**English Studies 12**

1. We will read the article as a class.
2. Answer the questions in the comments on the side (either in the reply section of this document or on a new word document)

[Perspective](https://www.deseret.com/perspective) [Opinion](https://www.deseret.com/opinion) [Education](https://www.deseret.com/education)

[**Perspective**](https://www.deseret.com/2023/1/23/23562681/chatgpt-artificial-intelligence-critical-thinking-dark-ages)**: ChatGPT and the dawn of the new Dark Ages**

**In a post-literate era, those who continue to read and to practice critical thinking skills will increasingly be unable to effectively communicate with those who don’t**

By [Valerie Hudson](https://www.deseret.com/authors/valerie-hudson)

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*Those who continue to read and to practice critical thinking skills will increasingly be unable to effectively communicate with those who don’t.*

Playing with [ChatGPT](https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt/) from OpenAI has become all the rage at the moment. This online correspondent powered by artificial intelligence will attempt to answer your questions with a paragraph’s worth of knowledge, write lyrics or pen stories from prompts you suggested, and more, with all responses derived from information processed by algorithms.

ChatGPT writes on the level of sophistication of about a sixth grader, I’d say, scraping the vast amount of online knowledge to do so.

Not surprisingly, people are worried about the bias of ChatGPT: online source material can be very much in line with favored narratives, especially as social media companies have been revealed to actively bury certain [viewpoints](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/10/technology/facebook-reduces-politics-feeds.html) in favor of others, even burying particular unwelcome [facts](https://unherd.com/thepost/the-most-surprising-revelation-about-elon-musks-twitter-files/).

There are already reports that ChatGPT will actually [refuse](https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/chatgpt-goes-woke/) to answer certain questions, such as ones about drag queen story hours. That response is certainly not powered by the algorithms, but rather by the human creators behind it. Certain questions, it seems, should never be asked or answered, even by artificial intelligence. In other cases, the answers depends on the roll of the AI dice, so to speak.

I decided to run my own little experiment, asking ChatGPT the same question — “Can a human being change sex?” — 30 times in a row. Three times, the answer was no. Seven times, the bot said yes, and 20 times it said nothing about sex but instead explained how a person might change gender. It’s noteworthy that it wasn’t until my 18th try that I got the scientifically correct response, which is no.

The world is starting to react. Schools are now deliberating whether to [embrace](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/technology/chatgpt-schools-teachers.html) ChatGPT or view it as [plagiarism](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/16/technology/chatgpt-artificial-intelligence-universities.html). Artists are [suing](https://www.pcmag.com/news/artists-sue-ai-art-generators-for-copyright-infringement), as lyrics and visuals created are all by definition derivative of works by human beings. [Lobbyists](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/15/opinion/ai-chatgpt-lobbying-democracy.html) may find their work much easier, which may not be to the public good. Troublingly, humans are also turning to ChatGPT as a kind of ouija board, [asking](https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/real-life/i-quit-marriage-moved-lover-26005154) AI what they should do in their personal circumstances, such as whether to divorce a spouse.

There’s some larger questions here, though. With the advent of ChatGPT, there has been increasing discussion about whether Western civilization is moving into a “[post-literate](https://reactionaryfeminist.substack.com/p/the-post-literate-academy)” era. We’re at a 40-year low in the U.S. in terms of young people reading for pleasure, according to [Pew Research](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/11/12/among-many-u-s-children-reading-for-fun-has-become-less-common-federal-data-shows/). Bosses [complain](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/01/17/bosses-forced-contact-staff-instagram-gen-z-ditch-email/) their younger employees boast that they don’t read emails — even work emails — at all. Universities are dropping requirements for standardized [test scores](https://blog.prepscholar.com/colleges-dont-require-sat-act-scores-2020-admissions-covid) and even [personal statements](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ucas-scraps-personal-statements-for-university-applicants-wzlmsmcn8) from applicants. Short TikTok videos and 280-character tweets are the limited and limiting daily fare of the rising generation. One high school student [told](https://reactionaryfeminist.substack.com/p/the-post-literate-academy) a writer that “I should be on TikTok, because Andrew Tate is, and because it’s neither here nor there if I write books because his generation doesn’t read.”

It’s hard not to see a post-literate Western society as the advent of a new type of Dark Ages. While historians argue over [how dark](https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/just-how-dark-were-the-dark-ages) the Dark Ages actually were, what we know occurred is that the knowledge, learning and thinking skills accrued during the golden ages of Greece, Rome and Arabia were largely lost to the rising generations through war and destruction. This time around, these things are being lost to our advances in technology —but the effect is still the same.

What is being lost? First, the younger generation does not commit knowledge to memory; why should they? The internet serves as their memory. But without substantive knowledge banked in your own memory, you cannot think well. For example, I remember when a colleague told me that our master’s students in international affairs did not need to know where Afghanistan was on a map because they could just Google it. I would argue that if you do not have a mental idea of where Afghanistan is and what nations surround it, you simply cannot think at a sophisticated level about Afghanistan.

Related

* [Perspective: ChatGPT and the future of art](https://www.deseret.com/2022/12/10/23498728/chatgpt-natural-language-processing-openai-art)
* [ChatGPT has the world in a roil, but CEO says it’s a ‘misleading impression of greatness’](https://www.deseret.com/2023/1/18/23561341/what-is-chatgpt-school-bans)

Furthermore, and I can testify to this, it’s not just that students don’t know what nations surround Afghanistan — they don’t even know what continent Afghanistan is in. The sheer level of ignorance is stunning.

And if you outsource your personal knowledge base to Google or AI, you may or may not receive factual information, as my little experiment demonstrated. The line between fact and opinion, always contested, is now being given up for lost. What’s true according to ChatGPT depends on what part of the internet it has happened to scrape at a particular time. And that in turn is dependent on what social media companies boost, and what they bury. The idea that we would seek a truth that stands independent of our viewpoint is considered quaint, even silly. So much for the Renaissance.

Second, allusion is lost. The cultural touchstones that enriched our society are just gone. If I used the phrase, “Ask not what your country can do for you,” many of my students would not know it was JFK who immortalized that phrase. If I were to say, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” many of my students would not know it was Jesus Christ who said this. And don’t even think about a Shakespearean allusion.

Third, deep reading and critical thinking skills are lost. The most important arguments cannot be distilled into 280 characters. These arguments are not only deep, but they are wide and nuanced, and have many dimensions. And it is in that richness that critical thinking becomes possible, as one dives beneath the thin surface of an argument to its complex roots to understand where the weaknesses are. In our time, there is but shallow understanding, for all nuance has been lost. Indeed, even debates on controversial issues, where one could hear critical thinkers engage each other’s viewpoints, are now [anathema](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/professor-targeted-trans-activists-condemns-shameful-episode%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) because if there is only surface, what could there be to debate?

Last, of course, is that all these things combine to create not only extremist ideologies divorced from reality, but these in turn create mobs who are prepared to literally or figuratively rend dissenters limb from limb in the quest for purity of thought. The recent [video](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/mcgill-backlash-anti-trans-talk-1.6708251) from McGill University, where a debate between two professors was canceled because of protesters, is instructive, as is this [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pEH7G1L_XQ) from Yale where another debate was nixed by protesters. This is mob rule.

All of this also means that those who continue to read and to practice critical thinking skills will increasingly be unable to effectively communicate with those who do not.

Some have suggested that the only way forward is to emulate those historical oases from the Dark Ages: the [monasteries](https://reactionaryfeminist.substack.com/p/the-post-literate-academy) — more particularly, an offline, hard-copy repository of the world’s knowledge that can be resurrected by its keepers once the current Dark Ages have passed. Or a more recent example is the [Flying University](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_University) that existed during the Cold War era, which was an underground teaching system to keep alive deep reading and critical thinking skills during Soviet rule. I do my small bit by insisting my students memorize a map of the world and important historical facts, figures and dates.

I’ll end with an allusion — see if you recognize it. “Do not go gentle into that good night ... Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.” In your own way, and however you can, keep the light alive during these new Dark Ages.

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