

# Warning: AI Invents Fake References

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I'm the managing editor of the *UCEA Review*. Additionally, as a dissertation consultant and editor for roughly 25 years ([editorjen.com](http://editorjen.com)), I have an unusual perspective. I have an expert's knowledge but observe the doctoral process from the student's perspective.

We all have seen an increase in the use of AI in doctoral student writing. AI use is obvious first because grammar errors are reduced. Second, the writing, although correct, is glossy to the point that my eyes slide right off of it. The language is boring, repetitive, and vague. My brain does not take in the information.

Apparently I am not alone in this. A neurological study by Kosmyna et al. (2025) for the MIT Media Lab indicated students who used ChatGPT to write essays could not recall their "own" work and showed low cognitive activity compared to students not using an AI assistant.

## AI in Analysis

I have had a few professors recommend students use AI to analyze interview transcripts—without having done so themselves to see how it works. This seems overly trusting in the ability of AI. I use Yahoo email, which has implemented AI to summarize each email, and the summaries are 100% wrong. In the last 2 years, I have yet to see a summary that was not an error, so I am more skeptical.

One student sent me the result of AI analysis of his interviews. It was a vague summary of each transcript and an even vaguer distillation of commonalities. Nastruzzi (2026) termed this vagueness "subtractive bias" and "semantic ablation": "The AI identifies high-entropy clusters—the precise points where unique insights ... reside—and systematically replaces them with the most probable, generic token sequences." I am not averse to technology and must admit I was disappointed at the result. The AI analysis was unusable, and we proceeded to analyze the transcripts appropriately, using our human brains and coding techniques to develop themes, as described in the student's methodology chapter.

AI likes to summarize—the more bullet points, the better! Yet research, including the qualitative research popular among EdD students conducting applied doctoral research, is about digging for details.

AI does not notice clues that humans might. For instance, in a study I worked on (Odom & Cook, 2026), managers asked to describe a mistake paused for a full minute and refused to answer. "Let's circle back around to that," several said. They could not remember making

a mistake. This absence of a response was itself a salient finding related to the research topic; in a supposed environment of nonjudgmental organizational learning, they still could not bring themselves to acknowledge and describe a mistake, even in a confidential interview. This absence of material likely would not be reported by an AI summary.

## AI Makes Up Fake Citations

Here's a startling fact: AI invents fake citations. The author might be an expert in the field, but the article title will be made up, the journal issue will not have the article, and the doi number will be fake. Here are some examples of references AI provided students who thought using AI would be a time-saver.

### Example 1:

Cameron, D. R., & Simeon, R. (2020). Intergovernmental relations in Canada. In J. Bickerton & A.-G. Gagnon (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Canadian politics*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195445517.013.0018>

Here, AI has mashed up several sources. Maybe now is a good time for some bullet points:

- Cameron and Simeon wrote "Governmental Relations in Canada: The Emergence of Collaborative Federalism," but it was published in *Publius* in 2002.
- Bickerton and Gagnon edited a different book, *Canadian Politics*, in 2020. However, Cameron and Simeon do not have a chapter in it.
- The *Oxford Handbook of Canadian Politics* was edited by Courtney and Smith and published in 2010; Cameron and Simeon are not in it.

### Example 2:

Adamuti-Trache, M. (2021). Teacher certification and interprovincial mobility in Canada: Policy tensions and labour market implications. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 196, 34–52. <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjeap/article/view/69764>

In the reference above, the URL doesn't work, and online searches for the article yield nothing. That particular volume of *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* has a different article for those page numbers.

### Example 3:

**X** Anderson, J. (2021). *Education and social stratification*. Routledge.

Routledge is unaware of this book's existence.

### Example 4:

**X** Hunter, R. C., & Donahoo, S. (2005). The politics of race in urban education policy. *Education and Urban Society*, 37(3), 245–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124505274981>

Again, an unnecessary mash-up of various sources:

- The doi is fake.
- Morris published an article in 1999 in *Phi Delta Kappan* with the subheading “The Politics of Race in Urban Education Policy.”
- That issue of *Education and Urban Society* has an article pp. 243–256, but it's by Baker and has a different title. Hunter and Donahoo are not published in that issue.
- These authors *are* published in a later issue; the correct citation, which for some reason AI did not use, is this:

**✓** Hunter, R. C., & Donahoo, S. (2005). All things to all people. *Education and Urban Society*, 37(4), 419–430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124505277740>

## Recommendations

Some university programs use AI detection software. At this juncture, however, it is unreliable. APA researchers entered the U.S. Constitution into one program; it deduced 99% of the Constitution was AI generated (Huff, 2024).

This is not surprising to me. Corporations will rush to release a product before it has been tested appropriately. In its early days, Grammarly was heavily advertised but horribly inaccurate, from punctuation to subject-verb matching. I am not adverse to technology use in writing. Reciteworks, owned by 4cite Labs, is a wonderful program. Grammarly is now useful, although it makes errors related to APA style, punctuation, and research terms (e.g., the unique meaning of *significant* in statistical research).

Grammarly and Turnitin both have released AI detection software applications that professors have described to me as giving false positives, an assessment supported by others (Barlow, 2025). Apparently students who use Grammarly's advanced features to help with their writing are also at risk of having their work flagged by Turnitin as AI (Kieffer, 2024; University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, 2025).

Use common sense. Having a dissertation flagged incorrectly as AI can have devastating consequences for a student. If results are flagged, instead of relying on percentages from a software system, professors can ask to hear portions of the interview recordings, to confirm they actually took place. Students should be able to show the transcripts and the coding processes, however messy. When I code transcripts, there is a clear trail of note taking, various coding books, marked-up transcripts, and so on.

Instead of relying on Google Doc comments for communication, actual conversations are needed. The whole point of a lit review is for the researcher-student to examine prior research and synthesize it to provide a foundation for their study. A secondary point is to show the dissertation committee that the student has an understanding of the topic. If a student cannot competently discuss their topic and lit review in an oral conversation, they are not ready to conduct the study, much less receive a doctorate and potentially enter the professoriate.

Check references to confirm they are real. **The best way is to click on the doi or other link.** Using AI for references at this point is not a time saver. Going back and replacing half of the references with real sources takes hours.

The ethics of using AI is beyond this editorial, although I would recommend greater awareness of the water resources used by large data centers, especially in communities affected by drought (Gorey, 2025; Nicoletti et al., 2025). Just be warned: AI lacks integrity, which is a requirement for reliable, meaningful research.

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