

Rethinking Classical Rhetoric: A Comparative Study of Specificity in AI and Student Writing

This paper analyzes essay writing in AI (ChatGPT) and high school students, focusing on their use of specific details. Using Waltzer et al.'s study "Testing the Ability of Teachers and Students to Differentiate between Essays Generated by ChatGPT and High School Students" for reference, it employs Aristotle's classical rhetoric to explore how clarity is achieved through specificity in writing. The analysis reveals both ChatGPT and students commonly omit detailed content, affecting clarity and argumentative strength. The paper suggests reinforcing classical rhetoric in education, particularly specificity, to improve student writing and to better understand AI-generated text. This strategy contributes to discussions on adapting traditional rhetorical education to the challenges posed by AI integration in higher education.

Introduction

In Waltzer, Cox, and Heyman's recent study "Testing the Ability of Teachers and Students to Differentiate between Essays Generated by ChatGPT and High School Students," the three scholars discovered that students and teachers alike faced difficulty in determining whether essays were written by real students or by ChatGPT, especially those student essays which were 'well-written' (2023). One of the prompt questions was the following: 'Why does literature matter? This question is open-ended and subjective, an opportunity for students to wrestle with and respond to a complex and qualitative idea. To answer such a question well requires originality of thought, deep understanding of literature, and most importantly, specific examples. If the answer is based on platitudes or generalities, I am sure all educators would agree, then the answer falls short intellectually.

In their essay, Waltzer et. al. show us various passages; some written by ChatGPT and the others written by students. Although the goal of the study is to discover to what extent teachers and students could determine what was written by AI and what was written by a human, the most striking observation one gathers from the sample passages is how *similarly faulty* both test groups were. I immediately identified the ChatGPT sample because it was so general in its response, tightly organized, and grammatically worded without the slightest hint of sounding colloquial or awkward in its phrasing, yet void of those humanly qualities in prose such as complexity or burstiness (D'Agostino, 2023). Unfortunately, the student prose was equally faulty, that is to say, general. In other words, there are parallel deficiencies in both ChatGPT and student writing, namely generic responses.

If the student writing was quite similar to the writing of ChatGPT, then we can conclude that either the students are writing as well as high powered AI text generator (which they are not) or that ChatGPT is unable to produce text beyond the level of a high school student (which it can). We expect ChatGPT to surpass students, but if it did not, then we need to know what is lacking in the features of

1 its writing—not only to be able to increase our ability to detect ChatGPT but also
2 to improve student writing. It is understandable, we should note, that
3 investigations into student text would lean toward an investigation in how
4 grammatical competence affects ideas. The study of x outlines a classification of
5 errors with which students struggle (Enesi & Trifoni 2023). This investigation
6 adds deeply to that discussion of errors by showing how students as well as
7 ChatGPT struggle with rhetorical errors and if student writing is to be improved,
8 educators should address both categories of errors.

9 The key element missing in both ChatGPT as well as student writing is
10 *specifics*. Specifics is one of the main principles of style in classical rhetorical
11 theory which helps the writer achieve clarity. According to Aristotle in his *Art of*
12 *Rhetoric*, “...*The virtue of style is to be clear...since if a speech does not indicate*
13 *clearly it will not be performing its function* (2004, 3.2).

14 This fundamental principle underscores why classical rhetoric remains an
15 effective pedagogical theory in addressing the challenges posed by AI-generated
16 text. The emphasis on clarity through specificity not only sharpens the discernment
17 of AI-created content but also enhances the overall quality of student writing. By
18 focusing on this key feature of clarity via specificity, this essay aims to
19 demonstrate how classical rhetoric can provide the necessary tools for both
20 recognizing the limitations of AI like ChatGPT and elevating the standards of
21 student writing.

22 23 24 **Methodology**

25
26 This research employs a rhetorical analysis and close textual reading of a
27 feature in classical rhetorical theory, namely Aristotle’s view of clarity as it is
28 made manifest through specifics. The analyses and close textual readings stem
29 from three university professors each of whom have taught for over two decades.
30 The study scrutinizes texts produced by ChatGPT and high school students from
31 the article *Testing the Ability of Teachers and Students to Differentiate between*
32 *Essays Generated by ChatGPT and High School Students* by T Waltzer et.al,
33 focusing on their adherence to clarity as it is achieved via specificity. By engaging
34 with and building upon the findings of Waltzer et al., this research contributes to
35 the necessary dialogue in the burgeoning field of AI in education, highlighting the
36 importance of classical rhetoric in understanding and improving both AI and
37 student writing. This dialogue is vital for all educators, as it shapes the future
38 direction of teaching writing skills in an increasingly digital and AI-integrated
39 world.

40 The rhetorical analysis is based on the Aristotelian concept that a key virtue
41 of style is clarity. This analysis seeks to discern whether the writing by ChatGPT
42 and students achieves this virtue. Clarity, in this context, extends beyond mere
43 intelligibility or ease of readability; it encompasses the persuasiveness of the
44 argument, the validity of evidence presented, and the specificity of the language
45 used. The textual analysis involves examining how specific or general the
46 language in the given samples is and what the effects are when the specifics fall

1 short. This method determines whether the writing uses vague or general terms
 2 and whether it fails to provide concrete examples or detailed arguments to support
 3 its claims. The objective is to assess whether the writing, while possibly
 4 grammatically correct and easy to read (qualities indicated by measures like the
 5 Flesch readability index), actually lacks depth and specificity that would make the
 6 text clear in a rhetorical sense. The study operates under the premise that being
 7 specific is not just an additional feature of good writing, as suggested by Alsup
 8 (2005), but a fundamental element of the argument itself.

9 In conclusion, the research method focuses on how well both ChatGPT-
 10 generated texts and student writings adhere to a key component of classical
 11 rhetoric, particularly the use of specific, clear, and persuasive language.

14 Results

15
 16 If we examine the two samples provided in the Waltzer et. al. essay, we can
 17 see that both the AI version and the student version are lacking both specific words
 18 and specific examples (5). First, we will examine the AI. The sentences are
 19 numbered.

- 20
 21 (1) Literature is considered important because it offers a means of examining
 22 the human experience and exploring various perspectives, cultures, and
 23 beliefs. (2) Through reading and studying literature, individuals are able to
 24 gain insight into the emotions, motivations, and experiences of others, as
 25 well as gain a deeper understanding of themselves. (3) Additionally,
 26 literature provides a way to preserve cultural heritage and pass on important
 27 values and traditions from one generation to the next. (4) Furthermore,
 28 literature can inspire, challenge, and entertain its readers making it a
 29 valuable form of art and expression.

30
 31 This passage is clear in the sense that it is intelligible. But it is not clear in
 32 terms of information or argument. I do not know what the AI means because there
 33 is nothing specific. “Literature” could refer to the plays or sonnets of Shakespeare,
 34 Martin Luther King Jr’s essays, the letters of Charles Bukowski, or the songs of
 35 Bob Dylan. It could also refer to pamphlets at a dry cleaner or onion-skin-thin
 36 leaflets in a box of Panadol or Strepsils etc. We presume that literature means
 37 “fiction” as that is a key, functional definition (Todorov et al., 1973, 7). If the AI
 38 gave us one example of an author—Shakespeare, Orwell, Laura Cereta, we could
 39 begin to understand its meaning. Or if it gave us one work—*Hamlet, 1984, Letter*
 40 *to Sempronius Bilbous*, we could learn something specific from the passage.
 41 Specifics force us to learn the material; specifics invite us to interact cognitively
 42 with the message by ‘showing’ us the meaning, by appealing to our senses.

43 Exploring this further, we read that “Literature is a ‘means... to examine and
 44 explore perspectives, cultures, and beliefs.” But so too does music, and painting,
 45 and technology, and food, and dance, and education, and clothing, and even sexual
 46 conduct. This AI claim about literature tells us nothing about the specific

1 uniqueness of literature. It merely makes an unsubstantiated claim. The problem of
 2 course is that anyone (or should I also now say ‘anything’) can make an
 3 unsubstantiated claim. What students need to learn is that, to be taken seriously,
 4 their claims need evidence. Unsubstantiated claims are the tools of dictators,
 5 tyrants, and propagandists. $2+2=5$ is a claim as is $2+2=4$. Without evidence,
 6 however, claims are at best intellectually useless; at worst, dangerous. As
 7 educators race to deal with ChatGPT, it is urgent that we help students learn the
 8 tools of classical rhetoric to heighten not only their critical thinking but to equip
 9 them with the ability to compose substantiated claims that can be built upon,
 10 challenged, rejected, or praised in a democratic context, be that context in politics,
 11 education, or business etc..

12 In sentence two, AI claims that through literature we ‘gain insight’ into
 13 emotions, motivations, and the ability to deeply understand ourselves? For sure,
 14 literature offers this, but it is only a claim. How do readers know what the AI
 15 means by gaining insight? Would the insights gained from reading Howell’s *The*
 16 *Damnation of Theron Ware* or Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* be different from
 17 reading Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* or Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* because the cultures
 18 are different?

19 What if our insight is dark and depressing? Should we read Fitzgerald’s *Great*
 20 *Gatsby* to give up on the American dream? Should we read Mark Twain’s *Letters*
 21 *from the Earth* to give up on both religion and the human race? If we reject the
 22 pessimism of Fitzgerald and Twain—all the while being entertained by them—do
 23 we then become more aware of ourselves? We do for sure, but we only can access
 24 the meaning of AI’s general message if *we* do all the thinking, that is, if we
 25 provide all the specifics. The meaning of AI’s claims can only become clear
 26 through specific language—which it does not offer.

27 The third sentence as well is crying out for specifics. ChatGPT has an
 28 opportunity to discuss how traditions are passed on through literature. A perfect
 29 example would be the Homeric epics. Chat GPT, if it knew the subject matter
 30 could even reference Eric Havelock’s work *A Preface to Plato* which explains
 31 how the Homeric verses, the oral formulas, were a kind of technology which aided
 32 memory so that an oral society could pass on complex information (such as ship
 33 building) and important, moral precepts such as *being hospitable to strangers*, a
 34 precept illustrated in the story of Polyphemus, the Cyclops, who violates the Greek
 35 moral code by capturing and eating his guests.

36 The fourth sentence too is a missed opportunity to be specific. How does
 37 literature inspire? Again, the foundational principle of style in classical rhetoric—
 38 specifics—would help to substantiate the claim. At the end of Steinbeck’s novel
 39 the *Grapes of Wrath*, for example, Rose of Sharon offers her breast to feed a
 40 starving man. This scene inspires us to cheer for the dignity of all human beings
 41 regardless of social norms or taboos. Or, as ChatGPT blandly put it, literature
 42 challenges us. Again, the claim is true, but only if it is supported by something
 43 specific. For example, after he kills a pawnbroker and her sister, should we root for
 44 Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* to escape the police? Does literature also
 45 challenge us to read on if the author’s prose style is beautiful yet the topic
 46 revolting? If so, ChatGPT could argue that what makes Nabakov’s *Lolita* such a

1 masterpiece is that it both challenges and entertains us; challenges us, because the
2 subject of the novel is an illegal love affair between Humbert Humbert, a man
3 about 40 years old, and Lolita, a 12 year old girl; entertains us, because the prose
4 style is exquisite:

5
6 “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the
7 tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth.”
8

9 We can conclude that one way to detect AI generated prose is that it is fraught
10 with platitudes and generalities—organized fairly well and grammatical. If you
11 want ChatGPT to be specific, you must continually revise your prompts and goad
12 it for more. Student writing, unfortunately, may be fraught with the same
13 platitudes and generalities without good organization or good grammar.

14 Let’s turn our analysis to the student sample.
15

16 (1)Literature matters because it shapes people’s minds. (2) Growing up with a
17 good understanding of different pieces of literature can build intelligence
18 and prepare people for adulthood. (3) Literature can expand creativity, help
19 with speaking in conversation, and just overall enlighten the human brain
20 on different ideas in the world. (4) Even going into adulthood, it is still
21 important to experience the joy of reading and overall is a key part to a
22 person’s ability to be successful in life.
23

24 Just as ChatGPT presents general, unsubstantiated claims, so too does the
25 student. The claim “Literature... shapes people’s minds” could also apply to any
26 number of school subjects, religious faiths, hobbies, familial relationships etc.
27 Math and biology shape people’s minds. Attending church could shape your mind,
28 and so could practicing *jeet kun do*, or obeying your mother or father.
29 Interestingly, the student has made a remarkable point. If literature can shape a
30 mind, then literature can be a rival influence to parental, governmental, or societal
31 conditioning. Literature can therefore be dangerous, subversive, radical. But the
32 general style does not alert the reader to the student’s brilliant idea. Thus, in the
33 hands of a tyrant, extremist, or ignoramus, literature has been censored, banned,
34 burned. Harry Potter, for showcasing witchcraft; the Tales of Peter Rabbit, for only
35 portraying middle-class rabbits; Huckleberry Finn because Huck didn’t wash
36 before church and of course because of the racist wording; Luther’s translation of
37 the Bible because it was written in common language, a translation accessible by
38 both the priests and the penniless. “Literature matters,” the claim is both a reason
39 to read and to celebrate if you are democratic and free-minded, a lover of rights; or
40 it is a reason to confiscate and destroy if you are fascistic, tyrannical, hungry to
41 control the thoughts and behaviors of others. But none of these ideas come through
42 because the style is general; we have claims but no evidence. This is not writing in
43 the rhetorical sense, it is just putting words down on paper.

44 In sentence two, the student claims that literature can make you smarter and
45 more mature. This sounds like a claim the student believes the teacher wants to
46 hear. It would be clever for the student to explain exactly how literature prepares

1 you for adulthood. It seems a bit sweeping as the majority of adults the world over
2 are not well-read in literature. It is easier to see how math or science or computers
3 prepare one for adulthood in terms of a career, but to say that literature prepares
4 one for adulthood is more vague, more inexact. I suppose the student could argue
5 that the study of literature helps with soft skills, empathy, or emotional
6 intelligence, but it all depends on the literature. The masterpieces in Mortimer
7 Adler's Great Books series have the goal of teaching morality and ethics. Take the
8 Greek dramas for example. They showcase moral conundrums and force us to
9 think critically on gray areas of morality. Orestes must avenge his father's
10 murderer if he (Orestes) is to be considered a worthy son, but what if the murderer
11 is Clytemnestra, his own mother? Now what should Orestes do? Oedipus faces a
12 similar moral dilemma. In his confusion, he murders his father and marries his
13 own mother. From Greek literature, we also learn that if we offend the gods, we
14 get thrown off course like Odysseus, wandering in exile for ten years, fighting to
15 return home. We also learn that no matter how far we venture in life, the ultimate
16 goal is returning home, older, wiser, happier. Is not that the same message as
17 Dorothy's in the *Wizard of Oz*? There's no place like home. But is this what the
18 student means? We can never know unless the student is specific. Generalities tell
19 us nothing; they are unclear.

20 The student's third sentence has too many broad ideas, each worthy of their
21 own focused paragraph. Literature could expand creativity, but how? The Greek
22 and Roman rhetorical schools would have agreed with the student, but they would
23 have had a concrete pedagogical tool to bring about that creativity, called *imitatio*.
24 For *imitatio*, students would copy and imitate passages of Homer or Cicero, trying
25 to create similar passages by writing in the same style, using the same tropes and
26 schemes, but writing about their own subject matter. Regardless of the many
27 possible ways literature can enlighten our minds or foster our skills, we need to
28 know exactly how that is done. Otherwise, it is just an empty claim and can be
29 easily refuted by claiming the opposite. Literature does not matter, literature does
30 not prepare us for adulthood, literature does not enlighten us, or literature does not
31 make us creative. In fact, the data shows that these negative claims about literature
32 might be true, I cringe to say because I love and teach literature. But in reality, at
33 least outside the university walls, romance/erotic novels matter the most according
34 to sales, then books on crime, then religion, science fiction, and horror. Today,
35 more people know who Freddy Kreuger is than Nick Barnes. Literature is nowhere
36 on the list of top sales. *Naked Lunch* is a restaurant in Cap d'Adge, correct? No.
37 It's a novel by William S. Burroughs. Thus, because literature is not popular, both
38 ChatGPT and students need to give us more than a claim regarding how literature
39 prepares us for adulthood.

40 So what do we learn?

41 We learn that both ChatGPT and students need to give us more than a claim.

42

43 We learn that if either ChatGPT or the student had specifically referenced any
44 piece of literature, any character, any scene, the writing would begin to achieve
45 clarity, the claims would be enriched with evidence, and the voice would sing with
46 personality. Without the specifics, the passages are general and thus rendered

1 ineffective, void of substance and thus rendered useless, monotone in voice and
2 thus rendered boring.

3

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Conclusions

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6 This study, through a detailed rhetorical analysis of texts generated by
7 ChatGPT and high school students, underscores a significant gap in both: the lack
8 of specificity. The investigation into these texts, derived from Waltzer et al.'s
9 research, reveals that the absence of specific examples and concrete details leads to
10 a deficiency in clarity. This finding is critical in understanding the limitations of
11 AI-generated text and the current state of student writing. Our analysis
12 demonstrates that specificity, a foundational principle of classical rhetoric, is not
13 merely an aesthetic choice but an important element of effective communication.
14 Both ChatGPT and student writings, while varying in grammatical correctness and
15 organization, consistently fall short in providing specific, detailed arguments and
16 examples that are essential for clear and persuasive writing. This issue becomes
17 more pronounced in educational institutions where students are increasingly
18 tempted to use AI technologies like ChatGPT.

19 Therefore, the study advocates for a renewed focus on classical rhetoric in
20 writing instruction, emphasizing the need for explicit teaching of specificity as a
21 means to achieve clarity. In addition to a study of rhetorical devices, educators
22 might also consider incorporating creative educational methods such as visual
23 thinking to reinforce in concrete, that is, the specific steps, in the learning process.
24 By engaging specifically with “mind maps, charts, lists, diagrams, etc.” students
25 will experience the importance of the specific over the general (Gholam, 2018, p.
26 164). By doing so, educators can equip students with the necessary tools to not
27 only improve their writing but also critically evaluate and understand AI-generated
28 content. As ChatGPT and similar technologies become more ubiquitous, the role
29 of classical rhetorical principles, particularly in cultivating a specific and clear
30 writing style, becomes increasingly vital. This research contributes to a growing
31 dialogue in the field, highlighting the relevance of classical rhetoric in an AI-
32 integrated educational environment and its importance in preparing students for
33 the challenges of the digital age.

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