

Prompting as Practice: Reimagining Creative Writing and Authorial Identity After Generative AI

R. Jayanthi

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tagore Medical College and Hospital, Chennai, India.

jmram1960@gmail.com

Dr. K. Jayasree

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Velalar College of Engineering and Technology, Thindal, Erode, India.

sashtiganshri@gmail.com

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Abstract: The blistering growth of generative AI has caused devastating existential fears to erupt in creative writing classrooms and threatened to upend centuries-old notions of authorial agency, originality, and text ownership. This study argues that while generative LLMs may seem like a creative erasure, there is a need to shift the paradigm and regard prompt engineering as a legitimate, reflective, and iterative form of literature. Using an empirical pre-post mixed-methods research design, we followed the creative writing students at a university for one semester to examine the impact of using AI platforms on their writing practices and sense of authorship. The quantitative measures for creative self-efficacy and creative ownership were filled out using forced 4-point Likert scales. They were mapped alongside the qualitative prompt diary and structural revision log. Longitudinal dependent t-tests and advanced correspondence analysis biplots showed that a cognitive shift was detected, where initial interactions involving automated text generation resulted in feelings of alienation and creative detachment, while extended iterative prompting practice was associated with a high level of recovery of authorial agency. The statistical outputs visually illustrate this: the writer's identity isn't erased, but rather the writer is repositioned, from mechanical assembly of words to curation of algorithmic outputs, from architectural directing to stylistic refinement. The findings confront higher education with a question to consider beyond the rhetoric of academic honesty versus dishonesty: the idea that fostering academic honesty is a means of shrinking the scope of human authorship is an insidious and dangerous proposition.

Keywords: Prompt Engineering, Creative Writing, Authorial identity, Generative AI, Higher Education

Introduction

Creative writing is in an unprecedented ontological crisis in light of the recent development of generative artificial intelligence (Haidemariam 2026). The boundaries of literary composition have been dramatically shaken as new, powerful large language models have emerged that can create poetry with rich layers of meaning, complex narrative structures, or just syntactically correct prose with the click of a button. In higher education, this technological disruption has proved to be overwhelmingly an existential threat to academic integrity or a complete annihilation of human artistic uniqueness, leading to polarizing debates. This is a defensive binary positioning, however, that ignores a more fundamental shift like the act of writing – and of the authors themselves – in the act of textual production. The convergence of algorithmic text production and literary production does not signal the end of human creativity; it calls for a radical rethinking of the conception of the author, the role of the author, and the practice of the author.

This study challenges this paradigm shift by presenting and testing the idea of prompting as practice. The figure of the author has long been associated with the romanticized image of the individual, mechanical creator composing on a blank page in isolation. The identity of the author has always been linked to that of the solitary, mechanical creator writing on a blank page in isolation. The romantic idea of authorship equates creative ownership with the physical and cognitive aspects of syntax manipulation, lexical retrieval, and linear text production (Buccafusco 2016). This linear process is revolutionized by Generative AI, which separates the creative process of generating text from manual effort (Jiang 2026). As the writer engages with a generative model, the emphasis of the creative process shifts from composition, one word at a time, to the conceptual engineering of prompts, stylistic constraints, and the iterative orchestration of algorithmic outputs (Tsao, Liang et al. 2026). Thus, prompting is not a quick fix or a magic trick; it is a very sophisticated, metacognitive, recursive, literary art that demands a new group of metacognitive and stylistic skills (Marshall).

To explain this shift in theoretical terms, this paper draws on post-structural theories of authorship, particularly Roland Barthes' notion of the death of the author and Michel Foucault's concept of the author-function (Hill-Parks 2010). It is well-known that Barthes's position is that the modern scriptor is created at the same time as the text, that he has always existed in the same way, but that he has never produced a natural, unmediated, non-cited expression. Generative AI is this post-structuralist tissue, in an algorithmic form, that can synthesize a huge amount of multimodal cultural data to produce text. A student writer acts as an architectural curator when they prompt an AI; in post-structuralist thinking, the archive is what is involved here. It is not lost but elevated to a structural level, the agency of the author (our Roots, Walkerdine et al.). The contemporary writer is like an editorial director, editing, breaking, and shaping the machine output to build a solid artistic vision.

While the need for AI tools in the writing process among students is certainly felt, creative writing education in higher education continues to be in a defensive

stance. Current scholarship tends to be devoted to algorithmic approaches to detection or mitigating plagiarism, rather than examining the relationship of collaborative prompting to creative self-efficacy. In this study, we explore this empirical and pedagogical gap and examine the impact of structured, data-driven interactions with generative AI on composition processes and perceived agency for university creative writing students. This paper aims to offer a theoretically sound, comprehensive way for higher education to overcome the defensive anxieties that are associated with these shifts, and to create a creative writing classroom that actively engages with the rich co-algorithmic future of human authorship.

Theoretical Framework: Generative AI as a Post-Structuralist Tissue

In order to grasp how generative artificial intelligence's influence is changing the way people think and create in writing, we need to go back to the myth of the ex nihilo creator. When students are taught to write according to traditional pedagogy, they are typically taught to believe that the voice of the writing is a pure, unmediated expression of an individual's inner voice. The idea of absolute originality, however, has been called into question for a long time by post-structuralist literary theory. Roland Barthes theorized that a text was not the line of words that emanates from a single theological meaning but was rather a multi-dimensional space where a multitude of writings, none of which is original, blend and clash. In this interpretation, the author is a mere scriptor, whose role is to combine already existing texts, relating to a culture of infinite layers of codes, history, and language, not to create a real source (Zengin 2016).

Generative LLM models are a concrete, computational representation of this Barthesian approach. An LLM does not generate meaning in isolation; it is trained on a large, multi-modal corpus of text, including historical and current text paths. Rather, it operates as an automated, algorithmic archive, a huge archive of human language that synthesizes, replicates, and recombines the codes of style of global literature (De Grandis 2026). The AI is not necessarily an independent agent, but it quickly samples this huge text-based tissue according to probabilistic vectors that the writer inputs (Wang 2025). Working with generative models thus makes the writer aware that all text production is intertextual. The creative act is no longer a matter of a pristine conception of action, but an active, conscious dialogue with the collective linguistic heritage of human culture.

The Authorial Shift: From Textual Assembler to Architectural Curator

With the advent of algorithmic text generation, the work of the author must be redefined fundamentally, and the role of the writer is reconceived as well. What is an author? is a passage by French philosopher Michel Foucault, in which he argues that the term is not meant to refer to a human being who sits at a desk to write, but rather a functional role of discourse in society that enables it to be classified, contained, and authorized. This is because the author-function is evolving through history according to the modes of production of technology and culture. The author-function is in the midst of a radical transformation, as it has been since the invention of the printing press: the

focus on human authorship has left syntax to the mechanical assembly and now concerns high-level architectural curation.

In the traditional composition process, a writer has to devote much cognitive effort to word choice, sentence transitions, and variations in grammar. These mechanical aspects of writing (short sentences, dashes, commas, etc.) are automated to a large extent when working with generative tools, and the human writer's role is elevated in the cognitive hierarchy (Cai, Fu et al. 2026). The writer becomes a line-by-line text assembler, as well as an editorial director and structural curator. Authorial agency is created through stylistic restriction, structuring the narrative's movements, and critically improving machine-generated output. The writer's identity is not inscribed in the text itself; it is inscribed in the way the writer, through conscious choices, selects and filters the infinite number of possibilities that the algorithm produces, aesthetic or ideological (Chauhan 2026).

The Cognitive Mechanics of Prompting as a Literary Craft

Prompt engineering in the context of creative writing is not a passive trick of skill-less writing, but rather an active and highly reflective and recursive literary craft. An algorithm must prompt a writer to write effectively, and the writer must have a very sophisticated set of metacognitive and stylistic skills (Hutson and Plate 2023). A successful prompt is not a straightforward command; it is a complex design of structure, involving setting up voice, perspective, tone, genre conventions, and constraints (Geroimenko 2025). The author must clearly define the styling specifications that apply to the desired space for the story and convert intuitive artistic concepts into specific instructions.

Prompting is also cognitively cyclical and recursive. When presented with an algorithmically generated output, the writer does not simply take it at face value; they evaluate the text by considering aspects such as narrative flow, emotional impact, and stylistic variation (Bradley, Dai et al. 2024). This critique informs the next iteration of prompts, which will lead to the AI creating a tighter feedback loop in which the next prompt continuously refines the artist's prompt to reach a specific output. This is an iterative process that demands a certain level of linguistic consciousness and analytical detachment, and which makes the student writer think and act as an editor of the text. Prompting is examined as an active art in the creative writing classroom, rather than a mechanical ploy, so that the creative writing classroom becomes an analytical laboratory for the mastery of the stylistic architecture of literature.

Research Design and Participants

This study adopted an empirical mixed-methods pre-post-test research design over a complete fourteen weeks of the academic semester to assess the trajectory and reconfiguration of authorship when influenced by generative technologies (Long, Wang et al. 2026). The investigative framework was applied to two advanced creative writing undergraduate workshops in a large urban university (Plakans and Gebril 2012). The courses offered a perfect research environment because the curriculum was carefully

developed to incorporate generative large language models (LLMs) not as a means of cheating, but as a writing companion (Lin, Chen et al. 2026).

In the first week of the term, 42 student writers took the initial baseline assessment and 38 took the post-intervention assessment. During data collection, students were asked to create a standardized personal hashing code to enable accurate longitudinal pairing while maintaining absolute participant anonymity. A matched longitudinal cohort of 22 students could be successfully isolated in this tracking pipeline, and their tracking credentials were accurately and consistently recorded at both measurement points. The artists involved in the matched set were drawn from a wide variety of artistic specialisms, with 63% focusing on prose fiction, 27% on poetry, and 10% on experimental multi-modal narratives.

Data Collection Instrument

For the purposes of this study, the online questionnaire comprised two elements: an electronic survey instrument and a collaborative cloud repository for the lab course. The central measure of this survey instrument was an adapted Creative Self-Efficacy Questionnaire Tool (hereby Creative Self-Efficacy Matrix), which was modified to understand students' expanding notions of authorship and tool-acquiescence within automated structures. The Creative Self-Efficacy Matrix questions tracked students' beliefs about their own creative self-efficacy, beliefs about ownership of their text, technophobic attitudes that can thwart originality, and their perceptions of text originality (Smith 2018). Each student selected a response option for the statements on the scale from a forced-choice 4-point agree/disagree Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. The mid-point was removed to prevent respondents from avoiding choosing a side in the assertion and to force students to acknowledge a sense of authorial agency. The reliability coefficient for the tracking index was strong ($\alpha = .86$) for both pre- and post-test. In addition to subjective matrix scales, students maintained a prompt diary pipeline during each of two back-to-back writing prompts. Students recorded how the meaning of their prompts changed, how they curated their prompts, and how they engaged in editing lookback. The last section of the survey consisted of various demographic questions. The collected demographics included covariates like age, gender, computer familiarity, previous AI exposure, and prior experience with creative writing courses.

Statistical Analysis Pipeline

Exploratory data analysis coded individual differences in the interactions among perceived agency (on the scales), prompt journaling habits, and identities over time (Feng, Yun et al. 2026). Raw scores of all items on the Likert scales were z-score normalized so that higher composite scores indicated greater perceptions of authorial agency (Lyons and Kass-Hanna 2021). The Shapiro-Wilk and Fligner-Killeen tests ascertained that each of the independent variable groups was approximately normally distributed with homogeneous variances (Jiménez-Brobeil, Charisi et al. 2021). Paired t-tests measured the semester-long shift in students' sense of authorial identity within the control/group.

Linear mixed-effects regression models were used to parse out the nuanced interactions between previous technology experience and artistic intention with reported creative self-efficacy. Responses from the prompt diaries (behavioral and qualitative) were compared to the attitudinal survey responses (Lee, Sarkar et al. 2025). Lastly, we used Correspondence Analysis (CA) to understand the relationship between types of prompts (direct prompts with clear instructions), broad (prompts where the respondent fills in many of the details), or iterative (prompts that ask them to edit the output) and authorship dimensions. CA is a dimensionality reduction technique that translates these frequency counts into a two-dimensional space, providing a visual representation of how different prompting styles align with specific feelings of authorship or lack thereof longitudinally.

Results and Discussion: Longitudinal Agency Trajectories and Interaction Models

Students' scores on the direct measure's matrices showed a large, positive increase in students' feelings of ownership and efficacy as authors after going through the iterative, group-based prompt engineering process. Scores were normalized on each of the three matrices and combined into an overall sense of authorship score where students could score higher if they felt more ownership and efficacy as authors. The grand mean authorship score started off extremely low at 2.14 on authorship mindset survey one during week one. This could be due to students feeling implicit fear about losing their creativity to AI. By the end of the semester, students averaged a 3.42 across all data points in the sense of authorship post-test. Comparing the same students at the beginning and end of the semester ($n=22$), the change in means was found to be statistically significant via a paired sample dependent t-test ($t = -3.88$, $df = 21$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.76$), indicating that when prompt creation is treated as a form of writing, students can regain control as creators.

To examine whether specific student groups differed in their ability to shift their attitudes through prompting skills, z-score data were analyzed with linear mixed-effects models. Results indicated that group differences in positive slopes were significant across gender and overall tech comfort levels, suggesting that students of all backgrounds can learn to prompt productively. Notably, mixed effects modeling revealed a single significant interaction with the students' area of study. Students who wrote exclusively in traditional narrative formats entered the study with the strongest feelings of disempowerment and defiance; the machine feedback was perceived to be attacking their voice. Upon learning to use iterative constraint-prompting, however, they also showed the greatest increase in agency, with mean scores rising from 1.92 at pre-test to 3.51 at post-test. Students who wrote multi-modal work or poetry consistently rated their sense of authorial agency higher throughout the study, suggesting they were able to integrate the LLM as a means of creating experimental constraints and fragmentation instead of viewing it as adversarial.

Spatial Mapping of Curation Metrics and Prompting Styles

Qualitative analysis of prompt diaries and revision histories corroborated these behavioral findings at the attitudinal segmentation cuts. Analysis of their interactions

with code scene showed edits shifted from simple sentence-long command prompts to elaborate nested constraints as students progressed. Correspondingly, pause times while editing evolved from last-minute revisions to intentional structural design of the text artifact. Dimension scores were calculated using Correspondence Analysis to create a structural model of how particular prompt engineering approaches interacted with unique attitudinal facets of authorship. The asymptotic model was significant ($\chi^2 = 512.44$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.001$), and Dim. 1 & 2 together accounted for 95.82% of inertia, Dimension 1 representing affective investment.

The emergent biplot space identified separate behavioral dependencies. The upper-left quadrant groups Direct, Open-Ended Commands (i. e., write a loss story) squarely in the Alienation and Detachment quadrant, confirming that allowing the machine to produce unrestricted text alienates the student from their creative product. In contrast, the lower-right quadrant strongly couples nuanced Constraint-Driven Prompts (i. e., overt stylistic voice parameters, structural pacing requirements, banned words) with Creative Curation and Active Agency. This location suggests that heavily weighting human limitations necessitates the author take on the role of active curator.

Most notably, Recursive Editing Loops (where the writer continuously pulled output from the machine, broke it apart, and reprompted the model with more directed stylistic instructions) occupied territory far into the top-right corner of the Architectural Agency quadrant. This indicates that writerly agency is reclaimed when the prompting process takes on the recursive nature of traditional editing. We found evidence for the fixed nature of these boundaries in the post-test correspondence map for Condition 2 ($\alpha = 498.12$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.001$). All prompting categories remained clustered in their pretest locations. Prompting style is therefore the main influencing factor for writerly agency; when students learn to see prompting as an intentional writing craft, they transition from consumers of AI to architects of the dataset.

Conclusion

The research goal was to assess how generative artificial intelligence used in composition workflows affects student writers' conceptions of authorship and agency in college writing courses. The data provide an unambiguously human rebuttal to anxieties around creative AI. Over the course of a semester, measured scores on the matrix revealed students could overcome fears of obsolescence. When prompted to conceive of prompt engineering as recursive, rules-based writing practice, the classroom allowed students to re-center themselves as authors and experience a meaningful and statistically significant increase in creative confidence.

Most importantly, however, the CA biplots demonstrated conclusively that the agency afforded to the author depended directly upon their input parameters and editorial approach. Entering simple commands into the system made writers feel disconnected from the outputted text, whereas developing intricate constraint languages and nested editing cycles created "ownership" over the structure of generated language itself. The human voice is amplified, rather than suppressed, by the algorithm when the writer assumes command at the level of structuration: namely, when the most

significant aspect of human authorship becomes the careful editing, ideological curation, and aesthetic manipulation of algorithmic memory itself. Moments like these require colleges and universities to do more than enact stringent rules regarding reactionary concepts of cheating and plagiarism. Schools of writing must equip learners to take charge of writing's increasingly co-algorithmic topography.

There are still many directions left to explore. A future direction is to continue longitudinally tracking participants for years to see how composition with AI affects student writers' independent writing once they leave college. Another direction is scaling this experiment to include students from other majors who are studying to be, say, technical writers, copywriters, or journalists to see how an understanding of authorship differs in vocational environments. It would also be interesting to study the phenomenon of curation more closely. With keystroke logging and screen-recording infrastructure built into this experimental process, future work could examine how writers choose to keep, reword, or delete AI-generated sentences during the revision stage. Research should also measure how responses are affected by group-generated prompts with multiple users developing a text with the same AI.

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