

Using AI to Full Advantage

Full Reference Guide · Cher'ere Rally · Wed 9/16

It's a conversation, not a search bar.

This is the deeper reference to go with today's talk — the same ideas, with more room to explain them, plus the comparison tables there wasn't time to put on screen. The one-page handout stays the quick-reference; this is the go-deeper version.

1. Getting Started

The Forklift Analogy

Moving a 2000 pound loaded pallet by hand is hard — most people can't do it alone. A forklift lets them move the pallet, but only because it multiplies strength, not skill; driving the forklift without the skills, they'd likely have a big mess to cleanup.

AI is the same shape of tool: it multiplies what one person can get done, but “driving” it well is a skill — not something that happens automatically just because you have access to it. (That skill is Section 3, below.)

Why This Isn't Search

- Search finds pages you still have to read and piece together. AI has a conversation, remembers what you told it, and does the work — drafts, summaries, comparisons, plans.
- **Unlike search, an AI answer today doesn't have ads embedded in it** — at least not yet. Search results are shaped by who paid for placement; the AI is just trying to answer the question.

2. Free AI Tools

Seven tools worth knowing about — not a ranking, just the landscape. Free tiers are genuinely usable for everything in this guide; no credit card needed to try today.

- **ChatGPT** (OpenAI) — the one most people have already heard of.
- **Copilot** (Microsoft) — already built into Windows/Edge.
- **Gemini** (Google) — integrates with Gmail/Docs/Drive.
- **Claude** (Anthropic) — strong on writing and long documents.
- **Siri / Apple Intelligence** — already on newer iPhone/iPad/Mac, no separate account.
- **Alexa+** — Amazon's AI upgrade to Alexa, likely already on an Echo somewhere.
- **Perplexity** — leans toward real-time research with cited sources.

See the Cost table (Reference Tables, near the end) for exactly what “free” includes and what the first paid step costs for each.

3. How to Talk With AI — the Big Unlock

Reframe it: you're not querying a database, you're delegating to a persona. Give it context up front, get a draft back, then redirect it like you would a person — not restart a new search when the first answer isn't quite right.

- Search habit: 3-4 keywords. AI habit: describe the actual situation, like explaining it to a friend.
- Give it context up front — who it's for, what you already know, any constraints.
- Ask follow-ups. Treat the first answer as a draft, not a final answer.

Before / After, live examples

Search-style: “2020 view winnebago truama eco mode”

Conversational: “I have a Truma continuous water heater in my 2020 View. Can you tell me what Eco does and how that compares to the other modes?”

Search-style: “2020 winnebago view front seat remove”

Conversational: “Hi, I have a Winnebago View 2020. I need to work under the passenger seat. What steps should I do to make this safe and not make any mistakes? Can you build me a step by step plan with any tools or supplies I need.”

A caution worth taking seriously

Giving it context is the whole point — but be careful what context that is. Don't give it, or connect it to, your bank account, passwords, SSN, or other sensitive personal/financial info. Treat it like talking to a helpful stranger: plenty of context about the situation is fine, your actual credentials and account numbers are not.

Privacy is bigger than passwords, too — think before pasting in confidential work documents, private financial or medical records, or sensitive information about other people (family, friends, coworkers). A good rule of thumb: give AI enough context to do the job, but not more sensitive information than the job actually requires.

4. Everyday Wins

- **Trip planning** — “plan a 3-day route from X to Y with 2 dog-friendly campgrounds.”
- **Email/message help** — turn rough notes into a polite email.
- **Recipe from what's on hand.**
- **Explain something confusing** — a bill, a warranty, a manual excerpt.
- **Potluck dish brainstorm** → **save to Notes** — brainstorm what to bring to a potluck, then have it saved straight into a note on your phone.

5. Leveling Up

- Upload a photo or document and ask questions about it — a manual page, a screenshot of an error.
- Ask it to remember preferences within a conversation.
- Voice input on phone apps, for anyone who'd rather talk than type.
- **“Write with Siri”** → **Notes** (iPhone/iPad/Mac, new with iOS/iPadOS/macOS 27) — talk through an idea conversationally with Siri and have the result dropped straight into a note, no app-switching, no copy-paste.

Don't let a multi-day project get lost

The real risk with something that takes more than one sitting isn't losing the AI — it's losing the *plan*. If your progress only lives inside one chat, it's stuck there: hard to find days later, and locked to whichever tool you happened to start in.

- **The fix that works with any tool, any tier:** ask the AI to write out the plan/progress in plain language, save that somewhere outside the chat — a note, a doc, whatever you already use — and update it as you go.
- **The payoff:** that saved plan is portable across AI engines, not just across days. Start in ChatGPT, hit a wall, paste the same saved plan into Gemini or Claude — it can pick up right where the other one left off. No AI remembers you between tools, but a plain note works with all of them.
- **ChatGPT (web):** no formal “export to Word,” but ask directly — “give me this as a file I can download” — and it generates one anyway.

- **Gemini:** reads and writes Google Docs natively (look for the sparkle icon inside Docs) — the smoothest single-tool version of this, since the doc lives in Drive.

6. Stepping Up to Paid

When it's worth it

- You're hitting free-tier limits regularly — e.g. drafting a whole season's worth of trip plans in one sitting.
- You want to hand it a real document to work from — your actual RV manual, an insurance policy, a campground contract.
- You want the most capable model available, not the scaled-down free one.

What paid typically unlocks

Higher/no usage limits, the most capable models, longer memory within a conversation, uploading your own files/photos regularly, image generation.

Getting your money's worth

- Use it for something you'd otherwise do every week or month — not a one-off curiosity.
- Bring it real context — your actual trip, your actual rig, your actual document.
- Keep coming back to the same conversation/thread instead of starting fresh each time.

Note: how strict a free-tier limit is varies by tool and changes often — true for Claude and Gemini today, much less true for ChatGPT's text chat, which went unlimited in August 2026. See the Cost table for current numbers.

7. Going Further (Optional): Version History With Git

If you start using AI to help write things you keep — trip logs, maintenance records, newsletters — eventually you may want a full history of changes, not just a saved note. That's what version control ("git") is: a save history you can rewind, automated instead of manual. It's a niche tool for people who want to go further, not something everyone needs — ask if you're curious.

8. The How-To: Plan → Draft → Execute & Refine → Final

Take a project you've been putting off through these 4 steps. Worked example below: actually learning what the Winnebago OnePlace systems panel does, instead of only ever using it to check tank levels — swap in your own project wherever you see the blanks.

1. Plan

Tell it the real situation like you're explaining it to a friend: the goal, what you already know, any constraints. Ask it to break the project into steps.

Template: "I've been putting off ____ because _____. Here's what I know: _____. Break it into a step-by-step plan I can actually follow."

RV example: "I have a Winnebago View 2020 with the OnePlace systems panel. I've only ever used it to check tank levels — I don't know what else it can do. Break down what OnePlace controls and help me make a plan to actually learn to use it."

2. Draft

Ask for a first pass — a plan, a checklist, an email, whatever the project needs. Treat it as a draft, not a final answer.

RV example: “Give me a checklist of every OnePlace feature to test this weekend, starting with the ones I’m most likely to actually use.”

3. Execute & Refine

Go do the actual thing — AI gets you unstuck, the doing is still yours. Then bring back what happened and keep adjusting in the same conversation, don’t restart from scratch.

RV example: “I made a checklist for starting the generator, but going through it for real I realized it’s actually going to start the thing — and I’ve never done that. Can we review it together so I know it’s right before I go ahead?”

RV example: “I went through the checklist and started it — it ran, but sounded rough for the first minute before smoothing out. What’s next?”

4. Final

Confirm it’s actually done to your standard. Note what worked so next time is faster.

RV example: “I’ve got it figured out — summarize in a doc what each OnePlace screen does in plain language so I have a reference for next time.”

Keep the plan somewhere outside the chat so it survives if days go by, and so it’s portable across AI tools — see Section 5.

9. The Most Important Rule: AI Can Be Wrong

AI can produce an answer that sounds confident, detailed, and professional while still being incorrect. Treat a useful answer as a starting point, not proof that something is true.

Why this happens

AI generates responses from patterns in information and the conversation. It doesn’t have a built-in guarantee that every statement is factual, current, or appropriate to your specific situation.

Things to watch for

Misunderstood questions, invented facts or sources, outdated information, incorrect part numbers or procedures, and answers that leave out an important exception.

A good habit

For anything that matters, ask: “How confident are you? What should I verify? What sources should I check?” If the decision carries real risk or cost, verify it independently — don’t stop at one confident-sounding answer.

10. A Simple Formula for Better Requests

Goal + Context + Constraints + Desired result. This is Section 3’s “give it context” advice turned into a checklist you can run through before hitting send.

Part	What to tell AI	Example
Goal	What you’re trying to accomplish	Plan a 5-day RV trip
Context	What AI needs to know	Starting in Seattle; traveling with two dogs
Constraints	Limits, preferences, or requirements	No more than 4 hours of driving per day
Desired result	What you want back, and how you want it presented	Day-by-day itinerary with campground suggestions

Even better: “Before you answer, ask me any questions you need answered.” This lets AI surface information you didn’t realize was important, instead of guessing.

11. You Don't Have to Know the Right Question

One of the most useful differences between AI and traditional search: you can start with uncertainty instead of needing the perfect search term.

- “I don't know what I don't know. What questions should I be asking?”
- “Teach me what I need to understand before I make this decision.”
- “Here's what I'm trying to do. What information are we missing?”
- “Give me three approaches, and explain the tradeoffs of each.”

12. AI as a Teacher

- “Explain this like I'm completely new to it.”
- “Now explain it one level deeper.”
- “Give me a real-world example.”
- “Quiz me to see if I understand it.”
- “I still don't understand that part — explain it another way.”

Ask it to adapt the explanation to your experience, instead of hunting for a single explanation written for everyone.

13. Don't Just Ask for Answers — Ask for Work Products

- “Turn this into a printable checklist.”
- “Make a table comparing these choices.”
- “Create a decision matrix with the factors that matter.”
- “Turn this into a one-page reference sheet.”
- “Create a step-by-step procedure I can follow.”
- “Turn my notes into a clean email or document.”

The goal often isn't the answer itself — it's something useful you can actually take out of the conversation and use. This is the same instinct behind the Plan → Draft → Execute & Refine → Final method (Section 8).

14. Ten Things You Can Ask AI to Do

- **Explain** — walk through a concept or process in plain language.
- **Teach** — build your understanding step by step, adapting to your level.
- **Compare** — lay out options side by side with real tradeoffs.
- **Summarize** — condense a long document, thread, or manual into the key points.
- **Analyze** — dig into data, a document, or a situation and surface what matters.
- **Brainstorm** — generate options when you don't know where to start.
- **Plan** — break a project into an actual sequence of steps.
- **Create a checklist** — turn a process into something you can follow by hand.
- **Rewrite** — turn rough notes into something polished (an email, a post, a doc).
- **Critique** — review something you've drafted and point out what's weak.

15. When to Use Extra Caution

AI can be extremely useful in high-stakes areas, but useful isn't the same as authoritative. For decisions with real risk, cost, or consequences, use AI to understand the issue and prepare questions — then verify the important conclusions before acting on them.

- **Medical:** use qualified medical sources or professionals for diagnosis and treatment decisions.
- **Legal:** laws and circumstances vary — verify important conclusions with authoritative sources or qualified counsel.
- **Financial:** verify current numbers, terms, tax rules, and investment information.
- **Safety:** for electrical, gas, mechanical, structural, or other hazardous work, verify procedures and follow the manufacturer's instructions.
- **Expensive decisions:** confirm prices, specifications, compatibility, and warranties before spending significant money.

This is the same spirit as Section 4's example: OnePlace and generator questions are exactly the kind of "get AI's help preparing, then verify before you act" situation this section is about.

16. Bringing It Together

Think of AI as a capable assistant sitting beside you. You bring the goal, judgment, real-world experience, and the final decision. AI can help you think through the problem, research, explain, organize, draft, compare, and refine. The better you communicate the real situation — and the more carefully you verify what actually matters — the more useful the partnership gets.

Start with the real situation. Give context. Ask questions. Iterate. Ask for useful work products. Verify what matters.

17. Reference Tables

Snapshot as of Aug/Sept 2026 — these features and prices move fast. Worth confirming again before relying on any specific number here.

Cost: Free vs. First Paid Tier

Tool	Free tier	First paid tier	Price
ChatGPT	Unlimited text chat; images/uploads/voice capped separately	ChatGPT Plus	\$20/mo
Copilot	Built into Windows/Edge; basic chat and Actions	Microsoft 365 Personal (bundled)	\$19.99/mo
Gemini	Chat, basic image gen, document reading, usage budget	Google AI Pro	\$19.99/mo
Claude	Chat, rolling 5-hour window (~15–40 messages)	Claude Pro	\$20/mo
Siri / Apple Intelligence	Free with compatible hardware, no subscription	— none exists —	—
Alexa+	Free with Prime; limited free without Prime	Standalone (no Prime)	\$19.99/mo
Perplexity	Chat with real-time web answers/citations	Perplexity Pro	\$20/mo

Pattern worth noting: every standalone chat tool's first paid tier lands around \$20/month — only Copilot and Alexa+ break that, and both do it by bundling the AI into something else you'd pay for anyway.

Desktop: Mac vs. PC Capability

Tool	App?	Voice?	Local file editing?	Mac vs. PC gap
ChatGPT	Mac/Win/Linux desktop app	Yes, in-app	Yes — “Work with Apps” edits local code/text/terminal	Same on both
Copilot	Windows-built-in; no Mac app	Yes (“Hey Copilot”)	Yes, Windows only — Copilot Actions on local files	Windows-only integration
Gemini	Mac/Win desktop app	Yes (Gemini Live)	Partial, stronger on Mac (screen-aware voice actions)	Mac ahead of Windows today
Claude	Mac/Win desktop app	Yes, 14 languages	Yes, with setup — needs a local connection (MCP)	“Computer use” agent is Mac-only
Siri / Apple Intelligence	Built into iOS/iPadOS/macOS	Yes, core feature	Limited — only via the Shortcuts app	Apple-only, no Windows version
Alexa+	Mobile/web app + Echo devices	Yes, core feature	No filesystem access	No Mac/PC difference
Perplexity	Mac/Win desktop app	Yes (Comet Voice)	Yes — “Personal Computer” local file editing	Mac launched first, Win close behind

Phone: Android vs. iOS Capability

Tool	App?	Voice?	File/photo access	Default assistant?
ChatGPT	Yes, both	Yes	Share sheet/uploads	Android: yes. iOS: yes, new (iOS 27)
Copilot	Yes, both	Yes	Share sheet/uploads	Android: yes (beta). iOS: no
Gemini	Yes, both; Android's default	Yes (Gemini Live)	Share sheet/uploads	Android: yes, default. iOS: not yet
Claude	Yes, both	Yes, 14 languages	Share sheet/uploads	Android: no. iOS: not yet
Siri / Apple Intelligence	iOS/iPadOS only	Yes, core feature	Limited (Shortcuts)	N/A — the iOS default until swapped
Alexa+	Yes, both	Yes, core feature	No	Android: yes, historically. iOS: no
Perplexity	Yes, both	Yes	Share sheet/uploads	Android: yes. iOS: no

iOS 27's “Extensions” framework (swap Siri’s brain for ChatGPT/Claude/Gemini/Grok) ships in the same release as the “Siri AI” overhaul — both landed right around this event.

Developer: VS Code Extension & Git Integration

Tool	VS Code extension?	Git integration?
ChatGPT	Yes — official Codex extension (9.8M installs)	Checkpoint-level revert, not full commit/PR authoring
Copilot	Yes — VS Code's flagship AI extension	Deep — commit messages, PR descriptions, native GitHub
Gemini	Yes, but individual-tier access cut June 2026 (moved to "Antigravity")	Connects to GitHub/GitLab; auto-reviews pull requests
Claude	Yes — official Claude Code extension	Deep — stages changes, writes commits, opens PRs via GitHub CLI
Siri / Apple Intelligence	No	No — not a coding tool
Alexa+	No	No — not a coding tool
Perplexity	Community/unofficial only	No dedicated git workflow features

Sources for pricing/feature claims: *Axis Intelligence, ToolChase, Ajelix, Apple Newsroom, MacRumors, 9to5Mac, About Amazon, GeekWire, and product documentation from each vendor — current as of Aug/Sept 2026.*