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ADVICE

How to Create Compelling Writing Assignments in a ChatGPT Age

A recent book offers a road map to new kinds of assignments to inspire your students to write.

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JOYCE HESSELBERTH FOR THE CHRONICLE

At a recent conference on teaching in higher education, I attended a session on ChatGPT. The session organizers, a team from the University of Central Florida, began by asking us to position ourselves into one of two camps — those

who were leaning into ChatGPT and those leaning away from it. Did we see this technology as an opportunity or a threat?

Instead of just letting us congregate around our existing positions, the organizers asked us to spend time on both sides of this divide. Each group had to brainstorm the exciting possibilities of artificial intelligence, as well as identify the potential challenges it poses to faculty work. I entered the conference room leaning away from ChatGPT and departed sitting squarely on the fence. But while my position shifted only a little bit — it did shift.

What drew me toward an awkward hug with ChatGPT were the comments of other participants about the power that AI has to spur creative thinking about how we teach writing. A program that can obviate some of the traditional tasks we assign certainly poses a threat, but that same program offers an invitation to think in new ways about the writing assignments we create.

A few days after I returned from the conference, I received a book in the mail that affirmed my newfound sense that 2023 has the potential to usher in an age of creative thinking about teaching and writing: Jessica Singer Early's [*Next Generation Genres: Teaching Writing for Civic and Academic Engagement*](#). Although her book doesn't directly address ChatGPT, it offers exactly the kind of innovative ideas we need as we wrestle — or dance — with the implications of artificial intelligence for college teaching.

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REPORT

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Writing theorists have pointed out for decades now that most of the tasks we assign take a few basic forms: the personal essay, the argumentative essay, the research paper. These assignments teach valuable skills such as thesis development, organization, and research.

But those same assignments are also the ones that ChatGPT can mimic very effectively. Limit your written assignments to traditional forms, and you risk offloading much of the learning that happens in your courses to artificial intelligence. More important, you close down other pathways that students can use to explore ideas, engage in arguments, and communicate with peers.

All of which is why Early's book is well-timed. It provides a road map to new kinds of writing assignments. She hangs her ideas on the notion of genres. We tend to think about writing genres in terms of literary work: fiction, poetry, drama, nonfiction. Those are the containers in which artists pour their words. But each of those genres contains multiple subgenres — nonfiction, for example, includes travel writing, memoir, self-help, and many more. The contribution of *Next Generation Genres* lies in Early's presentation of writing assignments in genres that we typically don't work with in higher education.

The book introduces writing assignments in eight genres. Some might be familiar to you. Because I am constantly on the hunt for new assignments for my writing and literature courses, I've already experimented with a few of the next-generation genres described in the book — such as podcasts or opinion essays. A decade ago an instructor with whom I was co-teaching a course convinced me to take a chance on a final assignment for which students would create something, then new to me, called “podcasts.” Since then I have seen multiple faculty members asking students to create podcasts in courses in many fields.

But even as an inveterate tinkerer of writing assignments, I was excited to discover in Early's book several new models that I can play with. I am not currently teaching this semester, but I'll be helming Introduction to Literature in the fall, and *Next Generation Genres* has me raring to start working on that syllabus a few months early. But while I have time to contemplate future assignments for my fall course, you might be teaching right now — which is why I wanted to share some of Early's ideas while a handful of weeks remain in the semester. You might still have the opportunity to create or revise a writing assignment that will keep your students engaged and challenged throughout the final weeks of the semester.

What you won't find in Early's book are tips on how these new assignments can foil artificial intelligence. As [a recent Chronicle essay](#) about the latest version of ChatGPT noted, you can't “out-prompt” it: “It's a dead end to focus on designing prompts that AI won't be good at.”

Next Generation Genres was published in early 2022, before ChatGPT appeared on the scene. But whether you are leaning into or away from AI in your courses, it has arrived. None of the assignments that Early describes are fool-proof measures to counteract the intrusion of [robot writing](#) into your students' learning. But they are compelling ways to reinvent your assignments and ignite your students' interest in writing and expressing their own ideas without the aid of a chatbot.

Here are a few of the genre-based assignments that caught my eye in the book, and that I hope to experiment with in my future courses.

Artist statements. If you have ever been to an exhibition that highlighted the work of a single living artist, you might have encountered an artist statement displayed on the wall or in a handout. The statement might explain the materials that the artist used, the circumstances that spurred the work, the artist's intentions, or even an assessment of how well they accomplished those intentions. Such statements require artists to step back from the creative process and reflect, articulate their thinking, and share it with an audience.

This genre of writing assignment could be applied to any work that a student produces: a traditional essay, a research presentation, even an essay exam. Shift the title to “creator's statement,” and possibilities open up. When you ask students to create something for your course, pair that assignment with a creator's statement in which students have to reflect on their processes, achievements, and challenges. You can find detailed guidance on what statements might look like in the book — or just visit your local art gallery and get inspiration from the walls.

Public-service announcement (PSA). Most of us have seen or remember public-service campaigns designed to inform people about health or safety issues. Lodged in my childhood memory, for some reason, is a PSA that featured

a girl sticking a knife into a toaster. This was apparently a bad thing. But we have plenty of recent examples of PSAs from the pandemic, urging the public to practice social distancing, mask up, or get tested. Even when PSAs take the form of 30-second television spots, they require much thinking and writing: brainstorming ideas, writing scripts, matching words with video or images, and editing.

In her chapter on public-service announcements as a genre of student writing, Early explains that “PSAs generally promote positive social behaviors through information and a call to action by mixing visual or digital and textual elements that share clear and concise messaging.”

When you ask students to create a PSA, you are inviting them to consider questions about purpose and meaning. Why does the material in this course matter? Why does it matter *right now*? Who should care about it? How should this course material change someone’s thinking or behavior? Once they have answered those questions, ask students to create a multimodal text that might include words, images, graphs, videos, and more.

Turning-point essays. One of the staples of every institution’s first-year writing courses is the personal essay: “Write about an experience that affected you in some way.” But instructors outside of the English department, however, might wonder about the value of personal essays in their disciplines. Enter the turning-point essay, in which students write about a turning point in their lives and explain how this significant moment moved them from one place to another.

These essays, as presented by Early, can focus on any aspect of a student’s life. But let me extend Early’s idea by arguing that turning-point essays could take a specific focus on a student’s learning in a course, no matter the discipline. Every student will come into a course with one understanding of the subject, and — one hopes — leave with another. Your writing assignment could pose a simple question: What was the turning point in your understanding? Students could write about a challenging assignment, a heated class discussion, a bit of feedback on their work, a visit to your office hours.

To write such an essay, students have to reflect on the state of their knowledge and revisit a learning experience from your course. That means they will have to tap into the power of metacognition, the process of stepping away from learning and examining it critically. Plenty of research [has demonstrated](#) that metacognition deepens student learning in multiple arenas, which is why you should look for opportunities to layer this question into student assignments whenever you can.

In presenting her next-generation genres in the book, Early provides detailed guidance on implementation. She includes a full assignment sheet for each genre, models of student work, suggestions for classroom activities to prepare students for the assignments, sources and reading lists, and references to digital tools that can support creative work in these genres. You will find everything you need to begin experimenting with new writing assignments in your current and future courses.

After I finished Early’s book, flush with new energy, I reached out to her to see if her perspective on writing assignments had changed in the wake of ChatGPT’s release. Nope, she answered: “It’s an exciting time to think about the teaching of writing, and about teaching more generally.” Clearly Jessica Singer Early has joined the leaning-into

camp, seeing artificial intelligence as another invitation to reinvent ourselves in the classroom — just as she encourages readers to do in *Next Generation Genres*, and as this teacher plans to do in the fall.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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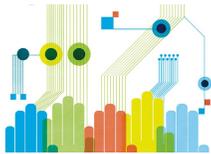
TECHNOLOGY

STUDENT SUCCESS

James M. Lang

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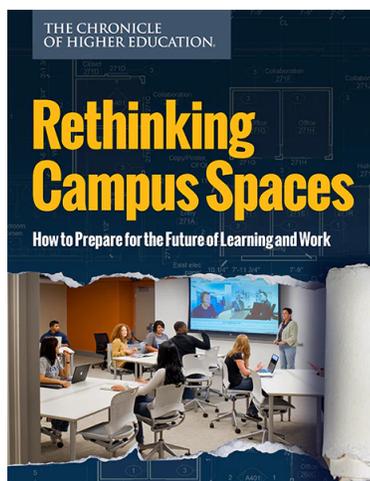
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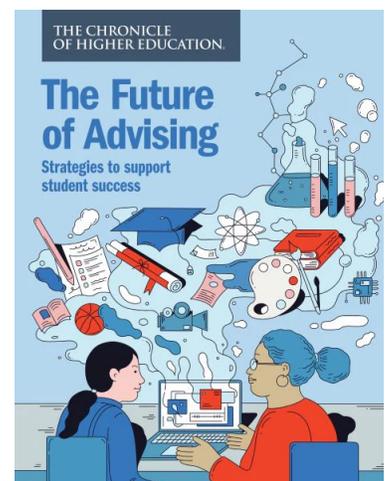
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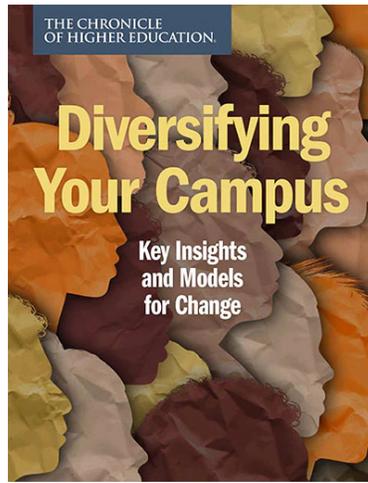
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