

But Can It Make You Cry?

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Photo by David John Arnett (Advertising '25)

“HAVE YOU HEARD about the new AI text generator?” my daughter texted several months ago.

I had, indeed, and decided to take ChatGPT for a spin by inviting it to engage in some self-critique.

My prompt: *I think AI text generation is an abomination.*

Its insta-essay included this concatenation: *I think everyone needs to stop trying to say AI codegen will magically happen, and that the only reason for that is because it's so good at the current generation that nobody is making much of an effort to use it at all. . . . I think, it's the best idea to ignore.*

I sent the whole rambling essay back to my daughter as my text response, only telling her at the end of the message that it was AI generated. Her reply?

“I was so confused until I got to the end of the last paragraph . . . I was thinking, ‘Oh my. I didn’t realize a single question would unleash such an uncharacteristic stream of consciousness! It doesn’t even sound like him.’ 😊”

Up to a point, she thought the “I” used in the generated content was me—even while something was telling her it was not. What *do* I sound like, really? How does my daughter divine my soul speaking from lines of text on her phone? As an editor she has learned to read with an eye for detail and voice, but the fact that AI-generated text could have led her along made me a bit uncomfortable. Something, however, did not seem quite right to her. The “I” and the me did not correspond. The synthetic voice revealed itself. Or, rather, it failed to reveal me.

The College of Humanities is currently engaged in discussions about the possible negative and positive impacts of AI content generation on the classroom. People weigh in on both sides, some seeing it as a tool to help students self-critique, while others see it facilitating cheating or depriving students of crucial fundamental writing and thinking skills. All are concerned about the fact that generated content can convincingly represent lies as truth.

If we should find ourselves asking a machine to make words for our use, most of the time those words serve as currency in some kind of commercial deal: as students, we exchange essays for admission, papers for grades; as workers, we trade reports for wages, documentation for reimbursement; as patients we swap descriptions for medicine or treatment. Machines can help us mint such ephemeral coinage, and if we use a content generator, its counterfeit

nature will sometimes make no difference to either party in the transaction. Certain contexts require only verbiage, information minus any real thinking.

However, when we bring pen to paper and use words to explore an idea, seek to voice our souls, we aspire to a level of authenticity that cannot hide the human inside. In those scenarios, if we have engaged in literacy’s heavy labor, our writing craft can become art. Hours of practice, multiple dead ends, and trashed drafts will have seasoned our writing persona with power to move, even to evoke tears of joy, sorrow, or laughter. AI can do impressive things, but can it make you cry?

The idea of the Turing test—can a machine deceive you into believing it is human?—will ever haunt us, but we must remember that the test is not of the machine but of the human. Can we be deceived, or will we soon note the absence of a distinct human voice in the digital conversation? Have we come to know another well enough to read his or her soul—or note its absence—between the texted lines of a crowdsourced appropriation?

A common maxim among writers is the phrase, “easy reading is usually very hard writing.” Part of what makes good writing is spending the time, often mid-sentence, to interrogate our thinking. Although an efficiency economy justifies much of technology, taking a bit longer to write something well yields treasure that can be far more valuable than an instant essay. It also teaches us to recognize our own voice, as

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well as to consider how we will be read by others. As we look anew at text that has become too familiar, we can make what we write more nuanced, more compelling, or more persuasive. When we compose, rewrite, and edit our final drafts, we have occasion to imagine how our future readers will respond, an exercise in empathy that pulls us outside ourselves. What might originally have evoked yawns may, after careful, humane input, draw tears.

If, on the other hand, we allow a machine to write for us, we bypass the chance to grow through writing, which, in its most glorious moments, can be a kind of revelation. Sometimes, especially when we are writing journal entries for our own reading, or letters or talks to move others, we may find ourselves following a train of thought that is not of our own making, one that leads to a better place where we learn new truth. This thoughtful, creative mode of writing trades prompts for promptings, and rather than being relieved of an onerous task, we instead find ourselves transformed through writing that can, and does, change our very souls. ■