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The Challenge Is to Write 50,000 Words in a Month. Should ChatGPT Be Able to Help?

An online writing community was set aflame this week after National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo, said it wouldn't take a stance on the use of A.I.

For over 20 years, writers around the world have participated in National Novel Writing Month, or #NaNoWriMo, as it's known online. The challenge is simple: Write 50,000 words in the month of November. Well, as simple as writing 50,000 words can be. (That's 1,667 words per day, for those of you doing the math at home.)

Of course, using a generative artificial intelligence platform, like ChatGPT, could make those words go by much quicker. But is that really ethical? In the spirit of the event? Good for the craft of creative writing in general?

These are some of the questions that fueled a heated debate this week among writers, editors and others in publishing who fear the creep of A.I. in their industry. It started with a statement from NaNoWriMo, the nonprofit organization that coordinates the writing marathon every year. It ended — though perhaps there is more to come — with resignations, a lost sponsor and plenty of prickly feelings in what is meant to be an uplifting community.

"NaNoWriMo does not explicitly support any specific approach to writing, nor does it explicitly condemn any approach, including the use of A.I.," the organization wrote on its website at the end of August. To fully condemn the technology, it said, would be "to ignore classist and ableist issues."

"For some writers, the decision to use A.I. is a practical, not an ideological, one," the statement continued, noting the "upfront cost burdens" in the publishing industry as well as the challenges that writers with different mental and linguistic abilities may face. "The notion that all writers 'should' be able to perform certain functions independently is a position that we disagree with wholeheartedly."

Kilby Blades, the executive director of NaNoWriMo, did not make herself available for an interview for this article.

Online, the reaction to the statement from many writers was swift and critical. The organization later updated its blog post to emphasize that it was speaking in broad terms and that it was "troubled by situational abuse of A.I.," but it appeared to do little to assuage writers' concerns.

Multiple writers, including Daniel José Older and Maureen Johnson, announced on X that they would be stepping down from NaNoWriMo's writers board. (The webpage for the writers board now defaults to an error message but an archived version from earlier this summer shows Ms. Johnson and Mr. Older among its ranks.)

In an interview, Ms. Johnson, a young adult fiction writer, said she became involved with NaNoWriMo because she supported its mission. The annual marathon was founded in 1999 by the writer Chris Baty with a small group of friends. Since then, millions of writers have participated, many of whom have gone on to publish novels conceived during the challenge.

Ms. Johnson said she had been involved with the organization for years, including a “pep talk” — an encouraging essay for NaNoWriMo participants — back in 2009.

“It was a way of encouraging people to sit down and set aside a block of time to learn to build writing muscle by drafting, by writing badly, by getting over self-doubt and boredom and writer’s block,” she said. She felt the challenge encouraged “community and creativity.”

“What I saw in their statement was the opposite of that,” Ms. Johnson said of NaNoWriMo’s recent post about A.I.

In a Substack post on Tuesday, Mr. Older, a science fiction and fantasy writer, shared the resignation letter he submitted, calling out the organization’s ties to ProWritingAid, an A.I. platform with optional generative tools that is a sponsor of this year’s NaNoWriMo.

“An organization for writers that supports Gen A.I. is not an organization for writers,” he wrote. (Mr. Older did not respond to a request for comment.)

Chris Banks, the founder of ProWritingAid, said the company was “unaware” NaNoWriMo was going to make a statement on A.I. and said he believed that “writers’ concerns about the role of A.I. are valid and deserve thoughtful consideration.”

Following the reaction online, NaNoWriMo released another statement on Friday, saying that the organization’s “position of neutrality” on the issue was not intended to be “an abandonment of writers’ legitimate concerns.”

“We absolutely believe that A.I. must be discussed and that its ethical use must be advocated for,” the statement read. “What we don’t believe is that NaNoWriMo belongs at the forefront of that conversation.”

This is not the first backlash NaNoWriMo has weathered in recent years. In 2023, the organization announced it was temporarily shutting down its online community forums after facing criticisms over content moderation and user safety. The recent A.I. controversy has prompted some sponsors to reassess their support.

Rex Mizrach, a founder of Ellipsus, a writing software company and a 2024 sponsor, said in an interview that the statement from NaNoWriMo seemed “unaligned” with its purpose. “We saw this as an attack on their own community and on our community,” he said.

Mr. Mizrach and his co-founder, John McClelland, said they felt “blindsided” by the statement. The company announced on Tuesday that it would no longer be backing the event.

Adam Leeb, the chief executive of Astrohaus, the company that makes the writing tool Freewrite, another NaNoWriMo sponsor, said that he had issues with some of the language the organization had used in its statement but that the company wasn’t ready to end its support just yet.

Some authors have said they have used A.I. for inspiration, or to explore the possibilities of form. The novelist Sheila Heti, known for her literary experiments, used a customizable chatbot to write a short story that was published in The New Yorker last year.

“Historically, anytime that people or organizations have tried to resist the march of technology, they’ve failed,” Mr. Leeb said in an interview.

98 While we don't have any generative A.I. in our products, we don't necessarily look down on people
99 who are using it," he added.]

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101 Eagle-eyed users on X noted that Freewrite's logo had been removed from the NaNoWriMo website
102 this week. Mr. Leeb said that was an error and that his team had not requested the change and was
103 looking into the situation.]

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105 Freewrite is currently "reviewing its relationship" with NaNoWriMo, he said.]

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107 "I really just hope that they can turn it around, frankly — and if they can't, we'll have to cut ties," Mr.
108 Leeb said. "But the hope is certainly that they can stay true to their core mission and find a way to
109 continue to encourage writers to write more and to express themselves."