AI use in NCTJ assessments - Guidance for assessors, tutors and learners

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is being embedded in newsrooms and content operations across the industry. Learners studying for an NCTJ qualification should have an understanding of what AI is, how to use it, and how it will impact on their role as a trainee journalist going into the newsroom. It is also important that centres understand the risks posed by AI, such mis-use of AI in NCTJ assessments.

This guidance has been provided to set out the NCTJ's arrangements for preventing the misuse of AI in NCTJ assessments. It identifies to what extent AI use may be permitted in NCTJ assessments, and outlines what is classed as misuse and therefore considered a form of malpractice.

Assessors, centres/training providers and learners should use this document and its contents to support the delivery of all NCTJ assessments. It should be read in conjunction with the NCTJ's malpractice and maladministration policy and sanctions policy, which are available to view on our website [here](#).

It is each centre/training provider's responsibility to have established measures in place to ensure that learners are aware of the importance of submitting their own independent work for assessment and for identifying potential malpractice.

All work submitted for NCTJ assessments must be the learners' own. This does not include any third-party material which may be permitted under the submission rules for some NCTJ assessments.

Learners who misuse AI so that the work they submit for assessment is not considered their own will have committed malpractice. This will be investigated under the terms of the NCTJ's malpractice and maladministration policy and may attract severe sanctions.

Learners and centre staff must be aware of the risks of using AI and must be clear on what constitutes malpractice.

Where tutors or assessors have any doubts about the authenticity of a candidate's work submitted for an NCTJ assessment (for example, they suspect that parts of it have been generated by AI but this has not been acknowledged), they must immediately notify the NCTJ.

The NCTJ assessments this guidance applies to

NCTJ exams are completed under the supervision of invigilators or proctoring software, with limited access to authorised materials. For most module exams, access to the internet is prohibited and lockdown software (either Safe Exam Browser or Proctorio) is required for examination delivery, which prevents learners accessing the internet or unauthorised materials. Where lockdown software is not used, because the exam requires access to the internet, the exam is delivered under the supervision of live invigilators who are responsible for ensuring the integrity of the assessment is maintained. The delivery of NCTJ exams will therefore be largely unaffected by AI tools, because learners will not be able to use these tools when completing their exams.

This document is intended to provide guidance in relation to the following NCTJ assessments which are not completed under examination or newsroom conditions: e-portfolios/portfolios of evidence, e-logbooks, coursework, projects, presentations, and assignments. Specifically, it applies to the following NCTJ qualifications/units:

- Level 3 Certificate in Foundation Journalism – assessments for all units, which are assignment-based

- Level 3 Content Creator end-point assessment – AM1 project/campaign report and presentation and AM2 portfolio of evidence

- Level 4 Diploma in Magazine Journalism – magazine project and portfolio

- Level 5 Diploma in Journalism – essential journalism e-portfolio; radio journalism coursework; videojournalism for digital platforms coursework; journalism for a digital audience coursework; data journalism coursework; and photography for journalists e-portfolio

- Level 5 Journalist apprenticeship end-point assessment – AM1 journalism project/project report and AM2 portfolio of evidence

- Level 5 Qualification in Practical International Journalism – e-portfolio of evidence

- Level 6 National Qualification in Journalism – e-logbook

- Level 7 Senior Journalist apprenticeship end-point assessment – AM1 journalism project/project presentation and AM2 portfolio of evidence

- Level 7 Leadership and Management for Journalists – portfolio of evidence

What is AI use and what are the risks of using it in NCTJ assessments?

AI use refers to the use of AI tools to obtain information and content which might be used in work produced for NCTJ assessments, leading to the achievement of NCTJ qualifications and/or units.

Misuse of AI tools in relation to NCTJ assessments at any time constitutes malpractice. Centres/training providers and learners should also be aware that AI tools are still being developed and there are often limitations to their use, such as producing inaccurate or inappropriate content.

Generative AI, or AI chatbots, are AI tools which generate text in response to user prompts and questions. Users can ask follow-up questions or ask the chatbot to revise the responses already provided. AI chatbots respond to prompts based on patterns in the data sets upon which they have been trained. They generate responses which are statistically likely to be relevant and appropriate. AI chatbots can complete tasks such as:

- Answering questions

- Analysing, improving, and summarising text

- Authoring essays, articles, presentations, fiction, and non-fiction

- Writing computer code

- Creating data sets, infographics, and other visual images

- Translating text from one language to another

- Generating new ideas, prompts, or suggestions for a given topic or theme

- Generating text with specific attributes, such as tone, sentiment, or formality

The use of generative AI/AI chatbots poses a significant risk if used by learners to complete an NCTJ assessment. As noted above, they have been developed to produce responses based upon the statistical likelihood of the language selected being an appropriate response and so the responses cannot be relied upon. AI chatbots often produce answers which may seem convincing but contain incorrect or biased information. Some AI chatbots have been identified as providing dangerous and harmful answers to questions and some can also produce fake references to books/articles by real or fake people.

What is classed as AI misuse in NCTJ assessments?

Learners must submit work for NCTJ assessments which is their own. This means that the final product must in their own words, it must reflect their own independent

work, and must not be copied or paraphrased from another source such as an AI tool.

Learners are expected to demonstrate their own knowledge, skills and understanding as required for the assessment in question and as set out in the relevant NCTJ programme of study. This includes demonstrating their performance in relation to the marking criteria for the relevant subject.

Any use of AI which means learners have not independently demonstrated their own attainment is likely to be considered malpractice. For the purposes of demonstrating their knowledge, understanding and skills, learners should not rely on tools such as AI. It is important that learners develop the knowledge, skills and understanding of the subjects they are studying.

AI tools must only be used when the conditions of the assessment permit the use of

the internet and where the candidate is able to demonstrate that the final submission is the product of their own independent work and independent thinking.

Examples of AI misuse include, but are not limited to:

- copying or paraphrasing sections of AI-generated content so that the work is no longer the candidate's own

- copying or paraphrasing whole responses of AI-generated content

- using AI to complete parts of the assessment so that the work does not reflect the candidate's own work, analysis, or evaluation

- failing to acknowledge use of AI tools when they have been used as a source of information

- incomplete or poor acknowledgement of AI tools

- submitting work with intentionally incomplete or misleading references to sources of information.

AI misuse constitutes malpractice. The malpractice sanctions applicable for plagiarism and misuse of AI tools may include disqualification from the assessment in question, a ban on sitting future assessments in that unit/qualification for up to 12 months or longer, disqualification from the qualification as a whole, and/or disqualification from taking any NCTJ qualification in the future.

A candidate's marks may also be affected if they have relied on AI to complete an assessment and the attainment that they have demonstrated in relation to the requirements of the unit or qualification does not accurately reflect their own work.

When can AI be used in NCTJ assessments?

Centres/training providers must make clear to learners the importance of referencing the sources they have used when producing work for an assessment, and how to do this. Appropriate referencing is key to maintaining the integrity of assessments.

If a candidate uses an AI tool which provides details of the sources it has used in generating content, these sources must be verified by the candidate and referenced in their work via their NCTJ portfolio, logbook or coursework cover sheet.

For end-point assessments, apprentices must verify these sources and reference them in their AM1 project report (for level 3 content creator and level 5 journalist) or as part of their AM1 project presentation (for level 7 senior journalist). Learners studying for the Certificate in Foundation Journalism (CFJ) must verify these sources and reference them in their candidate logbook, or in their individual unit submission.

Where an AI tool does not provide such details, learners should ensure that they independently verify the AI-generated content and then reference the sources they have used in their NCTJ cover sheet (or in their AM1 project report/project presentation for end-point assessments, or in their portfolio or logbook or individual unit submission for the CFJ).

In addition to the above, where learners use AI, they must acknowledge its use on their NCTJ cover sheet (or in their AM1 project report/project presentation for end-point assessments, or in their portfolio or logbook or unit submission for the CFJ) and show clearly how they have used it. This allows tutors and assessors to review how AI has been used and whether that use was appropriate in the context of the particular assessment. This is particularly important given that AI-generated content is not subject to the same scrutiny as other published sources.

Where AI tools have been used as a source of information, a candidate's acknowledgement must show the name of the AI source used and the date the content was generated, e.g. ChatGPT v3.5 17 May 2024, and provide a brief explanation of how it was used.

In instances where AI sources are not referenced correctly, and/or a tutor or assessor suspects that a candidate has used AI tools and not acknowledged this appropriately, the tutor/assessor will need to promptly notify the NCTJ as per the requirements of our malpractice policy, and the NCTJ will conduct an investigation to ensure that the work is the candidate's own. Further information on the NCTJ's malpractice investigation process can be found in our malpractice and maladministration policy available on our website.

Centre's responsibility

Centres/training providers must ensure that any policies and procedures they have in place to ensure the authenticity of assessments also address the risks associated with AI misuse.

Centres/training providers must make their learners aware of the appropriate and inappropriate use of AI, the risks of using AI, and the possible consequences of using AI inappropriately in an NCTJ assessment. They should also make learners aware of the NCTJ's approach to plagiarism and the consequences of malpractice.

Centres/training providers should:

- explain the importance of learners submitting their own independent work for NCTJ assessments and stress to them the risks of malpractice

- update their malpractice/misconduct/plagiarism policy to acknowledge the use of AI – what it is, the risks of using it, what AI misuse is, how this will be treated as malpractice, when it may be used and how it should be acknowledged (most simply for NCTJ assessments by referencing this document)

- ensure they provide learners with clear guidance on how to reference sources appropriately on cover sheets for NCTJ assessments

- ensure they provide learners with clear guidance on how learners should acknowledge any use of AI on NCTJ cover sheets for NCTJ assessments to avoid misuse

- ensure that tutors and assessors are familiar with AI tools, their risks, and AI detection tools

- ensure that each candidate is issued with a copy of this guidance document and understands its contents

- reinforce to learners the importance of the declaration on the cover sheet for their NCTJ assessment, where they confirm the work they are submitting is their own

- remind learners that the NCTJ has established procedures for reporting and investigating malpractice and provide them with a copy of the NCTJ's malpractice and maladministration policy.

Preventing AI misuse

To prevent AI misuse, education and awareness of centre staff and learners is key. The following are some actions that could be taken by centres/training providers, to help prevent the misuse of AI in NCTJ assessments:

- Consider restricting access to online AI tools on centre devices and networks

- Ensure that access to online AI tools is restricted on centre devices used for exams

- For NCTJ assessments that are internally assessed and not also attached to an exam date, such as the essential journalism e-portfolio or photography e-portfolio, set reasonable internal deadlines for submission of work and provide reminders

- Where appropriate, allocate time for some portions of work to be done in class under direct supervision to allow the tutor to authenticate a candidate's work with confidence

- Examine intermediate stages in the production of work to ensure that work is underway in a planned and timely manner and that work submitted represents a natural continuation of earlier stages

- Consider whether it's appropriate and helpful to engage learners in a short verbal discussion about their work to ascertain that they understand it and that it reflects their own independent work

- Do not accept work which staff suspect has been taken from AI tools without proper acknowledgement or is otherwise plagiarised – doing so is likely to constitute centre malpractice which may attract sanctions

- Issue tasks for centre-devised assignments which are topical, current and specific, and require the creation of content which is less likely to be accessible to AI models

Identifying AI misuse

Comparison with previous work:

When reviewing a piece of work to ensure its authenticity, it is useful to compare it against other work created by the candidate. Where the work is made up of writing, you can make note of the following characteristics:

- Spelling and punctuation

- Grammar use

- Writing style and tone

- Vocabulary

- Complexity and coherency

- General understanding, comprehension and working level

- The mode of production

Tutors could consider comparing newly submitted work with work completed by the candidate in the classroom, or under supervised conditions. If you see the following in a candidate's work, it may be an indication that they have misused AI:

- A default use of American spelling, currency, or terms

- A default use of language or vocabulary which might not be appropriate to the qualification level

- A lack of direct quotes and/or use of references where these are required or expected

- Inclusion of references or sources which cannot be found or verified

- A lack of reference to events occurring after a certain date (reflecting when an AI tool's data source was compiled), which might be notable for some subjects

- Instances of incorrect/inconsistent use of first-person and third-person perspective where generated text is left unaltered

- A difference in the language style used when compared to that used by the candidate in the classroom or in other previously submitted work

- A variation in the style of language evidenced in a piece of work, if a candidate has taken significant portions of text from AI and then amended this

- A lack of graphs/data tables/visual aids where these would normally be expected

- A lack of specific local or topical knowledge

- Content being more generic in nature rather than relating to the candidate themself, or a specialised task or scenario, if this is required or expected

- The inadvertent inclusion by learners of warnings or provisos produced by AI to highlight the limits of its ability, or the hypothetical nature of its output

- The unusual use of several concluding statements throughout the text, or several repetitions of an overarching structure within a single assignment, which can be a result of AI being asked to produce an assignment several times to add depth, variety or to overcome its output limit

- The inclusion of a strongly stated conclusion that does not logically follow on from previous statement or confidently incorrect statements within otherwise cohesive content

- Overly verbose or hyperbolic language that may not be in keeping with the candidate's usual style

Automated detection:

Online AI detection software can be used to analyse written content and determine the likelihood that it was produced by AI. For example:

- GPTZero (https://gptzero.me/)

- Quillbot (https://quillbot.com/)

These tools can be used as a check on candidate work and/or to verify concerns about the authenticity of a candidate's work. However, it should be noted that the above tools, as they base their scores on the predictability of words, will give lower scores for AI-generated content which has been subsequently amended by learners. The quality of these detection tools can vary and AI and detection tools will continue to evolve. The use of detection tools should form part of a holistic approach to considering the authenticity of learners' work; all available information will be considered by the NCTJ when reviewing any malpractice concerns.

Reporting AI misuse to the NCTJ

If AI misuse is detected or suspected by a tutor or assessor, it must be immediately reported to the NCTJ for investigation under the terms of our malpractice and maladministration policy, available on our website here.

The NCTJ ensures that our staff, examiners, assessors and moderators are appropriately trained in the identification of malpractice and have established procedures for reporting and investigating suspected malpractice.

If AI misuse is suspected by an NCTJ examiner, assessor or moderator, or if it has been reported by a candidate or member of the public, details of the allegation will be relayed to the centre/training provider, if applicable. The NCTJ will liaise with the Head of Centre regarding the next steps in the investigation and how appropriate evidence will be obtained. The NCTJ will then consider the case and, if necessary, impose sanctions in line with our sanctions policy, available on our website here.

The NCTJ will also take action, which can include the application of sanctions, where centre staff are knowingly accepting, or failing to check, inauthentic work for NCTJ assessments.

Review arrangements

The NCTJ will review this document annually as part of the NCTJ's annual self-evaluation arrangements and revise it as and when necessary, in response to customer, learner or regulatory feedback.

If you would like to feedback any views, please contact us via the details provided at the end of this policy.

This policy will be reviewed in September 2025.

Additional helpful guidance and information on AI misuse may also be found in the JCQ document 'AI use in assessments: protecting the integrity of qualifications' which is available online [here](#).

Contact us

If you have any queries about the contents of this document, please contact our head of awarding on 01799 544014 or by email; details are available from our website at www.nctj.com.