

Book review: Thorpe, J. (2024) AI for students: creative hacks for academic success: an illustrated guide. Glasgow: Promptly Books

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Josh Thorpe's self-published book of 'hacks' is inspired by his experiences supporting students to develop their academic literacies. He aims to combine his expertise and knowledge to help students develop good practice principles. Thorpe's accelerated approach to publication could be seen as a response to the rapidly evolving nature of generative AI (Gen AI), including its uses across the higher education (HE) sector. Despite the apparent simplicity and immediacy of the comic book format that Thorpe has adopted, the recommended 'hacks' are underpinned by scholarship and based on his practical and curious experimentation with Gen AI for learning and teaching. The book also offers students and educators a much-needed defence against unreliable or unethical Gen AI study 'tips' widely posted on social media.

Since 2022, the rapid growth of easily accessible Gen AI tools has prompted many HE institutions to establish rules and guidelines to regulate use of these technologies. Concerns about widespread plagiarism and the potential undermining of traditional assessment formats and, by extension, university qualifications drove this response. As the initial shock subsided, an understanding of the positive and creative potential of Gen AI to enhance learning has started to emerge across the sector. Many staff and students, however, are understandably hesitant to engage with this new technology due to a lack of confidence with using Gen AI or a fear of breaking the rules (Tierney et al., 2025). Meanwhile, others are using Gen AI without guidance or understanding, exposing themselves to potential cases of academic misconduct. Few books to date have been directly aimed at enabling students to

gain a critical understanding of and confidence in using Gen AI for their specific study purposes. Empowering students with valid and ethical Gen AI skills is a pressing issue across the sector. Thorpe's approachable book is a timely contribution into this gap.

Through a cartoon version of himself as a lecturer in academic skills, Thorpe shares practical AI study 'hacks' in seven bite-sized chapters. His approach invites the reader to dip into the book and apply the hacks themselves. It emphasises a playful and experimental attitude to learning, partly communicated through the entertaining illustrations. The format is likely to engage busy students who could read the whole book in less than an hour – or scan the contents for whichever hack they might need at a given moment. Rather than overloading the reader, Thorpe offers specific tips on using Gen AI for making quizzes, managing notes, engaging in critical thinking, searching and managing sources, and planning assignments. His suggestions about using AI for transcription and organising handwritten notes are especially welcome, as these hacks recognise the potential of AI to support personalised and inclusive learning.

Thorpe minimises the use of technical or meta language. Instead, he emphasises how Gen AI can be used as a potential study mentor or 'critical friend'. He gradually introduces the reader to 'prompt writing' by offering clear examples of how Gen AI chatbots can support different study purposes. The example prompts can be readily transferred to other contexts due to their simplicity, and are scaffolded to suit more complex tasks and to encourage active learning through Socratic questioning. In later chapters, Thorpe addresses wider issues of academic misconduct or over-reliance on AI by encouraging readers to join discussions around the limits of AI and its ethical use. Above all, readers are discouraged from 'getting the answer' directly from an AI bot and are instead offered ideas on how to make the most of AI to underpin active learning.

If learning developers are to engage students with critical thinking around Gen AI and its ethical use, students must be included in that conversation; top-down prescription or chastisement will alienate students and chase the use of Gen AI underground. Thorpe's clever use of comic book characters to represent a range of

student voices and raise frequently asked questions encourages an open discussion from differing perspectives. This approach models a collaborative and dialogic approach to Gen AI literacy, emphasising that everyone is learning about this emergent technology. Thorpe also subtly reminds us of the importance of human interaction and the value of peer learning and learner autonomy, and readers are encouraged to engage in meaning-making by considering the resources they bring to their studies.

There are some inevitable limits to this book. These reflect the challenges of using this format to explain complex concepts and the book's attempt to appeal to the broad category of 'students' (which includes a wide range of ages and prior experiences). Thorpe's book is probably most relevant for early-stage undergraduates rather than for students carrying out extended research projects. We would have liked to have seen more attention given to issues around systemic bias, GDPR and intellectual property, and the environmental impacts of AI. Gen AI use for data management, coding, and image generation would be useful future additions too. Additionally, including a reference list would have helped provide practical support for reader to engage in the wider conversations around the use of AI. But, on balance, this book is a valuable resource that will help to address the immediate needs of students. From the perspective of learning developers, lecturers, and other student-facing colleagues in HE, Thorpe offers a time-saving resource, with practical advice on how to craft ethical prompts and foster open and playful communication with students about Gen AI use. Readers of this book will be less daunted about experimenting with Gen AI in higher education. They will also be enabled and inspired to join in essential and fascinating conversations about Gen AI use in learning and teaching.

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References

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