

Book Review

AI and writing (1st edition), by Sidney I. Dobrin

Reviewed by:

Natalie Gardner*

The University of Tennessee Knoxville, USA

Karina Dale

The University of Tennessee Knoxville, USA

Correspondence

Email: hgardn10@vols.utk.edu

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Generative AI has upended the world of composition pedagogy; even AI's most ardent critics must acknowledge that access to generative AI platforms, such as ChatGPT, has fundamentally changed academic writing. Embracing this change, Sidney I. Dobrin of the University of Florida has composed an introductory textbook to AI-assisted writing, titled *AI and Writing* (Broadview Press, 2023). In the book's preface, Dobrin promises to "demystify GenAI for students" and assist them in integrating AI tools into the writing process. The end results of this project, however, are decidedly mixed; while *AI and Writing* is thoughtfully composed and undoubtedly engaging, it is lacking in terms of practical instruction and is already beginning to show its age.

AI and Writing is primarily intended as a resource for first-year composition courses, though it may also be useful as a supplemental text for higher-level writing courses. The book is divided into three sections: "Understanding Generative AI," "Opportunities and Applications," and "Challenges." *AI and Writing* is intentionally structured to encourage student engagement and in-class discussion; each chapter begins with a set of objectives for readers and a "before you read" section designed to prompt self-reflection. Also included within each chapter are "provocations," sections set apart from the text that encourage readers to consider big picture questions about GenAI's role in academia and society at large. The end of each chapter includes an extensive list of questions for the reader. These questions are grouped into three categories: "conceptual AI," which encompasses theoretical questions about GenAI

and society; “applied AI,” or practical questions intended to guide students in their use of GenAI; and discussion questions for small-group or whole-class discussions.

AI and Writing's first section introduces students to the basics of generative AI, beginning with a brief summary of the history of GenAI. In this section, Dobrin argues that “automated writing” isn’t *really* new; for years, bots have been composing text and newsrooms have been automating the writing process to publish stories faster (p. 5). Dobrin’s claim that the age of automated writing began long before the creation of generative AI will become a theme throughout the text.

Moreover, Dobrin considers generative AI to be just another in a series of tools that have changed how we write, as opposed to a fundamental paradigm shift. He compares the current discourse concerning AI in academia to the “moral panics” surrounding the popularization of Wikipedia or the word processor. Dobrin’s laissez-faire approach to AI use, which he represents as accepting and adapting to change rather than resisting it, is clearly informed by his analysis in this section.

Equally crucial in this section is the idea of “human-machine collaboration” (p. 8). The idea of the chatbot-as-collaborator undergirds Dobrin’s AI-assisted pedagogy. The concept itself is relatively simple; Dobrin claims that currently, generative AI is best used as a co-pilot of sorts for a human writer. AI chatbots and tools like them are stand-ins for a human collaborator and can offer students the same sort of help that a human assistant might. Naturally, this means that a chatbot should not do all the work of writing *for* a student, and that credit should be given when applicable. The remainder of *AI and Writing* is written to help students maximize the utility of said machine-collaborators. Also notable in this section is Dobrin’s discussion of academic integrity and his brief guide to citing tools such as ChatGPT.

The meat of *AI and Writing*, so to speak, is contained within the second section, “Opportunities and Applications.” This includes chapters on the writing process, prompting, image generation, using AI outside the classroom, and career readiness. Continuing with the metaphor of human-machine collaboration, Dobrin elaborates on the ways generative AI can assist students throughout the writing process. Suggestions include using generative AI to help generate ideas or to probe gaps in one’s knowledge, using AI-powered tools for practical proofreading, or using generative AI as a sounding board while editing. As promised in the preface, Dobrin proceeds at a breakneck pace, opting for a “big picture” approach that eschews detail for breadth.

Paired with *AI and Writing's* suggestions for how to collaborate with a machine is a chapter on prompting. Prompting, it would appear, is more akin to machine-wrangling than to machine-collaboration. This chapter is arguably one of the most important in the book, as the ability to generate useful AI output depends largely on a user’s skill in crafting detailed prompts. “Contexts of Use” explores the difference between academic writing and other genres and how to appropriately tailor one’s use

of AI to different contexts. Finally, “Career Readiness” briefly discusses what future employers might value in an employee and how to adapt one’s skillset to a changing job market.

The final section, “Challenges,” is a nod to ethical concerns regarding the adoption of AI technologies. The two issues that Dobrin chooses to discuss are bias and “materiality,” a combination of social and environmental issues resulting from AI adoption. Dobrin hints at issues of bias throughout the text, advising students to be aware that generative AI output is not guaranteed to be accurate, but he elaborates on this in chapter nine. The long-and-short of this advice is that any model is limited by its training data, and that it is the user’s responsibility to detect and mitigate the bias inherent in any large-language model.

Accessibility is *AI and Writing’s* greatest strength. Dobrin makes a commendable effort to meet students where they’re at with respect to their knowledge of generative AI. Regardless of skill level, students are likely to appreciate Dobrin’s down-to-earth style. His use of plain language and easily grasped strategies of analogical reasoning aid in readability. Dobrin’s humor, which he sprinkles amply throughout, makes *AI and Writing* less something to toil over and more like a conversation with a collaborator.

Moreover, *AI and Writing* is deeply committed to student engagement. As a thinner textbook, its strength lies more so in its ability to provoke thought than in providing a detailed account of its subject matter. Dobrin’s approach to instruction provides students with the necessary context to decide for themselves what they think about generative AI and how they should apply AI to their writing process. The provocations and discussion questions are thoughtful and nuanced, encouraging students to think critically about contentious and complicated topics. Instructors who encourage classroom discussion are more likely to reap the benefits of this text than those who prefer a conventional lecture.

The flip-side of Dobrin’s approach, however, is that *AI and Writing* often lacks specificity. The paucity of specific instruction in *AI and Writing* is certainly a downside to Dobrin’s approach. This lack of practical instruction becomes particularly obvious when Dobrin begins to directly discuss integrating AI into the writing process. While Dobrin’s instruction is far-ranging, it consists mostly of open-ended suggestions, as opposed to detailed guidance. Examples include advising students to use predictive text features in modern word processors (p. 54) and a list of questions to ask an AI chatbot about one’s writing (p. 57). The text rarely elaborates on the content it introduces and offers few examples of how to implement its advice. While Dobrin argues that this abstract, generalized form of instruction enables the textbook to be used in a wide variety of contexts, trading specificity for flexible generality offloads the work of guidance onto instructors and students.

This abstract, generalized approach also limits Dobrin's discussion of academic integrity. *AI and Writing* spends more time pondering how GenAI *might* change academic honor codes than it does discussing how to use generative AI with integrity. Rather than wade into potentially controversial discussions of AI ethics, *AI and Writing* attempts to avoid the question. This, of course, is understandable. Whether or not the use of generative AI in certain contexts counts as plagiarism is a complicated and as-of-yet unanswered question. Moreover, specific policies are likely to differ from institution to institution. Nevertheless, it is a question that needs answering, and Dobrin's approach leaves students with little support in doing so. Once again, *AI and Writing* offloads the work of answering these complicated questions onto the student and the instructor.

Closely related to the question of academic integrity is the question of AI ethics. Dobrin's stipulations for using AI ethically, unfortunately, offer little guidance. At no point does Dobrin discuss what sort of principles one ought to adopt to use AI ethically, nor does he offer advice for applying these principles in practice. Like its discussion of academic integrity, *AI and Writing's* discussion of ethics suffers from what scholar Luke Munn terms the problem of "meaningless principles," gesturing at "vague, high-level" ideals that offer minimal practical guidance (2022, p. 870). Without practical examples of what ethical AI use might entail, Dobrin's meditations on AI ethics, like his discussion of academic integrity, offer little support for the reader.

AI and Writing is strongest when Dobrin hammers down on the specifics of implementing generative AI into the classroom. A bright spot here is the fifth chapter, which offers a detailed guide to creating AI prompts, complete with examples and ideas for structuring a prompt. However, many of Dobrin's suggestions throughout the book are based on what AI *might* do in the future. The section of chapter four concerning AI feedback during the writing process is a great example of this. Generative AI is capable of many impressive things, but it cannot read and comprehend a text like a human would— it can only offer what is statistically most likely to be said about a given series of words. This is a very different process than reading a paper and offering feedback. His section on using AI for research is also predicated on what AI might be capable of in the future— he admits that right now, it isn't capable of accurately sourcing information, but that one day it will be useful in this regard (p. 52). While this is not a far-fetched possibility, it is not useful advice in the present day. While *AI and Writing* is certainly forward looking, at times Dobrin's suggestions are premature.

Many of these issues can be attributed to the fast-paced nature of AI development. *AI and Writing* was published in 2023, when much about generative AI's implications for composition pedagogy remained up in the air. The relative vagueness of the text is excusable in this context. It is certainly beginning to show its age. Some of the information included in text, such as MLA and IEEE protocols for citing generative AI

tools, is now out of date. Potential readers should be aware of this, and it may be prudent to wait for a forthcoming edition before purchasing this text.

Overall, *AI and Writing* is well-suited to its purpose as a resource for first-year students, or as a supplemental text in a higher-level course. It is a compelling and accessible example of student-first pedagogy that seeks to foster critical thought and student engagement. However, being on the bleeding edge of AI-assisted pedagogy when it was first published, *AI and Writing* is beginning to show its age. Additionally, its broad-but-shallow approach provides an extensive overview of the subject but may not suit the needs of every instructor. While a forthcoming, second issue may address these concerns, for now *AI and Writing* remains an engaging, if preliminary, attempt at creating a composition pedagogy for the future.

ORCID

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3435-9844>

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7952-0230>

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