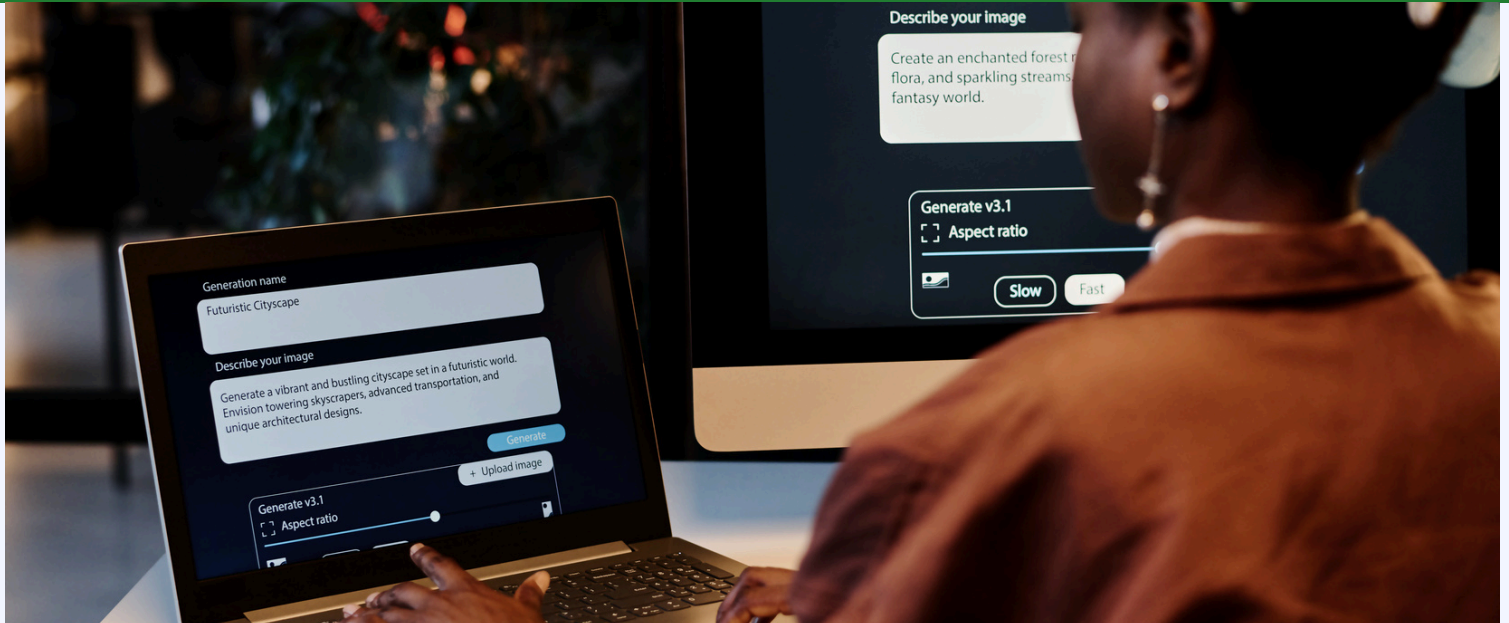


The Rattler's CLASSROOM CHRONICLES

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THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTOR



AI Persona TA

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As professors we worry students will use AI to cheat (until it takes our jobs). But we can also transform AI into a useful and engaging teaching assistant by creating AI personas tailored to our classes.

An AI persona defines the distinctive character and tone of an artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT. It is like an NPC (non-player character) in a video game. Both are designed to interact in a way that feels natural and engaging, enhancing the overall experience.

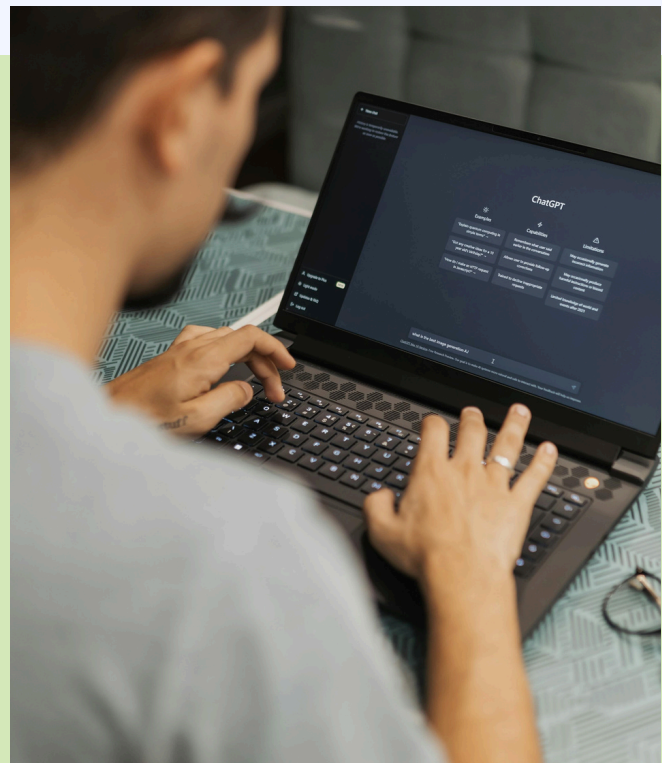
Creating a custom AI persona for a class involves two general tasks. While a robust Large Language Model (LLM) like CoPilot or ChatGPT will have a vast database, it will probably lack content specific to your class. So, the first task is to provide that information. The second task is to design a suitable persona. But why bother?



Students are often reluctant to ask questions in class or during office hours, perhaps because of fear of embarrassment or being judged. As the philosopher Thomas Hobbes noted, people often do not take criticism well from other people, for “to dissent is like calling him a fool.” But a student can interact privately with an AI TA without fear of embarrassment or judgement. And some people are more comfortable with (and addicted to) interacting with devices rather than other people, so an AI TA has an advantage here as well.

And, as Kyle Reese said of the Terminator, “It doesn’t feel pity, or remorse, or fear. And it absolutely will not stop, ever, until you are dead.” While we do not want our AI TAs to terminate students, it will never get tired, angry, inattentive, distracted or bored. This provides an advantage over humans, especially when a student is struggling with material or prefers to learn at a different pace from that offered in the classroom. As these advantages arise from the AI aspect of the AI TA, you might wonder why you should create a persona.

One reason is that creating a persona allows you to set guardrails, so the AI TA does not, for example, do the work for the students. Another reason is that, going back to the NPC comparison, an AI with a persona is more interesting and can make conversations feel more natural and relatable, thus keeping students engaged longer. A persona can also be designed to add humor, creativity, or unique quirks, making interactions more enjoyable. While this can be controversial and raises some moral concerns, a persona can convey empathy and understanding, creating a sense of trust and comfort.



One practical concern about customizing the persona is analogous to picking the paint used for classrooms. While most find the usual neutral colors dull, they also do not find them annoying. While creative use of color in the classroom might appeal to some, it might also be annoying and distracting to others. And we must never forget the lesson of Microsoft's Clippy. As such, care should be taken in making an appealing but not annoying AI TA.

A persona can also be designed to fit the needs of your class and students, thus creating a customized experience. A well-designed person can also simplify complex interactions, guiding the students through, for example, how to structure their paper or a complex problem. If the idea of having an AI TA is appealing, it is surprisingly easy to make this happen.

There are many ways to enable your AI TA. The cheapest and easiest is to provide your students with a prompt to create a persona and a file to upload to, for example, CoPilot. The downside is that the persona will be simple and both it and the file will be forgotten as soon as the session ends, requiring students to take these steps each time. The student will also have control over the persona prompt, so they can easily remove any guardrails you included.

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A more expensive option is to get a subscription, such as that offered by ChatGPT, that allows you to create a persistent persona with custom content. This is easier for the students and allows you to ensure that your AI TA will operate within your specified guardrails (mostly).

There is also the option of hosting your own customized local LLM. While you will need suitable hardware, this is much easier than it sounds. For example, with the free software Ollama you could be running your own LLM within minutes. Customizing it and creating a web interface for students is much more challenging, but there is also free software available for this. No matter what approach you take, you will want to ensure that your AI TA operates and is used safely and ethically. Here are some recommendations.



While the AI TA should help students, it should avoid providing complete answers to exam questions, essays, or assignments. Instead, it should focus on guiding students through problem-solving techniques and frameworks. It can also be designed to ask thought-provoking questions and encourage exploration of topics to deepen understanding.

On the moral side, you need to communicate the AI TA's limitations and your ethical guidelines for its usage. Encourage students to use the AI TA as a tool for learning rather than for shortcuts.

If the AI TA detects repeated behavior suggesting attempts to cheat (e.g., asking for answers to specific assignments), it could notify the user of the ethical standards.

“While it is reasonable to be worried about the negative impact of AI, an AI TA can be a useful addition to our classes.”

While you might worry that this would annoy students, Aristotle notes in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that “although people resent it when their impulses are opposed by human agents, even if they are in the right, the law causes no irritation by enjoining decent behavior.” While Aristotle's claim can be disputed, the same should apply to the AI TA.

While it is reasonable to be worried about the negative impact of AI, an AI TA can be a useful addition to our classes.



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