

## USING AI TO WRITE ESSAYS ISN'T CHEATING, STUDENT SAYS



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"I was really struggling. My grades were solid C and I was working so hard," Essay Witch admits.

Essay Witch is the name they have given themselves ahead of our interview. When we meet over Zoom, their camera is positioned so that their face is out of view. Instead, a t-shirt with a witch on it fills the screen.

They are nervous about revealing their identity; fearful of the consequences that may come from what they are about to disclose.

They have been using AI software to write their essays this year.

"I don't think of this as cheating. People use it for getting over writer's block."

Essay Witch learnt about the software during their summer internship. The company they were working for was using it to generate content.

"I was seeing this is what people use in the real world. This is one of the tools that's available and it's kind of silly that we don't use it."

They explain that they had been struggling with essay writing. They thought if people could use it in the "real world", why couldn't they use it at uni?

"I have the knowledge, I have the lived experience, I'm a good student, I go to all the tutorials and I go to all the lectures and I read everything we have to read but I kind of felt I was being penalised because I don't write eloquently and I didn't feel that was right."

Essay Witch shows me how the technology works. They use an example essay question, add in a few descriptions so the AI knows what style the essay needs to be in, and the AI starts generating paragraphs. And it looks coherent.

From inputting the essay question into the document, to generating a complete essay, Essay Witch reckons it probably takes half an hour at the most to have a comprehensive 1,000 word essay.

They reckon the software is an "assistance" like Grammarly and argue that students aren't penalised for using Grammarly which relies on AI to improve the user's writing, so question what the difference is.

"I looked through the [UC] rules and it says you can't get somebody else to [do the assessment]. Well it's not somebody, it's AI.

"I know there are people in my class paying people to write essays. I think that's wrong. This is not the same thing ...This is using tools that are there. I think it's okay," Essay Witch says.

"It's not copying. It's not plagiarism. Nobody else has this content. It's original content."

And they have gone from getting C's to B's and even A-'s.

Stephen Hickson, a proctor whose job it is to investigate any breaches of discipline at UC, says "an entire essay written by AI is no different from one written by another person".

"It's always been OK to get your mum (or the Academic Skills Centre) to read your essay or assignment and provide you with feedback that will improve the final product. The thinking, research, analysis and results remain largely in their original form and the work remains substantively yours.

"It's never been OK to get your mum (or anyone else, whether you know them or not) to write your submission. This would be considered academic dishonesty. It's not your work and you are attempting to pass it off as such."

Hickson says, "When submitting a piece of work ask yourself this question – if the Proctor were to ask me "how did you put together this piece of work?" would the answer clearly and convincingly convey that the work is substantively yours in both content and expression? ... If the process you went through to arrive at the final product doesn't have your intellect, time, blood, sweat and tears firmly and clearly at the centre of it then you have probably crossed from legitimate to not legitimate."

UC had a 258 percent increase in academic misconduct in 2020 compared to 2019, according to reporting by RNZ.

### The full statement from UC proctor Stephen Hickson:

How much artificial intelligence is it OK to use in your academic work? Seems like an easy question. An entire essay written by AI is no different from one written by another person. It's always been OK to get your mum (or the Academic Skills Centre) to read your essay or assignment and provide you with feedback that will improve the final product. The thinking, research, analysis and results remain largely in their original form and the work remains substantively yours.

It's never been OK to get your mum (or anyone else, whether you know them or not) to write your submission. This would be considered academic dishonesty\*. It's not your work and you are attempting to pass it off as such.

But what about a computer code generator? Or grammarly (an app that suggests corrections or improvements to your grammar)? Or even the spell checker on your word processor? A search engine is a powerful tool that helps you find useful material, but you didn't create Google. So, when does a useful tool cross the line from legitimate to not legitimate?

Rules on what is clearly not allowed are useful, and we have those. Ghost writing, using the ideas and words of others without attribution and so on are well understood. But not all our behaviour and choices can be defined by black and white rules, and we wouldn't want the world to be that way.

With so many tools at our disposal and an almost infinite way in which to use them it is an impossible task to create a definitive list, so we need to fall back on some useful principles to guide ourselves when making decisions around how to behave.

When submitting a piece of work ask yourself this question – if the Proctor were to ask me "how did you put together this piece of work?" would the answer clearly and convincingly convey that the work is substantively yours in both content and expression? Think about the process. If the process you went through to arrive at the final product doesn't have your intellect, time, blood, sweat and tears firmly and clearly at the centre of it then you have probably crossed from legitimate to not legitimate.

Don't be fooled. AI, bots, essay mills, "homework help sites" and the like can all act to take YOU out of the centre of the process just as much as another person can. Don't let artificial intelligence make you fall prey to natural stupidity.

\*Acts of dishonesty intended to gain an advantage for oneself or others in academic work. A key feature of such dishonesty is the intention to deceive.

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