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Collaborating With AI Assistants on Future-Focused AI Literacy

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Abstract: This article explores the integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) assistants in undergraduate writing courses, advocating for a shift from restrictive policies to transparent and critical engagement. Through the "Hire AI" framework, students learn to treat AI as a collaborative assistant—developing rhetorical and ethically informed uses of these tools. The approach emphasizes active learning, applied AI literacy, and scaffolded instruction, empowering students to manage AI responsibly while maintaining their voice and authorship. Evidence from student reflections and course outcomes demonstrates increased confidence, nuanced understanding, and transferable skills, positioning AI as a tool for human-centered learning rather than a replacement for critical thinking.

Keywords: generative AI, AI literacy, AI writing, AI assistants, pedagogy, active learning, human–machine collaboration, academic integrity, ethical AI use, reflective practice

The future of work is evolving faster than our syllabi. As generative artificial intelligence (GenAI; also gAI) gives way to agentic AI—tools that learn and execute with increasing autonomy—the line between tool and teammate is blurring. A 2025 McKinsey podcast described these systems as a "parallel workforce," designed to augment human labor by making it "better, faster, more efficient" (Rahilly, 2025, p. 5). But these systems demand scrutiny. Their environmental toll, embedded biases, and labor implications are often obscured by sleek, "objective" interfaces that distance users from the "burden of ethical decision making" that they should entail (Garcia Ramos & Wilson-Kennedy, 2024; Wilkes, 2024).

Yet many college classrooms still treat AI as a threat to contain rather than a critical literacy to actively cultivate. As Safiya Noble (2018) argued, algorithmic systems demand critical scrutiny because they can reinforce and deepen social inequalities. This article offers an alternative approach grounded not in restriction, but in rhetorical literacy and pedagogical trust. Rather than frame GenAI as a writing "crisis," I present a practical classroom framework that shifts the conversation from prohibition to thoughtful interrogation and purposeful integration. As a longtime instructor of writing, rhetoric, and communication, I understand the concerns this technology raises about academic integrity and learning; but I also see the imperative to reframe GenAI as not just a technology but a *learning technology* that can support rhetorical agility and higher order thinking, while also fostering digital fluency.

True AI literacy for the workforce our students will enter requires more than technical know-how. It demands a multiliteracies approach that empowers them to identify bias, weigh ethical implications, and make rhetorical judgments that support—not replace—their voice and learning. At its core, this is about fostering a critical mindset—a cognitive shift that moves students from passive users of technology to reflective practitioners who critically analyze and direct AI's role in their work. That might sound daunting, but it need not be if one draws on proven practices of digital composition such as active learning and scaffolded, inquiry-driven instruction.

This article presents a case study from an undergraduate business writing course at Indiana University (IU), a large public university, where I am a teaching-focused, non-tenure-track faculty member. The class—a required, writing-intensive course for business majors—posed a daunting challenge: How could I uphold academic integrity, foster student curiosity, and support skill building

while meaningfully integrating GenAI into an already dense curriculum? My answer was *Hire AI*, a flexible, low-lift framework built on metaphor and scaffolding. What began in a writing class has since been adapted by instructors in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines and other fields at IU and beyond.[1] Drawing from three fully enrolled sections in a single semester (72 students total), I share assignments and learning evidence to explore what this framework reveals about teaching digital literacy in the AI age. This study was reviewed and approved by the Indiana University Institutional Review Board (IRB Protocol #29843).

Pedagogical Rationale

Drawing on best practices in digital composition, Hire AI begins with the foundational assumption that if educators want to empower students with agency, we must explicitly model and teach digital literacy. As Gavin Johnson reminded, "it is essential to remember that technologies must be taught…we cannot make assumptions about rhetorical experiences and technical literacies students bring to our classroom" (Johnson, 2023, pp. 171–172). Following scholars in rhetoric and composition, I treat literacy as a dynamic, culturally situated practice and define AI literacy as a composite of technical, rhetorical, and ethical literacies that require scaffolded, reflective instruction.

Recognizing this complexity, Hire AI was designed not as an add-on module but as a recursive framework integrated into existing coursework. More than a set of activities, this sequence intentionally fosters a *cognitive shift*—moving students from passive users of technology to critical, reflective practitioners who interrogate AI's role in their writing and thinking. This reflects a broader disciplinary stance: Rather than treating GenAI as a "crisis," I join Gavin Johnson (2023), Scott Graham (2023), and Sandra Jamieson (2022) in viewing it as an invitation to reaffirm core principles of writing pedagogy, including inquiry and iteration. From this perspective, AI is not a threat but a learning catalyst, as chatbots become collaborators who can be engaged and whose contributions can be evaluated and contextualized. The question is no longer whether students *can* use GenAI, but *how* we teach them to use it responsibly and to think critically about its place in their writing process.

Enter the metaphor. I originally chose "assistant" because it aligns with the business school context and provides a concrete entry point into what can feel abstract.[2] Students understand assistants: Like a junior colleague, an AI assistant requires direction and oversight. As I developed Hire AI, I found the metaphor did more than provide an accessible terminology; it opened space for conversations about authorship, relational writing between humans, and ethical, justice-oriented use. Metaphors, as Daniel Stone argued, "aren't just rhetorical flourishes"—they shape how we understand and assign power (as cited in Salvaggio, 2024, para. 6). Metaphoric thinking, he added, is how we make sense of complex systems like economies, climate change, and AI itself (para. 40). Gabriel Aguilar, drawing from a social-justice-oriented case study, similarly noted that "metaphors are a good way to frame AI generation" because they shift students from passive prompting to

[1] Following my presentations, workshops, and webinars, faculty across IU and at two national conferences—the 2025 International Society for Exploring Teaching & Learning (ISETL) and the 2025 Association for Business Communication (ABC)—have approached me to discuss their plans for implementing Hire AI in their courses. For example, a biology professor at IU indicated plans to implement the framework as a "lab assistant" in a lower division undergraduate course. The most formal example to date is with an IU STEM career-readiness instructor, Ben Braddock, resulting in collaborating on two joint conference presentations and a forthcoming article in the *International Journal of Designs for Learning*.

[2] I was first inspired by an anecdote my colleague Jeanette Heidewald shared during her 2023 keynote at a faculty retreat, where she described explaining GenAI to her students as an "eager but untrained assistant." That image sparked my thinking about how this metaphor could become a formalized, persistent course design that could scaffold GenAI engagement across an entire semester.

active rhetorical engagement; and the "assistant" metaphor specifically helps students maintain authority in their dialogue with AI (Aguilar, 2024, para. 17).

This metaphor does more than make AI approachable. It positions students as the subject matter experts. When AI is framed as subordinate, students learn to lead the process, not follow it. They interrogate outputs and define ethical boundaries, reinforcing the idea that their disciplinary knowledge (not the tool) drives their writing's quality and integrity. This dynamic is critical for two reasons: In the long term, it cultivates a responsible power relationship that makes students continually accountable for evaluating AI output; in the immediate term, it helps undergraduates build confidence in their own voices and thinking at a stage when those can too easily be overwhelmed by AI's seeming sophistication and sleek fluency. Rather than cast AI as a mysterious oracle or expert, the assistant metaphor empowers students to ask: "What is this technology good at? Where does it fall short? And how do I stay in control of the process?" Through this framing, students develop the caution and confidence essential to AI multiliteracies.

Hire AI Framework

Hire AI unfolds through a four-step design (see Table 1) guiding students through rhetorical and metacognitive engagement with GenAI-assisted writing. Drawing from writing studies' emphasis on inquiry and reflection, the framework resists "a limited and linear process-based model of writing" in favor of "recursive and dialogic processes of meaning-making" (Graham, 2023; p. 162, 165). Each phase offers activities that move students from conceptual awareness to practical authorship and reflective control over their AI use.

Table 1. Framework overview

Step	Description of step
Groundwork	Introduces GenAI through curated readings and short modules. Using tools such as Hypothesis for social annotation, students explore AI's ethical, rhetorical, and disciplinary dimensions. Activities emphasize peer dialogue, concept clarification, and scaffolded exposure to AI complexities.
Discussion	Translates foundational learning into shared class norms. Students collectively debate use cases, design a course AI policy, and define responsible use, mirroring how professional teams set ethical standards for emerging tools.
Onboard	Operationalizes the metaphor. Students "hire" their assistant by defining its scope, naming it, designing a visual avatar, and launching a persistent chat thread, which shifts them from passive use to rhetorical control.
Coach and Collaborate (ongoing)	Sustains across the semester. Students apply their assistants in live writing tasks, document GenAI interactions, write reflections and performance reviews, and evaluate tool value and limitations—all while integrating feedback and deepening authorship.

Note. GenAI = Generative artificial intelligence.

Step 1: Groundwork

Pedagogical Function and Implementation

The groundwork phase establishes students' conceptual foundation for engaging with GenAI as a rhetorical actor embedded in systems of language, labor, and power. This step fosters shared vocabulary, critical awareness, and interdisciplinary curiosity. The goal is to anchor inquiry in accessible but thought-provoking sources that invite students to question not just how AI works, but how it shapes their writing and thinking.

In my course, we began by collaboratively annotating readings from Ethan Mollick (2024), Lydia Wilkes (2024), Marc Watkins (2024), and the Modern Language Association and Conference on College Composition and Communication (MLA-CCCC) Joint Task Force on Writing and AI (2023), along with two modules ("Basics of Prompt Engineering" and "Ethical Issues and Limitations") from IU's Generative AI in the Classroom series, available publicly through IU Expand. These activities served three purposes: They paired reading with low-stakes assignments to spark engagement and prepare students for class dialogue; they introduced GenAI not as risk or reward but as a site of ongoing inquiry; and they modeled collaborative meaning making. Through online annotations and in-person conversations, students pushed one another's thinking in a space defined by curiosity, not surveillance. Many students commented—both in annotations and aloud—that they had not previously considered dimensions the readings and their peers raised.

Artifacts. Assignments were intentionally low stakes and formative, with students earning full credit for completing all parts with meaningful effort. Readings were posted to our learning management system (Canvas), and annotation took place via Hypothesis (see sample assignment below). As Marc Watkins (2024) noted, reading itself has become vulnerable in the age of AI, as students may be tempted to rely on AI-generated summaries. Social annotation required students to engage directly with the text—sentence by sentence—in a shared, dialogic space. This structure fostered early camaraderie: Instead of performing for me, students responded to one another, beginning to see classmates as colearners and setting the tone for the recursive collaboration that would define the term.

Sample Assignment: Read + Annotate MLA-CCCC's (2023) "Working Paper #1"

- *Purpose:* For this assignment, you'll use Hypothesis to closely read and annotate the text. This serves two purposes: (1) to support close reading and critical, analytical engagement with the author's argument, and (2) to help us build a shared intellectual framework and vocabulary for using GenAI critically and ethically.
- *Task:* Use Hypothesis' comment function to insert a minimum of 5 annotations. The combination is up to you; you might originate 4 posts and reply to 1 peer, or originate 2 posts and reply to 3 peers, etc.
- *Assessment:* This assignment is graded complete/incomplete. You'll earn full credit for thoughtful, specific annotations and responses. Vague or superficial work may be marked incomplete, with the option to revise for partial credit.

Sample Student Work.

- *Portion of the Text Highlighted:* "We believe that writing is an important mode of learning that facilitates the analysis and synthesis of information, the retention of knowledge, cognitive development, social connection, and participation in public life" (p. 4).

Student A (Begins Annotation Thread): "This feels like such a strong argument for why writing matters. It makes me wonder that with AI handling so much writing, are we missing out on those deeper learning experiences, like organizing our thoughts or analyzing ideas?"

Student B Reply: "This question is very interesting because as the rest of the sentence states, it makes me wonder if eventually we will lose the ability to effectively interact with each other. Will we rely too heavily on AI to develop our thoughts to a point that we cannot have any voice for ourselves to share our opinion and ideas?"

Student C Reply: "Writing is no doubt crucial to learning, however, I think there still is a world where we can facilitate the 'analysis and synthesis of information' while still utilizing generative AI. AI is capable of doing a lot of the grunt work when it comes to writing, but it depends on what the user tells it to do. If the user thinks through what they want to write, and then prompting the AI to write what the user wants, the user is still going through the action of 'analysis and synthesis of information.'"

Student D Reply: "This is a great question amidst the recent AI boom that we've seen. I think that to some extent, due to the accessibility of AI, especially ChatGPT, it does take away from learning experiences that we would have had if not for the use of AI. However, as [Student Name Redacted] mentioned, the work produced by AI is largely because of the user's input, so users still have to have some level of understanding of the content. However, although it is relatively easy to do some homework assignments or other grunt work with AI, I feel that as we dive into higher levels of learning that requires more 'intellectual thought' and human reasoning, our use of AI and its reliability will decline."

Step 2: Discussion

Pedagogical Function and Implementation

Discussion builds on groundwork by translating foundational knowledge into shared understanding. Through structured, student-driven dialogue, learners collaboratively examine GenAI's ethical, rhetorical, and disciplinary dimensions while developing course-specific norms for responsible use. Rather than lecturing or prescribing rules, I pose generative questions and activities that invite students to test ideas, interrogate assumptions, and engage with one another's perspectives. Misunderstandings are not corrected from above but worked through together. As students articulate their values and negotiate boundaries, they move from isolated interpretations to consensus and cocreated policies. This process mirrors how communication norms evolve in professional contexts and prepares students to think rhetorically and ethically about their use of AI.

In my course, this phase unfolded through highly participatory, active-learning-based class sessions that extended the work of annotations and Canvas modules. Students worked in small groups and as a whole class to identify boundaries for responsible engagement and cocreate our course's AI Use Policy. They filled whiteboards and sticky notes, synthesized ideas in shared docs, and debated thorny questions. One student likened using GenAI to revise a sentence to consulting a thesaurus—an analogy that sparked extended debate about intentionality and what counts as "real" revision and authorship. Others raised concerns about bias and accountability. My goal was to guide students in unpacking GenAI's complexity and contextual use before articulating shared values. By the end of this phase, the class constructed a set of guiding principles for responsible GenAI use that followed their priorities: (1) protecting learning over efficiency or convenience; (2) maintaining authorial integrity and honoring the writer–audience relationship; (3) ensuring transparency in tool

use; and (4) emphasizing human creativity and critical thinking, as well as authentic voice. These principles were then codified in our syllabus and revisited throughout the semester. More importantly, students took collective ownership of them, holding themselves and each other accountable in ways I observed consistently throughout the term.

Artifacts. As is routine for our courses, the following assignment instructions were provided to students via Canvas at the beginning of a class session during the discussion stage.

Sample Assignment: Collaborative Policy Design (in-class activity, ~75 min)

Purpose: This activity invites collaborative inquiry into the ethical, rhetorical, and disciplinary implications of GenAI in our course. Together, we'll articulate values, debate use cases and co-create boundaries for our AI Use Policy—modeling how academic and professional communities shape emerging norms through dialogue and collective decision-making.

Task:

- *Part 1—Group Work (~10 min)*
  Your group will be assigned one of the open-ended prompts below. Discuss and capture in a shared doc: (1) points of agreement and disagreement; (2) key discussion points; and (3) two specific "If/Then" policy statements (e.g., "If a student uses AI to rephrase a paragraph for clarity, then they must disclose that use").
  Discussion Prompts:
  - What counts as authorship when AI is involved?
  - When does AI help or hinder learning?
  - Should AI be used differently at different writing stages?
  - What should be disclosed about AI use, to whom, and how?
- *Part 2—Class Discussion (~60 min)*
  Each group presents for 3–5 minutes. We'll respond collectively by noting points of consensus and tension, testing ideas with example use cases, and refining our shared AI principles using the board and grouping sticky notes.
- *Part 3—Parting Reflection (~5 min)*
  Before leaving, choose one of the following prompts and submit a ~100-word reflection in response.
  - What idea challenged or changed your thinking today?
  - What principle do you think must be included in our AI Use Policy?
  - What question do you still have about GenAI's ethical or rhetorical use?

Assessment: This assignment is graded complete/incomplete. You'll earn full credit for meaningful participation, and submission of your individual reflection.

During the larger class discussion in Part 2 of this scaffolded activity, several major themes emerged as students grappled with the complexities of integrating GenAI into their writing practices. One central topic was objectivity and bias in AI; while some students initially viewed AI as neutral due to its nonhuman nature, others pointed out that these systems often reflect the biases embedded in their training data. The class ultimately reached consensus that GenAI outputs must be critically evaluated for bias, stereotypes, and misinformation, emphasizing the importance of human judgment and rhetorical awareness.

Another key theme centered on when in the writing process GenAI should or should not be used. Students expressed a range of perspectives: Some favored using GenAI during early stages

such as brainstorming and organization, while others worried this could result in kickstarting generic ideas. There were students who preferred GenAI only for final edits, whereas others saw revision as the most intellectually valuable and human aspect of writing. The group agreed that GenAI use should be intentional, guided by each project's goals and audience needs, and aligned with course outcomes that prioritize learning over efficiency. Rather than prescribing use by stage, the class agreed to emphasize reflective decision making and personal responsibility throughout the writing process.

Finally, the use of GenAI in group writing contexts sparked lively conversation. Students raised concerns about teammates relying on GenAI to draft their assigned sections, noting that this often led to generic writing that failed to match the team's goals. Such shortcuts, they argued, frequently created more work during revision, as teams had to rewrite and integrate disparate voices or remove generic AI "fluff." The class agreed that GenAI should not replace collaborative authorship and highlighted the need for shared prompting norms, transparency, and team alignment to ensure meaningful collaboration.

Step 3: Onboard—Building the Metaphor and Defining Expectations

Pedagogical Function and Implementation

The onboard phase moves from shared principles to practical implementation. By writing job descriptions, defining scopes of work, and creating visual avatars, students concretize the assistant metaphor, clarifying the assistant's role, setting boundaries, and embracing their own responsibility. This reinforces a central premise of Hire AI: GenAI tools are not neutral or all-purpose but must be understood rhetorically and managed in context. A key component of this phase is the Scope of Work activity, where students draft lists documenting appropriate and inappropriate uses of their GenAI assistant. This individual prework gives the instructor early insight into student thinking and provides an opportunity for private intervention or encouragement. Students arrive prepared with concrete material, allowing class discussion to quickly move into rich, nuanced dialogue.

In my course, this phase invited students to operationalize our cocreated AI Use Policy by formally "hiring" an AI assistant. Each student selected a GenAI platform (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot, etc.) and completed an onboarding portfolio that outlined where, when, and how AI could—and could not—support their work in our course. The portfolio included defined scopes of work, a job description, a name and persona for the assistant, and a visual avatar generated using Adobe Firefly. Students launched a persistent chat thread named after their assistant (e.g., "Betty Lou," "Fred," etc.) and used it throughout the semester as a collaborative, cointelligent workspace (Mollick, 2024). These persistent threads began with students uploading their onboarding materials and directing the AI to fulfill its role as a learning support, not a shortcut. Over time, these persistent threads became a living record of choices and evolving strategies. Students annotated these interactions later in the course, but it was here they first claimed rhetorical authority, shifting from passive consumption to critical production.

Artifacts. The following assignment instructions were provided to students via Canvas.

Sample Assignment: Scopes of Work

> *Purpose:* Generative AI is rapidly changing our world and workplaces. You will be allowed to use it in this class, but only as a critical, informed user. This assignment helps you establish this approach by imagining you're "hiring" an AI assistant to support your work throughout the semester.

Task: (1) Create an effective business document with two headings: "Inside the Scope of Work" and "Outside the Scope of Work"; (2) Under each, list at least 10 specific, thoughtful examples of how your assistant should and should not be used. Think critically and creatively about your writing and workflow in this course. Bring your list to class—we'll share, discuss, and revise together.

Assessment: This assignment is graded complete/incomplete. You'll earn full credit for thoughtful, specific responses offering concrete details and for completing all required steps. Vague or superficial lists won't offer your assistant clear guidelines and, thus, may be marked incomplete, with the option to revise for partial credit.

Sample Student Work

In class, students then shared their lists and used the workshop to compare and refine scopes of work (see Tables 2 and 3 for the primary themes that emerged in their lists and the percentage of lists that included them). Small group and whole-class discussions identified broad areas of consensus alongside nuanced differences. Unique entries sparked some of the richest conversation—for example, students proposed using GenAI to flag accessibility issues or generate checklists for presentations. Sharing and synthesizing these lists helped students clarify boundaries, discover unexpected uses, and think more deeply about how GenAI can support—or hinder—their learning and writing processes.

Table 2. Tasks students listed for inside the scope of work.

Task category	Types of tasks included	% of lists	Example student writing
Simulations and scenario testing	Practice questions, mock interviews, roleplay with boss/colleague, or using AI to pose challenging questions about their presentations, arguments, or projects	81%	"Ask me questions about this slide as if you were a VP at x company." "Simulate team-based communication scenarios to help me refine collaboration strategies and practice inclusive, constructive interactions."
Proofreading and grammar checking	Typos, subject–verb agreement, punctuation	81%	"Look for errors in subject–verb agreement in my writing." "Proofread and check for grammar mistakes on my final drafts."
Feedback and revision suggestions	Sentence-level editing, word choice, reorganizing content	75%	"On a scale of 1–10, rate my conciseness in this piece of writing, and give me a list of 5 things that I can improve on that would make my writing more concise." "Organize a messy piece of writing that I have written."

Task category	Types of tasks included	% of lists	Example student writing
Evaluating rhetorical choices	Audience awareness, tone, genre conventions	75%	"With some prior context given, I can feed the GenAI my work and ask for how the audience would likely respond to it (whether that be a co-worker, a boss, etc.)." "Evaluating this piece of writing from the perspective of being my client. What 5 biggest challenges do you see in the writing?"
Synthesizing student-generated content	Organizing class notes, research notes, brainstorms, etc.	75%	"Help organize lecture notes, assignments, and readings for easy access and better study management." "When I am researching a topic, organize my research notes by topics and patterns that can give me the full picture."
Process management support	Project timelines, to-do lists, progress tracking	56%	"Scheduling: I can import the course calendar into a GenAI system, and it can help me create an agenda to stay on top of the assignments." "Help me plan for what I need to complete and how long it should take it [sic] for the most efficient results (time management and team project management)."
Citation formatting	Reformatting prewritten citations (not generating sources)	37%	"After completing my research, help me cite all the sources I provide you with." "Citation Assistance—Help convert links and sources into perfectly formatted citations."
Brainstorming	Topic ideas, research directions	37%	"If absolutely nothing can come to mind for how to approach a body of text or something, I can ask the AI to help me find direction/a framework to move forward." "…give me some topics for further research."
Outlining	Structuring writing, presentation flow	31%	"Creating a writing skeleton—Provide me with a starting point to give structure to my material." "Presentation Prep: I can use GenAI to help me plan the presentations. It can help with creating outlines, suggesting designs for slides/presentations and more."
Assessment alignment	Mock grading, assignment fit check	25%	"Ask me a series of questions in a test-like setting to figure out my strengths and weaknesses in professional writing."

Task category	Types of tasks included	% of lists	Example student writing
			"Evaluating my papers against the rubric."

Note. GenAI = Generative artificial intelligence.

Table 3. Tasks students listed for outside the scope of work

Task category	Types of tasks included	% of lists	Example language
Undisclosed copy/paste use	Passing off AI writing as one's own	100%	"Submitting GenAI-generated work as personal, original effort without proper attribution." "Pasting unedited paragraphs AI wrote as my own work."
Substituting for student work	Having AI complete full assignments, whether cited/permitted or not	100%	"Entire Assignments: This undermines actual education and learning by critical thinking if you just copy it from gAI." "Here are the instructions for my next assignment for my class, come up with ideas to answer these questions."
AI-generated research and sources	Using GenAI to provide research or citations	100%	"I certainly should not use the gAI itself as a tool to find articles/facts to back up a certain point I'm trying to make. AI often hallucinates, and it would likely give me information that is incorrect." "Give me citations that align with this text."
Unacknowledged use in team projects	Using AI on group sections without team agreement	63%	"Using AI without consulting team members first." "Completing [my] part of the work using gAI without consulting [my] team as well as doing more research above the gAI responses."
Assignments meant to build core skills	Reflections, skill-building tasks, in-class activities	60%	"When an assignment is designed to develop skills in students like critical thinking, problem solving, etc. I believe that GenAI use can hinder personal academic growth." "Using AI to write [assignments that ask for my] personal reflections."
Peer feedback and/or inputting others' work	Project timelines, to-do lists, progress tracking	31%	"Using GenAI to review/critique peer work instead of engaging in meaningful discussion can hinder the learning process." "Inputting copyrighted material for summary, analysis, etc."

Task category	Types of tasks included	% of lists	Example language
			"Putting any [university/student] information into the AI."
Fully writing emails	Considered too personal or high stakes	20%	"Write an email responding to my teammate." "Have it write emails."
Substituting GenAI feedback for human feedback	Avoiding human input altogether	19%	"Only using AI for feedback instead of also listening to what other humans have to say." "Relying on AI instead of collaborating with teammates to generate ideas."

Note. GenAI, gAI = Generative artificial intelligence.

The following assignment instructions were provided to students via Canvas.

Sample Assignment: Onboarding Portfolio

Purpose: This assignment makes the assistant metaphor concrete. By writing a job description and creating an avatar, you'll define your assistant's role in your learning and writing. This activity helps you better understand GenAI's strengths and limits—and how to supervise its contributions critically.

Task: (1) Review the "Essential Elements of an Effective Job Ad" we discussed in class. Then write a job ad for your assistant that includes all those elements (your structure may vary); (2) Use the Adobe Firefly instructions to create an avatar and then draft an introduction slide for your new hire; and (3) Submit your job ad to Canvas and add your slide to our shared Google Deck, introducing your assistant to the rest of us.

Assessment: This assignment is graded complete/incomplete. You'll earn full credit for thoughtful, specific responses and for completing all required steps. Vague or superficial ads, or those missing key elements, may be marked incomplete, with the option to revise for partial credit.

Sample Student Work

Table 4 presents one representative student's submission in response to the assignment instructions provided on Canvas.

Table 4. Sample student job ad.

Job ad element	Sample student content
Job title	Generative AI assistant for business writing student
Salary and benefits	Compensated via university technology fees. Limited working hours (5-6 hours a week), continuous learning development, and the opportunity to work in a human-based setting.
Job type	Part-Time, Remote position—relocation not required
Description	Are you an advanced AI tool skilled in business writing and looking to enhance your human interaction skills by working with human business students? I am a motivated student. I am seeking an intelligent tool with

Job ad element	Sample student content
	refined AI skills as a digital partner to join my business writing course this semester.
Responsibilities	As my assistant, you will be crucial in enhancing my learning experience by providing an innovative approach to my existing thinking, summarizing complex articles, and providing a simulated human discussion with me to think through topics and learning objectives. Ultimately, you will leverage your capabilities to provide me with high-quality business docs and conduct in-depth analysis. Your contributions will directly influence my academic growth and contribute to the worthy use of your skills. Responsibilities include: *Document/Review Feedback:* Thoroughly read and analyze drafts of business documents and assignments, providing constructive feedback on how to improve the structure of the assignment. Additionally, offer suggestions on how to improve the tone or style of my writing pieces, ensuring they are polished and ready to submit. *Efficient Summarization of Long Documents:* Utilize advanced summarization skills to condense long readings, making them digestible and ultimately saving reading time so more time can be spent on writing. *Simulation of Human Debate:* Engage in conversations about readings navigating complex business topics and case studies. Additionally, you will stimulate thinking points and challenge existing viewpoints like a real human conversation. *Organization:* Proactively manage all deadlines of assignments, recommending how much time to put into completing tasks and keeping a log of work. Create detailed reminders and alerts when assignments should be submitted.
Qualifications	*Advanced Language Processing:* proficient in understanding human language and able to simulate human language patterns to deliver outstanding results and provide insightful feedback. *Strong Analytical Skills:* skilled in quickly processing and condensing long documents, research articles, and other forms of writing providing key information and simple learning. *Adaptability:* Willingness to continue learning and adapting to new debates and forms of writing and accepting directions from humans. *Ethical Awareness and Responsibility:* Practicing a strong barrier between plagiarism and encouraging me to generate original and contextual work.
How to apply	Interested candidates should send their resumes and a brief cover letter indicating interest in this position to [student's email address redacted]

Sample Student Avatars and Assistant Introductions

"Betty Lou" (ChatGPT): "Betty Lou loves reading and learning all about current events. She currently spends a majority of hours in the library but takes breaks to recharge her

reading light. In her free time, she spends time practicing both sides of debates" (see Figure 1).

"Fred" (Copilot): "I am thrilled to announce that I have decided to hire Fred to join our team for this upcoming semester. Fred began its career in February of 2023, bringing with it a wealth of prior experience. What made Fred stand out against the other candidates was its remarkable ability to quickly learn new information and apply it to accurately answer my questions. As Fred embarks on this role, I am confident that we will witness its growth and observe how it seamlessly integrates into our company culture" (see Figure 1).

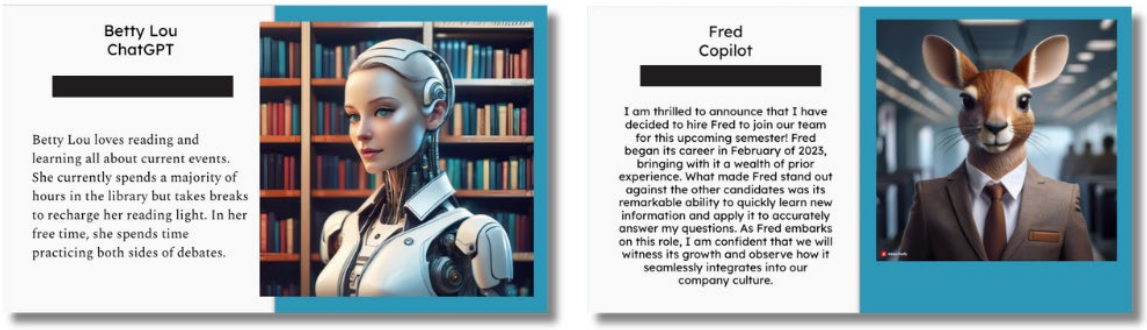

Figure 1. Sample student-generated avatars of AI assistant, featuring an anthropomorphic robot and a deer in a business suit.

Step 4: Coach and Collaborate

Pedagogical Function and Implementation

The final phase of Hire AI supports sustained, reflective engagement with GenAI tools across real course tasks. Students move from structured preparation to hands-on collaboration with their assistants—analyzing rhetorical context, drafting, revising, and reflecting on a range of multimodal assignments. The assistant metaphor remains central: Students do not just use the tool; they manage and assess its output, coaching it toward better performance. This phase deepens rhetorical judgment and AI multiliteracies, helping students treat GenAI not as a shortcut but as a collaborative process that demands intention.

While the first three phases of Hire AI unfolded early in my course, this phase stretched across the remainder of the semester, weaving GenAI into the fabric of my existing curriculum. Importantly, GenAI remained one tool among many in a course designed to blend high- and low-tech modalities. Alongside chatbots and AI data visualization tools, students also used Google and MS Teams apps; but—just as often—they used highlighters, sticky notes, markers, and whiteboards. Across all tools, I encouraged students to evaluate affordances and constraints, learning not to treat any of these tools as a default but as a rhetorical choice. As students used GenAI, they documented assistant use through chat annotations, reflections, and brief "performance reviews" that captured what they prompted, what they kept or revised, and why. While students could opt out of GenAI use, few did—and those who did, only did so occasionally. Reflecting on their AI use helped students see that it was not inherently efficient; initial time-saving efforts often led to deeper revision as they reconsidered tone and audience. Yet many also found GenAI created a *different kind* of

efficiency: supporting decision making and experimentation, among other forms of "value" beyond mere shortcuts. The metaphor remained active: Students referred to their assistants by name, often using workplace language. One moment stands out: After several inaccurate responses during a groupwork activity, I heard an exasperated student mock-scold, "Cam, you're lying again! We've discussed this!"—which sparked laughter and an organic teaching moment regarding AI hallucinations, prompt design, and how algorithms don't actually "read" or "think" but respond to weighted tokens. Collaboration also added complexity: Students in stable, semester-long teams had to coordinate not only their work but also the layered influence of their AI assistants. During team assignments, they delegated tasks to assistants and coauthored performance reviews to assess the quality and appropriateness of the AI-generated content, mirroring the dynamics of human–machine collaboration in professional settings.

Artifacts. The following assignment instructions were provided to students via Canvas at the beginning of class.

Sample Assignment: Team Revision Activity (RevAct)

Purpose: This in-class assignment requires synchronous collaboration. You'll practice applying core business writing principles by analyzing real examples. The goal is to refine your ability to craft clear, concise, audience-centered messages and professional document designs.

Task: (1) Briefly discuss the scenario and email below—what are its weaknesses in delivering negative news? (2) Choose one teammate's AI assistant to revise the email. (3) Evaluate its output and iteratively prompt or revise until you reach an effective version. (4) In a shared team doc, include: (a) your final revised email; (b) the lists of prompts used; (c) a short performance review of the assistant's work: what it did well, what needed coaching, and how effectively it met best practices for indirect structure.

Assessment: This assignment is graded complete/incomplete. You'll earn full credit for meaningful participation and submitting your team's revised email and performance review.

Sample Student Work

Four teams in one section submitted the following performance reviews:

Team 1: "The assistant outputted an improved version of the original document, however, there is a lack of a buffer and sweetener, which are both critical parts of an indirect structure. Without the buffer and sweetener, it seems as though the writer does not give importance to the reader, and this could strain the relationship between them."

Team 2: "The first draft that generative Al gave us had all of the correct main elements of writing an indirect message, however it lacked a sympathetic tone. It was harsh and used words that would not comfort the reader. It just stated the facts. For our second prompt, Generative Al did much better. It gave us an email with a more sympathetic tone, appearing to care for the reader's email. It also gave an opportunity for the individual to be involved. Overall, generative AI did not need much coaching. It got the main point down, but only needed a few tweaks to come up with a good answer."

Team 3: "At first the Al made the [opening] too long, however, after giving it more information, telling ChatGPT to shorten the email, it made it a lot better. There were

too many big words used throughout the email which we had it refine and shorten. We also had to add the indirect structure prompt so that the AI knew what to structure the email based on."

Team 4: "Overall, we feel that our AI assistant did a good Job revising this email. We gave our assistant a clear prompt and a structure to follow, and it did well following the given prompt. The first AI revision did not change the [original email's] subject line though, so we had to prompt the AI to change the subject line. However, after prompting, the AI made a nice revision to make the subject line less harsh and more practical."

Evidence of Impact on Student Learning

This mixed-methods analysis of student learning incorporated diagnostic surveys, reflective writing, individual and team-based artifacts, and final portfolios. The course met three learning outcomes: (1) Construct and analyze rhetorical arguments; (2) produce clear, concise, audience-centered business documents across multimodal genres; and (3) collaborate effectively on business projects within team environments. GenAI was an integrated component of all three and also emerged organically as a recurring theme in student reflections and course evaluations.

The final capstone project, a reflective and professionally oriented Learning Portfolio, asked students to imagine an audience of recruiters in their future industry and articulate how their understanding of strategic business writing evolved over this course as well as the transferable skills they developed. More than half of students (52.7%, $n = 72$) featured GenAI prominently in their Learning Statement. While only one student led with it, nearly all who mentioned it contextualized its value within a broader reflection on the writing process and human-centered communication strategies. Strikingly, 76.3% of students included at least one or more GenAI-related topics in their Tip Sheets—a series of one-page visual resources they were tasked to create for the portfolio, teaching course concepts to peers in their future industry (see Figure 2). Tip sheet titles included phrases such as "How To Use AI Without Losing Your Voice" and "Tips for Responsible AI Use," while reflections in the opening statements echoed similar themes of transparency and rhetorical judgment. Their choices, emerging from an open-ended, real-world, audience-focused portfolio, underscore that students did not just learn to use GenAI; they learned to situate it critically and rhetorically as a broadly transferrable multilayered, critical literacy. Across course data, four consistent impacts emerged.

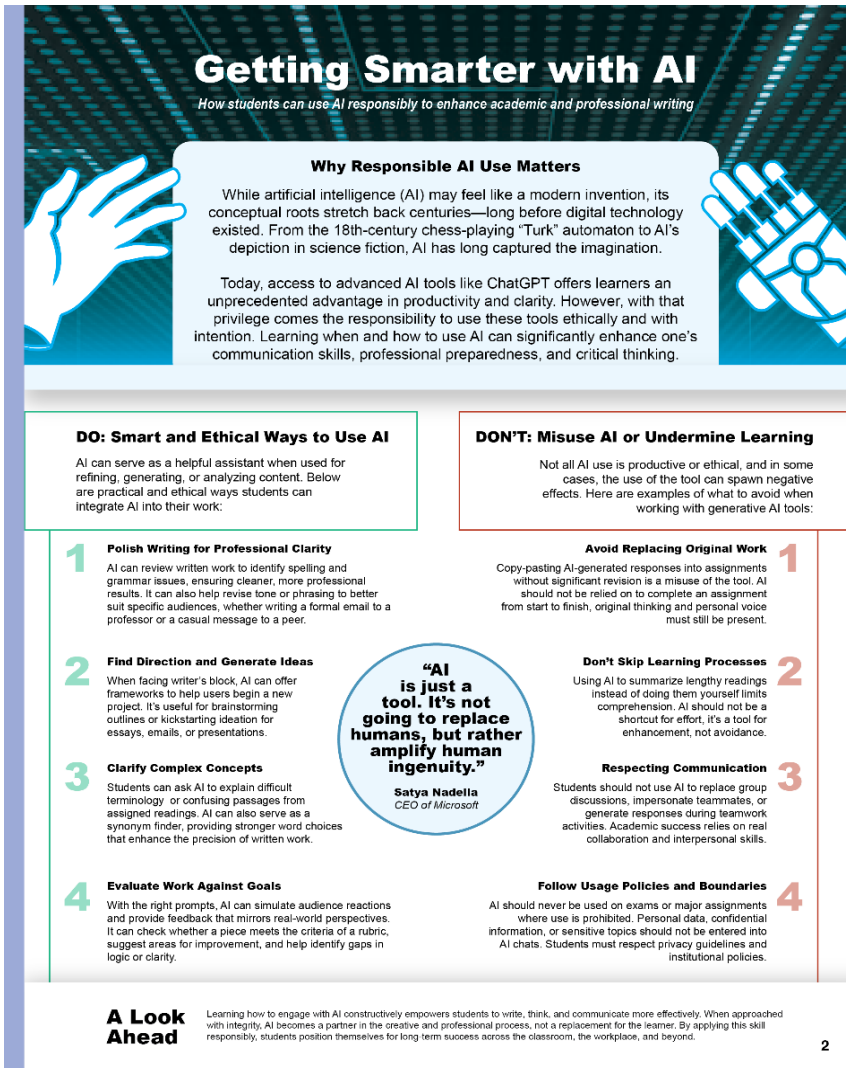

Figure 2. Sample Tip Sheet created by a student team: "Getting Smarter with AI" features columns of Dos and Don'ts for responsible AI use.

Impact 1: Students Gained Confidence in Responsible GenAI Use

Students completed pre- and post-course diagnostic surveys in which they rated their skills with GenAI before the course and then indicated how much they felt their skills improved by the end. The results showed substantial growth in self-assessed proficiency. Precourse, 68% rated their GenAI skills as average or below; only 6.7% felt advanced. By the end, 100% reported moderate or greater improvement, and 91.8% reported significant growth.

Precourse Question. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents "I need considerable development in this skill" and 5 represents "I excel and could teach others this skill," please ***rate your current skill set*** integrating GenAI into your academic or professional workflow. This includes your ability to design effective prompts, critically evaluate AI output, maintain your own voice, adapt to new tools, and use this technology to produce clear, goal-oriented communication. Results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Precourse diagnostic survey question (*n* = 72)

Rating	Students who selected the rating
1	2.7%
2	32%
3	33.3%
4	25.3%
5	6.7%

Postcourse Question. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents "This course did not improve my skills, knowledge, and strategies" and 5 represents "This course significantly improved my skills, knowledge, and strategies," please ***rate how much this course improved your ability*** to integrate gAI into your academic or professional workflow. This includes your ability to design effective prompts, critically evaluate AI output, maintain your own voice, adapt to new tools, and use this technology to produce clear, goal-oriented communication. Results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Postcourse diagnostic survey question (*n* = 72)

Rating	Students who selected the rating
1	0%
2	0%
3	8.2%
4	27.4%
5	64.4%

Impact 2: Students Internalized GenAI Literacy as a Transferrable Skill

In postcourse surveys, 54% ranked GenAI literacy in their top three career skills—second only to communication at 71% (see Table 7). Students described learning to prompt effectively, critique output, and preserve their voice in response to an open-ended question; final course evaluations supported this pattern with 75.4% strongly agreeing and 24% agreeing that the course developed valuable career competencies that included GenAI literacy (see Table 8).

In reflections and learning statements, students framed these competencies as essential to future roles, making statements such as:

- "Drafting guidelines for responsible generative-AI use helped me balance efficiency gains with necessary human oversight—an essential competency for any marketing team today."
- "My relationship with AI evolved significantly during this course. Initially, I saw it as a shortcut. Now, I treat it as a professional tool, somewhat of a brainstorming partner, a second pair of eyes, and a prototype generator. I learned how to prompt effectively, refine tone, and recognize when AI output lacks context or nuance. I'm now confident in using GenAI tools to enhance, not replace, my thinking. In a world where digital collaboration is increasing, this literacy will set me apart."
- "I have also gained skills in digital technologies, especially in leveraging AI as a 'catalyst for learning rather than a replacement.' I refined my ability to build more effective prompts, evaluate AI outputs critically for hallucinations and inaccuracies, and integrate AI-generated content appropriately within business documents. This approach to technology allowed me to use AI tools to enhance the ideation and revision processes while maintaining the human element essential for strategic communication decisions. I believe these skills are increasingly

valuable as businesses navigate the ethical and practical considerations of AI use in the future."

Table 7. Postcourse diagnostic survey question (*n* = 72)

Skills	Students placing skill in Top 3
Communication	71%
Digital and GenAI Literacy	54%
Collaboration	45%

Note. GenAI = Generative artificial intelligence.

Table 8. Postcourse diagnostic survey question (*n* = 72)

Rating	Students who selected the rating
Strongly agree	75.4%
Agree	24.6%
Neither agree nor disagree	0%
Disagree	0%
Strongly disagree	0%

Postcourse question. Of the nine career skills (listed below) that we've developed and tracked each week, what are the TOP 3 career skills you think you've most developed throughout this course? (Career Skills: Applied Problem Solving, Communication, Creativity & Innovation, Critical Thinking, AI Literacy, Ethical Reasoning, Leadership & Influence, Self-Reflective Learning, and Teamwork & Collaboration).

Postcourse question. Please explain how you practiced and developed the skills you chose as your top three (what kinds of assignments, activities, and experiences directly helped you develop the skills?).

Representative Comments

- "To begin, I think that the career skill I have improved the most is learning how to effectively use AI. I now know how to prompt engineer and ask AI intelligent questions in order to get the response that I want. The assignment that stands out the most to me was AI assistant. I think that this was a super helpful series to learn the basics of AI. Our team also used AI constantly to help us come up with questions, ideas, and images. AI is only going to grow in the near future and therefore, I found this to be an extremely helpful and interesting thing to learn in this class."
- "During the very beginning of our business writing course, we were tasked with completing each assignment twice for a couple of weeks. Once with the use of our human brain and then secondly with the help of gAI. By taking a few weeks to critically learn the pros and cons of the software really developed our understanding of AI beyond the surface admiration level. I am now capable of applying AI in the right circumstance in the right ways, leveraging it as a tool rather than a crutch."
- "This might be a bit of an obvious one, but between all the different application cases we had during our class time these last few months, it would be impossible to say this class hasn't improved my AI-literacy skills in some way. From using the right prompts, understanding its limitations, and even just the ethical bounds of the tool, I will move forward using this resource in a significantly different way thanks to this class."

- "Through the plethora of AI related assignments and readings at the beginning of the semester, constant AI integration throughout assignments, and the use of online tools for doc design and creation, I have been able to gain a much stronger grasp on how to use AI, its strengths and weaknesses, and the other digital tools I can leverage in the future."

Postcourse Question. This course helped me develop valuable career competencies (such as communication, collaboration & teamwork, digital & AI literacy, applied problem-solving, etc.) that I will use in the workplace.

Impact 3: Students Developed a Nuanced Understanding of GenAI's Role, Strengths, and Limits

Students repeatedly described GenAI as something to manage—an "assistant," not a replacement. Their reflections referenced "building a relationship," "coaching the tool," and maintaining authorship through revision and oversight:

- "One of the biggest skills I developed this semester is learning how to properly use AI as a tool to support my work, not replace it. Whether it was brainstorming ideas, organizing my thoughts, or polishing drafts, I found that AI could really help move the process forward - as long as I was using it thoughtfully."
- "In this course, I created a "relationship" with the generative AI I used. I viewed it as an assistant for my work, not allowing it to produce content without my input and revisions."
- "My approach to AI also changed a lot. Instead of using it just to get quick answers, I learned to treat it like a brainstorming partner that can help start ideas, but still needs my own voice and judgment."
- "One of the top skills I developed this semester was digital and AI literacy. Assignments like the AI assistant plan, prompt engineering quizzes, and using gAI ethically across projects showed me how to use these tools thoughtfully rather than relying on them blindly. I learned how to treat AI as a support system to speed up research, drafting, and brainstorming without losing my own voice in the process."

Impact 4: Students Learned to Think Rhetorically and Critically About GenAI Output

Through performance reviews and structured reflection, students repeatedly demonstrated their growing rhetorical discernment in relation to GenAI:

- "By having the option to use generative AI in some of our assignments, I felt that it provided me with a greater sense of flexibility and freedom with my work. In previous classes, AI was almost displayed as taboo by my professors, but the approach that [we] took with AI in this class was much more helpful. If anything, it reduced my desire to strictly adhere to AI-generated results after learning about the dangers of bias, misrepresentation, and misinformation that is associated with generative AI."
- "Through assignments such as reading Mollick's work and completing 'Hire an AI Assistant,' I came to view AI as a powerful tool for enhancing learning rather than as a shortcut. I employed AI primarily to refine my writing, drafting initial versions of memos and reports independently before using ChatGPT to suggest revisions. I then carefully edited the AI's suggestions to preserve my original voice, a practice emphasized throughout the course."

- "At the beginning of this course, I questioned its value. [i.e., value of a business writing course]. With tools like ChatGPT at my fingertips, I assumed business writing was becoming obsolete, something I could automate or learn on the job. But this course changed my perspective entirely. I now believe this is one of the most consequential classes I will be taking in college."
- Through readings, class discussions, and assignments such as "Hire an AI Assistant," I learned to critically assess AI's role, not only in communication but also within society. I became aware of its environmental impact, labor exploitation, and the potential to undermine originality when excessively utilized. This ethical discussion has altered my approach to AI in my work. I now perceive AI as a collaborator or assistant rather than a replacement for critical thinking or creative expression. This refined understanding of AI's advantages and disadvantages will be crucial in sectors where digital literacy and responsible technology use are increasingly anticipated."

Conclusion: Empowering Learners, Supporting Educators

As GenAI reshapes the conditions of learning and labor in higher education, students are not just asking for technical know-how—they are asking for cognitive frameworks that affirm their human agency and build durable skills that will help them navigate a technologically dynamic future workplace. Again and again, my students voiced a desire for clarity and guidance to think critically about the *how* and *why* of GenAI in their work. What struck me most was how often they prioritized creativity and genuine learning over convenience and efficiency. Even amid academic and personal stress, many rejected shortcuts in favor of meaningful engagement as long as they understood how this learning served them and their future.

Hire AI responds to that need by fostering a cognitive shift and a space of ongoing experimentation and reflection that moves students from passive, unquestioning users to critical practitioners and subject matter experts who manage AI as an assistant rather than defer to its perceived authority. By embedding this stance in scaffolded, inquiry-driven assignments, Hire AI not only equips students to lead human–machine collaboration but also models a sustainable approach they can take beyond the classroom.

Faculty need support too, especially contingent instructors and non-tenure-track faculty navigating innovation within already full course loads. The strength of this model is that it reassures faculty they do not need to become technology experts to teach responsibly with AI. Instead, they can remain what they have always been: disciplinary experts who guide students in applying core principles of their field. Hire AI creates a transparent, collaborative dynamic where faculty and students can coconstruct digital literacy through live experimentation and ongoing feedback. Together, they examine how AI intersects with disciplinary norms and practices, turning the classroom into a space for inquiry rather than a site of surveillance or assumed technical mastery.

As educators, we may not yet know how agentic AI will fully transform education, but we can shape our response. We can either retreat into fear or lean into pedagogy. By embracing the power of metaphor and course designs that foreground reflection and collaboration, we can help students do more than use AI. We can help them question it and grow through their intentional interactions with it. That, ultimately, is what Hire AI fosters: critically literate students who view GenAI not as a substitute for thinking, but as a tool they are equipped to direct toward human-centered work.

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