

Austin American-Statesman

ChatGPT can do many things, but it can't teach kids how to write about who they are

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Published 5:49 a.m. CT Sept 16, 2024

Over my 12 years as a college admissions advisor, I have helped 1,300-plus applicants choose schools and create a strategy. But my most significant role is in helping them find insight into their life experiences and articulate that in their admissions essays. For some applicants, (humanities students/aspiring lawyers, psychologists) this can be fun and easy as those kids are comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings. For many other STEM-focused applicants (computer science majors/engineers/med school-bound kids) it is a bit more of a challenge.

High schools, through budget cuts, a focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and perhaps a hint of apathy, aren't teaching students how to write a personal narrative. This is good for consultants like me. The writing these kids do are rhetorical analysis essays in AP English Language class. Writing about their life experiences, not so much. When I ask, as I often do, "how did you feel about (insert life experience here)?" They often reply, "Huh?" So, I play the role of a shrink and get them comfortable, draw them out, convince them that the topic we're discussing will make for a persuasive and memorable essay, then watch them run with it. This was mostly how I worked until last year.



ChatGPT refers to Artificial Intelligence tools that use algorithms to generate outputs and create content that can include text, audio, code, images and more. (Credit: Olivier Morin/Getty Images) *Olivier Morin*

In 2023, ChatGPT dropped out of the sky and changed how I work and what the kids can do in myriad ways. The effect was immediate and disturbing.

Recently, I worked with a future bio medical engineering student, a kid who knows more about math and science than he does about his thoughts and feelings. The first few drafts of his essay were short on insight.

He glossed over crucial details to highlight his math skills. So, I put my mentor efforts into overdrive, leaning on him to go deeper and express himself better. When the third essay draft landed in my inbox, I was shocked how much better written it was technically, but still short on the insight part. Next, I fed his draft into AI Detector, and the result was, “96% chance written by ChatGPT.” So, I tried frightening him by saying that schools have the software to determine such things. He did not know this, nor did he care. The rest of his essays felt the same to me – well written technically, and grammatically correct, but devoid of heart and soul and what makes for an excellent college essay.

AI is rendering many jobs obsolete. For college applicants with high grades, test scores and solid extra curriculars, ChatGPT may help them be competitive with an Ivy League admissions department, but it can't help them convey something that will ultimately get them accepted. ChatGPT is depriving these kids of something they never learned, nor think they need to know – how to express themselves. Some say, “my kid is going to create a prosthetic that will make life better for all.” And this is true. But what parents don't realize is that they're not valuing the importance of being able to convey who they are, and the insight needed to be a well-rounded student.

I hear how kids are lazy, hyper-focused on the pointless trappings of social media. The ones I work with do not fall into that stereotype. They are smart, motivated, eschewing the trappings of being a teen. They want a great education and to accomplish amazing things, to be a changemaker. Expressing themselves, being in touch with who they are, embracing self-reflection - this what ChatGPT is depriving them of.

Kids will use technology to help them, that can't be helped. But I hope parents and teachers will read this and take heed. ChatGPT can do many remarkable things. What it cannot do is teach kids how to think about who they are, be self-reflective, understand their feelings, and find a way to write about this. And that more than anything, worries me.

Last October, I received an email from a parent. Her son had to write an email to a teacher and asked her to review it. “I was pleased to see how much better his writing skills were after working with you. Thank you!”

Accomplish that, ChatGPT!

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