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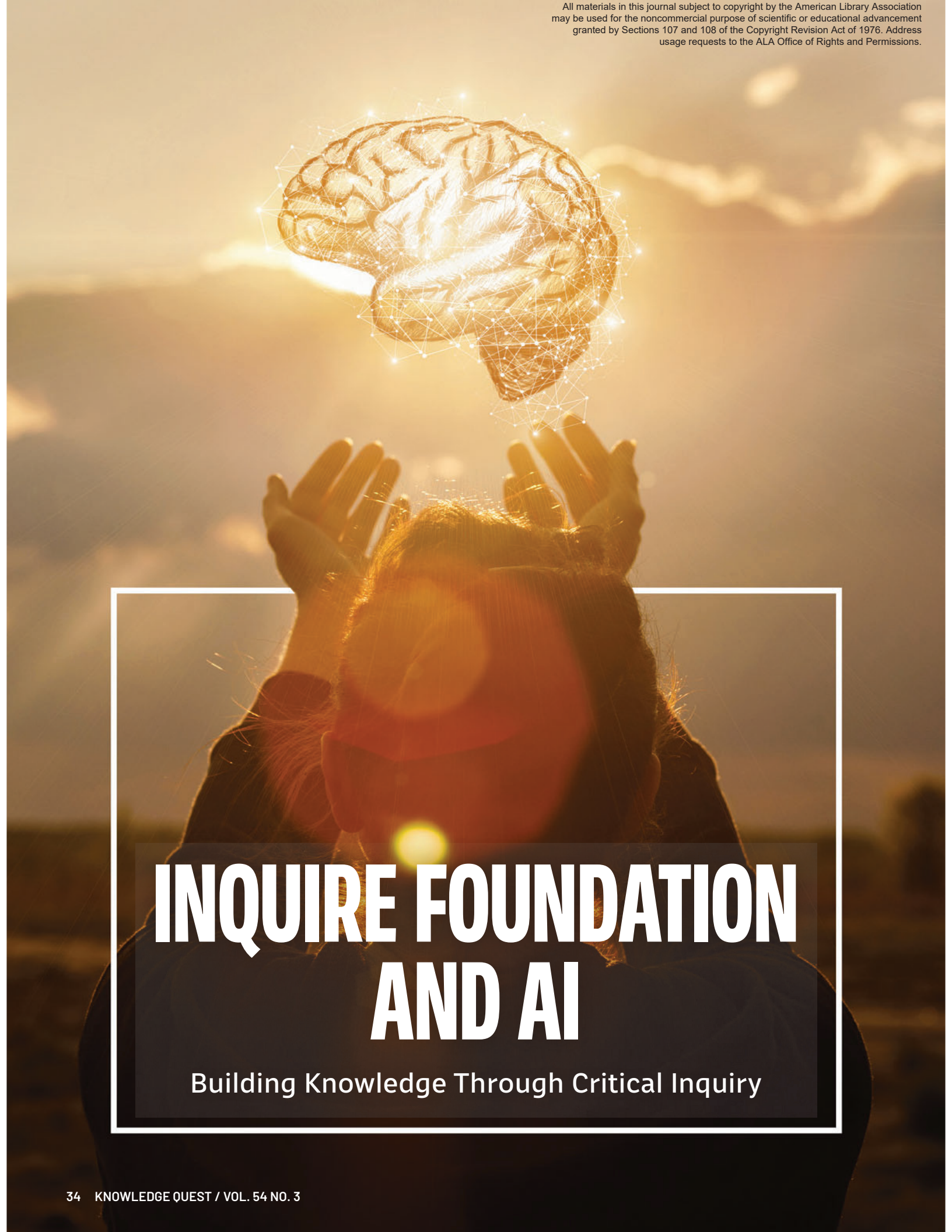

INQUIRE FOUNDATION AND AI

Building Knowledge Through Critical Inquiry

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BY **LORI DONOVAN**

Inquire Foundation's Key Commitment is "[to] Build new knowledge by inquiring, thinking critically, identifying problems, and developing strategies for solving problems."

Inquire allows school librarians to present information literacy, including digital and media literacies, including using and consuming artificial intelligence (AI), to create/develop/hone critical thinking skills, creating learners who build new knowledge and understandings to solve problems.

School librarians integrating AI tools into instruction doesn't require starting from scratch. The Inquire framework already provides a strong foundation for teaching critical thinking and problem solving. School librarians use the strategies that have worked well in their teaching—such as inquiry-based learning and reflection—to engage learners with new technologies like AI. By applying proven methods to emerging tools, learners achieve familiar learning outcomes in new ways. To make AI literacy explicit, connect Inquire competencies to AI-related outcomes:

- Inquiry and Problem-Solving: Evaluate how AI retrieves and organizes information.
- Information Evaluation: Assess accuracy, bias, and credibility in AI outputs.
- Ethical Use: Understand data privacy, authorship, and responsible citation of AI-generated content.
- Collaboration and Communication: Use AI tools to brainstorm, organize, and present ideas effectively.
- Reflection: Analyze how AI influences personal learning processes and decision-making.

These goals can be adapted to subject areas across the curriculum, reinforcing that AI literacy is not separate from information literacy but an extension of it. Let's explore how the Inquire Foundation can guide AI integration through three perspectives:

School librarians integrating AI tools into instruction doesn't require starting from scratch. The Inquire framework already provides a strong foundation for teaching critical thinking and problem solving.

1. Understanding AI in Retrieval Systems

2. Community Notes and Fact-Checking

3. Building New Knowledge Through Critical Inquiry

NOTE: These lesson ideas are based on secondary learners as most AI tools have a user agreement for ages 13 or older.

Understanding AI in Retrieval Systems

"Algorithms in the search and social media domains are most directly related to students' information-seeking behaviors because of the way these

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algorithms shape and control information. Despite their helpfulness in limiting information overload in the domains of search and social media, these algorithms also limit user agency by making decisions about what information to display and filter out" (Archambault). School librarians help learners understand that retrieval systems are not neutral: They are built and trained by humans, influenced by algorithms, and shaped by commercial interests.

Community Notes vs. Fact Checking

AI tools are powerful, but they also make misinformation easier to produce and spread. To help learners become critical consumers, school librarians connect AI literacy to digital citizenship and fact checking. Elissa Malespina, AI school librarian, posted October 9, 2025: "For educators, this is no longer a hypothetical. We need to prepare learners for a world where video cannot automatically be trusted, even when it looks convincing. That means teaching them that:

- "Believability is not proof. A polished video is not the same as verified evidence.
- "Consent matters. Inserting someone into a video without their permission can be harmful, even if it feels like a joke.
- "Verification is essential. Learners must practice checking sources, tracing content back, and using detection tools."

Scenario: A high school librarian partners with a history/social sciences educator to have learners look at online political ads to understand how algorithms are used to drive content material. (VA SOL USVA GOVT 6.D - 12th grade)

COMPETENCY

Inquire Think:

Learners display curiosity and initiative by:

1. Formulating questions about a personal interest or a curricular topic.
2. Recalling prior and background knowledge as context for new meaning.

OUTCOME

The learner analyzes the influence of media coverage, campaign advertising, public opinion polls, social media, and digital communications to determine how candidates appeal to voters and develop a rubric to rank the effectiveness of the campaign's message.

OBJECTIVES

a. (Think) Learners will develop questions that help analyze elements of a digital media campaign for their particular candidate.

b. (Create) Learners will use evidence found in research to determine the effectiveness of the media campaign.

c. (Grow) Learners will engage with new knowledge of the media processes of campaigns to demonstrate effectiveness of candidates' media messages.

I can statement: I can develop research questions and analyze results to determine the effectiveness of campaign messaging on voting constituents.

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Building New Knowledge in Critical Inquiry

The heart of Inquire is helping learners move beyond consumption toward creation—transforming information into knowledge. When applied to AI, this means using the technology not as a shortcut but as a collaborator in the learning process. "What students are doing is exactly what we always ask them to do: Show us your reasoning. They're not just copying information — they're analyzing, questioning, and understanding the path to an answer. This type of task also helps students navigate AI responsibly. AI cannot replace the critical thinking process; instead, it can augment students' reasoning skills when integrated thoughtfully" (Fisher and Frey).

A CLEAR FRAMEWORK FOR PROMPT ENGINEERING IN K–12 SETTINGS

Context: Provide the AI tool sufficient background to understand your request. Include details such as the learning goal, grade level, subject matter, and any relevant context for the assignment.

Language Simplicity: Use clear, straightforward language. Avoid complex terms or jargon to ensure that the AI can easily interpret your prompt.

Explain the Format or Use Examples: Specify what kind of response you're expecting. Offer examples or describe the desired format so the AI tool can generate results that align with your expectations.

Audience: Provide information about the intended audience, including grade level, personal interests, and any specific needs or considerations that might shape the response.

Relevance: Ensure that your prompt is aligned with the task at hand, the user's interests, and current events or trends. This connection helps the AI-powered tool generate results that are engaging, meaningful, and directly applicable to the context.

Text box from chapter 2, p. 12

Scenario: A middle school librarian works with an English/journalism teacher helping learners analyze a social media post and a TV news report for messages about AI deepfakes and assessing credibility of media messages. Learners will create a PSA for their peers on what they have learned. (Project Look Sharp Lesson Plan: https://tinyurl.com/2s2nr4ed)

COMPETENCY

Inquire Create:

Learners engage with new knowledge by following a process that includes:

1. Using evidence to investigate questions.

3. Generating products that illustrate learning.

OUTCOME

a. Learners develop their own opinions on the importance (or not) of assessing truth claims in the media.

b. Learners use reasoning tools and evidence-based reasoning to develop a better understanding of how media can manipulate viewers.

OBJECTIVES

a. (Think) Learners will reflect on emotional responses to a media message using prior and background knowledge of their own media use.

b. (Grow) Learners will identify ways to evaluate the authenticity of images in the age of AI from their own question strategies.

c. (Create) Learners will develop a PSA discussing the importance of assessing credibility in media messages.

I can statement: I can develop a PSA for my peers about the importance of checking the credibility of the media we consume.

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> AI cannot replace the critical thinking process; instead, it can augment students' reasoning skills when integrated thoughtfully.

One way to do this is by teaching learners to ask better question prompts. In the new Standards publication *Leveraging AI in school libraries: from basics to best practices*, author D.L.I. Seales uses the CLEAR model to help learners craft better prompts that demonstrate their critical thinking and makes that thinking visible.

Conclusion

AI is changing how learners access and create information—but the Inquire Foundation already equips school librarians to guide them through this transformation. By combining inquiry-based learning with digital and AI literacies, school librarians help learners think critically, evaluate information ethically, and use technology to build new knowledge.

Through understanding retrieval systems, practicing community fact-checking, and engaging in critical inquiry, learners not only navigate the digital landscape—they shape it. The goal is not to master AI tools themselves but to cultivate the habits of mind that make learners thoughtful, responsible, and innovative users of knowledge in an evolving world.

Scenario: The school librarian works with an 8th grade ELA teacher on a writing assignment that has learners practice writing expository texts to examine a topic or concept that conveys ideas and information with relevant, [and] well-chosen facts. Using the CLEAR protocol, learners draft a prompt to place in a generative AI tool to then write about the pros and cons of the AI tool. (VA SOL English, Reading, & Literacy, 8W 1.B)

COMPETENCY

Inquire Create:

Learners adapt, communicate, and exchange learning products with others in a cycle that includes:

1. Interacting with content presented by others.
2. Sharing products with an authentic audience.

OUTCOME

a. Learners apply CLEAR prompt to learn how to effectively write a prompt for a generative AI tool.

b. Learners debate their new knowledge on the best way to write a prompt for a generative AI tool.

OBJECTIVES

a. (Think) Learners will draft a prompt using CLEAR after seeing examples from school librarian and educator partner.

b. (Create) Learners will choose a generative AI tool to use their crafted prompt.

c. (Share) Learners will work in groups of differing generative AI tools to debate the merits and misses of each tool when it comes to prompt writing.

I can statement: I can develop a good generative AI prompt that will allow me to write an expository essay on the merits of using generative AI as a brainstorming tool.

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