Writing Now! Keeping the Human Voice in AI-Assisted Writing

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What does it mean to write now, in an age of generative AI? Seventeen years after Harold Thimbleby's much-loved chapter *Write Now!* was published, we're still recommending it to our students—not just for its practical advice, but for the way it captures the human side of writing. In this article, we reflect on why Thimbleby's message continues to resonate, even as tools like ChatGPT reshape how we write. Drawing on a real-world case study, we show how AI can support the writing process—not by replacing the writer, but by working alongside them. When used thoughtfully, AI can help overcome familiar hurdles like perfectionism and procrastination, and even surprise us with fresh phrasing. Yet the essence of good writing remains the same: clarity, voice, and a willingness to think through words. This article is both a tribute to *Write Now!* and an exploration of what writing can become when new tools meet old habits.

CCS Concepts: • Human-centered computing \rightarrow Natural language interfaces.

1 INTRODUCTION

There are some things that stick with you. Harold Thimbleby's chapter *Write Now!*, which was published in Cairns and Cox's 2008 book on *Research Methods for Human-Computer Interaction* [6], is something that has stuck with all of us. Seventeen years on from its publication it is still a key chapter that we recommend to our students—from undergraduate to PhD. They have all benefited from the wisdom in those pages.

One thing we have been wondering is whether our current students will be impacted by the piece in the same ways as those who have gone before them. It's going to depend on how they access it. If, like we did on the morning we started writing this article, they open a PDF of the chapter, an AI assistant that comes with Adobe Acrobat will offer to provide them with a summary:

"What's the most important info in the document?"

"The most important information in the document is the central advice: Start writing now, even before you've done the work. Writing is transformative and formative, helping to clarify your thinking, improve your planning, and identify gaps in your work early enough to address them. Key points include:

- (1) Writing as a habit: Begin writing immediately and adopt a 'nibbling' approach, where you write incrementally over time.
- (2) Benefits of early writing: Early writing reveals holes in your argument, plan, or program, allowing you to address them proactively.
- (3) Writing tools and techniques: Use tools like outliners, bibliographic organizers, and feedback mechanisms to refine your writing.
- (4) Self-esteem and feedback: Overcome self-esteem issues by sharing drafts early and seeking constructive feedback.

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- (5) Scaffolding: Accept that some writing will be temporary and serve as scaffolding, which can later be removed or repurposed.
- (6) Avoid perfectionism: Strive for 'good enough' writing rather than perfection to ensure timely completion."

Although this serves as a very useful summary—a great aide-mémoire to those of us who have already read the chapter, or as an overview for someone who is going to read it for the first time now, it does not replace the experience of reading the chapter itself. Just reading this summary is not going to make the chapter, and the genius within it, stick with this new AI-augmented reader in the same way as reading the chapter itself has made it stick with us. This is because it is the way that Thimbleby delivers the advice that makes it so impactful. It's the storytelling, the fact that he so clearly understands the emotional and practical experiences of the novice author when it comes to writing, and the clever ways he illustrates his advice that make it so impactful. For example, in the section on the importance of avoiding perfectionism, he includes a paragraph that he says he thought about deleting but chose not to, to demonstrate to the reader that you do not need to make your writing perfect before sharing it with others for feedback. The thing that makes sure the reader doesn't forget this advice is that the paragraph is struck through, just like this.

As we rapidly move into the era of AI-assisted writing, will we continue to see such expertly written pieces that don't just convey information but appear to speak directly to the intended audience? Although AI can improve readability and informativeness, AI writing has been criticized as often lacking critical details and a "human touch" [14]. This has fueled skepticism and "AI-shaming" [29], where skilled writers mock or dismiss those using AI tools. Such reactions might suggest a need for more nuance in how we perceive what the task of writing is *for* and *means* in different, often highly heterogenous contexts. Heuristics and guidance over hard policing, perhaps. Writing, at least in our part of the world, was once something that was entirely monastic [33] after all.

Thimbleby's chapter starts with a key truth: *"Writing is hard, and it's easy to postpone doing it!"* Arguably, with the advent of new AI-driven tools, such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, writing (or is it producing text) is now easier than ever. The rapid adoption of these AI tools isn't just reshaping how we access information but is also reshaping academic and professional writing [19], prompting urgent discussions about how to integrate these tools effectively while maintaining authorship and scholarly integrity [28]. Passive approaches—where AI autonomously generates text with minimal user input—often lead to generic, surface-level outputs [14]. By contrast, active collaboration, in which human authors iteratively guide and refine AI-generated content, offers a more promising pathway to improving both the efficiency and depth of writing [10].

Thimbleby advises starting early and using outlining tools or chapter headings—even if that's all you've got—then nibbling away at the content, extending whichever parts you can. New AI-assisted writing pipelines offer ways for authors to outline and nibble—even while on the move. No longer chained to the desk, writers can capture thoughts using mobile devices [16, 30] and use generative AI tools to brainstorm outlines or flesh out ideas into paragraphs.

Recent innovations are also enhancing how spoken thoughts are transformed into structured text. Lin et al.'s *Rambler* system [20], for example, combines speech input with Large Language Model-assisted tools for gist extraction and macro-level revision. This approach helps users revise their dictated content without needing to specify precise edits, encouraging diverse and iterative writing strategies.

Large Language Model (LLM) platforms like ChatGPT enhance writing efficiency but risk falling into a "speed trap", where content is generated rapidly without adequate reflection or review. Oversight of LLM outputs is essential to maintain accuracy and quality. These tools also introduce creative tension: while they require error correction, they

occasionally produce unexpected, elegant expressions that enrich the writing process. Gould, Brumby, and Cox [12] conceptualize the design fiction ChatTL;DR, imagining LLMs intentionally introducing errors to engage users critically. Further research could explore how such approaches might foster deeper interaction with AI-generated content.

Navigating these challenges requires a feedback-driven pipeline that can integrate voice dictation, LLMs, text editors, and dissemination platforms. Lee et al. [19] emphasize that balancing user agency, interaction design, and ecosystem considerations is key to unlocking AI's benefits. Active feedback ensures content resonates, offers novelty, and maintains credibility through peer engagement. This iterative process refines ideas and prepares them for impactful dissemination, as the following case study demonstrates.

2 CASE STUDY: WRITING AN ACADEMIC PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ARTICLE WITH AI ASSISTANCE

Here we illustrate an AI-assisted writing process through a practical case study: crafting an academic public engagement article on the challenges of online video meetings. The case study documents an actual writing task undertaken by one of the authors, providing a step-by-step exploration of AI-assisted methods and their potential to both support and hinder the writing process. By contrasting two approaches—AI-guided writing and human-guided writing—the study underscores the critical role of iterative human-AI collaboration in producing content that is engaging, accurate, and grounded in academic research.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, online meetings have become ubiquitous, reshaping how we work and interact remotely. Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research has extensively explored both the benefits and challenges of this shift [1, 3, 7, 11, 26, 32]. This case study focuses on crafting a public engagement article for an audience of professional knowledge workers on LinkedIn—a platform well-suited for discussing this topic.

We describe an AI-assisted writing process using OpenAI's GPT-4 model through the ChatGPT user interface.¹ While this case study uses ChatGPT, the focus is on the AI-assisted *writing process*; employing a different AI tool would likely result in different phrasing or stylistic outputs. The emphasis here is on the process itself and how the author utilizes AI tools to draft and refine their work.

2.1 Human-Guided Writing

Human-guided writing, in contrast to AI-guided writing, begins with an idea—often rooted in observations of daily life and framed within the context of an expert's knowledge of a field. As HCI researchers, we not only study our domain but also experience it firsthand, enabling us to connect real-world phenomena with established research principles. This foundational concept, emphasized in seminal works by Norman [22] and Cooper [8], highlights how effective design emerges from a deep understanding of the relationship between people and their environments.

The human-guided writing process began when one of the authors reflected on a typical online meeting and its impact on focus and engagement. Video calls impose a dual burden: participants must monitor their appearance while simultaneously engaging with others [3]. This strain, exacerbated by rigid interface features, such as the "self-view" display, fosters obsessive self-monitoring and detracts from meaningful interaction, contributing to widely reported online meeting fatigue [26]. Observing these challenges and considering potential adjustments inspired the initial drafting of a public engagement article.

2.1.1 Capturing Human Thoughts: Speech-to-Text Tools. To document these reflections, and taking Thimbleby's advice about "writing a project into existence", "talking to yourself" and using "scaffolding" the author used an iPhone 13 Pro

¹https://openai.com/index/gpt-4-research/

to record an 8-minute dictated note via the built-in *Notes* app. The spoken words were automatically transcribed using (Apple voice assistant) Siri's speech-to-text feature, generating over 1,000 words of raw, unfiltered thoughts. This was not a stream-of-consciousness exercise; the ideas were deliberately structured in the author's mind, drawing on years of academic writing and public speaking experience. The process functioned as an outlining stage, capturing the core argument and structure while leaving finer details and refinement for subsequent steps.

2.1.2 Iterative Refinement: Human-AI Collaborative Writing. Following the initial transcription, and following Thimbleby's advice regarding "nibbling" away at sections and using AI-collaborative "writing techniques", the human author engaged in an iterative refinement process with ChatGPT over a 24-hour period. The process began with a focused cleanup of the raw transcript using the following prompt:

"I'm a professor. I've made some notes. I used Siri to voice dictate them. However, there are some errors. Can you help me clean up the grammar? I will give you one paragraph at a time. Please retain 'my voice' as much as possible. Minimal edits—only improve grammar and flow."

Each paragraph was processed sequentially, resulting in a refined draft of 873 words—15% shorter than the original transcription. This initial pass corrected grammar and transcription errors while adhering to the minimal-edit brief, preserving the author's voice and leaving thematic connections and overall structure intact.

The next phase involved further refinement using a second prompt:

"Perfect! Here's the full text. Can you tighten it up? Retain my voice and style. Just make the argument as sharp and compelling as possible."

In this stage, ChatGPT processed the entire cleaned draft, reducing the word count from 873 to 575–a 34% reduction. The intermediate version featured streamlined analogies, more concise paragraphs, and an earlier emphasis on key ideas. For instance, the initial transcription's verbose statement, "We don't even need to do the research out what the answer is if you get a parallel of faces and your own face is there you'll be spending 90% of the time watching yourself," was refined into a more succinct and polished version: "Research confirms it: if you're faced with a grid of faces, yours included, you'll spend 90% of the time focused on yourself."

Despite this sounding compelling, the human author reflected on whether existing research actually supports this claim. Through the iterative process, a more conservative and grounded statement was crafted: "Instead of focusing outward, we're drawn inward—scrutinizing how we look and worrying about how we're perceived." This final version demonstrates the critical role of human oversight in ensuring that AI-assisted outputs align with evidence, maintain scholarly integrity, and balance clarity with factual accuracy.

The iterative process continued, with the human author revising the article over a 24-hour period. Quantitatively, the revisions involved more than eight explicit passes, with 60-70% focused on restructuring and deepening the argument, while the remainder addressed surface-level edits, such as grammar, clarity, and redundancy. Qualitatively, the process prioritized honing the narrative, preserving the author's voice, and expanding on impactful ideas.

A further example of this iterative refinement is a key analogy that evolved significantly throughout the writing process. The final version of the text reads:

"Imagine preparing your home for a guest. You'd tidy up to present a certain image. Now, imagine that instead of tidying up, you could control exactly what they see—as if you could direct their gaze, ensuring they only saw what you wanted them to see. This mirrors the self-view dynamic: a constant loop of monitoring and adjusting that keeps us managing instead of engaging."

This final version builds upon the intermediate version of the text:

"Imagine if, when a friend visited your home, you could control exactly what they saw. Instead of cleaning up, you'd block their view of the mess. But you'd also become obsessed, constantly checking to make sure you were managing their perspective appropriately. This is the same vicious cycle video calls create. We keep looking at ourselves, making sure the camera angle is flattering and the background is tidy, all while hiding the reality we don't want others to see."

Both iterations stemmed from the original raw transcript:

"Can you imagine if when a friend came to visit your house you could literally direct what they could look at and what they could not look at so instead of cleaning up you just simply could ensure that they never looked but that would be the catch you would want to know what they were always looking at. It would feed an obsession because you could control it. You need to make sure you're controlling it appropriately. This is the vicious cycle. This is why we look at ourselves online. We need constant feedback that we've not put the camera in the wrong place that our friend hasn't been allowed to look where they should not and see that the room is actually messy."

This example illustrates how a human-guided, iterative, AI-assisted writing process can transform a raw, unfiltered idea captured using a smartphone's speech-to-text feature into a polished and refined piece of writing using an LLM writing tool. Notably, the phrase "a constant loop of monitoring and adjusting that keeps us managing instead of engaging" emerged unexpectedly during the AI-assisted refinement process. This expression, absent from the original transcript, exemplifies how AI can contribute unanticipated yet resonant phrasing that enriches the narrative.

3 DISCUSSION

Despite all the advances in AI-supported writing, we're still going to be recommending Thimbleby's chapter to our students. Why? Because it's not just about how to write well, or how to actually get started instead of putting it off (though it's great for both). It's also about what writing does for you as a scholar. Writing isn't just a task to complete, it's a way of thinking, of figuring things out, of shaping your ideas. Even with the radical changes we've seen in writing technology, "Write Now!" still stands out as a reminder of what only human authorship can offer: connection, voice, and the ability to speak directly to your reader in a way that sticks.

There's been a lot of concern about the passive use of AI tools and the flat, formulaic writing that can result. However, our case study shows that it doesn't have to be that way. When you use AI as a partner rather than as a ghostwriter it can actually help you think, refine your ideas, and get past some of the usual hurdles like perfectionism or procrastination. In our case study, ChatGPT played a pivotal role in transforming raw transcripts into polished text. By condensing verbose speech into coherent narratives, sharpening arguments, and emphasizing key insights, it enabled the author to iteratively refine the work. This was not a passive process: the author actively evaluated and integrated the tool's outputs, correcting errors while incorporating unexpected—and occasionally elegant—phrasing that added an element of creative serendipity. For instance, the analogy describing the self-view dynamic in video calls as "a constant loop of monitoring and adjusting that keeps us managing instead of engaging" emerged as a particularly striking expression that was refined through collaboration with the AI. Such moments highlight how AI can enhance efficiency and clarity while fostering creativity, all while preserving the author's voice and intent.

The collaboration between the human author and the AI underscores the importance of maintaining authorial judgment in the writing process [28]. Scaffolding mechanisms for human-AI co-writing, particularly for less experienced

writers, can help balance user agency and guidance [10]. The case study described here further demonstrates that while ChatGPT improved productivity and clarity, it lacked the contextual awareness and critical perspective essential for scholarly rigor. For instance, in the original dictated notes, the author claimed that people spend 90% of their time looking at themselves in self-view during video meetings. This was refined to emphasize the broader insight that individuals often focus on themselves rather than engaging with others. This revision prioritized accuracy and intellectual depth, emphasizing the core insight rather than precise metrics that could easily be disputed by readers, ensuring that AI-generated outputs align with the author's intent and maintain scholarly integrity.

However, one limitation of current AI writing tools—highlighted in this process—is the difficulty of tracking edits across iterations. Chat interfaces like ChatGPT overwrite previous drafts, making it hard to revisit alternative phrasing or evaluate the impact of specific revisions. Recent work on *ABScribe* addresses this gap, introducing a structured interface that supports rapid comparison of multiple writing variations via in-place previews and reusable prompts. In user studies, it significantly reduced cognitive workload and improved perceptions of the revision process, suggesting promising directions for future co-writing environments [27]. Ultimately, the human author must still curate and shape the final product to reflect originality, accuracy, and meaningful contribution.

3.1 The Productivity Paradox of AI-Assisted Writing

AI-assisted writing processes, such as those described in this case study, enable authors to draft content rapidly and refine it iteratively, significantly enhancing efficiency while supporting creative exploration. The final article was produced in less than 24 hours from the initial dictation of voice notes. This demonstrates the dual-edged nature of generative AI tools and their impact on academic productivity.

The accelerated pace and ease of producing academic writing introduces significant questions about the broader academic ecosystem. A primary concern is the potential surge in academic submissions. For example, CHI paper submissions have grown significantly in recent years, while conference attendance has remained relatively stable [21]. This suggests that a consistent group of researchers is generating more papers annually, placing additional strain on the already overstretched peer review system. If generative AI tools further amplify this trend by enabling faster writing, there is a risk of overwhelming limited and overburdened reviewer pools, potentially compromising the fairness and quality of evaluations. This is a problem that extends beyond CHI, affecting many other academic communities [31].

Thimbleby emphasized the importance of getting the feedback authors need to improve their writing and their thinking. The introduction of AI-assisted writing has the potential to fundamentally reshape how authors approach and respond to the iterative processes of revision and feedback in academic workflows. For this case study, the article was drafted and published within 24 hours—appropriate for a social media post but not reflective of the more rigorous revision process expected for academic papers, such as those submitted to CHI. Typically, academic submissions undergo multiple rounds of informal feedback among co-authors, colleagues, and peers before submission. While faster drafting facilitates iterative improvement, there remains a risk that increased speed may unintentionally reduce engagement with peer feedback.

One potential advantage of AI-assisted writing is that it may encourage authors to rework or start anew based on feedback. The increased speed and ease of AI-assisted drafting aligns with Buxton's concept of *sketching* [5], which emphasizes the value of rapid iteration and "failing fast" by avoiding overattachment to early drafts. As Picasso famously remarked, *"Every act of creation begins with an act of destruction*". Writing, however, is traditionally a highly skilled and cognitively demanding activity, and authors often become attached to specific phrasings they have crafted—a sunk cost fallacy [18]. By focusing on directing the AI's output rather than crafting every sentence, authors may find it easier to

pivot, refine, and even start over in response to feedback. This is, of course, an open empirical question beyond the scope of this case study. Future research is needed to determine whether AI-assisted writing facilitates exploration and refinement, potentially reducing authors' reluctance to start afresh when revising their work.

3.2 The Automation Paradox of AI-Assisted Writing

Another paradox to consider is the paradox of automation [2], which raises additional concerns [17]. As authors increasingly rely on generative AI tools, they risk deskilling or losing confidence in basic writing abilities, instead relying on these tools to validate or refine their outputs. While ChatGPT is generally accessible at any time and facilitates seamless progress, it is not immune to disruptions, as evidenced by the unexpected server outage on 23 January 2025 [15]. In addition to such interruptions, OpenAI imposes daily usage quotas on ChatGPT, even for paid accounts. Once users reach their limit, they are shifted to a more basic version of the model—perceived as computationally cheaper and inferior in both responsiveness and quality.

These quotas introduce a subtle but valuable friction. While potentially frustrating for writers on tight deadlines, they prompt reflection on whether additional computational resources are truly necessary to complete the writing task. This aligns with HCI principles like *slow computing* [23, 24] and *design friction* [9], along with deliberate design strategies such as system "lockouts';' [4, 13, 25], which emphasize deliberate and thoughtful engagement with technology. In the context of AI writing tools, which facilitate rapid production, adopting slower, more deliberate thinking may lead to better outcomes [18]. Encouraging reflective pauses, where writers critically review LLM outputs [12], are essential for mitigating over-reliance, catching errors, and identifying unintended statements generated by the AI. This process ensures that the final output aligns with the author's intent and maintains quality.

4 CONCLUSION

Seventeen years after "Write Now!" was published, its central message still rings true: writing is not just a means of communicating ideas but a way of generating them. In an era when AI tools offer shortcuts and polished prose at the click of a button, Thimbleby's call to Write Now!, with all the uncertainty, imperfection, and discovery it entails, feels more urgent than ever. Our case study demonstrates that AI, when used thoughtfully, can support this journey: helping writers to iterate, reflect, and refine. But it cannot replace the habits of mind that Thimbleby championed that embrace writing as thinking, and value clarity, curiosity, and courage over surface-level perfection. His voice, playful yet principled, continues to guide a new generation of writers navigating unfamiliar tools but familiar fears. And for that, we remain deeply grateful.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We used AI tools to support the writing process but take full responsibility for all content and ideas presented. We hope that we have illustrated how AI-assisted writing can still convey the voice of the authors and thank Harold for his influence on our writing and that of all our students.

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