Death of the Essay?
Generative AI, Literature Teachers' Five Stages of Grief, and Alternative Assignment Design in Victorian Studies

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Abstract

In this essay, we discuss the ongoing fallout from generative artificial intelligence (AI) for literature instructors and reflect on our own and other scholars' experiences with students' adoption of such language generation tools, particularly in courses on Victorian literature. Since the essay in its current academic form is itself a mostly Victorian invention, many teachers of Victorian literature have a deep commitment to the genre. Given recent developments in AI-generated writing, we – along with many instructors – are in the process of grieving ongoing changes to a cherished teaching practice. For this article, we use what are popularly called 'the five stages of grief' as a heuristic to think through the end of the essay in undergraduate literature classrooms and to speculate on what lies beyond. This essay takes instructors' affective responses seriously and critically examines what these affects reveal about literary studies and the field's assumptions about the essay's validity as a mode of assessment. Ultimately, we make the case for rethinking the traditional essay assignment and for treating literacy exercises like the Victorians did: as spaces for exploration of personal literacy and world-building, as tools for imaginative play and for generative failure.

Are analytical or argumentative essays the best way to assess student learning in literature classrooms? In this article, we discuss the ongoing fallout from the recent introduction of generative artificial intelligence (AI) for literature instructors and reflect on our own and other scholars' experiences with students' adoption of such language generation tools, particularly in courses on Victorian literature. Much of the discourse surrounding these tools focuses on what generative artificial intelligence means for the 'standard academic essay' – that

cherished genre for so many teachers. While, as John Warner writes, the idea of '"standard" academic writing . . . doesn't actually exist in nature', most instructors of literature would likely agree on some of its key features: an original argument, quotations from literary passages, close readings of those quotations, and perhaps (in upper-level classes) a 'they say/I say'-style critical intervention. Indeed, this format remains the norm for journal articles and conference papers in professional literary studies.[1] Given recent developments in AI-generated writing, many instructors are in the process of grieving ongoing, and apparently inevitable, changes to this form as an established teaching practice. Even for those who have long incorporated rich alternatives or complements to the standard academic essay, AI developments have caused considerable concerns for academic writing generally. The key challenge that AI poses to college classrooms, as Carmen Kynard identifies, is that 'ChatGPT does an excellent job at writing the kind of white, school academese that most teachers, schools, institutions, corporate offices, and their rubrics value'.[2] Given the essay forms that AI-generated writing can imitate so easily, the six of us view the advent of ChatGPT and its ilk as an invitation to question what forms of assessment may be the most beneficial in literature classrooms.[3]

For this article, we use what are popularly called 'the five stages of grief' as a heuristic to think through the end of the standard academic essay (as it has been historically conceived and produced, in literature classrooms) and to speculate on what lies beyond.[4] Odd as it may seem to frame our field's response to generative AI through the lens of popular psychology, anyone who has read *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or attended a conference in the past two years will be familiar with feelings such as shock, anger, denial, dejection, and bargaining that inflect the discourse on how this technology impacts literature and composition teachers' work. This essay takes these affective responses

[1] John Warner, *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), p. 14. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *'They Say/I Say:' The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing,* 6th edition (New York: Norton, 2024).

[2] Carmen Kynard, 'When Robots Come Home to Roost: The Differing Fates of Black Language, Hyper-Standardization, and White Robotic School Writing (Yes, ChatGPT and His AI Cousins)', *Education, Liberation & Black Radical Traditions for the 21st Century* (11 December 2023) http://carmenkynard.org/when-robots-come-home-to-roost/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 12 of 12).

[3] We six authors are tenured or tenure-track faculty members at teaching-intensive institutions from across the U.S. Though we were trained as Victorianists, we all teach a wide range of generalist literary studies and composition classes at all undergraduate levels.

[4] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1969).

seriously, critically examining what they reveal about literary studies and the field's assumptions about the essay's validity as a mode of assessment. It begins with an acknowledgment of the trepidation that many instructors feel about the consequences this most recent technological revolution has had and continues to have on academic ethics and labour, as well as the collective shock of just how quickly things in higher education can fall apart (again).

Following this, we consider the efforts many instructors have made to retain the literary analysis or argumentative essay as the gold standard of academic assessment, despite its problematic privileging of Standard English. We then address the denial and bargaining that underlies the turn towards AI-detection software and other policing practices. Finally, we highlight the resulting reorientation that can come from asking not how to police AI in students' essay writing but whether the essay is the most useful pedagogical tool in the literature classroom in the first place.

In the end, we make the case for rethinking the standard academic essay assignment and suggest that professors of Victorian literature should treat literacy exercises according to the potential Victorians once attached to them: as spaces for exploration of personal literacy and world-building, as tools for imaginative play and generative failure. For the Victorians, after all, 'the essay' rarely resembled the kinds of academic writing most instructors encounter today and that are so AI-hackable. As David Russell's 2018 book on the Victorian essayistic tradition argues, nineteenth-century writers adopted the form so they could ponder 'social relationships, moral responsibility, education and culture'.[5] Above all, for Victorians like Charles Lamb, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, and Walter Pater, the essay is a social and poetic genre, 'a creative rather than controlling, a playful rather than violent way of handling not only other people, but also the world and its objects'.[6] The point of the essay, historically, is to instil both self-reliance of cognition and deep understanding of social interdependence – albeit for those privileged enough to have the time and literary background for such writing. The essay is both personal and political, both accountable and holding others to account, experimental, hyper-local, and open-ended. It is play, it is aesthetic, 'not quite literature, not quite philosophy, not quite politics'.[7] It's

[5] David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 69.

[6] Stephanie Kelley, 'David Russell on The Victorian Essay', *Five Books* (2018) https://fivebooks.com/best-books/victorian-essay-david-russell/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 5 of 71).

[7] S. Kelley (para. 27 of 71).

everything that generative AI is not. We propose, for teachers of Victorian literature, not a return to the Victorian essay form per se, but a reorientation toward this ethos.

Shock and Anger

For all of us, our first reactions to receiving AI-produced student work were shock and anger. One of us received her first AI-produced student paper in March 2023. It was a response to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Cry of the Children', and it very competently analysed the following lines:

> But they answered not our wailing;
> O they knew not we were human.
> Not a soul to hear the sighing of the guiltless man,
> Not one voice to claim him from the council of the damned,
> None to break the shackles, which the god-like foe had planned.

These lines, as readers might realise, are not Barrett Browning's. They were hallucinated by the large language model. The AI imagined 'The Cry of the Children' as a call to release an unnamed group of people from an unnamed oppression, using vaguely nineteenth-century poetic vocabulary.

The chipper self-assurance with which the student handed in this paper mirrors AI's overly confident voice, and both are a sign of the times. Something has gone awry in education, fuelled by technological disruption and societal trauma. In the words of Eleanor Courtemanche, who recently published a blog post on ChatGPT, we are reaping the fallout from a growing 'cynicism of the compromised post-pandemic classroom'.[8] Courtemanche links the issue of 'academic integrity' to that of the 'integrity of authorship'.[9] In our example, the student abdicated their responsibility to reflect on an actually existing cultural artefact (i.e., Barrett Browning's poem), failed to check whether the quoted lines in the essay matched the ones we had discussed in class, and put their own name in the document's header. They handed in 'content' in its purest form, something fact-free, context-less, and somewhat spooky, hoping that it would pass muster,

[8] Eleanor Courtemanche, 'AI and Academic Integrity: What Kind of Crisis?', *Personal Brand Blog* (31 July 2023) https://eleanorcourtemanche.wordpress.com/2023/07/31/ai-and-academic-integrity-what-kind-of-crisis/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 3 of 7).

[9] Courtemanche (para. 3 of 7).

and remaining rather unmoved when it did not. Just as OpenAI and dozens of other AI-developing companies shamelessly harvest stolen creative endeavours to train their models, this student reproduced the 'larger crisis of accountability in our profit-driven culture'.[10] These contemporaneous crises, of academic integrity and personal accountability, are, in fact, the same crisis. As Courtemanche cautions, 'AI is a trail that leads from nowhere to nowhere, and is completely indifferent to truth'.[11] As instructors, we have grieved (often with a fair share of anger and bitterness) what is lost when students take this trail. In the case of this 'The Cry of the Children' essay, the instructor was the one who mourned the student's lost opportunity to confront a profoundly moving and skilfully constructed piece of poetry; the instructor was the one who began to trust all her students a little less.

And yet, as we have realised, directing this anger at our students is misguided. At a time of industrial-style defunding, deskilling, and automation of faculty labour through educational technology; of computerised surveillance of students; of suspension of academic freedom, of phased-out tenure lines and eradicated institutional structures, AI is not where many of us want to focus our energies. Rather, AI's (thus-far) flat, detail-bereft, analytically empty, grammatically and orthographically correct prose appears to us like the ultimate victory of Standard English, the pinnacle of a lifeless, labour-extracting, rent-seeking system. As Alexandra Milsom argued, Standard English and current rules of academic essay writing descend from late-nineteenth-century theories of eugenics and processes of managerial standardisation that enforced white and wealthy norms of language use across primary, secondary, and higher education systems.[12] In a similar vein, Kynard asserts that '[t]his [disembodied language produced by AI] is exactly how school has taught us to write. And now, ChatGPT can do it faster and better'.[13] What generative AI reveals is how attached academics remain to these problematic forms.

Milsom suggests that to counter white language supremacy in the writing classroom means to 'stop policing' Standard English in students' essays: 'Students are not widgets, and strategies to meet their learning needs cannot be

[10] Courtemanche (para. 3 of 7).
[11] Courtemanche (para. 6 of 7).
[12] Alexandra L. Milsom, 'Assessing and Transgressing: On the Racist Origins of Academic Standardization', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 17.1 (2021) http://ncgsjournal.com/issue171/milsom.html [accessed 15 April 2025].
[13] Kynard, 'When Robots Come Home' (para. 8 of 12).

mass-produced'.[14] Next to the obvious labour issue, this is why we meet calls to teach with generative AI with suspicion. Do we want students to write perfect, AI-powered essays in perfect, white-standardised English? Do we want to teach meta-cognition by having students analyse and write about prose created by a model that has come into being through massive, unregulated theft of creative labour by for-profit tech companies?[15] Do we want to teach essays at all?

Where scholars such as Kynard have responded to ChatGPT and other generative AI tools as an opportunity for investigation and reflection, academia en masse, us included, has responded with shock and anger at the death of the essay in the literary classroom. Knowledge that students can turn to generative AI tools for varied forms of academic writing has exacerbated the policing, norming, and dehumanising of writing as anxiety about plagiarism and anger about having to catch it has become the focus of assignment prompts.

Denial and Dejection

One response to this frustration and fatigue is simply to say 'screw it' and continue teaching as one always has.[16] Another has been to take up the administrative call to familiarise and incorporate AI to avoid being deemed a 'dinosaur'.[17] Yet, amid the administrative push, few of us have been prompted to think about why we assign essays, let alone if we even should. The six of us attended six different U.S. graduate programs and now teach at six different colleges and universities. The standard academic essay is still the dominant genre of assessment at all of these institutions. Those of us who received pedagogical training in graduate school often did so in the context of a university writing centre or program where we learned best practices for composition instruction, including drafts, conferences, revisions, reflections, and portfolios – yet these exercises were all in service of the standard academic essay. We wrote article-style seminar papers in our own graduate classes, and we taught undergraduate

[14] Milsom (para. 27 of 37).

[15] Alex Reismer, 'These 183,000 Books Are Fueling the Biggest Fight in Publishing and Tech', *The Atlantic* (25 September 2023) https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/09/books3-database-generative-ai-training-copyright-infringement/675363/ [accessed 15 April 2025].

[16] Susan D'Agostino, 'Why Professors Are Polarized on AI', *InsideHigherEd* (13 September 2023) https://www.insidehighered.com/news/tech-innovation/artificial-intelligence/2023/09/13/why-faculty-members-are-polarized-ai [accessed 15 April 2025].

[17] D'Agostino (paras. 18-21 of 36).

students to do shorter versions of the same. Though some of us were encouraged to assign work in alternative genres, such as blog posts or podcasts for public audiences, these assignments were mostly complements to – not fundamentally reconsiderations of – the standard academic essay. In other words, even alternative genre assignments did not prompt us to question the essay as the dominant form of assessment. For most of us, pre-semester syllabus planning has rarely involved questions like, 'What genre of work should I assign to best facilitate and assess my students' learning?' Instead, we asked: 'How many essays should I assign, how many pages should I require, and do I need to include a research component?' As Warner notes, 'The "research paper" is simply another example of education folklore. I used to assign one because that's what you're supposed to assign. This is college, and college is for academics, and the research paper is academic'.[18]

This unreflective reliance on the standard academic essay as a mode of assessment perhaps explains why, when ChatGPT first launched in late November 2022, one prominent affect among many college teachers, including ourselves, was denial. We remember reassuring ourselves with statements such as: 'ChatGPT won't be a problem for the kinds of classes I teach! It might be a problem for high school essays, not college papers. Maybe it will pose a problem for history classes more than English classes. It definitely can't close-read like I teach my students to do'. Not only is it wishful thinking to suggest that the college-level English paper is so rarefied and sophisticated that it is somehow immune to replication, but such rhetoric additionally devalues and misrepresents the work of teachers in secondary schools and other fields.[19] ChatGPT could already pass the first-year curriculum at Harvard in mid-2023, as Maya Bodnick writes, and it quickly learns how to produce 'better, more specific, more pointed' essays when users know how to refine the prompts, as Corey Robin reflects.[20]

[18] John Warner, *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), p. 191.

[19] For generative AI's assignment-writing capabilities, see Kevin Jacob Kelley, 'Teaching Actual Student Writing in an AI World', *InsideHigherEd* (18 January 2023) https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2023/01/19/ways-prevent-students-using-ai-tools-their-classes-opinion [accessed 15 April 2025]; Anna R. Mills, 'ChatGPT Just Got Better. What Does That Mean for Our Writing Assignments?', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (23 March 2023) https://www.chronicle.com/article/chatgpt-just-got-better-what-does-that-mean-for-our-writing-assignments [accessed 15 April 2025].

[20] Maya Bodnick, 'GPT-4 Can Already Pass Freshman Year at Harvard', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (26 July 2023) https://www.chronicle.com/article/gpt-4-can-already-pass-freshman-year-at-harvard [accessed 15 April 2025]; Corey Robin, 'How ChatGPT Changed My Plans for the Fall', *Corey Robin* (30 July 2023)

We empathise with and have shared the impulse to deny the problem. We admit to feeling great momentary relief that the current iterations of generative AI haven't quite yet figured out how to perform a skilled close reading of a literary text, let alone synthesise a series of close readings into a coherent thesis with well-articulated stakes, though, as Ted Underwood warns, AI will soon develop the capacity for more sophisticated tasks like metacognition.[21] We derive some measure of comfort from the notion that, for now, there do seem to be clear 'tells' for AI-generated essays, such as made-up quotations. Denial, after all, can help us get through the day. This denial, however, is also closely tied to another set of affects plaguing many educators today: exhaustion, burnout, grief, and doom. Or in a word: dejection.

After all, AI necessitates the second major overhaul to our teaching in under five years. Didn't we *just* rethink our pedagogy for the pivot to online learning during COVID-19 and the attendant crises that continued, and were often exacerbated by, 'return-to-normal' instruction? These pandemic-era pivots were certainly not without rich pedagogical benefits, as some of us have written, but they were, and continue to be, profoundly exhausting.[22] When conversations about ChatGPT began to circulate in December 2022, one of the dominant responses we noticed among teachers was not panic, but weariness. When we read Bodnick's claim that '[p]rofessors need to completely upend how they teach humanities and social sciences', we feel tired.[23] Do we even have the energy to deal with another major crisis in higher ed – one that, as Matt Seybold writes, will certainly extend academia's 'well-documented labor intensification since 2020'?[24]

The 2023 working paper of the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI recommends 'prioritiz[ing] the development of critical AI literacy in faculty leaders' and 'expand[ing] institutional investment in writing

https://coreyrobin.com/2023/07/30/how-chatgpt-changed-my-plans-for-the-fall/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 8 of 17).

[21] Ted Underwood, 'We Can Save What Matters about Writing – at a Price', *Ted Underwood* (31 July 2023), https://tedunderwood.com/2023/07/31/we-can-save-what-matters-about-writing-at-a-price/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (paras. 6-8 of 16).

[22] Kimberly Cox, Shannon Draucker, and Doreen Thierauf, 'Introduction: "Teaching to Transgress" in the Emergency Remote Classroom', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 17.1 (2021) https://ncgsjournal.com/issue171/introduction.html [accessed 15 April 2025].

[23] Bodnick (para. 21 of 31).

[24] Matt Seybold, 'The Trash-Text Tsunami', *The American Vandal* (15 December 2023), https://theamericanvandal.substack.com/p/the-trash-text-tsunami [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 9 of 18).

instruction'.[25] While this sentiment sounds great, it also sounds like a lot of un- or under-compensated faculty labour. Many of our readers will not be interested in teaching students to experiment with AI for their writing. Many will be too tired to revamp their entire pedagogy for the current version of generative AI. More versions will follow, and quickly, and these versions will be more sophisticated than current ones. Jill Ehnenn and Carolyn Betensky, in a 2023 blog post, pointedly ask who would take responsibility for training tens of thousands of writing teachers to effectively incorporate AI into their classrooms: Who will pay for the training? Are instructors receiving course releases as they read the hundreds of think pieces, well-meaning educational guides on how to teach with AI, and addenda to statements grandly made by the joint MLA-CCCC taskforce as they discard everything they have learned about university-level writing instruction and start from scratch? Ehnenn and Betensky observe that 'ChatGPT represents a serious labor issue for faculty' and, with them, we want to think about setting 'healthy boundaries … instead of putting in more labor'.[26] It is fine to refuse to change one's pedagogy on someone else's terms and without institutional support. The unrelenting need for panic-mode instruction has instructors in constant cycles of overwork, exhaustion, and burnout, and it has instilled in many profound grief for an – admittedly idealised – 2019 classroom, along with a deep sense of doom for the future of academic careers and for the profession.[27] Those of us who have been in the profession for under a decade have now spent the *majority* of our careers under a state of emergency. While none of the six of us entered our careers with starry-eyed notions of academia, we did not anticipate this level of constant crisis or this scale of despair.[28]

[25] MLA-CCC Joint Task force on Writing and AI, 'MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI Working Paper: Overview of the Issues, Statement of Principles, and Recommendations' (July 2023) https://hcommons.org/app/uploads/sites/1003160/2023/07/MLA-CCCC-Joint-Task-Force-on-Writing-and-AI-Working-Paper-1.pdf [accessed 15 April 2025] (p. 11).

[26] Jill Ehnenn and Carolyn Betensky, 'ChatGPT and Academic Labor', *ACADEME BLOG* (22 August 2023) https://academeblog.org/2023/08/22/chat-gpt-and-academic-labor/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 5 of 9).

[27] We want to acknowledge our immense privilege here as six tenured and tenure-track faculty members, though the 'demographic cliff' in the United States and program and college closures in both the United States and the United Kingdom leave none of us immune to higher education's escalating crises.

[28] This sense of despair is near omnipresent. The comments section of Robin's article, for example, are littered with phrases like 'sadness', 'sense of loss', and prospects 'too depressing to bear'.

Bargaining

Faced with all this doom, a common impulse is to bargain. Perhaps we can't stop students from using AI, but we can catch them when they do. We have seen, and have at times employed, a variety of approaches for prevention and punishment, including stringent syllabus policies related to plagiarism, writing assignments that require lockdown browsers, proctored essay exams, in-class, handwritten essays, oral exams, 'Trojan Horse' writing prompts, and AI-detection tools that provided glimmers of relief, though tools such as OpenAI and Turnitin have not turned out to be particularly useful.[29] Though some of these approaches may have unexpected pedagogical affordances, they nonetheless smack of surveillance culture and leave students vulnerable to exploitation by detection service corporations like Turnitin that, as Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel write, can 'strip mine and sell student work for profit'.[30] Moreover, a reliance on such tools places us in a combative relationship with our students, transforming them from 'learners into potential plagiarizers' and us from teachers into plagiarism police.[31] In this context, to quote Kevin Gannon, students and teachers become 'adversaries' rather than 'allies'.[32] Rebecca Moore Howard helpfully summarises how this culture of surveillance and paranoia fostered by detection software harms the student-teacher relationship:

> Many of our colleagues are entrenched in an agonistic stance toward students in the aggregate: students are lazy, illiterate, anti-intellectual

[29] See Robin; Mondaysmadeeasy [@mondaysmadeeasy], 'Here's Some Advice for Using This Teacher Hack', *Instagram* (23 November 2023) https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0AetCixWRx [accessed 15 April 2025]; Owen Kichizo Terry, 'I'm a Student: You Have No Idea How Much We're Using ChatGPT', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (12 May 2023) https://www.chronicle.com/article/im-a-student-you-have-no-idea-how-much-were-using-chatgpt [accessed 15 April 2025]; and Marc Watkins, 'Will 2024 Look Like 1984?', *Marc Watkins* (30 July 2023) https://marcwatkins.org/2023/07/30/will-2024-look-like-1984/ [accessed 15 April 2025].

[30] Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel, 'A Guide for Resisting EdTech: The Case Against Turnitin', in *An Urgency of Teachers: The Work of Critical Digital Pedagogy*, ed. Morris and Stommel (Middletown, DE: Hybrid Pedagogy, 2020), pp. 245-59 (p. 245).

[31] Morris and Stommel, p. 255.

[32] Kevin Gannon, *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), p. 37.

> cheaters who must prove their worth to the instructor. Turnitin and its automated assessment of student writing is a tool for that proof.[33]

Even more troubling, the adversarial relationship between teachers and students fostered by plagiarism detection and anti-AI surveillance software only exacerbates the preexisting, justified feelings of stress, doom, and loss that loom over underserved and minority student populations at a time when these same populations are under attack. In the United States, concerns surrounding student-use of AI have been accompanied by the lingering effects of the global pandemic, along with its disproportionate effects on minority populations, suspensions of reproductive freedoms, revoked visas and deportations without due process, and threats of violence, all of which have disproportionately affected students and scholars of colour. Frustration and anger are inevitable for those inhabiting this traumatic landscape, especially when they must face an added culture of distrust and surveillance in the humanities classroom, which should be one of the few remaining safe spaces.

Viewed from the perspective of teacher-student relationships, the advice offered to underserved students navigating these intersecting crises can reproduce the same classroom culture of disingenuity and distrust fostered by illicit AI use. In a column directed at HBCU communities, one of the proposed strategies for student success involves 'playing nice':

> Even when it feels like administrators, faculty, or staff could be doing something differently . . . play nice. Being rude, overly frustrated, or angry is not going to make the process or person move more quickly; it may actually get in the way or slow something down . . . Evaluate what works to get you what you need, and keep doing that![34]

We do not fault this advice as ineffective or unnecessary. In certain contexts, playing nice is the only practical stance for underserved academic communities to continue receiving vital educational and bureaucratic support. But we do want

[33] Rebecca Moore Howard, 'Arguing against Turnitin', *Chenango Metonymy* (4 May 2013) https://rmoorehoward.wordpress.com/2013/05/04/arguing-against-turnitin/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 2 of 4).

[34] Antione D. Tomlin, Geoffrey L. Colbert, and Joshua Spivey, 'Thriving Despite the Challenges: Tips for HBCU Students and Faculty', *Interfolio* (11 March 2021) https://www.interfolio.com/resources/blog/tips-for-hbcu-students-faculty/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 12 of 13).

to point out that to 'play nice' is to not resolve anger through affective strategies such as open and honest communication, but rather to suppress it and put up a professional front. This emphasis on professionalism over honest communication mirrors to some extent generative AI tools' ability to simulate professional and academic writing, empty of true sentiment or discursive exchange. Both strategies for student success produce an academic environment where appearances and the preservation of norms are more important than authentic connections that foster learning and growth for teachers and students alike. And both demand heightened observation on the part of instructors to detect affective and academic dishonesty and develop open learning communities. Yet, as a field, we seem willing to bargain away our students' freedom from surveillance to preserve institutional norms, specifically the academic essay and other traditional forms of assessment, rather than question the validity and utility of these pedagogical practices.

Acceptance and Reorientation

Where, in this mess, can instructors carry out their mission to educate individuals and create communities of learners? And, further, can educating individuals ever simply be a goal in academia's current assessment culture where evaluation, and, ultimately, market-driven imperatives of financialisation reign supreme?[35] In light of all we have discussed above, we argue that one of the major threats to higher education posed by generative AI is one of distraction. Instead of focusing our energies on addressing deeply rooted educational inequities, recent political attacks on academic freedom, and the very real attacks on our students' physical and mental safety, we are caught up in endless trainings on how to write with AI in the classroom and how to police against it – all to preserve the standard academic essay, and academic writing more generally, as the ultimate form of literary engagement. Why? What do we actually teach by insisting on the essay as a demonstration of learning in the literature classroom? Would it be such a bad thing if the essay, as it's traditionally taught, were dead?

Despite our lingering anger, as well as our continued tendency to despair and temptations to bargain, we have ended up here: we have accepted that generative AI has, well, killed the essay and we are ready to reorient our pedagogies to alternative ways of practicing and evaluating learning. Efforts to maintain the standard academic essay ultimately foreclose reassessment of how

[35] Cris Shore and Susan Wright, 'Audit Culture Revisited: Rankings, Ratings, and the Reassembling of Society', *Current Anthropology*, 56.3 (2015), 421-44 (p. 425).

the genre replicates white supremacist systems of oppression through its privileging of Standard English and conventional modes of critical engagement. We speculate that attachment to the essay as an academic form is rooted in the values that undergirded its earliest functions. After all, Michel de Montaigne, the sixteenth-century inventor of the medium, used the essay as a 'laboratory for testing but not proving ideas', as a site where writers could explore authorial experience, where they could be 'unapologetically "romantic", "egocentric", and "self-indulgent"' if they wanted, all features that are obviously antithetical to the academic essay.[36] Much like Montaigne used the form, we wish for our students to experiment, to meander, to comment on thought as it is being formulated, to reflect on their cultural conditions of possibility, to foster intellectual growth and social change through personal and embodied engagement with other texts. Essay writing poses a challenge to the current generation of students who are often working, often first-generation, often nontraditional, often distance, and who do not have the time to learn both how to engage in this form of learning and how to demonstrate it in writing. Generative AI forces a reorientation of our literacy and writing aims back to these ideals.

But the industrialised form of the essay that contemporary academe insists upon no longer engages in such exploration and play. Kynard has written extensively about how academia's insistence on the traditional essay and Standard English promulgates the racism inherent in the genre and asserts that '[i]t shouldn't come as a surprise that students will turn to AI to write these white-standardized essays'.[37] AI, she convincingly argues, mirrors the expected language and structures of academe 'in the most sanitized and distant way possible. Violent as hell'.[38] According to Kynard, it is the white-standardised language and form, AI's insistence on form over content, that is 'violent'. While Kynard's focus is the composition classroom, the concerns she raises about whether traditional research papers, in fact, facilitate learning and whether the rubrics faculty attach to these essays do the kind of diversity-oriented work they often claim to do still applies to the types of essays commonly assigned in literature classrooms:

[36] Derek Owens, 'Essay', in *Keywords in Composition Studies*, edited by Paul Heilker and Peter Vandeberg (Portsmouth: NH, Boynton/Cook, 1996), pp. 85-87 (p. 85).
[37] Kynard, When Robots Come Home' (para. 6 of 14).
[38] Kynard, 'When Robots Come Home' (para. 9 of 14).

> The one stock essay form seems the easiest to teach and grade . . . This, however, does not mean that this is the only way to teach writing [or close reading in the case of the literature classroom], that this is a worthwhile assignment for teachers to give or students to complete, that there is only one kind of essay and one way to write it, or that there is only one kind of information and one way to dump it into writing.[39]

Instead of asking how to teach students to write with AI, how to catch students who have written with AI, or how to create essay prompts that will, somehow, beat AI, literature faculty should be asking why we want to hold onto the standard academic essay at all. In our estimation, this is a topic more readily discussed in composition studies and one that needs to be taken up by literature teachers as well.

To that end, Asao B. Inoue poses an important question: 'What I mean is how does a teacher not only do no harm through [their] writing assessments, but promote social justice and equality?'[40] As we thought through the challenges AI poses to contemporary literature classroom instruction and moved beyond the initial dejection, we became increasingly frustrated with the innate racist practices we were holding on to, even valuing, including the expectation that the essay constitutes the only valid form of student evaluation. In addition, assessment culture in academia has shifted the focus of teaching, moving discussions away from student learning and silencing the fact that exploration, play, and failure are essential to learning.[41]

While we acknowledge that rethinking the essay will not solve many of the challenges facing higher education today, we do believe that this is a first step in processing our collective grief and perhaps rebuilding a more equitable learning environment. As we designed the alternative assignments we share below, we asked ourselves what we wanted students to learn and what we wanted them to glean from the process of demonstrating that learning, instead of asking how we wanted our students to fit what they had learned into an essay. We all took different roads to a similar observation: the creation of pedagogically meaningful

[39] Carmen Kynard, '"Getting on the Right Side of It": Problematizing and Rethinking the Research Paper Genre in the College Composition Course', in *Genre Across the Curriculum*, ed. by Anne Herrington and Charles Moran (Logan, UT: Utah University Press, 2005), pp. 128-51 (p. 135).

[40] Asao B. Inoue, *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* (Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2015), p. 3.

[41] Shore and Wright, p. 431.

alternative assignments requires risk-taking, play, and a willingness to fail and try again.

If Not the Essay, Then What? Alternative Assignments for the Victorian Literature Classroom

Teachers of Victorian literature have devised countless creative alternatives to the standard academic essay. Indeed, when we presented the below list at the North American Victorian Studies conference in Bloomington, Indiana, in November 2023, a vigorous discussion followed during which many scholars shared their own riffs on these assignments. Resources such as the Collaborative Organization for Virtual Education (COVE) and *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom* provide robust collections of assignments in this vein.[42] Here we list some of the alternatives to the standard essay assignment that we have developed in our Victorian literature classes or in classes that feature Victorian literature. We have found these assignments and activities to assess or practise many of the same skills we hope students develop through traditional literary analysis essays. While these assignments tend to be less ChatGPT-hackable, that feature is less important to us than the fact that they more authentically engage our students in their learning.

In our opinion, and here we echo Seybold's *American Vandal* podcast, any response to the encroachment of technology capitalism on scholarship and on teaching has to be a collective one.[43] In sharing these alternative assessments, then, we wish not only to offer a glimpse into the wide range of alternatives to the standard academic essay, but also to engage in a practice of collective labour-sharing. We hope that readers will use, adapt, develop, and hack these assignments in their own classrooms, so that we might together build a robust collection of new ways for our students to write, think, and feel.

Teach Something!

[42] Pearl Chaozon Bauer, Ryan D. Fong, Sophia Hsu, and Adrian S. Wisnicki (eds.), *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom* (2021) https://undisciplininggvc.org [accessed 15 April 2025].

[43] Matt Seybold, 'EdTech, AI, & The Unbundling of Research & Teaching: *Criticism LTD*, Episode #13', *American Vandal Podcast* (2 November 2023) https://marktwainstudies.com/unbundling [accessed 15 April 2025].

Kimberly Cox developed her 'Teach Something!' assignment for her lower-division British literature survey at a public, open-enrolment college in remote Nebraska. The assignment challenges students to teach the class how an assigned section of a novel can be situated within its historical context (which the class explored during the first part of the semester) and to guide the group through an exercise that facilitates critical thought and verbal engagement. During the weeks dedicated to this final assignment, students determine what content will be discussed by deciding what they each find significant about the assigned novel. Cox's rubric rewards students for their depth of thought in the conception and planning of the activity more than for their success in running the classroom.

Key to this assignment is that Cox transfers control over classroom content and pedagogy to her students, becoming a facilitator and co-learner instead of teacher. She moves around the classroom, assuming the seat of the student who is presenting and whatever role the presenting student assigns her. Students are given half of a class period for their teaching demonstrations, and Cox grades students predominantly on their reflection that is due by the class period following the activity. One future high-school language arts teacher asked the class to imagine being twelfth graders preparing for an upcoming test on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by playing mad libs; Cox and students had to provide character names and plot details for the pre-written sentences, and also had to come up with emotions, moods, and tones to describe portions of the novel, which required unexpectedly interpretive work. Another presentation had the class imagine they were consumers asked to review a trip aboard the Nellie from Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) using *Yelp* to criticise British colonialism in the Congo.

This assignment emphasises close reading, analysis, creativity, synthesis, and both spoken and written discourse without privileging the essay format. The assignment's structure requires risk-taking and results in the decentring of traditional authority in the classroom. It facilitates deeper engagement with the course itself and its readings because students are tasked with determining content and managing a class, a particularly productive experience for English education majors who are often sidelined in literature programs. And, finally, it gives students space to mess up or fail and reflect on perceived successes and failures, which, in turn, helps them think about learning as a process rather than product. Cox has run versions of this assignment in face-to-face and online classrooms for a decade now and continues to find that this assignment generates students'

investment and creativity because it demonstrates her interest in what her students have to say.

'Inspired by'

Riya Das developed the '"Inspired by" Creative Project', an assignment asking students to synthesise course materials of their choice to reflect their creative interests. Students prepare an original creative piece inspired by a specific aspect in the syllabus, such as a historical figure, poem, essay, or novel. The assignment simultaneously introduces students to the process of adaptation or remediation of a text and empowers them to conceptualise creative work as academically valuable. Das initially developed the assignment for an introductory interdisciplinary humanities course at an R-2 classified Historically Black University outside of Houston. Befittingly inspired by her introductory students' enthusiastic responses to not just the creative artifacts they produced but the active processes of contemplation, creation, and reflection, Das later revised and used the assignment in an intermediate survey on world literature and an advanced course on Shakespeare at her institution.

For the '"Inspired by" Creative Project', students may adapt a text temporally, for example, writing a modernised screenplay based on a scene in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862). Students may also adapt a text into a different genre, for example, by creating a painting or a collage based on Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853). Students may further modernise a text and represent it on a twenty-first century digital platform, for example, by creating social media feeds for a character from Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893). Finally, students write a reflection detailing the significance of preparing a creative work focused on the literary or historical material of their choice, thereby centring their own voices in their writing. Students are thus able to play with and interpret texts through multimodal channels, while also learning to translate their original creative ideas into thoughtful narrative. This transmediation is an empowering method of intellectual engagement and writing beyond the bounds of the traditional essay.

The notable adaptability of the 'Inspired by' assignment not only allows Das to assess the effectiveness of her major essay-alternative assignment across instructional levels and subjects, given the broad range of courses most Victorianists teach, but also enables students to put their creative capacities in conversation with the academic material they were studying in class, thereby

rendering the act of writing a part of their creative process and output. As Das's students often note about this assignment, it amplifies their abilities and voice, and, in turn, mitigates the urge to seek original interpretations of texts elsewhere.

Victorian Museum

Shannon Draucker created a 'Victorian Museum' assignment for an upper-level Victorian literature class at a Franciscan liberal arts university in Albany, New York. Throughout the semester, students encounter several examples of the Victorians' fascination with exhibitions from the rise of institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum (1852) and Natural History Museum (1881) to the Crystal Palace Exhibition (1851) and the Colonial and Indian Exhibition (1886) as well as texts such as TN Mukharji's *A Visit to Europe* (1889). These examples encourage students to think critically about the politics of the Victorians' impulses to collect, preserve, and display artefacts. Throughout the semester, Draucker urges her students to find delight and intrigue in the many strange cultural artefacts the Victorians left behind: photos of the London Zoo's famous hippopotamus Obaysch, notices of performances by spiritual mediums, and advertisements for pills for 'sluggish livers' and other ailments. She prompts students to connect these artefacts to broader social and political phenomena such as the imperialist implications of the exotic animal trade and the emergence of zoos, the gendered and racial dynamics of the rise of spiritualism, and increased anxieties over public health and growing knowledge about disease spread.

The 'Victorian Museum' project invites students to create small exhibits on Victorian-era topics of their choice. The assignment has two parts. Part One, 'You as a Curator', invites students to write an exhibit introduction and compile a collection of at least eight artefacts, with captions for each. These artefacts can be literary, such as quotations from novels or poems, or cultural, including photographs, advertisements, and newspaper articles. Two of the eight artefacts must be present-day items: images or links to articles reflecting their topic's ties to contemporary concerns. In spring 2020, for instance, a student paired articles about the 1854 Broad Street cholera outbreak with photographs of healthcare workers during the early COVID-19 pandemic to draw parallels between these two crucial moments in public health history. In Fall 2022, a student examined diagrams of nineteenth-century dance forms (soft shoe routines, skirt dancing, polkas, and mazurkas) alongside photographs of twenty-first-century performer Misty Copeland to investigate the gendered and racial politics of dance culture

both in the nineteenth century and today. The exhibits can be presented digitally, for instance on blogs, PowerPoints, Word documents, or PDFs, or physically, as on poster boards. Part Two, 'You as Museum Visitor', takes place on the final day of class, and invites students to display their exhibits in the classroom and visit each other's exhibits.

The 'Victorian Museum' assignment helps students to develop their primary-source research skills and practice using digital databases such as the *British Newspaper Archive*, the *City of London Picture Archive*, and *HathiTrust*. It prompts students to organise, interpret, and synthesise information. On the exhibit day, students practice oral communication skills such as speaking in public and asking good questions. Most importantly, the exhibit day creates a vibrant learning community: the room buzzes as students walk around their museums and share excitement about each other's artefacts in ways far more dynamic and interactive than a traditional essay allows.

Narrating Victorian Poetry

Ashley Nadeau developed her 'Narrating Victorian Poetry' assignment as a complement to her study of student experiences with audiobooks in the Victorian literature classroom. Because her Victorian literature courses also serve as research sites, Nadeau's syllabi are weighted towards those nineteenth-century novels that are readily available as audiobooks at the expense of other genres of writing, like poetry. Wanting to expand her reading list and expose her students to a more diverse body of writers, Nadeau devised a choose-your-own-adventure assignment that challenged her students to become an expert on a poem of their choice and produce their own audio narration and interpretation of the text to share with their classmates. Provided with a list of suggested authors (including some from COVE's own list of 'Works by and about People of Color')[44], students choose a poem to research, recite, and post as a recorded narration in a shared, digital COVE anthology. They then write narrator's statements describing how their research informed their narration and reflecting on how the act of recitation shaped their critical and affective response to the poem.

The recorded narrations and accompanying narrator's statements are evidence of Nadeau's students' sustained, intimate, and creative engagements

[44] COVE, 'Works by and about People of Color' https://editions.covecollective.org/content/works-and-about-people-color [accessed 15 April 2025].

with these texts. Students have compared Emily Brontë's 'No Coward Soul is Mine' with their own feelings of faith, provided a carefully timed and historically appropriate score for a narration of Amy Levy's 'A Wall Flower', and reflected on the complexities of representation and appropriation in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'. One admitted to reading and re-reading her poem over one hundred times as she perfected her narration. While not every student is so assiduous, few will soon forget the poem they practiced and recorded for an audience of their peers.

Although Nadeau's assignment maintains a written component, this multimodal project fosters both intellectual and emotional engagement with literature. In terms of assessment, self-evaluation and the specificity with which students can discuss their process and the stylistic choices they made in recording their narration are valued over the formal elements of the traditional literary analysis essay. This loosely structured, student-driven format accommodates undergraduates with varying levels of academic experience and preparation. This latter point is especially critical in the context of the public, open-enrolment university where Nadeau teaches and is in keeping with her embrace of audiobooks as a means of making her classes more accessible for non-traditional and neurodiverse students. Building on the accessibility aims that animate this project, Nadeau intends to encourage future sections of students to contribute their recordings to Librivox's Weekly or Fortnightly Poetry project. As a volunteer-run, public domain project, Librivox provides a necessary counter to the increasingly commercial audiobooks industry and thus ensures future students will have access to free audio editions of Victorian literature. Her complete assignment and overview are part of a cluster of 'Beyond the Essay' assignments published on *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom*.[45]

Recitation Triptych

Kate Nesbit's three-part 'Recitation Triptych' project, like Ashley Nadeau's, asks students to practise performing close textual analysis through reading aloud. The project takes inspiration from the central claim of Catherine Robson's *Heart Beats* (2012): that the body of an individual reading a poem in the twenty-first century is different from the body of an individual reading that

[45] Ashley Nadeau, 'Audio Encounters with Victorian Poetry', *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom* (2025) https://undiscipliningvc.org/html/assignments/audio_encounters.html. [accessed 15 April 2025].

same poem in the middle of the nineteenth.[46] Students are asked to complete three tasks for this project. Firstly, an oral performance of two excerpts from our course texts, unified around a common theme of the student's choosing. Secondly, an 'historical context' essay that asks students to imagine they are performing this passage in the year it was published and consider how larger cultural trends, historical events, and contemporaneous texts would influence its interpretation. And finally, a creative nonfiction essay in which students reflect on the experience of reciting these pieces now, in their national and regional context, as themselves.

By pairing this assignment with readings excerpted from Dwight Conquergood's article on 'Rethinking Elocution' and Joshua St. Pierre's *Cheap Talk: Disability and the Politics of Communication*, the assignment also asks students to examine elocution's long-standing investments in ableist notions of comportment as well as classed and racialised Standard English.[47] The troubling aspects of elocution's history inform this assignment's assessment. The grades and feedback centre on interpretive intent rather than metrics related to the so-called 'quality' of a student's delivery, posture, or confidence. In their required 'performance notes' as well as their creative essays, students offer up summaries of this 'interpretive intent' and, in doing so, put forward analyses of Victorian literature that are deeply personal, richer, and more nuanced because of it. Students have recited excerpts from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) and George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* (1898) to critically examine their own family's mandates of religious obedience; from *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) to narrate their experiences of homecoming; from Gerard Manley Hopkins and Egbert Martin on experiences of affect that transcend language. Nesbit has always been struck by how these students teach her to see these texts in new ways (ways, one might add, that ChatGPT would never anticipate). And Nesbit has noticed that, through memorisation and recitation, students learn to attend to the details of language and sound more thoroughly than they would if simply instructed to close-read a passage.

Though this assignment can work well anywhere, the project carries unique resonances where Nesbit teaches in rural Iowa. The state has a particularly rich

[46] Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[47] Dwight Conquergood, 'Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and other Figures of Speech', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 20.4 (2000), 325-241; Joshua St. Pierre, *Cheap Talk: Disability and the Politics of Communication* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

history of nineteenth-century elocution and literary performance, as Marian Wilson Kimber has chronicled in her book *The Elocutionists*.[48] Delsarte performances, oratorical contests, and elocutionary concerts were popular across the country in the late nineteenth century, but especially so in Iowa. This old obsession has, in a way, lived on through the enduring centrality of speech and speech clubs in Iowa high schools. 'Speech' is a required class for all Iowans, and Speech Team is an enormously popular extra-curricular activity. For many of Nesbit's students, the task of literary performance is a familiar and perhaps nostalgic one, and a task rooted in local history. By combining performance, historicism and reading history, and strategic presentism, this assignment asks students to consider how historical moments, their bodies, and their modes of reading influence a text's interpretation.

Infographic

Doreen Thierauf's infographic assignment invites students to create a digital poster illustrating a social problem or development from one of the course texts, combined with a formal presentation of that poster to the class. Thierauf designed the assignment for her upper-level Victorian novel course at a predominantly minority-serving institution in rural North Carolina. Students design the infographic to provide their audience with a succinct visual representation of their research. It is guided by a thesis that may be either implicit in the infographic's design or explicitly labelled – though it must be stated directly when the student presents the infographic to the class. Ideally, students' infographics teach the rest of the class to view a text in a new light, and Thierauf explains to students that they should consider it a pitch for a researched insight.

Students may detail the individual moments of a coming-of-age story, map characters' travel or movements, or design a constellation of character relationships. In Spring 2024, Thierauf's students created infographics, for example, on the 'Phases' of Tess's social fall – a reverse coming-of age plot – in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) which was depicted using the anchoring image of a downward-facing funnel. Another student visualised the complicated exchange of blood, money, and knowledge among the cast of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) which ultimately leads to the birth of Mina and Jonathan Harker's son, rendered as a complex bubble chart with various color-coded lines

[48] Marian Wilson Kimber, *The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word* (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

and annotations. A third student tracked the physical movements of the cast of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) between the novel's two estates, leading them to the realisation that the Grange serves as a space that catalyses social friction, while Wuthering Heights operates as a space for that friction's explosive denouement.

Students may use a mix of keywords, short phrases, or sentences to help the viewer understand the infographic's point, though longer paragraphs are explicitly discouraged. As the class prepares for this assignment, Thierauf dedicates instruction time to visiting websites such as Canva, Easel.ly, Piktochart, and Knightlab's Timeline, which offer easy-to-adapt templates. Some students may opt to design their infographic from scratch, but, even then, extant templates provide models from which they can draw inspiration. The goal of this assignment is to both educate and visually entertain readers in a relatively short amount of time and to defend an idea without notes to an audience of peers. This task requires familiarity with the text, close-reading, analysis, and the ability to synthesise a great amount of information and relay it to an audience in a visually interesting and approachable way.

Concluding with Hope

Where we end, then, is really where we started – with the death of the standard academic essay. Yet, we hope to have arrived at a different stage of grieving: not with the sense that the humanities are dying or that literary studies and Victorian studies are doomed to disappear, but instead with a sense of acceptance and a willingness to embrace new models for teaching and learning. Instead of worrying about generative AI, we would rather take risks in the classroom to better facilitate learning. We would rather focus on the generative potential of failure as a pedagogical approach rooted in the play and potential that Victorians attached to literary exercises.

As we stated above, this moment requires a collective response. Our working conditions are our students' learning conditions. The student with whom we began this article is cynical about their education because the people who run academia are cynical about education. Seybold reminds us that the 'online-ification, EdTech, . . . and the digital university are actively hostile to the humanities'.[49] We will not necessarily stop assigning take-home writing

[49] Matt Seybold, 'EdTech, AI, & The Unbundling of Research & Teaching: *Criticism LTD*, Episode #13', *American Vandal Podcast* (2 November 2023)

assignments, as others have done, because that would mean 'accepting the deskilling of our labour that ChatGPT already portends': if we do not teach writing, we 'agree to being deskilled even before the university has forced it on us'.[50] What we will start doing, however, is reimagining what that writing looks like: notes for leading a class session, creative work, exhibit introductions and captions, scripts for narration, historical context analyses and creative nonfiction pieces, infographics, and other forms that place content above form. The great thing about writing, especially writing about literature, is that it is ambiguous and adaptable, like humans. While we were trained to expect our students to write with 'abstract, philosophical, and multisyllabic vocabularies' which approximates white-standardised English, this is not a necessary feature of academic writing.[51] And now, AI has perfected it anyway. As Kynard suggests, non-standardised languages and forms are far more difficult for generative AI to approximate, and that is where instructors can focus their efforts – creating assignments that students care about doing.

As we hope this article has shown, the death of the essay as an assessment genre encourages us to think more creatively about what students actually need to learn and how we can better engage them in showing us how they learned it. Over the past two years, we have encountered think pieces and institutional tools that encourage us to embrace generative AI in the classroom. But perhaps, paradoxically, one of the best opportunities posed by something like ChatGPT lies not in our use of the technology, but rather the embodied, whimsical, and exploratory ways we find to dispense with it.

https://marktwainstudies.com/unbundling [accessed 15 April 2025].

[50] Seybold, 'EdTech'.

[51] Owens, p. 85.

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