

## Using Generative AI in an Introductory Forecasting Assignment

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*Background:* Artificial intelligence (AI) is a common topic in the current educational environment, with a search of the Chronicle of Higher Education leading to 771 results (“Search results,” 2024). At the National Retail Federation’s 2024 Conference and Expo, there were at least 30 sessions referencing “AI” in the title (“Agenda,” 2024) and at the 2023 International Textiles and Apparel Association Annual Conference, there were at least six presentations discussing AI, along with a Special Topic Session focused on the use of AI in education (ITAA, 2023). As a result of the examination of information coming from both academic and industry sources, the ascension of generative AI raises the question: How can an assignment be designed to teach students how to best use generative AI as a tool in written work?

*Strategy:* In a midsize private university in the Northeast, the first assignment in a junior-level Fashion Forecasting class was rewritten to require the use of AI. In the previous year, the emergence of generative AI had apparently encouraged students to use that tool in completing the assignment, leading to its reconsideration. The assignment was designed to address the course objective of “Recognize and interpret social and cultural indicators and research findings to develop and communicate trends” through exploring how current events can affect the fashion industry. Students were instructed to find recent news articles about five topics (economy; politics; science, technology, and medicine; the environment; arts and entertainment), summarize each article, and then explain how the information in the article could affect the fashion industry in the future. While plagiarism had always been a concern in the article summaries, students had used their own critical and creative thinking to apply the article’s information to the fashion industry. However, because generative AI can easily complete both parts of the assignment, it had been utilized by at least some of the students in the class.

After this realization, an assignment was still needed to address this course objective early in the semester. The first revision of the assignment included the use of Turnitin, a platform embedded in the course’s learning management system that assesses the originality of content. An attempt was also made to develop questions that generative AI could not answer well. But this iteration of the assignment focused more on writing than critical thinking and “un-ChatGPT-able” questions made it too complex for an early assignment; thus, this version was discarded. After further reflection, the next version instead embraced AI, making it a requirement of the assignment.

*Implementation:* The revised assignment asked students to find current news articles about the same five topics, but then to use AI to a) summarize the article in 80-100 words and b) conclude how the information in the article could affect the fashion industry. They copied and pasted the AI results into a document, with appropriate citations. MLA is the style utilized in undergraduate courses at the university, and the online MLA Style Center offers guidance on citing generative AI, information with which students were provided. Citations for AI include the wording of the

prompt as well as the specific tool and the date (“How do I cite,” 2023). Next in the assignment, students were asked to identify three questions they had for each article after having used generative AI for the summary and application. Then they were tasked with finding an image of a fashion product, one corresponding with each topic, to recommend to a retailer based on the information in each article. The final section of the assignment asked students to reflect on the experience of using generative AI for this assignment. The assignment was introduced with a warning that not everything that AI generates is accurate, illustrated with two different biographies of the course instructor that were written by ChatGPT six months apart, each of which were entirely incorrect.

*Results:* Of the 26 students, 24 used ChatGPT, one used Bard, and one used PopAI. The summaries were mostly done well, though student questions indicated that the summaries did not help them fully understand the articles. For example, many of the articles on the economy referenced the Fed or the Federal Reserve, and after having AI summarize the articles, students often asked questions like “What actually is the Fed?” Also, some summaries were vague (“This article may offer insights into the discussions, decisions, and their broader implications for U.S. foreign relations and domestic policies.”) and one discussed the article content in the future tense even though the event had already happened. A surprising issue was word count. The assignment required summaries of 80-100 words but 24% of the summaries were over the limit (maximum = 181) and 22% were below the limit (minimum = 47). Several students commented on how unexpected that was.

Students varied on how much they liked using generative AI for this section of the assignment, with some appreciating “how quickly the results came up” and others expressing concern about the content of the summaries. For example, one said “I did see some information I probably would’ve fact checked in some articles I chose not to use” and another said “I did not like not being aware of what I was going to see and/or come up with because some things I found were incorrect with dates or it had trouble ‘reading’ the articles and said it could do nothing for me.”

The next part of the assignment, asking AI to apply the information from the article to the fashion industry, was generally not considered a success by students. The results varied quite a bit, ranging from one sentence to eight paragraphs, and some students were given statements like “The text does not provide any information or context related to the fashion industry. Therefore, it is not possible to determine how the events described might impact the fashion industry based on the provided information.” As one student said, “I found this to be frustrating because I myself could think of quite a few ways the information could affect the fashion industry.” Many said variations of, “I would use it again to help summarize articles for a quick understanding, but I wouldn’t ask a question to analyze it,” confirming the instructor’s impression that summaries are no longer viable in assignments if original student work is expected.

Overall, students offered mixed reviews on the experience of using generative AI. They noted that generative AI “is not always accurate, sometimes it does not always understand what you are asking it which makes it unreliable.” Several identified generative AI as a good background tool,

“in the same way Wikipedia is as a starting point.” Based on student feedback, it seems that as a group, they generally trust generated summaries but not conclusions based on those summaries.

*Conclusions:* With some tweaking, this assignment will be implemented in future versions of the course. It was successful in its dual purpose of 1) having students apply current social and cultural indicators to the fashion industry through the search for appropriate news article and their ultimate choice of recommended fashion products; and 2) illustrating some of the benefits and limitations to generative AI.

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