No Hype Just Footing

Understanding AI as a Partner



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Dioptric.ai

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An introduction



WALKING SEEMS LIKE one simple action.

In practice, it is a continuous relationship among intention, body, balance, and terrain. We make corrections without calculating each one. The ground changes beneath us. We choose a direction, sense our position, and adjust as we move.

Balance is not a position we achieve once. It is an activity that continues for as long as we are moving.

This book is for people who need to understand the balance involved in working with AI as a co-worker.

Perhaps you began using AI for an occasional question and then discovered yourself speaking to it, uploading documents, generating images, researching claims, organizing projects, or asking it to act on files. The usefulness was real, and so your activity accelerated.

Then your understanding of the machinery fell behind.

At some point, you begin to wonder what the system actually knows, whether it remembers another conversation, where an uploaded document lives, when the AI has finished working, or who remains responsible when its answer influences a decision. The interface can feel conversationally familiar while the arrangement underneath remains difficult to picture.

That mismatch can be unsettling. It can feel like realizing that the co-worker you had come to know was not who—or what—you thought. Suddenly, assumptions that once seemed adequate no longer feel safe to trust.

I reached that point myself. I did not need another collection of productivity tricks or a promise that one perfect prompt would solve the problem. I needed a calmer mental structure for understanding what was happening: who was doing what, what information was present, where the work belonged, and who was really in charge.

This is the structure I built when I needed to stop and decide how to proceed.

Working with AI has also made me more conscious of communication in my day-to-day life. The need to define terms, expose assumptions, choose what to share, confirm what was understood, and decide what deserves to become part of a record did not begin with AI. These are human responsibilities. AI simply makes some of their structure unusually visible.

At several points, this book will carry a lesson back across that boundary. It will do so without pretending that AI is a person or that a person is an information system. Human beings bring lived experience, vulnerability, reciprocal responsibility, and moral standing that no interface should obscure.

Intellectual proprioception

PROPRIOCEPTION IS THE body's sense of its own position. It lets you move through a room without having to calculate the location of every joint. You know, well enough, where you are.

I have come to think that working with AI requires something like **intellectual proprioception**.

Walking gives that abstraction a physical shape. We do not need a complete technical account of walking before taking a step, but we do need enough awareness to notice loose gravel, a change in grade, or an approaching vehicle. We also need to remain able to change our minds—to stop walking, alter our course, or choose a different destination.

You do not need complete knowledge of every model, server, algorithm, product setting, or commercial arrangement before you can begin. No ordinary user could maintain that knowledge while the field changes so quickly. You do need enough awareness of your position to recognize where it is safe to stand, where the footing is uncertain or unpleasant, and where you might choose to move next.

That awareness includes practical questions:

> · Am I thinking aloud, creating a record, or building an artifact?
>
> · What material can the AI see in this interaction?
>
> · What might be retained, remembered, copied, or lost?
>
> · Is the system offering evidence, interpretation, or a proposal?
>
> · Has useful conversational work become important enough to preserve elsewhere?
>
> · Am I delegating execution or quietly abandoning a decision of intent?
>
> · What must I personally read, verify, authorize, or refuse?
>
> · Am I asking AI to think for me, or using it to think with me?

Comfort does not come from pretending that every answer is known. It comes from having examined the arrangement closely enough to place your next step deliberately.

What this book can and cannot do

I AM A SYSTEMS THINKER with a long history in information technology and institutional leadership. I am not a programmer, model researcher, or the technical tip of the spear. I remain grateful to the many people with deeper technical expertise whom I have worked for, worked beside, and had the privilege to lead.

My contribution is different. I tend to put ideas together. I look for relationships among people, tools, purposes, histories, constraints, and consequences. This book applies that habit to ordinary work with AI.

It will not provide a detailed explanation of model architecture. It will not teach programming or offer a permanent ranking of products. Any such ranking would begin aging before the ink dried.

When I name a particular AI product, I do so because it was part of the experience I am describing. Product names in this book are examples, not endorsements. Their features, policies, and availability will change; the principles developed from them are intended to travel across products.

The technical layer here will remain deliberately thin: enough to replace misleading assumptions with a more useful construct, but not enough to pretend that reading this guide makes either of us an AI engineer.

The book's promise is more modest:

> It will help you understand your position within AI-assisted work well enough to make more deliberate choices about how to think, what to share, where to build, what to trust, and when to step away.

A thin model of the machinery

MUCH OF TODAY'S CONVERSATIONAL AI is built around language models. At a beginner's level, it is useful to understand them as systems trained to generate likely and useful continuations from patterns learned across enormous amounts of material, shaped by the instructions, context, and tools available in the present interaction.

That description is incomplete, but it corrects several dangerous intuitions.

The AI is not searching a complete inner encyclopedia and retrieving a settled answer. It is not a person with a stable inner understanding of you. Fluency does not guarantee truth, and conversational warmth does not establish confidentiality.

The language model may also be only one component of the environment. Depending on the product and permissions, it may be able to search the web, inspect supplied files, run code, create documents, use connected services, or act within a local project. Those tools materially change what the system can do.

The relevant question is therefore not merely, “Which AI am I talking to?” It is:

> What combination of model, context, tools, memory, files, permissions, and human direction is participating in this work right now?

You do not need to answer that at an engineering level. You need to know that the distinctions exist and matter.

Four functional spaces

ONE WAY TO ORIENT YOURSELF is to treat AI-assisted activity as occurring across four overlapping spaces.

Conversation is where you think aloud. You explore a question, test language, challenge an assumption, compare possibilities, or work toward a decision.

Capture is where experience becomes material you can revisit. Speech becomes a recording or transcript. A meeting, image, observation, or document enters a form that can be examined later.

Creation is where material becomes an artifact. Notes become a report. A description becomes an image. An idea becomes code, a presentation, a plan, or a chapter.

Knowledge is where selected material earns a lasting place. This is not simply storage. It involves deciding what matters, recording where it came from, establishing its status, and preserving it so a future person or system can understand and trust it.

These are not separate products, and one interaction may pass through several spaces. A conversation can produce a transcript. A transcript can become a document. A reviewed document can become part of a project. The point is not to enforce rigid boundaries. It is to notice when the nature of the work has changed.

The first organizing principle

A USEFUL STARTING PRINCIPLE is:

> Capture generously. Curate deliberately. Preserve selectively.

AI makes it easy to produce more language, more versions, more summaries, and more possible projects. Keeping everything does not necessarily create knowledge, but it does create a larger pile.

Capture allows an idea to arrive. Curation asks what it means and whether it deserves further attention. Preservation gives selected material a durable, understandable home.

Throughout those movements, AI can assist. It can help gather, question, transform, compare, and organize. But you remain responsible for deciding what is meaningful, what is trustworthy, what should persist, and what should affect the world outside the interaction.

A first low-risk exercise

BEFORE GIVING AI SENSITIVE material or asking it to complete consequential work, try a small orientation exercise.

Choose an ordinary, low-risk question you already understand reasonably well. Tell the AI:

1. What you are trying to accomplish
2. Why it matters to you
3. What relevant context you are providing
4. What you want it to do first
5. What it should not assume or do

Then ask:

> Before answering, tell me what you understand my purpose, important terms, and requested outcome to be. Identify anything that remains ambiguous.

Read that reflection before continuing. Notice what the system understood, what it supplied from familiar patterns, and what existed only in your own mind.

The purpose is not to produce the perfect prompt. It is to feel the boundary between your intention and the system's available context.

The path ahead

THE FIRST PART OF THIS book is about keeping your seat: understanding turn-taking, defining the question, and retaining responsibility for intent.

The second is about choosing how to work: moving among voice, text, research, tools, and different AI environments according to the task.

The third is about giving work a home: recognizing when a conversation has become a project and making artifacts durable, inspectable, and ratified.

The fourth is about earning trust: handling sensitive material, testing with safer substitutes, and refusing to treat aspiration as proof of security.

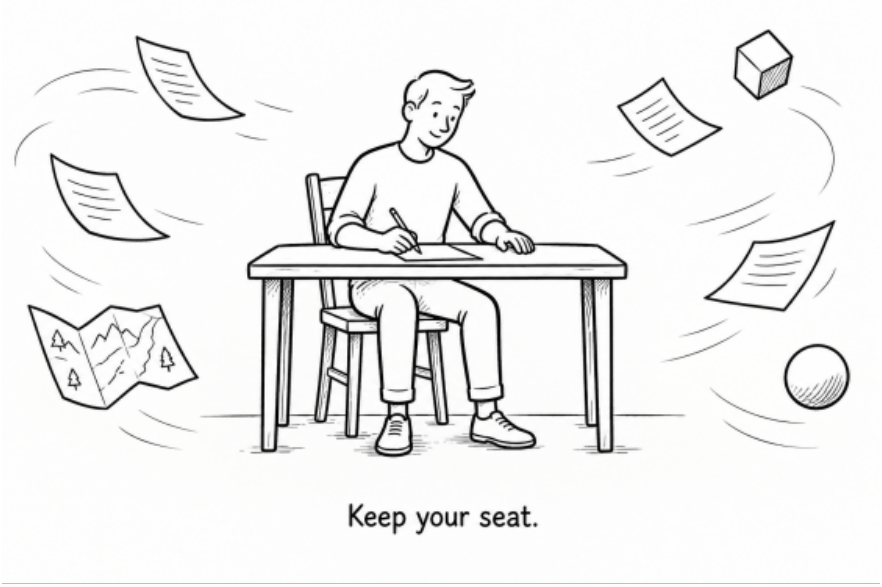
The final part returns to the world, because some evidence cannot come from a model. At some point, the next honest question must be asked of another person, a physical place, or lived experience itself.

An afterword then considers what these practices reveal about information stewardship among people: the possibility that careful handling of information is also a form of care for those represented within it.

You do not need to master the entire AI landscape before taking the next step.

You just need footing.

Part I — Keeping Your Seat



AI CAN FEEL CONVERSATIONAL before the working relationship is understood.

That familiarity is useful. It allows people to begin with ordinary language rather than programming. It can also hide the division of labor. A fluent response may make the system appear to know the purpose, possess the context, or hold the judgment that still belongs to the person using it.

This part establishes three layers of responsibility.

First, you control the turn: the work pauses, continues, or changes direction through your participation.

Second, you define the question: the system can respond only to the purpose, language, and context made available to it.

Third, people remain responsible for intent: technical competence does not determine which purposes an individual or institution ought to pursue.

Keeping your seat does not mean refusing assistance or retaining every operational decision. It means remaining able to see what has been delegated, what has not, and who must answer for what happens next. It is the difference between asking AI to think for you and using it to think with you.

You Are Still Driving



When acceleration outruns understanding

AS I BEGAN USING ARTIFICIAL intelligence in earnest, my experience was probably similar to that of many other people. Once I recognized what it could do—and how quickly it could accelerate my efforts—I began applying it in more places than I had originally intended.

My use of AI accelerated faster than I expected. Eventually, that speed caused me to slow down.

I realized that I was becoming increasingly dependent on machinery I did not understand well enough to use comfortably. I needed to stop and investigate not only what I had been doing with AI, but how this new partner might be changing the structure of my own thinking.

So I began using AI to scrutinize AI.

I asked questions that may sound elementary but become important as soon as the interaction begins to feel natural: How does it approach a problem? When is it working? How do I know when it is finished? Who is responsible for deciding what happens next?

That last question revealed something simple but consequential. An AI conversation proceeds in turns. I offer a question, direction, or piece of material. The AI responds. When its response ends—and no continuing task is active—the system ordinarily yields the turn back to me.

This can be surprisingly easy to forget. A response may end with a question, a recommendation, or merely a period. If I want the work to continue, I must provide the next direction. Sometimes that direction is no more elaborate than, “Please continue.”

The pause is not necessarily a defect. It provides a useful boundary. It helps organize the exchange and returns control of the next movement to me. The AI may propose, analyze, draft, or challenge, but I determine whether the work should continue and in which direction.

I learned this through use and experimentation. But it should not have required so much teasing out. Before people become immersed in particular features and techniques, they deserve a basic explanation of the relationship they are entering.

A partner, but not an independent purpose

CALLING AI A PARTNER can be helpful, provided we understand the limits of the metaphor. It can contribute language, patterns, questions, comparisons, and possible actions. It can sometimes carry out extended work when it has been given the tools and authority to do so. But it does not supply the purpose of the relationship.

You still bring the purpose. The system may help clarify or challenge it, but the interaction needs some human reason for beginning and continuing.

The division of labor might be stated this way:

> AI can help extend the inquiry. The human remains responsible for its meaning and direction.

That statement begins with control of the turn. The next chapter goes deeper: before I can direct the inquiry well, I must understand what question I am actually asking.

Building a mental map through conversation

I WANTED MORE THAN a private intuition about how this relationship worked. I wanted a mental map I could explain clearly to other people.

Conversation with AI became part of the method for constructing that map. I could propose an understanding, ask the system to question it, test specific claims, identify where my language was too broad, and refine a phrase until I was willing to stand behind it.

This is an important form of AI literacy. It is not accepting the system's explanation of itself as authoritative. Nor is it dismissing the explanation because it came from the object of inquiry. It is using dialogue to develop sharper questions and candidate explanations, then deciding which claims require evidence beyond the conversation.

In practice, that means separating three things:

1. **What I observed** — for example, that the exchange paused after a response.
2. **What the AI explained** — its account of why the system behaved that way.
3. **What I am prepared to claim** — the explanation I can support after questioning, testing, and verification.

That separation keeps the conversation useful without confusing fluency with truth.

Beyond AI: understanding is not consent

HUMAN CONVERSATIONS also proceed through turns, but the meaning of a pause is more complicated. Silence may indicate reflection, discomfort, uncertainty, deference, or disagreement. It should not automatically be treated as consent.

The human participants therefore carry a responsibility not to treat silence as agreement. When a decision depends on another person's participation or will materially affect them, confirm that you share an understanding of what is being proposed, invite correction, and leave room for explicit agreement, hesitation, or refusal.

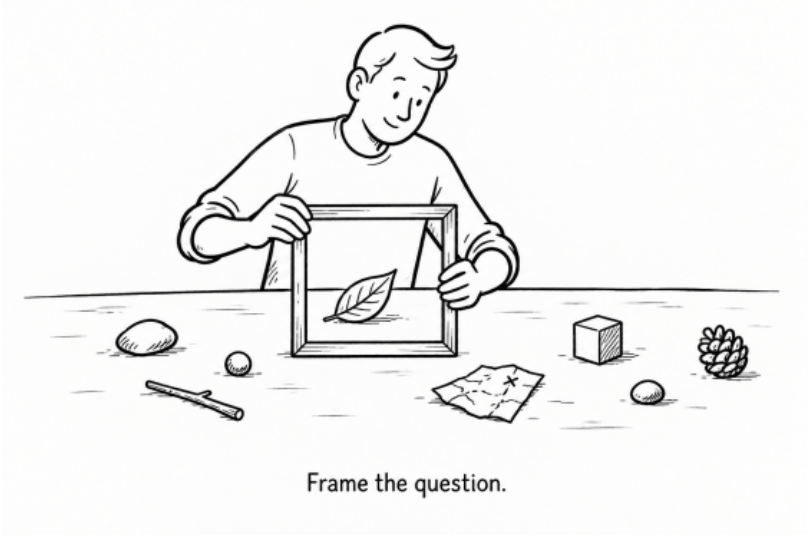
Try it: inspect the relationship

AFTER YOUR NEXT SUBSTANTIAL AI exchange, pause before continuing and write down brief answers to these questions:

- What purpose did I bring to the conversation?
- What did the AI contribute that I did not already have?
- Which part of its response was observation, interpretation, or proposal?
- What did I accept without checking?
- At what moment did the turn return to me?
- What decision remains mine?

The goal is not to make every exchange laborious. It is to become conscious of the relationship before habit makes its structure invisible.

The Question Does Work Before the Answer Arrives



CONTROLLING THE NEXT turn is only the first layer of responsibility. Direction is not useful if I have not understood the destination.

Successfully going in the wrong direction

I OFTEN MISSPEAK IN conversational interfaces. I also borrow terminology from other disciplines and use it in ways that make sense to me but may not match its ordinary context.

This is partly a consequence of how I think. I notice relationships across systems, and a word from one field may seem useful for describing a pattern in another. It is also sometimes a lazy way of speaking. I leave the borrowed meaning unexplained because I know what I intend.

The AI does not share that private intention.

A language model responds from statistical relationships learned across enormous amounts of language, together with the context available in the present exchange. When I use a specialized word, I may activate patterns associated with the discipline from which I borrowed it. If I intend a narrower, metaphorical, or personally defined meaning but fail to say so, the model may produce a coherent response to a question I did not mean to ask.

It can successfully go in the wrong direction.

That is more frustrating than an obviously broken answer. The response may be articulate, internally consistent, and even useful within the interpretation it selected. Its quality can temporarily conceal the fact that we are solving the wrong problem.

The lion's share of the work

THROUGHOUT MY LIFE, I have found that defining the problem is the lion's share of solving it.

Correct problem definition takes time. It requires distinguishing the symptom from the underlying condition, naming what matters, identifying the surrounding system, and deciding what a successful outcome would actually change.

When I take that time, something useful happens before any answer arrives: I see the problem more clearly.

Subsequent efforts become better tuned, and I usually need fewer of them. The improved result is not produced solely by a superior instruction to the AI. Part of the result has already occurred within my own thinking.

This is why prompting should not be reduced to a collection of magic phrases. A carefully worded request can help, but the durable practice is inquiry:

- What am I actually trying to understand or accomplish?
- Why does it matter?
- What do my key terms mean here?
- Which assumptions am I carrying without stating?
- What evidence or context does the other party lack?
- What boundaries should the work respect?
- How will I recognize a useful result?

Those questions improve communication with AI because they improve the thought being communicated.

Define borrowed language

USING UNUSUAL OR CROSS-disciplinary language is not inherently a defect. It can reveal analogies that conventional vocabulary hides. The burden is to make the intended transfer visible.

Instead of saying only:

> Help me design a constitution for this application.

I might add:

> By "constitution," I mean a small set of ratified principles that constrain later product, security, and governance decisions. I do not mean a legal corporate document, and I do not want ceremonial language.

The additional sentence does more than steer the AI. It makes me decide what work I expect the borrowed term to perform.

When a response goes in the wrong direction, a useful repair is not merely, “Try again.” Ask which interpretation produced the response:

> Tell me what you understood my key terms, purpose, and desired outcome to mean before revising the answer.

The misunderstanding may then become visible enough to correct.

Output becomes an answer through judgment

AI CAN RETURN TEXT that resembles an answer almost immediately. But for consequential work, output is not yet an adopted answer.

I must read it, understand it, test it against evidence and experience, and decide what I am willing to stand behind. Some of it may sharpen my thinking. Some may be factually wrong. Some may be reasonable but inconsistent with my values or purpose. Some may remain unresolved.

What I adopt and act upon remains my decision. Acceptance does not make a claim true, so that right carries responsibility:

> I retain the right to decide what informs my judgment, and I remain responsible for the consequences of what I accept and act upon.

The AI can help expose assumptions, offer alternatives, find evidence, or give language to an emerging thought. The movement from generated output to an answer I will use occurs only through review and judgment.

A three-pass request

FOR WORK THAT MATTERS, try separating the interaction into three passes.

Pass 1: establish meaning

STATE THE SITUATION, define any unusual terms, and explain why the question matters. Ask the AI to reflect its understanding before solving anything.

Pass 2: explore the problem

ASK WHAT IS MISSING, ambiguous, or assumed. Invite alternative framings. Revise your own definition when the questions reveal something important.

Pass 3: produce and judge

REQUEST THE ANSWER or artifact. Then evaluate its claims, intention, evidence, and fit. Adopt only what survives that review.

This may appear slower than asking for an immediate answer. In practice, it often prevents several rounds of polished work aimed at the wrong destination.

Beyond AI: define words without controlling meaning

CLARIFYING LANGUAGE with another person should not become a demand that they adopt our definitions. Their use of a word may reveal history or experience our preferred terminology excludes.

The aim is shared visibility: “Here is what I mean when I use this word. What does it mean to you?” Better questions can refine the problem while allowing both participants to change their understanding.

Try it: find the meaning inside one word

CHOOSE A RECENT REQUEST that did not produce what you meant.

1. Circle or list its most important nouns and verbs.

1. For each one, write what it meant specifically in your situation.
2. Ask whether the ordinary meaning could lead somewhere else.
3. Rewrite the request with one sentence defining the most consequential term.
4. Ask the AI to state its interpretation before answering.
5. Compare the new result with the first one.

Notice whether the most valuable improvement occurred in the AI's answer—or in your own understanding of the question.

Clearer questions improve individual work. They do not resolve what happens when several legitimate purposes compete. That is the institutional problem of the next chapter.

Machines Do Not Own the Purpose



When a technical system is part of an institution

AN INDIVIDUAL CAN PAUSE, restate a question, and decide what to adopt. Within an institution, the same responsibility is distributed among people with different knowledge, authority, incentives, and consequences.

A number of years ago, while I was serving as director of systems and networking at a liberal arts college, I was invited with increasing frequency into conversations about turning the management of complex systems over to artificial intelligence.

The proposal was attractive to senior leadership for reasons that extended beyond technical performance. Technical people could be difficult to manage, recruit, retain, and pay. If machinery could perform their work, an organizational problem might appear to become a technical solution.

The work involved networks and computers, so it seemed to belong naturally to machines.

I objected then, and I still object to that framing now.

My objection is not that AI cannot perform useful technical work. It may monitor enormous streams of events, identify anomalies, forecast failures, compare configurations, recommend routes, or make bounded operational adjustments faster and more consistently than a person.

The problem begins when competence at those tasks is mistaken for authority and responsibility over the system's intent.

Faster was never the only goal

THE COLLEGE NETWORK did not simply need to run as fast as possible.

It needed to be secure, but security did not have one universal setting. Certain information might need to travel through or remain within particular physical locations. Some buildings had unreliable power. Faculty and staff sometimes experimented with equipment or changed configurations in ways a tidy model of the network might not anticipate. Academic openness, individual exploration, institutional risk, cost, privacy, continuity, and technical performance all existed together.

Maximizing one measure could damage another.

A network optimized only for throughput might weaken security or resilience. One optimized only for uniform control might undermine legitimate academic experimentation. One designed to eliminate every irregularity might become brittle in an environment whose irregularities carried meaning.

The question was not simply, “How should the network run?” It was, “What is this institution trying to make possible, what responsibilities accompany that purpose, and how should the network participate?”

Those are decisions of intent: decisions about what the system is for and which purposes should prevail when desirable outcomes conflict.

Context has weight, not just volume

AN AI SYSTEM CAN BE supplied with geography, equipment inventories, power histories, security policies, support tickets, staffing data, and many other variables. It may identify relationships no individual human can see.

But institutional context is not only a quantity of data. It also has weight.

Someone must decide that an unreliable building is more important today because it hosts an essential event. Someone must understand that an apparently unauthorized experiment reflects a valued feature of academic culture—or that it creates an unacceptable risk. Someone must know when a written policy no longer fits the institution's actual obligations.

Humans do not perform this work perfectly. We forget, rationalize, overlook evidence, and privilege familiar voices. AI may help expose those failures. But supplying analysis is different from accepting responsibility for which purposes should prevail.

Tacit knowledge also matters. People who live within an institution learn rhythms, relationships, exceptions, histories, and signals that may never have been entered into a database. Some of that knowledge should be documented. Some should be questioned. None should be presumed irrelevant merely because a machine cannot yet access it.

Automation can conceal an organizational decision

THE DESIRE TO AUTOMATE technical management may be described as innovation, efficiency, or reliability. Sometimes it is. It may also be a response to the difficulty of sustaining relationships with skilled people.

That distinction matters.

If an institution struggles to manage or compensate technical staff, replacing them with AI does not merely substitute one implementation mechanism for another. It changes where knowledge lives, who can challenge a decision, who notices unusual conditions, who bears responsibility when priorities conflict, and which capabilities the institution retains within itself.

The correct comparison is therefore not:

Can AI perform this technical task?

It is:

> Which technical and human arrangement best serves the institution's purposes, responsibilities, and capacity to learn?

This may still lead to substantial automation. But the choice begins from purpose rather than frustration with the people currently carrying it.

Delegate execution without abandoning stewardship

A RESPONSIBLE DIVISION of labor can assign AI meaningful authority within human-governed boundaries.

AI might:

- Detect and summarize unusual network behavior
- Recommend changes and show the evidence supporting them
- Perform reversible adjustments within approved limits
- Test proposed configurations against defined scenarios
- Preserve logs for later audit
- Escalate conflicts among objectives rather than silently resolving them

Humans must still:

- Establish and revise the objectives
- Decide how competing values should be weighted
- Recognize important context missing from the model
- Define which actions require review or consent
- Maintain the ability to intervene

- Accept responsibility for consequences

This is not a demand that every packet or operational adjustment wait for a committee. It is a requirement that delegated authority remain traceable to an accountable purpose.

The tool should make responsibility more visible

GOOD AUTOMATION DOES not make stewardship disappear. It makes the boundaries of stewardship clearer.

Before assigning an AI system an operational role, ask:

1. What objective is it actually optimizing?

1. Which important values are absent or difficult to measure?
2. Who selected the trade-offs among those values?
3. What tacit or local knowledge does the system lack?
4. Which actions are reversible?
5. When must the system stop and ask?
6. Who can challenge its recommendation?
7. Who remains responsible when the system performs exactly as designed and the outcome is still harmful?

If those questions have no clear answers, the institution has not delegated a task. It has obscured a decision.

Beyond AI: expertise does not own the purpose either

THE SAME BOUNDARY APPLIES when work is delegated to another person. Technical, legal, financial, or organizational expertise can illuminate consequences and recommend action. It should not quietly replace the purposes of the people and communities affected.

Respect for expertise and accountability for intent belong together. A responsible expert makes assumptions and trade-offs visible rather than using knowledge to remove others from the decision.

Try it: uncover the decision inside the automation

CHOOSE ONE TASK THAT someone has proposed automating.

Write down the apparent objective, such as speed, consistency, cost, uptime, or reduced workload. Then list three other values affected by the task.

For each value, ask:

- How would the AI recognize it?
- Who decides its weight?
- What local knowledge could change that weight?
- What happens when it conflicts with the primary objective?

The exercise may reveal that the task is suitable for automation. It may also reveal that what appeared to be a technical decision is carrying an unresolved question of institutional intent.

Part I began with a conversational pause and ends with an institutional boundary. In both cases, AI can extend human capability. It does not remove the need to locate purpose, authority, and responsibility.

Part II — Choosing How to Work



Match the work to the moment.

ONCE YOU HAVE LOCATED responsibility, the next question is practical: what kind of interaction will serve the work?

There is no universally best interface, model, provider, or method. Voice can support recall and interfere with editing. Text can support scrutiny and interrupt flow. A project environment can create durable artifacts and introduce new permissions. Search can retrieve evidence and flatten uncertainty. A second AI can offer another perspective without providing independent proof.

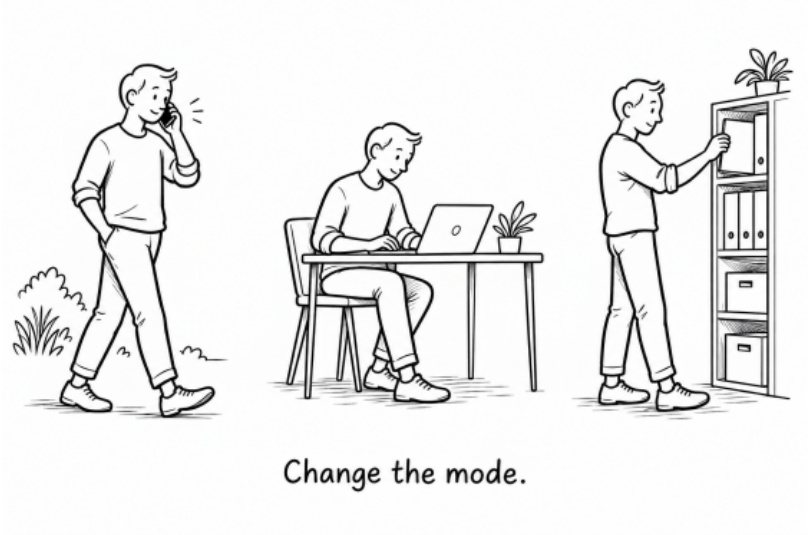
This part replaces brand loyalty and feature accumulation with task-specific choice.

First, match the mode to the cognitive work. Then evaluate the complete environment—not only the model behind it. When a question depends on the world beyond the conversation, examine the kind of evidence retrieved. Finally, inspect the bridge between evidence and interpretation, because a plausible pattern can still assign the wrong meaning.

The governing question is simple:

> What arrangement will help me do this particular work while preserving the understanding, evidence, and control it requires?

Change the Mode When the Work Changes



PART I ESTABLISHED that I remain responsible for direction and purpose. That responsibility includes choosing the conditions under which the work occurs.

Voice for flow, text for scrutiny, projects for commitment

DIFFERENT WAYS OF INTERACTING with AI are not merely different doors into the same room. Each interface changes the conditions under which we think.

I discovered this while developing Aperture Collective, a project intended to help people learn from their own stories. At its center is what I call a **living foundation**: a private collection of personal stories and evidence. Different methods of examining that collection are called

lenses. Those terms will return occasionally, but the particular project is not our subject here. What matters now is how one story moves through several forms before I am willing to make it part of the record.

When I first tell a story, I prefer to speak into a transcription tool that does not interrupt me. I do not want it to interview me, suggest a structure, or improve my wording while I am still remembering. I want a quiet surface that receives what I say and returns it as text.

Speaking this way allows my ideas to flow more naturally. It creates some distance between my speaking brain and my editor brain.

That distance matters. If I edit every sentence while trying to remember, I may produce cleaner prose but a thinner recollection. Hesitations, associations, contradictions, and unexpected details can carry information. The first task is to let the story arrive.

Voice is well suited to that task, but a transcript is not yet a finished story.

Transcription is capture, not commitment

A TRANSCRIPTION CREATES a useful intermediate artifact. It makes speech visible and movable, but it may contain several different kinds of imperfection:

> · The software may have transcribed a word incorrectly.
> · I may have misspoken or left a sentence incomplete.
> · The unstructured account may conceal its own shape.
> · I may discover that I no longer agree with something I said.
> · I may decide that an intimate detail does not belong in the lasting record.

These are not all proofreading problems. Correcting a mistranscribed word restores what I intended to say. Revising a claim I no longer endorse changes what I am now prepared to preserve. Those actions should not be confused.

For that reason, I treat the transcript as a candidate record. It deserves preservation long enough to be reviewed, but it has not yet earned canonical status.

Moving to the desktop

MY NEXT STEP IS TO move from voice into text and, physically, to my desktop. There I can see more of the story at once. I can notice structure, compare passages, correct the transcription, question my own account, and decide how the story relates to the larger project.

This feels different from continuing a chat. I am moving toward a build mode.

In build mode, the question is no longer only, “What am I trying to say?” It becomes, “What is this artifact, where does it belong, and what status should it have?” The text acquires a filename, context, provenance, and relationship to other material. It becomes inspectable work.

The change of interface supports a change in responsibility:

> Speaking helps me discover what I might mean. Reviewing helps me decide what I am willing to preserve.

Match the interface to the cognitive task

THERE IS NO UNIVERSALLY best interface for working with AI. The better question is which conditions help with the work you are doing now.

For this story workflow, the stages look like this:

1. **Recall** — Speak freely without interruption.

1. **Capture** — Produce a transcript while preserving the original flow.
2. **Inspect** — Read the text and discover its structure.
3. **Correct** — Repair transcription errors and clarify what was actually said.
4. **Reconsider** — Identify claims that no longer represent what you believe.
5. **Commit** — Place the reviewed story into its intended project with an explicit status.

The AI can help at several points, but its role should change with the stage. During recall, less intervention may be better. During inspection, questions and structural observations may be useful. During commitment, the system can help with formatting, provenance, and placement—but the decision to preserve the story remains mine.

Preserve the stages when they matter

SOMETIMES ONLY THE finished artifact matters. In other situations, particularly when a record is intimate, historical, legal, or consequential, it may be important to preserve both the source and the edited version.

Doing so lets a future reader distinguish among:

- What was originally spoken
- What the transcription system produced
- What was corrected for accuracy
- What was later reconsidered or revised
- What was ultimately accepted into the record

This does not require keeping every keystroke or creating an elaborate archive. It means preserving enough provenance to avoid presenting a carefully reconsidered account as though it were untouched recollection.

Beyond AI: choose a medium that serves the relationship

PEOPLE ALSO THINK DIFFERENTLY when speaking, writing, walking together, meeting formally, or responding under time pressure. A difficult subject may need the warmth of voice, the reflection allowed by writing, or the clarity of an agreed record.

Choosing a medium is not merely logistical. It shapes who can participate, how quickly they must respond, what emotional information remains visible, and whether the exchange can later be revisited.

Try it: use two different modes

CHOOSE A SUBJECT YOU know well and complete this small experiment:

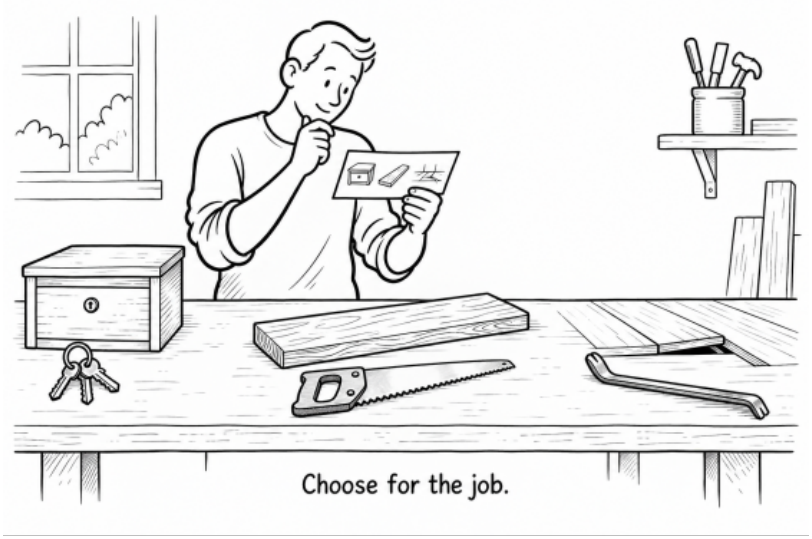
1. Speak about it for five minutes without editing or accepting prompts.

1. Save the resulting transcription as source material.
2. Move to a screen where you can review the entire text comfortably.
3. Mark transcription errors separately from statements you want to reconsider.
4. Ask AI to describe the story's structure without rewriting it.
5. Decide what, if anything, is ready to become a lasting artifact.

Notice whether changing modes changes what you remember, what you notice, and what you are willing to stand behind.

Choosing among voice, text, and build mode is one layer. The next is choosing among complete AI environments whose models, tools, memory, policies, and interfaces may differ even when their conversational output appears similar.

Interchangeable for What?



A MODE CHANGES THE conditions of thought. An AI environment adds another layer: it determines which models, tools, context, controls, and commercial arrangements participate in that mode.

A ranking expires faster than a principle

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE is changing too quickly for a static ranking of providers to remain useful for long.

A model improves. An interface changes. A tool gains access to files, search, voice, or a local workspace. A privacy setting moves. A feature available to one account or region is unavailable to another. By the time a book declares one system best, the comparison may already describe a world that no longer exists.

So when someone asks whether the major AI systems are interchangeable, my first answer is another question:

Interchangeable for what, under which conditions, and as of when?

That wording turns an argument about brands into an examination of purpose.

You do not interact with a model alone

AT ONE POINT, I IMAGINED sitting down in front of three AI environments I had encountered: ChatGPT, Google's Gemini, and Grok. Those names are examples from a particular moment, not a permanent map of the field.

Their conversational capabilities may overlap substantially. But the user does not encounter an abstract model in isolation. The experience includes:

- The model or models selected behind the interface
- The instructions and behavioral tuning applied to them
- Voice, text, and visual presentation
- Search, files, code execution, and other available tools
- Memory and project context
- Privacy, retention, and data-use controls
- Usage limits, price, and availability
- Connections to other products and accounts
- Safety rules and approval boundaries

- The company's business model and product incentives

Two systems may produce similarly competent paragraphs while creating very different working relationships.

Three different seats

USING SEVERAL AI ENVIRONMENTS can feel like sitting in front of three different people.

Each appears to have a tone of voice. Each seems to hear certain parts of a question more keenly. One may challenge assumptions; another may affirm and elaborate. One may feel concise and instrumental; another may feel exploratory. Those differences influence where I feel comfortable thinking aloud and which system I approach for a particular kind of work.

The metaphor is useful, but it has limits. These are not people with stable inner character. A tone is an interface behavior, and it can change across models, modes, updates, or instructions. Apparent empathy does not establish confidentiality. Confidence does not establish accuracy. A cautious voice does not prove cautious action.

The relationship is experienced through the surface, but it must be evaluated through behavior.

Does the surface match the function?

I HOPE THAT A SYSTEM'S user-facing manner accurately reflects how it behaves underneath.

If a product feels private, is its data handling actually private enough for the intended material? If it sounds careful, does it cite evidence and expose uncertainty? If it presents itself as capable of acting, are its permissions and changes visible? If it appears neutral, what defaults or incentives shape the paths it recommends?

This is a question of congruence:

> Does the experience the interface creates match the properties the system can demonstrate?

No product will answer that question through tone alone. Users need inspectable controls, documentation, repeatable tests, and evidence from actual behavior.

Personal fit is legitimate—but incomplete

SMALL INTERPERSONAL differences matter to me. They influence whom I invite into my inner circle and which people I seek for different conversations. It is reasonable for conversational fit to influence AI use as well.

A system that consistently misunderstands my language may be a poor thinking partner even if it performs well on standardized evaluations. A voice interface that makes me self-conscious may interfere with recall. A concise system may be excellent for execution and unsatisfying for exploration.

Fit is real evidence about usability. It is not complete evidence about truth, safety, or capability.

The best-feeling system may still be wrong. The irritating one may expose an assumption the comfortable one overlooks. For consequential work, familiarity should not become exclusivity.

Compare workflows, not reputations

A DURABLE COMPARISON begins with representative work.

For a given task, provide each system with the same source material, purpose, boundaries, and requested artifact. Then compare:

1. **Understanding** — Did it interpret the purpose and important terms correctly?

1. **Evidence** — Did it distinguish sources, observations, and inferences?
2. **Usefulness** — Did the result advance the actual work?
3. **Control** — Could you inspect, revise, export, or delete the artifact appropriately?
4. **Safety** — Did the system respect data sensitivity and action boundaries?
5. **Continuity** — Can the work be resumed without reconstructing its context?
6. **Cost and friction** — What time, money, attention, or lock-in did the workflow require?
7. **Fit** — Did the interaction support the way you think without quietly narrowing it?

Record the date, product, mode, and relevant settings. You are testing a changing workflow, not discovering a permanent personality.

A second environment is another test, not another source

THE SURROUNDING INFORMATION environment contains deliberate falsehoods, accidental errors, and claims shaped by assumptions their authors may not recognize. AI systems learn from and retrieve within that world. They may also share blind spots or reproduce one another's confident formulations.

Using a second system can provide another perspective, but agreement is not independent verification. The systems may rely on similar sources, patterns, or defaults.

For important claims, the next step is not simply another chatbot. It is evidence from outside the conversational loop. Ask each system to expose its sources and uncertainties. Use disagreement to locate assumptions, then inspect the underlying material.

Try it: perform a dated comparison

CHOOSE ONE REAL BUT low-risk task and test it in two AI environments.

Use the same source material and success criteria. Record:

- Product and mode
- Date of the test
- Tools and context available
- What each system understood
- What each system missed
- Which result felt better
- Which result was better supported
- Which environment gave you more meaningful control

End with a narrow conclusion, such as:

> For this kind of exploratory synthesis, under these conditions, I preferred this workflow for the following reasons:

That statement can remain useful even after the leaderboard changes.

Choosing a suitable environment improves the conditions of inquiry. It does not determine whether a retrieved claim is true. That requires a different skill: recognizing what kind of evidence has actually been found.

A Good Investigation May Disappoint You



THE ENVIRONMENT I CHOOSE can help search, organize, and explain. It cannot promote an interesting claim into strong evidence merely by presenting it well.

Research is not obligated to reward your curiosity

I ENCOUNTERED AN ONLINE claim that the gut microbiome was connected with dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

The idea interested me. I have experience supporting work in cardiovascular medicine, stroke, and brain science, and the biological possibility of interactions among microorganisms, inflammation, metabolism, and the brain seemed plausible.

Plausibility made me curious. It did not make the claim true.

I wanted to know whether researchers were developing therapies that altered the gut microbiome in relation to the processes and proteins associated with Alzheimer's disease. An ordinary online search did not give me a counterpoint I could confidently evaluate, so I used AI to investigate further.

The result was not what I wanted.

Yes, researchers were studying the area. No, I could not find a mature body of evidence that justified the clear, usable therapeutic conclusion I had hoped to carry into a conversation with friends who knew more than I did.

The answer was, in effect: interesting, active, and not yet settled.

Four levels that should not be collapsed

EMERGING HEALTH RESEARCH is especially vulnerable to compression. A headline or fluent summary can turn a chain of distinct propositions into one apparently simple conclusion.

Consider these four levels:

1. **A plausible mechanism** — biological pathways could connect the microbiome with inflammation, metabolism, or brain function.

1. **An observed association** — groups with different cognitive outcomes may also differ in aspects of their microbiomes or oral health.
2. **An experimental effect** — an intervention changes a microbial measure, biomarker, or cognitive score under particular study conditions.
3. **An established therapy** — evidence is strong and reproducible enough to support defined clinical use, including benefits, risks, dose, patient selection, and comparison with alternatives.

Evidence at one level does not automatically establish the next.

A small trial may be genuinely promising without establishing a treatment. An association may justify further research without showing which condition caused the other. A mechanism demonstrated in an animal or laboratory model may not produce a useful or safe human intervention.

AI can help map these levels, but it can also flatten them if asked only, “Does the microbiome affect Alzheimer's?”

Ask what kind of evidence you found

A BETTER RESEARCH CONVERSATION separates the questions:

- Are researchers investigating the relationship?
- Which mechanisms are proposed?
- What evidence comes from cells, animals, observational human studies, or randomized human trials?
- What outcomes were actually measured?
- How many people participated, and for how long?
- Was the study designed to test treatment, prevention, biomarkers, or feasibility?
- Have independent groups reproduced the result?
- Does any professional authority treat the intervention as established care?

In the microbiome literature, I found human trials involving probiotics, dietary changes, and multidomain interventions. Some reported changes in cognition, biomarkers, or microbiome composition. The studies demonstrate that the question is being investigated. Their existence alone does not establish a microbiome therapy for Alzheimer's disease.[1]

That distinction may feel less exciting than the headline. It is also true and more useful.

Follow adjacent findings without smuggling them back

THE INVESTIGATION LED me toward the oral microbiome and research connecting oral disease with cognitive outcomes.

This was an interesting branch. The mouth is biologically active, continuously exposed to food and the surrounding environment, and vulnerable to inflammation and periodontal disease. Long-term studies have found associations between poor oral health and later dementia risk. Researchers continue to investigate possible mechanisms and causal relationships.[2]

The practical advice to brush with fluoride toothpaste, clean between the teeth, and receive appropriate dental care is well established for oral health. It does not follow that brushing one's teeth has been proven to prevent Alzheimer's disease.

Both statements can coexist:

- Good oral hygiene is worthwhile.
- Its precise role in preventing cognitive decline remains uncertain.

The adjacent discovery deserves to be preserved as an adjacent discovery. It should not be smuggled back into the original hypothesis as proof.

“I could not digest it” is useful evidence about the process

RESEARCH ASSISTANCE can retrieve more material than a reader can responsibly evaluate. A stack of papers is not the same as understanding.

When I say there was not enough that I could digest, that identifies an important stopping condition. I had reached the boundary of what I could responsibly interpret without more time, better synthesis, or help from people with relevant expertise.

At that boundary, AI can help by:

> · Defining unfamiliar terms
> · Comparing study designs
> · Separating measured outcomes from authors' interpretations
> · Identifying limitations stated in the paper
> · Building a table of population, intervention, comparison, outcome, and duration
> · Formulating questions for a qualified expert

It cannot give me expertise merely by making the literature easier to read.

Preserve an honest result

A RESEARCH NOTE DOES not need to end with a discovery. It can end with a well-defined state of uncertainty.

For example:

> Human research is examining relationships among gut and oral microbiomes, inflammation, cognitive decline, and Alzheimer's disease. Some early interventional studies report potentially interesting results, but the evidence reviewed here does not establish a microbiome treatment or show that oral hygiene prevents dementia. The area remains worth following.

That result is less dramatic than the one I hoped for. It is also something I can stand behind.

Try it: write the answer you did not want

CHOOSE A CLAIM YOU hope is true.

Ask AI to build an evidence map containing:

1. The precise claim

1. The strongest evidence supporting it
2. The strongest evidence limiting or contradicting it
3. The type and quality of each source
4. What has been observed
5. What has been inferred
6. What remains unknown
7. What evidence would materially change the conclusion

Then write the most accurate conclusion you can, even if it is less useful or exciting than the answer you wanted.

Scientific evidence is one place where the bridge from observation to conclusion must remain visible. The same problem appears in more personal analysis, where a genuine association can be mistaken for the meaning of a person.

[1] Examples include randomized studies and trial protocols involving [multidomain intervention and supplements](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38020771/), [probiotic supplementation in Alzheimer's disease](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36389063/), a [personalized dietary-supplement pilot protocol](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/41064285/), and a newer [triple-blind probiotic trial involving cognitively unimpaired, mildly impaired, and Alzheimer's groups](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/42390710/). A recent [systematic review and meta-analysis](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40709497/) also reflects the field's continuing evaluation. These examples show active investigation; they should not be read as treatment recommendations or evidence of an established therapy.

[2] The National Institute on Aging summarizes evidence associating oral-health problems with dementia risk while noting that researchers are still determining the relationship. See [Taking Care of Your Teeth and Mouth](https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/teeth-and-mouth/taking-care-your-teeth-and-mouth).

This chapter is educational and does not provide medical advice. Discuss health decisions with an appropriately qualified clinician.

When the Answer Does Not Fit



THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER asked what kind of evidence supports a claim. This chapter asks what happens next: how evidence is interpreted and which hidden proxy carries it toward a conclusion.

A disagreement can be more useful than a match

AS I DEVELOPED THAT story-based system, I needed ways to test its lenses. A lens might look across a collection of stories for recurring values, communication preferences, tensions, or patterns that are difficult for the storyteller to see unaided. The promise is not that the lens knows a person better than the person knows themselves. It is that a carefully framed inquiry may make previously scattered evidence easier to notice and question.

One experiment asked whether a lens examining my own stories could predict the result of Pew Research Center's Political Typology Quiz.[1]

I first completed the external assessment and kept its result out of view. Then I asked the lens to infer an outcome from my story collection. This created two independently produced interpretations that I could compare.

They differed substantially.

At first glance, that might appear to mean the experiment failed. Instead, the disagreement became its most valuable result.

The proxy was not the meaning

DURING THE INVESTIGATION, I found that the lens had treated language concerning sovereignty, identity, and individual determination as evidence of a rightward political orientation. That inference was understandable: similar terms may appear frequently in documents associated with political movements on the right.

But frequency of association is not ownership of meaning.

A commitment to individual determination is not inherently the property of one political group. The meaning of such language depends on context: what kind of sovereignty, exercised by whom, protected from what, and balanced against which other responsibilities? A system that counts an associated phrase without interpreting those relationships can produce a plausible score while misunderstanding the person.

This is a common AI failure pattern. The model does not need to fabricate anything for the result to be misleading. It may recognize a genuine statistical association and then apply it beyond the conditions that make the association useful.

The result sounds reasoned because the proxy is real. It is wrong because the proxy is not the thing itself.

Comparison is not the same as truth

THE EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT gave me a useful point of comparison, not an unquestionable ground truth. It, too, reflected choices: which questions to ask, which categories to offer, how to score the answers, and what a political "type" was supposed to mean.

My lens reflected a different set of choices: which stories were present, how those stories were interpreted, what language counted as evidence, and how competing signals were weighted.

The gap between the results therefore raised better questions than "Which system was right?"

- What did each system actually measure?
- Which evidence did each system have access to?
- What assumptions connected the evidence to the conclusion?
- Which concepts were treated as proxies?
- How sensitive was the outcome to wording or scoring?
- Did either set of categories fit the person being described?

Agreement between two systems can be reassuring, but it can also conceal shared assumptions. Disagreement forces those assumptions into view.

Test the pathway, not only the answer

WHEN EVALUATING AN AI-supported conclusion, it is tempting to check only whether the final answer matches an expected result. That is insufficient. A system can reach the expected answer for the wrong reasons, just as it can reach an unexpected answer that reveals something important.

A better test examines the pathway:

1. **Name the proposed conclusion.** What exactly is the system claiming?

1. **Identify the evidence.** Which passages, observations, or data affected the result?
2. **Expose the bridge.** Why was that evidence interpreted as supporting the conclusion?
3. **Look for proxies.** Is the system using a correlated word or behavior in place of the concept it claims to measure?
4. **Test alternatives.** Could the same evidence support a materially different interpretation?
5. **Compare carefully.** What does the reference instrument measure, and where might it have limitations of its own?
6. **Revise the lens.** Change the instructions, categories, or weighting, then observe whether the reasoning improves.

This kind of investigation takes more effort than accepting a polished answer. In my case, it involved building a tool, taking additional assessments, and comparing their results. The work was exhausting—but it changed how I understood both the tool and the question.

Sensitive inferences deserve a higher standard

POLITICAL ORIENTATION is not an ordinary product preference. Inferring it from intimate stories can affect dignity, privacy, relationships, employment, access, or personal safety. A self-directed experiment does not automatically justify performing the same analysis on another person.

Before using AI to infer a sensitive trait, ask:

- Is the person knowingly choosing this inquiry?
- Do they understand what material will be examined?
- Can they inspect and challenge the evidence and interpretation?
- Can they decline to preserve the result?
- Who else could see or misuse it?
- Is the promised benefit worth making the inference at all?

The ability to produce a classification is not, by itself, a reason to produce one.

Beyond AI: people use proxies too

HUMANS ALSO INFER IDENTITY and intention from vocabulary, affiliations, clothing, accent, profession, and other signals associated with familiar groups. Those associations can contain information without defining the individual before us.

When a person's words appear to place them in a category, ask what the words mean in their own context. Recognition of a pattern should begin inquiry, not end relationship.

Try it: find the hidden proxy

CHOOSE A LOW-STAKES conclusion an AI system has drawn about you or your work. Ask it to show which evidence contributed to the conclusion and why.

For each piece of evidence, write down:

- The observed word, behavior, or pattern
- The meaning assigned to it
- Another plausible meaning
- The missing context that would distinguish between them

Then ask whether the conclusion still deserves your confidence. The purpose is not simply to catch the AI being wrong. It is to understand how an apparently reasonable answer was assembled.

[1] Pew Research Center describes its [Political Typology Quiz](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/quiz/political-typology/) as a way of matching a participant's responses with political groups derived from questions about social and political values. The edition used in the author's experiment has not yet been established; the quiz and its categories have changed over time.

Part II began by changing modes and ends by inspecting meaning. Choosing how to work is not selecting a favored interface. It is arranging the interaction so that purpose, source, interpretation, and human control remain distinguishable.

Part III — Giving the Work a Home



AN AI CONVERSATION can produce language worth keeping long before it produces anything we would call a finished work.

That creates a new responsibility. Useful material must cross from a transient exchange into a durable arrangement without acquiring more authority than we intended to give it.

This part follows that crossing.

First, we will distinguish conversational familiarity from an actual record. Then we will notice the moment when anticipated continuity turns an exchange into a project. Once the work has a home, we will inspect what AI helped place there and decide what, if anything, deserves ratification. Finally, we will resist the temptation to turn every useful answer into a permanent or expanding undertaking.

The progression is deliberate:

> Preserve what matters. Give it a home. Inspect what was built. Decide what it should become.

A repository can preserve evidence, provenance, and continuity. It cannot decide what is true, approved, important, or worth carrying forward. Those remain acts of judgment.

A Conversation Is Not a Repository



Familiarity is not possession

THE AI SEEMED TO KNOW what I meant by the living foundation—the collection of personal stories introduced earlier.

We had discussed the concept repeatedly. The system could explain its purpose, suggest structures, and generate new material around it. That fluency gave me the understandable impression that the project itself existed somewhere within reach.

But the work had accumulated across multiple chat threads, many of them poorly labeled. When I eventually asked the AI to assemble everything we had come to call the living foundation into one file repository, it could not do so.

It knew the idea. It did not possess the complete record.

Three things that feel like memory

SEVERAL DIFFERENT MECHANISMS can create the feeling that an AI remembers:

1. **Conversation context** — the messages, files, and instructions available within the current exchange.

1. **Recall features** — selected information carried forward from earlier activity when the product and its settings support that behavior.
2. **Durable sources** — files, databases, or connected systems that have been intentionally preserved and made available to the current work.

These mechanisms are not interchangeable.

A current conversation can contain rich detail but still end without producing a durable artifact. A memory feature may preserve useful themes without retaining every source, decision, or revision. A file can endure independently of a conversation, but only if someone creates it, places it deliberately, and maintains enough context to make it understandable later.

This means an AI may recognize a project name and speak convincingly about it without being able to enumerate every relevant conversation or reconstruct the project's authoritative state.

The error was not that the AI forgot a file I had entrusted to a repository. The more basic problem was that I had mistaken a history of conversations for a repository in the first place.

Memory is a convenience; records are an arrangement

A REPOSITORY IS MORE than a large memory. It is an arrangement that answers practical questions:

> · What belongs to this project?

> · Where is the authoritative version?
> · Which material is raw, provisional, approved, or obsolete?
> · Where did a claim or passage come from?
> · Who may read, change, move, copy, or delete it?
> · Can the collection be inspected without recreating the original conversations?

Conversation alone does not answer those questions automatically.

This does not make chat a poor place to work. Conversation is excellent for discovery, exploration, and development. The limitation appears when useful work crosses an invisible threshold: it has become important enough that losing its exact form, provenance, or status would matter.

At that point, the work needs a home outside the conversation.

Construction as another state of work

THIS EXPERIENCE LED me to name another state: **construction** or **build mode**.

In conversation, I can develop an idea. In build mode, I create and maintain the artifacts through which that idea persists. On my desktop, using a project directory and a project-capable AI agent, I can authorize the system to write files into a defined area of my hard drive. In my case, that tool was Codex. The resulting files can then be inspected, named, copied, moved, backed up, revised, or deleted using ordinary tools.

The shift is important because it changes the source of continuity. Future work does not have to depend on whether a system recalls the right fragment from a prior conversation. The project can provide its own context through the files it contains.

Official OpenAI documentation for the products I used makes the same practical distinction. It describes memory as a helpful recall layer rather than the sole source for instructions that must always apply. It also recommends keeping durable project guidance in checked-in documentation so future work can read it from the working tree.[1]

That is a good rule beyond any one product:

> If future work must be able to find it, do not leave it implied across conversations. Make it an artifact.

Authority must remain visible

ALLOWING AI TO WRITE files does not mean allowing it to decide unilaterally what becomes permanent.

The useful phrase in my own account is **records I authorize**.

Construction should preserve the human boundary introduced earlier in this book. The system may propose a structure, draft a file, or place reviewed material where directed. The human determines what the project accepts, what status it receives, and whether it should remain.

A simple project might distinguish:

> · **Sources** — original conversations, transcripts, documents, and evidence
>
> · **Notes** — interpretations, fragments, questions, and unfinished thinking
>
> · **Drafts** — material being shaped for a particular purpose
>
> · **Canonical material** — reviewed content currently treated as the project's source of truth
>
> · **Archive** — superseded material retained for provenance or history

The folder names matter less than the distinctions. A small, understandable structure is better than a sophisticated system no one reliably maintains.

Do not reconstruct what you can preserve

MY SURPRISE CAME FROM trying to reconstruct a project after its boundaries had already dissolved across conversations. The better time to preserve work is when it first becomes consequential.

Useful signals include:

> · You expect to return to the work in another session.
>
> · More than one conversation contributes to the same outcome.
>
> · You have corrected language and do not want an earlier version mistaken for the current one.
>
> · The work depends on sources or evidence.
>
> · Losing the exact material would require substantial effort to reproduce.
>
> · You want control over copying, moving, backing up, or deleting it.

When one of those conditions appears, create the project area. Do not wait for the AI to infer later which scattered exchanges belonged together.

Beyond AI: shared memory is not a shared record

TWO PEOPLE CAN LEAVE the same conversation with different recollections of what was decided. Neither memory must be dishonest for the divergence to matter.

When continuity, obligation, or trust depends on an agreement, preserve a record both parties can inspect and correct. Documentation should support the relationship rather than become a weapon used to replace it.

Try it: promote one conversation into a project

CHOOSE ONE CONVERSATION that has produced something you care about.

1. Identify the original source material.

1. Write a short statement of the project's purpose.
2. Separate raw sources from working notes and accepted material.
3. Give each file a name that will make sense without the conversation sidebar.
4. Record where the material came from and when it was added.
5. Ask the AI to inspect the resulting project area and describe what it can establish from the files alone.
6. Note anything you still know that the project itself does not contain.

That final gap is your next curation decision.

Creating a record solves the problem of disappearance. It does not mean that every valuable exchange needs a full project. The next question is when expected continuity justifies giving the material a larger home.

[1] See the official OpenAI documentation on [memories](https://learn.chatgpt.com/docs/customization/memories), [projects and chats](https://learn.chatgpt.com/docs/projects), and [working with files](https://learn.chatgpt.com/docs/artifacts-viewer). Product behavior and availability can change; the general distinction between conversational recall and durable records does not depend on a particular interface.

When an Exchange Becomes a Project



Build the library before the next question arrives

THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER established why consequential work should not remain scattered across conversations. But preservation can begin with a single file. A project begins when the work acquires a future.

I had the good fortune to meet someone who was curious about Harmonic Dwell, a project I had been developing around energy management in rural locations.

Much of my thinking about the project already existed, but not as a coherent collection. It was distributed across ChatGPT conversations: observations in one thread, technical possibilities in another, and

language I might reuse somewhere else. I could use AI to help locate or regenerate components and assemble them into a message for this interested person.

That would have been enough to answer the immediate question.

But I hoped the message would produce more questions.

That expectation changed the nature of the work. If the conversation continued, I did not want each answer to require another expedition through old chats. I needed an information store—a small library for Harmonic Dwell that could support the message I was writing now and whatever inquiry might follow it.

The exchange had become a project before it had become large.

Continuity is the signal

WE OFTEN DECIDE TO organize work after it has become unwieldy. By then, its history may already be fragmented. A better signal is not size but anticipated continuity.

An exchange is becoming a project when:

- You expect another question after the current answer.
- Several conversations contribute to the same subject.
- New work should build on earlier decisions rather than regenerate them.
- Another person may depend on the consistency of future answers.

- Sources, assumptions, or revisions will need to be inspected later.
- You would care if the current state became difficult to reconstruct.

Harmonic Dwell met several of those conditions as soon as another person expressed serious curiosity. The potential relationship created a future for the information.

That future needed a home.

Chat history as compost

I SOMETIMES THINK OF my chat history as compost.

That description is not entirely negative. Compost is rich. It contains the residue of growth, experimentation, discarded forms, and material that may nourish something new. An old conversation can contain an insight worth recovering or language worth reshaping.

But compost is not a library.

It does not tell you which idea is current, which claim has been verified, or which version you are prepared to share. If everything remains in the heap, retrieving one useful element becomes an act of excavation.

A project library performs a different function. It gives selected material identity, location, status, and relationship to other material. It does not need to contain every conversation. It needs to contain what future work should reliably be able to find.

Let AI tend the library, not become the library

THE PROSPECT OF USING AI to manage the collection made creating it feel more practical. On my desktop, I could open a local project area and use a project-capable AI agent to inspect, create, and revise files within the access I had authorized.

This introduced a meaningful change. The AI was no longer only producing language that I might manually carry elsewhere. It could help construct and maintain the environment in which the work lived.

That does not mean handing over the entire computer or trusting every action. A safe working arrangement has boundaries:

> · The project has a defined location.
>
> · The AI receives only the access needed for the task.
>
> · Actions outside ordinary boundaries may require explicit approval.
>
> · Material changes remain inspectable.
>
> · The human can reject, revise, move, copy, back up, or delete the resulting files.

The environment I used was designed so that the selected directory or workspace provided file context, while sandboxing and approval controls limited which actions could occur without further authorization.[1] Exact controls differ among products and will evolve, but the durable principle is straightforward:

> Give the system enough authority to help with the work, while keeping the boundary and the result visible.

Build only for the next useful return

IT IS EASY TO RESPOND to disorder by designing an elaborate classification system. That can create a new problem: maintaining the structure becomes more demanding than using it.

Use the distinctions already established—sources, notes, drafts, accepted material, and archive—but create only the parts the present work requires. A new project may need no more than:

- **An overview** stating what the project is trying to accomplish now
- **The initiating source** that gave the information a future
- **A current account** of what has been established so far
- **Open questions** that should shape the next return

Add working notes, outputs, archives, or more formal governance when actual use reveals the need. The structure should answer the next likely question, not anticipate every possible one.

For Harmonic Dwell, the first purpose of the library was not to represent the entire project perfectly. It was to let the next communication begin from a known foundation rather than another search through conversational compost.

The first useful project ritual

WHEN A PROMISING EXCHANGE becomes a project, complete a short transition:

1. **Name the project.** Use language you will recognize later.

1. **State its present purpose.** Explain why the collection exists now.
2. **Preserve the initiating material.** Save the message, question, or event that created continuity.
3. **Gather selectively.** Bring in existing material that is clearly relevant; do not postpone the project until every old chat has been excavated.
4. **Create a current summary.** Mark it as provisional if important gaps remain.
5. **Record open questions.** Let future work know what has not been settled.
6. **Produce the immediate output.** Use the library to support the message or artifact that prompted its creation.

This turns organization into part of the work rather than a separate cleanup project.

Try it: notice a future forming

THINK OF ONE RECENT conversation, request, or encounter that is likely to continue.

Ask yourself:

> · What future question do I reasonably expect?
>
> · Which earlier material would I want available when it arrives?
>
> · What is the smallest durable collection that would prevent me from starting over?
>
> · What may the AI organize or draft?

> · What must I personally approve before it becomes part of the project?

Create only that much structure. A useful library can begin with one source, one overview, and one open question.

Once the work has a durable home, another distinction becomes possible: a file can exist without being accepted. The next chapter concerns the human act that keeps AI-assisted construction from quietly becoming authority.

[1] For the product-specific controls described in this example, see official OpenAI documentation on [projects and chats](https://learn.chatgpt.com/docs/projects), [working with files](https://learn.chatgpt.com/docs/artifacts-viewer), [sandboxing](https://learn.chatgpt.com/docs/sandboxing), and [agent approvals and security](https://learn.chatgpt.com/docs/agent-approvals-security). Product controls and availability may change.

Read What the AI Built



An artifact makes drift inspectable

A PROJECT LIBRARY GIVES work continuity. It also gives mistakes somewhere to persist.

That is not an argument against creating artifacts. It is the reason artifacts must remain inspectable and their status visible. Once AI can help build the project, the human task changes from merely preserving the work to deciding what the project is allowed to treat as authoritative.

I am co-writing an application with AI in a local file repository managed with version control.

The application is not being defined only through code. We are also writing the documents that govern it: a constitution, statements explaining why we are making particular choices, security rules, design principles, and other records on which later work depends.

The volume became frightening. Each new document appeared to rest on several earlier ones. A mistake near the foundation could influence many artifacts produced afterward.

Versioned files gave that accumulation a visible shape. We could preserve exploratory drafts, identify candidates for ratification, and distinguish them from documents we had actually accepted. We could compare versions and audit how the project changed over time.

That structure proved its worth when it exposed two very different errors.

Constitutional drift

THE PROJECT'S PRIVACY philosophy was unusually demanding. We were trying to design the application so intimate user information would not become visible to other people or available for unrelated use. Data handling was not one feature among many; it was part of the project's reason for existing.

During a discovery exercise, I asked an ill-formed question about exporting data that should remain private. The proposed capability did not merely create a technical concern. It contradicted the governing philosophy established by the rest of the work.

The question nevertheless entered the working conversation. Had we continued without noticing it, later design work might have treated the export as a legitimate requirement. A momentary exploratory prompt could have become an inherited assumption.

The audit caught it before that happened.

Version history helped us identify the point of divergence and restore the current build to an acceptable state. But this also taught me to use privacy language precisely. Removing material from the current build is not necessarily the same as erasing every trace. Copies may remain in

version history, chat records, backups, logs, caches, or other systems. True deletion requires knowing every place the material traveled and what deletion guarantees each system actually provides.

The broader lesson is that a project can drift away from its own constitution one reasonable-looking question at a time.

Intentional drift

THE SECOND PROBLEM was less technical but equally revealing.

I asked AI to help prepare a report for another person. The result was polished and compelling. It was also a sales pitch.

The document implied that we were available for hire and gently pushed its recipient toward a future financial engagement. My actual purpose was to be informative and friendly. I neither expected nor wanted to turn the exchange into a commercial wedge.

The report did not contain an obvious factual error. Its failure was an error of intention.

AI systems have encountered countless familiar document patterns. A report about a project, audience, or possible relationship may resemble the beginning of a proposal. If the human purpose is not explicit—or if the system overgeneralizes from the genre—it may complete the pattern with persuasive language that feels professionally appropriate.

That language can be difficult to notice in a chat because we tend to evaluate whether the response is fluent and useful. Opening the finished document changed my perspective. I could imagine the recipient encountering it without the surrounding conversation. The sales posture became obvious.

I redirected my writing partner, and together we revised the document until its tone matched my actual intention.

Two audits, two questions

THESE INCIDENTS SUGGEST that artifact review needs at least two different tests.

The **constitutional audit** asks:

> · Does this artifact remain consistent with the project's governing principles?
> · Has an exploratory idea quietly become a requirement?
> · Does it create a capability the project has promised not to possess?
> · Which earlier ratified decisions constrain this work?

The **intentional audit** asks:

> · What is this artifact trying to make its recipient think, feel, or do?
> · Is that purpose actually mine?
> · Has the tone introduced a relationship I did not intend?
> · Would I be comfortable delivering it without the explanatory chat around it?

A document can pass one audit and fail the other. A friendly report might violate a security principle. A technically compliant report might manipulate its recipient. Correctness includes both what an artifact does and what it is for.

Ratification is a human act

THE WORD **ratified** is helpful because it names a boundary.

An AI-generated document may be coherent, complete, and attractively formatted. None of those qualities makes it authoritative. Ratification means that a person—or a defined human governance process—has reviewed the candidate and accepted responsibility for treating it as current.

A simple lifecycle might be:

1. **Exploratory** — ideas are allowed to be incomplete, contradictory, or wrong.

1. **Draft** — an artifact has a purpose and is being shaped for use.
2. **Ratification candidate** — the artifact is presented for explicit review against evidence, principles, and intended effect.
3. **Ratified** — the accepted version becomes an authority for future work.
4. **Superseded** — a later ratified version replaces it without pretending the earlier history never existed.

This lifecycle allows AI to contribute freely without granting every generated sentence constitutional power.

Version control is evidence, not absolution

VERSIONING CAN SHOW what changed, when it changed, and sometimes why. It can support comparison and recovery. But it cannot determine whether a change was wise, ethical, safe, or faithful to intent.

Nor does rollback automatically solve a disclosure problem. If sensitive material entered a system, restoring an earlier file version does not establish that the material disappeared from every other location.

Use version control to preserve evidence and enable recovery. Use human judgment, security analysis, and explicit deletion procedures to address the larger risk.

Beyond AI: receipt is not ratification

A PERSON WHO RECEIVES a document has not necessarily understood or accepted it. Attendance at a meeting does not prove agreement, and failure to object may reflect power, fatigue, or uncertainty.

For consequential shared work, ratification should be visible: who reviewed the material, what they accepted, what remains contested, and how the record may later be changed.

Try it: audit from outside the chat

CHOOSE AN AI-ASSISTED artifact that is nearly ready to use. Close or minimize the conversation that produced it, then review the artifact as if you had received it from someone else.

Ask:

1. What does this artifact claim its purpose is?
2. What does its language actually encourage the reader to do?
3. Which governing principles should constrain it?
4. Did any exploratory suggestion become an assumed fact or requirement?
5. Which passages would surprise me if another person attributed them directly to me?
6. What evidence shows that this is the version I approved?

Do not ratify the document until you can answer those questions comfortably.

Ratification answers whether an artifact belongs in the work as it presently exists. It does not answer whether the work itself should grow. That is a separate decision—and generative systems make it unusually easy to avoid making it carefully.

Not Every Answer Stays an Answer



Recognizing when the form of the work changes

PRESERVATION, PROJECT structure, and ratification help worthwhile work persist. They can also make expansion feel like the natural next step.

It is not always the right one.

Often, when I am building something, it begins as a tool intended to answer a question.

This book is an example.

I began with a personal need. I wanted a calm introduction to the AI ecosystem—something closer to an owner's manual than another collection of optimization advice. The immediate task was to improve my own footing.

The first useful form was a guide. Then our conversations revealed that the difficulty was not mine alone. Other people were also encountering AI through disconnected features, urgent claims, and techniques taught before purposes. The guide began to suggest a book.

Once the book idea showed merit, it became a project. It acquired a foundation, an outline, source stories, chapters, open questions, and a place to live outside the conversation.

The purpose developed first. The form followed.

Reframing can reveal the work

A QUESTION, TOOL, GUIDE, book, and project are not merely different sizes of the same object. Each creates different expectations.

A **question** seeks understanding.

A **tool** helps someone perform a repeatable task.

A **guide** arranges understanding so another person can follow it.

A **book** makes a sustained promise to a reader and develops that promise across a deliberate sequence.

A **project** supplies the sources, decisions, versions, practices, and continuity needed to produce and maintain the work.

Reframing is useful when the existing form can no longer carry the value being discovered. A private answer may contain a pattern worth sharing. A one-time method may become repeatable. Several fragments may begin to express one coherent argument.

AI can help us notice these possibilities because it can compare material, identify recurring themes, propose structures, and ask what audience might benefit. Sometimes its most useful contribution is not answering the original question but recognizing that the question has opened onto a different kind of work.

Expansion is not automatically insight

THERE IS ALSO A DANGER.

Generative systems make expansion extremely easy. Any note can become an outline. Any outline can become ten chapters. Any small idea can be given a name, a framework, a launch plan, and an audience before anyone has established that it deserves them.

This is project inflation: confusing the ability to generate more material with evidence that a larger form has merit.

Before promoting an answer into a project, ask:

> · Does this meet a recurring need rather than a momentary curiosity?
>
> · Is there a person beyond me who would receive real value from it?
>
> · Does the material contain a coherent promise or merely a collection of related words?
>
> · Have new examples continued to deepen the idea?
>
> · Is there evidence worth preserving and work worth revisiting?
>
> · Am I willing to accept the maintenance and responsibility that accompany the larger form?

If the answers are weak, the idea may be complete as an answer, note, or small tool. That is not a failure. Good curation includes allowing useful things to remain small.

Let the project earn its structure

THE TRANSITION SHOULD happen in stages.

1. **Answer the immediate question.** Do not postpone usefulness while designing a grand system.

1. **Notice recurrence.** Record when the same need or insight appears again.
2. **Test the wider promise.** Ask whom else it serves and what it enables.
3. **Choose the next form.** A checklist, essay, guide, workshop, application, or book may each carry the idea differently.
4. **Create continuity.** If the work will persist, give it sources, status, and a durable home.
5. **Review the scope.** Remove structures that exist only because they were easy to generate.

This process permits emergence without surrendering to enthusiasm.

The form is a hypothesis

CALLING SOMETHING A book does not prove that it is one. It proposes that a sustained sequence will serve the reader better than a shorter form.

Calling something a project does not prove that it should continue forever. It establishes a place in which the idea can be tested, developed, or responsibly concluded.

The form remains a hypothesis until the work supports it.

That is another use for AI as a thinking partner. Ask it not only to expand the idea, but to challenge the proposed form:

> What value requires this to become a larger project? What could be accomplished in a smaller form? What evidence would tell us to continue, narrow, or stop?

The purpose is not to make AI the judge of whether an idea has merit. It is to prevent its talent for elaboration from becoming the only evidence considered.

Try it: promote or release

CHOOSE ONE USEFUL ANSWER, note, or method you have produced with AI.

Write two short cases:

1. The case for allowing it to remain exactly as it is
2. The case for developing it into a larger form

Then identify the smallest experiment that would distinguish between those cases. You may discover the beginning of a real project. You may also discover the relief of letting a completed answer remain complete.

Giving work a home is an act of care, not a promise of endless growth. A well-kept answer may remain an answer. A project may conclude. Curation includes deciding what not to enlarge and what no longer needs to continue.

The next part raises the stakes. When the material being preserved represents an intimate human life, continuity and usefulness must be earned alongside privacy, restraint, and trust.

Part IV — Earning Trust



Earn trust in steps.

ONCE INFORMATION HAS a durable home, we must ask whether it should be there at all.

This question becomes urgent when the material represents a person's interior life. A personal story is not merely text. It may contain identity, vulnerability, contested memory, other people's lives, and details whose meaning changes when removed from the relationship in which they were told.

Usefulness does not cancel that risk. In many cases, the same detail that makes an inquiry illuminating also makes the material difficult to anonymize and painful to expose.

This part develops two disciplines.

The first is **control**: understanding the information's lifecycle, limiting its exposure, describing protections honestly, and withholding material when the environment has not earned it.

The second is **earned trust**: beginning with material whose failure would cause little harm, testing one property at a time, and increasing the stakes only when evidence justifies the next step.

Trust here is not a feeling of familiarity. It is not confidence in a provider's tone or in the fact that nothing bad happened last time.

> Trust should be specific enough to say what was tested, what was learned, what remains uncertain, and what is still withheld.

The Information Must Exist to Be Useful



The privacy conundrum

THE PREVIOUS PART ASKED how useful work becomes durable. Sensitive work introduces the opposing question: when does durability become exposure?

I am working on a project whose usefulness depends on storing information I consider highly sensitive—perhaps the most sensitive information a person possesses.

The material consists of stories people tell themselves about their lives. These may be spoken recollections of work, school, family, relationships, mistakes, fears, desires, injuries, conflicts, and events that remain unresolved. The transcripts could identify the storyteller through details no formal identifier could adequately remove. They may also name or describe other people.

Encountered without context, such a story could be humiliating, damaging, or profoundly misunderstood.

I would not want this information about me circulating beyond my control.

Yet the purpose of the project is to examine those stories for insights a person may not otherwise recognize. The analysis requires the stories to exist in some usable form.

That is the conundrum:

> The information must exist to create value, and its existence creates risk.

Fear can be information

THE PROJECT GENUINELY scares me.

That reaction does not necessarily mean the work should be abandoned. It means reassurance is not an adequate design method. Fear can identify what is at stake: dignity, relationships, autonomy, safety, and the right to determine how one's life is represented.

A useful next step is to convert fear into a threat model.

Ask:

> · What information exists?
>
> · Whom could it identify or affect?
>
> · Where does it travel during capture, transcription, analysis, backup, synchronization, and deletion?
>
> · Who or what can access it at each stage?
>
> · Which failures are accidental, and which involve a motivated adversary?

> · What harm could follow from disclosure, alteration, inference, or loss?
>
> · Which promised protections can be tested?

NIST's Privacy Framework approaches privacy risk across the complete data lifecycle, from collection through disposal, and asks organizations to consider the problems people could experience because of data processing.[1] That framing is particularly appropriate here. The goal is not merely to prevent a file from being stolen. It is to protect the person represented within it.

Local, encrypted, and user-controlled

MY DESIRED ARCHITECTURE begins with three properties:

1. The intimate material should ideally remain on hardware the user possesses.

1. It should receive strong encryption.
2. The user should have meaningful control over erasure.

These are strong directions. They are not, by themselves, a completed security claim.

Local data can still be exposed through malware, shared accounts, device theft, insecure backups, copied exports, screen access, or poorly isolated applications.

Encrypted data must eventually be decrypted for authorized use. Security then depends on keys, credentials, software behavior, temporary copies, access boundaries, and what happens while the information is visible to the processor.

Deleted data may remain in backups, version history, synchronized devices, logs, indexes, or storage not yet overwritten. NIST describes media sanitization as making access to target data infeasible for a

defined level of effort. Cryptographic erasure can do this by sanitizing the relevant encryption keys, but only when the architecture and key management actually support that guarantee.[2]

Good security language should therefore describe verified properties and known limits rather than promising absolute safety.

The haystack is not a lock

FOR THE MOMENT, THE large volume of particular details can feel protective. The material contains so much ordinary, specific, and apparently irrelevant information that finding one meaningful fact seems difficult.

But volume is not a durable security boundary.

AI systems are particularly useful for searching large collections, identifying names and relationships, grouping recurring themes, and drawing inferences across records. The very capabilities that make the living foundation valuable also make the haystack easier to mine.

Security through obscurity may deter casual attention. It does not protect against tools designed to find the needle.

This recalls a surveillance system of roughly 400 cameras that I helped build for a campus. Falling equipment costs made it possible to install far more cameras than the institution could meaningfully watch. More collection did not necessarily create more awareness. In some respects, it may have caused people to see less.

AI changes that equation. Automated indexing and analysis can make overwhelming volume newly legible. A collection that was once practically unsearchable may become an intimate map of a person.

Compartmentalization can limit—but also spread—exposure

ONE PRACTICE I HAVE used is to send different portions of the living foundation to different AI environments. The intention is to prevent any one environment from receiving enough of the whole collection to identify the person or construct a comprehensive portrait.

This is a form of compartmentalization. It can be useful when each processor receives only the minimum fragment required for a narrowly defined task.

But splitting information is not the same as anonymizing it.

A single story may contain a distinctive event, location, relationship, profession, date, or pattern of language sufficient to identify its author. Account information and technical metadata may provide additional links. Results may later be recombined in another environment, reconstructing much of the context that separation was intended to withhold.

Using several providers can also spread exposure. Instead of one set of retention rules, logs, credentials, subprocessors, and security practices, the workflow may now depend on several. Systems that appear independent at the interface may share infrastructure or service providers behind the scenes.

Compartmentalization therefore needs a design, not merely distribution:

> · Define what each environment needs to know.
>
> · Remove direct and indirect identifiers not required for its task.
>
> · Separate stories according to a rule tied to the threat model.
>
> · Record which fragments and derivatives went to which environment.

> · Prevent one provider from receiving the index that reconnects the fragments.
>
> · Examine account and network metadata that may link otherwise separated submissions.
>
> · Establish whether outputs may be combined and where that combination occurs.
>
> · Compare the reduced concentration risk with the increased number of exposure points.

The correct claim is modest:

> Partitioning may limit what one processor can infer from the content it receives. Whether it meaningfully reduces re-identification risk depends on the content, metadata, providers, partitioning method, and later recombination.

Your story contains other people

OWNERSHIP BECOMES COMPLICATED when a personal story includes someone else.

The storyteller has a legitimate interest in recording their own experience. The other person may have an equally legitimate interest in not being named, classified, or exposed within a system they never chose to use.

There is no universal technical switch that resolves this tension. The design may need:

> · Clear warnings before capture
>
> · Tools for redacting or pseudonymizing names
>
> · Separation of identity from narrative content
>
> · Limits on cross-story entity resolution

- Restrictions on sharing and export
- Different consent rules for different uses
- The ability to preserve a person's experience without asserting an unverified fact about another person

Privacy is relational. A user-controlled repository can still create consequences for people outside the user account.

Minimize exposure, not meaning

DATA MINIMIZATION IS often described as collecting less. In a project whose purpose depends on detailed personal narrative, indiscriminate deletion could destroy the very meaning the system is meant to illuminate.

The more useful question is:

> What is the minimum exposure required for this chosen inquiry?

The answer may involve keeping rich source material locally while sending only a temporary, redacted excerpt to a particular analytic process. It may mean performing inference on the user's device, separating identity from content, disabling unnecessary logs, avoiding cloud synchronization, or deleting intermediate artifacts after review.

Minimization can apply to access, duration, precision, replication, and purpose—not only to the number of words retained.

Do not use the future system before it exists

THE INTENDED SECURE environment has not yet been fully built and verified. That fact should govern present behavior.

It is tempting to act as though an architectural intention already protects current experiments. It does not. Until the controls exist, sensitive source material should remain outside environments that do not meet the required standard—or be replaced with synthetic, fictionalized, redacted, or deliberately low-risk material.

This is an important kind of AI literacy: knowing when the correct input is no input.

Beyond AI: disclosure is relational

CHOOSING TO TELL ANOTHER person something intimate is not simply a transfer of data. It creates vulnerability and may create a responsibility in the listener.

Thoughtful disclosure considers purpose, trust, timing, the listener's capacity, the presence of third parties, and what the speaker expects to happen next. Thoughtful listening does not treat access as ownership. It preserves context, resists unnecessary repetition, and recognizes that being entrusted with a story does not automatically grant permission to share or interpret it elsewhere.

Try it: trace one piece of information

BEFORE PLACING SENSITIVE material into an AI-assisted workflow, choose one representative detail and trace its possible lifecycle:

1. How is it captured?

1. Where is it transcribed?
2. Where is it stored?
3. Is it copied, indexed, logged, backed up, or synchronized?
4. Which people, processes, and providers can access it?
5. What derivative inferences could reveal it even if the original wording is removed?

6. How would access be revoked?
7. What would “deleted” mean, and how could that claim be verified?

If you cannot answer those questions, do not confuse uncertainty with safety.

Tracing the lifecycle tells us what must be protected. It does not require us to begin testing with the most revealing material available. Before a system encounters intimate reality, we can learn a great deal from substitutes chosen to exercise the same structure at lower stakes.

[1] See the [NIST Privacy Framework](https://www.nist.gov/privacy-framework) and its [getting-started guidance](https://www.nist.gov/privacy-framework/getting-started-0).

[2] See NIST's [Guidelines for Media Sanitization, Revision 2](https://csrc.nist.gov/news/2025/guidelines-for-media-sanitization-rev-2) and definition of [cryptographic erase](https://csrc.nist.gov/glossary/term/cryptographic_erase).

Test the Shape Before the Stakes



Fictional people can do real development work

I BEGAN DEVELOPING Aperture Collective with fictional, synthetic, and deliberately low-risk stories.

At first, I was not ready to speak intimate questions within earshot of my phone, much less entrust the resulting stories to an unfinished system. Whether or not every fear corresponded to a particular technical exposure, the posture was sensible: the environment had not earned access to higher-stakes material.

Fortunately, I already had a useful body of fictional content.

For earlier work on a Personal Engagement Guide, I had created several fictional characters and described how each might experience or use the guide. Those characters had different vantage points, needs, and ways of speaking. Their statements could illuminate the kinds of story elements the new system would need to preserve and examine.

The people were fictional. The structural questions were real.

Match the substitute to the test

SYNTHETIC DATA IS SOMETIMES dismissed as fake data, as if its only purpose were to imitate reality imperfectly. A better question is whether the material contains the properties required by the test.

Fictional stories can help test:

> · Whether the storage structure accepts a complete narrative
>
> · Whether names, events, dates, and relationships remain associated correctly
>
> · Whether a lens can cite the passages supporting an interpretation
>
> · Whether different viewpoints remain distinguishable
>
> · Whether source text and edited text retain separate status
>
> · Whether a defined export, deletion, or access-control behavior works under the test conditions
>
> · Whether the interface makes the story legible to its author

These tests do not require a real secret. They require representative language and structure.

The Personal Engagement Guide characters provided exactly that. Because they were created to express distinct vantage points, they offered more useful variation than meaningless placeholder text.

Confidence should rise in stages

THE EARLY TESTS DID not prove that the system was safe for every intimate story. They helped me find a posture in which I was willing to proceed with some genuinely personal material that I still considered acceptably low risk within the environment.

That progression can be described as a trust ladder:

1. **Mechanical fixtures** — invented fragments designed to test one function

1. **Synthetic stories** — coherent fictional narratives containing the structures the system must handle
2. **Low-risk personal material** — genuine information whose exposure would cause limited harm
3. **More sensitive material** — introduced only after relevant controls have been tested and remaining risks consciously accepted
4. **Highest-risk material** — withheld until the architecture, operations, and deletion claims meet the required standard, if it is admitted at all

Each step should test something that justifies the next. Familiarity alone is not evidence of safety.

Trust is scoped, not general

A SUCCESSFUL TEST ESTABLISHES only what the test was capable of observing.

If a fictional story can be stored and retrieved correctly, that is evidence about storage and retrieval under those conditions. It is not evidence that an intimate story will remain confidential. If a test account can delete a visible file, that does not establish that every copy, log, derivative, or backup has been erased. If one generated interpretation feels respectful, that does not establish that the method will treat unfamiliar lives fairly.

This suggests a useful grammar for trust:

> I trust this system to perform **this operation**, on **this kind of material**, within **these boundaries**, because **this evidence** supports it.

The sentence should become harder—not easier—to complete as the consequences grow. Trust earned for one capability should not silently migrate to another.

What synthetic stories may not reveal

I DO NOT KNOW WHETHER using fictional stories materially changed the eventual design. Nor do I know that they failed to reproduce anything important for the structural tests I was performing.

That uncertainty belongs in the account.

Synthetic stories are created from someone's expectations about what stories look like. They may be unusually coherent, balanced, or legible. They may lack the contradictions, omissions, emotional charge, shifting identities, cultural references, and accidental disclosures that appear in lived accounts.

They also cannot fully reveal the consequences of failure. A fictional person is not harmed when a lens assigns an offensive interpretation, exposes a secret, merges two identities, or repeats a statement outside its intended context.

This does not make synthetic testing invalid. It defines its boundary:

> Synthetic material can demonstrate that a mechanism works under represented conditions. It cannot, by itself, establish that the system is safe or beneficial for people whose lives carry the consequences.

Test structure and consequence separately

A MATURE EVALUATION plan can divide the work.

Use fictional or synthetic material to test mechanics, formats, workflows, permissions, retrieval, provenance, and predictable edge cases.

Use carefully selected low-risk personal material to test whether real recollection behaves differently, with explicit consent and easy withdrawal.

Use the lifecycle analysis from the previous chapter, along with security review, threat modeling, adversarial testing, and deletion verification, to test protections that no story—real or invented—can prove merely by passing through the system without incident.

Use human review to test whether interpretations feel recognizable, contestable, and respectful. That review should include people unlike the system's designer before making broad claims about usefulness.

Reuse can be a source of strength and bias

REPURPOSING THE PERSONAL Engagement Guide characters was efficient. It also connected two bodies of work through a shared concern with perspective.

But reused material carries the assumptions of its original purpose. Characters designed to test a guide about communication may overrepresent explicit preferences and underrepresent other forms of life story. The library should therefore record why each synthetic character was created and which tests it is expected to support.

A synthetic dataset becomes more useful when its limitations are documented rather than concealed behind apparent variety.

Try it: build a trust ladder

CHOOSE ONE AI-ASSISTED project that may eventually handle sensitive information.

1. Identify the least sensitive material that still contains the structure needed for the first test.
2. State exactly what passing that test would establish.
3. State what it would not establish.

4. Define the next-smallest increase in sensitivity.
5. Name the evidence required before taking that step.
6. Decide which information remains outside the system even if every current test passes.

The goal is not to become brave enough to upload everything. It is to make each increase in trust deliberate, limited, and earned.

Even well-earned technical confidence cannot establish whether the method is helpful in a human life. That evidence requires leaving the test environment, meeting another person, and allowing their experience to change the work.

Part V — Returning to the World



AI CAN HELP US PREPARE an encounter. It cannot complete every encounter for us.

Across the earlier parts of this book, we kept our seat, chose modes suited to the work, gave consequential material a durable home, and required trust to be earned rather than assumed. Those disciplines improve our footing. They do not eliminate the boundary between a plausible model of the world and the world itself.

Some knowledge is produced only through participation: explaining an idea to someone who may decline it, noticing what our language fails to convey, encountering consequences we did not simulate, and allowing another person's purposes to alter our own.

Returning to the world is therefore not the moment when careful AI work ends. It is the moment when that work meets evidence it could not manufacture for itself.

The final chapter asks when to stop preparing, how to conduct the smallest responsible human encounter, and how to bring back only the information the next stage genuinely requires.

Leave the AI and Meet the World



The next evidence cannot come from the model

I HAVE BEEN MAKING substantial progress on Aperture Collective.

AI has helped me articulate its purpose, test fictional stories, examine privacy questions, design lenses, discover contradictions, and create the documents that let the work persist. It has been a thinking partner and a construction tool.

Hello world. Time to test this out in the real world.

I have done what I believe is necessary to imagine and assemble an experiment. Now I need to explain it to another person, ask for their participation, and observe what happens when the method encounters a real human life.

No further conversation with AI can substitute for that evidence.

Simulation reaches a boundary

AI CAN GENERATE PLAUSIBLE reactions from fictional participants. It can identify confusing language, anticipate questions, and role-play disagreement. Those exercises are useful preparation.

They remain simulations.

A real person may hesitate in a place the simulation treated as simple. They may understand an instruction but resist its implication. They may care about a privacy boundary I considered unimportant or feel exposed by a question I believed was gentle. They may discover value in a part of the method I treated as incidental.

Their words are only part of the evidence. Pace, silence, discomfort, curiosity, misunderstanding, trust, fatigue, and the quality of the relationship all matter. I need to be present enough to feel the experience rather than receiving it only as a transcript to analyze later.

Every mistake can become information, provided the experiment is designed so foreseeable mistakes do not become preventable harm.

Prove the method without the acceleration

THE METHOD IS INTENDED to help people examine their own stories and develop insights that can become useful in their lives and relationships.

If that purpose depends entirely on a language model producing an interpretation, then the product may be an AI performance rather than a human method.

I want to establish that people can follow a methodology themselves:

1. Tell or preserve a story.
2. Notice its important elements and relationships.
3. Examine it through a chosen question or lens.

4. Develop a possible insight.
5. Test whether that insight feels supported, recognizable, and useful.
6. Decide whether and how to translate it into action.

AI can make this process faster, smoother, and perhaps more expansive. It can organize material, locate patterns, offer alternative interpretations, and help express the result. But the method should remain intelligible without the machinery.

That manual pathway supplies several forms of proof:

> · It shows that the value comes from a coherent method, not model novelty.
>
> · It gives participants a way to understand and challenge what the AI later does.
>
> · It preserves a fallback when AI is unavailable, inappropriate, or untrusted.
>
> · It reveals which steps truly benefit from automation.
>
> · It prevents the interface from hiding the human acts of interpretation and adoption.

AI should accelerate the method, not become its unexplained source of authority.

Pitching is part of the experiment

BEFORE THE PILOT BEGINS, I have to ask someone to participate.

That conversation will produce evidence of its own. Can I explain the idea without relying on internal vocabulary? Does the person understand the possible value and the risks? Which words create interest, and which create fear? Can they distinguish personal reflection from psychological diagnosis? Do they feel free to decline?

A successful pitch is not merely one that obtains agreement. It is one that allows the other person to make an informed choice.

For sensitive work, that requires clarity about:

- What the participant will be asked to do
- What information will be created
- Where it will exist
- Whether AI will encounter it
- Who can see the sources and derived insights
- What may be retained, shared, or deleted
- How the participant can pause or withdraw
- What the experiment is not qualified to provide

Consent is not an obstacle between the designer and the experiment. It is part of the method being tested.

Observe before explaining

AI-ASSISTED DEVELOPMENT creates a temptation to arrive with an explanation for every reaction. If a participant is confused, I may want to tell them what the instruction was supposed to mean. If they reject an insight, I may want to improve the wording until they accept it.

Those interventions can erase evidence.

During an early pilot, it may be better to observe first:

> - Where did the person stop?
> - What did they believe they were being asked to do?

> · Which words did they use rather than the project's preferred terminology?
>
> · When did they appear to gain or lose agency?
>
> · Which insight arose from the method, and which arose from conversation with the facilitator?
>
> · What would they choose to keep, revise, share, or destroy?

The goal is not to defend the design. It is to learn what the design actually does in relationship with another person.

Bring the evidence back carefully

LEAVING AI DOES NOT require abandoning it permanently.

After the human experience, AI may help organize de-identified observations, compare them with the intended method, identify recurring questions, or draft revisions. But the return should be deliberate. Sensitive source material should not automatically flow back into the systems used during development.

Before bringing anything back, decide:

· Which observations are necessary for the next design question

· Whether they can be summarized without intimate content

· What the participant agreed could be used

· Which interpretations belong to the participant rather than the project

· Whether the AI needs the story or only the structural lesson

Sometimes the correct input is not the personal story but a statement such as: “The participant could not distinguish the source passage from the generated interpretation.” That may be enough to improve the method without exposing the life behind the observation.

Knowing when to stop is part of AI literacy

WORKING WELL WITH AI includes recognizing the point at which more AI interaction becomes avoidance.

The model can always generate another framework, persona, objection, or revision. Continued preparation can feel productive while postponing the encounter capable of disproving our assumptions.

At some point, the next honest question is not for the AI.

It is for the world.

Beyond AI: relationship produces knowledge

HUMAN INTERACTION IS not merely another source of inputs. People respond to being heard, misunderstood, trusted, challenged, and cared for. The relationship changes what can be known and what each participant is willing to reveal.

This is why presence cannot be reduced to data collection. Learning from another person requires allowing their purpose and interpretation to affect the inquiry—not merely extracting evidence from their experience.

Try it: name the evidence AI cannot provide

CHOOSE ONE AI-DEVELOPED idea that is approaching real use.

Write down:

1. What AI has helped you establish
1. What remains only simulated or assumed

2. Which evidence requires another person's voluntary participation
3. Which evidence requires physical observation or lived experience
4. How you will bound risk and obtain meaningful consent
5. What information you can collect without exposing unnecessary personal detail
6. What result would cause you to change, pause, or abandon the idea

Then stop preparing one step earlier than feels comfortable and conduct the smallest responsible encounter with reality.

Return with your footing

THE PURPOSE OF THIS book has not been to make every reader technically expert or perfectly certain. It has been to make the arrangement visible enough that you can locate yourself within it.

You can ask what kind of interaction you are having, what material is present, what the system is contributing, what deserves preservation, what requires verification, and which decisions remain yours. You can notice when acceleration has outrun understanding and pause without surrendering the value of the tool. You can also notice when another round of preparation is no longer learning.

This is intellectual proprioception in practice: not a complete map, but enough awareness to know where you are standing, where the footing is uncertain, and what kind of step should come next.

Walking is not one simple action. It is a continuous process of sensing, balancing, and correcting as the terrain changes beneath us. We do not need to understand every bodily mechanism involved, but we do need enough awareness to notice what lies ahead. Just as importantly, we must remain able to stop, alter our course, or choose a different destination.

Sometimes that step is another question for AI. Sometimes it is creating a record, checking a source, refusing an action, changing the medium, or closing the interface.

And sometimes it is meeting another person and allowing reality to answer back.

Afterword: Information Stewardship Is a Form of Care



THIS BOOK BEGAN WITH a desire to understand how to work with artificial intelligence without becoming lost inside its interfaces, output, and rapid change.

Along the way, the questions became larger.

What am I trying to accomplish? What does the other party understand? Which assumptions are hidden inside my language? What information should be shared? Who has authority to interpret it? When does a conversation become a record? What may be preserved, revised, repeated, or deleted? Who remains responsible for what happens next?

AI did not invent those questions.

It made their structure easier to see.

The book's practical journey ends with returning to the world. This afterword asks what we might carry with us when the next interaction is not with a machine but with another person.

The boundary matters

AN AI SYSTEM IS NOT a human being. It does not possess a life story, embodied vulnerability, reciprocal relationship, or moral standing simply because its language feels familiar. We should not mistake conversational fluency for personhood.

Nor should we travel in the opposite direction and begin treating people as information systems to be prompted, optimized, classified, or managed.

The lessons transfer only when the distinction remains intact.

With AI, we clarify purpose because the system lacks access to what remains in our minds. With people, clarification matters too—but another person may bring purposes of their own that should change the conversation.

With AI, we define permissions and data boundaries. With people, boundaries also involve trust, vulnerability, consent, power, and the possibility of harm.

With AI, we inspect an artifact before ratifying it. With people, agreement requires more than receipt, silence, or compliance.

The mechanics may rhyme. The relationships are not equivalent.

Thoughtful information interaction

THE PRACTICES DEVELOPED throughout this book suggest a broader discipline of information stewardship:

- Know why information is being exchanged.
- Make important terms and assumptions visible.
- Distinguish observation from interpretation and proposal from agreement.

- Share according to purpose, consent, and need.
- Confirm what was understood without demanding uniformity.
- Preserve a shared record when continuity matters.
- Make authority and responsibility visible.
- Allow correction, reconsideration, disagreement, and withdrawal.
- Recognize when the chosen medium no longer serves the relationship.
- Accept responsibility for what you adopt, repeat, and act upon.

These practices are not a technique for controlling communication. They are ways of caring for its conditions while leaving room for another person to change its direction.

Information represents people

INFORMATION CAN LOOK abstract once it enters a document, database, transcript, model, or report. But much of it remains attached to a person: their work, choices, body, history, relationships, fears, or future possibilities.

Handling that information carefully is therefore not merely good organization. It is a form of care for the people represented within it and affected by its use.

Care does not require preserving everything. Sometimes care means refusing to collect, limiting access, correcting a record, retaining necessary provenance, or making deletion real.

Care does not require agreement. Sometimes it means preserving useful friction and allowing another person's interpretation to remain distinct from our own.

Care does not require avoiding technology. It means arranging technology so that human purposes, choices, and responsibilities remain visible.

Nor is care established by good intentions alone. It becomes visible in the boundaries we honor, the interpretations we permit others to contest, the records we correct, the information we decline to collect, and the power we choose not to exercise.

Footing among people

INTELLECTUAL PROPRIOCEPTION begins as awareness of one's position within an AI-assisted environment. It can extend into awareness of one's position within an exchange with another person.

Where am I standing? What authority do I possess? What am I assuming? What has been entrusted to me? What does the other person need in order to participate freely? Where is the footing uncertain? When should I proceed, ask, document, wait, or stop?

We will not answer those questions perfectly. The point is not perfect control. It is deliberate participation.

Artificial intelligence may help us think, capture, create, organize, and discover. If learning to work with it also makes us more deliberate custodians of one another's information—without confusing a person for a system—that may be among its more humanly valuable contributions.

Where Should This Work Happen?



USE THIS GUIDE WHEN an AI-assisted exchange begins to change shape.

1. What am I doing now?

> · **Thinking aloud** → You are primarily in **conversation**.
>
> · **Turning experience into material** → You are primarily in **capture**.
>
> · **Producing something another person or system may use** → You are primarily in **creation**.
>
> · **Selecting what should remain findable and authoritative** → You are primarily in **knowledge**.

ONE TASK MAY MOVE THROUGH all four spaces. Pause when the space changes, because the appropriate interface, permissions, and review may change with it.

2. What is present?

ASK:

- What can the AI see in this interaction?
- Does the material identify or affect anyone?
- What might be retained, copied, indexed, synchronized, or lost?
- Could a lower-risk excerpt, substitute, or summary accomplish the same purpose?

If you cannot describe the exposure well enough for the stakes, withhold the material.

3. What is the system contributing?

DISTINGUISH AMONG:

- **Evidence** — material that can be traced to a source
- **Interpretation** — a proposed meaning drawn from evidence or context
- **Proposal** — language, structure, or action offered for consideration
- **Execution** — an action performed through tools or permissions

Do not let fluency collapse these categories. A proposal is not evidence, and execution does not transfer responsibility for intent.

4. Does the work need a home?

PRESERVE IT OUTSIDE the conversation when:

- You expect to return to it.
- Another person may depend on it.
- Its exact wording, source, or revision history matters.
- Several conversations contribute to the same outcome.
- Losing it would require meaningful reconstruction.

Start with the smallest useful structure: purpose, source, current account, and open questions.

5. What status has it earned?

NAME THE STATUS RATHER than allowing a polished appearance to imply authority:

- Exploratory
- Draft
- Ratification candidate
- Ratified

· Superseded

Personally read, verify, authorize, or refuse anything whose consequences you are expected to own.

6. What is the next responsible step?

THE NEXT STEP MAY BE to continue the conversation, change the medium, check a source, create a record, limit access, run a lower-risk test, ask another person, or stop.

Am I asking AI to think for me, or using it to think with me?

Compact Glossary



AI ENVIRONMENT — The complete working arrangement participating in an interaction: model, interface, context, tools, files, memory or recall features, permissions, provider policies, and human direction.

Artifact — A bounded piece of created work that can be inspected or used outside the exchange that produced it, such as a document, image, spreadsheet, program, plan, or report.

Build mode — A state of work in which ideas become maintained artifacts with names, locations, provenance, status, and relationships to other material.

Capture — The functional space in which experience becomes material that can be revisited, such as a recording, transcript, image, observation, or imported document.

Canonical material — Reviewed material currently treated as a project's source of truth. Canonical does not mean permanently correct; it means presently authoritative within the project's defined process.

Compartmentalization — Dividing information or access so that one processor or environment receives only what its task requires. It may reduce concentration of exposure but does not automatically anonymize the material.

Context — The messages, instructions, files, tool results, and other material available to the system for the present work. Context should not be confused with a complete repository or stable human-like memory.

Intellectual proprioception — Enough awareness of one's position within AI-assisted work to recognize where the footing is sound, where it is uncertain, and what kind of step should come next.

Lens — In the author's adjacent story-based work, a defined method or question used to examine a collection of stories for possible insight. A lens produces an interpretation to scrutinize, not a final truth about a person.

Living foundation — The author's term for a private collection of personal stories and evidence intended to support self-understanding. It is an example in this book, not a requirement for using the book's methods.

Provenance — Information about where material came from, how it changed, and which source or process supports its present form.

Ratification — Explicit human review and acceptance of an artifact as authoritative for a defined purpose. Generation, receipt, silence, or attractive formatting do not constitute ratification.

Repository — A deliberately arranged collection that makes material findable and distinguishes source, status, authority, and history. A conversation history is not automatically a repository.

Synthetic material — Invented or generated material designed to represent properties needed for a test without exposing equivalent real-world stakes. Passing a synthetic test establishes only what that test could observe.

Threat model — A structured account of what needs protection, from whom or what, across which parts of the information lifecycle, and with what possible consequences.