ChatGPT

# A family guide to help teens use AI responsibly

The AI models that power ChatGPT are an important new technology that can help people express creativity, learn something new, and create new opportunities. Understanding how it works can help you understand how to use it more thoughtfully, safely, and confidently.

# How AI works

## AI models learn from [huge amounts of information](#)

Large language models (also known as LLMs, like the models that power ChatGPT) are trained by reading huge amounts of text - like publicly available websites - so they can learn patterns in language. During training, the model guesses the next word in a sentence, gets feedback when it's wrong, and slowly improves through billions of examples. Over time, it learns grammar, information about the world, and how to analyze patterns in data. For example, if it sees the beginning of a sentence like "Peanut butter and…," it learns that "jelly" is a likely continuation based on patterns it has seen before. Because of this training, AI can generate responses that sound natural, relevant, and tailored to a user's question. It isn't pulling a stored answer from a database—it's generating language that fits the context of the conversation.

## Ask the same question and get two different answers

ChatGPT doesn't return one fixed result the way a search engine does. It generates responses based on patterns and probabilities, and there can be more than one reasonable way to respond. The goal is that the answers are helpful and consistent on the big points, even if the wording, examples, or structure changes. If you need consistency, you can ask for it directly in your prompt. For example: "Give me three options and pick the best one using the same criteria each time," or "Use the same format as you did in your last response; that was really helpful."

## What AI is especially good at

When you're using ChatGPT or another large language model, you might notice answers that include links or references. This is more likely when the question depends on recent or changing information, or when you explicitly ask for sources. In those moments, search can help the model check up-to-date details or point you to sources you can verify yourself. It doesn't happen in every conversation because many questions don't require the web, and sometimes the best response is based on explanation, brainstorming, or the information already in your chat. If you want a more thorough, source-based answer, you can use tools like [ChatGPT Search](#) or [Deep Research](#) (if it's available on your account). In ChatGPT, open the tools menu in the message composer and select Deep Research, then type your question (you'll also have the option to attach files for context). Deep Research is designed for more in-depth, multi-step questions and will include citations or links you can review.

## AI can make things up

Even when ChatGPT provides sources, it can still make mistakes - like misunderstanding what a source says, mixing details from different places, misquoting, or filling in gaps with something that sounds plausible. These mistakes are often called hallucinations: the model generates a response that seems confident and fluent but isn't actually grounded in verified information. Hallucinations are more likely when a question is ambiguous, when details are very complex or specific, or when the answer depends on more recent information. That's why it's important to use critical thinking and double-check claims. If links are included, read the sources directly and make sure they really support the answer—especially for quotes, statistics, names, and anything high-stakes. You can see some examples of hypothetical hallucinations below, with explanations for why. Understanding the "why" can help you catch similar mistakes when using AI tools.

| User | "Who started the 'NPC TikTok' trend?" | "How many short-answer questions are on the AP US History exam this year?" | "What's the best way to study to get straight A's?" |
|---|---|---|---|
| AI | "Charli D'Amelio first made the trend popular." | "There are 4 short-answer questions." | "The best and most effective way to guarantee straight A's is to study for two hours every night with flashcards. This method works for everyone and always leads to top grades." |
| Reality | It wasn't her, but the model generated a big name associated with TikTok. | AP formats change. If the model's training data predates the update, it might confidently give the old number. | There is no single guaranteed study method that works for everyone, learning styles vary, courses differ, and grades depend on many factors. The model generates a response suggesting there's one right answer and makes it sound universal and certain. |

## Make AI work for you

While the way that AI tools are built means that they have some vulnerabilities, AI models are also very good at explaining why they did what they did and what they did wrong. And tools from OpenAI, like ChatGPT Search and Deep Research, can access more recent information from the internet to inform answers. You should always check sources and verify things like quotes, technical information or references to external documents.

# How to responsibly use AI

### Use AI as a partner, not a replacement

AI is great at generating ideas quickly, explaining concepts in different ways, and helping you organize your thoughts. But it doesn't have your life experience, relationships, or full context - and sometimes it can sound confident even when it's mistaken. Humans and AI have different strengths, and that's the point. AI can help you understand information more quickly, but you are the one who decides what's true, what's fair, what's appropriate, and what you actually believe.

So, if you're writing an essay, AI might help organize your ideas or suggest outlines, but your thoughts, voice, and opinions still need to lead. Similarly, if you wake up with a headache, ChatGPT can help you prepare for a doctor's visit by summarizing symptoms or making a list of questions. But it isn't a doctor, it cannot offer you a medical diagnosis, and it shouldn't be your final source for medical advice.

### AI can help you think—but it can't truly support you emotionally

Using AI safely isn't just about accuracy, it's also about knowing when human judgment and care matter most, particularly when talking to AI models about things that are emotional or sensitive. OpenAI continuously works to make its models safe – for example, by building features that help detect emotional distress, prompting users to take breaks, and guiding people to trusted resources when needed. But even with these safeguards, ChatGPT can't truly understand your life the way a person can—and it isn't a substitute for professional help.

AI can sound confident and feel more personal than previous technologies. That's because it's trained on patterns in human language and generates responses by predicting the next words that are most likely to fit what you asked. The result can feel natural—sometimes even like ChatGPT "gets" you – making it easier to believe what it says or to overrely on it for support. It's important to remember that ChatGPT is still an AI tool; it can get things wrong and should be used judiciously, not as the sole or final source of truth.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, unsafe, or like you need emotional support or guidance, it's important to reach out to people in your life - friends, family, a trusted adult, a school counselor, or a mental health professional. AI can help you think, learn, and put your thoughts into words, but it can't replace human care, connection, or expertise. If something feels urgent, don't wait for an AI response, *get help from a real person right away.*

## Fact check and slow down

Just as with any online information, it's important to fact-check, question what you see, and use your critical thinking skills. You can do this by cross-checking facts using ChatGPT's search functionality or trusted websites. It's always helpful to pause and ask yourself where ChatGPT's information came from and to be cautious if there are no clear sources. You can also ask ChatGPT to double-check itself ("Are you sure?" "Can you cite sources?") and then verify details elsewhere.

## Use AI to build your AI skills

How you ask a question shapes the answer you get. The more specific, clear, and thoughtful your prompt is, the more helpful the response usually becomes. [Practicing good prompt-writing](#) is like leveling up your search skills. Instead of asking, "Help me with homework," try "Explain how photosynthesis works like you're talking to a 9th grader who loves sports." The second prompt gives AI more to work with, and gives you a better answer. You can also use [study mode](#) to get step-by-step instructions to your questions.

## Check out your Data Controls to make choices about your data

AI allows for personalized learning and experiences tailored to your needs, but it's important to remember how your information is used and the choices you have to control it. In settings, you can: customize your experience with Memory, decide if your chats are used to improve our models for everyone, export your chat history, and delete or archive your chats. Choose what feels right to you.

Visit our [Help Center](#) and [Privacy Portal](#) to learn more about privacy in OpenAI's products and how to adjust your settings.

We hope this guide helps you understand how ChatGPT works and how to use it responsibly. AI is changing quickly, and we'll keep updating our approaches and resources as we learn.