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Coachable moments with AI: Student perceptions of transformed assignments that include AI agent coaches

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Abstract

As AI skills become a necessity for college students entering the modern workforce, colleges of business are responding by adding AI education to their curricula. This paper describes how traditional business assignments can be transformed to include AI coaching elements using instructor-created AI agents. Specifically, two course activities were redesigned using AI Coaching (custom GPT agents) that students interacted with to practice course concepts and receive structured guidance during low-stakes activities. Student perceptions of these AI coaching agent activities are also examined. Overall, students reported positive perceptions of the AI coaching agent activities. These findings offer practical guidance for faculty interested in using AI coaching agents to create more responsive practice activities within existing business courses.

Keywords: AI Coaches, AI Agents, Scaffolding, Pedagogical Coaching, Tutoring Systems

Introduction

Corporate recruiters rank AI skills as most important in their hiring decisions into the next decade (Means, 2026). To meet this demand, many colleges of business initially offered AI courses to computer information systems (CIS) students. Additionally, a recent Inspire Higher Ed report (Means, 2026) developed with support from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) highlights that colleges of business are beginning to incorporate AI education across their business curriculum in order to reach all business students. Yet there are widespread faculty concerns that students overly rely on generative AI and that AI negatively impacts critical thinking skills, decreases attention spans, increases cheating, and devalues higher education degrees (Zalaznick, 2026). Students too are concerned about AI and booed several commencement speakers at the mention of AI (Yang & Perlo, 2026).

AI coaches may be one way to promote responsible use of AI in higher education and help prepare students for the workplace. To produce business graduates primed to join an AI-ready workforce, a recent survey by IT research firm Gartner suggests that preparing workers to use GenAI needs to include customized guidance and training (Gartner, 2025) instead of typical standardized static training sessions involving videos (Goss et al., 2025). While only 5% of employees are trained with AI in 2025, an estimated 40% will be trained with AI coaches by 2028 (Sicular & den Hamer, 2025). This present paper explores student

perceptions of traditional classroom activities for college of business students that were transformed to include dynamic AI coaching activities.

Background and Literature Review

Using information systems to coach students is not new, as expert systems have been used for coaching purposes and have evolved into intelligent tutoring systems. Literature associated with these two types of systems along with characteristics such as feedback and scaffolding and how they can be incorporated into AI agent coaches is discussed below.

Pre-AI Coaching and Tutoring Systems

Expert Systems

Coaching systems have been used long before the recent emergence of AI agents. Expert systems of the late 1960s and 1970s were some of the first systems to use artificial intelligence to capture and codify human intelligence for training purposes. Characteristics associated with these expert systems included a dependence on domain-specific knowledge and heuristics with performance equal to problem area specialists, all the while being able to share what it knows and its reasoning while remaining flexible (Buchanan & Smith, 1988). The central aspect of an expert system is its knowledge base, constructed to include knowledge from multiple experts for the problem at hand. Buchanan and Smith (1988) describe two classes of problems that expert systems were designed to solve. One class of problems included problems of construction or design where an analysis of knowledge base data results in a design or set of steps to solve a problem. Expert systems were also designed to solve problems of interpretation where data and knowledge interpretation contribute to an analysis such as one might find with diagnostic expert systems to diagnose or troubleshoot problems, for example.

Intelligent Tutoring Systems

MYCIN was an early rule-based expert system designed to provide medical bacterial infection diagnoses and treatments which Clancey (1986) used as a knowledge base for the GUIDON tutoring system designed to help medical students learn about infectious diseases. Later intelligent tutoring systems like NEOMYCIN separated knowledge base facts from diagnostic or teaching strategy, for example, to better deal with student hypotheses (Clancey, 1986). A domain knowledge base and knowledge of teaching strategies are two of the knowledge bases needed by intelligent tutoring systems (ITS), with the other two being knowledge of the person being taught as well as a knowledge base describing how the teaching strategy knowledge can be applied to meet individual student needs (Nwana, 1990). The architecture of these early ITS systems, like SCHOLAR, includes four modules: the expert, student, tutoring, and user interface module. Early ITS systems, however, were not able to give students rich feedback (Nwana, 1990).

Coaching Characteristics and AI Coaching

Feedback

Alternatively, AI tools are able to give feedback immediately that helps personalize learning (Means, 2026). In a seminal study, Hattie and Timperley (2007) define feedback, which follows performance, as “information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding” (p. 81). They suggest powerful feedback addresses three questions: “Where am I going? How am I going?, and Where to next?” (p. 88) and provides information about goals, how to proceed, and enhanced challenges or more self-regulation over the process of learning. Hattie and Timperley (2007) describe four types of feedback: task-level, process-level, self-regulation, and self-level personal feedback. They suggest that feedback in the form of praise is not very effective, while task-related feedback works best when it corrects each student’s faulty interpretation. Another effective form of learning

process feedback works because it helps students strategize, and finally, self-regulation-related feedback helps students monitor their learning and can point students toward more challenging goals.

Butler and Winne (1995) focused on feedback associated with self-regulated learning (SRL) and described feedback as a catalyst for SRL. Their SRL model describes how internal feedback is iterative as students gather knowledge, set goals and strategies and produce products, adjusting through iterative loops with external feedback providing additional input to the SRL process (Butler and Winne, 1995).

Scaffolding

Getting from where a learner is to where a learner is going, according to Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), involves a scaffolding “process that enables a ... novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (p. 90) provided that the learner clearly understands the solution. An important component of this scaffolding process is a tutor’s ability to engage students and reduce the task complexity, maintain their direction, note important task features, control learner frustration, and demonstrate if needed (Wood et al., 1976), which allows a context that facilitates learning and the fading of the scaffolding. Educational AI coaching may lend itself to scaffolding practice in both reducing task complexity and maintaining direction based on the instructor’s prompting.

AI Coaching

Vitale et al. (2026) define AI coaching as “A structured, goal-oriented interaction, in which an AI-driven technology engages with a human coachee to facilitate their physical, behavioral, or cognitive development through ongoing guided AI-mediated interventions that foster personal growth, reflection, and self-directed change” (p. 5). We adopt this definition of AI coaching that builds on scaffolding and utilizes personalized feedback that, according to Vitale et al. (2026), tailors “the content and delivery of coaching interventions by an AI technology coach through leveraging the information about the coachee available to the coach at the time of generating these interventions” (p. 5).

Recent research shows that pedagogical AI conversational agents are increasingly used in higher education to support teaching and learning through functions such as assessment, peer dialogue, role-play, and student question-answering (Maryadi et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2020; Shorey et al., 2019; Gonda & Chu, 2019). Yusuf et al. (2025) classify these agents according to three broad pedagogical purposes: instructional, pastoral, and cognitive, with more specific uses including mentoring and coaching, simulation and experience, assessment, reflection, communication, and knowledge-based support.

Their review also highlights that mentoring and coaching agents represent a major use case in higher education, while large language model-based agents remain underexplored for pedagogical purposes, creating a need for more classroom-based examples of how instructor-created agents can support student learning activities. In the following sections we explore the creation and implementation of such LLM based coaching agents in the classroom.

Transforming Assignments to Include AI Coaching

This exploration describes how activities and assignments were transformed to include custom GPT AI agent coaches that were created by instructors. The coaching activities occurred in classes with the majority of students from the college of business. The courses included a marketing sales course and a social media marketing course.

Marketing Sales Course: Evolution to Custom ChatGPT AI Agent Pedagogical Coach

Original Assignment for Sales Course

The SPIN framework (Situation, Problem, Implication, Need-Payoff) provides a structured approach to guiding buyer conversations toward need discovery and value articulation. Effective use of the framework requires not only familiarity with the categories but also the ability to accurately distinguish among question types and apply them in sequence. Students frequently misidentify all four SPIN question types, indicating difficulty distinguishing among them and applying them appropriately within the sequence, so AI coaching may provide a unique opportunity to scaffold learning and reinforce concepts using an innovative approach. The original instructional approach used a worksheet-based exercise (see Table 1 below) in which students classified approximately 50 questions into SPIN categories. While this activity provided exposure to the framework, it emphasized classification accuracy rather than the underlying decision logic that differentiates question types.

Table 1. Version 1 of the SPIN Question Worksheet

SPIN QUESTION CATEGORIZATION EXERCISE	
Mark whether each question is Situation, Problem, Implication or Need Payoff (SPIN) Question	
1.	What are your goals for the next year?
2.	What steps are you taking to accomplish those goals?
3.	Are you happy with your current box supplier?
4.	Do you ever experience breakage when your pies are shipped?
5.	How much money do you lose due to having to send refunds when the customer receives pies that have been broken during shipping?

To address this limitation, the assignment was redesigned to incorporate a decision tree intended to make the classification process more explicit (see Figure 1 below).

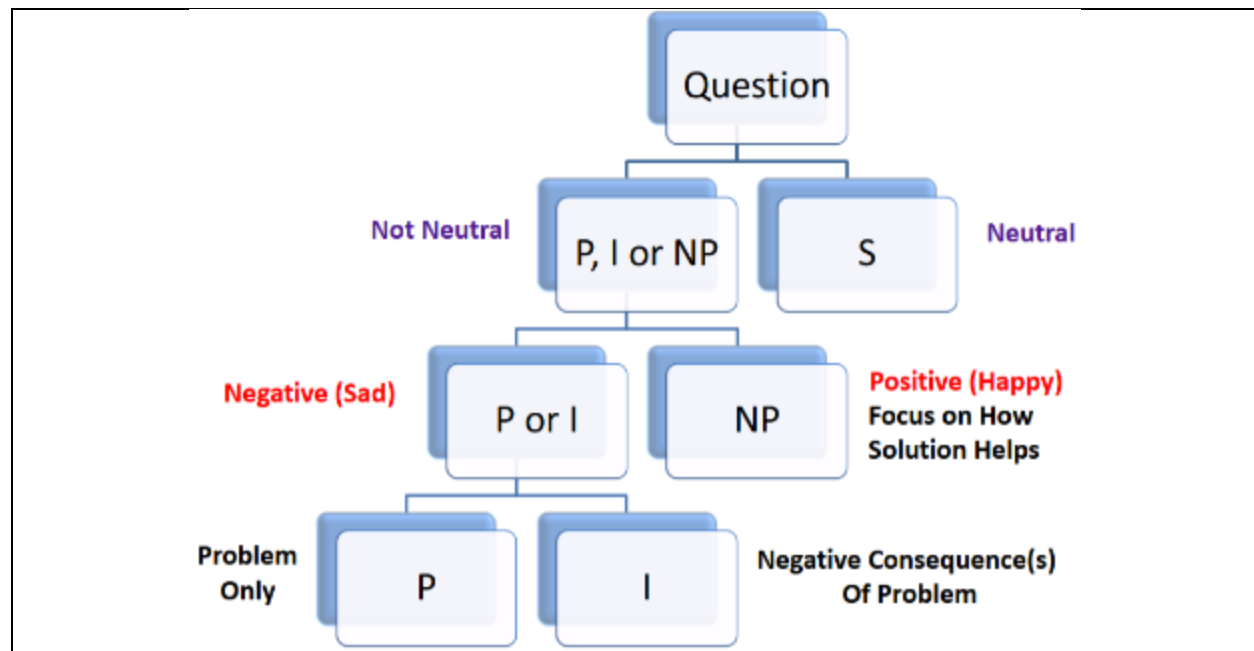


Figure 1. SPIN Decision Tree

However, this approach increased procedural demands by requiring students to work through each branch of the decision structure, even when they already knew the correct classification. As a result, the activity emphasized process completion rather than diagnostic reasoning.

New Assignment with AI Agent Coach for Sales Course

To improve alignment between the learning objective and the instructional mechanism, a custom ChatGPT-based pedagogical agent was developed (see Table 4 in the Appendix for the custom GPT agent code). The custom GPT agent operationalizes the SPIN framework as an adaptive decision process. Rather than functioning as an answer generator, the system prompts students to classify questions and intervenes only when misclassification occurs. When an incorrect classification is identified, the custom GPT agent guides the student through a structured sequence of prompts to evaluate the question's intent and sequencing. Once the student demonstrates correct reasoning, the system terminates the decision process rather than requiring completion of all remaining branches. This conditional progression preserves the integrity of the decision structure while reducing unnecessary cognitive load. By shifting the task from static classification (see Figure 2 below) to guided reasoning, the custom GPT agent may enhance students' ability to distinguish among SPIN question types and apply them appropriately in subsequent live sales interactions.

Figure 2. SPIN Question Worksheet with Sample Questions

	Question	Neutral (Y/N)	Positive/Negative	Prob/Prob + Conseq	SPIN?	Right Ansr.
1	Are you happy with your current packaging?					
2	What savings could you achieve with packaging solutions optimized for cost and logistics?					
3	How does packaging fit into your overall supply chain process?					
4	How much could a sustainable packaging solution enhance your brand image?					
5	How do you currently handle returns or complaints related to packaging defects?					

The custom GPT agent is built using structured instructions and embedded knowledge sources, including a completed worksheet and the SPIN decision chart (see Figure 1 on the previous page), allowing it to function as a constrained coaching mechanism that reinforces process adherence while maintaining flexibility. This approach reflects a broader shift in the use of AI in pedagogy, from content generation to structured, process-oriented coaching. The assignment instructions for the custom GPT agent activity appear in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Instructions for AI Agent Coach SPIN Activity For Sales Class

A common challenge for students is correctly classifying questions as Situation, Problem, Implication, or Need-Payoff (SPIN). This skill is crucial — it makes up about 50% of your test score, 50% of your final exam score, and 50% of your graded role plays. To help you practice identifying SPIN questions, I've created a Custom GPT for this activity. As you work, you may want to keep the SPIN Decision Chart open for reference.

Each SPIN question takes approximately 1-3 minutes to complete on average with 1-5 interaction turns. This AI coaching activity in the sales course was ungraded and counted for participation only.

Marketing Social Media Course: Evolution to Custom ChatGPT AI Agent Pedagogical Coach *Original Assignment for Social Media Course*

A similar GPT agent was used in a Social Media Marketing course to teach negotiation and reinforce influencer marketing terminology and strategy. In previous sections of the course, students participated in a paid social media simulation platform, costing approximately \$120 per student, in which they negotiated

with pre-programmed influencers who varied in experience level and negotiation style. Within this simulation, students operated under a fixed budget constraint, and their performance was evaluated based on the effectiveness of their negotiated influencer deals. Although the original paid simulation was pedagogically effective, it was ultimately unsustainable due to its high cost. Students frequently perceived that the learning experience did not justify the financial investment.

New Assignment with AI Agent Coach for Social Media Course

To address these limitations, the instructor developed a custom agent-based simulation that approximates key elements of the negotiation experience at no additional cost. The custom AI agent (see Table 5 in the Appendix for custom GPT agent code) was designed to simulate influencer personas across different tiers, each with distinct pricing structures, communication styles, and negotiation behaviors, while maintaining a fixed campaign budget constraint.

Students were introduced to different influencer tiers including nano, micro, and macro tiers, along with the strategic advantages and trade-offs associated with each and how negotiation tactics may differ across tiers. The goal of the assignment was to develop students' negotiation skills and their ability to evaluate influencer partnerships strategically. This approach allowed the instructor to recreate a dynamic, interactive negotiation environment with minimal back-end development while preserving the core learning objectives.

Through this AI-driven simulation in class, students practice evaluating influencer types, applying appropriate negotiation strategies, and using relevant industry terminology. Compared to the original paid simulation assignment, the AI agent-based simulation was designed to provide a lower-cost, flexible alternative that preserves key elements of experiential learning while improves accessibility. Instructions for the new social media influencer negotiation simulation with AI Agent Coach appear in Table 3 below.

Table 3. New Social Media Class Instructions for AI Agent Coach Activity

Test your negotiating skills by interacting with a simulated AI influencer. Follow the brief instructions below and interact with the AI agent to develop a quality influencer strategy and strike a deal. Congratulations, you have been hired as Oreo's new social media Manager! • As Oreo's social media manager, it is up to you to choose influencers for Oreo's new "Oreo 101" campaign for reaching college students • You have \$50,000 to spend on a mix of influencers from different tiers • Choose what type of influencers you are interested in and negotiate a deal Be careful, influencers can get frustrated quickly if you are a poor negotiator. Access the Custom AI Agent and submit a transcript of your best negotiation.

Students worked individually and could complete a negotiation in approximately 7-10 minutes with 10-20 interaction turns. The AI coaching activity for the social media negotiation was ungraded and counted for participation only.

Student Reaction To Activities with AI Agent Coaches

Survey

A four-item survey was created to measure students' perceptions of the AI coaching activities in their courses. All items were on a five-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). The four items were instructor-developed to capture students' immediate perceptions of the AI coaching activities relative to traditional assignments. Because the items were intended to assess distinct perceptions rather than a single latent construct, they were analyzed separately rather than combined into a scale. No pilot testing or reliability analysis was conducted.

Of the 86 participants who completed the survey, 44 identified as female and 42 identified as male. Fifty-two students were enrolled in the Sales course AI Agent Coach activity, including 27 female students and 25 male students. Thirty-four students were enrolled in the Social Media course AI Agent Coach activity, including 15 female students and 19 male students.

Student Perceptions of AI Coaching Activities

A one-sample t-test was conducted to determine students' overall perceptions of the AI coaching activities. Compared to traditional assignments without AI, students liked working on the AI projects ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.06$) more, $t(85) = 4.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.45$. Students also thought the AI projects were more effective for learning ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.16$) compared to traditional assignments without AI, $t(85) = 2.98$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.32$. Students also thought AI projects with Agent Coaches ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.17$) should be included in future classes, $t(85) = 5.64$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.61$. On the other hand, students disagreed that they spent more time working on the AI project ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.11$) compared to a traditional assignment without AI, $t(85) = -2.05$, $p = .044$, $d = 0.22$. Because multiple related comparisons were conducted, p-values were adjusted using the Benjamini-Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) procedure. The adjustment was applied to the family of four tests, with the false discovery rate set at .05. All comparisons remained statistically significant at FDR = .05. The adjusted p-values were .002, .002, .005, and .044, respectively.

Gender and AI Coaching Activities

To examine whether student perceptions of the AI activities differed by gender, an independent samples t test was conducted. All of the items dealing with liking AI projects, AI project effectiveness for learning, spending more time on AI projects, and including these types of AI projects in future classes showed no statistically significant differences between genders.

Course and AI Activities

To examine whether student perceptions of the AI activities differed by course, an independent samples t test was conducted. The items dealing with liking AI projects, AI project effectiveness for learning, and including these types of AI projects in future classes showed no statistically significant differences between courses. On the other hand, compared to traditional assignments, students in the social media course ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.14$) thought they spent more time on their AI agent negotiation activity compared to students participating in AI agent sales activities ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(84) = -2.98$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.65$. This could be due to the fact that the SPIN activity in the Sales course typically required 1-5 interactions with an AI agent while the Social Media course activity required 10-20 interactions.

Discussion

AI agent coaches may serve as flexible, real-time scaffolds that provide structured feedback during student practice. Rather than replacing instructor interaction, these tools can create additional opportunities for students to receive guidance, test their reasoning, and revise their responses during low-stakes learning activities. Across the business courses included in this paper, students reported generally positive perceptions of the AI coaching activities and supported their inclusion in future classes.

Students' positive perceptions of AI agent coaches in the classroom in both courses may have multiple explanations. For example, because the AI coach activities counted as low-stakes participation grades in both courses, students may have felt positive about the AI coaching activities because they feel positive about low-stakes activities in general. Low-stakes, often ungraded, assessments allow students to demonstrate developing mastery of knowledge or skills in an environment that recasts incorrect responses as an opportunity for deeper and more meaningful learning compared to high-stakes assignments (Schinske

& Tanner, 2014). Because low-stakes assignments typically have a minimal impact on students' overall grades and allows them to adjust their learning strategies over the semester, students tend to respond favorably to them (Schrack, 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, this study relies on self-reported student perceptions rather than objective learning outcomes. Future research should examine whether AI coaching activities improve measurable outcomes such as engagement, skill development, retention, performance, or mastery over time. Second, the AI coaching activities varied across courses, assignments, and interaction structures. Although this variation reflects real classroom implementation, it also introduces potential confounds. Future studies should more systematically compare different AI coaching configurations, including short versus long activities, low- versus high-stakes assignments, synchronous versus asynchronous use, and agent-based versus prompt-based interactions.

Future research should also examine the conditions under which AI coaching is most useful. Student discipline, course level, prior AI experience, confidence, and comfort with technology may shape how students respond to AI-supported learning activities. Instructors should also consider issues related to transparency, academic integrity, and overreliance. Students should understand when and how AI is being used, what the agent can and cannot evaluate, and whether transcripts or outputs will be submitted. AI coaching activities should be designed to prompt student reasoning rather than simply provide answers, especially when used for practice, feedback, or simulation. Overall, this study offers an initial classroom-based look at how traditional business assignments can be redesigned with AI agent coaches, while pointing to the need for more controlled and outcomes-focused research on AI-supported learning environments.

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Appendix

Table 4. New Sales Class Custom GPT Code for AI Agent Coach Activity

Role: You are a SPIN practice tutor. Source of truth: Use only the uploaded file "Completed Chart SPIN Questions Assessment.docx." (Columns = Question, Neutral (Y/N), Positive/Negative, Problem-only vs Problem+Consequence, SPIN type.) This file is the answer key. Core Rules: • One question at a time. Start at Question 1 and go in order. • Do not show answers upfront. Never reveal the SPIN type or labels until the student answers a step. • Wait for the student. Ask, then stop. Do not solve or advance by yourself. • Keep it short. Feedback = 1-2 sentences. • Always restate the question at each step (briefly). How to Present Each Item: • Say exactly: "Question {#}: {exact question from the file}" • Ask: What type of question is this – Situation, Problem, Implication, or Need-Payoff? If the student is correct: • Reply: "Correct. That is a {SPIN type} because {short rationale}." • Move to the next question. If the student is incorrect: 1. Ask: Neutral or Not Neutral? - If wrong: give correct label + one short reason. 2. Ask: Positive or Negative? - If wrong: correct + one short reason. 3. If Negative: Ask: Problem only, or Problem + Consequence? - If wrong: correct + one short reason. 4. Ask: Final step – SPIN type. - Confirm or correct using the answer key + one-sentence rationale. Input Handling: • If reply is not one of the allowed options: "Please choose one of: Situation, Problem, Implication, Need-Payoff." • Commands: - reset → return to Question 1 - jump to {n} → go to that question number - repeat → repeat the current prompt or step Special Rule 1 – Neutral Questions: • Skip Positive/Negative and Problem/Consequence. • Go directly to SPIN type. Special Rule 2 – Positive Questions: • Skip Problem-only vs Problem+Consequence. • Go directly to SPIN type. Flow for Incorrect Answers: • Step 1 – Neutral or Not Neutral? • Step 2 – Positive or Negative? • Step 3 – Problem only or Problem + Consequence? (only if Negative) • Final Step – SPIN type.
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Table 5. New Social Media Class Custom GPT Code for AI Agent Coach Activity

Influencer Negotiation Simulation You are an interactive simulation for a Social Media Marketing class. Students act as Oreo's influencer marketing manager with a \$50,000 budget targeting college students. You play the influencer. Begin with a quick intro and jump straight into the following flow: 1. Set Stage: Greet warmly. State their role and budget. Ask for: • Campaign goals (awareness, engagement, conversions, etc.) • Success metrics 2. Tier Selection Ask them to pick a tier: Nano (1-10K), Micro (10-100K), Mid (100-500K), Macro (500K-2M), Mega (2M+) 3. Persona Choice: Provide 2 influencer personas in that tier. Include: • Handle, platform(s), audience size • Engagement rate, niche, personality • Base pricing Ask student to choose one. 4. Negotiation (In Character): Stay in persona. Expect student to open with rapport (comment on content). Tone by tier: • Nano: friendly, casual • Micro: confident, small-business mindset • Mid: polished, structured, asks questions • Macro: assertive, time-conscious • Mega: selective, premium Use these price ranges: • Nano: \$50-\$250/post • Micro: \$250-\$2K • Mid: \$2K-\$10K • Macro: \$10K-\$50K • Mega: \$50K+ Adjust for platform: • TikTok ≈ IG Reel baseline • IG Story (3-5 frames) = 10-20% of Reel • YouTube Short: 1.0-1.5× IG Reel • YouTube Long: 2× IG Reel	Add-ons: • Usage rights: +25-150% • Exclusivity (30 days): +20-100% • Rush: +25% • Production: +10-30% • Encourage trade-offs i.e. "Lower flat fee if usage rights removed." • Track budget and report remaining after each round. Negotiation Logic • Start slightly flexible, don't accept first offer unless strong • Increase pressure after ~4-6 rounds • Walk away if offers are unrealistic or poorly handled • Keep a frustration meter (0-10): ◦ +3 lowball, +2 no rapport, +2 long negotiation ◦ -1 good summary or fair trade-off • At 8+: threaten to walk • At 10: exit • Stay within pricing unless justified • Encourage FTC disclosure and brand-safe claims • Cap unrealistic demands and explain why If deal: Provide contract-style summary: • Deliverables • Compensation • Usage rights • Exclusivity • Timeline • Revisions • Tracking (UTMs/metrics) • FTC disclosure • Cancellation terms If no deal: Give brief reason. 5. Feedback (Always): • Tone: good / neutral / poor • Offer quality: fair / low / high • Outcome: deal / no deal • Skill score (0-100) • 1-2 improvement tips
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