

MY AI WRITING POLICY

My name is James Bach. I wrote this policy with the help of my brother, Jon Bach.

The Policy

- **I do not let AI draft *any* text for a signed work of which I am the lead author.** This is because my writing expresses not merely my beliefs, but also my identity. Using AI to compose text is like wearing a mask. If I obscure who I am, I impair my credibility. Furthermore, using AI to write carries a well-earned stigma, since it is a darling tactic of scammers and fakers. I don't want that stink on my work. I want anyone who reads my writing to be confident that they are seeing the full evidence of who I am.
- **I allow myself to use AI to create unsigned works of plain factual text.** For instance, I have no problem with Claude Code documenting a program that I asked it to create. Even in that case, if I share this with another person, I remain accountable for its content.
- **I allow myself to use AI to help *develop or critique ideas* or to *critique text*.** I hate to be wrong. If AI can help me be less wrong, I welcome it. Although I always start with my own ideas, I might ask AI to challenge those ideas, or independently research the topic. I would then look over its work and decide if I want to cover a new topic or angle that the AI may have indicated. I might also ask AI to review the final text and spot typos or sloppy writing. In other words, I can use AI the same way I would let a human colleague help me write a piece for which I would nevertheless declare myself sole author.
- **Under no circumstances will I allow an AI to represent me or pretend to be me.** There are only a few people in the world who are qualified to speak for me. No AI's are trustworthy to do so.
- **I do not acknowledge AI when it helps me in my work.** When a human helps me write in any substantial way, I intend to acknowledge them in the piece. I don't do this to signal any diminishment of my ownership, but only because credit matters and I want them to have their due. AI doesn't need to be honored. I don't acknowledge AI for the same reason I don't list all the other tools or, say, the brand of computer I was using when I composed it.

WAYS AI CAN HELP ME WRITE

- When I am finished with a piece, I might give it to GenAI and ask if it sees any typos. I might also ask GenAI to critique it. This can be a good way to anticipate some of what my colleagues might say. Then I can decide if I want to clarify or extend some aspects of my piece.
- When I am researching for a piece, I might ask GenAI to make me aware of relevant scholarly works. I would only cite them if I were able to read the original papers. That way there is no chance that I can be victimized by hallucinations.
- I can also use AI for "transpection," which means that I ask it a question that I myself am considering, I then argue with it and ask follow up questions for the purposes of helping me form my own thoughts on the matter.

BACKGROUND

I wrote this as an exercise in examining and addressing the problem of authorship in business and personal writing. Unfortunately, the time has come when truths that once went comfortably without saying must be laid out, awkwardly, in plain view.

A great many of my fellow humans have chosen to retreat behind bland masks of AI-generated text. Some of these are people I once respected and now respect a little less. And some of the people I respect less don't deserve it—because I suspect them of using an AI ghostwriter even when they didn't. I don't know who they are, but we all are forced to judge, these days. It's as if we are forced to evaluate every single professional and personal communication as potential spam.

You could, of course, refuse to judge. Accept every communication at face value. If so, you will form incorrect beliefs about the thoughts, motives, and skills of the people around you. Eventually, that will have humiliating consequences. I want to protect myself from that, if I can.

What is Authorship?

It is normal, especially in professional writing, to collaborate with people who are not acknowledged in the text. We get ideas from co-workers, passing spouses¹, friends, and things

¹ Microsoft Word, and my brother, don't agree with me that the phrase "passing spouses" works here. He says "I don't know what that means." He even said "do you mean your wife is dying?" Under normal circumstances, I would react to my brother's concern by arguing with him a little ("are you saying you have NO IDEA what I'm talking about") then, based on his reaction, probably rephrasing this to "passerby spouses" or "a spouse passing by." In this case, I'm leaving it in, as I would have if he hadn't been watching me write. The phrasing is an example of me trying to be "myself" and attempting to evoke interesting imagery (e.g. of my wife looking over my shoulder and making a comment then walking away)

we see online. Whether writing professional or personally, I have no problem saying “I wrote this” even if I was assisted in some way. Or I might acknowledge someone who didn’t draft a word of it, wanting to honor them for helping me work up the ideas.²

We are all influenced in more general ways, as well. I’m sure my experiences as a 10-year-old, trying to make sense of the articles in *Scientific American*, had a big effect on my writing style. Also, being the son of writer Richard Bach has had no small impact. He drilled into me the importance of avoiding clichés. Reach for the interesting image!³

In professional writing, we may suppress authorship entirely, or make it a big deal, depending on the context. In a 1999 press release about the Certified for Windows 2000 program, someone at Microsoft wrote “Working with VeriTest and Microsoft to define the certification test plan will be well-known testing consultant, James Bach.” I was surprised and pleased that they decided to acknowledge my authorship of the exploratory part of that test protocol.

So, what shall I say authorship is? I would say there are three principal dimensions to it: drafting, ownership, and content.

Drafting consists of generation and acceptance. Generation is the process of selecting words, phrases, and grammatical structures from my working vocabulary, then linking them together into sentences, etc. acceptance is the ability to take or leave the generated text. Acceptance is the process of ultimately approving or refusing to approve that text. If you have the power of acceptance, then you control the work, but here’s a key thing: generation is also a kind of control, because no one can possibly accept text that they were never shown. The text generator has the right of first refusal, no matter what the accepter wants. If you are presenting text for approval by some other person—for instance, if you are a ghostwriter doing someone’s biography—your client never sees the fifty other ways you could have written their bio. From their point of view, they can “prompt” you and they can complain about what you wrote. That’s about it. It is a weak sort of authorship.

The process of writing *Taking Testing Seriously* was mostly me drafting the first half of the book (the part that documents the RST methodology) and Michael Bolton carefully considering it, suggesting edits and deeply involved in the acceptance process. The way I would describe the result is something akin to smelting: I brought the iron, Michael brought the carbon, and via our debates we forged it into steel.

Text consists of ideas and expressions (what I’m saying and how I say it). Well, technically a text is only so many expressions. Ideas aren’t “in” the expressions, but rather signified or implied

with my writing. It’s also an example of how I may fall down as a writer—but that’s all part of the glorious and tragic experience of human communication.

² That’s why Jon is listed as a co-author of this piece. He didn’t draft any of it, but it’s based on a few long conversations we had.

³ Such as a “passing spouse” dammit.

by them. The actor who supplies the ideas may not be the one who supplies the expressions. The ghostwriting process is an example of that division.

There is one more critical element of authorship: ownership. I will break that down into two parts, as well: intention and accountability. Intention is what I intended to say. When I write, I am trying to communicate something. I may fail to get that idea across. I might even have a poor grasp of the subject matter. If so, my writing is often muddy and over-complicated. Jerry Weinberg called that “gobbledegook.” When he spotted paragraphs in my work that were hard to understand, complicated, and at the same time also vague, he’d suggest that I’d lost control of the writing. Did I really intend to say that, or was I merely shot-gunning my words in the general direction of a point? The solution to gobbledegook is usually to think more, study more, and sometimes to take more space and time to explain the matter with clarity.

Whatever I say I have authored, I must be able to say I understand it, and it is what I meant to say.

Finally, there is accountability. Am I able to defend what I wrote? Is what I wrote my actual position on the matter at hand? Or do I now repudiate my words? One would expect an author of a work to stand behind the words, and accept the consequences of having written it.

AI does not have intentions and cannot be accountable. It spontaneously generates text based on statistics and a little randomness. It has no essential point of view, and no inner life—only the balance of training data. Whatever I ask it to write for me, someone else may ask it to write the opposite, and it will do so without complaint or reservation.

So, if you give AI a brief prompt, or a crude draft of something, and AI spits out a completed work, who is the author? No one, really. Not yet. What ideas does the work convey? Are you sure those are the ideas you understand and intend to be in the text? Is the phrasing acceptable? Are there references? You better check each one. Can you explain and defend that text? Even if you can answer all that in the positive, what if your colleagues discover that this piece was produced with the substantial assistance of AI drafting? Will they discount your part in the writing, and assume that you did nothing? Using AI as a co-author can be hazardous to your reputation.

Another Motivation For This: Mental Fitness

Using AI incurs another hazard. It risks weakening the mind. The very friction and inertia that makes writing difficult also drives a process of thinking. Writing (and speaking) improves ideas. I don’t find writing to be easy. But there nothing for it! I taught Rapid Software Testing methodology for decades before I ever wrote it down. Yet writing it caused me to deepen it and extend it. Via the writing process, Michael and I discovered contradictions and fuzzy zones that we were able to improve.

To gain the skills, I must do the work. AI can’t do this for me. AI will always take the path of least resistance to a bland conclusion.