The Use of Generative AI in Graduate Committee-Based Exams, Projects, Theses, and Dissertations

Graduate School, The University of Alabama, December 2025

Charge to departments:

Each graduate program should develop specific parameters regarding the degree to which the use of generative AI is allowable, including, where relevant, what usages of generative AI are not allowed by the program.

Guidance:

As the culminating experience of master's and doctoral degrees, theses and dissertations assess multiple dimensions of a student's academic skills, including but not limited to: formulating an original research question; conducting broad, thorough, accurate, and advanced research; advancing and testing a hypothesis or theoretical framework; assessing and analyzing results or conclusions; creating an original expression of art/music/imagination; creating multi-media products; or writing the study at the expected level of sophistication, professional fluency, and precision expected of scholars possessing a graduate degree.

In degree programs that require a committee-based project, thesis, and/or dissertation, students are expected to demonstrate the above skills through both a written document and an oral defense. Regardless of the process used to compose the document, students are responsible for the full content of the document and are expected to demonstrate, in the oral defense, their ability to engage with the concepts and evidence provided in the document. Because the development and mastery of advanced academic skills is expected not only during the degree program but throughout the scholar's subsequent professional career, the primary responsibility of authorship resides with the student. For these reasons, over-reliance (as defined by the academic discipline and the program or advisory committee faculty) on generative AI is strongly discouraged.

Generative AI refers to artificial intelligence systems that can create new content, including text, images, audio, video, code, or data outputs, in response to user prompts or inputs. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Large language models (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot)
- AI writing assistants that generate substantive content beyond basic grammar/spelling correction (e.g., NotebookLM)
- AI coding assistants (e.g., GitHub Copilot, CodeWhisperer)
- AI image generators (e.g., DALL-E, Sora, Veo 3, Veo 3.1, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion)
- AI audio and video generation tools (e.g., Sora, Veo 3, Veo 3.1)
- AI-powered data analysis tools that generate interpretations or conclusions

Different academic disciplines will have distinct expectations regarding the level to which the exam/thesis/dissertation process can or should be aided by generative AI technologies. Some examples of generative-AI-integrated work might include:

- Initial brainstorming
- Initial literature review
- Development of theoretical framework
- Design of research methodology
- Data analysis
- Data transcription and coding
- Generation of static graphics (charts, images, and diagrams) or dynamic graphics (animations, interactive visualizations, or simulations) or video
- Generation of audio content
- Generation of software code
- Translation
- Proofreading/editing/revision for improvements in style, organization, clarity
- Proofreading/editing/revision for accuracy and sophistication
- Generating full paragraphs/pages/chapters from the prompts or data provided

A thorough disclosure of how generative AI was used in the exam/project/thesis/dissertation process is required of all students who submit generative-AI-integrated work.

As with all matters of academic integrity, students are expected to adhere to the guidelines of their degree program. Faculty members should remain attentive to work that is technically inconsistent or unusual, that may signal inappropriate use of generative AI. Unauthorized use of generative AI tools for scholarly work may be considered an offense under UA's Academic Misconduct Policy and/or Research Misconduct Policy.

All users need to be aware of the potential inaccuracies, fabrication of sources and citations, and biases of generative AI tools since they are trained on data from the public internet.

Departments may adopt a shared policy on the use of generative AI for committee-based exams (including qualifying exams, comprehensive exams, and candidacy exams), projects, theses, and dissertations. However, many decisions about the appropriate use of generative AI are topic-dependent. Thus, variation from a department-wide policy is permissible, but should be documented so that the guidance to students is clear and shared among the members of the faculty committee. The guidance to students should be provided as early as possible in the student's research or exam-preparation work.[1]

Students should be made aware that current copyright regulations around generative-AI-produced content are unclear. Copyright violations might also occur when AI supplies text from unattributed sources. Additionally, future detection tools might point towards generative-AI-sourced text that was inaccurately documented by the student author. Limitations regarding future publication may arise. Thus, caution is urged for all students when using generative AI in the composition of their manuscripts.

[1] We encourage departments to share their policy statements on the use of generative AI in committee-based exams/theses/dissertations with each other, so that best practices in this arena can be shared.

Examples of statements that programs might use/adapt include:

- The use of generative AI is permitted for brainstorming, initial bibliographic searches, and the production of graphics (charts, images, etc.). The student is responsible for verifying all bibliographic information, and for any omissions; this responsibility cannot be transferred to generative AI. Students are also responsible for ensuring that information from generative AI has not been plagiarized from some other source, given that generative AI often reproduces text from prior sources. Students are responsible for writing the exam/project/thesis/dissertation manuscript themselves, although generative AI may be used for editing. Entire paragraphs written by generative AI – even if from student-submitted prompts – are not allowed, since students (with faculty mentorship) are expected to develop and refine their own independent scholarly voice and style. Students are expected to include a Generative AI Disclosure Statement in the opening pages of the manuscript, detailing how generative AI supported the creation and writing of the exam/thesis/dissertation.

- The use of generative AI is permitted for data analysis and computation, as well as for research. However, students are responsible for the accuracy and completeness of all information generated by AI. Students are responsible for fact-checking any AI-generated content.

- The use of generative AI is permitted for developing/writing/debugging/proofreading code; however, responsible AI-assisted coding is itself a graduate learning objective. Students are expected to integrate AI tools thoughtfully and transparently, using them to deepen technical understanding rather than bypass learning, and to demonstrate maturity in deciding when AI assistance is appropriate versus when independent implementation is required. Effective use includes employing AI to explore design options and prototype solutions while maintaining mastery of foundational programming principles; critically evaluating and refining AI-generated code for correctness, efficiency, security, ethics, reproducibility, and maintainability; and ensuring clarity and documentation through human-readable logic, comments, and version control. As part of their development, students should operate as AI-informed learners who use AI to expand exploration, as evaluators who rigorously assess and improve AI outputs, and as innovators who refine workflows and contribute creative or methodological improvements to AI-enabled programming practices. Students must be able to explain and justify their coding decisions, document AI assistance, and demonstrate full conceptual command and independent authorship. Ultimately, AI may enhance rigor, creativity, and capability, but it cannot replace disciplinary expertise, academic integrity, or critical thinking; students remain fully responsible for the validity, originality, and functionality of all code submitted.

- The use of generative AI is not permitted at any phase of the exam/project/thesis/dissertation work. All research and writing must be produced by the students themselves. Use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT in the research, writing, or revision of an exam/thesis/dissertation manuscript constitutes academic misconduct.

All students who use generative AI during the exam/project/thesis/dissertation process must include a disclosure statement, the exact nature of which should be agreed upon between the

student and the faculty at the start of the project. A sample structure for such a disclosure statement might be:

> During the preparation of this exam/project/thesis/dissertation, the author has utilized [Generative AI Tool Name and version/date], a language model created by [Generative AI Tool Provider]. The [Generative AI Tool Name] was used for purposes such as [e.g., brainstorming, grammatical correction, writing paraphrasing, citation, etc.]."

Students should be made aware that most professional publication outlets will also require such a statement. Thus, the accuracy of these disclosures, documenting from the outset the ways in which generative AI was used, is of the utmost importance. As an example: the *Journal of Information Systems* editorial policy contains the following statement: "Authors need to disclose the use of generative AI and AI-assisted tools in their work. Use of AI and AI-assisted writing tools must be consistent with the AAA policies on Authorship and Plagiarism, as well as other requirements listed in the AAA's Publications Ethics for Academic Research."[2]

Data Privacy and Confidentiality: Students must ensure that any data entered into generative AI tools complies with UA policies including IRB protocols, data use and software licensing agreements, intellectual property regulations, and confidentiality requirements. Sensitive, proprietary, or identifiable information should not be uploaded to commercial AI platforms without appropriate safeguards. Usage must also comply with UA's Office of Information Technology list of approved and prohibited AI tools and the Office of Research & Economic Development policies regarding intellectual property as well as data governance policies regarding quality, privacy and confidentiality.

Research Contributions to AI Models and Datasets: While this guidance focuses on the permissible use of generative AI in exams/projects/theses/dissertations, there may be graduate-level research that contributes new knowledge regarding the models and datasets that underpin AI systems. Thus, the current guidance should not be interpreted as discouraging student projects that advance the research, development, or application of generative AI, whether for purposes of discovery, improvement, or comparative evaluation of AI-driven methods.

Training and Resources: The UA Teaching Academy (UATA) provides training resources on ethical use of generative AI in teaching and learning, as well as verification techniques and best practices for disclosure. Faculty and graduate students are encouraged to participate in these training opportunities.

Document source: Ad Hoc Committee on Generative AI Use in Graduate Committee-Based Exams, Projects, Theses, and Dissertations, Fall 2025:

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- Katherine Chiou, Anthropology
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[2] American Accounting Association. 2024. "Journal of Information Systems Editorial Policy." https://aaahq.org/Research/Journals/Journal-of-Information-Systems/Editorial-Policy.

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