MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI Working Paper: Overview of the Issues, Statement of Principles, and Recommendations

MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI

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Working Paper: Overview of the Issues, Statement of Principles, and Recommendations

Introduction

As generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies become widely available as writing aids, the Modern Language Association and the Conference on College Composition and Communication, a chartered conference of the National Council of Teachers of English, affirm our common values as organizations serving professional educators. We believe that writing is an important mode of learning that facilitates the analysis and synthesis of information, the retention of knowledge, cognitive development, social connection, and participation in public life. We believe that writing itself—from the earliest impression of marks on clay to recent word processors with autocorrect, research citation, and other aids—has always been a technology and, as such, is always open to new technologies. However, we also believe that human endeavors are at the heart of a humanities education—and education more broadly—and are concerned that support for writing and language learning programs could be under threat.

We affirm that the term *writing* describes a process as well as a product and that the labor of students, teachers, and writing professionals should be credited and compensated. We believe that higher education's specific institutional role of credentialing the achievements of students as individuals means that generative AI cannot simply be used in colleges and universities as it might be in other organizations for efficiency or other purposes. To this end, we believe the primary work of educators is to support students' intellectual and social development and to foster exploration and creativity rather than to surveil, discipline, or punish students.

This working paper explains the relevant history, nomenclature, and key concepts to our profession. Under this framework, the paper declares the broad risks and potential benefits of artificial intelligence to language, literary, and writing scholarship and instruction and the ways generative AI will affect all of us in higher education: students, scholars, instructors, administrators, and staff members. The paper then suggests principles and recommendations for creating policies, guidelines, and practices that draw on our strengths as teachers and scholars.

Future working papers will focus on the other important topics raised by large language models (LLMs) in more detail—for example, ethics, citation practices, linguistic diversity, reading, pedagogical implications, language instruction, and others as they emerge. This working paper recognizes that our understanding of writing and how it is taught requires reenvisioning in the light of what looks to be seismic shifts warranted by LLMs.

Background

The MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI (TF), formed in December of 2022 by the executive leadership of the Modern Language Association and the CCCC Executive Committee, was charged as follows:

- taking stock of the current state of the issue and identifying implications for teachers, students, organizations, and scholars
- creating community for members to share resources
- creating resources that will synthesize, set professional standards, and make recommendations or provide guidance to members
- supporting and mapping out promising directions of scholarly interest for learning more about the issue

The group convened on a biweekly basis, surfacing key issues and developing priorities. After developing a web presence, the group created a resource page and developed a questionnaire under the auspices of the MLA and CCCC to gather input from educators. In spring 2023, the MLA and CCCC distributed the questionnaire to learn more about concerns, questions, and issues that LLMs raise for writing, language, and literature educators. The questionnaire, as well as responses from reviewers (acknowledged at the end), has helped the TF identify priorities for developing resources. A high-level overview of the responses is available in the appendix.

As a first step toward these charges, the TF is issuing this working paper, the first of an anticipated several working papers to begin a conversation and establish principles as the organizations move forward in an era of rising use of generative AI technologies for educational, scholarly, commercial, and public purposes.

History, Nomenclature, and Key Concepts

Theorizing computers as intelligent, and even sentient, has long been tied to their ability to produce writing (such as Christopher Strachey's *LoveLetters* in 1952), and interact with human beings in conversation (such as Joseph Weizenbaum's *ELIZA* in 1964). Members of the Modern Language Association and the College Conference on Composition and Communication have likewise been using and working with automatic text generation for decades, a corpus of research that has provided critical context for this group's work.

Generative artificial intelligence is often conflated with artificial *general* intelligence (AGI), which is the human-like, seemingly sentient AI that is still the stuff of science fiction. *Generative AI*, by contrast, refers to computer systems that can produce, or generate, various forms of traditionally human expression, in the form of digital content including language, images, video, and music. LLMs are a subset of generative AI used to deliver text-based formats like prose, poetry, or even programming code. The GPT grouping of LLMs currently enjoys the most public recognition, but there are others available; GPT itself stands for generative pre-trained transformer, with each piece of that nomenclature bearing a specific technical meaning.

For our purposes it is enough to say that in 2018 the nonprofit OpenAI developed the means to yoke generative pre-trained models to the so-called transformer architecture introduced by Google in the previous year, thus delivering dramatic increases in performance. The widely discussed *ChatGPT* is a specific application of GPT-3 (now GPT-4), released in late 2022 by OpenAI. It combines an easy-to-access browser interface with a chatbot style of interaction, whereby a user can enter a series of discursive prompts and engage with the outputs of the model in an ongoing dialogic stream.

LLMs work by using statistics and probability to predict what the next character (i.e., letter, punctuation mark, even a blank space) is likely to be in an ongoing sequence, thereby "spelling" words, phrases, and entire sentences and paragraphs. It is not unlike autocomplete, but more powerful. LLMs are trained on vast bodies of preexisting text (such as content from the Internet), which, to some extent, predetermine their output. All of the text a model generates is original in the sense that it represents combinations of letters and words that generally have no exact match in the training documents, yet the content is also unoriginal in that it is determined by patterns in its training data. The same language model may generate a variety of different sequences in response to the same input prompt. A model cannot reliably report on which sources in its training data contributed to any given output. All of this combines to make the output of LLMs qualitatively different from any other form of text, even texts that might have been computer generated according to some other method. It should be noted that given the assortment of software applications drawing on LLMs, presenting them through different user interfaces to offer various affordances, they are also unavoidable.

Although it is often tempting to speak in terms of what an LLM is "doing" or "intending" or even "thinking," what we are witnessing is the production of word sequences that look like intentional human text through a process of statistical correlation. As the models are refined, expand their language corpora, and draw on greater computational power, their outputs mimic the writing of sentient humans more convincingly. LLMs do not, however, "think" in the way that we would define such an activity as it takes place in human cognition.

Risks to Language, Literature, and Writing Instruction and Scholarship

The risks and threats to students, teachers, and the profession are real and profound. Societal conversations are underway as well about the costs of LLMs, including the spread of misinformation, biased outputs, privacy and copyright violations, and environmental costs. All of these concerns affect our students and should inform our response as educators. We will focus here on potential costs specific to our goals as educators and scholars and to the goals of our professional roles.

Some of the immediate risks posed by LLMs are to the interactional and human components of teaching, research, and student engagement. Student reading practices can become uncritically automated in ways that do not aid critical writing instruction or faculty assessment approaches. The increased use and circulation of unverified information and the lack of source transparency complicates and undermines the ethics of academic research and trust in the research process. Additionally, although using LLMs to collect and synthesize preexisting information may provide students with models of writing and analysis, such models reproduce biases through the flattening of distinctive linguistic, literary, and analytical approaches.

Risks to students

- Students may miss writing, reading, and thinking practice because they submit generative AI outputs as their own work or depend on generative AI summaries of texts rather than reading.
- Students may not see writing or language study as valuable since machines can mimic these skills.
- Students may experience an increased sense of alienation and mistrust if surveillance and detection approaches meant to ensure academic integrity are undertaken. Such approaches have been proven unreliable and biased; they can produce false positives that could lead to wrongful accusations, resulting in negative consequences for the students.
- Students may face increased linguistic injustice because LLMs promote an uncritical normative reproduction of standardized English usage that aligns with dominant racial and economic power structures. Worldwide, LLMs may also perpetuate the dominance of English.
- Students may have unequal access to the most elite tools since some students and institutions will be able to purchase more sophisticated versions of the technologies, which may replicate societal inequalities.

The above risks could hurt marginalized groups disproportionately, limiting their ability to make autonomous choices about their expressive possibilities.

Risks to teachers

- Teachers may be asked to make significant changes to their practice without adequate time, training, or compensation for their labor. This has particular implications for college writing instructors who work in contingent positions (adjunct faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and full-time, non-tenure-track faculty), who make up the vast majority of writing instructors and work in often precarious and under-supported conditions.
- Teachers may lack adequate support and up-to-date training to understand LLMs as they relate to our disciplines.
- Teachers will need to spend time and energy developing critical AI literacy (that is, literacy about the nature, capacities, and risks of AI tools as well as how they might be used), which will divert their attention away from other teaching practices and course content unless adequate resources are given to build it into the curriculum.

Risks to programs and the profession

- The public view of writing or language study may be seen as less valuable since machines can mimic these skills. People may believe that generative AI replaces the development of critical thinking, composing, process knowledge, and the metacognition that writing helps students develop.
- Institutions may struggle to plan and provide for the kind of labor and resources needed to meaningfully respond to these challenges.

- Academic values around giving credit to sources may be compromised because LLMs can't or don't point to the sources in their training data that shape their outputs.
- Uneven access to AI text generators may increase inequities between scholars of different institutions or countries.
- The rapid changes in the technology and tools available will make it difficult for institutions to keep policies updated.
- Variation in policies among instructors, departments, and institutions could make it hard for students to anticipate what writing skills and practices will be needed or acceptable in their next class.
- Contingent faculty may be excluded from top-down decision making on generative AI yet simultaneously be expected to carry out labor-intensive policies and teach critical AI literacy.
- Academic administrators may seek to increase class sizes or modify workloads based on perceived efficiencies created by AI. This has the potential of affecting jobs in areas that support or require writing instruction and support.
- Reliance on AI-generated analysis and writing by scholars can undermine the wide range of research practices, including research, writing, and peer review, that characterize scholarship.

Benefits to Language, Literature, and Writing Instruction and Scholarship

While acknowledging the inherent pitfalls of generative AI, the technology affords enormous potential benefits. It has the promise to democratize writing, allowing almost anyone, regardless of educational background, socioeconomic advantages, and specialized skills, to participate in a wide range of discourse communities. These technologies, for example, provide potential benefits to student writers who are disabled, who speak languages other than English, who are first-generation college students unfamiliar with the conventions of academic writing, or who struggle with anxiety about beginning a writing project. They also augment the drafting and revising processes of writers for a variety of purposes.

Because of the power of LLMs, these technologies can also contribute to literary study in digital spaces. LLMs can detect layouts, summarize text, extract metadata labels from unstructured text, and group similar text together to enable search (see Miller). In the future, data in large corpora of texts—such as those available at *Project Gutenberg*—could be cleaned and standardized by automated processes that use LLMs. More important, this data could be quickly placed into a spreadsheet format that enables more ambitious digital humanities projects for those without advanced programming skills. LLMs provide a resource for synthesizing broad and varied documents and textual information. They can collect and organize information such as dates, authors, and book titles in ways that can make the research and reading process quicker and differently accessible.

Benefits for language instruction

- Language students can use LLMs to create translations that include explanations and wording options.

- Language students can develop expertise even while using generative AI. Although it may be used to produce a rough draft of a translation, refining such translations will still require knowledge about language choices, especially with literary works.
- Language students can ask LLMs questions about a text in another language.
- Language teachers can use generative AI to quickly come up with examples (Poole).

Benefits for literary studies

- Students can use LLMs as instruments for creative wordplay.
- Students with a range of technical expertise can use LLMs, which can be prompted to produce code, to create electronic literature and digital writing.
- Teachers can train and prompt LLMs to respond to specific literary passages as an aid to class discussions.
- Teachers of literature can use LLMs to produce imitations of authors' styles and thematic concerns, assisting in lessons on these topics.
- Teachers and students can use LLMs to produce sample texts following established or innovative constraints, such as meter, rhyme, alliteration, and poetic and narrative forms.
- Teachers and students can use LLMs to provide basic interpretations of literary texts, which can serve as low stakes launching points for discussion.
- Students and teachers can ask LLMs about literary works dealing with similar themes because LLMs have access to massive amounts of information about different writers across literary periods and nationalities.

Benefits for writing instruction

- Students can use LLMs to help stimulate thought and develop drafts that are still the student's own work and to overcome psychological obstacles to tackling invention and revision. When used in these ways, LLMs have the potential to act as literacy sponsors to emerging academic writers.
- Students can use generative AI to produce creative materials when developing multimodal writing projects that communicate in modes other than written text, since generative AI can process data involving still images, sound, and moving images.
- Teachers can integrate LLMs into the writing process and enhance students' rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, and knowledge of conventions.
- Teachers can use LLMs to offer a practical demonstration of some key rhetorical concepts that have influenced writing and rhetoric studies, especially as related to questions of process, praxis, and the construction of meaning.
- Teachers can use LLMs to provide models of written prose that can be used to highlight differences in genre, tone, diction, literary style, and disciplinary focus.

- Teachers can use LLMs to offer new processes for students developing multimodal writing genres since LLMs have the capability to process multimodal inputs and outputs.
- Teachers can use LLMs to provide course content that bridges the gap between writing across disciplines.
- Teachers can use LLMs to quickly generate different models of response and stimulate discussion about various approaches to a writing prompt. These technologies allow instructors to "show" as well as "tell" what different writing strategies look like.
- Teachers and students can use LLMs to complement existing tools for English language learners—such as usage dictionaries, grammar checkers, language tutorials—to experience success more rapidly in their writing efforts.
- Writers who come from diverse and various linguistic and educational backgrounds may benefit from the more sophisticated grammar, style, and genre editing capabilities of LLMs by receiving access to the "language of power."

Principles and Recommendations

As organizations working together, we urge educators to respond out of a sense of our own strengths rather than operating out of fear. Rather than looking for quick fixes, we should support ongoing open and iterative processes to develop our responses. At the institutional level, policy should be accompanied by education about AI; when creating policy, institutional actors must prioritize both ethical conduct and the mission of higher education.

As LLMs evolve in predictable and unpredictable ways, the organizations offer the following principle-driven recommendations:

1. Provide support for teachers as we adapt our teaching methods and materials and respond to the complexity of issues and labor involved. Such support should be at multiple levels—from institutions and organizations, programs, departments, and school districts. Such resources and support should be compatible with the values outlined at the start of this statement.
2. Center the continued teaching and learning of writing on writers and the inherent value that writing has as a mode of learning, exploration, and literacy development for all writers.
3. Create guiding documents, guiding materials, and resources for students and teachers that can be a foundation for policy and discussions of best practices, one that emphasizes the value of process-focused instruction and activities to the continued development of students' intellectual and literate lives. Students, teachers, and institutions need to understand the ethical, environmental, and labor implications that LLMs introduce as well as issues of copyright, data use, and privacy.
4. Focus on approaches to academic integrity that support students rather than punish them and that promote a collaborative rather than adversarial relationship between teachers and students. We urge caution and reflection about the use of AI text detection tools. Any use of them should consider their

flaws and the possible effect of false accusations on students, including negative effects that may disproportionately affect marginalized groups.

5. Develop policy language around AI by promoting an ethic of transparency around any use of AI text that builds on our teaching about source citation. For example, most AI generators produce a transcript of the interaction with the user, which can be reproduced as documentation.
6. Formulate policy that can educate about AI and help frame how campuses and communities respond to or take up AI and writing challenges and opportunities. We call for faculty involvement in the formation and evaluation of policies about AI rather than a top-down approach. We advise the use of an iterative policy process where we continue to reflect and revise based on feedback as the technology and our thinking about it evolve.
7. Use caution about responses that emphasize surveillance or restrictions on the writing process that make the conditions of writing for class radically different from writing conditions students will encounter in other classes, work environments, and their personal lives.
8. Prioritize the development of critical AI literacy in faculty leaders and higher education administrators. By this we mean not just how AI models work but also about the risk, rewards, capacities, and complications of AI tools. We support allocation of more resources for developing critical literacy among teachers and students around the nature and pitfalls of text generators. Critical AI literacy is now part of digital literacy, and students and teachers should be made aware of bias and inaccuracy in model outputs and the particular vulnerability of students who may not yet have sufficient expertise to critically evaluate language model outputs, including seeing them as sentient.
9. Develop critical AI literacy in publishers and editors. Publishers and editors would be well served to develop critical AI literacy since they may encounter manuscripts that incorporate computer generated texts, both with LLMs and with artisanal software. We support the development of policy by leaders in scholarly communication (e.g., the Committee on Publication Ethics) alongside humanities-specific policy in relation to research and publication in these fields, noting that the field of electronic literature has decades of experience publishing and critically assessing such work.
10. Dedicate time and resources to considering new guidelines for faculty use of AI by stakeholders and leaders to fully engage with the implications. New AI tools like *ChatGPT* and others produce both opportunities for efficiency and new labor attached to educating, evaluating, and supporting learners.
11. Expand institutional investment in writing instruction so that students can better assess how LLMs are constructed, trained, and deployed and learn to write—and rewrite—the instructions to these platforms for composing, a process often described as prompt engineering, drawing on existing expertise in rhetorical knowledge.
12. Communicate with students, colleagues, and the public about the continuing value of writing to develop thinking.

Ultimately, this first statement from the MLA-CCCC task force calls for constructive and collaborative approaches to AI and writing and recognizes the strengths that our fields jointly bring to the questions at hand. We are called upon to do some reimagining and some revisiting of commonplaces of our fields. We

are up to this task if we do so with care, dialogue, reflection, and humanity, all of which are central to the allied fields represented by our organizations.

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Appendix: Responses to the CCCC-MLA Joint Task Force Questionnaire

In March and April 2023, the MLA and CCCC collaborated on disseminating a feedback form to learn more from stakeholders about their perceptions of the significance of large language models for their classrooms, programs, and campuses. In a subsequent working paper, we will provide an in-depth report on the results of the questionnaire. For the purposes of this working paper, two questions are relevant: What concerns, if any, do you have about use of *ChatGPT* and other AI text generation technologies in teaching, and what opportunities, if any, do you see in the use of *ChatGPT* and other AI text generation technologies in teaching?

Of the 456 respondents to the question on concerns (five being most concerned and one being least concerned) the response level on a scale of five was 3.82. The two most common categories of concerns included concerns about plagiarism and integrity, and the inability of instructors to be able to detect AI. The second significant category of concern focused on respondents expressing worries that students would use AI instead of learning to write, practice important writing or critical thinking skills, learn a language, or to learn in general.

Of the 412 respondents who provided a response to the question about opportunities, the average was 3.24. The most common opportunities identified by AI and writing focused on the technology being helpful to students' writing processes at multiple stages. The next most commonly identified opportunity focused on the possibility that AI tools can help students think about aspects of AI writing and its limitations and to learn how to improve on it (e.g., creating example papers or text for students to evaluate or revise). Perhaps most telling was that a large number of respondents to this question were unsure of possible opportunities or did not see any opportunities.

However, graphing the responses show that the level of concern in terms of the data distribution is significantly higher (being skewed toward greater concern) than the level of opportunity, which was more evenly distributed across responses (see figs. 1–2).

Figure 1: Distribution of responses to question 7.

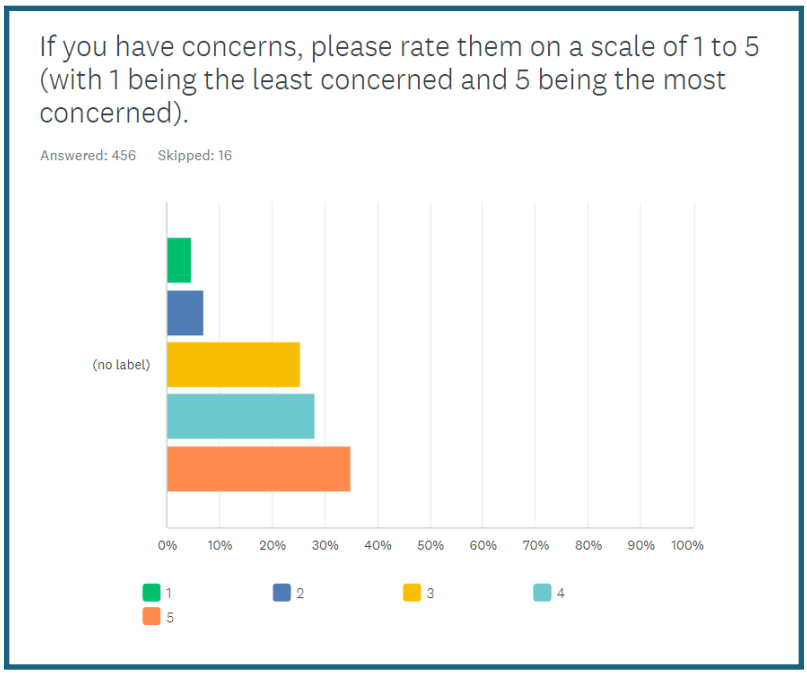

Figure 2: Response distribution to question 9 regarding opportunities.