

- » Finding out how Claude works
- » Discovering what makes Claude different
- » Knowing when to double-check Claude's responses

# Chapter 1

## Introducing Claude

**Y**ou've been hearing about AI assistants. Perhaps your colleagues rave about using them, or you've seen articles about how they change the way people work. But what exactly is Claude, and what can it do for you?

In this chapter, you discover what Claude is without getting buried in technical jargon. You find out how Claude differs from search engines and other tools you might already use. You then discover the types of tasks that are best suited for Claude. Finally, and most importantly, you find out when you should verify its responses and when it's best to use another tool. By the end of this chapter, you'll have a clear understanding of how to start using Claude effectively.

## Describing Claude

Claude is available in several plans to fit different needs. The Free plan gives you access to core features at no cost. Pro and Max are paid plans that unlock higher usage limits, priority access, and advanced features. Team and Enterprise plans are designed for organizations that need collaboration tools, administrative controls, and security guarantees.

Throughout this chapter, features that require a specific plan are noted so you always know what's available to you. For a detailed list for each plan, see Chapter 2.

Claude is an AI assistant created by Anthropic, a leading AI software development company. Think of Claude as a well-informed partner who's always available to help you write, think through problems, learn new topics, and get things done. You can have conversations with Claude through an app or a browser on a smartphone or tablet; a laptop; or a desktop computer (see Chapter 2 for details). Claude responds in natural language. It's just like texting with a knowledgeable colleague who's always available.



TIP

For more information about Anthropic's mission and approach to building Claude, see <https://anthropic.com/company>.

## Defining AI without the jargon

AI (artificial intelligence) may sound intimidating, but at its core, it's just software that can understand and respond to your questions and requests in a way that feels natural and helpful.

Claude is what's called a *large language model* (LLM). In plain English, this means that Claude has been trained on a mixture of licensed data, data created by human trainers, and text from the internet. Through this training, Claude learned patterns about how language works and how to answer questions, explain concepts, write different types of content, and reason through problems.



TIP

You don't need to understand the technical details of how Claude works any more than you need to understand how your car engine works to drive it. What matters is knowing what you can do with Claude and how to use it effectively.



REMEMBER

Unlike traditional software that follows rigid software rules ("if this, then that"), Claude is designed to understand context and ambiguity. If you ask, "Make this email friendlier," Claude understands what *friendlier* means and how to adjust the tone. If you say, "Explain quantum physics like I'm 12 not 20," Claude knows to simplify the language and use relatable examples.

## Understanding how Claude differs from search engines

Today's search engines, like Google AI Mode (<https://google.com/aimode>) and Copilot (<https://copilot.com/>), use advanced AI. They now feature conversational answers, summaries, and direct recommendations, instead of just producing lists of links based on keywords. This blurs the lines between web search and generative AI, but it's important to understand where Claude stands apart. Here are several of Claude's distinct strengths. Claude can:



REMEMBER

- » **Process and synthesize extremely large documents or datasets:** Claude can work with full ebooks, manuals, and multipage reports in a single conversation. Most AI search engines, even with recent upgrades, are limited to medium-size document analysis.
- » **Engage in deep, multiturn interactions:** These interactions include nuanced reasoning, brainstorming, planning, and extended dialogue, well beyond the short conversational memory of even the most advanced AI-driven search platforms.

Deep multiturn conversations are extended back-and-forth exchanges where each message builds on the previous ones. Claude maintains the full context of what you've discussed in each conversation. This is in contrast to AI search engines, which typically handle one to three exchanges before losing context or requiring you to start over.
- » **Generate, structure, and refine original content:** This content includes emails, documents, creative writing, and executive summaries tailored to your unique prompts, context, and files.

## Knowing what makes Claude special

Several AI assistants exist today, so what makes Claude different? Here are some key characteristics that set Claude apart. Claude:

- » **Has a natural conversation style:** Claude responds in a conversational rather than a robotic or overly formal way. The tone can adapt to your needs: professional for business writing, collaborative for brainstorming, and helpful for learning.
- » **Excels at complex thinking:** Claude performs well at tasks that require reasoning and analysis. Whether you're working through a business decision or understanding a complicated concept, Claude can break down complex problems into manageable pieces.
- » **Is an effective writing assistant:** From emails to reports to creative content, Claude helps improve your writing. It can match specific tones and styles, and many users find it particularly good at editing and refining drafts.
- » **Is honest about its limitations:** Claude is often more transparent about limitations than many AIs, but it still sometimes provide incorrect or outdated information without explicit warning, especially for recent events. The model attempts to tell you when it doesn't know, but it doesn't always do so. You should always verify important or high-stakes information.



TIP

- » **Focuses on safety and helpfulness:** Anthropic built safety into Claude from the ground up. They say that “Claude is designed to be helpful, harmless, and honest.” It declines requests that could cause harm while remaining genuinely useful.
- » **Provides a long context window:** Claude can work with large amounts of text at once. You can upload entire documents, share long context, and have extended conversations without Claude forgetting what you discussed earlier. (See Chapter 5 for information about Claude’s Memory settings.)

Claude’s maximum context window varies by version, but your actual limits depend also on versions and subscription tiers. As of April, 2026, Claude Opus 4.7 and Sonnet 4.6 support 1 million tokens (2,500 pages of text) and are available at no extra cost on Pro and Max. Claude Haiku 4.5 remains at 200,000 tokens (500 pages).
- » **Creates artifacts:** When you ask Claude to create substantial content like documents, code, or web pages, it generates these as separate artifacts (windows) you can easily view, edit, and download, not just as text in a chat. (Check out Chapter 16 for more about using artifacts.)

## Discovering How Best to Use Claude

Like any tool, Claude has its sweet spots. It shines when performing some tasks, but also has its limitations. Knowing both will help you use Claude effectively and avoid frustration. In this section, you discover the areas in which Claude excels.

### Writing and thinking

Writing and thinking are widely considered Claude’s superpowers. You can use Claude for writing and thinking tasks such as the following:

- » **Draft creation and polish:** Claude excels at first drafts of emails, reports, blog posts, and social media content. It can take your rough draft and suggest improvements in clarity, tone, and structure.
- » **Tone and format transformation:** Claude adapts to your audience, whether the tone needs to be formal or casual. It distills long documents into summaries and transforms formats, such as turning meeting notes into action items or technical specs into easy-to-understand explanations.

- » **Problem-solving and analysis:** Claude breaks down complex problems, compares options, finds pros and cons, and helps you think through implications from several perspectives.
- » **Idea generation and planning:** Claude generates options quickly and creates outlines, frameworks, and step-by-step plans to help organize your thinking.



REMEMBER

Most tasks that AI can help with involve language, reasoning, and creativity. If you can describe what you need in words, Claude can probably help you.

## Learning complex topics

One of Claude's most valuable capabilities is helping you learn. If you're trying to understand a new concept or master a skill, Claude can be a patient tutor.

Consider what makes Claude effective for learning:

- » **Explanations at your level:** Tell Claude your background knowledge ("I'm new to this" or "I have a basic understanding of economics"), and it adjusts its explanations accordingly. No more getting lost in jargon or feeling talked down to.
- » **Complexity simplified:** Complex topics become digestible when Claude breaks them into smaller concepts, explains connections, and builds understanding step by step.
- » **Multiple perspectives and analogies:** If one explanation doesn't click, ask Claude to try a different approach. It can use analogies, examples from different domains, or alternative frameworks until something resonates.
- » **No judgment:** Feel free to ask "dumb questions" or ask the same thing multiple ways. Claude never makes you feel bad for not understanding something, which is important when you want to learn.
- » **Interactive learning:** You can ask follow-up questions, request clarification, or dig deeper. The conversation adapts to your learning pace and interests.
- » **Practice and examples:** When you're learning a skill, ask Claude for practice problems, examples, or exercises. It can check your work and explain where you went wrong. You can be specific about exactly what's tripping you up.

To get started, here's how to think about constructing a prompt:

- » **Understanding technical concepts:** "Explain blockchain like I'm an artist, not a programmer."

- » **Learning new professional skills:** “Teach me the basics of project management.”
- » **Making sense of documents:** “Summarize this legal contract in plain English.”
- » **Preparing for challenges:** “Help me understand this topic for my presentation.”
- » **Filling knowledge gaps:** “I understand X and Z, but what’s Y?”



TIP

You start using prompts in Chapter 3, and I cover creating prompts in depth in Parts 3 and 4.

## Recognizing What to Verify

Claude is very capable, but it’s not perfect. Understanding when to verify Claude’s responses is crucial for using it effectively and responsibly. Verification matters most for high-stakes decisions, specific facts, and time-sensitive topics.



REMEMBER

Verification is not a failure of Claude but rather a smart practice when using any information source.

Always verify the following types of information:

- » **Specific facts and figures:** Claude generally provides accurate information, but errors, hallucinations (confident but incorrect statements), and outdated information can occur, especially for highly specific or recent data. Verification is critical for important use across all content.
- » **Current events and recent information:** Claude’s knowledge has a cutoff of early-to-mid 2025, depending on the model you’re using. To find the exact date for your model, ask Claude directly: “What is your knowledge cutoff date?” For anything more recent, use Claude’s web search. Note that web search is available on all plans, including Free, so you can use it to supplement Claude’s knowledge for time-sensitive topics.
- » **Medical, legal, or financial advice:** Claude can provide general information and help you understand concepts, but never rely on it for professional advice in these critical areas. Always consult appropriate professionals.
- » **Citations and sources:** If Claude mentions a study, quote, or specific source, verify that it exists and says what Claude claims it does. Claude sometimes gets sources wrong or combines information from multiple sources.

- » **Code and technical implementation:** Claude is competent at writing code, but the code may have bugs or security issues. Always test and vet code thoroughly before use.

When verifying information, watch for these red flags:

- » **The answer seems too convenient:** If Claude's response aligns perfectly with what you hoped to hear, verify that it's accurate, not just what you want to be true.
- » **The information is unusually specific:** Highly detailed statistics or specific technical specifications require verification.
- » **The stakes are high:** For important decisions, significant financial implications, or situations where errors could cause problems, always verify.
- » **Something feels off:** Trust your instincts. If something in Claude's response doesn't seem quite right, investigate further.
- » **You need to cite the information:** If you're writing an academic paper, professional report, or anything that requires citations, verify the information through primary sources.

## VERIFY ANYTHING THAT MATTERS TO YOU

To always be confident in the information you use, build these good verification practices:

- Cross-check important facts with authoritative sources.
- Ask Claude to explain its reasoning or provide the basis for claims.
- Use Claude's web search feature for time-sensitive information.
- Consult subject matter experts, if possible, for critical decisions.
- Test code in a safe environment before production use.
- Use a second AI tool (such as Gemini or ChatGPT) to independently check critical claims.

The goal isn't to distrust Claude; it's to use it wisely. Think of verification as part of good information hygiene, whether you're getting information from Claude, search engines, or anywhere else. Claude is a powerful tool that works best when combined with human judgment and appropriate verification.

# Understanding When to Use a Different Tool

Claude is versatile, but it's not the only tool for every job. Knowing when to use another tool alongside or instead of Claude saves you time and frustration. Consider using search engines when you need the following:

- » **The absolute latest information:** For breaking news, current stock prices, today's weather, or anything happening right now, search engines are faster and more up-to-date. (Pro and Max users can enable Claude's web search for current information.)
- » **Multiple perspectives:** If you want to explore various viewpoints on a controversial topic or compare different sources, search engines let you see the range of opinions and sources directly.
- » **Specific websites or resources:** Need to find a particular company's contact information or access a specific government form? Search engines excel at finding and accessing specific web resources.

Use specialized software for the following:

- » **Doing complex calculations:** For financial modeling, statistical analysis, or scientific calculations, use Excel, specialized calculators, or analytical software. Although Claude can help explain formulas or troubleshoot spreadsheet errors, it's not designed for computation.
- » **Creating visual designs:** For graphic design, photo editing, or complex visual projects, use dedicated design software. Claude can create simple diagrams and write HTML/CSS (the code that creates web pages) for web design, but it's not a replacement for image-generation applications such as Midjourney (<https://midjourney.com/>) or DALL-E 3 (<https://openai.com/dall-e-3/>).
- » **Managing structured data:** Databases, spreadsheets, and data management tools are better for organizing, querying, and analyzing large datasets. You can integrate Microsoft Excel into Claude to create and revise spreadsheets along with other capabilities. (This function is available only for Pro and Max plans.)
- » **Working with real-time collaboration:** For team projects that require simultaneous editing, use collaborative tools such as Google Docs or Microsoft Teams. Claude works with only one person at a time in each conversation.



Consult human experts for the following:

- » Medical diagnosis and treatment plans
- » Legal advice and contract review
- » Licensed professional services (for example, accounting or engineering)
- » Critical safety decisions
- » Personal counseling

Understanding how to strategically combine tools makes you more effective than relying on any single tool. Here are some combinations to consider:

- » **Start with an AI tool like Perplexity ([www.perplexity.ai](http://www.perplexity.ai)) for search, and then analyze with Claude.** When researching a topic, use search engines to gather current sources and specific information. Then paste that information into Claude and ask it to analyze, compare, or synthesize what you found. A search gives you the raw materials. Claude helps you understand what they mean and how to use them. This approach combines the strengths of both: current information from search with analysis and explanation from Claude.
- » **Draft with Claude, refine with specialized tools.** Claude excels at quickly turning your ideas into a first draft. Once you have that draft, move it into your word processor for detailed formatting, spell-checking with proper context, and collaboration with colleagues. Use presentation software to design slides after Claude helps you outline your structure and key points. The specialized tools handle the final polish and format, while Claude handles the heavy lifting of getting started and organizing your thinking.
- » **Let Claude explain what experts tell you.** After consulting a doctor, lawyer, or financial advisor, you might have questions about what they said or need help understanding the implications. Ask Claude to explain medical terms, break down legal concepts, or help you think through financial decisions. Claude can't replace professional advice, but it's excellent at helping you understand and apply what the experts told you. This approach works particularly well when you need to make informed decisions based on professional guidance.
- » **Use Claude to write better search queries.** If you're not finding what you need through a search, ask Claude to help you refine your search strategy. Describe what you're looking for and what you've tried. Claude can suggest alternative keywords, explain search techniques, and help you frame your question more effectively. Then use those improved searches to find what you need. This method creates a feedback loop where each tool makes the other more useful.

- » **Don't expect Claude to remember information from one conversation to another.** Each new discussion starts fresh. If you need Claude to remember context across sessions, either keep working in the same conversation or provide the context again. (Pro and Max users should see Chapter 5 for information about Claude's Memory features.)
- » **Don't use Claude for formal documentation or official records.** For legal documents, medical records, financial statements, or official correspondence that require compliance with specific regulatory requirements, work with the appropriate professionals and use established systems. Claude can help you understand these documents or draft initial versions but shouldn't create the official versions.

Still unsure which tool to use? Ask yourself whether you need current, real-time information. If yes, start with search engines or specialized real-time tools. Are you making a decision with serious legal, medical, or financial consequences? If yes, consult appropriate professionals. Do you need to understand, create, or think through something? If yes, Claude is likely a good fit.



REMEMBER

Often, you'll answer yes to more than one question. That's when combining tools makes sense. Search for current facts, consult experts for critical decisions, and then use Claude to help you understand and apply what you've learned. The goal isn't to choose one perfect tool. It's about combining the right tools for your situation.