

Call for Papers for Edited Collection

The Last Word: The ‘Death’ of the Essay in the Age of AI

Abstracts due 15 August 2025

Shortly after the public launch of ChatGPT, a number of prominent AI enthusiasts proclaimed the death of the essay, joining a long tradition of epitaphs announcing the genre’s death. While the history of the essay is long and the genre varied, today, most people associate the essay with school assignments. Indeed, in the modern university, one tenet has been central to the education of millions of undergraduate students: writing essays is productive for both learning about a topic and demonstrating one’s knowledge of it. This assumption, however, must be reconsidered, as Generative AI (GenAI) arguably poses a more serious challenge to traditional pedagogy—including the take-home essay—than any disruptions that have preceded it. In this transformative age of AI, we are reflecting on what, exactly, the essay means and how it functions: culturally, academically, pedagogically.

The college essay is a comparatively recent addition to university classrooms, having been ‘invented’ in its modern form in the 1880s. Yet, from the outset, the college essay has been embattled. By 1917, the college essay was already described as universally hated—with one student arguing that it “is a form of thought-expression invented by the devil.” Twentieth-century scholarship is littered with evangelists advocating for a replacement to the essay. And yet the format has persisted. What value has essay-writing produced for students, their instructors, and for graduates writing out in the wider world? Is the institution of the college essay worth defending? When GenAI promises to write our essays for us, what comes next?

This collection invites writers, scholars, educators, and practitioners to explore the past, present, and future of the essay in an age of generative AI. We welcome contributions that critically engage with the essay as a pedagogical form, historical artifact, cultural institution, and evolving genre. Topics may include (but are not limited to):

- The history of the essay in higher education
- Pedagogical strategies for teaching writing with or against AI tools
- Ethical, practical, and disciplinary implications of AI-assisted composition
- Critical assessments of AI’s impact on academic integrity and authorship
- The role of the essay in fostering critical thinking, creativity, or conformity
- The value and effectiveness of the essay in student learning and university assessment
- Institutional pressures shaping writing instruction in the AI era
- Alternatives to the traditional essay in a digital or multimodal writing landscape

We welcome proposals from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including writing studies, education, digital humanities, communication, and cultural studies. We intend to submit to “Perspectives on Writing” at WAC Clearinghouse, whose editors have expressed interest in this collection.

Short abstracts of up to 300 words are due by August 15. Please include a short author bio of up to 75 words and a CV. Due to the pressures for timeliness on a rapidly-shifting topic, full drafts (4,000–8,000 words) will be requested by January 1, 2026. Submit proposals and inquiries to the editors, Nathan Murray (nathan.murray@algonau.ca) and Elisa Tersigni (elisa.tersigni@utoronto.ca).

We look forward to your contributions!