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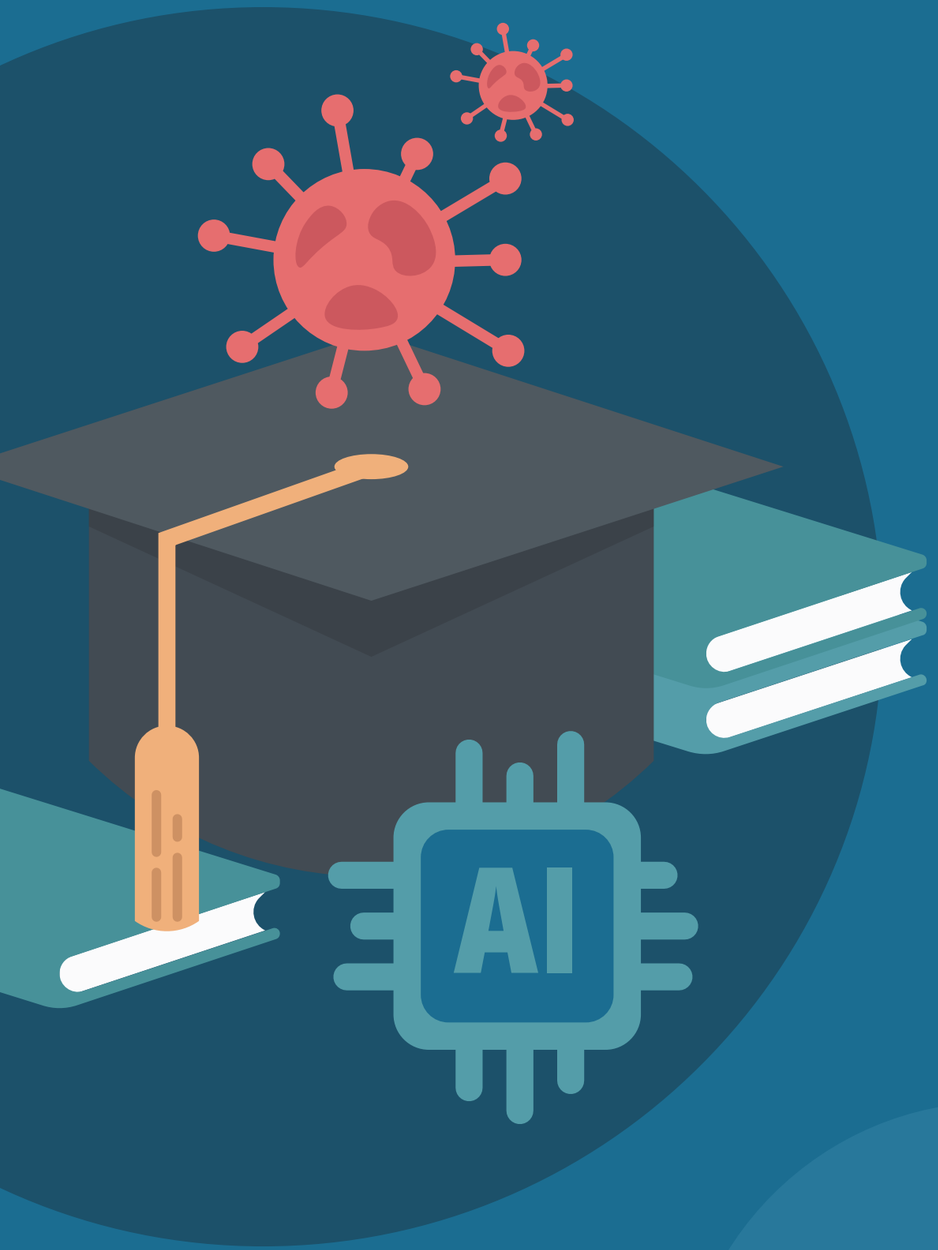


Generation Interrupted:

How COVID and AI Have Changed Writing in High School and College

INTRODUCTION:

A Generation Spanning K–12 Through College Entry

Today's students transitioning from high school to college and first and second year college students represent a generation unlike any before it. They entered middle school just as the world shut down for COVID-19, and their formative years have been shaped by virtual classrooms, disrupted milestones, and uneven access to academic support. Now, they carry with them both the lingering effects of pandemic-era learning loss and a new reality: **the daily presence of artificial intelligence in their education.**

For faculty and administrators alike, this convergence of pandemic disruption and AI adoption is reshaping every facet of education. On one hand, AI tools have lowered barriers, giving students confidence, fluency, and access to real-time support. However, without proper guidance or implementation, these tools have also introduced unnecessary risk into education ranging from data and privacy concerns to the possible erosion of depth, originality, and authenticity.

Academic leadership cannot afford to wait. AI is already reshaping how students write, express ideas, and demonstrate learning. The challenge is not just to manage misuse, but to rethink how writing is taught. From middle school through college, students need instruction that fosters critical thinking, encourages authentic engagement, and positions AI as a tool for learning, not a shortcut.

The future of writing is being written now. Will K–12 and higher education lead together, or be left adapting to forces they did not shape?

The Student Journey and College Transition

The effects of the last five years are now showing up in classrooms, especially in student writing. This generation's academic development has been defined by disruption, and their relationship with writing has been shaped by technology.

A GENERATION OF DIGITAL NATIVES UNDER PRESSURE

Middle School
(COVID Disruption):

Remote learning, cognitive offloading began here, and core literacy skills suffered. Social/emotional development was interrupted just as students entered adolescence.

High School
(AI Normalization):

AI tools became commonplace study companions. Students used them to increase fluency, but often skipped reflective steps. Learning gaps widened between those guided in AI use and those left uncoached.

College Entry
(Writing Readiness):

Today's freshmen arrive with writing that is more polished on the surface but often lacks depth, originality, and resilience

> *AI is reshaping writing into a more collaborative and iterative process. It gives students a powerful, personalized learning tool to organize their thoughts and strengthen their ideas. The COVID generation, still rebuilding trust in education after learning in isolation, often approaches AI with hesitation. Our role as educators is to guide them toward ethical, creative use that restores their confidence and voice.*

Heather Olson

DIRECTOR OF ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE | FLORIDA SOUTHWESTERN STATE COLLEGE

BEHAVIORAL SNAPSHOT

Writing Habits Shaped by Disruption and AI

Today's students were shaped by the dual forces of pandemic-era disruption and rapid AI adoption. As a result, their writing behaviors often reflect high digital fluency but uneven academic development. These patterns are not signs of disengagement. They are adaptive responses to years of fractured instruction and tool-based learning environments. Understanding these behaviors is critical to building interventions that restore depth, curiosity, and resilience.

- **Fluent but Fragile**
  Students are comfortable producing written work, especially with AI support, but struggle with revision, feedback, and sustained critical thinking. They may appear confident on the surface but often lack the stamina or strategies to refine and strengthen their ideas. When challenged to revise, many express frustration or anxiety, having internalized a one-and-done approach to writing.
- **Task-Oriented, Not Process-Driven**
  Much of their academic experience has conditioned students to focus on completion over exploration. They prioritize meeting assignment requirements rather than engaging in iterative thinking. As a result, writing becomes a checklist activity, structured around prompts, rubrics, and due dates, rather than an opportunity for discovery and expression.
- **AI as a Writing Shortcut**
  For many students, AI tools are a default starting point for writing. Instead of brainstorming independently, they turn to AI for ideas, structure, or phrasing. While this can help overcome initial barriers, it often prevents students from fully developing their own arguments or voice. Over time, this reliance can erode originality and limit the cognitive struggle essential to growth.
- **Polished but Detached**
  AI-assisted writing tends to look clean and grammatically sound, but it can mask a lack of engagement or understanding. Students may produce essays that meet surface-level expectations but lack personal insight, curiosity, or authenticity. The result is writing that performs well on rubrics but reveals little about how a student thinks or what they believe.

These behaviors should not be seen as deficits, but as signals. They reflect how students have adapted to a rapidly changing learning landscape. The opportunity now is to design writing instruction that meets them where they are, while helping them rebuild the habits, mindsets, and skills that make writing a meaningful act of learning.

Evidence of Cognitive Offloading

Want to go Deeper?

Explore real classroom strategies for reducing AI overreliance in our webinar, Avoiding Cognitive Offloading: How to Keep Students Thinking in the Age of AI.

WATCH THE WEBINAR

The surface polish in student writing today often masks a deeper issue. As AI tools have become more accessible, many students have shifted away from the mental work that writing requires. Instead of brainstorming, reflecting, or revising on their own, they lean on AI from the start.

This behavior, known as cognitive offloading, lowers the barrier to completion but also limits the kind of thinking that leads to real learning. When students bypass the struggle of organizing ideas or reworking a draft, they miss the opportunity to build essential skills in reasoning, resilience, and self-expression.

Research from Packback confirms this trend. In our study on **Avoiding Cognitive Offloading**, we found clear patterns in how students use AI across the writing process. Without consistent coaching, students increasingly outsource the most cognitively demanding steps like idea generation, structure, and revision. The result is work that looks complete but lacks depth.

KEY OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD:

- Faculty report that student writing is more polished on the surface but often lacks substance or originality.
- Students say they feel pressure to produce professional-sounding work, even if it means prioritizing style over thought.
- **Packback engagement data** shows that when students are required to ask questions and iterate on their work, they generate 2X more original and meaningful content.

These patterns are not limited to education. **Research from MIT** on generative AI in the workplace found that while AI can improve performance for weaker writers, it also narrows the gap between high and low performers. As everyone begins to rely on similar tools, differentiation fades and authentic growth slows.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE MIT STUDY:

- AI raised baseline writing quality, especially for lower performers.
- Stronger writers were pulled toward a common AI-influenced style, reducing uniqueness and voice.
- Heavy reliance on AI led to less improvement over time, suggesting long-term stagnation when overused.

This generation of students sits in the middle of a growing paradox. They are producing more writing than ever before, but their work often lacks the depth and originality that comes from true engagement. They are more fluent, yet more fragile.

Institutions now face a pivotal decision. The goal is not to restrict access to AI, but to guide its use in ways that support real learning. Preserving authentic writing, critical thinking, and cognitive struggle is essential for long-term student success.

How AI Is Changing Writing

AI has become a default support system for many students. Its benefits are real: improved grammar, clearer structure, and increased confidence. But these gains often come at the cost of deeper thinking. When students skip the essential steps of struggle, reflection, and revision, they produce cleaner writing that lacks substance.

Faculty describe this contradiction plainly. Assignments look more polished but feel thinner in thought. The result is more consistency across student work, but less originality, less risk-taking, and less meaningful growth.

This tradeoff raises concerns about long-term skill development. Uncoached AI use doesn't just polish essays. It flattens voice, reinforces formulaic thinking, and encourages students to focus on finishing rather than thinking.

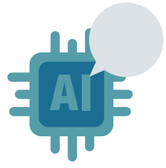
The Balancing Act

AI's influence on writing instruction brings both promise and complexity. For some students, especially those with disrupted learning or limited academic support, AI builds confidence and helps them participate more fully. For others, it raises concerns about fairness and authenticity.

Faculty are increasingly aware of this divide. When writing looks polished but lacks depth, it becomes difficult to tell whether students are developing skill or simply depending on technology. The challenge extends beyond academic integrity. It is about ensuring students are learning to think and express ideas, not just finishing assignments.

A study at Ivy Tech Community College, featured in Campus Technology, **found a 13.39 percent increase in A/B/C grades in courses using Packback, along with measurable gains in participation and engagement, particularly among historically underrepresented groups**. Ivy Tech faculty member Nicole Duttlinger explained, "The lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more important than ever to ensure that the online learning experience is as effective and fulfilling as in-person programs."

The takeaway: AI can be a powerful tool for learning, but only when implemented with intention. Structure, reflection, and transparency are what turn AI from a shortcut into a scaffold for growth.



Reframing AI as a Coach, Not a Crutch

To preserve authenticity and promote growth, AI needs to be embedded into instruction with intent. Guided platforms like Packback provide feedback aligned to academic standards and support students in building skills while maintaining their voice.

DATA SNAPSHOT

Bridging Pandemic Gaps with AI Coaching

This table highlights common writing challenges exacerbated by pandemic-era remote learning and shows how Packback's AI feedback bridges those gaps. By aligning with middle school Common Core standards, it demonstrates how guided AI can transform a potential crutch into an instructional coach.

LEARNING GAP	COMMON CORE STANDARDS	RISK OF UNCHECKED AI USE	HOW PACKBACK BRIDGES THE GAP
DEVELOPING SOPHISTICATED ARGUMENTS	*CCSS.ELA-Literacy. WHST.6-8.1a, 1b, 1e*	*AI-generated essays present claims but rarely engage counterclaims*	**Counterclaim prompts, Essay Structure feedback, and Dive Deeper chat guide students to engage with alternative views and organize evidence logically.**
SYNTHESIZING & CITING SOURCES	*CCSS.ELA-Literacy. WHST.6-8.1b*	*AI stitches summaries into "patchwork" essays, obscuring citation needs*	**Source Check, Citation Credibility, and Originality Fingerprint push students to integrate sources with analysis.**
ACHIEVING CLARITY, COHESION & VOICE	*CCSS.ELA-Literacy. WHST.6-8.2a–2e, 1c–1d*	*AI output is grammatically correct but stylistically flat*	**Feedback on Transitions, Sentence Variety, Vocabulary, and Tone Support helps students refine voice and engagement.**
MASTERING THE WRITING PROCESS	*CCSS.ELA-Literacy. WHST.6-8.4, 5*	*Students use AI as a fix-it tool, skipping revision*	**Packback chats for brainstorming, outlining, and holistic feedback teach writing as recursive process.**
DEVELOPING INQUIRY HABITS & FLUENCY	*CCSS.ELA-Literacy. WHST.6-8.7, 10*	*AI gives instant answers, discouraging curiosity and iteration*	**Packback's inquiry-based platform fosters question-asking, peer responses, and iterative writing practice.**

The Educator Perspective

Educators at all levels, from middle school to first-year college, face the difficult challenge of balancing opportunity with integrity. They see firsthand how AI has improved student confidence while also creating new concerns about originality and voice. This duality requires them to think differently about instruction, assessments, and the very goals of writing education.

Faculty and teachers alike are no longer asking if students are using AI, but how they are using it. They recognize that banning AI is both unrealistic and counterproductive. Instead, the focus must shift toward guiding its use, modeling responsible practices, and embedding AI within frameworks that emphasize curiosity and authentic engagement.

PRIMARY EDUCATOR CONCERNS:

- **Blurred authorship:** When AI contributes to student work, where is the line?
- **Loss of voice:** Assignments often sound polished but lack individuality or conviction.
- **Stalled growth:** Students complete tasks but struggle to improve over time.
- **Equity tension:** Students with better AI literacy or access may outperform peers, regardless of ability.

For me, the line between AI contributions and staying at work is that the student is using a form of educational AI and not just cognitive offloading. It is important that my students are able to show that they are actually engaged as well as doing their own thinking. I support the notion or the idea of AI as an instructional method assisting my students where they might be afraid to ask for help or do not know how to seek feedback in the writing. A lot of my students after Covid struggle to advocate for themselves in and out of the classroom. I find that AI is a good starting point as well as a support system for students that might not have received the education that they deserve.

Keith Hollowell

LITERATURE PROFESSOR | VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

Emerging Opportunities

The same challenges raised by AI—authorship, voice, equity, and growth—are prompting educators to reimagine how writing is taught. Rather than working around AI, many are using this moment to modernize instruction and deepen student learning.

Key shifts are emerging:

- **Process over product:** With AI handling surface-level polish, instruction is focusing more on ideation, revision, and reflection.
- **Scalable feedback:** AI tools support consistent, timely feedback, giving educators more space for one-on-one guidance and higher-order skills.
- **Authentic prompts:** Assignments that center curiosity and inquiry are helping restore student voice and originality.
- **Expanded access:** Real-time support is opening doors for students who previously lacked confidence or fluency in writing.
- **Metacognitive engagement:** Reflection before and after writing encourages students to stay connected to their ideas and learning process.

These shifts reflect more than just adaptation. They mark a broader return to what matters most in writing education: thoughtfulness, engagement, and growth.

Instructional Reflection in Practice

Structured reflection before and after writing helps students engage more intentionally with their ideas, building habits of planning, self-assessment, and revision that AI cannot replicate.

- **For students:** Clarifies purpose before writing and prompts deeper evaluation after.
- **For educators:** Reflections roll up into dashboards, offering insight into student mindset, growth, and areas for support.

THE IMPACT:
More authentic writing, more self-aware students, and more informed instruction.

Want to see it in practice?

See how the University of Arkansas used Packback to implement guided reflection and improve both student outcomes and instructional insight.

Read the case study

Equity and Confidence Across the Continuum

As educators evolve writing instruction in response to AI, one theme is becoming clear: support must be equitable. The same tools that build confidence for some students can raise fairness concerns for others, especially when guidance and expectations vary.

Equity and confidence are deeply connected in the age of AI. For underprepared students, AI often acts as a lifeline, offering support that encourages participation, risk-taking, and progress in writing. But that same support can create tension, particularly when stronger writers question the fairness of peers who lean heavily on AI.

This moment demands intentional design. Institutions have a responsibility to ensure AI closes gaps rather than widens them.

When AI is introduced with structure and transparency, it can serve as a scaffold for growth. **Packback's data** shows confidence increases across the board when students receive real-time feedback within a pedagogically guided framework.

Designing for Confidence and Integrity

How schools guide AI use directly impacts outcomes. Without structure, tools can undermine growth. With the right design, they build confidence while preserving authenticity.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Perceived Unfairness

Stronger students may feel AI gives peers an unearned advantage.

Obscured Gaps

Polished essays can mask weak thinking or skipped steps.

Misuse and Overreliance

Students may rely on AI as a shortcut without clear expectations.

WHAT GUIDED AI LOOKS LIKE ON PACKBACK

CONFIDENCE GAINS

82% of students report increased writing confidence with real-time feedback and structured reflection.

AUTHENTIC THINKING

Reflection prompts keep student intent visible and help educators track depth of engagement.

INSTRUCTIONAL VISIBILITY

Packback's dashboards surface patterns in effort, growth, and originality across diverse learners.

Want to see what equity by design looks like at scale?

Watch The Engagement Equation to learn how guided AI support increases confidence, boosts equity, and drives measurable outcomes in student writing and retention.

WATCH THE WEBINAR

Best Practices for Ethical AI in Writing Instruction

The path forward requires rethinking writing instruction at every level of education. Rather than focusing on prohibition, schools and colleges should emphasize responsible usage and design curricula that prepare students to thrive in a world where AI will be ever-present. This shift requires not only technical guidance but also cultural change: educators must show students that writing is still about thinking, questioning, and discovering, even when tools can handle the mechanics.

Best practices for ethical AI use are already being piloted in classrooms that prioritize reflection, originality, and curiosity. By embedding AI literacy into instruction and redesigning assignments for engagement, educators can ensure students learn to partner with AI in ways that build, rather than erode, core skills.

- Teach AI literacy early (middle & high school).
- Use reflection before and after writing.
- Redesign assignments for curiosity and authentic engagement.
- Use platforms like Packback to provide transparent feedback loops and faculty dashboards.

The goal is not to ban AI, **but to implement it as an extension of the educator.**

PACKBACK SPOTLIGHT

Putting Ethical AI into Practice

Educators are already using Packback to model responsible and transparent AI use in writing instruction.

- **AI with instructional guardrails:** Students receive feedback that supports revision and critical thinking, not shortcutting.
- **Customizable prompts:** Faculty can design assignments that prioritize originality, evidence, and depth.
- **Visibility into student effort:** Real-time analytics show how students engage with writing and where support is needed.

WHY IT MATTERS

Packback helps institutions implement AI intentionally. It keeps pedagogy at the center while scaling support for both students and faculty.

CONCLUSION

Leading Together

The future of writing is already being shaped in middle school classrooms, high school assignments, and college composition courses. Institutions that act now will set the standard for responsible, effective writing instruction in the age of AI. Those that wait risk falling behind and losing the chance to shape how learning evolves.

The challenge is real. The opportunity is greater. By working together, K–12 and higher education can lead a shift that preserves originality, builds confidence, and prepares students to write and think with purpose.

The time to lead is now.