

Using AI to find and understand evidence: guiding principles for commissioners

AI tools such as CoPilot, Claude and ChatGPT can help you explore, summarise and make sense of information.

How AI tools might help you

Summarising documents
Exploring topics, spotting patterns
Shaping questions & search terms
Drafting questions to ask experts

Important limitations

Systematic evidence searches
Citing statistics or study findings
Assessing the quality of evidence
Critical decision-making

Used well, they can save time and broaden your thinking – think of these tools as assisting you not substituting your critical thinking. There are some real risks if tools are used uncritically. Here are some guiding principles to help you use AI effectively and ethically.

Start but don't stop here

Use AI as a starting point, alongside other sources. AI can support thinking but cannot replace judgement. You are responsible for interpreting evidence and making decisions.

Be specific in your prompts

Vague questions produce vague answers. Specify details like population, intervention, setting, or outcomes. Ask for sources and caveats explicitly.

Know the knowledge cut-off

Most AI models have a training cut-off date so are unaware of recent publications, guidance, or events. Always supplement with a current database search e.g. MEDLINE.

Watch for hallucinations and misplaced certainty

AI responses can sound authoritative even when evidence is weak, contested, or absent. Ask: "How strong is the evidence?" Always verify references and read primary sources.

Watch for gaps and bias

AI reflects the data it is trained on. Ask what might be missing or under-represented. Build a fuller picture by exploring multiple sources.

Follow organisational policy

Check your organisation's policy before using any AI tool for work tasks. Avoid entering sensitive data.

There are lots of resources available to help you – here are two of our favourites:

[Oxford Bodleian Libraries: Using AI to Support Academic Work](#)

Although aimed at academics, this is a very useful guide written for non-specialists.

[NIH Library Generative AI Toolkit](#)

A simple, hands-on guide with checklists and tips, including how to assess and verify outputs.