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AI as Collaborative Muse: Enhancing Pre-Writing for Academic Authors

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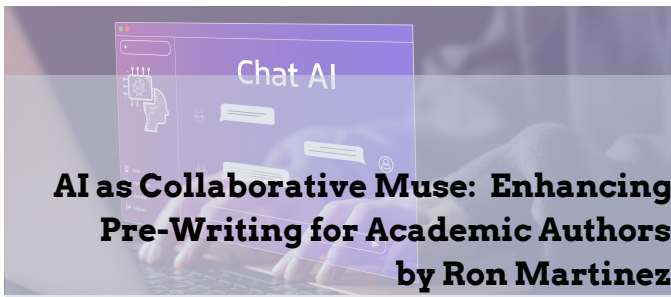
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Since the public release of Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, educators have debated the use of AI in academic settings. In particular, teachers of writing have expressed concern that students may simply ask an LLM to write essays for them. However, as Faculty Writing Coach at the University of Oklahoma, I have observed that students often seek my help during the *pre-writing* phase (e.g., brainstorming, outlining); the writing *per se* they prefer to do themselves. Here I present some AI-enhanced¹ pre-writing activities that can help authors writing for academic publication.

Freewriting Revisited

Description

The goal of freewriting is to simply write as much as you can on a particular topic without worrying about grammar, vocabulary or organization. In “the old days,” it was up to the writer to then organize those notes to use them to draft a paper.

Why AI Helps

Although freewriting can help overcome writer’s block, it can be less effective among EFL authors because language itself can also “block” them. It can be an added challenge to then try to reorganize those notes. But AI can quickly transform those words —written in almost any language — into an outline in English that follows the typical genre conventions of a research article.

A variation on this is to eliminate the “writing” part of freewriting altogether, and instead

¹ I used Claude.ai (by Anthropic) for these activities. Claude allows the user to attach documents to the prompt, and is more reliable than other LLMs in my

dictate your thoughts to really let them flow. (This can even be done on a smartphone using a Google Docs app, for example.) The AI can then take the transcribed notes and organize them into an outline in the same way.

Example Prompt:

“Use the attached notes to create an outline for a research article.”

Finding a Working Title

Description

One of the first questions I ask authors is “What’s the title?” A title can not only guide a reader’s attention, but in the pre- and while-writing phases can also help focus the writer. I therefore always recommend having at least a carefully conceived working title when drafting.

Why AI Helps

People often struggle to come up with a good title. With AI, writers can simply describe what the article will be about, and the LLM will generate several options in seconds. Even if the writer does not like any of the suggested titles, the exercise itself is productive in two ways. First, the AI’s suggestions can help ideate other options. Second, the exercise of describing one’s ideas and vision for an article can be a valuable exercise in helping writers refine what they want to write.

Example Prompt:

“I’m trying to think of a title for an article I’m writing...” (Describe in detail what you want to write about and who the intended audience is.)
“...Can you suggest some good titles?”

Summarizing Literature

Description

When scholars write, they have to situate their work in dialogue with existing publications. Since new publications come out every day, authors can feel overwhelmed and spend hours combing through scores of published works as they draft.

Why AI Helps

LLMs are generally good at digesting and summarizing large chunks of information. This can be a time-saver since you will not only be able to read the main points (e.g., findings, conclusions), but you can actually interrogate the article. With an LLM like *Claude*, which allows the user to attach documents, you can prompt the AI to provide a summary of a PDF, for example. After the AI generates a summary, you can ask further specific questions such as “Where did the study take place?” and “What practical implications are mentioned?” (This can also help the author decide if the paper is worth reading even more carefully.)

Another important part of incorporating literature is knowing how one published work compares with others. You can also ask an LLM to compare two or more PDFs.

Finally, since paraphrasing can be challenging, the summaries provided by the LLM can also be adapted and incorporated into their writing.

Example Prompt:

“Summarize/compare the attached article(s).”
(And follow up with any specific questions.)

Choosing a Journal

Description

There is perhaps no decision more important than where an author decides to submit a manuscript. In the pre-writing phase, knowing which journal(s) you are going to submit to also influences the manuscript itself (e.g., length, style). However, in most disciplines there are hundreds of possible journals to choose from. Specialized search engines exist (for example, *JANE - Journal / Author Name Estimator*), but these are usually limited by their databases, which can be biased towards particular disciplines or even specific publishers.

Why AI Helps

Here you must be careful. This activity has only worked for me (at the time of writing) with

Anthropic’s *Claude* AI; other LLMs I have used have produced unreliable responses. However, if you use *Claude*, in my experience the suggestions it provides can be spot-on. Unlike existing search engines, *Claude* does not limit its results to a particular publisher or indexing service, and can include key journals that – again, in my experience – other search engines rarely include, such as association journals (e.g. the *Writing Center Journal* of the International Writing Centers Association). Moreover, *Claude* not only suggests the names of journals, but explains why it offered those specific suggestions.

Of course, the names the AI offers should be just a starting point. It is up to the writer to conduct further due diligence, including visiting the journal website to carefully read the author guidelines.

Example Prompt:

“I am looking for a journal to publish my article. Here is a synopsis:” (Write/paste in title and summary of the article-in-progress – the more detail the better.) “Can you recommend journals that would be a good fit?”

Final Thoughts

AI is evolving very rapidly; the activities described here are not intended to be comprehensive or definitive. However, what I hope was shown is that AI can be used to augment (not replace) and assist (not automate) the writing process (not just the product).

PS: The title for this article was inspired by a suggestion from *Claude.ai*.

Ron Martinez is the Faculty Writing Coach at the Center for Faculty Excellence at the University of Oklahoma where he supports authors in the writing of research manuscripts and proposals. He has also been a fellow for the US Department of State English Language Specialist program.