

Department of Social Anthropology: AI Policy for Students

Artificial intelligence tools have become increasingly powerful and widespread, with significant implications for teaching, learning and assessment across higher education. While some tools (e.g. scheduling, proofreading) can be helpful, others present significant ethical and other risks, and can even be detrimental to your educational and professional development.

This policy aims to give students in the Department an awareness of the rules, recommendations and considerations surrounding the use of AI in social anthropological research, writing and assessment. Its aim is to support you on your learning journey, as you cultivate key research, analytical, and writing skills that you can take into multiple academic and non-academic sectors. We hope this document will help you make informed choices about how to make the most of your time in Cambridge, and how to keep growing and challenging yourself, with or without AI. Remember too that there are many people you can turn to for help with your studies, such as your DoS, supervisors, lecturers and mentors, so please don't hesitate to reach out to them for support!

Given how rapidly this issue is evolving, these guidelines are not exhaustive or final, but will be regularly reviewed in light of feedback and further developments. You are encouraged to read this policy alongside the manifesto and principles on AI provided by the [School of Humanities and Social Sciences](#).

Principles

The use of AI in higher education is raising fundamental questions about what degrees are for, what learning involves, what the point of reading and writing is, and how progress should be evaluated. Responses to these questions will vary. But here are some principles that shape the Department's current thinking about AI:

- **Degrees are not only about writing essays and passing exams.** They're about being curious, being challenged, learning to read, write and think critically, and cultivating new skills and perspectives on the world. They're also about taking responsibility for your own learning and development. All these skills cannot be outsourced to someone or something else.
- **Process matters** – as much as, and even more than, outputs. Learning happens through experimenting, failing, getting stuck or confused and figuring a way through, getting diverted, and adapting to new leads or information. These can't be outsourced either.
- **Ethics and integrity matter.** As social anthropologists, we should be holding ourselves to the highest [ethical standards](#) – with or without AI. The actions that we take as individuals can affect others, and have knock-on effects that we can't always anticipate. All engagements with AI must be guided by our discipline's ethical standards and procedures.
- **The environment matters.** AI has significant [environmental impacts](#), consuming vast amounts of minerals, rare earth elements, [energy](#) and water (much more than a regular Google search, for example), causing environmental pollution (e.g. mercury, lead) and contributing to global carbon emissions.

Considerations

On the basis of these principles, here are some questions you should consider when engaging with AI:

- Do I actually need AI for this? What exactly is AI being used for – collating, analysing, recommending, checking, etc. – and would I get a better outcome if I read an article or ask my lecturer, supervisor, DoS or friends instead?
- Would I be comfortable letting another person do what I'm asking this tool to do?
- Can I trust this tool to get it right? Is it reliable? Will it end up reproducing widespread [biases](#), or start [hallucinating](#)?
- How, if at all, will this tool help me attain X goal or develop Y skills?
- How will this tool facilitate my learning process? Could it hijack, [diminish](#) or override parts of that process?
- What am I gaining and *not* gaining by using this tool?
- What are the risks of using this tool – not just for me, but also for other people and/or their work? How will I mitigate them?
- What will happen to the material that I am feeding into this tool? Where is it going, who will have access to it, for what purposes, and to what ends?

Rules

Whatever we think of AI, there are several cases in which its use is explicitly prohibited. If detected, it may be treated as a case of [plagiarism and academic misconduct](#), in line with the University's policies. These include:

1. **Using AI to write your assignments for you.** This is no different to getting someone else to write them on your behalf, and will be treated as such.
2. **Feeding teaching material provided by the Department (e.g. lecture slides, recordings, exam or essay questions) into an online AI tool.** This constitutes a breach of copyright and/or intellectual property, effectively handing over someone else's work to an external tool and/or database.
3. **Feeding ethnographic data that you or others have collected (e.g. interview transcripts) into an online AI tool.** This could entail a breach of privacy and trust, and may have significant legal implications with regard to data protection regulations. See below on alternatives for on-device transcription.
4. **Using AI to summarise or explain work that you have not yet read or thought through yourself,** i.e. to do the reading and analysing for you. (This includes relying on automated AI summaries, e.g. by Google, Adobe Acrobat, MS CoPilot.) Dealing with large or complex bodies of text, summarising ideas, analysing other people's work, and articulating your own opinion are all vital skills that you need to cultivate yourself.
5. **Quoting something that's been generated by AI** (e.g. fake references or quotes, summaries) as an academic source. Always cite real sources that you've actually read.

6. **Using cloud-based AI tools for note-taking, transcription or other forms of recording** in a lecture, seminar or other teaching setting without explicit permission from the instructor and other attendees.

Suspected violations of these rules will be treated as cases of [academic misconduct](#) and investigated in line with the University's policies. Examiners have the right to invite candidates for an oral examination to confirm that the material they have submitted (e.g. for dissertations or coursework) is their own.

Grey areas

There are many other ways you might use AI, some of which are listed below. If you do use one or more of these, please make sure that you don't cross the line into 'prohibited' territory (e.g. copy-pasting an AI summary of a theory into your essay, allowing an editing tool to change your argument). And do remain alert to the potential risks involved. If in doubt, ask!

1. Using AI tools for day-to-day or time-saving tasks (e.g. scheduling).
2. Using copyediting, proofreading, and other tools to correct grammatical, spelling, and other errors – this may be especially useful if English is not your first language.
BUT: Make sure the tool doesn't change the meaning of your narrative. Are you comfortable with the way AI writes? Are you comfortable with your own writing and ideas being reproduced and possibly remixed by AI? Would you share this with someone else if there was a risk of them poaching or revising your work?
3. Using AI for automatic transcription, as long as this is done offline on your own device, using tools such as [whisper notes](#) or <https://github.com/JuergenFleiss/aTrain>.
BUT: Check your device backup settings to ensure that transcripts are not inadvertently being made available online.
4. Searching for references and other material relevant to your essay or assignment
BUT: AI can hallucinate. Check and double-check that what it gives you actually exists or is relevant to your work. Even better: use other tools like JSTOR, Google Scholar, the Haddon Library's many [resources](#), work collaboratively with other students, or ask your lecturers, supervisors, and the friendly Library team!
5. Using AI tools to create basic study aids (e.g. flashcards, mind-maps)
BUT: As above, make sure that you've done your own reading and analysing *first*, rather than relying on AI to do the interpreting for you. Make sure you're not feeding teaching material provided by the Department directly into AI to create such aids.
6. Using AI tools to create visual or other material to illustrate, express or extend your own arguments and descriptions. This may be useful in various situations, e.g. to protect your interlocutors' identities (by showing fictional characters rather than their real faces), or when putting together a practice-based portfolio (e.g. for SAN16).
BUT: Be very careful about potential breaches of copyright, because AI isn't. Do not upload any images of real people, and make sure you're not reproducing or modifying someone else's work without permission. There are other safer sources, like work with [Creative Commons](#) licences,

that you can also use. Also, generating images and other audio-visual material is very energy intensive: is the environmental cost worth it?

NB: Any use of AI-generated visuals must be accompanied by a statement that documents the prompts and platforms that were used to create the material. The outputs must be clearly contextualised within the wider piece.

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