

Cultural, Literary, and Rhetorical AI Studies

A PhD cohort and intellectual community in the Purdue Department of English
Launching Fall 2027

Overview

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) represents one of the most consequential transformations in the history of language, meaning-making, and human communication. AI now participates directly in the practices of authorship, interpretation, pedagogy, and persuasion that have long defined the humanities.

The Cultural, Literary, and Rhetorical AI Studies PhD cohort in Purdue English brings humanistic methods to understanding this transformation, treating AI not only as a technology but also as a cultural and rhetorical event that demands historical perspective, theoretical rigor, and ethical attention. How can we make sense of the transformations of the present without understanding the *longue-durée* shifts that paved the way? From orality to literacy, from the Gutenberg revolution to the rise of digital networks, technological systems of inscription and mediation have always transformed what it means to produce and receive meaning.

Students in the cohort will pursue research at the intersection of literary studies, rhetoric and writing studies, cultural studies, media theory, and the history and philosophy of technology. The goal is to prepare scholars who can analyze AI's effects on culture and communication while also contributing to the broader future of English studies.

Research Themes

The cohort is designed around open, evolving questions. Typical research directions include:

- **Authorship, meaning, and interpretation:** how AI changes what it means to write, read, and attribute agency to texts.
- **Rhetoric and public discourse:** AI's role in persuasion, credibility, misinformation, and accountability.
- **Culture, power, and representation:** how models reproduce (or contest) assumptions about race, gender, disability, class, and canon formation.
- **AI aesthetics and creativity:** originality, style, remix, plagiarism, and intellectual property in machine-assisted art and literature.
- **Reading, writing, and pedagogy:** teaching and learning in environments where language can be generated, optimized, and personalized at scale.
- **Digital literacy and the future of publics:** how algorithmic mediation reshapes communities, attention, and shared worlds.
- **The prehistory of AI:** how past transformations in representation and knowledge make the present possible.

Faculty & Mentoring

The cohort is anchored by four core Purdue English faculty whose work connects AI to literary theory, rhetoric, writing studies, and digital humanities. In addition to these four core faculty, numerous other faculty and graduate students in the Department of English are currently also carrying out cutting-edge research on AI. Students joining this cohort would thus benefit from a robust culture of research and inquiry. In addition, students in this cohort will benefit from Purdue University's broad strengths across communication, philosophy, history, and engineering through guest speakers, collaborative events, and (when appropriate) interdisciplinary advising.

The Core Faculty:

Robert P. Marzec (literary theory, technology, authorship) studies how computation reshapes interpretation, canon formation, and the politics of literary value, bringing contemporary theory into dialogue with generative AI.

Thomas J. Rickert (rhetorical theory, media, technology) examines rhetoric across ancient and contemporary contexts, with particular attention to how digital and AI-mediated environments shape persuasion and social life.

Jennifer Bay (professional writing, rhetoric, AI) publishes on AI and methodology and emphasizes professional development—helping students translate humanistic AI expertise to academic and non-academic careers.

Dino Franco Felluga (critical theory, digital humanities) researches how digital platforms transform knowledge and leads major digital humanities initiatives, offering cohort students pathways into collaborative, public-facing scholarship.

For more on research into AI in the Department of English, see [here](#).

Curriculum & Community

Cohort members take a shared graduate seminar each semester during the first two years, each of which will be taught by one of the core faculty members. These seminars will build common theoretical and methodological ground across English studies and AI-focused inquiry. Students complete the standard PhD plan of study in their home area (e.g., rhetoric and composition, literary and cultural studies) while using the cohort as a focused secondary area that supports comprehensive exams, teaching, and dissertation research.

The ORACLE Lab and Professional Development

The ORACLE Lab (“Of Rhetoric, AI, Culture, Literature, and English Studies”) will be the cohort’s hub for conversation, collaboration, and mentoring. Meeting regularly across the academic year, the Lab supports dissertation development, shared reading and methods workshops, and professionalization in emerging areas of AI-focused humanities research.

Across the program, cohort students receive structured support for research, teaching, and career preparation. While dissertation topics will vary, students typically build a portfolio that includes

publishable scholarship, conference participation, and teaching experience connected to AI and English studies.

- Collaborative workshops through the ORACLE Lab (methods, works-in-progress, dissertation planning)
- Opportunities to design or teach AI-related courses and modules in writing and literature
- Conference and publication mentoring in rhetoric, literary/cultural studies, DH, and AI-focused humanities venues
- Career preparation for both academic paths and diverse professional tracks where critical language expertise matters

Why Purdue

Purdue offers an unusual environment for humanistic AI research: a top-tier research university with major strengths in engineering, computer science, and data science alongside a Department of English known for rhetoric, theory, writing studies, and digitally engaged scholarship. Cohort students can pursue rigorously humanistic questions about AI while also finding opportunities for dialogue and collaboration across campus.

As AI becomes a central site of cultural production and public communication, graduate students with deep expertise in language, interpretation, rhetoric, and ethics will be increasingly needed—within higher education and in roles that require critical analysis of AI-mediated writing and discourse. The questions this cohort pursues will not be resolved in just a few years. They will define humanistic scholarship for a generation. Purdue's singular position at the intersection of technical expertise and humanistic tradition makes it one of the few institutions in the country capable of hosting this inquiry in the form it demands: not as a supplement to technical AI research but as a consequential intellectual enterprise in its own right. The program will pursue original scholarship, develop new critical methodologies, and train the next generation of scholars equipped to think rigorously and critically about AI from within the humanities.