

Read the Tea Leaves SOFTWARE AND OTHER DARK ARTS, BY NOLAN LAWSON

31 AUG

On not becoming a cyborg

Posted August 31, 2026 by Nolan Lawson in writing. Tagged: AI. [1 Comment](#)

I was a voracious reader as a kid, and I noticed a funny phenomenon: whatever writer I had most recently read, my next paper for English class would sound like them. If I read a bunch of Stephen King, I'd sound like Stephen King. If I read the *Narnia* series, I'd sound like C.S. Lewis (complete with British spellings and antiquated turns of phrase).

I know I've carried this tic into adulthood. As much as I've tried to find my own consistent voice in my blog writing, I know that whatever author I last read is sitting there in the back of my head, weighing in on my word choices and sentence rhythm.

So imagine my alarm when, in my last blog post (<https://nolanlawson.com/2026/08/23/the-asteroid-currently-hitting-frontend-web-development/>), the word "load-bearing" popped into my head. I used scare quotes and even called it out as a "Claude-ism," but I couldn't fight the feeling that it was *le mot juste* (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mot%20juste>). I couldn't find another phrase that felt more appropriate. And as Stephen King said, if you have to hunt for a word in the thesaurus, it's the wrong word (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/14337-any-word-you-have-to-hunt-for-in-a-thesaurus>), so I went with it.

The most recent book I've been reading is *Anna Karenina*, and it would be much more flattering to my ego if Tolstoy's short, punchy phrases (at least in the translation I'm reading) made their way into my writing. And maybe they did. But then there's the obvious Claude loanword in the middle of it, sticking out like an blemish.

More and more I've found my brain alighting on these phrases: "load-bearing," "belt-and-suspenders," "earns its keep." As much as I try to bat them away, they keep coming back. It shouldn't be surprising: my job these days is effectively to shepherd agents, skimming their meandering robo-prose and trying to steer them towards better code. But I can't help but be disturbed at how much they're rubbing off on me.

Immersion

I have a degree in linguistics, so I understand the power of immersion. I mean, you don't need to have read Chomsky to notice things like people picking up on the accents of those around them. I have a cousin who lived in England for a decade, and her accent morphed into a Transatlantic, Katharine Hepburn-esque hybrid of Kansas drawl and Bristol pep, until eventually she moved back and it wore away.

For a more dramatic example, when I visit family in France, I find that after a weeklong adjustment my brain starts thinking in French, dreaming in French. (Much to the detriment of my mental capabilities, I'm sure, since my French is much worse than my English!)

I like to imagine that reading is slightly different, though. When you're reading a good novel and you get lost in it, the author is in some sense hijacking your brain – you visualize their world, their words *become* your thoughts. And I find that this affects my writing much more than my speech, which makes sense: reading/writing and listening/speaking are governed by different parts of the brain (<https://neurosciencenews.com/writing-reading-aphasia-2032/>).

I think it's also possible to resist the environment you're immersed in. I spent years in big-tech corporate culture, where every phrase is hedged and every expression flattened into a kind of mush designed to be as inoffensive as possible. I *hated* this voice, but of course I noticed it sneaking into my writing over the years (“on the other hand,” “to be fair,” etc.). If you read my pre-big-tech posts (<https://nolanlawson.com/2014/04/26/web-sql-database-in-memoriam/>), they're a lot more wild and freewheeling. I'd like to think I'm de-programming myself now and getting closer to that original voice.

(This is actually one of the reasons I stopped asking for reviews of my drafts. The reviewers were extremely helpful – thank you all! – but I found that it made me over-think things, try to anticipate every possible negative reaction from my audience, and thus land on a kind of “both-sides” journalism that made it unclear what I was trying to say in the first place.)

At some level though, I have to accept that “you are what you eat” when it comes to your linguistic diet. The evidence of accents, language, style, and rhetoric all point toward the current Borg (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borg>) of LLMs being an overwhelmingly poisoned water the more you dunk yourself in it. You can resist, you can cleanse yourself in other waters, but to some degree I worry that “resistance is futile” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borg#%22Resistance_is_futile%22) because they will infect your speech, your writing, and even your thoughts in ways that may even be invisible to you.

Stay human

So how do we fight this horde of agents colonizing our brains? In short: stay human, friends. Resist the whispering earring (<https://croissantology.com/earring>). Be jealous of your time and attention, and try to find other sources of artistic and intellectual sustenance (<https://nolanlawson.com/2026/03/22/the->

diminished-art-of-coding/) than the chatbots. As doomed as it may feel, try to keep a part of yourself that is the tiny little village of Gauls (<https://asterix.fandom.com/wiki/Gaul>) holding off the Roman invaders. Whatever your inner sanctum is, protect it from AI infiltration.

One strategy is to be deliberate about where you expose yourself to AI influence. I recently vibe-coded a silly guitar app (<https://toot.cafe/@nolan/117181623848863628>) to try to help me get better at guitar solos – I play a phrase, the AI responds to my phrase, etc. I have no concerns about my guitar-playing becoming robotic, because I’m not trying to become Eddie Van Halen; I’m starting from such a low bar that even playing a halfway-decent riff in the pentatonic scale is challenging enough for me. Elsewhere, I’m more guarded.

For example, this is why I don’t use LLMs for any of my writing – not even to spellcheck. I’d rather my prose have all the warts of my sometimes-stilted sentences, my often too-esoteric word choice, my generous sprinkling of odd English idioms, than to give it even a whiff of Claudese.

Plus, I know that as soon as I ask the chatbot for help on even a single sentence (“can you help this land better?”), it’s all over for me. I’ve already given up on keeping my own voice in my code: I used to care a lot about variable names, function arrangement, which kinds of for-loops to use… and now I just accept Claude’s little stylistic quirks because they’re not worth fighting. If I let the same thing happen to my English writing, I’d feel like it had lost some indelible stamp of me-ness.

I think there’s also something to be said for showing a courtesy to others: be clear what’s LLM-authored and what’s not. In my workplace writing, I have a habit of bookending all my Claude quotes with clear markers – `<blockquote>` , `<details>` / `<summary>` , etc. – to make it clear which words are Nolan-words and which are robo-words. I certainly find myself tuning out a piece of writing if it appears to be AI-generated, and the worst thing is not knowing whether someone’s sent you their robot ghostwriting or not: it forces you to do this mental classification for everything you read. So I try to spare others this cognitive strain. (Unless my bots disobey me!)

Maybe this is a losing battle, though. Maybe the kids are already growing up with their brains shaped by AI the same way they were shaped by social media. Maybe the whispering earring will win, and it will hollow out some part of our brains the same way we all forgot how to navigate once Google Maps came out. (This certainly describes me.) But personally, I’m too much of a purist to go gentle into that good night (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46569/do-not-go-gentle-into-that-good-night>) . I plan to resist in my own small ways, even as I accept that generative AI has become an inescapable fact of everyday life and in particular the life of a programmer.

Even if it’s Quixotic, to me this quest is crucial, critical, all-important, foundational, paramount for the perseverance of the human spirit in the age of AI. The only thing it’s not is “load-bearing.”

One response to this post.

Posted by Will on August 31, 2026 at 9:43 AM

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yep, checks out

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