

FUTURE OF LEARNING

How AI can teach kids to write – not just cheat

Chat GPT's 'voiceless' writing can help students find their writer's 'voice,' and allow teachers to quickly analyze trends in student writing

by **JAVERIA SALMAN** October 26, 2023

Experts say that, if done right, generative AI could be a useful tool in helping students improve their writing. Credit: Kate Flock for The Hechinger Report

While the reading and math “wars” have gotten a lot of attention in education in recent years, writing instruction has not received that same focus. That is, until the release of ChatGPT last year.

There isn’t really an agreed-upon approach to teaching writing, according to Sarah Levine, an assistant professor at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education. But now that ChatGPT is here to stay, experts like Levine are trying to figure how to teach writing to K-12 students in an age of AI.

“The question that teachers are having to ask themselves is, what’s writing for?” she said.

ChatGPT can produce a perfectly serviceable writing “product,” she said. But writing isn’t a product per se — it’s a tool for thinking, for organizing ideas, she said.

“ChatGPT and other text-based tools can’t think for us,” she said. “There’s still things to learn when it comes to writing because writing is a form of figuring out what you think.”

Earlier this year, Levine and her team conducted a pilot study at a high school in San Francisco. Students in an English class were given access to ChatGPT to see how they engaged with the tool.

Some were given prompts that asked them to create an argument based on directions, such as, “Some people say we should have a new mascot at our school. Some people say we should keep our old mascot. What do you think?” Other prompts were more creative, such as asking students to write an outline for a movie script about a new superhero based at their school.

Levine and her team found that students looked to ChatGPT, primarily, for help in two categories: Ideas or inspiration to get started on the prompt questions (for example, “What kind of mascots do other schools have?”) and guidance on the writing process (“How do you write a good ghost story?”).

Editor’s note: This story led off this week’s Future of Learning newsletter, which is delivered free to subscribers’ inboxes every other Wednesday with trends and top stories about education innovation.

Email Address

Choose from our newsletters

- Weekly Update
- Future of Learning
- Higher Education
- Early Childhood
- Proof Points

Subscribe

“What the kids are now getting from this AI is what expert writers already have: a big bank of examples that they can draw from when they’re creating,” Levine said. Using ChatGPT as a sounding board for specific questions like these can help students learn to be stronger writers, she added.

Related: [How college educators are using AI in the classroom](#)

While the study is ongoing, the early findings revealed something surprising: Kids weren’t excited about ChatGPT’s writing. “They thought it was ‘too perfect.’ Or ‘like a robot,’” Levine said. “One team that was writing said, ‘We asked ChatGPT to edit our work, and it took out all of our jokes so we put them back.’”

Levine said that, to her, that was the big takeaway of the pilot. She’s heard teachers say they struggle to help students find their voice in writing. When students could contrast their own writing to ChatGPT’s more generic version, Levine said, they were able to “understand what their own voice is and what it does.”

Mark Warschauer, a professor of education at the University of California, Irvine, has spent years studying how technology can change writing instruction and the nature of writing itself. When ChatGPT was released, he decided to tailor some of his research to study ways generative AI could help students and teachers, particularly English language learners and bilingual learners.

Like Levine, Warschauer, director of the university’s Digital Learning Lab, said he believes ChatGPT can help students who struggle with writing to organize their ideas, and edit and revise their writing. Essentially, it could be used as an early feedback tool to supplement the work of a teacher, he said.

As part of a project on the effectiveness of ChatGPT as a tool for giving students feedback on their writing, his team at the Digital Learning Lab placed student essays that had already been evaluated by teachers into ChatGPT and asked the AI to provide its own feedback. Then experts blindly graded both the human and AI feedback. While the experts found the human feedback was a little better overall, the AI feedback was good enough to provide value in the classroom. It could help guide students as they progressed on an assignment, allowing teachers to spend more time with students who need extra support, Warschauer said.

Warschauer’s team has also partnered with UC Irvine’s school of engineering to create an intelligent writing coach, to be called PapyrusAI. The tool, which the teams plan to release next year, would be tailored to help middle school and high school students improve their writing through intensive coaching, he said.

In addition, he said, the tool is being designed to provide a safe and protected way to use AI, to address parents’ and educators’ concerns about student data and privacy on ChatGPT, which stores students’ data.

Stanford's Levine also sees value in using ChatGPT to coach students on writing.

“A lot of teachers feel intimidated when it comes to teaching writing, because they themselves don't necessarily feel like they're the best writers,” Levine said. ChatGPT can help teachers fill in gaps in writing instruction by working as students' debate partner or coach she said.

ChatGPT could also help teachers more quickly analyze trends in student writing, identifying areas of success or struggle. If students “don't understand how to connect one idea to another,” Levine said, Chat GPT could provide this feedback instead of teachers having to write, “Try connecting these ideas using a transition,” on every paper. Teachers could then devote more time to developing lessons that focus on that skill.

“Writing should be and is a human experience,” Levine said. Teachers can retain that experience, even when using AI. If they help students learn how to use the new tool effectively — much as they now use spellcheck or Grammarly — students will understand that ChatGPT is “more or less a giant autocomplete machine, as opposed to a place that has facts,” she said.

“If we think that clarifying your own thinking is something worth doing, then we need to teach writing,” Levine said. “In other words, writing is a way of learning. It's not just a way of showing your learning.”

*This story about **AI writing** was produced by **The Hechinger Report**, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for the **Hechinger newsletter**.*

At The Hechinger Report, we publish thoughtful letters from readers that contribute to the ongoing discussion about the education topics we cover. Please read our guidelines for more information. We will not consider letters that do not contain a full name and valid email address. You may submit news tips or ideas here without a full name, but not letters.

By submitting your name, you grant us permission to publish it with your letter. We will never publish your email address. You must fill out all fields to submit a letter.

© 2024 The Hechinger Report.

Proudly powered by Newspaper by Automattic