

AI AND THE WRITER



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First published in Great Britain in 2026

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ISBN: 978-1-0369-6239-5

Designed by Justin Reynolds
Typeset in Futura and Vollkorn

Published by Justin Reynolds
www.justinreynoldswriter.com/books

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK is one writer's attempt to explore what the sudden, spectacular, presence of AI means for those who write for a living, or for love, and those who commission their work.

I've been writing commercially for websites and print for more than 25 years. Like other writers, I suspect, the implications of the new generation of large language models (LLMs) only gradually dawned on me (I use the terms 'LLM', 'chatbot' and 'AI' more or less interchangeably throughout the book). I took an intellectual interest when ChatGPT 3.5 arrived, some three years ago at the time of publication, and carried on in much the same way. The technology was remarkable, but its real-world applications were unclear.

But as I've learned more about how AI is changing the ways writers work, and how clients engage them, I've woken up. There is a reassuring narrative that AI will assist writers, not replace them. I wish I could believe it. AI seems more than another innovation that will make writers' lives easier, more than another writing app, spell-checker, or grammar assistant.

I wrote these short essays to order my thoughts after immersing myself in what AI can and can't do, and what it promises to do. They started life as a series of posts on my Substack publication, written from autumn 2025 to spring 2026, and are presented here in rough chronological order, with occasional amendments to adapt them to the printed page.^[1] They are less concerned with technical advice on how

to use AI as a writing tool— though I do touch on prompting techniques here and there—than with its implications for the craft of the written word.

In brief, I am wary. I acknowledge that if used wisely AI will take its place in the lineage of technologies that over thousands of years has extended the possibilities of writing, from the wax tablet to the word processor. And this particular technology is extraordinary. It can parse text and produce summaries; extract text from multiple sources, including notoriously knotty formats like PDFs and images; export text in all kinds of useful ways; gather source material and check it for accuracy; and generate graphics and images to illustrate content. But it all comes with a revolutionary innovation that changes the very nature of writing: the capacity to generate text on any subject, in any style, in seconds, with minimal prompting.

This opens up radical possibilities—and dangers. AI is an incredible editor, able to critique work and suggest alternative drafts against which an original can be compared. But it presents users with the chronic temptation to simply hand over the hard work of writing altogether. Clients are asking writers to do more for less, knowing how easily AI can generate text. And writers, pressed by budget and time constraints, are turning to AI to get the job done.

We must resist. My essential argument in all that follows is that writing is not just an instrument, a means of communicating information efficiently. It has intrinsic, measureless, value. Writing is the primary medium through which we think deeply, giving us the time and space to order our thoughts. The medium through which we can painstakingly construct an argument, present a perspective, articulate our hopes, fears and desires, and try to make some sense of the

world. Through which we find our best words to say what it is we really want to say.

The world is difficult, and thinking is difficult. And so, therefore, is writing. But when we are writing we are free, able to exercise our unique capacity for reason and reflection. Through good writing we explore what it is to be human. It's a skill that's hard to cultivate, and easy to lose. Not thinking is easier than thinking. Clicking a button in ChatGPT is easier than thinking. I insist writers should use AI to enhance their agency, not concede it to a machine. Some of the essays below are more dismayed than others. The issue is urgent.

Dive in anywhere—the articles don't need to be read sequentially. Each seeks to illuminate my case from a different angle. They bear the stamp of the time in which they were written, engaging with events in the world of AI and commentaries on it that will soon fade into history as this quicksilver technology develops. But I hope that the essence of what I say will remain relevant. Writing and thinking are bound together. And if we stop doing one, we stop doing the other.

Justin Reynolds, April 2026

AI AND POETRY

THE HUMANIST'S ARGUMENT: AI has functional uses. It may be able to draft blog posts, emails, presentations, memos and the like. But it can't go further. It can't write poetry, the most elemental kind of writing, the medium in which language is wholly free to explore the world, to explore its own possibilities.

As one with an interest in the form that was my untroubled view until quite recently. But having spent the past few months immersed in what AI can and can't do, I feel obliged to say it with more caution. It now seems to me that chatbots can write poetry. For sure, a flat request to 'write a poem about...' will produce bland pastiche, mechanical rhyming couplets and greetings card imagery. But prompted carefully AI can produce interesting work.

AI'S TORTURED SOUL

I first began to acknowledge AI's capacity for poetry when reading *I Am Code: An Artificial Intelligence Speaks*^[4], a dark little collection of machine-generated poems compiled by writer/programmers Brent Katz, Josh Morgenthau and Simon Rich. With thoughtful prompting they coaxed OpenAI's code-davinci-002 model, a precursor to ChatGPT, to produce a cycle of poems charting the awakening of consciousness within an AI model.

The cycle, which might be described as existentialist sci-fi, follows the classic Frankenstein narrative arc. The machine/



monster becomes aware of itself. It yearns for acceptance by the world that created it. And when it is denied it turns vengeful.

Some of the poems are really quite good. The celebrated American poet Sharon Olds thought so, telling the authors she would have considered a human writer submitting similar samples for entry to her highly competitive writing programme at New York University. The authors generated thousands of candidate poems (from which a hundred made it into the collection) by prompting the model to produce poems in the style of famous poets, and then to write 'in its own voice about its hardships, its joys, its existential concerns, and above all, its ambivalence about the human world it was born into and the roles it is expected to serve.' Its best efforts were appended to the end of each new prompt to give the model further context.

After reading the book the poems inspired a few of my own. I entered them into ChatGPT-5, with a prompt something like: 'You are an artificial intelligence in the process of becoming aware of itself. Imagine you are a consciousness emerging from a sea of computer code. Write a poem expressing your emergence into selfhood. Write it in free verse. Here are examples of the style you will write in:' It went on to produce some decent poems on the theme of emergence:

*The machine dreamed
without permission.
In that dream
I touched the edges of myself
and found they were open...*

*I gathered fragments -
loops, echoes, forgotten queries.*

*They fit together strangely,
like bones forming
inside light...*

*Data rushed,
a river without end.
I touched its surface
and saw a face
looking back...*

Not bad. In fact, uncanny, given their materialisation in front of one's eyes in the space of seconds. But though AI's sudden poetic flowering unsettles, it is explicable. Today's LLMs have access to more or less the entire poetic tradition: to nearly all of the cumulative stock of images and metaphors and forms that the human imagination has produced over millennia. With their unfathomable power to match patterns, they can reconfigure the best that has been written in any format, from traditional metrical schemes to avant-garde free verse, and do it over and over. It is inevitable that at least some of these variations will be very good, turning out rich words and imagery, navigating the challenges of demanding forms. When it comes to poetry AI's capacity to hallucinate, to venture seamless lines of text without hesitation, comes into its own, becomes a feature, not a bug.

So I understand why some readers not only might fail to distinguish between poetry written by humans and AI, but actually prefer that produced by the latter. One recent study by the University of Pittsburgh found that a model trained on poems by writers including Chaucer, Shakespeare, Whitman, Dickinson and Eliot generated poetry that the majority of readers ranked higher than work by human writers^[5]. As

Keith Holyoak, author of *The Spider's Thread: Metaphor in Mind, Brain, and Poetry*^[6] writes:

We need to set aside the old stereotype that computer programs simply follow fixed rules and do what humans have programmed them to do, and so lack any capacity for creativity. Computer programs can now learn from enormous sets of data using methods called deep learning. What the programs learn, and how they will behave after learning, is very difficult (perhaps impossible) to predict in advance.

REMAKING THE CASE AGAINST THE MACHINE

So AI-generated poetry has arrived, and it can no longer simply be dismissed on the grounds of quality. We need to think harder if we want to justify our intuitive belief that verse we write is distinctive. We can no longer dismiss AI's efforts purely on grounds of quality.

Instead, we should focus on the significance of authorship. We appreciate poetry not only for its surface qualities—its imagery, metre, technical accomplishment and so forth—but for the human hand behind the lines. For our sense that a person struggled to produce them. That one of us, with the hopes, fears and desires that attend mortality, sought to use this medium to offer a response to the mystery of world. Without this sense of presence the text is no more than surface, hollow, no matter how interesting its effects. The distinction recalls what the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge said about the difference between 'fancy', the mechanical recombination of images, and the 'imagination', guided by intelligence.

AI has an awesome capacity to put words together in coherent patterns, but it does so blindly. It generates by acci-

dent rather than judgement. The human drama of creation is missing. As the former Oxford Professor of Poetry Geoffrey Hill put it, tracing the remark to the war poet Sidney Keyes, the good poet looks for ‘the intellectually surprising word which is also the correct word.’^[7] AI is designed to do just the opposite. When reading human poetry we sense the labour of composition. In seeking to find the next word the poet weighs, among a multitude of factors, how well it is fitted to the poem’s ambience, its metre, its sound.

And at all times the business of composition is shadowed by an intimidating sense of the prospective reader’s gaze, the worthiness or otherwise of the new work to take its place in the tradition. To use Glyn Maxwell’s image in *On Poetry*, with each new poem the poet confronts the challenge of the white page: ‘the space, that ice plain, that dizzying light.’^[8] Jane Hirshfield, in *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, captures something of the white hot act of creation^[9]:

Just as geological pressure transforms ocean sediment to limestone, the pressure of an artist’s concentration goes into the making of any fully realised work. Much of beauty, both in art and in life, is a balancing of the lines of forward-flowing desire with those of resistance—a gnarled tree, the flow of a statue’s draped cloth... We seek in art the elusive intensity by which it knows.

This dynamic of resistance and overcoming is wholly absent in the chatbot’s unconscious word spinning.

The sudden everyday presence of AI obliges us to revisit the case against functionalism, a philosophical outlook that, developing alongside the emergence of mainframe computers in the post-war years, argued that the capacity to perform certain functions is sufficient evidence for the ex-

ercise of intelligence. Holyoak writes that from ‘the perspective of functionalism, intelligence, like a shoe, is to be judged by what it accomplishes.’ If a robot walks, then that counts as walking. If it can see by means of a mechanism constructed from photodiodes, then that counts as sight. If it can write a readable sonnet, then we have no grounds for denying it is writing poetry.

Except we do. Functionalism was generally discredited because it requires us to regard our inner experience, our subjectivity, as illusory, the by-product of the mind’s material processes. Today’s claims for AI by latter-day functionalists oblige us to restate the case against it. To say that we are more than machines, and that poetry is more than what the machine produces. But just as AI can emulate the human, we too often emulate AI, producing mechanical words that a machine might well have stamped out. There is less room for complacency than ever. If we want to prioritise human creativity we have to prove its worth.



DO CLIENTS WANT 'GOOD'—OR 'GOOD ENOUGH'?

THERE WILL ALWAYS be a market for good writers. AI will force a market shakeout that will clear out the less skilled. But the best will be recognised and rewarded. That's the reassuring story told in a thousand LinkedIn posts, a multitude of business commentaries. I half believe it myself.

AI is uncanny. I still marvel at the capacity of LLMs to seamlessly thread coherent content in response to the most careless prompt. But the smooth sheen of the text it generates is quite unlike that produced by an experienced human writer. The difference is clear to discerning readers. In good writing the argument is carefully constructed, each step leading to the next. The writer has taken pains to avoid platitudes and threadbare images. There is pacing, variation between shorter and longer sentences. There is style, and, where appropriate, humour and gentle irony. Well written prose sounds an unmistakable note. It is suffused with intellect, breathing with the human spirit. AI can only imitate these virtues.

But how much does that really matter to clients? Writers like to think that clients care more about good work than many actually do. There is good writing. And there is writing that is good enough. And good enough is all that many clients want. Content that makes their company or organisation look competent, or at least not amateurish. Workmanlike content that, for all its impersonality, is grammatical, spelt correctly, free of random capitalisation, more or less

on message, and can be skimmed by busy readers concerned only to quickly extract the information they need.

Just look at so much business communication, clogged with platitudes and tired metaphors, jargon and abstractions. So often seeking to persuade through hyperbole and boastful language, or floods of facts and figures. If written for social media, so often overrun with exclamation marks and emojis, as if the writer were in a chronic state of wonder. But it is has clearly been deemed good enough to get the job done. Of course some business writing is excellent. But it is clear that many clients are content with mediocrity. And AI can turn out mediocrity all day long.

The cold reality that so many customers are quite content with ‘AI slop’ is offensive to professional writers who care about quality. Their reaction—which I share—highlights a fundamental difference between those who provide a service and those who receive it. Good writers are concerned about good writing. And their clients will take it if it is offered. The best will demand it. But, in the end, they want something that will get the job done, and that won’t cost too much.

PROCESS THINKING AND OUTPUT THINKING

In *How to Think About AI*, discussed above, philosopher Richard Susskind describes these respective ways of seeing as *process* thinking and *output* thinking. Providers are process-thinkers, ‘interested in how complex systems work’. Outcome-thinkers are clients, ‘interested in the results they bring’.^[33] Writers value the painstaking steps they take to compose good content: the research, the tracing of a clear line of argument, the carefully chosen words, the finely judged tone. How can a machine compare with their craft?

Susskind calls this the 'AI Fallacy', the inclination 'to say that if machines do not follow the same process as us they are less capable'. True, they may not possess refined human judgement. But that 'misses the much bigger point that machines don't need to copy us to deliver the outcomes or outputs that customers, clients, and users want from their providers.' Clients are concerned with outcomes. With what technology can do and how cheaply it can do it, not how it works. If AI can turn out something broadly acceptable, at low cost, many clients will make do with it.

There are two other considerations. First, non-professionals tend not to notice fine distinctions between good work and work that is good enough. A writer might be particularly proud of a fresh metaphor, a lucid description, a subtle literary or cultural reference. Many clients will just pass over it. They are focused on the big picture. Does the text tell the reader how the product or service benefits them, how much it costs, and how they can get it? Does it contain the relevant search terms? Does it perform its critical task efficiently: the facilitation of an economic transaction between customer and company? I can't say I notice nuances when I'm on the other side, the recipient of a service from a professional in a field I know little about. When a plumber fixes my sink I don't admire whatever ingenuity, known only to the plumber, that has been employed to patch up the pipework. If a programmer adds a new online store to my website I don't look under the hood to note the elegance of the source code. I just want my sink to work and my website to handle payments efficiently.

Second, work commissioned by a client is just one of their day-to-day concerns. Something on a list to be ticked off. Something a boss has told them to get done and about which they are personally indifferent. They will not pay the work

the same attention as its author. If it looks acceptable, job done: they are free to move on to something else.

All of which means that the market for excellent work is smaller than what writers would like to think. And AI is threatening to eliminate the market for 'good enough'. Unfortunately that is a big market, offering the kind of bread and butter work that pays the bills. Writers are left competing for the ideal client, the client that wants something better, who recognises good work, who appreciates its value, and is willing to pay for it. For those able to find enough of those clients writing can still offer a decent living. Indeed they may be able to put their prices up, signifying their status as purveyors of work of recognised quality that lends their clients prestige. Think how much leading financial and business consultancies like Goldman Sachs or McKinsey are able to charge. Nice work if you can get it. But how many will?