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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Is This the End of the Take-Home Essay?

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Like so many of us, I've spent the past two years in a paralyzed panic over artificial intelligence's effects on my classroom. I teach undergraduates, mainly gen ed philosophy courses, and writing has been a key component of all my courses. When ChatGPT hit the mainstream, it became a constantly looming presence, threatening to devour every part of teaching that I care about. I didn't "wrestle" with it. Nothing so active and dignified. I went on an emotional roller coaster of ignoring it, freaking out, wishing it away, catastrophizing, and then ignoring it again.

It didn't work. AI was still there. I tried writing about it, but that just made me feel worse. And my writing was awful, page upon page of "Oh my god, the sky is falling." Depressing, unhelpful – and bad writing. I trashed every single page.

Some of my colleagues argue that we must incorporate this wonderful new tool into our teaching. We should encourage students to use AI for "basic" tasks like summarizing texts and outlining arguments, freeing them up for more advanced work. Others point out that summarizing and outlining *are* advanced tasks for many of our students since they don't know how to do either, and that students need to first acquire skills like summarizing in order to later acquire more advanced skills. To make that learning possible, they argue, we need to build protective walls to keep AI out of our classes. Several want our Writing Center to ban

Grammarly and its ilk.

I agree with the second group that our students usually don't summarize or outline well. And I agree that allowing students to outsource tasks they haven't yet mastered to AI will make it harder for them to learn to read, write and, most importantly, to think critically. I'd love to operate in a sheltered space behind protective walls. But I don't think the walls will hold.

Hence my freaking out. But after two years, I have finally managed a few moment of calm thought, aided by James Lang's wonderful blog post. I've come to the following key conclusions:

- AI-assisted writing isn't going away. Damn it.
- We aren't reliable AI detectors and we don't have reliable automated AI detectors (although we can catch blatant and unskilled uses).
- If we continue to assign take-home essays, some of our students will use AI to write them. We won't know how many or how much they will use it, and we won't catch many of them.
- Take-home essays are important pedagogical tools, and I don't as yet have any promising substitutes.

My immediate task is to figure out how to navigate my classroom spaces with all this and my own teaching goals in mind. What do I want to prioritize, and what am I willing to sacrifice?

It is tempting to prioritize not being duped. And making not being duped the priority has the clear advantage of producing simple action steps: No more take-home essays. Switch to lockdown browsers or old-school blue book exams.

Following James Lang, I am not switching, at least not yet. This is because I think there are more important things at stake than minimizing the risk of cheating.

As I listen to colleagues who are switching to in-class exams, I am thinking about why I've been avoiding them for my entire teaching career: *They do not test what I want to teach.*

Switching from essay-writing to in-class exams requires moving from messy and open-ended discussion towards lectures. I don't want to make that move. My students have enough lecture classes. They don't need another one from me. But they do need what I am good at teaching. My students need a class that focuses on discussion and self-reflection, inviting them to engage each other and the materials and think through their own lives, actions, and values. I want to teach those classes, and then I want my assessments to provide opportunities for students to chew over things we've talked about and the views they've encountered in class, developing arguments, reflecting on their experience, pursuing thoughts and objections, and seeing where it all takes them. Take home essays do that.

But assigning those essays leaves me wide open to cheating. So what do I do in my classes to reduce the risk?

- I include more low-stakes writing.
- I make the papers worth less and include plenty of scaffolding and in-class work on them.
- I grade a little differently, rewarding bland, generic, but correct writing less and messy and creative writing more.
- I add some quizzes – and I am experimenting with using AI to draft multiple choice questions.
- I keep an eye out for obvious AI misuse and I use the built-in detection software. But I try not to obsess about it, and I try to be OK with knowing that some students will get away with things they shouldn't (this part is definitely a work in progress).

Most importantly, I try to connect with my students and I try to convince them that I want to hear what they think, and that their opinions matter to me and to the world. I encourage them to draw on class discussions and their own experiences when they write, and I encourage them to say what AI cannot say because AI is not them.

I'm also looking around for guidance from others. Reading a *Chronicle of Higher Education* newsletter, I just came across Kimberly Kirner's writing assessments. She sets out to help her students develop their own voices, and she grades based on the students' progress towards goals that they develop together. I plan to learn from Kirner and others like her over the summer and experiment with her assignments next semester.

AI is here to stay and our students have access to it. It's not the situation I would have chosen but it is what is in front of us. It will be on us as educators to guide students so that they can still develop as critical thinkers and writers. That work has many parts, and thankfully we don't all have to do all of it. Despite the pep talks from the AI-optimists on my campus, I don't see myself working with students to help them write better AI prompts, and I don't yet see a good role for AI in my courses. But reading Kirner and Lang reminds me that there is important work here that I *am* suited for and that I care about: I can help students see that they and their voice matters and I can help them develop their voices and become better informed so that they can speak and write more effectively.

## Notes & Bibliography

Kimberly Kirner is Professor of Anthropology at California State University at Northridge.

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<https://wabash.center/2025/07/is-this-the-end-of-the-take-home-essay/>