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Acceptable-Use Policy for Generative Artificial Intelligence on Graduate Milestones and Examinations

Department of Engineering Education

Scope

This policy applies to the use of generative artificial intelligence tools that can a) generate text, images, videos, or other types of content and b) provide feedback or recommendations for revisions to complete tasks associated with graduate program milestones and examinations[1]. GenAI tools can create content and provide recommendations with minimal user input. Some popular examples include OpenAI's ChatGPT and GPT-5, Anthropic's Claude AI, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, Apple Intelligence, and predictive text. A continuum of these GenAI tools is incorporated into regular working tools such as search engines, Microsoft Word, and Grammarly. All graduate students and faculty are responsible for exercising judgment regarding the appropriate use of these tools per the principles contained in the University at Buffalo Graduate Honor Code and abiding by the guidelines outlined later in this policy. The policy does not cover work associated with an assistantship or other written material.

Seeking Clarity

The nuance associated with GenAI usage is difficult to capture in a static document. Therefore, graduate students are strongly encouraged to first seek clarity from their faculty advisor whenever they have questions about GenAI usage or are unclear whether these expectations apply. If the advisor is not able to clarify then the graduate student and faculty member should seek clarity from the Graduate Program Director. **The policy will be updated as these tools evolve, and as the Department's understanding of these tools and their usage continues to advance.** Changes will be voted on by the faculty and emailed to the Department. At a minimum, the policy will be reviewed annually by the DEE Graduate Program Committee.

I. Policy Purpose

This departmental policy aims to outline the acceptable use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools during DEE milestones and examinations (e.g., qualifying exams, dissertation proposals), and detail disclosure expectations of students. We believe there is potential for GenAI to support research and writing, but these tools cannot replace a researcher's creativity, reasoning, judgement, and critical thinking. It is important to critically consider the limitations and risks associated with using GenAI. These include risks associated with the accuracy of information generated by and used to train GenAI models; data privacy, sovereignty, and security; and copyright and intellectual property. There are many GenAI platforms, and each has its own operating parameters. **When considering if and how to use GenAI, it is your responsibility to fully assess the risks and discuss them with your advisor and committee.**

[1] Qualifying Exam, Dissertation Proposal, PhD Dissertation, MS Thesis, PhD and MS research or project.

This policy considers the goals of the DEE Graduate Programs and milestones alongside the strengths and limitations associated with GenAI. It also incorporates structured opportunities for graduate students to carefully consider how they plan to use GenAI.

This policy applies to the Qualifying Exam, Dissertation Proposal, PhD Dissertation, MS Thesis, PhD and MS research or project. It does not apply to courses. Each course has its own GenAI use policy.

This policy defines the maximum amount of GenAI use that is deemed acceptable by the Department. It is possible that individual advisors may have stricter policies around GenAI use than the Department.

II. Disclosure Expectations

Transparent documentation of GenAI use is expected across all graduate milestones. Most journals, publishers, and conferences have GenAI use policies and restrictions. It is important to adhere to their guidelines in addition to the DEE guidelines. To support documentation of GenAI use, graduate students must carefully log all uses and be prepared to share upon request. One mechanism to log your GenAI uses is to keep a logbook that includes the date, the corresponding GenAI tool, how you used it, why you used it, and how it influenced your thinking.

For each milestone, complete and attach the "GenAI Disclosure Template" on page 9 to communicate which GenAI tools you used and how you used them. You should be prepared to answer questions about your use of GenAI during the oral component of these milestones. When necessary, GenAI should be cited.

For the Dissertation Proposal, develop and attach a "GenAI Use Plan" on page 10 to document the anticipated uses of AI to conduct the proposed research, write the dissertation, and/or prepare presentations and publications. It is expected that graduate students will develop their GenAI use plan through discussions with their advisor and committee.

III. Acceptable-Use Policy & Violations

We recognize that there are numerous ways that GenAI can be used, and the difference between acceptable and unacceptable use may be small. This policy is organized by the intention associated with one's use of GenAI: 1) using GenAI for exploration, 2) using GenAI for enhancement of user-generated content, 3) using GenAI for content creation, 4) using GenAI as a research tool, and 5) using GenAI to engage with existing literature. Within these areas, we communicate the acceptable uses of GenAI across three stages: 1) before PhD candidacy, 2) after PhD candidacy, and 3) the MS culminating experience.

Rationale: Before passing the Qualifying Exam, there are more restrictions on how GenAI can be used. This benchmark was selected as a distinguishing time because candidacy status marks the point that PhD graduate students have been determined to be ready to pursue creative, original, independent research and as such, likely, have the knowledge and skills to critically evaluate GenAI. The Qualifying Exam allows the graduate faculty to assess a student's aptitude to identify, assess, and synthesize scholarly literature to develop a research study. If GenAI is used, it would prevent the graduate faculty from being able to assess students' aptitude accurately. Likewise, if

students use GenAI prior to the Qualifying Exam, they may not develop the necessary skills to be successful on this exam. Within this policy, the MS culminating experience (e.g., project or thesis) is considered separate from the PhD milestones. The rationale behind this decision is that the goals of the MS are different from those of the PhD. The culminating experience is intended to give students the opportunity to engage in a project within the discipline that integrates knowledge and skills developed across their coursework. The MS degree is not intended to prepare students for future independent research.

A. Using GenAI for exploration

Definition of this use: When used for exploration, GenAI outputs are treated like information gathered through an internet search engine. The output provides initial information that would require verification and may guide further inquiry.

Within the MS culminating experience, it is **acceptable** to use GenAI as a first step in exploring ideas, theories, research methods, and/or topics.

Before PhD candidacy, it is **not acceptable** to use GenAI for exploration. If used, the violation would be categorized as **cheating**.

After PhD candidacy, it is **acceptable** to use GenAI as a first step in exploring ideas, theories, research methods, and/or topics.

B. Using GenAI for enhancement of user-generated content

Definition of this use: GenAI is capable of enhancing content that was originally created by the student. We define these capabilities to include:

Editing	Using GenAI to check spelling, grammar, punctuation, formatting, and/or word choice to enhance clarity, flow, style, and tone of user-generated content.
Rewriting or rephrasing	Using GenAI (1) to offer sentence or paragraph-level suggestions that can be accepted or (2) to directly reword a sentence or paragraph by changing the sequence of words or using alternative words. At no point should your use of GenAI to rewrite or rephrase exceed more than 1%, which is equivalent to 1 page out of 100 pages, of your entire dissertation.
Soliciting Feedback	Using GenAI to iterate on user generated content (e.g., providing an outline and asking for feedback or ways to expand it).

Within the MS culminating experience, it is **acceptable** to use GenAI in editing, rewriting or rephrasing, and soliciting feedback.

Before PhD candidacy, it is **only acceptable** to use GenAI for editing.

After PhD candidacy, it is **acceptable** to use GenAI in editing, rewriting or rephrasing, and soliciting feedback.

Note: it should be acknowledged that the mechanics of GenAI models include aspects that could compromise intellectual property, therefore caution should be exercised in deciding the proportion of the student generated work to be enhanced through these tools.

C. Using GenAI for content creation

Definition of this use: GenAI is capable of creating new content and ideas based on limited user input and without user-generated content. Here content creation specifically refers to content outside of the process of collecting and analyzing data. For the policy on creating content within the research process, please see "Using GenAI as a Research Tool" in Section D below.

We define GenAI capacities related to content creation to include:

Drafting	Using GenAI to develop a preliminary version of written work. (e.g., prompting GenAI to write a paragraph on the history of engineering education)
Outlining	Using GenAI to recommend main ideas, key concepts, supporting details, and evidence to include in the work (e.g., proposal, paper, chapter).
Conceptualizing	Using GenAI to develop specific research goals/objectives, purpose statements, and questions. Such as formulating research goals, purpose statements, research questions, and/or aims.
Interpreting	Using GenAI to review study data to arrive at relevant conclusions and/or implications.

At any stage across the MS and PhD, it is **not acceptable** to use GenAI for content creation as defined in the table above.

Rationale: The use of GenAI-created content or applying AI-generated ideas is not allowed for two core reasons. (1) The PhD and MS are meant to demonstrate a student's ability to contribute to the literature, largely independent of collaborators. Directly applying AI-generated text or ideas does not demonstrate this ability. (2) As publishers and funding agencies continue to prohibit AI co-authorship, there is a chance that work involving AI usage in this manner may not be publishable.

If GenAI is used this way, the violation would be categorized as **plagiarism**. As a litmus test, graduate students and faculty should ask themselves if a person would have been given authorship had they performed the same work through collaboration. If yes, the usage would be considered unacceptable.

D. Using GenAI as a research tool

Definition of this use: GenAI tools are capable of supporting research, including data collection and analysis. In most cases, it will be up to the student's advisor, dissertation committee, and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to determine if a use is acceptable.

At all stages across the MS and PhD, it is **acceptable**[2] to use GenAI **to transcribe** or type out speech or visuals into a written format.

[2] Any usage of GenAI during this process, including transcription, should be reviewed by the IRB and approved by the respective dissertation committee.

At all stages across the MS and PhD, it **may be acceptable**[2] to use GenAI for tasks related to data collection, analysis, and visualization. These uses are defined by the research method being implemented, existing literature, and a student's committee or advisor. As such, the committee and the IRB will determine what is acceptable, rather than DEE. Any student who uses GenAI tools to analyze data should make sure they understand the tool's data policies and revisit them periodically to ensure they have not changed.

If AI is used as a research tool without obtaining proper authorization, the violation would be categorized as **research misconduct.**

E. Using GenAI to engage with existing literature

Definition of this use: GenAI can respond to prompts about specific pieces of scholarly work. Additionally, GenAI has been incorporated into platforms that support organizing and identifying literature. The capabilities of GenAI with respect to engaging in existing literature include:

Formatting citations	Using GenAI to generate citations or citation metadata (e.g., BibTeX) from existing literature provided by the user.
Synthesizing	Using GenAI to combine findings, ideas, and arguments from multiple scholarly sources to form a cohesive, new understanding of the topic.
Summarizing	Using GenAI to provide an overview or list of key takeaways from scholarly sources for the purpose of determining the significance of the work regarding the user's needs, or to serve as a reminder of what the user has previously read. This does not include using the text GenAI produced because that would be considered drafting.
Identifying	Using GenAI to generate a list of relevant scholarly sources as a preliminary step in selecting scholarly pieces to read.
Creating a literature map	Using GenAI to expand the user's understanding of literature by having it visualize the connections between academic papers, authors, and research topics.

Rationale: Engaging with existing literature to develop arguments, identify gaps in knowledge, and learn new methods or theories is a core goal of the MS and PhD programs in DEE. GenAI has been shown to produce hallucinations or fabricated responses that are not based on accurate or appropriate information. Related to literature, these hallucinations include fabricating citations and falsifying summaries of scholarly work. It will likely be difficult for students, especially students in their earlier years of graduate work, to identify hallucinations because they may not be familiar with the research area or the relevant authors. It is also important for students to develop the skill to skim an article and determine its relevancy to their own work.

At any stage across the MS and PhD, it is **acceptable** to use GenAI to **format citations**. It is expected that students will verify the accuracy of citations and relationships between scholarly work. Students are encouraged to develop literature maps on their own without the use of GenAI as it is a valuable skill and supports broad understanding of literature within a specific scholarly space. If GenAI is used to generate a literature map, it is the students' responsibility to ensure the accuracy of the map.

At any stage across the MS and PhD, it is **not acceptable** to use GenAI to **synthesize** existing literature (see table above for definition). If GenAI is used in this manner, it would be considered **plagiarism**.

Additionally, within the MS culminating experience, it is **acceptable** for students to directly prompt GenAI to **summarize** literature, **generate literature maps**, or **identify** relevant literature.

Additionally, before PhD candidacy, it is **not acceptable** to use GenAI to **summarize literature***, **generate a literature map***, or **identify existing literature***. If GenAI is used in this manner, it would be considered **cheating**. *We acknowledge that some repositories and digital libraries incorporate summaries, lists of relevant work, and literature maps without direct user input requesting these outputs. In such cases, it is acceptable to use these outputs as an initial step in understanding existing literature. As a litmus test, graduate students and faculty can ask if the same output would be available to others using the same platform. If yes, then it is an acceptable use of GenAI to develop initial understanding. However, students are supposed to enhance their understanding further. An example of an unacceptable use would be uploading the articles that were provided for the qualifying exam and prompting GenAI for summaries, a list of relevant work, or a literature map.

After PhD candidacy, it is **acceptable** for students to directly prompt GenAI to **summarize** literature, **generate literature maps**, or **identify** relevant literature. It is strongly recommended to track such interactions through the logbook described in Section II.

Table 1: Overview of Acceptable-Use Policy

This overview is not intended to be read on its own. It is a supplement to the written text and does not include sufficient nuance to capture the complexities of GenAI use. ✗- not an acceptable use; ? - To be decided by advisor and/or dissertation committee; ✓ - acceptable use.

		Stage		
Using GenAI for exploration		**Before candidacy**	**After candidacy**	**MS**
Exploration	GenAI outputs are treated like information gathered through an internet search engine. The output provides initial information that requires verification and guides further inquiry.	✓	✓	✓
Using GenAI to enhance user generated content.		**Before candidacy**	**After candidacy**	**MS**
Editing	Using GenAI to check spelling, grammar, punctuation, formatting, and/or word choice to enhance clarity, flow, style, and tone of user-generated content.	✓	✓	✓
Rewriting or Rephrasing	Using GenAI (1) to offer sentence or paragraph-level suggestions that can be accepted or (2) to directly reword a sentence or paragraph by changing the sequence of words or using alternative words.	✗	✓	✓
Soliciting feedback	Using GenAI to iterate on user generated content (e.g., providing an outline and asking for feedback or ways to expand it).	✗	✓	✓
Using GenAI for content creation		**Before candidacy**	**After candidacy**	**MS**
Drafting	Using GenAI to develop a preliminary version of written work. (e.g., prompting GenAI to write a paragraph on the history of engineering education)	✗	✗	✗
Outlining	Using GenAI to recommend main ideas, key concepts, supporting details, and evidence to include in the work (e.g., proposal, paper, chapter).	✗	✗	✗
Designing	Using GenAI to develop a research plan, study protocol, or data collection tool.	✗	✗	✗
Conceptualizing	Using GenAI to develop specific research goals/objectives, purpose statements, and questions. Such as formulating research goals, purpose statements, questions, and/or aims.	✗	✗	✗
Interpreting	Using GenAI to review study data to arrive at relevant conclusions and/or implications.	✗	✗	✗
Using GenAI as a research tool *(Will likely require IRB approval.)*		**Before candidacy**	**After candidacy**	**MS**
Transcribing	Using GenAI to type out speech or visuals into written form.	✓	✓	✓
All other research activities	Using GenAI as a tool to support data collection, analysis, or visualization in any way.	?	?	?
Using GenAI to engage with existing literature		**Before candidacy**	**After candidacy**	**MS**
Formatting citations	Using GenAI to generate citations or citation metadata (e.g., BibTeX) from existing literature provided by the user.	✓	✓	✓
Synthesizing	Using GenAI to combine findings, ideas, and arguments from multiple scholarly sources to form a cohesive, new understanding of the topic.	✗	✗	✗
Summarizing	Using GenAI to provide an overview or list of key takeaways from scholarly sources for the purpose of determining the significance of the work in regard to the user's needs or to serve as a reminder of what the user previously read. This does not include using the text GenAI produced because that would be considered drafting.	✗	✓	✓
Identifying	Using GenAI to generate a list of relevant scholarly sources as a preliminary step in selecting scholarly pieces to read.	✗	✓	✓
Creating a literature map	Using GenAI to expand the user's understanding of literature by having it visualize the connections between academic papers, authors, and research topics.	✗	✓	✓

IV. GenAI Disclosure Template

See **Disclosure Template for a fillable Word Document that can be completed and included with your milestone*

Student Name:

Advisor Name:

Date:

DEE Milestone

☐ Qualifying Exam

☐ Dissertation Proposal

☐ Final Dissertation

☐ Final MS Thesis

During the preparation of this work, I used GenAI tools as described below (check all that apply):

☐ Exploration

☐ Editing, rewriting/rephrasing, or refining

☐ Research tool

☐ Format citations

☐ Summarize literature, identify literature, or create a literature map *(not acceptable us before PhD Candidacy*

Provide a narrative description of your GenAI usage. Include the name of the GenAI tool/service as part of this description.

Please initial and sign to confirm the following:

_____ I acknowledge reading the Department of Engineering Education Milestones and Examinations Acceptable-Use Policy for GenAI.

_____ After using this tool/service, I reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content.

_____ I am willing to share additional information about my AI usage if requested.

_____ I certify that what is documented above represents the full scope of my use of GenAI tools as part of this milestone.

Signature _____ Date_____

V. PhD Dissertation Proposal: Planned Uses of GenAI Template

See **Planned Uses Template for a fillable Word Document that can be completed and included with your milestone*

Complete and include this document as part of your PhD Dissertation Proposal.

As I conduct my PhD dissertation research, I plan to use GenAI tools as described below (check all that apply):

☐ Exploration

☐ Editing, rewriting/rephrasing, or refining

☐ Research tool

☐ Format citations

☐ Summarize literature, identify literature, or create a literature map

For each use you checked above, list the risks associated with that use of GenAI and your plan to mitigate these risks.

_____ I acknowledge re-reading the Department of Engineering Education Milestones and Examinations Acceptable-Use Policy for GenAI.

_____ I agree to have ongoing discussions with my advisor and committee about my use of GenAI tools across my dissertation research process and update them on challenges that arise from GenAI use and any additional uses of GenAI beyond what is captured above.

_____ I agree to log my use of GenAI and provide appropriate acknowledgement in my work.

Signature _____ Date_____