

FEATURE

AI: love it, hate it, or tolerate it?

BY GORDON GRAHAM



Three writers walk into a bar: one loves AI, one hates AI, and one tolerates AI. The bartender says, “You guys spend more time debating AI than writing! Are you here for drinks or a Turing test?”

Or maybe he says, “Let me guess, you want one glass half-full, another glass half-empty, and a third glass that’s an AI hallucination?”

Or maybe he says one of the 10 other punchlines ChatGPT spit out for me in about 15 seconds. And that’s the issue of AI for writers in a nutshell: As of mid-2023, it’s lightning-fast, it’s super-cheap, but it’s not all that good. So how should writers look at AI, and how should we use it?

The first time I used ChatGPT, in February, I felt like I was being sucked into a black hole. My whole writing career — 50 years of developing my craft — was going through a soul-melting wormhole. I felt like I was accessing god-like powers to see all, to know all, and to write all. It was intoxicating.

But then, as I used ChatGPT more, I ran up against its limits and foibles. It got exasperating. Today, in a kind of dialectical arc stretching over the past six months, I’ve come to a middle way. I tolerate AI, I use it when I figure it can help me, and I avoid it when I’m pretty sure it can’t.

I’m not saying every writer should follow the same path. There’s no right or wrong here. There’s only what suits you, your craft, your workflow, and your values.

“If you are a strong writer with a particular voice, you may never want to use AI for writing,” Ethan Moller, a professor of management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, writes in his newsletter, *One Useful Thing*. “If you are continually paralyzed when faced with a blank page, AI may be more useful.”

Writers who love AI

Some writers are excited about AI and feel we can gain a lot from it. To start with, AI is fast. Unspeakably fast.

For example, Montreal-based copywriter Nick Usborne got an idea for a book on a Sunday and had it up on Amazon by Tuesday. He used ChatGPT to outline, research, and draft a 40-page e-book called *Decoding Disinformation: your guide to recognizing misinformation, fake news, and deepfakes online*.

“ChatGPT studied the subject and put together the structure, the information, the appendix of resources.

It’s really good at brainstorming ideas and organizing information,” says Usborne. “And it’s been exposed to a million pieces of writing. It’s read Hamlet, it’s read the Brontë sisters. It knows what active voice is. It knows our craft.”

He uses AI to brainstorm, write articles for his websites, and draft headlines and promotional emails. And he continues to experiment with ebooks.

Writers who love AI tend to treat it as a 24-7 sounding board and writing buddy who never gets grouchy. They love how it beats down blank page syndrome by cheerfully brainstorming ideas. And at least for nonfiction, they feel that AI tools can already outline, draft, polish, critique, and summarize as well as many copywriters working today.

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As for fiction, Toronto author Stephen Marche recently used AI to generate the mystery novella *Death of an Author*. The well-timed release earned write-ups everywhere from *The Atlantic* to *Wired*. In the book’s afterword, Marche says his goal was to create a book that was 95 percent computer-generated, short (25,000 words), and “compulsively readable, a page-turner.” I think he succeeded on all counts.

Marche used three AI tools: ChatGPT; the writing aid Sudowrite; and the natural language processing model Cohere, from a Toronto-based company. First, he generated passages with ChatGPT. Next he pasted those into Sudowrite to revise for length, details, or voice. Finally, he created sprinkles of imagery with Cohere, which he credits with the best lines in the book.

In his afterword, he says three factors helped him pull off the project: “First, I had an elaborate plan, and I knew where I was going. Second, I have more familiarity with the technology... And finally, and by far the most important, I know what good writing looks like.”

In other words, writers who know the most about writing get the best out of AI. His advice? Don't fear AI. Treat it like a tool. Use the technology for what it's good at, and get ready for new art forms to emerge from it.

AI may open the door to bold new horizons of creative freedom. What about using AI to complete half-finished manuscripts? What about mashing up your personal style with your idols, from Jane Austen to Roger Zelazny? What about stories that reconfigure themselves to different lengths, reading levels, settings, styles, or even mediums from anime to audiobook? All this may be possible sooner than we expect — and writers who love AI can't wait.

Writers who hate AI

On the other hand, some writers fear that AI spells the end of all we hold dear. For nonfiction, it researches like a kid copying from Wikipedia, and when it draws a blank, it just makes shit up. For fiction, it remixes the infantile clutch of clichés it scraped off the web. And AI writes in a wooden style that makes our worst first drafts sound like Shakespeare.

Elizabeth Creith, from Northeastern Ontario, has written humour, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. She has published two books and has a YA fantasy trilogy coming out, plus countless pieces in everything from the *Old Farmer's Almanac* to *Canadian Living*. She's never written anything with AI, and she intends to keep it that way.

"Using AI would never cross my mind," she says, "and if it did, I would go and wash my mind out with soap!" She first encountered the issue of computers and creativity in 1977 with her first husband, a PhD student in computer science at Cornell. "We had a 'discussion' that got very heated about computers writing music," she recalls, "and my argument was that computers cannot actually create."

It takes human skill to create art, she believes, and human discernment to polish any work of art. "The problem with AI is an ethical problem," says Creith. "It's handing over creation to something that can't create. And why are we giving the computers the most fun stuff to do?"

For AI to have any training data, she notes, people have to create. But today our creations serve AI, whether we like it or not. Our books, articles, and websites are used to train AI without recognition or recompense. So while the original creators get nothing, Big Tech profits.

"I know some people will give away their writing just to see their name on the screen or on the page. But every time you undersell yourself, you're underselling every other creator as well," says Creith. And she sees how AI can play a part in devaluing human creativity.

12 Things Writers Can Do That AI Can't

Here are 12 things you can add to your writing to "humanize" it in a way that AI can't, at least for now.

1. **First-person:** Writing as "I" creates an intimate tone that AI can't match.
2. **Sensory details:** Add colours, smells, sounds, and textures to immerse your reader in a scene.
3. **Personal anecdotes:** Share your lived experience to show your personal history, insights, and vulnerability.
4. **Humour:** AI doesn't get jokes, puns, or witticisms, so add humour for a human connection.
5. **Parables:** Sum up a point with an apt parable.
6. **Questions:** Include questions that anticipate what a reader may be wondering about: Who? What? Why? Where? When? And how?
7. **Pop culture:** Use a line from a recent pop song. Mention a character from a recent movie. This adds relatability.
8. **Wordplay:** Poetic wordplay can transport readers. Use assonance, sibilance, and onomatopoeia to suffuse your sentences with sound.
9. **Metaphors:** Compare vastly different things to show connections that would never occur to an AI. Find a metaphor that ties together the start and end of your piece.
10. **Rhetoric:** Mine timeless rhetorical devices for memorable phrasing. No AI would write, "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow..."
11. **Literature:** AI has scanned many books, but it draws on them poorly. Use an epigram from a well-known author. Call up a fable, goddess, or myth from antiquity to add depth and resonance.
12. **Compassion, curiosity, empathy, and forgiveness:** Use these supremely human virtues to make your story richer and less predictable.

But that's not all we have to worry about. At a recent conference on AI for writers, business writer Ann Handley pointed out no one masters any skill without years of study and practice. Yet AI tools enable every beginner to generate text at a basic level of competence. Why would anyone toil for years to improve their writing? Who would bother pushing on towards mastery? And who will even be there to judge the difference between competence and excellence?

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Beyond that, there's the looming threat that AI misinformation will cause election strife, chaos, even civil war. The most dire warnings point to the end of civilization and humanity itself, once we unleash AI systems that can reiterate and improve themselves. And these warnings aren't coming from crackpots; they're from notables like University of Toronto computer science prof Geoffrey Hinton, aka “The Godfather of AI.” (He was also one of the early investors in Cohere).

From this perspective, the benefits of AI for writers are small potatoes compared to the potential damage, and we all should just put away these tools.

Writers who tolerate AI

I'm in this camp. While I noodle around writing novels, I make my living writing content for companies, especially the persuasive essays called white papers.

White papers are at the outer limits of what today's AI can manage: 3,500+ words that build a logical argument backed by convincing evidence given with proper footnotes. In March, I wrote a white paper by prompting ChatGPT. It was certainly fast: it gave me an outline in seconds and cranked out 10 drafts in a day and a half as I urged it to sound less stodgy. All in all, it shaved off at least one-third of the time a white paper usually takes me. And it was cheap — maybe \$2 of my US\$20 monthly fee for ChatGPT Plus.

But the quality was disappointing. ChatGPT wrote 3,150 words in short chunks with a clunky style that scored only 36 out of 100 on the Flesch Readability Ease scale. By comparison, my own afterword rated 72, twice as readable. And 16 of the 18 sources ChatGPT suggested were bogus. Made up out of thin air. I had to re-research that paper with the new Bing, which ate up another day.

But still, it delivered text I'd score at C+ or B-. I've edited drafts that were just as rough from professional writers. And next time, I'll use AI with real-time web access to get reliable sources.

So I tolerate AI and use it for brainstorming, where it's especially strong. I use it to summarize tedious reports I can't possibly wade through. And I may even use it to bang out first drafts. But I always polish up those drafts to humanize them with writing tricks only humans can do (see sidebar). And I never send anything straight from AI to an editor. That's career suicide.

Love AI, hate it, or tolerate it: there's no right or wrong. I believe the best approach is to use AI when it helps your writing, avoid it when it doesn't, and learn to tell the difference. As for the future, time will tell whether AI ends up a blessing or a curse. Most likely, it'll be a bit of both.

Remember that anything cultural, personal, sensual, or unexpected is beyond the scope of what AI can do today. And possibly, for all time.

Gordon Graham has lived in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, and finally settled down in the picturesque town of Thessalon in Northwestern Ontario. For 50 years, he has written nonfiction including magazine features, software manuals, computer books, and white papers, which are essentially short, persuasive essays. He wrote White Papers For Dummies to share what he learned from doing more than 300 of these for companies from Switzerland to Silicon Valley.