



DSA Policy on the Use of AI in Masters Dissertations and PhDs submitted for the DSA Prizes

Underpinning any discussion of AI must be a recognition of the environmental and climate-related impacts of its energy and water use, and social justice issues around access to AI tools, siting of data centres and other aspects of AI technology use and structure. We would encourage all of our development studies colleagues to reflect on the use of AI, both from the perspective of research ethics (as we focus on here), but also the wider social and environmental impact of its use.

We understand that AI is a useful tool for researchers, and that its use is becoming more widespread to help streamline and support various aspects of the research process: from compiling reading lists for literature reviews, assisting with translation processes, summarizing concepts and ideas, or helping those for whom English is a second or third language express their ideas, to name but a few. However, we also recognise that AI brings with it an increasingly powerful tool for unfair practice, for writing rather than helping find ways to frame large sections of a paper or thesis, and using it to do – rather than support – the research and analysis itself.

All institutions have or are in the process of developing their own response to the challenge of AI use in research and assessments. At the DSA, recognising it can be both helpful and harmful, and that openness and transparency in its use is important, we have decided that all submissions for the annual Masters dissertation, and Development Studies PhD prizes be accompanied by a statement by the student on how AI was used in the research and writing (if at all). This is seen as critical for the judges in assessing the submitted works, but also for maintaining the integrity of the prizes. We also hope that it can contribute to the ongoing discussions about how to recognise and encourage good AI use practice in research.

The DSA principles for fair AI use:

Underpinning our approach is our understanding that effective and fair use of AI should reflect **full cognitive engagement in their use, and must avoid cognitive surrender** (Shaw and Nave 2026) in its use. Above all, research must reflect **human-led and -centred learning**. By this we mean that AI should always be used as a tool to support the research and writing process, not as a replacement for the researcher's scrutiny, analysis, intuition and expertise that are core to the research.

Fair and legitimate use of AI, for the DSA, entails:

1. Asking questions of the responses given by AI, and not assuming it is sufficient or complete
2. Testing the logic of AI: using our critical skills and learning to 'test' the accuracy of a response
3. Using AI to develop the argument, shape our own critical thinking or take the lead in providing insights in the production of new knowledge and ideas
4. Being open, clear and explicit in how AI has been used in the production of that knowledge and the specific output

Examples of **acceptable human-centred uses of AI** might include (but are not limited to):

- Testing ideas and theories through the use of AI (but **not** asking AI to develop those theories and ideas)
- Making use of AI translation tools, subject to the results being checked for accuracy or presence of AI hallucinations
- Making use of AI to find relevant research on a particular area, and helping to compile reading lists and/or bibliographies, subject to verification of sources



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- Using AI to summarise theories prior to undertaking more in-depth reading
- Using AI to translate or transcribe discursive evidence and discourses
- Using AI to prepare visual representations of evidence the researcher has collected and provided

In all cases, it is expected that the researcher would not simply accept what the AI tool has produced, but engage with it critically and interrogatively as a starting and not an end point.

Areas where **AI might be used** (and its use should be indicated), **but which may be more problematic**, include:

- The use of AI to help write in an academic style or for a particular standard of written English. Many students use proof readers, and the same principles would apply to the use of AI in their place: it is legitimate to use it to spot spelling or grammatical mistakes; but it should not be changing the meaning or adding to analysis and critical insights. It may be used in particular places to help the author explain an idea or argument, especially for those for whom English is not their first language, but it cannot be used to write substantial sections of a section, chapter or whole thesis. The written work must be the work of the author, not of AI and the author's voice should be retained.
- Whilst using AI to help understand theories and concepts as a first step to deeper reading and immersion can be helpful in learning and understanding, this can only be a first step and should not replace reading those texts. As an example, it is fine for a student to ask for a summary of Bourdieu's ideas on *habitus* before engaging with those works. But it would not be acceptable to take that summary and replicate it in the written work. Nor can it replace actually reading Bourdieu – the AI in this case is just a tool for aiding the understanding of new ideas and concepts to help the research, and the researcher must be alert that summaries provided may be selective.
- The use of AI for analysis of data: whilst it may be used as a tool to help in the process, this must be subject to the cognitive engagement of the researcher.

Areas where AI use would be considered **unacceptable** include:

- Using AI to write whole or substantial sections of written work (for example, asking AI to write the literature review, or to write a context section for a case study)
- Using AI to provide the data analysis without checking for accuracy or any substantive input from the researcher
- Using AI to create the theoretical framework
- Using AI to generate information or evidence which is about the ethics and politics of AI itself.

The AI use statement

For all future submissions to the DSA Masters Dissertation and PhD prizes, all students will be asked to submit a (separate) statement of their AI usage in relation to the work.

There is no fixed format for this, as usage will vary considerably. However, we have drafted a model (based on an AI statement that was included in a Development Studies thesis, that we felt was evidence of good practice in being open and clear about its use) that might be helpful to show what kinds of information and detail should be included. In addition to this example, researchers may want

to detail if they are using a free or paid for service, and a short reflection on any AI bias or training they feel the model may have acquired from your use.

Having completed the research and first stages of analysis, I have used Chat GPT-4.5 to test and develop the theoretical framework by asking it to undertake an analysis of my own writing and summarise the key arguments, and to produce matrices of my findings and analysis. This has provided me with an additional perspective on the clarity of my theoretical explanation and outline, and supported editing to ensure greater understanding. I have used Perplexity AI and Claude AI to help identify research outside of my areas of expertise that I was not aware of that may be relevant to my own research. I have also used these engines to summarise and organise the large amount of notes I took as part of the research, to allow me to more quickly find use the information and knowledge in my thesis. Finally, I have used Chat GPT 4.5 to check the writing makes and avoid grammatical mistakes that might hinder understanding, as well as asking a friend to proof-read the text. The research (including reading the literature), the analysis, the ideas and theories that have been developed, remain my own work throughout, and I have engaged with AI as a tool to support my own work.

We would also encourage our members to discuss within their institutions whether such statements on AI use should be expected to be included in the actual dissertation or thesis; and how this compares to the ones already in existence.

The DSA Dissertation / Thesis Prize AI statement

All submissions to the DSA Masters Prize or the PhD Prize are expected to complete and submit this form alongside the thesis or dissertation.

Name:

Title:

Confirmation of AI usage:

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AI has not been used in any capacity in the research or writing of this work

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AI has been used to support the research and/or writing of this work, with details of how it has been used below.

Statement on AI usage

Signed:

Date: