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Essay by Martha Nichols

The Real Existential Threat of ChatGPT



I've started noticing how much I breathe out through pursed lips, especially when I'm set on doing a task. That task could be anything—taking out the garbage, remembering what to put in the laundry, packing for a trip—although I suspect it has to do with fear of forgetting the sequence. *You always did it this way, but why this way? Am I doing it right?* It's like thinking too hard about walking. The sequence seems natural until it isn't.

My mother used to do the same thing. She'd curl her top lip over the bottom, puffing out little breaths, almost like Lamaze breathing. In the late 1990s, she was in her sixties when I began noticing this. I assume it was unconscious on her part rather than intentional, although Mom liked to exaggerate how much effort she exerted doing anything. Now I realize she lived with that anxiety like a throat cuff every second.

These days, anxiety thrums through me as well, which means she bequeathed some part of herself, whether genetic or learned, and here it is, my mother's face emerging behind my own. She's not a ghost, exactly, more a corrective, a way to think through what I used to judge—the inevitability of cognitive decline, of all that stays locked inside us. All the nervous energy required to measure life, to accept what's lost with each puff of air.

That's why I write: to recapture the air. To discover who I am and have been and will become. No one else can do that for me. I create meaning through words as my life proceeds and changes, out of ideas and memories that may amount to nothing yet remain mine.

Am I doing it right? One foot, then another foot, but who decided on this sequence? Who am I?

"I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking," as Joan Didion put it in 1976, "what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear." That's from [Didion's "Why I Write."](#) [5] itself a nod to the [1946 essay by George Orwell](#) [6]. It's the big existential question for writers, who toil in their own heads, solitary and self-obsessed.

It seems so human, that self-obsession. Except generative artificial intelligence (AI) could well produce something similar, accessing my past writing and other personal data points. Didion's "Why I Write" has always disturbed me, but not because she called writing an aggressive act. It's because she acknowledged how much she didn't control who her "I" became. If AI based on large language models continues to evolve, a machine just might be able to predict my next response to who I am, nudging me to choose whatever it spits back.

The question isn't whether that's possible. It's whether that's good for me or for humanity.

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I've been writing, teaching writing, and editing other writers for decades. I co-founded *Talking Writing* in 2010, in love with the idea of how transformative writing can be. My textbook *First-Person-Journalism* (Routledge, 2022) came out last year. Probably my most creative recent work has focused on designing better ways to learn how to write and on encouraging personal storytelling outside the mainstream.

So—obviously—I don't believe AI systems should write for us or teach us how to write. When [OpenAI publicly released ChatGPT-3.5](#) [7] toward the end of 2022, I took it seriously, but most of my literary friends shrugged it off at first or seemed hazy about the technology. How could a fancy version of spellcheck possibly matter to anyone doing *art*?

More creative writers are worried now. The [Writers Guild of America](#) [8] (WGA), representing many Hollywood screenwriters, went on strike in early May with a call to arms of "[writers are human beings.](#)" [9] The strike goes beyond the potential impact of AI, but it's connected to the core dispute over how much writers are paid and who gets credit for their work.

Striking [writer and producer James Schamus](#) [10], part of the WGA negotiating committee, says that he and many of his colleagues are "both nervous and excited" about AI as a tool for storytelling. But he bluntly states the challenge in a *Guardian* opinion piece:

Of course, our bosses are also dreaming of replacing us another way: with generative AI software. One of the most startling moments in our negotiations came when the conglomerates flat-out refused to even counter our proposals about AI, instead offering an 'annual meeting to discuss advancements in technology.' I don't think even an AI chatbot could have come up with a more absurd response.

Why Humans Write

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The outcry against such an existential threat to writers has been swamped by competing excitement about AI's ability to help people who hate writing or struggle with a nonnative language or want to [generate quick ideas for posts](#) [11]. Learning to write is hard or boring, this thinking goes, so automating it will save time and clean up our words.

Indeed, [Google plans to make a "Help me write" composing option](#) [12] widely available soon for Gmail and Docs, embedding Bard, its AI system, into the applications many of us use for writing. As [Casey Newton of Platformer](#) [13] notes, "Google's AI will write the first draft; offer alternate paths to consider; or do a cursory scan of a new subject you're interested in."

Like those screenwriters, this both excites and unnerves me. My first response to ChatGPT's public launch last year was *Thank God I'm not teaching high school English or expository writing. I'd be running for the exits*. Now I think we all should be running for the exits.

I don't want AI channeling my first-person voice. It's a threat to all genuine voices but may well become the norm soon, under the guise of a helpful bot making us more creative by "collaborating." I came of age as a writer with second-wave feminism, which itself challenged the male status quo about how a story could be told. Writers like Gloria Steinem, Nora Ephron, Audre Lorde, Ellen Willis, and many others less well known have influenced younger generations in ways that often go unrecognized. Much of that fiery, subjective writing from the 1960s and '70s, including the [lost tradition of underground feminist newspapers](#) [14]—some of which I worked on—has not been digitized. It's rapidly vanishing from the public record.

I'm not giving up my ideals yet, but generative AI systems are trained on this incomplete digital record, which [tends to homogenize everything](#) [15]. The engineering mindset of AI researchers is so different from my own that the media coverage of AI to date has left me feeling alone, stuck in an alternate universe. All I can do is send counter-messages from a distant planet.

Am I doing it right? Do you understand what I'm saying? What do you think writing is?

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We write for all sorts of reasons, some glorious, some awful, but mostly just functional. I can admit that much, and in the coming months and years, I'll need to admit much more. Which is why this spring, after arguing with myself about whether AI could help writers, I decided to find out. Like so many others—as of April 2023, the [ChatGPT website receives about a billion visits monthly](#) [16]—I began experimenting. Here's a sample:

Prompt: Write a paragraph, in the style of Martha Nichols from *Talking Writing*, on the theme of why humans write.

ChatGPT: Why do humans write? Perhaps it is the desire to connect with others and share our experiences, to create meaning from chaos, or simply the need to express ourselves. Writing allows us to record our thoughts and feelings in a tangible way, giving us the ability to revisit them and reflect on our own growth and change over time.

Well. Opening with a rhetorical question is a classic move, one I often use, and it's humbling to see it mimicked by a machine. The sentences flow along at the same dull pace without anything specific to make a reader pay attention. I've also got more serious criticisms—but still.

Readers might be convinced I wrote it. It's not even inaccurate in terms of what I've publicly expressed. Maybe it *is* me, except I didn't write it.



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In the 1980s, I ran a women's writing workshop in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, one of my first forays in writing instruction. I did so under the auspices of the Bay Area Women's Resource Center (now the [Bay Area Women's and Children's Center](#) [17]) and the Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center, both charitable organizations. The latter was subsidized by [St. Anthony's Foundation](#) [18], the Catholic complex that provides a soup kitchen and other services to those in the neighborhood, many of them homeless.

I remember who I was in my twenties in vivid mental snapshots, striding through dirty BART stations and up Eddy Street to the Women's Resource Center, passing junkies and panhandlers who waved but didn't hassle me because they knew me. That's what I remember first, everything burnished by a heroic glow: my bravado, my mission, my youthful faith that it's possible to change the worst circumstances. At the time, I was completing a master's degree in creative writing at San Francisco State University and working as an educational software designer.

Yet I feel other memories in my body, things I'm not so eager to recall. Such as the time Salima Rashida, one of my workshop participants, hugged me from behind on the street, and I jumped like a fish snagged on a line. Salima, who was out of prison on parole, just laughed, her shaved dark head one more shadow in the fog. "I scared you, didn't I, Teach?" she said.

I was scared of everything and nothing then, a White girl with a facade of confidence. As I write about this now, I'm simultaneously old and young, but I also have the advantage of consulting a book about the Tenderloin Women Writers Workshop. Author Caroline Heller, a graduate student then, sat in on my workshop as the focus of her doctoral research project. Her thesis became the book [Until We Are Strong Together: Women Writers in the Tenderloin](#) [19] (Teacher's College, 1997), a paean to the emotional support offered by nonacademic writing workshops in community settings.

Caroline recorded and reproduced dialogue from some of those workshop sessions. She also included individual stories of several participants and me, based on qualitative interviews. Here's a quote of mine from the "Martha" chapter:

Writing is lonely. You have to forge some sort of context where people develop a sense of belonging. In a place like the Tenderloin, this is especially necessary. It's a vastly interesting place, but it's still an incredibly threatening environment for the women who live here. So to have a haven, a place where they are safe, not just physically, of course, but emotionally, is primary.

I told Caroline that I saw my role "not as that of a teacher to the workshop members, but as that of facilitator," which made sense politically and ethically. It still makes sense. Over the years, I've done much more teaching in academic settings, growing into the mantle of writing instructor—*teacher, professor, editor*—although I'm struck by what a gut call it remains. Effective writing . . . or derivative pabulum? A strong, individual voice . . . or mimicry?

Writing *is* lonely. There are skills to teach, but helping someone find their own voice is not just a matter of lessons and grades. We are such messy, brilliant-stupid beasts. I like the messiness, even the idiocy, but I sense a growing crusade to eradicate human imperfection.

Now we text and email and post about how lonely we are. There's an epidemic of loneliness, especially since the pandemic, everybody keeps saying the same thing, but that's the problem—crowdsourcing emotion. Generative AI has emerged in a virtual world in which feelings and our ability to express them to others has already been filtered through an array of technical platforms. So we model ourselves on fictional characters, on influencers or personas. We perform our emotions rather than feel or interpret them or allow them to exist without explaining them away.

The traditional reason for the value of writing instruction is that writing is thinking. It is, but for me the real loss we face with generative AI is clear when I reframe it as *writing is feeling*. The product of writing isn't simply a specific story or an email; it's not "content" or "information." For writers, the product is themselves—who they are and what their lives mean—and the last thing we humans need is another layer of mediation between us and the real world.

Sometimes there is no right answer, true or false. Neat paragraphs in response to a prompt are not enough. Sometimes the mistakes we make in words or the world shouldn't be edited away, as if they never happened. ChatGPT and other AI bots can mimic human exchange, but they can't replicate sitting together in a utilitarian meeting space, where those present feel the tensions in their own bodies, the wobble of unhappiness in chapped lips or a sagging chin, our breaths puffing out. The machine can't fill the silence with feelings that go beyond words.

Am I doing it right? What's the sequence of rightness and wrongness and every gradation in between? Will you sit with me now, witnessing the mistakes I've made, my humanity?



Art Information

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Martha Nichols co-founded *Talking Writing* and is a faculty instructor in the journalism program at the Harvard University Extension School. Much of her teaching craft appears in her book [First-Person Journalism: A Guide to Writing Personal Nonfiction with Real Impact](#) [20] (Routledge, 2022). She is also the editor of [Into Sanity: Essays About Mental Health, Mental Illness, and Living in Between](#) [21] (Talking Writing Books, 2019).

For more information, see [Martha Nichols Writer](#) [22].

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