

A Loss for Words

By Christina Taheri

I probably shouldn't say this, but sometimes I fantasize about hurting Sam Altman. In this fantasy, he is attending one of those artificial intelligence evangelistic events, a conversation on a stage with two den chairs and a coffee table. He speaks with glib optimism about generative AI. "This technology," he says, "will usher in a future defined by *productivity*."

And with this word I will go apeshit like a savage predatory creature, wild and injured. I'll pounce and lash at him with unmanicured nails, digging into his baby-face skin, screaming at him with my torrent of rage. Under most circumstances, I'm not one for violence or profanity, but I'd let him have it. I find comfort in knowing I'm not the only teacher who feels this way. Just check out the educator support groups on Reddit.

Something happened this week that made me feel all of this with renewed force. Four students in one of my classes used ChatGPT to complete a major writing assignment. I know this because I require my students to draft their work online, which creates a version history of their writing process. The version history presents a time stamp and tracks the changes of a document. The time stamps should show the labor of trying out an idea or turn of phrase, rejecting the idea, retrying it with different words, moving on, and returning back. When two pages of polished writing appear within a minute in the version history, this raises suspicions because, as everyone knows, it takes longer than a minute to write two pages.

I filed four academic integrity violation reports Thursday evening, and grew increasingly irritable with each one. The entire process took four hours and left me feeling decidedly *unproductive*. The work I had hoped to accomplish—grading, prepping, reading—all got displaced, and I seethed. When my husband asked a simple question, I yelled a salty response. The dog wandered in the room, whining and hoping for a walk; I barked at her to go away. My son treaded lightly. A version of this scenario has happened every semester since the release of ChatGPT in November 2022.

Out of the four reports I wrote, one girl in particular stood out. Significant portions of her assignment appeared without process work, and the language of the writing read as synthetic, polished, and vacuous. The writing scanned as 98% possibility of being AI generated in two different AI detectors. I emailed her and asked if she possibly used an offline draft to complete some of the work. I'm not sure why I did this; it wouldn't prove she had done the work herself. She emailed me that yes, she had used an offline draft and included the file in an attachment. I checked the document properties, which showed the beginning date of the document was the same day as my email. This could only mean that she had cheated and was now lying about it.

Since Open AI released ChatGPT nearly a year and a half ago, and it became clear how effective it would be at responding to any writing prompt instantaneously, I've experienced a series of personal crises in varying levels of acuity. First, I feared my job as a writing teacher had suddenly become irrelevant. What's the point of a writing class if you can ask a chatbot to say whatever you want and see it respond with superior precision and insight, instantaneously drawing from all of the collective knowledge ever expressed by humanity?

And even if I still had a job, how should one teach writing now that these chatbots exist and aren't going away? How can teachers get students to buy into the grueling process of learning to write? How should a teacher grade papers now that students can cheat so easily? Also, isn't it inevitable that humanity will collectively become dumber as we rely more and more on super intelligent chatbots to do all our thinking for us?

Other anxieties followed. The rapid succession of technological revolutions—television, personal computer, internet, smartphones, social media, generative AI—force masses of humanity to adapt to radical new ways of being in the world at a pace of change that feels like driving with the accelerator stuck on the gas, careening out of control. Students entering college, saddling themselves with debt, could see their entire field become obsolete by the time they graduate. Education aims to prepare people with skills and competencies for the working world, but how can teachers do this when foundational skills the workforce depends on today could become irrelevant tomorrow? When else in human history has the pace of change been so expeditious and radical? These cycles of technological innovation and obsolescence impose on us a constant pressure to adapt to cataclysmic disruptions, a kinetosis so cut off from former ways of living that we can no longer imagine, let alone remember, what's been lost.

But perhaps my alarm was overblown.

As months went by, and writing programs across the country didn't collapse into oblivion as I initially feared, my anxieties eased with a sense that jobs like mine will remain necessary, at least for the meantime. After all, learning happens through the writing process. Knowledge generation passes from one mind to another through the writing process. Aptly conveying thought and feeling into words is a skill that will always be important to people, even if a computer appears able to do it perfectly for us.

To my relief, with each new semester, I found that it has been fairly easy to get most students to buy into the goal of a writing class. The vast majority of students want to learn and grow and change. They want to be more able, not less. They recognize that something is lost when everything is gained too easily, that there's value in working through a personal weakness, trying and failing, retrying and improving enough to eventually be able to do something or experience something precious and essential.

But for other students, and for many people, expression through writing is just so hard. In one of Raymond Carver's short stories, the narrator attempts to describe a cathedral to a blind man, and he gives it his best shot, but he sputters in stops and starts. His language is inadequate to

describe something so vast and majestic. Tom Jenks, who edited some of Carver's work, revealed that this story originated from a moment Carver experienced himself—a guy whose writing was so good it fed his family. The narrator comes to the end of what his words are able to do. This happens to all of us. It's the most helpless feeling.

Carver understood the frustrating experience with language as a deep personal struggle—and an opportunity. The story ends with the narrator and the blind man sitting on the floor, both holding a single pen, drawing a cathedral together in a breathtaking moment of human connection. The idea is that when language fails, art can take over as a powerful medium for a meaningful shared experience.

And now we can easily bypass that struggle. ChatGPT, describe a cathedral:

Picture standing at the entrance of a cathedral. The air inside is cool and carries a subtle scent of aged stone and polished wood. As you step forward, your footsteps echo softly, creating a sense of space and vastness. The sound seems to bounce off high walls and arches, creating a symphony of echoes that adds to the cathedral's imposing presence.

Run your hands along the sturdy columns that line the nave. They are cool and smooth to the touch, with intricate carvings telling stories of faith and history. The texture beneath your fingertips reveals the craftsmanship and dedication that went into creating this architectural masterpiece.

Above, imagine the ceiling soaring high, so high that it seems to disappear into darkness. This height creates a sense of awe and reverence, emphasizing the verticality that symbolizes a connection between Earth and the divine. As you listen, you might hear the faint rustle of air, carried by the vaulted ceiling high above.

Feel the warmth of sunlight streaming through stained glass windows, casting a kaleidoscope of colors on the floor. Sense the play of light as it dances and bathes the space in a soft, colorful glow. Each window tells its own story through the patterns and imagery, conveying a narrative of faith and spirituality.

In the center of the cathedral, imagine a massive organ, its pipes reaching towards the heavens. The deep, resonant tones of the organ reverberate through the space, creating a powerful and emotional atmosphere that envelops you. The music adds another layer to the experience, stirring the soul and evoking a sense of transcendence.

I arrived to class ten minutes early, and she was there, the student who had cheated and lied. She was waiting for me and asked very softly if we could talk privately, so quietly that I had to ask her to repeat herself.

Even though I didn't know her well, I genuinely liked her. She was an international student who had qualified for a scholarship from her country's government. In her conversations with friends before class, they would speak in their native language sounding like water rolling over smoothed stones; she was playful and boisterous, easygoing and quick to laugh. As she stood in front of me in the dim light of the classroom, I noticed for the first time how small she was. This young woman, always so bubbly and enthusiastic, was crestfallen and despairing.

We stepped out of the classroom and walked toward a bench. Even as we walked down the hall together, she tried to explain what happened. "I just want to show you," she kept saying. She opened her laptop and went to the class project. "Look, see? I opened it now, and it shows that the document is created now. But see? When I sent you the file, I didn't know that you suspected me." I was confused but tried to follow along. We were looking at the file she completed offline. This wouldn't prove that she had written the project herself. She was trying to show me that she didn't intend to lie about it when she sent me the file.

I could see what she was getting at. The document properties showed that the file began a few minutes before our conversation started even though it was clear that the document was the same file she had sent the day before. She hadn't been trying to lie.

As she walked me through the document, she grew agitated with the sense that she could not show me anything to prove that she didn't cheat. Her lips began to tremble. As we sat on the bench together, two students from class walked by. Her eyes welled with tears. I knew she didn't do the work, and I explained how I knew. I hated confronting her about it. I just want to teach writing. I want to enjoy my students. I don't want to accuse people of wrongdoing, chase them down, report them to some committee, and watch them squirm.

We sat together with the computer on her lap. I could see every part of her face, the smooth skin of her youth, the creases where she smiles, every hair in her eyebrows, her expression floundering between hurt and humiliation. "I shouldn't cry in front of you," she said whispering to herself as she whipped her face with a ready tissue. "I don't want you to think badly of me." She was trying to convey something, and it was getting caught in her throat. She spoke moving her hands like she was using a tool to gain momentum. "I'm not that kind of person. I don't want you to think bad of me..." Her voice quaked in her mouth. "...Because I am close to you."

She looked at me for a moment the way that broken people look out at the world with a constant question mark, asking if anyone can fill in the gaps enough to make meaning from a jumble of confounding feelings. She turned away to wipe her eyes.

And I recognized this. It was so familiar.

I saw myself. A desire for nothing more than to please. A desperation to be liked by a teacher I thought about outside of class. A longing to impress and a sense of my lagging inadequacy. With her back turned to me, I resisted the urge to reach out and hold her, to embrace this version of my student self and tell her I understood everything. I understood what happened and

why and that I'm so sorry. I wanted to shed her remorse, to forgive her, to give her enough of myself to restore what had been lost.

"I don't think badly of you," was all I could say.