The plain English AI starter kit

A take-home reference card from the Aptem AI and Change webinar series

How to use: Keep this on your desk while you experiment. Side 1 is the glossary. Side 2 is the prompt shape worksheet you bring to webinar 3.

Term	Definition
Foundations	
Artificial intelligence (AI)	Broad label for software that performs tasks normally requiring human judgement.
Machine learning	The branch of AI where systems learn patterns from data rather than follow fixed rules.
Deep learning (neural network)	Machine learning using many layers of artificial neurons. Powers today's generative AI under the hood.
Generative AI	AI that produces new content (text, images, audio) rather than classifying existing input.
Classification AI	AI that sorts inputs into categories: spam or not, fraud or not. The older mainstream type, predating generative AI.
Large language model (LLM)	The engine behind chat tools: a statistical model of language trained on huge text volumes.
Foundation model	A general-purpose model trained at scale and then adapted for specific tasks.
Open vs closed model	Open-weight models you can run yourself (Llama, DeepSeek). Closed models you can only reach through the vendor (GPT, Claude, Gemini).
How models work	
Training data	The material a model learnt from. Quality and scope shape what it can do.
Parameters	Internal numbers a model adjusts during training. More is not always better.
Token	The unit a model reads and writes (roughly a syllable or short word). Limits and pricing count tokens.
Context window	The amount of text a model can hold in view at once. Bigger means more material per go.
Inference	What the model does when you use it: running, not learning. Training happens once; inference happens every prompt.
Multimodal	A model that handles more than one kind of input or output: text, image, audio, video.
How you use it	
Prompt	What you write to the model. The input that shapes the output.
System prompt / user prompt	The system prompt sets the rules and persona; the user prompt is your specific request.
Meta-prompting	Asking the AI to help you write your prompt. Useful for complex or unfamiliar tasks.
Zero-shot / few-shot	Zero-shot: you ask with no examples. Few-shot: you give two or three examples to steer style or format.
Custom assistant	A saved, reusable setup for a recurring task. Custom GPTs, Projects, Copilot agents.
Connector	A link that lets the AI read or write in another system (Drive, SharePoint, Slack).
Agent	AI that takes actions, not just produces words. Reads, writes, clicks, schedules.
Sandbox	A contained space where the AI can act without affecting the rest of your system.
Going deeper	
Fine-tuning	An extra round of training to specialise a general model for a particular task or tone.
Retrieval-augmented generation (RAG)	The model looks up relevant documents at query time and uses them to answer. Reduces hallucination.
Grounding	Anchoring answers in verified sources so the model does not rely on memory alone.
Chain-of-thought (reasoning)	The model works through its reasoning before answering. Newer "thinking" models do this automatically.
MCP (Model Context Protocol)	An open standard for letting AI connect to tools, data and apps. Think USB-C for AI.
Risks and controls	
Hallucination	The model confidently producing something that is not true. The single biggest risk in plain-English use.
Bias	Unwanted patterns carried in from training data. Matters most for decisions about people.
Prompt injection	A third party hiding instructions in a document or web page that hijack the model's behaviour.
Guardrails	Rules and filters that constrain what the model will do, say, or touch.
Deepfake	AI-generated audio, video or images made to look like a real person. Matters for verification and safeguarding.
Alignment	The ongoing work of making models behave the way developers and users intend.
Language confusions	
Model vs product	GPT-5 is a model; ChatGPT is the product. Claude Opus 4.7 is a model; Claude the app is the product.
Copilot	Microsoft's family name. Consumer Copilot, Copilot Pro, Microsoft 365 Copilot, GitHub Copilot, Copilot Studio. Same name, different products.

Try it this week

The prompt shape worksheet, the risk test, two places to start

How to use: Write one line in each box. Apply it to the task you picked in webinar 1's friction backlog. Bring your completed worksheet to webinar 3.

The prompt shape (worksheet)

Five parts said aloud as a sentence. That is what a good prompt looks like.

Step 1 Context

Role for the AI first. Then who you are, who it's for, why it matters.

Example. *You are an experienced curriculum designer. I run curriculum for a training provider; my team needs a briefing before Monday's design meeting.*

Step 2 Task

One verb, one deliverable.

Example. *Summarise this Skills England standard for the curriculum design team.*

Step 3 Materials

What you're giving it: attach, paste, link.

Example. *PDF attached: the standard. Plus our current curriculum outline.*

Step 4 Shape

Format, length, tone, structure.

Example. *One A4 page. Plain English. Three sections: what's changed, what's new, what's implied.*

Step 5 Check

Who sees it, what decision it drives, worst case if wrong.

Example. *Goes to the curriculum team. Drives design decisions for next term. Worst case: we design against the old standard.*

The three-question risk test

1. Who sees the output?
2. What decision does it drive?
3. What's the worst case if it's wrong?

Same three questions as the check line of the prompt shape. Ask them at the end of every prompt.

Two places to start on Monday

Summarise a Skills England standard into a staff briefing.
Best fit: Claude (long context). *Regime:* chat.

Turn a Teams meeting into actions for a manager who wasn't there.
Best fit: Microsoft 365 Copilot. *Regime:* product.

Start with friction you already feel. Start narrow, specific, supervised. Measure one win before scaling.

Run your prompt. Measure one win. Pick the next task. Repeat.

Next in the series: the critical distinction: understanding the opportunity of different AI products. Thursday 28 May 2026, 11.00 to 11.45.