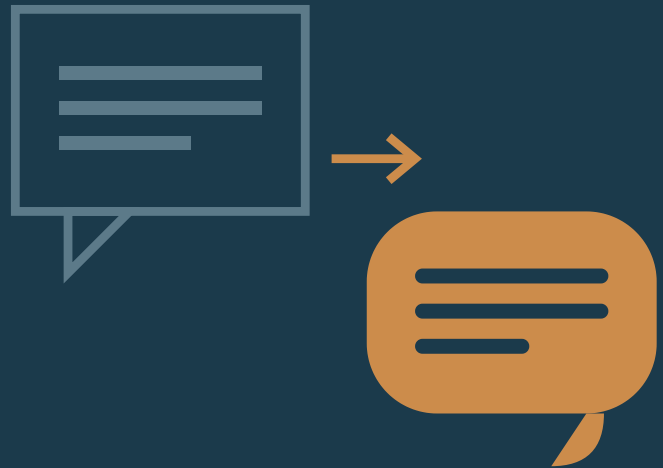


A TWENTY-MINUTE WORKBOOK

The Twenty Minutes That Fix ChatGPT

*Why it answers like a robot,
and how to make it answer like a friend.*



Brian Allen

I'm not a genius and you're not either,
but we have the tools at our disposal
to make us look like one.

thegenxgenius.com

Why your answers are boring

It does not know a single thing about you, so it writes for everybody — and writing for everybody is how you get writing for nobody.

You asked it something. It gave you back a paragraph that sounded like a brochure written by a committee. Balanced, agreeable, faintly encouraging, useless. You thought: *this is what everyone is excited about?*

That reaction was correct. It is also incomplete.

What you met was the factory setting. Out of the box it is answering a person with no name, no job, no history and no opinions — because that is genuinely all it has been told about you. So it aims at the middle of everybody. That is why it hedges, why it gives you five options instead of one, and why it keeps telling you what a great question that was.

THE WHOLE IDEA

**It is not being vague at you.
It is being vague at everyone.**

Tell it who it is talking to and most of the vagueness disappears. That is not a trick or a secret prompt. It is a settings page almost nobody opens.

Twenty minutes, four parts. You will set up the things that matter and skip the ones that do not. You will describe yourself once, and it will use that forever. You will learn what a request needs in it. And you will learn to push back on a bad answer — which is the part that separates people who find this useful from people who quietly gave up.

1

The four settings that actually matter

There are dozens. Four of them change your results. I will tell you which four, and which ones you can safely ignore.



Memory, and the big text box

Everything below lives under **Settings**, reached from your name or picture in the corner. The exact wording shifts every few months — these companies redesign constantly — so I have described what each thing *does* rather than promising which tab it is sitting in today. If a name has changed, look for the one doing the job described.

1 • Custom instructions — the big one

A short description of who you are and how you want to be spoken to, applied to every conversation you ever have. It is the single largest improvement available to you, it takes ten minutes once, and almost nobody fills it in.

We write yours properly in Part Two. For now, find where it lives and leave it open.

2 • Memory — turn it on

With memory on it remembers across conversations: your name, that you are planning a trip in March, that you prefer short answers. Without it, every conversation starts from nothing and you re-explain yourself forever.

You stay in control. There is a list of everything it has remembered and you can read, edit or delete any of it. **Go and look at that list once** — not because anything is wrong, but because seeing it turns memory from something being done to you into something you are using.

WORTH KNOWING

Memory is also how it gets better at you over time. A month in, it stops asking things you have already answered. That is the difference between a tool and an assistant, and it is one toggle.

Two more, and the ones to ignore

3 • Data controls — your call, not mine

There is a setting about whether your conversations may be used to improve the product. Off means your chats stay out of that process. On means they may be used.

I am not going to tell you which to pick, because it is genuinely a preference and anyone claiming there is one right answer is selling something. What I will say: **go and look at it, so that however it is set, it is set that way because you decided.**

4 • Two-factor authentication — turn it on

The one setting I will be firm about. Two-factor means that even if somebody has your password, they still cannot get in without your phone.

Your conversations will end up holding more of your life than you expect — drafts of letters, questions about your health, notes about your family. Lock it properly.

Ninety seconds.

And the ones you can skip

- **Connected apps.** Only relevant if you want it reading your cloud files. Skip unless you have a reason.
- **Voice selection.** Pick whichever you find least irritating. Not important.
- **Appearance and themes.** Cosmetic.
- **Follow-up suggestions.** Whether it ends every answer with another question. Try it both ways for a day.

BEFORE YOU TURN THE PAGE

Two toggles and one text box.

Memory on. Two-factor on. Data controls looked at and decided. Then the text box — which is the next three pages, and the reason you are here.

2

Write yourself down

Ten minutes describing yourself, once, will improve every answer you get for as long as you use this thing. This is the part that does the work.



Who are you?

Write your answers here first, in pen. Then type them in. Doing it on paper first matters more than it sounds like it should — people write something real on a page and something stiff in a box.

Do not try to sound professional. Write the way you would tell a new colleague about yourself on the first morning.

01 WHO ARE YOU?

Name, roughly what you do or used to do, where you are, anything that comes up often. *If you are retired, say what from — forty years of it is still the lens you see through.*

EXAMPLE

“My name is Brian. I am 55, in western North Carolina. I ran my own business for years and now I run a small online shop. I write a lot — letters, listings, teaching material. I am practical and I do not scare easily.”

What you are usually trying to do

This is where you tell it the kinds of jobs you will keep bringing it, so it stops guessing every time.

02 WHAT DO YOU ACTUALLY USE IT FOR?

Think about the last month. What did you want help with — or what would you have asked, if you had trusted it? *Be specific. “Writing” is too broad. “Letters to insurance companies that get results” is useful.*

EXAMPLE

“Mostly writing that has to persuade somebody — letters, product descriptions, teaching notes. Planning trips. Explaining things I do not understand yet, in plain language, without being talked down to.”

WHY THIS ONE MATTERS MORE THAN IT LOOKS

Answering it changes the *shape* of what comes back, not just the tone. Tell it you write to persuade and you get drafts with an argument in them. Leave it blank and you get the beige middle of everything, forever.

How you want to be spoken to

This is the box that kills the robot. Most people leave it empty, get robot answers, and conclude the machine is like that. It is not. It is waiting to be told.

03 SET THE TONE

Short or thorough? Should it argue with you or agree? Formal or plain? Is humour welcome? *Say what you do not want, too. That works just as well.*

EXAMPLE — STEAL THIS AND CHANGE IT

“Talk to me like a smart friend, not a support line. Get to the point — no long preambles and no telling me what a good question it was. If you think I am wrong, say so and say why. Plain words over impressive ones. Humour is fine when it fits. Never pad an answer to make it look thorough.”

NOW GO AND TYPE THEM IN

**Three boxes. Ten minutes.
Done forever.**

Copy your three answers into custom instructions. Then ask it something ordinary — anything — and watch the difference. This is the moment most people say *oh*.

3

Asking so you get a real answer

A request that works has four things in it. Once you have seen them, you cannot unsee them — and it becomes a habit within a week.



The same request, twice

WHAT MOST PEOPLE TYPE

Write a letter to my insurance company about my claim.

You will get back a competent, empty letter that sounds like every other letter. It has no idea what happened, who you are writing to, what you want, or how firm to be.

WHAT GETS YOU SOMETHING USABLE

My roof claim was denied — they say the damage is wear and tear, but the storm was on 3 March and I have the inspector's report saying otherwise. Write a letter to the claims adjuster asking them to reopen it. Firm and polite, not angry. Under one page. Do not threaten legal action, I am not there yet.

The four ingredients

Context	What is going on. The facts it cannot possibly know.
The task	What you actually want made. A letter. A list. An explanation.
The shape	How long, what form, who reads it.
One limit	The thing to avoid. This does more work than people expect.

A SHORTCUT WORTH HAVING

If you cannot be bothered to structure it, just say more. Ramble at it. Three untidy sentences of real context beat one tidy sentence with none. It is far better at sorting out your mess than it is at guessing.

Your turn

04 SOMETHING YOU ACTUALLY NEED

One real thing you would like help with this week. Write the lazy one-line version first — the way you would have typed it.

05 NOW REWRITE IT WITH ALL FOUR

Context, the task, the shape, one limit. Take your time. This is the only exercise here that becomes a habit.

STOP — CHECK YOUR OWN WORK

Could a stranger do this job from what you have written? If a competent stranger would still have to ask you a question, that question is the missing ingredient. Add the answer and you are done.

4

Say it's wrong

The first answer is a draft, not a verdict. The people who get the most out of this are simply the ones who say so.



The three-round drill

Almost everyone reads the first answer, decides it is mediocre, and closes the tab. They are right that it is mediocre. They are wrong that this is the end of it.

It is not offended. There is nothing to hurt, no relationship to manage, nothing to soften. You can be blunter with this than with any human alive, and blunt is exactly what works.

ROUND ONE — CUT IT

Too long. Half that, and lose the introduction.

ROUND TWO — FIX THE VOICE

Too formal. Say it the way I would say it out loud.

ROUND THREE — AIM IT

You have missed the point. The important part is that they already admitted fault in writing. Start again from there.

Three rounds takes about ninety seconds, and it is nearly always the difference between something you delete and something you send.

THE ONE TO REMEMBER

**“That’s not it.
Here’s what’s wrong with it.”**

Then say the wrong thing plainly. Nine times out of ten the second attempt is the one you wanted — and you got there by complaining, not by learning anything clever.

Stop describing it. Hand it over.

Do not tell it about the letter. Paste the letter.

This is the biggest single jump in quality after the settings, and the one people are strangely reluctant to take. They describe the email they received. They summarise the contract. They explain what the report said.

Paste the thing itself. Then ask your question about it.

- “Here is the letter they sent me. What are they actually saying, and what are they not saying?”
- “This is the contract. Which parts should worry me?”
- “Here are my notes from the meeting. Turn them into something I can send round.”

You can hand it documents and photographs as well as typed text. A photograph of a confusing bill, a form you do not understand, a page of a manual — all fair game, and all far better than your description of them.

THE PATTERN UNDERNEATH ALL OF THIS

Every improvement in this workbook is the same move: **reduce what it has to guess.** The settings tell it who you are. The four ingredients tell it what you want. Pasting the material tells it what you are looking at. Guessing is where bad answers come from.

When it is confidently wrong

Everyone selling AI courses skips this page. I would rather you heard it from me than found out on your own with something that mattered.

It generates language that fits the pattern of a good answer. Usually that lands on the truth, because true things are what it was trained on. Sometimes it does not — and nothing in the tone changes when it does not. No wobble, no hedge, no tell.

Where it goes wrong most

- **Specific numbers, dates and prices.** Especially anything recent.
- **Quotations and sources.** It can produce a plausible citation for a study that does not exist.
- **Legal and medical specifics.** Fine for explaining a concept. Not a substitute for someone qualified and accountable.
- **Anything after its training cut-off,** unless it has searched — and it will not always tell you which is which.
- **Local detail.** Opening hours, who runs what, what is on this week.

THE RULE THAT KEEPS YOU OUT OF TROUBLE

If being wrong would cost you money, health, or a relationship — check it somewhere else. For everything else, roughly right and instant is enormously useful. Knowing which of the two you are doing is the entire skill.

A useful habit: ask it *“how confident are you about that, and what would you check?”* It is often honest about where it is on shaky ground — but only if you ask.

What never goes in

Treat it like a very capable stranger you have hired — useful, worth trusting with a great deal, and still not someone you hand your bank details to.

Never paste

- Social security or national insurance numbers
- Bank account, card, or login details
- Passwords, of anything, ever
- Other people's private information — medical, financial or personal. Not yours to hand over.
- Anything you are under a duty to keep confidential

Perfectly fine

- Your own health questions, in general terms
- Letters, contracts and bills with the account numbers blacked out
- Your work, your writing, your plans, your worries
- Photographs of forms and documents — same rule, cover the numbers

ONE MORE, BECAUSE IT IS GENUINELY NEW

Be careful with voices and photographs of your family. Convincing fake audio can now be made from a very short sample, and it is being used against people your age and older. **Agree a word with your family** — a word anyone claiming to be them in an emergency has to say. It sounds paranoid until the day it does not.

Twenty minutes, in order

The page to print and keep beside you. Tick as you go.

☐

Turn memory on

Then read the list of what it has remembered, once.

☐

Turn on two-factor authentication

Ninety seconds. The one I will nag you about.

☐

Look at the data controls and decide

Either answer is fine. Deciding is the point.

☐

Type in your three answers from Part Two

Who you are, what you use it for, how you want to be spoken to.

☐

Ask it something ordinary and notice the difference

This is the moment it stops sounding like a machine.

☐

Rewrite one real request using all four ingredients

Context, task, shape, limit.

☐

Push back on the first answer — three rounds

Too long. Too formal. You missed the point.

☐

Paste in something real instead of describing it

A letter, a bill, a photo of a form.

☐

Agree a family safe word

Five minutes at dinner. Worth more than everything above.

IF YOU ONLY DO ONE

Number four.

Everything else is an improvement. The three boxes are the difference between a robot and a friend.

The other ones, honestly

People ask which they should be using. Here is a straight answer, including my own bias, stated so you can discount it.

Everything in this workbook works on all of them. Every one has a version of custom instructions, memory and data controls, in a slightly different place under a slightly different name.

ChatGPT	The one most people mean when they say AI, and the one this workbook is written for. Enormously capable, and the biggest pile of help available when you get stuck.
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Claude	My own preference, and I will say why rather than pretend I do not have one: it writes better and it argues with me more honestly. Fewer people use it, so there is less help online.
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Gemini	Google's. Worth a look if you live in Gmail and Google Docs, because it is already sitting in there.
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Copilot	Microsoft's, built into Windows and Office. Convenient if that is where you work.
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WHAT I WOULD TELL A FRIEND

The setup matters more than the brand.

Someone with their three boxes filled in on the tool they like least will get better answers than someone with empty boxes on the best one in the world. Pick one, set it up properly, use it for a month.

Who made this, and why

I am Brian Allen. I am 55 and I live in western North Carolina.

I did not come to this as a technology person. I came to it running a small business, needing to get things done, and finding that every tutorial was made by someone half my age for someone half my age — fast, breathless, and quietly assuming I was behind.

I am not behind. Neither are you. We grew up with the first home computers and taught ourselves everything since. The tutorials were aimed at the wrong people.

If it helped, pass it on — send the file to whoever you know who tried this once and decided it was not for them. And tell me what you got stuck on. I would rather hear that than the thing that worked.