

# AI Literacy Isn't a Skill. It's a Way of Thinking.

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Most AI guidance handed to students right now is still tool-use thinking. Use ChatGPT for essays. Here's a prompt for your college application. Use this for study hacks. That's a narrow approach to AI, and it has a short shelf life. The students who will actually do well with AI are the ones who develop a through line: a repeatable way of thinking they can carry across classes, decisions, and whatever comes next.

## TOOL-USE THINKING (the niche approach)

- ✗ Learns approved use cases
- ✗ Borrows prompts from TikTok
- ✗ Works until the tool changes
- ✗ Tied to one class or assignment
- ✗ Expires with the semester

## THROUGH LINE THINKING (the real skill)

- ✓ Develops a personal lens
- ✓ Asks better questions
- ✓ Transfers across every subject
- ✓ Applies to research, writing, career
- ✓ Builds over time

## Three concepts that reveal a student's through line

- 1** *It's not fair.* Tap into that wiring for justice and equity. This student will engage when the work connects to something they actually believe in.
- 2** *Why does it have to be done this way?* Lean on that systems thinking. They're already questioning the assignment before they start it. Give them a framework and they'll run with it. Give them a rule with no reason and they'll roll their eyes.
- 3** *I just need to get the grade.* This student is telling you exactly what they're optimizing for. AI becomes a way to produce output until something makes the content worth caring about. The through line is there. It just hasn't been activated yet.

## What this looks like in practice

A student with a strong through line doesn't just complete the AI assignment. They start connecting what they're doing in one class to something they've been wrestling with in another. They push back on the model's output because it doesn't line up with what they actually believe. They ask why the prompt is framed the way it is. Whether that student is driven by fairness, by questioning the system, or by something they genuinely care about, the through line is what turns AI from a completion tool into a thinking tool.