

Ethical AI in Professional Writing: Pedagogical Implications from Student Reflection Analysis

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Introduction

As AI technologies rapidly reshape the landscape of higher education, instructors and students face growing uncertainty around the ethical use of these technologies. Although interest in AI ethics is increasing across disciplines, there remains a critical exigence in empirical research examining student reflections on ethical AI modules in professional writing (PW) courses (Bedington et al., 2024; Ranade & Saravia, 2024).

PW, a window into the writing of many other disciplines, is well positioned to lead faculty in navigating the ethical use of AI in professional writing (Card & Duin, 2023). Therefore, we developed, implemented, and evaluated five ethical AI teaching modules for undergraduate and graduate PW courses offered by the English Department in Fall 2025 and Spring 2026, with the goal of extending these practices across many interdisciplinary fields.

Research Questions

- What key themes can be identified in student reflections before and after the teaching modules?
- How do these teaching modules shape students' understanding of AI ethics and their views on AI's role in different PW contexts?
- How can these findings inform the design of ethical AI teaching modules for PW courses?

Data Collection

Module	Pre-Module Essay (N)	Post-Module Essay (N)
AI and editing	10	12
AI and hiring	11	11
AI and visual design	16	15
AI and content auditing	5	5
AI and prompt engineering	8	8

Ethical AI Teaching Modules in Professional Writing Courses

Module	Pre-Module Reflection	In-Class Activities	Post-Module Reflection
AI and editing		1. Use an AI platform to create a cover letter. 2. Critique the results. 3. Discuss improvement plans for drafting prompts.	
AI and hiring	1. What is your understanding of AI ethics? 2. How do you understand ethical practices in AI-assisted professional writing (editing/hiring/visual design/content auditing), and in what situations might ethical concerns arise?	1. Identify AI job hiring tools. 2. Apply these tools to their personas and critically evaluate the pros and cons for each. 3. Present on differences of these AI tools.	1. How has this module reshaped your understanding of AI ethics and influenced how you will approach AI use in your future professional writing practices? 3. What insights did you gain about the potentials and limitations of using AI tools in professional writing?
AI and visual design		1. Read, discuss, and research ethical considerations of using AI for visual design. 2. After identifying a specific image needed for a document, search Google for a relevant example and use AI to generate one. 3. Compare the images and discuss the possibilities and limitations of AI-generated imagery and ethical considerations.	
AI and content auditing		1. Conduct audience analysis and perform a manual content inventory and auditing of a webpage. 2. Use a GenAI tool to generate results of audience analysis and content inventory and auditing of the webpage. 3. Compare the results conducted by human and generated by GenAI and discuss the rhetorical and ethical implications.	
AI and prompt engineering		1. Discuss AI tools and strategies of writing prompts. 2. Create and revise a prompt following the rhetorical principles. 3. Write a debriefing memo to discuss ethical considerations.	

Topic Modeling-Based Discourse Analysis



(Modified from Fairclough's (1989) critical discourse analysis model)

Themes in Pre- and Post-Module Reflections

Theme	Pre-Module Emphases	Post-Module Emphases
Ethical concerns	Abstract and broad discussions of ethical concerns such as bias, plagiarism, trustworthiness. • "...biases that AI can provide based on the way its probability output works with the information it has access to"	Rhetorical interpretation of ethical issues in the PW context. • "biases can present based on language used to prompt and based on what it could be pulling from"
PW practice	Limited familiarity with AI raises concerns of using AI in PW. • "I do not know much about the role of AI ethics in visual design; however, AI often does not make good visuals."	Understanding AI's limitations and potentials in PW from a rhetorical perspective, and how to use AI responsibly. • "it would be very useful to have it either at the start of the project to cut down on template prep and gathering data, but the rhetorical analysis and implications should be something that is controlled by us "
Agency and Creativity	Awareness of AI raises concerns about creativity that needs to be addressed. • "We must strive to achieve a sense of creative accomplishment by limiting idea generation by artificial thought."	Drawing on rhetorical theories to analyze how AI raises concerns about creativity and agency. • "concern for AI's agency and its lack of understanding within the rhetorical situation of content."
Environmental concerns	Concerns about environmental and energy issues brought about by AI. • "AI data centers are harming the environment"	N/A

Shifts in Student Reflections

- From abstract discussion on ethical concerns to rhetorically contextualized interpretations on ethical issues in PW
- From hesitant use of AI to critical interpretation and responsible use of AI in PW practice
- From perceiving AI as a general threat to human agency to contextualized and rhetorical understanding of these concerns
- From broad and general understanding to focused and critical understanding of AI

Discussion & Implications

- These modules helped students recognize the boundaries of AI's ability and influence on human agency while situating ethical considerations within different professional writing practices.
- The findings suggest instructors to incorporate socio-cultural context to enhance students' understanding of AI in PW practices

References

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