



How teachers can defeat ChatGPT-using students

Faculty at the University of Florida discuss how to deal with ChatGPT on Jan. 13 in Gainesville. In response to the increased student use of ChatGPT, a chatbot that generates articulate and nuanced text, colleges and universities are restructuring some courses and taking preventive measures.

Todd Anderson/The New York Times

BY DAVID MCGRATH Chicago Tribune Jan 28, 2023

An administrator at the college where I was teaching English called to say a lawsuit had been filed against the school by a student with hearing loss, alleging I violated his rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

It was the late 1990s, and the news was a surprise. Through three decades of teaching, the only complaints, by and large, were from students who received failing grades. Whereas, the plaintiff in the lawsuit, a man in his late 20s who paid close attention during lessons and whom I could always count on for a smile when I told a joke, dropped the class before grades were issued.

I puzzled over the basis for the legal action. Granted, my seminars included a lot of oral discussion. But the student had been assigned a sign language interpreter who conveyed everything said, whether by me while writing on the whiteboard or by other students participating in discussions.

There were no quizzes or tests, and the final grade was based primarily on five essays that students completed during the term.

But two of the essays had to be written in class and turned in by the end of the 80-minute period. Those two assignments were what the student objected to, alleging that I did not make accommodations, under the ADA, for his individual learning style and needs.

Before he withdrew, he told me that he required more time for the in-class essay. I conceded that he could finish at home, as long as he started it here and showed me the unfinished work.

This he wouldn't do, sitting at his desk, signing with his interpreter.

My suggestion that he at least get a couple of sentences down, or a brief introductory paragraph that I might read before he left, was also declined.

When I related all of this to the attorney deposing me over the telephone, he asked why I did not allow the student to do the work at home. I explained that 40% of a student's grade must derive from writing that I know is authentic and not plagiarized. I told him that I hang on to the in-class essays to use as a "control," for judging the ownership of the other three.

Later, I learned the lawsuit was unsuccessful. The "W" remained on the student's transcript, no refund was issued and he retook the class with another teacher. More importantly, a simple teaching practice for ensuring academic integrity was affirmed. And this is the same method that can be just as effectively employed today to detect and deter cheating in college with ChatGPT. The language-processing artificial intelligence bot generates competent, focused writing, which many fear will be used by college students to produce papers for their professors. It's a free program invented by research company OpenAI that can swiftly provide cogent-sounding sentences and paragraphs in response to a question or a prompt.

For example, a student doing a paper on climate change might feed ChatGPT four prompts that produce four 500-word blocks of text explaining climate change and elaborating on its causes, possible solutions and the potential consequences for not taking action. Voilà! A 2,000-word term paper.

It works a bit like Google. But instead of responding to a search prompt, as Google does, by offering and excerpting articles, blogs and websites, ChatGPT generates a direct answer to the prompt in nearly flawless text and at reading and vocabulary levels as basic or as advanced as you want. Rather like a robotic term-paper mill. ChatGPT uses artificial intelligence to "write" an article by cribbing from an enormous amount of data it has been fed from millions of sources — without citing those sources.

This last fact alone makes it a lousy cheat sheet, since college professors routinely require documentation of sources used in essays and term papers. And for informal or personal essays requiring no research, an in-class written essay or timed essay test would thwart a cheater.

Of what practical use, then, is ChatGPT?

It may prove to be an effective time-saver in situations in which plagiarism is acceptable or forgiven. For example, a speech writer might use ChatGPT to produce a 15-minute stump speech for a politician, which can then be easily adapted for each town they visit. A second draft can be pumped up by directing ChatGPT to add topical humor or an inspiring anecdote.

A teacher in a hurry can use ChatGPT to craft a class lecture or discussion, with a prompt such as: What were the four major causes of the Civil War?

Anyone in need of a toast, instructions for CPR, a letter of apology or a humorous set of wedding vows might also benefit.

I would use it to generate a term paper right before my students' eyes and then show them every sentence I would flag with my red pen, for its obvious undocumented appropriation from a published source.

If you're a student, beware: 9 out of 10 who cheat with ChatGPT would likely be caught, earning an F for their trouble or outright expulsion. (See the article "Cheating in class at new level" published in the Jan. 19 Tribune.)

And the 10th student, smart enough to evade detection, is probably smart enough that they don't need ChatGPT in the first place.

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