Artificial Intelligence (AI) and student writing: What you should know

Generative AI services and tools for writing have become a critical topic, especially for students who now have to figure out whether they should be using these tools when they write for college, and, if so, when and how? Further, using Generative AI as part of the writing process presents a number of risks students should be aware of so they can make the best choices to support their learning.



Learn your class's AI policy

Regardless of any personal feelings or thoughts about AI, students must comply with the policies in their classes. What is considered to be an acceptable degree of engagement with AI differs depending on the academic field, the institution, the instructor– it can even differ on individual assignments. Be sure always to check the AI policy in each of your classes; one class or instructor is likely to treat it differently than another. Some classes may allow for its use with certain aspects of the writing process; others may prohibit its use completely. Some may even require you use AI for some work. The AI policy is usually found in the class syllabus. If it's not, be sure to ask your instructor.

"Using AI as a Tool" in academic writing

A common recommendation for approaching AI is to "use it as a tool"–but what does that mean for academic writing?

In the writing process, **research shows that AI platforms can support learning when they are used to provide feedback:** along with peers and tutors, they can provide another perspective on what is working–or not yet working–in your writing.

Other ways of using AI as a tool in the writing process might be asking questions about grammar, about outlining tips, and about citing sources, along with other targeted questions where the level of control given to the AI is limited.

If you do use AI, be sure you **use it as a tool by asking targeted questions,** rather than providing it with untargeted prompts

⇢ Ask targeted questions

Asking targeted questions about your writing means you still retain control over it, and the AI feedback you get is based on work you've already done. (Be careful about asking too many questions back-to-back though, as this has been shown to make the AI responses less useful as it iterates–repeats its attempts–based on the previous prompts.) **Targeted** questions ask for something specific, avoiding wide-ranging, general queries.

Examples of targeted questions:

- Did I use commas right in this sentence?
- How do I cite a journal article that has two authors in APA?
- Where in my paper should I put my thesis statement?
- What is a good strategy for integrating source information into a paragraph?

⇢ **Avoid using untargeted prompts**

Using general, untargeted prompts surrenders control over your work to an AI, which creates numerous risks. (The next section goes over those risks; go there for the important details.) **Try your best to avoid these types of prompts.** Learning how to construct an effective, targeted prompt to query AI–called "prompt literacy" or "prompt engineering"–is considered a key basic skill needed to use AI responsibly.

Examples of untargeted prompts:

- Fix my commas in this paragraph.
- Put citations in this paper.
- Make an introduction with my thesis statement.

Some risks of using generative AI in writing

Any time you allow AI to intercede in your writing process when you write in college, you risk losing out– not only on intended learning outcomes for the specific task, but on your ability to control your own writing and forward your own voice.

There are also major academic honesty concerns students must be aware of to stay in good standing with the school, namely the issue of **plagiarism.** Never use any AI-generated writing and pass it off as your own. Doing so risks violating the college's policy on plagiarism. "AI-generated writing" means something you have asked or allowed AI to write in whole or in part or AI-generated information that you simply copy into your writing.

If your class or specific assignment does allow you to use AI-generated work in some way, you must document it properly. (Look for how to document AI use in reliable documentation resources.) But be aware that even when AI use is documented, it's often unclear what actual sources were drawn on and whether they are reliable sources.

Reminder: In college, you should use AI in your writing process **only to the extent that the class policy allows.*** But **even when you do use it according to policy, there are some risks you need to be aware of:**

- **Stealth AI:** Even before AI moved to the center of our public conversations, we've been using it regularly. To some degree, the results of every Google search has involved some form of AI (and now it is overtly included). This doesn't mean it's unethical to use search engines–it's just a good illustration of pervasive AI use is already in our everyday behavior. Be thoughtful; you may have discovered or even been encouraged to use tools in your writing that you don't realize are AI.

* And if you're tempted to "cheat" the AI use policy, be aware that there are many ways you might be "caught."

An example of "stealth AI": Using Grammerly to point out grammar errors in your writing that you then correct yourself is using the service as a tool; letting Grammerly correct the errors it identifies in your writing is letting AI do work for you.

- **Fingerprints:** Using AI to help you revise or edit writing (or to revise it for you…) can leave an "AI fingerprint" on your work, which exposes it to being flagged by AI checker programs, if your instructor uses one. (Many do.) Unfortunately, the checkers aren't reliable; they often "flag" a lot more of a paper as being AI-generated than may be true–even sentences that are 100% your own–if they detect any AI influence in the work. This means that even using AI according to policy might cause a headache for you if an instructor thinks you may have used it unethically or not according to policy.

- **Hallucinations:** Because of the way generative AI works, it can generate statements or information that looks right, but isn't actually real. These are called "hallucinations," and anyone using generative AI needs to be aware of them.

  In academic writing, these hallucinations often show up in citations and source pages. Beware! Not only will it greatly benefit you to learn how to do your own targeted research, but if you ask AI to find sources for you, it may "find" reference information for sources that don't actually exist.

  For example, AI might provide information about a journal article that *looks* like a real source, with authors, a title, a journal name, and all the publication info (volume, issue, page, and even a DOI number, *but there is no such article.* Some parts of the information might exist in some places–it might be a real journal, for example, or the author names may be actual authors of other articles–but no article by that title by those authors actually was published in that journal on those pages, etc. In some cases, it might all be fabricated. AI might even provide "information" or "research" from hallucinated sources–research that would, of course, itself be an AI hallucination.

  Either circumstance is a **serious breach of academic honesty.** Be sure to check any source an AI attempts to give you. To do this, use the research tools you would ordinarily use to find sources. (To save time and learn more, in most cases it probably makes best sense just to do the searching yourself in the first place.)

- **Losing your voice:** Relying on AI-generated material risks you losing your voice as a writer. College is a prime space for people to practice communicating effectively through writing, which is a vital skill to have in your personal and professional lives. Having a voice that is yours, rather than an artificial one, better represents your way of thinking, your personality, and your values.

- **Losing brain strength:** Off-loading too much of your work to AI creates something called "cognitive atrophy," which results in lower brain activity. Remember that all parts of the writing process, including brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revision, and editing, require you to think and make sense of information and ideas as you figure out what you want to say and how you want to say it. Writing is much more than the final product, and all parts of it make our brains work better!