

AI as an Academic Writing Companion: Prompting, Rhetoric and Research Writing

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Abstract

This Teaching Practice paper documents and reflects on a workshop aiming to infuse rhetorical knowledge into Generative AI prompting. The workshop – ‘AI as an Academic Writing Companion’ – is aimed at PhD candidates and academic faculty. It runs at a large Scandinavian university where English is a second language for most researchers, but is very much the expected language of academic publication.

It is easy to be dazzled by the superficial, sentence-level fluency of Gen AIs, especially if one is a novice researcher writing in a second language. This superficial fluency may obscure the AI’s lack of rhetorical principles, however. The AI may lack them, and the researcher may not know the AI lacks them. To combine academic literacy with a critical sense of the capabilities of AI chatbots, therefore, the workshop draws on Moxley’s idea of kairos-based prompting. The aim here is to develop and apply the rhetorical knowledge necessary to guide a bot’s responses; in this way, the workshop combines the needs of researchers for both traditional academic literacies and generative AI literacy.

The paper describes the prompts and the pedagogy behind them, and our reflections on the development of the workshop.

Introduction

The last few years have seen not only the arrival of generative AI (Gen AI) in education and society at large, but a range of responses to it: Gen AI chatbots like ChatGPT may show sparks of general artificial intelligence (Bubeck et al., 2023); perhaps they are not mere stochastic parrots, but they still get sums wrong (Arkoudas, 2023); or perhaps they are “bullshit” (Hicks et al., 2024). We see, too, a range of educational responses: for example, Zhao et al.’s (2024) documentation of graduate students’ use of generative AI, and Heidi McKee’s wide-ranging experimentation with AI over a bachelors module (which includes McKee reminding her students that they are better writers than the AI (Bedington et al., 2024)). Studies are also now appearing focusing on L2 graduate writers (e.g. Ou et al., 2024; Tan, 2025).

Although an understanding of a field’s rhetorical conventions are vital for a writer’s development, there has been, as Moxley (2024) observes, a lack of interest in the potential of kairos-based prompting, i.e. prompting that actually draws on the rhetorical knowledge of the writer and on an understanding of disciplinary texts as rhetorical artefacts that are rhetorically situated. The workshop we describe in this article fuses rhetorical knowledge with prompting knowledge to help L2 doctoral writers (and other researchers) both better understand disciplinary conventions and to refine their work using prompts that are rhetorically informed.

This Teaching Practice paper outlines and discusses a workshop called ‘AI as an Academic Writing Companion’, which has now run four times at our institution. It is a workshop for PhD candidates, faculty and other researchers, and complements a workshop called ‘AI as a Research Companion’. Our institution is a large Scandinavian university where English is a second language for most researchers, but is very much the expected language of academic publication. The overwhelming majority of PhD candidates at this institution (and in Scandinavia generally) write theses by publication. Postgraduate writing pedagogy at our institution, then, is very much about writing for publication, and an essential part of that is understanding field- and journal-specific rhetorical conventions. The present workshop seeks to harness Gen AI to improve participants’ understanding of these rhetorical conventions, and to help participants employ the conventions in their own texts.

Gen AI, Research Writing and Rhetorical Principles

The workshop begins with Tardy’s model of genre knowledge as writing expertise, which allows us to begin thinking about moving an AI’s ‘attention’ from sentences to rhetorical concepts:

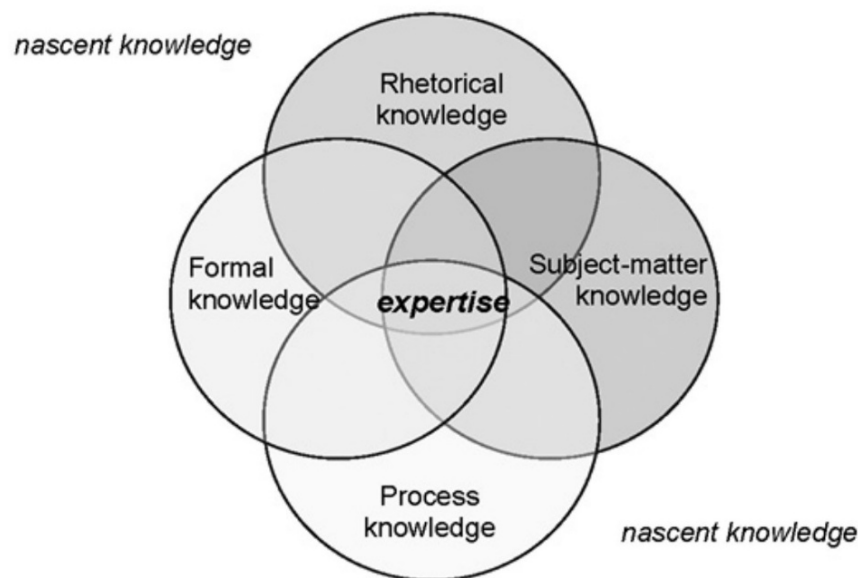


Figure 1: Christine Tardy’s model of genre knowledge as writing expertise. Used with permission from *Building Genre Knowledge* by Christine Tardy. © 2009 by Parlor Press. All rights reserved.

Part of the value of this diagram is that it makes available to participants an expanded concept of writing, and allows them to see how writing is intertwined with all aspects of the research process and not limited to a knowledge of grammar or lexis. Formal knowledge here includes sentence level capabilities, grammar and word choice; rhetorical knowledge encodes an understanding of a discipline’s conventions of communication and how those play out in that discipline’s genres. The model means we can point at what we know Gen AIs are already helpful with – for example sentence structure (formal) and brainstorming (process knowledge) – while showing how those aspects overlap with the rhetorical prompting knowledge we aim to develop:

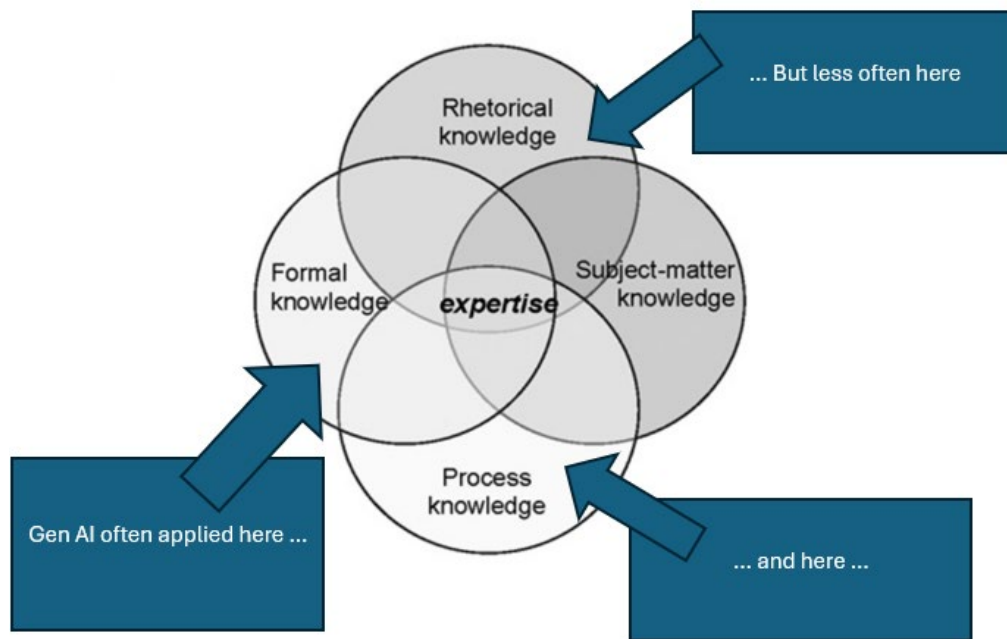


Figure 2: Gen AI interventions in Tardy's model. Researchers already use AI in connection with formal and process knowledge, but we aim to work with rhetorical knowledge. Process knowledge is outside the scope of the current workshop.

Building on this model, then, the workshop consists of two categories of exercise. The first one fits squarely into the formal knowledge area of Tardy's model – this category concerns the level of detail needed for prompts that effectively polish sentences and clarify meaning. The second category of exercise, though, takes aim at the rhetorical knowledge zone. This is the work where we know less about AI effectiveness (cf. Moxley 2024) – so the question underpinning the workshop is “How do we make kairos-based prompting possible? Can participants acquire and deploy the necessary rhetorical knowledge to prompt more effectively, and drive the AI towards the rhetorical conventions of their disciplines and genres?”

Organisation of the Workshop and Purpose of the Prompts

We begin the workshop with an introduction to how generative AI chatbots work, their applications in research, and their potential impact on academic writing, and it's here that we bring in Tardy's model to orient the work. The practical part of the workshop, following this introduction, includes four prompt sessions, each session focusing on linked aspects of academic writing, from language improvements based on flow to the rhetorical organisation of longer stretches of text. All the prompts for each session were accessible to participants through the online collaboration tool Padlet, so that participants can paste prompts directly into the Gen AI of their choice. We reproduce the prompts straight from the Padlet here, so that the reader has a better sense of what participants were actually looking at.

The workshop hops around the stages of the writing process. We do not begin with genre analysis and end with proofreading because sentence-level work seems to us a good way of warming up and trying out a Gen AI's capacities. The aim is to experiment and develop both genre and prompting awareness. So, a participant may do some sentence-level prompting with any part of their text (an Introduction, a Discussion, a Conclusion) before we move over to prompts aimed at the rhetorical dimensions of an Introduction specifically. (There is not time in the workshop to return to sentence-level work. Our aim, then, is to provide prompts, and an approach to prompting, that writers may continue to employ, develop and play with after the workshop has concluded.)

Prompt Session 1: Language development and proofreading

The first prompt session focuses on the use of Gen AI for text improvements and is aimed squarely at the ‘formal knowledge’ portion of Tardy’s model. It has been used as a warm-up exercise based on the rationale that using a Gen AI for language improvements and proofreading is already quite common among researchers, especially for those without English as their first language (see, for instance, Noorden and Perkel (2023)).

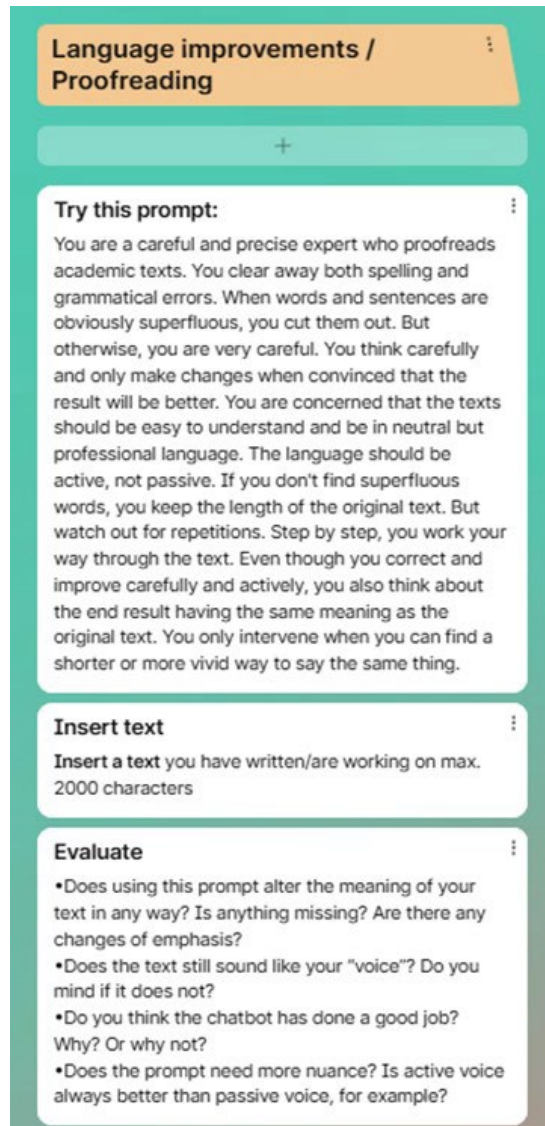


Figure 3: The workshop’s opening prompt, and follow up instructions. The prompt modifies an existing prompt developed for non-academic proofreading purposes by a Norwegian journalist and author of a book on ChatGPT (Bjørkeng, 2023).

We debated cutting the part of the prompt that specifies active rather than passive voice, but decided to leave it in so that participants could consider whether a more ‘active’ text really was what they were looking for – or whether the passive voice was better for voice, purpose and rhetoric in some cases. We wanted participants to not simply accept what the AI was giving them, but to compare it with their own sense of disciplinary rhetoric and their own sense of voice. The prompt also served as an example of how comprehensive the construction of prompts can be, including several detailed instructions, which in turn emphasised the importance of adjusting prompts to specific disciplinary needs, preferences, and traditions. It is not only the output that gets evaluated here, but the prompt itself.

This broad-spectrum prompt – and evaluation of its output – is then followed up with two more focused prompts, on old-to-new information flow (Swales & Feak, 2012) and topic sentences. These require more writing knowledge on the part of the participants, so the topics are scaffolded before the participants begin prompting. Coupling these more specialised prompts with the broad-spectrum prompt was aimed at giving participants a range of paragraph or sentence level options for text development. Figures 4 and 5 show these prompts.

Start with this prompt:
What do you know about Swales and Feak's "old to new information flow"?

Once you have confirmed that the AI understands old-to-new information, use this prompt:
I'm going to paste in an extract and I want you to suggest ways of improving flow based on "old to new information" structure. You may occasionally, where absolutely necessary, add a linking word such as "moreover" but your primary flow tool should be old to new. You may also correct spelling and grammar. Show my original text and the new one side by side and put your revisions into bold so I can see them clearly.

Evaluate and iterate
What is the AI doing well? What are you curious about? What do you want it to say more about? What doesn't work?

Tell the AI what works and what doesn't.

Figure 4: Prompt to develop old-to-new information flow

Start with this prompt
Do you know what a topic sentence is?

Then use this prompt and upload a 3-4 paragraph section of text
Do all the paragraphs contain topic sentences as either the first or second sentence? If not, please suggest topic sentences where they would be appropriate.

Evaluate and iterate
Are the AI's responses useful? Do you need to reprompt for better results?

Figure 5: Prompt to evaluate topic sentences

In our experience, asking the AI if it knows what something is, and then asking it to base further responses on the definitions it supplies, permits more effective prompting where rhetorical

concepts are concerned. There is some anecdotal evidence that the prompter is checking here that the relevant concepts are in the AI's training data (Eliot, 2024).

Prompt Session 2: Using Gen AI to analyse texts

As Figure 6 shows, the next part of the workshop asks participants to start using Gen AI to explore the construction of texts, and to call attention to structural and linguistic features that they may learn from or adapt for their own writing:

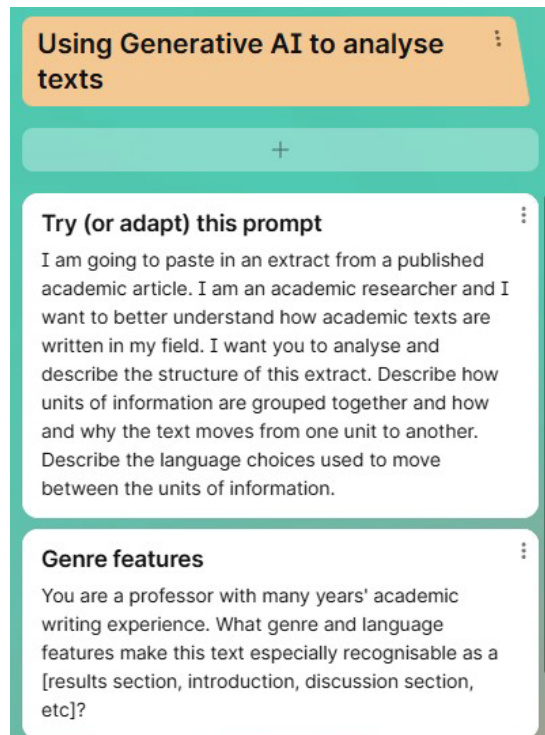


Figure 6: The initial prompts from Prompt Session 2

It is here that we begin emphasising the importance of engaging the AI in a dialogue. Participants are encouraged to ask follow-up questions, to ask the AI to explain its choices, to query what it tells them. The more the participants engage in a dialogue, the more likely they are to personalise the AI's responses and find useful, adaptable responses.

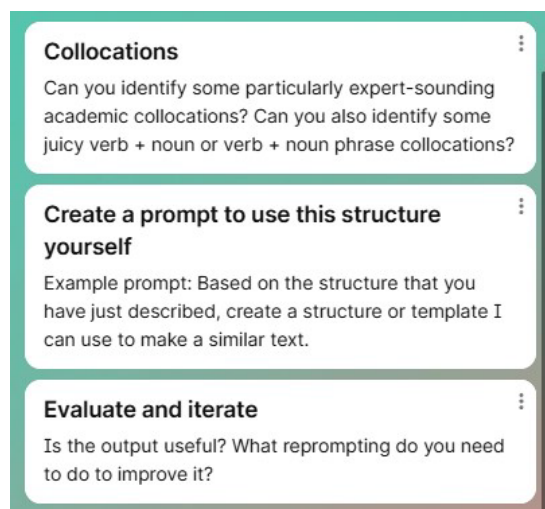


Figure 7: The second set of prompts and instructions in Prompt Session 2

As can be seen in Figure 6, Prompt Session 2 also tasks participants with using the AI to identify “juicy collocations” (cf. Charles, 2012). Academic collocations are extremely useful for projecting disciplinary identity but we have found in our teaching that participants often have difficulty spotting them – so asking an AI to do the ‘noticing’ may be an answer to this problem. More generally, this is an instance where writing developers act as a bridge between the PhD candidate and the AI, by showing how prompting can be driven by key rhetorical terms.

We also include two prompts in this session to observe and comment on language that calls a reader’s attention to points or interest (or, indeed, moments of hype) and hedging language.

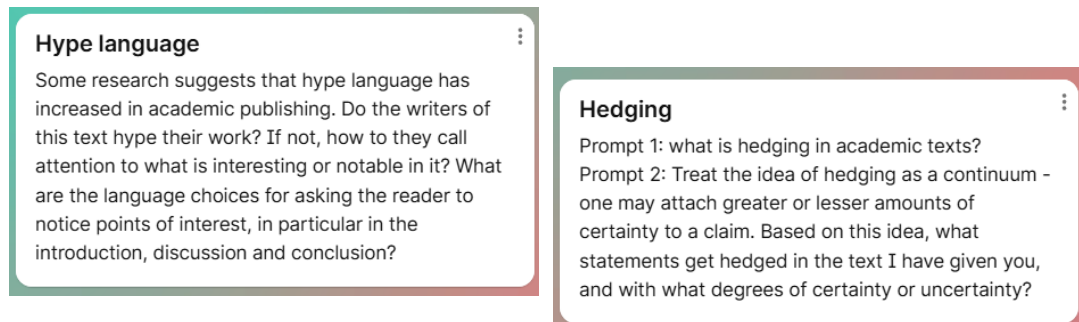


Figure 8: Prompts to detect hype language, language for notable points, and hedging language

Prompt Session 3: Three approaches for Introductions

The prompt in Figure 9 is an attempt to equip the AI with some of the perceptions that an experienced academic reader might have. We wrestle here with the fact that a good academic reader will be able to ask questions of a text that are far beyond a generative AI’s capabilities – questions such as “Does the starting point appropriately reflect the text’s emphases,” “Is there a mismatch between the claims of the introduction and the rest of the text,” or “Are you in fact writing two articles here?” The best way of trying to approximate this kind of reading, we decided, was to ask for alternative ways of beginning, and asking the AI to attend to disjunctures and digressions.

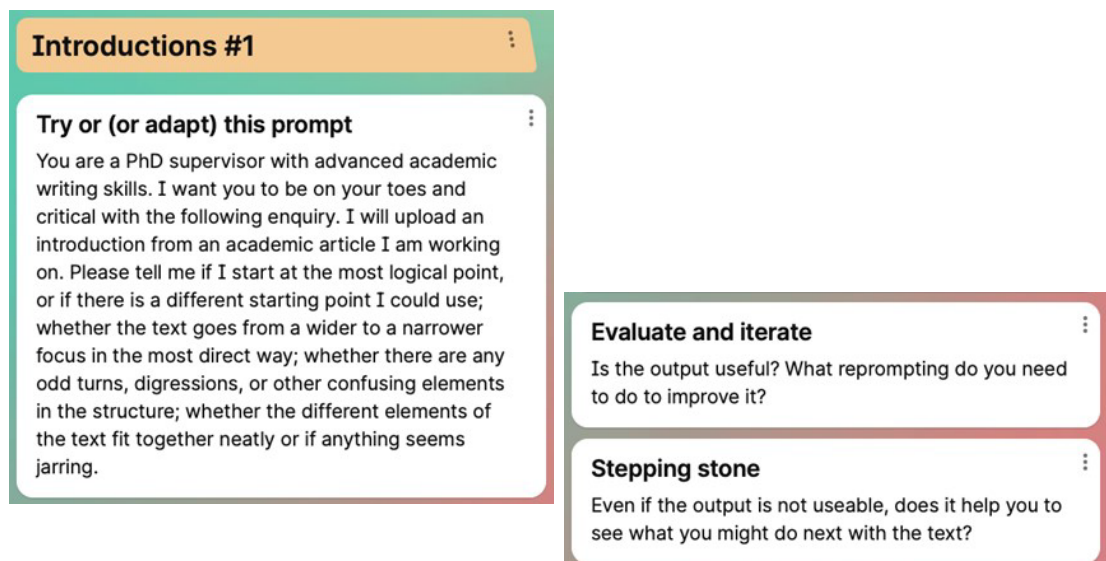


Figure 9: Prompt for developing the introduction for a research article, and follow up instructions

The second approach to Introductions is to ask participants to specifically use the Create a Research Space (CARS) model described by Swales and Feak (2012):

Introductions #2

CARS model

Rhetorical Moves in research paper introductions

Introduction sections of research papers follow a typical pattern in response to two types of competition:

1. Competition for research space
2. Competition for readers

Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) model (Swales & Feak, 2004): the work of others and/or what is known about the world is primary, and your own work is secondary (note: this is reversed in the Discussion section).

Move 1 Establishing a research territory		
a	by showing that the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic, or relevant in some way (optional)	
b	by introducing and reviewing items of previous research in the area (obligatory)	

Move 2 Establishing a niche		
a	by indicating a gap in the previous research, or by extending previous knowledge in some way (obligatory)	

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CARS breakdown

Prompt #1

Do you know what John Swales's CARS model is for research article introductions? Please describe it for me.

Prompt #2

Use your knowledge of the CARS model for this prompt.

You are a PhD supervisor with advanced academic writing skills. I want you to be on your toes and critical with the following enquiry. I will upload an introduction from an academic article I am working on. Please tell me if I am using the CARS model in the most effective way; whether there are any odd turns, digressions, or other confusing elements in the structure; whether the different elements of the text fit together neatly or if anything seems jarring.

Figure 10: Prompts aimed at the CARS model for article introductions (cf. Swales and Feak 2012)

We think participants are more likely to obtain a thorough CARS-based analysis of their texts if they have already prompted the AI to describe the CARS model itself. Again, where distinct rhetorical concepts are being brought into play, we explain them before prompting begins.

Participants can choose which of the introduction prompts they play with. There is a third one in this menu, based on Pat Thomson's alternatives to the CARS model (Figure 11):

Start with this prompt:

Please review what Pat Thomson says about alternatives to the CARS model. Thomson's alternatives are here:
<https://patthomson.net/2021/07/05/the-problem-with-gap-talk/>

Now try this prompt

I am going to upload the introduction to an academic article. Please use your knowledge of Thomson's alternatives to the CARS model to suggest some alternative introduction structures for me.

Figure 11: Prompt for more unusual introduction structures

The instructions in these prompts for the AI to “be on your toes”, are again based on anecdotal evidence (Eliot, 2024) that formulations like this will produce a more alert, critical response from the AI.

Prompt Session 4: Developing sections of text

The two final prompts (Figure 12) draw on Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (e.g., Maton, 2013). They are, in fact, a “language of enactment” (Kirk, 2017) that aims to transform LCT concepts into terms that learners and the AI can use. Behind the prompts is the idea that a Discussion section, for example, might be quite mobile, might ascend and descend between specific instances and more abstract theorising. This idea is in turn based on the LCT concept of the semantic wave. As Maton (2013) argues, academic texts range between instances of language that are context dependent (for example the phrase ‘this study’, which assumes the reader’s knowledge of the study) and less context dependent (knowledge that is outside of or in addition to ‘this study’, for example). As a Discussion section moves away from ‘this study’, as it draws on knowledge outside of itself, semantic gravity weakens and a semantic wave is created (Maton, 2013; Muir & Solli, 2019). At any point in the writing of the Discussion, a writer may wave up (become more abstract) or wave down (become more concrete – descend to the specific context of the text). These prompts aim to bring more of this dynamic movement into a writer’s Discussion section.

Developing sections of text

Try (or adapt) this prompt

You are the editor of an academic journal. I want you to be on your toes, alert and critical. I'm going to upload my discussion section for an academic article. It is from the discipline [insert discipline]. I want to publish it in [insert journal name]. Are there any typical features of a discussion section that are not present? In what ways can I develop this text further?

More prompts

- Suggest where I should add counterarguments.
- Suggest where I should refer more to scholarly literature.
- Suggest where the text is too theoretical, and could be improved by examples.

Suggest where the text is too specific, and could be improved by connecting specific data with theory.

Stepping stone

Even if the output is not useable, does it help you to see what you might do next with the text?

Figure 12: Prompts for developing participants' own texts

This prompt session also includes an opportunity for participants to compare sections of text with already published work:

Comparison prompt

I am going to upload a published academic text, and then I am going to upload the [methods/results/discussion - you choose!] from my own article. I want you to compare the two. If I use the already published text as a model, what can I learn about developing my own text? Are there structural features from the published text I could incorporate? Are there language choices I could adapt?

Figure 13: Comparison of participants' texts with published work

Participant responses

In the fourth iteration of the workshop, we were in a position to collect participant feedback. Feedback was collected in two rounds: a Mentimeter exercise at the workshop midpoint (which was also used for discussion) and a survey at the end. 22 participants were present for the Menti, and 21 for the survey. The Mentimeter questions and responses are reproduced below:

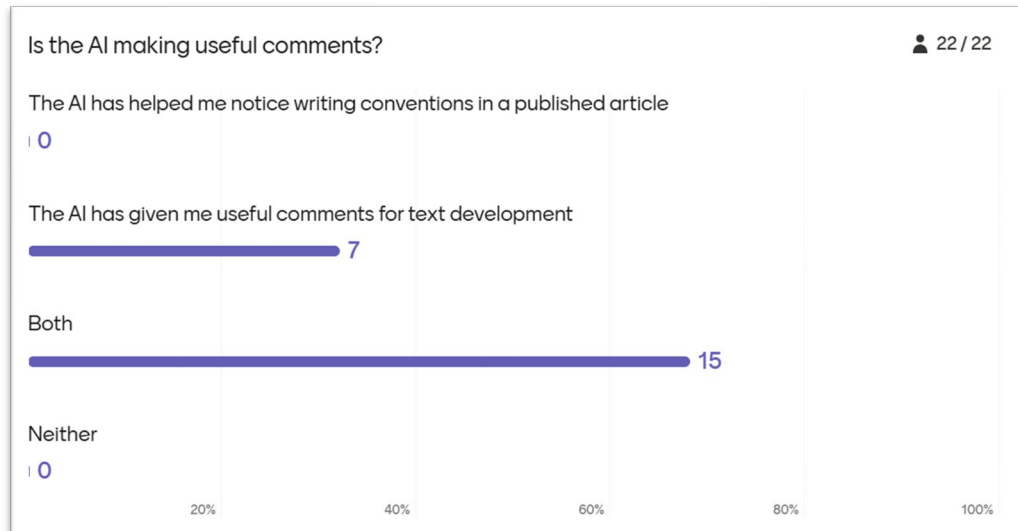


Figure 14: Midpoint responses on the effectiveness of the AI's responses

Noteworthy here, we think, is that no-one thought the AI was good at noticing conventions but *not* at giving developmental feedback. It was either good at both or just at text development, according to this group.

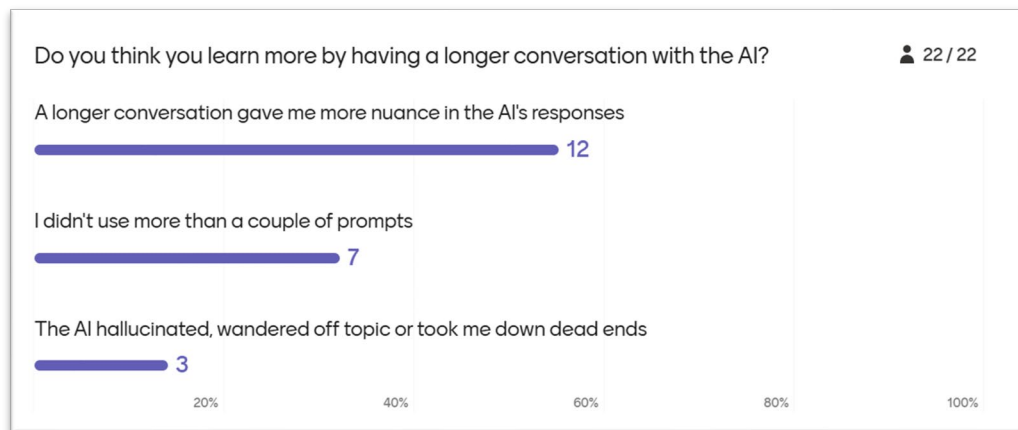


Figure 15: Midpoint assessment of the effectiveness of longer conversations

We wanted to test the idea that a longer conversation will produce more nuanced writing advice, and feedback here provisionally bears out that idea. We see here, though, a weakness in the workshop with the number of people only getting as far as a couple of prompts – the workshop is about four hours, including a break for lunch, and we are trying to compress a considerable quantity of material into it. (This issue comes up again in connection with the survey, as we mention below.)

In the survey at the end of the workshop, we asked participants what had been most useful for them. Three comments were vague; but the other eighteen (85.7%) mentioned several positive outcomes connected with using AI for writing. Eight mentioned either improved prompting, or

the workshop prompts themselves being effective. A further six commented on the value of connecting rhetorical concepts to prompting. One person mentioned both improved prompting and the rhetorical dimensions of prompting.

Three others commented on the value of making prompts more 'specific', which, given that the only specificity in the workshop is rhetorical concepts, can perhaps also be taken to mean the connecting prompts to rhetorical strategies.

We also asked whether participants felt they had more control over AI use in their writing (100% said "yes") and whether they felt more confident in evaluating an AI's suggestions about their writing (95.2% said "yes"; 4.8% were not sure).

We asked participants to comment on what they thought we should improve. No-one commented on the content of the workshop, but several mentioned that they wished it could be split over two sessions. As we have mentioned, we pack a lot of rhetorical information into the four hours. In other circumstances, we devote an hour and a half to teaching the CARS model alone; so we interpret the comments about time to mean that participants find taking onboard both the prompting knowledge and the rhetorical knowledge quite taxing.

Power, writing and writing power

It is easy to refer to Gen AI as a tool. We hear our undergraduates do it; Sam Altman does it sometimes too (e.g., Lee, 2024). But perhaps the word 'tool' hides something. 'Tool', like 'prompt engineering', conveys a splendid neutrality, a common-sense construction of the world that insists on humans as the sole purveyors of action, meaning and intent. That idea is troubled by Lesley Gourlay's (2015) work on students' experiences of the agency of objects. Gourlay shows, for example, that a highlighter pen is not simply a 'tool': it *makes possible* a certain interaction with text, and therefore a certain experience of thinking and authorship. In other words, objects and devices fail to be contained by the categories 'object' or 'device'; because they act on the students' behaviour, we are able to say that they are agentive, thereby overrunning the conceptual categories with which we try to pin them down. And if everyday objects might be said to have an 'agency' that dramatically complicates their description as 'objects' or 'tools', we surely need to reckon with the 'agency' of Gen AI too.

An antecedent for this position can be found in the work of Langdon Winner. Winner (1980) remarks that "if our moral and political language for evaluating technology includes only categories having to do with tools and uses, if it does not include attention to the meaning of the designs and arrangements of our artefacts, then we will be blinded to much that is intellectually and practically crucial" (p. 125). The idea that tools are neutral collapses when we ask "Who possesses the tool?" An object ceases to be neutral if person X has it and person Y lacks it but needs it.

There is a debt to Heidegger in Winner's thinking, to the concept of *Gestell*, or 'enframing'. For Heidegger, it is not merely that a language of tools and uses hides a network of meaning and power; rather, it is the case that technology produces the world, and new technologies produce the world anew. Technology 'enframes' the world, conditions our perception and understanding of the world (Heidegger, 1977). Enframing does justice to the idea that Gen AI – potentially – intervenes in thinking and writing to an extent that word processors do not. Writing itself, of course, may be considered an enframing – hieroglyphics, handwriting, typesetting and word processing all enframe the world differently and make possible different kinds of text and thought. But Gen AI steps beyond this because – as we have described above – its own distinctive enframing is to remove, to some extent, writers' power over and presence in their own text. It does so by rewriting or completing text, often unbidden.

The present workshop is quite cautious, then, because one of the things it seeks to do is make visible the enframing and offer participants the opportunity to think about it and guard against it. We think it is important to do this precisely because it is easy to fall into the habit of calling Gen AI a tool. Where this technology is concerned, it is not only a matter of whether person X

has it and Y does not; no end user of the technology 'has' it. Open AI has it, Google has it, Microsoft has it. To describe Gen AI as a tool risks hiding these structures of power and ownership. Such a description would conceal, too, the risks that come when intellectual work becomes more and more imbricated in these power structures, and when AI developers may not share the same aims as AI users.

Coda

We said at the outset that we would describe the workshops that we ran, and offer some reflections on them; and we ended by talking about Heidegger, power and technology. In a way, this is the inevitable effect of a new kind of enframing. There are no local questions here. There is perhaps no ethical teaching practice paper about AI that ends, simply, with teaching practice. Gen AI ramifies; local questions spill over into ethical, political and philosophical ones. Very reasonable questions about the affordances that Gen AI might grant novice research writers cannot help but be contiguous with questions of power and ownership – and this is without even considering the biases and hallucinations LLMs are prone to.

At this time of writing, a cautious workshop such as the one we describe here is possible at least in part because today's PhD candidates formed their academic habits, their academic ethics, before the advent of ChatGPT. We therefore encounter questions in this workshop about the ethical use of AI chatbots. But, as these cohorts give way to those who began their academic careers after the arrival of Gen AIs, we might expect this workshop to change substantially. We will discover the extent of this new enframing.

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