Finding a voice: Personal Statement Writing in the Age of Generative AI

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of generative AI on the personal statement writing process for graduate school applications. Through a review of existing literature and interviews with both academic professionals and students, this paper explores AI's role in drafting, editing, and reviewing personal statements. Drawing from the research articles, I aimed to investigate what is currently discussed in the field, including AI's influence on the writing process, student perspectives on AI use, and the ability of admissions committees to detect AI generated writing. My interviews with academic professionals provided insights into the editing and reviewing stages of the application process, while interviews with students highlighted how AI shaped their writing process. This paper discusses the many advantages and disadvantages of AI's use, as well as ethical concerns surrounding its current and future role in the admissions process. I also reflect on my own experience writing a personal statement for my optometry school application, tying together my initial thoughts on generative AI then discussing and applying what I've learned through this research. Ultimately, my findings suggest that if AI continues to expand rapidly into the graduate school application landscape, especially in the personal statement section, then clearer steps must be taken to ensure ethical use, proper education, and equitable access.

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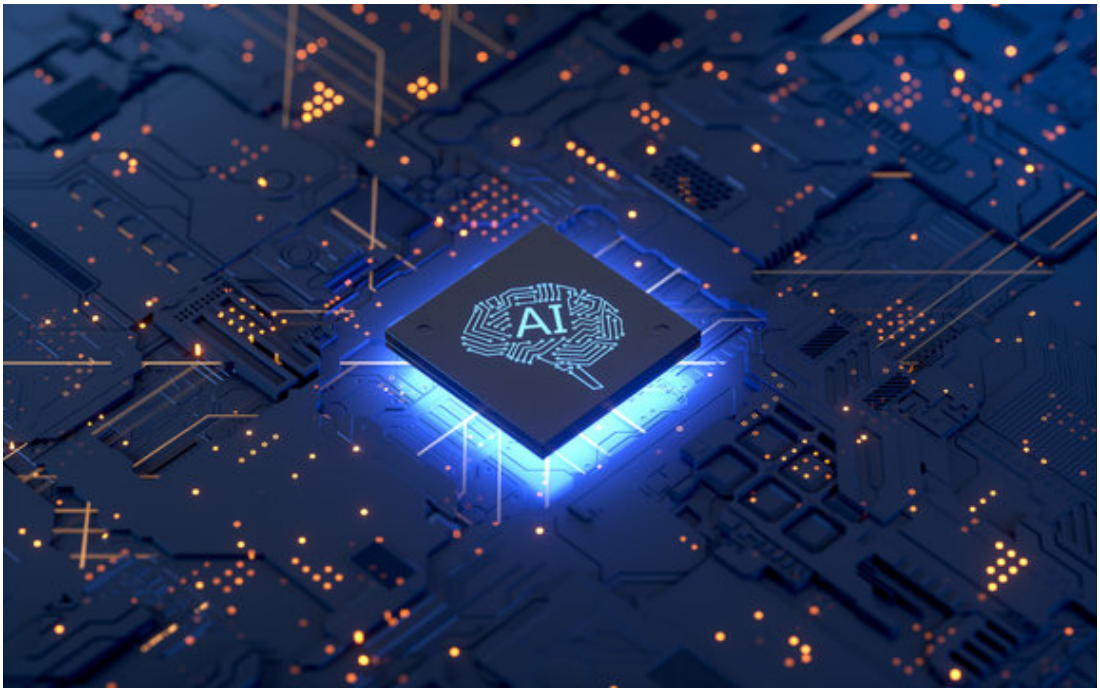

Introduction

Starting your personal statement can be, in my opinion, one of the most stressful experiences in the process of applying for graduate school. Whether it be to medical school, a masters program or, in my case, optometry school, writing about your journey is an integral part of the application. You want to present yourself in the best way possible, standing out from the crowd, and still checking every box you think the admissions committee is looking for. It's one thing to talk about your passion for a field; it's an entirely different challenge to capture that story on paper and do it within a strict word limit.

Why This Topic

When you search something on Google, the first result is often powered by AI. When you draft an email or a document, an AI enhancement from Gemini or Copilot is just a click away. AI is changing so much about the technology landscape and I do not think that academics and more specifically, the graduate school application process will be exempt from its influence.

I can still remember the first time I had ever heard of ChatGPT. A friend of mine was using it to assist him with a coding assignment, and at that time, I did not understand how it could be used outside of that context. Then I started to see the distinct black and white knot logo everywhere, a hallmark of ChatGPT. In class, I started to notice that many of my classmates had the tab open right alongside our assignment for the day. As time went on, I kept hearing more about how generative AI was being used in all areas of academics including: test prep, writing, grammar and more. This got me thinking: Are students using this technology for their applications too? Is there a line for high stakes writing like a personal statement vs just a run of the mill discussion board post?

As someone who recently went through the graduate school application process, I will not lie, the temptation to use AI was strong. With so many unknowns and strict guidelines, I ultimately decided against it, but the thought lingered. For this project, I wanted to explore what academic professionals and students are saying about AI's role in the application process and how it might shape the future of admissions. I am focusing on the personal statement because it was the area where I felt most tempted to use AI, and from my experience, writing is where students are most likely to turn to generative AI.

Definition of Generative AI

"artificial intelligence that is capable of generating new content (such as images or text) in response to a submitted prompt (such as a query) by learning from a large reference database of examples."

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Generative AI definition & meaning*. Merriam-Webster. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/generative%20AI

Annotated Bibliography

Chan, C. K., & Hu, W. (2023). Students' voices on Generative AI: Perceptions, benefits, and challenges in Higher Education. International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education, 20(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-023-00411-8

In this article the authors cover many different aspects of the AI landscape as it relates to students, specifically in higher education. The study reveals that students with more AI literacy are less anxious about using generative AI and are more likely to use it for brainstorming, summarizing, and generating ideas. One of the key benefits for generative AI highlighted by students is the ability to provide immediate feedback, acting as a virtual tutor. However, a point of concern among researchers is that students may become over reliant on these tools, potentially hindering their development of writing skills and understanding of ethical issues like plagiarism. Despite these concerns, survey responses from students indicate that many do not view over reliance as a significant risk and instead believe in further integration of generative AI for higher education. One student even compared the rise of generative AI to the rise of computers, suggesting that it is better to embrace the technology rather than resist it.

Liu, M., Zhang, L. J., & Biebricher, C. (2024). Investigating students' cognitive processes in Generative AI-assisted digital multimodal composing and traditional writing. Computers & Education, 211, 104977. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2023.104977

In this study eight Chinese international undergraduate students at a university in New Zealand were evaluated in their use of generative AI in traditional essay writing and powerpoint assignments. All participants were English as a Foreign Language students. With the use of multimodal writing becoming more prevalent, the authors wanted to compare how these students would think about these projects with the assistance of generative AI. These students reported that they utilized AI to help organization, language, content, as well as to generate images to further enhance their writing or powerpoint projects. Students also identified a risk for overuse of AI, observing the potential for over reliance on AI and decreased critical thinking. One way to address this concern, they suggested, would be to require students to write their own first drafts before asking AI to enhance them, allowing students to learn while still producing a polished final product. Finally, the authors pointed out that more research is needed to evaluate teaching methods for AI integration and to develop better AI detection tools, helping students use AI in an informed and ethical way.

Lum, Z. C., Guntupalli, L., Saiz, A. M., Leshikar, H., Le, H. V., Meehan, J. P., & Huish, E. G. (2024). Can Artificial Intelligence Fool Residency Selection Committees? analysis of personal statements by real applicants and Generative AI, a randomized, single-blind multicenter study. JBJS Open Access, 9(4). https://doi.org/10.2106/jbjs.oa.24.00028

This study focused on if an orthopedic surgery residency selection committee could tell if a personal statement was real or AI generated. The researchers used 15 real personal statements to train ChatGPT and BARD, which were then asked to write an entirely AI generated statement for the committee to review. Personal statements generated by BARD were successfully identified 90% of the time, where statements generated by ChatGPT successfully fooled

the committee 56% of the time. The committee also rated the statements on many different factors including punctuation, structure, originality, personal interests, relevancy and more. The real statements did score higher in the categories related to personal interests and originality compared to statements generated by AI. The researchers did conclude that the real personal statements did not perform significantly better overall, suggesting that there is not a clear advantage for using AI. They also noted that even with repeated exposure, the committee did not get better at identifying AI generated statements. This is important because as the testing landscape changes, more emphasis will be put on the personal statement. Given the current concerns with authenticity and ethical use of generative AI, further research is needed to evaluate reliable methods for assessing and verifying the integrity of personal statements.

How Advisors and Admissions Committees See AI

Methods

In this section of my research I chose to interview academic professionals who had real life experience within the graduate school application process. All of the interviewees either work directly with students in an advising or professor role, or they serve on graduate admissions committees. I wanted to get both sides of the story, the people who help students write and edit their personal statements, as well as those who read and evaluate those statements as part of the admissions process. I broke the interview questions into 3 parts: AI's role in Graduate School Applications, Ethics, and finally, Looking Towards the Future. I felt that this was the best way to see present and future perspectives of this ever evolving topic of discussion.

Discussion:

AI's role in Graduate School Applications

A personal statement is a tricky topic when it comes to AI influence. Most academic professionals I spoke with agreed that AI has both pros and cons, and a lot depends on the context in which it is being used. One distinction that most of these professionals made was allowing the generative feature to edit grammar and punctuation, vs relying on old fashion copy and paste methods. This is where most of the discussion of Pros and Cons started. On one side, AI can be a tool used as a 'sounding board' to organize thoughts, clear up grammar mistakes, and help students who may not be as strong in writing to better structure their ideas. On the flip side, if the student relies on AI to write for them, it can be easy to lose personal voice and become too generic; which is a main point where AI use can become obvious in personal statements. A personal statement is supposed to reflect you and your experiences. It was never meant to be a cookie cutter, follow a specific cadence type of writing assignment. Everyone's story is different so sounding too generic can be a shiny mark of generative AI use if not used in a thoughtful and conscientious way.

This brings up a real concern for the academic professionals involved with admissions: how to regulate and flag the use of AI. The biggest challenge with this is that AI detection tools are not reliable and have not caught up to current generative models because of their ever-evolving nature. Since these tools cannot always be trusted to distinguish between a statement written with or without AI assistance, it's difficult for admissions committees to make an informed judgment without speaking directly with the applicant. This leaves the responsibility on the students to use AI ethically.

Another interesting note on this topic was that interviewees on the admissions side of the process had stricter views on students letting AI do too much of the work, while interviewees on the advising side were more open to helping students learn how to use the tools effectively. This difference in perspective may come from a slew of different reasons like exposure to AI use, rules regarding AI use on the applications or from the difference of perspectives from advisors and admissions committee members. Advisors typically see the idea development and editing stages, whereas admissions committees see the final product and are evaluating for authenticity and originality.

Another topic of discussion that came up in this section of the interview was equity. Some students have better access to generative AI tools, or they know how to use them more effectively with things like prompt engineering. The gap starts to form between the students who are taught and exposed to how to leverage these tools and those who are not.

Something that really stuck out to me was a comment about how important it is for students, especially in fields like healthcare, to be able to communicate confidently without depending on technology. A personal statement can serve as a benchmark for this skill, and using AI to craft it might be seen as a shortcut. Natural and effective communication between a healthcare provider and patient isn't something that can be taught via AI; it develops gradually through experience and practice. That development could be undermined if students aren't taught how to ethically use these tools and where to draw the line for over reliance.

Ethics

One thing most of the interviewees agreed upon was that if students do choose to use AI they should do so ethically. That being said, I should mention that some believe that AI should not be used at all in the personal statement writing process for ethical reasons. This reasoning comes from the fact that personal statements have existed long before AI came into the picture and that ethically, the student should be able to market themselves on their own. Additionally, if the use of AI is prohibited, there is no place for it in the writing process; though that is hard to police from the admissions side of things.

If AI is not prohibited and the student does choose to use it, there are many ethical hot topics to be considered. These include whether the student understands prompt engineering, has received appropriate training on AI use, and is aware of the institution's current guidelines regarding the use of generative tools. These three topics are integral for students who chose to use AI, as they highlight the ethical use rather than copy paste methods. Ethically, if a student is turning in a personal statement that is marketed as a representation of what they bring to the program, it should not be copied and pasted directly from generative AI. The student's voice still matters and their experiences are something that cannot be fully captured by a computer model. This is why prompt engineering and ethical use tactics are so important; they help ensure that students who choose to use AI are still putting forward an authentic version of themselves.

The discussion of ethics about the use of generative AI also brings up the topic of equity again. If AI is permitted in application materials, students from different backgrounds will use AI with different levels of access and training. This can create an unfair advantage for students with more exposure to generative tools or access to higher-quality models. Which, once again, is nearly impossible to police from the admissions side of things.

Another key ethical consideration is the way generative AI platforms are trained. Everything inputted into the system is being used to train the model. This raises questions about privacy as well as concerns about accuracy and bias. If flawed information is entered, the model continues to output flawed responses. Essentially, bad information in, bad information out. For this reason, anything generated by AI should be carefully reviewed to ensure it reflects the student's actual resume and experiences. Ethically, students have a

responsibility to make sure that nothing they submit misrepresents who they are or what experiences they've had.

Looking Towards the Future

AI's rapid expansion indicates that it is here to stay. This expansion begs the question of how AI will change personal statements in the admissions process, both in how they are written and reviewed, and if AI will be formally integrated, if at all. This question stumped most of the professionals I spoke with. On one hand there is a strong belief that AI has no use moving forward in the application process, because it calls into question the integrity of the student and how they are using these models. On the other hand if students do use generative AI they need to do it in an ethical way, which is where policy comes into play. It's hard to say how AI could be integrated ethically; institutions still want students to have their own thoughts and ideas, but the degree to which a student can market themselves varies greatly. This is where the use of AI could step in to level the playing field between applicants who are strong writers and those who are not. The issue is, this variation makes it difficult to create clear policy on generative AI's acceptable uses that also addresses the ethical concerns outlined in the previous section.

With this in mind, I asked academic professionals their thoughts on how the admissions process could change in light of AI's inevitable influence on personal statement writing and review. The fact of the matter is that AI is going to become more and more widely used so it seems inevitable that students will use it, authorized or not. So, how will institutions get ahead of this? A common suggestion from interviewees, both from the advising and admissions sides, is that institutions integrate a "check round" into the admissions process. This could include the implementation of in-person writing assignments, increased reliance on interviews to "check" paper to person, short video rounds, or even the dissolution of personal statements in their entirety. This would ensure that admissions decisions are based on a personal knowledge of the applicant, reducing the threat of AI-generated statements.

The Student Experience with AI

Methods

In this section of my research I interviewed a few students from different backgrounds and graduate programs, including both medical and non-medical fields. To ensure relevance to my research, all of the interviewees have applied for a graduate program and wrote a personal statement for their application in some capacity. To encourage openness and honesty, I have chosen to keep these students anonymous. I felt that this was the best way to capture the students' true thoughts, opinions and genuine experiences with AI while they were writing their personal statement.

Discussion:

AI's role in Graduate School Applications

The use of generative AI is becoming an increasingly common tool when it comes to academics. Students and young people have always been at the forefront of new technology and being able to adapt and implement new technologies for various purposes. From a student perspective, AI has obvious uses for academic purposes especially when it comes to writing and crafting a personal statement. For many of the students I interviewed, generative AI was used as a tool for brainstorming ideas, planning out structure and ensuring that their ideas were clear and that their experiences are compelling. The pressure to craft the perfect personal statement is what initially draws students to the use of generative AI, as it can offer much assurance in the editing and drafting process.

Some of the students I talked with told me that AI was an incredible editing tool, helping them further streamline their original thoughts. Others, went the more traditional route when writing their personal statement, without the use of generative AI. These students expressed concerns that AI would take away their individual voice and authenticity of their writing.

The stark difference between the students who used AI and those who did not, was their familiarity with prompt engineering and their awareness of institutional policies regarding generative tool use. Students who were less familiar with prompt engineering tactics avoided the use of AI due to concerns about admissions committees flagging their applications for use of AI. Whereas, students who were confident in their ability to prompt engineer were much more open to using AI on important writing assignments like the personal statement. However, even the students who believed they were using AI ethically, rather than simply copying and pasting, still experienced challenges. While the benefits of generative AI included saving time, streamlining thoughts, and boosting confidence in the final product, there were also drawbacks. For example, if a student submitted a sentence to be edited for grammar and punctuation, the AI would sometimes also alter wording or sentence structure. So, the students who used AI had to meticulously read over all of the products and ensure that their voice was still being portrayed.

Ethics

The main ethical concern with students around the use of generative AI for personal statement writing revolves around maintaining authenticity and preventing over reliance on AI's generative sentence-writing capabilities. Many students are concerned that admissions committees will be able to flag their applications for AI use, so much so that they either forgo the use of AI altogether or are overly cautious with what they submit. These students emphasized the importance of continual editing and review to make sure that the AI-edited version of their thoughts was still authentic to them. These students also expressed concerns that with too much AI editing, their writing started to lose the personal touch to their story, which is something AI models lack an understanding of.

Ethically, students said they would only recommend AI for early-stage tasks like editing, brainstorming ideas, or streamlining thoughts during the initial draft. Anything beyond that can get tricky and could risk crossing into over-reliance which could ultimately strip away the personal nature of the statement. While AI can be an incredibly useful tool to get started, it can be hard to change a sentence generated by an AI model to fit your own voice, so it's better to avoid the temptation. This line is a hard one to tread, but even those who opted not to use AI recognized its value; as long as it's used responsibly without removing the authenticity of each student's own story and experiences.

Looking Towards the Future

Technology has continued to evolve and change, and most students I spoke with see AI as just the next branch in that evolution. One student even joked that people used to be scared of TVs, and now they're in every household. That same kind of expansion is something students expect for AI. They see it becoming a standard part of not just the admissions process, but everyday life.

With this inevitable expansion in mind, students also foresee changes in how personal statements are evaluated; many of which were also indicated by academic professionals. A few mentioned the idea of implementing some sort of "check" factor, like interviews or follow-up conversations. These could be used as a way for admissions committees to get a more well rounded picture of the applicant and further check person to paper. On the other hand, some students stated that this in-person "check" could add more stress to an already stressful process and create logistical barriers, especially for students juggling busy schedules or applying from out of state.

Despite all the uncertainty for the future, there was a common understanding among students that AI is here to stay. Instead of resisting the change, they felt institutions should focus more on teaching students how to use it responsibly. This would include its ethical use, prompt engineering strategies and understanding how to use AI and still preserve originality.

Personal Experience

Initial Thoughts

In all honesty, before I delved fully into the research and interviews, my perspective on AI was one of complete avoidance. I had heard about AI detectors that could supposedly flag your work for even minimal AI influence, and with how unforgiving the graduate application process can be, even the suspicion of AI use felt risky enough to stay far away. In fact, AI is almost a taboo topic in some of my classes, we don't discuss whether it is acceptable to use or the contexts in which it might be appropriate, which only increases the distrust in its utilization. As a result, I didn't even feel comfortable using AI tools for basic editing on my personal statement.

Beyond the fear of getting caught using AI, I also wanted my personal statement to genuinely reflect my own experiences and passions, in my own words. I did not want a generative AI model to take my personal experiences and spit out a cookie cutter personal statement that anyone else could have written. I wanted to be able to stand on my own two feet when I told the admissions committee exactly why I would not only fit into the program, but also succeed. Additionally, I think another reason why I did not turn to AI for assistance is because I worked very closely with my advisors to edit and fine tune my statement into something I was entirely happy with when it came time to submit my application.

Reflections Post-Research

As I began researching and interviewing people with a range of views on AI, I realized the landscape is much broader than I originally thought. I always thought that generative AI was just a way for students to copy and paste entire projects without even having to understand anything they were turning in. Through this process I now see the multitude of different uses that generative AI has, completely apart from copy and paste, which I should mention is a completely unethical way to use the program. Instead there are various ways to implement AI into the process that still upholds what most believe to be an ethical way of using AI.

During the drafting stage of the writing process, the AI can be asked to to help with initial brainstorming, organizing a story, helping with essay structure or highlighting and emphasizing key traits. Further, if the student is exposed to and taught effective prompt engineering tactics such as Role Prompting, asking the AI to act like a admissions committee reader and identify weak spots, or Contextual Prompting, in which the AI is fed the paragraph for editing as well as the key notes to highlight. There are many more examples of prompt engineering, but those are the ones I learned and believe would be most useful to students during the personal statement writing process.

Additionally, there are so many different motivations for students to use AI. All students are different and have different experiences and ways to go about marketing these experiences. Where some students might be incredible at writing, others may have all the markers of a perfect candidate but their personal statement does not reflect this because they are not as strong in grammar and composition.

Looking forward, if admissions committees do want to ban the use of AI on Personal Statement Writing I do not think it is ethical to solely rely on AI identifiers. So many academic professionals have indicated that these softwares are nowhere near as sophisticated for how advanced the current generative models of AI are. Instead, there will have to be changes in the admissions process, whether that be an implementation of AI as well as included guidelines for use or a shift towards in person methods to check person to paper, which many professionals have already suggested.

Case Study

In this section I will be conducting a short case study to further show the effects of AI on Personal statement writing. After writing this paper, I wanted to wrap up by comparing the uses of AI and seeing where they differ. I'll start by writing my own short paragraph based on two experiences that led me to apply to optometry school. Then, I'll use ChatGPT to generate a paragraph using the 2 same experiences. Finally, I'll use prompt engineering strategies to edit my original statement, making sure to further edit and refine it on my own to ensure the product still sounds true to me.

Original Statement- No AI influence

I vividly remember getting my first pair of glasses. That year in 6th grade I had the unfortunate luck of being sat in the very back of almost all of my classes and, lo and behold, I could not see the board. So when I told my parents, they immediately called up our local optometrist to get me scheduled. I remember thinking that my optometrist was the smartest person I'd ever met. She solved my problem of not being able to read that pesky last line of letters on the screen so effortlessly. I had a laundry list of questions for her, and she patiently answered each one. Then, in the summer between my sophomore and junior year of college, I needed a job. I decided to apply at an optometry office that was close to my house and I was able to work as a technician that summer. I was so excited to work in healthcare and to learn more about a profession that I had admired so much as a kid. The more I worked the more I saw myself being really happy in the field. I had always had a love of science and I loved the idea of getting to form relationships with my patients. The job perfectly combined both passions into something that I really felt like I could do well and make a difference in.

AI Generated Statement

- ➔ Prompt used: "Write me a paragraph for a personal statement about: getting my first pair of glasses and working as an optometric technician."

My interest in optometry began the moment I received my first pair of glasses. I still remember the awe of seeing the world come into focus—details I never knew I was missing suddenly became clear. That experience not only sparked my curiosity about vision but also gave me a deep appreciation for the impact of quality eye care. Years later, working as an optometric technician solidified my passion for the field. I enjoyed the hands-on involvement in patient care, from conducting pre-tests to assisting with contact lens training, and I saw firsthand how compassionate, thorough care can improve lives. These combined experiences have driven my commitment to becoming an optometrist, so I can help others gain clarity—both visually and in their overall well-being.

Prompt Engineered Statement

- ➔ Prompt used: “Edit this statement, as if you are on an admissions committee for Optometry School. Highlight the personal aspects of my story.” I then further edited the jargon.

I vividly remember the day I received my first pair of glasses. In sixth grade, I was seated at the back of nearly every classroom, and I struggled to see the board. When I told my parents, they quickly scheduled an appointment with our local optometrist. I had a laundry list of questions, and she answered each one with patience and clarity. Years later, during the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college, I found myself looking for a job. I decided to apply at a local optometry office and was thrilled to work as a technician. I was eager to work in healthcare and learn more about the profession I had admired since childhood. The more I worked, the more I realized how much I enjoyed the field. With my love of science and the opportunity to build relationships with patients, optometry felt like the perfect fit. It allowed me to pursue both of these passions in a way that would enable me to excel and make a meaningful impact on others.

My Takeaways

After comparing all three versions, I’ve realized that while the AI-generated paragraph was clean and structured, it didn’t really sound like something I’d say, especially in an interview. It felt a little too polished and lost a lot of the fine details that make the statement sound personal to me. The prompt engineered version was closer to something I might submit, especially after I fine tuned it myself, but it still took a lot of checking and rewording to ensure it sounded like something I would authentically write. Honestly, that makes me wonder if it’s really worth it. I already consider myself a strong writer, so all the checking and training the model felt a bit like extra work on an already stressful process. That being said, I can definitely see how this process could help someone who struggles with getting started, organizing ideas, or knowing how to say what they want to say. In that case, AI can be a helpful tool to help get started.

Final Thoughts

Looking back on my research for this paper, it's clear that generative AI is already making a large impact on the graduate school application process, especially when it comes to personal statements. After hearing from students, advisors, and admissions committee members, it's obvious that opinions vary. Some see AI as a helpful tool to brainstorm ideas, organize thoughts, or polish writing. Others are more hesitant, noting concerns with losing authenticity, over reliance, or making the process unfair for students with different levels of access.

The truth is that there is no blanket statement right answer when it comes to generative AI. Everyone approaches writing differently, and have varying strengths, experiences, and methods. For some students, AI can help bridge the gap between good students with weak writing skills and students who are strong in both academics and writing skills. On the other hand, some students who are strong writers might feel as if AI would take away the authenticity of their statement.

If there's one big takeaway, it's that students need to be taught how to use AI ethically. As the technology keeps advancing we will continue to see the implementation of AI all around us, and we need to be preparing students for this changing landscape. Schools and students are still figuring this out, and it's probably going to take new policies, clearer expectations, and maybe even a shift in how we think about personal statements altogether. As technology evolves, so must the admissions process. This change will be a necessary and measured step forward, one that aligns with the shifting landscape of higher education.