

I'm begging you: Never write with AI

BY BRET L. STEPHENS

© THE NEW YORK TIMES CO.

This column isn't so much an argument as it is a plea: Don't use artificial intelligence to help you write. Never let AI do your writing for you.

Don't use it for school papers, work briefs, letters to your in-laws, speeches at your company gathering or emails (however perfunctory) to your colleagues or friends. Don't let it organize your notes. Don't let it suggest an opening sentence, a segue or a closing paragraph. Don't ask it to write a first draft and pretend that editing that draft somehow makes it your own. It doesn't.

Do none of these things not because they are unethical. Writing with AI is unethical when it's a deception: when you pass off words, ideas and information as your own when they aren't. An acknowledgment can largely address the problem. Do none of these things, either, because you might be able to learn to write better than an AI can. Pretty soon, if not already, you won't, just as you can't outrun a car or outplay a chess app.

The problem with writing with AI is that it's mentally enfeebling — an escalator toward a result when you really need to make a daily habit of taking the stairs. As it becomes ubiquitous, it undermines not only our individual ability to write but also a society's collective ability to reason, a culture's inner capacity to create and everyone's reason to care. We're already reckoning with the well-documented decline of reading; AI is accelerating the decline of writing, ushering us further into what The Atlantic's Rose Horowitz calls our "postliterate age."

What, uniquely, does writing do? It compels thought. It compels thinking in ways that silent contemplation or spoken language rarely can. It compels us to subject our thinking to the effort of articulation, the rigor of grammar, the tests of intelligibility and coherence, the inspection of others. In doing so, it also enjoins us to be clear, logical and accurate — and accountable. People may easily forgive a word said in anger but not so easily one written in anger, precisely because the fact that it was written tells us that it was considered.

The considered word matters. It has staying power and moral weight. We use the expression "I want that in writing" not only so there's no mistaking the exact words that have been agreed upon but also as proof that the words are meaningful in the first place.

But what happens when the words aren't considered because they were written by (or with the help of) a machine?

Words become hollow. Imagine the father of the bride turning to AI to help him write his daughter's wedding toast: What the AI can supply in eloquence it subtracts in effort and authenticity. Now imagine that the daughter learns that the speech was written by AI: Wouldn't she be right to be disappointed, if not insulted?

Many would argue there's a big difference between using AI for something as significant and personal as a wedding speech and the boring and frequently exhausting tasks of writing, say, routine office memos. But the intellectual muscle that is exercised in everyday writing is the same one used for the writing that matters. We become better writers by the constant effort that mundane writing demands. We become better thinkers by investing into that writing a degree of attention we'd never give it if we relinquished the task to AI. We become more creative when we learn how to put a personal stamp even on routine things, making them unmistakably our own.

These skills are now evaporating. A recent examination using AI-detection technology of 100 doctoral dissertations found that 56% of them contained "more than negligible" AI-generated writing and 19% had "more than 50% AI-generated text." Anecdotal stories from college professors have a finger-in-the-dike feeling with regard to their efforts to hold back the flood of AI-generated student papers. It's easy to treat the problem as one of mere cheating. But "cheating" doesn't capture the real scope of the AI threat, which isn't merely to academic integrity or personal betterment but also to democratic self-governance.

The link between literacy and the rise of democracy is well known: People who can read and write for themselves have, historically, also been good at choosing and advocating for themselves. What happens when the process goes into reverse? When people lack the patience to absorb arguments more than a few pages or sentences long? When they lack the ability to contradict those arguments because they've never honed, through daily practice, the most essential skill for clear thinking?

We're already getting a taste of what this world looks like in President Donald Trump's social media posts and the sway they clearly exert over tens of millions of Americans. But that's a reflection of where the country was a decade ago, in the pre-AI age. How much further down the road are we now, with our even more diminished capacity to read, write and think?

The next time you're tempted to just adopt an automated response for a text message or an email, don't. Type out a response that's your own. Think of it as an act of free will. Or a vote against Trump. What takes you a few additional seconds is an act of resistance against an ever-dumber world.

Bret Stepehns is a New York Times opinion columnist.