My Student Was Submitting AI Papers. Here's What I Did
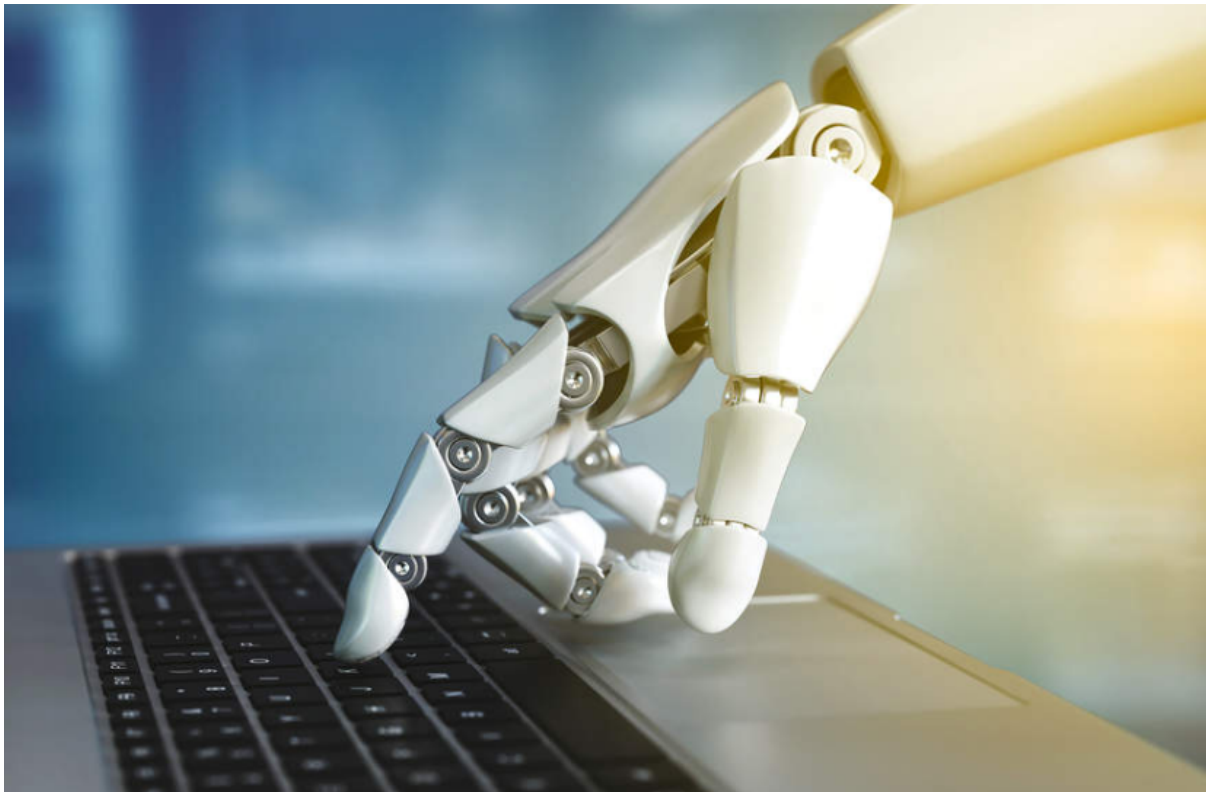
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(Image credit: Getty Images)

Over the summer it finally happened to me: While reading a student essay in an introductory online college course at one of the universities at which I teach, I began to suspect not only that this student hadn't written it but that no human mind had. In other words, it was the work of AI (artificial intelligence).

Like many educators across the globe, I was thrust into a brave new world of modern teaching that I had not been trained for and to which an appropriate response was unclear.

While I was aware of many **effective AI detection tools** , I had also heard horror stories of **false positives from these same tools**. My institution had recently announced a policy forbidding instructors from accusing students of using AI in their work. This gave me some institutional framework in which to operate, but I also did not want to reward a student with a positive grade for using a machine to do their writing for them.

Here's what I did, both in this case and in subsequent cases of suspected AI use that I've encountered.

1. Detecting AI: I Trusted My Instincts to A Point

The first step in this process for me was to use common sense while reading student work. AI tools have gotten good at writing in one sense but they tend to be bland – the written equivalent of white noise or smooth jazz.

In addition, the student I first suspected submitted work that was markedly different from any they had submitted previously that term. But as good as I think my spidey sense for detecting AI writing is, it would definitely not stand up in a court of law, so I knew I needed further evidence before proceeding.

2. I Trusted AI Detectors to A Point

My next step was to run part of the suspected AI-generated paper through an AI detection tool. The paper came back as more than 95 percent likely to have been generated by AI in two different detection tool readings. As a control, I put parts of two other student papers that seemed to be written by humans through the same detection tools – these came back as human-generated, as I suspected.

Tip: If you don't already have a favorite, check out our **AI detection tool guide**. Also, remember that there have been **privacy concerns raised about AI detection tools**, so make sure never to put any identifiable information from a student through one of the tools. Finally, be aware that **some universities have stopped using AI detection tools** over concerns about accuracy.

3. I Conferred With Colleagues

After the positive readings from the AI detection tools, I was nearly certain the paper was AI-generated. However, I was mindful that **false positives have occurred** and students deserve the presumption of innocence when it comes to academic

violations.

I reached out to a colleague in my department who oversees my work and brought him up to speed on the situation and what I'd found. He read the paper and put it through a separate AI detection tool, and agreed it was almost certainly AI-generated. He then brought in a superior of his for a third opinion and to discuss a course of action.

This process helped protect the student by ensuring that I wasn't misreading the situation somehow. Talking with others also protects me as an untenured educator because it documents that I am acting in accordance with the university's AI's policies. This is especially important because at many institutions these policies are evolving constantly and in some cases haven't been formalized yet.

4. I Spoke With The Student Without Accusing Them of Using AI

My colleagues and I decided the best course of action would be to try and speak with the student. During this conversation I would ask how they conducted their research for the paper without mentioning AI or accusing them of anything. I reached out via email and asked to talk with the student on the phone or via video call. When the student didn't respond, I emailed specific questions about the content of the paper, and said I needed these to be answered before I could grade their work.

At the same time, I sent class-wide emails that I had encountered suspected AI-use in the classroom. These announcements reminded students that using AI writing for essays was against course policies.

Ultimately, the student never responded and the paper received a zero. I've since encountered several other instances of suspected AI use and they've all played out pretty much the same way. None of my students have been penalized for violating academic standards but none received credit for work that they did not produce, which is my primary concern.

It's a small, but I think important, victory for human writing.