Our Students' Humanity Is Worth Protecting: An Argument for GenAI Refusal

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I'm totally exhausted. It seems like every day there is a new story about the ubiquitous nature of GenAI in our lives, culture, and educational spaces. Honestly, I've given up trying to stay ahead of the wave of AI information. This is not a Luddite response to an emerging technology or a "head-in-the-sand" reaction in the hopes that the AI monster will eventually go away; instead, I'm making an informed choice to refuse the AI creep that seems to lurk around every corner. I believe that there is a way to acknowledge the presence of GenAI tools without abdicating my pedagogical ethos and responsibility as a composition instructor to "do no harm" to my students and their humanity. In fact, my argument here is that my refusal of GenAI in my freshman composition courses stands as my best attempt to protect my students' humanity.

What you are about to read is a pedagogical claim from just a simple person (an educational hack) who possesses a strong tolerance for failure and imperfection. Even though I've just completed my twenty-fifth year of teaching full-time at the community college level, I'm still living in fear of being discovered as a fraud, that some administrator will inform me of my dismissal from the institution on the grounds of educational incompetence. The imposter syndrome is real, my friends. I say this not as an "aw, shucks!" disclaimer—but you should know where my argument is based, from the location it emerges, so that you maintain the freedom to reject it. This is a personal, subjective experience, one that demonstrates the messiness of teaching and learning.

There is so much to say about my resistance to GenAI and the ethical dilemmas upon which it's based. My reasons for refusal are many—so let me summarize them quickly before moving on to my pedagogical approach to refuse GenAI. For me, it must be rejected based on three ethical principles: (1) it's trained on plagiarized intellectual property in violation of copyright rules without any compensation/acknowledgement of those who own that property[1]; (2) it's extractive of the environment with the use of water[2] and electricity for operational purposes which leads to harmful effects for largely underrepresented communities[3] (a full-on environmental racism); and (3) it's exploitive of human labor, especially of those representing the global

majority.[4] It always cracks me up when I see webinars or presentations advertised with something about "The Ethical Use of AI" for teachers and students. (Spoiler Alert: there is no ethical use of AI!) Unfortunately, these well-intentioned events often focus on the wrong ethics (or equity, or empowerment), serving as the mouthpiece or hype-men for the mission of tech companies selling the urgency of GenAI tools that supposedly will transform teaching and learning.[5] The tech bros have created what I call "the capitulation to the lie of inevitability," that if we aren't using GenAI tools in our classrooms, we're somehow not meeting students "where they are," or worse, that we are doing a disservice to our students who apparently will need AI skills to make it in the employment world someday. The myth here is: "Since GenAI is everywhere nowadays, attention must be paid." I ain't buying it. Like the lies and bullshit (I refuse to call them "hallucinations") conjured up by Large Language Models, this fabricated fear of missing out (FOMO) deserves to be rejected outright. It is disappointing how gullible many of us in educational spaces can be when some new technology promises the world[6]—that their product will magically transform our learning spaces (as long as we pay them the requisite amount for a site license!). Anyone remember the MOOC craze that was supposed to transform online learning and democratize higher education?!

It serves to mention that my contention lies specifically with AI tools that generate content—writing, images, audio, video, etc. There may be reasonable arguments for machine (or deep) learning AI that can perform wonderful scientific tasks[7] or burn through reams of data while performing algorithmic mathematics at lightning speed. These tools have been around for some time and have remained in their respective lanes, proving their usefulness via human management. Unfortunately, the newest iterations of AI—those launched from LLMs—are where I believe the wheels have begun to fall off, mainly because the human has been unceremoniously booted out of the loop!

So, the above discussion serves as the foundation for my AI refusal. Now what? How do I introduce and justify this refusal to my freshman composition students? How do we agree as a learning community to reject GenAI tools in our writing? More importantly, how can I motivate my students to depend on their authentic (often messy) human writing voices, to de-incentivize them from simply co-opting their writing to the plagiarism machine or their precious critical thinking to an algorithm?

Here are some simple pedagogical moves that have been working for me:

1. **Being transparent with a clear AI policy**. There is something meaningful in inviting students to "look under the hood" of a typical LLM[8] to obtain the knowledge of what's actually happening with GenAI tools. It's amazing how many of my students admit that they had absolutely no idea of the environmental implications of prompting a LLM, or of how AI companies prey on/exploit workers in the Global South to identify and filter out toxic content in their products, offering compensation that is far from a living wage. As the saying goes: When we know better, we do better. And a side benefit is that students find a kind of freedom (based in social justice) in removing themselves as potential perpetrators of such harm.
2. **Establishing an assessment approach that elevates the process over the product.** Since 2010, I've been using some version of ungrading,[9] presently arriving at a labor-reflex model that emphasizes my students' ability to reflect upon and self-assess their learning growth. Without the threat of grade-based judgments, students are free to explore their humanity through the written word, to speak with a voice that is all their own. In fact, in my previous attempts to employ AI-based feedback tools (before my conversion to all-out AI resistance), my students often cited frustration over the AI-generated feedback that often encouraged the abandonment of their human voice for a machine-like automated slop that did not sound like them. They were certainly on to something! The LLM output is a plausible replication of human language—often perfect in grammatical form and structure, yet with no humanity behind it. I've learned that we assess what we value; if I value a "standard" form of English writing and grade against it, then it would be fully understandable if students depend on GenAI tools to create the academic voice that meets the standard. There is a certain inevitability here where students play the "game of school" because that is what their environment entails. As John Warner argues, "Students are the products of what they've been rewarded for doing inside the system," a system that permits (and, I would argue, encourages) "academic cosplay to substitute for learning."[10] In my AI policy, I remind students that so much in academic writing emphasizes "sounding" correct or intelligent, which is another way of demeaning the multiple/diverse grammars that students bring to their writing in favor of a white, privileged use of language.[11] However, when we elevate the process—the thinking, the planning, the creativity essential to produce a written

product—students are free to make mistakes, to engage in the "friction" that produces growth in their learning/writing. We do this largely without grades.

3. **Providing ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge.** One thing that grates my nerves about GenAI tools is the often-repeated statement: "I asked ChatGPT . . ." As if this tool is the oracle of all human knowledge! What bothers me most about this reliance on technology for information/knowledge is that it creates a false assumption in students that they come to the course with nothing to offer, that they are simply empty vessels to be filled with the expertise of the instructor. In fact, they often enter my courses without ever having been asked about their expertise. But when I introduce blog prompts that rely on their internal knowledge about themselves or the external worlds they inhabit, it's as if the lights come on. This is when their writing becomes most animated, most human! Having students employ agency to contribute to the good of our learning community is the true empowerment I'm after. When AI companies promise educators a frictionless learning environment where equity/access is ensured, they are actually pushing a humanless future. (Forget about maintaining "the human in the loop"!) When we focus our writing on ideas for which we have a passion/expertise or that resonate with us on a human level, we do not need to ask ChatGPT—we are motivated to assume the role of knowledge-makers. Warner sums this up well: "More importantly, when students are asked to share their knowledge and insights with the world, and those insights are given value, they will turn away from the bullshit"[12] produced by GenAI tools.
4. **Exchanging a community-based agreement to avoid GenAI and the surveillance-based "cop shit" promised by AI detectors** (which is another way for tech companies to monetize learning). As I write this, I've just learned that the company that owns the learning management system my college uses has signed an agreement with OpenAI (the company that owns ChatGPT) to implement AI-infused tools into the LMS.[13] Ugh! So now my concerns have been expanded from simply the fears of having my students' data extracted and monetized in the LMS to now having to worry about their intellectual property being scooped up by OpenAI and perhaps used to train its future versions of ChatGPT. The fight seems endless, and there is only so much one instructor can do, so I focus my efforts on creating the learning conditions that honor my students' integrity. I tell them I trust them fully—a *compassionate trust* that reflects our

learning community and is woven into everything that we do together in the course. I aim to create a practical demonstration of Jesse Stommel's hopeful description of a trusting relationship between the instructor and student: "Learning is always a risk. It means, quite literally, opening ourselves to new ideas, new ways of thinking. It means challenging ourselves to engage the world differently. It means taking a leap, which is always done better from a sturdy foundation. This foundation depends on trust — trust that the ground will not give way beneath us, trust for teachers, and trust for our fellow learners in a learning community."[14] One practical way I encourage this reciprocity of trust is by creating "Completion Statement" Surveys that students complete when they submit a blog posting assignment. One of the statements that students must mark "True" or "False" is the following: ***I have NOT used any GenAI tool (ex: ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Grammarly, Copilot, etc.) to generate content in my blog posting. My blog posting submission complies with Professor Buck's 🏈 Policy for AI Usage in ENGL-121. My blog posting is 100% my wording and sentence structure (warts and all!). This ensures that I am interested in developing my unique writing voice. My focus is not on being perfect but on growing and improving within my writing practice.*** In my official AI Policy, I emphasize an assessment conversation that will take place if I feel like a student has used GenAI within their blog posting; however, I make sure that I characterize this interaction not as punitive or surveillance-based (e.g., the "cop shit" I want to avoid) but as a way for the student and I to understand (and ascertain) the reasons for the AI use. On the whole, these Completion Statements serve as pedagogical "nudges" that reinforce our learning agreement to engage in the messiness that is writing development, to engage in a reciprocal trust that our work will be human-based rather than some slop produced by a language simulator! When students make this commitment, they are investing in themselves.

That's it. Those are the four main approaches I'm using to create a practical learning environment that eschews the use of GenAI and its attending harms. Are they perfect? No. Could students use AI without my knowledge? Yes. Will some students still approach my course as simply a "stepping stone" to overcome or a "hoop" to jump through on their way to a degree? Sure—we're talking about humans here! However, I can attest that the majority of my writing students (mostly online FYC students!) enter genuinely

into this human endeavor to see writing as a product of thinking, not as a transactional skill engineered by some computer algorithm. There is a freedom to explore meaningful learning without the ranking/sorting of traditional grades or the bullying nature of GenAI's FOMO. By the way, they also receive my promise that the feedback I provide will be my own, emerging from a human who is engaging with their writing (and by extension, their thinking). They know that I genuinely want to read what they have to say, that my teaching joy emerges from observing the exercise of their writing voices. Joshua R. Eyler argues, "Feedback, not grades, is the driver of intrinsic motivation, since it is nonthreatening and typically focused on individual improvement. The fact that grades also dampen our students' ability to be creative and increase their anxiety about failure further diminishes the role grades should be playing in our learning environments."[15] Our trust is truly reciprocal when the focus is on learning growth, not standardized performance.

I can't imagine the humanless cycle where an instructor creates an assignment using AI, the students complete the assignment using AI, and then the instructor uses AI to assess the student submissions. This is certainly not a world I want to inhabit, let alone teach in. Audrey Watters provides an excellent description of this dystopian setting for reading and writing: "Why write if only a robot will read it; and why read if a robot has written it? . . . There's a real thoughtlessness in all of this—not just the emptiness in the intellectual endeavor of robot-authorship, but a lack of consideration for audience, for community, for the reciprocal relationship of writer and reader."[16] If I genuinely hold the belief that writing is an embodied action full of human expression, then refusing GenAI is the only way to protect my students' humanity.

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[1] Simon Chesterman, "Good Models Borrow, Great Models Steal: Intellectual Property Rights and Generative AI," *Policy and Society* 44, no. 1, January 2025, accessed August 1, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puae006.

[2] Pengfie Li, et al., "Making AI Less 'Thirsty': Uncovering and Addressing the Secret Water Footprint of AI Models," *arXiv Archiv*e (Cornell University), March 26, 2025, accessed August 1, 2025, https://arxiv.org/pdf/2304.03271.

[3] Dara Kerr, "How Memphis Became a Battleground over Elon Musk's xAI Supercomputer," *NPR*, September 11, 2024, accessed August 1, 2025, https://www.npr.org/2024/09/11/nx-s1-5088134/elon-musk-ai-xai-supercomputer-memphis-pollution.

[4] Billy Perrigo, "Exclusive: OpenAI Used Kenyan Workers on Less Than $2 Per Hour to Make ChatGPT Less Toxic, *Time*, January 18, 2023, accessed August 1, 2025, https://time.com/6247678/openai-chatgpt-kenya-workers/.

[5] Referencing the work of Emily M. Bender and Alex Hanna, *The AI Con* (New York, NY: Harper, 2025), 163–64.

[6] Tressie McMillan Cottom depicts AI as the embodiment of "mid tech," failing to deliver upon its promises. Tressie McMillan Cottom, "The Tech Fantasy That Powers A.I. Is Running on Fumes," *New York Times*, March 29, 2025, accessed September 9, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/29/opinion/ai-tech-innovation.html.

[7] Yasemin Saplakoglu, "How AI Revolutionized Protein Science, but Didn't End It," *Quantamagazine*, June 26, 2024, accessed September 9, 2025, https://www.quantamagazine.org/how-ai-revolutionized-protein-science-but-didnt-end-it-20240626/.

[8] For a more extensive critical look at GenAI, see Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Megan McIntyre, and Maggie Fernandes, "Refusing GenAI in Writing Studies: A Quick-start Guide," *Refusing GenAI in Writing Studies*, 2024, accessed September 9, 2025, https://refusinggenai.wordpress.com. Also see Cate Denial, "Against Generative AI," *Cate Denial*, August 14, 2025, accessed September 9, 2025, https://catherinedenial.org/blog/uncategorized/against-generative-ai/.

[9] For a further exploration of ungrading, see Jesse Stommel, "Ungrading: an Introduction," *Jesse Stommel*, June 11, 2021, accessed September 9, 2025, https://www.jessestommel.com/ungrading-an-introduction/; Susan D. Blum, "The Ungrading Umbrella," *Grow Beyond Grades*, accessed September 9, 2025, https://growbeyondgrades.org/blog/the-ungrading-umbrella; and David Buck, *Crowdsourcing Ungrading* (Columbia, MD: Howard Community College Pressbooks, 2020), https://pressbooks.howardcc.edu/ungrading/, accessed September 9, 2025.

[10] John Warner, *More Than Words: How to Think about Writing in the Age of AI* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2025), 168.

[11] Asao B. Inoue, "Why Does Conventional Grading Feel So Unfair?", *Asao B. Inoue's Infrequent Words*, June 2, 2021, accessed August 1, 2025, https://asaobinoue.blogspot.com/2021/06/why-does-conventional-grading-feel-so.html.

[12] Warner, *More Than Words*, 162.

[13] Sarah Huddleston, "Instructors Will Now See AI Throughout a Widely Used Course Software, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 23, 2025, accessed August 1, 2025, https://www.chronicle.com/article/instructors-will-now-see-ai-throughout-a-widely-used-course-software.

[14] Jesse Stommel, "Trust, Agency, and Connected Learning," *Hybrid Pedagogy*, November 9, 2014, accessed August 1, 2025, https://hybridpedagogy.org/trust-agency-connected-learning/.

[15] Joshua R. Eyler, *Failing Our Future: How Grades Harm Students, And What We Can Do About It* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), 17.

[16] Audrey Watters, "Mark All as Read," *Second Breakfast*, December 20, 2024, accessed August 1, 2025, https://2ndbreakfast.audreywatters.com/mark-all-as-read/.