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Writing Against Generative AI

Part I: Reflective Reading Journal Prompt (Spend 10 minutes composing and follow with 10 minutes of class discussion)

For today's class, you read "[Ghosts](#)" by Vauhini Vara and listened to this American Life's podcast [Ghostwriter](#) about the creation of the essay. Vara used an AI generator, Chat GPT-3, to help compose the essay, working in tandem to respond to and replace the generator's content. Here is her description at the start of the essay:

Last year I became fascinated with an artificial intelligence model that was being trained to write human-like text. The model was called GPT-3, short for Generative Pre-Trained Transformer 3; if you fed it a bit of text, it could complete a piece of writing, by predicting the words that should come next.

I sought out examples of GPT 3's work, and they astonished me. [. . .] I contacted the CEO of OpenAI, the research-and-development company that created GPT-3, and asked if I could try it out. Soon, I received an email inviting me to access a web app called the Playground. On it, I found a big box in which I could write text. Then, by clicking a button, I could prompt the model to complete the story. I began by feeding GPT-3 a couple of words at a time, and then—as we got to know each other—entire sentences and paragraphs.

I felt acutely that there was something illicit about what I was doing. When I carried my computer to bed, my husband muttered noises of disapproval. We both make our livings as writers, and technological capitalism has been exerting a slow suffocation on our craft. A machine capable of doing what we do, at a fraction of the cost, feels like a threat. Yet I found myself irresistibly attracted to GPT-3—to the way it offered, without

judgment, to deliver words to a writer who has found herself at a loss for them. One night, when my husband was asleep, I asked for its help in telling a true story.

I had always avoided writing about my sister's death. At first, in my reticence, I offered GPT-3 only one brief, somewhat rote sentence about it. The AI matched my canned language; clichés abounded. But as I tried to write more honestly, the AI seemed to be doing the same. It made sense, given that GPT-3 generates its own text based on the language it has been fed: Candor, apparently, beget candor.

In the nine stories below, I authored the sentences in bold and GPT-3 filled in the rest. My and my editor's sole alterations to the AI-generated text were adding paragraph breaks in some instances and shortening the length of a few of the stories; because it has not been edited beyond this, inconsistencies and untruths appear.

Re-read the final section of the essay (9) and then re-read either passage 1, 2 or 6 (passages that are primarily generated by AI). What differences strike you between the text that Vara ultimately created (9) and the other sections? Where do you find strength, truth and beauty in Vara's writing that does not exist in the AI-generated versions? Does the AI surprise you in its strengths? Ultimately, what makes Vara's contributions feel more human?

Part 2: Assignment: Writing against AI (30 minutes total; while students write, work on your own example on the projected overhead in real time. Save a few minutes for discussion/reflection.)

In "[Ghosts](#)," essayist Vauhini Vara writes about her use of an AI generator, Chat GPT-3, to help write an essay about her sister's death. To compose the essay, Vara worked in tandem with the generator, offering a piece of writing, prompting Chat GPT to generate content that could plausibly follow it, and then using the response to reclaim her story and motivate her to explore the experience in greater depth. Of the process, she writes:

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Taking Vara’s example, use [ChatGPT](#) to prompt your own writing experience. (Join [here](#) if you do not have an account.) In the chat box, write “Compose an essay that begins with the following:” and write one or two sentences of your own creation. Read what Chat GPT creates, consider it, then **delete it** and begin again, each time writing your human-created sentences after the prompt. You may find that some of what Chat GPT writes inspires you, or offers an idea you hadn’t considered – and that’s fine. Keep notes about those findings on a separate sheet/document and refer to them as you construct your piece. For this assignment, focus on writing about a personal experience (as Vara does) or begin to explore the topic you have chosen to write for the science writing essay.

Reflection Questions:

- What do you embrace about what Chat GPT offers?
- What do you reject or push against?
- Do you feel yourself rooting for your own ideas? Why or why not?
- In the process of rejecting the AI text and re-writing your contribution, how do you distinguish your humanity?