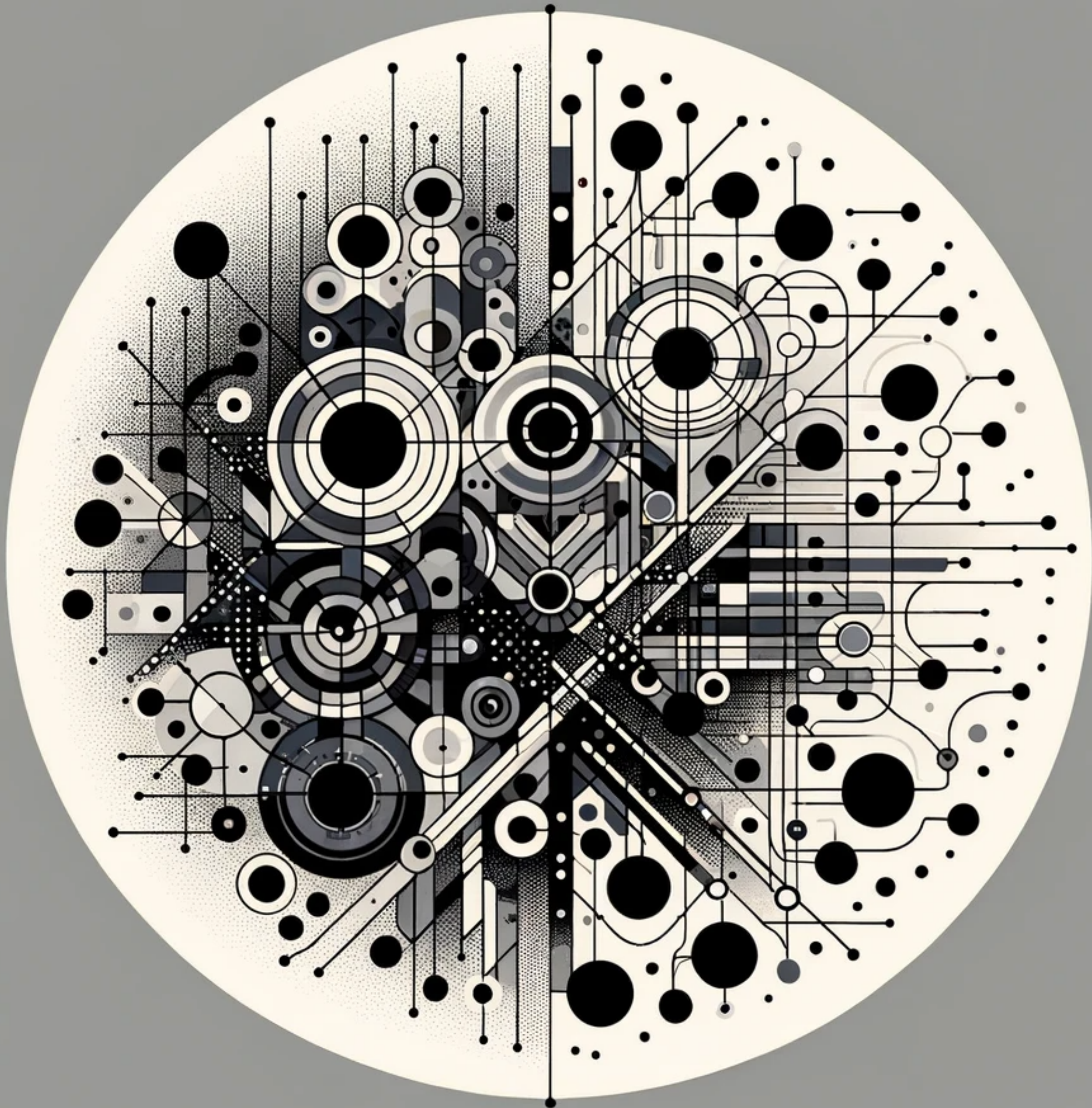




# „I knew that reading the texts wouldn't do me much good anyway“: Ethnographic Perspectives on Generative AI and Changing Practices of Reading in Academia

**Lukas Griessl** | *Ludwig-Uhland-Institute of Historical and Cultural Anthropology, University of Tübingen*



# Hybrid Epistemic Practices

Generative Artificial Intelligence and the Transformation of Academic Assemblages in the Qualitative Social Sciences and Humanities

## University of Tübingen

- Prof. Dr. Christoph Bareither (PI)
- Dr. Libuše Hannah Vepřek (Co-Investigator)
- Dr. Lukas Griessl (Postdoc Researcher)
- Annabelle Schönherr (Student Assistant)

EBERHARD KARLS  
UNIVERSITÄT  
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GEFÖRDERT VOM



Bundesministerium  
für Bildung  
und Forschung



Baden-Württemberg

MINISTERIUM FÜR WISSENSCHAFT, FORSCHUNG UND KUNST



## Hybrid Epistemic Practices...

- ...emerge from interconnected academic assemblages, consisting of heterogeneous elements, such as researcher, rules, methodologies, lecturer, students, spaces, technologies, GenAI...
- Academic assemblages are typically organized around shared epistemic practices, which are always shaped by the distributed actions of various actors and elements.
- ...are “practices in which **GenAI strongly participates** in acquiring, producing, contextualizing, and circulating knowledge, and in which agency is shared between GenAI and human actors in such a way that the **epistemic roles** and capacities of both elements become **indistinguishable**” (Bareither, Griesl, 2026)

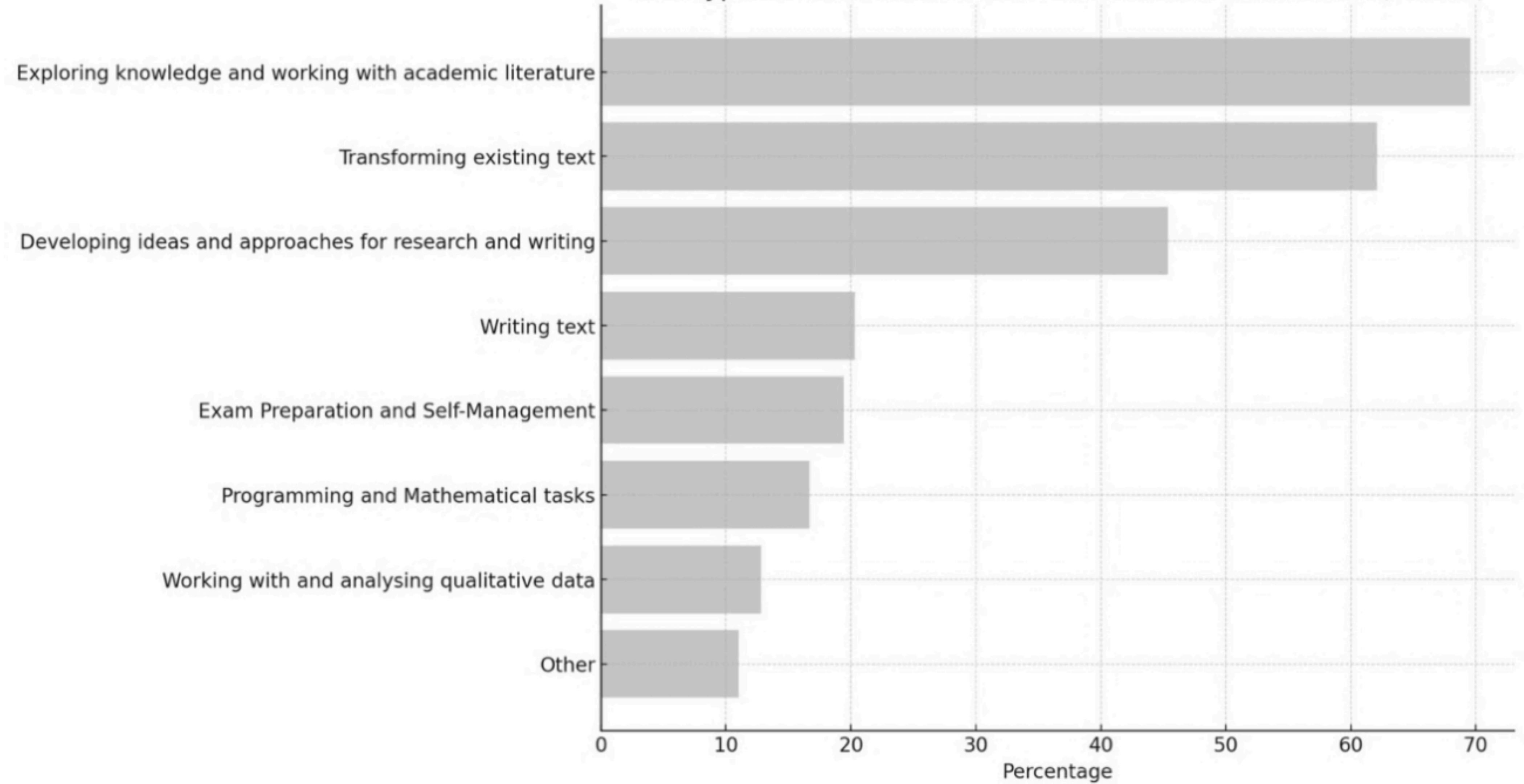


## Methodology / Schedule

- **April 2024: Survey**
  - University-wide online survey (500+ participants) on the use and perception of GenAI
- **July 2024 – February 2025: Ethnographic (Group) Interviews**
  - 15 researchers / 21 students
- **June 2025 – August 2025: Media Diaries**
  - AI-based media diaries with 7 students
  - Regular self-interviews with a CustomGPT, focusing on everyday GenAI use in academia, feelings, reflections, and changing practices
  - 75 media diary entries
- **August and September 2025: Interviews**
  - Reflective Interviews with participants of media diaries

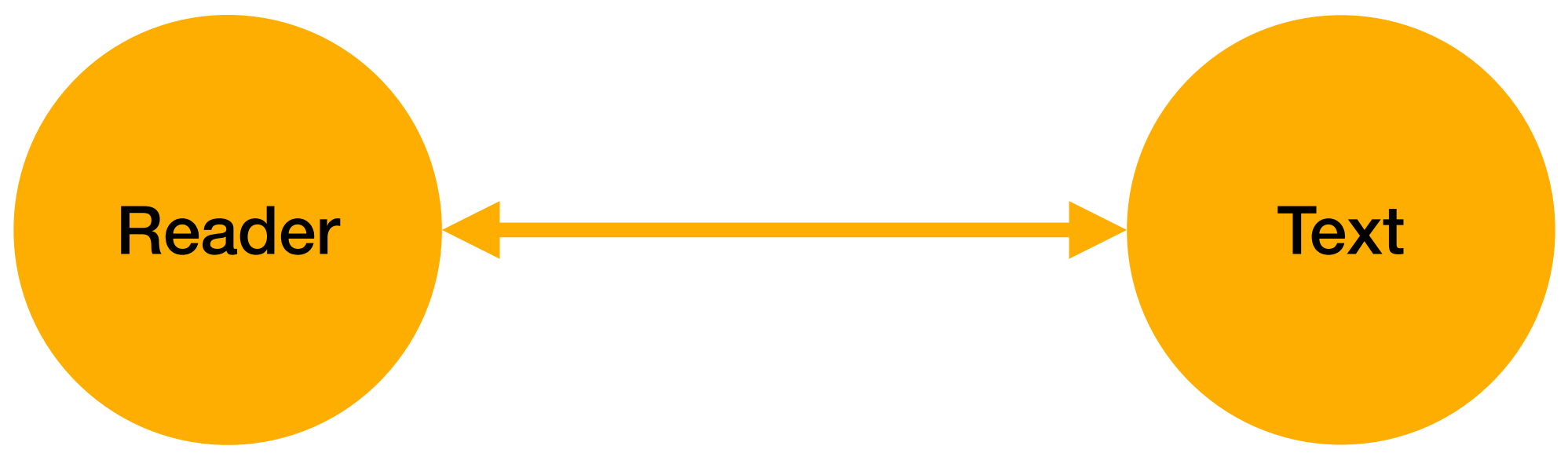


Task Type Distribution in Social Sciences and Humanities (Sorted)



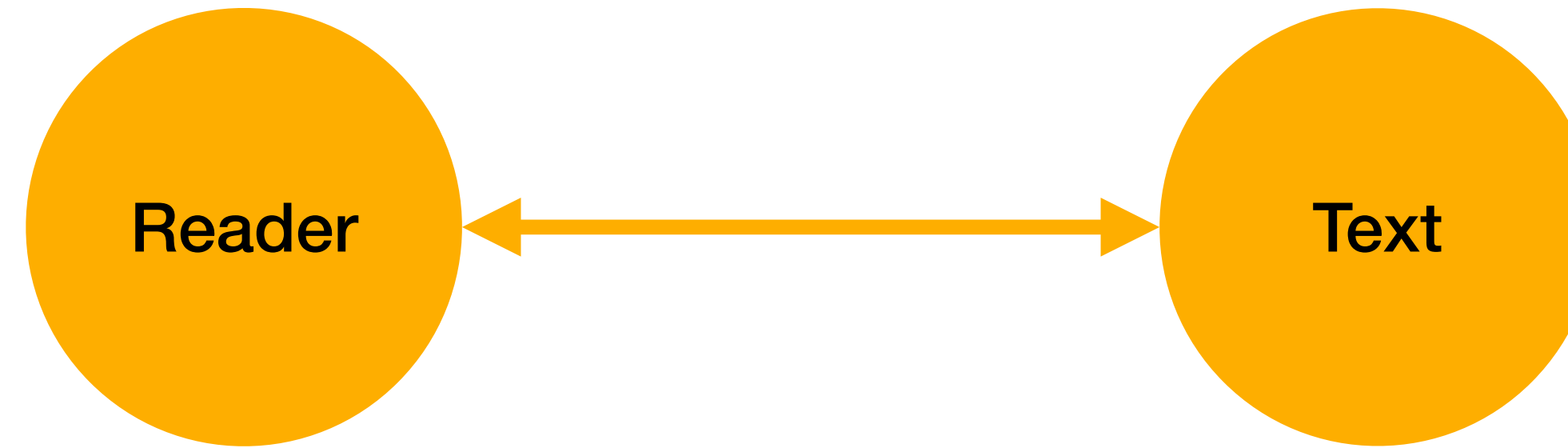


# Traditional Reading

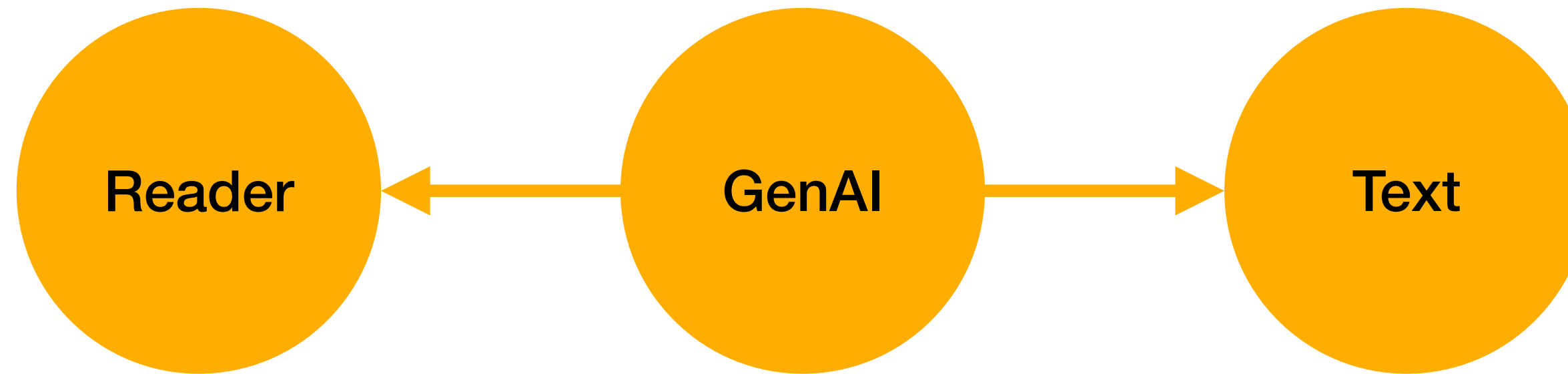




## Traditional Reading



## Reading with GenAI

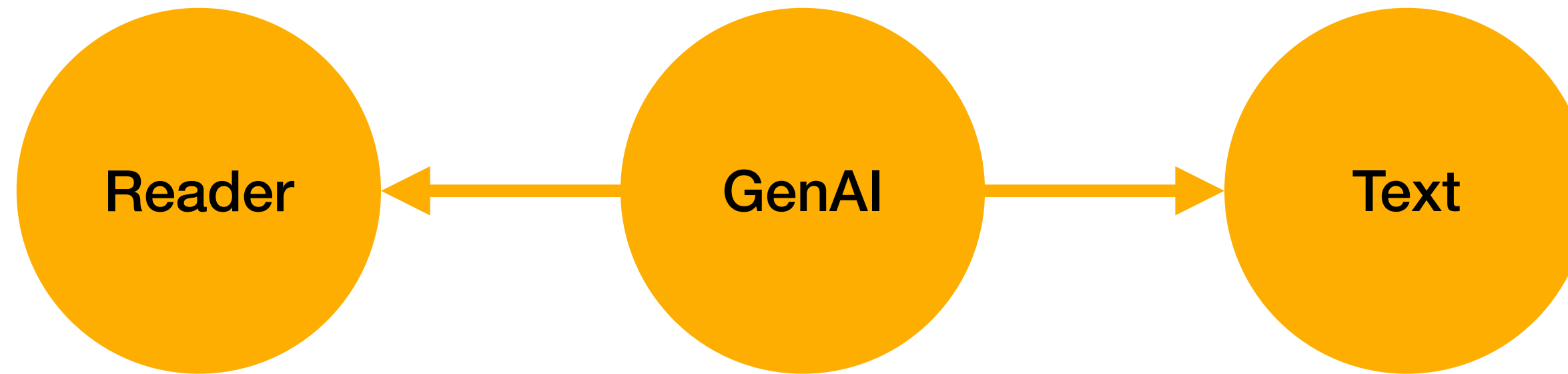




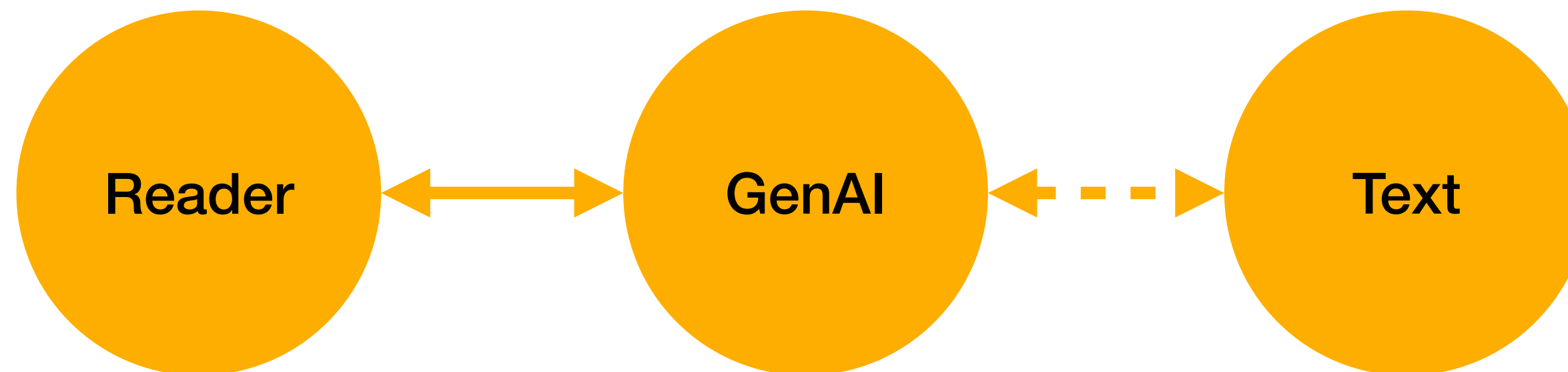
Traditional Reading



Reading with GenAI



Reading only with GenAI





“I think it’s more of an advantage, because it simply saves work and is more individualized and tailored to the student. It allows them to have information presented exactly in the style or manner they need, whether in terms of language, level of difficulty, wording, or even with connections to prior knowledge. [...] You can also specifically look things up again or ask about points you didn’t understand. I mean, those of us who already had the internet during our studies are at an advantage compared to those who didn’t and had to get everything from books. But I think AI simplifies things even further and avoids those sometimes unnecessary detours of ‘I read something, but it doesn’t help my understanding because it’s not actually what I need.’”

- Viktoria, PhD student (translated from German)



Individualisation of  
knowledge

Reduction of  
epistemic and  
linguistic barriers

Efficiency

Perceived as epistemic  
advantage

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## AI-mediated pre-reading (Vor-Lesen)

“And, um, I think I spent so much time with ChatGPT just trying to figure out the topic of my term paper in the first place. Because the lecturer didn’t help me at all in finding a topic, and that whole process was so difficult. [...] And then I sort of worked it out with GPT somehow, and was like, okay, maybe **what literature could I use? And ChatGPT was like, ‘Yeah, you could look at this or that.’**”

- Linda, BA student (translated from German)



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“I always kind of treat AI as if it were my student assistant (Hiwi) (laughs). And I think a lot of the things that are replaced by AI are also things where, honestly, I don’t really need to learn anything. Like, [...] **what’s the point of learning how to do literature research? I mean, what’s the point? I have a tool that just generates that for me.**”

- Noah, BA student (translated from German)



## AI-mediated pre-reading (Vor-Lesen)

GenAI structures what to read before reading begins

Outsourcing of literature research

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## Reading as interactive, dialogical and tailored

“When I read a text, I don’t just sit in an empty room with only the printed text and try to study it. I usually have Google open as well and look up words [...]. And, yeah, [...] it’s often just like a better Google. I can have individual passages explained to me again and so on.”

- Anton, BA student (translated from German)



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“I first try to follow ChatGPT’s reading, then read the text again for myself, and then revisit my own previous interpretation. So it’s a somewhat heuristic approach. What comes out in the end remains open. **That said, I see ChatGPT primarily as a provider of interpretations**, since as an LLM it draws on a huge dataset, which of course opens up a much wider range of interpretive possibilities than I could arrive at on my own.”

- Robert, BA student (translated from German)



## Reading as interactive, dialogical and tailored

Reading as dialogical

GenAI as co-  
interpreter

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- Elisabeth, BA student (translated from German)



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“Sometimes if I find a very complicated article, especially [...] in academic German, I can ask it **to retell it to me** [...], like I give a feedback that I come from a different field, this is not my native tongue, but I really need to understand what it is about in simpler terms. And there, I think, I trust that it's not changing too much, at least for what it is. It is helping because there are things that I wouldn't be able to understand otherwise.”

- Evelyn, PhD Student



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Mediated access

Adjusting the content  
and the text

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## Reading as interactive, dialogical and tailored

“I also **felt a bit stupid**, I have to say. At the same time, [...] I wasn’t sure whether that was really just due to my tiredness, or whether I wouldn’t have understood the text anyway. And I think that would really frustrate me if that were the case, which I also think might be possible. [...] Basically, **it didn’t feel good at all to need support in the first place.**”

- Charlie, BA student (translated from German)



## Reading as interactive, dialogical and tailored

Self doubt

Discomfort  
with  
support

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## Reading as interactive, dialogical and tailored

„Because a friend of mine told me that she always listens to podcasts and studies that way [...] and now she had all her notes, her slides summarized by AI, and then she had a podcast script written based on that and converted it using a text-to-audio app. **And now she basically listens to her summary as a podcast.** And I think that's such a great idea.”

- Hannah, BA student (translated from German)



## Reading as interactive, dialogical and tailored

Decentering of text

Changing role of  
original text

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## Delegating Reading

“...for example, I have to turn in a reading journal this Friday, but I haven't read the assigned material yet, and I won't be able to finish it in time, so I'll have to use ChatGPT for that

- Charlie, BA student (translated from German)

“... I've been pretty stressed out the last few days, I was pretty tired, and it was a relief to have the text summarized for me... I don't think I would have gained that much more insight if I'd read the text myself.”

- Charlie, BA student (translated from German)

„I knew that reading the texts wouldn't do me much good anyway“

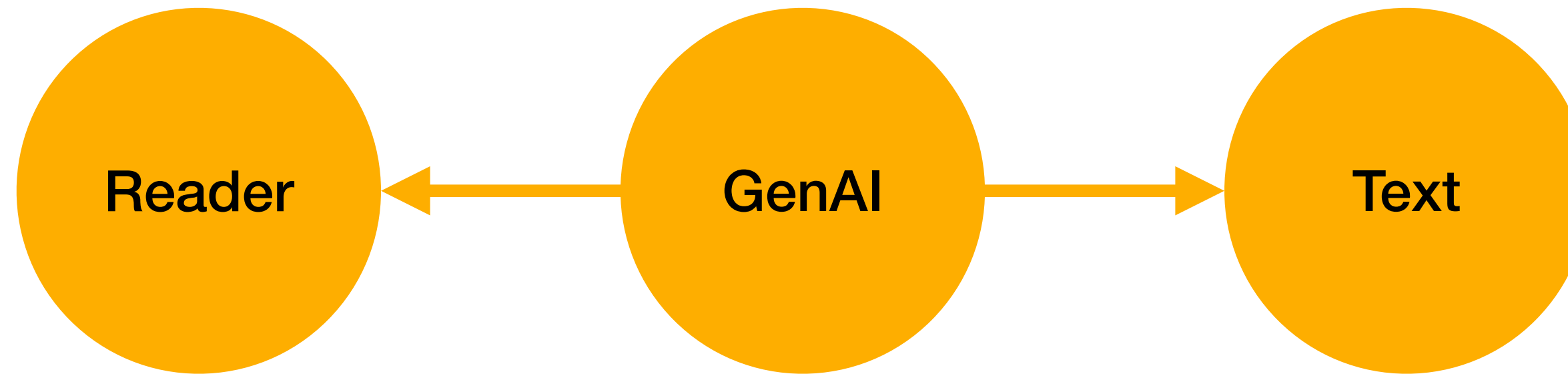
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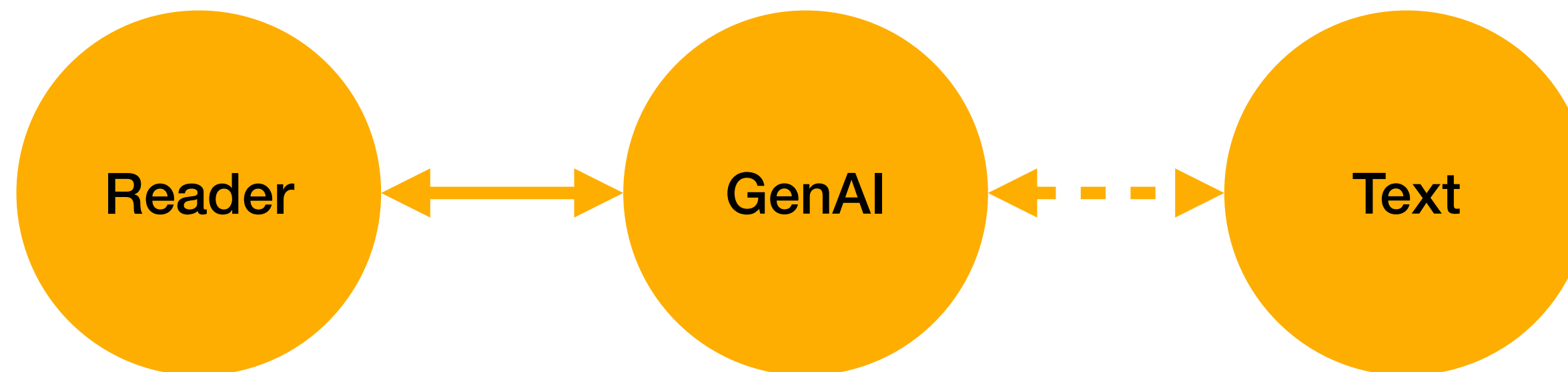
## Traditional Reading



## Reading with GenAI



## Reading only with GenAI





## Boundaries of AI-mediated reading

“I wouldn’t just feed „The Dialectic of Enlightenment“ or a text by Adorno into an AI and say, ‘Okay, what does he have to say?’ **No, you really have to read it yourself, because that’s how you actually build knowledge for yourself.** And honestly, that’s **too sacred to me to outsource to anything**, and it’s not the kind of application I’d really want to see it used for.”

- Robert, BA student (translated from German)



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traditional reader-  
text relation

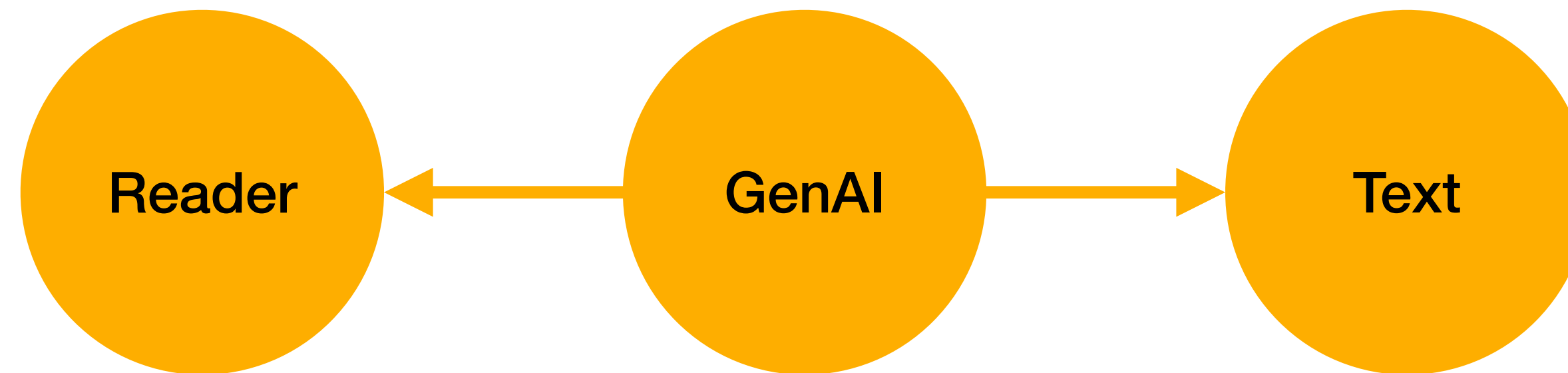
Some texts (and  
people) resist change



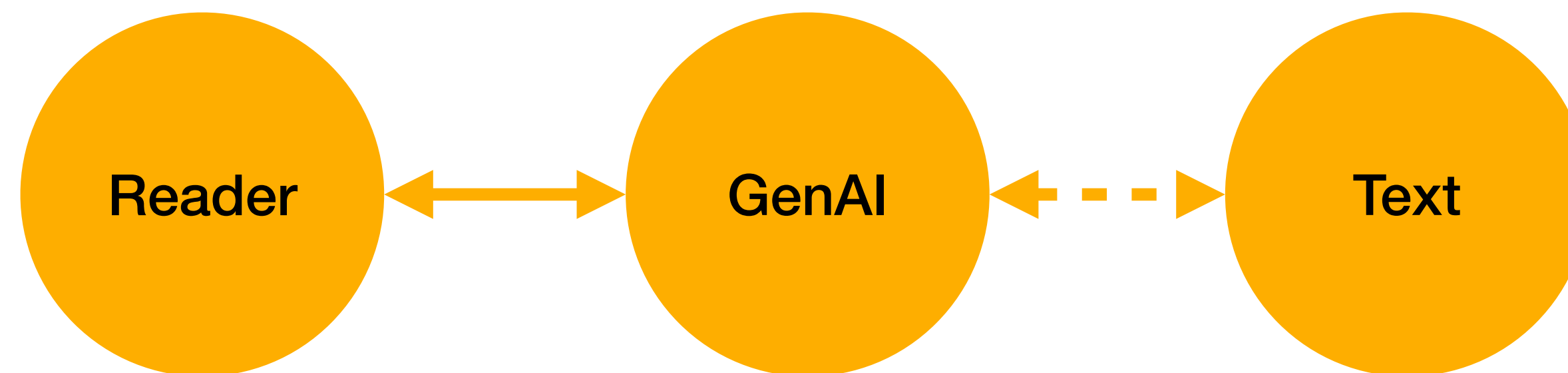
Traditional Reading



Reading with GenAI



Reading only with GenAI





# Thank you for your attention!

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