

Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

Convincing the Machine: Using Rhetoric to Get the Most Out of AI Writing Assistants in Proposal Writing

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Overview

This assignment teaches students to treat generative AI as a rhetorical collaborator that must be convinced through recursive prompting, strategic data curation, and continuous adjustment. Students assume the role of grant writers advocating for a project, community, or initiative of their choosing. Across four activities they learn to diagnose how the AI represents what a funder wants, recognize where it misses the mark, and rhetorically shape its output toward audience expectations.

In Activity-1, students locate an actual request for proposal (RFP) and analyze it to identify genre conventions, audience priorities, and evaluative criteria. In Activity-2, students translate the analysis into a series of prompts designed to steer the AI toward the RFP's stated values by testing, revising, and comparing iterations to see ways in which small rhetorical shifts change response. In Activity-3, students assemble a data corpus for the AI (e.g., background facts, stakeholder needs, mission statements, contextual materials) and experiment with different inputs to see how the AI absorbs, ignores, or distorts those details. Finally, in Activity-4, students synthesize findings into a polished grant narrative and compose an AI use memo explaining when AI output was accepted, adapted, or rejected and why.

The process is well-supported by recent scholarship on AI and rhetorical instruction. Laflen et al. demonstrate that AI literacy instruction provides tangible benefits when embedded in traditional rhetorical analysis assignments, including those where students examine audience expectations, identify rhetorical moves, evaluate language, and discuss disciplinary conventions. Law similarly argues

that writers can improve rhetorical judgment and prompting effectiveness through iterative human/AI collaboration.

Further, framed through Krueger's work on maintaining unique writer voice even with AI assistance, our assignment positions AI writing as a site where students must actively arbitrate between machine-generated prose, disciplinary genre conventions, and professional audience expectations. By requiring students to identify both explicit and implicit RFP evaluation criteria, the assignment foregrounds moments in which students decide when AI-generated language aligns or undermines the voice required by the funding context. Classroom activities include rhetorical analyses of example RFPs, side-by-side comparisons of multiple AI drafts, and small-group "AI debugging" sessions in which students identify inaccuracies, biases, misaligned tone, and genre mismatches. Students practice "convincing the machine" to conform to professional standards, discovering that generative AI can approximate genre conventions and audience appeals only when guided by informed rhetorical judgment.

Designed for first-year writing, technical communication, and professional writing courses, these activities offer students hands-on experience within a professional genre while also giving instructors flexible and scalable lessons based in rhetorical theory and sound educational practices. Gupta and Shivers-McNair conceptualize this approach to prompt writing as wayfinding, emphasizing the cognitive actions and intentional decisions used to navigate the various virtual spaces and sites of writing.

Time Commitment

4 class sessions

Materials

Students will need access to a computer, a generative AI writing tool, sample requests for proposals or calls for funding, and word-processing software. Instructors may also wish to provide sample grant narratives, example prompts, and short readings on genre analysis or rhetorical decision-making related to AI-assisted writing.

Refer to “Further Reading” below.

Assignment and Activity Process

Activity-1

- Students should locate a real RFP, call for funding, or grant announcement from a government agency, foundation, nonprofit, or institutional funder. Students may work individually or in groups. To facilitate the search, instructors might provide specific funding databases or sources (e.g., Grants.gov, Candid/Foundation Directory, institutional or foundation websites).
- Students conduct a rhetorical analysis of the RFP, identifying the following:
 - Intended audience (e.g., reviewers, program officers, institutional stakeholders),
 - Values and priorities emphasized by the funder (e.g., innovation, impact, equity, feasibility),
 - Key genre conventions of grant writing (e.g., structure, required sections, evaluation language, submission instructions), and
 - Explicit and implicit evaluation criteria, including clearly stated requirements (e.g., eligibility rules, scoring rubrics, required outcomes) and rhetorically implied expectations such as mission alignment, modality language (e.g., “pilot,” “scalable,” “evidence-based”), preferred populations or communities, sustainability narratives, and assumptions about impact and feasibility.
- Students summarize their analysis in a brief memo or worksheet that will later guide their AI prompting decisions.
- As a class or in small groups, compare RFP analyses to bring to light how different funding contexts shape rhetorical

expectations.

Activity-2

- Using the RFP analysis, students should draft an initial prompt designed to guide a generative AI system toward producing a grant-appropriate narrative (Zhu et al.). Instructors might provide the following “Mad-Lib”-style template for students to customize (Rice et al.):

You are writing as a [role/organizational identity] preparing a grant proposal for [funder name].

The proposal responds to an RFP focused on [stated problem or priority] available here: [paste hyperlink to solicitation].

The intended audience is [primary evaluators/reviewers committee/board], who value [implicit priorities such as mission alignment, modality language, equity, or scalability]. You can read more about the funder here: [paste hyperlink to agency/business/institution web site].

Draft a [specific section of a grant narrative, e.g., statement of need or project description] that emphasizes [key values or outcomes], maintains a [describe desired tone and level of formality], and avoids [common pitfalls or potential misalignments identified in your analysis of the RFP].

- Students generate multiple AI drafts by:
 - Revising prompts to adjust audience framing, purpose, tone, or constraints (e.g., specifying expert reviewers versus a general audience; foregrounding feasibility over inspiration; shifting tone from visionary to evidence-based; and/or constraining the output by length, evaluation criteria, or other terminology from the RFP), and
 - Testing ways in which different rhetorical moves (e.g., foregrounding impact, feasibility, urgency) affect output.

- Students place AI-generated drafts side-by-side on the computer or printed and annotate them to identify the following:
 - Where the AI aligns with or diverges from the RFP's expectations, and
 - Evidence of when the AI successfully follows grant-writing conventions (appropriate tone, structure, and evaluative language) versus when it does not (text that is off-topic, overly generic, misaligned with the funder's mission, or inappropriate for grant reviewers/audience).
- In small group “prompt workshops,” students should share findings from their prompting strategies and diagnose why certain prompts produce stronger or weaker results.

Activity-3

- Students should research and create a curated data corpus to provide context for the AI, which may include the following:
 - Sample project descriptions or funder/applicant mission statements,
 - Community, participant, and/or stakeholder needs and demographics,
 - Organizational background or prior initiatives,
 - Previously awarded applicants and/or projects, and
 - Relevant statistics or contextual narratives.
- Students test ways in which the AI uses, ignores, or distorts curated materials by:
 - Supplying different combinations of data, and
 - Altering the order or framing of contextual inputs.

- Students should then identify issues related to accuracy, bias, omission, and overgeneralization, documenting or annotating where AI output requires correction or intervention. Zhu et al. identified various patterns of engagement between students and AI output related to writing and revision by rating areas such as planning and ideation, information seeking and evaluation, writing and presentation, and conversational engagement.
- Discuss in groups or as a class how data selection and orchestration function as rhetorical acts, not neutral technical steps. Sanz-Tejeda et al.'s synthesis of recent studies reinforces this approach, noting that students should take the time to understand and learn from their mistakes to continue to develop fundamental skills such as self-correction and text revision rather than use AI to simply correct surface-level errors.

Activity-4

- Students should then select and revise AI-generated material to produce a polished section of a grant narrative (e.g., statement of need, project description, organizational capacity, impact section).
- Students should compose an AI Use Memo that:
 - Explains how AI was prompted and supplied with data,
 - Justifies rhetorical decisions to accept, revise, or reject AI-generated text, and
 - Reflects ethical considerations such as transparency, bias, and accountability.
- Students should share excerpts of their narratives and memos in groups or as a class to discuss rhetorical efficacy and ethical tradeoffs.
- The assignment concludes with a reflective discussion on what it means to “convince the machine” and how

rhetorical agency operates in AI-mediated professional writing. Alcruz and Schroeder argue that a cognitive apprenticeship model supports accountability and professional judgment (see also Krueger; Sanz-Tejeda et al.).

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Develop rhetorical awareness of how generative AI systems simulate audience and proposal genre
- Practice recursive prompting as a form of rhetorical invention and revision
- Analyze the proposal genre and adapt writing to real-world evaluative contexts
- Critically assess AI-generated text for accuracy, bias, and appropriateness (omission, overgeneralization, etc.)
- Articulate ethical and rhetorical decisions related to AI-assisted writing

Learning Accommodations

- This assignment may be implemented in in-person, hybrid, HyFlex, or fully online classrooms, with all activities adaptable for synchronous or asynchronous participation (e.g., discussion board posts).
- Students may choose different grant-writing contexts or projects to align with their interests and comfort levels (e.g., scholarship application, corporate giving campaign, government contract).
- Instructors may allow students to work individually or collaboratively to support different learning preferences.
- Assignment materials can be provided in multiple formats,

including written, visual, and digital examples.

- Students may submit drafts and reflections in stages to allow for iterative feedback and revision.
- Alternative participation options may be offered for in-class discussions, such as written reflections or asynchronous responses.

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