Like many writing researchers, I’m also a Writing Program Administrator (WPA). Alongside my research in computation and writing, I direct the composition program at University of Pittsburgh. Here, I write from this perspective as a WPA, at least as much as from my research expertise in computation and writing. Despite and even because I believe generative AI will be part of our writing landscape from now on, I want to make a case for leaning into the writing process, leaning into engaged writing pedagogy.¹

The other thing I want to tell you about this piece is that it’s based on a short talk I gave on invitation from Pitt’s Faculty Senate, with our Chancellor and Provost in the audience, on the morning of my colleague Dave Bartholomae’s passing. As I was drafting the remarks, I knew that Dave was in hospice care, and I was thinking about what his teaching and research meant for Pitt and for the field of composition. I kept steering away from a more technical angle for the talk, away from my research on AI and writing, and toward my role as the Director of Composition at Pitt. I kept thinking about first year composition. And when I think about first year composition, I think about Dave Bartholomae.

Dave was an endowed chair in composition at Pitt, a giant in the field of composition, a former chair of our English department (14 years!), winner of the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize (2004) and the CCCC Exemplar Award (2006), Pennsylvania Professor of the Year (2014), and a great colleague, mentor, and teacher. His co-authored Ways of Reading is a popular composition textbook. His article, “Inventing the University” (1986), which describes the way first year students have to imagine the university in order to reproduce its discourse, is hugely influential in the field of composition. Essays were his medium, and he wrote many that featured student writing and thinking. Dave was a big man in his perspective and his presence and his influence on the English department and the composition program at Pitt. In 1975, Dave chose a position at Pitt in composition over one elsewhere in Victorian literature. He taught first year writing throughout his career—an orientation I admired so much it influenced my own decision to join Pitt’s faculty. In his last year at Pitt, he requested to teach Workshop in Composition in order to return to the course and the students who helped to launch his career. His heart was always in writing and teaching.

Dave’s influence is all over the argument I make here. He always thought of me as a tech person—which he, decidedly, was not—but I like to think that, near the end of us working together, he understood the value of having a
tech person in the humanist camp. I tried to carry out that role when I spoke on the day of his passing and in what I share with you below.

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The composition program at Pitt teaches over 7,000 students a year in first year writing and general education writing classes for students across the university. In its structure and emphasis, Pitt’s composition program is a lot like those at other universities. Our courses focus on students, and we do that through the texts they read and produce. We focus on students’ writing processes, what they think and grapple with as they write, how they change and grow in that process. In first year composition, we sometimes call this “writing for critical inquiry.” The first course goal for our first year composition course is this:

**Engage in composing as a creative, disciplined form of critical inquiry.**

In this course, you’ll compose as a way to generate ideas as well as explain them. You’ll form questions, explore problems, and examine your own experiences, thoughts, and observations. Investigating a multifaceted subject, you’ll be expected to make productive use of uncertainty as you participate in sustained scrutiny of the issues at hand.

We ask students to generate ideas, form questions, examine their own experiences, and “make productive use of uncertainty.” While many universities’ first year composition courses focus on argument, the model at Pitt avoids “arguments” per se. As a teacher coming from an argument-based tradition, it took me a long time to understand what that meant.

Making productive use of uncertainty runs counter to what large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT represent, and even what ChatGPT outputs when I ask it about the value of writing: to explain, to argue, to persuade. ChatGPT is—infamously—never uncertain. It responds with confidence if it’s right and even if it’s obviously, tragically wrong. More importantly, it has no relationship to what it means to be uncertain, to inquire, to examine its own experiences. It has no stakes in what it writes.

The writing for critical inquiry that our first year students do isn’t about projecting confidence. It’s not about getting points in a row with a thesis statement that lays them out and a conclusion that restates them. Writing for productive uncertainty isn’t that neat or simple. It’s based on the idea that students can thrive wrestling with difficult texts, that they can come up with
new and important questions about their worlds and their own words. The point isn’t what kind of writing students produce, exactly, although writing is the medium students use to pursue their inquiry. The point is the process they went through to get there. The point is the challenge: the pleasurable difficulty of writing and reading.

Key to this model of writing for critical inquiry are teachers who talk with students, who foster conversations among students about their writing, who read student writing, who host communities of students listening to each other, teachers who serve as authentic sounding boards and audiences for student writing. This kind of teaching works in small classes where students get to know each other and where the teacher knows them and their writing process. Crucially, there are no right answers at which to arrive.

ChatGPT’s model of writing is something else. It is about arriving at answers. And when economists project that large language models will automate the teaching of first year composition, which they have (Felten), that’s the model of writing they’re thinking of. Shrink the vision of what writing is for and then it can be automated. Writing is for conveying forgone conclusions. It’s a conduit for information. The student could automate much of their writing in this model, it’s true. And the teacher could automate their comments back. And the student and teacher could then go off and do something else while their AI proxies send writing back and forth, in an infinite ouroboros! This is no one’s utopia.

Our undergraduates don’t want this world either. In surveys I have given in our composition courses over the academic year, our undergraduates overwhelmingly recognized the value of the writing process, and they comment that using a software platform to generate essays is completely missing the point of their composition course.

But, as we respond to this new reality of large language models that can write, as the model of writing for right answers gets integrated into our word processors, as the breathless rhetoric about efficiency and amplification of intelligence that accompanies the generative AI discourse gets operationalized in the very materials we use to compose and think with, I keep returning to our model of first year composition, to the idea of writing for critical inquiry—writing for productive uncertainty.

When I think about first year composition, I think about my colleague Dave Bartholomae. When Dave retired from Pitt in 2018, he sent
a few colleagues and former students “The Last Stack,” an unpublished reflection on grading his last stack of student papers and featuring—as he always did—student writing. He wrote:

I’ve taught intro writing courses just about every semester since 1973. I’ve learned to read and to value student writing for what it is and what it does, and for what it can and can’t do, particularly over time. As I prepared this collection, I was surprised to see how consistent my teaching has been from beginning to end, from Basic Reading and Writing in 1975 to Travel Writing in 2018. I was teaching writing as a way for writers to generously and productively locate themselves in worlds they don’t and can’t command, worlds both physical and discursive—an appropriate lesson, I believe, for the work of the academy and for life as an adult.

Dave was still and always learning from students.

Large language models like ChatGPT have become exceptionally good at writing answers. And even if they’re not always right just yet, they’re getting better every day. But: writing like that misses the plot. The writing of LLMs is about arguments and answers, not the kind of writing that Dave was talking about: the very human act of “writers generously and productively locate[ing] themselves in worlds they don’t and can’t command, worlds both physical and discursive.”

Against the headwind of generative AI, I keep returning to what I learned from Dave and other colleagues, about the human act of writing. And I wonder: what if we leaned into a model of writing for critical inquiry, for productive uncertainty, for figuring out how to “productively locate [ourselves] in worlds [we] don’t and can’t command?” Let’s remind ourselves—and our students—how writing can help us learn and can help us develop new questions. How it can help us to heal trauma, recognize love, and understand new perspectives.

Leaning into this mode of writing means leaning into the humans who connect to students—our faculty, advisors, and undergraduate research mentors who make the university a place for our students. It means smaller classes taught by teachers paid decently and who are dedicated to supporting and listening to students, to helping them discover their own ideas in writing, helping them to process the accumulated knowledge of generations of scholars before them, probing and challenging it in order to build on this knowledge.

Again, our undergraduates can lead the way for us here. The National Survey of Student Engagement outlines high-impact practices that connect students to faculty and locations more deeply, situations that support and also challenge students like community work and collaborative research opportuni-
ties with faculty. The intensity of writing courses is also what keeps students engaged in their work at a university.

So when the call comes to eliminate the writing center because ChatGPT irons out student prose just fine, when a budget model suggests that we could save thousands by raising course caps and eliminating sections of first year composition because students don’t really need to learn to write anymore, we must resist that. What is writing for? I hope we will remember that it’s the faculty and the community and the human engagement that keeps students here—and keeps us here as faculty as well.

We will need to learn to teach by integrating this technology into the way we teach writing, but we can still do so with productive uncertainty. Figuring out what that looks like forces us to return to this question: what is writing for? Writing is for a lot of things, including communication and conveying ideas and contextualizing data and translation of difficult concepts into more accessible prose. LLMs already do some of that work well, and we can work with them to do it. As Antonio Byrd argues in this volume, indeed, it’s critical for writing justice that we embrace the current landscape of literacy that includes LLMs.

But teaching writing with LLMs ethically means understanding what aspects of writing they can’t do. ChatGPT answers that writing is for informing, persuading, expressing, recording, or entertaining. It doesn’t say it’s for learning or inquiry or growth or belonging or productive uncertainty or the pleasure of wrestling with difficult ideas. Large language models such as ChatGPT will produce good writing. They will not produce challenging, thoughtful, innovative humans, such as good writing instruction helps to nurture now.

As a human writing teacher and administrator, I find the question What is writing for? to be more generative than any answer AI or human can give. As I teach and talk with colleagues, I want to keep asking that question and keep finding more reasons to write at the same time that I write and research these brave new technologies.

Note

1. A version of this essay was posted online on April 4, 2023, annettevee.substack.com/p/chatgpt-writes-answers.

Works Cited


National Survey of Student Engagement. Indiana University, nsse.indiana.edu/