How to Use ChatGPT for Research

A practical workflow for using ChatGPT to shape a question, discover useful leads, compare evidence and keep a transparent record of your work. Treat ChatGPT as a research assistant, not as evidence or a substitute for reading sources yourself.

UPDATE NOTE ChatGPT features and available research tools can change. The steps here focus on sound research practice rather than a particular screen or button. Check the options available in your account and confirm important information in original sources.

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1. Refine the question before you research

Start with what you need to decide or understand, not just a broad topic. A useful research question names the subject, the population or setting, the outcome you care about and any relevant time period. If those details are unknown, ask ChatGPT to identify the gaps instead of filling them in by guesswork.

Use this refinement checklist

- Define key terms. Ask what a phrase such as effective, safe or successful should mean in this enquiry.
- Set boundaries. Specify place, population, period, subject area and the level of detail you need.
- Separate the main question from sub-questions. Break a large topic into answerable parts and decide which parts matter most.
- Name the intended use. A classroom overview, a policy briefing and a personal decision need different evidence and depth.

TRY THIS PROMPT

I want to research [topic] for [purpose/audience]. Help me turn it into one focused main question and 3 to 5 sub-questions. First list ambiguous terms and missing choices. Do not assume facts I have not supplied.

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2. Find leads without mistaking them for evidence

Use ChatGPT to widen your search plan, generate alternative search language and spot perspectives you may have missed. Its suggestions are leads to investigate, not proof that a source exists, is relevant or supports a claim. If your account offers web or file research features, treat their outputs as starting points and inspect the linked material directly.

A repeatable lead-finding sequence

1. Ask for search concepts, synonyms and related disciplines. Request phrases used by specialists, competing terminology and terms that could narrow or broaden results.
2. Ask for a source map, not a list of made-up references. Identify likely source categories such as official statistics, legislation, research reviews, scholarly studies, professional bodies and first-hand documents.
3. Search using the suggested terms in suitable catalogues, search engines and official websites. Save the exact title, author or organisation, publication date and stable link as you go.
4. Check fit before reading deeply. Confirm that each result addresses your question, the relevant people or setting, the time period and the kind of evidence you need.

Choose source types deliberately

Primary	Secondary	Reference
Original data, laws, records, interviews or direct statements. Useful for first-hand evidence, but still check scope, methods and context.	Reviews, analyses and reporting that interpret primary material. Check how closely the interpretation follows the underlying evidence.	Handbooks and explainers can orient you and reveal terms. Follow their references to stronger or more direct evidence.

TRY THIS PROMPT

For this question: [paste question], suggest search terms, alternative wording and types of sources that could answer it. Separate leads from verified facts. Do not invent titles, authors, statistics or links.

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3. Synthesise, trace and check the evidence

Once you have gathered real material, ChatGPT can help organise notes, compare arguments and expose unanswered questions. Give it the source text or your notes and ask it to distinguish what the material says from what it infers. Keep the original documents open so you can verify every important summary.

Synthesis that keeps differences visible

Build a comparison around themes, not a smooth-sounding consensus. For each source, note its question, method, population or setting, date, main finding and limitations. Ask ChatGPT to group recurring themes, disagreements and gaps while preserving which source supports each point. A difference between studies may reflect different methods or contexts rather than a simple error.

TRY THIS PROMPT

Using only the notes below, make a comparison of shared findings, disagreements and evidence gaps. For every point, cite the source label from my notes. Mark unsupported interpretations as questions, not conclusions. Notes: [paste labelled notes].

Trace claims back to the source

For each claim you may use, find the exact passage, table or data point that supports it. Open the source itself rather than relying on a search snippet, a chatbot summary or a citation repeated elsewhere. Check whether the cited material supports the wording, population, date and strength of the claim. If you cannot locate the passage, treat the claim as unverified.

Check claims and citations

- Verify existence: search the exact title and author or organisation. Open the record or full text and confirm the publication details.
- Verify support: read the relevant passage and check whether it supports the claim as stated, not merely a related topic.
- Verify detail: check author, title, publication, date, page or section, and DOI or URL against the source record.
- If any detail cannot be verified, do not cite it as fact. Ask ChatGPT to flag missing evidence, but make the final decision yourself.

Never ask ChatGPT to invent missing references or fill citation details from memory. A plausible-looking citation can still be fabricated, misquoted or unrelated to the claim.

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4. Document your method and conclusions

A short method record helps you retrace how you reached an answer, update it later and distinguish your judgement from AI assistance. Keep it alongside your notes and source files. Record enough detail for another person, or your future self, to understand what you searched, what you kept and what remains uncertain.

Keep a compact research log

- Question and scope: record the final question, key definitions, intended audience and boundaries.
- Search trail: note where and when you searched, the terms used, filters applied and any limits.
- Source record: save verified bibliographic details, stable links, access dates where useful, and the exact passage or data used.
- Decisions and limits: explain why sources were included or excluded, note conflicts and state what you could not verify.
- AI assistance: note the tool used, the task it helped with, the date or version if known, and how you checked its output. Do not include private or sensitive material unless you are authorised to do so.

Final quality check

1. Can each important statement be traced to a source that you have opened and checked?
2. Have you represented uncertainty, disagreement, dates and limitations fairly?
3. Are all citations real, complete and relevant to the statements they accompany?
4. Could another reader follow your method and tell which parts were your judgement and which were AI-assisted?

The safest habit is simple: use ChatGPT to improve your process, then use traceable evidence and your own judgement to support your conclusions.
