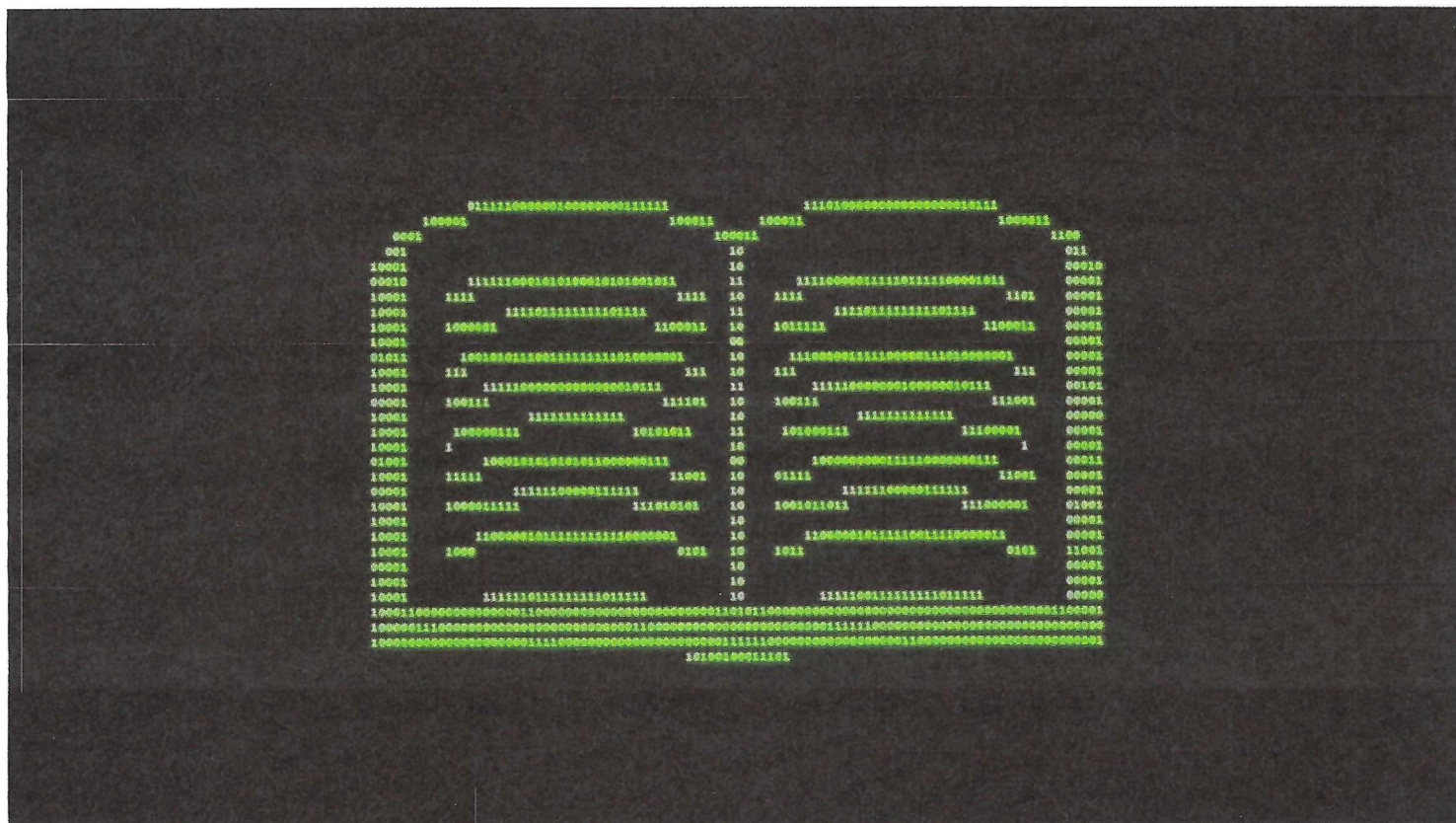


TECHNOLOGY

The End of High-School English

I've been teaching English for 12 years, and I'm astounded by what ChatGPT can produce.

By Daniel Herman



Erik Carter / The Atlantic

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Teenagers have always found ways around doing the hard work of actual learning. CliffsNotes dates back to the 1950s, “No Fear Shakespeare” puts the playwright into modern English, YouTube offers literary analysis and historical explication from numerous amateurs and professionals, and so on. For as long as those shortcuts have existed, however, one big part of education has remained inescapable: writing. Barring

outright plagiarism, students have always arrived at that moment when they're on their own with a blank page, staring down a blinking cursor, the essay waiting to be written.

Now that might be about to change. The arrival of OpenAI's ChatGPT, a program that generates sophisticated text in response to any prompt you can imagine, may signal the end of writing assignments altogether—and maybe even the end of writing as a gatekeeper, a metric for intelligence, a teachable skill.

If you're looking for historical analogues, this would be like the printing press, the steam drill, and the light bulb having a baby, and that baby having access to the entire corpus of human knowledge and understanding. My life—and the lives of thousands of other teachers and professors, tutors and administrators—is about to drastically change.

I teach a variety of humanities classes (literature, philosophy, religion, history) at a small independent high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. My classes tend to have about 15 students, their ages ranging from 16 to 18. This semester I am lucky enough to be teaching writers like James Baldwin, Gloria Anzaldúa, Herman Melville, Mohsin Hamid, Virginia Held. I recognize that it's a privilege to have relatively small classes that can explore material like this at all. But at the end of the day, kids are always kids. I'm sure you will be absolutely shocked to hear that not all teenagers are, in fact, so interested in having their mind lit on fire by Anzaldúa's radical ideas about transcending binaries, or Ishmael's metaphysics in *Moby-Dick*.

To those students, I have always said: You may not be interested in poetry or civics, but no matter what you end up doing with your life, a basic competence in writing is an absolutely essential skill—whether it's for college admissions, writing a cover letter when applying for a job, or just writing an email to your boss.

Read: The college essay is dead

I've also long held, for those who *are* interested in writing, that you need to learn the basic rules of good writing before you can start breaking them—that, like Picasso, you have to learn how to reliably fulfill an audience's expectations before you get to start putting eyeballs in people's ears and things.

I don't know if either of those things is true anymore. It's no longer obvious to me that my teenagers actually will need to develop this basic skill, or if the logic still holds that the fundamentals are necessary for experimentation.

Let me be candid (with apologies to all of my current and former students): What GPT can produce right now is better than the large majority of writing seen by your average teacher or professor. Over the past few days, I've given it a number of different prompts. And even if the bot's results don't exactly give you goosebumps, they do a more-than-adequate job of fulfilling a task.

I mean, look at this: I asked the program to write me a playful, sophisticated, emotional 600-word college-admissions essay about how my experience volunteering at my local SPCA had prepared me for the academic rigor of Stanford. Here's an excerpt from its response:

In addition to cleaning, I also had the opportunity to interact with the animals. I was amazed at the transformation I saw in some of the pets who had been neglected or abused. With patience and care, they blossomed into playful and affectionate companions who were eager to give and receive love. I was also able to witness firsthand the process of selecting the right pet for the right family. Although it was bittersweet to see some animals leave the shelter, I knew that they were going to a loving home, and that was the best thing for them.

It also managed to compose a convincing 400-word “friendly” cover letter for an application to be a manager at Starbucks. But most jaw-dropping of all, on a personal level: It made quick work out of an assignment I've always considered absolutely

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“unhackable.” In January, my junior English students will begin writing an independent research paper, 12 to 18 pages, on two great literary works of their own choosing—a tradition at our school. Their goal is to place the texts in conversation with each other and find a thread that connects them. Some students will struggle to find any way to bring them together. We spend two months on the paper, putting it together piece by piece.

I’ve fed GPT a handful of pairs that students have worked with in recent years: *Beloved* and *Hamlet*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Parable of the Sower*, Homer’s *The Odyssey* and Dante’s *Inferno*. GPT brought them together instantly, effortlessly, uncannily: *memory, guilt, revenge, justice, the individual versus the collective, freedom of choice, societal oppression*. The technology doesn’t go much beyond the surface, nor does it successfully integrate quotations from the original texts, but the ideas presented were on-target—more than enough to get any student rolling without much legwork.

It goes further. Last night, I received an essay draft from a student. I passed it along to OpenAI’s bots. “Can you fix this essay up and make it better?” Turns out, it could. It kept the student’s words intact but employed them more gracefully; it removed the clutter so the ideas were able to shine through. It was like magic.

I’ve been teaching for about 12 years: first as a TA in grad school, then as an adjunct professor at various public and private universities, and finally in high school. From my experience, American high-school students can be roughly split into three categories. The bottom group is learning to master grammar rules, punctuation, basic comprehension, and legibility. The middle group mostly has that stuff down and is working on argument and organization—arranging sentences within paragraphs and paragraphs within an essay. Then there’s a third group that has the luxury of focusing on things such as tone, rhythm, variety, melliflence.

Whether someone is writing a five-paragraph essay or a 500-page book, these are the building blocks not only of good writing but of writing as a tool, as a means of efficiently and effectively communicating information. And because learning writing is an iterative process, students spend countless hours developing the skill in elementary school, middle school, high school, and then finally (as thousands of underpaid adjuncts teaching freshman comp will attest) college. Many students (as those same adjuncts will attest) remain in the bottom group, despite their teachers' efforts; most of the rest find some uneasy equilibrium in the second category.

Working with these students makes up a large percentage of every English teacher's job. It also supports a cottage industry of professional development, trademarked methods buried in acronyms (ICE! PIE! EDIT! MEAT!), and private writing tutors charging \$100-plus an hour. So for those observers who are saying, *Well, good, all of these things are overdue for change*—"this will lead to much-needed education reform," a former colleague told me—this dismissal elides the heavy toll this sudden transformation is going to take on education, extending along its many tentacles (standardized testing, admissions, educational software, etc.).

Perhaps there are reasons for optimism, if you push all this aside. Maybe every student is now immediately launched into that third category: The rudiments of writing will be considered a given, and every student will have direct access to the finer aspects of the enterprise. Whatever is inimitable within them can be made conspicuous, freed from the troublesome mechanics of comma splices, subject-verb disagreement, and dangling modifiers.

But again, the majority of students do not see writing as a worthwhile skill to cultivate—just like I, sitting with my coffee and book, rereading *Moby-Dick*, do not consider it worthwhile to learn, say, video editing. They have no interest in exploring nuance in tone and rhythm; they will forever roll their eyes at me when I try to communicate the subtle difference, when writing an appositive phrase, between using commas, parentheses, or (the connoisseur's choice) the em dash.

Which is why I wonder if this may be the end of using writing as a benchmark for aptitude and intelligence. After all, what is a cover letter? Its primary purpose isn't to communicate "I already know how to do this job" (because of course I don't) but rather "I am competent and trustworthy and can clearly express to you why I would

be a good candidate for this job.” What is a written exam? Its primary signal isn’t “I memorized a bunch of information” but rather “I can express that information clearly in writing.” Many teachers have reacted to ChatGPT by imagining how to give writing assignments now—maybe they should be written out by hand, or given only in class—but that seems to me shortsighted. The question isn’t “How will we get around this?” but rather “Is this still worth doing?”

I believe my most essential tasks, as a teacher, are helping my students think critically, disagree respectfully, argue carefully and flexibly, and understand their mind and the world around them. Unconventional, improvisatory, expressive, meta-cognitive writing can be an extraordinary vehicle for those things. But if most contemporary writing pedagogy is necessarily focused on helping students master the basics, what happens when a computer can do it for us? Is this moment more like the invention of the calculator, saving me from the tedium of long division, or more like the invention of the player piano, robbing us of what can be communicated only through human emotion?

Maybe the moment when I felt most caught between these two thoughts was when I asked GPT a question from an exam I give in my Eastern-philosophy course, something I’ve never imagined a student could find outside assistance to answer: “Explain the Madhyamaka Buddhist idea that all phenomena lack inherent existence, using a funny, specific example.”

ChatGPT wrote back, as ever, instantly:

The Madhyamaka Buddhist idea that all phenomena lack inherent existence can be illustrated with a funny example: let’s say you have a pet hamster. You might think that your hamster has its own inherent existence, but in reality, your hamster is made up of many different elements such as its fur, its bones, its muscles, and its brain. None of these elements exist independently or inherently on their own, so your hamster itself does not have any inherent existence either. The same goes for all phenomena—everything is made up of various components that don’t have inherent existence, so nothing has any inherent existence either.

Everything is made up; it's true. The essay as a literary form? Made up. Grammatical rules as markers of intelligence? Writing itself as a technology? Made up. Starting now, OpenAI is forcing us to ask foundational questions about whether any of those things are worth keeping around.

Worried About ChatGPT? Don't Be

ChatGPT raises questions about what we value in writing instruction, Hetal Thaker writes.

By [Hetal Thaker \(/users/hetal-thaker\)](#)

// January 23, 2023

Perhaps because it showed up at the end of the fall semester, when so many of us were exhausted from grading, from the tripledemic, from Zoom meetings, or maybe because we knew something like this was coming—we just knew it—but news of ChatGPT's ability to write what many consider to be perfectly adequate student essays has not settled well on higher education.

Stephen Marche tells us "[The College Essay Is Dead](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2022/12/chatgpt-ai-writing-college-student-essays/672371/)," while, in a separate essay for *The Atlantic*, Daniel Herman considers "[The End of High-School English](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2022/12/openai-chatgpt-writing-high-school-english-essay/672412/)." Even Google (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/21/technology/ai-chatgpt-google-search.html>), seems concerned about sharing its turf. Google!

My many years of English courses have taught me to be skeptical of such hyperbole, so I decided to test it out myself. I began by entering one of the 2022–23 Common App [essay prompts](https://www.commonapp.org/blog/2022-2023-common-app-essay-prompts) into the program:

Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?

As soon as I pressed enter, I realized that I should have instructed the model on length, but I thought, "Maybe it'll somehow know." After all, the chat bot has apparently killed both high school English and the college essay. Who knows what else it's capable of?

Here was the response:

One thing that someone has done for me that has made me happy and thankful in a surprising way was when a friend of mine offered to drive me to the airport for an early morning flight. I had not asked for their help and was planning on taking an Uber, so when they offered to take me themselves, I was really touched by their thoughtfulness and kindness.

This act of kindness motivated me to be more aware of the needs of others and to try to be more helpful and supportive in my own relationships. It also reminded me to be grateful for the friends and loved ones in my life who are always there for me and willing to go above and beyond to show their care and support. It made me realize the power of small gestures to make a big difference in someone's day and to inspire feelings of gratitude and appreciation.

Grammatically fine, on topic, probably passable for many students. After all, if I were a student used to red ink on my essays, I'd happily submit this. Why? Because that red ink has shown me over the years that I am not a good writer. My comma usage is suspect. I may shift subjects midparagraph. I might have a hard time staying on topic. If that is what I've been hearing from English teachers my entire academic life, this fixes all of those problems.

But what happens when I rewrite the prompt, asking this time for 500 words? I get this:

One thing that someone has done for me that has made me happy and thankful in a surprising way was when a friend of mine offered to drive me to the airport for an early morning flight. I had not asked for their help and was planning on taking an Uber, so when they offered to take me themselves, I was really touched by their thoughtfulness and kindness.

This act of kindness really stood out to me because it was unexpected and completely selfless. My friend could have easily taken the opportunity to sleep in or use the time to do something for themselves, but instead, they woke up early and offered to help me out. It was a small gesture, but it made a big impact on me and showed me how much they cared about me and my well-being.

This experience made me feel grateful and appreciative of the people in my life who are always willing to lend a helping hand, even when it's not asked for. It reminded me of the value of kindness and the power it has to make a positive difference in someone's day.

In terms of how this gratitude has affected me, it has definitely motivated me to be more mindful of the needs of others and to try to pay it forward by being more helpful and supportive in my own relationships. It's easy to get caught up in our own lives and priorities, but moments like this remind me of the importance of being there for others and showing them that they matter.

In addition to motivating me to be more supportive of others, this act of kindness also made me more aware of my own gratitude and the impact it can have on my relationships. It's easy to take the people and things we have for granted, but expressing gratitude and appreciation can go a long way in strengthening our connections with others.

Overall, this experience was a reminder of the power of small acts of kindness and the importance of being grateful for the people and things in our lives. It has motivated me to be more mindful of the needs of others and to show my appreciation for the people who make a positive difference in my life.

Introduction, body, conclusion? Check, check, check! And hello, transitions! I see you. What English professor has not spent the better part of a month convincing their students to use them? Check!

This is a technically proficient essay for a student entering college. Again, if I were a student who had heard my whole life that I am not a proficient writer, this would be a game-changer. But what was it like to read? Did you make it to the end, or just skim? Or did you follow my initial gut reaction, which was to read the first paragraph and say, "I see where this is going," and then not even bother to skim because you didn't need to? This might be because, as Tressie McMillan Cottom [explains](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/20/opinion/chatgpt-writing-ai.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/20/opinion/chatgpt-writing-ai.html>), "ChatGPT impersonates sentiment with sophisticated word choice but still there's no élan. The essay does not invoke curiosity or any other emotion. There is a voice, but it is mechanical. It does not incite, offend or seduce. That's because real voice is more than grammatical patternmaking." What is missing from the Common App response is humanity, emotion. The essay evokes nothing in the reader—no response, no connection to self, to the world. It certainly wouldn't make it through an admissions review.

Contrary to their hyperbolic titles, Marche and Herman's essays are not, in fact, about the death of the essay or the end of high school English. Instead, they bring up many of the important issues that the humanities have been grappling with for decades: relevance, creativity, assessment, shrinking enrollments. ChatGPT is simply another reason to keep grappling and, as Marche implies, maybe speed things up a bit.

Herman brings up another, more critical issue. Later in his essay, he divides his high school students in thirds in a hierarchy of writing proficiency: the lowest group that's "learning to master grammar rules, punctuation, basic comprehension, and legibility"; a middle group that "mostly has that stuff down and is working on argument and organization"; and the highest group "that has the luxury of focusing on things such as tone, rhythm, variety, mellifluousness." According to Herman, most students will never reach the highest level.

ChatGPT also has the ability to revise draft writing by improving grammar and clarity. Herman describes feeding a student's draft essay into the model with the prompt "Can you fix this essay up and make it better?"—only to find that it could.

"Maybe every student is now immediately launched into that third category," Herman posits. "The rudiments of writing will be considered a given, and every student will have direct access to the finer aspects of the enterprise. Whatever is inimitable within them can be made conspicuous, freed from the troublesome mechanics of comma splices, subject-verb disagreement, and dangling modifiers."

It is at this point that I consider my own time in the classroom, where for many years I worked with "developmental writers," those students who struggled with either Herman's first- or second-level issues, or sometimes both. These were nontraditional adult students, immigrant students, students coming from underfunded rural or predominantly Black school districts, and students with learning disabilities, to name a few. These are the students who are currently being left out of the ChatGPT discussion. Using Herman's categories, I have seen students exhibit unique writing voices, rhythm, variety, creativity—features of his highest-level writers—while struggling with mechanical issues and organization. Putting aside for a moment the much larger discussion of the ways in which Standard American English are rooted in whiteness and therefore naturally privilege some writers over others (see [Asao B. Inoue](https://asaobinoue.blogspot.com/) (<https://asaobinoue.blogspot.com/>), 's work on antiracist writing pedagogy and white language supremacy), we see how these students disrupt Herman's writing skill hierarchy and how and why we should be thinking about these students in the context of chat-bot writing.

Consider how one such student defines nature in an anonymous virtual bulletin board: "For me nature is somewhere we go to disconnect from the world around us a safe, serene, and beautiful place. Also where everything is alive and far from the pollution of the everyday life we live in." Are these sentences grammatically or mechanically correct? No. But they tell us about how the writer defines the term, and how that definition is deeply connected to their own position in the world, and their perception of where that is—away from the safety and purity that nature signifies. There is a lot to unpack there, and that's just the thing. Where the chat bot essay produced no emotional response in the reader (beyond boredom, anyway), these two sentences evoke concern, curiosity, perhaps some assumptions about the writer, but also a desire to know more.

ChatGPT produces correct Standard American English, but (for now, anyway) it can't produce the complex, deeply engaging work my "developmental" writers could. The best writing challenges us; it provides us with a snapshot into the writer's mind, into seeing how the writer has engaged with their subject, how they developed and challenged their ideas, and how they connect their own ideas to those with whom they are in conversation. Are these the qualities we are championing in the classroom? Are these the observations we graffitied on our writers' drafts? Students will only gravitate to chat bots if the message they are getting from their writing instructors is that the most important qualities of writing are technical proficiency and correctness.

Marche sees this moment as an opportunity to bridge what he calls the "chasm" between technology and humanism, but perhaps instead teachers of writing can use the moment to attend to matters that are more in-house. Herman concludes his essay with a series of questions that could be taken as dismissive, but I take as sincere:

Everything is made up; it's true. The essay as a literary form? Made up. Grammatical rules as markers of intelligence? Writing itself as a technology? Made up. Starting now, OpenAI is forcing us to ask foundational questions about whether any of those things are worth keeping around.

"That's what we've been trying to tell you!" the progressive writing faculty among us might be thinking. If the outcome of ChatGPT is a greater, deeper discussion about the ways in which we approach academic writing in the classroom, the ways in which we

discuss what good writing does and how to assess it, then we should welcome it with open arms. We should be telling our undergraduates that good writing isn't just about subject-verb agreement or avoiding grammatical errors—not even good academic writing. Good writing reminds us of our humanity, the humanity of others and all the ugly, beautiful ways in which we exist in the world.

A former writing instructor with 15 years of experience, Hetal Thaker is now a senior instructional designer at the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan.

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