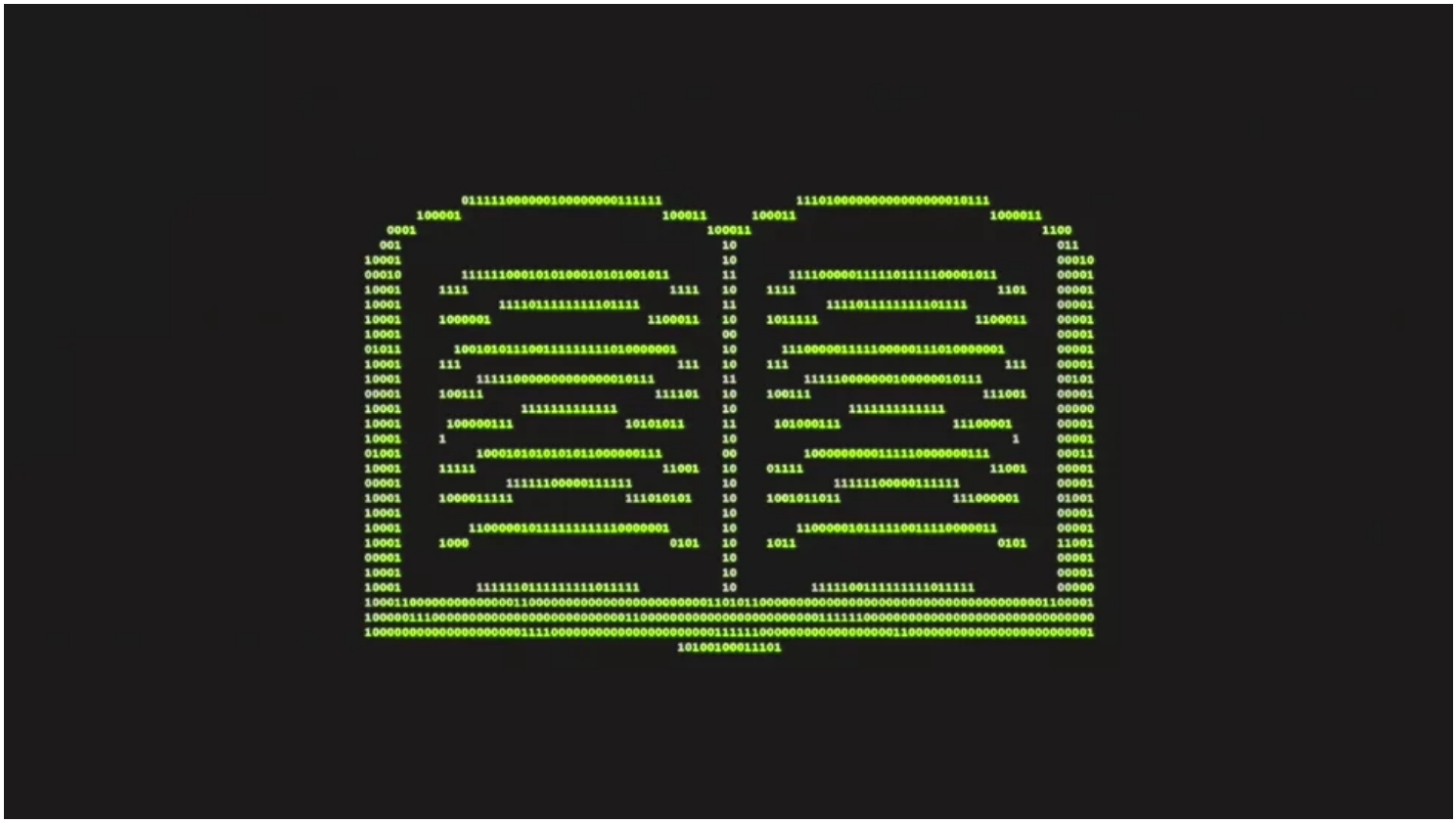
TECHNOLOGY

The End of High-School English

I've been teaching English for 12 years, and I'm astounded by what ChatGPT can produce.

By Daniel Herman



Erik Carter / The Atlantic

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Teenagers have always found ways around doing the hard work of actual learning. CliffsNotes dates back to the 1950s, "No Fear Shakespeare" puts the playwright into modern English, YouTube offers literary analysis and historical explication from numerous amateurs and professionals, and so on. For as long as those shortcuts have existed, however, one big part of education has remained inescapable: writing. Barring outright plagiarism, students have always arrived at that moment when they're on their own with a blank page, staring down a blinking cursor, the essay waiting to be written.

Now that might be about to change. The arrival of OpenAI's ChatGPT, a program that generates sophisticated text in response to any prompt you can imagine, may signal the end of writing assignments altogether—and maybe even the end of writing as a gatekeeper, a metric for intelligence, a teachable skill.

If you're looking for historical analogues, this would be like the printing press, the steam drill, and the light bulb having a baby, and that baby having access to the entire corpus of human knowledge and understanding. My life—and the lives of thousands of other teachers and professors, tutors and administrators—is about to drastically change.

I teach a variety of humanities classes (literature, philosophy, religion, history) at a small independent high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. My classes tend to have about 15 students, their ages ranging from 16 to 18. This semester I am lucky enough to be teaching writers like James Baldwin, Gloria Anzaldúa, Herman Melville, Mohsin Hamid, Virginia Held. I recognize that it's a privilege to have relatively small classes that can explore material like this at all. But at the end of the day, kids are always kids. I'm sure you will be absolutely shocked to hear that not all teenagers are, in fact, so interested in having their mind lit on fire by Anzaldúa's radical ideas about transcending binaries, or Ishmael's metaphysics in *Moby-Dick*.

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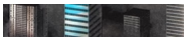

To those students, I have always said: You may not be interested in poetry or civics, but no matter what you end up doing with your life, a basic competence in writing is an absolutely essential skill—whether it's for college admissions, writing a cover letter when applying for a job, or just writing an email to your boss.

Read: The college essay is dead

I've also long held, for those who *are* interested in writing, that you need to learn the basic rules of good writing before you can start breaking them—that, like Picasso, you have to learn how to reliably fulfill an audience's expectations before you get to start putting eyeballs in people's ears and things.

I don't know if either of those things is true anymore. It's no longer obvious to me that my teenagers actually will need to develop this basic skill, or if the logic still holds that the fundamentals are necessary for experimentation.

Let me be candid (with apologies to all of my current and former students): What GPT can produce right now is better than the large majority of writing seen by your average teacher or professor. Over the past few days, I've given it a number of different

prompts. And even if the bot's results don't exactly give you goosebumps, they do a more-than-adequate job of fulfilling a task.

I mean, look at this: I asked the program to write me a playful, sophisticated, emotional 600-word college-admissions essay about how my experience volunteering at my local SPCA had prepared me for the academic rigor of Stanford. Here's an excerpt from its response:

> *In addition to cleaning, I also had the opportunity to interact with the animals. I was amazed at the transformation I saw in some of the pets who had been neglected or abused. With patience and care, they blossomed into playful and affectionate companions who were eager to give and receive love. I was also able to witness firsthand the process of selecting the right pet for the right family. Although it was bittersweet to see some animals leave the shelter, I knew that they were going to a loving home, and that was the best thing for them.*

It also managed to compose a convincing 400-word "friendly" cover letter for an application to be a manager at Starbucks. But most jaw-dropping of all, on a personal level: It made quick work out of an assignment I've always considered absolutely "unhackable." In January, my junior English students will begin writing an independent research paper, 12 to 18 pages, on two great literary works of their own choosing—a tradition at our school. Their goal is to place the texts in conversation with each other and find a thread that connects them. Some students will struggle to find any way to bring them together. We spend two months on the paper, putting it together piece by piece.

I've fed GPT a handful of pairs that students have worked with in recent years: *Beloved* and *Hamlet*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Parable of the Sower*, Homer's *The Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno*. GPT brought them together instantly, effortlessly, uncannily: *memory, guilt, revenge, justice, the individual versus the collective, freedom of choice, societal oppression.* The technology doesn't go much beyond the surface, nor does it successfully integrate quotations from the original texts, but the ideas

presented were on-target—more than enough to get any student rolling without much legwork.

It goes further. Last night, I received an essay draft from a student. I passed it along to OpenAI's bots. "Can you fix this essay up and make it better?" Turns out, it could. It kept the student's words intact but employed them more gracefully; it removed the clutter so the ideas were able to shine through. It was like magic.

I've been teaching for about 12 years: first as a TA in grad school, then as an adjunct professor at various public and private universities, and finally in high school. From my experience, American high-school students can be roughly split into three categories. The bottom group is learning to master grammar rules, punctuation, basic comprehension, and legibility. The middle group mostly has that stuff down and is working on argument and organization—arranging sentences within paragraphs and paragraphs within an essay. Then there's a third group that has the luxury of focusing on things such as tone, rhythm, variety, mellifluence.

Whether someone is writing a five-paragraph essay or a 500-page book, these are the building blocks not only of good writing but of writing as a tool, as a means of efficiently and effectively communicating information. And because learning writing is an iterative process, students spend countless hours developing the skill in elementary school, middle school, high school, and then finally (as thousands of underpaid adjuncts teaching freshman comp will attest) college. Many students (as those same adjuncts will attest) remain in the bottom group, despite their teachers' efforts; most of the rest find some uneasy equilibrium in the second category.

Working with these students makes up a large percentage of every English teacher's job. It also supports a cottage industry of professional development, trademarked methods buried in acronyms (ICE! PIE! EDIT! MEAT!), and private writing tutors charging $100-plus an hour. So for those observers who are saying, *Well, good, all of these things are overdue for change*—"this will lead to much-needed education reform," a former colleague told me—this dismissal elides the heavy toll this sudden transformation is going to take on education, extending along its many tentacles (standardized testing, admissions, educational software, etc.).

Perhaps there are reasons for optimism, if you push all this aside. Maybe every student is now immediately launched into that third category: The rudiments of writing will be considered a given, and every student will have direct access to the finer aspects of the enterprise. Whatever is inimitable within them can be made conspicuous, freed from the troublesome mechanics of comma splices, subject-verb disagreement, and dangling modifiers.

But again, the majority of students do not see writing as a worthwhile skill to cultivate—just like I, sitting with my coffee and book, rereading *Moby-Dick*, do not consider it worthwhile to learn, say, video editing. They have no interest in exploring nuance in tone and rhythm; they will forever roll their eyes at me when I try to communicate the subtle difference, when writing an appositive phrase, between using commas, parentheses, or (the connoisseur's choice) the em dash.

Which is why I wonder if this may be the end of using writing as a benchmark for aptitude and intelligence. After all, what is a cover letter? Its primary purpose isn't to communicate "I already know how to do this job" (because of course I don't) but rather "I am competent and trustworthy and can clearly express to you why I would be a good candidate for this job." What is a written exam? Its primary signal isn't "I memorized a bunch of information" but rather "I can express that information clearly in writing." Many teachers have reacted to ChatGPT by imagining how to give writing assignments now—maybe they should be written out by hand, or given only in class—but that seems to me shortsighted. The question isn't "How will we get around this?" but rather "Is this still worth doing?"

I believe my most essential tasks, as a teacher, are helping my students think critically, disagree respectfully, argue carefully and flexibly, and understand their mind and the world around them. Unconventional, improvisatory, expressive, meta-cognitive writing can be an extraordinary vehicle for those things. But if most contemporary writing pedagogy is necessarily focused on helping students master the basics, what happens when a computer can do it for us? Is this moment more like the invention of the calculator, saving me from the tedium of long division, or more like the invention

of the player piano, robbing us of what can be communicated only through human emotion?

Maybe the moment when I felt most caught between these two thoughts was when I asked GPT a question from an exam I give in my Eastern-philosophy course, something I've never imagined a student could find outside assistance to answer: "Explain the Madhyamaka Buddhist idea that all phenomena lack inherent existence, using a funny, specific example."

ChatGPT wrote back, as ever, instantly:

> *The Madhyamaka Buddhist idea that all phenomena lack inherent existence can be illustrated with a funny example: let's say you have a pet hamster. You might think that your hamster has its own inherent existence, but in reality, your hamster is made up of many different elements such as its fur, its bones, its muscles, and its brain. None of these elements exist independently or inherently on their own, so your hamster itself does not have any inherent existence either. The same goes for all phenomena—everything is made up of various components that don't have inherent existence, so nothing has any inherent existence either.*

Everything is made up; it's true. The essay as a literary form? Made up. Grammatical rules as markers of intelligence? Writing itself as a technology? Made up. Starting now, OpenAI is forcing us to ask foundational questions about whether any of those things are worth keeping around.

Daniel Herman is a high-school teacher and the author of *Zen and the White Whale: A Buddhist Rendering of Moby-Dick*. He lives in Berkeley, California.

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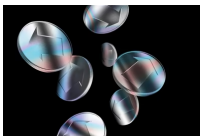

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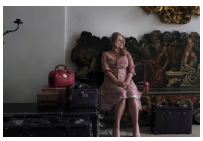

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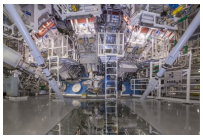

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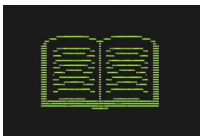

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