must contend with GenAI, and we believe writing centers have a key role in the AI-tinted future of higher education writing pedagogy. HBCUs have a particularly important role to play in addressing the canonized corpus that is embedded within GenAI, and HBCU writing centers can and should serve as leaders in the space. We hope these four example scenarios can be used as a starting point for writing center coaches who want to ethically and responsibly use GenAI with their students while refusing the “canonized corpus.” However, writing center coaches are only one stakeholder at the university. University administrators, faculty, instructors, and staff must collaborate with writing centers to address the rise of GenAI. Only through this collaboration can stakeholders in higher education ensure that students recognize the canonized corpus embedded within GenAI.

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