



AskAway Best Practices: Handling GenAI Questions

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Introduction

Background

The widespread use of Generative AI (GenAI) since the release of ChatGPT in late 2022 has had a strong impact on reference services, including AskAway. It has changed student expectations of digital experiences – from assumptions that chat services are staffed by bots, uncertainty about the appropriate use of GenAI for course assignments, and changes to how search systems are powered, approached, and used. The rapid advances and changes in technology are moving at a pace faster than policy and regulation development, yet as service providers, we are on the front line of questions from students, faculty, and staff.

There are many types and uses of artificial intelligence. For these best practices we are specifically referring to GenAI, defined as:

“a subset of artificial narrow intelligence that uses algorithms to create or generate new, realistic content such as text, images, audio, and video based on patterns found in training data. Examples of GenAI systems include ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Midjourney. Although these tools can produce original-seeming results, they operate within the boundaries of their training and do not possess general understanding or self-awareness.” (University of Notre Dame, [AI Overview and Definitions](#))

GenAI is increasingly being created for and integrated into library search tools. We are seeing many platforms release GenAI powered functions to summarize articles, recommend search terms, and perform other tasks previously requiring cognitive skills to complete. Since it is almost unavoidable to encounter AI powered tools in the digital environment, we hope these best practices clarify the role of AskAway service providers in assisting students with complex questions.

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide service providers with best practices for responding to student questions about GenAI. They will outline the scope of responsibility and provide consistency in how we handle GenAI-related questions on the service. They are grounded in chat reference best practices including approachability, engagement, incorporating instruction, and supporting the development of information and digital literacy skills (see RUSA’s [Guidelines for the Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers](#) and AskAway’s [Chat Reference Best Practices](#)).

AskAway is open to all questions and will provide help with course-related research tasks (e.g., finding books or journal articles, citing sources, using the library, etc.). If the question is outside the scope of AskAway, requires specialist knowledge, or if it cannot be answered within a reasonable amount of time, AskAway service providers should make an appropriate referral.

As a post-secondary library service, AskAway’s goal is to teach students the principles and techniques of research rather than conducting research on their behalf. As GenAI is a rapidly evolving technology and as each institution may have different policies and guidelines in place, it is up to each service provider how much technological literacy instruction they feel comfortable and are able to provide.

Application

These best practices will be shared with service providers via training and the staff website. A service provider's professional judgement, the number of chats they are handling, and their library's policies or practices may affect how these best practices are applied.

These best practices will be updated as needed as the technology changes and as new guidelines are implemented.

Handling AI Questions

General Guidelines

Know your comfort level. You don't need to be an expert in GenAI, but you can always guide the student to information that may support their learning, digital literacy skills, and research skills, without making assumptions or judgements about their use of GenAI.

Anything outside of the scope of AskAway that is not related to reference services can be referred to the instructor, the academic department, or a complementary service such as the writing centre. Find specific examples in the section below.

Establish Expectations

Let the patron know what kind of help you can provide. Use the *AskAway Chat – AI Expectations* script for responding to AI use questions.

- Chat – AI Expectations: "I'm happy to help you find resources on AI and direct you to guidelines at your institution, if they are available. These resources can help you make informed decisions for yourself."

Communicate with Positive Language

Let the patron know what kind of help you can provide instead of what you cannot do. And take an educational and curious, rather than a punitive approach. Use your reference interview skills to find out more about their question, so you can guide them to the most appropriate sources. For example, if a student asks about using AI to analyze survey data, you could start by asking if they have looked at the guidelines for AI use at their institution and if their instructor has provided any guidance for their assignment.

Use the Reference Interview to Determine Context

If possible, ask one or two questions to help determine what type of patron they are (e.g., student, faculty) and any other information that will help you understand their information needs. For example, GenAI guidelines and policies are often different for students versus faculty. Having this information will help you know where to direct them and which resources will be most helpful.

Point Students to their Institution's AI Guidelines and/or their Library's AI Guide

If an institution has created AI Guidelines, they will be listed on the [library's AskAway Policy Page](#) under *Generative AI Guidelines*.

Often the Generative AI guidelines will come from a department other than the library, such as the Academic Integrity Office or Teaching and Learning. Some institutions may not have guidelines but will provide information about their current approach to AI. You can also check if the library has an AI subject guide at their institution. By pointing students to their library guides, they will become more familiar with their library and the resources available to them.

- Refer to the [library's Policy Page](#) - *Generative AI Guidelines*
- Or *Subject Guides* and search for one on AI.

Encourage Students to Check-in with their Instructor

If the student is seeking guidance about the appropriate use of GenAI tools to complete an assignment, refer to the institutional guidelines and recommend that they look at their course syllabus for expectations on GenAI use and ask their instructor directly about their policy for the course.

Tags Chats Appropriately

To help AskAway keep track of the types of AI related questions that are being asked, please add one or both of the following [tags](#), as appropriate:

- AI Literacy
- Bot

If AI is the topic of the student's research (e.g., I'm looking for peer-reviewed articles on GenAI use among high school students), the above tags will likely not apply. Instead, apply the "Research" tag and any other tags, as appropriate.

Specific Question Types

The sections below were determined based on common questions that were assigned the "AI Literacy" or "bot" [tag](#). This section can be updated if new types of questions start coming into the service.

Assuming AskAway is a chat bot

The welcome text in the AskAway chat box lets students know that the service is staffed by real people. If a student or other user assumes or asks if AskAway is a bot or AI-powered, use the *Begin – Not a Bot* script to remind them that AskAway is staffed by real people:

- Begin – Not a Bot: "Hi! AskAway is staffed by real library staff members (no bots here!)."

If you're comfortable, add your name as well to personalize the interaction.

Am I allowed to use AI tools for X?

If available, direct the student to their institution's AI guidelines and/or their library's GenAI guidelines on the [library's Policy Page](#), or to their instructor.

Encourage the student to reflect on what they want to use the AI tool for and why. Consider the [CARE framework](#) in your interaction with the student. Are they hoping to get facts, interpret information, summarize concepts, construct text, get assistance with processes, etc.? What is their goal and what are the consequences of using GenAI for their learning process?

If they are asking about using GenAI for writing tasks, refer them to their writing or learning centre. Use the *Chat – Refer Writing* [script](#).

If they are asking about using AI tools for library research processes, encourage them to evaluate the tool (see evaluation tools below). Offer to help them find reliable information through the library and other trusted resources. You may wish to use the following *Chat – AI Tools for Research* script:

- Chat – AI Tools for Research: "If you decide to use AI tools to help you get started with your research (e.g., brainstorm keywords, summarize complex topics), it's important to critically evaluate their output as the information may not be accurate or relevant. When it comes to finding reliable and diverse sources for your topic, we encourage you to search for them using your local library and databases."

Evaluation of AI tools / results

Direct them to an evaluation tool, like:

- [The ROBOT Checklist for Evaluating AI Tools](#) (Newcastle University)
- [AI Evaluation Guide](#) (Deakins University)
- [Choosing the Right Tool: Questions to Consider](#) (UBC)
- [Evaluating GenAI Outputs](#) (University of Saskatchewan)

These tools are provided as references only and do not take precedence over institutional policies and guidelines.

Citing GenAI

Adapted from the AskAway [Citation Best Practices](#).

If students ask about using any Generative AI tools in their assignment or research, please remind them to check with their instructor and/or the submission guidelines for their assignment. You can also visit the [library's Policy Page](#) to see if an official statement or policies exist outlining the acceptable use of Generative AI.

If these tools are allowed:

- Remind students that they must cite the content to distinguish their ideas from those provided by the tool(s).
- All users of Generative AI must apply critical thinking skills to ensure ethical and responsible use of the content provided.
 - The algorithms that run GenAI tools such as ChatGPT do not evaluate content and can perpetuate harmful biases and misinformation. Newcastle University has created a [Thinking Critically about AI Skills Kit](#) to help users critically evaluate the information produced by GenAI. Students can also reach out to their institution's library to find additional resources.

It is important to note that the rules for citing AI generated content are expected to change and evolve as the field rapidly develops, so students should check regularly to see if there are changes or updates.

Guidelines for citing GenAI in specific formats (e.g., APA, MLA) are available in AskAway's [Citation Best Practices](#).

Searching for an article from a hallucinated citation

Students may encounter invalid citations that have been falsely generated by GenAI. This could be because the author of the paper used GenAI and included a hallucinated citation or because the student used a GenAI tool:

- Although the source may look real, you can manually check to see if the citation is real by checking the citation link or DOI, searching Google Scholar for the article, or checking the archives of the cited journal. If you do not find it, it is likely an invalid citation. (Naddaf and Quill)
- Communicate generously with patrons. GenAI tools can provide results that seem convincing and can often seem uniquely well-suited to the patron's needs. Use your reference interview skills to ask the patron for background information (e.g., “Can you tell me more about how you found out about this resource?”). Asking a patron directly if they retrieved the reference from a GenAI tool has the potential to seem accusatory and may elicit a defensive response.
- Acknowledge their frustration and offer support in re-directing the search to the library and relevant databases or provide guidance on search terms by conducting a reference interview.

Academic integrity

If a student has a question related to academic integrity and AI, refer them to the appropriate contact or website at their institution (e.g., the Academic Integrity office, the Writing or Learning Centre). For example, if they have concerns that they will be accused of using GenAI for an assignment or concerns about someone else's use of AI, refer them to their instructor and/or the appropriate contact through their institution. The *Generative AI Guidelines* on the [library's Policy Page](#) may include helpful resources.

Researching AI

Treat it like any other research question. Direct them to a subject guide if available, brainstorm keywords and synonyms, narrow the scope of the research question, and explore the best database to search for relevant sources.

How can I access GenAI tools?

You can discuss with the student what tasks they are hoping to get help with from a GenAI tool. If it is not within the scope of library research, you can use the *Chat - Limits script* or

assist them with finding a subject guide. You can also ask if their institution or assignment offers guidelines on GenAI use.

Appendix: Recommended AI Guides and Websites

Local Guides and Websites

- If an AI policy or guidelines from the student's institution exists, point them to it first. Refer to the [library's Policy Page - Generative AI Guidelines](#)
- Or, search the institution's list of subject guides. Some examples:
 - [The Essential Douglas College AI How-To Manual](#) (Douglas College)
 - [Artificial Intelligence](#) (JIBC Library)
 - [GenAI Student Guide](#) (KPU)
 - [Generative AI](#) (UBC Library)

Sources outside of AskAway / B.C.

Evaluation:

Newcastle University. "Thinking Critically about AI: Advice to help you evaluate AI tools and the outputs they generate." *Academic Skills Kit*. <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/academic-skills-kit/information-and-digital-skills/ai-literacy/thinking-critically/>

Responsible use:

University of Notre Dame. "AI Overview and Definitions." *AI for Teaching and Learning*. <https://learning.nd.edu/resource-library/ai-overview-and-definitions/>

University of Saskatchewan Library. "Learning with GenAI – How Much is Too Much?" *Research Guides*. https://libguides.usask.ca/Learning_with_GenAI

University of Victoria Libraries. "Scholarly Use of GenAI Tools: Start here." https://libguides.uvic.ca/AI_Tools

Role of the library:

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