

HOW TO WRITE BETTER THAN AI

Douglas McPherson road-tests some writing AI tools, and asks editors and writers what wordsmiths need to do to survive in a world of computer-generated content

In an age where artificial intelligence churns out text at lightning speed, the question looms large: can human writers compete, or are they destined to become mere footnotes in the story of creativity?

The scary part is that I didn't write that sentence. I asked ChatGPT to give me the opening paragraph for an article on how writers can compete with AI.

It's a decent opening, and it materialised on the screen quicker than I could pull the top off my biro.

The good news, if you're worried about AI taking our jobs, is that ChatGPT's para ran to another 71 words – AI-generated writing tends to be excessively wordy – and it wasn't all such high quality.

Its second sentence was okay, although it basically rephrased its first: 'As AI-generated content floods the internet, writers find themselves at a crossroads, grappling with both the challenges and opportunities that this technological revolution presents.'

After that, it started to get boring, with a dry tone more suited to an academic paper than the magazine article I had asked for. I think – well, let's say hope – that what I have written here has that more chatty, engaging quality that makes magazine writing as entertaining as it is informative.

For the purposes of this article, I also gave ChatGPT and its Google-based competitor Gemini some ideas for short stories, asked it to come up with a choice of plots, and then to turn those outlines into complete stories.

The results, while grammatically perfect, were unusable, even as a foundation to build on.

The most impressive result I had was from music generator Suno, which will put very convincing vocals and music to your lyrics – a boon for songwriters who don't sing or play an instrument. It's not as good as a real singer, though, and, crucially, isn't good at coming up with original lyrics of its own.

So is AI a threat, a tool that will make us more productive, or – at this stage – an over-hyped irrelevance?

'When ChatGPT first landed, I had more of a sense of apocalypse about it than I do now,' says journalist and editor Steve O'Brien.

'I tested it out to see if it could do something that would stand as tall as most articles on the internet and I soon realised that it

wasn't able to do that,' continues O'Brien, who contributes to titles including *Vintage Rock*, *SFX* and *Radio Times*.

'We all expected it to improve exponentially, but it doesn't seem to have made any great strides forward since it launched two or three years ago.

'When you ask it to be funny, it can't be. When you ask it to be clever it's not quite able to be. It tends to write in a very generalised and clichéd way. There's nothing distinguished about the writing.

'I think there's room to use it to create a very rough first draft that you could then embellish and put some human touches to,' O'Brien adds. 'But even then, it's so unreliable, and that first draft is ridden with clichés and things that trained journalists wouldn't do.'

One thing that AI can't do is pick up a phone and obtain the original quotes that separate a quality magazine feature from a Wikipedia entry.

'I asked ChatGPT to write an article about the making of a film with quotes from all the main actors, and it gave me made-up quotes!' O'Brien laughs.

'What's worrying is that some editors will get ChatGPT to write articles, and because they're cutting back on fact-checkers and sub-editors, this stuff will go unchecked onto the internet, contributing to the misinformation out there.'

At the moment, O'Brien says he isn't aware of AI being used much in the magazine business. For his own part, he occasionally uses it as a brainstorming tool.

'This morning I asked it for some punning headlines, the way you would throw ideas around in an office. I invariably won't use any of its suggestions, but it might push me in a direction that allows me to come up with something better.'

The only AI tool that O'Brien has fully embraced is Otter, to transcribe interviews.

'You put in your mp3 file and what would have taken me an afternoon now takes five minutes. That's been a game changer,' he says.

Novelist Della Galton is aware of writers losing work to AI.

'I know an artist who is using it to write all her blog posts, for which she used to pay someone £100 a month,' says the author of the Puddle Duck Farm series. 'I haven't used it

myself, but I know some authors who are using it to edit their work – indie authors in particular.'

Intriguingly, Galton says some readers appear to be using AI to write Amazon reviews – perhaps in the hope of appearing more erudite.

'In an online author group, people were giving examples that were fairly obviously AI-produced. They were almost nonsensical in an intelligent kind of way. There were lots of big words in them, but they were quite contradictory. It would go on about the narrative form, the characterisation and the structure. Normal readers don't do that.'

According to Cassandra Davis of Cahill Davis Publishing, the publishing industry as a whole seems to find the use of AI acceptable in marketing but not in editorial.

'I use it to write ad copy and social media posts,' says Davis. It saves me a good ten hours a week, which is useful in a small press where I'm doing a hundred other things.'

Cahill Davis doesn't use it for editing, proofreading or cover design, however, and has added a clause to its contracts prohibiting authors from using AI in the creation of their books.

'At the moment you can't copyright work generated with AI,' Davis explains. 'And if a publisher can't have the copyright there's nothing to stop someone else pirating your book and selling it themselves.'

Even if the law around copyright changes, Davis says, 'I don't think AI-written books are going to be as much of a problem as people think they are. Especially for fiction. People are still going to write. That creative pursuit isn't going to go away.'

'I think it will be more a case of how much will people rely on it?' Davis adds. 'We've all had writer's block or you've written yourself into a corner and you're not sure how to get out of it. Maybe people will say *this is what I've written* and AI will give them some ideas to move on.'

'I think AI-written books will be more of an issue with non-fiction, such as short business books where they're recycling information that's already out there,' Davis continues. 'I've seen people post on social media, "I've just published my 100th ChatGPT-written business book." I wonder how good they are, but at the same time I don't want to spend my money to find out!

'I use it for things in my personal life, like creating meal plans for the week,' Davis adds. 'But what you get out of it depends on what you put into it. And if you're going to put the time in to get good results, you might as well have just done it.'

The women's mags *My Weekly* and *People's Friend* are currently using some AI artwork produced by picture libraries, but according to a blog post by the *Friend's* fiction editor Lucy Crighton: 'We're not currently using AI to proofread, edit, or write our short stories, serials, poetry, or any other fiction content.'

So, could an AI write a *People's Friend* story?

'The answer is – not yet,' Crighton wrote. 'I've been able to spot AI-generated stories so far, partly because they lack real emotion or depth, partly because they're too "tidy" (with no

"human errors"). But there's no doubt that the technology is moving apace – the difference between now and even six months ago is astonishing.'

The Romantic Novelists Association has made AI-assisted books ineligible for its competitions, or for critique through its New Writers scheme.

For RNA chair Seána Talbot, the real question about using AI is, 'What's the point? To use AI undermines the heart of the human experience of writing. I want to read something that I know to be authentic. I think we should be highlighting the enormous value in connecting with another human being via a piece of creative writing.'

Asked what qualities humans can bring to writing that AI can't, Talbot says, 'We bring realness. Visceral experiences and emotional understanding. I think it could be a while before AI can create a believable facsimile of human experience. We also bring unexpected twists and turns. AI is inherently predictable, and bases its assumptions on likelihood and averages. Good books don't work like that!

'AI has the potential to save time on research,' adds Talbot, who writes as Catherine Tinley. 'But at present the accuracy of AI-generated search results can be questionable.'

Looking to the future, Talbot says, 'When AI was first talked about I was hoping it would do my household chores and leave me free to write. Instead the housework is still there, and AI wants to write books! There is a risk that art will lack meaning because it's created by AI, and meanwhile we're still doing all the chores. No thanks!'

Finally, here's ChatGPT's view on the future: 'AI can assist with writing, but it is unlikely that it will replace human writers completely. While AI can generate text based on patterns and algorithms, it lacks the creativity, empathy, and intuition that human writers bring to their work. Additionally, writing is often tied to personal experiences, emotions, and cultural perspectives that are unique to each person. As a result, AI will likely continue to play a complementary role to human writers, rather than completely replacing them.'

Well, that's reassuring. But your replacement would say that, wouldn't it? [WR](#)

HOW TO WRITE BETTER THAN AI

- 1. Work on your craft.** If you don't need AI for grammar, word choice or plotting, you'll develop your own voice and a more engaging style than AI's bland tone.
- 2. Write from personal experience.** Put in the observations, insights and emotions that give the reader a sense of 'being there' because you have been there, rather than recycling clichés as AI does.
- 3. Interview people.** This works for fiction and non-fiction to get fresh, personal takes on things, rather than recycling information already out there, as AI does.