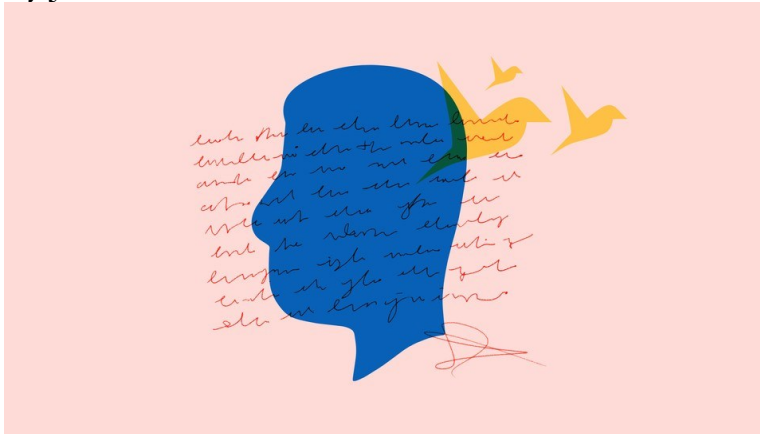# What ChatGPT Can't Teach My Writing Students

Learning to write trains your imagination to construct the person who will read your words.

By Jonathan Malesic

Tyler Comrie / The Atlantic
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As the first student papers of the academic semester come rolling in, college and high-school teachers are expressing concern about ChatGPT, the artificial-intelligence interface that responds to queries with competent, if boring, paragraphs. It seems to open up whole new vistas of academic dishonesty, and it calls into question how and why we teach writing at all. A professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School has said that ChatGPT's answers to his operations-management class would have earned a B or B–. That seems about right; if a student in my first-year writing class had turned in a ChatGPT-generated essay last semester (and for all I know, someone did), they would have easily passed.

The fact is, boring competence is better than what some high-school or college graduates attain, and it's all most people, in their daily lives, need their writing to be. If, in a few years, AI can do a passable job at most adult writing tasks—sharing information, telling quick stories, apologizing for the delay, and expressing a hope that all is well—then why spend so much time in school learning the maddening complexities of English prose? Surely there are more important things to study than subject-verb agreement, comma splices, and transition sentences.

But learning to write is about more than learning to write. For one thing, it's about learning to turn a loose assemblage of thoughts into a clear line of reasoning—a skill that is useful for everyone, not just those who enjoy writing or need to do a lot of it for work.

Just as important, learning to write trains your imagination to construct the person who will read your words. Writing, then, is an ethical act. It puts you in relation to someone you may not know, someone who may, in fact, not yet exist. When you learn to write, you learn to exercise your responsibility to that person, to meet their needs in a context you cannot fully know. That might sound like a lofty goal for a paper about, for instance, the major causes of the American Revolution. But even that bog-standard assignment can get students to anticipate what another person knows and expects. You wouldn't write the same essay to a veterans' group as you would to new immigrants.

Writing is never simply self-expression. It's expression to a specific audience for a specific purpose. In some cases, like a love letter, a writer knows their audience intimately. In others, the audience is every bit a work of the imagination as a novel's characters are.

Great writers have known this truth for centuries. Nathaniel Hawthorne writes in the introduction to _The Scarlet Letter_ that "when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates and lifemates." Writers, then, should give up trying to address the public at large, but should "imagine that a friend, a kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend, is listening to our talk."

I would not go so far as to say that you and I are friends, but to convince you that I'm right about writing and the moral imagination, I need to make a mental model of who you are: what you value, what annoys you, how much explanation and evidence you need. And then I invite that imaginary version of you to look over my shoulder and suggest revisions. My editors give voice to a model of you too. (And meanwhile, advertising software compiles its own portrait.) If the essay is to succeed, our models must do justice to who you are. That's the first step in our responsibility to you.

When this act of imagination is executed well, a reader can feel profoundly understood, as if a stranger has told them some previously unknown truth about themselves. That's how I felt reading Meghan Daum's 2014 essay "Difference Maker," which is about her ambivalence toward parenthood and her somewhat ineffectual advocacy for children in

the foster-care system. Daum describes a "Central Sadness" that became a "third party" in her marriage. "It collected around our marriage like soft, stinky moss," she writes. "It rooted our arguments and dampened our good times. It taunted us from the sidelines of our social life."

My wife and I both read the essay when it came out and thought, *Yes, this is what we're feeling*. Our Central Sadness had a different character than Daum's had, but it played a similar role for us. Naming the affliction didn't solve the problem, but it did help us understand its depths. Reading the essay was therapeutic.

Writers are not morally better in their behavior than other people, and writing is not the only way to <u>develop</u> an empathetic mind. In fact, in the age of Instagram and <u>Substack</u>, many writers abuse their power to forge imaginary connections by cultivating one-sided, parasocial relationships with readers. Through calculated oversharing about their daily lives, authors can maintain the illusion that they are their readers' smartest or funniest or most curmudgeonly friends.

Still, developing this ability to connect with others through the imagination is central to ethical life. The philosopher Mark Johnson argues in his 1993 book, *<u>Moral Imagination</u>*, that ethics is not primarily about applying universal rules to specific situations but about "the ongoing imaginative exploration of possibilities for dealing with our problems, enhancing the quality of our communal relations, and forming significant personal attachments that grow." Empathy plays a central role in this model of ethics. We cannot act responsibly toward others unless we "go out toward people to inhabit their worlds, not just by rational calculations, but also in imagination, feeling, and expression."

School, however, does not often train students to exercise this mode of imagination through writing. "I find that when students arrive in college, they don't see writing as a medium of communication, really," Jim Warren, an English professor at the University of Texas at Arlington who specializes in rhetoric and composition, told me. "They see it as sort of this engineering task that they're then going to present to us as examiner and hopefully have us say, 'Yeah, you did it right.'"

A big part of the problem, Warren writes in a recent article, is that though all 50 states' education standards (plus those in the District of Columbia) require that students learn to write essays to specific audiences, only 12 states actually test high-school students on this ability. And because tests drive curricula, Warren contends, it is likely that students in the majority of states are getting little, if any, instruction in how to write with an audience other than their teacher in mind.

To be sure, trying to figure out "what the teacher wants" is an exercise in moral imagination, albeit a limited one. The task for teachers is to expand that exercise. Warren told me that for some assignments, his students write about whatever they want to whomever they think needs what they have to say. The students then research this audience and explain to Warren whose eyes he'll read their paper through. In peer-editing sessions, students adopt the mindset of one another's audiences. Warren said students tell him at the end of the semester that the exercise gets them thinking more about readers' expectations. "I think it moves the needle a bit," he said.

In the scope of human history, mass literacy is a new phenomenon. Today, just about anyone can, in principle, communicate to someone far away in time and space. Writing is not the only modern form of action at a distance, though. Around the same time that human societies became literate on a large scale, their citizens also began burning mass quantities of fossil fuels that, we now know, can make life much harder for people who are far away in time and space.

Some of the biggest ethical challenges facing residents of rich countries in this century have to do with how we act toward people we can only imagine: climate refugees who (for now) mostly live far away, future people who will inhabit post-Anthropocene Earth, artificial intelligences, and animals whom we see as having a growing scope of rights.

Now that we are beginning to reckon with the harm we have done to the climate and are trying to reverse it, we need every bit of the empathetic imagination that mass literacy fosters. It seems inevitable that large-language models of AI will allow us to offload some of the writing tasks that students learn in school. But we can't allow ourselves to lose the capacity to empathize with distant strangers at just the moment when we're more able than ever to communicate with them.