

FREE GUIDE | AI101.UK

The AI Starter Guide

5 things every beginner needs to know
before using AI — in plain English

What AI actually is

How to get better results

What AI gets wrong

What to share — and what not to

Which tools to start with

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Practical AI Education for UK Learners

What AI actually is

(It's not magic — and knowing this changes everything)

Most people assume AI is doing something magical. It isn't.

ChatGPT, Claude, and similar tools are called large language models. They were trained on billions of pieces of text — books, websites, articles, conversations — and learned the patterns of how language works.

When you type something, the AI doesn't search a database or think through an answer. It predicts the most statistically useful next word, based on all those patterns. Then the next word. Then the next.

That's why it can write emails, explain concepts, brainstorm ideas, and summarise documents. Language underlies all of those tasks — and predicting language is what it does extremely well.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Once you understand that AI is predicting language rather than looking up facts, you'll immediately understand why it sometimes gets things wrong — and why the way you phrase your request matters so much.

TIP

Think of AI as an extremely well-read assistant who never forgets anything they've read, but occasionally misremembers specifics.

How to get dramatically better results

(The difference is almost entirely in how you ask)

The single biggest factor in how useful AI is to you is the quality of your prompt — the text you type in.

Most people type a short, vague request and get a short, vague response. The fix is simple: give AI more to work with.

Use the CRAFT framework as a checklist:

C Context — What's the situation? Who is this for?

R Role — Ask AI to act as an expert: 'Act as an experienced HR manager...'

A Action — Be specific: write, summarise, compare, generate 5 ideas

F Format — Tell it how you want the output: bullet points, 200 words, a table

T Tone — Specify: professional, casual, direct, empathetic

QUICK EXAMPLE

VAGUE: 'Help me write an email.' SPECIFIC: 'Write a 150-word professional email to a supplier who has missed our deadline. Tone: firm but polite. Include a request for a written commitment on the new date.'

TIP

If the first response isn't quite right, don't start over. Tell it what to change: 'Make it shorter' or 'The tone is too formal — rewrite it.'

What AI gets wrong — and how to catch it

(This is the most important safety lesson)

AI will confidently tell you something that is completely wrong. Not vaguely wrong — completely fabricated. This is called a hallucination.

It happens because AI generates plausible-sounding responses based on patterns, not because it's checking facts. When it encounters a gap in its knowledge, it doesn't say 'I don't know.' It generates what a plausible answer would look like.

The writing style gives you no clue. A hallucinated response sounds exactly like an accurate one.

Hallucinations are most common with:

- ✗ Specific statistics and percentages
- ✗ Citations, book titles, research papers
- ✗ Quotes attributed to real people
- ✗ Legal, medical, or financial specifics
- ✗ Anything about events after its training cutoff

THE RULE

Use AI to explore, draft, and think. Verify anything specific that matters against a primary source before acting on it. It's a brilliant thinking partner — not a reliable authority.

TIP

Ask AI: 'How confident are you in this? Are there any parts I should verify?' It won't always flag uncertainty, but it sometimes will.

What to share — and what to keep private

(Most people don't think about this until it's too late)

Your conversations with AI tools are sent to company servers to generate a response. By default, both OpenAI (ChatGPT) and Anthropic (Claude) may use conversations to improve their models.

This doesn't mean your conversations are public. But 'private' is relative — treat it like email rather than a personal diary.

Never share:

- ✗ Passwords or PINs — ever, under any circumstances
- ✗ Bank account numbers, sort codes, National Insurance numbers
- ✗ Confidential company information or unreleased plans
- ✗ Other people's personal details without anonymising first
- ✗ Details of active legal proceedings

PRACTICAL TIP

Replace real names, company names, and specific figures with placeholders. 'Our client Acme Ltd ordered 500 units at £12 each' becomes 'A client ordered X units at £Y each.' Same quality of help, zero data exposure.

TIP

Both ChatGPT and Claude let you turn off conversation history and model training in settings. Worth doing if you regularly discuss sensitive topics.

Which tools to start with

(And you don't need to pay for any of them — yet)

There are dozens of AI tools available. Most beginners should start with just two, both of which have excellent free tiers.

ChatGPT (by OpenAI) is the most widely used AI assistant in the world. The free tier using GPT-4o mini handles most everyday tasks well. It's a natural starting point because of its large community and wealth of tutorials.

Claude (by Anthropic) often feels more like talking to a thoughtful person. Particularly strong at working with long documents and careful reasoning. The free tier is genuinely capable.

Our honest recommendation: try both free tiers for a few weeks before paying for either. The skill of prompting transfers between tools, and both will serve you well.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Start free. Build the habit. Use AI for one real task this week — an email, a summary, some research. The only way to learn what it can do for you is to actually use it.

TIP

Visit ai101.uk for practical courses that take you from AI-curious to AI-confident, with hands-on exercises and a verifiable certificate.

Ready to go further?

This guide is just the beginning.

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