



# Harvard College Writing Program

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## **A Framework for Designing Assignments in the Age of AI**

The emergence of AI tools like ChatGPT presents both challenges and opportunities for thinking about how we teach critical thinking and writing across disciplines. There is no one way to redesign assignments; choices about assignment design should always be tied to learning goals for a course. As we rethink writing assignments for the fall semester, we recommend beginning by asking the following questions about your assignment goals:

- What do you want your students to learn by doing this writing assignment?
- What might students find meaningful about this assignment? How might you frame for your students what is meaningful about doing this assignment?
- What steps do you want students to take as they complete this writing assignment? (e.g., grapple with a complicated text; identify a question that hasn't been asked in lecture; enter one of the controversies that has been introduced in the course; argue against a commonly held position; analyze data; conduct original research)
- How might students be able to use AI to complete this assignment? Would the use of AI interfere with your learning goals? If so, how might you redesign to mitigate that? Below, we offer some tips on how to redesign assignments to make it less likely that students can/will use AI.
- Could AI enhance what you want them to learn? Would using AI tools offer a new way of understanding the course material?

## Strategies for redesigning writing assignments in the age of AI

- **Personalize the assignment.** Ask students to use something from class discussion, from their own lives, from a small group discussion, or from observations that they conduct as part of the assignment.
- **Ask students to reflect on their process as part of the assignment.** Assign a reflection component in which students talk about how they arrived at their ideas or assign steps along the way in which students reflect on their process.
- **Introduce different sources and different ways of engaging with sources.** Consider asking students to conduct interviews, to visit relevant collections, to present analysis of sources as part of class discussion.
- **Keep the critical thinking, rethink the paper.** If the goal is to make sure students understand a core concept or text, or engage critically with course materials or research, consider other ways of measuring that knowledge such as oral presentations or multi-media projects.
- **Keep the assignment, require in-class assessments.** If the paper is a useful learning experience for your students, consider building in in-class peer assessment that requires all students to have a clear understanding of course concepts. Successful assessments will be those that require students to understand the course concepts in order to participate.
- **Keep the assignment, change the incentives.** Change the grading system, engage students in creating assessment rubric, raise the bar so that ChatGPT output is not an A grade.
- **Build research assignments that must be completed in steps or phases.**
- **Use AI output as an object of critique for the course.** Use the technology to encourage critical thinking about claims and evidence and also to help students think about ethical problems created by the use of ChatGPT (e.g., bias in the output, stealing ideas, narrowing of thought through its generation of average discourse).
- **Use AI in an assignment to help you meet a teaching goal.** AI could potentially be used to understand the conventional discourse on a topic, to generate case studies, to support data analysis, or to serve as primary data.

## Example: A menu of options for teaching summary in the age of AI

How might the strategies outlined above work in practice? We have been discussing how to handle assignments that ask students to learn or practice some of the more foundational steps of writing, like summary, which is easily outsourced to ChatGPT. Even though students *can* use AI to generate summaries, there will be many occasions when summarizing a text is actually an important step for students to take to understand a concept or a reading. Here are a few ways that we think those assignments can be handled in the age of AI:

- **Summary as class exercise.** In Expos Studio, we are thinking about having students begin class by taking a few minutes to list the points that they saw as most significant from the reading they have done for that class. The instructor could then gather those points in a group discussion, listing them on the board, and asking the class to make decisions about which points are fundamental in that summary and which might be less necessary; how to frame the source's main idea; and how to demonstrate the connections between the ideas. This combination of individual work (generate the main ideas on your own) and group work (discuss together how to prioritize, shape, and connect those ideas) offers students the chance to think critically about a source as they learn how to read carefully. This exercise could be done in courses where a goal is to make sure students understand how to read foundational texts and how to identify important claims and evidence.
- **Individual summaries done in class.** As an alternative to the group summary exercise, Expos students could be asked to write individual summaries during class. The instructor can then choose one or two of the summaries to workshop as a class, allowing the opportunity to both work through questions about the source and to work on skills of reading effectively and summarizing. This type of exercise could also be adapted to non-Expos courses. We imagine that this will be most effective if the instructor clearly articulates the goals of summary (to understand a complex text, to identify the most important arguments, to identify what doesn't make sense, etc.).
- **Make summary a component of a new, broader assignment.** Instead of assigning a summary, assign a summary that is accompanied by a discussion of what is not clear/what questions the student has about the source. Then plan to follow up in class about both parts of the assignment to encourage students to ask genuine questions (since they will know that an important part of the assignment is to identify what they don't understand/want to know more

about/have questions about). Students could certainly ask ChatGPT to generate questions for them, but the prospect of discussing those questions in class may help them understand why it makes sense to actually do the work themselves.

- **Break down the tasks of summarizing into smaller parts that teach the same skills/thinking.** Use Canvas discussion threads, Jamboards, or other tools inside or outside of the classroom to have students post claims, evidence, questions about a text instead of summarizing it. If we ask for smaller segments of the summary, students are going to see this as a low-stakes assignment that is easier to do themselves. If we think carefully about what the smaller segments are, we will still be teaching/encouraging critical thinking.
- **Assign small groups to summarize readings on a rotating basis and present summaries, along with questions, to the class.** The oral component encourages ownership over the assignment; the group component will (in at least most cases) encourage students to do the work themselves.
- **Reading groups.** Assign students in a course to small groups that they meet with periodically in class—and possibly outside of class. Make summary part of what they are asked to work on when they discuss assigned readings, and ask them to upload group summaries, sometimes in audio format, along with questions they identify about the texts or comparisons between texts. Here again, the focus is less on the individual student producing the product (the summary) and more on scaffolding a discussion that helps students develop the skills of identifying and grappling with claims and evidence.