

From Curiosity to Classroom Practice: Integrating Generative AI into Writing Instruction

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It started with a simple request on the first day of our Independent Study: italicize anything that came from ChatGPT.

It wasn't a joke or a trap. "Dru," an English major with a knack for both authentic prose and digital tools, began our study with a straightforward question: was ChatGPT allowed for the research and writing he would be completing on Digital Activism during our study? "Sure," I said, "but anything you integrate from generative AI needs to go in italics." That was it. No penalties. No lectures. No hidden grading consequences. The goal wasn't to catch misuse, but to observe and understand how he might authentically incorporate AI into his work. This Independent Study wasn't just a teaching moment for him, it was also a learning moment for me; one that began with letting go of control and leaning into curiosity.

Our Independent Study quickly evolved into a shared investigation into thinking and writing with AI, and Dru led the way. As an already avid user of ChatGPT, he attended our weekly meetings ready to share not just what he had worked on, but also how he had worked on it. "I got stuck structuring this argument," he'd say, "So I asked ChatGPT to outline it for me. *Here's what it gave me.* I didn't like it, but it helped me see where my logic was thin." Another week, he might tell me, "I used it to rewrite that intro paragraph. I was tired and wanted to see how it would handle different tones. I ended up keeping *only one line*, but it helped me get unstuck."

During those sessions, I gained insight into Dru's writing process and began to see how generative AI is quietly becoming part of how students think and write. And, it wasn't scary. In fact, it was fascinating. In the years before AI, my focus had been on scaffolding the writing process: brainstorming, drafting, revising, reflecting. I taught invention strategies and rhetorical flexibility. I encouraged students to see writing not as a product, but as a process shaped by audience, purpose, and genre. When ChatGPT entered the scene, I was skeptical. I worried it would short-circuit the complicated and dynamic processes required to learn these elements of writing, offering students prepackaged paragraphs instead of hard-earned clarity. But what Dru showed me through our honest discussions was that students aren't look-

ing for shortcuts, they're looking for support. Sometimes it's about efficiency, sure. But often, it's about momentum, feedback, or companionship in the act of writing.

That one simple rule, italicize anything that was AI generated, allowed for a pedagogical shift I didn't see coming. I began to realize that AI use could be integrated into the research and writing process as an effective tool, not a replacement for thinking. Now, I teach with AI instead of around it. Early in the semester, my students and I talk about ChatGPT directly. I don't bury it in an academic integrity slide; rather, we talk about what it can do well, such as generating examples, rephrasing ideas, and providing explanations, and where it falls short, such as depth, originality, voice, and nuance. Then, I show them how to use it.

Our first foray is usually using ChatGPT to help revise the first draft of a term for a Glossary of Keywords for the course. Students sign up for a term in class, complete general online research, and then email me a first draft of their term before leaving for the day. We discuss "shitty first drafts" (Lamont, 1995), and I make it clear I am not interested in anything other than their authentic interpretation of the term for the first draft. After class, I email the students some feedback to consider for revision during our next class. Armed with their initial research as well as my feedback, we use the next class to log into ChatGPT, spend some time interfacing with the program and discussing prompts, and then using it to help draft a second definition. Before making final revisions, we spend time discussing the info that ChatGPT has provided them based on their prompt. Some heuristics we use for this discussion are: What's useful here? What's misleading? What would you change? I encourage students to check the feedback I have given them, as well, to triangulate. After the glossary terms are revised, posted, and presented, I have the students reflect on their process.

Their reflections on integrating ChatGPT into the writing process have been more insightful than I anticipated. Some students explain that they use it to clarify what they mean while others use it to further develop their original thoughts. Some try out tone shifts or different approaches to sentence structure. Many end up abandoning the AI output entirely in favor of their own voice and wording, but not before it served its purpose as a mirror or a muse. Importantly, students don't have to hide their use of generative AI. Rather, they are tasked with critically engaging it. In doing so, they're developing the very skills I want them to cultivate: rhetorical awareness, critical thinking, and self-reflection. Of course, it's not perfect. Some outputs are misleading, even harmful. We talk about that. We examine examples where ChatGPT invents sources or oversimplifies complex ideas. I remind them that fluency is not the same as truth and that good writing is not just about coherence, but about accuracy, ethics, and intention.

For me, integrating AI hasn't meant lowering standards in the classroom; it's meant raising the bar for transparency and process. And, I wouldn't have reached this point without that Independent Study with Dru. What began as a small experiment grounded in curiosity gave me a front-row seat to how students are actually using these tools. This approach worked because it aligns with core values of education, including trust, reflection, and growth. When we ask students to reflect on their tools and choices, we treat them as thinkers, not cheaters. Teaching writing in the age of AI means acknowledging the presence of these tools and helping students engage them critically, creatively, and transparently. By making space for that engagement, we support not just compliance, but genuine development as writers and thinkers.

References

Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. Pantheon Books.