

The AI Bootcamp

1

What AI actually is, and which one to use

In this chapter you'll learn

One sentence that defines an assistant, the 4 names that matter, and a rule for picking yours

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 A LinkedIn carousel here, a YouTube tutorial there, a \$2,000 cohort course that goes out of date before the refund window closes.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 can explain in one sentence what an AI assistant does and how it differs from a search engine, name the 4 major assistants and one thing that tells each apart, and you'll have picked one to use for the rest of this course.

Many people who join this course have never had one real conversation with AI. Readers describe going from "it felt like too much" to fluent. This chapter is the first step of that shift, and everything else in this course assumes you've made a decision here.

CONTENTS	1.1	An AI assistant is a program you talk to
	1.2	A search engine is not an assistant
	1.3	4 assistants worth knowing by name
	1.4	Don't compare. Pick

TOPICS REQUIRED

None. This is the first chapter of the whole course. What you bring instead is a willingness to make a choice you're allowed to revisit later.

AFTER THIS CHAPTER

Chapter 2 assumes you've made your pick. It walks you through creating an account for the one you chose and shows you the screen you'll return to for the rest of the course.

1.1 An AI assistant is a program you talk to

It reads what you write and writes back a reply built specifically for what you asked. Not a search result, not something pre-written: something generated fresh, every time, for you.

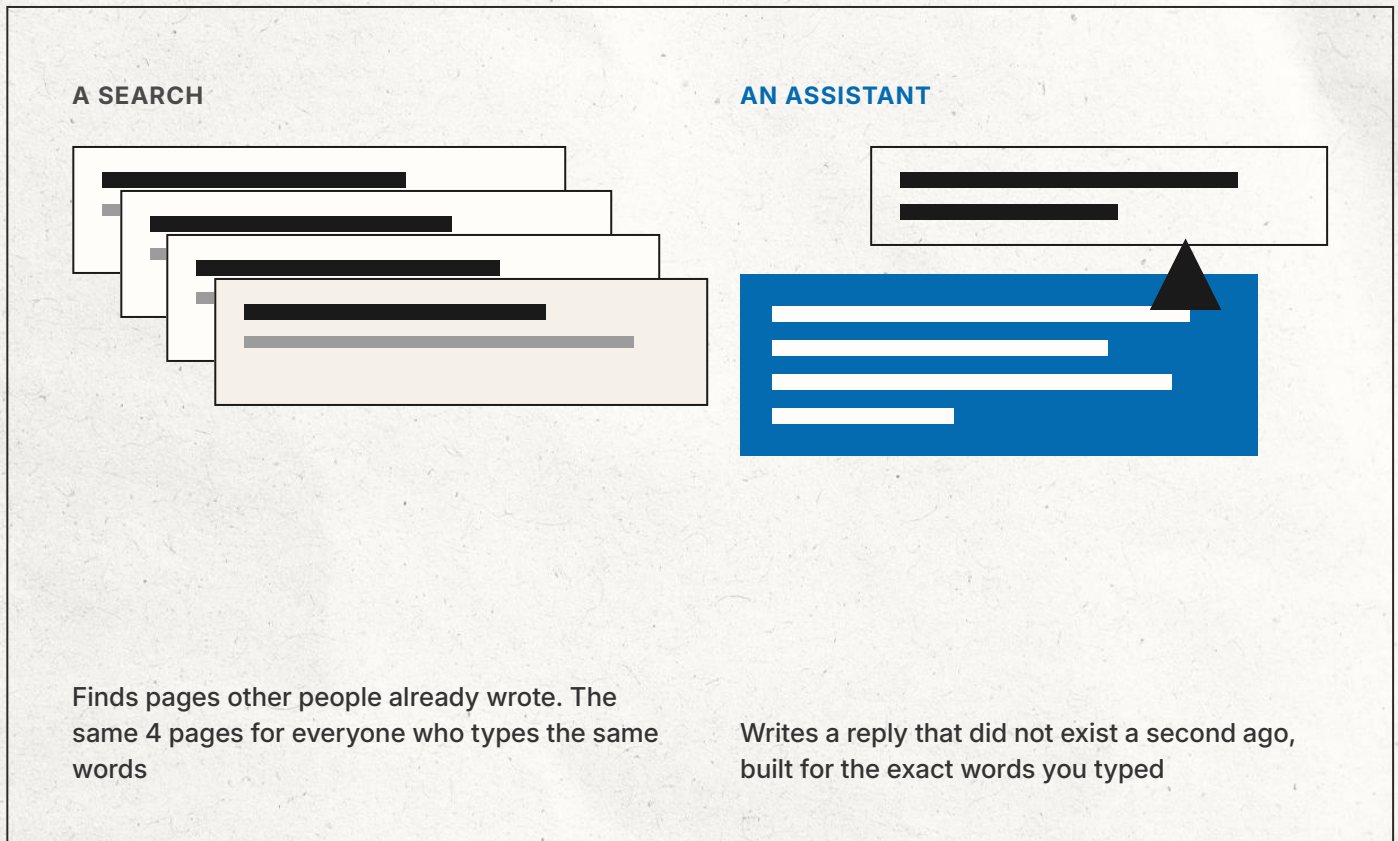


Fig 1.1 A conversation, not a query. The reply below did not exist until the question above was asked.

1.1

Not a search. A search finds pages other people already wrote.

Not a template. A template gives you words chosen before anyone knew your question.

Other names. Chatbot, model, LLM. Same thing. This book says assistant.

In one sentence: it's a program you talk to in plain language that reads what you write and writes back a reply built specifically for what you asked. Not a search result, not something pre-written, but something generated fresh, every time, for you.

That's the whole idea. Everything else in this course is about getting better at the conversation, not learning some separate technical skill.

It helps to remember the two things it is not. A search engine finds pages other people already wrote. A template gives you words someone chose before they knew your question. An assistant does neither: it composes an answer to the exact thing you typed, at the moment you typed it.

You will see people call this a "chatbot," a "model," a "large language model," or an "LLM." For the next 89 lessons those words all point at the same thing you are about to open in a browser tab. This book says assistant.

1.2 A search engine is not an assistant

You already know how to type a question into a box. The problem is that two very different boxes look almost identical, and using the wrong one for the job is where most people's first frustration with AI comes from.

Search engine	AI assistant
A directory. It finds pages other people already wrote and ranks them for you. TRAITS · Returns links, not answers · The same result for everyone who asks · Best when the answer already exists, written down, somewhere PROS + Sources you can open and check yourself + Fast for a known fact or a specific site CONS – You still read and combine the pages yourself – No help when the answer doesn't exist yet, or needs combining	A collaborator. It reads your exact question and writes a new answer built for it. TRAITS · Returns a written answer, not links · A different reply for every different question · Best when something needs combining, explaining or drafting PROS + Skips the step of reading 6 tabs yourself + Adapts tone, length and format to what you asked for CONS – Can sound confident while being wrong, see Chapter 8 – Not a source in itself: check anything that matters

Fig 1.2 Same box, different job. Knowing which one you opened changes what you should expect back, and how much you should trust it.

1.2

The problem. People default to whichever box is already open, out of habit, not fit.

The tell. If the answer already exists on one page, search. If it needs combining or writing, ask an assistant.

Both stay useful. This course is not "assistants replace search." You will still search. You will just also know when not to.

Here is the problem this chapter exists to fix: search engines and AI assistants look like the same thing, a box you type a question into, so people use them interchangeably and then blame the tool when it disappoints them.

They are not the same thing. A search engine is a directory: it finds pages other people already wrote, ranks them by relevance, and hands you a list of links. An AI assistant is a collaborator: it reads the exact words you typed and writes a brand-new answer built for that question, one that did not exist a second earlier.

That difference shows up in what each is actually good at. A search engine is fast and checkable when the answer already exists, written down, on some page: a store's opening hours, a definition, a specific person's title. Its cost is that you still have to open the pages and piece it together yourself.

An assistant is strongest exactly where search is weakest: when the answer doesn't exist anywhere as a single page, because it needs combining, summarizing, drafting or explaining in your specific context. Its cost is that it can sound just as confident when it's wrong as when it's right, which is why Chapter 8 is entirely about catching that.

Neither tool retires the other this year. You will keep searching for facts you can verify on sight. You are here to add a second tool for the much larger category of work that search was never built to do.

1.3 4 assistants worth knowing by name

ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini and Copilot. For the next 89 lessons the differences between them matter far less than actually starting.

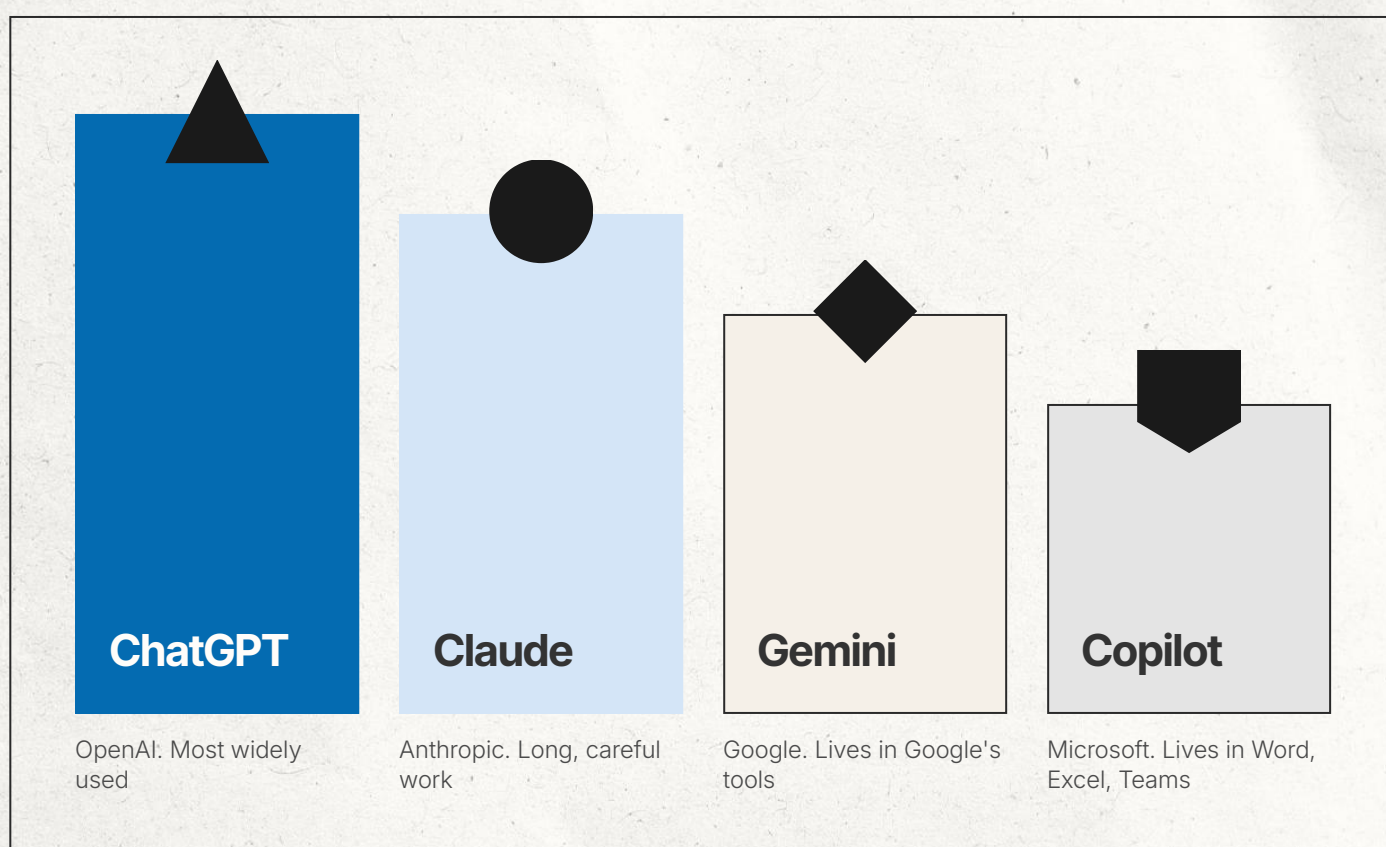


Fig 1.3 Four assistants, doing the same job. The bar heights are just visual rhythm here, not a ranking or a market-share chart - what actually tells them apart is the one line under each name.

1.3

ChatGPT OpenAI. The one most people have heard of.

Claude Anthropic. Careful with long, complex tasks.

Gemini Google. Reaches into Search, Gmail and Docs.

Copilot Microsoft. Reaches into Word, Excel and Teams.

ChatGPT, made by OpenAI, is the one most people have heard of and remains the most widely used, though the gap is narrowing as Claude, Gemini and Copilot grow.

Claude, made by Anthropic, is known for being especially careful and thorough with longer, more complex tasks: writing, analysis, following detailed instructions closely.

Gemini, made by Google, is built into Google's other products, from Search and Gmail to Docs, Sheets and Slides. If your work already lives there, Gemini reaches into it most naturally.

Copilot, made by Microsoft, lives directly inside Word, Excel, Outlook and Teams. If your company already runs on Microsoft 365, Copilot reaches into the apps you're already sitting in, without a separate tab.

Here's the thing worth saying plainly: for the next 89 lessons, the differences between these four matter far less than actually starting. All four can do the vast majority of what this course teaches.

Picking the "best" one is comparison-shopping dressed up as diligence, and it's the single most common reason people delay starting at all.

1.4 Don't compare. Pick

Use this rule instead of a comparison table. Read from the top and stop at the first line that is true for you.

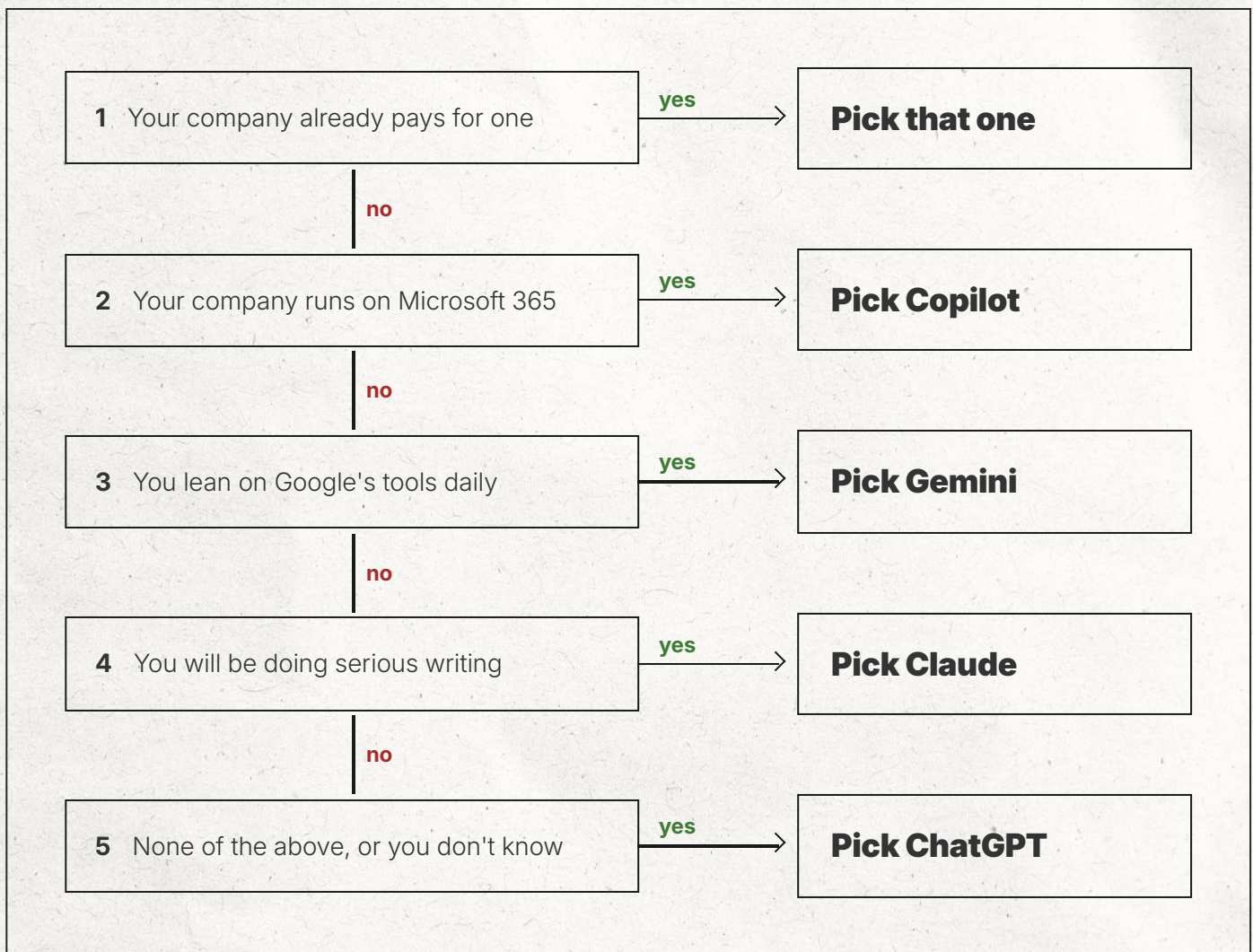


Fig 1.4 The picking rule. The last line catches everyone else: ChatGPT has the most available help if you get stuck, simply because more people use it.

1.4

You can switch. Nothing here locks you in. Accounts are free to open.

You must choose. Chapter 2 needs an answer before you turn the page.

If you don't know, pick ChatGPT. It has the most available help if you get stuck, simply because more people use it. If your company already pays for one of these four, pick that one. If your company runs on Microsoft 365, pick Copilot. If you lean on Google's tools daily, pick Gemini. If you know you'll be doing serious writing, pick Claude.

Whichever you choose, you can switch later. Nothing here locks you in. The accounts are free to open, the conversations are yours, and Chapter 2 works the same way for all four.

But you do have to choose now, because Chapter 2 needs an answer. Write it on the exercises page before you turn it.

READING ENDS HERE

Everything before was reading. Everything after is doing.

3 exercises, About 15 minutes and one real decision that opens Chapter 2.

Do these before Chapter 2

3 exercises. About 15 minutes

Write your own one-sentence definition of an AI assistant, in your own words.

List two moments from this week where you explained something to a colleague, wrote something from scratch, or looked something up. Circle one: that's the task you'll bring to this course.

MOMENT 1

MOMENT 2

THE DECISION

Make your pick. Chapter 2 starts there.

☐**ChatGPT**

Most widely used

☐**Claude**

Best for long, careful work

☐**Gemini**

Best if you live in Google's tools

☐**Copilot**

Best if your company runs Microsoft 365

You can switch later. You cannot skip this.

Chapter 1 on one page

AI ASSISTANT

A program that writes a fresh, custom reply to whatever you type, built for that exact question

SEARCH VS. ASSISTANT

Search finds pages someone else wrote. An assistant writes a new answer combined for you

THE 4 THAT MATTER

ChatGPT (most widely used) · Claude (best for long, careful work) · Gemini (best if you live in Google's tools) · Copilot (best if you live in Microsoft 365)

THE RULE

Don't compare, pick. You can switch later

NEEDED BEFORE CHAPTER 2

Your pick, and one real task from your week

BRING TO CHAPTER 2

Your pick and your task. Chapter 2 opens the assistant you picked, creates the account, and shows you the one screen you'll return to for the rest of the course.

BOTTOM LINE

You can now say what an assistant does and how it differs from search, name the 4 and tell them apart, and you've picked yours.

NEXT CHAPTER

Open your account, and meet the screen you'll live in

Chapter 2 takes the assistant you picked and gets it running: the account, the first screen, and the 3 things on it you will actually use. By the end you will have had your first real conversation.

BRING WITH YOU

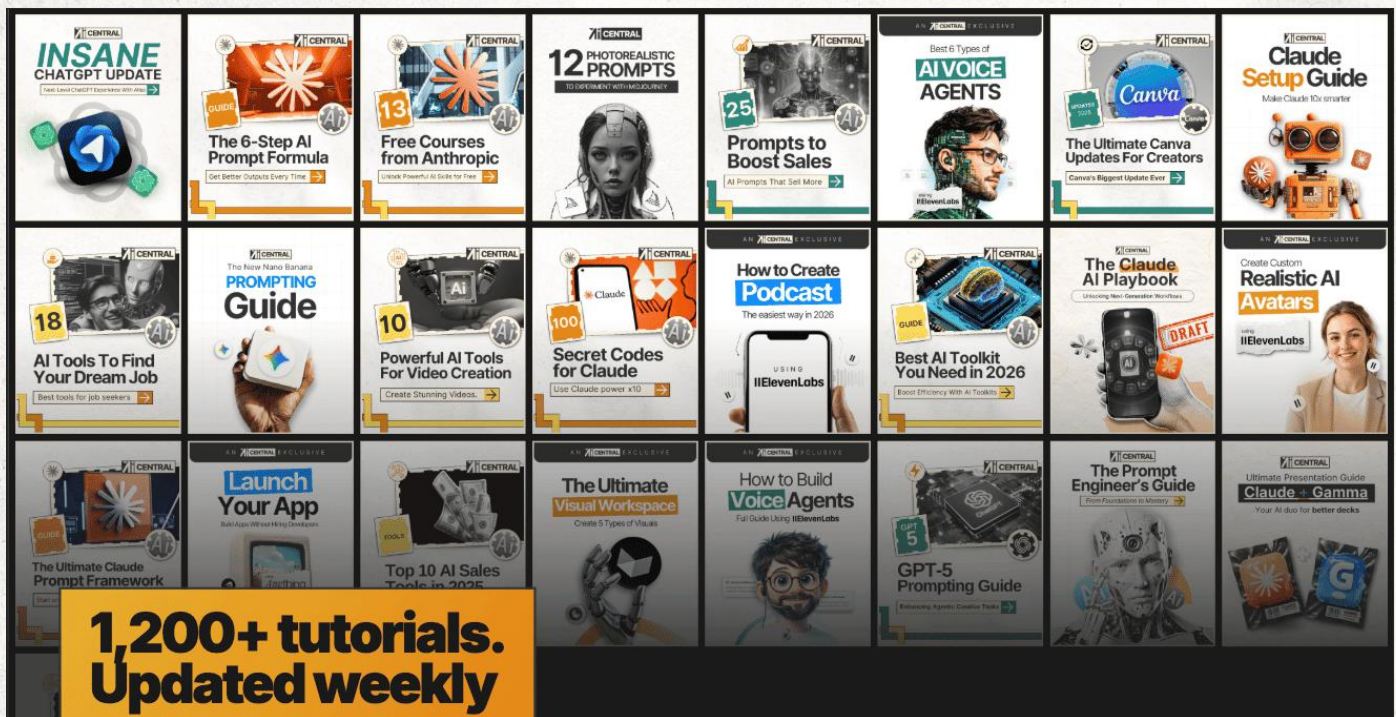
- ☐ The assistant you picked in exercise 3
- ☐ The one real task you circled in exercise 2

GO FURTHER

The Ultimate AI Library

Every guide, prompt pack and playbook AI Central has published, in one place. The reference shelf this course keeps pointing you to.

explore the library



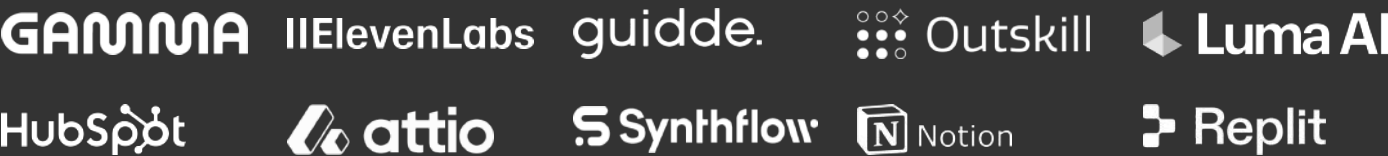
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