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RHETORIC IN CRISIS: THE VALUE OF RHETORICAL EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF AI

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Abstract

With the advent of generative artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT and others, rhetorical educators must begin asking themselves what the purpose of their field is if AI can do everything they typically teach their students. This chapter discusses what we can still teach our students that will benefit them when the landscape of rhetorical education is changing rapidly. In particular, this chapter discusses what AI can't do, and thus what we, as rhetorical educators, need to still be teaching our students. While the advent of AI may change the ways that we teach and use rhetoric, rhetorical education is as important or even more important now than it ever has been. Teaching students to think critically about rhetoric in an age of AI is vitally important to their future success in academics as well as in professional and social settings. In the end, this chapter is an argument for why we, as a field, are still needed and should continue to exist.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, rhetorical education, writing, critical thinking*



1. Introduction

Recently, discussions across the university have focused on how we might have to adapt our teaching in the face of generative artificial intelligence (AI). Rhetorical education, in particular (and its related field of writing studies), seems to be having an existential crisis. This may sound overly dramatic, but with the advent of generative AI such as ChatGPT and others, many are asking themselves: Why do we exist? What is the purpose of our field if AI can do everything that we typically teach our students? As an illustration of why these are important questions to answer, consider the following: While on a tour of our campus, a group stopped by our writing center, which has peer tutors to help students with writing papers for their classes. A parent asked the tour guide, loud enough for the tutors to hear: “Why do you need a writing center when AI can fix their papers for them?” This and others like it are the kinds of questions we are contending with. Thus, we need more discussion about the effects of AI on student learning and ways we might have to adapt our pedagogical approach, especially in rhetoric classes. Many across the university are embracing the new era of AI, but others are more wary or may even be downright against their students using it at all. While I am not going to argue that we should ban AI completely in our classes, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss what rhetorical education still has to offer that large language models can’t do, what we can still teach our students that will benefit them when the landscape of rhetorical education is changing rapidly. Focusing on rhetorical concepts such as style, voice, ethos, kairos, ethics, and audience awareness, this chapter will discuss what AI can’t do, and thus what we, as rhetorical educators, can still offer our students. While the advent of AI may change the ways that we teach and use rhetoric, rhetorical education is as important or even more important now than it ever has been. Teaching students to think critically about rhetoric in the age of AI is vitally important to their future success in academics, as well as in professional and social settings. Along with this, a major challenge is to justify why we exist to people outside our discipline. How do we convince students, as well as academic stakeholders, that our discipline is still needed? What arguments can we make in the face of very real threats of having our programs and thus our jobs cut? In the end, this paper is an argument for why we, as a field, are still needed and should continue to exist.

2. Rhetorical Education in U.S. Universities

In the United States, people who study rhetorical theory can mostly be found in two places at the university: departments of communication, where they focus mostly on oral communication/speech-giving/oratory, etc., and writing studies, a discipline often called Rhetoric and Composition, where they focus on using rhetorical theory in written arguments. I come from the latter tradition, so my focus is on the teaching of writing. In the United States, nearly every university has a required introduction to academic writing course that all students must take. Often this course is called “First-Year Composition.” My own university has a 2-course sequence: Composition 1, which is called “Writing in Academic Contexts,” and Composition 2, “Writing in Personal and Public Contexts.” Something similar to our Composition 1 is required at almost every U.S. university. This course, along with an often similarly required “Introduction to Oral Communication” is very often the only place where students get any explicit rhetorical education. They are also required to take some “general education” courses in history, science, art, social and behavioral science, and several others, but the rest of their education is narrowly focused on career training.

At my university, I am a half time administrator with the title of Composition Coordinator, a job often called at other universities the Writing Program Administrator. One of the purposes of my job is to help my fellow professors teach writing in the most effective ways possible. But here



is the problem: Composition is a required course that students don't want to take. Either they just hate writing and don't want to have to take a writing course, or they think that they don't need it because whatever career path they are going into won't require them to write, or any number of other reasons. Whatever the reason, teaching this course is already difficult because the class is full of students who don't want to be there. Then, along comes generative AI and gives them a way to not do any of the work, by just having AI do it for them. We have had more academic dishonesty cases in the past 2 years than the whole rest of my career combined. So, many in my department are looking at AI through the lens of academic dishonesty – students are just using it to cheat, to not do the work assigned, and just turn in papers written by generative AI.

What I want to focus on in this chapter is what students lose by just using AI instead of writing their own papers. I am not advocating for a total ban on AI. I believe that AI can be a very powerful and useful tool to enhance writing, but I want to focus on what we still need to be teaching students, what they lose by not learning from and applying skills taught by rhetorical professionals. As argued by Sano-Franchini, McIntyre, and Fernandes (2025), “Writing studies teacher-scholars understand the relationship between language, power, and persuasion,” while ChatGPT does not. They go on to argue that “we must recognize the harms that will result when writing is primarily treated as a tool to transcribe answers, including its implications for critical thinking, democratic decision-making, and linguistic variation and expression” (n.p.).

3. What Do Students Lose by Using AI to Write Their Papers?

The question of what students lose when they use AI is an important one because it leads us to what they need from us and therefore what arguments we can make for why we are important. The following list is not comprehensive but does give some of what I believe are the most important issues to consider.

- **Linguistic diversity/Use of individual voice and style.** There are 30 dialects of American English, and 160 total English dialects. In the U.S., we have what linguists call Standard American English (SAE), which is what many people think is the most important dialect for U.S. speakers to know how to use. Many linguists argue against this, though, stating that all dialects should be valued equally (Cameron 1995; Lippi-Green 1997). In the U.S., there is a major debate among Composition scholars about whether we should make students learn SAE in our classes or whether we should be advocating for all dialects to be accepted (Young 2011; Inoue 2019; Baker-Bell et al. 2020; Kynard 2023). Many people of color see SAE as racist because it's typically only spoken as a first dialect by upper-middle-class white people (Alvarez 2017; Patanayak 2017). For example, in the writing program at Stanford University that is run by Adam Banks, rather than seeing so-called “non-standard” dialects as deficits, they “are committed to honoring the wide range of language, literacy and rhetorical practices students bring with them, and to helping all our students see those practices and the traditions they come from as offering strengths and assets they can bring to academic writing and speaking” (teachingwriting.stanford.edu 2023, n.p.). This debate has sparked questions about whether AI should be used since it only spits out “perfect” SAE in everything it writes. Many are calling this racist and biased against people of color. For example, “Alfred L. Owusu-Ansah has shown how ChatGPT advances linguistic homogeneity and white language supremacy” (qtd in Sano-Franchini et al. 2025, n.p.) Thus “we must go beyond merely acknowledging that new writing technologies reinforce linguistic homogenization to actively resist contributing to this outcome, particularly when



the known benefits do little to outweigh the established risks” (Sano-Franchini et al. 2025, n.p.). However, even if you don’t want to get into that debate, what AI spits out is stale, voice-flattening prose with no individual style. It can write something “correctly” in terms of SAE grammar, or “well organized” in a super boring definition of “organized,” but it never gives you flare; it doesn’t show an individual’s voice or style; it doesn’t let a writer’s own personality come out. These are the kinds of things that rhetorical educators can teach. We help students find their own voice, to use their own individuality when they write in order to write in ways that represent who they are and where they are from. I don’t want students who just know how to put prompts into AI. I want students who use their individual voice in their own way to argue for what they believe in.

- **Critical thinking (about Kairos, audience, effectiveness of sources, etc.).** Historically, in the USA, a major purpose of higher education was to create citizens who could think critically and deeply about the world, who could analyze texts and keep themselves from being manipulated, who could recognize fake news when it was presented to them, etc. If students are using AI to read for them, to analyze and summarize arguments for them, to write papers for them, they lose the ability to think critically. When it comes to concepts such as Kairos, audience awareness, effectiveness of sources, and the appropriateness of a particular argument, AI can’t make those adjustments. ChatGPT does not know the particulars of a person’s rhetorical situation, who their particular audience is, the particulars of their kairotic moment, etc. ChatGPT’s writing is so very general that it can’t work well for any particular situation with all the nuances of that situation. Students need to learn to think critically about the nuances of rhetorical situations if they are to use rhetoric effectively. Using AI hinders that. Therefore, rhetorical educators are still needed to teach them that. In addition, students lose the ability to write and make arguments themselves without using AI. I like to compare it to using a calculator to do simple math. Why do we teach 7-year-olds to add and subtract? Why don’t we just teach them how to use a calculator? My university department has recently added a writing class called “AI Prompt Engineering”. It feels a bit like we are just teaching students how to use a calculator. In this writing class, we are not teaching them to write; we are teaching them to use AI to create texts. What happens when someone needs to make an argument, and they don’t have access to the internet? I know this sounds like that old math teacher’s line: “You won’t always have a calculator with you,” when, in fact, we do actually always have calculators with us on our phones now. However, I still believe that if students don’t have the skills to actually make arguments or write well themselves (without relying on AI), they won’t be successful. Rhetorical educators are needed to teach students how to actually make reasoned and logical arguments themselves without the use of or help from AI.
- **Writing to learn:** When students write a paper about a subject, and I mean, really write it themselves without any AI, they learn so much more about the subject than if they just read about it or if they memorize some facts about it to pass a test. This is what composition scholars call “writing to learn.” It is why writing studies experts advocate for the use of essays and other written texts for assessment purposes rather than just relying on tests. However, if students use AI to write their papers for them, they do not actually learn the content of what they write about. This becomes a problem when the content is essential knowledge for their degree or career path. If a student is in college to become a history teacher, for example, and uses ChatGPT to write their history papers for them, they fail to learn a lot of content that they are going to need in teaching history. This could have much



more disastrous consequences if they are going into medical fields or engineering, etc. The Association for Writing Across the Curriculum (AWAC) hypothesized that generative AI tools would cause a negative impact on the use of writing to learn and think critically. Their statement on AI argued that “Writing to learn is an intellectual activity that is crucial to the social development of learners and writers. This vital activity cannot be replaced by AI language generators” (Crystal N. Fodrey et al. 2023). In addition, recently, an important empirical study from the Michigan Institute of Technology (MIT) came out that shows evidence that “LLM users consistently underperformed at neural, linguistic, and behavior levels,” when compared to students who wrote their papers themselves or only used search engines such as Google or Bing (media.mit.edu 2025).

- **Metacognition:** In writing pedagogy circles, we talk a lot about transfer of learning, the idea that learning in one context positively affects tasks performed in another context. If a student learns some things about writing in my class, for example, and that knowledge helps them more effectively write a paper in another class, they have had a positive transfer of learning. What is important to our conversation about AI is that students have to learn the original knowledge very well in order to transfer it. In addition, they have to use metacognition in the new context in order to access that learning and know when and where to use it. None of this is likely to happen if they just use AI to write their papers because when using AI, they never actually learn to think critically about what they are learning or to reflect on how that learning might be useful in other contexts. Metacognition, as well as active, engaged learning, is a necessary component for transfer to happen. AI allows students to do the work of a course without active, engaged learning, and therefore, they are less likely to transfer that knowledge.
- **Ethics:** One thing we have to keep in mind, even when we do use AI in our classes, is ethics. I won't go into great detail about this because it has been covered extensively by others, but rhetorical educators are needed to help students know how to use AI ethically. We cannot just allow students to use it however they want without teaching them about all the ethical issues that come with that. We are uniquely qualified to help students understand the ethical issues related to AI and thus are needed to help students navigate this issue.

4. Possible Pedagogical Adaptations Needed

It is not business as usual for rhetorical educators. Changing technology is going to cause us to have to adapt our teaching, whether we like it or not. In this final section, I want to suggest some possibilities for adaptation that might keep students from over relying on technology while helping them continue to grow their critical thinking and rhetorical skills. What I will discuss in this section is by no means all-inclusive, and there might be better ways of doing things. These are simply a few things that I am currently doing in my own classes that you may also want to try.

- First, it is vitally important to be very clear on what “appropriate use of AI” means to you in your class. Opinions vary greatly across the university, and if students do not know what is allowed in your class, they are likely to cross a line they didn't know you had. In my own classes, I have had students tell me that they are very worried about being accused of using AI when they didn't. I have also had conversations with students who (in my opinion) crossed a line only to have them say, “but this is exactly what my other teacher told me to do.” If we are not being clear on how and when students are allowed to use AI, they will



cross lines without meaning to and be confused as to why what they did was wrong. In my classes, we discuss AI quite a lot in the first two weeks of class. I explain to them that it is important to ask their teachers about AI use because there are so many varying opinions. We then create an AI use policy together as a class, which I have students sign, saying they agree to follow it. This does not guarantee that students will not use AI in other ways, but it does deter them to some extent and provides clear guidelines that they helped create. Even if you don't have them create their own AI use policy, transparency is extremely important so that students know where you draw the line.

- This term, students in my class are doing all the work (writing, reading, etc.) in class. There is very little outside work required. This is to ensure that students aren't using AI in ways that are not ethical. I have them write their papers in class, and I walk around and observe them writing as well as offer help during the writing process. Many other professors are moving back to in-class essays or oral reports rather than having students write papers outside of class. In many ways, this feels very wrong. It's an inauthentic writing situation; it's not the way real writing gets done. It also feels like a bit too much surveillance. Additionally, it means that I have had to cut some content from the course because we don't have time in class to cover it. However, I think the pros outweigh the cons in this particular moment. If this approach causes students to do their own work, to learn to think critically about the topics they are writing about, to make effective arguments themselves without needing to rely on AI, these outcomes are more important than the loss of a bit of process authenticity or the removal of a few topics we might have talked about in previous classes.
- One option for making sure students are revising their own work and not just plugging it into AI to "fix" it, is to make them turn on the "track changes" function in Word so that you can see all of the revisions and edits they make. I like this for two reasons: it does help me see that they did their own revisions, but also, it just helps me see their writing process more clearly. I can see how much revision they have actually done much more easily than going back and forth between earlier drafts. If I want them to make significant revisions on their drafts, this helps me see whether they really did.

If it sounds like all of these suggestions are just about keeping students from using AI, you are correct. While I mentioned above that I'm not necessarily for AI being completely banned in our classes, I do think in our writing classes, students should be doing their own work, without the use of AI as much as possible. Because, as mentioned above, students lose the ability to use critical thinking, to write to learn, to transfer their knowledge, etc., it's important to limit their use of AI when possible. The three suggestions above are not going to work in every classroom situation, and they are not the only adaptations you may need to make. They are simply things that I have tried or I am currently trying, which I think will have positive results. See Appendix 1 for a larger list of possible classroom adjustments.

5. Conclusion

As Adam Banks has argued, rhetorical educators "are committed to helping students become strategic, ethical, thoughtful communicators who are deeply attuned to audience and situation" (teachingwriting.stanford.edu). We can't do this well if students are using AI to write their papers. He goes on to say that "no matter ... the tools and technologies at our disposal," what "available means of persuasion" we are discussing, "the more we are embedded in various technological



ecosystems to communicate, the more we need discernment and deep cultural knowledge(s) to write, speak and create” (n.p.). I agree that discernment and critical thinking are key. While we are going to have to change some ways we teach rhetoric because of generative AI, I agree with Sano-Franchini et al. when they argue that “radically revising and restructuring our discipline around GenAI is premature at this time, given the uncertainty and instability of the future of these technologies” (Sano-Franchini et al. 2025). While I do think it is incredibly important at this moment to reconsider how we teach writing in the face of the increasing amount of AI use across our campuses, embracing AI fully and integrating it into our classes wholesale is not the right answer.

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Appendix 1:

Other classroom ideas

- Have them do an AI response to the reading, and then critique the response AI gives them.
- If they are doing interviews, have students upload the audio of their interviews.
- Ask them to write non-traditional genres. For example, ask them to write a dialogue or narrative using the texts you read, rather than an essay.
- Do oral exams/recitations.
- Use hand-written tests in class rather than papers they write outside of class.
- Make them put phones and/or computers away (tech-free while in class).
- Move around the class, watch what they are doing on their computer/etc. (this is especially important if you are having them do most of their writing in class).
- Use Lockdown Browser with video for take-home tests.
- Make assignments more personal and different, using local sources, something AI really can't do.
- Add into the assignment prompt, in white text, something not related, so that if students cut and paste the prompt into ChatGPT, it will discuss that thing (tomatoes or Mickey Mouse, etc).
- Show them something written by ChatGPT and talk to them about why it is not good, and why their own writing is actually better.