

Meta-Writing: AI and Writing

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Can I just say? *And* is one of my favorite coordinating conjunctions. It's so deceptively simple, sitting there in between two things, just connecting them—but the sneaky thing about *and* is that you never quite know what kind of connection it is making until you figure out what kind of connection it is making. *And* can be used to connect two parallel items (oranges and lemons), to indicate sequence (go and sit), to indicate addition (and baby makes three). It can also, weirdly, be used to double up on identical words: to indicate progression along a state (I am getting hungrier and hungrier), to intensify (I have been writing for ages and ages), or—God help me, what a joker this little word is—to flag how one word can be itself in more than one way: “Aimée is writing and *writing* this piece.”¹

The prompt “AI and Writing” is an *evocative* formulation: it juxtaposes two concepts without indicating the nature of the relationship between them. What *is* the relationship between them? This prompt opens up ideas. I begin to imagine possible relationships, branches of inquiry or argument, and now I'm curious. “AI and Writing” is a *provocative* formulation, too: the relationship of AI to writing is currently the matter of heated debate, often polarized. The agnostic attitude connoted by the *and* feels dangerous and urgent: this is no time for neutrality! This is existential stuff! I experience a strong, possibly negative reaction, as if the phrase is goading me with its impassivity: my heart races and my palms start to sweat. So now I'm also a bit agitated, in the part of my brain where facts meet values, and ideas meet structures. When I encountered the prompt “AI and Writing,” then, I got excited: my affect, certainly, is “very enthusiastic and eager,” and there is something elemental happening, too, more akin to the way *excited* is defined in physics as “an energy state higher than the normal or ground state” (Apple Dictionary app), like a crackling cloud in a rumbling sky when the hair on your arms starts to stand up just before the discharge of lightning, like the Beastie Boys rapping “I'm rolling down the hill, snowballing, getting bigger / An explosion in the chamber, the hammer from the trigger” (Beastie Boys).

This is what writing feels like for me, every time: surprising and joyous and confounding and allusive and elusive and annoying and impossible.

Writing: “AI and Writing”

The passage above took me two weeks to write, but also 20 minutes to write, and then a week to edit.

What I did was this: I chewed on the prompt of “AI and Writing” in my head for about a week, started free writing on my computer and scribbling on bits of paper at random times, became distressed by how upset the topic made me and the sheer number of reasons that it upset me, discussed some ideas with friends, collected and read a blizzard of op-eds and journalistic pieces, (re)wrote many hundreds of words into the stubs I had started, and became overwhelmed. I then capped this stage off with the advanced self-soothing/avoidance techniques of expelling my best one-liners on Twitter, practicing particularly complicated passages of Debussy for many hours on the piano accompanied by a relentlessly dinging digital metronome, summoning a martini, and taking to my bed early with the hard sudoku on the *New York Times* web app.

What I did was this: I woke up, still sulking, ate Shreddies doused in almond beverage, in bed, and suddenly realized I had just spent two weeks enacting in my process what I had been trying to grab at with my prose. I opened my laptop, then Pages, then the dictionary app. I looked up *coordinating conjunction*, and then I looked up *and*, and then I looked up *excited*, and then I looked up *evocative*, and then I looked up *provocative*, and then 20 minutes later 20 percent of this piece was written. Then I scribbled to myself: “Beastie Boys,” “Duckworth dog bone,” “stupid sci-fi bafflegab magic Clarke,” and dove head first into some brand new internet holes where I spent the next hour getting giddy on ideas.

What I did was this: Repeatedly snuck back into those paragraphs for 20 seconds or three minutes at a time, fussing the words, or the pace, then snuck back out again, for the next week.

What I did was this: wRiTInG and ‘writing’ and ✨writing✨ and *writing*.

Generated Response: “AI and Writing”

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become increasingly prevalent in the field of writing, with numerous applications and tools available to assist writers in various aspects of the writing process. Some of the ways in which AI is used in writing include:

1. Grammar and spell-checking: Many word processing programs and online writing tools incorporate AI-powered grammar and spell-checking features that can help writers catch errors and improve the quality of their writing.
2. Content creation: AI-powered content creation tools can help writers generate ideas, develop outlines, and even create entire pieces of content based on specific keywords or topics.

3. Language translation: AI-powered language translation tools can help writers translate content from one language to another, making it easier to reach a wider audience.
4. Text analysis: AI-powered text analysis tools can help writers analyze the effectiveness of their writing by providing insights into factors such as readability, tone, and sentiment.
5. Writing assistants: AI-powered writing assistants can provide writers with suggestions for improving their writing, such as alternative word choices or sentence structures, helping to improve the overall quality of the writing. While AI has the potential to be a valuable tool for writers, it is important to note that it is not a substitute for human creativity and critical thinking. Writers should still be mindful of the context and purpose of their writing, and should use AI tools as a supplement to their own knowledge and expertise, rather than relying on them entirely. With the right balance of human skill and AI-powered assistance, writers can produce high-quality content that effectively communicates their message to their intended audience.

“Indistinguishable from Magic”

In 1973, the science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke offered up his Third Law: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” which is the kind of thing science fiction writers like to pronounce, and op-ed writers like to quote (Clarke; Dunn; Karpf). Certainly, it is not difficult to find popular writing on generative AI that leans heavily into awe, wonder, fear, and other forms of “magical” thinking. I think this is misplaced: a generative AI is mostly lightning-fast computational grinding. The “writing” it spits out is essentially the sum of brute force data scraping and storage, brute force processing power, and some clever procedures that have as their ultimate purpose a passable mimicry of written human language. Essentially, ChatGPT can largely be understood as the code version of the “infinite monkeys theorem,” in which it is surmised that, given enough time, an infinite number of monkeys bashing away at an infinite number of typewriters will, without muse or intent or an MFA, reproduce, say, the works of Shakespeare. It’s not magic; it’s just grunt work made workable by the sheer scale of resources thrown at it, with the resources in the case of generative AI being of the computing rather than simian variety. A Large Language Model (that’s what ChatGPT is) is programmed to calculate a plausible-sounding (not “correct,” please note) text output in response to a prompt. It’s just *faster monkeys* if those monkeys had been told what task they were meant to accomplish and been given a

massive subset of human writing to cut, paste, and recombine from instead of randomly smacking at individual typewriters keys.

What's really magic, actually, is writing. Writing is speech by other means, and both more and less than speech. Writing is an act of communication, of persuasion, of instruction, of exploration. What an amazing, unlikely, hopeful thing writing is: to think beyond the present moment, to develop a system of inscription and abstraction to catch and save and share ideas, to imagine an audience, to desire to reach them. What a human thing to do! I wish we spent more time being amazed by writing. I wish we spent even some tiny fraction of the time, curiosity, effort, and money that we are willing to spend to teach machines to imitate writing on teaching human beings how to write. Mostly, we are enmeshed in systems where we find ourselves removed from the possibility and opportunities for amazement, instead finding ourselves harried, under-resourced, and worried that maybe writing is over and our jobs along with it. This moment of reckoning, though, might also be the evocative and provocative prompt that lets us see *What Writing Is And What's It's For* with more clarity and power—and to fight for it.

Writers versus “Writing”

Consider my response to the prompt “AI and Writing,” versus what ChatGPT generated. I hope you found my writing engaging and surprising. I was trying to capture the giddiness of discovery, the play of ideas and words, the means by which the act of writing or even thinking about writing is the most powerful form of active learning I have ever experienced, to show rather than tell. I'm reading bits out loud to my teenager and laughing my ass off, and then re-writing things to put the beats where I want them, changing words, moving sentences. I am trying to open a little space in your brain to see the question of AI and Writing the way I see it. As a 750-word essay on AI and Writing for a first year academic writing course? I would probably earn a pretty lousy grade, if we're being honest. There is the personal pronoun. Emoji. Expressive typography. Non-standard paragraph structure. No clear thesis. Contractions. Colloquialisms. The Beastie Boys are not an academic source. It is a surprising response to the provided prompt, and “surprising” in academic writing courses is usually not celebrated. In fact, my writing seems almost willfully insubordinate, self-sabotaging, as if I'm “just looking for a fist / to put [my] face in” (Beastie Boys).

The AI-generated response, by contrast, is a marvel of correct, mild-mannered, balanced, objective prose. It has a clear introduction and a summary conclusion. It makes clear points organized sensibly into a numbered list, which is consistently formatted and pleasingly parallel in construction and theme. No careless errors or shifts in tone or wild swings at stray pitches.

No split infinitives. The impression it gives is of smooth confidence and competence, the soothing quality of authority that oozes from abstract nouns in sentences crafted in faultless Standard English. If you read it with an eye to content, however, you might notice: the response is a bit repetitive, and it's also internally contradictory in ways it doesn't seem aware of.

- Are “writing” and “content” the same thing?
- What is the difference between “grammar and spell-checking” and “text analysis”?
- Is the goal to improve writing or produce more writing faster?
- What is a “writing assistant”?

There seems to be some sort of unaddressed power struggle between human writer and AI content creation hidden inside abstract nouns: The items are grammatically but not semantically parallel. Nevertheless, it's the kind of expository writing—*real talk*—that would get a high grade in most high school classrooms and many university ones. Hypnotized by form and tone, it's easy to miss that this says almost nothing concrete, or valuable, and doesn't really cohere. Or perhaps we don't really look: one of my own colleagues, hearing me rant about the insipidity of AI writing, told me, “If my students produced insipid writing that was grammatically correct? I would be delighted. A+.”

“Delight Me”

Every year I hand out syllabi to first year university students afraid to write literally anything at all, who enter my classroom as if walking towards their own executions, who experience reading and writing as a rigged game with secret rules applied arbitrarily by a series of stern authority figures drawing blood and draining the life force from their GPA with runic spells cast by red pens: frag, agr, colloq, red. They want to see the rubric. They want to know the formula. They want grammar worksheets for extra credit. They want to know exactly what they have to put on paper and how to control the outcome. They want to know what ideas they are meant to be arguing. They do not want to free write; they look physically pained when brainstorming. Writing is an obstacle between them and their future, a future without writing in it. They are resentful. They will tell me on the first day of class: I don't want to be here; I'm bad at writing; I'm never going to need this. *Just tell me the right answer, and I'll do it.* The conclusion I've come to is this: my students think that good writing is producing an error-free response to a prompt—that there's an ideal answer that the prompter already knows, and the goal of writing is to approach that secret answer as near as possible, with the least amount of risking being wrong. They think this because it has been, actually, much of their experience of writing in school contexts, which is what they consider to

be writing. In many cases, we have been training them to try to write like a machine would. Smooth, bland, correct, formulaic, compliant, voiceless, not-wrong. ChatGPT does it better, but it's never been worth doing: this is why students hate writing it and you hate grading it.

In a first year writing-intensive English course on Digital Lives, I had a student come to my office after the first assignment, to ask where he had “lost grades.” Computer science and engineering students ask me this question very frequently. He had done quite well, and I told him so in my standard response. “But how,” he asked, “if I wanted to get a higher mark? What would I have to do?” I surprised myself by answering: “Delight me.” And then he surprised me: he kept coming to my office, kept talking through with me what could distinguish writing that got the job done from writing that was delightful. How the way we express the idea—through pacing or vocabulary or register—makes up a good part of persuasion and effectiveness. I told him to read more, to notice the writing, to mark where he was surprised, to feel where the beats landed. He would need to risk a big idea and try to find the way to understand it by writing his way in, taking his reader with him. He kept pushing, and I kept pushing. By the end of the term, he was getting grades in the mid 90s. It was not so much that he was submitting better writing projects, although he was, but that he was really developing a sense of what writing can be and do. We were both delighted.

Writing without Writers

Generative AI pretends that there can be writing without writers, which is as nonsensical as suggesting there can be swimming without swimmers, or breathing without breathers. The advantage that human writers have—beyond our crystallized knowledge, contextual understanding, desire to connect, and gift for linguistic and syntactical innovation—is that we seek, produce, and discern meaning. The mirage of sufficiently advanced AI blinds us to the fact that it is nothing more than an imitation game, an infinite number of monkeys, a stochastic parrot. The generated text is boring, or derivative, or both, and often factually incorrect. When I write, it's because I have something to say, and I know that if I do it persuasively, I can change some part of the world in some small way. It's because I love endlessly looking up words I already know, to disrupt my reliance on received understanding. It's because I know I will emerge with so many more ideas than I started with, and I find that exciting. It's because the way I'm going to write is going to sound like me and that's how that differs from what others would write is what makes up the scholarly conversation. My students deserve to feel like this too, but they don't. Most of my writing instruction is now oriented toward teaching my students that their own ideas are worth expressing, that they're not “writing

up results” so much as “writing into understanding,” that their language is valuable, and their experiences relevant, that I am a real reader ready to learn from what they write. I mostly try to nurture in them the passion, purpose, and perseverance that Angela Duckworth names as the core components of “grit”—that quality that motivates and sustains doing hard and ambitious things. A writer who does not care about a topic, and sees no point in writing, is never going to write anything worth reading. That isn’t just a poor imitation of some poorly understood ideal instance—since ChatGPT is so good at producing that kind of text, we can with confidence release our students from that burden.

And where might we go then?

Notes

1. “And” is a conjunction, I feel, that, like, *gets* différence in a fundamental way.

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