

Clarifying AI and Plagiarism Exercise Key: Taking a Cue from SJSU

San José State University (SJSU) is located in the heart of Silicon Valley, where much generative AI has been developed. In its [Vision Statement](#), the university acknowledges the significance of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and robotics. After all, SJSU faculty and student research contributes to the development of these emerging technologies. The university states it is committed to ethical principles as it is exploring how to teach with AI.

Given the immense popularity of AI chatbots such as ChatGPT among students, the university recently updated its [Academic Integrity policy](#) for avoiding plagiarism. It defines plagiarism as follows:

[T]he act of *representing the work of another as one's own* without giving appropriate credit, *regardless of how that work was obtained*, and submitting it to fulfill academic requirements.

The italicized sections in the policy emphasize two important points:

- Doing academic work requires that the work you turn in is your own. A paper that is written by AI is not considered your own original work.
- It doesn't matter which AI program/software you use. Using any of these to write your papers is considered a form of plagiarism.¹

1. Based on the definitions provided by San Jose State, why is using generative AI on a writing assignment considered plagiarism?

The linguist Noam Chomsky famously dismissed generative AI as “high-tech plagiarism.” Why? Because AI chatbots retrieve information they find on the Internet without crediting original sources, the output they present can be inaccurate, biased, and in violation of copyright. Students presenting AI-generated work as their own are acting unethically, committing plagiarism. College instructors expect students to submit their own authentic work for evaluation, not work created by others, including chatbots.

2. As you read the SJSU rules carefully, does it appear that AI generated work is permissible if you admit having used, say, ChatGPT and provide a citation in MLA or APA format?

No, it seems that SJSU does not permit the use of AI in any form to write papers. The second bullet point quite specifically states that regardless of software, papers must be written by students themselves or they commit plagiarism. This radical prohibition of AI assistance therefore seems to extend to using AI to generate ideas, provide a structure, and revise a paper. This last prohibition of AI may be problematic as you will see below.

3. Considering that in the workplace you may very well be asked to use AI to help you write, is SJSU's strict policy realistic? How can you use AI ethically?

Academic writing is more rigorous (stricter) in its citation and documentation standards than casual business writing, i.e., daily correspondence. Citing information gathered from

secondary sources correctly and documenting it by using, for example, the APA citation format, traditionally would make your work ethical. However, SJSU currently upholds a broad prohibition of any AI software in student writing. It appears that even if you give credit to AI, you will commit plagiarism. Even if you were to use AI only to edit your text, providing a reference would not be acceptable at San José State. It goes without saying that writing your own authentic work instead of relying on text generated by AI chatbots is ethical.

- 4. Conduct a search of your university's web pages. Look for AI policies. Check with your instructor which rules your university has imposed regarding the use of gen AI. You may find answers in the syllabus. How do your organization's policies compare to SJSU's?**

Answers will vary. Generative AI is evolving fast, and organizations struggle to adapt their curricula and policies.

- 5. If your university allows AI use in some form, why should you document the use of AI chatbots even for editing your text? After all, spelling and grammar checking with Grammarly, which is also AI-based, does not need to be cited.**

Many users are already enjoying the benefits of AI chatbots to help them finetune their own work and create largely error-free texts. But Grammarly, an invaluable tool that is also AI-powered, offers much less extensive interventions than ChatGPT. The difference is that Grammarly does not write the entire paper and even in editing merely offers suggestions. If gen AI is allowed at your university, a proper APA citation should be provided. The workplace is a lot more casual with citing sources, but your future employer may also issue policies for AI use that need to be followed.

Whether using chatbots or Grammarly, in both cases a writer should not blindly rely on the automated help because the suggestions could also be inaccurate. In other words, AI tools and Grammarly are not infallible, yet. The responsibility rests with the human user to decide what is correct.

- 6. Why is it important to personalize business correspondence generated by AI?**

AI-generated text may be grammatically correct, but it tends to sound impersonal. Its answers can sound unspecific and general. In situations requiring a personal touch such as a thank-you note after an interview, it's important that the text come across as genuine and authentic to achieve the desired audience response.

- 7. What are some ways to personalize AI-created text?**

To personalize AI-generated text, include the recipient's name when writing an e-mail, text message, or other correspondence. Add a specific observation or vivid detail because even the most sophisticated chatbots can produce vague and impersonal writing.

Further critical-thinking questions to entertain with students could include the following:

1. What is the purpose of a college education?

This is a larger, philosophical question, of course, and answers may vary. However, most would probably agree that among the goals of attending college is to acquire knowledge, learn to do research, and practice critical thinking to succeed in any chosen career and becoming an informed citizen. By cheating and using unnamed sources, students take disallowed shortcuts and deprive themselves of a proper education.

2. How does the use of uncited sources, including AI, affect assessment, i.e., grading?

One of the major arguments against plagiarism is that it skews the fair competition in a course. Like doping in sports, plagiarists often gain an unfair advantage in comparison to their honest peers. Plagiarists—whether conventional or AI-savvy ones—are evaluated (graded) for work they haven’t done themselves.

3. What does *voice* mean in the context of writing and why is it important?

Just as your speaking voice is unique, so is your own writing characteristic of you. Authentic writing is specific to each writer. When we read, we can imagine the writer as speaking to us. Because chatbots scrape the Internet and provide an answer assembled from various unknown sources, so far, their “voice” tends to sound impersonal. In situations when only our writing represents us, it is important that others perceive us as authentic. Most of us want to communicate with a human being, not a bland bot.

Note: The rules of AI use in academic writing are evolving fast, resulting in sometimes contradictory statements. Departing from the university’s sweeping prohibition of AI in the writing of papers, the [School of Information at SJSU seems to allow AI](#) if it is cited and documented in APA format. Know your institution’s AI policies. A course syllabus may be a starting point.

¹ San Jose State University (n.d.). *Artificial intelligence (AI) & Plagiarism*. <https://library.sjsu.edu>