Prompt Engineering as Rhetorical Practice: Redefining Literacy in AI-Mediated Education

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Abstract

This study examines prompt engineering as an emerging form of rhetorical practice and positions it as a critical component of literacy in AI-mediated educational environments. With the increasing integration of generative artificial intelligence tools in academic and professional contexts, the act of composing prompts has evolved into a strategic communicative process that shapes knowledge production and textual outcomes. Drawing on classical and contemporary rhetorical theories, this paper conceptualizes prompt design as a form of purposeful discourse involving audience awareness, genre conventions, and contextual framing.

Using a qualitative and conceptual research approach, the study analyzes prompt–response interactions to identify key rhetorical strategies such as role-based prompting, constraint-setting, and iterative refinement. The findings indicate that effective prompt construction mirrors traditional writing practices, requiring clarity of intent, metacognitive awareness, and critical engagement with language. Furthermore, the study highlights the pedagogical implications of prompt literacy, arguing that it should be integrated into English Studies curricula to enhance critical thinking, digital competence, and ethical awareness in AI-assisted writing environments.
The paper also addresses broader societal and educational implications, including challenges related to authorship, academic integrity, and algorithmic bias. It concludes that prompt engineering represents a transformative shift in literacy practices, redefining the role of the writer from content producer to rhetorical designer in human–AI interaction. This reconceptualization contributes to ongoing discussions in education, society, and policy regarding the future of literacy in the digital age.

1. Introduction

The rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI), particularly large language models such as ChatGPT developed by OpenAI, has transformed how texts are produced, revised, and interpreted (OpenAI, 2023). As AI systems increasingly mediate writing practices across academic and professional domains, prompt engineering—the strategic design of inputs to guide AI-generated outputs—has emerged as a crucial communicative activity. Traditionally viewed as a technical skill, prompt engineering can be reconceptualized as a rhetorical practice involving audience awareness, genre knowledge, and contextual framing. Within English Studies, where rhetoric and composition are central, prompt writing represents an extension of classical rhetorical principles into human–AI interaction. This study argues that prompt

engineering constitutes a new form of literacy, requiring interpretive, persuasive, and critical competencies similar to traditional writing practices.

2. Literature Review

James Paul Gee advances a sociocultural theory of language that reconceptualizes literacy as embedded in social practices (Gee, 1996). Central to his work is the distinction between "Discourse" (with a capital D) as socially situated identity performance and "discourse" as language-in-use. Gee argues that literacy involves mastering socially recognized ways of speaking, acting, and valuing within communities. Widely influential in education and literacy studies, the book challenges autonomous models of literacy by emphasizing power, ideology, and access. Scholars regard it as foundational for New Literacy Studies and critical approaches to language, identity, and learning.

Kenneth Burke develops a rhetorical theory that positions language as a form of symbolic action rather than mere representation (Burke, 1966). He argues that humans are "symbol-using animals" who construct reality through terministic screens, which shape perception and motive. His work expands the dramatistic framework, emphasizing identification as central to persuasion and social cohesion. Scholars highlight Burke's interdisciplinary influence across rhetoric, communication, and cultural studies, noting his integration of philosophy, literary criticism, and sociology. The work remains foundational for understanding how discourse shapes motives, identities, and power relations.

Richard Lanham explores how digital technologies transform reading, writing, and rhetoric (Lanham, 1993). He introduces the concept of "hyper reading" to describe interactive, non-linear engagement with electronic texts, contrasting it with traditional linear reading. Lanham argues that digital media alter attention, memory, and composition, reshaping how writers and readers construct meaning. His work bridges literary criticism, rhetoric, and media studies, highlighting the cognitive and cultural implications of electronic communication. Scholars recognize The Electronic Word as pioneering in understanding digital literacies.

Shoshana Zuboff examines how digital platforms commodify personal data to predict and influence behaviour, defining this phenomenon as "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019). She argues that companies extract private experiences as raw material for profit, creating asymmetrical power dynamics between corporations and individuals. The book blends empirical research with critical theory, highlighting implications for privacy, autonomy, and democracy. Scholars regard it as a landmark critique of contemporary data economies, provoking debates on regulation, ethics, and the societal consequences of pervasive digital surveillance.

3. Objectives

- To conceptualize prompt engineering as rhetorical practice.
- To examine its relevance within English Studies.
- To analyse the rhetorical strategies embedded in effective prompts.
- To evaluate its implications for pedagogy and literacy theory.

4. Hypothesis

Prompt engineering operates as a rhetorical practice that involves interpretive, persuasive, and critical skills similar to those required in traditional writing; therefore, it can be considered an essential component of contemporary literacy within AI-mediated educational contexts.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology:

- **Textual Analysis:** Examination of prompts and corresponding AI outputs.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Comparing traditional writing processes with AI-mediated composition.
- **Theoretical Application:** Applying rhetorical theories to prompt construction.
- **Case Studies:** Observing prompt strategies across academic, creative, and professional contexts.

Data consists of sample prompts structured with varying rhetorical strategies (e.g., role-based prompting, genre specification, constraint-based prompting).

6. Conceptualize prompt engineering as rhetorical practice

To conceptualize prompt engineering as rhetorical practice is to move it from the realm of technical optimization into the domain of purposeful discourse. Prompt engineering is often described as the skill of crafting inputs that produce accurate or desirable outputs from generative AI systems such as ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023). However, beyond its procedural function, prompt writing operates as a strategic act of communication. It involves intention, audience awareness, contextual framing, and linguistic choice—core elements long examined within rhetorical theory (Burke, 1966; Gee, 1996). Understanding prompt engineering through a rhetorical lens reveals it as a contemporary extension of composition practices rather than a departure from them.

At its foundation, rhetoric concerns how language is used to achieve particular effects within specific situations. Classical theorists such as Aristotle emphasized persuasion as a function of ethos, pathos, and logos (Aristotle, trans. 2007), while later scholars expanded rhetoric to include symbolic action (Burke, 1966). When a user constructs a prompt, they engage in similar symbolic action: defining the task, shaping the AI's role, specifying tone and genre, and anticipating possible interpretations. The prompt becomes a rhetorical artifact designed to guide a non-human yet responsive audience—the algorithmic model—toward a desired communicative outcome.

Prompt engineering also aligns with the concept of the rhetorical situation, articulated by Bitzer (1968), which includes exigence, audience, and constraints. In AI interaction, the exigence may be the need to generate an academic summary, creative narrative, or technical explanation. The audience, though algorithmic, requires clear instructions, contextual detail, and structured guidance to produce relevant discourse. Constraints include token limits, training biases, genre expectations, and the user's own communicative goals. Effective prompt design responds to these elements strategically, demonstrating rhetorical sensitivity.

Moreover, prompt engineering foregrounds the importance of metadiscourse—language about language. Prompts frequently include directives such as "adopt a formal tone," "write in 250 words," or "provide evidence-based arguments." These instructions shape not only content but also style, structure, and stance. In this sense, prompts function similarly to assignment guidelines in composition classrooms or editorial briefs in professional writing contexts (Hyland, 2005). The prompter must anticipate how linguistic cues will be interpreted and must revise iteratively when outputs diverge from expectations. This recursive process reflects the drafting and revision practices central to rhetorical composition.

Conceptualizing prompt engineering as rhetorical practice also highlights its dialogic dimension. Unlike static texts, prompts initiate an exchange between human and machine. Each output informs subsequent prompts, creating a feedback loop that resembles conversational rhetoric. The user negotiates meaning with the system, refining instructions and clarifying intent. This collaborative dimension challenges traditional notions of solitary authorship and

positions rhetorical agency as distributed across human and technological actors (Hayles, 2012).

Finally, framing prompt engineering rhetorically underscores its epistemological implications. Prompts do not merely retrieve information; they shape how knowledge is organized, framed, and presented. The choices embedded in prompts influence which perspectives are foregrounded, what evidence is prioritized, and how arguments are structured. Thus, prompt engineering becomes an act of knowledge design. Recognizing it as rhetorical practice affirms that it is grounded in interpretive judgment, critical awareness, and communicative strategy—qualities long central to the study of rhetoric and English Studies (Lanham, 1993; Selber, 2004).

7. To examine its relevance within English Studies

To examine the relevance of prompt engineering within English Studies is to recognize how deeply it intersects with the field's central concerns: rhetoric, composition, discourse analysis, authorship, and literacy (Gee, 1996; Selber, 2004). English Studies has long explored how texts are produced, interpreted, and circulated within specific cultural and technological contexts. The emergence of generative AI systems such as ChatGPT introduces a new writing environment in which human intention and machine processing converge (OpenAI, 2023). In this context, prompt engineering becomes a significant site of textual production and critical inquiry.

First, prompt engineering aligns closely with rhetoric and composition studies. Writing effective prompts requires clarity of purpose, audience awareness, genre knowledge, and stylistic precision—skills traditionally cultivated in writing classrooms (Hyland, 2005). When students compose prompts, they must articulate tasks, define constraints, and anticipate interpretive outcomes, mirroring the processes involved in drafting essays or professional documents. These parallels position prompt literacy as an extension rather than a disruption of established writing pedagogies.

Second, prompt engineering invites renewed examination of authorship and agency, long-standing debates within literary and theoretical traditions. The collaborative interaction between human users and AI systems complicates conventional understandings of the author as the sole originator of meaning. English Studies, particularly through poststructuralist and reader-response frameworks, has already questioned stable notions of authorship (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1969). AI-mediated writing intensifies these questions, making prompt construction a critical moment where intention, control, and textual authority intersect.

Third, prompt engineering contributes to discourse and genre studies. Prompts often specify form—"write a research abstract," "compose a sonnet," or "generate a policy brief." In doing so, they rely on shared genre conventions and disciplinary knowledge. Analyzing how prompts encode these conventions offers insight into how genres are operationalized, simplified, or transformed in AI-generated texts (Swales, 1990). English Studies can thus investigate how algorithmic systems reproduce, hybridize, or standardize discourse patterns across contexts.

Furthermore, prompt literacy intersects with digital humanities and media studies. As textual production increasingly involves algorithmic mediation, understanding the mechanics and rhetoric of prompts becomes essential for critically engaging with digital culture (Hayles, 2012). Students and scholars must learn not only to interpret texts but also to interrogate the systems that generate them. Prompt engineering provides a practical framework for examining bias, representation, and power embedded in AI outputs (Zuboff, 2019).

Finally, integrating prompt engineering into English Studies supports the discipline's evolving mission to prepare students for contemporary communicative environments. Literacy

today extends beyond reading and writing traditional print texts; it encompasses navigating multimodal, networked, and AI-driven platforms (Selber, 2004). By treating prompt engineering as a legitimate object of study, English Studies affirms its adaptability and relevance in a technologically mediated world. Rather than displacing traditional literary and rhetorical inquiry, prompt engineering expands the field's scope, reinforcing its foundational commitment to understanding how language shapes—and is shaped by—changing cultural conditions (Lanham, 1993).

8. Types of Prompting Strategies

Prompting strategies refer to the structured approaches users employ to guide generative AI systems such as ChatGPT toward desired outputs. These strategies vary in complexity, purpose, and rhetorical design, and understanding them helps frame prompt engineering as both a technical and communicative practice.

1. Zero-Shot Prompting - Zero-shot prompting involves providing a direct instruction without examples. The user simply states the task (e.g., "Summarize this article in 200 words"). This strategy relies on the model's pre-trained knowledge and is effective for straightforward tasks. Rhetorically, it emphasizes clarity and precision in task definition.

2. One-Shot and Few-Shot Prompting - In one-shot or few-shot prompting, the user includes one or more examples to demonstrate the expected format or reasoning pattern. For instance, providing a sample question-answer pair before posing a new question. This method guides the AI through analogy and pattern recognition, functioning rhetorically as modeling or exemplification.

3. Role-Based Prompting- Role-based prompting assigns a specific persona or professional identity to the AI, such as "Act as a literary critic" or "Respond as a historian." This shapes tone, vocabulary, and perspective. It draws on rhetorical ethos, establishing authority and contextual framing within the response.

4. Chain-of-Thought Prompting- Chain-of-thought prompting encourages the AI to display step-by-step reasoning. By asking the model to "Explain your reasoning step by step," users enhance logical transparency and coherence. This strategy foregrounds logos, making argumentative processes visible.

5. Constraint-Based Prompting- This approach sets clear boundaries—word limits, structural requirements, stylistic guidelines, or theoretical frameworks. Constraints help refine outputs and reduce ambiguity, mirroring rhetorical control over arrangement and style.

6. Iterative Prompting- Iterative prompting involves refining prompts based on previous responses. Through feedback and revision, the user incrementally improves accuracy and relevance. This recursive strategy reflects drafting processes in composition studies.

Together, these prompting strategies demonstrate that effective AI interaction depends on deliberate rhetorical choices. Each type shapes how meaning is structured, interpreted, and generated, reinforcing prompt engineering as a dynamic literacy practice.

9. Analyse the rhetorical strategies embedded in effective prompts

To analyse the rhetorical strategies embedded in effective prompts is to examine how language is deliberately structured to guide, constrain, and shape AI-generated responses. Effective prompts are not accidental or neutral; they are carefully constructed rhetorical artifacts designed to produce specific communicative outcomes. When interacting with generative AI systems such as ChatGPT, users engage in strategic linguistic decision-making that mirrors traditional rhetorical practice (OpenAI, 2023; Burke, 1966).

One central strategy is clarity of exigence. Effective prompts clearly articulate the purpose of the task—whether to summarize, argue, narrate, or critique. By specifying the

communicative goal, the prompter reduces ambiguity and directs the AI toward a defined rhetorical objective. This mirrors the classical emphasis on identifying purpose before composing discourse (Aristotle, trans. 2007). Without a clearly stated exigence, outputs tend to be generic or misaligned with user expectations.

Another key strategy is audience specification. Strong prompts frequently define the intended readership: "Explain for undergraduate students," "Write for a policy-making audience," or "Use language accessible to children." Such instructions shape diction, tone, and complexity. Although the AI itself is the immediate respondent, the imagined audience embedded within the prompt influences the generated text. This reflects the rhetorical principle that discourse must be adapted to audience expectations and interpretive frameworks (Bitzer, 1968).

Constraint-setting also plays a vital rhetorical role. Effective prompts include structural and stylistic boundaries such as word limits, formatting requirements, genre conventions, or theoretical frameworks. These constraints function similarly to rhetorical canons of arrangement and style, organizing how information should be presented (Lanham, 1993). For example, directing the AI to "write in 300 words with an academic tone and include three supporting arguments" establishes both macro-structure and stylistic parameters.

Additionally, effective prompts often employ role assignment as a persuasive strategy. By instructing the AI to "act as a literary critic," "assume the role of a historian," or "respond as a peer reviewer," the prompter invokes disciplinary authority and shapes epistemological stance. This technique parallels ethos-building in traditional rhetoric, as it frames the voice and credibility of the response (Burke, 1966).

Another embedded strategy is iterative refinement. Prompting is frequently recursive: users adjust phrasing, add clarifications, or narrow scope based on prior outputs. This process resembles drafting and revision in composition, where rhetorical effectiveness emerges through continuous adjustment (Hyland, 2005). Iteration acknowledges that meaning is negotiated rather than fixed, reinforcing the dialogic nature of AI-mediated writing (Hayles, 2012).

Finally, effective prompts demonstrate metadiscursive awareness—explicit guidance about tone, structure, evidence, and perspective. Such instructions reveal an understanding that language choices directly shape interpretive outcomes. In this sense, prompt engineering foregrounds rhetorical consciousness: the prompter must anticipate how linguistic cues will be operationalized within the AI's generative processes. Analysing these strategies highlights that successful prompting depends on rhetorical sensitivity rather than mere technical manipulation. Effective prompts integrate purpose, audience awareness, structural control, and revision, demonstrating that prompt engineering is deeply rooted in the principles of rhetorical design (Selber, 2004).

Evaluate its implications for Pedagogy and Literacy theory

The emergence of generative AI systems such as ChatGPT has significantly reshaped contemporary writing environments, compelling educators and theorists to reconsider foundational assumptions about literacy, authorship, and learning (OpenAI, 2023; Hayles, 2012) . Evaluating the implications of prompt engineering for pedagogy and literacy theory reveals both transformative opportunities and critical challenges. As prompt engineering becomes an increasingly common practice in academic contexts, it demands systematic integration into educational frameworks rather than peripheral acknowledgment.

From a pedagogical perspective, prompt engineering reframes writing as a process of designing instructions rather than solely producing extended texts. Traditionally, writing instruction has emphasized thesis development, organization, argumentation, and revision (Hyland, 2005). While these remain central, prompt literacy introduces an additional layer: the

ability to articulate precise, rhetorically effective directives that guide AI systems toward meaningful output. This shift encourages students to think metacognitively about how language functions. To compose an effective prompt, a learner must clarify purpose, define audience, specify genre conventions, and anticipate interpretive outcomes. In this sense, prompt writing reinforces core rhetorical principles rather than undermining them. Moreover, integrating prompt engineering into pedagogy can strengthen critical thinking skills. Students must evaluate AI-generated responses for accuracy, bias, coherence, and relevance rather than passively accepting outputs (Selber, 2004). This iterative process mirrors traditional drafting practices, positioning AI interaction as a collaborative stage in composition rather than a substitute for intellectual labour. Educators can design assignments that require students to document prompt evolution, analyse rhetorical adjustments, and justify revisions. Such practices foreground reflective learning and rhetorical awareness.

However, the pedagogical implications also include challenges related to academic integrity and assessment. The availability of AI-generated text raises concerns about originality and authorship. Literacy theory has long debated the nature of authorship, particularly in light of poststructuralist arguments that decentre the author as the sole origin of meaning (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1969). AI-mediated writing intensifies these debates by distributing textual production across human and machine agents. In classroom contexts, this necessitates clearer frameworks for transparency, attribution, and ethical use. Rather than banning AI outright, educators may need to redefine authorship as inclusive of prompt design, critical oversight, and editorial decision-making.

Prompt engineering also compels a reconsideration of literacy itself. Traditional literacy models emphasize reading and writing as discrete human skills grounded in print culture (Gee, 1996). Digital literacy expanded this framework to include multimodal composition and online navigation (Selber, 2004). Prompt literacy extends it further to encompass human–AI interaction. Here, literacy involves not only producing text but also designing the conditions under which text is generated. It requires understanding algorithmic mediation, recognizing system limitations, and crafting language strategically to achieve desired communicative goals.

From a theoretical standpoint, prompt engineering aligns with sociocultural models of literacy that view reading and writing as situated practices shaped by tools and technologies (Gee, 1996). Just as the printing press and word processor altered compositional habits, generative AI introduces new affordances and constraints. Literacy theory must therefore account for the co-productive relationship between humans and intelligent systems. Meaning is no longer constructed solely by an individual writer but emerges through dialogic exchange between user and algorithm (Hayles, 2012). This collaborative dimension challenges autonomous models of literacy and foregrounds distributed cognition.

Additionally, prompt literacy highlights issues of power and representation embedded within AI systems. Because AI models are trained on vast corpora reflecting existing cultural discourses, they may reproduce dominant ideologies or marginalize alternative perspectives. Pedagogically, this creates opportunities for critical literacy instruction. Students can analyze how prompts influence representation, examine patterns of bias in outputs, and explore how rephrasing instructions alters ideological framing. Such activities foster awareness of language as both constructive and political, reinforcing long-standing goals of critical pedagogy (Zuboff, 2019).

Another implication concerns assessment practices. If students increasingly rely on AI-assisted drafting, evaluation criteria may need to prioritize process over product. Emphasizing prompt design, revision history, and reflective commentary allows instructors to assess rhetorical decision-making rather than solely the polished final text. This shift could encourage deeper engagement with writing as inquiry and experimentation. At the same time, equitable

access remains a pressing concern. Not all students have equal familiarity with AI tools or the digital fluency required for effective prompting. Integrating prompt engineering into curricula must therefore include explicit instruction, guided practice, and discussions of ethical boundaries. Without such scaffolding, disparities in technological literacy could widen existing educational inequalities.

Ultimately, the implications of prompt engineering for pedagogy and literacy theory are neither wholly disruptive nor purely supplementary. Instead, they signal an evolution in how literacy is conceptualized and taught. Prompt engineering foregrounds rhetorical awareness, iterative revision, and critical evaluation—skills already central to English Studies. By incorporating prompt literacy into curricula, educators can prepare students to navigate AI-mediated communication responsibly and creatively. In redefining literacy as the capacity to design, interpret, and critique algorithmically generated discourse, English Studies affirms its relevance in an era shaped by intelligent technologies. Prompt engineering thus becomes not merely a technical competency but a transformative pedagogical tool—one that expands the scope of literacy theory while reinforcing its enduring commitment to rhetorical and critical practice (Lanham, 1993).

10. Threats

- Over-reliance on AI reducing independent critical thinking.
- Ethical concerns such as plagiarism and authorship ambiguity.
- Algorithmic bias embedded in training data.
- Institutional resistance within traditional humanities disciplines.
- Digital divide in access to AI technologies.

11. Data Analysis

Analysis of prompt-output pairs reveals:

- Specificity increases coherence and relevance of AI responses.
- Contextual framing influences tone and genre accuracy.
- Role assignment enhances disciplinary alignment.
- Iterative prompting mirrors drafting and revision processes in writing.

For example, vague prompts produce generalized responses, while rhetorically structured prompts yield nuanced, academically styled outputs. This demonstrates that prompt construction directly shapes discourse production.

12. Key Findings

- Prompt engineering mirrors classical rhetorical principles—ethos, pathos, logos.
- It requires audience awareness (the AI model as interpretive agent).
- It involves genre knowledge and stylistic precision.
- It promotes metacognitive awareness of language production.
- It constitutes an emergent literacy essential for 21st-century communication.

13. Advantage

- Enhances rhetorical awareness.
- Encourages strategic thinking in writing.
- Bridges humanities and technology.
- Expands research efficiency.
- Supports inclusive and adaptive learning environments.

14. Disadvantage

- Risk of homogenized writing styles.
- Potential academic misuse.
- Dependence on proprietary platforms.
- Reduced emphasis on traditional drafting skills.
- Ethical uncertainty regarding intellectual ownership.

15. Comparison

Table 1 : Traditional Writing Vs Prompt Engineering

Traditional Writing	Prompt Engineering
Writer produces full text	Writer designs instructions
Focus on expression	Focus on direction and framing
Linear drafting process	Iterative refinement process
Human audience	AI-mediated audience
Individual cognition	Human–AI collaboration

Prompt engineering shifts the writer's role from sole author to rhetorical architect guiding algorithmic discourse production.

16. Conclusion

This study establishes that prompt engineering should be viewed not simply as a technical activity but as a rhetorical practice that reshapes how meaning is constructed in digital environments. By framing prompts as intentional, audience-oriented, and context-sensitive forms of discourse, the analysis demonstrates that interacting with generative AI systems such as ChatGPT involves rhetorical decision-making comparable to traditional writing practices (OpenAI, 2023). Elements such as genre awareness, tonal control, structural organization, and persuasive intent remain central, reinforcing the continuity between classical rhetoric and AI-mediated communication.

The study further situates prompt engineering within the broader traditions of rhetoric, composition, and discourse analysis, highlighting its relevance to English Studies. Effective prompts incorporate strategies such as task framing, role specification, constraint-setting, and iterative refinement—techniques that closely align with established rhetorical principles (Aristotle, trans. 2007; Burke, 1966). At the same time, these practices introduce new forms of human–AI collaboration, expanding rhetorical inquiry to include dialogic interactions with computational systems.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings emphasize the importance of integrating prompt literacy into contemporary writing instruction. Developing the ability to design, evaluate, and refine prompts fosters critical awareness of authorship, agency, and textual production in AI-mediated contexts (Selber, 2004; Hayles, 2012). This shift encourages educators to reconsider literacy not only as the ability to produce text but also as the capacity to guide and interpret machine-generated discourse.

In conclusion, prompt engineering represents an emerging form of literacy that extends the scope of English Studies in response to evolving technological conditions. Recognizing it as a rhetorical practice affirms its academic significance and highlights its potential to reshape teaching, learning, and knowledge production in the digital age.

Conflict of Interests

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