Case Study

**Writing About Controversies in American Politics: Using AI to Examine Counterarguments and Definitions**

Students refine their writing and critical thinking about controversial political debates by prompting generative AI for counterarguments and definitions of key concepts.

**Brief Summary**

Students use large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT iteratively to identify and co-produce counterarguments used in the debate of controversial subjects in ways that assist with rather than replace their own written work. Through a series of guided steps, they are tasked with using LLMs to co-produce written argumentation. Students are prompted to provide an analysis of their experiences and realizations regarding where and when LLMs can be used most effectively.

**“Brainstorm a Prompt with ChatGPT”**

You will notice that we do not give you the specific question we want you to orient your treatment of a particular policy controversy around. Use ChatGPT to brainstorm the prompt you respond to in your writing assignment. Write your assignment based on this prompt. In the appendix, give a DETAILED meta-account of what your process in generating a prompt looked like (i.e., what questions did you ask before you arrived at your question? Were those questions appropriate/relevant? Was ChatGPT useful in generating prompts? Why or why not?). The appendix should be about 500 words (and no more) and is a part of your total word count.

**WORD COUNT: 1000-1500 words**

**Learning Outcomes**

- Developing AI Literacy
- Writing Skills
- Critical Thinking
- Examining Multiple Viewpoints

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**Category**

Writing assignments, Developing AI literacy

**Instructors**

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**Department**

Department of Government
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**Course**

GOVT 2817: America Confronts the World

**Discipline**

Political Science

**Course-level**

Undergraduate, Introductory to Intermediate

**Course size**

73 students

**Implemented**

Fall 2023

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Context
This political science course asks students to engage with the multiplicity of viewpoints and visions within American politics and foreign policy. In this writing-intensive course, students complete several assignments that ask them to examine controversies in political policies and how a word like ‘democracy’ can be used in different ways. Specifically, assignments asked students to explore how ChatGPT handles prompts around counterarguments or definitions of key concepts, as a way of viewing different perspectives around a controversy.

Implementation
Through a series of drafts and self-reflections, students critiqued the use of AI by identifying its strengths and weaknesses. Students were given three directives for their use of AI: “Brainstorming a Prompt with ChatGPT,” “Identifying Counter Arguments with ChatGPT,” and “Explaining and Defining Concepts with ChatGPT.” First, students conducted their work solo, based on course readings and discussions. Then, they asked ChatGPT to conduct the same exercise. Students were asked: Does your detailed analysis match the definition that the chatbot came up with? Why? Why not? What are the differences and similarities between the chatbot definition and your articulation of the term? In another assignment, students were asked to use a ChatGPT counterargument to strengthen their original thesis.

Reflection and Future Directions
“To our surprise, most students found ChatGPT to be cumbersome in generating objections to their arguments, with most students citing a lack of specificity.” Peter Katzenstein, instructor

Students shared that they enjoyed the chance to explore the use of LLMs and discuss how they may be useful in their writing process. While in the beginning, the students were very polarized (embracing or skeptical) in their response to using AI, in the end the majority emerged more neutral on its utilization and pragmatic in their approach.

The instructors also note that students engaged critically with the nuances of how different terms such as democracy or authoritarianism are used by different authors and also how they are defined by ChatGPT. Using the AI and non-AI prompts together helped build the critical thinking skills that are a key component of the course.

How to Implement This in Your Class
Consider the following to use generative AI constructively in a course:

- **Engagement:** Have regular engagement with your students, either through 1-on-1 check-ins with the instructor or with teaching assistants. Take special care to ensure that students can properly discuss and vet their ideas

- **Experimentation:** Encourage students to fully engage with and explore the limitations of the AI tool, to push the boundaries of how it can be used, and to recognize its shortcomings. Ask students to provide feedback and self-reflection on their endeavors using AI as a co-producer of their work. What has worked well? What has failed?

- **Expectations:** Share with the students the expectations of the assignment, specifically how they are meant to use AI as a thinking and writing assistant. Be sure that they understand how they will be graded. Students also need guidance in proper citation practices regarding the use of generative AI.