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Outsmart ChatGPT: 8 Tips for Creating Assignments It Can't Do

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Since the latest version of ChatGPT emerged late last year, educators have been puzzling over how to reconcile traditional writing instruction with tech that can churn out everything from essays to haikus with uncanny sophistication.

Some educators contend ChatGPT can be a learning tool, while others say it's more likely to be used as a cheating tool. In fact, more than a quarter of teachers say they've caught students using ChatGPT to cheat, according to a survey from Study.com, an online learning platform.

That raises the question: Can educators remove students' temptation to use ChatGPT and other so-called "large language models" to plagiarize by coming up with assignments that the ChatGPT won't be able to handle? If yes, what might those assignments look like?

We asked educators and experts on all sides of the broader debates about ChatGPT to give us some strategies for AI-proofing assignments. Here's what they told us:

1. Ask students to write about something deeply personal

Consider having students delve into their scariest moment, the biggest challenge they ever overcame, or even answer a quirky personal question: Would you rather be the bucket or the sand?

It's difficult at this point for AI to fake highly personal writing, said Joshua Rosenberg, an assistant professor of STEM education at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. (For the record, Rosenberg thinks it's valuable for teachers to incorporate AI writing tools into some assignments.)

To be sure, even with these personal essays, students "could make it up," acknowledged Kristin Daley Conti, a 7th grade science teacher at Tantasqua Junior High School in Massachusetts. But most of her middle schoolers are too eager to share their stories to outsource the job to AI, she explained. "They like to center things around themselves," she said.

One wrinkle: Writing only about personal heroes or big life challenges isn't as effective as other types of assignments for teaching students the reasoning and critical thinking skills that good writers must master, said Michelle Brown, the founder and CEO of CommonLit, an online reading program.

"I cringe a little bit at the idea that we will overcorrect and make a lot of writing personal," she said. "What makes writing instruction good is that you're synthesizing complex information from a complex text or complex sources. So, if we're trying to make our assignments ChatGPT-proof that could be one way, but I worry about the consequences on student learning."

2. Center a writing assignment around an issue specific to the local community

ChatGPT doesn't have a strong background in hyperlocal issues, though that is likely to change as the tool becomes more sophisticated, experts say. But for now, educators may be able to minimize how much help ChatGPT can be on a particular assignment by grounding it in the school community—maybe even by asking students to write about a new school rule or the student council election.

Teachers could also ask their students to connect information about the water quality in a nearby pond the class studied to global patterns in environmental conservation. "There probably just isn't a lot of data" available online about such a small body of water, Rosenberg said.

3. Direct students to write about a very recent news event

At this point, ChatGPT can't capture much information about things that happened just days earlier, Rosenberg said. Teachers could ask students to compare a very recent news event to a historical one, say the balloon that was reportedly sent by the Chinese government to spy on the United States with the Cuban missile crisis.

While ChatGPT may be able to spit out some sort of answer, it is likely to be muddled, Rosenberg said. "The model might generate just factually wrong things about time-sensitive events," he said. "That can be a good cue to teachers that something's fishy."

4. Have students show or explain their work

In math class, students usually show how they arrived at a particular answer to get credit for solving a problem. That concept could apply to writing, Rosenberg said. For instance, teachers could prompt students to detail their brainstorming process, explaining why they choose to write about a particular topic.

Teachers could also ask questions such as: "How did you decide to structure your paper this way? Did you just start writing or did you think 'my first paragraph is going to be on this and then my second paragraph on this?'" Rosenberg said. "That could just hold students a little bit more accountable for their process of writing."

On a similar note, two literacy focused technology nonprofits, CommonLit and Quill, would love to see developers come up with new technology that analyzes keystrokes or various versions

of a draft to decide whether a particular piece of writing was produced by a human or a robot, a more sophisticated process-based approach to discouraging cheating.

5. Ask students to give an oral presentation, along with the written work

One way to make this work: Ask students to record themselves on a video platform such as FlipGrid, talking about their essay, story, report, or other assignment, Daley Conti, the middle school science teacher, suggested.

That could deter cheaters. And it would provide students who did get help from AI in completing their assignment with an incentive to at least learn the content. "Even if they did get it from ChatGPT, they would have had to read it, digest it, and then talk about it," Daley Conti said.

6. Return to a pre-digital age and ask students to handwrite their essays in class

This low-tech solution seems obvious. And it might be the most surefire way to make certain that students aren't getting help from AI or even their parents or other students in the class.

Sal Khan, founder of one of the most prominent education technology tools, Khan Academy, sees value in having students do their writing the old-fashioned way, even as he thinks K-12 schools should help students learn to write using ChatGPT as well.

"One mitigation, which isn't a bad idea, is to have students do more writing in class periods, in front of you," Khan said in an interview. "I think it's a good idea to do more of your actual writing and workshopping in class. The best writing classes are the ones where it's like a real writers' workshop, and kids are writing all the time. And the teacher and peers are giving each other feedback."

7. Put project-based learning to work

Teachers could lean towards big, multi-disciplinary projects that an AI essay "isn't going to be an appropriate measure of," said Joseph South, the chief learning officer for the International Society for Technology in Education, a nonprofit.

For instance, he said, several school districts explored water quality in different parts of the country for a social studies course, looking at different policies in different states and cities. They tested the water in their own communities, looking for contaminates. Then they created graphs and charts showing the impact of local policies on local water supplies, and presented their findings.

"ChatGPT was never going to do that project for them," South said. "It'd be impossible to cheat on that project with it. And the kids didn't want to cheat because they were doing something really cool and interesting and relevant to their lives."

If students are "taking pride in their work, they don't want a robot to write it," he said.

8. Run the assignment through ChatGPT before giving it to students

Maybe asking students for their take on a local issue—the school board election, perhaps—is one way to get around the power of ChatGPT. One hiccup: If users point ChatGPT to specific sources, it will use them in crafting a response to a prompt. So, if students put in links to a few articles in the local newspaper about the election, the tech may produce a surprisingly sophisticated take.

Teachers hoping to come up with assignments the tool can't handle should keep that in mind, said Peter Gault, the founder and executive director of Quill, a literacy-focused technology nonprofit. "The trick is if you could say read this article, and then give a link and then do it and then see how it performs," he said.

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