

1/14/2025

In spring of 2024, in response to the Dean's Statement of Educational Policy and Program, a "Writing about Writing" group was formed. The charge was to formulate a statement about the aims of writing at St. John's College, and how those aims fit into the Program of Study we undertake here. The dean asked that group to think both positively, about what writing means to us here, and negatively, about how the use of large language models in our writing might circumvent those aims. The following is a distillation of the report from that committee to the dean.

We are a college committed to conversation. But we are also a college dedicated to rigorous, critical thinking, to language and its use, and to books that offer us manifold examples of clarity, creativity, and beauty. In class, we learn from each other: we listen, we attempt to articulate our thoughts, we move with the thoughts of others and we courageously try and test our ideas among our peers. We can start a thought and allow someone else to complete it or challenge it. We ask questions and rely on friends and classmates to help us pursue the answer.

As a writer, then, we write in a community of thinkers. Tutors, fellow students, and others may, or even should, make impressions on our thoughts and writing. In some ways, then, writing is continuous with the other required activities at the college: reading the books, speaking in class, giving demonstrations, preparing translations, composing music, observing the world. No one of these activities is wholly distinct from another. As with these other activities, we engage in writing through the common effort possible only in a genuine community -- studying with friends, fellow students, the writing assistants, the tutors -- companions we trust to offer genuine help and correction.

Still, the independent nature of writing is important. So, while it might seem that we write for others, for a tutor or another reader, and with others, in conversation with friends, colleagues, and assistants, the first person of concern, the most important reader, is always the writer. As writers, we become self-reliant and self-sufficient. We take a stand. We find our voice in all its many forms: what interests us and why, what tone and style is appropriate, how we engage with a text and, perhaps most importantly, what we have to say for ourselves. A good writing process can help the writer to achieve self-knowledge.

When we write, we become our own interlocutors. We find our own opening questions and take upon ourselves the responsibility of pursuing them through some development, possibly, though not necessarily, to some conclusion. Writing requires that we begin a thought and have the focus to stay with it, even when it challenges us. In other words, writing is another form of thinking.

Because of this, when we write an essay, we are in the midst of a continual process. The essay is, and is a product of, that process. The process itself, perhaps especially including finding a

question to drive the inquiry, is worthwhile. Unlike a verbal conversation or thought process, though, the aim is a specific product: the essay. The process of writing should not, therefore, finish with a simple transcription of the writer's thoughts as they come. Rather, the product should be an authentic reflection of the writer's current thinking on a topic, as developed, tested, and made presentable.

Students should not write in order to please their tutors. Rather, they should write to find out something they really want to know. Every St. John's essay should be an inquiry, rooted in a real question the writer has. There is no single form it should take, but it should take some definite form. That form emerges through editing—the process of working out the best possible way to write what should be written, with clarity, precision, rigor, creativity, and style. The process of writing and editing improves with practice and the willingness to make mistakes. As in sports and other effortful activities that require disciplined repetition, practicing writing risks failure and falling short. It requires the courage to try and try again. Writing more makes for a more confident writer, one who is less likely to shy away from the empty page, less likely to feel unprepared to engage in the inquiry, even when the nature or flow of the inquiry is obscure.

The seemingly omnipresent offer of artificially generated assistance is false, intrusive, and dangerous. It promises to supplement but actually supplants your writing. It deprives you of the rare and beautiful chance to think. It makes you show a false face to the world and does you no real good. It produces something no one wants to read. Large language models may be new, but the problem presented by them is not new. Sophists also promised to deliver ready-made speeches guaranteed to make their young practitioners successful and happy. Socrates and Plato had a great deal to say, and write, about this.

Your thinking cannot be done for you by anyone else. Don't pretend you can outsource it.