



AI Literacy for College Students

Thinking Critically, Ethically,
and Creatively with AI

Module 3:

Using AI Ethically

Ethical AI use isn't just about avoiding plagiarism; it's about using AI in ways that are fair, responsible, and thoughtful about how your choices affect yourself and others. Because what's ethical can depend on the situation, purpose, and impact, using AI ethically means exercising good judgment, being transparent about how AI contributes to your work, and handling personal or sensitive information carefully.

AI can support learning and increase access, but it can also raise concerns about misinformation, consent, and creative labor, or the time, effort, and skill that people put into creating original work. Using AI ethically means recognizing both its benefits and potential harms, including respecting the contributions of human creators whose work AI may build on, giving credit where it's due, and being aware of how your use of AI affects others.

At its core, ethical AI use asks a few key questions:

- Who benefits from this use of AI?
- Who might be harmed or disadvantaged?
- What is being replaced, hidden, or avoided by using AI?
- Am I being honest and transparent about how I'm using it?

Ethical vs. Unethical Use: What's the Difference?

AI is often used **unethically** when it:

- replaces learning or thinking that a person is expected to do themselves
- makes it seem like someone did work they didn't actually do
- spreads incorrect, biased, or misleading information without verification
- is used in ways that affect others without their knowledge or consent

Unethical use can harm:

- the user, by weakening skills, understanding, or credibility
- other people, through unfair advantages, misinformation, or exclusion
- institutions and communities, by damaging trust, fairness, and responsibility

Ethical use, on the other hand, involves:

- supporting learning rather than replacing it
- being transparent about AI use when required or expected
- checking accuracy and bias instead of assuming correctness
- considering how AI decisions or outputs affect real people

Why This Matters

Because AI does not understand meaning or consequences, **ethical responsibility always falls on the human using it**. You are accountable for how AI is used in your work, even when the tool makes choices feel automatic or easy.

Developing AI literacy means learning to pause and ask not just, “*Can I use AI here?*” but “*Should I use AI here, and what are the consequences if I do?*”

There may not always be a clear-cut correct answer, but ethical AI use begins with awareness, reflection, and responsibility.

Guidelines

- Follow course and institutional policies.
- Disclose AI use transparently.
- Avoid replacing thinking or skill development.
- Protect personal or sensitive data.
- Consider broader impacts on fairness, inclusion, and creativity.

Example: Appropriate and Inappropriate Uses of AI

Check out the following example that illustrates how to (and how not to) use AI for a writing assignment.

The Assignment:

- ✓ Write a 4–5 page argumentative essay on a current issue.
- ✓ You must take a clear position, use credible sources, and write in your own words.

Appropriate Use of AI

Students use AI to help with parts of the essay, like:

- **Brainstorming topics**
A student asks AI for ideas about current issues, like “possible essay topics on inflation, rising prices, or the economy,” and gets a list to consider.
- **Narrowing down a research question**
A student has a broad topic like “economic prices” and uses AI to suggest a more focused question, such as, “How does rising inflation affect college students’ daily spending?”
- **Creating an outline**
A student uses AI to make an outline: Introduction → Claim → Evidence → Counterarguments → Conclusion, then adds their own points under each section.
- **Getting feedback on clarity or grammar**
A student pastes a paragraph into AI to check for confusing sentences or typos, then revises it themselves.

Why it’s okay: Students still choose their own topic and position, do their own research, write the essay, and only use AI to help organize ideas or fix unclear sentences. This way, the essay shows what the students actually know and learned, and the students are prepared for future assignments or exams.

Inappropriate Use of AI

A student asks AI to generate the entire essay, including finding sources, making arguments, and writing paragraphs, and then turns it in as their own work. They might make small changes, like tweaking a few words, but they don’t add their own ideas or thinking.

Why this is not okay: AI is doing the main work, so the student misses out on learning how to research, think critically, and write. The essay doesn't show what the student understands, and it does break school rules about honesty in work. It also means the student won't be ready for exams, class discussions, or future assignments that require their own thinking.

Is My AI Use Okay? (Quick Check)

Ask yourself:

- Did **I** adhere to my instructor's guidelines/course policies?
- Did **I** choose the topic, thesis, and evidence?
- Did **I** write the words myself?
- Can **I** explain and defend my ideas without AI?
- Did AI **help me** improve my work, rather than create it?

If you answer **yes** to all of these, your AI use is likely okay.

If not, it's time to rethink how you're using AI.

Try It

Identify one appropriate and one inappropriate way you could use AI for a recent or upcoming assignment. Explain why the uses are appropriate and inappropriate.