

## A (Long) Note About AI (ChatGPT and other tools)

The last year has seen an enormous amount of interest and development in text-generating AI tools. You may have played around with some of these tools yourself. You may also have seen articles proclaiming that “[The College Essay is Dead](#).” And you may be wondering what on earth these tools mean for you, as a college student who is currently enrolled in a writing class.

Before I was a writing professor, I actually studied computational linguistics and worked briefly on developing natural language processing systems. So I know a **lot** about these tools. One thing I know is that, at least for now, what systems like GPT-4 are doing is simply predicting the next word based on context. This means that these systems can often generate text that sounds very “fluent”, and even makes quite a bit of sense ([though this is mostly because we are the ones making sense of it!](#)).

**BUT:** these Large Language Model (LLM) systems are, quite literally, “bullshit-generators”: they produce text that *sounds good* without any concern for whether or not it is *true*. Importantly, these systems cannot, on their own, “cite sources” for the claims they generate (when you ask them to, they’ll do something that *looks like* citing sources, but these sources are in many cases either partially or completely made up!). There are major academic honesty implications here, and this is something you need to take very seriously.

I also want us to think about what it means when you see articles about how these tools will be the end of college writing: these articles take for granted that what **you** are doing, dear students, is simply writing nice-sounding but meaningless bullshit, and that nice-sounding but meaningless bullshit is what **I** want from you, as your teacher. I don’t think either of those things is true! I also don’t think these tools are going away, so I think it’s important to learn to use them ethically, in ways that don’t compromise your own learning or the development of your writing skills but instead help you deepen your understanding of what you’re doing when you write. That’s the approach I’m going to take with AI in this class.

**In this class, I expect that the papers you submit to me represent your own thinking and your own choices, at every level:** from the topics you cover, the particular arguments you make, the organization of your paper, the structure of your paragraphs, all the way down to your choices about individual words and punctuation. You are the writer and will need to be able to explain and defend the choices you’ve made in your papers. That’s going to be rather hard to do if you weren’t the one *making* those choices. Is it possible to trick me into thinking you wrote something when it is actually the product of an AI text-generator? Probably, but to do so, you will have to think deeply enough about the choices that GPT-4 (or whatever system you’re using) made that you are able to explain and defend them as your own, potentially in a 1-on-1 conference with me. That’s not actually easy, and if you *are* able to successfully do it, that means that in the end, you actually *are* learning a lot of the things I want you to learn about choices in writing. So let’s focus on how we can use these tools to learn and develop as writers, not on whether we can use them to fool our teachers into thinking we’ve done the work when we actually haven’t. Doing the work is still the only way to actually *learn*, and learning is why you’re in college.

**If you do use an AI tool as part of your writing for an assignment in my class:** I expect you to cite the tool used, and I also expect you to explain *how* it was used in your Writer's Memo. Failure to *fully and accurately* do so will result in a Major Breach (as it is an academic honesty violation). We will discuss the specific expectations for how AI usage should be documented and cited in class. Please reach out to me if you have questions!