

## Generative AI: The Voice of the Other

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In late 2022, AI materialized in my classrooms. Of course, I had heard about AI and played with its various forms, asking silly questions and completing simple tasks, but never really considered it to be more than an interesting distraction. Suddenly, AI was everywhere: classrooms, newscasts, political speeches, websites, apps—everywhere. It seemed as if the internet and cell phones had birthed a child, with a gestation period of what seemed like days. Then, in early 2023, I saw something in a student paper.

As a scholar of rhetoric, I was trained to understand and distinguish voices in text. Sometimes one's gender or other positionality can be articulated by how they write; likewise, what is not written also provides insight, especially when a specific something would be expected. This student's paper was interesting to me because it was not in any voice I had read before. It was perfectly imperfect

It was organized, coherent, and well-written, but that little rhetorician in the back of my brain said, "something's not quite right about this." Sometimes, if I feel I might be imparting a bias to, or having a misimpression of, a particular student paper, as was the case with this one, I put it aside, so I can come back having (hopefully) forgotten my initial reading. But when I returned to the paper, I had the same sense: something was still, well, off. That "other" voice was omnipresent, almost oppressive. The class was just past the midpoint of the spring semester, so I had a good sense of each student's writing style and voice. And this paper didn't fit anything I had read so far that semester.

Occasionally, a student's writing style makes a dramatic leap and becomes smoother, more powerful, more present. So I was cautious, again, about my own reading and what I might be imparting to the paper. While I don't recall doing it in this case, my usual practice would be to send a copy or an excerpt of the paper to a colleague and ask what they thought. More often than not, we are in alignment. But then it hit me. I realized this could be written by AI. ChatGPT was freely available, and other AIs were popping up like weeds after a fresh rain. I read the paper again and tried to decipher the mystery. Was this written by AI? What does AI writing even look like?

As I read, I noted the clear organization and structure. The perfect sentences and perfect grammar. Finally, it dawned on me. Students don't write like this; I don't even write like this. It was too perfect. Yet there was something else, something much more important.

It was dead.

Lifeless.

Perhaps even boring.

Human writers tend to inject anecdotes, humor, slight digressions, stylistic preferences, and other perceptible creations of our genius. This paper had none of those, and once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it. The paper was so clearly lifeless—this was my *aha* moment.

I sat back in my office chair and, if I'm being honest, was relieved to have what I thought was a probable answer to this mystery.

But my thought that it was written by AI needed further confirmation. The only one that could do that was the student.<sup>1</sup> So after the next class, I asked him to speak with me for a moment. What follows is a good paraphrase of our conversation.

ME: I was reading your paper last night, and I was wondering if you could tell me a little more about it.

STUDENT: Okay.

ME: Tell me about how you wrote it, like, your process.

STUDENT: Well, I just wrote it.

ME: Aw, c'mon. Give me more than that. Tell me about the idea, what you wrote first, where you were, what you were thinking, what you revised; you know, all those things we've talked about in class.

After a pause, I read a few lines from the paper and asked him to explain what they meant. As many instructors would probably guess, the student, at this point, froze up a bit and was unsure how to answer. While previously used to ensnare plagiarizing students, these questions seemed to be useful for detecting AI usage too. So I asked a more basic question, "Did you write this?" When I ask this question, I make sure my tone is not accusatory but markedly curious. And that's when he admitted he didn't write it and stated, rather matter-of-factly, that he had no idea what it even said.

I nodded my head, appearing to be thinking, and then I couldn't help it—I smiled. He caught the smile, and we laughed. I wasn't angry; I was curious. I asked him to tell me about it. And he did. He used ChatGPT and described, roughly, the prompting process and how quickly it produced text. "I was so excited it was done!" he exclaimed. "I didn't even read it through." After more discussion with him and other students in the classes that followed, I realized generative AI would be an important part of my courses moving into the future. But beyond what my students had told me and what I had heard from newscasts and listservs, I knew little about AI.

I decided to focus on voice because that is the custom piece of authenticity I hear in student writing. As Nelson and Castello (2012) explained, "a writer's voice is inferred from textual cues by those who read the text; it is manifested in the social relation between writer and reader in a particular context" (p. 34). Further, Elbow (2007) wrote, "Not only do most readers hear voices in texts as they read, they tend to hear people in the texts. [. . . They] usually infer a person behind the words and build themselves a relationship of some sort with that person" (p. 180). As instructors, we are the readers, and we hear our students in their texts. Moreover, we *do* have a relationship with our students. We know something about them, even if it's the first day of class. Many times, we read freewrites or other short pieces of writing from students and begin to understand their writerly voice. It is this voice that we notice in their writing, or not. When that distinct voice is not there, we pay more attention because it's different from the experience we already have with that student writer.

Additionally, we notice whether writing is hitting certain benchmarks. "In academic discourse practices," wrote Nelson and Castello (2012), "writers are generally expected to conform to certain norms, which include the conventions of academe in general as well as more specific conventions associated with their own disciplinary specialization" (p. 35).

More precisely, students are expected to utilize what they've been taught over the course of a semester. The various little adjustments, vocabulary, and stylistic choices we've discussed in class should be expressed in their prose to show a progression toward academic discourse. Nelson and Castello (2012) continued: "Through adopting and employing these conventions, writers are more likely to be seen as having a voice that is *authentic* for the practices in which they engage" (pp. 35–36). In other words, students are seen by us as authentic when they construct an academic voice that aligns with our expectations based on their writing (level), course materials, and readings from class. This transition is when voice starts to fold into authenticity. They are combining their academic voice with their personal voice in a way that embeds in their writing those digressions, anecdotes, and stylistic choices with academic markers of what we've been teaching them. They are expanding their authentic writing skillset to include more complex academic discourse. As students try to meet the demands of a required skill level, they, more likely than not, lack the experience to be fully authentic in their writing because the academic conventions may be beyond their present grasp. And at the moment, our support becomes critical. However, if that demand is too much for them to manage (for whatever reason), then this is the point at which students may rely on outside support such as AI.

While I did know that AI writing was sometimes weird, for the most part and depending on the topic, it was not easy to detect. To illustrate an example of the weird, I asked DeepAI about the pros and cons regarding universal health care. While I don't recall the exact prompt, I did take a screenshot of a chunk of the output, and what follows is the first sentence of the conclusion: "In conclusion, universal healthcare has its merits and demerits, and its suitability is dependent on the context in which it is applied." Because we know the sentence was written by AI, it can be used as an example of what to look for in student writing. For instance, the text certainly is lifeless and boring. But some people are lifeless and boring in their writing too, so, for me, that tone is not a consistent tell. Now look at the word choice. One word sticks out to me: *demerits*. I've been teaching writing knocking on twenty years now, and I can say that I've never read or written the word "demerits" in any article, paper, presentation, or anything else. In fact, the only time I can recall hearing the word was as a teenager in the Civil Air Patrol when I was not following orders or was in some sort of trouble (which was more common than I would care to elaborate on).

My point is that when I asked DeepAI to write about universal healthcare, I assumed it was using the full corpus of the English language. In that broad context, "demerits" is perfectly suitable and fits into the function of the prompt. But very few people use that word in general discourse today. That usage was the blinking I-was-written-by-AI light I had stumbled across earlier.

It dawned on me that having students freewrite would be a way to identify their voice and distinguish it from AI writing. Freewriting has always been a critical tool in my toolbox. Each semester, I gather enough of a student's unique voice in my head that I have pretty good success detecting plagiarism. (In fact, we might be able to create an archive of student freewriting to show them their progression and more about their voice, but I'm getting a little ahead of myself.)

Students can begin to understand their voice by contrasting it with the other voice(s) generated by AI, as a way to facilitate their critical thinking and writing skills. To this end, I have drafted a three-part working protocol: understanding writing style, identifying differences, and applying this knowledge.

First, to understand writing style, students need to interrogate vocabulary, tone, structure, and word choice and even listen to the “voice” they hear. By explaining how we as faculty “listen” to the voice(s) of a particular piece of writing, and then asking students to do the same, we create a dialogue with them. Through this dialogue, we can place voice at the center of the classroom, allowing students to hear, as we do, the varieties, distinctions, and perhaps accents in writing.

Second, students can identify variations in writing based on their understanding of the first area of the protocol. By comparing their writing to other student writing, they can see differences but also a commonality in ability or experience. It’s the abilities and experiences that we most often hit on when that tingle of an “other” voice pops into a piece of writing and we start to inquire as to where or what this other actually is. Generative AI texts can then be introduced for students to evaluate and interrogate differences in word choice, coherence, content, and style. The depth of the AI writing also becomes an area to explore: Is the discussion surface level or deeper, such as requiring expertise? Would the author have *that* expertise? These questions lead to the critical evaluation phase that encourages students to discuss bias, emotional depth, and personal context, while focusing on how one’s experiences pop up and influence one’s writing. I believe it is these discussions that are the most fruitful for students as they learn to decipher AI in order to recognize their own voice.

As noted earlier, in-class writing is a favorite of mine, most notably freewriting. At the beginning of most classes, I ask students to start writing about any number of things. Sometimes, I might have them write about a reading or a current event. Other times, I might have them write a recipe or tell me about their favorite restaurant. Occasionally, I cut them off mid-sentence and ask them to stop writing because I want them to understand that writing need not be complete. Yet, there have been times that I let them write for fifteen minutes, and I remind them that if they feel they have run out of things to write, they should write, “I don’t know what to write,” until something comes to them. Student freewriting allows me to learn each student’s voice and style, which helps me assist them better later on in the semester (perhaps, at some point, with that archive I mentioned earlier). Because I’ve learned each student’s voice, it becomes quite easy to detect plagiarism and, now, the use of AI, but as a way for them to recognize their own emerging voices.

The last aspect of the protocol is practical application. Utilizing the earlier aspects of interrogating and understanding the distinctions between their individual voices and AI voice(s), students can better understand why things like opinions, emotions, and personal experiences enhance authenticity within their writing. Assignments that challenge them to write using those can be a catalyst to further develop their individual voices.<sup>2</sup>

By working with this protocol, I’ve come to further appreciate how our writing voices are complex fusions of experiences, emotions, and nuances that define our uniqueness. An individual voice reflects the writer’s style—tone, word choice, cultural influences, and life encounters—which forms a distinct and genuine expression. In contrast, a generative AI writing voice is built from extensive data analysis and intricate algorithms, enabling it to imitate various writing styles learned from large amounts of data, resulting in outputs that might seem less nuanced, occasionally formulaic, and constrained by context. While AI can emulate certain elements of our writing, it often stumbles with depth, authenticity, and intricate understanding, which spring from the complexities of human life and thought inherent in any of our voices.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>AI detection has been proven to be notoriously inaccurate; even ChatGPT's own AI detection program provided a "low rate of accuracy" (Kirchner et al., 2023). However, these programs have recently become more accurate, but there is still no foolproof method of detection.

<sup>2</sup>One interesting aspect of AI is that it has a difficult time with African-American Vernacular English. So Students' Right to Their Own Language may have never been more important. Of course, generative AI is great at White Mainstream English (shocking, I know!).

### References

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