2025, Volume 10, Issue 2

Oohs, Boos, and Breakthroughs: Teaching Writing with ChatGPT

Taylor Joy Mitchell and Jessica McKee
Embry-Riddle University

The tension was palpable during our Humanities and Communication Department meeting in January 2023. Faculty had returned from break apprehensive, having read the tea leaves printed in *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher of Education* about ChatGPT's impact on writing studies. The consensus seemed to be that ChatGPT would, at best, increase plagiarism or, at worst, "kill the college essay." We sat in the back, slowly shaking our heads. We could not wholly accept our colleagues' fears or their defiant refusal to engage with the tool. Colleagues since graduate school, we've weathered many crises in the humanities, all the while remaining committed to our professional goal of helping students become better readers, writers, and thinkers. We must prepare them for the world they inhabit now, so we wondered if AI could become integral, not antithetical, to the writing process.

Inspired, we secured IRB approval for a small-scale study in two sections of English Composition, which is our university's equivalent to a first-year writing course. It is the only instructive writing course in our students' general education curriculum. The study set out to examine student perceptions on a series of traditional and AI-assisted, in-class invention workshops. Students would first engage in a traditional writing workshop and, during the next class session, participate in an AI-assisted one. Rather than push first-year students toward AI, we wanted to demonstrate its potential and its limitations. The results suggest integrating AI into the invention stage can give students a more nuanced understanding of how AI can complement, but not replace, human-centered writing practices.

We narrowed our study's focus to gathering student perceptions, rather than assessing improvement in their writing. This shift allowed us to take advantage of our study's timing, as many students were still unfamiliar with or unsure of using AI in an academic setting. After participating in these workshops, students completed reflective surveys for homework. We asked them to compare and rate their experiences. In addition to ratings, we included open-ended questions, anticipating that students would share how these workshops helped them not only retrieve prior knowledge, but actively identify gaps and seek out new insights. Secretly, we were also wishing for results that would calm our colleagues.

We picked the invention stage to implement our teaching strategy for dealing with AI because, as rhetoric and composition faculty, we have learned that inexperienced writers (especially at a STEM-focused school like ours) benefit from explicit instruction early on in the writing process. Implementing AI during the invention stage, we hoped, would reinforce the processes of writing and avoid the reductive trap that ChatGTP could present for students: mistaking technical proficiency with effective communication. The design of our traditional and AI-assisted workshops was dependent on course assignments and learning outcomes.

Our first project, titled "How to Write Like a ___," asked students to research a professional or interest-based discourse community and create an informative guide, explaining how this community communicates. For our first workshop, we modelled several traditional brainstorming strategies. Students were given twenty minutes of class time to brainstorm the communication techniques for their chosen discourse community. A few students created mind-maps or cool charts but most just listed superficial details based on their limited experiences as a member of this group. They were often unaware of the community's more formal genre conventions, audience expectations, and rhetorical norms. During the next class session, we instructed students to use ChatGPT to strengthen their understanding of their discourse communities. Some students gasped. One balked at having to make a ChatGPT account. Another inquired about potential plagiarism policy violations. Out of the 46 students, only a handful had OpenAI accounts; we walked the others through the login process. Then, we modelled how to politely prompt ChatGPT for specific answers and warned them not to blindly believe responses. We gave students targeted prompts to guide their AI interactions, such as "What are the genres of communication for ___?" or "What kinds of publications exist in this community?" The classroom quieted. Students prompted, and ChatGPT offered language, genres, and discourse features that many had not previously considered.

The second writing project asks students to respond to specific claims made in an editorial. This project builds rhetorical reading and argumentative writing skills, particularly focusing on their ability to respond to public discourse. Once we verified that students selected an editorial, students had to summarize it. As students usually need support with this step, we developed a traditional workshop using the templates from Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say*. Students were given twenty minutes to fill out specific templates on identifying main claims and summarizing their editorial. They shared with peers the points they would include in their summaries. Then, in the following class session, we asked students to prompt ChatGPT to summarize their editorial, identify its key claims, and generate counterarguments. We handed back students' hardcopy templated summaries, so that, for homework, students could compare their summaries with ChatGPT's. As in the first workshop, students were surveyed on these two approaches and identified areas where their own thinking was deepened or challenged.

Student perceptions on the AI teaching strategy were both expected and surprising. Several commented on the speed or efficiency of the AI-assisted workshops. One student praised the ChatGPT workshop, saying "AI made it possible to outline a rough draft within seconds." Yet, as students recognized that ChatGPT "helped get the ideas flowing," they worried about the loss of personal connection: "AI-generated [ideas]... were too broad... not human. Personal experience can do wonders for brainstorming," one commented. Another stated, "I don't feel a connection to the ideas because they aren't mine... it makes me feel as though I cheated." More emphasized the value of critical thinking in the writing process, perceiving that traditional invention strategies produced more authentic writing. Despite critiques, most students said they would use both AI and traditional brainstorming techniques. One called them "complementary tools." As another student put it, "ChatGPT didn't give me the answer, but it helped me know where to start." That sentence has stayed with us because, as educators, we want to show students where to look for the answers. It captured the real pedagogical value of AI when used thoughtfully, not as a writer, but as a thinking partner. For many, AI did not replace traditional brainstorming—it enriched it.

Like our colleagues, our students still questioned AI's place in academic writing, but with guidance, students can explore its potential as a writing tool. Exploring AI in class, together, worked best because we could monitor student engagement with AI. Hearing them "ooh" at the speed of responses or "boo" when paragraphs are absent of thought allowed us to have multiple conversations about authorship and agency, conversations that undoubtedly made their way into student reflections.

After implementing our AI teaching strategy, we found that our colleagues' concerns were not misguided—but they weren't the full story either. Yes, some students will use AI to cheat, to hand in writing that is not their own, to do anything to skip the hard work of choosing the right words to express their ideas. This was true prior to AI's arrival. Now, though, faculty have a variety of choices to make: refuse to use AI, forbid their students from using it, expend energy trying to catch AI use, transition back to blue book in-class writing, or determine ways to incorporate AI into existing pedagogical practices. We chose the latter.

Our AI teaching strategy taught us more about the processes of writing and of writing pedagogy, and, ironically, less about AI. We have rethought our writing prompts and how much weight we give to the final product over the process assignments. Since no assignment can be wholly AI-resistant, we've explored how and why we framed assignments the way we did. We have now created multiple low-stakes opportunities to show students AI's capabilities. We have also developed a robust AI course policy that complements the university's guidance, one that is always subject to revision.

Implementing AI into writing instruction reminded us that good teaching is about experimenting, listening, and adapting. AI did not replace our pedagogy, just as it did not replace student writing. Instead, it allowed us to sharpen some of the duller tools in our teaching toolbox and provided a better sense of what matters to writing teachers: process over product, intention over automation, and a classroom culture that values curiosity, ethics, and thoughtful reflection.