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Can ChatGPT Make the Right Moves? A Comparative Rhetorical Analysis of Human- Authored and AI-Generated Texts

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Overview

When text-based generative AI (GenAI) made its way into the writing classroom, we decided to take a direct approach to both talking about and working with these tools without having to sacrifice teaching critical analysis and rhetorical awareness. In addition to teaching students functional knowledge about AI, this work also equips them with the literacy to critique it, cultivating the kinds of multiliteracies that Stuart Selber describes in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* (2004).

Helping students develop rhetorical knowledge acts as a bridge between understanding GenAI tools on a functional level and being a critical reader of texts generated by AI. Because we are preparing students to enter academic and professional spaces that have been, and will continue to be, shaped by the development of GenAI, it is imperative that they build a diverse set of literacies to become informed, and not passive, users and observers of these tools.

This assignment is a rhetorical analysis paper appropriate for use in a range of writing courses, from first-year composition to upper-division English courses to writing intensive courses across the discipline. During a unit focused on rhetorical analysis, students are tasked with comparing and contrasting the rhetorical prowess of human-authored and AI-generated arguments. Through learning about rhetorical moves and using the rhetorical situation to prompt a GenAI chatbot, this unit culminates in a rhetorical analysis in which they develop a nuanced position on whether or not GenAI can create effective academic arguments and be relied upon as a credible source of information in research. This assignment can be adapted across many contexts and analyzing a wide variety of genres to use as comparison texts, depending on the type of institution and course learning outcomes.

Time Commitment

4-5 weeks

Materials

Instructors need to either provide or guide students in choosing four, short scholarly articles to read on the same topic. Students must also be provided with the “Make Your ‘Move’: Writing in Genres” reading by Brad Jacobson, Madelyn Pawlowski, and Christine M. Tardy. Students will need a computer in class to use ChatGPT or another chatbot. Collaborative software, such as Google Docs or Canvas Discussions, may be used when crafting prompts for the chatbot. Instructors need to provide a Rhetorical Moves Chart template, which can be adapted from the “Make Your Move” reading.

Assignment Process

- Students read “Make Your ‘Move’: Writing in Genres” to learn about rhetorical moves.
- Students are assigned to read and annotate one of four short, scholarly articles, all of which are written on the same topic.
- Then, students answer the following questions about the rhetorical choices the author made in their piece to create a rhetorical moves chart. These are some, but not all, of the questions listed in the appendix in “Make Your ‘Move’: Writing in Genres.”:
 - Identify how moves help carry out the genre’s actions
 - What is the purpose of the article? What argument does it make about writing and AI?

- Who is the audience for your article?
- What is the context of this article? (you should find out what you can learn about the journal that published this article).
- Identify rhetorical strategies
 - How does the article use logos, ethos, and pathos?
 - What sources are cited? Are these real sources—can you find them online or in the library? How do the sources cited contribute to the argument the author makes?
- Identify language features. Consider examining:
 - Contractions (e.g. it's, I'm, we're, you've)
 - Verb tense (present, past, future)
 - Use of specialized vocabulary
 - Use of pronouns
 - Sentence structures
- Critique rhetorical moves
 - What are the strengths and limitations of this article?
- Next, students will learn how to prompt the chatbot by providing it with the rhetorical context needed to generate a text in the same genre. This output serves as a comparison text to the human-authored scholarly article.

- Students then annotate the AI-generated text, making note of the presence of rhetorical moves from the chart.
- Finally, students will compose a comparative rhetorical analysis essay in which they compare and contrast the use of these rhetorical moves in the human-authored and AI-generated texts, using the moves from the chart they created as a class as the basis of their discussion. Through their analysis, they take a stance either in support of or against the question of whether a chatbot can write effective academic arguments and serve as a credible source of information for scholarly research.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of what rhetorical moves are and how they are used by authors in different genres
- Use rhetorical knowledge to generate GenAI outputs
- Critically analyze rhetorical moves in scholarly articles and AI-generated texts

Learning Accommodations

- The professor may generate one article per group or one article for entire class use to reduce environmental impact and/or provide an alternative for students who prefer not to engage with GenAI tools.
- Students may also create AI-generated articles in groups rather than individually to reduce the environmental impact.

- Students may compose multiple prompts to try with the chatbot, but just choose to send one into the chatbot.
- Groups may be assembled at different stages of the assignment to maximize engagement in different modalities and/or scheduling patterns.
- Material should be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, digital delivery.

Works Cited

- Jacobson, Brad, Pawlowski, Madelyn, and Tardy, Christine M.
"Make your "Move": Writing in Genres." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, edited by Dana Driscoll, Megan Heise, Mary Stewart, and Matthew Vetter, vol. 4, WAC Clearinghouse, 2021, pp. 217-238.
- Selber, Stuart A. *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. SIU Press, 2004.