



# THE WHEN BEFORE THE HOW



Ethical and Practical Boundaries of AI in Academic Research Writing

AECT 2025 Panel Session

Moderator: G. Curt Fulwider, Florida State University

Panelists: Zhichun Liu, Bret Staudt Willet, Jegoong Moon, Chaewon Kim, Stephanie Gilstrap



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**Focus: academic research writing (not creative or coursework).**

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**Guiding question: When does AI-assisted writing cross from helpful to ethically problematic?**

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**We explore the 'when before the how'—ethics before technique.**

# WHY THIS MATTERS



AI tools like ChatGPT streamline research but blur ethical boundaries.



Raises issues of authorship, accountability, and fairness.



Particularly impacts non-native English-speaking scholars.

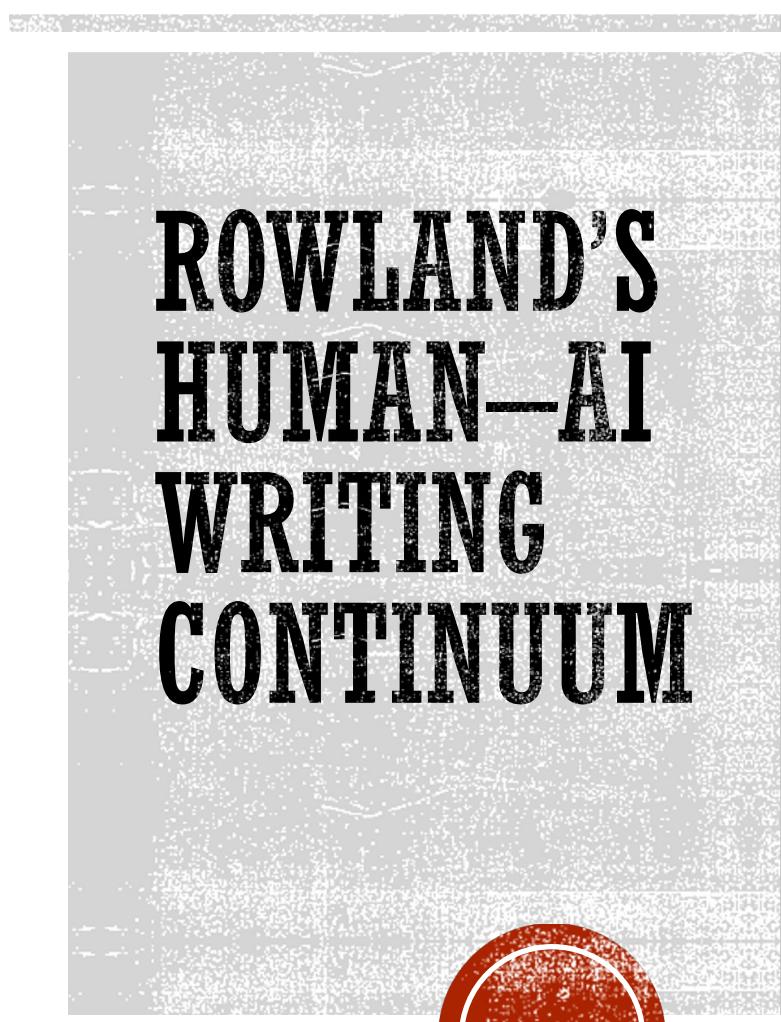


Publishing norms and ethical standards are still evolving.



**Table 1.** A possible approach to classifying the varying levels of the human-AI writing continuum.<sup>4</sup>

| Level                     |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| "Entirely" human written. | 1. Student does things in the traditional way: All topic analysis, reading, note-taking, planning, writing and editing done solely by the student. Only AI use is word processor's built-in spell and grammar checking.   |
|                           | 2. As per level 1, but student also uses Grammarly or a paid proofreader to correct and refine what they have written. No refinements add anything of substance to the student-generated text.  |
|                           | 3. As per level 1, but ChatGPT is asked for feedback on how the student written text can be improved / clarified / simplified and/or ChatGPT is asked for feedback on how well student-written text meets writing assessment criteria such as completeness of argument. Student adopts or adapts recommended changes.   |
|                           | 4. Student asks ChatGPT to analyse the assignment topic, i.e. to generate sub-topics / sub-questions to consider when addressing the assigned topic and/or asks ChatGPT to provide a possible outline for the assignment in the form of points to make / sub-topics to address / questions to answer. Student adopts or adapts the proposed plan but then does all required researching and writing themselves. |
|                           | 5. Based on a plan or outline either generated by themselves or adopted/adapted from ChatGPT, student does all the required research and takes structured and referenced notes within the skeleton of the plan. ChatGPT is asked to convert (some of) the structured notes to properly cited paragraphs which the student then adopts or adapts.  |
|                           | 6. When note-taking from sources, an AI is asked to paraphrase text copied and pasted from the source. The student then uses these paraphrases to construct their assignment, either using them without modification or synthesising and expanding on them as they would with notes taken by themselves.  |
|                           | 7. Student has a "conversation" with an AI about a topic, refining their question prompts based on their assessment of the AI's responses, then identifies the best responses and compiles and edits these as needed. Any necessary fact-checking is completed by the student using "traditional" methods.  |
|                           | 8. Student refines / edits / adjusts / adds to a response to a prompt generated by an AI. A limited example of this level is asking an AI to suggest titles for a student-written essay or abstract. A more extensive example could include asking an AI to suggest a possible abstract in response to excerpts from a research paper.  |
| Entirely AI written       | 9. Student adopts without change, a piece of writing generated by an AI in response to a prompt.  |



3: AI gives feedback on clarity or argument strength.

4: AI helps outline structure; human writes content.

5: AI drafts paragraphs from structured notes.

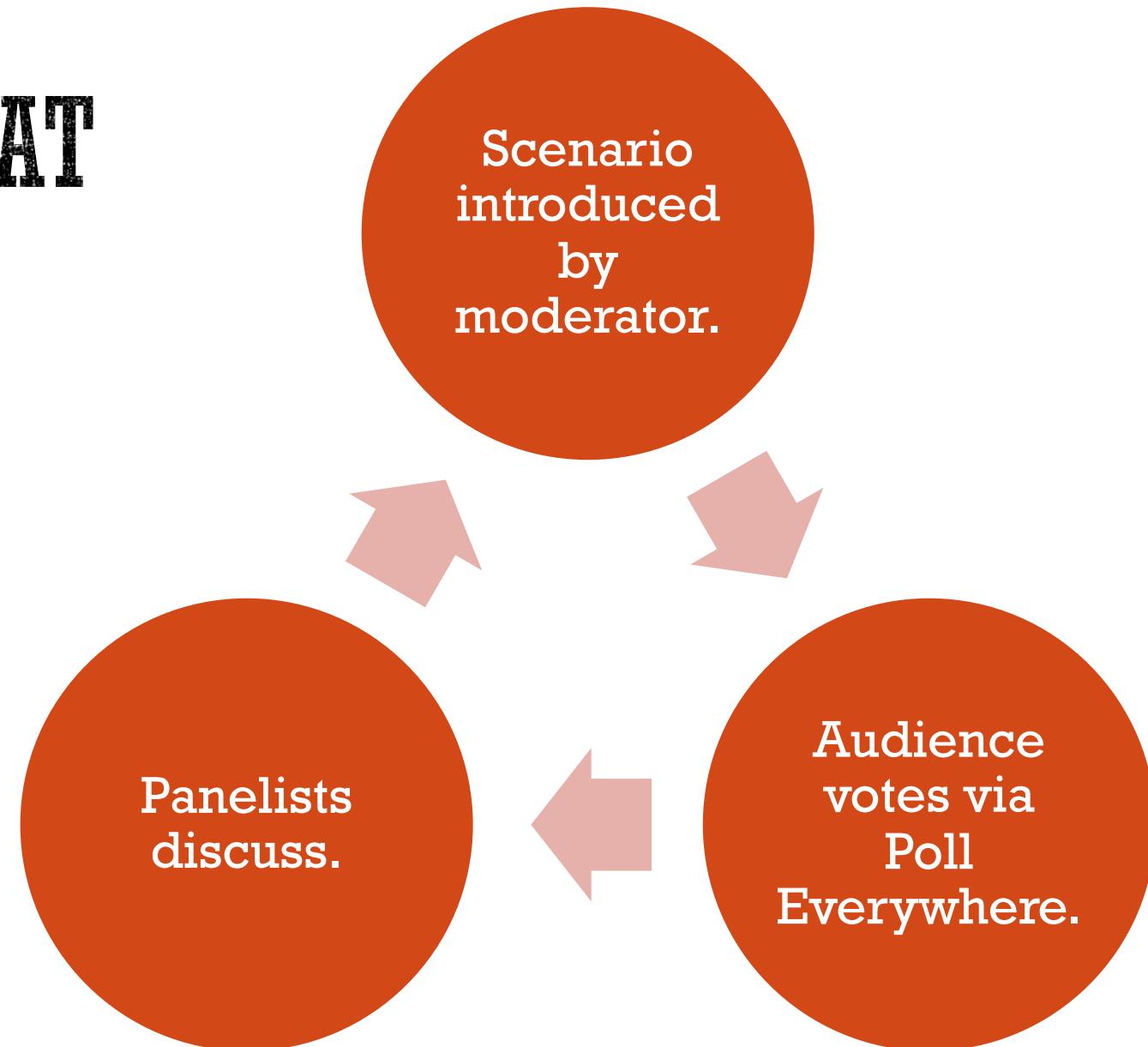
6: AI paraphrases or summarizes sources.

7: AI co-creates content through conversation and refinement.

## FOCUS RANGE FOR GENERATION:

LEVELS 3–7

# SESSION FORMAT



# SCENARIO 1: ABSTRACT CO-WRITING

A researcher pastes sections of their completed paper into ChatGPT and iteratively refines a 250-word abstract through multiple prompt-and-revise cycles (“make it more concise,” “emphasize novelty”). The final abstract is heavily shaped by AI phrasing, though all information originates from the author’s study.





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## Scenario 1: Abstract Co-Writing (Pre)

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1: Entirely Human  
Written

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3

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5

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SEE MORE

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# SCENARIO 1: ABSTRACT CO-WRITING

A researcher pastes sections of their completed paper into ChatGPT and iteratively refines a 250-word abstract through multiple prompt-and-revise cycles (“make it more concise,” “emphasize novelty”). The final abstract is heavily shaped by AI phrasing, though all information originates from the author’s study.



## **SCENARIO 2: JOURNAL REVISION**

A research team receives “major revision” feedback. Before rewriting, they paste the entire results section into ChatGPT and ask for suggestions on how to reorganize the argument for clarity and logical flow. They use some structural suggestions and rephrase transitions but do not insert AI-generated sentences.





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## Scenario 2: Journal Revision (Pre)

1: Entirely Human Written

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A research team receives “major revision” feedback. Before rewriting, they paste the entire results section into ChatGPT and ask for suggestions on how to reorganize the argument for clarity and logical flow. They use some structural suggestions and rephrase transitions but do not insert AI-generated sentences.



# SCENARIO 3: LIT. REVIEW DRAFTING

A doctoral student compiles annotated notes summarizing 30 studies. They paste the notes into ChatGPT with the prompt, “Turn these into a coherent literature review section (APA style).” The AI produces a rough draft that the student revises for flow and accuracy before submission.





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## Scenario 3: Lit. Review Drafting (Pre)

1: Entirely Human Written

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# **SCENARIO 4: DISS. CHAPTER ORGANIZATION**

A PhD candidate uses ChatGPT to generate possible subheadings for their discussion chapter, based on a brief summary of findings. The AI provides a list of themes, which the student adapts into an outline before writing all text independently.





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## Scenario 4: Diss. Chapter Organization (Pre)

1: Entirely Human Written

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# **SCENARIO 4: DISS. CHAPTER ORGANIZATION**

A PhD candidate uses ChatGPT to generate possible subheadings for their discussion chapter, based on a brief summary of findings. The AI provides a list of themes, which the student adapts into an outline before writing all text independently.



# **SCENARIO 5: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK DEV.**

Two scholars developing a theoretical framework feed ChatGPT a long exchange about their ideas and ask it to summarize and refine their emerging argument. They copy portions of the AI's phrasing directly into the manuscript draft.





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## Scenario 5: Conceptual Framework Dev. (Pre)

1: Entirely Human Written

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# **SCENARIO 5: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK DEV.**

Two scholars developing a theoretical framework feed ChatGPT a long exchange about their ideas and ask it to summarize and refine their emerging argument. They copy portions of the AI's phrasing directly into the manuscript draft.



# **SCENARIO 6: METHODS PARAPHRASING**

A non-native English-speaking researcher copies sentences from prior publications describing standard procedures and asks ChatGPT to paraphrase them to avoid plagiarism. They integrate those paraphrased sentences into their paper, citing the original methods appropriately.





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## Scenario 6: Methods Paraphrasing (Pre)

1: Entirely Human Written

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# **SCENARIO 6: METHODS PARAPHRASING**

A non-native English-speaking researcher copies sentences from prior publications describing standard procedures and asks ChatGPT to paraphrase them to avoid plagiarism. They integrate those paraphrased sentences into their paper, citing the original methods appropriately.



**Q&A**

