Promoting Writer Agency and AI Literacy through Process and Reflection

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This essay explores a first-year writing assignment, including excerpts of prompts, rubrics, and related scaffolding for integrating and assessing a critical AI literacy learning objective with other learning objectives for rhetorical knowledge and writing processes. This IRB-approved research (H25055) considers a multipart writing assignment that asks students to compare their own writing without generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) assistance with a human-in-the-loop writing process and a machine-in-the-loop writing process (Knowles, 2024) using rhetorical analysis and persona prompting for portions of the assignment. Students also completed a writing process portfolio and reflective writing to help promote metacognitive practices and writer agency through "thoughtful choice" (Kroll, 2018) and reflection on the different writing processes. Students considered GenAI's limitations and affordances in their workflow, employing rhetorical analysis to analyze their own writing and GenAI outputs for the assignment and grappling with their personal views of the impact of GenAI on their writing. The study includes a sample of student responses. To promote writer agency and critical AI literacy, the assignment sequence supports students in making informed and thoughtful choices in their use or refusal of GenAI technologies in their writing.

In the years since the widespread public rollout of ChatGPT and other generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) technologies, the conversation around GenAI literacy has evolved to include more overt discussion of writer agency as writers and instructors recognize different dimensions of the risks of overreliance on GenAI. While much of the early discourse around GenAI centered on academic honesty, as seen in examples from Alex Barrett and Austin Pack (2023), at this point, a more insidious risk associated with reduced or lost age ncy is gaining attention, as seen in the 2025 Computers and Writing Conference, themed "Agency and Authorship." In their third working paper (October 2024), the Modern Language Association and Conference on College Composition and Communication (MLA-CCCC) Joint Task Force on Writing and AI also attends to themes of agency while arguing for the importance of scaffolding students' AI literacy:

> Students need practical, instrumental strategies for using GAI to accomplish specific objectives. … GAI literacy, however,

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> should also include the capacity to design or critique tools (Selber), to reshape the rhetorical situation in which one is writing in order to claim more agency, and to question the ethics and efficacy of using these tools in the first place. (5)

In this list of objectives related to the development of GenAI literacy, the authors consider the importance of students "claiming more agency." In a list related to "critiqu[ing] tools" and "question[ing] the ethics and efficacy of using these tools," students' need to embrace their agency may seem to contrast with the ways that agency can be threatened by or ceded to these technologies. Of course, the rhetorical situation also includes other aspects of students' writing contexts. For instance, how do course policies, instruction, and assessment impact student agency, such as when GenAI use is either required or restricted?

This IRB-approved study (H25055) explores a series of related assignments, including prompts and rubrics, designed to promote critical AI literacy and writer agency. The central assignment is a multipart essay that blends persona prompting, rhetorical analysis, and a combination of writing without GenAI assistance, writing with human-in-the-loop processes, and writing with machine-in-the-loop processes (Knowles, 2024). However, equally important to student learning are the related writing process portfolio and reflective writing. These assignments allow students to gain experience with different ways of using GenAI technology in their writing processes and to explore those experiences and students' related or resulting views on GenAI use. While conversations around GenAI are sometimes framed in binaries, such as risks and benefits or AI evangelists and AI refusers; critical AI literacy may afford students many more nuanced positions on GenAI use.

In this paper, I argue that promoting critical AI literacy and writer agency requires scaffolding students' "thoughtful choice" (Kroll, 2018) between different writing processes with or without varying types of GenAI use. While Barry Kroll discusses writers' choices in the context of the continuum of fast to slow rhetoric, the concept of thoughtful and deliberative choice can also be applied to other continua related to writers' processes and rhetorical decisions. For instance, in exploring their rhetorical agency and critical AI literacy, students may consider the continuum of writing or text generation processes, from human-authored to machine-generated texts. On one end of this continuum are solely human-authored texts (such as those handwritten with no technological assistance), followed by those composed with machine-in-the-loop processes (with an engaged writer employing AI as part of their workflow) or human-in-the-loop processes (with a baseline level of human engagement accompanying GenAI use) (Knowles, 2024), and finally texts composed with virtually no thoughtful human engagement in the process

(such as texts generated with GenAI and an assignment prompt that was cut and pasted into the input box without the writer reading the prompt or output). The essay concludes with discussion of a small sample of student responses to their reflective writing process assignments, showing how students work toward embracing their agency as writers and deepening their sense of critical AI literacy—even as they arrive at different positions with regard to GenAI use in their writing processes.

Critical AI Literacy and Writer Agency

The MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI, reflecting the views of many—but certainly not all—writing studies scholars, argues for the scaffolding of GenAI literacy in language, literature, and writing classes. In their argument for "Building a Culture for Generative AI Literacy," the task force asserts, "The importance of such literacy should be reflected in course learning objectives that are the grounds for assessment" (Adisa et al., 2024, p. 11). In other words, in their view, it is not sufficient to merely integrate GenAI through policy; it should also be considered in the instruction and assessment in the course. They go on to explain how first-year writing, as a shared requirement and introduction to university-level discourse, research, and writing practices, carries a "special responsibility" (p. 14) to support students' development of AI literacy. The task force recognizes the academic freedom of individual instructors to refuse integrating GenAI learning objectives in their courses; however, they also suggest that this position may burden other instructors with the responsibility for this teaching and learning (p. 11). In a somewhat contrasting view, Megan McIntyre (2024) argues for the validity of both classes that prohibit GenAI use and those that allow GenAI use with citation, emphasizing the challenges of integrating GenAI effectively. Maggie Fernandes and Megan McIntyre (2025) go further, arguing that AI literacy instruction restricts linguistic justice and ignores Students' Right to Their Own Language (CCCC).

Whatever choices an institution, program, or individual instructor makes, they have the potential to impact writer agency. For instance, the MLA-CCCC task force frames choices students make regarding GenAI use in terms of agency, providing an example of "modeling student agency to not use GAI" (p. 16). Thus, students' choices on whether and how to use GenAI in their writing processes may be viewed as expressions of their agency. Notably, the example provided by the task force focuses on choosing *not* to use GenAI; is the student choice to use GenAI equally agentive? In the pre-GenAI era, Marilyn Cooper (2011) argues that students are already empowered as writer agents by virtue of the power of their words to express their individual identities and views and to impact their interlocutors. Cooper (2011) asserts the following:

> Individual agency emerges ineluctably from embodied processes; agency is inescapable for embodied beings. As Rickert says, students in writing classes (like all concrete others) are productive agents already. What we need is not a pedagogy of empowerment, but a pedagogy of responsibility. We need to help students understand that writing and speaking (rhetoric) are always serious actions. (p. 443)

If Cooper's argument still applies, as embodied beings (in contrast with GenAI systems), our student writers enjoy agency through their "writing and speaking," which may be distinct from their efforts with text generation. In any case, their choices and their words express their agency, and our course policies and curricula must strive to reinforce this agency and students' appreciation of both their agency and, as Cooper argues, their responsibility for their rhetorical choices.

Writing Processes and Reflection

Of the eight habits of mind identified in the Council of Writing Program Administrators' (CWPA) "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing," the CWPA identifies three of those practices—metacognition, openness, and flexibility—as being supported by reflection. For instance, they suggest that "reflect[ing] on the texts that [writers] produced in a variety of contexts" can help increase metacognition (p. 5); "listen[ing] to and reflect[ing] on the ideas and responses of others—both peers and instructors—to their writing" can promote openness (p. 4); and "reflect[ing] on the choices they make in light of context, purpose, and audience" can help promote writers' flexibility (p. 5).

Each of these areas are relevant for students' cultivation of critical AI literacy as they consider their choices in their writing processes, their written texts, and their audiences, purposes, and contexts. For instance, while GenAI may be a suitable or even ideal technology for certain applications or contexts, it may be wholly inadequate for others. Crystal VanKooten (2016) theorizes meta-awareness and related reflection, dividing meta-awareness into areas such as process, techniques, rhetoric, and intercomparativity, showing how students move toward different aspects of meta-awareness in first-year writing. Metacognitive work in each of these areas can promote a deeper sense of critical AI literacy.

Prompts and Rubrics

The activity described in this essay builds on and adapts an assignment described in Rob Terry's "Slowing Down Rhetoric via Persona Prompting" (2025), developed by Rob Terry and Natalie Ingalsbe. In their original assignment, students use persona prompting to generate three opinion pieces in

Copilot on a topic of debate selected by the instructor or the individual students. Students then use the Toulmin rhetorical framework to analyze and compare the opinion pieces. To practice persona prompting, writers engage in "a structured prompt engineering approach that embeds a consistent and predefined set of characteristics, behaviors, or traits to guide the model's responses in a manner aligned with a specific personality or identity" (Olea et al. 2024, p. 1). This assignment scaffolds an aspect of AI literacy related to prompting while assessing students' rhetorical analysis, and it is aligned with the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition for rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and composing; and processes.

Building on the strengths of this assignment with its integration of AI literacy and rhetorical analysis learning objectives, the adapted assignment made several changes to promote additional writer reflection and opportunities to build critical AI literacy. In particular, in Fall 2024, three sections of first-year writing at a regional research university in the southern United States were included in this study; and for these sections, the adapted assignment featured the following modifications:

1. Inclusion of an additional learning objective related to GenAI literacy
2. Changing the three opinion pieces from being all GenAI-generated to one solely human-authored text composed by the student writer, one essay generated with a machine-in-the-loop writing process, and one essay generated with something closer to a human-in-the-loop writing process
3. Including a rubric category related to distinguishing between machine-in-the-loop and human-in-the-loop writing processes.

In addition to departmental learning objectives related to rhetorical analysis, the adapted assignment used in this study included the following learning objective: "Cultivate awareness of the relationship between your writing and ideas and the types of writing and idea generation that are possible through generative AI technologies." To support this objective, the prompt included the following sections, excerpted below:[1]

Part 1: Articulating Your Own Position

First, write a 500-word position piece that answers the fol-

1 Part 1 is new to the revised prompt. Part 2 was adapted from Terry (2025) to feature only two opposing personas. In Part 3, Persona 1 and Persona 2 directions are new to the adapted version of this assignment, and the rhetorical situation supplied in Part 3 was maintained from the original prompt. Part 4 was adapted to include reflective questions related to the differences in writing processes and GenAI integration across the opinion pieces in addition to the original prompts related to Toulmin analysis.

lowing questions: *Should the use of generative AI be allowed in first-year student writing? If so, to what extent or in what ways, and why? If not, why not?*

Part 2: Develop Personas: Create Two Personas:

Persona 1: This persona should take the same position you articulated in your position piece for Part 1. You will need to add details to this persona using the persona prompting strategy we practiced in class.

Persona 2: This persona should take a position that in some way opposes the position taken by Persona 1. Develop the details for this persona using our class guide.

Part 3: Write Opinion Pieces, Integrating Generative AI Technologies: Using Copilot, have both personas write a 500-word opinion piece advocating for their position, written for a general audience that will be read on a popular local social media forum. These pieces should reflect the persona's unique viewpoint and arguments but be accessible to an audience without specialized knowledge.

- For persona 1, you will compose a text with machine-in-the-loop writing (where you write the essay with support from generative AI technologies). To do so, you must do one or more of the following: (1) Enter your Part 1 opinion piece in Copilot, request AI feedback, and revise based on that feedback AND/OR (2) Enter your outline or prewriting for your Part 1 opinion piece to prompt a new opinion piece based on your ideas, but generated by AI. Next, you should review the output text and make any changes you see fit, either by hand or by use of generative AI. Finally, you should read your revised text to check and make final corrections for accuracy, style, and readability to ensure that the persona 1 text still reflects your position on the topic of generative AI in college writing.
- For persona 2, you will generate an opinion piece that presents an *opposing* view to your argument with human-in-the-loop writing. To do so, you will prompt Copilot; Copilot will generate a text based on your persona 2 prompting; and you will read the resulting text and make any final edits or corrections.

Part 4: Evaluate the Arguments (500-word analysis essay):

In a final analysis essay, identify which of the three position pieces you feel is the most persuasive and effective for a general audience.

- In your analysis of effectiveness, to go beyond simply indicating which piece you agree with the most, perform a Toulmin analysis that uses quotes and specific references to that position piece to illustrate why you find it so effective.
- To what extent do you believe the effectiveness of the position pieces relates to how they were composed, including whether and how you used generative AI?
- Were the elements that you found most or least effective in the position piece(s) the result of your own brainstorming, writing, or revisions? Were they the result of generative AI output, feedback, or revisions? Both or neither? Provide examples.
- You might, but are not required to, compare features from the position piece that you found strongest against what you found less successful in the other essays.

Sequencing and classroom writing lab time were important aspects of this assignment. For Part 1 of this assignment, I emphasized both in the prompt and in class the importance of the sequential nature of the assignment: Part 1 must be completed first as it must be human-authored and without the influence of GenAI technologies, using only the student's own brainstorming and research either individually or with peers. To complete Part 1 later, after having generated opinion pieces with GenAI, could result in some influence on the human-authored text from having read the GenAI-generated texts. Parts 2 and 3 relied heavily on peers being able to help one another in class and my circulating to help address technical questions. Part 4 obviously could not be completed until the other parts were already complete. To collate all of the parts of the assignments, I supplied students with a template.

Students were also required to submit a writing process portfolio that included a prewriting assignment, a rough draft, peer review sheets, a revision planning sheet, and a cover letter. These materials were designed to encourage students' reflection on their writing processes, including GenAI use, while Part 4 of the final essay encouraged students' analysis of their writing processes and the written products that came from those different research and writing processes (with and without GenAI assistance).

While the rubric for the writing process portfolio was geared more toward completion with contract-style grading, the rubric for the final draft of the essay included criteria related to the critical AI literacy learning objective for the assignment, including the ability to distinguish between machine-in-the-loop and human-in-the-loop writing processes as well as the ability to transparently document GenAI use. Rubric criteria included

1. The appendix features at least four distinct generative AI prompts: (1) the Persona 1 prompt, (2) the Persona 2 prompt, (3) at least one Persona 1 paper prompt, (4) at least one Persona 2 paper prompt. The prompts show thoughtful attention to providing relevant details and carefully differentiating between machine-in-the-loop writing and human-in-the-loop writing. All prompts are clearly and accurately cited in the works cited page.
2. The appendix features at least four distinct generative AI prompts: (1) the Persona 1 prompt, (2) the Persona 2 prompt, (3) at least one Persona 1 paper prompt, (4) at least one Persona 2 paper prompt. The prompts provide sufficient relevant details and differentiate between machine-in-the-loop writing and human-in-the-loop writing. All prompts are clearly cited in the works cited page.
3. The appendix features at least four distinct generative AI prompts: (1) the Persona 1 prompt, (2) the Persona 2 prompt, (3) at least one Persona 1 paper prompt, (4) at least one Persona 2 paper prompt. The prompts attempt to differentiate between machine-in-the-loop writing and human-in-the-loop writing. All or most prompts are cited in the works cited page.
4. The appendix features some persona and/or paper prompts, but it may or may attempt to differentiate between machine-in-the-loop writing and human-in-the-loop writing. The prompts may or may not be cited in the works cited page.

Student Responses

More and less experienced users of GenAI achieved different types of learning through the assignment. For instance, one of the more experienced GenAI users in the class created the following persona prompt for this assignment:

> Persona: Karen, Background: She hates AI seeing it as a crutch and a source of uncreativity, and she would NEVER recommend AI use in school or college, Tone: concerned and protective,

> Goal: to protect students from relying on the use of AI
>
> hey Karen, can you write a five paragraph, 500 word, argumentative essay about whether first year students should use AI in their writing

At just sixty-five words, this prompt appeals to the stereotype of "Karen," who in this case opposed GenAI use. The writer uses an informal style with phrasing like "hey Karen;" however, in the prompt, the writer shows rhetorical awareness by prompting for a specific genre: "argumentative essay."

The student reflected that there are other types of prompting beyond persona prompting but observed that his learning related to the particular GenAI technology the class was asked to use:

> I learned more about the limitations of copilot, and how it often stays close to a script so that unlike most other AI's it can remain more factually correct, yet at the cost of explanations. My opinion remains unchanged about AI, and I still view it as a way to enhance my essay while not allowing it to write the essay.

Having extensive previous experience with other GenAI technologies, such as ChatGPT, this writer was disappointed and frustrated with his experiences with Copilot. However, in terms of learning, the writer was able to appreciate more deeply the real differences between the technologies, reaffirming his preferences between the different products as well as his view on the importance of maintaining his own voice.

A less experienced GenAI user experimented with lengthier persona prompts and reached a more general but no less important conclusion about GenAI use. This writer produced a 348-word prompt that also alludes to and adapts another existing character, Tolkien's Dwalin, excerpted below:

> Persona: Dwalin Wilhelm, a first-year Mechanical/Aerospace engineering student with an impressive creative mind.
>
> -Background: Dwalin is well-versed in the mechanics of flight and how a plane manages to achieve flight. He grew up with LEGO's that helped nurture his creative mind so that he can imagine how the pieces work in tandem. He is a decent writer, but finds it more enjoyable when he writes about subjects he is interested in. …
>
> Dwalin, please orchestrate a 500 word essay on how far AI should be allowed in the first-year writing process. It should

> follow this outline: Your position should follow the premise that first-year writing students should be able to use AI to only the extent of Generalized Brainstorming, Basic Outline Preparation, and Editing for practicality and/or preference.

This writer uses considerably more detail and a more formal style, even including politeness markers like "please." In terms of genre, this prompt uses the more general term "essay," and leaves the argumentative part implied by referencing "Your position." While this prompt is more detailed, it features less directness and specificity about genre. This writer supplies an outline, as well, however, allowing the writer to retain greater control of the direction of the essay.

Based on this experience with using Copilot, this writer reaches a conclusion that holds across all GenAI products:

> I learned that AI is both a crude but specific tool. The output is a direct result of the input. The less that is put in the less that comes out, and therefore; the inverse is true. A better input provides a better output. … I am not opposed to including AI in the writing process, it's just that I would rather keep that involvement at a 'minimum' per say. … I do find that the machine-in-the-loop essay is well engineered and in tune with the finer points of my voice.

This writer, too, embraced the value of his own voice, articulating a somewhat more hesitant position about GenAI use but deploying the vocabulary he learned during the unit and assignment to showcase his understanding that there are different ways and degrees of integrating GenAI into one's writing processes.

This kind of reflective work provided students an opportunity to consider the impact of GenAI on their individual voices, with students writing first without GenAI and comparing their own writing with GenAI outputs. The attention to students' own voices in the assignment provided an opportunity to discuss Students' Right to the Their Own Language, an important part of their agency as writers. While this second student arrived at a cautious position with a more favorable stance toward machine-in-the-loop writing, the assignment also makes negative assessments available. As the first student perhaps knowingly suggests in his persona's name choice, GenAI often produces flattened and stereotyped outputs.

Discussion and Conclusions

Dianna Winslow and Phil Shaw (2017) show how scaffolding metacognitive practices can help promote agency in first-year writing, and we observe this

same finding in the present study. Students reflect on their writing and writing processes with and without GenAI assistance and embrace their own views on integrating GenAI into their writing processes. However, there may be tensions between the more complex scaffolding of this reflective work in the assignment sequence used in this study and certain aspects of students' critical AI literacy development. For instance, while the multi-part structure and writing portfolio helped to break down a complex assignment and allowed students to explore the continuum of GenAI integration in their writing processes, this same structured scaffolding may have limited creativity in exploring GenAI or overwhelmed some students. For comparison, when considering the scaffolding of information literacy, in a study of first-year student research essays and their related class prompts, M. Sara Lowe, Sean M. Stone, Char Booth, and Natalie Tagge (2016) found that "Prompts with moderate sequencing produced better student scores than prompts that were heavily sequenced" (p. 132). These findings surprised the researchers, who expected more scaffolding to support greater information literacy; however, they concluded that the additional sequencing might have been overwhelming for some first-year students.

With this possibility in mind, for future curriculum design and research, I am considering ways of streamlining this assignment to allow students to explore the continuum from human-authored to machine-generated texts with less structured sequencing. It may be that more in-class lab time to experiment with GenAI in ways that are guided by the students' own curiosity may further deepen their critical AI literacy in evaluating whether, to what extent, or in what ways they would like to integrate (or resist) GenAI in their writing processes. If unexamined GenAI use can threaten students' agency as writers, so too can course policies or assignments that flatten conversations about GenAI into binaries or that restrict students' engagement with their own writing processes. Reflective writing that promotes metacognitive skills across students' writing processes remains a powerful tool for supporting student agency and critical AI literacy; and the complexity of the ever-evolving GenAI landscape demands strategies for instruction and assessment that encourage students to embrace their rhetorical agency.

This study shows that combinations of GenAI use for some (parts of) assignments and rejection of GenAI for other (parts of) assignments, when informed by reflective practices, can help students consider their voice, their use or refusal of GenAI, and their writing. Assignments—across writing contexts in first-year writing and beyond—must balance attention to the twin needs for such scaffolding and for writer creativity in their writing processes. These concepts can be applied in a range of writing situations. In an upper-level English class this semester, I have restricted GenAI use in one paper while encouraging students' choice in other papers, asking them to reflect on

the differences if they later choose GenAI. As a writing center director, I also train consultants to support writers' reflective choices in using or refusing GenAI as they develop GenAI literacy. Assignments that scaffold writer choice, creativity, and reflection can encourage writers to embrace their agency and their unique voices even in the GenAI era.

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