

Notes toward policy and practice around generative AI (gAI) and synthetic text in Literature Humanities, Fall 2023

Joseph A. Howley jah2220@columbia.edu

Associate Professor of Classics and Paul Brooke Program Chair for Literature Humanities

Some Lit Hum instructors preparing for the fall semester have asked for suggestions and guidance around the written work component of Lit Hum in the context of new AI tools. While neither the College nor the Core is issuing any new policies on this, experts and practitioners have spent the last year collecting information and gathering best practices on this front, and I've done my best to arrive at some initial conclusions on the matter. I present my thoughts here in the hopes they may be helpful.

“AI” is a fast-changing and high-profile technology that resists simple blanket policy at the level of an entire course like Lit Hum. Even the moniker “AI” points to its slippery nature: tools like Bard, Llama and Chat-GPT are a form of machine learning known as “Large Language Models”, to which the label “AI” is applied not only for simplicity but also for purposes of marketing and the pursuit of investment and short-term profit. For our purposes, I'll refer to the current crop of these LLM text synthesizers as “generative AI” or “gAI”. Much remains unknown about the future of these tools and their impact. Many of us may have already seen their effects in the classroom, and it is reasonable to worry about the way that the free availability of synthetic text generators may change our practice going forward. Many of us have grown accustomed to using writing assignments in certain ways and for certain purposes, and are reasonably unsettled by the possibility that students could effectively cease to complete these assignments themselves and instead start turning in synthetic text that we could not, at first glance, distinguish from mediocre authentic composition.

But we do not need to panic, nor do we need to reinvent the wheel. In a university, we aim to uphold and instill values of academic integrity, and to encourage a spirit of intellectual inquiry. Both of these might seem threatened by gAI tools. But both academic dishonesty and the evasion of hard intellectual work have always been with us (e.g., students paying someone to write an essay for them). Insofar as gAI tools do represent a real shift, a variety of options and approaches are at our disposal; below I want to lay out which ones I see as most beneficial for a course like Literature Humanities. These are the concrete steps we can take that I think are a) the best use of our time and b) most likely to support our teaching and improve student learning (regardless of the situation with AI). This unsettling of our habits and assumptions is also an opportunity to interrogate our practice and ask if there are better ways to accomplish the things that we have always assumed that certain kinds of assignment would do for us.

Please take these notes as guidelines, suggestions, and as a menu of possible steps to take, not as policy directives.

- **Consider and articulate why you set writing assignments.**
 - Helping students understand the purpose of writing assignments can reduce cheating.
 - Consider the writing assignments you use in Lit Hum. **Why** do you assign them? **What** do you expect students to get out of completing them? Why do they carry the **weight** they do in the overall class grade? What **relation** do your writing assignments have to your overall goals for the course?
 - Articulate the answers to these questions to students as part of the assignment and in class. Transparency about why we set assignments and facilitating student metacognition about the

work they do are two [proven and effective strategies](#) for increasing student engagement and learning.

- You do not *need* to change how you set writing assignments. Simply providing greater transparency to students about the nature and purpose of writing assignments is a small change with transformative potential.
- If you want to explore new ways of thinking about using and teaching writing in your class you might want to consult the book [How Scholars Write](#), by our colleagues Aaron Rizenberg and Sue Mendelsohn. Students may already be encountering this book and some of the methods it describes in *University Writing*.
 - We may not be used to thinking of Lit Hum as a class in which we teach writing, but it is a class in which we use writing; if we are going to use writing in class, we need to teach it.
- If you want to rethink how you use and conduct assessment, a book I have found very readable and thought-provoking is [Specifications Grading](#) by Linda Nilson, especially the first few chapters.
 - Even if you do not adopt the grading approach Nilson advocates for, her analysis of the state of assessment and review of literature is both accessible and clarifying.
- **Give students more opportunities to become comfortable with producing authentic writing in low-stakes contexts.**
 - Helping students get more comfortable with writing can reduce cheating.
 - Writing is often high-stakes for students who do not yet feel comfortable with it.
 - Grade weighting that seems generous to us can still seem high-stakes for students; for example, a paper worth 25% of the final grade where only the final product itself is assessed, rather than any drafts or other parts of the process, can be experienced by students as high-stakes.
 - Consider how students might perceive the risk of performing poorly on any given assignment.
 - Consider integrating writing into class time. This does not need to be assessed writing exercises; instead, you might begin class with five minutes of free writing around a guiding prompt, or you might use a free writing exercise to help students warm up for a class discussion.
 - Set next-class, no-grade, short-term writing assignments. Have students prepare for the next class's discussion, or focus in their reading, by writing a response that will not be graded, but that is targeted at your plan for that next class.
 - Sometimes we use small writing assignments as means of checking the completion of reading assignments, etc. Consider adjusting how you administer such assignments to make them less amenable to cheating with text synthesis *and* more effective at helping students practice writing.

- Scaffold writing assignments in a way that focuses attention and grade weight on process rather than product. You might have students submit outlines, then drafts, before a final submission of an essay, or have them work on part of this process in-class.
- **Educate yourself and your students about what LLM systems are and how they work.**
 - [This lecture available on YouTube](#) by computational linguist Emily Bender, co-author of the important paper "[On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots](#)," is an excellent and scholarly introduction to the history, function, and important features of Large Language Models, and includes a useful framework for thinking about when and where they may or may not be applicable. It may be the single most effective way of spending 45 minutes if you want to learn about these tools and how to think critically about them.
 - Play around with Chat-GPT yourself. Some instructors have found it effective to demo the tool in the classroom as part of discussing an essay assignment, inviting the class to evaluate and critique the synthetic text output.
 - One limitation of this approach is that the tools may not be a capable specimens of the best kind of work we would want students to aspire to. How effective is this for conveying expectations?
 - A more robust critique of this practice might point out that it constitutes free advertising for the products in question, and that user data is training data for these tools, which instructors may not want to be in the business of providing.
 - Another critique would observe that major LLMs are trained on [stolen intellectual property](#) and using [exploitative labor practices](#), presenting an ethical objection to their use, especially in classroom settings. These critiques are worth making to students.
 - *My personal view* is that **faculty who are inclined to learn these tools and deploy them protreptically should feel free to do so, but no faculty should feel obliged to do so, and that there are good reasons not to.**
- **Do** decide on a clear and specific policy for your class about the submission of synthetic text, and make it available clearly.
 - Even in the absence of 'perfect' enforcement tools, these policies help to convey to students your expectations.
 - If you are comfortable with students using gAI tools, you might consider specifying that they should cite their use, whether for synthesizing text, generating ideas, etc. Make clear to students what sort of gAI use should be cited and how you want it cited.
 - More so than a general statement of principle on your syllabus, students are likely to internalize a specific policy about when and how synthetic text may or may not be submitted when it is articulated or reiterated in every applicable context.
 - As with the advice on writing assignments generally above, be sure to explain and discuss with students the rationale for your policy and how it relates to the learning you expect them to do in the course.

- If a student takes one of your writing assignments to the Writing Center, the person helping them should be able to quickly ascertain what your rules and expectations are, the better to steer students away from academic dishonesty.
- For reference, the University Writing syllabus now contains the following language: **“Because essays foreground a writer’s original thinking and language, you may not use AI writing generators to produce language for any draft.”**
 - This is not the only kind of policy statement you might want to include.
 - You might want to specify that text generators cannot be used unless directed otherwise for a specific assignment, or that certain kind of use is permissible with citation (see above)
- **Don’t pursue perfect or automated enforcement of a ban on “AI” tools.**
 - There are no effective or reliable “AI detectors” that can distinguish synthetic from authentic text. The best [don’t work](#) and the worst are [discriminatory](#).
 - Machine-synthesized text in the Lit Hum context can have certain tells; for example, an LLM will reliably invent quotations from books.
 - Breaking down large assignments allows you to watch as students’ ideas progress and evolve over time. This might discourage the use of gAI by making the use of such tools more time consuming than doing the writing on their own.
 - Best practices when you suspect students are submitting other than their own work remains the same: speak to the student and ask about their process for producing the work, and discuss specific passages or aspects of the work that give you pause.
 - [The Center for Teaching and Learning has resources on Academic Integrity](#)
 - [College policy and resources on Academic Integrity can be found here](#)
 - If you suspect a student of cheating, you should [contact Larry Jackson](#)
- **Do as much as you are inclined and able.**
 - You are not **obliged** to throw out all your assignments and syllabi, shift everything to oral examination and in-class writing, or invent an entirely new way of teaching. Small changes can be effective in ameliorating some of the worst potential adverse impacts of these tools.
 - You are **welcome** to be as creative as you want and are able. The only requirement of writing as a component of Lit Hum is that students complete 12-15 pages (3000-3750 words) of graded writing each semester; how they do that writing and what form it takes is at your discretion.
 - Remember that some students may need to use electronic devices for writing assignments. They should have documentation from ODS to support this. You can still assign in-class writing, and you may ask all students to write longhand except those with such accommodations.
 - Keep notes. This spring, we will hold a triennial syllabus review for Lit Hum, and I intend to consider assessment in addition to the reading list. I hope that we can distill some lessons from teaching in this new environment to inform that discussion, and if you experiment with new

approaches, I will look forward to hearing about your experience. Please keep some notes on how it goes.

Transparency and metacognition are the watchwords for more effective assignments and more engaged student learning. As we explore ways of responding to this shifting situation, whether with new approaches or familiar ones, we should involve our students in our process. If you are trying something new, or using something old and familiar, explain to students why you are doing it and what your expectations are, get their feedback, and try to learn from them about their own experiences, expectations, and challenges.

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