

A FREE GUIDE

How to Use AI Without Learning AI

A plain-English guide to getting real help from AI, even if you've never done more than a Google search.

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A product leader who uses AI in his everyday work. No jargon, no hype, just what actually helps.

Start here

Search "how to use AI" and you'll drown.

Most of what comes back is too technical, too fast, or written for people who already work in tech. Models, tokens, parameters, prompt engineering. Twenty minutes in, you still don't know what to actually type, and you quietly close the tab.

Here's the good news. You do not need any of that.

You don't need to learn how AI works to use it well, the same way you don't need to understand engines to drive a car. What you need is one simple habit: knowing how to ask. That's the whole skill. Everything in this guide is built to teach it to you in an afternoon.

By the end, you'll be able to sit down with any AI tool and get real, useful help with your writing, your decisions, your planning, and the messy stuff you've been putting off. No jargon. No setup. Just a better way to ask.

Let's go.

Why AI probably let you down the first time

Most people meet AI and treat it like Google.

They type a few words, hit enter, and expect a clean answer to appear.

"Marketing plan." "Resume help." "Email to my boss." Then a wall of generic text comes back, and they think, well, that wasn't very good.

The tool wasn't the problem. The ask was.

AI isn't a search engine. A search engine looks up pages other people already wrote. AI is closer to a sharp, fast assistant sitting next to you, one who will draft almost anything, talk through almost any problem, and never get tired. But like any assistant, it can only be as good as the instructions you give it. Hand it three vague words and you'll get a vague answer. Tell it what you actually need and it gets surprisingly good, surprisingly fast.

The best way to think about what AI is for: it gets you from a blank page to a first draft, and from messy thinking to something organized. That's its real gift. Not perfect final answers. A running start.

The one shift that changes everything

Stop querying. Start briefing.

A query is what you toss at a search box. A few keywords, take it or leave it. A brief is what you'd give a capable assistant before they go do the work. A sentence or two about what you want, who it's for, and what matters.

Watch the difference.

Query: "Write an email asking for time off."

Brief: "Help me write a short, friendly email to my manager asking for the Friday before the holiday weekend off. I already have the vacation days. I want to sound appreciative but not like I'm asking permission for something I've already earned."

Same tool. Wildly different result. The second one isn't better because it's fancy. It's better because it tells the AI the handful of things only you knew.

That's the move. You don't need clever wording or special tricks. You just stop treating AI like a vending machine and start treating it like the smartest temp worker you've ever hired.

Which tool should you use? Pick one and stop shopping.

Quick detour, because this is where a lot of people get stuck before they even start.

There are several big AI tools, and they're all good enough. The popular ones right now are ChatGPT, Google's Gemini, Claude, and Microsoft Copilot. You could spend three weeks comparing them. Don't.

Here's the only guidance you need to begin: pick one, ideally the one closest to where you already work. Live in Gmail and Google Docs? Gemini is right there. Use Microsoft Office all day? Copilot is built in. Just want a general all-rounder to start playing with? ChatGPT or Claude. Any of them will do everything in this guide.

Then use that one tool every day for two weeks before you even think about switching.

Because here's the truth almost nobody tells beginners: you are not blocked because you picked the wrong tool. You're blocked because you don't yet have a repeatable way to use one. Fix that, and the tool barely matters. That repeatable way is the next section.

The loop: a simple way to ask that works every time

This is the core of the whole guide. Four steps. Run them in order and you'll get good results on almost anything.

1 Dump the messy version. Don't clean it up first.

Most people freeze trying to write the perfect, polished request. Skip that. Brain-dump the situation exactly as it sits in your head, tangents and all. "Ok so I need to write something to my landlord about the heating, it's been broken since Tuesday and I already texted once and nothing happened and I don't want to be rude but I'm annoyed." That's a great start. The mess is the raw material.

2 Tell it to ask you questions before it answers.

This is the single most powerful move in this guide, and almost no beginner knows it. At the end of your request, add this line:

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"Before you answer, ask me any questions you need to give me a better result."

Now the AI does the hard part for you. Instead of guessing and handing you something generic, it asks the three or four things it actually needs to know. You answer them. And the result it gives back is the one you would otherwise have had to drag out of it over five tries. You flipped the work. The AI is now interviewing you, which is exactly what a good assistant does.

3 Separate what you know from what you're guessing.

As you answer its questions, notice which things you're sure about and which you're just assuming. Tell it the difference. "I know the deadline is Friday. I'm not sure my boss has seen the draft yet." This one habit keeps AI from building a confident answer on top of a shaky guess.

Get it into a usable shape, and flag what's still unknown.

Here's where most beginners quit too early. They read the first answer, decide it's not quite right, and give up. Don't. The first draft is the start of a conversation, not the end of one. Just keep talking to it. Make it shorter. Change the tone. Say "that's too stiff," or "give me three more options," or "what am I missing?" You can correct it, push back, and redirect as many times as you want, and it never gets annoyed. And anything that's still uncertain, leave it clearly marked rather than letting the AI smooth it over. "Note: still need to confirm the date" is a feature, not a failure.

That's the loop. Dump, let it ask, separate known from guessed, shape and flag. You'll be running it without thinking within a week.

What AI is bad at, so it doesn't catch you off guard

AI is a fast, capable assistant. It also has real blind spots, and knowing them up front saves you from getting burned.

The big one: it may not know anything current. Many AI tools learned from information up to a certain point in time, so they can be hazy or flat wrong about recent events, today's prices, or this week's news. Worse, instead of admitting it doesn't know, AI will sometimes invent a confident, official-sounding answer. So if you need up-to-date facts, make sure your tool is actually searching the web (most can now), and double-check anything that matters.

A few other soft spots worth knowing. It's a language tool, not a calculator, so check any exact math or counting yourself. It can produce a real-looking quote, statistic, or source that simply does not exist, so verify facts before you repeat them. And for anything where being a little wrong is a real problem, like legal, medical, or money questions, treat it as a starting point and confirm with a proper source.

None of this makes AI any less useful. It just tells you what it's for. Use it to draft, organize, brainstorm, and think faster, and stay the one who checks. That's exactly what the next few habits are about.

Four habits that keep you out of trouble

The loop gets you good answers. These four habits keep you safe and sharp.

Let the AI ask the questions. You just learned this, and it's worth repeating because it matters that much. The fastest path to a great answer is making the AI pull the details out of you instead of guessing. When in doubt, end with "ask me what you need to know."

Never fully trust a confident "done." AI can sound completely sure of itself and still be wrong. It can make things up and deliver them in a calm, professional voice. So for anything that matters, ask it to show its work. A great line to keep in your back pocket:

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"What assumptions did you make in this answer, and what should I verify before I rely on it?"

That one question has saved a lot of people from a confident mistake.

Check the things that carry risk. Numbers, dates, names, laws, anything medical or money-related, anything current. AI is a fast first draft, not a final authority. Verify the parts where being wrong would actually cost you something.

Keep private things out. Easy rule, no technical knowledge required: if you wouldn't email it to a stranger, don't paste it into an AI tool. Passwords, financial details, other people's private information, confidential work documents. When in doubt, leave it out and describe it instead.

Watch the loop work: three real examples

Here's the loop on the kind of stuff you actually deal with.

The email you've been avoiding. You dump it: "Need to tell a vendor we're not renewing. We've worked with them two years, I don't want to burn the bridge, but the decision is final." You add: "Ask me anything you need first." The AI asks

whether you want to give a reason, whether you'd work with them again later, and how warm or formal you want to sound. You answer. What comes back is a kind, clear, final email that would have taken you forty minutes to get right on your own.

The document you don't have time to read. You paste in a long, dense report or contract and say: "Summarize this in plain English in five bullets, then tell me anything in here I should be worried about or follow up on." Now you're not just getting a summary, you're getting a summary plus the AI flagging the parts that need your attention. Two minutes instead of thirty.

The thing you're trying to plan. "Help me plan a weekend trip for my family. Three kids, tight budget, we like the outdoors, we're driving." Then: "Before you build the plan, ask me what you need to know." It asks about dates, distance, the kids' ages, what counts as tight. You answer. You get a real plan shaped to your family, not a generic listicle.

Notice the pattern. Every one of these is the same loop. Dump the mess, let it ask, answer honestly, shape the result. You're not learning twelve techniques. You're learning one, and using it everywhere.

Do this today

Reading about AI is like reading about swimming. You learn it by getting in.

So here's your first move, right now. Open whichever tool you picked and paste this in:

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"I'm brand new to using AI. Ask me a few questions about what I do day to day, then show me three specific ways I could start using you this week."

Answer its questions. Pick one of the three ideas. Try it before you close the tab.

Then tomorrow, take one annoying task you've been putting off, an email, a plan, a document you don't want to read, and run the loop on it. Dump the mess. Tell it to ask you questions first. That's it. That's how this stops being something you read about and becomes something you do.

One more thing, if this is for work

Maybe you don't just want to write better emails. Maybe you build things for a living. You run a team, you own projects, you're the one turning fuzzy ideas into something other people can actually build.

If that's you, this same loop has a much sharper version. The way I use AI to write specs, break down work, reason through data, and hand clean work to a team runs on exactly the habit you just learned, scaled up for people who ship.

That's what I write about every week. Short, practical, no hype, built from real product work. If you want the version of this guide aimed at people who do this for a living, that's where to find it.

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— Jason

Appendix: starter prompts worth saving

Copy these, change the brackets, keep the ones that work.

1 "Before you answer, ask me any questions you need to give me a better result. Here's what I'm trying to do: [dump the situation]."

2 "I'm brand new to this. Explain [topic] to me in plain English with three simple examples."

3 "Summarize this in five bullets, then tell me anything I should follow up on or be worried about: [paste text]."

4 "Rewrite this so it's clearer and easier to read. Keep my meaning. Don't make it sound stiff: [paste text]."

5 "Help me write a [warm / firm / professional] message to [person] about [situation]. Ask me what you need before you draft it."

6 "Compare [option A] and [option B] for someone who cares most about [what matters to you]. Give me pros, cons, and a recommendation."

7 "What assumptions did you make in this answer, and what should I verify before I rely on it?"

8 "Based on what I do each week, suggest a simple routine for where AI could save me time, and what I should still do myself."