



ELON
UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR
Writing
Excellence

Functional, Critical, Rhetorical AI Literacy

Main Takeaway

When integrating the use of generative AI into course curriculum, it is important to ensure that functional, critical, and rhetorical AI literacy is maintained by both instructors and students. These skills help students learn to use AI in the writing process deliberately, rather than passively.

Just as we teach students to use search engines, citation tools, or Wikipedia, generative AI should be integrated into the classroom as part of a broader writing ecology. These tools are evolving rapidly, and so are our students' relationships to them.

Functional AI Literacy

The practical knowledge and skills both educators and students need to effectively and ethically integrate AI into academic writing. This skill will help students feel confident when understanding how to use AI tools responsibly, while maintaining the integrity of their learning process.

This form of literacy involves:

- **Establishing Clear Expectations**
Define and communicate guidelines for how AI may or may not be used in specific writing assignments.
- **Maintaining Transparency**
Both students and instructors should engage in open dialogue about the goals of the writing assignment and the acceptable use of AI.
- **Framing AI as a Tool**
AI should be framed as a supportive tool for allowed writing assignments. It should not be seen as a shortcut to completed work.
- **Syllabus and Class Policy Clarity**
Instructors should include explicit "Acceptable Generative AI Use" policies in course materials to promote consistency and accountability.

Critical AI Literacy

The ability to analyze, question, and evaluate the use of AI in the writing process. This includes ethical use, assessment of outputs, and awareness of the broader implications of using AI in academics.

This form of literacy involves:

- **Critiquing the Limitations of AI**
Understand that AI generated responses often lacks rhetorical nuance, contextual awareness, and accuracy. AI may also generate based on biases, hallucinated information, or a misunderstanding of tone and/or voice.
- **Comparing AI to Other Technology**
Frame AI as another writing tool, such as Google, Grammarly, or Wikipedia. The use of AI in writing must involve the same amount of discernment as any other source or tool.
- **Evaluating Outputs**
Encourage students to analyze AI generated outputs to assess for biases, accuracy, and coherence. Students should not take any AI response at face value, and further research and examination should be highly encouraged.
- **Ethical Use**
Discuss with students what is considered ethical and nonethical use of AI in each of their writing assignments. Include concerns about plagiarism, cheating, and their learning outcomes.
- **A Wider Understanding**
Help students consider why and how they use AI in academics, and how it affects their learning outcomes and writing process.

Rhetorical AI Literacy

The ability to understand how to use AI in ways that are thoughtful, purposeful, and appropriate in assisting the writing process.

This form of literacy involves:

- **Using AI as a Writing Partner**
Practice using AI in class to support the different stages in the writing process. Analyze how AI tools help assist in brainstorming, researching, drafting, and revising/editing.
- **Understanding Prompt Crafting**
Teach students how to write effective prompts that include clear context, tone, and specific questions and guidelines.
- **Analyzing the Rhetorical Qualities of AI**

Evaluate the generated outputs. Analyze the tone, audience awareness, structure and voice and assess whether the outcome is appropriately assisting the writing process.

- **Thinking about Student Voice and Purpose**

Inform students on the voice of AI, and emphasize the importance of student authorial voice. Understand that while AI can serve as a tool for scaffolding ideas, it is important to preserve originality.

- **Exploring Genres**

Teach students to explore how their writing may change across genres or disciplines, and how different prompt phrasing can shape these outcomes.

- **Human-AI Loop**

A process where students guide the AI, evaluate its responses, and reshape them to fit their voice, genre, and rhetorical goals. Practicing prompt variations helps students see how form, tone, and audience guidelines affect AI outputs.

Example AI Integration Ideas

Activity	How It Works	Learning Objective	AI Literacy
Brainstorming Essay Topics	Students use AI to generate topic ideas or research questions, then critique or build on them.	Encourages creative thinking and idea development.	Functional, Critical
Outlining Arguments	Students input a thesis and prompt AI to suggest a supporting outline; compare to their own.	Strengthen organizational strategies.	Functional, Rhetorical
Revising and Editing	Use AI to suggest tone or clarity improvements; students decide what to keep and why.	Reinforce revision as intentional, not passive.	Critical, Rhetorical

Example Classroom Activities

Activity	How It Works	Learning Objective	AI Literacy
Prompt Crafting	Students test and revise prompts to see how wording impacts output.	Build awareness of how inputs shape results.	Rhetorical
Bias Detection	Students analyze AI responses to spot missing info, bias, or assumptions.	Encourage critical reading and ethical use.	Critical
Collaborative Writing	Groups co-write with AI: one writes prompts, one revises, one critiques, etc.	Practice teamwork and multi-step AI writing.	Functional