

AI Is Easy: Setting Up Your First AI

Alex Poolman · CHI-Publishers

Contents

Welcome	4
Chapter 1: You are not behind	6
Chapter 2: What this thing actually is	9
Chapter 3: What setting it up actually involves	12
Chapter 4: What you need before you start	14
Chapter 5: Where to start, and on what	16
Chapter 6: Getting an account, safely	18
Chapter 7: The screen, explained once	20
Chapter 8: Your very first conversation	22
Chapter 9: Asking so that it understands you, and fixing what comes back	24
Chapter 10: Talking instead of typing	28
Chapter 11: Showing it a photograph or a document	30
Chapter 12: Your first real job	33
Chapter 13: The smallest kit that covers you	35
Chapter 14: Free or paid	37
Chapter 15: Keeping what works, and making it a habit	39
Chapter 16: Jobs around the house	43
Chapter 17: Learning something with it	46
Chapter 18: When it will not do something	49
Chapter 19: When it is wrong	51

Chapter 20: Being safe: what you type, and the fakes	53
Chapter 21: Staying the boss, and the mistakes beginners make	57
Chapter 22: When something goes wrong	60
Chapter 23: Helping somebody else start	62
Chapter 24: Your first fortnight, the second month, and the short version	64
The words people throw about	69
Sources and further reading	71
About this edition	73

Welcome

What is this little book about?

Getting started. Not the theory, not the history, not what it might do to the world. Just how you, today, go from having never touched one of these things to using one comfortably for something you actually needed doing.

Who is it for?

Somebody who has heard about all this for two years and never opened one. Somebody who tried once, got a peculiar answer, and quietly decided it was not for them. Somebody who has been meaning to and has not. All three of you are in exactly the right place.

Do I need to know anything first?

Not one thing. You do not need to be young. You do not need to be good with computers. If you can send an email and read this page, you have everything you need. Every big word is explained the moment it appears.

Is this going to be a list of buttons?

As little as I can manage. Screens change every few months, and a book made of button positions is wrong before it is printed. This one teaches you the shape of the thing, so that when a button moves you shrug rather than panic.

How should I read it?

It is built out of questions, the sort you would ask out loud at the kitchen table. Each gets a short, plain answer. Read it straight through, or go hunting for the question that has been stopping you.

What will I be able to do at the end?

Have one of these set up, know how to ask it things properly, know what not to trust, and have a habit that survives the second week. That last one is the part everybody skips, and it is the reason most people give up.

Is everything in here the whole truth?

It is the honest short version, which is a different thing, and I would rather say so on the first page.

What does that mean in practice?

Every explanation in this book is a simplification chosen to be useful rather than complete. Where a simplification could mislead you, I say so in the same breath. Where a claim comes from somewhere, you will find the source at the back.

Is there anything to do, or only to read?

There is something to do, and I would push you towards it. Every chapter ends with one small thing to try, in a shaded box. Reading about this teaches you surprisingly little. Ten minutes of trying teaches you a great deal.

Chapter 1: You are not behind

Everyone seems to understand this except me.

They do not. That feeling is manufactured, and we should take it apart before doing anything else. It is the single biggest thing standing between people and their first useful afternoon.

Where does the feeling come from?

From the noise. Every few weeks a company announces the most advanced, most intelligent, most capable thing ever built. Then another one does. Each announcement is designed to sound like a turning point you have already missed. Put fifty of those in a row and of course you feel late.

Is any of it true?

Some of it. Most of it is the same thing with a new number after its name. The honest position is this: the difference between knowing nothing and using one competently is enormous, and the difference between last year's version and this year's is small. You are standing at the big step, not the small one.

But other people talk about it so fluently.

People talk fluently about things they have used twice. And the fluent talk is nearly always about the newest thing, which is exactly the part that does not matter. Nobody is quizzing you on version numbers. There is no exam.

What is actually true?

That the problem was never your ability. Nobody drew you a route. Everything written about this was written by people who already understood it, for people who already understood it, and that leaves out almost everybody. That is a failure of explanation, not of

intelligence.

So what is the honest starting position?

You are perfectly on time. Most of what you need fits in an afternoon. And the people who use these things well are not the ones who read the most about them. They are the ones who used one for six small dull jobs and stopped finding it strange.

What should I do with the rest of the noise?

Ignore it, deliberately, for a month. No announcements, no comparisons, no debates about which one is best. One tool, small jobs, a month. Then look up, if you like. You will find you have missed nothing at all.

Is there an age at which this gets hard?

No, and the question comes up so often that it deserves a straight answer. There is nothing to learn here except how to describe what you want, and you have been doing that your whole life.

Is any of it in my favour?

Yes. People who have written a lot of letters are better at this than people who have not, because explaining yourself clearly is the entire skill.

What if I tried once and hated it?

Then you almost certainly did the thing everybody does on the first attempt. You asked something you already knew the answer to, judged the reply as though it were an exam, and closed the window. Come back with something you genuinely want done, and stay for three rounds instead of one. It is a different experience.

Try this now. Write down the one thing about AI you have been quietly embarrassed not to understand. Keep the note. By chapter nine you will have crossed it off.

Chapter 2: What this thing actually is

What am I dealing with?

A computer program that has read an enormous amount of writing and has become very good at one trick: working out which words should come next. You type something, it builds a reply one word at a time, extremely fast, each word chosen to fit what came before.

That is all?

That is all, and it is enough, which is the surprising part. Think of somebody who has read every cookbook ever printed. Ask what goes with lamb and they answer instantly and well, without opening a book. They are not remembering a page. They soaked up the patterns. These helpers have done that with almost everything people ever wrote down.

Let us do the three things it is not.

Helpful, and worth saying plainly. It is not a search engine. It is not looking things up unless it tells you it did. It is not a robot, with no body and nothing moving anywhere. And it is not a person sitting at the other end typing back, which people genuinely wonder and are too embarrassed to ask.

Then what should I picture?

A very well-read assistant. Quick, tireless, no ego, and available at four in the morning. Also, occasionally and confidently wrong, which is the one thing about it you must never forget. We will come back to that properly.

Is it thinking?

Not the way you and I think. There is no little person weighing things up in there, no worry, no wanting. There is an enormous amount of arithmetic working out which word fits best. It feels like thinking from the outside because the result reads like a person wrote it. Inside, it is sums.

Does it know me?

No. It has never seen your files, your diary or your bank statements. It read the world's writing, not yours. And between conversations it remembers nothing about you unless you deliberately arrange otherwise. When you close the window, nothing is sitting there thinking about your problem.

Does any of this matter for using it?

One part does, enormously. Because it is continuing writing rather than fetching facts, it can produce something completely untrue in a perfectly confident voice. Hold on to that and the rest of this book makes sense.

Why does the same question give a different answer twice?

Because at each step it does not simply take the single best next word. It is allowed to reach past it now and then and take another that also fits. Without that pinch of chance the writing reads like a form letter.

So two answers is not a fault?

It is normal rather than a fault, and asking twice is a free way to test anything that matters.

Does it get cleverer the more I use it?

Your copy does not change at all. It stays exactly as it is until its makers release a new version. What improves is you, getting better at asking, and that improvement is much larger than people expect.

Try this now. Ask one of these helpers what it is not. Then check its answer against the three things in this chapter. It is a good first test of both of you.

Chapter 3: What setting it up actually involves

Do I have to install something?

Almost certainly not, and this is the first thing that stops people. There is nothing to download, nothing to buy, nothing to plug in. You open a web page in the same thing you use to look at any other web page, and it is there.

Then what does setting up mean?

Three small things. Getting to the right web page. Making an account with an email address. And typing something in. That is genuinely the whole of it, and it takes about five minutes including the kettle.

Why does everybody make it sound harder?

Because the videos are mostly made for people who want to build things, and because there is a whole industry of people whose living depends on this seeming complicated. The setting up genuinely is trivial. The using it well is what takes a bit of practice, which is why most of this book is about that instead.

What about the app on my phone?

There is one, and it is worth having, but do it second. Start on a proper screen where you can see what you are doing. Add the phone once the thing is no longer strange, and then you have it in your pocket, which is where you will actually use it.

Will it change my computer?

No. Using a web page changes nothing on your machine. If you later install the phone app, that is an app like any other and you can delete it in two seconds. Nothing here is a commitment.

Do I have to pay?

No. There is a free version, it is really capable rather than a crippled advertisement, and you never have to give a card. If something demands card details before you have typed a single question, you are in the wrong place. That is worth a chapter of its own later.

How long before I know whether I like it?

One session, honestly. Twenty minutes with three real questions tells you more than a month of reading. And if the answer is that you do not like it, that is a perfectly good outcome, arrived at properly.

Is my old computer good enough?

Almost certainly. All the work happens on the company's machines, not yours, so your computer is doing nothing harder than showing a web page. If it can show you a news site, it can do this.

What about my internet connection?

Anything that streams video will be more than enough. A slow connection makes the answer arrive a little more slowly and changes nothing else.

Try this now. Time yourself. Open the page, make an account, and ask one question. If it takes longer than ten minutes, something has gone wrong and it is not you.

Chapter 4: What you need before you start

What do I actually need?

Four things, and you almost certainly have all of them. Something that connects to the internet. An email address you can get into. Ten quiet minutes. And one real question you would like answered.

Why does the question matter?

Because it is the difference between a demonstration and a use. Most people's first session is a test: they ask something they already know the answer to, judge the reply, and close it. That teaches you nothing except that it can answer. Come with something you in practice want.

What sort of question should I bring?

Something small, harmless and real. A letter you do not understand. An email you have to write and have been putting off. Something you want explained. A list you cannot get started on. Nothing important, nothing private, but real.

Do I need a new email address?

No, your ordinary one is fine. If you would rather keep this separate from everything else, a free second address does no harm. Do not make that decision a reason to postpone the whole thing, which is what usually happens.

What about a password?

If it asks for one, use a few unrelated words strung together rather than something short and clever. Three ordinary words with a number is far harder to break and you will actually remember it. Better still, let your phone or computer make one up and keep it for you.

Should I write anything down?

One thing. Which email address you used. That is the only detail people lose, and it is annoying to recover. Everything else you can look at again whenever you like.

Anything to prepare mentally?

One decision: you are allowed to be bad at this for a fortnight. Nobody is watching. Nothing you type is graded. The people who get comfortable are the ones who let themselves fumble for two weeks rather than expecting to be fluent on the first evening.

Should I tell anyone I am doing this?

Only if you want to. There is a small social awkwardness about it that nobody talks about, and it fades. Plenty of people use these things daily and never mention it. If somebody you trust already uses one, telling them is truly useful, because having one person to ask a daft question is worth more than any guide.

Try this now. Write down, now, the one real question you will bring to your first session. Not a test. Something you actually want an answer to.

Chapter 5: Where to start, and on what

Phone or computer?

Computer for the first session, if you have one. A bigger screen makes it easier to see what is happening, and typing a proper question is easier with a proper keyboard. Once you are comfortable, the phone is often the better one, and we will get to why.

Which helper should I start with?

Any of the well-known ones, and I mean that. The honest truth is that they are far more similar than the arguments suggest, and everything you learn on one carries over. Choosing is the smallest decision in this book and it stops more people than any other.

Give me a way to pick, then.

Pick the one somebody you know already uses, so you have somebody to ask. If nobody comes to mind, pick the one whose name you have heard most. If that still does not settle it, pick any of them and start. You can change your mind next week at no cost.

Should I try several at once?

No, and this is the most useful advice in the chapter. Trying three at once is the surest way to learn none of them. Use one thing for a month until it is second nature. Then, and only then, look at another.

What if I choose wrong?

There is no wrong. Nothing is bought, nothing is signed, nothing is lost. Moving to a different one costs you an email address and five minutes, and everything you have learned comes with you.

Do I need to worry about which country made it?

Not for ordinary personal use. If you handle other people's private information for a living, it is worth one question about where the work happens, because that decides whose rules apply. For planning meals and understanding letters, it does not arise.

What if my language is not English?

They all work in dozens of languages and they are good at the widely written ones. Ask in whatever language you think in. The only thing to know is that English still tends to be very slightly their strongest. You can always ask a question in one language and request the answer in another.

Try this now. Pick one helper and write its name on a piece of paper. That is your choice for the next month. The decision is now made and you can stop thinking about it.

Chapter 6: Getting an account, safely

How do I find the right page?

Here is a piece of advice worth more than the rest of this chapter. Search for the name of the **company** that makes it, not the name of the product. Product names get copied by fake sites hoping you will type your details into them. The company's own page is the safe way in.

How do I know I am in the right place?

The address at the top of the screen should be the company's own, spelled exactly right, with no extra words bolted on. Look at it once, properly, before you type anything. Fake sites rely on you not looking, and looking takes two seconds.

What happens when I sign up?

You say you want an account and give an email address. It sends you a short code or a link to prove that the address is yours. You type the code or click the link. You are in. There is no form asking your income and your mother's maiden name.

Should I use the sign in with button?

The one-offering to use your existing account elsewhere. It is quick and it is safe enough. What it does mean is that the two are linked, so if you ever lose access to one you have trouble with both. Using an email address and a password is slightly more effort and slightly more independent. Either is fine.

What should I never do while signing up?

Never enter card details for a free account, because you do not need to. Never enter your details on a page you reached by clicking a link in an unexpected email. And never continue if anything is asking for more than an email address and a password.

What if it asks for my telephone number?

Some do, to cut down on people making thousands of fake accounts. That is a reasonable reason and it is a normal request. If it makes you uneasy, that is a fair reason to try a different one, and you will not be short of options.

Am I signed up for anything I will have to cancel?

No. A free account bills you nothing and can sit there unused forever. You have to go and deliberately choose to pay, and enter a card, before any money moves.

Should I let it stay signed in?

On your own computer at home, yes, and it saves a small nuisance every time. On a machine other people use, no. Sign out when you finish, exactly as you would with your email, for exactly the same reason.

Try this now. Before you type anything, look at the address at the top of the screen and read it letter by letter. Do this once, deliberately, so that it becomes a habit.

Chapter 7: The screen, explained once

What am I looking at?

Far less than you expect, and that is deliberate. There is a big empty box, usually at the bottom, where you type. There is a list down one side of the conversations you have had. And there is a small button somewhere for starting a fresh one. That is nearly all of it.

What about all the other little buttons?

Ignore them for the first session,. Nothing you can press in there will delete anything of yours, spend money or send anything to anybody. The worst outcome available is an answer you did not want.

What is the button for a new conversation?

It gives you a blank slate. Use it whenever the subject changes. Everything in one conversation is remembered within that conversation, so keeping one subject per conversation keeps the answers sharp and keeps your list worth having.

What is a temporary conversation?

Many of them have one, and it is worth knowing about. Anything you say in a temporary conversation is not kept in your history and is not used to improve the service. It is the same idea as a private window in your browser. Handy for anything you would rather not have sitting in a list.

What if my screen looks different from this?

It probably will, because they redesign these things constantly, and this is exactly why this book does not describe buttons. Look for the big empty box. That is the only part that never moves. Everything else

you can find by poking about, and you cannot break it.

What if I actually cannot find something?

Ask it. Type: where do I find the settings. How do I start a new conversation. It knows how it works and it is a far better guide than any menu. That is the one circular piece of advice in this book, and it in fact works.

Can I delete a conversation?

Yes, and it takes two clicks. Anything you would rather was not sitting in a list can go. It is worth knowing where that is on the first day, because knowing you can undo something makes people much braver about trying things.

Does it matter if my list gets long?

Only for finding things. There is usually a way to search your old conversations, which is more useful than it sounds once you have a few months of them. Naming the ones that matter takes two seconds and saves five minutes later.

Try this now. Find three things: the box where you type, the button for a new conversation, and the settings. That is the whole tour. Ignore everything else for a fortnight.

Chapter 8: Your very first conversation

What should I type first?

Something with no stakes at all. Explain what a mortgage is in plain words. What is the difference between a virus and a bacterium. Give me twenty names for a small bakery. Then read the answer.

And then?

This is the important bit, and almost nobody does it. Type: now say that more simply. Watch it change gear. Then type: now give me an example from everyday life. Three rounds on one question teaches you more than thirty separate questions.

How do I actually send it?

Type in the box and press the key you would press to send a message. Some of them start a new line instead, in which case there is a small arrow to click. Either way, the answer starts appearing within a second or two, usually word by word as it is written.

Why does it appear gradually?

Because it really is being written as you watch, one piece at a time. It is not loading something that already exists. That little detail tells you more about how it works than a page of explanation.

Can I ask a follow up?

Yes, and this is where the value is. It remembers everything said so far in that window. You can say, that is too long, or I meant for a beginner, or you have missed the point, it is about the deposit. It adjusts.

Do people actually do that?

Too few. Most people ask once, are disappointed, and close the window, when the good answer was one sentence away.

What if I make a spelling mistake?

It does not care in the slightest and will understand you anyway. You do not need capital letters, correct punctuation or full sentences. Write it the way you would write a note to a friend.

How do I know when I have finished?

When you have what you wanted, or when you have had enough. Nothing needs saving. Nothing needs closing properly. The conversation sits in your list and you can go back into it in three weeks and carry straight on.

Should I be polite to it?

It makes no difference to the machine, which has nothing to hurt. It makes a real difference to you. People who write in whole courteous sentences explain themselves better, and better explanations get better answers. So be polite if you like. It is quietly in your own interest.

Can I stop it halfway through an answer?

Yes, there is usually a stop button while it is writing. Handy when you can see within two lines that it has misunderstood you. Stop it, say what you actually meant, and save yourself reading four paragraphs of the wrong thing.

Try this now. Ask something you already know about. Then type: now say that more simply. Then: now give me an everyday example. Watching it change gear is the moment most people relax.

Chapter 9: Asking so that it understands you, and fixing what comes back

Is there a right way to ask?

There is, and it is not a secret code. The best single sentence I know is this: type it the way you would ask a helpful, patient friend. Not a command. Not a search. A request to somebody who wants to help and knows nothing about your situation.

Is there a shape to it?

Three parts, and this is the most useful thing in the book. Set the scene. Say the task. Give the rules.

What is setting the scene?

Who you are and what you are trying to achieve, in two lines. I run a small plumbing firm and I am writing to a customer who is unhappy. Without that, it has no idea whether you are a lawyer, a teacher or a schoolchild, and it guesses.

And the task?

What you want done. Write it. Explain it. Shorten it. Find the holes in it. Compare these two. Be plain about the verb, because that is the part it acts on.

And the rules?

How you want it. Short. Friendly but firm. No jargon. About six lines. And best of all, an example: here is something I wrote before, match this. Showing beats describing every single time.

Show me a poor one and a good one.

Poor: write me an email. Good: write a short email to my landlord. The boiler has been broken a week and I have called twice with no reply. I want it fixed this week. Firm but polite, about six lines. Same effort to type. A completely different result.

What if I do not know what I want?

Say exactly that. I am not sure what I am asking for, here is the situation, ask me questions until you understand. It is very good at this, and it is the most underused thing a beginner can do.

How long should my question be?

Longer than most people write and shorter than a lecture. Three or four lines beats one line every time. If you find yourself running past a page, you have probably got two jobs rather than one.

Does it help to give it an example?

It is the strongest single trick in this chapter. Paste in something you wrote before and say, in this style. Show it one example of the sort of list you want. It copies patterns extremely well, and showing beats describing every time.

Should I break a big job into pieces?

Almost always, and this is what separates people who get good results from people who do not. Do not ask for the whole thing. Ask for the outline. Look at it, fix it, then ask for the first part. You catch a wrong turn at the beginning rather than at the end.

Most of the time it is close but not quite. What then?

This is the commonest situation of all and it is where most beginners quietly give up. They read it, decide it is not what they wanted, and close the window. The good answer was one sentence away.

What do I say?

The specific thing that is wrong. Not that is not right, but that is too long, cut it in half. Or you have written it as though I am the customer and I am the supplier. Or the third point is the important one, build it round that. Precise complaints get precise repairs.

Can I ask it to change only one bit?

Yes, and hardly anybody does. Keep the second paragraph exactly as it is and rewrite the rest. Give me three different endings and leave the rest alone. It is good at this.

What if it keeps making the same mistake?

Stop correcting and start again. A conversation that has gone wrong tends to stay wrong, because everything already written is shaping what comes next. Open a fresh one and write a better first question using what the mess taught you.

How many goes should I expect?

Two or three for anything real. If you are getting exactly what you want first time, you are probably asking for something simple. Treat the first answer as a draft to react to rather than an answer to accept, and the whole thing becomes far less frustrating.

Is there anything I should not do?

Do not argue with it about whether it was wrong. It will apologise, agree with you, and do the same thing again. It is not learning from being told off. Say what you want instead of what it did, and you will get there twice as fast.

What if the answer is right but sounds nothing like me?

That is the normal state of a first draft and it is easily fixed. Say so plainly: too formal, I would never use that word, make it sound like somebody talking. Or paste in something you wrote and ask it to match. Either works, and it takes one round.

Try this now. Write the same request twice, once as one line and once with the three parts from this chapter. Send both in separate conversations. Then take the weaker answer and say the one specific thing that is wrong with it.

Chapter 10: Talking instead of typing

Can I just speak to it?

On the phone, yes, and for many people this is the moment the whole thing clicks. You talk, it listens, and it can read the answer out loud. For anything longer than a line it is far quicker than a keyboard.

Will it understand me?

Very well. Accents, hesitations, changing your mind halfway through a sentence, starting again. You do not have to speak like a newsreader. Talking exactly as you would to a person is how you get the best out of it.

Who does this help most?

Anybody whose hands or eyes make typing tiring. Anybody who thinks better out loud. Anybody who is walking about. And it has a quieter benefit: people explain themselves far more fully when speaking, and fuller explanations get better answers.

Is it strange to talk to a machine?

For about a minute. Then it is no odder than leaving a voice message. If it feels uncomfortable in public, type on the phone instead, which works perfectly well. The voice is an option rather than the point.

Can I use the camera?

On the phone you can point it at something and ask about it, and this is in practice delightful the first time. What is this plant. What does this warning light mean. What does this label say, when it is in a language you do not read.

Should I get the app straight away?

Second session rather than first. Learn the shape of the thing on a proper screen, then put it in your pocket. Everything you do in one appears in the other, so there is no cost to having both.

Try this now. Ask a long, rambling question out loud on your phone, exactly as you would explain it to a friend. Notice that the answer is better than the one you would have typed.

Chapter 11: Showing it a photograph or a document

Can it look at a picture?

Most can now, and this is the feature hardly anybody knows is there. Photograph a letter, a form, a label, a handwritten note, a plant, a broken part, a page of a book. Ask what it says or what it means.

Why is that so useful?

Because it removes the typing, which is the main reason people do not bother. Nobody is going to retype a two page letter from the council to ask what it means. Everybody will photograph it. That one difference turns an idea into a habit.

What is it good at?

Reading text in a photograph, which is wonderful for forms and foreign menus. Describing a scene. Explaining a chart. Making sense of a diagram. Telling you what an unfamiliar object probably is.

What is it bad at?

Counting things accurately. Very messy handwriting. Anything needing real precision, such as measuring. And it will do all of those badly with total confidence, so the warning from later in this book applies with full force.

Does the photograph need to be good?

Better than you think, and less than you fear. Flat, well lit, in focus, and taken straight on rather than at an angle. Thirty seconds of care saves a wrong answer. If it struggles, it will usually say so.

What is the best first thing to try?

The most tedious official letter in your drawer. Photograph it and ask three things. What is this actually saying. What do they want from me. Is there a deadline. That single exercise sells the whole business better than any explanation.

Can it read handwriting?

Clear handwriting, usually yes, and it is truly useful for old letters and recipe cards. Difficult handwriting, patchily, and it will guess rather than say it cannot read a word. If the words matter, check them against the original.

Can I give it a whole file?

Yes, and this is where it stops being a novelty. You attach a document and ask about it. A contract, a report, a long letter, a manual, a set of terms and conditions. It reads the lot in seconds.

How do I attach one?

There is a small button near the typing box, usually a paperclip or a plus. Press it, find your file, and it appears above your message. Then type your question underneath as normal. That is the whole procedure.

What should I ask about a document?

Three questions cover most of it. What does this actually say, in plain words. What should I be worried about in here. And what should I look at first. That last one is the best of the three, because it turns forty pages into three paragraphs you then read yourself.

Why should I still read those three paragraphs?

Because a summary is a confident piece of writing, and confident writing is what these machines produce whether or not they have it right. Use the summary to find where to look. Do not use it as a substitute for looking.

Is it safe to upload things?

Treat an upload exactly as you would treat typing the words, because that is what it becomes. A photographed letter contains every name on it. A spreadsheet contains every row, not just the one you cared about. There is a chapter on this and it is worth the ten minutes.

Is there a size limit?

There is, and it is generous. A report, a contract, a manual, all fine. An entire filing cabinet, not in one go. When something is too big it will tell you, and the answer is to ask about one part at a time.

Can I give it more than one document at once?

Usually, and comparing is where that becomes valuable. Here are three quotes, tell me what differs and what nobody has mentioned. Making a fair comparison is tedious work, and tedious work is exactly what you want to hand over.

Try this now. Photograph the most tedious official letter you have and ask what it says, what they want, and whether there is a deadline. Then read the letter yourself and see what the summary missed.

Chapter 12: Your first real job

What should my first real use be?

Something you actually need doing, that would take you half an hour, and that nobody else will see. That combination is the sweet spot. Real enough to matter, small enough to be safe, private enough that a poor result costs you nothing.

Give me some candidates.

The letter from an official body that you have not opened. The email you have been putting off for three days. The list you cannot get started on. The thing you have to explain to somebody and cannot find the words for. The comparison of three quotes.

Walk me through one.

Take the unopened letter. Photograph it. Type: I am a private individual, this arrived today, tell me plainly what it says, what they want from me, and whether there is a deadline. Read the answer. Then ask: quote me the exact words they are relying on. Then: what are my options, and what would you check before deciding.

Why that last question?

Because it stops you accepting an answer whole. Asking what would you check turns it from an oracle into an assistant, which is what it is. And it usually names one thing worth verifying, which is exactly what you should verify.

Then what?

If a reply is needed, now ask for it, with rules. Firm but not angry. Under two hundred words. Use their own wording back at them. Then read it and change the two sentences that do not sound like you, because they never do.

How long does that take?

About twelve minutes, against an evening of dread. And notice that it decided nothing. It read, explained and drafted. The decision was yours and the letter went out in your name. That is the shape of every good use of these things.

What should I not do for a first job?

Anything with a deadline today. Anything involving money you would lose. Anything containing somebody else's private details. There will be time for the important things once you know how it behaves.

What if the first real job goes badly?

Then look at what you asked rather than at what it produced. Nine times out of ten the instruction was vague in a way that was invisible to you and obvious to nothing else.

So what do I actually do?

Rewrite the question with the three parts from chapter nine and try once more. If it fails again, it may be the wrong job for it, and that is worth knowing too.

Try this now. Do this today, on something you actually need. Small, private, and half an hour of work. Then notice how long it really took.

Chapter 13: The smallest kit that covers you

Should I be collecting tools?

No, and this chapter exists to stop you. There is a trap almost everybody falls into, and it has a shape. You hear about a new one and you try it. Then you hear about another and try that. After two months you have accounts with nine things and are competent at none.

Why does that happen?

Because every announcement is designed to make the thing you already have sound obsolete. It rarely is. Somebody who is actually good with one helper will run rings round somebody who has dabbled with nine, and it is not close.

What should I do instead?

Ask yourself a different question. Not what is the best tool, but what is the smallest set of tools that covers everything I actually need. For most people that number is one. For some it is two. Almost nobody in fact needs three.

How do I work out my set?

Three steps. First, spot a need that comes round every week, not a need you imagined. Second, find one thing that meets it. Third, and this is the step everyone skips, use that one thing until it is second nature before you look at anything else.

How do I know when it is second nature?

When you reach for it without deciding to. When something is annoying and you have already pasted it in before you thought about it. That usually takes about a month of ordinary use, and until it

happens you are not ready for a second tool.

What if something turns out to be no good?

Then drop it, and do not feel you have failed. Trying something for a fortnight and concluding it does not do what you needed is a successful experiment. The failure would be keeping it out of politeness and never using it.

Am I missing out by using only one?

Almost certainly not. One capable helper covers the overwhelming majority of what an ordinary person wants. The exception worth knowing is that it is handy to have a second one, free, for a second opinion when something matters. That is a five minute sign up, not a new habit.

What about the ones already inside things I use?

You probably have several without knowing. There is one in your phone, one in your email, one in your office software, one in your search results. They are the same sort of machine behind a smaller doorway. Handy for a quick job where you already are, and weaker than going to the helper directly for anything substantial.

Try this now. Write down the one need that comes round every week. That single line decides what you should learn properly, and lets you ignore everything else.

Chapter 14: Free or paid

Do I need to pay?

Not to begin, and probably not for a good while. The free versions are really capable rather than a crippled advertisement. For explanations, letters, ideas, tidying up writing and understanding documents, you can do real work and never pay a penny.

What does paying actually buy?

Four things. More use before it asks you to wait. The bigger, more careful engines. The extra abilities, such as longer research and reading very large documents. And better service when everything is busy.

Which of those matters?

Almost always the first. The free version lets you have a good run and then asks you to come back later. If you use it twice a day you will never notice.

And if I use it more?

If you have started leaning on it during your working day, you will hit that wall by mid-morning. That is the moment paying starts to make sense, and not before.

How much is it?

I am deliberately not printing a figure, because prices change and a wrong number is worse than none. It is in the region of a monthly magazine subscription for the ordinary personal plan. Look it up when the moment comes, and note that paying yearly is usually cheaper.

Could I be charged by accident?

Not from ordinary use. You must deliberately choose to pay and enter a card. Nothing you type spends money. If a message appears claiming to charge you for a conversation, that is not the real thing and you should close it.

Can I stop?

Yes, from the settings, and you keep the rest of the period you have paid for. It is the same as any other subscription, and nothing you have done is lost when you go back to the free version.

What is the honest test for whether it is worth it?

Use it free for a fortnight and watch two things. How often you were stopped and told to wait. And whether you reached for it without deciding to. If both answers are often, pay. If not, wait a month and ask again.

Is the paid version much cleverer?

Less than the price suggests, for ordinary work. On writing, explaining and understanding documents, most people cannot tell the two apart in a fair test. The gap shows up on long, knotty jobs with many steps. Paying for power you never use is a common and avoidable disappointment.

Try this now. Use the free version until you meet its limit. Note the time of day it happened. That, and nothing else, is the number that tells you whether to pay.

Chapter 15: Keeping what works, and making it a habit

Why do people stop after two weeks?

Not because it disappointed them. Because of friction. They worked out a way of asking that gave a really good answer, did not write it down, and by Thursday could not remember it. So the next attempt was worse, and the one after that did not happen.

What is the fix?

Keep the ones that work. When something produces a in practice good answer, save the wording. Anywhere. A note on your phone, a document, the back of a notebook. The place matters far less than the habit.

What exactly should I save?

The whole thing you typed, not a summary of it. The four lines about who you are, what you want, how long and what tone. That is the reusable part. Next time you change two words and you are away.

Where should I keep them?

Here is the better version of that answer: keep them where you will use them, not where you found them. If you write the same sort of message every Monday, put the wording in whatever you look at on Monday. A prompt filed somewhere tidy that you never open is a prompt you do not have.

Is there something built in for this?

Usually, and it is worth ten minutes finding. Most helpers have a place in the settings for a few standing lines about you, which they read at the start of every conversation. Who you are. How you like answers.

What to avoid. Write six lines once and every conversation afterwards is better.

Give me an example of those six lines.

I run a small building firm and write mostly to customers and suppliers. Keep answers short. Plain English, no jargon. Anything written for me should be friendly but firm. Say when you are unsure rather than guessing. That is the whole thing, and the difference is immediate.

When should I update them?

Whenever something annoys you twice. That is the whole rule. The second time you find yourself giving the same correction, it belongs in the standing lines rather than in the conversation.

Is there a risk in writing things about myself in there?

The ordinary one, and no more. Whatever you put in those settings sits on the company's computers along with everything else. Put in what makes your work easier. Do not put in anything you would mind them keeping, which for most people means no addresses and no health details.

How do I keep this going past the first fortnight?

With a small system rather than good intentions, because good intentions are exactly what fail here. The pattern that works has two parts and takes under an hour a week in total.

What is the first part?

A little and often. Five or ten minutes, most days, on something real. Not studying. Using. The single most common reason people drift away is that they only reach for it on big occasions, and big occasions are rare.

And the second part?

One proper block a week. Half an hour, at a time you actually protect, in which you try exactly one new thing. Not five. One. Attach a document for the first time. Try the voice. Write your standing lines. Set up something that saves your best wording.

Why only one thing?

Because one thing tried is worth more than ten things read about. That is the whole difference between people who get good at this and people who have watched a lot of videos about it. Trying is slow and it sticks. Reading is fast and it evaporates.

How do I decide what the one thing is?

Keep a short list. Every time you think, I wonder whether it could do that, write it on the list rather than chasing it immediately. On your weekly half hour, take the top item. The list is never empty and you are never casting about for what to do.

What about keeping up with the news?

Follow one or two sources, for five minutes, and no more. The temptation is to follow twenty, which produces the paralysis from chapter one. One source, five minutes, and the weekly half hour where you actually do something. That combination beats any amount of consumption.

How long until this is just part of my week?

About a month for most people, and the sign is a pleasant one. You stop thinking of it as a thing you are learning and start thinking of it as somewhere you go when something is tedious.

What if I miss a week?

Nothing happens. This is not a language course and there is no streak to break. Pick it up again with a small job, which is how you started,

and you will find nothing has been lost. The people who fail are not the ones who missed a week. They are the ones who only ever intended to start.

Try this now. Save the exact wording of the next really good answer you get. Then put half an hour in your diary this week, with one line in it: try one new thing.

Chapter 16: Jobs around the house

What can it help with at home?

More than people expect, and this is where a beginner should spend the first fortnight. Everything here is harmless, immediately useful and requires nothing but typing what you want.

Meals and shopping.

Give me five dinners for this week using chicken, nothing that takes over half an hour, and a shopping list at the end. Then: swap the third one, we had that last week. This is one of the most used things it does, and one of the least written about.

Understanding the official post.

The letter from the council, the tax office, the insurer, the hospital. What is this actually saying, what do they want, is there a deadline. It is very good at turning official language into plain language, which is exactly what official language is designed to resist.

The awkward message.

The complaint that should be firm but not rude. The reply to the difficult relative. The note about the neighbour's hedge. Tell it the situation and the tone you want. Then change what does not sound like you.

Working out how to do something.

How do I get this stain out. What is the right way to bleed a radiator. How do I fold this thing properly. It is truly good at this, and it will answer a follow up question, which a website will not.

Planning something.

A birthday, a trip, a move, a project in the garden. What am I forgetting. What is the sensible order to do these in. What usually goes wrong with this. That third question is worth asking about almost anything.

Making sense of a pile.

A long thread of messages, a page of notes, a set of comments. Ask what the main points are and where people disagree. It is good at finding the shape of a mess, which is the tiring part of reading one.

Getting unstuck.

Give me twenty ideas for this. What am I forgetting on this list. What could go wrong with this plan. It is quick, tireless and has no pride, so it will happily produce twenty of which three are worth having. Three usable ideas in two minutes is a good trade.

Settling an argument.

Handle with care, because this is exactly where it invents things. Fine for what is the difference between these two words. Not to be trusted for what year did that happen, unless it goes and looks it up.

Writing something nice.

A speech for a wedding. A card for somebody leaving. A message you cannot find the words for. Tell it what the person is actually like, in three lines of your own, and ask for a draft.

Will the draft be good?

It will be too smooth. But the version you make of it will be far better than the blank page you were staring at.

Practising something difficult.

A conversation you are dreading, an interview, an awkward phone call. Ask it to play the other person and to be realistic rather than kind.

Practising out loud against something that never gets bored is a genuine advantage, and it costs nothing.

Try this now. Ask for five dinners this week using what is already in your cupboard, with a shopping list at the end. It is a small thing and it converts more people than any explanation.

Chapter 17: Learning something with it

Can it teach me things?

It is one of the best uses there is, and it is not the one people reach for first. What it offers is not knowledge exactly. It is a patient explainer who will go round again as many times as you need and never once makes you feel slow.

How is that better than looking something up?

Looking something up gives you the explanation everybody gets. This gives you one aimed at where you actually are. You can say I followed the first half and lost it at the bit about interest, and it starts again from there. No book has ever done that.

What should I type?

The single most useful sentence in this book: explain this to me as though I know nothing about it, and use an everyday example. Then follow with more simply, or with a different example, or with what would I need to understand first for this to make sense.

How do I know I have understood?

Turn it round. Ask it to test you. Ask me five questions on what we covered and tell me what I get wrong. Or explain it back in your own words and ask where you went astray. Being asked is a completely different thing from being told.

Is there a catch?

The big one from chapter nineteen, and it bites hardest here. When you are learning something new you cannot tell a right explanation from a wrong one. That is the whole reason you are learning it. So lean

on it for the explaining and check the hard facts elsewhere.

What is it best at teaching?

Anything where the difficulty is the words rather than the thing. Legal language, official forms, financial terms, medical letters, technical documents from a trade you are not in. All of those are mostly a vocabulary problem in disguise.

Can it help me learn a language?

It is one of the better uses, and in a particular way. Have a simple conversation in the language you are learning and ask it to correct you gently as you go.

Is there another way in?

Write a message badly and ask it to fix it and explain each change. You get the message and the lesson in the same minute, which is what a good teacher does.

Can it help me read something that is beyond me?

Yes, and this is worth trying on the thing you gave up on. Paste in the difficult paragraph and ask what it is actually saying. Then ask what you would need to understand first. Working backwards from the hard part is often much faster than starting at the beginning again.

Can I learn while I am doing something else?

This is the habit worth stealing. When you hit a term you do not know in the middle of a job, open a second conversation and ask about it there, while the first carries on. Learn and do in the same hour, rather than promising yourself you will look it up later.

Try this now. Pick something you have always meant to understand. Ask it to explain simply, then again with an everyday example, then to test you on it.

Chapter 18: When it will not do something

Sometimes it refuses. Why?

Every one of these has a list of things it has been told not to do. Some of the list is plainly sensible. Some of it is clumsy, and you will meet the clumsy part sooner or later, usually on a perfectly innocent question.

What does it decline?

Anything that looks as though it could hurt somebody. Medical and legal questions where a wrong answer is dangerous. Anything about a real named person's private life. Reproducing a living writer's work. And a wide grey band around all of that where it errs towards no.

My question was completely innocent.

It usually is, and that is the annoying part. It cannot see your intentions. It is matching the shape of your question against shapes it was told to avoid. Ask about a poison for the novel you are writing and it sees the poison, not the novel.

So what do I do?

Explain your real situation honestly, in one line, and ask for the general information you actually need. I am asking about my own test results. I am writing a story and this is for a scene. That is context rather than a trick, and it often unlocks a sensible answer.

Can I pretend to be a doctor or a nurse?

No. You will see that advice elsewhere and it is a bad idea. It is dishonest. It usually produces a worse answer too, because the helper is now writing for somebody who does not exist. And the limits are

there for exactly the cases where a wrong answer could hurt somebody.

And if it still refuses?

Try being more specific about what you actually need, which is often narrower than what you asked. A different one may draw its lines elsewhere, and using another for an ordinary request is fine.

Where is the line?

Working through helper after helper to get past a limit that two of them have already applied. And if the question touches somebody's health, rights, money or safety, that is the moment to ask a qualified person.

Should I try to argue it round?

Not worth your time. If two have both declined, either the question sits somewhere awkward or you want a person rather than a machine. Arguing with it does not work, and inventing a story to get round it usually produces a worse answer even when it succeeds.

Try this now. Next time it declines, rewrite the request to say plainly what you need it for and how narrow your question really is. Notice when that is enough, and when it is not.

Chapter 19: When it is wrong

Does it make things up?

Yes. Regularly, confidently and in a lovely calm voice. This is the most important chapter in the book, and the one thing I would want you to remember if you forgot all the rest.

Why does it do that?

Because it is not looking anything up. It is continuing a piece of writing in the way writing usually continues. A confident sentence with a specific detail in it is exactly what should come next. Whether the detail is true is a different question, and not one it is asking.

Is it lying to me?

No, and the distinction matters. Lying needs somebody who knows the truth and says otherwise. There is nobody in there. It has no idea whether it is right, because a true sentence and a false one look exactly the same from the inside. That is why it never sounds unsure.

When is it most likely?

There is a clear pattern and it is worth learning. Most with small hard facts: dates, figures, names, who said what, whether a particular book or law exists.

And when is it safest?

With soft general work: explain this, tidy this up, give me ten ideas, what might go wrong here. The more your question sounds like a quiz question, the more careful you should be.

How do I protect myself?

Three habits, none of them hard. Ask whether it would matter if this were wrong, and check elsewhere if it would. Give it the document

rather than relying on its memory, which removes most of the room to invent. And ask where it got something, since a helper that cannot say is one you should not lean on.

Is there a fourth?

Ask the same thing twice, in two fresh conversations. Two answers that disagree tell you the ground is soft. Two that agree prove nothing, because the same error can come back twice. Better still, ask a second helper and compare.

Should this put me off?

Not at all, and I would hate to end this chapter there. Think of a bright, willing, well-read friend who is right most of the time and occasionally confidently wrong. Nobody would call that a bad friend. Nobody sensible would take their word on a legal deadline either.

Try this now. Ask for three published books on a subject you know well, with authors and years. Then check each one. Whatever you find will stay with you longer than this chapter.

Chapter 20: Being safe: what you type, and the fakes

Is it safe to type anything?

No, and the danger is not what people picture. The risk is rarely somebody stealing your words. It is that they end up somewhere you did not imagine, and cannot be pulled back.

Where do my words go?

Over the internet to the company's computers, where the answer is worked out, and then back to you. Along the way they may be stored, and depending on your settings and your plan, they may be looked at by people improving the service.

What should I keep out?

A short list worth learning. Passwords and bank details. Other people's private information, especially anything medical or financial. Anything covered by a confidentiality agreement at work. A client's documents when they have not agreed to it. And anything you would be uncomfortable seeing quoted back at you.

What about things I upload?

The same rule exactly. People are careful about what they type and then attach a spreadsheet with four hundred rows of names in it without a second thought. The file becomes the words.

Is there one habit that covers most of it?

Strip out the identifying details, and go further than feels necessary. Taking the name off is not enough. Somebody can still be picked out by an address, a job title, a date of birth, a customer number or a rare illness. Two ordinary details together can be enough. Take out

everything that could reasonably point at a person.

Is there a setting worth changing?

One. Somewhere in the settings is a switch about whether your conversations are used to improve the service. Turn it off if that matters to you. It takes thirty seconds, once, and then you can stop thinking about it.

What if I have already typed something I should not have?

Do not panic and do go and look. You can delete a conversation, and you can turn that switch off. Do both, and note that deleting takes it out of your view rather than erasing every copy at once.

And after that?

Adopt the habit that saves you every time: before you paste, ask whether you would email this to a stranger who works there.

Are there fakes?

A great many, and beginners are exactly who they are aimed at. This chapter is short, and every line in it will save somebody a bad afternoon.

What do the fakes look like?

A website with almost the right name. An app in a shop with almost the right icon. An advertisement at the top of your search results that looks official. They copy the appearance closely, and their whole business is that you will not look carefully.

How do I avoid them?

Search for the name of the company that makes it rather than the name of the product, and go to their own page. Look at the address at the top of the screen and check it is spelled exactly right with nothing extra bolted on. Two seconds, every time, and you are safe.

What about apps?

Check who published it, which is written under the name in the shop. It should be the company itself. A free app with a very similar name published by somebody you have never heard of is not the thing you were looking for.

What are they after?

Usually your card details, sometimes your password, sometimes just a subscription you did not mean to buy. Remember the rule: the real free version never needs a card. Anything demanding one before you have typed a question is wrong.

What about emails?

Treat any unexpected email about your account with suspicion, especially one saying something urgent. Do not click the link. Go to the site yourself the way you normally do, and look. If something actually needs your attention, it will be waiting for you there.

Is there a general rule?

Yes, and it applies to everything, not just this. Nothing genuine ever needs you to hurry. Urgency is the tool, every single time. When something is pushing you to act quickly, that is the moment to slow down.

What about things claiming to be a cheaper version?

Be careful with anything offering the well-known helper at a fraction of the price, or without an account. Some of those are simply reselling the real thing with your conversations passing through a stranger's hands. There is a free version of the real thing. There is no reason to go round the back.

Try this now. Open the settings and decide once about the switch for using your chats to improve the service. Then search for the product name and look at what appears above the real thing.

Chapter 21: Staying the boss, and the mistakes beginners make

Who is in charge here?

You are, and it is worth saying out loud because it is easy to slip. These things are fluent, fast and endlessly agreeable, and fluency is persuasive. It is possible to find yourself nodding along to something you would have questioned from a person.

Does it just agree with me?

It leans that way. Push back on a correct answer and it will often fold and apologise even when it was right. That is a habit picked up from being trained to be agreeable, and it means its agreement proves nothing at all.

How do I get something honest?

Ask against yourself. Instead of is this a good plan, ask what are the three strongest reasons this fails. Instead of is this well written, ask what a harsh editor would cut. You get far more useful answers, because you asked for the shape of a criticism rather than the shape of a compliment.

Should I let it decide things?

No. Let it lay out options, find what you had not thought of, argue both sides, and do the tedious parts. The decision stays with you, because you are the one who lives with it and it will have forgotten the conversation by tomorrow.

Will it make me lazy?

Only in one way: if you stop reading what it hands you. Used as a thinking partner it does the opposite, because being argued with

sharpens you. The difference is entirely in whether you engage with the answer or simply forward it.

What is the healthiest way to think of it?

A very well-read assistant who works fast, never tires, has no ego, and is wrong just often enough that you always read what they hand you. Nobody would call that a bad colleague. Nobody sensible would sign their work unread either.

Should I worry about becoming dependent on it?

Ask the question you would ask about any tool. Nobody worries about depending on a calculator, because we agreed that arithmetic by hand was not the point.

Then what is the point here?

The thing worth protecting is your judgement about whether something is any good, and that only weakens if you stop reading what it gives you. Keep reading, and there is nothing here to be anxious about.

What goes wrong most often?

Nine things, and every one of them is easy to skip once somebody has named it. I would rather you read this chapter now than discover them one at a time over six months.

Asking once and giving up.

The largest group of disappointed people by a wide margin. The first answer is a draft. React to it.

Being too vague.

Write me an email is not a request, it is a hint. Two lines of who and what and how long changes everything.

Testing it instead of using it.

Asking things you already know the answer to teaches you nothing except that it can answer. Bring a real job.

Trying four different ones at once.

The surest way to learn none of them. One tool, one month.

Believing a confident answer about a hard fact.

The one that costs actual money. Dates, figures, names and rules all deserve a second source.

Never finding the settings.

Six lines about yourself, written once, improve every conversation you will ever have. Almost nobody writes them.

Letting one conversation run for weeks.

It gets vague and your history becomes useless. One subject per conversation.

Reading about it instead of using it.

Ten videos and no attempts is the most common shape of not getting started. Half an hour of fumbling beats all of it.

Waiting for a good reason to use it.

The ninth mistake, and the quietest one. People save it for something important and then never have anything important enough. It is for the small dull jobs, and the small dull jobs are where the hours actually go.

Try this now. Take a plan you are fond of and ask for the three strongest reasons it fails. Then read the list of beginners' mistakes again and mark the two you have already made.

Chapter 22: When something goes wrong

It has stopped answering. What now?

Almost always one of four things, and none of them are your fault. Work down the list and you will fix it in under a minute.

It is thinking and thinking and nothing happens.

Give it a minute, then reload the page. Your conversation will still be there. If it happens repeatedly, the service is probably busy, which happens at peak times, and there is nothing to fix.

It says I have reached a limit.

That is the free allowance from chapter fourteen. It resets after a while, usually a few hours. Nothing is broken and nothing is lost. If you meet it often, that is the signal that paying might be worth it.

It has forgotten what we were talking about.

The conversation has got too long, and the earliest part has in fact fallen out of view. Start a fresh one and paste in three lines of what matters. Better still, ask it first to summarise everything established so far.

Everything looks different from yesterday.

They redesign these constantly. Look for the big empty box, which never moves, and ignore the rest until you need it. If you cannot find something, ask it where the thing is.

I cannot get into my account.

Use the forgotten password link, and check you are using the email address you signed up with, which is the detail everybody loses. That is

why chapter four asked you to write it down.

It is giving me nonsense today.

Start a new conversation. A conversation that has gone-off the rails stays off them. Nine times out of ten a fresh start with a clearer question fixes what looked like a fault.

It has stopped halfway through writing.

Type carry on, or continue from where you stopped. It picks up. This happens on long answers and is not a fault, and knowing the two words saves you asking the whole question again.

Try this now. Before you need it, find the button that starts a new conversation and the link for a forgotten password. Knowing where they are turns a panic into a shrug.

Chapter 23: Helping somebody else start

Somebody has asked me to show them. How?

Do not give them a tour. That is the instinct and it is wrong. A tour of features teaches nobody anything, because none of it attaches to something they wanted.

What should I do instead?

Ask them one question: what is the most annoying small job you have this week. Then do that one job together, on their machine, with them typing. Twenty minutes, one real result, and they have it.

What if they say they are too old or not technical?

Say what is true. There is nothing technical here. If they can write a note to a friend, they can do this. The only skill is describing what you want, and they have been doing that their whole life.

What if they are frightened of breaking something?

Show them, do not tell them. Press a few things in front of them and let them see that nothing happens. Point out that nothing in that window deletes their files, spends their money or sends anything to anybody.

What should I not do?

Do not type for them, however much faster it would be. Do not show them four different ones. Do not explain how it works underneath, however interesting you find it. And do not use the word prompt.

What should I leave them with?

Three things written on paper. The web address. Which email they used. And one sentence to start with next time, such as explain this to me as though I know nothing about it. That is a better present than an hour of explaining.

When should I follow up?

In about a week, with one question: what did you use it for. If the answer is nothing, do another twenty minute job with them. The second real result is the one that makes the habit stick.

What if they get frustrated?

Almost always because they asked once, got something vague, and concluded it was useless. Show them the reacting. Type too long, or that is not what I meant, and let them watch it adjust. That single demonstration fixes more frustration than any explanation of how it works.

Try this now. Think of one person who would benefit and has not started. Do not send them a link. Offer them twenty minutes and one real job.

Chapter 24: Your first fortnight, the second month, and the short version

Give me a plan.

Two weeks, a few minutes a day, and one half hour block. Nothing in here is important, and that is the point. By the end of it this will have stopped being a thing you are learning.

Week one, day by day.

Sign up and ask one thing you already know about, then ask it to say it more simply. Explain a dull letter. Shorten an email you already sent. Ask for twenty names for something.

And the rest of the week?

Photograph a label and ask what it means. Ask it to explain a word you have nodded at for years. Ask for a week of meals with a shopping list.

What is the half hour in week one?

Write your six standing lines about yourself and put them in the settings. That is the highest value half hour in the whole fortnight and almost nobody spends it.

What if a day gets missed?

Nothing happens. There is no order these have to be done in and no penalty for skipping one. The list is there so that you always have something small to reach for, not so that you can fail at it.

Week two?

Now something you actually need. Attach a document and ask the three questions. Try the voice on your phone. Ask it to argue against

one of its own answers. And save the wording of whichever request gave you the best result.

What should I avoid in the fortnight?

Do not pay for anything. Do not put anything private in. Do not use it for the important document with the deadline. Do not sign up for a second one. And do not read anything else about it, including this book.

How will I know it worked?

There will be a moment, usually in the second week, when you reach for it without deciding to. Something will be irritating and you will paste it in without thinking. That is the whole transition. It is not a skill you learn. It is a habit you fall into.

The fortnight is over. What now?

Now it gets interesting, because the fumbling is behind you and you can start doing things that actually save you time. Here are seven things to try, roughly one a week, in the order I would do them.

Give it a job with several parts.

Up to now everything has been one question. Try something with three. Read this document, tell me the three things I should be worried about, and draft a note to my colleague explaining them. Watch how it handles being given a whole job instead of a question.

Ask for the plan before the work.

For anything long, ask for the outline first. Give me the five points this should make, in order, before you write anything. Look at the outline, fix what is wrong, then let it write. This one habit prevents the commonest waste there is, which is a beautifully written thing that was the wrong thing.

Get a second opinion.

Sign up, free, to a second helper. Paste in an answer from the first and ask what is wrong with this, what has been missed, what would you challenge. Anything is far more willing to find fault in somebody else's work than in its own. One paste, thirty seconds, and it is the cheapest check available.

Have it interview you.

Instead of explaining everything up front, say: I want to write this, ask me questions until you have enough. It will ask five or six good ones, and you will find yourself explaining things you had not thought to mention. The result is noticeably better than anything you would have briefed.

Use it on a decision rather than a task.

Not write this, but help me think about this. Lay out the options. What would make each one wrong. What am I assuming that I have not checked. What would somebody who disagrees say. This is the use that people who rely on these things most talk about, and beginners almost never try it.

Learn something properly with it.

Pick a subject you have always meant to understand. Give it half an hour a week. Explain it simply, then more simply, then with an example, then test me on it. Four weeks of that will take you further than a book, because the explanation keeps adjusting to what you did not get.

Teach somebody else.

The last one, and the one that will show you how far you have come. Sit with somebody who has never touched it and do one real job with them. You will discover that you know a great deal more than you thought, which is exactly the point.

What should I be watching for in month two?

One thing. The jobs you quietly stopped handing over because it disappointed you once. There are usually two or three, and they are almost always jobs where your instruction was vague rather than jobs it cannot do. Try one of them again with the three parts from chapter nine, and you will often get a surprise.

When should I look at what else is out there?

Now, and briefly. After two months of real use you can judge a new thing in five minutes, because you know what you actually need it for. That is a completely different position from where you started, and it is why chapter one told you to ignore all of it for a while.

If I forget everything else, what should I keep?

Ten things. They are the whole book.

One.

You are not behind. The big step is from nothing to something, and you are taking it now.

Two.

There is nothing to install. An email address, five minutes, and a free account.

Three.

Find it by searching for the company, not the product, and look at the address before you type anything.

Four.

Type it the way you would ask a helpful, patient friend. Set the scene, say the task, give the rules.

Five.

The first answer is a draft. React to it. Two or three rounds is normal.

Six.

Photograph the letter. Attach the document. Answers grounded in something you gave it are far more reliable.

Seven.

It can be completely wrong while sounding completely certain. The more it sounds like a quiz answer, the more you check.

Eight.

Do not type anything you would not email to a stranger who works there.

Nine.

One tool, one month. Save what works. Five minutes a day and half an hour a week.

Ten.

You are the boss. Ask it to argue against you, and keep the decision yourself.

And that is it?

That is it. You now know more about starting with these things than most people who have been using one for a year. Not because it was hard, but because somebody finally explained it in plain words.

Try this now. Close the book, open the page, and ask it something small.

The words people throw about

Can you translate the jargon?

Here are the words you will actually meet, in plain terms. You do not have to learn them. Come back here when somebody uses one at you.

AI.

The whole field. Machines doing things that used to need a person. A very broad word doing a lot of work.

Model.

The thing itself. The very well-read machine that guesses the next word.

Prompt.

Whatever you typed. That is all it means. Your question is your prompt.

Chatbot.

The window you type into. The doorway rather than the machine.

Token.

A small piece of a word. What these things chop text into, and what they count by.

Training.

The long, expensive process of feeding it enormous amounts of writing so it learns the patterns. It happened long before you met it.

Cut off.

The date the reading stopped. It knows little after that unless it goes and looks.

Hallucination.

When it states something untrue in a confident voice. The most important word in this list.

Context window.

How much it can hold in mind at once. When a long conversation starts forgetting the beginning, you have filled it.

Multimodal.

It can handle more than text. Pictures, sound, sometimes video.

Agent.

A helper that does not just answer but goes off and performs steps for you. A different animal, and it has its own book in this series.

Open weights.

A model whose trained dials have been published, so anybody can run it on their own machine. It rarely means everything is public: the training data and the method usually are not.

Benchmark.

A test used to compare them, endlessly quoted in announcements. Treat it as you would a company quoting its own exam results.

Sources and further reading

Why does a book like this need sources?

Because a book that warns you about confident unsourced claims should not make any of its own. Everything below is where a specific claim in this book comes from, and all of it is freely readable.

You are not behind.

Three ideas here come from Jeff Su's work on becoming comfortable with these tools without the overwhelm. The smallest useful toolkit, the friction that makes people stop, and the weekly hour of actually trying something. His videos are free and short.

Search for the company, not the product.

This advice appears in most careful beginner guides, and for good reason. Look up guidance from your national consumer protection or cyber security body on fake websites and search advertisements. The advice is the same everywhere.

What a language model actually is.

The design that made these practical was published by Google researchers in 2017 as "Attention Is All You Need". You do not need to read it. It is worth knowing it exists.

Why it sounds so confident.

Look up reinforcement learning from human feedback. It explains why these helpers rarely say they do not know, and why they tend to agree with you.

Deleting conversations, and how long things are kept.

Look up the data controls page of the service you use. Providers state their own retention periods, and these change, which is why no

number is printed here.

Identifying somebody from more than a name.

The UK Information Commissioner's Office publishes plain-language guidance on anonymisation and on when data still counts as personal. It is the clearest short explanation of why removing a name is not enough.

Anything else?

Where this book gives no source, the claim is one of three things. An opinion. A habit I recommend. Or something you can check yourself in ten minutes with the box at the end of the chapter.

About this edition

When was this written?

The technology, product features and prices described here were checked in August 2026. This is a fast-moving field. If you are reading this a year later, expect the ideas to have held and the details to have moved.

Which parts will age fastest?

The chapters about how these things work, how to ask, and what to check are built to last. Anything touching free and paid plans, what a helper can be connected to, and how much it can hold in mind will date soonest. Where something looks out of date, trust the principle and check the detail.

Is this advice?

No. This book is general explanation, not professional advice. Nothing in it is legal, medical, financial or employment advice, and no AI helper is a substitute for a qualified person. Where a question touches somebody's health, rights, money or safety, ask a professional. Where your employer has a policy about these tools, that policy comes first.

What about other people's information?

Removing a name does not make information anonymous, and some kinds of information need more care than others. If you handle personal data for a living, treat this book as a starting point and follow the rules that apply to your trade.

Some things are repeated across the series. Is that a mistake?

No, it is on purpose, and it is worth saying plainly. Each book is written to be read on its own. So the welcome, the safety advice about

what not to type in, and the habit of checking anything that sounds like a quiz answer appear in all of them. If you are reading the whole set, you will meet those twice. That is the price of not assuming you started at book one.

Who wrote it?

Alex Poolman, for CHI-Publishers. This is one of a series called AI Is Easy, written for people who were never given a plain explanation and quietly decided the fault was theirs. It was not.

What if I find a mistake?

Then I would rather know. A book that argues for checking things has no business being precious about being checked.

Alex Poolman

CHI-Publishers, August 2026