

Start Here: What Is AI?

Never used AI before? Perfect. This guide starts from zero: no tech background needed.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- AI is just software you talk to in normal language; if you can text, you can use it.
- It learned by studying huge amounts of writing, so it's great at words: drafting, explaining, summarizing.
- It can 'hallucinate' (state false things confidently), so check anything important.
- Think of it as a fast, well-read assistant, not an all-knowing authority.

Start from zero

You already use AI without noticing: your phone's face unlock, Netflix and Spotify recommendations, spam filters, maps rerouting you around traffic, and autocorrect all rely on it. What's new since about 2022 is AI you can simply **talk to**.

What it looks like

You open an app or website, see a text box (like a messaging app), and type something like *"Help me write a thank-you note to my neighbor for watching my dog."* Seconds later, it writes one. You can reply "make it shorter" and it will. That's it. That's the core skill.

How a computer "learns"

Normal software follows exact instructions a programmer wrote. AI is different: instead of being told every rule, it is shown huge numbers of examples and figures out the patterns itself, the way a child learns to recognize dogs by seeing many dogs rather than memorizing a definition.

The one-minute version

When people say "AI" today they usually mean **generative AI**: software that can create text, images, audio or code when you ask it to in ordinary language. The chat assistants most people use are built on **large language models (LLMs)**.

An LLM was trained by reading a huge amount of text (books, websites, code) and learning to predict the next word in a sentence. Do that billions of times and the model picks up grammar, facts, writing styles and even step-by-step reasoning patterns.

AN ANALOGY

Think of a very well-read intern who has skimmed most of the internet, never gets tired, answers in seconds, and sometimes makes things up rather than admit they don't know.

Types of AI you'll run into

Type	What it does	Examples
Chat assistants	Answer questions, write, summarize, reason	ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Grok, Copilot
Image generators	Create pictures from a text description	Midjourney, DALL·E, Imagen, Grok Imagine
Voice & audio	Transcribe speech, clone voices, make music	Voice modes in assistants, Otter, Suno
Built-in AI	AI features inside apps you already use	Gmail "Help me write", Microsoft 365 Copilot, phone photo editing
Agents	Take multi-step actions for you (browse, fill forms, run tasks)	Agent modes in major assistants

What AI is good at

- **First drafts** of emails, posts, letters, reports.
- **Explaining** confusing topics at any level ("explain like I'm 12").
- **Summarizing** long documents, articles or meeting notes.
- **Brainstorming** ideas, names, plans, gift lists.
- **Rewriting** for tone, length or clarity.
- **Organizing** messy information into tables, lists or schedules.

Where it struggles

- **Facts and numbers:** it can invent statistics, quotes, citations and URLs.
- **Recent events:** without web search it only knows what it was trained on.
- **Precise math** on long problems (better models are improving, but double-check).
- **Your personal context:** it doesn't know your situation unless you tell it.
- **Judgment calls:** medical, legal and financial decisions still need a qualified human.

REMEMBER

A fluent, confident answer is not the same as a correct answer.

Myths vs. reality

Myth	Reality
"AI understands me like a person."	It recognizes patterns in language; it has no feelings or lived experience.
"It's always searching the internet."	Only when a search/browse feature is on. Otherwise it answers from training.
"If it says it, it's true."	It can be fluent and wrong. Verify important claims.
"You need to be technical to use it."	If you can type a text message, you can use AI.

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