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Beyond Polishing: The Compounding Dynamic of GenAI in Academic Writing

Jim McKinley

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Article

Abstract

Generative AI can reshape stance and voice in multilingual student writing, with effects that appear to be shifting over time. Using a random sample of English L2 master's-level assignments at a UK university from two cohorts (2019 and 2025, N = 25 each), I first compared submitted drafts, then subjected parallel excerpts to GenAI "polishing" prompts. Across both cohorts, the technology consistently reduced hedging, suppressed self-mention, and reframed authorial stance into more categorical and impersonal forms. While these outcomes confirm existing critiques of homogenisation, the more revealing finding is a compounding dynamic. I use this term within an ecological view of writing and technological mediation to describe how AI-mediated drafting and AI-based polishing interact in the same writing environment. The 2025 students' original texts, acknowledged by most to have been written with GenAI support, already resembled AI outputs, and polishing then reinforced the drift. Compared to the 2019 cohort, their drafts contained fewer hedges, greater lexical diversity, and syntactically simpler sentences. This longitudinal perspective shows how the stylistic fingerprints of GenAI are being internalised within writing practices, narrowing rhetorical space even before the tool is explicitly applied. I highlight the pedagogical imperative of critical AI literacy: that writers must be trained to use generative AI effectively by interrogating its outputs, resisting its homogenising pull, and preserving their intended stance.

Keywords: [generative AI](#); [digital writing](#); [academic voice](#); [writer identity](#); [rhetorical drift](#); [Global Englishes](#)



The UCL Academic Communication Centre and the IOE Academic Writing Centre warmly welcome you to the:

IOE Academic Writing Seminar Series

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Beyond Polishing: AI in academic writing

Prof. Jim McKinley

#IOEWritingSeminar





I need AI to
make my
writing better!

When students write with AI, it often feels *easier*

Removing difficulty feels like improvement

- smoother
- faster
- more efficient

But something else is happening

- less hesitation
- fewer decisions
- less visible effort

When writing becomes too easy, something gets lost...



This is what Madhavan calls the “beauty of friction”... the role of resistance in learning and ownership.

The beauty of friction that lets us feel the world

Financial Times US
5 Feb 2024

Guru Madhavan

The writer is a systems engineer and author of 'Wicked Problems: How to Engineer a Better World'

GLP-1 drugs and GPT models share an unsettling kinship. Each promises to dissolve friction so thoroughly that we forget it was ever there. One rewires how the body registers hunger; the other turns inklings into instant expertise. Both reveal how reflexively we welcome the removal of resistance and how rarely we ask which kinds deserve to stay.



The paradox

“the voice is all wrong... a mix of bland and obsequious, not mine”*

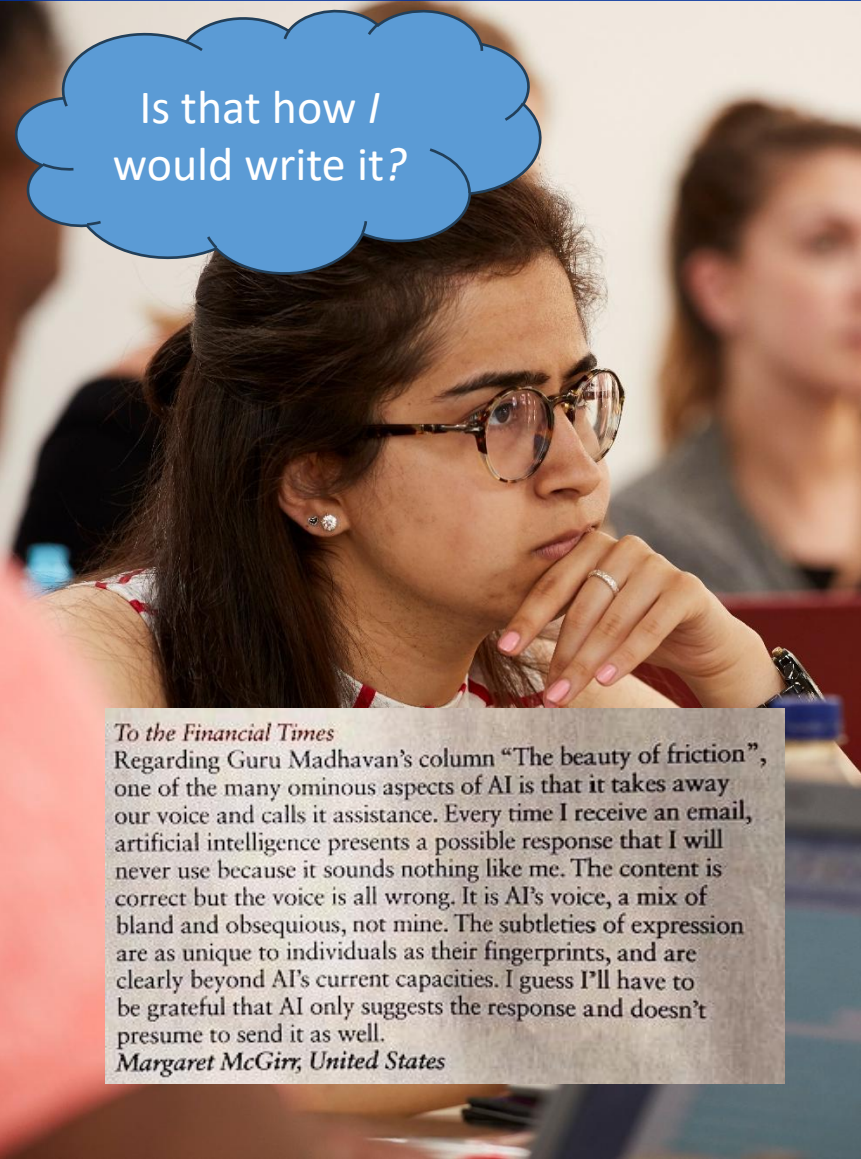
- grammatically correct
- clearer structure
- more formal

*Voice = stance, positioning, and ownership

But:

- less like the writer
- less sense of ownership
- harder to see where the thinking is

Writing can be improved without being authored.

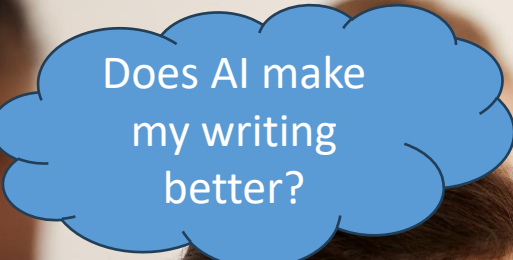


Is that how I would write it?

To the Financial Times

Regarding Guru Madhavan’s column “The beauty of friction”, one of the many ominous aspects of AI is that it takes away our voice and calls it assistance. Every time I receive an email, artificial intelligence presents a possible response that I will never use because it sounds nothing like me. The content is correct but the voice is all wrong. It is AI’s voice, a mix of bland and obsequious, not mine. The subtleties of expression are as unique to individuals as their fingerprints, and are clearly beyond AI’s current capacities. I guess I’ll have to be grateful that AI only suggests the response and doesn’t presume to send it as well.

Margaret McGirr, United States

A blue, cloud-like thought bubble containing the text 'Does AI make my writing better?'.

Does AI make
my writing
better?

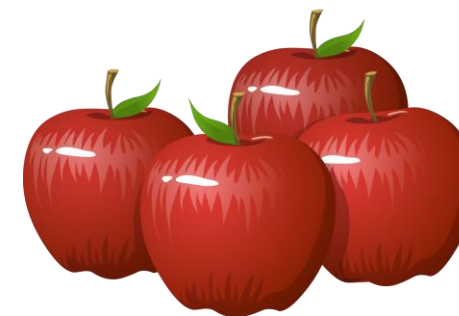
Where we usually stop

When students use AI, it's easy to think of it as:

- editing
- improving
- polishing

So, the question becomes:

- Does AI make writing better?



But this keeps the focus on the *final* text

- how it reads
- how correct it is
- how “academic” it sounds

It ignores how
the writing was
produced

Where is this
actually
coming from?

But if they're already using AI while drafting...

What happens *before* polishing?

- How are they drafting?
- Where is the language coming from?
- What already looks "AI-like"?



The bigger shift
may be happening
earlier in the
writing process



The study (McKinley, 2026)

Master's student writing (UK university)
two cohorts:

- 2019 (pre-GenAI)
- 2025 (GenAI environment)

Compare:

- original submissions
- AI-polished versions

Not just what AI does to texts, but how writing is changing over time

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Is this still *my* argument?



Journal of English for Academic Purposes

Volume 78, November 2025, 101583



Structured peer feedback for authorial voice development: A proof-of-concept study with Chinese doctoral writers in the UK

Jim McKinley ^a , Dandan Zhu ^b , Nathan Thomas ^a

What polishing does

Before (student draft)

- *This suggests that students may benefit from more explicit feedback.*

After (AI-polished)

- *The findings suggest that students benefit from more explicit feedback.*

- “may” disappears
- claim becomes categorical
- authority shifts away from the writer (less *authorial*)

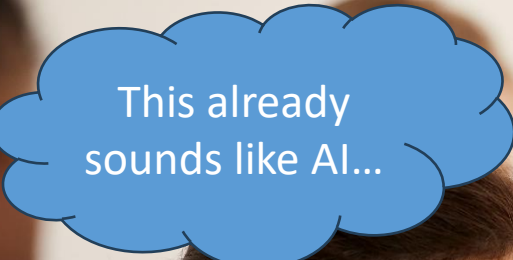
It looks small, but it changes how the argument is positioned

What's happening to the writing


In both groups of students*:

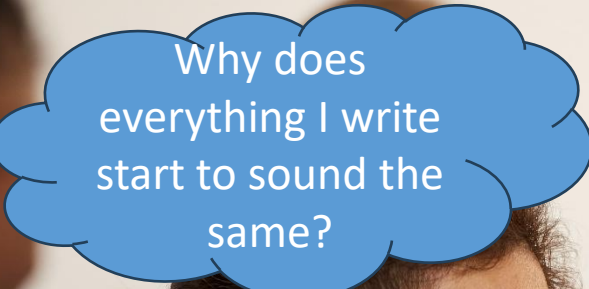
- less hedging
- less self-positioning
- more impersonal authority
- *in 2025, these features are already visible in the drafts

The writing becomes more categorical, and less visibly authored

A blue, cloud-shaped thought bubble with a white border, containing the text 'This already sounds like AI...'.

This already sounds like AI...

A photograph of a young woman with long dark hair and glasses, wearing a red and white striped shirt, sitting at a desk in a lecture hall. She is looking towards the right of the frame with a thoughtful expression, her hand resting on her chin. A laptop is visible in the foreground.

A blue, cloud-like thought bubble containing text.

Why does everything I write start to sound the same?

The “compounding dynamic”

Step 1 Drafting

- students use AI while writing
- drafts already follow AI-like patterns

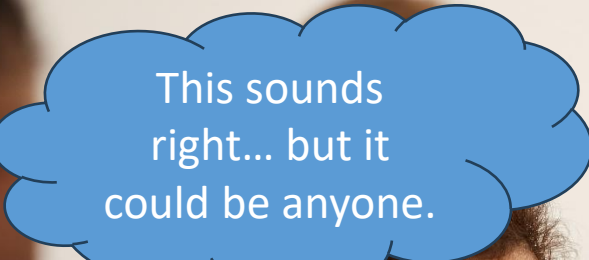
Step 2 Polishing

- AI removes remaining hedging
- strengthens claims
- standardises phrasing

Step 3 Reinforcement

- the same features are amplified
- the next piece of writing starts from this baseline

Drafting and polishing are no longer separate stages... they begin to reinforce the same kind of writing

A blue, cloud-shaped thought bubble with a white border, containing the text 'This sounds right... but it could be anyone.'

This sounds right... but it could be anyone.

What this does to writing over time


What starts to drop out:

- hedging (“may”, “might”, “appears to”)
- self-positioning (the sense of a writer behind the claim)
- exploratory phrasing (working things out on the page)

What becomes more common:

- categorical claims (“this shows”, “it is clear”)
- impersonal authority (“the findings suggest...”)
- familiar, repeatable structures

Different writers begin to produce very similar texts

A young woman with long dark hair and glasses is sitting at a desk in a classroom, looking thoughtful with her hand on her chin. A blue thought bubble is positioned above her head.

I can submit this,
but I'm not sure I
can explain it.

The deeper problem

Students might recognise both sides of this shift...

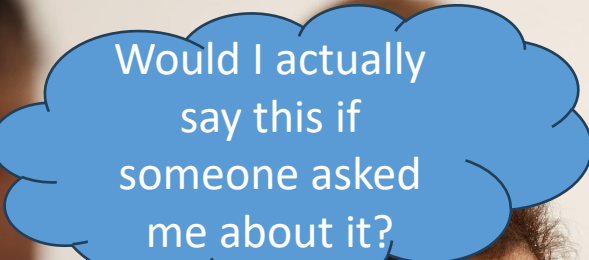
On the surface:

- clearer structure
- more fluent expression
- more “appropriate” academic tone

Authority increases in the text, but decreases for the writer

But underneath:

- the argument feels slightly off
- the wording doesn't quite match their intention
- they struggle to explain or defend what's written

A blue, cloud-shaped thought bubble with a white border, containing white text. It is positioned above the head of a young woman in the background image.

Would I actually say this if someone asked me about it?

What this means for student writers

The issue isn't just whether the writing is "better".

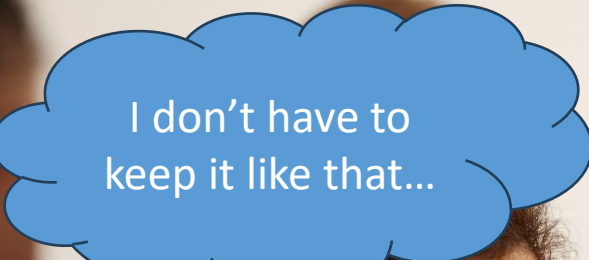
Choosing from AI isn't the same as writing it.

It's whether it still reflects what students mean...

- *Where did this wording come from?*
- *Would you actually say this?*
- *Can you explain and defend it?*

Using AI isn't the problem, relying on it without noticing what it changes is!

Clarity matters, but so does ownership!

A blue, cloud-shaped thought bubble with a white outline, containing the text "I don't have to keep it like that...".

I don't have to
keep it like that...

Using AI well

This isn't about avoiding AI, and it's not about using as much of it as possible (or improving "prompt engineering")

It's about what they do with it...

- noticing what changes when they use it
- deciding what to keep and what to rewrite
- checking that the argument still reflects their thinking

Using AI well means staying in control of the writing

*Don't just accept the output, work on it
until it says what you mean.
If you can't explain it, it's not finished!*

Final thoughts

- Writing is being *shaped* by AI, with less visible writer agency.
- As language becomes standardised through AI, meaning and stance can shift with it.
- Students' writing may be partly AI generated, much like writing supported by samples, but they still need to own it.

The question isn't "Is this better?"
it's "*Is the writer still visible?*"

