

The AI Bootcamp

24

Your Prompt Playbook

In this chapter you'll learn

The 3 or 4 jobs that earn a written approach, the 5 lines of a play, and a review that stops it fossilising

The AI Bootcamp

THE PROBLEM

Most AI education is a pile of disconnected tips. A LinkedIn carousel here, a YouTube tutorial there, a \$2,000 cohort course that goes out of date before the refund window closes. None of it is built to be read in order, so nothing compounds. You finish twelve videos and can recite twelve facts, not perform one new skill.

THE FIX

The AI Bootcamp is built the other way. 90 skills, packed 2 to 3 per chapter, 36 chapters, 3 tracks. Every chapter states what it needs from you and what it hands to the chapter after it, so skill 47 only works because skill 12 already landed. Read it in order and by the end you are not collecting facts about AI, you are running work through it.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

We built this because we kept meeting smart people who felt behind on AI for no reason other than nobody had organized the material for them.

This book does not assume you are technical, and it does not water anything down either. Every chapter earns its place: a real skill, a real exercise, a one-page companion you can flip back to in month three when you have forgotten the details but still need the answer.

If a chapter loses you, or a chapter changes how you work, I want to hear about it either way.

Kris

Editor, AI Central

Write to me at editor@thecentral.ai

THE 3 TRACKS

AI 101

Get running

Pick a tool, set it up, write a clear instruction, use it safely at work.

AI 202

Prompt properly

The framework behind every good instruction, and catching AI when it is wrong.

AI 303

Build without watching it

Connect AI to your tools, and automations that run while you are not looking.

IN THIS LESSON YOU'LL LEARN

By the end of this chapter you will have a document with your recurring jobs listed, a written approach for the 3 or 4 that matter most, a check on each one that tells you when it is finished, and a rule for when to revise a play rather than letting it quietly go out of date.

You have eleven chapters of technique behind you and, if Chapter 17 landed, a handful of templates. What you still do not have is an answer to the question that actually arrives on a Tuesday afternoon: this thing has landed on my desk, what do I do with it. AI 101 closed by giving you a rhythm. This track closes by giving you a document.

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TOPICS REQUIRED

Chapters 13 to 23, and in particular the templates you wrote in Chapter 17, the quality bar you set in Chapter 22, and the failure taxonomy from Chapter 23. You also need your calendar and your sent mail from the last 8 weeks, open, before you start the exercises.

AFTER THIS CHAPTER

Chapter 25 opens AI 303 and assumes you have written down at least one job in enough detail that somebody else could run it. That written job is what the next track acts on.

24.1 The unit of a playbook is a job, not a prompt

Chapter 17 gave you templates for tasks you repeat. This chapter is a level up from that: which of your recurring jobs deserve a documented approach, and how the pieces of this track combine into one.

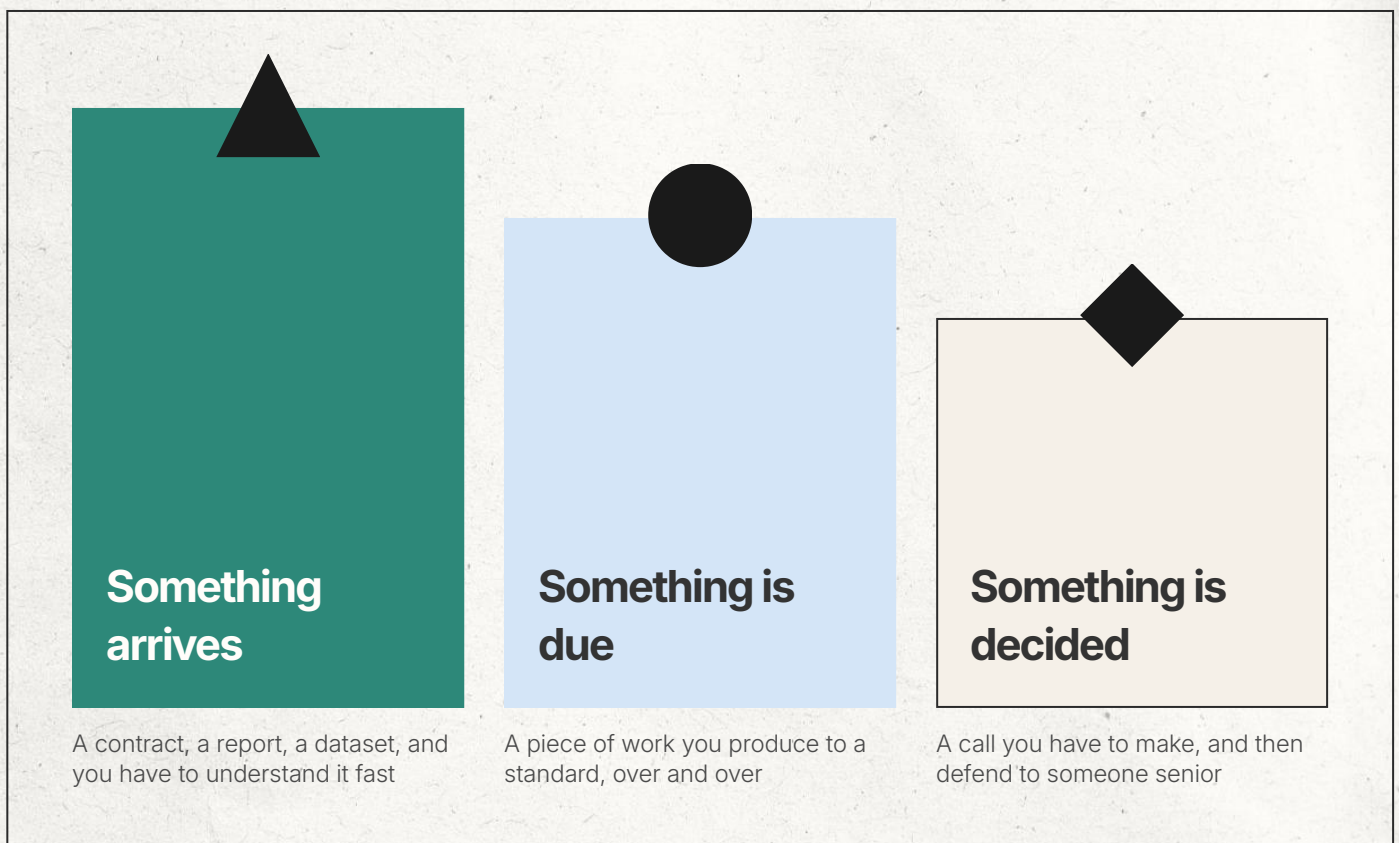


Fig 24.1 Almost every recurring job a senior professional has is one of these 3. The bar heights are visual rhythm, not a ranking: which kind dominates your week is personal, and it tells you which of the last eleven chapters you will lean on hardest.

24.1

The test. It happened at least 3 times last quarter, a bad version costs you real time or credibility, and you rebuild the approach from scratch each time. All 3, or it does not earn a page.

Three or four. Not twelve. A playbook with twelve plays is a document nobody opens, and the first person to stop opening it is you.

Where to look. Sent mail and last quarter's calendar. Not memory: memory over-reports the interesting work and forgets the work you actually repeat.

Here is the problem this chapter exists to fix. You now know a great deal. You have a framework, examples, decomposition, a way into long documents, a way to handle numbers without being lied to, and a taxonomy of how the thing fails. What you do not have is any answer to which of those to reach for when a 60-page supplier contract lands and you have two hours before the call. So you improvise, which means the quality of your work depends on how tired you are at 3pm.

The fix is to stop organising what you know by technique and start organising it by job. A prompt answers a question. A template, the Chapter 17 kind, does one task with different inputs. A play is bigger than both: it is the whole approach to a job that keeps arriving, from the moment it lands to the moment you are willing to send it.

Look at your recurring work and you will find it sorts into 3 kinds. Something arrives that you have to understand: a contract, a board pack, a customer research file, an analyst report. Something is due that you have to produce to a standard: the monthly update, the deal review, the recruiting brief. And something has to be decided and then defended to a person who will push back. Most professionals are heavier on one of the three than they think.

Not every recurring job earns a page, and the third part of the test is the part that does the real work. Plenty of things you do weekly you already do fluently, in a groove, without rebuilding anything. Those need nothing from you. The jobs worth writing down are the ones where you start from a blank screen every single time even though you have done it eleven times before, because that blankness is the tax you are paying, and it is the only tax a playbook actually removes.

Do not do this from memory. Memory hands you the unusual month and hides the ordinary one. Open your sent mail and your calendar for the last 8 weeks instead, and read them as a stranger would, looking only for the thing that appears again and again. Almost everyone is surprised by at least one entry on that list, and the surprise is usually the highest-value play in the book.

Go and make the list now, before you read the rest of this chapter. Then cut it to 3 or 4. You are not being asked to document your job. You are being asked to name the small number of jobs where writing it down once will pay you back every month for a year.

24.2

One page per job, and 5 lines on it

A play is not a longer prompt. It is the small amount of thinking you do every time this job arrives, written down once, so that you never have to do it while tired.

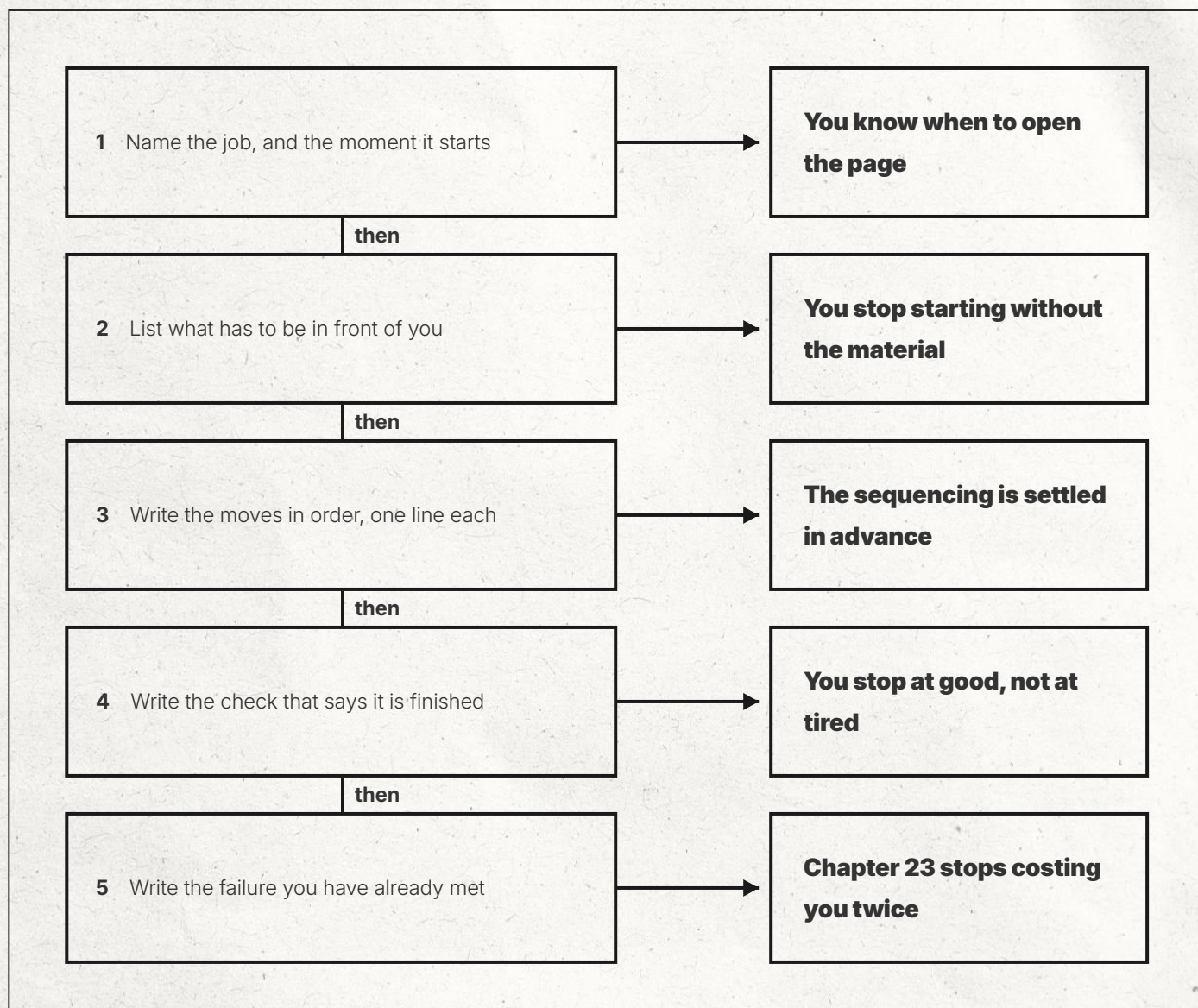


Fig 24.2 The 5 lines, in the order they are easiest to write. Line 4 is the one almost everybody leaves off, and it is the line that decides whether the play saves you any time at all.

24.2

The trigger. Write it as a moment, not a topic. "A supplier proposal lands in my inbox" beats "supplier analysis", because only one of those tells you when to act.

The moves. Two or three, usually. If a play needs eight, it is two plays, and Chapter 16 already explained why one giant instruction fails.

The check. Your Chapter 22 quality bar, rewritten as a question you can answer yes or no in under a minute.

A play is one page, and 5 lines fill it. None of those lines is a prompt. The prompts live in the library you built in Chapter 17, and the play is what tells you which ones to take down and in what order.

Start with the trigger, and write it as a moment rather than a subject. "When a supplier proposal arrives and I have to recommend yes or no" is a trigger. "Supplier analysis" is a filing label, and a filing label will not occur to you at the moment you need it. This is the same naming discipline Chapter 17 applied to templates, one level up.

The second line is what has to be in front of you before you start, and it is duller and more useful than it sounds. Almost every bad run of a job begins with starting it without the thing you needed: last year's version, the actual numbers rather than the summary of them, the policy you are supposed to be checking against. Write the list once. Chapter 7 covered getting your own material in front of the assistant, and Chapter 9 covered what you are allowed to put there, so this line inherits both.

Then the moves, one line each, in order. This is where the track assembles. A move might be "pull the commitments out of the document", which is Chapter 18's work. It might be "check every figure separately", which is Chapter 19's, for the reasons Chapter 19 gave. It might be "argue the opposite case and see what survives", which is Chapter 21. Each move can point at a template you already wrote, so the play stays short: two or three lines, not a procedure manual.

The fourth line is the check, and it is the one people leave off. Take the quality bar you set in Chapter 22 and write it as a question with a yes or no answer: could a reader answer the 3 questions my CFO always asks, from this page alone. Without that line you are finished when you run out of energy, which is not the same thing as finished, and it is the single largest source of work that has to be redone.

The last line is the failure you have already met on this specific job. Chapter 23 gave you the general taxonomy; a play carries only the one that has actually bitten you here. On contracts it is usually invented specificity, a clause number that reads perfectly and is not in the document. On anything with a table in it, it is arithmetic done inside prose. One line, naming it and naming the 30 seconds that catches it. Write the first play now, for whatever sits at the top of the list you made in 24.1.

24.3 A recipe covers one task, a play covers a class of work

The difference between the two is not length. It is whether the thing still works on an input you were not thinking about when you wrote it.

A recipe	A play
<p>One task, one prompt, one good result, kept because it worked on Thursday.</p> <p>TRAITS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Written from a single instance, while it was still fresh · Quietly assumes the next input looks like that one · Silent about what to do when the answer comes back wrong <div> <div> <p>PROS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Takes a minute to write, which is why people do it + Reproduces one good day almost exactly </div> <div> <p>CONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Breaks the first time the input arrives in a different shape – Gives you no way to tell a good run from a bad one </div> </div>	<p>A class of work: a trigger, the material, several moves, a check, and a failure you have already met.</p> <p>TRAITS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Written from 2 or 3 instances that genuinely differed · Names the kind of material, never one specific document · Says what going wrong looks like, and what to do about it <div> <div> <p>PROS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Holds when the next case arrives in a shape you did not predict + Someone else can run it and land on your standard, not theirs </div> <div> <p>CONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Needs a second and third run before you can trust it – Tempting to over-write, at which point nobody reads it again </div> </div>

Fig 24.3 Both get written after something goes well. Only one survives contact with the next case. The test: hand it to a competent colleague along with a file you have never seen, and see whether they come back with your standard or their own.

24.3

Two instances, minimum.

You cannot see the shape of a job from one run. The second run is where what repeats separates from what was accidental.

Name the class. "Board papers", not "the March board paper". The name is what tells you next month whether this new thing belongs here.

Not every move is AI. A play can contain "call the account manager and ask". Writing that step down is what stops you reaching for the assistant on the one part it cannot do.

Here is a whole play, written out, so you can see the assembly. The job: a supplier proposal arrives and you have to recommend yes or no to the executive team inside two days. It happens 5 or 6 times a year, it always matters, and you have always started it from nothing.

The trigger is the proposal landing. The material is the proposal itself, the incumbent contract, and the 3 numbers your finance director will ask about, all in front of you before anything starts. That second line alone kills the most common bad version of this job, which is the one where you get 40 minutes in and discover you were reading an out-of-date pricing annex.

Then 3 moves. Pull out what the supplier is actually committing to, what is conditional, and what is simply absent, working from the document rather than from the assistant's general knowledge of supplier contracts, which is Chapter 18's discipline. Check every figure and every date separately, out of the prose, because Chapter 19 was specific about where arithmetic goes quietly wrong. Then make it argue against your own emerging recommendation and see which objection you cannot answer, which is Chapter 21, and which is the move most people skip because by then they have decided.

The check: could someone read my one page and answer the 3 questions the executive team always asks. Yes or no, in under a minute, from Chapter 22's bar. And the known failure, one line: it invents clause numbers that read perfectly, so every clause reference gets matched against the document before this leaves my desk.

Read that back and notice what has happened. Chapters 18, 19, 21, 22 and 23 have stopped being 5 techniques you might remember to use and become 5 lines you will actually perform, in order, because they are written on the page in front of you. That is the entire trick of a playbook, and it is why it is worth an afternoon. Notice also that one move in a real version of this play is not an AI move at all: at some point you telephone the account manager. Write that step in. A play that pretends every step belongs to the assistant is the fastest way to use the assistant on the one part it is worst at.

The play above is a play and not a recipe for one reason: it was written after the second time, when a proposal arrived structured completely differently and the original approach fell apart. Do the same. Write your first version now, run it on the next real case, and expect to change it. What you are looking for on the second run is the sentence you had to add, because that sentence was always part of the job and you had never said it out loud.

24.4 A playbook that never changes is a fossil

You cannot feel whether any of this is working. That is not a character flaw, it is a measured finding, and it is the reason a play carries a date and a line of evidence rather than your confidence.

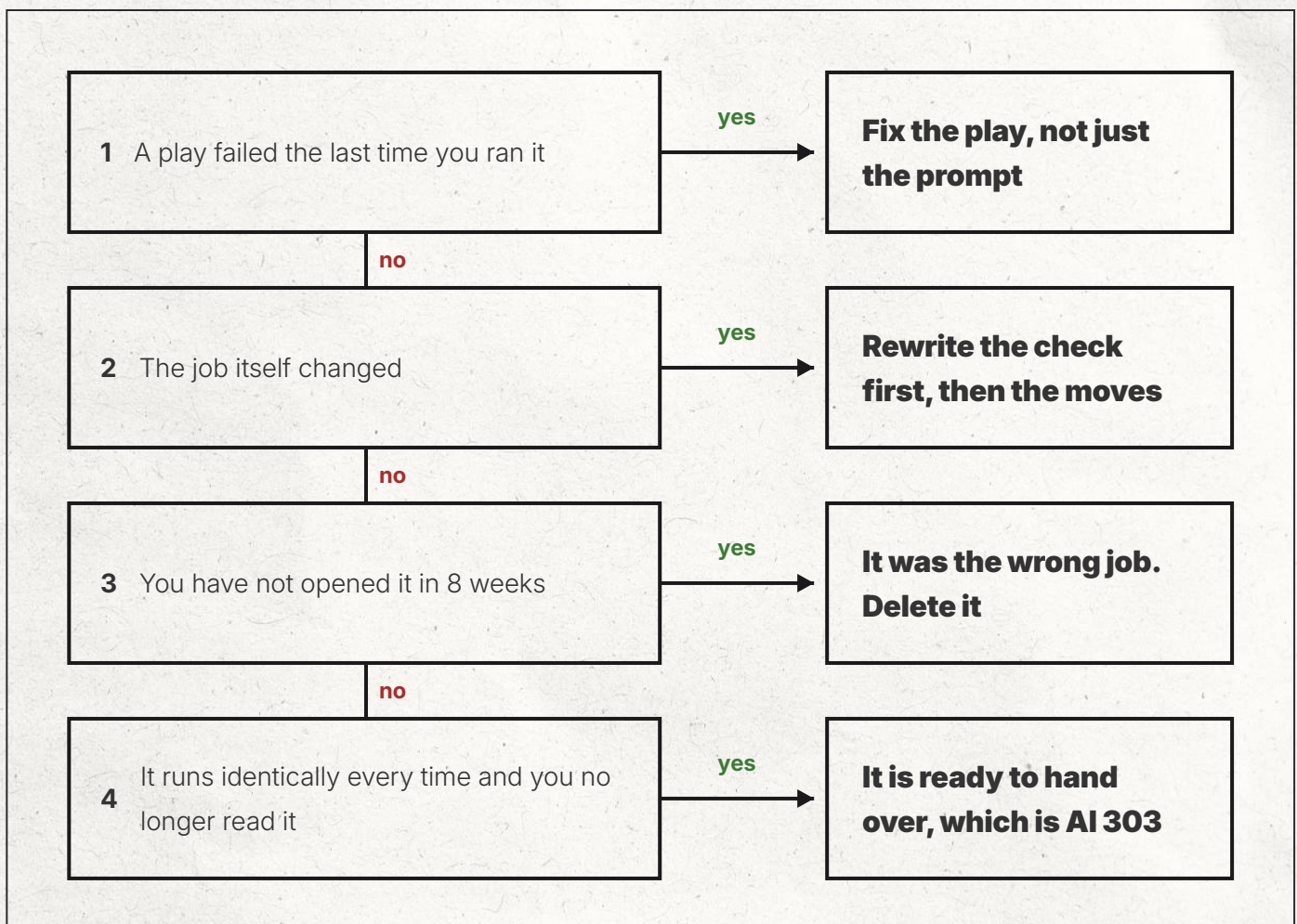


Fig 24.4 Read down until a line is true, and do what it says. Most maintenance is a 2-minute edit. The last line is the one this whole track has been building towards.

24.4

Date every play. A play with no date is a claim with no evidence. In 6 months you will not remember whether it predates the tool you now use.

One line of proof. What it produced the last time you ran it. This is the only defence against keeping a play out of affection.

Prune harder than you add.

Four plays you actually run beat twelve you have. A playbook grows by deletion more than by writing.

Start with the uncomfortable part. In 2025 a research group ran a careful trial with 16 experienced open-source developers across 246 real tasks on codebases they had worked on for years. Before starting, the developers expected AI tools to make them about 24% faster. Measured, they were 19% slower. Afterwards, having done the work, they still believed they had been roughly 20% faster. Those are software developers on their own repositories and none of it transfers directly to your inbox. What does transfer is the size of the gap between how it felt and what happened, in people who were experts at the underlying work.

Which is why a play carries a date and one line saying what it produced the last time you ran it. Not as bureaucracy: as the only correction available to you. And this is deliberately not a weekly ritual. A review you schedule is a review you cancel. The 4 triggers in the figure are the whole maintenance regime, and they fire when something happens rather than when a calendar says so.

Now the encouraging part, which is more specific than the usual claims. One of the most-cited studies of people using an AI assistant on real work, run across a large customer support operation, found productivity up 14% on average, roughly 34% for the least experienced staff, and close to nothing for the most experienced. The mechanism the authors describe is the interesting bit for you: the tool spread the working approach of the best performers to people who did not have one. Read that again with your playbook in your hand. Writing down how you do a job well, so it runs the same way on a bad Thursday, is you doing that for yourself.

And the sober counterweight, because this book does not sell. Economists tracking the Danish labour market found that 2 years after ChatGPT launched, with adoption widespread and workers reporting real time savings, there were precise nulls on earnings and recorded hours, with any effect ruled out above 2%. The work visibly reorganised. The measured payoff did not show up where everyone expected it. Adoption is not benefit. Being able to name exactly what you now do differently, and check whether it held, is the only version of this that survives contact with a serious question from your boss.

There is one more thing worth knowing before you turn the page, because it names where this is all going. Anthropic publishes a periodic index of how its assistant is actually used, and in the report covering the 8 months to August 2025 the share of consumer conversations it classes as directive, meaning the person hands over a whole task rather than working through it turn by turn, rose from 27% to 39%. That is one company's data on one assistant, and it describes what people do rather than proving that it works. But the direction is unmistakable, and it is the direction this book now takes.

Everything in the 24 chapters behind you has had you present for every turn. You typed, it answered, you judged, you corrected. From Chapter 25 that stops being the only mode: the next track is about work that happens while you are somewhere else. The reason this chapter comes immediately before it is not tidiness. A job can only be handed over once its trigger, its steps and its check exist in writing, because that is what you would have to say out loud to a new hire and it is exactly what you would have to specify to something running unattended. Your playbook is not a souvenir of AI 202. It is the specification AI 303 acts on, and the last line of the figure above is where you will start.

READING ENDS HERE

Everything before was reading. Everything after is doing.

3 exercises, About 20 minutes and one real decision that opens Chapter 25.

Do these before Chapter 25

3 exercises. About 20 minutes

Open your sent mail and your calendar for the last 8 weeks. List every job you did more than twice. Then cross out the ones you already do fluently without rebuilding the approach. What is left is your shortlist, and it should be 3 or 4 long.

Take the job at the top of that shortlist and write the play. Three lines here. Lines 4 and 5, the check and the known failure, go straight into your own file underneath.

<div>THE TRIGGER: THE MOMENT IT STARTS</div>	<div>WHAT HAS TO BE IN FRONT OF YOU</div>	<div>THE MOVES, IN ORDER</div>
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Put today's date on the play. Then mark the one job on your shortlist you would most like to stop sitting through, and write one sentence on what would have to be true for it to run without you. Chapter 25 starts from that sentence.

Chapter 24 on one page

DOES IT EARN A PAGE

Three times last quarter, a real cost when it goes badly, and you rebuild the approach every time. All 3 or it stays off the list. Aim for 3 or 4 plays, never twelve

THE 5 LINES OF A PLAY

The trigger, written as a moment · what must be in front of you · the moves in order, 2 or 3 · the check, as a yes or no question · the failure you have already met here

RECIPE OR PLAY

A recipe was written from one good day and breaks on the next shape of input. A play was written from 2 instances that differed. Test it by handing it to a colleague with a case you have never seen

WHEN TO TOUCH IT

It failed, so fix the play not the prompt · the job changed, so rewrite the check first · 8 weeks unopened, so delete it · it runs without you reading it, so it is ready for AI 303

NEEDED BEFORE CHAPTER 25

The playbook itself, with 3 or 4 plays dated, and one of them marked as the job you would most like to stop sitting through

BRING TO CHAPTER 25

Your playbook, with 3 or 4 plays written and dated, and the one you marked. Chapter 25 works on a job whose steps and check already exist in writing, and that marked play is it.

BOTTOM LINE

You have a written playbook: your recurring jobs named, an approach recorded for the ones that matter, and a rule that keeps it from going stale.

NEXT CHAPTER

What an AI Agent Actually Does

Chapter 25 opens AI 303 with the shift the last 24 chapters have been preparing you for: the difference between an assistant that replies to you and one that takes steps on your behalf. What actually changes, what it buys you, and what it costs you in supervision.

BRING WITH YOU

- ☐ Your playbook, with 3 or 4 plays written and dated
- ☐ The one play you marked: the job you would most like to stop sitting through

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