



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN HUMANS IN KNOWLEDGE ORGANISATIONS **STOP WRITING?**

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If your organisation is in the throes of rolling out Copilot, Claude – or your LLM of choice – the odds are, you’re focussing on two things:

- 1.** The efficiencies you can achieve (even if you’re shaving a few minutes a day off email reading, they all add up)
- 2.** How to make sure outputs are accurate (because, as we all know, GenAI forms sentences that are plausible – even if they’re not always entirely accurate)

But for knowledge organisations – including professional services, universities, charities and think tanks, whose offer is expertise, judgement, advice, research and ideas – there’s a much bigger consideration:

How will widescale use of GenAI for writing affect the way your organisation develops new knowledge and insight?

ISN'T REPLACING HUMAN WRITING WITH GEN AI A NO-BRAINER?

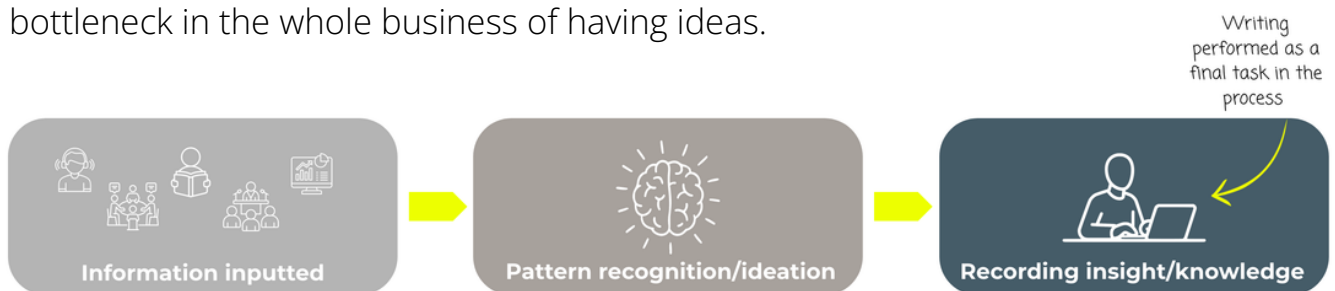
The case for replacing the long, often brain-achy activity of writing with GenAI feels compelling. Writing a report can take days. Reading emails thoroughly and constructing appropriately nuanced responses can take hours. Responding to a particularly tricky email can take over an hour in itself. Getting an LLM to bang out the same documents in seconds seems like a no-brainer.

There's also research that suggests new starters in your organisation – even if they're very junior – can get up to speed rapidly when they're assisted by GenAI.

So why wouldn't you embrace GenAI wholeheartedly – and encourage your colleagues to use it too?

The false premise

However, there's an assumption that sits underneath almost every GenAI business case – that writing comes after the thinking, and is an expensive bottleneck in the whole business of having ideas.



The assumption is that human beings absorb information, think deeply – then when their thoughts are fully formed, sit down to perform the arduous task of recording their ideas by writing them down.

It treats human writing as little more than an inefficiency. As a theory, this is clean, simple, easy to present in a boardroom... **and it's completely wrong.**

HOW THINKING REALLY HAPPENS, AND WHY WRITING IS A PART OF IT

As academics have explored for decades, human cognition is not a neat process. It's messy, iterative – and it doesn't all happen inside your brain:



A spark of thought enters your head while you have a shower



You scribble notes on Post-Its and stick them on your desk



Another connecting thought happens while you're in a meeting – and you jot it down in a notebook



You begin to write your thoughts down in earnest, synthesising and refining because the words you commit to the page don't feel quite right to start with – or don't stand up to interrogation



You discuss your emerging thesis with a colleague and get their feedback



You go back to your draft and tweak it...

This is not a linear process. It's nebulous. You're relying on your brain to make connections, but your brain can't contain all the moving parts that may or may not become a part of your final solution. So you externalise them – in diagrams, conversations, notes and **in writing**.

Which means writing isn't simply a way of recording completed thoughts. It's a way of externalising thinking so that you can stress test and refine it.

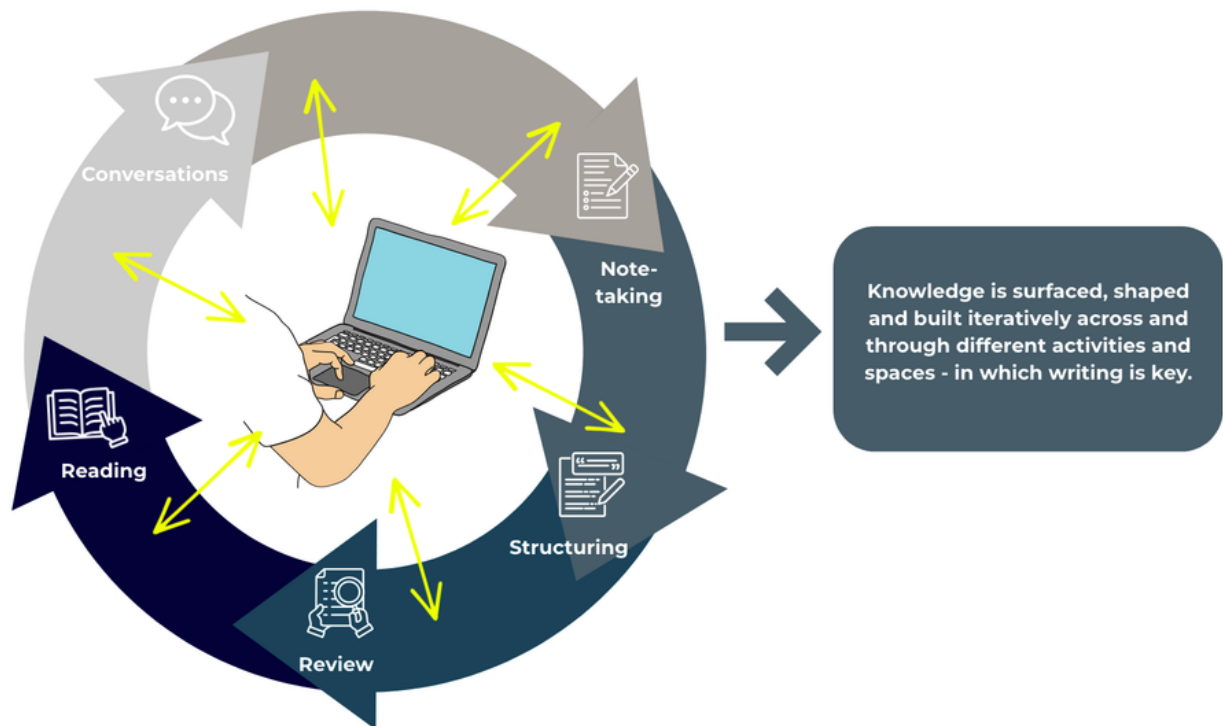
Writing doesn't make your brain ache because it's an unnecessary bottleneck. It makes your brain ache because it's an integral part of the thinking process itself.

In other words, writing is a cognitive tool – and the more fluid your writing skills are, the more powerfully you can use them to help you think.

Everything described so far points to something important – that thinking doesn't happen in one place. Instead, it happens across a lot of different places and activities. At Wordtree, we think of this as a cognitive ecosystem.

This ecosystem is made up of all the objects and spaces where thinking emerges and is then interrogated and refined – our brains and intuitions, whiteboard doodles, discussions, notes, drafts and more. As academics have reasoned for decades, our thinking happens across and through all of these spaces.

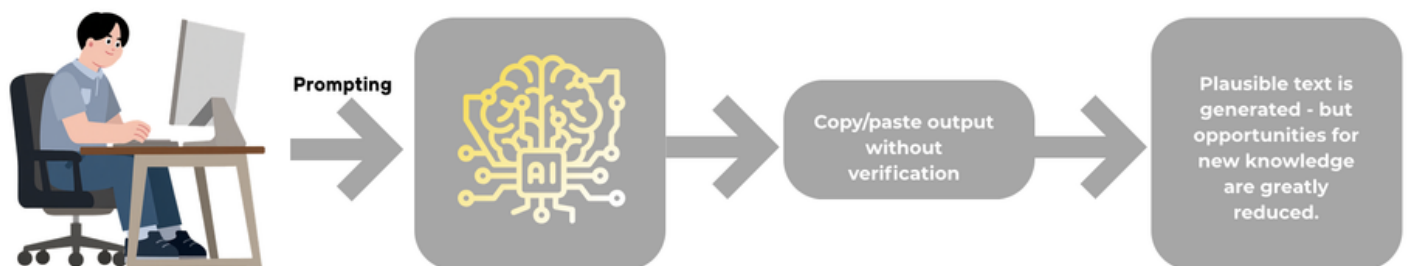
In knowledge organisations, writing tends to be the primary way of surfacing, externalising and refining thinking – and it's used throughout the thinking process, a lot like this:



SO WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU SUBSTITUTE HUMAN WRITING WITH GENERATIVE AI?

If you were to literally replace human writing with GenAI writing, then you would do something pretty profound to your organisation's knowledge-creating ecosystem. Because what you'd be doing is removing one of the mechanisms through which thinking happens – and replacing it with a technology that does some or all of the “thinking” for you.

This would give you a process that looks something like this:



We know of some knowledge organisations that have adopted this kind of workflow – particularly where they've built RAGs on top of LLMs to customise the information that GenAI uses. And you can certainly create efficiencies through doing it. But the trade-off is where the thinking happens. Because when you redesign workflows in this way, you're moving increasing amounts of “thinking” to the model.

Even if you decide to use GenAI to enhance colleague writing, rather than to outright replace it, you need to take care that it doesn't remove the thinking outside of your organisation.

WHY SHOULD KNOWLEDGE ORGANISATIONS LEARN TO LOVE HUMAN WRITING?

For knowledge organisations, the ability to create new and organisational knowledge isn't just a nice to have. It's an existential necessity – the wellspring of their competitive advantage.

Human writing is an important part of this knowledge-building capability. Not because it's an important craft – or because being able to create perfect sentences is an indication of intellectual prowess. It's because writing is a mechanism through which thinking happens.

If fewer people are doing the difficult cognitive work of analysing, synthesising and challenging ideas, then organisations may become very efficient at reproducing existing knowledge. However, they could also become less able to generate genuinely new insight. It's a trade-off that may not become visible for months or years – but for organisations whose value depends on expertise, it really matters.

So before you roll out company-wide GenAI adoption programmes, think carefully about how your organisation creates knowledge – and how AI changes that process.

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT ADOPTING GENERATIVE AI IN KNOWLEDGE ORGANISATIONS?

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