



The Future of Writing:

Harness AI While Preserving Student Learning





Introduction

The Generative AI Era and the Value of Writing

Within a few hours of generative AI tools being made public in late 2022, higher education students were prompting such tools to create passable five-paragraph-essay-style pieces of content.

The fact that the gen AI output from such prompts meets the standards of a college education is a problem in and of itself, says John Warner, speaker, writer, and former college instructor with twenty years of experience across multiple institutions.

“If ChatGPT can do it, and if the purpose is learning, it’s not worth doing,” writes Warner in a piece for *Inside Higher Ed*. “We should collectively see this technology as an opportunity to re-examine our practices and make sure how and what we teach is in line with our purported pedagogical values,” he states in [another article](#).

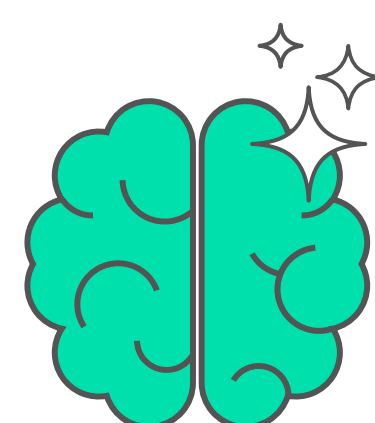
When we examine the role of writing in higher education, let’s be clear about exactly what we mean by *writing*. For the sake of this ebook, we break writing into four stages: process, composition, critical reflection, and output.

The 4 Stages of Writing



Process

Identify the audience, define goals, investigate the existing body of knowledge, brainstorm new perspectives



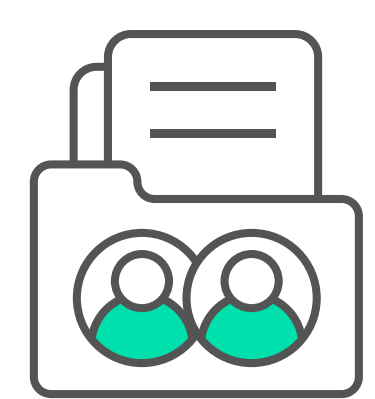
Composition

Organize thoughts, construct arguments, craft narratives, formulate core messages



Critical reflection

Evaluate factual accuracy, writing quality, and effectiveness for the intended audience and toward desired goals



Output

Produce the final format of content to hand off to the intended audience

“Brilliant people didn’t become brilliant by letting gen AI write for them. The technology is astonishing and very useful, but writing is still the ultimate learning tool.”

—Stephen Monroe

Assistant Professor and Chair of Writing and Rhetoric Department, University of Mississippi

The introduction of gen AI disrupts writing in the output stage. Although its results may be somewhat generic, this technology can now generate writing with the click of a button. This doesn’t present an existential threat to writing as the foundation of learning but rather a transformative opportunity to further develop students’ uniquely human skills for process, composition, and critical reflection. With the help of astute instructors, students can learn how to harness gen AI to augment the entire writing experience, thereby enhancing their writing, extending their learning, and boosting their career readiness.

Gen AI represents an entirely different kind of technology from what writers and students have adapted to in the past. Instead of a passive tool or an opportunity to outsource writing, gen AI offers a true partnership that helps people do better, higher-quality work.

To make the most of their higher education experience—and be as prepared as possible for the workforce after graduation—students will need to learn how to partner with technology to work more efficiently while developing new habits to improve their composition and critical thinking. Students desperately need guidance and training from instructors to gain a clear sense of when using gen AI is useful and effective and when it’s important to rely on human composition and process.

Read on to explore how you can begin working toward that future, leading your students into a new era where their skills and experience with writing and technology prepare them for successful careers.

The Complementary Evolution of Writing and Technology

The impact of technology on writing is nothing new; it's a story that unfolds every one hundred years or so. It begins with a new, radical technology that threatens the value of writing as we know it. However, rather than replacing writing, new technologies have consistently empowered people to harness writing in novel ways, driving history-altering creative revolutions.

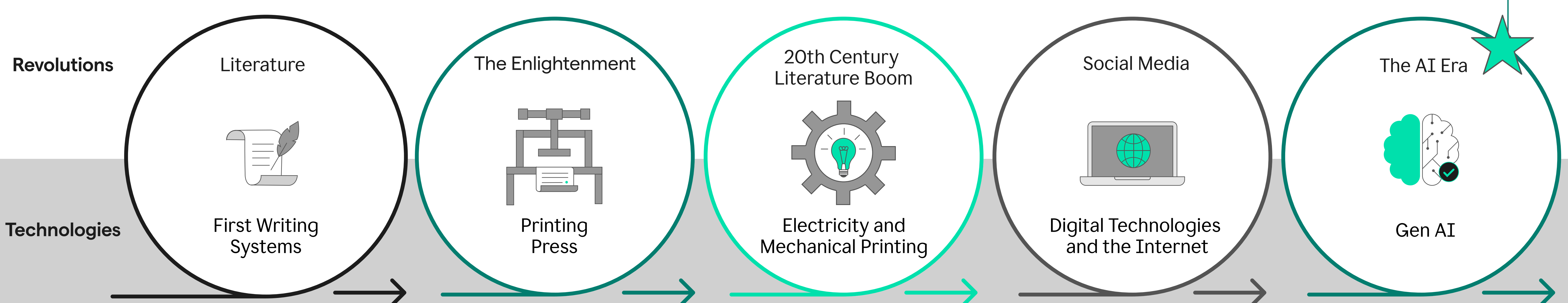
Our era's new, radical technology is generative AI, and it's poised to have as significant an impact on communication as the first written word or the printing press. What is different this time around is the active role gen AI plays in writing compared to its passive predecessors like word processors, spellcheck, and even the algorithms that support online search.

Understanding the cause-and-effect relationship between technology and writing doesn't tell us exactly how gen AI will impact writing, but it does tell us that we—as educators, students, and writers at large—will play an essential role in uncovering just how this powerful technology will usher in our era's next creative revolution.



Creative Revolutions and the Technology That Fueled Them

We are here



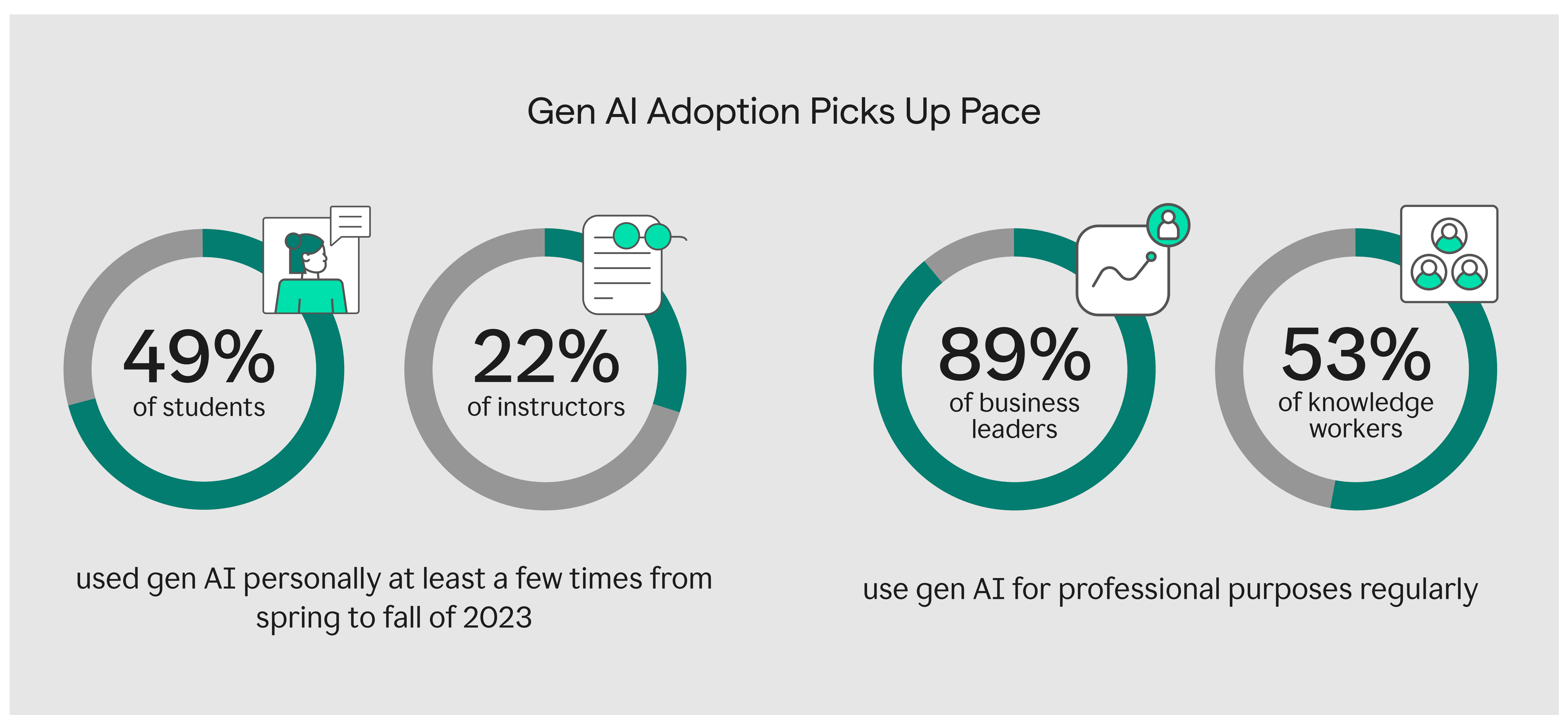
Section 1

The Future of Writing Is a Collaboration Between Writer and AI

When awareness of generative AI skyrocketed in late 2022, it didn't take long for usage to spread across campuses and workplaces around the globe. Today, as much as **49% of students and 22% of instructors** say they used gen AI personally at least a few times from spring to fall of the 2023 academic year.

Gen AI adoption rates are even more pronounced in the workplace. According to our [2024 State of Business Communication report](#), **89% of business leaders** and **53% of knowledge workers** are already actively using gen AI for professional purposes. Moreover, **72% of all professionals** using gen AI use it for writing tasks, emphasizing writing's outside role for professionals in the workplace.

We can say with certainty that today's students will use AI tools to communicate when they enter the workplace. The best way to prepare the current generation to be more effective communicators—instead of blindly copying and pasting from gen AI tools—is to ensure they emerge from their higher education experience with the skills to competently collaborate with these tools.



Collaborating productively with gen AI means students need to possess the basic writing and critical thinking skills necessary to understand what effective output actually looks like across a wide variety of contexts and audiences; they also need the gen AI skills to support the kind of writing they'll be doing in the workplace.

Writing skills and writing process

Learning and practicing a strong writing process allows students to develop important skills like critical thinking, clarity of thought, the art of investigation, and so much more. This is a valuable and pivotal part of the higher education experience because it introduces students to what writing instructors call “the struggle.”

“Humans learn when they struggle,” says Warner. “We need to ensure students in particular value process over product and don’t completely outsource the struggle of writing to a machine that merely puts words onto a page.”

We don’t want students to struggle simply as a rite of passage. We want to acknowledge the necessity of struggle in developing critical thinking and writing skills. Struggling with a concept is the only way a student can hone their personal writing ability and, to use a phrase from the business world, carve out their own competitive advantage as a communicator.

Claire Mischker, lecturer of composition and director of the Graduate Writing Center at the University of Mississippi, agrees. The writing process in and of itself—regardless of the output—is a valuable skill for students to master. Without being given genuine opportunities to develop their own voice and tone, understand how to develop an argument, write for varied audiences, and practice different types of writing, students will have a much harder time effectively evaluating and digesting a gen AI output or becoming an effective workplace communicator.

“We need to preserve the process of writing and the struggle of writing as a valuable learning tool and recognize that written communication is an inherently human process in a lot of scenarios beyond merely trying to convey basic facts or information.”

—John Warner

Speaker, writer, and former college instructor



The introduction of gen AI doesn't eliminate "the struggle" necessary for becoming a good writer. Instead, it moves the struggle from the output of writing to the stages of process, composition, and critical reflection—where it is even more beneficial for students' development. Previously, students had devote a disproportionate amount of effort to writing output. Now, output is still essential, but students can spend more of their developmental efforts on composition and process.

"We try to orchestrate instruction to emphasize the value of the process," says Mischker. "My students can use gen AI to experiment and meet the requirements of the assignments, but I structure the assignments so that true success in the class only comes from prioritizing process over product."

AI skills and AI process

Helping students produce better writing and become better writers is the first priority for educators. A close second, however, must be instilling gen AI competencies into students that translate into the workplace. Practicing with gen AI helps familiarize students with the kind of writing that will be done in the professional world. Gen AI also provides students immediate constructive feedback in the form of a one-on-one, always available, endlessly patient writing partner that can support any stage of their process.

For example, Dr. Leo Lo, dean of the College of University Libraries and Learning Sciences at the University of New Mexico, emphasizes the importance of prompting as a key competency for all professionals and students.

"We've always wanted students to leave the institution being able to do more than they came in with. We need to teach students how to use AI as a collaborator in such a way that they can accomplish more than they could have without using it—and at the same time maintain authority over these tools."

—Sid Dobrin

Professor and Chair of the English Department
University of Florida



72% of organizations using gen AI use it for writing tasks

“Teaching prompting will give students a leg up in getting the most out of an AI tool as generative capabilities become embedded in the systems in which we work,” says Dr. Lo. “But it has to be explicitly taught and practiced, and the key elements of good writing are still embedded in the ability to become a good prompt engineer.”

Scholars like Sid Dobrin, chair of the English department at the University of Florida and gen AI thought leader, also focus on the potential of gen AI tools to help students do new things, not just old things, faster.

“We spend so much of the conversation asking how AI is going to help us do the things we’ve always done,” says Dobrin, “not how it is going to help us develop new things to do. Quite frankly, we are doing a disservice to students and their near-term career prospects if we’re not helping them use these tools in the learning and writing process now.”

“Good prompt engineering is really just good writing, and good writing is good prompt engineering. If we want to get the most out of LLMs, we’ll continue to teach students what we’ve been teaching in the writing process: clarity, conciseness, and specificity.”

—Stephen Monroe

Assistant Professor and Chair of Writing and Rhetoric Department, University of Mississippi





Section 2

How Does Collaboration Between a Writer and Generative AI Work?

As institutions, instructors, and students continue to experiment with AI-assisted thinking and writing, we'll start to see a much wider spectrum of what collaboration between a writer and generative AI can look like. Institutions will want to guide the experimentation so that the result is not just a net jump in more words generated, but a step change in meaning, thought, and effective communication on behalf of students.

A more collaborative future of writing must still be built on the foundational principles of good writing and give students the chance to master important skills for themselves. Without a definitive grasp of effective writing, students will rely on the whims of gen AI rather than harness its power.

This relationship will also teach students the appropriate and ethical use of gen AI throughout the writing process. Ultimately, students will understand when and where it is appropriate or helpful to bring in AI-powered assistance and do so where it has the potential to improve the overall outcome.

In the collaborative future of writing, the writer’s role will evolve to emphasize the strengths of artificial intelligence and human experience and perspective. Here are some principles of this collaboration that might emerge:

Writers as project managers

Co-creating with gen AI will require writers to add the role of project manager to their traditional role of creator. Creating content will involve sourcing and evaluating many ideas and making choices about what will best serve the project’s purpose—high-level critical thinking skills that will benefit them in the workplace.

Better communication, not more communication

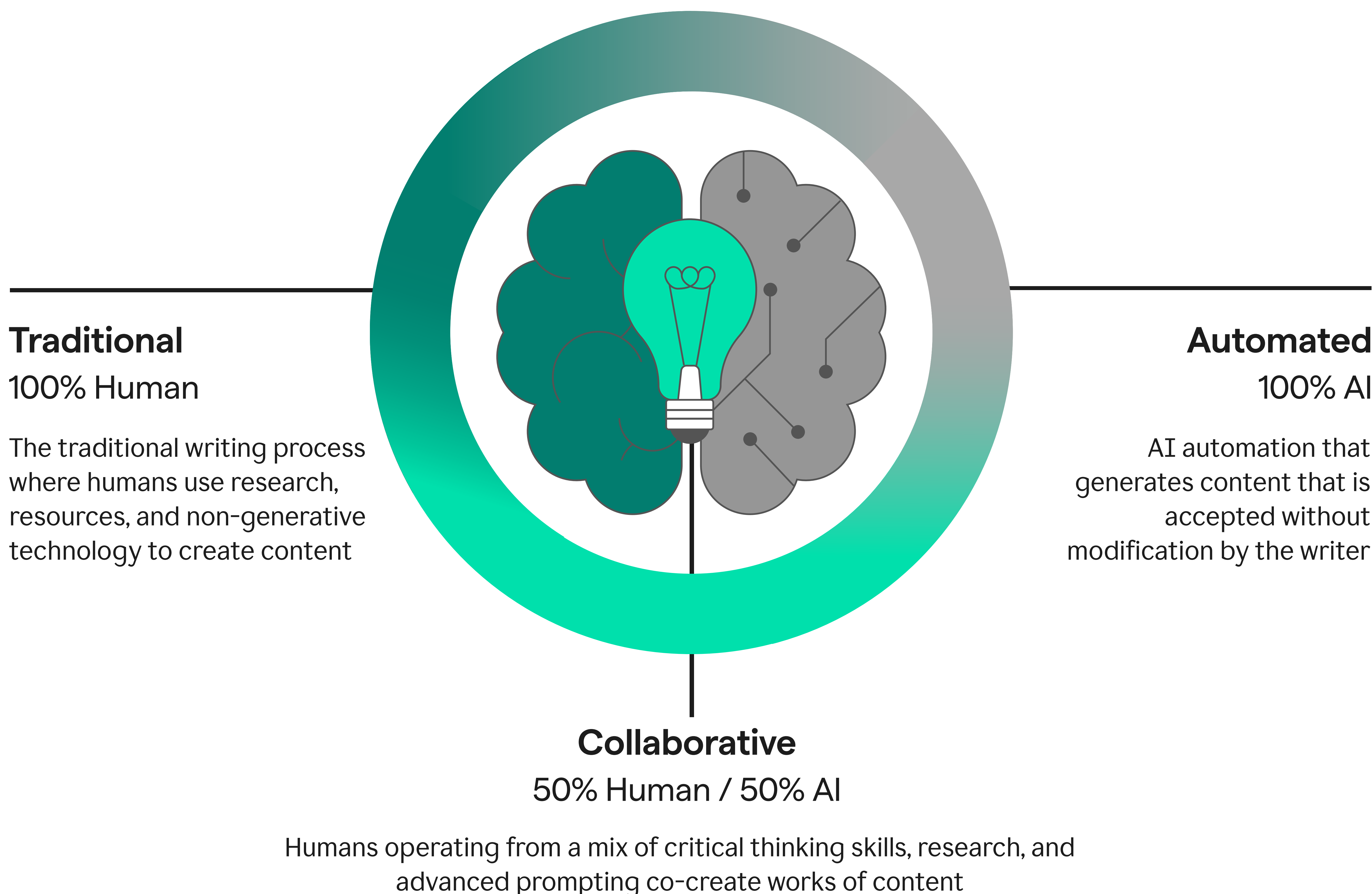
Communication in the workplace continues to rise year over year, and the focus will be on improving communication clarity. Co-creating with gen AI is about communicating better, not communicating more.

Engagement and resonance, above all

As a tool anyone can use, gen AI removes the barriers to developing quick but generic content. This will lead to readers of all kinds placing a significant premium on engaging, resonant, and contextually aware communication.

Calibrate Your Collaboration

Writers need to consider the task, audience, and purpose of any written communication when deciding the right blend between traditional and automated efforts.



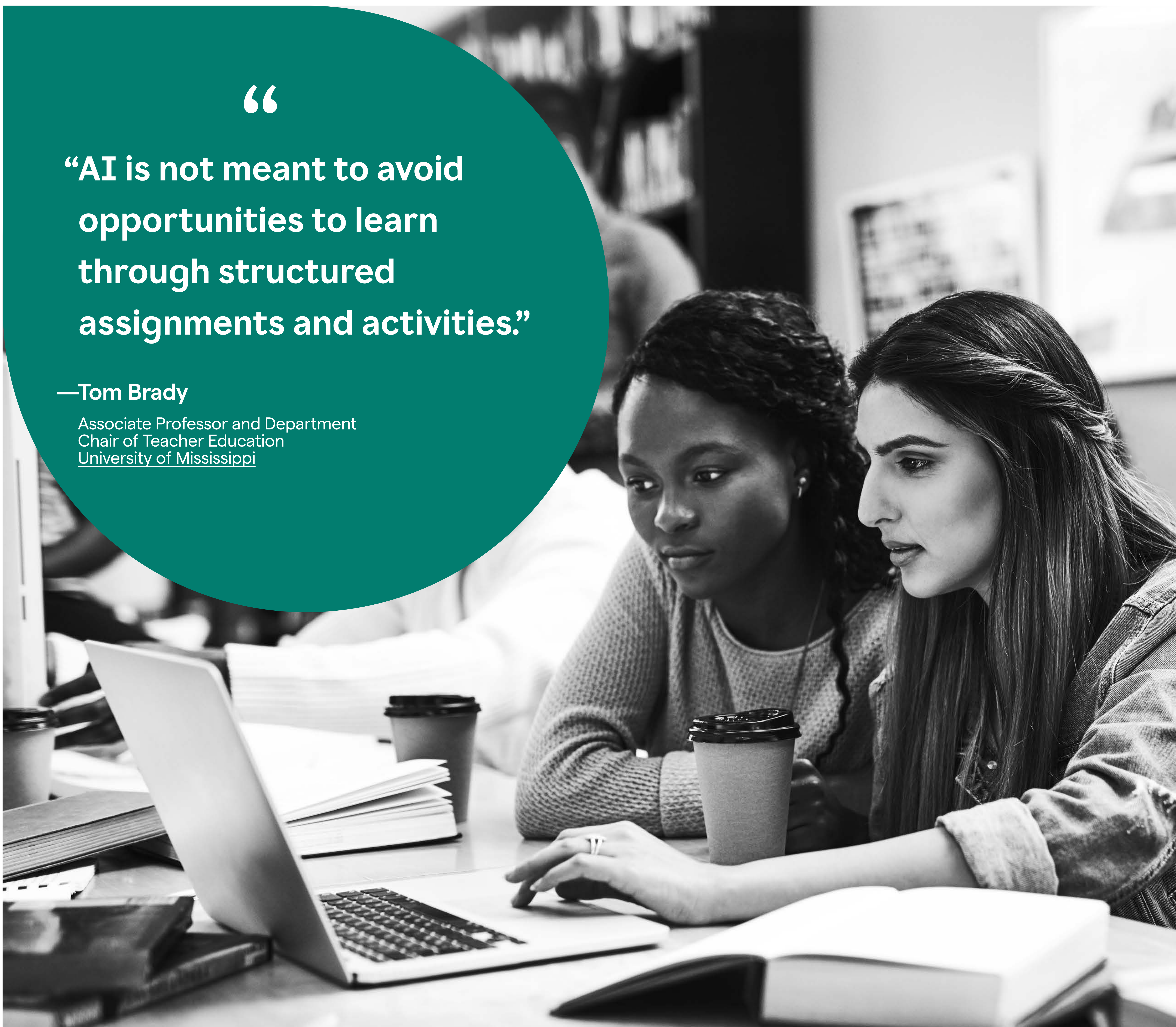
Incorporated successfully into the higher education curriculum, gen AI will benefit students the most. Students will use AI tools to augment their writing, enhance their own voice and critical thinking, and tailor their messaging. Those students will grow into professionals who leverage gen AI to stand out in a workplace defined by ever-increasing volumes of written communication. They will use their collaboration with gen AI to more efficiently compose and deliver low-level writing tasks while helping to enhance the creativity, engagement, and core messages of higher-stakes writing.

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“AI is not meant to avoid opportunities to learn through structured assignments and activities.”

—Tom Brady

Associate Professor and Department
Chair of Teacher Education
University of Mississippi





Section 3

How Institutions Can Shape the Future of Writing

As generative AI becomes an active participant in the writing process, higher education instructors and administrators will have a front-row seat to observe how the concept and practice of collegiate-level writing is redefined. It's time to develop your stance on AI in your educational environment and create a campus-wide adoption of that perspective so you can guide and support the future of writing at your institution. Here's how:






1. Embrace and encourage the use of gen AI.

Knowing how to leverage gen AI will be an essential skill for graduates in the very near future. While exceptions can and should be made for cases where its use can detract from the purpose of the assignment, infusing gen AI tools into courses and curricula—and teaching students digital literacy skills—can enhance learning outcomes and career readiness.

Dr. Lo offers an example of how instructors and students can be trained on new educational concepts in his [CLEAR framework for prompting gen AI tools](#), these types of practices deepen student awareness of and proficiency in using these tools productively.

The CLEAR Framework for Prompt Engineering

Think of prompt engineering as the art of conversation with AI.

-  **Concise** – be articulate
-  **Logical** – structure the prompt
-  **Explicit** – tell AI exactly what you want it to do
-  **Adaptive** – tweak and refine
-  **Reflective** – learn from each AI interaction

2. Understand the limitations of AI detectors.

The introduction of gen AI tools in late 2022 was immediately followed by the introduction of AI detectors. However, with little insight into how these tools work or how accurate the results are, instructors and institutions have realized the pitfalls of relying solely on AI detectors to catch gen AI plagiarism. False positives account for at least 1% of results from Turnitin’s detection tool, which, when considering the volume of writing assignments over the academic year from a single institution, equates to hundreds of students falsely accused of inappropriate AI use each semester. Growing instances of false AI-usage accusations have made some institutions cautious. In fact, Vanderbilt University, has paused using AI detectors, stating, “We do not believe that AI detection software is an effective tool that should be used.” Grammarly advocates that institutions consider several indicators of academic integrity violations before enforcing a punishment on a student. AI detectors can be used but only as a data point to raise the issue with a student and probe how and why their writing may have been flagged. Yes, this approach can be time-consuming, but it’s also in the best interest of preserving transparent and productive faculty-student relationships across institution types.

3. Prioritize transparency and documentation.

In the early experimental days of wielding gen AI in the classroom that we are currently in, it can be nearly impossible to agree on the right or wrong application of the tool. Instead, your institution should focus on transparency and documentation around when and how the tool is used. Instructors should get into the habit of setting clear parameters around proper usage, and students should get into the habit of following their institution's policy and working with ethical intent.

4. Lean into non-written assessment formats.

For most areas of study, writing is no longer a good gauge for assessing a student's content knowledge because gen AI can passably regurgitate baseline knowledge. As a result, institutions need to embrace writing as a higher-order thinking task and not merely as a basic assessment tool. Look at how work happens in today's collaborative environment—working in teams, creating projects, defending ideas verbally—and incorporate new, practical, and more engaging ways to assess comprehension and mastery.

“Writing to report learning or knowledge won’t survive disruption from gen AI in the long-term. In fact, long before gen AI, faculty were already moving toward more authentic assessments that allow students to apply real-world learning and skills in different exercises.”

—Marc Watkins

Academic Innovation Fellow, University of Mississippi



5. Create an engaged gen AI steering committee.

Gen AI technology is in its early days of development. Whatever best practices emerge today may become outdated quickly as new use cases emerge. To stay on top of these changes, institutions need to create bodies of leadership around gen AI usage from within the institution. An engaged steering committee filled with a diverse mix of educators and administrators devoted to continuously learning about this technology will ensure the institution has informed practices and that those practices evolve as necessary.

“We assume our students are inherently digitally native, but they don’t always understand the professional, ethical ways to deploy new technology like gen AI. They need to be taught how to use these tools responsibly, effectively, and efficiently.”

—Sid Dobrin

Professor and Chair of the English Department
University of Florida





The Role of Generative AI in the Future of Writing

Generative AI has the potential to be an active participant in almost all aspects of the writing process, completely redefining the concept and practice of writing at the collegiate level. Whether or not your students graduate with the ability to think critically about their writing and take a truly collaborative approach with gen AI is up to how your institution approaches this technology.

It may not be possible to have all of the answers right now. Still, institutions need to have a clear perspective on the value of writing and ground rules for the necessary experimentation required to uncover the impact that gen AI will have on both higher education and the world of business.

Above all, this is a call for institutions and instructors alike to remain hopeful about the future. As Dobrin put it, “We’re not losing the core components we value in writing like critical thinking, problem-solving, and storytelling—we’re recontextualizing them in a different kind of technology that opens us up to amazing new possibilities.”



Launch Your Institution Into the AI Era

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For educators:

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