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On ChatGPT: A Letter to My Students

The rapid development of AI-generated content has led to something of a crisis in higher education.

By Russell P. Johnson | APRIL 6, 2023



Dear Students,

By now, you are surely familiar with ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence programs that are capable of composing essays. Perhaps you've used it for your college papers—one [study](#) shows that, as of this January, thirty percent of college students have.

The rapid development of AI-generated content has led to something of a crisis in higher education. The death of the college essay is [already being predicted](#), though [some argue](#) that reports of its death [have been exaggerated](#). In February, one of your classmates optimistically suggested that the onset of AI could lead to the end of banal writing prompts. Just as lions make the antelope herd faster by eating the slowest members, so GPT may compel professors to develop better writing prompts without easily automated responses. But developments within the past few weeks [suggest](#) that even creative prompts cannot escape the hungry maw of AI. This has led many adaptive professors to welcome our new robot overlords by designing assignments that require thoughtful use of the technology.

Now, I could remind you, my dear students, of the severity of what will happen if you get caught using this technology for your assignments. The use of this technology to craft essays is a form of plagiarism, and indeed, the technology itself is plagiaristic. As Bible scholar Anatheia Portier-Young writes, "It is a violation of the academic integrity norms and expectations which require that your work be your own. Tools such as ChatGPT harvest the ideas and work of others without giving credit for them." I could warn you that the arms race between AI programs and AI detection programs has not yet been decisively won, and anyone caught using ChatGPT for their papers will face university disciplinary processes.

But instead, I'll encourage you to think about what will happen if you use AI and *don't* get caught. What will you miss out on if you subvert the writing process? Is learning how to write argumentative papers simply a drudgery to be automated away as soon as possible, or is it a [spiritual exercise](#)?

When I assign you to write a four-page paper on the *Zhuangzi*, for instance, it is not because I am under the illusion that you will need that knowledge later in your professional life. Writing a four-page paper on the *Zhuangzi* will not prepare you to compete in the high-pressure economic landscape of twenty-first-century America. Spending time with Daoist philosophy will, if anything, make you *less* employable, since CEOs tend not to be thrilled about “non-doing.”

No, the reason why I insist you do writing assignments like this is that they give you valuable practice discovering insights and communicating them to others. Reading texts closely, encountering a problem, developing a plausible interpretation, and persuading readers of that interpretation—these are the steps one must go through in order to write a good paper. Going through these steps again and again makes us clearer thinkers and better communicators. Resolving confusions readers could have when reading the *Zhuangzi* gives us practice imagining how other people see the world and showing them a more accurate representation of how things are.

Theologian Jonathan Malesic [makes](#) this point well: “Just as important, learning to write trains your imagination to construct the person who will read your words. Writing, then, is an ethical act. It puts you in relation to someone you may not know, someone who may, in fact, not yet exist. When you learn to write, you learn to exercise your responsibility to that person, to meet their needs in a context you cannot fully know.” Learning how to write persuasively involves learning to see the world through another person's eyes, to identify the limitations of their perspective, and to guide them toward a new one using reasons and evidence. One can certainly develop these capacities outside of college, but college courses provide a supervised, low-stakes environment to practice the [rhetorical arts](#) of invention, arrangement, and style. At its best, this training in writing prepares you to employ empathy, imagination, and intellect all at once in the act of communicating with someone who disagrees with you.

This practice can have religious significance. [According](#) to Buddhist author Charles Johnson, the Buddha's practice of *upaya kausalya* involves “adjusting the wisdom to the level on which his listeners can receive it.” It is not enough to know the *dharma*, one must also know how to share it with those who have not accepted it. Many religions involve a responsibility to show others truths that they may not presently acknowledge.

As Ludwig Wittgenstein [writes](#), “To convince someone of the truth, it is not enough to state it, but rather one must find the path from error to truth.” I know it may seem to you that you are simply learning an essay form and applying it repeatedly. But this form mirrors the structure of thought, and a good essay is thoroughly dialogical—anticipating objections, responding to misinterpretations, and providing only what is needed to bring someone from confusion to clarity. Paradoxically, we write essays in isolation so we can arrive at the truth through conversation. Thus, even if you are writing your papers alone in the library at 2:14 am, you are getting better at thinking alongside others, a rare and necessary skill in an age of misinformation and polarization.

Furthermore, you pay specific attention to the world when you know you will need to write something. The Chinese playwright [Li Yu](#) is quoted as saying that one must keep one's pen in one's sleeve as one goes about one's day, so that when the time comes to write, everything will present itself. If I know that I will have to write a paper about courage in a month, then I start to see courage pop up everywhere—in news articles, in SportsCenter segments, and in ads for cryptocurrency. Writing assignments tune your attention to pick up on aspects of experience you may have glossed over, and as Iris Murdoch [argues](#), writing itself is an act of developing one's capacity for attention.

St. Augustine, John Calvin, Wittgenstein, E.M. Forster, Joan Didion, and Stephen King do not have much in common (students, you may have to trust me on this). But all of them insist they learn what they think through the act of writing. For most of us, writing is a process whereby our ideas become clear, not a process by which we take what is lucid within our minds and translate it to prose. Writing bakes our half-baked ideas. It makes the mind more transparent to itself. One cannot neatly separate writing for self-expression (your own poetry, for instance) from the kind of writing we do for others (your four-page essay). If you use ChatGPT for your writing assignments, you deprive yourself of the benefits of coming to terms with what you actually believe.

Making an AI program write a paper for you is like turning on a treadmill, letting it run for 26.2 miles without taking a step,

and then claiming that you ran a marathon. You are reinforcing within yourself the notion that a diploma is more important than an education, that getting a grade is more important than learning. Whether you get caught or not, I invite you to examine your priorities, and to consider what you will be missing if you bypass the frustrating but rewarding task of writing.

I also want you to think about me. You are responsible, not just to your imagined readers, but to your actual reader. If you submit a paper written by a computer, I have to spend thirty minutes grading a paper written by a computer. I will be investing a half hour of my time—our most irreplaceable resource—gently pointing out the flaws in the reasoning and style, re-reading “your” argument to ensure I understand “your” points, and offering constructive criticism that is both honest and encouraging. That is time I could have spent volunteering at a local charity, watching the sun rise over Lake Michigan, or telling my wife I love her.

I am spending part of what Mary Oliver calls my “one wild and precious life” giving you feedback on the papers you submit. I do it because I care about you, and because I believe that even if I am the only one who ever reads it, your writing matters.

Image by Glenn Carstens-Peters via Unsplash



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