

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

‘Bots’ Can Write Good Essays, But That Doesn’t Make Writing Obsolete

Source: Natalie Wexler, Forbes.com, December 21, 2023

Artificial intelligence has spawned a new creation, ChatGPT, that can produce well written essays in the amount of time it takes to sharpen a pencil. But that doesn’t mean we should give up on teaching students how to write.

All you have to do is locate the “chatbot,” type in a prompt, wait perhaps 30 seconds, and voila—you get an essay that, according to one university instructor, is better than what is produced by the average MBA student. Supposedly, each essay is unique—and therefore not detectable as plagiarism.

The tsunami of commentary that has followed the unveiling of ChatGPT has an apocalyptic quality. “The End of High-School English,” proclaims the title of one article in The Atlantic. “The College Essay Is Dead,” mourns another.

Another strain of analysis advises us to look on the possible bright side of this development. Maybe ChatGPT will free teachers and students from the tedium of slogging through conventions like spelling and grammar and enable them to focus on higher-order concerns like the voice, tone, and rhythm of written language. Maybe auto-created writing will generate “critically examined building blocks of essays” that allow students to make more sophisticated arguments.

Maybe. But it’s more likely that students will simply take advantage of an end-run around requirements they see as burdensome and, possibly, meaningless. “I have the knowledge, I have the lived experience,” one student in New Zealand was quoted as saying, in justifying the use of artificial intelligence to write papers. “I’m a good student ... but I kind of felt I was being penalized because I don’t write eloquently, and I didn’t feel that was right.”

But eloquence isn’t necessarily what’s needed. Most teachers at any level, including college, would settle for clarity and coherence. Anecdotal and empirical evidence indicate that many students struggle to express themselves in writing. The most recent national tests in writing found that only 27% of eighth- and twelfth-graders perform at the proficient level or above.

Writing is more than a skill

If writing were just a skill that is now being rendered obsolete—as some have argued with regard to cursive handwriting—this development might not be so alarming. But writing is far more than that. When done well, it isn’t just a matter of displaying what you already know—although it’s crucial to have some pre-existing knowledge of the topic you’re writing about. The process of writing itself can and should deepen that knowledge and possibly spark new insights. So when students use ChatGPT, they’re not just cheating whatever institution is giving them credit for work they haven’t done. They’re also cheating themselves.

Beyond that, it’s been found that when students write about what they’re studying—in any subject—it boosts their retention of the material. That increases the store of knowledge in their long-term memories, which in turn makes it easier to acquire *more* knowledge. Knowledge, it’s been said, is like Velcro: it sticks best to other related knowledge.

Explicit writing instruction, beginning at the sentence level, also helps students understand the texts they’re supposed to read. The syntax of written language is more complex than that of spoken language, with constructions like subordinate clauses and the passive voice. Many students don’t just become familiar with that syntax through reading. But when they learn to use those complex constructions in their writing, they’re in a much better position to understand them when they encounter them in text.

All of this is to say that if teachers give up on the idea of teaching or assigning writing, the results could be disastrous. We already have a serious literacy crisis, with some 48 million adults struggling to read, by one count, and 130 million lacking literacy proficiency, by another. The last thing we need is a development that will make that situation worse.

How to combat ChatGPT

So what are teachers to do? Some have suggested moving to “flipped” classrooms, where students listen to recorded lectures at home and then do “homework,” presumably including writing assignments, in class. Teachers could also have students give oral presentations, which presumably they wouldn’t be able to do if they don’t actually understand the essay they’ve turned in. But having students do all their writing in class would be cumbersome, and oral presentations probably aren’t as powerful a learning tool as a written assignment, especially for ensuring that students become familiar with the complex syntax of written language.

Another possibility is to assign the kind of writing that ChatGPT is unable to do—specifically, writing that takes a position. The bot has been programmed to take definitive stands on a few issues, such as whether vaccines cause autism (no) and whether climate change is real (yes). But when I asked it if Andrew Jackson was a good president, ChatGPT proved wishy-washy.

“The legacy of Andrew Jackson’s presidency is a subject of ongoing debate and interpretation,” the essay began. After a review of the major events of his administration, it concluded, “Ultimately, the question of whether Andrew Jackson was a good President is a matter of personal opinion and depends on one’s perspective and values.”

In between there was some language that was identical to its response to a previous prompt I had given the bot, asking it to “evaluate” Jackson’s presidency. In both essays, for example, the following sentence appeared verbatim: “This policy, known as the Trail of Tears, resulted in the deaths of thousands of Native Americans as they were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands.” So maybe detecting plagiarism won’t be that hard after all.

But the best defense against ChatGPT is to start teaching expository writing, explicitly and beginning at the sentence level, in elementary school. Presumably, kids at that age won’t be using the bot—and if they did, teachers would be able to detect the ruse pretty easily.

You might think elementary schools are already teaching writing. But few teachers have received good training in how to do it, and curricula and materials vastly underestimate how difficult writing is. Even kindergartners are expected to write at length, while they’re still struggling with basics like letter formation and spelling. Little or no effort is usually made to teach kids how to construct sentences. And often students are asked to write on topics they know little about, which simply doesn’t work.

It’s still possible, of course, that high school and college students will resort to something like ChatGPT. But if effective writing instruction begins in elementary school, they will have already learned to construct complex sentences and create linear outlines for a paragraph or essay—skills that help with reading comprehension, logical thinking, and learning in general. And should their computers crash, or if they’re the victim of a power outage, they’ll still be able to construct a decent essay.

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the development of bots that can write essays? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.