4 Ways to Use ChatGPT to Prepare for Class

Erik Ofgang   April 4, 2023

ChatGPT is pretty good at being a teaching assistant and helping educators prepare for class. (Image credit: Photo by Levart_Photographer on Unsplash)

Using ChatGPT to prepare for class is easier than I expected.
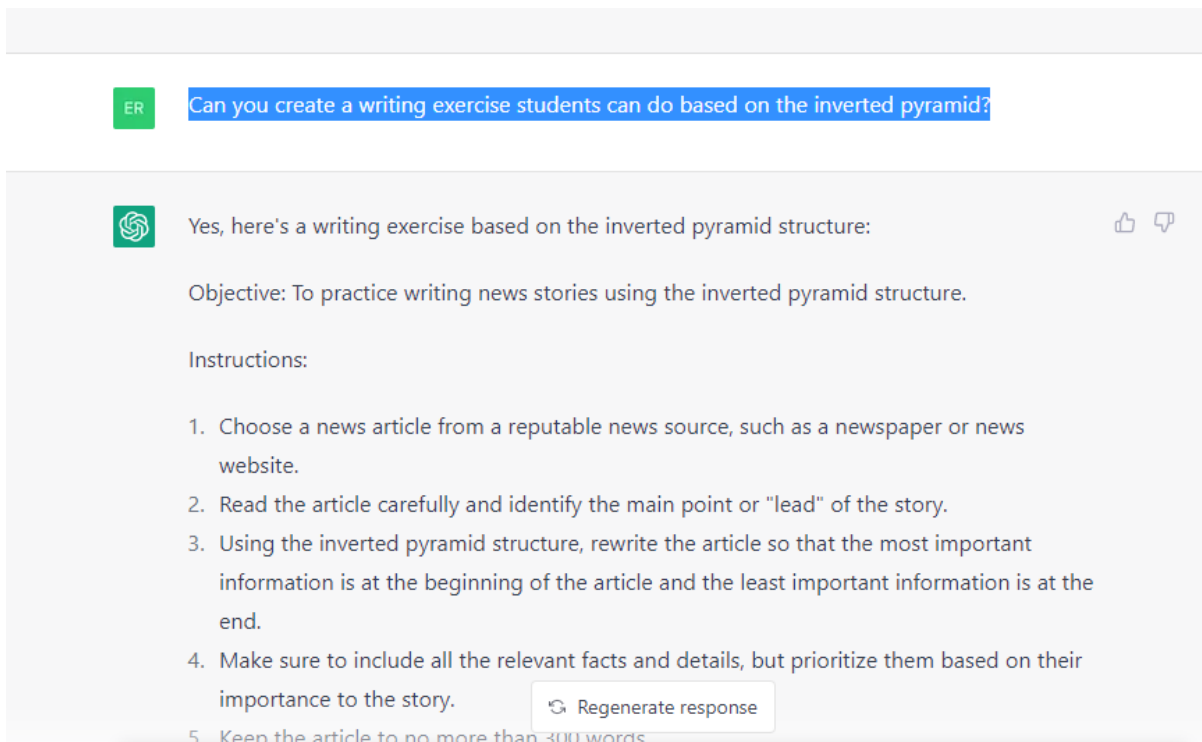
I recently had the free GPT-3.5 version of ChatGPT create several lesson plans, quizzes, exercises, and a syllabus around journalism topics I teach, and was impressed by the quality and speed by which content was generated.

I wouldn't personally use ChatGPT for these purposes in my own classes due to a variety of reasons, including lack of clarity on whether this would violate institutional rules at the colleges at which I teach, my personal concerns about potential plagiarism in AI-generated text, and my preference for human-generated content overall.

That said, it's easy to see how the free version of ChatGPT, and other similar tools such as Google Bard and the GPT-4-powered subscription version of ChatGPT, could be helpful to teachers, especially new educators.

Here are a few quick ways to use ChatGPT to prepare for class. Keep in mind these tools do make mistakes and ChatGPT and similar AI-powered chatbots are better at providing broad introductions to topics than getting into the weeds, the way educators and their students often do.

1. Using ChatGPT to Prepare for Class: Generating Lesson Plans

(Image credit: OpenAI)

Organizing our thoughts into a cohesive lesson plan takes even skilled and experienced educators time. ChatGPT can generate semi-detailed lesson plans on introductory topics in mere moments.

I teach journalism and asked it to create a lesson plan around the inverted pyramid – an important concept in traditional news stories in which the most important information in the story is provided at the beginning.

My prompt: Can you create a writing exercise students can do based on the inverted pyramid?

ChatGPT's response:

Sure! Here's a lesson plan on the inverted pyramid for college students:

__Title__: Mastering the Inverted Pyramid Structure in Journalism

__Objective__: To understand and apply the inverted pyramid structure in news writing.

__Materials Needed__:

Whiteboard or blackboard

Markers or chalk

Handouts with news articles

Writing materials for students

__Introduction__ (10 minutes):

Begin by explaining to students that the inverted pyramid is a structure commonly used in journalism to write news articles. The structure places the most important information at the beginning of the article, with less important details following in descending order. Explain that this structure is designed to allow readers to quickly grasp the most important information and decide if they want to read further. Show examples of news articles that follow the inverted pyramid structure.

__Activity__ (30 minutes):

Divide students into pairs or small groups and provide each group with a news article.

Instruct students to read the article and identify the most important information in the first paragraph, followed by the next most important information in the second paragraph, and so on.

After each group has identified the important information in their article, ask them to rewrite the article in inverted pyramid style, with the most important information in the first paragraph, and so on.

Ask each group to share their rewritten article with the class and discuss the differences between the original article and the inverted pyramid version.

__Discussion__ (20 minutes):

Lead a class discussion on the benefits and drawbacks of the inverted pyramid structure. Ask students to discuss the advantages of the structure, such as allowing readers to quickly grasp the most important information. Also, ask them to identify any potential drawbacks, such as making the article seem formulaic or sacrificing the narrative or storytelling elements of journalism.
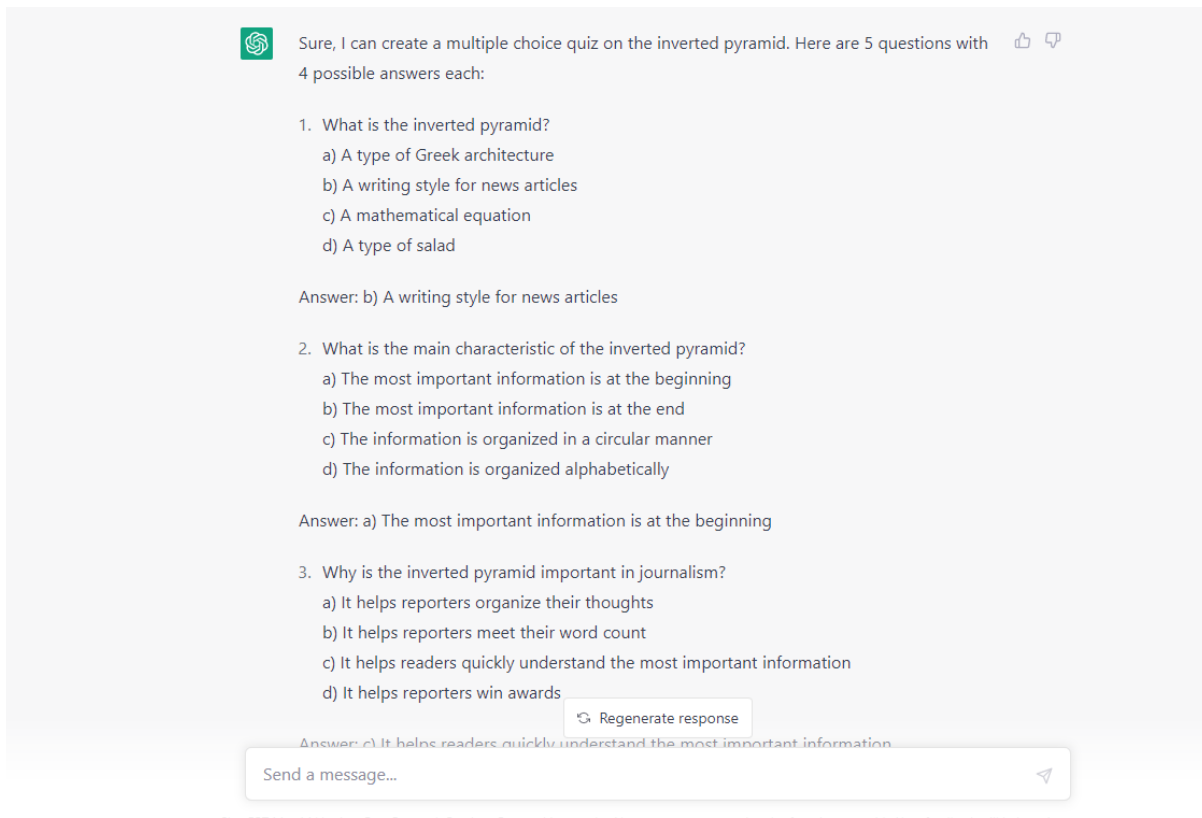
Conclusion *(10 minutes):*

Summarize the lesson and encourage students to practice using the inverted pyramid structure in their own writing. Remind them that while the structure is useful, it should not be used as a substitute for good writing, storytelling, or other elements of journalism.

Assessment*:*

Assess students on their ability to identify the most important information in a news article and to apply the inverted pyramid structure to rewrite the article. You can also assess their participation in class discussion and their ability to reflect on the advantages and drawbacks

How ChatGPT Did: ChatGPT created a really strong lesson plan that, please don't tell my employers, is very similar to how I actually teach the inverted pyramid. If I were to actually use this lesson plan, I would update it slightly and make sure that I was including mention of related journalism jargon terms, such as the lead/lede and nut graph. ChatGPT was also incapable of taking the lesson to the next level when I asked it to provide me with four examples of recent stories that used the inverted pyramid. The Bing search chatbot, which is powered by GPT-4, also failed in this respect, as did Google's Bard.

2. Using ChatGPT to Create Quizzes

(Image credit: OpenAI)

ChatGPT can also be used to generate quick quizzes. While educators will want to make sure that they are checking the information carefully, it's another good time-saving method. When you're not working directly with a textbook, crafting questions for liberal arts topics can eat up a lot of time.

My prompt: Can you create a writing exercise students can do based on the inverted pyramid?

ChatGPT's response:

Sure, I can create a multiple-choice quiz on the inverted pyramid. Here are 5 questions with 4 possible answers each:

1. What is the inverted pyramid?

a) A type of Greek architecture

b) A writing style for news articles

c) A mathematical equation

d) A type of salad

Answer: b) A writing style for news articles

2. What is the main characteristic of the inverted pyramid?

a) The most important information is at the beginning

b) The most important information is at the end

c) The information is organized in a circular manner

d) The information is organized alphabetically

Answer: a) The most important information is at the beginning

3. Why is the inverted pyramid important in journalism?

a) It helps reporters organize their thoughts

b) It helps reporters meet their word count

c) It helps readers quickly understand the most important information

d) It helps reporters win awards

Answer: c) It helps readers quickly understand the most important information

4. What is the "nut graf" in the inverted pyramid?

a) A small paragraph that summarizes the entire article

b) A paragraph that explains the headline

c) A paragraph that provides background information

d) A paragraph that includes a quote from a source

Answer: c) A paragraph that provides background information

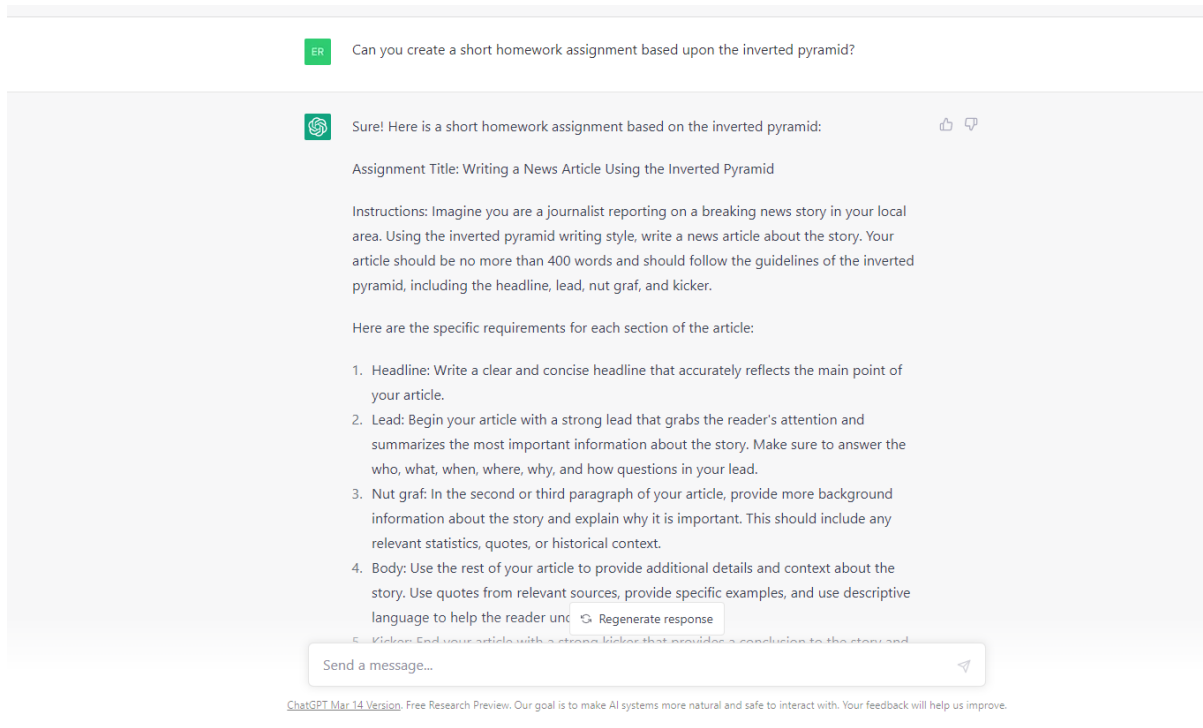**5. What is the "kicker" in the inverted pyramid?**

a) A paragraph that concludes the article

b) A paragraph that introduces a new topic

c) A paragraph that provides a personal anecdote

d) A paragraph that includes a humorous comment

Answer: a) A paragraph that concludes the article

How ChatGPT Did: I'm impressed by its speed and the clean formatting of the questions. However, question one feels a bit too easy for college students and overall these skew toward the easy side, but as a quick way to generate some starter questions that would be ungraded, these are fairly strong.

3. Using ChatGPT to Write Homework Assignments

(Image credit: OpenAI)

ChatGPT works really well as rapid-fire prompt-generating machine. You can easily ask it to generate questions, assignments or homework on various topics that you can than tweak as necessary.

My prompt: Can you create a short homework assignment based upon the inverted pyramid?

ChatGPT's response: *Sure! Here is a short homework assignment based on the inverted pyramid:*

Assignment title*: Writing a News Article Using the Inverted Pyramid*

Instructions: Imagine you are a journalist reporting on a breaking news story in your local area. Using the inverted pyramid writing style, write a news article about the story. Your article should be no more than 400 words and should follow the guidelines of the inverted pyramid, including the headline, lead, nut graf, and kicker.

Here are the specific requirements for each section of the article:

1. Headline: Write a clear and concise headline that accurately reflects the main point of your article.

2. Lead: Begin your article with a strong lead that grabs the reader's attention and summarizes the most important information about the story. Make sure to answer the who, what, when, where, why, and how questions in your lead.

3. Nut graf: In the second or third paragraph of your article, provide more background information about the story and explain why it is important. This should include any relevant statistics, quotes, or historical context.

4. Body: Use the rest of your article to provide additional details and context about the story. Use quotes from relevant sources, provide specific examples, and use descriptive language to help the reader understand the story.

5. Kicker: End your article with a strong kicker that provides a conclusion to the story and leaves the reader with a lasting impression.

Submission Guidelines: Submit your article in a Microsoft Word or Google Docs format with your name and the date on the top of the page. Your article should be double-spaced and written in 12-point Times New Roman font. Submit your assignment via email to the teacher or instructor by the due date.

How ChatGPT Did: I like the clear and precise guidelines, which can help serve as a checklist for students. However, the details about how students should write this news article are too vague. Should students conduct their own interviews or rewrite an existing story? Also, ChatGPT seems to focus a lot on the "the kicker," which isn't even a part of a traditional inverted pyramid-type story.

4. Writing Syllabi

(Image credit: OpenAI)

ChatGPT might not write the most thoughtful of syllabi but what it lacks in depth and meaning it makes up for in brute speed. It took me less time to generate this syllabus using ChatGPT than it did to make coffee this morning and I have an automated coffee maker (calm down coffee snobs, it's a Chemex-made piece of space-age tech designed to emulate a pour over prepared by a skilled barista).

My prompt: Please write a syllabus for a college class called Journalism 101: Basic News Writing.

ChatGPT's response:

Course Title: *Journalism 101: Basic News Writing*

Course Description: *This course is designed to introduce students to the basic principles and techniques of news writing. Students will learn how to write news articles using the inverted pyramid style, conduct research and interviews, and use Associated Press style guidelines. Through a combination of lectures, readings, writing exercises, and assignments, students will develop their writing and reporting skills and gain a deeper understanding of the role of journalism in society.*

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- *Write news articles using the inverted pyramid style*
- *Conduct research and interviews for news stories*
- *Use Associated Press style guidelines*
- *Analyze and critique news articles*
- *Understand the ethical and legal considerations in journalism*

Textbooks:

- *The Associated Press Stylebook, 2021 edition*
- *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel*

Assignments and Grading:

- *News Articles (40%): Students will write several news articles throughout the semester using the inverted pyramid style. These articles will be graded on accuracy, clarity, organization, and adherence to AP style guidelines.*
- *Quizzes (20%): Students will take quizzes on AP style and news writing techniques.*
- *Critiques (20%): Students will analyze and critique news articles from various sources, evaluating their effectiveness and identifying strengths and weaknesses.*
- *Final Project (20%): Students will produce a final news article that incorporates all the skills and techniques learned in the course.*

Attendance and Participation: *Attendance and participation are crucial to success in this course. Students are expected to attend all classes, arrive on time, and actively participate in class discussions and exercises. Attendance will be taken at every class session.*

Grading Scale:

A = 90-100%
B = 80-89%
C = 70-79%
D = 60-69%
F = below 60%

Policies*:*

- *Late Work: Late work will only be accepted in cases of emergency or serious illness, and only with prior approval from the instructor.*
- *Academic Integrity: Plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade for the assignment and potentially for the course.*
- *Disability Accommodations: Students with disabilities who require accommodations should contact the Disability Services office as soon as possible to discuss their needs.*

Course Schedule*:*

Week 1: Introduction to News Writing

- *Introduction to the course and syllabus*
- *Overview of news writing and journalism*
- *The role of journalism in society*

Week 2: The Inverted Pyramid

- *The structure and purpose of the inverted pyramid style*
- *Writing effective leads and nut grafs*
- *Identifying and prioritizing news elements*

(ChatGPT provided similar broad stroke journalism topic suggestions through 8 weeks of class)

How ChatGPT Did: I like that ChatGPT included details such as learning outcomes, textbook suggestions, plagiarism guidelines, and accommodation information. It's not a finished syllabus but it could certainly have saved me time during a stressful weekend back around 2014 when I was teaching one of my earliest classes and frantically trying to get my syllabus together.

However, there are some drawbacks. Initially, I didn't specifiy the length of the course I was teaching so it created an 8-week course. In a follow-up prompt not shown here, I asked it to create a schedule for 16-week course. It said it would do that and then proceeded to create another 8-week course. However, this was the only example of a "lie" or misleading statement provided by ChatGPT I encountered while preparing this story.

Overall Take: ChatGPT already has the potential to help educators with class prep in specific ways. Though in its current form it sometimes behaves like an overconfident student, certain it can accomplish things above its ability.

That said, it's only going to get better going forward. Actually, it already has. The free version of ChatGPT I used for the examples in this story has already been surpassed by the subscription-only ChatGPT plus, which is powered by GPT-4 and is noticeably more sophisticated in its responses.

To share your feedback and ideas on this article, consider joining our Tech & Learning online community.

Tech & Learning Newsletter

Tools and ideas to transform education. Sign up below.

Erik Ofgang is Tech & Learning's senior staff writer. A journalist, **author** and educator, his work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and Associated Press. He currently teaches at Western Connecticut State University's MFA program. While a staff writer at *Connecticut Magazine* he won a Society of Professional Journalism Award for his education reporting. He is interested in how humans learn and how technology can make that more effective.