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Is using AI cheating, or are teachers assigning the wrong homework?

Insight

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Across classrooms today, a certain unease hangs in the air. Students are turning in essays that seem more polished, more logically structured, and more mature than their previous work suggested was possible. Teachers find themselves staring at pages that read far better than expected, and they cannot help but wonder whether something artificial is at play. The speed and quality simply do not align with the timelines these assignments required in the past. What once demanded steady effort over several weeks of research, outlining, and iteration now materializes in hours or minutes, and the shift is disorienting.

But the deeper story is not about student behavior. It is about the systems surrounding them. For decades, academic assignments were designed around the work required to complete them. Essays took weeks because research took time. Drafting took time. Editing took time. Producing a well-reasoned argument on paper wasn't just an intellectual challenge; it was a logistical one, and students were evaluated on how well they navigated it.

AI has collapsed that timeline, and in doing so, it has revealed the difference between learning the process of writing and learning the thinking behind writing. The instinct to equate AI use with cheating stems from a belief that the artifact – the essay itself – represents mastery. But if the essay can now be generated quickly and competently by a machine, then perhaps the artifact was never the true measure of mastery in the first place. Perhaps we were evaluating the scaffolding around thinking rather than the thinking itself.

This is not a failure of students nor a failure of teachers. It is a signal that the academic model must evolve. And more importantly, it is a preview of the evolution the business world is undergoing at the same time.

When tools accelerate, expectations must shift with them

Throughout history, new tools have always invited skepticism. The arrival of calculators raised concerns about weakening arithmetic skills. Spellcheck prompted debates about whether students would ever learn to spell. The advent of the spreadsheet was feared to threaten the very existence of the accounting profession. Search engines

raised concerns that easy retrieval would replace deep internalization of knowledge and research. But eventually, society recognized that these tools did not diminish intellect; they shifted it. They allowed humans to move past the mechanical foundations and engage more deeply with higher-order thinking.

AI is following this same trajectory, but at a scale and speed we haven't seen before. Students are not using AI because they want an unfair advantage. They are using it because it is now part of the intellectual environment in which they live. They see it as a natural extension of inquiry, much like older generations saw libraries, then databases, then search engines. The discomfort arises only when we insist on evaluating students using criteria built for a world that no longer exists.

Rather than doubling down on older assessments, we should ask more foundational questions.

What does learning look like now?

What does thinking look like?

What abilities matter most in a world where AI can generate clean prose but cannot, on its own, form perspective or judgment?

These are not rhetorical questions; they are the blueprint for creating meaningful education and meaningful work in the years ahead.

This shift calls for a reimagined assignment – one that measures not the artifact but the intellectual journey. And that journey begins long before the first draft and continues long after it.

A reimagined assignment for an AI-enabled era

Instead of discarding the essay assignment entirely, we can transform it into a multi-stage inquiry that pushes students deeper into thinking, research, evaluation, integration, and defense. Each stage becomes an opportunity to cultivate the skills that matter most in a world where AI handles the mechanical layers.

Below is a theoretical three-part assignment structure that creates a more rigorous, more comprehensive, and more reality-aligned approach to learning.

Part 1: Reveal the thinking by revealing the prompts

Every intellectual exploration begins with uncertainty. Students begin with questions, tentative hypotheses, and

fragments of understanding that need structure. When working with AI, this exploration becomes visible. Prompts reflect curiosity. Iterations reflect growth. Revisions reflect challenge and reconsideration. The trail of prompts becomes a living record of how thought develops, expands, and sharpens.

That is why the first part of a modern assignment should require students to document their entire process of working with AI. This includes their brainstorming, initial hypothesis, the series of prompts they used to investigate the topic, the evolution of their questions, the way they refined the model's responses, and the steps they took to verify information independently. It should also reveal the moments where the model's output fell short, imagined, hallucinated and the student had to redirect the inquiry or reject flawed reasoning.

By surfacing the prompt flow, educators gain a clearer view of the student's intellectual engagement than the final essay could ever provide. They see the scaffolding of the student's reasoning, the lines of inquiry pursued, and the points where critical judgment showed up. The work becomes less about producing a polished document and more about demonstrating intellectual discipline. To create rigor, a teacher could implement some minimum requirements for prompting that include some must-haves, like:

- At least 50 meaningful interactions and prompt iterations
- The inclusion of fact-checking
- Source and citation validation
- The inclusion of examples, quotes, and original research

This step reframes AI from a shortcut to a platform for reasoning. The student leads; the model assists. And the process becomes as important as the output.

Part 2: Deepen the argument with real human perspectives

While AI excels at generating structure and summarizing existing knowledge, it cannot replace the richness that emerges from real human dialogue. Meaningful understanding often comes from hearing the experiences, interpretations, and insights of others. Perspectives, especially from experts in the field, sharpen arguments. Contradictions force greater clarity. Diverse viewpoints expand one's sense of what the topic truly encompasses.

The second part of the assignment should therefore require students to gather direct human perspectives – not imagined scenarios or secondhand summaries, but real conversations with people who bring context, nuance, and lived experience. These interviews may be conducted in person or remotely, and AI can certainly aid with transcription or thematic analysis, but the act of engaging with real people remains fundamentally human. Teachers could apply requirements that enforce preparation and rigor around the process, such as:

- have an interview guide
- respond to the answers the interviewee is providing rather than ticking off your list of questions
- demonstrate research and knowledge of the interviewee's background so your questions can be tailored to their area of expertise
- the interview should last for a minimum of 30 minutes

After the interview, students should identify the insights that matter most, differentiate between opinions and factual claims, and integrate those contributions into their evolving assignment with full traceability back to the source. This process does more than enrich the essay; it teaches students to navigate ambiguity, weigh multiple viewpoints, and articulate how new information changes their understanding. It pushes them to move from theoretical reasoning to applied insight.

By design, AI becomes a tool for synthesis rather than a substitute for engagement. The student must still interpret, evaluate, and assimilate what they learn through conversation.

Part 3: Defend the work to demonstrate true comprehension

The final step of this new rigorous intellectual effort is the ability to defend one's conclusions. When students present their arguments to others and respond to questions, they demonstrate a level of comprehension that cannot be hidden behind polished prose. The defense becomes a proving ground for clarity, depth, and adaptability.

In this part of the assignment, students present their work – potentially supported by AI-generated slides or summaries – and engage in structured questioning. The questions may come from instructors, peers, or even an AI system trained to challenge assumptions. What matters is the student's ability to articulate their reasoning, explain how they evaluated sources, and describe the impact of the perspectives they gathered. They are not just defending the substance of the essay (*"the what"*); they are showing their work and explaining the reasoning behind their conclusions (*"the how"*).

This transforms assessment from a static exercise into a dynamic exchange. It also elevates accountability. Students who engaged deeply with their topic will naturally handle the defense with confidence, while those who relied solely on generated text will struggle to articulate the thinking behind it.

The defense closes the loop. It reinforces that the goal of education is not simply to produce a deliverable but to cultivate an informed, articulate thinker capable of navigating complex ideas with clarity.

The same transformation is happening in business, and the stakes are even higher

What is unfolding in academia is a mirror of what is unfolding in the workplace. Employees armed with AI tools now accomplish in minutes what once required entire teams and elaborate processes. Initial drafts leap forward in quality. Research accelerates. Analysis becomes more thorough and more consistent. And managers, much like teachers, find themselves unsure how to evaluate the results.

The instinct to question legitimacy is the same: *“If AI helped, is this real work?”* But just as in education, this is the wrong question. The presence of AI does not diminish human contribution; it changes where human contribution must occur. The new value is not in producing the first draft but in shaping the direction, validating the insights, challenging the assumptions, and communicating the implications.

Businesses, like classrooms, must redesign their assignments. Analysts must be evaluated not on how quickly they compile a report but on how well they interpret the findings. Strategists must be evaluated not on the volume of slides produced but on the clarity of choices presented. Leaders must be evaluated not on the memorization of data but on their ability to integrate information into coherent decisions.

AI doesn’t lower expectations. It raises them – *dramatically.*

Refocusing on what truly matters: thinking, reasoning, and mastery

Both education and business are now confronting the same reality: the mechanics of work are increasingly automated, and the artifacts of work are less reliable proxies for capability. Mastery must therefore be measured by the reasoning behind the work, not merely the product of it.

In this new landscape, the most valuable skills are those that AI cannot perform alone. These include judgment, synthesis, ethical reasoning, original insight, perspective-taking, scenario evaluation, and the ability to communicate ideas with nuance. These skills have always mattered, but AI pushes them from the background to the foreground. They are no longer “nice additions.” They are the core of meaningful work.

By redesigning assignments – in education and in business – to emphasize these skills, we create environments where AI enhances learning and productivity rather than undermining them. We shift from protecting outdated processes to cultivating the thinkers we need for the future.

The question was never whether AI constitutes cheating. It is whether we are still assessing – and rewarding – the right things.

The bottom line

AI has not cheapened the essay, the research report, the analysis, or the presentation. It has clarified the difference between mechanical tasks and intellectual capability. Students using AI are not undermining learning; they are revealing the limitations of our traditional assignments. Professionals using AI are not cutting corners; they are navigating a new baseline for productivity and insight.

The real opportunity is to redesign the work so that AI becomes a catalyst for deeper thinking rather than a threat to it. When we do this well, we do not diminish human learning. We elevate it. We expand it. And we make room for the kind of thinking that has always set humans apart – the kind that remains irreplaceable.