

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

<https://www.wsj.com/opinion/ai-robs-my-students-of-the-ability-to-think-education-school-learning-880267c7>

OPINION COMMENTARY [Follow](#)

# *AI Robs My Students of the Ability to Think*

They report that they find their ability to write, speak and conduct basic inquiry is slipping away.

---

By Alex Green

Aug. 12, 2025 12:20 pm ET

One of the things I love about teaching political communications is my students' eagerness to take up the art and craft of the work at hand. Shame seldom cast its shadow on our classroom conversations. Last year that changed.

More than half the nonnative English-speaking students and a notable number of native English speakers told me that after relying on AI to draft their papers and emails, their ability to write, speak and conduct basic inquiry is slipping away. They tell me this as if they have done something wrong, never considering that it is their professors, not they, who should carry that burden.

I am no stranger to the effect of technology on language and literacy, nor am I shocked by its bland patterns of enthusiastic advent, which always give way to shabbiness and decay. Google promised the ability to search—a word that has terrific depth and meaning—and delivered a crass advertiser-led sorting system. [Facebook](#) started as proto-Tinder before a revamp that said we'd get Woodstock-style digital communes. Then it locked us in a space where people scream at each other.

Through it all, I have tinkered with, embraced, studied, used, thrown away and taught about more forms of technology than I can remember, from letterpress printing to podcast production. But no new technology has produced such a terrifying admission of stark and fundamental disempowerment by my students as AI has. For all its promise, AI is being developed and used in ways that are disabling.

There is little evidence that senior university faculty are committed to tamping down the rampant overuse of AI. Instead, it is the paperweight on a pile of evidence that at an ethical level, universities are too timid or ignorant to insist that students use the core skills we are supposed to be teaching them.

Perhaps willful ignorance is the better phrase—these core skills are no mystery. They involve an ability to sift through information and understand who created it, then organize and pull it together with logic, reason and persuasion. When teachers dream of our students’ successes, we want to see these skills help them thrive.

For that to happen, students must gain the ability to synthesize information. They must be able to listen, read, speak and write—so they can express strategic and tactical thinking. When they say AI is eroding their ability to speak and write, this is what they’re losing, often before they’ve ever fully gained it.

It’s the result of disturbing trends. One is the general decline in educators’ commitment to seeing communications as a fundamental skill that all courses should develop. I often write a page of notes in response to a page of graduate student homework, describing not only what the student should do but why and how to do so in the future. Too often, the reply is: “I haven’t gotten this much feedback since high school.”

Compliments are nice, but these asides don’t fill me with joy. Nor do the many excuses academics give for this collective failure—from financial and time constraints to the old hyperliteralist trope that we must respond to student demands—even when they’re unwittingly against their own educational interests—and torch everything else.

Along with this decline in teaching, I am often told (as though I write with a quill) that technology is eclipsing our need to teach these skills to the expert degree we once did. This is the voice of technological evangelism in higher education, and its adherents encourage a deeper embrace of AI, even though—with a few exceptions—they have little to no ability to lead students to any kind of mastery.

The types of academics who engage in this kind of boosterism aren’t known for their subtlety, so I am constantly inundated with—and told to celebrate—new faculty-created AI tools for everything from the art of cutting text down (try putting the “I Have a Dream” speech into an AI shortener) to the mortifying practice of using AI to summarize student course reviews or even grade assignments.

When confronted, these evangelists often push back with hypersimplified examples of handy AI shortcuts, such as customer service-style bots to answer students’ questions about crucial aspects of course management. But I’m struck by their tone, which often presumes that current teaching methods and student engagement are some kind of drudgery that has entitled us to AI-based relief, even if it comes at the expense of our students’ learning. All the while, its use is indiscriminate and widespread. Just ask the

students who are using it to the point where a tool now has mastery over them and is robbing them of language.

In my work, which ranges from negotiation to disability policy, the implications of this disempowerment are frightening. Colin Powell once told my colleagues and me that he often winced at how people would, with a choice of words so poorly attuned to the other side of a negotiation, walk into a room and convert “an adversary into an enemy.” His observation reflects the depth and breadth of intentionality that humans must possess to do the careful work that can be a matter of life and death for others.

Contrary to what AI enthusiasts claim, the human possession of these skills will never become irrelevant if we value life, society and governance. For students to grow into professionals who have those skills, they must first develop them. What it will take for their teachers to defend that right when those teachers already possess the knowledge and power to do so, I do not know.

*Mr. Green teaches at Harvard’s Kennedy School and is author of “A Perfect Turmoil: Walter E. Fernald and the Struggle to Care for America’s Disabled.”*



ILLUSTRATION: ROBERT NEUBECKER

*Appeared in the August 13, 2025, print edition as ‘AI Robs My Students of the Ability to Think’.*

---

## Videos

