
WHY THE NEED FOR WRITING INSTRUCTION PERSISTS IN THE AGE OF GENERATIVE AI: A PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL REFLECTION

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Abstract

As an educator reflecting on the challenges posed by generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), especially with the rise of models like ChatGPT, I explore the enduring significance of writing instruction in the modern-day classroom. Starting with a personal encounter that exemplifies the transformative potential of writing, this piece delves into my journey as an English teacher. The central question revolves around whether GenAI writing diminishes the value of traditional essays, prompting a deep exploration of my own experiences and beliefs as an educator. I emphasize the cathartic essence of writing, extending beyond academic standards to become a crucial tool for self-discovery and understanding the complexities of the world. Despite the influence of AI on every aspect of our society now, I assert that fostering authentic conversations and teaching reflective essays are essential for students' personal growth and critical thinking.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, AI, generative AI, GenAI, ChatGPT, writing instruction, traditional essays, reflective essays, personal growth

“What’s the biggest problem English teachers face?” a colleague of mine from grad school asked me one day over brunch.

“There are many, but the biggest on my mind—right now—at this very moment—is generative artificial intelligence and the question of whether writing instruction still matters in this modern world,” I responded.

When ChatGPT took the world by storm, there was concern about its capabilities and its erroneous results, coupled with the fact that it writes in a very dry and basic manner. However, some of my colleagues use it to plan lessons and even draft emails. The debate about its effectiveness is still being pursued, and yes, many could argue that the secret is out. There’s no turning away from artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace or anywhere. What startles me more recently is the question of whether generative AI (GenAI) has shown that writing instruction is no longer important. In fact, several respected colleagues of mine have asked if teaching the essay (any essay) is an effective way to assess student comprehension, understanding, and ultimately, mastery of a unit’s goals.

Is writing in the ELA classroom needed? It was such a shocking question I never thought I'd hear such a thing, but I heard it from several people who really wondered about the effectiveness of it in a world where content generated by ChatGPT and other GenAI models cannot always be detected. The question surprised and troubled me because the very reason I chose to become an English teacher was to teach writing to students and show them its power, regardless of whether they need to write another argumentative essay after graduating from high school.

When I entered the teaching profession as a post-secondary and secondary English teacher, my primary goal was to instill a passion for writing in the upcoming generation. Writing had been my lifeline during a challenging childhood and a tumultuous high school experience. Despite not always having the best English teachers, one history teacher stood out in cultivating my love for writing. His encouragement allowed my creativity to flourish in essays, shaping my belief in the power of written expression.

One such day as a lowly high school sophomore after a particularly hard night at home and feeling as though I had no prospects in life, I came into my first-hour history class and began work on our assignment. To this day, I could not tell you what that assignment was, but I can tell you that my pen died, and that was simply the last straw for sophomore me. After incessant screaming all throughout the night in a troubled home and lacking significant sleep, I threw my pen across the room heatedly and without warning.

Several students laughed and whispered, but Mr. Teefy, my history teacher, walked over to me and leaned down. I thought, *oh boy, I'm getting in trouble—this is my first time getting in trouble—what do I do?*

“Are you okay?”

Those were the three words that escaped his lips. I looked at him and he looked at me, with more concern than anger.

“No,” I said and then, as a teenager often does in these moments, I began to cry.

“Why don't you write about it?” he said, giving me a pen from his pocket. “Don't worry about this worksheet. Just write about it and then we'll talk after class.”

This is a moment that I think about often as an educator and as an individual who tries to cultivate grace in herself and in others. I still get misty-eyed thinking about this moment because the kindness my teacher extended that day forever changed me. Those three words “Are you okay?” showed me that he valued me as a person, and then, without hesitation, the request to write about it, showed me he wanted to know what was wrong. What's more, his wanting to talk about it after class, solidified the feeling that perhaps there could be a solution that I didn't know about. I wrote and I wrote; I wrote as though my life depended on it, and at the end, I apologized for being disruptive: “I'm sorry,” I wrote in messy handwriting. “I like your class, but I'm tired, and I feel so alone.”

As a teenager, having this reflective moment made me more aware of who I was and who I could be. This is where my love for writing fully flourished and I saw the power it could have in my life.

This was a moment that showed me how cathartic writing can be. It wasn't to meet a standard but to be acknowledged as a person. I remember feeling as though something in me had shifted after that class. It was due to the kindness of my teacher and his invitation to write. I suddenly recognized why I was upset—it was not the stupid Dollar Store pen. It was deeper than that. As a teenager, having this reflective moment made me more aware of who I was and who I could be. This is where my love for writing fully flourished and I saw the power it could have in my life.

As I progressed through my academic journey beyond high school into the post-secondary arena, from a philosophy major to an English literature major, I encountered a shifting landscape in

education. The rise of AI-generated content, including ChatGPT, provoked questions about the relevance of traditional essays. Debates emerged within the educational community—is the essay still a valuable tool for evaluating students’ progress, or are there more efficient and modern alternatives? My initial outrage colored my worldview. Of course, writing matters—how could it not? Why were we even asking such a silly question? Writing is more than punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure.

Initially resistant to this concept of the loss of credibility of the essay, I, as a proponent of multimodal composition, began contemplating the necessity of essays. Reflecting on my own experiences, I realized that writing essays had been crucial not just to meet academic standards but to understand myself. As I transitioned to teaching writing at the college level, I encountered students apprehensive about composition, especially those for whom English was a second language.

I made it a priority to convey to my students that their success was my success. I aimed to demystify writing, emphasizing that it wasn’t about being exceptionally smart or sounding sophisticated immediately. Writing, I insisted, was about putting ideas on paper and engaging in the critical thinking inherent in the writing process. It’s about illustrating the thoughts we have in our heads on a piece of paper and then dissecting it to better understand ourselves and how we view the world in that present moment. Can a language learning model really do that for our students?

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As a current high school English teacher in my second year, I face the challenges of a changing educational landscape dominated by AI. I started the year with narrative essays, allowing students to explore their individuality. While contemplating the continued relevance of essays, I experimented with essay conferences, wondering if there were alternative ways for students to express narratives, perhaps through multimedia projects. These one-on-one conferences gave me access to students’ voices. If a student suddenly sounded like a robot and overused the word “indelible,” I usually had a good idea it was a bot essay.

During these conferences, I reflected on whether I was asking too much of my students, considering the discussions among other educators. Were traditional essays still necessary, or could we explore more inclusive and innovative methods that I wasn’t thinking of? Surprisingly, my students embraced the narrative essay assignment, expressing genuine interest in writing about themselves. Their stories, though not always polished, revealed the richness of their experiences.

One essay highlighted the transformative power of writing. A quiet student in one of my afternoon classes shared with me a traumatic event that happened to her at a young age. The event was horrific, but as I read the essay, I turned to her and said, “Thank you for sharing this with me. I’m so sorry this happened to you.” She teared up a bit and said that writing about the traumatic event had helped her process it better. Her therapist had even looked at it, and they were able to facilitate a discussion to help her healing journey outside of the class. We shared a good conversation, and then discussed ways to improve it. She took the critiques, revised the essay, and ultimately submitted a better piece of writing than she had written before. The interest in her—in her story in that moment—suddenly made writing important to her. It was an opportunity to understand herself better, and after this exchange, I knew that to beat the bot, it was a matter of understanding our students better and celebrating their ability to be vulnerable in their writing.

Despite concerns about plagiarism and reluctance from some students to engage in traditional writing assignments, the benefits of fostering genuine conversations and writing reflective essays outweigh the risks. In a world increasingly dominated by visual culture, the written word

remains a powerful tool for exploring one's identity and understanding the complexities of the world and the inner workings of a student's mind.

Writing traditional essays teaches students to develop and articulate a clear thesis, support their arguments with evidence, and address counterclaims. This process not only enhances their analytical abilities but also helps them learn to evaluate and synthesize information from various sources. It is through this rigorous intellectual exercise that students learn to present their ideas logically and persuasively. To get students to see value in this, we might need to impart the wisdom that writing is a way for their voices to be understood by themselves first, and then heard by the world. A professor of mine once wisely told me, "Nothing can replace the written word." While imaginative writing allows students to express personal experiences and emotions and even process them in a deeper level, traditional essays demand intellectual engagement and the ability to reason logically. This type of writing helps students develop a deeper understanding of the material and enhances their ability to communicate complex ideas clearly. To engage students in this process, we must first let students discover their voices in imaginative writing and choose topics that are timely, current, and will engage them in the world they currently find themselves in as technology rapidly advances and threatens to eliminate linguistic diversity and a generation of budding writers.

Generative AI might assist in generating content, but it cannot replicate the personal intellectual engagement required for writing traditional essays. It also cannot replace our students' voices, and that right there is ultimately what we should keep preserving in teaching through the *process* of writing. This reflective journey has reaffirmed my conviction that students need writing instruction not just for academic success but also for personal growth. Providing them with the sacred space to explore their thoughts and express themselves fosters not only critical thinking about the world but also self-discovery. Just as writing saved me years ago, it continues to be an indispensable tool for students navigating the challenges of today. As educators, I believe we need to remind our students that their voices, their words, do matter and are worth engaging in for creative and intellectual purposes.

Author Biography

Stephanie Robinson (she/her) is a secondary educator in the Goddard School District and a post-secondary adjunct instructor for composition/rhetoric. She is an avid writer and published poet, but as a first-generation college graduate, she is always an educator first. Stephanie can be reached at srobinson@goddardusd.com. Visit her teaching portfolio at www.stephrobinson.strikingly.com.