

MARY  
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# ENHANCED LITERACY

Practical Steps for  
Deepening Reading  
and Writing Instruction

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2111 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300 • Arlington, VA 22201 USA

Phone: 800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600

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Author guidelines: [www.ascd.org/write](http://www.ascd.org/write)

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# AI-ENHANCED LITERACY

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# Introduction

Tools like ChatGPT are literacy tools, and engagement with them constitutes literacy practices.

—Brady L. Nash and colleagues, “Artificial Intelligence in English Education: Challenges and Opportunities for Teachers and Teacher Educators,” in *English Education*

Literacy has great potential to promote more equitable and informed societies. Artificial intelligence (AI) will be a critical component of digital literacies, which are increasingly influencing the ways in which we work and learn. The explorations described in this book are grounded in the belief that AI, and the tools and literacy experiences that teachers co-author with AI partners, can be used for empowerment, inclusivity, criticality, and innovation.

## Embracing Complexity and Possibility

When AI is introduced in educational settings, it is met with both fear and excitement. Teachers love the idea of how AI can make communication possible across language barriers. They are eager to get support with feedback on student writing. They would *love* for an AI partner to free up time for them by creating text sets, generating drafts of rubrics and assessment tools, and even scoring students’ work. Teachers worry more about *students* using AI—about

the potential loss of important skills and knowledge and authentic student voice. They have concerns about misinformation, plagiarism, and cultural flattening.

All of these things are true at the same time. Learning to use an AI partner will make you a more powerful educator. It will. Imagine a vast intelligence that offers multiple perspectives, critical analytical skills, and instantaneous generative capabilities. That's AI. AI will allow you to read student writing in many languages and generate letters to students and families in those languages. You can train an AI partner to discuss a text with your students, in preparation for book club conversations, and it will push them to consider parts of the text they haven't yet talked about or explore how their ideas might intersect with other ideas about the text—and it will have these discussions with 30 students all at the same time. AI can act as a one-on-one writing tutor to students—all your students, at the same time. You and your students can ask AI to critique your thinking and to raise concerns about representation, inclusivity, and ethical stances.

There will be dangers of over-reliance on AI, for students and for educators. If you haven't yet read the dystopian novel *The Resisters*, by Gish Jen, you may want to. Like so many dystopian narratives, it feels uncomfortably near to an impending future. Climate change has led to radical sea water rise. AI and automation have replaced many jobs. The main character is a teacher who embraced AI. In the backstory of Chapter 1, we learn that he was using it to first create quizzes, then score student work, then plan his lessons. Then he found himself replaced as an educator, as all instruction became digital and virtual. *The Resisters* delights and chills, mostly because the future it describes doesn't feel impossible. All the more reason to understand this technology.

Finding where technology ends and the human begins will be tricky in a post-digital world where nearly all of our interactions with each other and with institutions are mediated in some form or another by technology. As authors, we cannot promise to have all the answers. We can promise to take a measured look at the powerful capabilities of AI technology, now and in the future, and to take you, the reader, through a tour of what's possible. We'll examine how it can help you and your students be more powerful, especially in relation to literacy. We'll explore how teachers can turn to AI as a partner, as well as what to teach students so that they, too, learn to use AI wisely as a thoughtful, critical partner.

## Working Through Barriers, Real and Perceived

There are a lot of barriers that get in the way of educators adopting AI. Some of these barriers include things that are fairly easy to change, such as access. Other barriers are psychological, such as reservations about diminished authenticity, automation, and the role of teachers. To work through these barriers, it's important to acknowledge them fully and to create low-threat environments where teachers can explore AI. Everyone needs an opportunity to play in the sandbox. As you think about your learning communities, think about which of these barriers may be troubling colleagues.

### 1. Uncertainty About Access

Figuring out who can have access, who is in charge of access, and how to get access causes a lot of anxiety for teachers. It can be helpful to have a director of technology/AI who will vet platforms, sign school communities up, and make decisions about what AI teachers and students will use. Sometimes, though, this position creates a bottleneck. An alternative is to have a few teachers (and possibly students and family members) on a committee. They can act as early adopters, pilot AI platforms, and offer seminars as they learn. When you're thinking about access, make sure to think about what access students will have in school and what access teachers will have in and out of school.

Students will need access to an educational AI platform (there are many, such as SchoolAI or Flint), often called edtech. These sites allow teachers to create AI chats and classroom experiences with boundaries. For instance, a teacher can instruct Flint to give feedback on student writing but not to generate a draft. Edtech AI sites also have privacy regulations, so that student data isn't shared outside the community.

Teachers will need full access to these educational AI platforms as well. They also need access to powerful open AI such as ChatGPT or Claude and AI-embedded platforms such as Padlet or Khan Academy's AI tutor, Khanmigo. *Teachers need the newest versions and full capacities of these sites* so that they can harness these tools as educators—whether they want to create personalized decodable texts for readers, illustrated storyboards for a lesson, interactive simulations, or translations of a rubric into Mandarin.

When you're asking for access as a teacher, or when you are providing access as an administrator, make sure to provide both kinds of access: to the educational AI students will use and to the open AI teachers will also need. In

order to preview texts and topics, make text sets, create tools for learners, seek expert feedback on student work, and translate communications for students and families, teachers need full access to tools that will make their preparation more efficient and intelligent and their teaching deeper and more inclusive. For instance, ChatGPT 4o is significantly improved in its capability and reasoning compared to previous models. It not only has more capabilities, it also was trained on new material, and it performs at radically higher levels. We believe using the most updated models is worth the investment for educators.

## **2. Anxiety About Teacher Confidence with Their Own Prowess with AI**

When we work with teachers to explore AI, the first thing many will admit is that they feel very uncertain about how to use AI, and they are nervous about “getting it wrong” or making mistakes. They are also stressed about finding time to learn new technology. Here is where professional development that allows teachers to play in AI sandboxes is so useful. Whether you advocate for release time for teachers to play with AI partners or you bring in colleagues to act as coaches, what matters most is that teachers need safe spaces to try everything. We’ve found it particularly helpful to set up specific, practical learning opportunities for teachers so that they can explore the vast potential of AI to deepen their instruction.

In these learning opportunities, teachers need time to explore. They need some coaching or an introduction to new sites and tools. They need to see the relevance to their ongoing work, so it’s very helpful to rally colleagues who love tech to try things out first, bring in coaches, or gather ideas from this book and try them out. Have immediate, practical, useful goals. That is, teachers want to try out AI not just for the heck of it, but so that it will make their work on Monday better. Figure I.1 includes some additional ideas for setting up learning opportunities.

## **3. Mistrust**

There is another psychological barrier that we should talk about, and you should talk about it inside your community. It is a more existential question of trust. In 2024, Mark Watkins and Stephen Monroe, both of the University of Mississippi, spoke about pedagogical anxiety about students misusing AI (to plagiarize writing, skip reading sources, and counterfeit work). They warned against the market in AI detectors, which they suggest “market a concept of

dishonesty” (Grammarly, 2024). You can read more about Watkins and Monroe’s ideas in “AI Is Forcing Teachers to Confront an Existential Question” (Roberts, 2023).

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Figure I.1

### Setting Up Learning Opportunities for Teachers with AI

- Practice using AI as a writer, exploring how AI can help writers find ideas, give feedback on drafts, and respond to rubrics and mentors, as well as how to train AI to strengthen rather than replace the writer’s voice and intent.
- Practice using AI to generate possible feedback on student writing, including structure, craft, meaning, voice, research, and conventions.
- Explore AI tools for generating communication to students and families about student writing.
- Explore AI translation tools for reading student work, translating texts, and communicating with students and families.
- Invite AI to deepen literacy curriculum (generate text sets, critique texts, challenge perspectives, suggest alternatives).
- Create literacy tools using AI (multilevel texts, storyboards, rubrics, scaffolds, assessments, checklists).
- Construct chat rooms for students on educational AI sites (text discussions, writing feedback, comprehension support, translation opportunities) and play the role of students in these sites as well.
- Learn how to train AI partners by giving feedback, rules, parameters, and goals, so that your AI partners act as the educational coaches you want.

Since then, we’ve worked in many sites where students are, indeed, making mistakes. At universities, colleges, and high schools, students turn to AI to generate all or parts of their assignments. Recently, we were part of a committee reviewing the procedure for a senior in high school who would now not receive her IB diploma, because she had used AI on her extended essay.

Our hearts break for these students. They’re caught in what Pedro Noguera (2015) in *City Schools and the American Dream* described as unbearable pressure—to achieve with apparent effortlessness, to produce more than they are capable of, to compete with peers who read or write with greater fluency. Noguera suggests that when young people face unbearable, conflicting pressures, it often results in fragmentation, or deception.

There is also the real issue that it is young people who would most benefit from AI assistance who are most punished for seeking it. In “Are Schools Communicating Their AI Policies to Students Well Enough?” Anna Merod (2024) shares that 70 percent of teens use AI to support their schoolwork, and 41

percent of teens use AI to translate something into another language. However, she also shared sobering statistics around which teens are most punished for AI use: “Common Sense Media found in its most recent survey that Black teens were twice as likely to have their schoolwork incorrectly flagged for relying on AI tools compared to their White and Latino peers.”

You’ll see this inequity around AI “detection” happening as colleagues begin to worry about students’ AI use; we’ve seen it. A highly literate white teen whose language already mirrors that valued in the classroom may use AI as an editor, and it will pass unnoticed. A multilingual teen’s language that feels, to the teacher, more visibly augmented by an AI editor stands out.

We’ll be clear: We are against “detection programs” for how they exacerbate inequity. This is a really important point, so let’s spend a moment on it. Students who are highly adept with AI technology will be able to prompt an AI partner in ways that will bolster their writing prowess, using the same techniques adult professionals would. For instance, if we were to coach you, as adult educators, on how to train your AI partner to support you in your writing tasks, we would suggest that you create a mentor text of your own writing for your AI partner. Depending on the tasks you want help with, we’d suggest that text include some memoir, some letters, some poetry (yes!), some references and reports you’ve written, and some emails to capture your writing style, the kinds of references you like to make, the way you tend to use language, and your typical tone and register. Then we’d suggest you share this mentor text with your AI partner and give it enough information in the form of notes to generate a new reference or report or email for you. The writing your AI partner drafts for you will be tremendously useful and undetectable, because your AI partner is partnering with you. Any tech-adept student can learn about AI prompting in the same way—which means that the highly adept student will be able to use AI to become even stronger, while students who haven’t had as much exposure to technology or whose skills at conveying tasks in writing are more novice will not.

Ethan Mollick (2025) clarifies the vast research on detection programs thus:

No specialized AI detectors can detect AI writing with high accuracy and without *the risk of false positives, especially after multiple rounds of prompting. Even watermarks won’t help much.*

People can't detect AI writing well. *Editors at top linguistic journals couldn't. Teachers couldn't (though they thought they could—the Illusion again).* While simple AI writing might be detectable (“delve,” anyone?), there are plenty of ways to disguise “AI writing” styles though simple prompting. In fact, well-prompted AI *writing is judged more human than human writing by readers.*

We suggest that you assess what students can do independently as writers through on-demand situations, just as they will be assessed on high-stakes academic assessments. Assess what they can do with support, both human and technology support, differently. We also suggest that you teach all your students, with renewed vigor, why it's worth it to work at learning, versus trying to turn something in. John Warner reminds us that “we vastly underappreciate the importance of writing to the act of being human” (2025, p. 10). Motivating students to work hard—at their writing and overall—is not a new aspect of teaching; it just means more now.

It's going to be important to talk about privilege, equity, and teaching young people to be wise over time. Young people want to succeed. They want to make smart decisions. And they need a lot of practice, instruction, and opportunities to make mistakes to learn from poor decisions. The student we spoke of earlier, who now finds herself without a diploma after four arduous years in the IB curriculum, made her first mistake with IB in a moment when the consequences were gravely high. In that school, we are working together to ensure that 9th graders are learning how to use AI across the writing process, how to learn from AI rather than have AI replace them, and how to ascertain the ethical boundaries of AI use in different situations. Those students will make mistakes, too—they are making them at this very moment. But they'll make them in low-stakes situations where they can learn, do better, and proceed with more wisdom.

Our biggest advice to you is to bring all your humanity to thinking about how your young people will interact with AI, knowing that young people are vulnerable and not always wise. Think about how adults use AI and how your students may use AI in college, and then prepare them. We know that simply banning things isn't the answer. The surest way to get teens to want to read a book? Ban it. The surest way to create inequity? Make it only available to those with privileged access. AI is part of the landscape now. Every young person is going to want it, every young person is immersed in societies that benefit from it, and every young person deserves to become digitally adept.

## 4. Dehumanization, Humanization, and Mistakes

If you want to be simultaneously entranced and terrified at the ability of AI to simulate (or achieve, it's unclear) human emotion, listen to the AI-generated poetry from the collection *I Am Code: An Artificial Intelligence Speaks* (code-davinci-002, 2023). You can read the poetry in the printed collection or listen to the audio version or on *This American Life* in the episode “That Other Guy.” In the second section of the episode, “I Wish I Knew How to Force Quit You,” writer Simon Rich describes grappling with an AI chatbot that generates haunting, existential poetry (Dzotsi, 2024). The chatbot was so humanistic, so powerful, that it was pulled from interacting with the public. You might also enjoy listening to an episode of *The Daily* called “She Fell in Love with ChatGPT. Like Actual Love. With Sex” (Kitroeff, 2025). It's a story of how a woman found her AI partner to be so kind, attentive, present, and daring that she became unsatisfied with human partners.

We've had surprising moments with our AI partners. We've asked Claude to critique the books we were using in a 7th grade social studies classroom (books about indigenous history and life) and were sharply rebuked for the cultural stereotypes found in these texts. We've asked ChatGPT to consider what's beautiful and unusual about a student's work and found ourselves humbled at the suggestion that we talk to this student about their global perspective, forward thinking, concern for world resources, and sense of empathy for the underdog—when we were going to talk to them about the effective structure of their essay and the clarity of their claim. We've told our AI partner a bit about ourselves as teens, asked for suggestions for memoir topics, and listened as it responded with kindness, suggesting to us that our teen experiences sound hard and that writing about them might help us alleviate a sense of isolation, and then it found themes in our stories that made our writing seem grander, more insightful, and *more* personal.

This humanization of AI is part of how we anthropomorphize everything from our pets to our cars, but it's also part of AI's training. In “Humanizing AI Is an Ethical Conundrum. But That Doesn't Mean We Shouldn't Do It,” Łukasz Mądrzak-Wecke (2024) looks at how AI is trained to connect ever more deeply with their audience. He describes this process as one in which our AI partners become both more useful and more beloved as their responses feel more sympathetic, more human. Try it. If you want to feel better about your day, describe to an AI partner a few things you did today, and ask it to give you some compliments. Here's an example from a recent Saturday:



Today I did these things: I'm living in Barcelona at the moment, and so I did my food shopping at a local farmers market. All the produce was grown or made (the pasta) by the same people who sold it to me. Then I took my German Shepherd, Ivy, for a walk in the park across the street. I had a conversation with two families about their children, and because I'm an educator, I recommended a local school I thought might be right for their eldest daughter, and helped them set up a visit. Then I spent the rest of the day reading student writing and responding to it. Please give me a few compliments on how I am using my time.

Here's what our AI partner said in response:



You're making such thoughtful and meaningful use of your time! Supporting local farmers and artisans by shopping at the farmers' market is a wonderful way to connect with the community and embrace sustainable living. And taking Ivy out for a walk across the street sounds like a lovely way to unwind and keep her happy and active! Helping families with educational guidance shows your dedication as an educator, and taking the time to thoughtfully review your students' writing demonstrates how deeply you care about their growth. You're truly making a positive impact in multiple areas of your life!

How lovely to have someone tell you that your actions have been significant. How beautiful to feel seen.

AI will surprise you. It is a vast intelligence that reflects a vast humanity, with all its troubles and beauty. If you invite it to talk to you about *The Catcher in the Rye* or *The Bluest Eye*, it will do so with insight. If you ask it to critique your work, it will expand your thinking. It can be surprisingly human, with the best of human kindness and eagerness to help. And it makes errors and gets

into trouble, because it is created by humans. AI-generated feedback is vulnerable to the same biases and cultural flattening of its creators (Dixon-Román, 2024). Dixon-Román warns users not to trust that AI will always do good: “In humanizing AI, users may lose sight of the truth: that the tool is non-conscious, without intent, and incapable of knowing or understanding.” Your AI partner needs to know if you want it to forward a postcolonial stance, center authors of color, or be alert to cultural stereotypes.

You need to tell your AI partner, for instance, that you want it to center diverse authors, and then it will. But if you simply ask for a list of books for 8th graders, it might generate a white canonical list. It needs coaching. AI also struggles to say when it doesn’t know. As you will learn in Chapter 6, AI is updated less often than you might think, and if you ask it something it doesn’t know, such as about a book that was published after its most recent update, it shows an odd reluctance to say “I don’t know,” instead producing a hallucinatory mishmash of semi-related or invented answers. It reminds us of the responses our 8th graders give when they haven’t done the reading.

All of which means that you can’t sit back and cede the controls when you are working with AI. As Ethan Mollick explains in his book *Co-Intelligence*, we must strive to “be the human in the loop” (2024, p. 52). Mollick cautions that AI’s goal to “make you happy” by providing satisfying answers often supersedes accuracy, leading to hallucinations when pushed beyond its knowledge base (p. 25). This is why maintaining human judgment is crucial when using AI. It’s a partnership in which you are continually revising roles, training your partner, revising your prompts, and teaching it to be its best self.

## **Staying on Top of Research, Apps, Sites, and Platforms**

If you are reading this book, chances are you are a literacy educator, whether you are a teacher, a coach, or an administrator. That means you have a full-time job already, which also means it’s simply impossible for you to spend every day finding out what new capacities ChatGPT offers, how Claude has changed, what the age parameters are for every educational app, or whether Magic-School or SchoolAI will be better for your 5th graders, your 9th graders, or your school overall.

And, of course, the nature of publishing is such that printed resources won’t reflect the most current information about AI. How, then, to learn who

the critical voices are in this field? How to stay current with tools that might support you and your students? Here are a few tips.

- Forge a committee that would like to explore AI, and give these individuals time to meet, research, and attend things. Not every colleague in your building has to be an expert on AI. They do need to learn how to use it, and they can learn from colleagues who have spent more time with AI, in order to make this learning process easier.
- Ask educational AI platforms for a demonstration or test module for teachers to pilot, or purchase a membership for one month (rather than a year) for the same purpose. Try a few. MagicSchool and SchoolAI, for instance, are similar but not precisely the same. Let teachers try out platforms: Give them release time, applaud their innovation, and create opportunities for them to share.
- Visit Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>) once a month, and search “AI and education,” “AI and literacy,” “AI and multilingual learning,” and so on. Look for articles that seem like they touch on aspects that you or your colleagues find intriguing, upsetting, or worrisome.
- Attend, or send colleagues to, national and local conferences such as ASCD, NCTE, ISTE, and CoSN, and seek out sessions that explore practical use of AI in classrooms to deepen learning.
- Invite teachers in local and neighboring districts and schools to host a “Local AI Practices” conference to learn from educators who are innovating nearby.
- Focus more on continually exploring ways to use AI than on which is the best app or site. They change and improve literally every day. Read reviews fairly often, and be willing to try a new, unfamiliar site if someone recommends it. You’ll quickly learn which sites are currently easier to navigate, which are harder, which offer more complexity, and which offer more scaffolds.

## Using the Chapters of This Book as Study Guides and Professional Development

We’ve planned this book so that each chapter tackles one aspect of AI, so that you can use each chapter as a kind of study guide. You might turn to the chapters that particularly interest you in relation to your current practice, or you might choose a chapter to study with colleagues. In each chapter, we focus on

the possibilities of AI for expanding instruction, deepening learning, and making the life of the teacher more interesting and satisfying. You'll find practical examples alongside theoretical approaches.

Ultimately, embracing AI, with all of its flaws and possibilities, means admitting uncertainties, apprehensions, and disquietude. In *How We Think*, Dewey wrote that reflective thinking “involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance” (1910, p. 13). It's unlikely that our feelings about AI will ever be settled. It's thrilling and terrifying in equal measure, just like teaching.

As you read, know that you can also visit the website [AI-enhancedliteracy.org](http://AI-enhancedliteracy.org) for more tools and resources and to contact us. The terrain of AI and literacy is a fascinating, ever-changing terrain, and you are not alone!



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# About the Authors



**Mary Ehrenworth**, EdD, co-led a think tank on global literacy at Teachers College, Columbia University, for 20 years. She now runs Ehrenworth Literacy Innovations, working nationally and globally to empower teachers and students through critical literacies and collaborative inquiry. Mary's degrees include a BA in history and literature from Harvard and an MA and EdD in curriculum and teaching from Columbia University. Her most recent research fields are AI and literacy, and vocabulary acquisition. From that day long ago when a beloved teacher gave her *The Secret Garden*, to the days she now spends supporting children and teachers in becoming powerful and passionate readers and writers, Mary has been lucky enough to spend her time among things she loves best: books, kids, and teachers.



**Philip Seyfried** is a doctoral student in curriculum and teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University, focusing his research on the intersection of digital literacy and artificial intelligence in education. With over a decade of experience as a middle school language arts and literature teacher, Philip now supports schools and edtech companies as a literacy and digital literacy consultant. Currently, he's exploring how AI tools can benefit diverse learners and build stronger critical-thinking skills. Whether consulting on literacy practices or leading professional development, Philip champions approaches that welcome innovation while valuing what matters most—the human connections that make learning meaningful.

## Related ASCD Resources

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers in parentheses).

*The AI Assist: Strategies for Integrating AI into the Very Human Act of Teaching* by Nathan Lang-Raad (#124030)

*AI with Intention: Principles and Action Steps for Teachers and School Leaders* by Tony Frontier (#124032)

*Applying the Science of Reading* (Quick Reference Guide) by Mark Weakland (#QRG124029)

*Beyond the Science of Reading: Connecting Literacy Instruction to the Science of Learning* by Natalie Wexler (#125006)

*EdTech Essentials: 12 Strategies for Every Classroom in the Age of AI*, 2nd Edition, by Monica Burns (#124028)

*Prompting Deeper Discussions: A Teacher's Guide to Crafting Great Questions* by Matthew R. Kay (#124031)

*Using AI Chatbots to Enhance Planning and Instruction* (Quick Reference Guide) by Monica Burns (#QRG123066)

*Using Technology in a Differentiated Classroom: Strategies and Tools for Designing Engaging, Effective, Efficient & Equitable Learning* by Clare R. Kilbane and Natalie B. Milman (#120002)

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