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Deglamorizing AI Writing: A Weaverian return to Language, Reality, and Rhetoric

Abstract

Overzealous attitudes about Gen AI writing often ignore crucial human-to-reality and human-to-human relationships that fuel writing processes. Such attitudes can overlook how we compose and why we communicate to one another. This article consults rhetorician Richard Weaver and the classical liberal arts tradition to celebrate grammatical dimensions of composition and rhetorical dimensions of communication in contrast to harmful shortcuts found in transhumanist Gen AI writing technologies. Ultimately, the article argues that writers should be cautious of Gen AI writing and embrace humanistic writing as an activity of the contemplative life.

Keywords: classical liberal arts, Richard Weaver, grammar, rhetorical arts, communication arts, composition

Introduction

In his 2025 journal article for *AI & Society*, Mark Ryan (2025) consults post-structuralist Michel Foucault when critiquing Human Centered Artificial Intelligence (HCAI), a current trend in the discourse about artificial intelligence. Ryan explains that HCAI values "humanity" too much. Consulting the Foucault, he maintains that the "human" is social-constructed, and historically contingent (1308). Through the same lens, "value" itself is also critiqued. Foucault claims that human nature cannot be prioritized over other values because human nature is constantly changing and diverse (1310). According to this Foucauldian logic, "human-ness" cannot act as the basis of "value." Apart from deconstructing HCAI, Ryan does not propose any solution. He admits that a Foucauldian analysis provides "no appealing alternative to humanism" and "little clear-cut guidance on where we go from here" (1315). While Ryan celebrates the Foucauldian interpretation, stating that we should be wary of "human centered" positions, he ultimately does not settle on a clear stance toward AI technologies.

While post-structuralism overdilutes these discussions about AI with relativism, other perspectives unapologetically celebrate the practicality of generative artificial intelligence. Specifically, many scholar-teachers

embrace Gen AI within college writing classrooms (Bullock–Bertsch–Goggin 2026; Irish–Gazica–Becarra 2025; Fyfe 2022; Putra 2023) – and some scholar-teachers even endorse Gen AI in children's grade school classrooms (Kangasharju–Ilomaki–Lakkala–Toom 2022; Ng–Luo–Chan–Chu 2022). These arguments from practicality are commonly fueled by two underlying assumptions. First, they assume that polished written products (using Gen AI) are more valuable than humanistic writing processes (not using Gen AI). Secondly, they assume that education should primarily teach skills that prepare students for the professions where AI technologies will inevitably drive the means of production. Both arguments are built upon consequentialist premises; they assume that ends justify the means. Both perspectives trumpet "utility" and "efficiency" and neglect the harmful implications of such evaluative criteria.

Noncommittal and consequential perspectives about Gen AI seem to overlook a basic aim of communication as articulated by Augustine (2008) in Book Two of *De Doctrina Christiana*: the transmission of what is in a speaker's or writer's mind to an audience's minds (30). Accordingly, contemporary positions can neglect several foundational dimensions of this transmission process – specifically, how we compose as humans, how we communicate as humans, and why we communicate as humans. Using the work of twentieth-century Platonist rhetorician Richard Weaver, this article underscores these foundational dimensions. It then traces how current Gen AI writing technologies damage the essentials of language and rhetoric, and ultimately harm our capacity to contemplate reality and care for others. Applying a classical liberal arts methodology, this article spotlights human-to-reality formations and human-to-human formations in contrast to Gen AI writing deformations.

Grammar and reality

Per Book One of Aristotle's (2004) *Rhetoric*, communication involves a writer (or speaker), an audience, and reality. To be effective, a text symbiotically involves these three elements in some capacity. As such, several relationships drive effective communication: a human writer to actual reality, a human writer to a human audience, a human writer to the text, a human reader to the text, and a human reader to actual reality. Grammar concerns the writer's relationship to reality and the language he or she chooses for the text; however, linguistic choices are not arbitrary. According to Bonaventure (1996), a pivotal figure in the medieval liberal arts tradition, grammar concerns the

faculty of "apprehending" by "means of correct speech" (4). Grammar is tethered to reality, and reality is the external dimension shared by both writer and reader. Rhetoric connects the writer and reader to one another. Rhetoric concerns the writer's relationship with the audience through a textual use of grammar and an acknowledgement of reality.

Grammar, reality, and rhetoric all compose communication. They do not only concern the product, but also the *process* of communication. After all, humans contemplate reality, discern grammatical choices, and convey reality to fellow human beings through grammatical choices. As such, the composition process unfolds into a communicative product. Grammar plays a crucial role in the process. Classically, grammar can be defined as "the art of inventing symbols and combining them to express thought" (Joseph 2014: 1) or "thing-as-it-is symbolized" (Joseph 2014: 6). Such symbols are established by human beings in correspondence to visible and invisible dimensions of reality. Grammar is fundamentally human; however, grammar offers more than the computation of symbols and referents. In this way, grammar does not resemble mathematics since grammar requires a human interpreter of the world.

While Gen AI may require human users, Gen AI tends to leave out the human being as the grammatical interpreter of the world. After all, Gen AI chooses language for its human users. When using AI, users command a bot to assemble a text by "engineering" prompts for the bot. Therefore, users indeed choose language for the prompts; however, users' prompt language can neglect the outside world of referents. The outside world of referents becomes secondary (if at all) to an internal digital space commanded by the bot. When engineering prompts, users command a machine to find words that signify users' interpretations of reality, despite the bots not personally knowing users or the users' experiences. Ultimately, users become less concerned with choosing words about the world and its meaning; instead, they become concerned with how the machine interprets their "prompt language."

In short, it seems that Gen AI users sever ties from natural grammatical processes, which involve naming things in reality. The process of naming things is a meaningful human task. As Richard Weaver (1985b) explains, "To know a thing is not to arrive finally at some direct perception of a property… but to form some ideal construct of it, in which meaning and value are bound" (121). According to Weaver, things do not give meaning to words; it is meaning that makes things "things" (121). And naming things is crucial in this process. Weaver is adamant: naming things facilities thought. Weaver

explains, "words do not have relation to thoughts alone; they have relation to the real world *through* thought. (125); to that end "without language thinking is impossible" (Weaver 1965: 51). Ultimately, language choices are crucial because choosers of language live in the world, understand the world, and communicate understanding to others. Gen AI, on the other hand, chooses language for its users and undercuts human individuals' labour as interpreters of reality and wrestlers with meaning. Users of Gen AI voluntarily outsource the intellectual labour to the bot. To this end, neglecting grammar undercuts writers' human faculties. Twentieth-century rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1963–64) defines the human being as the "symbol-using animal" (491). While Burke emphasises that we use these symbols toward pragmatic ends, symbol-use elevates us above the beasts (491–93), and the symbols that we invent and agree upon can even transcend the referent itself (496-98). When users rely on Gen AI to generate symbols for them, they do not evolve toward transcendence as transhumanists may promote, but ironically, they appear to devolve downward to resemble beasts.

As a contemporary of Burke, Richard Weaver specifies that the invention of symbols is not arbitrary. When we name things, we think about the deeper natures of those things. And because fellow human beings agree on these names, the human community agrees in the existence of objective reality, and the grand order of things, outside of individual subjectivity. While naming things is convenient and pragmatic, it also connects individuals and discourse communities to the *kosmos*. The grammar of naming escorts thinkers toward the definitions of things. In "Language is Sermonic," Weaver (1985a) explains that when we consider definitions of things, we consider what is "most permanent in existence" and "above the flux of phenomena" (212). Contemplating definitions leads people toward philosophy and metaphysics (212). Language choices connect writers to reality, but also to the logic about the nature of things. Language fosters both the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life) as well as the *vita activa* (active life), rather than only the *vita activa*. If Gen AI chooses words for the writer, it erodes philosophical and theological habits of mind as facilitated through language. As such, Gen AI writing is fundamentally anti-intellectual and anti-spiritual.

Furthermore, grammar depends on imagination. According to Weaver (1985b), imagination is not "external measurement"; rather, it is "internal receptivity or capacity" which "holds in contemplation all the various meanings that have to remain discrete and yet have somehow to function together in coherent discourse" (123). Weaver maintains that the imagination involves a "mutuality of spirit" with others, which makes meaning possible;

consequently, as imaginative beings, individuals become receptive to "true meanings" (123). If writers do not engage the imagination in this way, they may agree to "wrong or perverted" meanings (123). When Gen AI provides language for users, users' grammatical imaginations are not fully engaged. While it is possible to cross-examine every word generated by Gen AI much like a copyeditor edits a manuscript, it is quicker and more convenient to neglect such meticulous copyediting processes. Therefore, Gen AI writing platforms establish tempting environments to ignore the "contemplation" of "all the various meanings" because "mutuality" is engineered by the machine, not by the human spirit." Ultimately, users become susceptible to "wrong or perverted meanings."

Reality and rhetoric

Weaver (1985b) explains that grammar is a covenant—and the nature of a covenant offers more than mere convenience or fleeting causes (136). When people hold a covenant with one another about the meanings of words, they reinforce that covenant when they actively choose words in respect to an ideal correctness. This activity offers a type of gravitas and sacredness. The writer's understanding of reality grows stronger through the activity of choosing language; in addition, since the chosen language is understood by readers, the connection between the *reader* and reality also strengthens; as a result of both connections, the bond between writer and reader symbiotically strengthens, too. However, when a writer outsources language choices to AI, the entire tripartite relationship is compromised. Specifically, any erosion of the bond between writer-interpreter and reality (grammar) negatively affects the bond between writer and reader (rhetoric).

Humanistic writing is rhetorical because it communicates more than facts, information, and material measurements. While the scientistic position about consummate measurability of the world may be comforting, it places us and our limited epistemologies at the centre of the *kosmos*. This solipsism disconnects us from nature. In "Language is Sermonic," Weaver echoes this sentiment. He explains that twentieth-century positivism and scientism were fundamentally anti-rhetorical. They neglected the human spirit. Today, people fall into a similar Cartesian trap with their optimistic fervour toward Gen AI. While logic and data can be important to communication, feeling is also important because spirited emotion is a part of the human experience. Weaver essentially echoes C.S. Lewis's (2001) complaint against the "men without chests" in Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*. Essentially, Lewis and

Weaver offer reminders about Plato's tripartite charioteer metaphor from *Phaedrus*. In Plato's metaphor, a charioteer represents rationality, a wild, dark horse represents the appetites, and a white, tamed horse represents the spirit. Plato promotes a balance of all three elements, emphasising the importance of both rationality and spirit. Using Plato as a foundation, Weaver and Lewis fundamentally agree that humans differ from computers because, unlike computers, humans must balance all three elements of the soul. Lewis (2001) remarks that in a well-organised human being, the "head rules the belly through the chest," that is, by "stable sentiments" (11). Effective human communication reflects this relationship.

Rhetorical communication depends on feeling as well as logical argumentation. As Aristotle (2004) famously points out throughout his *Rhetoric*, persuasive communicators appeal to *pathos* as well as *logos*. And, as Cicero famously notes and Augustine reiterates, eloquent rhetors move and delight; they do not merely instruct. A rhetor cannot move and delight without considering emotion and beauty. In this way, rhetorical communication fuses "literary values" with "political urgencies" (Weaver 1985a: 225). The rhetorician can be both flowery and practical (225). Accordingly, as Weaver explains, both dimensions help language operate "sermonically." Diametrically opposed to Michel Foucault, Weaver maintains that human values exist in correspondence to objective values that are understood hierarchically. In this way, a rhetorician acts as a type of "noble" lay preacher who aims to direct our passion toward noble ends (225). The human being may be understood as the "symbol-using animal" as Burke claims; however, as Weaver qualifies, the human may also be considered a "classifying animal" (224). We classify values and rhetorically communicate them to others to uplift other people. When the non-human Gen AI undercuts this rhetorical mission by reducing communication to facts and information, as it is prone to do, it undercuts the loving act of rhetorical communication where human rhetors seek to uplift their fellow human audiences toward goodness.

As a commercial enterprise, Gen AI does indeed use feeling, as it corresponds to pleasure and comfort, but not to lift human beings toward nobility in a spirited manner. Instead, Gen AI tends to manipulate the feelings of user-customers to woo them. For example, Gen AI apologizes when it provides incorrect information as if bots can feel remorse. From these responses, bots appear to stoke empathy in users by pretending that they are human with human feelings. By falsifying that reality, bots manipulate users' emotions by confusing users' understandings of ontological reality. Users *feel* as if they are writing to other humans, but they are not. Moreover, Gen AI bots often lean toward relativistic

positions so as not to offend customer-users, and occasionally invent false information to satisfy customer-users' desires. This type of relativity and generated falsehoods deflect users away from negative reactions, which significantly differs from ethically pursuing truth.

Gen AI's deflection away from truth and toward satisfaction, which Byung-Chul Han (2024) correlates with the modern obsession with social media "likes",, exhibits unethical uses of rhetoric as articulated in Plato's (2003) dialogue *Phaedrus*. In *Phaedrus*, Phaedrus shares that persuasive orators do not have to know what is beautiful and true but only what *seems* so (260a); but here, Socrates corrects Phaedrus. Socrates explains that good speakers know about truth before discoursing on it (259e); instead of merely telling audiences what makes them happy, a good speaker leads the souls of audience members toward truth (261b). Ultimately, Socrates defends ethical rhetoric: a position supported in Plato's (1987) *Gorgias*, as well. According to Socrates in *Gorgias*, truth seeking and candour are central to good speaking and writing (521d6-e1). Like medicine, Socrates explains, rhetoric should heal. To illustrate, he contrasts medicine with pastry baking (464a-465e). Unfortunately, Gen AI aligns closer to the latter. It focuses on a pleasurable experience or customer satisfaction rather than uplifting readers to goodness and truth. Gen AI provides pastries to stimulate the appetites of the customer-user, rather than medicinally healing the soul.

Conclusion

The field of education offers one of the most dynamic arenas to trace the current impact of Gen AI. At many educational institutions, Gen AI writing platforms are encouraged in the classroom, ironically, during writing instruction. For example, in the newest seventh edition of *The Norton Field Guide to Writing* textbook, published in 2026, authors Richard Bullock, Deborah Bertsch, and Maureen Daly Goggin include an eight-page section at the beginning of the textbook that normalises Gen AI use in student writing. The section offers a range of pre-engineered AI prompts to shortcut students' writing processes. These prompts ask AI to comb through students' notes for possible topics for the student, ask AI what details the student should supply in their writing, and ask AI what a student should write in forthcoming paragraphs of a paper (61–68). The textbook authors advocate that students should treat AI like a writing tutor. To the authors' credit, they clearly communicate that students should prudently use AI to guide their writing and avoid having AI write their paper; however, unlike a human writing tutor who refuses to write a student's

paper out of ethical concerns, Gen AI does not have the same ethical code. With some simple clicks, the student can prompt the AI "tutor" more and more, which essentially allows AI to craft the entire paper for students. By normalising AI integration, The Norton Field Guide sets students up to pursue what feels satisfying (i.e., outsourcing their intellectual labour), rather than pursue what is truly edifying.

Many compositionists seem to underestimate Gen AI technology by equivocating it with past technologies. For example, S. Scott Graham (2023) compares Gen AI to "erasers, typewriters, word processors, SMS, and spell-check", which were all once considered "inimical to writing" (163). Gesturing to veteran scholar Andrea Lunsford, he explains, "writing studies was always already worried about the effects of new technologies. However, in each of these cases, we learned how to adapt our pedagogy to new realities, and the end results have been that students now write more than ever before without any measurable decline in quality" (163). Yet, this comparison seems to miss some clear distinctions. Typewriters, erasers, word processors, and spell checkers changed how writers compose on the page. With these technologies, humans still consulted reality and rhetorically considered human-to-human exchange. Typewriters, erasers, word processors, and spell checkers are not transhumanist technologies; Gen AI, on the other hand, is a transhumanist technology. Unlike erasers and even spell checks, Gen AI has the capacity to replace rhetorical invention processes and undercut philosophical habits of mind. Counter to Graham's claims, digital ecologies have indeed seriously harmed the quality and quantity of thinking (Han 2024; Haidt 2024; Barba-Kay 2023; Carr 2011), which has, and will continue to, harm the quality and quantity of writing, because writing naturally depends on thinking. Even Lasse Rouhiainen, author of several pro-Gen-AI-writing books, admits that despite his enthusiastic appreciation of AI, human thinking will absolutely atrophy from AI writing technologies (Rouhiainen 2024: 29).

Mark Ryan (2025) is right when he says that the human being is not the centre of the universe; however, transhumanist entities cannot be the centre of the universe either. Instead, as the classical, medieval, and Renaissance traditions understood much more today's popular attitudes, human beings should ideally cooperate with the *kosmos* (Lewis 2012), not conquer it (Lewis 2001). While Gen AI can certainly assist fields of healthcare and science, communication is not a science. As an art, communication conveys individual expression while it also connects individuals to the nature of things and other people. If the communicative arts are neglected, humans will continue to retreat deeper into what Charles Taylor (2007) calls their "buffered selves"

as humankind has done since René Descartes' "cogito ergo sum" (131). So, at this point, we may need to "bend the stick" in the opposite direction per Aristotle's advice from his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1109bl-7). In such a "stick bending" process, classical philosophies of communication like those outlined by Richard Weaver – and by extension, Plato and C.S. Lewis – offer more sobering clarity than ever. They remind modern writers that the art of communication patiently connects the *vita contemplativa* to the *vita activa* (Hurley 2024). Recalibrated by these thinkers' wisdom, modern writers can reclaim their roles as caring communicators, rather than mechanical users. In this way, writers will be able to healthily temper their Gen AI use—or limit it altogether—and genuinely uplift others toward noble ends.

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