

CHAPTER 7.

“CHATGPT IS GOOD AT SOME STUFF ... BUT IT’S NOT LIKE IT’S A PERSON”: STUDENT WRITERS REFLECT ON AI

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Like most writing center directors in 2023, I was thinking seriously about how to respond to the threat of generative AI (GenAI): how to prepare consultants to work with writers and what to do if they suspected its use, among other things. We were talking about it as a staff, with new consultants, and everywhere in between, but we were trying to better understand the thing before deciding exactly how to respond. And yet, like most policy writing and quick responses, something happened in September 2023 that called for an immediate response. A rightfully outraged graduate student requested a meeting with a member of our admin team to discuss her asynchronous feedback from a consultant on a grant application; her feedback was generated by GenAI.

I was caught completely off guard!

According to notes from my assistant director, Amulya was a fourth-year PhD student in Psychology who had a long history with using our writing center as well as experience as a tutor.¹ She booked an hour-long, synchronous online appointment to discuss a major grant proposal with Cassia, a sixth-year, international PhD student in Physics with a few years of writing center experience. After 10-15 minutes of discussing the project, Cassia concluded the appointment and told Amulya that she would be sending her detailed feedback via email. While this was not what the writer wanted, she agreed. At first, Amulya was happy with the line-by-line feedback she promptly received. Yet, when she looked more closely, she realized that the voice did not sound like her own. She noticed that the dozens of comments had the same timestamp, which prompted her to run it through an AI detector. Sixty percent of the feedback shared by the consultant was AI-generated.

¹ All names have been changed to pseudonyms that aim to preserve cultural, gender, and other identity markers made visible in the original names.

I felt deep gratitude for the writer's willingness to talk with us. She voiced her real concerns over the sharing of her intellectual property without her permission, the possibility of getting caught by her advisor for cheating on a grant that now appeared to be heavily written by GenAI, and the lack of respect for her own voice. We apologized profusely, committed to writing a policy to clearly prohibit such activity, and told her that we would meet with Cassia and consider what to do next.

When I met with Cassia, I was nervous about how she would react: would she deny her use of GenAI? Would she get defensive? Instead, Cassia was completely relaxed: she had no idea this behavior wasn't okay, and she used GenAI for her own work as well so figured it would be acceptable. She seemed sincere. Clearly, Cassia was not convinced that using GenAI was the wrong way to go. Although she stopped using it in her writing center feedback, she still wanted to use it herself if it was allowed.

While there is much to unpack here, I want to highlight what this taught me about writers and writing centers, about what they expect and what they need: writers, like Amulya, are not coming to the writing center to get the kind of help that GenAI offers; they want something else. And yet, some writers, and even our staff members, are using GenAI in ways that they believe to be sound. Still, in the center, when we integrate GenAI into our practice without writer consent or intent, we are doing them and ourselves a disservice.

While writing center studies so far has seemed to focus primarily on how to integrate or tutor *with* AI in the center (Deans et al.; Coffill; Bell; Cheatle), and writing studies more generally has suggested that perhaps some students turn to AI because they believe they have nothing to learn or they will not need writing in their future (Davis and Taczak; Morrison), writers like Amulya, and many others with whom I spoke, suggest otherwise. Several scholars have offered more nuanced approaches to writing and AI, pointing out the need for creative, critical engagement with not just the software's output but also with how the corpus gets created (Byrd; Johnson), how it responds across languages (Owusu-Ansah), and how we might integrate critical awareness and use into our writing (center) pedagogies intentionally and carefully (Graham; Vee; Johnson; Stanton; Giamo, "TPR AI").

Yet, in writing centers, where we do not have a 15-week semester in which to engage in critical conversation, it might be smarter to approach our response to GenAI differently. Drawing on data from 535 student writers from across the US who shared their experiences with writing centers and (sometimes) AI with me, I think we, as a field, have been misguided, despite good intentions. Instead of attempting to integrate AI into writing center praxis, we should centralize the human, affective, collaborative work we do.

CENTERING WRITERS: AN OVERVIEW AND METHOD

This data comes from a project that is not about GenAI; it is first and foremost about student writers. This project, which I have titled, “Centering Writers” aims to amplify writer voices from underrepresented backgrounds at eight different institutions to understand writer experiences and how they perceive popular commonplaces in writing studies, such as inclusivity, access, belonging, and advocacy.²

This qualitative, empirical research is rooted in an ethnographic and folkloric approach, drawing on a rich tradition within writing studies as well as on more recent scholars who attend critically to identity, representation, and presentation of both participants and researcher (Brodkey; Cintron; Hallman Martini, *Disrupting*; Heath; Lindahl; Mortensen and Kirsch; Price; Restaino; Webster). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured not only at my home institution, but also at the additional seven that participated in the study. The writing center directors at each university assisted with both question development and survey distribution to writers at their schools. At the end of the survey, writers were asked about interest in an interview.³

All 535 survey responses (distributed in spring 2023) and 51 interviews (conducted from summer 2023 - fall 2023) were fully conducted, coded, logged, transcribed, and analyzed by humans, both me and a couple of smart and gracious research assistants. I used Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, an Infinity foot pedal, and an audio playback control software called Express Scribe.⁴ The survey results referenced in this chapter respond to the short answer prompt: describe an experience in your writing center that you found memorable. Interviews were conducted with fifty-one writers. Although these interviews were conducted shortly after GenAI became commonplace in most universities, these perceptions are invaluable because they give us a sense of students’ initial reactions and attitudes before GenAI became more prevalent (see within this collection Bleakney et al.; Miftah et al.; and Flederjohann and Perkins).

WRITERS AND AI: USE AND PERCEPTIONS

This overall dataset is widely diverse. While 73 percent were female and over 69

2 Data is drawn from students at two Research 1 (R1) universities and a small liberal arts college (SLAC), a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), a tribal college, a two-year college, and a regional campus.

3 Writers were compensated for time completing the survey (via a gift card raffle) and for time spent interviewing (gift cards).

4 For a more detailed explanation of the logging, coding, and interview method used, see Hallman Martini, “Counselors, Tsunamis.”

percent were undergraduates from across majors, nearly 40 percent were over 22 years old, 30 percent identified as other than straight/heterosexual, over 55 percent as a race other than white, over 45 percent as fluent in a language other than English, and nearly half identified as having one or more disabilities. Each writer's perspective shared includes a footnote bio that provides some of this demographic information. Given that most writers represented in empirical writing center research (including research on GenAI) come from predominantly white universities (see Bleakney et al., this collection; Zieve-Cohen et al.), I find it valuable to know that much initial resistance to GenAI among writers who use their centers is coming from students who identify as other than white, in addition to holding many other under-represented identity markers.

While the number of students using GenAI at the time of this survey (2023) seems incredibly low at just 5.4 percent (n=29), the overall use of technology assistance with writing is quite high, at 63.5 percent, with Grammarly being the highest used assistive technology at 52.7 percent (n=282).⁵ Further, given that the survey short answer questions primarily asked about memorable experiences with the writing center, writers did not provide any detail about their experiences with GenAI. In fact, in 19,794 words shared by 535 writers, neither GenAI nor AI was mentioned. Not even once. Therefore, interviews with writers are a better indication of writer perceptions. Of the 51 writers interviewed, 26 did not mention AI or simply said they did not use it, 14 said they used it, and 11 said they did not use it but did provide their perception of it. To that end, Perceptions 1 and 2 are from writers who spoke about AI (n=25). Perception 3 is drawn solely from those who use AI (n=14).

PERCEPTION 1: GENAI IS CHEATING (52%; N=25)

Like Amulya's concern about being perceived as cheating on her grant application, nearly half of the writers who shared their perceptions of GenAI mentioned that they consider it to be a form of cheating. While emotional responses varied from fear to temptation, to disgust, to hatred, the connection to cheating remained constant. For instance, Astur⁶ talks honestly about GenAI, which he does not use, explaining that "it's a good software, but it's cheating, because AI is doing your work and not you ... it's kind of really lame in my opinion because it's not your work and then you're claiming [it is] and you're not improving." Despite its ability to help in some ways, Astur still considers its use dishonest, as

5 This number includes students' use of papermills, Chegg, GenAI/ChatGPT, and Grammarly. Writers had much to say about their use of Grammarly, especially in relation to GenAI, but discussing this is beyond the scope of this chapter.

6 Astur is a trilingual Somalian immigrant and sophomore undergraduate at a Midwestern R1.

well as not very good, as he notes both the mistakes that it makes as well as the obvious marker of its use: “the words don’t have a soul to it, you can say.”

Similarly, Zein⁷ does not use GenAI and admits their fear around its use, expressing frustration with AI art specifically and the way that it “takes existing [art] from real people doing real work and not getting the credit.” In this sense, they seem concerned with stealing as a form of dishonesty or cheating. Still, Zein is concerned about GenAI in academic settings, asking: “What is it about writing, or our assignments or education that our students don’t feel that they can do on their own? ... Are we not giving our students the tools and the resources they need, and so therefore ... they’re turning to these outside sources?”

Other writers find the connection between GenAI and cheating to be more nuanced, as they still use it. To illustrate, Marina⁸ admits that she uses GenAI to help her identify areas where she can eliminate words, explaining, “I try to be ethical about it because I never want to submit a piece of writing that I feel like I cheated on ... I’ve had a lot of professors actually who encourage us to use it (laughs), which I’m trying not to because I don’t feel like I’m a strong writer and I really value that skill, so I’m working on it.” In this case, use of GenAI for word elimination rather than generation seems like a more acceptable use of the tool for Marina, especially because she is interested in learning how to become a better writer, a skill that she feels like she is learning when she visits the writing center through conversation: “I think the writing center provides the outside perspective, again, having people who have seen other students’ writing is super helpful ... it’s just nice to be able to have a conversation with someone as well, ask them questions that come up in that moment.”

Similarly, Clay⁹ finds GenAI to be a way of cheating through the writing process by skipping the early brainstorming stage of thinking about the prompt. He argues, “I think the cognitive processes are important. I think ChatGPT disrupts that ... it’s like a cheat system for student writers to go over the next step rather than ... think about topics, that sort of brainstorming session ... it sort of gets rid of that and goes straight to the writing stage.”

Clay then compares GenAI to fast food.

Similarly, according to survey data about memorable experiences, writers value the center because it supports their agency, independence, and learning of new skills (26.8%, n=77). One writer notes appreciation for consultants who

7 Zein is a bisexual, transgender, neurodivergent Hispanic graduate student in the humanities at a regional PNW college who works in the office for affirmative action.

8 Marina is a senior undergraduate Asian public health major at a regional Pacific Northwest (PNW) college.

9 Clay is a junior physical sciences major at a New England SLAC whose first language is Bisaya/Cebuano.

“comment on specific things that didn’t fit the voice of the paper instead of only [on] things that were incorrect from a writing standpoint.” Another writer mentions her appreciation for a similar attention to voice in asynchronous feedback that she received through email, noting that “it was clear, but also offered flexibility so that my voice remained my own in writing.” Not only do many writers value preservation of their own voice and autonomy over their writing, but they also want to learn new skills that they can take with them and apply to their own writing when they are working independently. One writer shared a memorable experience from their past, explaining that the tutor “gave me strategies to help teach me how to pay better attention. I remember one recommended I print things out and cover up everything but the line/sentence I was trying to proof. I am now much more effective on my own.” Without mentioning GenAI, these writers indicate their respect for determining and strengthening the voice of the paper (their voice) and learning how to revise and edit writing independently.

**PERCEPTION 2: GENAI IS NOT HUMAN (76%; N=25)
AND IT’S JUST NOT VERY GOOD (56%, N=14)**

Alongside their perception of GenAI as a form of cheating, many of the writers above also noted its lack of humanity: Astur mentions its lack of soul, and Marina explains that she prefers to “use a real human being.” Other writers noted this too, such as Juan,¹⁰ who is a user of his center and a current tutor-in-training. Juan hesitates in his discussion of GenAI, admitting, “I have used ChatGPT, I won’t lie to you (laughs), but ... it cannot replace human emotions and a lot of times, the AI will be wrong.” Juan has much to say about the community within his center, which he describes as “comfortable,” “welcoming,” and full of “happy people,” especially for writers like him who speak a first language other than English. Juan also spoke about the benefits of having bilingual sessions to work on personal scholarship essays, where he talked through ideas in Spanish, and the bilingual consultant helped him translate. This practice relied on human engagement and would not be possible with AI.

In addition to the preference for humans over AI, some writers mention that GenAI does not help them improve as writers. Sabine¹¹ explains how she used GenAI once with mixed feelings: “It was kind of cool because it was, like, done for me, but it, like, it was *done* for me, you know?” She further describes the experience as a “stress reliever,” yet still prefers the writing center since they

10 Juan is a sophomore undergraduate gay male student whose first language is Spanish and who identifies as an undocumented student at a small HSI in the West.

11 Sabine is a white, female junior majoring in occupational therapy at a two-year college in the West with an anxiety disorder.

“use my example, fix it, but then I needed to do the rest, so I actually learned ... you’re not really learning with ChatGPT ... [the learning part] is super important ... this learning that I’m doing now applies to everything in my life.” Through learning about herself as a writer, Sabine knows that she’s a visual learner, so she can tell her future employer that she needs to do things in a hands-on kind of way and take notes in the field. These are things she learned about herself through her experiences with the writing center and ones that would not be possible with GenAI.

This aligns with Emma’s¹² perspective of GenAI as a less dynamic, one-dimensional, imitator of human language. As a computer science major, Emma explains in depth both what GenAI is good at and what it’s not good at, emphasizing along the way that “it’s not good for getting correct answers because it imitates human language and that’s its first and foremost job.” Emma’s emphasis on imitation speaks to both GenAI’s strengths—which she notes are often at the end of the writing process when you need to find synonyms, consider alternative ways of organizing or “reorienting to the topics of your paper,” and presenting your ideas in different words—as well as its weaknesses—like coming up with new ideas, conducting research, and connecting to real sources.

While Emma does use GenAI as a tool, most of our interview focused instead on how her experience in the writing center, and with one consultant, supported her during a time of crisis. In descriptions of her work in the center, she mentions love, kindness, and her struggle with writer’s block and not being able to produce a draft. Yet, her tutor helped her “turn bullet points into paragraphs.” Not only had Emma’s college experience been interrupted by COVID, like many of her peers, but she also lost her mother, which made returning to school and being productive even more grueling. She explained, “The problem wasn’t procrastination, I had worked for many hours. I just quite literally couldn’t think. My tutor had one of the kindest responses I’ve ever received, he didn’t make me feel bad about it at all. He said we could still work with what I had and he offered extra help to get me back on track. Thanks to him, I didn’t end up failing that class that semester.”

Like Emma, many other writers indicated that they value kindness (43.2%, n=124), validation/confidence (64.6%, n=95), and collaborative work during sessions (53.7%, n=50). The sheer presence of kindness throughout the survey responses and interviews *is* overwhelming. One writer simply states kindness alongside availability: “I was able to sign up for multiple sessions which was really nice and the tutors were so kind,” while another notes that it was memorable because

12 Emma is a senior, bilingual, biracial, undergraduate computer science major with ADHD and depression at a New England SLAC.

she was able to bring her infant with her to the center, where “some instructors played with him” while she had her session. Another admits her initial nervousness at the start of the session, and yet, “Throughout the meeting, the person was very nice and genuine. I felt that my writing was understood and together we made great improvements.” This kindness is often paired with a sense of collaboration, like one writer who explains, “I came in with a messy draft, and together a peer reviewer and I planned out the next steps.” Sessions of kindness and collaboration often result in writers feeling a sense of confidence (belief in one’s ability to write) or validation (a felt sense of being seen, heard, or understood as a writer). A case in point, one writer notes: “The advisor helped me formulate a draft by asking probing questions to better understand what experiences were truly most important to me. This showed me that they cared about me as an individual.”

PERCEPTION 3: CHATGPT IS A TOOL (57%, N=14) THAT CAN BE USED MORE EFFECTIVELY FOR NON-ACADEMIC WRITING (64%, N=9)

Like Emma’s explanation of how GenAI can be useful, several other writers also mentioned that they did find some value in using GenAI as a tool.¹³ Yet, none of them were very excited about it, nor did they consider it to be reliable, accurate, or intelligent. For example, Hao¹⁴ explains that GenAI can be a “helpful aid” that he uses to make his writing clearer, especially regarding fragmented sentences. This gives him a “skeletal structure” from which to work. Hao also says that he never cuts and pastes directly, and that GenAI is simply “not very good,” and “it kills creativity.” Juan also uses GenAI as a tool, and, like Hao, uses it early on in his writing process and does not ever use exactly what GenAI offers. Juan’s perspective of GenAI as a tool is shaped by his experience with faculty talking about it: “Like every class that I have [used GenAI for], the faculty use it as a tool, not something that will do your work for you.” Although Juan does not necessarily seem to consider GenAI to be cheating, he does distinctly talk about an ethical way of using it. As someone whose first language is not English, Juan explains his use of AI to help him when “I have an idea in Spanish but not exactly in English, or an idea I just can’t seem to translate it to words.” He goes on to use a brilliant metaphor to describe his use of GenAI:

I cannot untie the knot on a specific sentence, and so the way that I use it is I just put it into ChatGPT, ChatGPT gives me

13 Student use of GenAI as a tool is nuanced and significant. Analysis of this data set is in process.

14 Hao is a gay, Vietnamese international student in the life sciences and recent graduate of a New England SLAC who used his writing center over ten times.

a word, and then I’m like, ‘oh, I didn’t have it this way’ and then I don’t use what ChatGPT gave me at all. I completely do my own after that, because it tells me how to unknot the knot, and, or it kind of like, develops the idea I had a little more specifically so then my brain just starts like, ‘oh, this is what I can do this is what I can do, this is what I can do.’ So, I implement that in my writing, and I don’t use exactly what ChatGPT has told me because I’m just like no ...

Both Hao and Juan use GenAI as a tool in the early stages of their writing processes before they take their writing to the center. They are both very clear about not actually using what GenAI produces. Similarly, Kabir¹⁵ is adamant about his refusal to use any software like GenAI that “does the work for you” or produces text that the writer then uses directly. Kabir prefers Quillbot, which he describes as a “re-worder,” and something that is not cheating in the way that GenAI can be, as “it’s my ideas, but it’s using better words and stuff.”¹⁶ Kabir’s use of AI falls in line with others who use it primarily to give them alternative options for sentence structure and word choice.

While most students were quite mellow in their attitudes, one was very much not. Kira¹⁷ put it perhaps most directly: “I fucking hate ChatGPT,” they said twice during our interview. Despite their frustration, both as a writer and as a teacher, Kira does admit that they use it quite a bit in their workplace but is outraged by its use in the university:

And, don’t get me wrong, I use ChatGPT, cause I do, like, side projects in terms of content writing and stuff, so one of my clients has me writing, um, you know when you have an app, and apps have little chat bubbles that pop up? So, when I’m writing emails and chat bubbles for apps and services that go to clients, I’m using ChatGPT because nobody cares. I know so many people who do for content writing because it’s outsourced to the global south because we’re cheaper labor, apparently, and they use a bunch of ChatGPT for it, and that’s fine, but for academic writing, I fucking hate it because it’s so stupid ...

15 Kabir is a current teaching assistant and soon-to-be graduate student at his alma mater, an R1 in the Midwest. He identifies as Asian, speaks fluent Tamil, and used the writing center extensively to aid him in writing his personal statement for medical school.

16 Quillbot seems to be similar to GenAI in some regards but tends to work with shorter amounts of text.

17 Kira is a genderqueer, neurodivergent humanities graduate student whose first language is Urdu.

Kira goes on to explain that she discourages both her students and herself from using GenAI in academic writing, claiming that she would “much rather get a B or a C and write myself than take a risk on something like that ... it’s not intelligent at all.” Here, Kira justifies her decision to use GenAI for writing about which “nobody cares” but finds a different kind of value in academic writing. Although her exact reasoning for holding this position is not clear, it is possible that, given the inequitable labor conditions of her “content writing” job, she treats the writing with what she deems an equal lack of respect and care by using GenAI.

Similarly, Millie¹⁸ used GenAI during her internship with a non-profit to write up articles and policy memos. Yet, she didn’t like it because “it doesn’t sound like me ... [and it] doesn’t cite sources and it makes stuff up.” She chose not to use it in her legal research class, despite her professor’s encouragement. Kira and Millie are not the only writers to use GenAI for non-academic or course-based purposes: Kabir used AI for medical school applications, and Molly¹⁹ used GenAI to help her write an awards acceptance speech for her program when she had no idea how to start.

Overall, most writers used GenAI as part of their process, along with the more valuable experience of going to the writing center. For example, Kabir used GenAI quite a bit before meeting with his consultant to talk through his statement, often meeting for two hours at a time, twice a week. This aligns with responses from the wider dataset of writers who used the center for high-stakes writing support: Writers go to the writing center for help with applications related to their future (40%, n=57) and to get acclimated to the university (21.1%, n=30). Over 30 percent of memorable stories were about application materials specifically, and the majority of writers interviewed also mentioned using the center for this kind of help. In addition, many writers, especially those returning to school, used the center to help reorient them to university life. A case in point, one writer explains: “I was lost on how to write an essay because I was returning to school after a 15-year gap. The writing center helped me create an outline and answered my questions. They really helped me out.” Similarly, Elena²⁰ admits her temptation but also her fear of cheating and her turn towards the writing center due to her learning style. In other words, these writers have memorable writing center experiences when they are working on or in high-stakes writing environments, either related to their future beyond graduation or in their current moment of higher education, in which they feel under-prepared.

18 Millie is a white, straight female law student with ADHD at an R1 in the South.

19 Molly is a 33–39-year-old mother of three who returned to a two-year college in the West to pursue occupational therapy.

20 Elena is a 33–39-year-old female Hispanic immigrant who speaks Spanish at home and is an undergraduate education student at an HSI in the West.

Worth noting here is that for these writers, who are primarily writers of color, queer identifying, neurodiverse, immigrants, and/or are nontraditional in some way, GenAI may be a tool, but it is not sufficient for providing the human-centered feedback these writers want and need.

WRITING CENTERS AND AI: A WRITER-INFORMED PATH FORWARD

Unsurprisingly, writer feedback about the use and value of GenAI is somewhat varied, although most seem cautiously resistant. Yet, if I listen seriously to what these writers are telling me, then I can't help but hear the value and worth in what we do in writing centers, especially through our human-to-human connections, which are even felt online and asynchronously. These are the writers who came through school during COVID-19, which means they know what it's like to lose human interaction, so perhaps they have a different sense than those who came before or those who will come after. I can't help but think about Amulya and how we failed her. How many students might have a similar reaction to the writing center's use of GenAI? If the writing center doesn't offer human response to writing, then what is the point?

I'm thinking too of Genie Giaimo's recent call for higher education to “invest more in things [like writing centers] that we already know have a deep impact and help students not only to finish their degree, but also to flourish” (“The College Writing Center”). Similarly, I argue that we, too—as educators, writing program administrators, tutors, and writers—should devote ourselves to this kind of work: deep, impactful work that is meaningful to writers and is often affective, collaborative, and human.

Of course, I still recognize that we need to respond to our current technological moment, and that it would be irresponsible to simply ignore GenAI, even though research in this area is still new and evolving. Based on what I have learned from writers in this study so far, here is what I suggest:

1. Keep one-on-one consultations about student writing and human interaction without using GenAI, unless its use is initiated by the writer. This aligns with current writing center pedagogy that emphasizes collaborative agenda setting, and if a writer introduces GenAI into the agenda, then it makes sense for it to be part of the session.
2. Offer outward-facing workshops about GenAI for writers: how to use it ethically, what it's good for, what it's not so good for, etc.
3. Host critical conversations about new technologies (like GenAI) and writing for the campus community.

When I began this research, I was very interested in what we might learn from writers about how best to integrate and work alongside GenAI. I am no longer interested in this. Much to my surprise, my attitude has changed from one of curious optimism to more of an eyeroll to a heartfelt recommitment to the interactive basis of most writing center work. Instead of drinking the GenAI Kool-Aid, perhaps we can continue to do the kind of work we've always done, the kind of work we're known for, and lean into it more. For many students with whom I spoke, for those who are already using their university writing center as an invaluable resource, our physical spaces, our affect, our consultants, our kindness matters at least as much as our pedagogical interventions. Writing centers have long been spaces of and for difference. Spaces of and for writers. When it comes to preserving a space of human-to-human, affective collaboration around writing, I can't help but wonder: if not us, then who?

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