

Special Issue Editorial

# Introduction: The Present and Future(s) of Writing in the Age of Artificial Intelligence/Le Présent et le(s) Futur(s) de la Rédaction à l'ère de l'Intelligence Artificielle

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## Introduction

In the three years since the release of ChatGPT in November 2022, countless academic articles have opened with that very (or a very similar) phrase, marking a transitional moment for the study of writing. The proliferation of “Since the release of ChatGPT...” openers is indicative of the real disruption caused by generative AI (GenAI) in academic contexts and, we suggest, a tendency to focus on technological response (how do we detect AI use? Do we ban AI tools? Seek to integrate them into teaching and learning? Are Large Language Models (LLMs) drafting tools? Search engines? etc.) rather than writing itself. This special issue of *Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie* recenters writing in these conversations, thinking through what writing is, what it does, and why and how writing matters, in the age of artificial intelligence.

The articles in this issue examine the implications of GenAI tools across diverse teaching and learning contexts, disciplinary situations, and pedagogical frameworks. Read together, however, their diversity converges around a shared insight into *writing as a relational act*. “Writing matters,” contributors Thieme and Amell straightforwardly assert. Writing matters, and continues to matter, as we negotiate extremes of AI-interaction, from avoidance to adoption (to reference Saunders and

Boldt's framework), and from "hype" to "grave worry" (Thieme & Amell). Writing continues to matter, but it will continue to matter *more*, our contributors collectively suggest, when it is privileged as a site of relationship. These articles move away from thinking about writing as a skill towards writing as a process that works to enact relationship, specifically in the context of knowledge construction. The increasing integration of GenAI tools into the relational spaces of writing amplifies previously existing challenges around the teaching and learning of writing (Eaton et al.), making us reconsider the humanness of knowledge-making; a humanness that has always been foundational, but may have perhaps become taken for granted. Our authors help us to think through essential questions of embodied attention (Banting; Veselka et al.), situated intention (Thieme & Amell), community recognition (Saunders & Boldt; Li & Lin), and dialogic integrity and trust (Eaton et al.; Thieme & Amell).

The aim of our call for papers was *to solicit research into the impact that technologies based on artificial intelligence are having and will have on academic and professional writing, its teaching and practice*. We sought empirical and theoretical work that would explore the appropriation of GenAI tools in academic contexts; the re-conception of writing-related identities (teacher, learner, member of a given discourse community); writing in and across genres; ethics, plagiarism and postplagiarism (see Eaton, 2023); writing processes and practices; and translingual writing strategies, to list a few categories from that initial call. Certainly, the papers collected in this issue speak explicitly to these categories and to prevalent questions about efficiencies *versus* efficacies. They also speak to the multiple ways in which GenAI's entry into academic writing contexts both reveals and threatens the relational foundations of knowledge-making. Our contributors invite us to consider epistemological questions about how knowledge comes into being through human interaction and how we might (and should) reassess contemporary advancements of relational epistemologies (see, for example, Bearman & Ajjawi, 2023; Markauskaite et al., 2022).

## Thinking through Writing in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

In order to point to the distinctly human value of attention in contrast to the outputs of GenAI, poet Meghan O'Rourke, in a July 2025 guest essay for *The New York Times*, referenced a stanza from the Mary Oliver poem "Sometimes":

Instructions for living a life:

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it.*

(Oliver, 2008).

It is through paying attention, O'Rourke suggests, that we become human, or enact our humanity; attention is the headwater of individuality, and in writing about the objects of our attention, writers expand our human "sense of what it means to be alive" (O'Rourke, 2025).

LLMs cannot pay attention, of course, either to the casual, small astonishments of human life or to the interpretation of a Mary Oliver poem; as Banting reminds us in this issue, LLMs "can no more close-read than they can read at all." The point here is not simply to assert, "GenAI cannot do what humans can do." Rather, our focus is on what human work remains essential to our writing processes across contexts and disciplines. As contributors Thieme and Amell write, "the social nature of research means that awareness of our relations – to other researchers, to community members, to larger audiences – matters to the quality of our research and writing." In writing contexts mediated by GenAI (whether we are aware of that mediation or not), how do we maintain space for the relational work of paying attention and telling about it that is essential to academic knowledge-making?

This issue is published in the midst of scholarly debate about relational epistemology, a view of knowledge-creation as an interleaving of human and non-human "actors". Bearman and Ajjawi (2023) offer the following definition of relational epistemology: "knowledge is not a singular property of an individual or a machine but is contextualised within particular relationships between people, things and spaces." Bearman and Ajjawi (2023) build explicitly on Johnson and Verdicchio's (2017) articulation of AI systems as "*sociotechnical ensembles*... combinations of artefacts, human behaviour, social arrangements and meaning." Within this framework, GenAI is not a tool introduced into writing practices and processes, but an agent (or agentive actor) reconfiguring primary relational dynamics through which knowledge-making occurs. This understanding of relational knowledge-making resonates with Eaton's (2023) advancement of "hybrid writing" under conditions of "postplagiarism." Eaton (2023) moves us beyond binary thinking about human- *versus* AI-generated text (and all of the detective work and gotcha! moments we devote to distinguishing the two), asserting,

...hybrid writing co-created by human and artificial intelligence is becoming prevalent and will soon become the norm. Text generated by artificial intelligence tools is not static. It can be edited, revised, reworked, and remixed. The result can be a product that is neither fully written by a human, nor by an AI, but one that is hybrid. Trying to determine where the human ends and where the artificial intelligence begins is pointless.

The suggestion, it seems, is that we adapt to these conditions of hybrid knowledge-production, accepting that the wires of human and machine cannot be disentangled (to extend the metaphor further: we need not be concerned about whether the blue or red wire needs to be cut, as there are no real stakes attached to cutting either wire).

“Relationships between people” is privileged in Bearman and Ajjawi’s definition (though not necessarily with the purposefulness we suggest is essential), and the contributions in this issue indicate that these human relationships must continue to be privileged. Similarly, while hybrid authorship may not dissolve the interpersonal, human-relational foundations of knowledge-making, these hybrid conditions, our authors argue, do require us to be more intentional about cultivating and protecting these foundations. We know that writing in academic contexts is not the encoding of pre-existing knowledge into a text. Writing is a knowledge-making activity (Estrem, 2016); it is a process through which knowledge comes into being through a writer’s engagement with sources and genres, the dialogic relationship between writer and audience, the writer’s positioning on the threshold of or within (or against!) a given discourse community, the writer’s processes of drafting, seeking feedback, and revising. Between the lines of these engagements is relationship: writing enacts relationships between the writer and their subject matter (a way we might conceive of intent), writer and reader, writer and discourse community, writer and disciplinary conventions.

Each of our contributors attends, in their own ways, to the conditions under which knowledge-making should remain humanly relational. If knowledge is “held between actors” (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2023), we have to think about which actors are in view, in what relationships, doing what kind of work? Which relationships are sustained, and how are they enacted? For example, a graduate student using GenAI to refine their language while maintaining intellectual ownership of their ideas, who critically evaluates AI suggestions against disciplinary norms in conversation with peers and instructors, seeks active relationship with knowledge-making processes and the discourse community they seek to join (Li & Lin). Conversely, a learner who offloads all their intellectual and rhetorical labour to GenAI, who submits text without engaging its content, without intention apart from the receipt of a grade, opts out of the relational work through which knowledge is built; the

reader cannot authentically respond without the relationality of intention and trust (Veselka et al.; Thieme & Amell).

The contributions to this special issue invite us to pay attention to the relationships that matter within academic contexts of knowledge-production. They also reveal what is threatened when these relationships are disrupted or displaced by AI-mediated interactions that signal without substance, offering what Banting calls “ritual worship in the absence of belief.” If knowledge-making depends upon human actors engaging intentionally with each other, whether that engagement is in the form of texts, disciplinary conventions, peers, instructors, tutors, etc., this work cannot be offloaded to AI without fundamentally changing what we mean by knowledge, and most specifically, writing as a knowledge-making act: that essential human act of paying attention, being astonished, and telling about it.

## Overview of the Special Issue

*“Simulated Social Action: Assessing Generative AI’s Attempts at the Rhetoric of Literary Criticism”*

Sarah Banting, Mount Royal University

Banting’s article examines whether large language models (LLMs) can produce a professional piece of literary criticism by comparing LLM outputs to the characteristic rhetorical moves of research articles in English studies. While LLMs successfully signal genre, ultimately, they fail to perform the social actions that constitute literary criticism as a form of humanistic knowledge-making. LLMs can recirculate linguistic patterns but cannot participate in the dialogic, motivated engagement through which knowledge emerges in literary studies.

*“Where We’re At, What We Must Know, and Where We Can Go: A Systematic Review of Research about Writing and Artificial Intelligence”*

Christopher Eaton, Isabella Belmonte, Talla Enaya, Sarah Flood, Zainab Khalil, Anthony Makwanda, Mian Muhammad Ahmed Shah, Alexia Toma, Tiffany Wang, Connor Yu, University of Toronto Mississauga

Eaton et al. develop a thematic map of early research conversations on artificial intelligence, writing, and writing pedagogies in order to point to important next steps as the scholarly record on AI and writing develops. This collaborative review by a university instructor and nine undergraduate students identifies five prominent themes: AI literacy frameworks, evaluating AI outputs, human-AI

rhetorical collaborations, AI and bias, and academic integrity. Analysis reveals significant gaps in the current scholarly record, including the need for empirical data on how students evaluate AI outputs in different disciplinary contexts, more nuanced understanding of human-AI rhetorical collaboration beyond efficiency metrics, and consolidated approaches to AI literacy that build on existing pedagogical knowledge. The review concludes that while conceptual frameworks have proliferated rapidly, the field lacks sufficient empirical evidence about how these frameworks function in practice and how students actually engage with AI tools in their writing processes. This snapshot of early scholarship provides a foundation for more focused, practice-based research as the conversation develops.

*“Doctoral Students’ Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in Academic Writing: Their Engagement with AI-Powered Writing Tools”*

Vickie W. K. Li, The Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong, & Linda H.F. Lin, English Language Centre, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Research on postgraduates, especially EAL doctoral students’ engagement with GenAI remains relatively limited; yet, these students are expected to demonstrate a higher level of writing proficiency to effectively disseminate their research within the academic community. To address this gap, Li and Lin’s study examines how EAL PhD students engage with GenAI tools behaviourally, cognitively, and affectively in a thesis-writing course. This study has significant pedagogical implications regarding: i) the support needed by EAL PhD students to effectively use GenAI in their writing; and ii) possible ways to integrate GenAI technology into academic writing courses.

*“Avoid, Adopt, Adapt: Positions on GenAI in Canadian Writing Centres”*

Gillian Saunders & Natalie Boldt, University of Victoria

Saunders and Boldt report on an environmental scan of 31 Canadian university writing centre websites to assess how these critical support spaces are publicly responding to generative AI in student writing. The analysis reveals a fragmented landscape: as of summer 2024, only three writing centres had explicit public statements on GenAI use (one taking an “avoid” position, two an “adopt”), while 47% offered no public GenAI-related resources at all. This silence is particularly concerning given that writing centres traditionally serve as spaces where students negotiate scholarly identities and try on disciplinary discourses. The authors argue that writing centres’ omission from broader

institutional AI conversations represents a missed opportunity, as writing centres are ideally positioned to help students develop critical GenAI literacy while maintaining the relational, process-oriented approaches central to writing development.

*“Generative AI and Socio-Rhetorical Views of Writing”*

Katja Thieme, University of British Columbia & Brittany Amell, Carleton University

Thieme and Amell argue that conversations about generative AI and writing instruction must be grounded in core disciplinary insights from writing studies, particularly concepts of intention, process, and trust. Drawing on rhetorical genre theory, the authors demonstrate that academic writing enacts relationships through which students develop contextual awareness, agency, and authentic positionality relative to a given discourse community. The article examines how AI-generated text disrupts these relational dynamics as AI lacks genuine communicative intent, making it unclear whose intentions are being recognized when students submit AI-assisted work. Similarly, AI cannot participate in the trust-building networks essential to academic knowledge-making. The authors contend that pedagogical decisions about AI integration must prioritize maintaining the conditions under which writing can remain a social, dialogic practice through which knowledge emerges.

*“Always Watched, Always Watching: The Role of Surveillance in Writing Educator Experiences with Generative Artificial Intelligence”*

Mercedes Veselka, York University, Lorelei Lingard, Western University, Kathryn Hibbert, Western University & Mary Ott, York University

Veselka et al. examine how generative AI is reshaping teacher identities and pedagogical agency in writing instruction, focusing particularly on the pressures of surveillance, understood through Foucault’s metaphor of the panopticon, in AI-mediated contexts. Drawing on narrative inquiry with two writing instructors, the study indicates that generative AI amplifies existing power dynamics in teaching and learning as well as institutional constraints, creating conditions where educators must navigate conflicting expectations between fostering genuine learning relationships and enforcing compliance. The authors argue that meaningful pedagogical responses to AI require institutional environments that prioritize collaborative learning processes over punitive surveillance, creating

space for teachers and students to negotiate roles and explore uncertainties together rather than positioning educators as watchful gatekeepers of “authentic” work.

## Final Words

We, the editors of this issue, would like to extend our thanks to the contributors of this volume, who turned their work around in record time in order to publish as soon as possible. We would like to express our gratitude to the excellent team of reviewers who gave us their time and constructive feedback. Thank you to the Journal Editors, Jordana Garbati, Taylor Morphett, Valérie Delavigne, and Sara Vecchiato for your continuing conversation and support. Finally, the editors would like to express our gratitude for the opportunity to work together, as we have really enjoyed working with one another throughout the compilation of this special issue.

## Endnotes

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