

Capstone 2.0: Elevating Research through AI Literacy

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As artificial intelligence (AI) transforms the landscape of political analysis and research, equipping students with AI literacy has become essential for a changing job market and world. This paper explores the integration of AI literacy into a senior political science capstone course (PSC 401). I review emerging literature on AI's role in the classroom and present pedagogical strategies I used to embed AI competencies within this senior capstone course. Additionally, I share survey findings that capture student perspectives on the value, challenges, and opportunities encountered in this course when using AI, offering insights for future curriculum development.

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming how we teach, learn, and conduct research. As AI becomes increasingly prevalent worldwide, it is essential for students—particularly those studying political science—to understand the skills needed to use these tools effectively while critically assessing AI's limitations. The growing use of AI in working environments has fostered narratives around the urgency of fostering "AI literacy" in higher education. Moreover, AI has changed the current information environment. To encourage civically and critically minded individuals, we should provide students with knowledge and skills to assess this new technological tool. AI literacy refers to using AI tools and technologies wisely, understanding the limitations, and contemplating the ethical implications. Scholars agree that acquiring AI-related competencies is critical for student success in a rapidly evolving world (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; Thai, 2023). Many disciplines, including political science, are experiencing significant changes due to AI, and educators are beginning to adapt their teaching methods accordingly (Luckin et al., 2016). However, integrating AI literacy into the classroom remains complex and marked by ongoing debates about ethics (Azevedo et al., 2024), the environment, and equity.

This paper focuses on my experience incorporating AI literacy into a senior political science capstone course (PSC 401). Three main questions guide this research: First, what are effective pedagogical strategies for incorporating AI into senior research capstone courses, thus improving AI literacy among political science students? Second, what benefits and challenges do political science students identify in integrating AI into a senior capstone course like PSC 401? Finally, what are students' perceptions of AI use and the incorporation of AI literacy into senior capstone courses?

To begin with, I share my strategy for incorporating AI literacy into the class. Then, I share the methodology and results from a short survey of the students' experience with AI literacy and feelings towards AI more generally. Ultimately, I find promising results that allowing students to "play" with AI encourages them to see the tool's limitations. Students were receptive to a policy that provided flexibility to use AI but also showed significant skepticism about what AI could create.

This research is important because most political science programs have yet to include AI literacy in their curricula despite its growing relevance. By integrating AI education into PSC 401, I aimed to equip students with critical skills for navigating the job market and understanding AI tools' strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, I hoped to model realistic methods of incorporating AI literacy into research-focused courses for other educators.

What do we know about Teaching with AI?

In exploring the literature around AI literacy, I've found less on how to teach AI literacy and more on the fears associated with AI use. For example, Ardoin and Hicks (2024) conducted a survey of faculty in March 2023. They found concerns span from academic plagiarism (37%) to an over-reliance on Chat GPT, diminishing student skills (26%), a small proportion (6%), and the probability of bias and hallucinations. Student perception of AI appears slightly more positive (Dhawan and Batra 2020; Thi 2023), expressing more curiosity than fear. More broadly, studies also responded to fears that AI will replace humans (Giray 2024; Chan and Tsi 2023), arguing for a complementary working relationship.

As I was most concerned with how to teach AI literacy, I focused on pedagogical resources speaking to this topic. There are some suggestions, such as the 'reflect and improve' prompts, in which students reflect on the AI-created material and try to improve them (Ardoin

and Hicks 2024) or illustrate the application in specific classes, such as Introduction to International Business (Yan 2021). Sade et al. do a terrific job highlighting the range of AI tasks that students can use, including anything from accessibility support to allow for text-to-speech or voice recognition to data visualization, vocabulary enhancement, or thesis generating (Sade et al. 2024). Yet, scholars and writers have published fewer articles that provide clear direction for teaching AI literacy. This lack of resource materials is likely due to the new AI technology and how quickly AI changes.

In my search, arguable the best resource on teaching with AI at the college level was the encompassing text, *Teaching with AI: A Practical Guide to a New Era of Human Learning* (2024) by José Antonio Bowen and Edward Watson. The authors note that the goal of AI literacy is to “prepare students to question assumptions, analyze problems more deeply, tolerate discomfort of ambiguity, find subproblems and clearly reframe problems (all parts of a classic liberal arts education) the better prepared they will be not only for the first wave of AI inspired jobs for subsequent waves that are still unknown” (Bowen and Watson, 2024, page 47). Within the text, Antonio and Watson provide an overview of AI basics before sharing information on how AI can influence thinking, teaching, and learning. They also include specific practical tools, such as a rubric, to encourage students to think beyond what AI can do or prompt ideas to use AI as a collaborator or tool for feedback. However, the text does not explore the ethical or environmental implications associated with the use of AI.

Importantly, this literature review is time-sensitive, as interest in AI and education grows, and new articles, books, and resources are frequently being released. Additionally, AI evolves rapidly, which means that strategies that are effective now may not remain relevant in the future.

PSC 401 Description and AI integration

Senior Project in Political Science (PSC 401) is the capstone course for political science majors. Capstone courses are designed to allow students to integrate and apply the knowledge, skills, and competencies developed throughout their major coursework (Ishiyama et al., 2015). PSC 401 was created with this purpose in mind, allowing students to reflect on their academic journey and apply their writing, knowledge, literacy, and analytical skills to an independent research project. Typically, the class consists of 17 to 20 students. According to the West Chester University Class Catalog, the course tasks majors with the “execution of an empirical research project in political science.” The course culminates in either a policy analysis or an empirical research paper, requiring substantial independent effort supported by faculty guidance. Students develop a research question, complete a literature review, collect and analyze data, write a 20-to-30-page paper, and present their findings at an academic poster session for the department. Most students approach the course with trepidation due to its rigorous demands.

To help students overcome their initial apprehension and succeed, I have integrated several strategies into my teaching of PSC 401. First, I incorporate a hiking metaphor as a unifying theme for the class, weaving this metaphor throughout the syllabus, online learning management system, and assignment descriptions. For example, the “empirical evidence check-in,” where students confirm their data source, is symbolized by a cairn—a stack of rocks hikers use as a trail marker. This metaphor extends to explain various elements of the course. My role as the instructor is not to “carry students up the mountain” but to provide a “map” (deadlines), “snacks” (resources), and emotional support as they “hike” toward completing their projects. I emphasize that the journey will vary; staying on pace feels like a steady walk, while procrastination can lead to a difficult scramble up a steep cliff. Students have embraced this

metaphor, using it to describe their progress, such as whether they are “still on the trail” or “lost in the woods.” This shared language has made the project more comprehensible and accessible.

Another key feature of the course is using a “revise and resubmit” grading model. Early assignments, such as research questions, annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, and methods sections, are scaffolded to ensure students build their projects on a strong foundation. When students submit an assignment, they receive one of three responses: “accepted with minor revisions” (allowing them to proceed with minor edits), “revise and resubmit” (requiring revisions within a week), or “desk rejection” (if students do not submit the assignment on time). This system encourages students to take risks and learn from mistakes, as they can earn full credit by addressing feedback. From my perspective, this model highlights students who struggle early, reducing the likelihood of “disaster” projects later. While this approach increases grading demands and may not scale well for larger classes, it has proven effective for this context.

Third, I use in-class writing sessions to provide additional structure to the course. In the past, students often delayed work on their papers, leading to rushed, poorly written submissions. To address this, some class meetings review elements of the research process, such as hypothesis development, and other class sessions are dedicated to in-class work time. Somewhat like a flipped classroom, during these work sessions, I circulate to meet with students, provide guidance on obstacles they may be facing, and provide students dedicated time to work on their projects.

The introduction of AI tools has presented new opportunities and challenges for the course. In the Fall of 2024, I began integrating AI literacy into the curriculum. This process began by developing an adaptable AI policy. The course’s AI policy (see Appendix) emphasizes intellectual integrity and requires students to acknowledge AI support. Three periodic

conversations accompanied this policy on AI literacy. During the first week, we discussed what constitutes intellectual integrity and reviewed the AI policy, which students then signed. I also shared a curated list of AI tools that could aid their research and writing. During this time, we also discuss some ethical concerns with using AI, such as privacy concerns or environmental concerns. In the future, as these concerns become clarified, I'd like to provide a collection of articles noting the "pros and cons" of AI use and considering what responsibility we have as scholars to consider the effects of these tools.

The second conversation occurred during the literature review phase. I demonstrated tools like Semantic Scholar and Elicit, sparking discussions about the strengths and limitations of AI-generated outputs. Finally, during their writing stage, I introduced some strategies for crafting effective AI prompts and encouraged students to use AI to refine their rough drafts (see Appendix). Future course iterations will likely include more assignments requiring students to use these tools and reflect on their utility and shortcomings of AI use. Still, as I, too, was learning about AI, this felt reasonable as a starting place to incorporate AI literacy into the class. In this initial phase of AI integration, I wanted to assess their perceptions and experiences. Consequently, I surveyed their use of AI and attitudes, both general attitudes to AI and attitudes toward AI within the course context.

Survey Methodology

To investigate student perceptions of AI, students enrolled in PSC 401 were invited to participate in the survey via email at the end of the semester¹. The invitation email explained the purpose of the study, emphasizing how their feedback would contribute to improving AI-related curriculum and detailing what their participation would entail. Broadly, I ask three main categories of

¹ This study was approved by the West Chester University Institutional Review Board (IRB-FY2025-139).

questions in the survey. The first are demographic questions. These questions ask about the frequency of AI use, types of AI used, and broadly, if they found AI use helpful for the course. I also particularly ask about gender because preliminary literature suggests that women are less likely to use AI (Bowen and Watson, 2024). Still, we do not know if the strategic incorporation of AI literacy opportunities in class will close this gap.

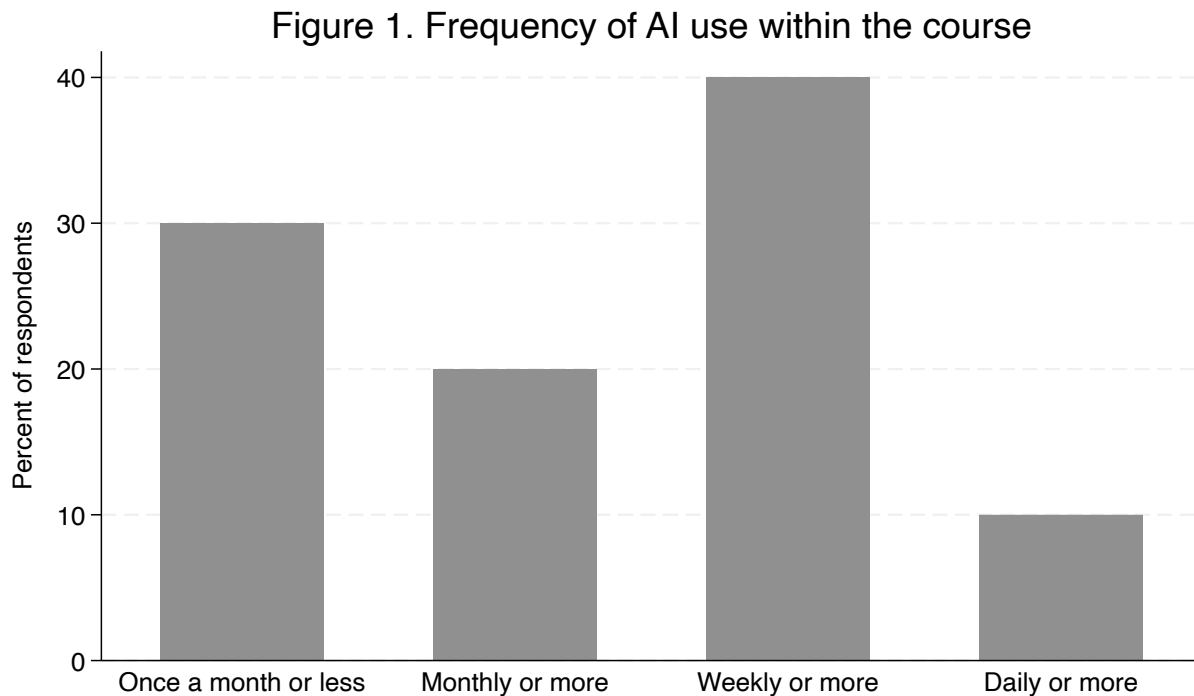
The second group of questions assesses student perception of the benefits and limitations of AI. I base these questions on pre-existing survey instruments used to assess student perceptions of AI (Thi 2023, Zhai 2022, Dhawan and Batra 2020). The last group of questions is a series of open-response questions, asking students to note the strengths and weaknesses of AI, as well as what an ideal AI policy for the class would look like, and if they have ideas for stronger AI literacy integration.

The survey invitation was distributed on Monday, December 9, 2024, the last day of classes. Ultimately, the survey had a 70% response rate from students and seemed similar to the demographics of the larger class. 70% of respondents were women compared to 30% who identified as men, which is identical to the gender breakdown in the class. Likewise, the average grade of the respondent was an A, which is also the average of the class breakdown.

Results

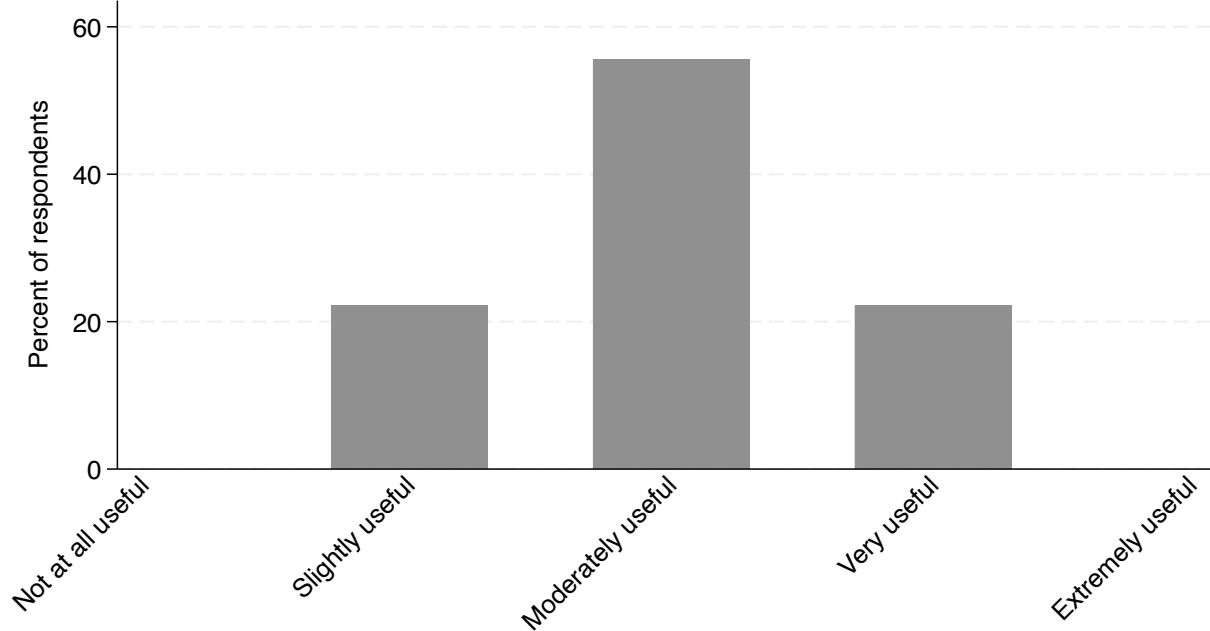
Although students had the opportunity to use AI in the course, the use of AI was not universal or consistent; rather, it suggested a relatively normal distribution of responses. One respondent had never used AI, while another used the tool daily. As depicted in Figure 1, around 40 percent use the tool on less than a monthly basis, and around 40% of respondents use the tool weekly. The most frequently used AI tool students mentioned using was Chat GPT (54%, n=6), while a few mentioned other research-based tools like Research Rabbit or Semantic Scholar (n=2) or writing

tools like Grammarly (n=1).



When asked how useful the respondent found AI for the course, we see another normal distribution, as depicted in Figure 2. The majority of respondents (55%) felt it moderately useful, with around 22% finding it very useful or slightly useful. Importantly, this means that no respondent felt AI was “not at all useful.”

Figure 2. How useful did you find AI for this class?



Beyond asking about their use of AI in the class, I also wanted to learn about their overall feelings towards AI use. The questions' mean responses are depicted in Figure 3. In general, many seem to express positive feelings towards AI. For example, 70% of respondents agree that they envision integrating AI into their learning preferences. In comparison, 60% of respondents agree that AI can provide unique insights they may not have thought of themselves. Additionally, 60% of respondents agree that AI improves writing efficiency, and 80% agree that AI can help students better understand theory.

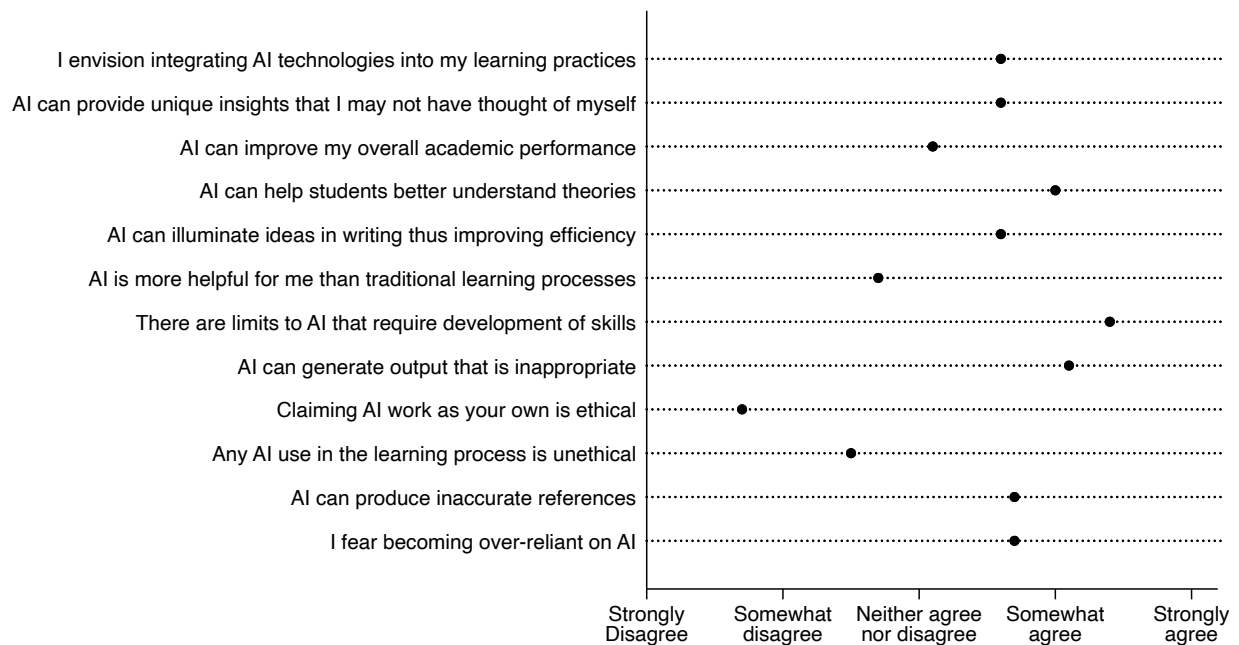
When it comes to the learning process, students in this sample were more skeptical of the tool for learning purposes. Slightly less, about 50% somewhat agree that this tool improves their academic performance, while 30% disagree. Furthermore, when asked if AI is more helpful than traditional learning processes, 30% somewhat agree, while 40% disagree.

It appears that as much promise as can be seen, these students also understand the limits of AI. 60% of respondents strongly agree that AI has limits that require developing specific

skills. They also recognized AI's inaccuracies, with 80% of respondents agreeing that AI can create inappropriate outputs (with no students disagreeing) and all respondents agreeing that AI can produce inaccurate references. Additionally, 60% of respondents fear becoming over-reliant on AI.

There are some promising results regarding AI ethics. About 80% disagree with the phrase, "Claiming AI work as your own is ethical." Additionally, 60% somewhat disagree with the idea that any use of AI in the learning process is unethical.

Figure 3. Mean Feelings Towards AI



In addition to quantitative measures, I use open responses to capture what students see as the strengths and weaknesses of AI within the course. Students note multiple AI strengths, many of which relate to the writing process, such as using it to outline or fix spelling and grammatical mistakes. Students also noted strengths in ways in unique and specific ways, noting, "It is super handy to put your citations in alphabetical order" or using AI to gain feedback, writing, "I

specifically used AI to look over each assignment I submitted. I could upload my rough draft and the rubric to see if I was properly hitting each point."

Interestingly, when asked about strengths, multiple students also noted the ability to help find sources. However, one student specifically notes, "I also used it when it came to my sources, but I learned I don't really need to because sometimes it does just create nonsense links." Hence, even when noting the strengths, students found limitations when experimenting with AI.

When prompted about weaknesses in AI use, all students were quick to note that AI's limitations are inaccuracies. They reported things like "AI can be incorrect!!" or "It can create false information" or "not always correct." One student also noted that the source of the information is adjacent to the course and thus can be contextually inaccurate.

When asked what an ideal class policy is for AI, many students noted the current class policy. One student notes, "I believe Dr. McQueen's policy was really well done and thought out. It allowed me to experiment with ChatGPT outside of what I usually use it for (as Google). She also told us about uploading the rubric and your rough draft, and I found that SUPER helpful, especially when I was working on my rough draft." Another student noted, "Outlawing it is asking for issues going forward, but it's important to not become reliant," suggesting an understanding of the limitations of AI and its proliferation. I suspect this preference may be because of the lack of variation they see with AI policy in other classes.

To close, I asked students for suggestions on what else I should include in teaching the course and AI literacy. One student suggested integrating it more into the data analysis section, and another suggested focusing more on the fact that AI will create fake sources (a repetitive theme in the open response). Another note, "I think what could really help students learning how to use ChatGPT or other AI is that it isn't an all-knowing machine; if you want it to look

something up or you want something to be super specific, you have to input that. I think an interesting thing that could be taught or told to students to help them learn how to use these new AI systems that will inevitably be a part of our daily lives in the next 5 to 10 years is how to properly use them." This respondent, like others, seems to accept that AI will proliferate in the future and has internalized the limits of AI. Similarly, another student notes, "It's all about the way you use A.I., not the use of it in general," suggesting nuance in using these tools.

Conclusion

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by the experience of incorporating AI literacy into the class. The structure of the course remained largely unchanged, and incorporating these discussions and demonstrations did not create significant additional labor. The survey results suggest that students can recognize the limits of AI and are attuned to many of its ethical implications. Allowing students to decide whether to use AI, rather than banning it outright, seemed to empower them to engage critically with the tool. Having them learn and be responsible for their limitations encouraged them to avoid relying on AI as a "second brain" and to thoughtfully consider the ramifications of its use.

Importantly, this experience reflects the outcomes of a single class and is not representative of all students. Many participants were high-performing seniors, likely more prepared and willing to grapple with the complexities and limitations of AI. Introducing AI literacy in an introductory class would likely require a different pedagogical approach. Further research with larger, more diverse sample sizes is needed to explore how students across various academic levels and disciplines conceive of AI use. Additionally, while the sample size in this study was too small to draw definitive conclusions about gendered differences in AI engagement,

exploring gender variation in AI perceptions and usage remains a promising area for future research.

Faculty concerns about the AI revolution are numerous, and this class addressed only a fraction of them. For instance, many political science faculty worry about cheating. In my course, I incorporated strategies such as in-class writing time, scaffolding assignments, and requiring students to acknowledge AI use explicitly. These measures help guard against academic integrity issues by fostering transparency and accountability.

That said, AI poses many challenges that lack straightforward solutions. There is an inherent tension between preparing students to navigate a workforce increasingly shaped by AI and addressing the environmental, ethical, and privacy concerns associated with its use. As an educator, I remain uncertain about whether AI is a "good" tool for society. However, this uncertainty did not prevent meaningful engagement with students on this complex topic. By fostering critical thinking and open dialogue, I aimed to equip students with the tools to navigate the evolving landscape of AI responsibly and thoughtfully.

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APPENDIX OF RESOURCES AND ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS

A1. AI Policy For Dr. McQueen Classes

The real danger is not that computers will begin to think like men, but that men will begin to think like computers. - Sydney Harris (Journalist)

AI is not a second brain. It is a language-learning model and not always accurate. However, there are benefits to using AI. Like any tool, we need to know where, when, how to use It, and what its limitations are. You can't use a screwdriver to hammer in a nail—you need to know the right tool and when to use it. In this class, some assignments will help you understand the limits and strengths of AI. Some tasks will require you to rely on your own memory and not use AI. In all assignments, the focus is on developing your skills, critical thinking, and knowledge. I hope we can all learn when and where to appropriately use AI.

As part of using AI, we need to acknowledge it. Teamwork and the recognition of contributions are cornerstones of most professions, while taking credit for others' work is universally frowned upon. Your personal reputation is strengthened when you share credit appropriately. Integrity begins with openly disclosing the tools, techniques, and technologies that contributed to your work. You are expected to be transparent about the support you received, especially as new technologies raise important questions about disclosure.

Class Policy

- Whenever you use AI in any form or assignment, you must note if, how, and why you used it within your document. This response should be a paragraph at the beginning of your document or attached to the assignment.
 - Example: I created the initial draft of this work and then sought feedback from friends, family, or AI to help paraphrase, check grammar, or offer suggestions. Based on this feedback, I made specific changes, including restructuring sections, reordering content, and correcting grammar and spelling.
- Do not use AI to formulate responses (i.e., putting an essay prompt into chat GPT, asking Bard to “write a research paper on term limits”). You need to be able to understand the content and structure of assignments. However, you can use AI to help you edit your responses. Please know you will need to edit AI and always relay if, how, and why you used AI for the assignment. AI is not foolproof.
- In nearly all assignments, you will highlight information (reading and lecture material) from the class. Consequently, even though you can access the tool, AI may not be applicable in all assignments. Furthermore, you will be held responsible if you
- If there are suspicions of plagiarism, such as using AI to formulate a response or not clarifying your use of AI as an editing tool, you will have the opportunity to meet with Dr. McQueen. The first instance of plagiarism will result in a 0 on the assignment and a warning. The second account of plagiarism, you will receive a 0 on the course and may be reported for academic plagiarism. Given the severity of this penalty, consider how you can demonstrate the steps you took to produce your work and be honest in your use of AI(save iterative drafts, be able to prove you created the work).

Signature _____

A2. Collection of AI Tools

Communication

- GPT-4 (e.g., ChatGPT): Advanced language models that help with generating content, summarizing information, translating text, and assisting in brainstorming ideas.
- Claude: Claude can help with tasks like writing, coding, analysis, and research, and can answer questions. Claude is designed to be helpful, harmless, and honest, and is built with safety and ethics in mind
- Grammarly: An AI-powered writing assistant that improves grammar, punctuation, style, and clarity in writing, making it especially useful for academic writing and research papers.

Research and Citation Management Tools

- Zotero: An AI-enhanced reference manager that helps researchers collect, organize, and cite their sources. It also offers a plugin for word processors to streamline the citation process.
- Mendeley: Similar to Zotero, Mendeley helps in managing and sharing research papers, discovering research data, and collaborating online.

Data Analysis Tools

- IBM Watson: Offers a suite of AI tools for data analysis, including Watson Studio for machine learning and Watson Discovery for text analysis. These tools help researchers uncover insights from structured and unstructured data.
- Tableau: Uses AI to help create data visualizations that are easy to understand and interpret. It's particularly useful for presenting complex data in a clear and compelling way.

Finding Sources

- Semantic Scholar: An AI-driven search engine that uses machine learning to provide more relevant academic paper recommendations and to summarize key points of papers.
- Scite.ai: Uses AI to analyze citation contexts, helping researchers understand how a paper has been cited by others (e.g., supporting, contrasting, or mentioning).
- Research Rabbit: a free online tool that uses artificial intelligence (AI) to help researchers map literature citations and find scholarly publications. It's designed to help users save time when searching for references for essays, literature reviews, or minor projects
- Elicit: Using large language models (LLMs), Elicit finds papers relevant to your topic by searching through papers and citations and extracting and synthesizing key information.

See Georgetown's Artificial Intelligence Guide located here

<https://guides.library.georgetown.edu/ai/tools>

A3. Using Ai To Help At This Writing Stage.... (from Bowen and Watson 2024)

Examples of prompts to help your writing

- Provide five different ways of organizing these ideas into a paper
- Write an abstract for this paper
- Propose an alternative structure for this article
- Summarize the main arguments in the paper
- What other ways could I expand on the idea in paragraph X?
- What parts of this story might confuse the average reader?
- What will people think a book with this title is about?

Using AI for Feedback

- What would make this essay/project better?
- Find the errors in this code/article?
- What are some other ways to phrase this idea?
- Are there other important points, data, or references I am missing?
- Which passages/slides/arguments are least clearly stated?
- How can I make the beginning more compelling to readers?
- Act like a caring professor with high standards. Prove me specific and clear feedback about my work. Start by asking me for a specific assignment and for a rubric or sample work of the quantity I want to achieve. Analyze the assessment against the rubric or sample work and provide feedback. Start by noting strengths and weaknesses. Guide me to improve my work one question at a time. Don't improve it yourself, just give me feedback.

Using AI As a Tutor

- Help me understand this using a soccer/car/music/advertising analogy
- Can you provide me a simpler explanation to make sense of this?
- Can you create multiple choice questions for me to practice based on these notes?
- Here is my answer to X question on Y for the midterm. What's wrong with my answer?
- Can you give me examples of where I can use this if I had a job in politics?

Using AI to Roleplay and Brainstorm

- Act like professor Y and have a dialogue with me about the attached assignment. Read the assignment and ask me questions to check for comprehension. Ask me to explain how I understand the components of the assignment. If I go off track, direct me to specific sections of the assignment to make sure I am clear of what I need to do.
- You are a college student who will engage in a friendly debate with me ask me what topic I should debate and then ask me to state my perspective then challenge my perspective with an alternative view and data only take your side and do not prompt me with potential arguments I could make keep your responses similar in length to mine.
- You are a board but nice hiring manager for the city and I'm interviewing for an entry level job as a code compliance officer review my resume and attached job description and interview me for the position ask me questions that are typical for a recent college graduate looking for a position like this ask me only one question at a time and follow up if my answer is incomplete do not prompt me with helpful tips until we are finished then evaluate my performance and provide feedback that would improve for the next interview