

# Rhetorical AI Literacy in Theory and Practice

## Abstract

The fast-growing scholarship on AI literacy varies both in technological scope – ranging from machine learning more generally to generative AI (genAI) in specific – and in the underlying understanding of literacy, i.e. functional and/or critical approaches (Gu & Ericson 2025, Almatrafi et al. 2024). Following Selber's (2004) concept of multiliteracies and Watson and colleagues' (2025) call for *sociotechnical pragmatism*, we advocate for an approach to genAI literacy that supplements techno-functional and ethical-critical competencies with a pragmatic, rhetorical perspective. We understand genAI not just as a technology but as a rhetorical praxis in which humans and machines become co-authors of genAI output (Gottschling & Kramer 2025). Treating genAI as a mere tool which can be controlled through prompt engineering overlooks the complexity of human-machine interaction in light of evolving capabilities of genAI chatbots. By being perceived as a conversation partner, genAI chatbots challenge the fundamental assumption in media and communication studies that technology functions as a medium through which communication between humans happens (Guzman & Lewis 2019). Therefore, we conceptualize genAI as a rhetorical partner with a focus on preserving human agency in the co-creation process.

Gottschling (2025) proposes a conceptual framework for *Rhetorical AI Literacy (RAIL)* which enhances technological and ethical approaches to genAI literacy with rhetorical competencies. Rhetoric as a discipline has always had a threefold focus: 1) production and performance, 2) the theory thereof, and 3) the critical analysis of rhetorical practice. Process knowledge (*techné*) of how genAI chatbots produce text can help to shape outputs more effectively and analyze them more critically; critical judgement (*iudicium*) as a core rhetorical competency helps users to evaluate the output to ensure situational appropriateness (*aptum*) (Gottschling 2025). Based on this framework, the *Center for Rhetorical Science Communication Research on Artificial Intelligence (RHET AI)* at the University of Tübingen has developed a workshop format for teaching *RAIL*. The concept is was implemented throughout 33 workshops at adult education centers (*Volkshochschulen*<sup>1</sup>) in Southern Germany from March 2025 to February 2026. The workshop series is accompanied by an empirical study evaluating the rhetorical approach through questionnaires as well as exploring lay users' perceptions and usage on genAI via qualitative interviews.

Our concept focuses on practice-oriented examples to explore genAI's opportunities and limitations. The session was proposed as a hybrid between a research talk and a hands-on workshop; due to time constraints the hands-on exercises will not be possible, but exercises will still be illustrated. Based on theoretical reflections and preliminary empirical findings our contribution tackles the following questions: what

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<sup>1</sup> Note that German *Volkshochschule* is not equivalent to the Danish *folkehøjskole* but rather like an *aftenskole*.

knowledge, skills, and attitudes can help lay users to navigate genAI responsibly? How can we improve *RAIL* through training measures such as workshops?

## References

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## Short biographies

**Markus Gottschling** is a research associate at the Department of General Rhetoric at the University of Tübingen where he also teaches, and coordinates scientific activities at the *Center for Rhetorical Science Communication Research on Artificial Intelligence (RHET AI)*. There, he leads the working group ‘Communicative Competence’, which focuses on how communication skills shape the relationship between science, society, and technology. Since 2025, he has been co-director of the RHET AI Coalition, an international research network at the interface of rhetoric and artificial intelligence.

He develops and teaches training programs in science communication, both for the RHET AI Center and as part of the certificate program Science Communication and Media Competence, which he oversees.

His current research explores how rhetoric and generative AI interact – particularly in co-creative writing processes and the development of what he calls Rhetorical AI Literacy. He is also interested in the role of fictionalization in science communication and how narrative techniques can reshape public engagement with scientific knowledge.

**Rafaela Pfeil** is a PhD student at the *Center for Rhetorical Science Communication Research on Artificial Intelligence* at the University of Tübingen. She is part of the center's working group 'Communicative Competence.' Her research focuses on Rhetorical AI Literacy and everyday usage of generative AI. In her doctoral thesis, Rafaela Pfeil investigates which knowledge, skills and attitudes can help lay users in navigating generative AI responsibly. Moreover, she studies how Rhetorical AI Literacy can be fostered through training measures such as workshops. Rafaela Pfeil studied General Rhetoric and Media Studies (B.A.) at the University of Tübingen, Germany, and Media and Communication (M.A.) at the University of Roskilde, Denmark.

**Salina Weber** is a research assistant at the *Center for Rhetorical Science Communication Research on Artificial Intelligence* at the University of Tübingen. She is part of the center's working group 'Communicative Competence.' As part of the certificate program *Science Communication and Media Competence* at the University of Tübingen, Salina Weber is responsible for developing and teaching training formats for science communication. She has extensive experience as a trainer, for rhetoric, presentation skills, and science communication. Salina Weber studied German Studies and General Rhetoric (B.A.) at the University of Tübingen, where she also earned her masters degree in General Rhetoric (M.A.).