Rhetorical Choices & Voice: Generative AI in the First-Year Composition Classroom

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Abstract

Generative AI has become a quotidian discussion topic in many writing departments, and the conversations often focus on the negative aspects or the disruptions it has caused. A growing number of teachers and scholars, though, have embraced the new technology and welcomed it into their classrooms. In the Spring 2024 semester, students in my first-year composition (FYC) classes completed an assignment that asked them to use generative AI to create an essay that they then re-worked through a combination of changing language/phrasing, changing content, and adding/removing content. This chapter argues that students are still doing rich and sophisticated rhetorical work like they would when beginning a piece from scratch. Grounded in Composition theory and scholarship, and featuring students' reflective thoughts on the assignment, this chapter makes the case that students understand and value their own voices in writing. Further, this study challenges the common belief that students want to take the easy way out and use generative AI uncritically. Rather, students seem to be comfortable with a new type of co-agency in which they use generative AI as a tool to assist them, not one that takes over.

Keywords: *generative AI, first-year composition (FYC), agency, voice, rhetorical choices, English language learners (ELLs), writing process, post-product, educational inequities*

Introduction

Countless suggestions to help college students gain identity and agency as writers have been employed to various successes over the last several decades; however, there are ample stories to show that so many students continue to feel like outsiders when doing academic writing. This is due at least in part to the idea that, as noted language scholar Ken Hyland posits, "[a]cademic writing is not just about conveying an ideational 'content', it is also about the representation of self" (2002, p. 1091). In the case of the first-year composition (FYC) student, this often means an eighteen year old whose sense of self is not one of a scholar. Identifying as an academic can be difficult when trying to find footing and navigate the new world that is college; however, teachers and their assignments can play roles, too. Embracing the affordances of generative AI and re-considering the way we assign writing might be ways for writing instructors, in particular, to help students change their sense of self and to take on "different identities" (Kerr & Amicucci, 2020, p. 9), ones where they feel more comfortable and confident with academic writing.

College writing, and specifically FYC, is rarely in the national or global spotlight for positive reasons, and the last couple of years have been no exception. The proliferation of generative AI has elicited a wide range of negative headlines around college writing, ranging from renewed

calls for blue books and proctors to predictions of the end of FYC and other courses. To a certain degree, the panic is understandable: The tsunami of generative-AI options has been overwhelming for faculty, and the rapid pace at which the technological capabilities have improved has "made it hard to keep up with the state of play" (Tugend, 2023). However, another wave of headlines has been out there for those interested in reading and seeing the learning opportunities generative AI presents: Teachers and researchers across the U.S. and the world have been engaged in meaningful work with students to explore how generative-AI can enhance college writing classes.

The work with, and avoidance of, generative AI in college courses encompasses a prodigious range, from wholesale acceptance to all-out bans, with many levels in between. What is clear, though, is that generative AI tools seem to be here to stay. As such, it is an opportune time for writing teachers to re-evaluate what they assign and why. In particular, it is a critical moment in examining how to ensure marginalized or disadvantaged student populations do not become victims of a generative AI surge that further rewards those with means and those who occupy traditional roles of power. One step in working toward educational equity is playing with what Composition scholar John Paul Tassoni calls the "post-product era in college writing, one in which a good deal of instruction and students' development as writers occur in the aftermath of a 'final draft'" (2024, p. 202).

A Different Assignment

In the Spring 2024 semester, students in my FYC classes took on a new kind of essay assignment, one that surprised them when it was introduced. The prompt for this assignment asked students to use ChatGPT or another generative AI site to produce an essay on their choice from a list of predetermined topics such as free college, fast fashion, cryptocurrency, and NIL deals for college athletes. The students were then tasked with taking ownership of the piece by modifying at least half of the original essay through a combination of changing language/phrasing, changing content, and adding/removing content (see Appendix A for the Rhetorical Choices and Voice prompt).

The idea behind the assignment is multi-faceted, though some features stand out. First, students were working with issues on which they already had some preexisting knowledge and relevance to their lives. Second, they started from what is ostensibly an academic piece, as the prompt asks them to have the AI generate an essay. Lastly, they completed reflections throughout the process and wrote a culminating unit reflection, explaining their choices on what they left in and what they changed. These reflective writings were illuminating in helping me see important aspects of students' writing processes such as scaffolding, style and word choices, and what they deem is most essential to "good" writing and their own writing identities.

One advantage to using the Rhetorical Choices and Voice assignment is the opportunity to bypass, or at least mitigate, some of the mental barriers many students face. Some students lack confidence and/or experience and thus see themselves as "bad" writers or not at the level of their peers. This mental hurdle at the starting line can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, dread, and other negative emotions throughout the writing process, even when these students are very capable of college-level thinking and writing. Beginning from an already-generated essay can help them leap ahead of some of the negative emotions and focus instead on making the piece their own. Whereas teachers might see AI-generated products as "unoriginal text that's ideal for revision" (Graham, 2023, p. 167), many students see cleanly-written and organized thoughts, perhaps the equivalent of taking a test where someone or something has answered the first several questions

correctly for them but there is still plenty of the test left to complete. This may be especially true for marginalized students who might benefit from a new spin on the idea of a de-composing approach (McRuer, 2004), at least in the sense that the Rhetorical Choices and Voice assignment subverts traditional process-based approaches and creates a starting point that allows students to both begin with and disassemble a college-level piece. Tassoni (2024) argues that such students might feel more comfortable with norms as they work from AI pieces that have been generated from Large Language Models (LLMs) trained on discourses of privilege and power. In fact, "decomposing practice[s] can come to represent a first line of belonging for marginalized student populations" as they work from products that in some ways fit within "academia's givens" (Tassoni, 2024, p. 209). And while there are certainly problems inherent in the idea of students feeling more confident with artificial writing over their own, the subsequent work that happens with this assignment allows them to evaluate that writing and learn more about themselves as writers. In their work on metacognition, Dianna Winslow and Phil Shaw posit, "[n]ot all writers and learners know how their writing and learning works, or if they do, they may not be ready to trust their knowing" (2017, p. 205). The Rhetorical Choices and Voice assignment is designed to help students gain trust in their knowledges and abilities.

Building trust in themselves is imperative to students better understanding how to use generative AI as a tool and not a crutch. Clearly, one potential downside to having students work with generative AI and become more proficient with it is the possibility that they begin to rely on it more and lose faith or interest in improving their own writing, reading, and thinking skills. As such, it is essential with assignments such as the Rhetorical Choices and Voice essay to echo Tassoni in emphasizing far more than the product, to "move away from framing writing assignments as primarily product-based endeavors" (McVey, 2022). Valuing reflective work, revision, and comparative evaluation (i.e., having students write on a topic and then compare it to what generative AI produces on the same topic), and making it count for substantial portions of grades, can help mitigate the potential for students to become overly reliant on generative AI and to instead see the importance of their own writing. Prioritizing all of the rhetorical decisions students make in creating a piece submitted for grading can "help them successfully complete a writing task while also recognizing the limitations of [generative AI] in supporting their growth and development as writers" (MLA-CCCC, 2024). The drawbacks to using generative AI in the writing classroom are real, but teachers do have some control over the value students place on their choices and their voices.

Results and Student Reflections

Key among my findings from this study is that students appreciated the starting point. Having an AI-generated essay to begin with increased engagement and helped many of them feel like they had an academic piece in place, but that it just wasn't theirs yet. Further, the assignment provided a huge confidence boost for English Language Learners (ELLs) and other students who have trouble starting writing assignments and/or who worry excessively over grammar, phrasing, etc. Students' thoughts on the assignment design and their roles made the unit feel like a nice blend of the three major paradigms in early Composition theory: cognitivism, expressionism, and social constructivism. And despite what some doubters might think, students were critical of the AI, often suggesting that what it generated was too robotic or that it did not contain enough specific examples. This critical awareness on the benefits and limitations of generative AI will undoubtedly

serve students well in a rapidly-shifting landscape where such tools will play an increasing role in their educations and careers.

In the next sections, I will use students' own reflections to show how the assignment design unlocks ways to use generative AI as a tool for helping them become more confident writers, an outcome many writing teachers have dismissed over fears that the tools are doing the work for students. I will argue that the assignment design allows *all* students to focus on their own learner agency, which can aid in increasing scholarly engagement as well as in decreasing educational inequities. Further, despite widespread assertions that the use of generative AI truncates students' writing processes, I contend that this assignment can actually enhance these processes as students are tasked with making a wide range of rhetorical choices that help them better understand how writers take ownership of their work and establish a voice. Generative AI might help make "writing processes more efficient in a manner analogous to a calculator" (Tsufim & Pomerleau, 2024, p. 101), but that does not mean that the process is nonetheless a rich and empowering one. As students themselves explain in the following sections, they are growing as writers and strengthening their abilities to make rhetorical decisions.

Agency/Voice

One of the main goals of the assignment is for students to further establish and become confident in their own writing voices. This can be tricky for all students, but perhaps more so for students who feel their natural way of speaking and writing is shunned or looked down upon in academia and professional settings. In these situations, students have often learned to hide or cover up their unique voices. Unfortunately, as previously suggested, some students "may view generic AI-generated text as more valid than their own" (qtd. in D'Agostino, 2023), according to Laura Dumin, professor of English and director of the technical writing program at the University of Central Oklahoma. This possibility created a potential complication, and some students recognized it in their reflections. Allison wrote that "it can be tough to change something that seems pretty well written," while Chauncy noted "I am still learning how to take a piece and make it sound like my own." These are honest and mature thoughts, though they contrast sharply with the following reflection from Melanie, a student who seemed to be far more comfortable with prompt engineering than her classmates: "AI can be beneficial when trying to express 'voice' in a writing because you can tell it how to portray the message it is distributing." Here, Melanie seems more interested in manufacturing a voice than nurturing her own, which is still an interesting rhetorical exercise.

Responses such as Melanie's, though, were not common. The majority of students seemed to build confidence in their abilities to transform the AI-generated essays and make them their own by adding their voices. Tre wrote that there "were times in this essay where I really didn't know what my voice was or how to express myself, but this assignment helped me find it and learn myself." And Allison, who seemed earlier in the process like she might have a hard time changing what the AI wrote, noted "I learned more about myself in this unique creative process, as I was forced to find my voice." Many students expressed similar sentiments, even as they admittedly grappled with their own understandings of writing as a college student, as an academic. Writing teacher and scholar Nick Tingle observes that the "particularities of the author…are frequently buried in much academic writing" (2004, p. 10), and it was apparent that some students thought that such an approach was expected from them. The desire to sound "smart" was strong for some of them, and it was clear that students scuffled at times with how to revise writing that they thought was what was expected from them in college; however, despite all of the alarms about AI doing

the work for students, many want to produce writing that comes from them and represents them. Perhaps Cameron captures it best: "Using AI takes away the authenticity of a writing being someone's own and that alone ruins the whole idea of a voice. If there is any voice in an AI generated writing it won't be yours." Most students want to be heard and read, and that happens best by using one's own words and style. They know and care about this.

Of course, there is no denying that using generative AI has an impact on voice or agency. For example, when doing a comparative evaluation practice exercise where students were asked to write an introduction paragraph and have AI generate an introduction paragraph to see what they liked better, some students opted to stick heavily with the latter. Still, this was one part of a much larger whole, and perhaps it is indicative of the changing nature of authorial agency. Borrowing from Bruno Latour's fair position theory "acknowledging the significance of humans and nonhumans in shaping the process of knowledge making," Jiang et al. (2024, p. 925) posit that generative AI has altered how many writers think about agency and that we must now consider co-agency if we are to write using machine assistance as part of the process. Further complicating this issue, in my study, students provided rich data through their work and reflective thoughts; however, very few of them dug deeply into what they meant when they used words such as "voice" or "agency." It is thus not entirely clear to me whether they prioritize content and specific examples or stylistic/language choices when they think about agency. This remains an area for future exploration and research.

Revision

Another goal of the assignment is to help students become better revisers, to understand that good writing takes time and is part of a recursive process. Rhetoric professor S. Scott Graham posits that "[w]hen writing education is grounded in the best insights of writing studies, it aims principally at helping students develop more robust and recursive revision practices" (2023, p. 166). FYC students, in particular, tend to struggle with revision, even when receiving pointed feedback from their instructors. This is often chalked up to laziness by writing teachers, but the reasons are far more complex. Some students see being told to revise as a "punishment for not getting it right the first time" (Trupiano, 2006, p. 178). Relatedly, some adopt a "perfect first draft strategy" (Charney, 2002, p. 93), viewing writing assignments as tasks to conquer such as chores rather than as learning experiences that evolve over time. Many students don't have a framework for revision, having limited experience with it and limited or no knowledge about what more advanced writers do when they write. Whatever the case, FYC students can grow significantly by becoming stronger revisers. In this study, many students self-reported improvement with their revising skills. Not only was establishing voice through word choice and style important, but it was also clear students were recognizing weaknesses and limitations with the content of the AI-generated text, and this is where they saw opportunities for "text-base[d] changes" (Faigley & Witte, 1981, p. 403). Justin suggests that his ChatGPT "essay sounded too robotic. The AI-generated text has a tone to it that makes it clear it's being written by a computer." Other students were critical of structure. Jasmine noted that "ChatGPT…structures the paragraphs by labeling introduction all the way down to conclusion whereas I would never do that in any of my essays." Blake was critical of AI-generated beginnings to pieces, and this persisted through multiple iterations of AI-generated essays: "I feel like AI introductions were very boring and they kind of seem the same every time I use them."

It is worth questioning here how much prompt engineering students were doing and how results might have changed based on that. Only a few students mentioned in their reflections that they had AI generate more than one essay, so it is safe to assume most students worked with what was first produced from their only prompt. This is an interesting area to explore, and prompt engineering has great potential for the creation of new assignments, though that is for another study. As for this study, the students' concerns with the AI-generated material created the right conditions for meaningful revision. In addition to the types of statements listed above, several students also noted that AI was not great at providing specific examples, so that was a main area of focus in revision for them. In class meetings, we worked on adding specificity to texts and discussed how that made the pieces stronger and more vivid for readers. Take this from Alita's essay on fast fashion:

> ChatGPT produced the following sentence and then moved on to the next point: "Fast fashion is also linked to deforestation, pollution, and the depletion of our precious natural resources."
>
> Alita kept the sentence above as is in her essay, but added the following directly afterwards: "Many countries in Africa have paid environmental costs for America's obsession with fast fashion. Ghana and others have suffered ground, air and water pollution from decomposing, low-quality used clothing sent from America. Countries such as Nigeria and Ethiopia have even banned shipments of used clothing, and other African countries are trying to pass bans."

The added material in Alita's essay clearly makes the work stronger and shows, rather than just tells, some of the negative impacts linked to fast fashion. Alita's situation was not unique either. Most students realized that they had valuable knowledge and experience to bring to the essays, that they could add to the "sterile echo, devoid of intuitive leaps" (Edwards, 2024) typical of writing produced by the AI. When asked to evaluate the strongest and weakest parts of their essays very near the due date, Jared did not mince words regarding his writing on Name, Image, and Likeness deals in college sports: "The weakest part of my essay is the chat generated part as the chatbot does not know the topic as well and isn't updated with the most recent information." Jared is indicative of many students who are eager to share in writing what they have learned through lived experiences and through research beyond generative AI outputs.

ELLs & Trouble Starting/Continuing

So, if students think generative AI produces text with a robotic voice and that the products need revision, what is with all the hype? The potential answers are numerous, but here I want to focus on ELLs and native English speakers who have trouble starting or who benefit from extra help through steps of the composing process. Perhaps more than any other college course, FYC can be extremely anxiety-inducing for ELLs. All students can struggle with the idea that writing is not so much about right and wrong as it is about rhetorical choices and process; however, ELLs can more readily experience these feelings, which can inhibit their work and growth. Even when ELLs speak and understand English very well, they can suffer from a lack of confidence that inhibits their voice and their process. The international students who were part of this study wrote reflective pieces consistent with the common concerns of ELLs. Anna acknowledged that she

"struggled with the language the most. It was difficult for me to find certain words that would express exactly what I wanted to write." Alex expressed a similar sentiment, though he seemed a bit more comfortable in making changes: "If I saw vocabulary that I wasn't familiar with, I changed it to vocabulary I would normally use." These reflections are in line with recent research that shows "word choice was the chief writing difficulty" (Show, 2015, p. 240) reported by ELL study participants. For at least one ELL, the vocabulary meant additional learning opportunities. Farrah wrote that the "AI used some words or stuff that I had never heard of before which meant that I had to read about these things to try to get a better understanding of the context." This is a positive on the surface because of the language development that is happening, but it ties in to a huge concern for all students, but ELLs in particular: time. In her research, Professor Vicki Pallo writes that "[o]f all the ways in which we might best empower ELL students, by far one of the most impactful is time (2023, p. 195). ELLs often labor through steps that other students make more quickly (Silva, 1997, p. 215). And this is one key reason an assignment like the one featured in this study can help. In less time than starting from scratch on an essay, ELLs can still go through an extensive and beneficial writing process that helps them grow as writers and, as well, may help with language acquisition. Farrah went on to write that "using AI had a good impact on my process. It got me going faster in the beginning and I got a better picture of what I wanted to convey."

But struggles with time and with beginning or continuing essays are certainly not unique to ELLs. One of the refrains in the student reflective pieces was that the process of completing the essay didn't feel like it took as much time as other writing projects they had completed, even though we spent the same time on this assignment as we would on a piece starting from scratch. Further, many students noted that using generative AI was helpful in getting started and/or unstuck. Simone wrote that generative AI gave her "a great basis to start with." Caleb added that the "AI did a good job outlining the piece." Both students went on to write about what they needed to add, remove, change, etc. to make the pieces their own, but their thoughts on beginning were common among most students. A recent study in a University of Louisville honors Composition class produced similar findings, noting that ChatGPT was "especially helpful in the beginning stages" (Smith, et al., 2024, p. 139) as well as near the end of the writing process. Further, there was consensus among my students that the assignment allowed them to spend less time on what normally was most difficult for them and more time on taking ownership of the pieces. Of course, one could argue that it is important for students to work through the aspects of writing that are difficult for them; however, there is also a case to be made for focusing on what helps them build confidence and submit final products on which they made significant investments and of which they are proud.

Conclusion

Working with generative AI in writing classrooms is certain to become more and more common in the coming years, and while my class wasn't the first to experiment with an assignment where some of the text was produced by a machine, it is still novel, and even taboo, for many teachers and students. However, I hope that reality is changing, because a main takeaway from this study is that students gain from the experience. Based on my students' reflections and my conversations with them, they were reading, they were making rhetorical choices, they were researching, they were trying to bring in their voices and identities, and they were writing. All of these actions were happening for the best-prepared and least-prepared students. All of these actions were happening for students from privileged backgrounds and for students from marginalized groups. One question teachers of writing must ask themselves is what are our goals. If our goals

are to help students learn and grow exactly as we did when we were in school, then we will in all likelihood be severely disappointed teaching in the 2020s; however, if our goals are to help students be rhetorically-savvy and confident, then we need to acknowledge that generative AI allows for this. Renowned scholar Roz Ivanič argues for the teaching of writing to be focused above all else on "helping students to take an identity as a person who writes" (1998, p. 85). Generative AI, despite the doomsaying, does not take away our ability to maintain that focus. In fact, it should be seen as a disruption in the best possible sense because effective teaching means frequently adapting to changes and re-thinking assignments and ways to motivate and engage students. FYC is an ideal locus for change, for an "expanded definition of what the essay is and what it can do" (Winterowd, 1994, p. 121), because so many students take the course while in the midst of huge life changes and because so many of them don't have strong preconceived notions of what the course will be. If FYC "can and should be" a place where "students might reconsider writing apart from previous schooling and work," an "exploratory moment" (Downs, 2013, p. 50), then teachers need to embrace opportunities for this to happen. Generative AI, and assignments like the one my students completed, provides teachers with new ways to connect with students and to help them grow.

Finally, we should never doubt that the vast majority of college students are eager to learn and become their best selves. Cheating on academic work is cheating the self, and most students not only know that, but they respect it. My students wrote many thoughts on wanting to be heard and wanting to be effective communicators. Reisha proclaims proudly that the "final version of my paper definitely has my voice in it and does not sound like a robot wrote it. I added in key facts and interesting takes on society that the robot did not include nor process." Undoubtedly, the technology will advance, and soon we may see generative AI writing that does not sound so robotic, but students will still want to be largely in charge of their writing and their learning. In Paul Fyfe's trailblazing study on "cheating" on a course's final essay using an earlier version of GPT, he writes that using "GPT-2 only deepened [students'] desire for control" (2023, p. 1401) over their work. Fyfe, who admittedly had different goals than I with his study, goes on to write that his "class did not conclude one way or another that writing with AI was tantamount to plagiarism" (2023, p. 1402), but in the end, my question is simply this: So what if an AI generates part of a writing if the student is still doing the challenging rhetorical work of making a piece her own?

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Appendix A: *Rhetorical Choices & Voice Assignment*

Context and Assignment:
This assignment is designed to help you better understand the choices that writers make and to help you think through your own rhetorical choices. To begin, we will generate a short essay (ideally 700-1,200 words) based on one of the topics listed below using ChatGPT or another generative AI platform. You may have the AI produce an informative or argumentative essay. Then, you will read and critique the essay, pointing to perceived strengths and weaknesses. Keep in mind that the weaknesses you identify might be material that is included in or omitted from the essay. Next, you will identify a target audience for the essay and explain why you have chosen that group, you will compile a list of changes that you want to make, and you will rework the piece accordingly. Your final submission must contain the original work generated by the AI along with your revised version. At least 1/2 of the original material must be changed in some way or ways. Lastly, you will complete a reflective writing for the unit in which you explain your choices for changing material as well as for leaving some of the essay as is.

Considerations:
The goal of this assignment is for you to better understand how writers shape and share ideas, how writers make rhetorical choices when drafting content, how writers use their voices, and how writers make decisions on revising and editing. In short, we are exploring how writers take ownership of their work and establish a voice. Examining and considering the content (or ideas) in your essay will be very important; however, one key point to remember is that we don't need to disagree with information to revise. Beyond content, you may choose to make revisions or edits in your work because you feel like the changes better represent your voice or style.
Below are some questions to consider:
- Is the information in the essay accurate? Can you independently verify assertions, statistics, and other material claimed in the piece?
- Would the essay benefit from additional support of the main idea(s)? For instance, would an example or another example or two help? Would some, more, or different statistical data improve the essay? Would bringing in a source or sources help? If so, what kind of source material? Why?
- Is the essay's style appropriate for the audience you have identified? Is there too much or not enough jargon/specialized language? Is the writing accessible and clear? Do any parts read like something you would write? Why or why not?
- How do your changes improve the piece? Keep in mind that the word "improve" here is subjective. You might, for instance, see changes that make the essay sound more like you as improvements.

Audience:
Audiences can be very broad. For example, many newspapers, television shows, videos, etc. are made for a wide range of people. For our purposes, though, try to identify a more specific sector of the population for you to consider (e.g., college students, the elderly, parents, Mississippians, immigrants, taxpayers, investors, teenage girls/women, etc.).

Topic choices:
- Financial aid or free college
- Any aspect of NCAA athletics including NIL

- Cryptocurrency
- Fast fashion
- Healthcare costs or issues

Requirements:
- Minimum of 1/2 of the original essay must be changed and/or built upon (this can be a combination of changing language/phrasing, changing content, and/or adding content)
- Correct MLA citation of any sources incorporated
- Copy of AI-produced essay and final assignment submitted by due dates
- Completion of Unit Reflection explaining your decision making