Teaching with AI: an in-class activity to assess policy writing

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**Overview**. An in-class activity where students used Copilot to evaluate their completed work (a policy memo) from the perspective of different kinds of professionals.

**Goal**. To introduce students to a practical, ethical use of generative AI that might be applicable in the workplace and to have students thoughtfully consider some of the strengths and weaknesses of genAI.

**Summary**. Students want to use AI tools effectively, efficiently, and ethically, but often don't know how. After students submitted their policy memos, we used generative AI in class to assess them from the perspectives of a legislative director, a local CEO, an NGO, and an academic researcher. We had a classroom discussion on the usefulness of that feedback and later students submitted a short reflection paper on the activity and what they learned.

Many gained knowledge and practice of using genAI at a more sophisticated level then they had been using it, or were more thoughtful about how they were using it. Many saw that the output from Copilot could be of varied relevance, and the importance not just of "human in the loop" but "human in charge." They understood to use or adapt Copilot's recommendations that were helpful and to ignore the rest. Overall, they developed a greater sense that genAI can be very useful but recognized it is a tool, not an answer.

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**Background**. Students chose a character at a real or fictional organization (vice president, research director, etc.; ExxonMobil, Human Rights Watch, Philadelphia Bikers and Birders, etc.). They each wrote a policy memo (2,000 words, expert-to-expert, stakeholder-to-stakeholder) and a matching policy brief (a one-page engagement piece, seeking to develop interest among potential future allies). Each student's memo and matching brief identified a public policy issue, offered policy proposals, and made specific asks of some level of government - U.S. (Congress or executive agency), state, local, IGO, or non-U.S. government. Course is undergraduate (300-level) public policy and policy writing, a required course for political science and related majors.

**In-class activity**. On the day after students submitted their memos, students used the following prompts in class to ask for evaluation of the memos from the perspectives of different professionals.

First, they prompted Copilot to evaluate the memo from the role of a legislative director of the relevant level of government.

Students reviewed Copilot's evaluation. They considered relevance, coherence, validity, and other issues. Then in a classwide discussion, some students volunteered their opinions and reactions to what Copilot offered, what kinds of things in their opinions it did well and did not, etc.

After this discussion of the first evaluation "from the legislative director," they prompted again, this time asking for a more critical evaluation. We then discussed how these more critical evaluations differed from the first.

Students then repeated the exercise, asking for an evaluation (and then a more critical evaluation) from the perspective of a local CEO, an NGO, and an academic researcher.

Finally, each student asked Copilot for a summary/synthesis of the several evaluations it had produced. The assignment deliverable was this synthesis along with the student's reflection on the activity: the mechanics of using genAI, their thoughts on reviewing Copilot's outputs, overall strengths and weaknesses, possible other similar applications of this process, etc.

**Student Outcomes**. Students came to this activity from a variety of levels of competency and experience using genAI. In general, their experience was that:

- Copilot's initial evaluations of memos were generally very positive, sometimes offering recommendations on basics like improved structure, more data as evidence, a more moderate, professional, and less emotional voice, or an explanation of costs.

- Prompted for more critical evaluation, Copilot offered more substantive critiques and specific suggestions on format, content, organization, distinguishing facts from opinions, more quantitative evidence and data visualization, legal reasoning, citations, identifying a clear call to action, etc.

- Most students had mixed reactions to the initial evaluations. They noted a combination of useful, relevant advice along with advice that was irrelevant or that they specifically chose not to take. They appreciated the option for a checklist of the recommendations but sometimes needed the next step, e.g., "*how* to make the tone more professional," not just "make the tone more professional."

- Many students had two a-ha moments – the human is necessary and the human is in charge:

(1) "I need to read the AI output and determine which parts are useful for me and which are not,"

(2) "When I think this through, I see that I don't have to take the advice of the AI."

These were especially empowering revelations for many of them.

**Caveats**. One student of 75 refused to do the activity on environmental grounds; she was invited to watch the student next to her do the activity. After the activity, two students (including the environmentally-minded student) protested that all of this genAI output was the job of students - to review their own work, develop their own critiques, produce their own improvements, etc. - and not of a machine.

**Conclusions**. Many students valued the specificity of the individual evaluations more than the more general synthesized summary, but others appreciated the synthesis for organizing what was otherwise a very long and sometimes contradictory set of recommendations.

Most students had positive reviews of the activity. Many gained knowledge and practice of using genAI at a more sophisticated level than they had been using it or were more thoughtful about how they were using it. Many saw that the output from Copilot could be of varied relevance, and the importance not just of "human in the loop" but "human in charge." They understood to use or adapt Copilot's recommendations that were helpful and to ignore the rest. Overall, they developed a greater sense that genAI can be very useful but recognized it is a tool, not an answer.

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**The Activity**. Students were advised but not required to use their individual access to the University's Microsoft Copilot license. Students were introduced to the privacy questions of genAI systems inside and outside such a license. They were also instructed on the option to choose "Temporary Chat" if they wanted.

**Step 0. Getting Started**

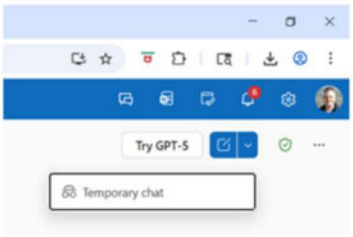
**Log in**

If you login to mail.american.edu, on the left you'll see this Copilot icon

**Public or Private?**

If you are logged in, nothing we do here will go into training Copilot inside or outside American University. You can set your own settings for whether you want to to train Copilot for your own AU use.

For now, we can start a new chat by going to the top right of your Copilot page and clicking on the pen and paper and choosing new chat which Copilot will associate with you/your AU login - or clicking the down-arrow and choosing "temporary chat" which Copilot will not associate with you.




If you prefer to use ChatGPT or something else, that's up to you but you will be outside the protection of AU's enterprise license and privacy protections.

The instructions for students, with prompts, were:

**Step 1. Introduction to prompt engineering.**

Discussion to introduce the students to some of the basic ideas: clear, specific, contextual, techniques, etc., and the reasons why better prompting is important. Students understood "You" in the prompt as the genAI. Supplemental text:

"A lot (maybe too much) has been made of "prompt engineering." But at this stage of the technology's development, there's still some GIGO [garbage in, garbage out] implications:  the better your instructions and expectations, the better your genAI output can be.

Let's begin by asking Copilot to evaluate how your memo might be received by a legislative director - not the Elected Legislator, but the person who really does a lot of the shaping of what the Legislator sees, supports, does, etc.

Read the following, and then copy and paste it into your Copilot page:

*You are being asked to assume the role of a legislative director evaluating a policy memo brought to you from an outside organization. This memo is part of an undergraduate political science course. Each student chose a public policy issue and drafted a memo with policy proposals for a government agency. Each student wrote the policy memo*

*(approximately 2,000 words) from the perspective of a real or fictional organization - a company, a think tank, and NGO, etc. The primary audience is the government actor but the secondary audience includes any relevant stakeholders and others doing work on this policy area*.

*Your role is to evaluate the memo on the seriousness or importance of the issue, the relevance of the issue to the intended audiences, the framing of the issue and proposals, the quality of the evidence supporting the proposals, the specificity and practicality of the proposals, and the persuasiveness of the memo. One note: the memo should be on letterhead or with a cover page, and should not just be the To: From: Date: Re: format. I will upload the memo. For the first evaluation, please take on* ***the role of a legislative director*** *- a senior staff member for a legislator.*

Then click the + sign on the left side and attach your memo.
Then click the blue and white arrow/circle on the right side to "enter."

Give it a moment; it will probably pause, and then write, and maybe pause and keep writing a couple of times.

Ok, now take a couple of minutes to read slowly the evaluation."

Students reviewed the output from Copilot and then we had a classwide discussion on what the AI offered and students' reactions to the output. Then students were asked to prompt for a more critical evaluation in Step 2.

**Step 2. Ask again, better.**

After our class discussion, students asked for more critical feedback.

"Copilot will probably offer to rewrite the memo or other things. We're not going to do that.

Instead, add the following prompt:

*Please look at the same memo, this time more critically, specifically noting places for improvement and ways this should be more professional - in approach, tone, content, logic, ask, etc.*

What feedback does it offer now?"

Students examined the new feedback and we had another classwide discussion.

**Step 3. Get more perspectives.**

We repeated the activity for feedback from different perspectives by editing the original prompt, and asking how Copilot's feedback changed and what feedback was consistent, repeated, etc.:

*For this evaluation, please take on **the role of a CEO of a medium-to-large** company that is influential in the relevant jurisdiction and that is impacted by legislation in the region.*

*For this evaluation, please take on the role of **the executive director of an NGO** that typically may share some perspectives and goals of the memo's author/organization, but that also sometimes differs in important ways.*

*For this evaluation, please take on the role of an **academic researcher** at a university or think tank. What can the researcher learn from the memo? How might the researcher assist the memo's author in a revised version?*

**Step 4. Reflect thoughtfully on all this.**

After these iterations, students asked for a synthesis of the several evaluations, then wrote a reflection on the several parts of this in-class activity, focusing on what they learned, how they reacted throughout, and how they might use this new knowledge in other classes or other situations. This synthesis and reflection is what they submitted for this assignment.