ALIGN

AI Levels for Instructional Guidance & Navigation

Practical Guide for Faculty

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What this is: A shared vocabulary for communicating AI expectations on assignments. Faculty select a level (0–5), state it in the instructions, and students know what is allowed.

What this is not: A mandate, a ranking system, or a detection tool. Level 0 is a full and legitimate choice. ALIGN does not require faculty to redesign assignments.

Key point: Existing assignments can be labeled with an ALIGN level. No redesign necessary.

The Problem

A Montgomery College student takes three courses in the same semester. In each one, generative AI is handled differently.

Course A: AI is Prohibited	Course B: AI is Encouraged	Course C: No Guidance Given
The syllabus states that any use of generative AI constitutes academic dishonesty. The student avoids all AI tools across all her courses to be safe, including in courses where AI use is expected.	The instructor expects students to use AI for brainstorming and revision. The student is unsure how much AI is acceptable and worries about crossing a line she cannot see.	The syllabus says nothing about AI. The student hears classmates are using it. She does not know if it is allowed, tolerated, or grounds for a violation. She guesses.

That evening, the same student opens a job posting that lists AI fluency as a required qualification. Three classrooms, three different messages, no way to reconcile them.

All three instructors may be making reasonable pedagogical calls. The problem is not disagreement across courses. The problem is that students cannot read those differences when every classroom communicates expectations in its own language. ALIGN provides a shared framework so faculty decisions become legible to the students they affect.

ALIGN does not require faculty to change what they are already doing. It provides a label for decisions that are already being made. An existing assignment can be tagged with an ALIGN level, with no redesign required.

ALIGN Works Regardless of Where Faculty Stand on AI

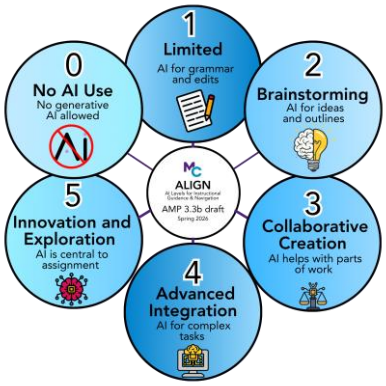
Faculty who restrict AI	Faculty who already integrate AI	Faculty still learning about AI
Level 0 makes that restriction visible and intentional. Students recognize it as a pedagogical decision, not an oversight or omission. The level communicates the expectation without requiring a lengthy policy statement.	ALIGN provides a consistent structure so faculty are not reinventing their AI policy for every assignment. Students encounter the same framework across courses and build transferable habits around transparency and documentation.	No AI expertise is required. Level 0 for assignments that require independent student work is a respected, intentional choice. The CTL offers support for faculty ready to explore further at any pace.

Support Resources

For faculty: The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) offers workshops and one-on-one consultations on integrating ALIGN and AI-inclusive pedagogy.

For students: The Digital Learning Center (DLC) and MC Library provide AI literacy workshops, tutoring support, and guidance on interpreting ALIGN levels.

The Six ALIGN Levels



Level 0: No AI Use

No generative AI allowed

Students complete all work independently. No generative AI tools may be used at any stage: brainstorming, drafting, editing, or submission. Assistive technologies approved by the College for accessibility remain permitted.

What Faculty Do	What Students Do
• Design assignments that can be completed without generative AI • Explain why AI is restricted (e.g., foundational skill-building, assessment of independent reasoning) • Clarify that assistive tools for accessibility remain permitted • Consider process checks: drafts, in-class work, or oral explanation	• Complete all planning, research, writing, and creation independently • Use only course materials, approved references, and their own knowledge • Do not use ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, or any generative AI tool • Treat the assignment as a measure of their own skill

Level 1: Limited

AI for grammar and edits only

AI acts as a reviewer or editor for limited mechanical tasks. Students write original content first, then may use AI for grammar, clarity, or minor wording. AI does not add to or alter student thinking. Brief disclosure is required.

What Faculty Do	What Students Do
• Allow limited AI use for surface-level revision (proofreading, formatting suggestions) • Clarify boundaries: what counts as "too much" AI rewriting • Emphasize that students must review, correct, and approve any AI suggestions • Provide simple disclosure expectations (e.g., one sentence at the end of the assignment)	• Create an original draft before using any AI tool • Use AI only for grammar, minor clarity edits, or organization after drafting • Briefly disclose that AI was used and for what purpose • Remain responsible for checking meaning and accuracy after edits

Level 2: Brainstorming

AI for ideas and outlines

AI serves as a thought partner for planning and idea development. Students may use AI during the planning stages to generate ideas, develop outlines, or explore directions. All final written or produced work must be the student's own.

What Faculty Do	What Students Do
• Design assignments that require students to show their planning (outlines, concept maps, planning notes) • Encourage students to compare their own ideas with AI suggestions • Provide prompts or questions that help students evaluate AI outputs for relevance • Make expectations for reflection and visible thinking explicit in the instructions	• Use AI to brainstorm ideas, generate possible topics, or outline key points • Write and analyze the final work independently • Provide a short reflection explaining how AI shaped their ideas and what they changed • Evaluate whether AI suggestions align with assignment goals and course content

Level 3: Collaborative Creation

AI helps with parts of the work

AI acts as a co-creator for portions of text, data, code, or visuals, with clear human control and oversight. Students are responsible for reviewing all AI output, applying their own judgment, and ensuring the final submission reflects their own understanding.

What Faculty Do	What Students Do
• Teach students how to critically evaluate AI outputs for accuracy, bias, and appropriateness • Require students to submit evidence of visible thinking (side-by-side drafts, prompt excerpts, annotated AI outputs) • Design rubrics that reward reflection, editing, and understanding, not just polished final products • Clarify which parts may involve AI and which must be fully student-generated	• Use AI for specific portions of the assignment while maintaining their own voice and judgment • Keep track of key prompts and revisions, or provide comparison notes between AI output and final work • Demonstrate visible thinking by showing how they modified, reorganized, or built on AI outputs • Cite AI use and explain how they ensured accuracy and integrity

Level 4: Advanced Integration

AI for complex tasks

AI functions as a collaborator across multiple tools or modalities to support complex tasks. Students use AI to coordinate or synthesize across tasks such as summarizing multiple sources, drafting project plans, or simulating scenarios.

What Faculty Do	What Students Do
• Provide structured opportunities for multimodal or project-based use of AI • Guide students to evaluate AI outputs for accuracy, bias, and ethics as part of the assignment • Make equity expectations explicit (e.g., recommending free or institutionally provided tools) • Include criteria for visible thinking and decision-making in the rubric	• Use AI strategically to coordinate or synthesize across tasks • Systematically evaluate AI outputs for accuracy, bias, and ethical implications • Provide visible thinking through structured reflections, logs, or process documents • Address issues of equity and access explicitly when choosing tools and workflows

Level 5: Innovation & Exploration

AI is central to the assignment

AI is an engine for innovation, research, or creative exploration, often connected to workforce or discipline-specific applications. Students design or experiment with AI workflows and demonstrate advanced AI literacy, ethical reasoning, and workforce-aligned reflection.

What Faculty Do	What Students Do
• Facilitate advanced, exploratory, and discipline-specific AI use (simulations, data analysis, creative design, workplace scenarios) • Emphasize evaluation of reflection, critical analysis, and innovation, not just polish or complexity • Help students connect AI use to professional and workforce contexts, including ethical and equity implications • Require clear documentation of process, tool selection, and visible student thinking as core parts of assessment	• Design or experiment with new AI applications, workflows, or creative uses beyond typical classroom tasks • Use AI across the full workflow (idea generation, drafting, testing, revising) while maintaining documented human oversight • Provide robust visible thinking: prompt logs, design rationales, comparisons across tools, ethical analysis, and self-assessment • Critically examine the ethical, social, and disciplinary impacts of their AI use

How to Apply ALIGN to an Assignment

ALIGN does not require assignment redesign. Existing assignments can be labeled with a level based on the expectations already in place. Faculty are naming a decision that has already been made, not creating a new one.

Step 1: Identify the learning goal. What is the assignment designed to assess? Independent reasoning? Professional communication? Complex synthesis? The answer determines what role AI should play.

Step 2: Select the level that matches. If AI would undermine the goal, Level 0 is the right call. If AI can support the goal in a specific way, the corresponding level describes that support. Different parts of the same assignment can carry different levels.

Step 3: State it in the assignment instructions. Name the level. Clarify what is allowed and what is not. If documentation is expected, specify what it looks like.

Visible Student Thinking

When AI is permitted, students show their process. The depth scales with the level:

- **Level 1:** One sentence. "I used Grammarly for proofreading after I finished my draft."
- **Level 2:** Two to three sentences explaining how AI shaped their planning and what they changed.
- **Level 3:** Prompt excerpts, side-by-side comparisons, or annotations showing revisions to AI output.
- **Levels 4–5:** Structured process documentation, decision logs, ethical analysis.

Identify the Level of an Existing Assignment Using Copilot

Faculty who are comfortable using generative AI can use Microsoft Copilot to identify what ALIGN level their current assignments already reflect. No redesign is needed. This process simply names the level that is already implied by the assignment's expectations.

Prompt for Microsoft Copilot

I am a professor reviewing an assignment for my students in my [course] class. I am going to paste one of my current assignments below. I am also going to describe the ALIGN framework, which uses six levels (0–5) to describe the role generative AI plays in a specific assignment.

Based on the assignment as written, identify which ALIGN level (or combination of levels) best describes what is currently expected of students. Explain the reasoning. If different stages of the assignment map to different levels, identify each stage separately.

Here are the ALIGN levels:

Level 0 (No AI Use): Students complete all work independently. No generative AI allowed.

Level 1 (Limited): AI for grammar and light edits only, after the student writes the original draft.

Level 2 (Brainstorming): AI for idea generation and outlining. Final work is student-produced.

Level 3 (Collaborative Creation): AI helps draft or revise portions. Students review, revise, and cite AI use.

Level 4 (Advanced Integration): AI for complex tasks like synthesis and data analysis. Process documentation required.

Level 5 (Innovation & Exploration): AI is central to the assignment. Full workflow documentation and ethical reflection required.

[PASTE ASSIGNMENT HERE]

Not comfortable using AI? The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) can help faculty identify ALIGN levels for their assignments through a brief consultation. The Digital Learning Center (DLC) and MC Library support students in understanding and applying ALIGN levels to their coursework.

Examples Across Montgomery College Courses

These examples use real MC course designators and represent common assignment types. Different stages of the same assignment can carry different levels.

Course	Assignment	Level	Rationale
ENGL 101	Argumentative essay	**0 (draft)** **1 (revision)**	The draft measures the student's own argumentation and voice. Grammar checks after drafting mirror professional editing practice.
BIOL 150	Lab report	**0**	The report assesses whether the student can document a scientific process accurately. AI-generated text would bypass the skill being measured.
BUSN 210	Company strategy analysis (group project)	**2 (research)** **3 (write-up)**	AI supports brainstorming research angles. The written analysis requires critical review and citation of any AI involvement.
CMSC 140	Programming assignment	**0 (midterm)** **3 (final project)**	Early assignments assess foundational coding. The final project mirrors real developer workflows where AI-assisted coding is documented.
NURS 113	Patient case study and care plan	**0**	Clinical judgment cannot be outsourced. The assignment measures the student's ability to apply clinical reasoning to a specific scenario.
ARTT 201	Digital media brand identity package	**5**	AI image generation is the medium. Students lead the workflow, document prompts, and reflect on ethical implications of AI-generated imagery.
HIST 100	Primary source analysis	**0 (analysis)** **2 (topic selection)**	Historical interpretation must be the student's own. AI can support the earlier process of narrowing a research topic.
MATH 181	Calculus problem sets	**0**	Mathematical reasoning is the learning goal. AI-generated solutions would eliminate the practice required to build the skill.
PSYC 102	Research summary and reflection	**2 (research)** **1 (final draft)**	AI supports early-stage exploration of psychological concepts. The final reflection must be the student's own analysis, polished with light editing.
COMM 108	Persuasive speech outline and delivery	**2 (outline)** **0 (delivery)**	AI can help generate and organize initial talking points. The speech itself must reflect the student's own voice and reasoning.

Sample Syllabus and Assignment Language

General Syllabus Statement

The following is student-facing language that can be adapted for a course syllabus.

This course uses the ALIGN framework to communicate expectations about generative AI on each assignment. Each assignment will include an ALIGN level (0–5) indicating whether AI may be used, how, and what documentation is expected. Different assignments may carry different levels. If an assignment does not list a level, assume Level 0 (No AI Use) and ask the instructor for clarification.

Assignment-Level Statements

The following can be placed directly in assignment instructions.

ALIGN Level 0 (No AI Use)

Complete this assignment without generative AI tools. Do not use ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, or similar tools at any stage (planning, drafting, revising, or submission). Spell check and grammar check built into Word or Google Docs are permitted. Accessibility tools approved by DSS are always permitted.

ALIGN Level 1 (Limited)

Write the original draft of this assignment without AI assistance. After drafting, AI tools may be used for grammar, spelling, and minor clarity edits only. AI should not add ideas, restructure arguments, or change the meaning of the work. Include a one-sentence disclosure at the end stating what AI tool was used and for what purpose.

ALIGN Level 2 (Brainstorming)

AI tools may be used to brainstorm topics, explore possible angles, or develop an outline for this assignment. All final written work must be produced independently. Include 2–3 sentences at the end explaining how AI contributed to the planning process and what was changed or discarded from the AI suggestions.

ALIGN Level 3 (Collaborative Creation)

AI tools may be used to help draft or revise sections of this assignment. Students are responsible for reviewing all AI output, applying their own judgment, and ensuring the final submission reflects their own understanding. Submit a brief note identifying which sections involved AI assistance and what revisions were made. AI use must be cited or acknowledged.

ALIGN Level 4 (Advanced Integration)

AI tools may be used to support complex tasks in this assignment, including synthesis, data analysis, scenario modeling, or project planning. Students must evaluate all AI outputs for accuracy, bias, and limitations. Submit process documentation that includes: what AI tools were used, how outputs were evaluated, and what decisions were made based on AI results versus independent analysis.

ALIGN Level 5 (Innovation & Exploration)

AI is a central component of this assignment. Students are expected to design an AI-integrated workflow, document the full process (prompts, iterations, tool selection, decision points), and provide ethical reflection on AI's role, limitations, and implications. The assessment evaluates critical thinking, process documentation, and innovation, not just the final product.

Common Questions

Is ALIGN mandatory?

No. It is optional.

Does ALIGN require faculty to redesign their assignments?

No. ALIGN is designed to be retrofitted to existing assignments. Faculty are labeling a decision that has already been made, not creating a new framework for their course. An existing assignment can be tagged with a level in under a minute.

Does choosing Level 0 signal opposition to AI?

No. It signals that the assignment is designed to measure independent student work. That is a pedagogical decision.

Can different assignments in the same course carry different levels?

Yes. That is the design. Faculty can also assign different levels to different stages of the same assignment (e.g., Level 2 for outlining, Level 0 for the final essay).

What if a student violates the stated level?

It is treated like any other academic integrity issue. The difference is that with ALIGN, the expectation was stated clearly in advance.

Is AI expertise required to use ALIGN?

No. Faculty can use Level 0 exclusively. The CTL offers support for those interested in exploring further.

Is ALIGN a detection system?

No. ALIGN relies on communication and disclosure, not detection software.

What about students without access to paid AI tools?

When AI is permitted, free options should be recommended: ChatGPT free tier, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini. Assignments should not require paid tools without providing a free alternative.

Where can faculty and students get support?

Faculty: Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) for pedagogy, ALIGN consultations, and AI-inclusive assignment design.

Students: Digital Learning Center (DLC) and MC Library for AI literacy workshops, ALIGN level interpretation, and academic support.

Faculty already make decisions about AI in their assignments. ALIGN gives students a way to understand those decisions. No redesign required. No expertise needed. No mandate attached.

Questions or feedback: Daniel.Umana@MontgomeryCollege.edu

AI Use Disclosure:

An artificial intelligence tool (Claude, developed by Anthropic) was utilized to support the synthesis, summarization, and organization of information produced by the 3.3.b Team. The tool was also used to assist with drafting and formatting this guide. All information was independently reviewed, verified, and approved by the author prior to publication.

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