

How AI Has Disrupted the Literacy and Critical Thinking Abilities of First-Year College Students



2024 has been an eventful year, from having my car tire disconnect from the joint in a McDonald's drive thru to ending the school semester having created more great writers through my English-101 course. Although this has been an eventful year, it has also been an insightful one. Never have I been more concerned for the literacy of American youth and first-year college students than I am now as an educator.

No More Writers

With the advancement of AI writing technology comes the very real threat to American literacy and critical thinking, and this is evident in first-year college students. Because they have access to AI writing tools, too many students don't see the importance of writing or reading.

Reading and writing are fundamentally linked and are inseparable from critical thinking. In this context, critical thinking is one's ability to think about the way one thinks. In this process, one not only comes to an opinion but evaluates how and why they came to that opinion.

“... reading helps a person retain information.”

As an example, if a person believes students shouldn't eat in a library because they are messy, they should ask themselves why they believe that. What supporting facts or evidence leads them to that conclusion? This person might have heard rumors about mice in a local library. In thinking about this, the person is compelled to do more research and might find that the mice in the local library came from poor construction not food items. Alternatively, they might read an official news report saying the mice in the library are indeed the result of poor eating habits of students.

Moreover, that person might realize they jumped to a conclusion too quickly. Evaluating their decision-making process will make them ask more questions before forming an opinion on a subject in the future. This is an effective step towards strengthening their critical thinking process.

In the above example, the person took further steps to gather more information. To do this, the person had to actively look for it and consume the information by reading it. A person could get information from videos. However, reading from a book helps a person retain information and gives them space to highlight examples or points to come back to, while they process the information.

“[AI has] also disrupted research.”

However, AI hasn't only disrupted reading, writing and critical thinking; it's also disrupted student research. In order for a student to write a research paper pre-AI, they had to read books, articles and journals to gather information from credible sources to support their claims. This interaction with reading, taking notes and researching exposes the student to the process of vetting information. It gives them multiple angles from which to view an argument.

With AI, students just write in a prompt or two until the bot gets it right to their standards. The student skips reading, writing, researching and critical thinking. They essentially do no work. This is troubling for many reasons, including because it is leading to a rise in the inability of students to write and perform critical thinking.

Write One Grammatically Sound Sentence

Students are inundated with sentence fragments, abbreviations and typos across TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms. Nearly all of the posts on these apps contain grammar or punctuation errors. Students, in texts and other messages, communicate with their friends by default using sentence fragments, misplaced commas, run-on sentences and other writing errors. This is not an attack on internet language. This is a comment on too many students' inability to convey thoughts in written standard English in a formal setting, such as a college or workplace. While they regularly consume bad grammar and punctuation on the internet, some students are not reading books, newspapers or other sound communications.

Most students are not seeing grammatically correct sentences or written communications ripe with critical thinking and debate. Therefore, they find it difficult create one sound sentence. Too many students believe incomplete sentences or sentence fragments are complete sentences. They don't understand that to make a complete sentence, the sentence (in simplest explanation) needs a subject and a verb. It's a simple concept students used to learn in grade school. It is now something they regularly struggle with throughout high school, college and their professional lives.

“AI can't help the supervisor give specific nuanced... directions”

A sophomore in high school sending sentence fragments by way of text to his friends is different than a supervisor sending a poorly written email to his entire team. Writing is as nuanced as the directions it tries to convey sometimes. Because of this, AI can't help the supervisor give specific nuanced operational directions to his team for the entire week, taking into consideration a few absent employees. In this example, the supervisor who can't write also can't depend on AI, and it's embarrassing to send out badly written emails to his team. They'll laugh behind his back in the break room. This is fixed in the writing process.

The Perfect Shitty Draft

All experienced writers will agree that the polishing of any written communication starts with revising, editing and proofreading. As previously noted, critical thinking in this context is the process of one's thinking about how one thinks. Revising is similar because it requires a person to review their own writing and, thereby, their own thinking.

Revising and editing a document might mean taking out a weaker statement or changing the way an idea is worded to make it clearer. Sometimes, a person reads their own work and sees a flaw in their logic and change it. This is done before the world is allowed to view it. If it isn't, the flaw in logic or fallacy could be used against the writer.

“... no essay [or] text message... is perfect in the first draft.”

It's vital to know that no essay, text message or other form of written communication is perfect in the first draft. This is why it's called the “first draft” and not called the “only draft.” There are going to be errors. Upon second read, the writer is looking for and fixing these mistakes. There might even be a third draft, depending on the length of the communication and its intended audience. Some students are doing just a draft.

Too many students that care to write at least some of their own essays are not proofreading their essays. If they haven't read an article in the last four years, they're not likely to be interested in reading a three- or four-page document, even if they are the person who wrote it. If AI doesn't see any errors, neither do they. This over-reliance on AI is limiting the intellectual growth of students.

The Takeaway

The misuse of AI to write essays and other communications is threatening the long-term literacy and critical thinking of the average student. Too many students are no longer engaging in the process of reading, researching, critical thinking and writing by the time they come to college. AI can't replace humans, but it can replace the will of humans to engage in learning processes. Students must be reengaged with reading and writing, along with critical thinking. Otherwise, the country risks a world of drones controlled by what AI thinks.

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