Close the Gap: Preparing journalism students in Gen AI skills for the industry

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Background

In the fall of 2024, my approach in my news reporting class shifted from evaluating content to teaching my students to use generative AI tools ethically in news reporting and to prepare them for the media industry. Since 2024, Generative AI has been used in newsrooms and agencies as part of their workflows (Mahadevan, 2024; McBride, 2024). Additionally, institutional access to Co-Pilot for students helped integrate Generative AI skills into coursework and assignments. During the semester, my students used Co-Pilot in the news reporting course to write inclusive headings, check for AP style accuracy, and create images for their news stories with acknowledgment, some of which were published nationally. They also used the platform to summarize data and large documents in this class.

Explanation of the teaching practice or activity

Students in my news reporting course have to report and write four to five news beat assignments every semester on politics, law enforcement, business, sports, and a solutions journalism topic of their choice, which provides them with experiential knowledge of working in newsrooms. We conduct editorial meetings to discuss storylines, and on field reporting days students cover the stories and write them, including a headline and an image.

Before the Generative AI integration, students used a one-pager or a PowerPoint slide available on Blackboard on AP style to review their work. They would also create a generic headline or submit without a headline. Since integrating Generative AI, I have encouraged students to use prompts to review their work and create headlines.

Prompt

In their beat assignment reporting, students had the option to use a combination of the following prompts, or they could use any two for an accurate result:

For AP accuracy	For headline creation
• Check the following story for AP style accuracy based on the attached guideline. • Check the following story for AP style accuracy based on the highlighted guidelines below. • Check the following story for AP style inaccuracies based on the attached guideline. • Check the following story for AP style inaccuracies based on the highlighted guidelines below.	• Create a headline for the following story. • Create a headline for the following story in five words. • Create an engaging and accurate headline for the following story in five words.

Rationale

There is an urgent need for higher education to bridge the gap between industry and academia because industries are unable to fill positions that require an AI skill set, including in journalism and communication (Watson, 2025). First-generation students often lack mentorship and guidance in the industry, which puts them at a disadvantage in learning newer skills to progress. I belong to an institution with many first-generation students. This assignment prepared my students with a skill that the industry is already using.

Thus, I included different ways in the assignment to integrate generative AI-based assignments into classroom settings, preparing students to improve their written content, such as titles, subheads, graphics, and other materials. Additionally, classroom discussions on stereotypes and cybersafety issues in Generative AI platforms support all students engaging on the topic of equity, inclusion, and belonging in news stories and classrooms. By bridging academia and industry, this initiative ensures journalism students graduate AI-skilled, ethically aware, and professionally prepared for the evolving media landscape.

Learning Outcomes

This assignment is associated with this learning outcome: *Evaluating and writing stories for accuracy, completeness, taste, readability, and AP style.*

Spring 2024 Students	Beat 1 (politics)	Beat 2 (business)	Beat 3 (solutions journalism)
Student 1	8.6	8.6	6.8
Student 2	9	9	7.7
Student 3	9.3	6.5	8.4
Student 4	0	0	9
Student 5	8.4	7.5	8
Student 6	0	7	7.8
Student 7	0	8	9
Student 8	9.3	8.6	7.8
Student 9	9	7.8	8
Student 10	9	8	7.5
Student 11	8.4	7	8.4
Median	8.6	7.8	8

After Generative AI Integration			
Fall 2024			
Students	Beat 1 (politics)	Beat 2 (business)	Beat 3 (solutions journalism)
Student 1	9.8	10	8.8
Student 2	9.3	9.3	8.8
Student 3	4	8.6	8.6
Student 4	9.8	9.3	9.3
Student 5	9	8	8.6
Student 6	9	9	8.8
Student 7	9	9	8.6
Student 8	7.8	8.6	8
Median	9	9	8.7

Beat News Rubric

Errors/Rewards	Points Deducted/Added
Errors in fact	1 to 2 points
Misspelled name	1 point
Poor reporting	0.5 to 1 point
Story too short	0.5 to 1 point
Missed lead	0.5 points
Unclear writing	0.5 points
Poor story organization	0.5 points
Grammatical error	0.2 points per error
Misspelled word	0.2 points per error
Punctuation error	0.2 points per error
AP Style error	0.2 points per error
Outstanding reporting	+0.5 to 1 point
Outstanding writing	+0.5 to 1 point
Use of Generative AI tools	+0.5 to 1 point
– Effective use of AI to create engaging and accurate headlines.	+0.2 to 0.5 points
– Use of AI to generate relevant and high-quality images	+0.2 to 0.5 points
– Use of AI to check and correct AP Style errors	+0.2 to 0.5 points

Improvements in assignment scores: Before introducing the use of Generative AI platforms, students often lost 1-2 points for not creating a headline and AP inaccuracies, out of 10 points based on the rubric. Students shared that they were hesitant to write a headline, since it was only worth a point. In previous semesters, I have included both a PowerPoint slide and a one-pager on our learning management system with the assignments, for students to use them as a quick guide for AP review. Despite this initiative, there was no change in grades on AP style and headline inclusion in the beat reporting assignments in the two consecutive semesters of Fall 2023 and Spring 2024. The average beat reporting score was 80% (B-). After introducing the generative AI platforms in the Fall of 2024, the average score of beat reporting increased to 90% (A-). See below the evidence of effectiveness after introducing the generative AI modules in assignments and the beat assignment rubric.

Analysis: Bridging Academia and Industry

The motivation for this shift is to bridge the gap between academia and industry (Bowen & Watson, 2024), as media industries struggle to find candidates with the necessary AI skills (Lacy, 2024). At the same time, the journalism industry has already implemented generative AI for data analysis, fact-checking & verification, interview question review, language translation, style checks, and more. This teaching practice directly addresses the call for journalism pro-

Examples of Headlines, Images and Acknowledgments created by students after Generative AI integration

Diverse perspectives: Reactions to presidential candidates' immigration policies*

*headline created by copilot

Headline & Cover Photo created by Microsoft Copilot

AP Style & Grammar checked by Microsoft Copilot

Cover Photo created by Microsoft Copilot

Collegiate athletes battle body image pressures despite institutional support efforts

Examples of headlines before the integration

Why is there a gap?

Vehicle Owners Continue to Worry as Theft Increases

grams to proactively prepare students to leverage the technology ethically for tasks like content creation, data summarization, and copyediting (Lacy, 2024). By integrating an accessible AI tool like Co-Pilot, the curriculum democratizes access to industry-relevant workflow enhancements.

Analysis and Critique of the Strategy

Before Generative AI integration into the project requirements, students frequently lost **1 to 2 points** out of 10 for not creating a headline and for AP inaccuracies on their beat assignments. The assignment requirement to include a Generative AI headline ensured students no longer missed that part. The average beat reporting score was **80% (B-)** in the two consecutive semesters of Fall 2023 and Spring 2024. This suggests that a combination of passive instruction (PowerPoint and quick guides) and active instruction of going over AP style and quizzes was insufficient to significantly change student habits related to attention to detail in editing. The inclusion of Generative AI was both to teach students a skill and encourage better editing habits.
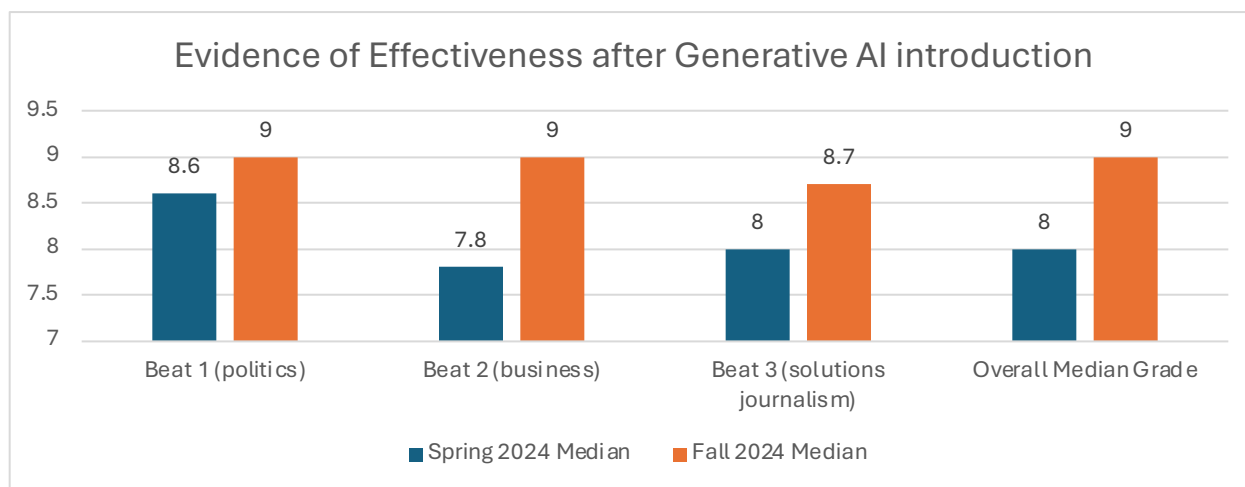
The introduction of the generative AI platforms in Fall 2024 served as a critical intervention. By using Co-Pilot to generate headlines and check AP accuracy, students essentially received an always-available, customized "desk editor" for a portion of their work. This directly aligns with the recognized potential for AI tools to reduce reporter workloads and enhance factual verification and data analysis skills (Munoriyarwa & Lima-Santos, 2024).

This change led to a significant, tangible outcome: the average beat reporting score increased to 90% (A-). The rubric clearly aligns the rewards for this practice: students can earn +0.5 to 1 point for the use of Generative AI tools, including +0.2 to 0.5 points each for effective use of AI to create engaging headlines and to check and correct AP Style errors.

This evidence suggests that integrating Gen AI didn't replace the need to learn editing, as students would still edit after the prompt use. They would use the prompt results as guidance, but manually edit to check for accuracy. This helped students close the "details gap," allowing them to focus more energy on the core journalistic practices of reporting and organization of their story. These skills still require critical thinking. As Coogan (2023) suggests, other AI-proof skills take longer to develop than a degree program timeline. At the same time, the increase in scores is a strong indicator of effectiveness; a more robust critique could acknowledge the risk of skill erosion (Bowen & Watson, 2024), where students may develop a dependency that hinders skill acquisition when

Figure: Evidence of Effectiveness Generative AI Introduction

Evidence of Effectiveness after Generative AI introduction

	Spring 2024 Median	Fall 2024 Median
Beat 1 (politics)	8.6	9
Beat 2 (business)	7.8	9
Beat 3 (solutions journalism)	8	8.7
Overall Median Grade	8	9

the tool is unavailable. Yet, a couple of times, some students experimented with Co-Pilot for news references, instead of our course library page; the results were not always accurate.

Recent research, such as Aitamurto and Boyles (2025), identified that for journalism students, AI is simultaneously seen as a tool for enhancement *and* a threat to the profession's core norms, underscoring the necessity of continued process-focused assessment rather than solely product-focused grading. In the first few classes, the students used the prompts in class, and we discussed the responses. This helped us to critique how the tool works and what to watch out for when using the tool.

Requiring students to submit their process and prompts is a key step in ensuring the tool is used to complement, not replace, core skills. The tools should work as companion tools, not replacements, something that I have followed in my news reporting class.

Conclusion: Learning Outcomes and Professional Alignment

This initiative ensured that journalism students are prepared based on the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications' Professional Values and Competencies. It is tied to the learning outcome of: *Evaluating and writing stories for accuracy, completeness, taste, readability, and AP style,* which aligns directly with ACEJMC's Professional Values and Competencies:

Write clearly and correctly: Achieved through the use of Gen AI in headline creation and AP style accuracy.

Use technology effectively: Achieved through the use of Gen AI platforms, including instruction on acknowledgment, ethical use, and cybersafety.

Additionally, including this initiative in an election empowered my students to discuss politics confidently. Covering politics has always been intimidating for them, but Co-Pilot, as a companion tool, helped them prepare their stories with confidence.

Finally, Gen AI is a tool for collaboration, not a replacement for human context!

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