# GenAI Authorship and Agency in a Professional Writing Course

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The emergence of highly capable and widely accessible generative AI tools has sparked widespread concerns about student authorship and agency. This pilot study draws on student reflections from a 5-week undergraduate Professional Writing for Business course in which students had the option to use AI to compose their assignments. These reflections suggest three key insights: First, that AI use creates new opportunities for developing students' critical AI literacy (Bali, 2023; MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force, 2023) and rhetorical metaknowledge. Second, such integration presents challenges around students' perceptions of their own learning and agency. Finally, the study suggests a pedagogical process for AI literacy that is iterative, building in repeated opportunities for AI-assisted composing, reflection, and instructor feedback on both the writing output and the AI-assisted writing process. This approach can help faculty and students illuminate—and navigate—the conflicting understandings of plagiarism and intellectual property that can occur in PW courses, sites where differing academic, workplace, and digital cultures converge.

This study reflects a moment in time. The summer of 2023 feels like a lifetime ago in the world of AI development, and yet questions around AI use in the classroom remain unresolved: Should we ban it? Resist it? Embrace it? Do we stay the course or upend everything we're doing in the classroom? At the time, I was preparing for my autumn course, Professional Writing for Business, and I was reading a mix of laments and celebrations of the ways large language models (LLMs), particularly ChatGPT, had disrupted education. Outside the field of composition and rhetoric, research teams like Shakked Noy and Whitney Zhang (2023) and Fabrizio Dell'Acqua et al. (2023) released large-scale studies of workplace writing suggesting that access to ChatGPT could improve professionals' work. Surveys like Cardon et al. (2023) described a widespread view that this technology would be essential in business communication moving forward. At the same time, there was growing concern over students offloading their learning and agency to LLMs (Cardon et al. 2023). In the popular press, Stephen Marche (2022) decreed the college essay "dead," Ian Bogost (2023) declared that the past year had "end[ed] in ruin," and Ethan Mollick proclaimed a "homework apocalypse" (2023).

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In other words, it seemed clear that I couldn't ignore this development. What was less clear was how. If I allowed it into my classroom, what would happen when "the nearly unbridled power of ChatGPT" was unleashed (Cummings et al., 2024, p. 4)? Would students offload their agency and authorship to these AI tools? What would they learn—or fail to learn—about writing?

In taking on these questions, this paper contributes to a growing body of work exploring student perspectives on writing with LLMs (Bedington et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024; Fyfe, 2023; Yan, 2023), which demonstrate diverse attitudes, uses, and understandings of generative AI (genAI) that complicate the popular narrative of it simply being a cheating tool (e.g., Barbaro, 2023). As Stephen McElroy and Kristi Girdharry (2024) point out, "Listening to students' views provides a more comprehensive understanding of AI's impact on education and helps to ensure that ethical guidelines and teaching strategies evolve in ways that resonate with and benefit the primary users in educational settings"—that is, students themselves (p. 579). In this spirit, this paper draws from student voices to examine the impact of genAI on their sense of agency and how these perceptions are complicated—and even contradicted—by their interactions with it. It suggests a pedagogical process for AI literacy that is iterative, building in repeated opportunities for AI-assisted composing, reflection, and instructor feedback on both the writing product and process. Such an approach, which allows students autonomy over their learning, can create a more trusting environment in the classroom, creating space for instructor guidance around AI use.

## Methods

This pilot study draws on student reflections from a 5-week 2-credit undergraduate Professional Writing for Business course. The two sections from which students were recruited were taught in an online asynchronous modality. In the course, students wrote four packets of short documents in response to different workplace scenarios (see Table 11.1). For each packet, students could choose to write their documents with or without AI assistance. Following the approach used by Paul Fyfe (2023), if students chose to use AI, no limitations were given on its use, but they needed to accompany their documents with a human-authored reflection. Of the 23 students enrolled across the two sections of the course, eight agreed to share their reflections for this IRB-approved study. The reflections were de-identified and coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

In their reflections, students were asked to consider their AI-assisted process and their learning:

**Process Questions**

1. How did you prompt the AI?
   - Did you simply copy my assignment? If so, which part?
   - Did you do anything to guide the AI into producing more useful output? (In other words, did you engage in prompt engineering?) If so, how did you guide the AI?
2. Did you revise the AI's output? If so, what did you change and why?

**Learning Questions**

3. To what degree are these documents "your" writing?[1] Do they sound like you? Would you consider them your intellectual property or the AI company's? Explain.
4. What is your takeaway from using AI on this assignment? What did you gain and what did you lose by using AI to assist you?

**Table 11.1. Summary of Packet Contents**

| | |
|---|---|
| Packet 1 | 2 internal emails and a memo delivering mixed news |
| Packet 2 | A series of internal and external documents in response to suspicious activity in a bank client's account |
| Packet 2 | A memo advising company leadership on an ethical dilemma |
| Packet 4 | A series of internal and external documents in response to a negative online review |

In this way, the course created what Matthew A. Vetter, Brent Lucia, Jialei Jiang and Mahmoud Othman (2024) called a *local ethic*, "a framework that is capable of exploring unique ethical considerations, values, and norms that develop at the most foundational unit of higher education—the individual classroom" (p. 1). This local ethic, Vetter et al. argued, aligns with calls for a more ecological understanding of ethics, one in which students and teachers negotiate ethics through "ongoing dialogue" (p. 3).

To facilitate this dialogue, the course was designed to allow students multiple opportunities for AI experimentation on both their written product and their AI-integrated process. This iterative approach provided insight into how students were using AI in their projects—how they were prompting it and editing its output—and allowed me to provide feedback on how this use might be helping or hindering their success. Additionally, this course structure created opportunities for dialogue around ethical AI

1 This question is taken directly from Fyfe (2022)

use, including guidance on whether students' choices around AI might be accepted in other courses or in the workplace. For example, in the opening materials for the course, I asked students to consider what other ethical systems would be available to them:

> When deciding whether to use AI for this class, keep in mind that you may not be allowed to use it in your other courses—definitely check each professor's policy. Additionally, many workplaces have banned AI use over security and intellectual property concerns; others will automatically reject candidates using AI assistance for their cover letters or resumes. In other words, consider what you'd like to get out of this class: Are you hoping to better understand how to use AI as a writing assistant? Or are you more interested in learning how to compose for situations when AI use isn't possible?

I was then able to return to the local ethics of various workplace and classroom uses in my feedback throughout the course.

## Student Uptake of AI

Overall, 4 of the 23 students enrolled the course opted to use AI on all their assignments, while 7 students chose not to use artificial intelligence at all (Figure 11.1), echoing Robert E. Cummings, Stephen M. Monroe, and Marc Watkins' (2024) conclusion that "college writers may not always be eager adopters of AI tools" (p. 9). One interesting finding was that student uptake of AI peaked in Assignment 3, with 13 students opting to use it, but decreased on the final assignment (Figure 11.2).

If students were completely offloading their learning to AI, one would expect that once they did so successfully, they would continue throughout the term. While it is outside the scope of this study to measure the success of AI-assisted writing versus purely student-generated writing, from my perspective, I didn't notice a correlation between grades and AI use. Some students' documents were more successful when they used AI assistance; others weren't. Further, while there were a few students whose work was unsuccessful because they submitted AI output with only cursory edits and little critical thinking, substantial revision of AI output didn't necessarily guarantee better outcomes. In fact, this is similar to Shakked Noy and Whitney Zhang's (2024) results. Their study of professional writers did not find that extra time spent editing AI output led to statistically significant improvement in how documents were rated.

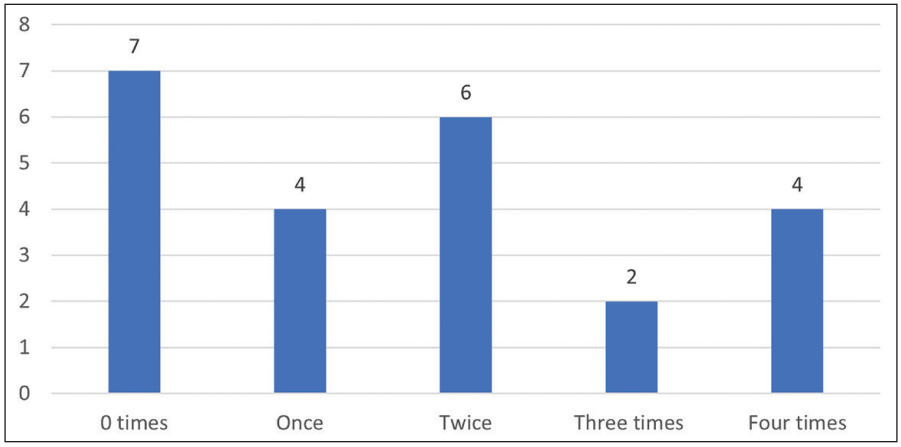


*Figure 11.1. Number of times students reported opting to use AI (out of 23 students)*

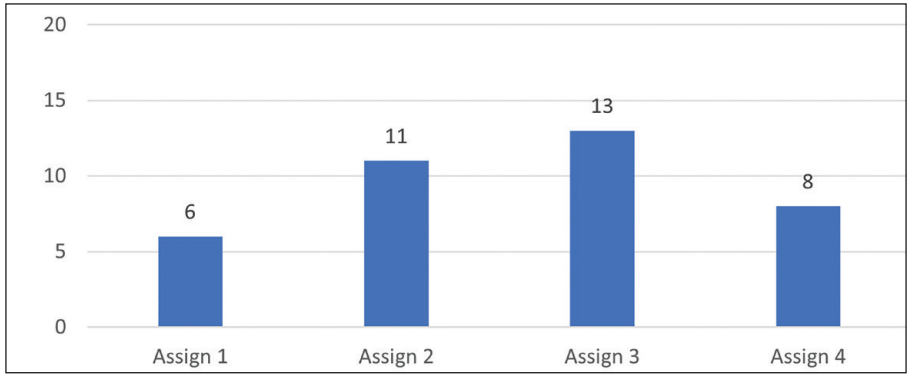


*Figure 11.2. Number of students reporting use of AI from assignment to assignment (out of 23 submissions)*

## Students' Perceptions of their Learning

Many students reported that using AI helped them think more deeply about the course concepts, including rhetorical theory, and—of course—AI itself. For example, a student I'll call James wrote:

> My takeaway was really learning how to use AI. Given my very limited experience with AI, I wanted to try it for an assignment in this course before the quarter's end but I wanted to find my style before and I feel I did that over the first 3.5 weeks. So, my biggest takeaway was seeing how effective it

> can be and to not be afraid of prompting it to give it the style I want and not be afraid to change what it gives me to fit that voice as well.

Another student, Eric, reported:

> I have found that often my results are more appropriate when asking [ChatGPT] to first consider the context in which they are creating the finished product. … As humans, we use rhetorical tools to communicate; I believe it is equally important for the AI to understand the context of the rhetorical situation as it often offers a more tailored result.

Others, though, admitted that they were using AI to replace their learning. Kalia described her experience this way:

> My takeaway from using AI this assignment, is that it definitely saved me a lot of time, however, it can cost me the skill of taking my time and organizing such assignments. It also takes away my integrity as I did not input much into this assignment.

While Kalia subsequently chose not to use AI on her other assignments, another student, Asher, took a different approach. He also reported that using AI inhibited his learning, saying, "[I]t's a dependency cycle. … you don't learn anything when someone else does the work." Asher, however, continued to use artificial intelligence on three of the four major assignments in the course despite continuing to report that he was "los[ing] the learning aspect of the assignment[s]."

This admission would seem to suggest that Asher's approach involved little critical thinking. In actuality, however, there was a disconnect between Asher's reports of his sense of agency in the learning-focused reflective questions (3 and 4 above) and his description of his process (questions 1 and 2). In fact, his approach to prompting and editing involved a great deal of experimentation and thoughtfulness. For example, he reported refining his prompt through several iterations, testing it across multiple AI platforms before settling on ChatGPT, and then using his own insights as well as the tool itself to revise the output.

What to make of this disconnect? Professional writing exists at the intersection of different workplace and academic cultures (Reyman, 2008). Claire Lauer and Eva Brumberger (2019) contrasted writing in school "where students are asked to produce complete documents through a process that begins with invention and drafting and extends through revision and delivery"

with what they observed in professional settings, where "many writers actually act as multimodal editors…often encountered *in medias res* after the content has been originated by coworkers or consultants" (p. 637). Perhaps Asher's discomfort stems from this difference: He was accustomed to writing in academic spaces and so acting as prompter and editor—shortcutting the drafting stage—left him uneasy.

## AI Enhances Creativity...All in the Same Direction

Because of his extensive upfront work, Asher also noticed something other students didn't report: that large language models often produce similar output, despite individual variations to the prompts. As Asher put it, "I ran [the prompt] through about five or six times and started to see that the same wording and structure start to reappear. Even though I tried to engage in prompt engineering to a[n even] greater extent, I found the limit of what I could do when it came to altering the structure and wording of the memo."

I was beginning to notice this similarity as well. The third assignment centered on an ethical dilemma that I had assigned to students many times over the years. This time, though, I saw students present solutions I'd never seen before—really good ideas, too. However, many of them presented the *same* novel solutions. In other words, a paradox started to appear. From the students' perspectives AI use enhanced their critical thinking: multiple students reported that AI helped them think more deeply about the ethical dilemma. For example, one student described the AI tool as "guiding" him to "look at the ethical aspects and much more complicated topics than what I initially thought of alone." Another reported:

> I gained a lot of knowledge being able to see the ideas that the AI generated and gained a different understanding from the ideas that I wouldn't have thought of on my own…. I believe that the AI allows one to gain a more in depth understanding of the problem at hand and solutions that can be used to solve it.

Yet, from a reader's perspective, this notion of expanded critical thinking disappeared because so many other writers' ideas seem to have expanded in the same direction. As I wrote in a message to students, this similarity suggests "limitations for using AI for workplace writing: If you use it in a client pitch, a job application, or a class paper—and your competitors are also using AI—it might be more difficult to distinguish yourself."

This finding aligns with other studies that suggest that while AI use can increase an *individual's* creative output, it may flatten creativity across *groups* (Dell'Acqua et al., 2023; Doshi & Hauser, 2024). It also emphasizes the benefits of an iterative, open approach to AI that integrates reflection and feedback. When we don't know if or how students are using AI—or if we ban it outright—it becomes more challenging to show them its limitations. In this case, this demonstration of limitations might explain why fewer students selected the AI option in the final assignment of the course.

## Distributed Agency, Neither Human nor Machine

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the students who opted to use artificial intelligence, particularly those who used it on multiple assignments, reported a different orientation to intellectual property and authenticity than many educators. Eric, when asked about this, responded:

> Who owns the IP behind the generated works? … If I were to punch 2 + 2 into a calculator and it responds 4 would I say that is my answer or the calculators? I would argue that it is somehow simultaneously both and neither.
>
> I consider this similar to if I composed a loan amortization spread sheet and showed my boss saying, "Here are my calculations," my boss would most likely not respond by saying "LIAR! Those are Excel generated calculations." [A]lthough ChatGPT generated the result, I plugged in the inputs and conditions, and I claim full accountability for the work meaning I am staking my reputation on the accuracy of Chat.

In this way, Eric's response suggests a theory of agency that is more complex than what my reflection question (Is this 'your' work?) implies. Instead, it aligns with Jialei Jiang, Matthew Vetter, and Brent Lucia's (2024) findings that some students take a view of agency that is distributed, neither fully human nor machine: "agency is not confined to individual entities but is distributed across various actors. Together, humans and nonhumans collectively create agential capacities that continually adapt and reshape in reaction to ongoing movement and socio-material action" (p. 926). In the case of genAI, "The agency of writing becomes distributed across both human and nonhuman actors, generating a synergistic effect." (p. 3). Thus, Eric's reflection reminds us that our choices in the workplace aren't fully ours: They are influenced by office hierarchies, the norms and procedures of our fields, and the technologies that mediate our work.

Additionally, Eric shows that our disciplinary values are not necessarily shared by all writers—that ethics reflect local contexts and rhetorical ecologies (Vetter et al., 2024). Eric was a senior, and—as his example of the loan amortization spreadsheet suggests—was deeply immersed in his discipline, which colored his perception of the role of writing. The MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI defined writing as "a process as well as a product" (p. 3) and asserted that "generative AI cannot simply be used in colleges and universities as it might be in other organizations for efficiency or other purposes" (p. 3). However, for many writers in this study, it is the product, rather than the process, that matters and will continue to matter as they enter workplace writing contexts.

## Hidden AI, Transparent AI

A final finding from this iterative, open, and reflection-based approach was that it made conversations around artificial intelligence a lot less loaded. In simple terms, it allowed me to teach: I was able to comment on students' AI implementation, suggest prompt engineering techniques and revision strategies, and correct misassumptions about how genAI works. For instance, when a student, George, submitted an assignment that appeared AI-generated without the required reflection, rather than accusing him of "cheating," I simply emailed a reminder to send in the missing component. George, however, responded that he *hadn't* used AI. So I asked him for a chat. Our subsequent conversation led to the realization that he was using artificial intelligence without realizing it.

Too often, a student's failure to cite AI is treated as a moral failing or attempt at deception, when sometimes, it is simply an error. By treating artificial intelligence tools like any other technology, "neither good nor bad" (Kranzberg, 1986, p. 545), conversations around unacknowledged AI use became a lot less fraught.

However, that's not to say that these technologies are neutral either (Kranzberg, 1986). In fact, this conversation was a wake-up call for us, helping us realize the interface of Grammarly, the tool that George was using, obscured the fact that genAI was integrated into the platform. The result was that both of us built our critical AI literacies (Bali, 2023): George was subsequently more judicious in his uptake of Grammarly suggestions, eliminating the generic language choices that flagged to me as AI-generated, and I became more cognizant of how hard it is for students to navigate AI use, especially with tools like Grammarly, CoPilot 365 and Gemini being built into word processors and search engines: They don't always know when they're using it.

## Conclusion

Overall, the reflections I collected from my students present conflicting views of agency when writing with AI. While some, like Eric, seem comfortable with a sense of distributed agency, others, like Kalia and Asher, were uneasy with losing control over their work and their learning. At the same time, Asher's reflection demonstrated that students' sense of their agency and their actions aren't always aligned. While he reported feeling a "dependency cycle" with AI, his reflection suggested that he was, in fact, thinking *very* critically about his prompting and the AI output. Meanwhile, George, who thought he was fully in control of his writing, found that AI had taken over without his awareness.

The pedagogical implications of these students' experiences are also complex: On the one hand, given the potential loss of control over their work, it seems important to allow students to "refuse" AI (Sano-Franchini, McIntyre, & Fernandes, 2024). At the same time, when 85% of college students have used AI for coursework (Flaherty, 2025), these students' challenges reinforce the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force's (2024) assertion that faculty "simply cannot afford to adopt a stance of complete hostility to GAI [or generative AI]: such a stance incurs the risk of GAI tools being integrated into the fabric of intellectual life without the benefit of humanistic and rhetorical expertise" (p. 9). In other words, students need our support and guidance.

In particular, navigating this shifting terrain requires explicit conversations with students around the ways that these technologies challenge traditional notions of authorship and agency. One potential framework is Jiang, Vetter, and Lucia's (2024) concept of a "more-than-digital" AI literacy. Drawing on Latour's (2004) actor-network theory, this framework advances the notion of agency and authorship as distributed, "constantly evolving and embedded within the interactions between student writers, AI technologies, and elements of classroom ecology" (2024, p. 924). Raising the awareness of genAI as an agential technology can help students make more informed decisions about their work, recognizing when it might be influencing their output.

One possible classroom approach is the iterative approach that I took here: Giving students repeated opportunities to choose whether to use AI and asking them to reflect on those choices. This course structure allows students to receive feedback on their process and the rhetorical impact of their work, and it encourages them to consider the effect on their learning. Such an approach doesn't ignore the complex nature of distributed agency. Instead, it allows instructors and students to experiment together, negotiating this tangled, evolving ecology openly, and—hopefully—more successfully navigating our current moment of AI disruption.

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