

Ripped from the Headlines Essays: Focus on Critical Thinking, Concise Writing, and Responsible Use of Generative AI Tools

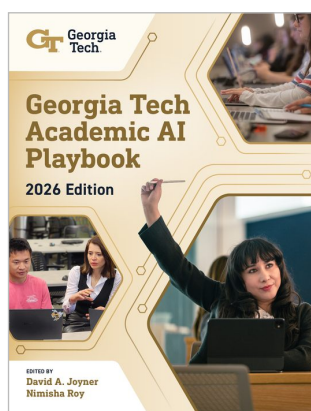
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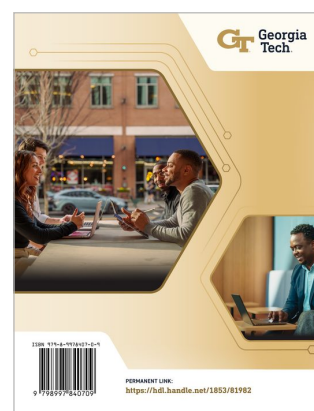
About the Playbook

The Georgia Tech Academic AI Playbook collects stories of how artificial intelligence is being used, taught, and responded to in Georgia Tech classrooms. The 2026 Edition gathers 67 articles from faculty, staff, and researchers across every college at Georgia Tech, along with the Library, the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Georgia Tech Research Institute, the Office of Information Technology, and the Provost's Office.

Each article is a “play”: a specific initiative carried out in a real course, documenting the prior context, the actions the instructor took, the results, and the lessons learned. The volume closes with 20 lessons synthesized across the full collection.



Front cover



Back cover

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Title: Ripped from the Headlines Essays: Focus on Critical Thinking, Concise Writing, and Responsible Use of Generative AI Tools

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Formation

The focus of this article is a short writing assignment, known as a Ripped from the Headlines (RFTH) essay. As the policy related to the use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools evolved over time, this section explains the background of the assignment which has been a part of the class since its creation.

MGT 6727, a class known as Privacy for Professionals, was developed by Peter Swire and DeBrae Kennedy-Mayo in the fall of 2019. The online class was designed so that each module covered one chapter of the book entitled “U.S. Private-Sector Privacy,” which Swire and Kennedy-Mayo co-authored. (Swire & Kennedy-Mayo, 2018; Swire & Kennedy-Mayo, 2020; Swire & Kennedy-Mayo, 2024). Since the inception of this online class, it has been taught through Professional Education as part of the Master of Science in Cybersecurity and the Master of Science in Analytics. Approximately 1,500 online students have completed this course.

The class has two types of assignments – multiple-choice exams and short writing assignments. With the advent of GenAI tools, Swire and Kennedy-Mayo updated the Syllabus and Class Policies to explain which assignments prohibited the use of these tools and which permitted the use of these tools. Because the exams (which are graded automatically in Canvas) had been designed as “closed book,” the use of AI tools is prohibited on these exams. According to the AI Assessment Scale, these exams rank “1 – No AI,” meaning the student “must not use AI at any point during the assessment” (Furze et al., 2024). With the short essays, the use of AI tools is permitted “to complete any elements of the task” (Furze et al., 2024). This means the assignment ranks “4 – Full AI” on the AI Assessment Scale with a “focus on directing AI to achieve [the student’s] goals while demonstrating [the student’s] critical thinking” (Furze et al., 2024).

When the class was initially conceived, this short writing assignment was created to repurpose an in-class participation exercise, known by the same acronym of RFTH, where a student discussed a recent news article relevant to the material covered during a particular in-person class. For MGT 6727, the in-class version of RFTH became a written assignment for each module in the class. Referred to as a RFTH essay, the assignment was designed to focus on both critical thinking skills and concise writing skills. Each essay is approximately 500 words and contains three distinct sections. These include: (1) objective summary of a recent online news article on the subject matter for the module; (2) objective analysis that relates the news article to the module; and (3) subjective opinion that expresses the student’s view of the news article and the module. With the advent of GenAI tools, these short essays were reenvisioned to have a new purpose: helping students to develop skills in responsibly using GenAI tools.

Action

In MGT 6727, the details of the policy regarding the use of GenAI tools have changed over time. This section focuses on the initial policy for the use of these tools as well as describes the grading approach to these essays, which remains in place to the time of the writing of this article.

The initial policy related to the use of GenAI tools on RFTH essays permitted students to use these tools so long as they revealed that they had used these tools. A student revealed this usage, not by attesting to an oath, but by including both the prompt that the student used and the output received from the tool. When a student used GenAI tools, the overall grade for the essay was based on the quality of the essay as well as the unique student voice evidenced in the prompt and any subsequent editing of the output from the GenAI tool.

The Syllabus and Class Policies explained that students are responsible for the content of the essays that they submit (regardless of whether they use GenAI tools). These documents state that potential deductions include (but are not limited to): insufficient depth or low quality of essay; news article that does not relate to module material; opinion in objective section (either Summary or Analysis); failure to properly use quotation marks; and inclusion of false content, referred to as hallucinations, in the essay. At the beginning of each semester, the instructional staff discusses concepts of academic integrity with students – including proper use of quotation marks and paraphrasing – in a variety of ways including posts and videos in Ed Discussion.

Although students in MGT 6727 are permitted to use GenAI tools, they are not required to do so. The submission deadlines for these essays fall by the week, meaning that a student cannot complete all of the essays for the semester in one sitting. This approach was taken to encourage students to engage with the class material regularly throughout the semester.

Because Professional Education assigns teaching assistants (TAs) to the class based primarily on the number of students enrolled in the class, MGT 6727 has a small team of TAs who grade all of the student essays for every module. The first week of class is considered a week to help students calibrate to the expectations for these essays. In this initial week, the instructional staff provides comments to each section of every essay. In subsequent weeks, the instructional staff leaves a comment for the student for any deduction taken from an essay.

Table 1: Matrix of Level of AI Usage & Level of Human Interaction

Table 1	HIGH Level of AI Usage	LOW Level of AI Usage
HIGH Level of Human Interaction	<i>RFTH Essays</i>	
LOW Level of Human Interaction		<i>Proctored Exams</i>

With this feedback from the instructional staff, most students obtain a perfect (or near perfect) grade on these RFTH essays within a few weeks – as was the expectation when this assignment was originally designed to replace class participation in an in-person class. Importantly, this approach of matching the

high level of student usage of GenAI tools with the high level of human interaction through intensive grading by the instructional staff has yielded the results desired for this assignment (Table 1).

Result

The policy related to revealing the use of GenAI tools for RFTH essays has recently been updated. Although the requirement to provide the prompt and the output originally seemed innovative, it was recently abandoned for this assignment.¹ As the GenAI tools developed, the AI transcripts became longer, occasionally reaching 20 to 40 pages for a 500-word assignment. In practice, the instructional staff reviewed fewer transcripts than expected. Despite certain textual cues (such as lengthy phrases or entire sentences from another author used without quotation marks), the instructional staff did not believe that it had sufficient evidence to accuse students of using AI tools without revealing such usage, as required by the original policy. This hesitation over the lack of documentation was in part because the accuracy of AI detection tools is currently not reliable, though this could improve in the future (Edwards, 2023). In determining how to address these concerns, the instructional staff acknowledged that, even with the presence of an AI transcript, the focus was on the quality of the essay itself. When students used these AI tools without revealing their usage, problems with the essays, such as failure to use quotation marks, could often be identified by plagiarism checkers and then verified by the human grader.

Based on these concerns, the requirement to reveal the use of GenAI tools and to provide the transcript from the tool was dropped. Under the updated policy, students who are using GenAI tools and struggling with the assignment are encouraged to submit their AI transcripts. Human graders can often identify problems in writing by reviewing an AI transcript. Although not many students ask for this type of review as most students excel with this assignment within a few weeks of starting the class, this assistance can be valuable for students who are experiencing difficulties in honing their writing skills.

Beginning in Spring Semester 2026, the instructional staff grading these essays noticed hallucinated news articles – meaning that an entire essay would be premised on a news article that did not exist. The following language was added to the Syllabus and Class Policies in Summer Semester 2026: “Please be aware that use of a hallucinated news article, meaning one that does not exist, as the basis of the RFTH essay may result in a grade of zero for the assignment.”

In reflecting on this assignment, it is important to point out that the RFTH essay was part of the class both “pre and post” GenAI tools. Although the particulars of the grading rubric have changed over the semesters so analysis of the grades over time is not particularly meaningful, the key takeaway is that students, regardless of whether they use GenAI tools, struggle with the same part of the assignment at the beginning of the semester – analysis. Although this could change in future as the GenAI tools develop, students using these tools often do not score perfectly on the assignment at the beginning of the semester. This class helps students to understand both the concept of taking responsibility for the content of their submissions and the effort required to succeed with these tools.

¹ Although this approach was discontinued for this short assignment, the approach may prove useful in classes with longer writing assignments. Kennedy-Mayo has successfully used this approach in another class where the assignment was a lengthy project.

Lessons

- **Lesson 1:** For each type of assignment in the class, the instructional staff may want to consider explicit language in the Syllabus and Class Policies that explains whether, and to what extent, GenAI tools are permitted. Use of the AI Assessment Scale may be helpful in communicating the requirements of each assignment.
- **Lesson 2:** In considering the level of AI usage permitted by students on a particular assignment, the instructional staff may want to consider the accompanying level of human (instructional staff) interaction for that assignment. The RFTH essay described in this article, which permits student usage of AI tools, is coupled with a high level of human interaction to ensure that the tool is responsibly used and that the pedagogical goals of the assignment are met. (Note that the class also has proctored exams where no AI tools are allowed. These exams are graded by an automated process within Canvas.)
- **Lesson 3:** With the rapid rate of change occurring with technology, the instructional staff may want to re-evaluate and/or tweak its policy towards these GenAI tools each semester. For example, AI detection tools could improve over time, which could lead to another adjustment to the GenAI usage policy for RFTH essays. Any changes would also necessitate an update to the Syllabus and Class Policies.

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