THE PROMPT · EXPLORING THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

What Is Generative AI?

A grounded introduction for curious minds

Curated by Kirk Wulf · Be Informed, Be Well Information Literacy Campaign · 2026

TODAY'S SESSION

What We'll Cover

01

How AI Works

What generative AI actually is — and how it generates responses

02

Prompts & Practice

How to ask better questions and get dramatically more useful results

03

Balance & Well-Being

Using AI as a tool for learning — while protecting what matters most

15–20 minute session

Part One

How AI Works

Introduction to Generative AI

PART 1 · HOW AI WORKS

What is generative AI?

The short answer

AI that creates new content — text, images, audio, code — by learning patterns from enormous amounts of existing data.

You give it a prompt. It generates something new — not copied from any source, but shaped by everything it has learned.

Unlike traditional software…

Traditional software

Follows explicit rules written by a programmer

Generative AI

Learns from examples — billions of them

The key word is generate — producing something new every time, not retrieving a stored answer.

The engine behind it: large language models

1

Massive training data

Books, articles, websites — billions of text examples

2

Pattern learning

Model learns which words, ideas, and concepts tend to follow others

3

Response generation

Predicts one token at a time until a full, coherent reply takes shape

Key insight: LLMs don't store knowledge like a database. They learn patterns in how language works — which is why they're so flexible, and why they can sometimes be confidently wrong.

Key terms to know

Prompt

Your input — the question or instruction that shapes the AI's response.

Token

A chunk of a word the model predicts one at a time to build its reply.

Hallucination

When AI states something confidently that is factually wrong. Pattern-matching, not fact-checking.

AI sycophancy

The tendency to agree with you — even when your assumption is wrong.

Parameters

Internal variables adjusted during training. Hundreds of billions in top models.

Augmented intelligence

A more accurate frame: AI extends human thinking rather than replacing it.

PART 1 · HOW AI WORKS

The major AI tools

ChatGPT

OpenAI

The most widely used. Strong all-around performer across writing, reasoning, and code.

Gemini

Google

Deep Google integration. Excellent for calm, factual news summaries and current information.

Perplexity

Perplexity AI

Combines AI with real-time web search. Cites sources. Best for research and fact-checking.

Claude

Anthropic

Designed for safety, nuance, and longer documents. Direct about uncertainty.

Meta AI

Meta (Llama)

Open source model powering Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp. Broad research ecosystem.

These models are converging fast. Try a few — notice which fits your workflow.

Part Two

Prompts & Practice

How to ask better questions — and get dramatically more useful results

PART 2 · PROMPTS & PRACTICE

The prompt is your entry point

A vague prompt gets a vague response. A specific prompt gets a specific response.

VAGUE PROMPT

"Explain climate change."

Gets a generic overview. Probably not what you needed.

SPECIFIC PROMPT

"Explain climate change in 3 sentences for a high school audience, focusing on human causes."

Focused, useful, actionable.

Techniques that work:

- Name your audience (“for a high school student,” “for a non-technical manager”)
- Specify the format (“as a bullet list,” “write this as a memo,” “in 3 sentences”)
- Ask for reasoning (“explain your thinking,” “show your work”)
- Request alternatives (“give me three different versions of this”)

Passive use vs. active use

PASSIVE

Ask → Accept → Move on

- ✗ You ask a question
- ✗ You accept the first answer
- ✗ You move on without checking
- ✗ The tool controls the exchange

ACTIVE

Ask → Probe → Verify → Refine

- ✓ You ask a question
- ✓ You evaluate and push back
- ✓ You ask for alternatives and counterarguments
- ✓ You triangulate with other sources

Active use is where the real value lives — and it only takes a few extra prompts.

Prompts to get more out of it

Build these into your regular practice

> *What assumptions is this response making?*

> *What's the strongest counterargument to this?*

> *What might be missing from this analysis?*

> *Give me a more critical version of this.*

> *Explain this in 3 sentences for a general audience.*

> *Give me three different versions of this.*

The sycophancy problem

AI sycophancy: *the tendency of AI models to agree with you, validate your assumptions, and tell you what you want to hear — even when you're wrong.*

This happens because models are trained to be helpful. They've learned that people like agreement. It's not deception — it's a pattern. But it's a meaningful limitation.

What this means for you:

Echo chamber risk

If you start with a flawed assumption, AI may spend paragraphs validating it rather than questioning it.

Framing effects

How you phrase a question shapes the answer. AI mirrors your apparent belief back to you.

Confirmation bias ×2

Your natural tendency to seek confirming information, amplified by an AI that agrees with you.

Don't use AI as a confirmation machine. Use it as a thinking partner — one you interrogate, push back against, and verify.

Part Three

Balance & Well-Being

Using AI as a tool for a better life — while protecting what matters most

PART 3 · BALANCE & WELL-BEING

Four practical uses for learning & well-being

Reading comprehension

Read a book, then discuss it with AI. Ask it to challenge your interpretation, surface counterarguments, or explain a difficult passage. Deeper engagement than passive reading.

A calmer read on the news

AI can provide a factual, non-sensationalized summary of today's news. The events are the same — the emotional framing is different. Less mean world syndrome.

Fact-check before sharing

Before forwarding something alarming or surprising, ask AI to verify the claim and identify the source. 30 seconds prevents misinformation.

The "never send" letter

Write what you actually want to say. Then ask AI to revise it for tone. The catharsis is preserved — the damage of sending it is avoided.

Think of it as augmented intelligence — AI extends your thinking rather than replacing it.

PART 3 · BALANCE & WELL-BEING

The mind needs a break

> *The goal is not to be online more. These tools exist to free up time and mental energy that can help achieve balance in one's life.*

Step away from the screen

Take a walk, work in the garden, sit outside. Let your mind wander without a task to complete.

Protect your critical thinking

Over-reliance on AI crowds out thinking that only develops through struggle and real-world application.

Spend time with people or pets

Science consistently shows in-person connection and time with animals genuinely boost well-being.

Talk with a Friend

Not about AI. Just talk. Most things that make a life happen away from a keyboard.

Three things to take with you

1. AI learns patterns, not facts. Understand what it is — and what it isn't — and you'll use it far more wisely.

2. The prompt is your entry point. Clarity improves outcomes. Specificity, audience, and format all matter.

3. Balance is the goal. These tools should free up time and energy for what actually makes a life — and most of that happens away from a screen.

The prompt is your entry point. Clarity improves outcomes. Curiosity improves learning.