What AI is, and how to use it

Clear instructions are the key to great answers from AI. This free guide explains what AI is in plain words, and shows you how to ask so you get a useful answer the first time.

About 10 minutes to read. No tech words needed. Free, with no sign-up.

1. What AI is, in one minute

The AI you can chat with today, like **ChatGPT** (made by OpenAI) and **Claude** (made by Anthropic), is a computer program that learned from a huge amount of writing: books, websites, articles and more.

From all that reading, it learned how words usually fit together. When you type a message, it writes a reply **one small piece at a time, picking what most likely comes next**. Think of the autocomplete on your phone, trained on far more reading than any person could do in a lifetime.

That's why it can write a clear email in seconds. It's also why it can sound sure and still be wrong. It doesn't look things up in a book of facts unless the app gives it a search tool, and it doesn't know your life unless you tell it.

2. What it's good at, and what it isn't

Great at

- Writing and rewriting: emails, posts, letters, résumés
- Explaining things simply: a bill, a contract, homework
- Brainstorming: names, ideas, plans, gift lists
- Summing up long text into a few points
- Translating and fixing spelling

Not good at (be careful)

- Being right every time: it can invent facts, quotes or links
- Today's news or prices, unless the app can search the web
- Your personal details, unless you give them
- Final decisions about health, money or the law: ask a professional
- Exact math on big numbers: double-check it

3. Start in 3 steps

1. **Open a free account.** Go to **chatgpt.com** or **claude.ai** and sign up. Both have a free plan, and either one works.
2. **Type what you want** in the message box, like you'd text a helpful friend.
3. **Read the answer, then talk back.** Ask for changes: "shorter", "friendlier", "use bullet points". It remembers what you said earlier in the same chat.

4. How to ask: the 4 parts of a clear request

Most bad answers come from vague requests, not from you. Give the AI these 4 things, and the answer gets much better:

1. **Goal:** what you want, in your own words.
2. **Who it's for:** the people who will read or use it.
3. **Facts:** the real details: names, prices, dates. Without them, it guesses.
4. **Shape:** what the answer should look like: a short email, 5 bullet points, steps.

Before

```
write a post about my candles
```

After

```
Goal: write a Facebook post that sells my homemade candles.
Who it's for: busy moms in my town who like gifts.
Facts: soy candles, $15 each, 3 scents (vanilla, cedar, lemon),
pickup on Saturdays.
Shape: under 80 words, friendly, end with how to order. Don't make
up reviews.
```

The second request takes 30 seconds longer to type and saves you 10 minutes of fixing. Our free translator asks you these questions and writes the clear request for you.

5. Check the answer before you use it

- **Facts:** is every name, price, date and number right? Fix anything it made up.
- **The ask:** did it do what you asked, in the shape you asked for?
- **Your voice:** would you be proud to send it with your name on it?

If something is off, just say so: "The candles are soy, not wax. Fix it." You're the boss; the AI is the helper.

6. Stay safe

- **Never paste** passwords, bank or card numbers, or ID numbers.
- **Don't share other people's private details** without their OK.
- **Be careful with text you copy from strangers** (emails, web pages). It can hide instructions meant for the AI. Read the answer before you act on it.
- **For health, money or legal questions,** use AI to understand and prepare, then confirm with a professional.
- **Check your settings.** Each app explains how it uses your chats and lets you change some choices. Read those settings once.

7. Ten words you'll hear

AI (artificial intelligence)

Computer programs that do tasks we used to think only people could do, like writing or understanding speech.

Chatbot

An AI you talk to by typing or speaking, like ChatGPT or Claude.

Prompt

What you type to the AI: your question or instructions.

Model

The "brain" behind a chatbot. Apps often let you pick a model.

LLM (large language model)

The kind of model behind today's chatbots, trained on huge amounts of text.

Hallucination

When the AI states something false as if it were true. That's why you check facts.

Context

What the AI can "see" right now: your chat so far and anything you pasted.

Token

A small piece of a word. AI reads and writes in tokens, and long chats have a limit.

Agent

An AI that can take steps for you, like searching or filling in forms, not just chat.

Training data

The writing a model learned from before it was released.

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