

## About the “Almost Weekly Letters”

From Siri to Skynet: Our Complex Relationships with Technology  
Duke University – Fall 2023

There’s a long history of writers writing to each other, either narrating through their processes, visiting and revisiting what the life of a writer looks like, what it means, and how it shapes a person, or really just talking through their days with each other from the relative solitude of their practice. Knowing this, and referring to this history, I asked students to write me letters—actual letters, mind you, with a salutation, and in an informal and personal style—and in these letters to reflect on their work in the course.

– Sean Michael Morris (“When We Talk about Grades, We Are Talking about People”)

Nine times during the semester, you will submit brief “letters” of about one-and-a-half-pages, single spaced, or about 750 words long. Topics for the letters will be made available on Mondays and, in general, are due on Friday night, though you can submit your letters before that deadline.

Usually the topic relates to the theme that is being discussed in the seminar during the week. Sometimes the topic will be based on a video or a brief reading. Sometimes the letter will involve a careful and directed use of ChatGPT or another AI-assist for writing (note the rules below).

For the most part, the letter is **predominantly a consideration of the topic** that is distributed at the beginning of the week, but it also contains **two other elements** that you can either append at the end of the letter or make part of the entire piece. These elements are

- a **brief consideration of your individual progress** – what was hard, what was easy, what was particularly useful (or not), what seemed to resonate with life beyond class (or not) and
- a **question** that you would like to pose to the rest of the class.

In this way, you’ll have a chance to reflect on the “content” of the course, briefly consider your progress (or lack of progress), and connect your thinking with the thinking of others in the course. (The question, by the way, may or may not become part of the class discussion.)

I’ve heard the Almost Weekly Letter referred to as an “unessay,” a term that I confess I don’t entirely understand. But the term points out that the Almost Weekly Letter is not typical “academic writing,” and it’s certainly not to be taken as a “five-paragraph essay.” Rather, understand the Almost Weekly Letter in terms of the audience – your instructor as a fellow thinker – and the tone and manner as more personally reflective, informal, and conversational. The tone isn’t chummy or slang-laden, but it isn’t coldly impersonal either. Finding your writerly voice in a letter will probably be a challenge, but over the years nearly every student in the seminar has succeeded after a couple of letters.

## Using AI-assists. Some rules.

ChatGPT and similar Large Language Models (LLMs) have dominated much of the conversation about writing and learning how to write. Hollywood writers and actors are on strike as I write this, in part because of the threat that AI poses to their professions. It's very, very likely that you've used ChatGPT or Bing or another LLM to put together a piece of writing. Whether their use helps or impedes learning and becoming a writer (or, more importantly, a *clear thinker*) is still an open question.

**We'll be using AI-assists for writing in the course, but they'll also be a focus of our critical attention, too.** Some of the Almost Weekly Letters will require an AI-assist precisely so that together we can examine the ways that they change the experience – and the value – of writing and of AI in education.

Of course, **this means that you should refrain from using AI-assists for the writing in the course.** I'm not going to use a detection application in an attempt to figure out whether you're using ChatGPT or another AI tool; it's pretty clear they don't work very well in any case. It's a matter of honor for you to refrain from using ChatGPT or the like, and it's important to maintain a focus on what the seminar is about, since your use of such tools is an object of scrutiny in the course. They, too, are part of "our complex relationships with technology."

What about Grammarly? Grammarly's powers and assists have been enhanced by AI since last fall's run of the seminar. **At least at the beginning of the course, please do not use Grammarly.** We will discuss it at some point. Your regular old (and sometimes annoying) spell-check tool is okay, but do not use an assist that spits out prose on your prompt.

## The mechanics

- Please submit Microsoft Word .doc or .docx, LibreOffice .odt, or PDF format for your submissions. (I prefer PDF, if you can do it.) **Use Sakai to make your submissions**, and know that you can resubmit as many times as you wish between assignment day and the final deadline.
- Please use a **sans-serif, 11- or 12-point typeface** like Arial or Helvetica. Most, if not all, word processing applications have a word count feature. **Use the 750-word limit as a guide**, and strive for clarity of thought but don't obsess about going a bit under or over the word count – though I think rock bottom should be 500 words or about one page.
- **Date your letter.** A salutation isn't necessary, but you can use it if you wish. (Just don't call me "Hey, you!")

## When they come up in the semester

Almost Weekly Letters will be due at the end of weeks 1-2,4-6, 8-10, and 12 – all before Thanksgiving Break, you might note.

Sakai will release the letter topics on Mondays at 12:00 am. They're due that Friday at 11:59 pm.