# Ashoka University
## Office of Admissions

## On-the-Spot Essay Prompts 2025 Intake

The on-the-spot essay evaluates the following parameters: engagement with the prompt, critical thinking, clarity of thought, and creativity. Candidates will be given two topics to choose from at the time of writing the essay. Candidates cannot use any external resources to help them write the essay. The essay has no word limit; however, candidates are given 30 minutes to complete the exercise. The essay can be attempted with minimal preparation.

Please find attached some sample prompts and essays. These essays were written by candidates in the previous Admissions Cycles on prompts given to them during their Ashoka Aptitude Assessment.

***Disclaimer: The views expressed in these essays by the various authors do not reflect the opinions and views held by Ashoka University.***

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**1. Virtual assistants namely Cortana, Siri, and Alexa used in smart devices such as smart phones, tablets, smart speakers, etc are assigned female identities by default. Is this because of the tendency to associate women with roles where they are expected to assist others? Engage with the statement and write your views.**

The tendency to associate women with such roles where they are expected to serve and assist is one, I believe, that plays a defining factor when it comes to assigning female identities to virtual assistants. Firstly, the archetype of the woman waiting on and serving their male counterparts, the apparent breadwinners, is one that has been found throughout history, literature, and popular culture. Whether it is the age-old stereotype of the average Judeo-Christian household with a homemaking wife and an employed man of the house, or domestic roles being largely dominated by women even today, it is apparent that there is a tendency in many different cultures across the world to associate women with roles of servitude. As any student of psychology will be able to tell you, associations like this are deeply rooted and further validated through what one may witness in an average patriarchal society today. Drawing from this assertion, it is clear as to why this archetype of women may lead to their voices being used for digital assistants; it is the status quo that the world is used to, and thus, becomes the instinctive response that seems to makes sense.

Secondly, corporates - especially large, multi-national corporates such as Apple and Amazon - do their market research and go out of their way to play into the expectations and desires of their customers. One such clear example of this is the heavily targeted advertisements based on user data. Thus, it stands to reason that these companies would tailor each and every one of their products for their consumers' needs. Given the incredibly high number of customers that these multi-national companies have, and that virtual assistants are made to appeal to the widest bracket of these customers possible, it makes perfect sense for them to assign female identities to these virtual assistants due to their customers' inherent expectations of women playing roles of servitude. As highlighted in my first argument, these expectations of women are borne from age-old stereotypes, and this only serves as further evidence of just how deeply rooted the archetype of the serving woman really is.

Thirdly, one point that may be considered is how male-dominated the technology sector really is. Various studies have shown that women face all kinds of difficulties in technology, and the typical tech workplace will be dominated by men. As such, one most consider the idea that the association of women with roles of servitude is far more likely to be enforced by men, given their natural vested interest in maintaining status quo where they have the upper hand. This isn't to say that every single man on the face of the planet is a woman-hating chauvinist; rather, that these unconscious psychological associations are simply far more likely to take root in individuals' minds if it plays to their interests - whether they are aware of it or not. Therefore, given not only how male-dominated the tech workplace is, but also how men seem to hold more positions of authority in the sector (with the CEOs of most leading tech companies being men), the association of women with roles of servitude is far more likely to take shape.

One must consider the counter-argument that this decision to assign female identities with virtual assistants is simply because it seems to be the most neutral option, with no such thought going into the matter as I have described. To this I would say, there is a reason that the voice of a woman is perceived as the most neutral option, and that has to do with the social and psychological association of women with assisting and serving. No matter how neutral or balanced an option might seem, if it is the most instinctual one, then there is a logic to it - as I have asserted in my previous arguments.

Thus, I would like to conclude by reasserting by stance on the matter; the decision to assign female voices to virtual assistants by default is, indeed, due to the tendency to associate women with roles where they are expected to assist and serve.

**2. Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth. Due to the constant presence of fake news in our day-to-day lives, our idea of truth has become coloured by the content we consume. Do you agree or disagree? Give a reasoned response.**

Although most academic disciplines are in pursuit of the truth, it is difficult to ascertain a concrete and absolute truth. Acknowledging this results in a healthy degree of scepticism in most academic communities; however, this spells ambiguity and confusion for the common individual. There is a one-sided reliance on epistemological gatekeepers in order to access information; therefore, for a large period of time, we were reliant on mainstream media as a source of the truth. Mainstream media often demonstrably do not fulfil the ideal and objective standard for reporting, and biases often colour the reporting. At times, these biases are overt and present in the style of reporting, in the instance of sensationalized news debates and opinion segments. The biases that are more difficult to identify are larger biases that arise from trends in the choice of ideas explored in reporting. For instance, in the US, the amount of coverage given to Islamic terrorist activities was larger than the actual amount of any such crimes in the country. Another similar implicit bias is that of neutrality, wherein multiple truths are projected with the same credibility which distorts reality while maintaining the superficial aesthetic of objective distancing. Presenting "both sides" often distorts what is scientifically proven such as the news articles that project climate change denial and acceptance, which stagnates the response to an urgent global issue.

The authority and potential ulterior interests of large mainstream news corporations caused due to funding and accommodation provided by other figures of authority in the state might incentivise individuals to rely on non-mainstream independent news outlets. The presence of the internet has enabled individual figures to report on local social issues and ideas and spread information through direct messaging applications such as WhatsApp, or on public platforms like YouTube or Facebook. While these independent platforms may present information that is outside the potential larger biases of expansive

news media conglomerates, they also platform false information with more accessibility than ever before. While some platforms like YouTube can still be governed to an extent with moderation and regulation, applications such as WhatsApp can be a breeding ground for groundless conspiratorial claims, historical revisionism, and pseudo-scientific information. Moreover, such "independent" news forwards are often potentially backed by the larger governmental organizations that have their hands on mainstream media, nullifying the potential benefits of having independent platforms for reporting.

Returning to the initial predicament, the truth has never been clear, and will always be coloured by our experiences and the content we consume; moreover, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Personal truths such as faith in a larger meaning, or personal philosophies help provide comfort and a sense of meaning to individuals; however, gatekeeping and the larger prevalence of media in our lives has accentuated the potential control that authoritative organizations can have over an individual. The academic Chomsky, through his propaganda hypothesis model, discussed how implicit control can be exerted over the citizens of a nation through the media spread by those in power. It is imperative that individuals question media, using critical tools of scepticism and looking for evidence to ground news reports in order to identify a more credible "truth". That being said, scepticism that leads to conspiratorial beliefs such as climate change denial are unhealthy, and individuals must retain trust for academic consensus. Questioning information is beneficial; however, uninformed questioning of academically proven ideas is not. Scepticism is rooted in scientific philosophy, as even scientific academia recognizes that truth is not absolute. In fact, as indicated by Karl Popper's principle of falsifiability, the potential for alternative hypotheses and explanations is what gives weight and grounding to the accepted hypotheses and explanations. While I do not believe academia should be the arbiter of all truth, the academic method is rigorous and critical enough to be more reliable as a source of knowledge than news media.

That being said, academia is like an ivory tower and has far less accessibility than television news, WhatsApp forwards, and YouTube videos; therefore, it is important that the individual is educated enough to recognize the sources of knowledge and understand how truth may be constructed by those in power. While it is potentially harmful to constantly be a sceptic, individuals should have the ability to question those in power and those with authority and identifying when the "truth" comes from sources of social authority is imperative in defogging the biases in news media.