

Writing Spaces

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Owning the Process: Co-Learning AI Through Critical Inquiry and Workflow Literacy

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Owning the Process: Co-Learning AI Through Critical Inquiry and Workflow Literacy

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Overview

This in-class activity invites students and instructors to co-investigate how generative AI and other writing technologies shape composing processes across academic and professional contexts. Designed to fit a single 50- or 75-minute class session, the activity can be used at any point in a writing course when students are actively engaged in a significant writing or research project. Although it was developed for first-year composition, it scales readily across disciplines and course levels.

The activity is grounded in workflow literacy—defined here as the reflective practice of analyzing how tasks, tools, technologies, and collaborators interact across a writing process (Lockridge and van Ittersum; Gottfredson and Mosher). Drawing on Tim Lockridge and Derek van Ittersum's work on writing workflows as socio-technical arrangements, and on Conrad Gottfredson and Bob Mosher's framework of learning-in-the-workflow, the activity asks students to make visible the decisions and trade-offs that are often invisible within everyday composing. Annette Vee's scholarship on AI and writing further informs the activity's critical stance, positioning AI-mediated writing as a site of uncertainty and negotiation rather than inevitable automation (Vee, "Large Language Models").

Rather than treating AI as either a threat to academic integrity or an efficiency tool to be accepted uncritically, this activity resists narratives that frame technological adoption as inevitable. Instead,

students and instructors work together as co-investigators, mapping the stages of an actual writing or research project and identifying the people, tools (AI, digital, and non-digital), and decisions involved at each stage. For each tool or practice under consideration, students evaluate questions of efficiency (Does this save time, or just shift labor?), efficacy (Does this actually improve my work?), and ethics (Is my authorship and rhetorical decision-making transparent?).

A central feature of this activity is the instructor's role as co-learner rather than expert authority. Instructors complete their own version of the workflow map and share observations about the values and learning goals embedded in their course design, making visible how their own commitments shape the conditions in which students make tool-use decisions.

The activity culminates in a brief workflow proposal or reflection memo in which students articulate how their tool choices align with their project goals and ethical commitments. This written deliverable can serve as a process document accompanying a major assignment or as a standalone reflection. The activity aligns with the Writing Spaces call for generative-AI activities that foreground critique and rhetorical agency by positioning teachers and students as collaborative investigators of evolving writing technologies.

Time Commitment

One 50- or 75-minute class session

Materials

This activity requires a workflow mapping handout or table (printable or digital) with columns for each stage of writing: People Involved, Tools/Technologies, Efficiency rating (1–5), Efficacy rating (1–5), Ethics rating (1–5), Decisions & Judgments, and Workflow Literacy Insights. A sample table is provided at the end of

this document and may be adapted freely. Students will also need access to any ongoing writing or research project they are currently developing. No specialized technology is required, though projecting a shared example workflow at the start of class can help orient students to the task.

Instructors should also prepare their own partially completed workflow map in advance—one drawn from their actual course design, assessment practices, or their own experience as a writer. This does not need to be polished; a rough draft that surfaces genuine tensions or uncertainties is more useful than a tidy showcase. If students wish to complete their reflection memo digitally, access to a word processor or shared document platform is sufficient.

Activity Process

- Students receive an introduction to workflow literacy (5–10 minutes): the instructor briefly frames the concept of a writing workflow as a sequence of tasks, people, and tools, and explains that the class will analyze a real writing project using this lens.
- The instructor shares their own workflow map (3–5 minutes, woven into the introduction or as a brief demonstration): using their prepared example, the instructor makes visible what learning acts and practices they most value in the course—close reading, source evaluation, iterative drafting, rhetorical decision-making, or others—and reflects briefly on how those values inform the course's approach to AI tools. This moment of disclosure is not about policing tool use; it is about modeling the kind of honest self-examination the activity asks of students. Instructors are encouraged to name tensions they genuinely hold, not just policies they enforce.
- Students individually map the stages of an ongoing writing

or research project using the provided workflow table (15–20 minutes): for each stage, they identify the people involved, the tools and technologies used or considered, and ratings of efficiency, efficacy, and ethics (each on a 1–5 scale), along with the key decisions and trade-offs involved.

- Students discuss their workflow maps in small groups (10–15 minutes): using the critical inquiry prompts provided, groups compare their tool choices, examine where decisions are concentrated, and discuss what their workflows reveal about their values and priorities as writers.
- The instructor participates in a brief whole-class debrief (5–10 minutes): listening to student observations about tools, trade-offs, and ethical decisions, and reflecting alongside them on what their workflow maps reveal about their values and priorities as writers.
- Students write a brief workflow proposal or reflection memo (10–15 minutes in class, or assigned as homework): in 150–200 words, students articulate which tools or strategies they will use or avoid, how those decisions align with their rhetorical goals and ethical commitments, and what they have learned about their own composing process.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Develop rhetorical awareness of how purpose, audience, genre, and ethical considerations shape decisions about tool use across stages of a writing process
- Apply a framework of efficiency, efficacy, and ethics to evaluate AI and other digital tools within their own writing practices

- Articulate and take ownership of their composing decisions in a written workflow proposal or reflection memo
- Transfer workflow literacy as a repeatable method for evaluating tools and processes in future academic and professional writing contexts

Learning Accommodations

- Students may choose between individual or collaborative completion of the workflow mapping table in order to maximize engagement and accommodate varying levels of comfort with reflective writing.
- The workflow table and reflection memo prompt should be made available in both print and digital formats to support students with varying accessibility needs and to accommodate in-person and remote or hybrid course delivery.
- The workflow reflection memo may be submitted in writing, as a voice recording, or as a brief oral presentation to the instructor or small group, to accommodate students with learning differences or writing-related challenges.

Works Cited

- Gottfredson, Conrad, and Bob Mosher. *Innovative Performance Support: Strategies and Practices for Learning in the Workflow*. McGraw-Hill, 2011.
- Lockridge, Tim, and Derek van Ittersum. *Writing Workflows: Beyond Word Processing*. Broadview Press, 2020.
- . "Find the Best Tools for the Job." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, vol. 4, edited by Dana Driscoll et al., Parlor Press, 2022, pp. 1–18.
- Vee, Annette. "Large Language Models Write Answers." *Composition*

Studies, vol. 51, no. 2, 2023, pp. 176–181.

Further Reading

Gottfredson, Conrad, and Bob Mosher. "The Five Moments of Need." *Innovative Performance Support: Strategies and Practices for Learning in the Workflow*, McGraw-Hill, 2011, pp. 17–40.

Vee, Annette. *Coding Literacy: How Computer Programming Is Changing Writing*. MIT Press, 2017.

Appendix: Workflow Mapping Table

Use this table to map the stages of your current writing or research project. For each stage, identify who is involved, what tools or technologies you used or considered, and rate each on efficiency, efficacy, and ethics using a 1–5 scale (1 = low, 5 = high). Then note the key decisions or trade-offs you faced and any insights about your workflow.

Writing Stage	People Involved	Tools / Technologies	Efficiency (1–5)	Efficacy (1–5)	Ethics (1–5)	Decisions & Judgments	Workflow Literacy Insights

Scale guide:

- Efficiency — Does this save time, or just shift labor?
- Efficacy — Does this actually improve my work?
- Ethics — Is my authorship and rhetorical decision-

making transparent?