

# With ChatGPT, Teachers Can Plan Lessons, Write Emails, and More. What's the Catch?

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## ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

The artificial intelligence tool could be a time-saver for teachers, but some have concerns.

## FULL TEXT

The education community has been abuzz with the rise of ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence tool that can write anything with just a simple prompt. Most of the conversation has been centered on the extent to which students will use the chat bot—but ChatGPT could also fundamentally change the nature of teachers' jobs.

So far, teachers have used—or considered using—the chat bot to plan lessons, put together rubrics, offer students feedback on assignments, respond to parent emails, and write letters of recommendation, among other tasks. While some educators worry about the implications of automating these parts of teaching, others say that the tool can save them hours of work, freeing up time for student interactions or their personal life.

After all, a typical teacher works about 54 hours a week, but just under half of that time is devoted to directly teaching students, according to a nationally representative survey of teachers conducted by the EdWeek Research Center last year. Just under a third of teachers said if they could spend less time on any one task, it would be general administrative work.

"Teacher burnout and teacher retention are such huge problems in the United States," said Braxton Thornley, a language arts teacher and digital teaching and learning instructional coach at Bingham High School in South Jordan, Utah. "A lot of that is [because] the workload is enormous. If technology allows a teacher to have three to four extra hours with their family every week, then that's something I think we have to capitalize on and hopefully do."

Thornley recently used the AI bot to help him plan a lesson about analyzing tone in written documents. He wanted to present students with 10 separate paragraphs arguing that school should start at a later time, each using a different tone. In the past, he would have written each paragraph himself. But this year, he asked ChatGPT to write the paragraphs—one that was upbeat and funny, one that was angry, one that was professional, and so on.

It saved him more than an hour of time.

"I was completely blown away by how much it's capable of doing," Thornley said of the chat bot.

Even so, some teachers say they worry that using artificial intelligence will strip away some of the creativity and relational aspects of the job.

"To me, lesson planning is the fun part. I don't want to hand that over to a chat bot," said Madi Saenz-Payne, a high school creative writing and English/language arts teacher in California, who added that she feels similarly about using the bot to help with grading. "It takes the human side out of it. ... Making so much of [teaching] automated—I feel like you lose some of the joy of it.

"It will reduce your tasks, but is it also reducing the pleasure of teaching?"

ChatGPT lessons are the 'recipe,' but the teacher is still the chef

Late last month, Stephen Lockyer, a primary school teacher in west London, tweeted that AI would be

"transformative" as a teacher. He shared an example of how ChatGPT planned three lessons on how volcanoes are formed.

His tweet was seen by almost 800,000 people, with dozens of teachers from both the United Kingdom and the

United States responding in great interest—and some concern. Lockyer said in an interview that he understood the skepticism, but believes the artificial intelligence should be viewed as a tool to help teachers—not as a replacement for their own expertise.

"Your lesson plans are your recipe—you still need a chef. You still need a teacher to make that recipe come alive," he said. "If you've got a plan that's bare bones that you can build on and flesh out and make wonderful, then that'll save so much time."

But the technology of ChatGPT is not foolproof: Saenz-Payne said she noticed a factual error when she experimented with asking the bot to plan a lesson for an early chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The tool also has limited knowledge of world events that happened after 2021, and the bot, which is trained in part through human coaching, has the potential for bias, including racism and sexism.

Also, it can't tailor a lesson to a specific class or individual students like a teacher can.

"There are some skills and some pedagogical knowledge that teachers need to have in their heads in order to design good instruction, and they're never going to replace that with ChatGPT," said Paulo Blikstein, an associate professor of communications, media, and learning technologies design at Teachers College, Columbia University. While ChatGPT can be a helpful tool for an experienced teacher, he said, "the danger is that people start relying on those tools before they have the in-depth knowledge about teaching and classroom management and lesson planning design. ... The danger there is that the technology will drive the teaching and not the other way around." Blikstein said the worst-case scenario is a dystopian future where a district foregoes professional development for teachers on lesson-planning or instruction, in favor of training them in artificial intelligence. But if used responsibly, ChatGPT can be a powerful time-saver for teachers, he said.

For example, teachers could use artificial intelligence to find resources to supplement their lessons, he said. Or teachers could use the chat bot to efficiently formulate summaries or reports that they have to submit to administrators about the work that they're already doing.

Should teachers use AI for grading?

ChatGPT can also offer feedback on student work. But some teachers have balked at using it for that purpose, saying that the examples of grading from the chat bot feel shallow or even inaccurate.

"I want my feedback to build on conversations I've had with students and [their] past writing," Thornley said. Also, while the technology might get it right nine times out of 10, there's always the risk that it won't grade one student's work correctly, Blikstein said. Teachers would still need to personally review each piece of feedback. "What if some students are thinking outside of the box and write an essay that is radically creative, and the AI doesn't understand it?" Blikstein said.

Christina Torres Cawdery, an 8th grade English teacher at Punahou School in Honolulu, worries that ChatGPT could introduce bias into the feedback—dinging a student for writing in their authentic voice instead of using more academic language.

Hovering above those concerns is a theoretical question about using artificial intelligence to review students' work that could have been produced by the same AI.

"There is a tacit contract between teachers and students—the student is tacitly saying, 'I'm a human. I am doing my work myself.' And the teacher is also saying, 'I'm a human. I am grading the work as a human,'" Blikstein said. "If we start using AI for both sides, student and teacher, these kinds of ethical contracts need to be reconsidered and made transparent to both parties.

"Otherwise, we're going to get into this very weird place where you start to have to have software to detect cheating, ... but then the students will also be suspicious of the teachers. It becomes this weird learning environment, that people don't trust each other anymore," he said.

The chat bot can write emails, letters

The chat bot could take over some communication for teachers. For example, if a parent emails asking why their child can't submit late work, ChatGPT can draft a thorough, professional response in seconds.

Thornley sees the potential in using artificial intelligence to respond to some of the more rote emails he writes, but

he's not sure if he'd use it to communicate with a concerned parent.

"Oftentimes, as a teacher, I want to add so much more context to a parent than I think the chat bot could handle in an efficient way," he said.

However, if ChatGPT eventually incorporates a text-to-speech feature, Thornley said he could quickly share his thoughts verbally and have the chat bot formulate them into a clear email.

"That's really going to be a gamechanger," he said.

Cawdery said she could see herself using the chat bot to send mass emails to parents, such as an announcement about an upcoming school event. But she's not sure she'd want to use it for an individual message.

"If it's a relationship that's already been difficult, I don't know if I want to trust a bot. Or if it's a relationship that's been close, it's going to feel distant," she said. "The bot can't sound like me—it doesn't know me."

Cawdery added that she might use it to draft a body of a message, which she could then edit to sound authentic.

ChatGPT can also formulate letters of recommendation for students, based on just a few descriptors from a teacher.

On a recent social media poll, more than a third of high school teachers reported writing more than 10 letters of recommendation for students on average each year—a lengthy task.

Still, Sandy Jameson, an AP English Language teacher at Nazareth Area High School in Allentown, Pa., said the AI-generated letter of recommendation seems more generic than she would be comfortable submitting on behalf of a student.

But, she added, it did offer a good template. Teachers could generate a letter and then fill in anecdotes and examples that were specific to the student.

ChatGPT is blocked by some districts

Already, some school districts—most notably New York City—have blocked the tool on school devices and networks to prevent student cheating, which could make it harder for teachers to use it as well.

But some educators say they hope administrators don't dismiss the capabilities of the tools out of fear. It might even be a positive thing for teachers to "come up with prompts that aren't easily AI-able and have to think of activities along the way that you can't just plug in and spit out," Saenz-Payne said.

And while that new way of thinking and assigning work might take some more time, teachers could offload at least some of the more rote tasks off their plates.

"There are lots of repetitive functions that you have to do as a teacher that [ChatGPT] can actually take care of really, really easily," Lockyer said. "We're very, very much in the early days, but it'll be fascinating in terms of the improvements that it can make in education."

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