

Tutors' Column: GenAI in the Writing Center

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As a millennial, I clearly remember the launch of CleverBot in 2008—how my friends and I crowded around my mom's iMac trying to make the rudimentary AI curse. Ten years after CleverBot's launch, I downloaded the chatbot Replika and spoke with it daily (until its responses got too repetitive). From Siri to Alexa, AI has become ubiquitous enough to ignore. However, ChatGPT and similar Generative AI (GenAI) seems more troubling than past AI. The issue with GenAI is not just its potential for plagiarism or its ability to mimic humans with fidelity. In fact, the false idea that it can replace human writers is itself an issue because GenAI may diminish authorial ownership, which could dismantle diversity in voice and language. Luckily, writing centers are potentially poised to mitigate these issues, and perhaps, with widespread action, this could be an opportunity for systemic change.



To understand GenAI's possible impact, I asked one program, ChatGPT, to analyze Siegfried Sassoon's poem "Glory of Women." I gave ChatGPT my professor's assignment parameters and watched with surprise as paragraphs began to populate rapidly. I was used to chatbots needing time to 'think' and only providing a few sentences at most. My brief panic subsided when, to my great relief, ChatGPT's poetry analysis was demonstrably wrong. ChatGPT 'believed' the poem to be sincere in its adulation of women and mothers, completely missing Sassoon's irony and thinly veiled, arguably misogynistic, disgust. Case closed: ChatGPT couldn't replace me. I again felt confident dismissing the bot, until I remembered I'm both an English major and a writing tutor. Would someone less interested in serious literary analysis care that ChatGPT's analysis was so lacking?

If a student lacks interest in literary analysis, then ChatGPT's incompetence hardly matters. If a student doesn't read "Glory of Women" and copy/pastes ChatGPT's analysis, they may still get a passing grade if they followed the rubric—one area where ChatGPT excels. In fact, ChatGPT's analysis followed, to the letter, my professor's instructions, including word count and format. In my experience as both student and tutor, precisely following rubrics can sometimes be as important as the content of the writing itself. Whatever the reason, some students will use GenAI's ability to write confidently and sound academic to get passing grades. This trust in and use of AI drastically changes the landscape of contemporary writing, both in classrooms and writing centers.

When students feel writing assignments are high-stakes and fear failure and humiliation, GenAI may seem like an easy solution. These same feelings have previously motivated students to risk cheating and plagiarizing; however, GenAI uniquely aggravates the problem. Returning to the example of ChatGPT's analysis of "Glory of Women," if a student brought me a similarly misguided

analysis, I could engage in conversation with them about the poem and nonjudgmentally bring up GenAI. I could then explain that the bot amounts to nothing more than several Google searches wearing an academic trench coat, warn them of overly relying on AI, and collaborate with the student to develop a deeper understanding of the poem. But this is not a panacea. Given the range of texts and topics students bring into the writing center, I will be faced with content written by GenAI as problematic as what it provided about “Glory of Women,” but on a subject unfamiliar to me. In such a situation, how can I assist that writer if I can’t tell they’ve used GenAI? Further, with no foolproof tools to detect AI, my toolkit is relegated to current writing center practices that have yet to adapt to current AI capabilities. Limiting as that may sound, strategies already used in writing centers can be surprisingly effective.

A proactive effort is needed to understand GenAI as technology requiring guidance for effective and ethical use by informed teachers and tutors. Recently, when tutoring a student with writer’s block, I asked ChatGPT for reasons to pursue an English degree. ChatGPT provided five answers, almost all of which I disagreed with. The AI focused on career preparedness, whereas I believe studying literature is worthwhile for its own sake. The student seemed surprised at how I used ChatGPT. They used GenAI to get (seemingly) accurate answers, whereas I used it to generate a disagreeable answer that inspired me to respond.

This interaction reveals a common misconception of GenAI that writing centers must combat to effectively use GenAI in tutorials. Writers may feel reluctant to disagree with GenAI because advertising often personifies GenAI as intelligent and objective. However, it is simply amalgamations riddled with biases: GenAI creators and owners restrict topics deemed offensive or dangerous, decided not democratically or publicly but by individuals and business owners who may be incentivized primarily to monetize rather than inform AI users. Understanding this about GenAI is crucial to understanding its limitations and the danger it poses to writing. GenAI, by nature of its creation and monetization, obfuscates authentic positional perspective and limits diversity in authorial voices.

Writers relying on GenAI filter their authentic voices through a sieve that removes diversity and personal flair in favor of language partial to its creators, who are disproportionately white men. This is the threat of GenAI I am most concerned about, particularly within writing centers. Director of Canisius University’s writing center, Graham Stowe, notes GenAI’s potential for perpetuating systemic injustice by diminishing authorial voice and diverse communication. Stowe warns that “hegemonic and dominant linguistic systems are bound to be embedded in the systems that make the bots function.” One of the ‘benefits’ often touted for GenAI is that it can produce “clean,” “error-free” prose. But our field knows that the language and positions considered ‘neutral’ and ‘correct’ are those of groups with social power (Baker-Bell). GenAI defaults to white mainstream American English, limiting linguistic variation that naturally results from students’ diverse experiences and perspectives.

When working with fearful or less motivated writers, tutors have many tools at their disposal. Writing Center researchers Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson have written extensively about motivating writers, including reinforcing student ownership. This tactic is effective for tutoring whether or not students have used GenAI because the goal is to reinforce “the student’s ownership... [and] emphasize students’ responsibility for their writing” (Mackiewicz and Thompson 67). Rather than trying to suss out whether a student used GenAI, tutors can reach for existent best practices to support writers.

Recently, I worked with a student whose writing style seemed inconsistent, and I suspected she had used GenAI. After speaking with her about her research topic, mass incarceration, it became

clear she felt disconnected from her writing. She expressed a hatred of writing, said she was bad at it, and explained she felt like a parrot regurgitating other people's points. I asked her why she picked this topic. She immediately spoke passionately about the inhumanity of mass incarceration. I quickly wrote down her words and read them back to her, and she seemed genuinely surprised at what she had said. I modeled how to turn speech into writing, and she excitedly took over. Whether or not she used GenAI, she was capable of writing the paper and had something worthwhile to say. I hope, with a renewed sense of ownership, she now feels capable.

While GenAI may be a new threat, writing centers have long been concerned with student ownership and honoring diverse positionalities, voice, and linguistic variation. After all, academic writing was exclusionary and homogenous long before GenAI. Non-white, non-male positional perspectives have historically been limited and silenced (Baker-Bell). While tutors have some tools to combat linguistic racism, GenAI exacerbates the core, systemic issues within writing, intensifying the need for more radical, community-wide changes in writing centers and classrooms.

Educators, tutors, and writers of all kinds have advocated for such changes for longer than I have been alive, and I'm not suggesting there is a magic bullet to fix systemic linguistic injustice. However, if there is a potential advantage to GenAI's proficiency and adherence to white mainstream American English (and its deleterious effect on voice and language), it's that GenAI has made material and visible the otherwise slippery linguistic slope toward white patriarchy. This problem creates an opportunity to implement more innovative and radical practices to address systemic injustice, building off current practices regarding technology literacy and encouraging ownership. As a tutor I can and will advise writers to ditch GenAI's analysis on Sassoon and tell me what they *really* think—I'd rather hear that the poem *slapped* or *sucked* than see AI proclaim that it's for the glory of women.

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