

The Plain-English AI Worksheet

Half the difficulty with AI is that the words are used to impress. This turns vague impressiveness into specific claims you can actually judge.

Part 1. A plain-english glossary

The words are used loosely and often to impress. Here they are in plain terms. They are overlapping slices of one idea, not distinct magic.

Term	What it actually means
AI	Software doing tasks we would normally think need human judgement. An umbrella, not one thing.
Machine learning	Systems that learn patterns from examples rather than following written rules.
Generative AI	AI that produces new content: text, images, audio. A branch of machine learning.
Agentic AI	AI that takes actions toward a goal across steps, not just producing an output.
Large language model	The model behind most chatbots: trained on huge text to predict and produce language.
AI search	Search that understands a question and generates an answer, rather than listing links.
Narrow vs general	Everything usable today is narrow: good at specific tasks. General AI does not yet exist.

Part 2. Four questions for any 'AI solution'

Ask these whenever someone pitches you AI. Write their answers next to each. Vague answers are the answer.

What specific task does it do?

Not 'AI'. The actual job, in one plain sentence.

—

—

What is it trained on?

Whose data, how much, how relevant to your case.

—

—

How do you know when it is wrong?

There must be a way to catch confident errors.

—

Who is accountable when it is?

A named human owns the decision, not the model.

The one fact to keep in the room. Today's AI matches patterns; it does not understand. Its fluency is unrelated to its accuracy. So it can be confidently wrong, and the confident tone will not warn you. Anyone selling it as understanding or thinking is confused or selling. Judge the specific task, the data, the error-checking, and the accountability, not the impressiveness.