Teaching Tip Tuesday
Alternatives to Essays

Although there has always been a possibility that students might "cheat" while writing and essay, the emergence of generative AI programs has made it simultaneously easier for students to "cheat" and less detectable when they do. This has led many instructors to question the usefulness of essays as a means of assessing student achievement of learning outcomes touching on content knowledge, understanding, and analysis. Scholarship of teaching and learning tells us that students are less likely to cheat if they find an assignment relevant to their personal lives or professional goals, and if they find the assignment enjoyable to complete. Here are some creative ideas to replace standard essays that may engage your students and limit their use of AI shortcuts.

- **Multimedia timeline.** These can be used to show the development of ideas, theories, or movements over time. Creating or using existing videos or infographics for particular points of interest on the timeline allow students greater creative control in how to demonstrate knowledge.

- **Concept-map literature review.** Students construct a visual representation of the relationships between individual research studies, with annotations and explanations of those relationships.

- **Social Media profiles/conversations**. Students construct social media profiles and friends lists for historical figures. Using the framework of social media dialog, students can demonstrate their understanding of the philosophy or position of these figures. (A useful tool for this is Fakebook from classtools.net. Students don't need an account to create and download their work.)

- **Translated learning.** Students present a topic from the course to a particular audience, using the format they feel will best reach the target audience. Examples might be producing a picture book to explain photosynthesis to second-graders, or making a tic-tok video to explain the impact of an environmental regulation to teens. As part of this assignment, students should reflect on the choices they made in translating their learning for this audience (e.g. what they left out or simplified, and why).

- **5-minute summary.** Students record a video recap of the key take-home points from a module. Encourage them to be creative by presenting their recap as a dramatic reading, a poem, a rap, a movie trailer, or a puppet show.

- **Musical Review**. Students specify a "Playlist" that is related to a reading or lesson, explaining how they think it is related to the lesson. This makes a great interactive discussion board post.

- **Pechakucha.** Students create a pictures-only slide presentation with 20 slides. Each slide plays for 20 seconds while the student speaks extemporaneously on the topic in question.

- **Group notes.** Students collaborate in small groups to produce complete notes to lectures, videos, and readings.

- **Un-essay.** Each student chooses how they wish to demonstrate their knowledge. A single rubric is used to evaluate student work, regardless of form.

Mandernach, J. (2023, July 25-27). Beyond term papers and exams: Innovative assignments for the online classroom. [Conference presentation] Distance Teaching and Learning Conference, Madison, WI, USA. (https://conferences.upcea.edu/DTL-SOLAR2023/)