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CAMPUS NEWS

Blue books are back: The revival of pen and paper exams

Blue books are seeing a revival at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and college campuses across the county as more professors grow concerned about online cheating with artificial intelligence tools.

By [Annika Bereny](#)

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Fresh off the heels of summer break, some students were startled by three words they thought had been lost to time: "blue book exam."

Indeed, for many students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison this year, gone are the days of the take-home paper or at-home Canvas final. Faced with rising instances of students using generative artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT and Google Gemini, to cheat, professors have instead returned to the ol' reliable: a handwritten, in-class exam.

A December 2024 [survey](#) of 337 higher education leaders conducted by Elon University and the American Association of Colleges and Universities asked about AI use on their campuses. 59% of those leaders said that they believe cheating on their campuses has increased since generative AI models have become widely available, with 21% saying it has increased "a lot." Additionally, 54% of them said they believe faculty members are not effective in recognizing AI-generated content.

For Information School Assistant Professor Clinton Castro, the hunch that his students were using ChatGPT on their assignments came as a "rude awakening."

"I'm teaching this big class, and I'm having a lot of trouble staying on top of the GPT stuff," Castro said. "I think it's being used way too much, probably. I don't even know how to prove how, but we all have a sense. I just felt like, 'Oh my gosh.' [There's] a lot going on right now, and it's really hard for me to figure out what to do."

Cue blue books.

Across the country, blue book use has risen significantly. At the University of Florida, blue book sales in the 2024-2025 school year were up 50% with that number increasing to 80% at the University of California, Berkeley, according to a May [Wall Street Journal article](#).

At UW-Madison, Information School Administrative Specialist Molly Cook told the Cardinal that when she went to order blue books for the information school in early September, the 12-page books were sold out with no restock date in sight. Moving down one size, the books were in a three-week backorder, though Cook said they were able to arrive within two weeks.

Decades of digitization

For some upperclassmen and graduate students on campus, blue books have just been a return to their roots. Information School associate professor and Director of the Center for the History of Print and Digital Culture Jonathan Senchyne said blue book exams were the norm for any class with a written response when he first began teaching at the university level as a graduate student 21 years ago.

Even in high school, many students had to complete exams for Advanced Placement (AP) or the SAT by hand — with the exception of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier this May, however, the College Board made 16 of those exams [fully digital](#), including AP U.S. History and AP Environmental Studies. Ironically, those tests will be administered on a digital interface called [Bluebook](#).

Because of the constant movement toward digitization, Senchyne said he too has felt the pressure to move coursework online.

"I think a lot of things happen out of a combination of convenience and expectation," he said. "Some decisions about teaching were made, not based in good reason or principle ... But rather, students expect this. The university pays for it. It's less bothersome to do it this way."

Along the way though, Senchyne said he lost focus of what he was truly trying to assess from his students. After receiving 40-50 final exams in a 400-student class with clear evidence of ChatGPT usage, including the inclusion of the ChatGPT logo in the pasted text, Senchyne had had enough.

When he made the decision to switch back to blue book assessments in fall 2024, he said he wasn't necessarily looking for the best-written paper quality-wise, but rather the ability to connect concepts from class to each other and explain their relevance.

"This is a better use of my grading time and my TAs' time so that they're not spending all this time doing detective work about academic dishonesty and putting [time] back into meaningful feedback and discussion sections," he said. "I want them focusing on that, and I want them developing a relationship with students that is like, 'this is a trusted place to answer questions,' rather than, 'I am a detective who is out to police your digital writing practices.'"

Innovating the blue book

Despite their usefulness in the current moment, blue books were phased out for a reason — often efficiency but occasionally accessibility. Castro and Senchyne are both aware of this, though, and have worked to make their exams as forgiving as possible for students.

"One of my big reservations about the blue book was I thought that there was going to be a massive trade off," Castro said. "I think that there's something really valuable about sitting with an idea, writing in stages, doing drafts. And I wasn't really quite sure how to keep that goodness with the blue book."

To fix that, the papers in his class have become a multi-step — and multi-blue book — process. Students write their first drafts in blue books, which are then collected and redistributed for peer review. Final drafts are also handwritten in blue books, with the chance to rewrite those even after having been graded.

"At the end of the day, all I want is the students to learn," Castro said, "and if someone has to write their essay three or four times, and I get to hold my standards nice and high, I'm going to feel really good about a lot of people getting a good grade."

Senchyne, too, had worries about trade-offs that could come with using blue books.

"When I did this last fall, it became clear to me that a lot of people in my classes are first- year students who are taking their first semester of college in another country, in another language," he said. "This year, I told all students for the exam, 'if you want, you can bring a print dictionary. If that's an English dictionary, because that's your first language, if it's a translation dictionary, first language to English, that's fine.' I've done a lot of thinking about how to, again, get to the thing I actually wanted, rather than all these other things that are flying around it."

Betting on blue books

Senchyne likened exams to an adage he often hears as a distance runner: the distance will either validate or expose your training. To him, an exam merely serves to showcase the training that has been done throughout the class — the thinking and the studying that familiarizes a student with concepts.

"The point is to strengthen the body or to practice self discipline," he said. "The point is not transactional in producing a paper, the end product of the paper is an afterthought to the process."

Both Castro and Senchyne said they've found success in blue books and will continue to use them in future courses.

"I think there's an underlying theme here about efficiency and inefficiency, challenge or difficulty," Senchyne said. "Like, do blue books make things more difficult for faculty, for students, compared to what you could just do if you just put everything in Canvas? Yeah, probably. But the point of getting an education is not to have the most efficient, easy process along the way. The point is to challenge yourself, and I think we have to get back to a world in which there's room for inefficiency that lets us grow."

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