The Plain English AI Glossary

31 essential AI terms explained the way I'd explain them to a neighbor over coffee.

STEVE CHAZIN
stevechazin.com | AI for the Rest of Us

No computer science degree required. No hype. No fear. Just plain talk about the technology reshaping everything.

A

AI (Artificial Intelligence)

Software that can do things we used to think only humans could do. Recognize your face. Understand what you're saying. Write a cover letter. Diagnose a disease from an X-ray. What changed is scale. Modern AI learned from billions of examples, ran on computers powerful enough to crunch that data, and crossed a threshold where it stopped feeling like a party trick and started feeling like a colleague. The word "artificial" trips people up. It doesn't mean fake or inferior. It means human-made. The intelligence is real. The source is silicon.

Agentic AI

An AI that can act on your behalf, not just respond to commands. Think of the difference between a calculator (you tell it exactly what to do) and a personal assistant (you tell it what you want, and it figures out how to make it happen). We're moving from AI that answers questions to AI that solves problems.

AI Agent

A software program powered by AI that can perform tasks autonomously. Unlike traditional software that follows rigid if-then rules, an AI agent can adapt to new situations and figure things out on its own. The "agent" part means it has some degree of independence to make decisions within boundaries you set.

Algorithm

The set of instructions a computer follows to solve a problem or make a decision. AI algorithms are different: instead of following rules a human wrote, they learn the rules themselves from data. When people say "the algorithm" decided what you see on social media, they mean a system that learned to predict what will keep you scrolling and got very good at it.

Automation

When a machine handles a task that a human used to do. The spreadsheet automated arithmetic. Email automated the memo. AI is automating the first draft, the research summary, the customer service response. The pattern is consistent: automation doesn't eliminate work, it shifts where human effort goes. Usually up the skill chain.

B

Benchmark

A standardized test used to measure how well an AI system performs. Think of it like the SAT, but for machines. When you see headlines like "new AI beats humans on IQ test," what you're really seeing is a benchmark result, not proof the AI is smarter than you.

Bias

When an AI system produces results that systematically favor or disadvantage certain groups, often because its training data reflected existing human prejudices. Bias in AI is one of the most serious problems in the field because the outputs feel objective since they came from a computer, when they're actually encoding historical inequality.

C

Chatbot

A software program designed to simulate conversation with a human. Modern AI-powered chatbots actually understand what you're saying, can handle unexpected questions, and maintain context across a conversation. ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini are all chatbots in the technical sense, though calling them that undersells what they can do. It's like calling a smartphone a "phone."

Codified Knowledge

Documented rules, established procedures, and textbook facts that are easy to write down. Because it follows predictable patterns and strict logic, codified knowledge is exactly what AI excels at replacing or automating. If your job relies entirely on codified knowledge, an AI can likely do it faster. See also: Tacit Knowledge.

Context Window

The amount of information an AI can "remember" during a single conversation. Early AI systems could only process a few paragraphs at once. Modern systems can handle entire books. A bigger context window means the AI can understand more nuanced questions and reference earlier parts of your conversation.

D

Deep Learning

A subset of machine learning inspired by how the human brain works. It's called "deep" because of many layers of artificial neurons, each learning to recognize increasingly complex patterns. This is how AI learned to recognize faces in photos, translate languages, and generate images from text descriptions.

F

Fine-tuning

Taking a pre-trained AI and teaching it to specialize in something specific. Think of it like hiring someone who already speaks English and training them to be a medical translator. This is why some AI tools are amazing at coding but terrible at poetry, while others are the opposite. Same foundation, different specialization.

Foundation Model

A large AI model trained on enormous amounts of data that can be adapted for many different tasks. GPT-4, Claude, and Gemini are all foundation models. Companies build specific products on top of them without having to train a new AI from scratch each time.

G

Generative AI

AI that creates new content rather than just analyzing existing content. This includes systems like ChatGPT (text), DALL-E (images), and tools that create music, video, or code. It's not copying something that already exists. It's producing something new based on patterns learned from training data.

H

Hallucination

When an AI confidently states something that's completely wrong. It's not lying (AI doesn't have intent), but it's making things up. It might invent a research study that never happened or cite a book that doesn't exist. The AI genuinely doesn't know it's wrong. Always verify important facts. Trust, but verify.

I

Inference

The computation that happens when a trained AI model does actual work. Training an AI is like teaching a student everything they need to know for a job. Inference is them showing up to work every day and actually doing it. Training happens once. Inference happens every time you ask the AI a question.

L

LLM (Large Language Model)

The technology behind modern conversational AI. An LLM is a massive neural network trained on huge amounts of text to understand and generate human language. ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini are all LLMs. They're remarkably good at predicting what word should come next in a sentence, which turns out to be surprisingly powerful.

M

Machine Learning

The fundamental idea that computers can learn from experience rather than being explicitly programmed for every task. Instead of writing rules for spam detection, you show the system thousands of examples and it figures out the patterns itself. It's how Netflix learns what you like and how your phone learns your face.

Model

The actual AI system that's been trained and is ready to use. GPT-4o is a model. Claude Sonnet is a model. Think of it like a finished product versus the factory that made it. The factory is the training process. The model is what comes out.

Multimodal

An AI that can work with more than one type of input or output, including text, images, audio, and video. When you take a picture of a restaurant menu in a foreign language and your phone translates it in real time, that's multimodal AI at work.

N

Natural Language Processing (NLP)

The branch of AI focused on helping computers understand, interpret, and generate human language. This is what lets you talk to Siri or Alexa, or have a chatbot actually understand what you're asking. Every time an AI reads, writes, or speaks, NLP is involved.

Neural Network

A computing system inspired by the structure of the human brain. Instead of processing information in a straight line, a neural network has layers of interconnected nodes that pass information back and forth until they arrive at an answer. Nobody programs the rules. The network figures them out by itself.

O

Open Source

AI where the underlying code is made publicly available for anyone to use, study, or modify. The opposite of proprietary AI like ChatGPT, which you can only access through OpenAI's products. Open source accelerates innovation since thousands of developers can improve the model rather than just one company's team.

P

Parameters

The internal numerical settings inside an AI model that get adjusted during training. A model with more parameters can learn more complex patterns, which is why you hear numbers like "70 billion parameters" thrown around. Bigger isn't always better since larger models are slower and more expensive to run.

Prompt

The instructions or question you give to an AI. A vague prompt gets vague results. A specific, well-crafted prompt gets remarkable results. The difference between "write a story" and "write a two-paragraph bedtime story for a five-year-old about a brave mouse who's afraid of cheese" is everything.

R

RAG (Retrieval-Augmented Generation)

A technique that gives AI access to specific, up-to-date information beyond what it was originally trained on. Instead of answering from memory, the AI can look it up first. This is how AI can answer questions about your company's internal documents even though it was never trained on that data.

S

Superintelligence

A hypothetical AI that surpasses human intelligence across every domain. Not just chess or radiology, but creativity, emotional intelligence, scientific reasoning, everything. We don't have it. We don't know if or when we'll get it. Worth being skeptical of anyone who claims to know exactly when it's arriving.

T

Tacit Knowledge

The experiential wisdom, intuition, and human judgment you build from years of actual practice. The ability to "read a room," know when to break the rules, or understand the unwritten context of a problem. AI cannot replicate this. As AI automates codified knowledge, your tacit knowledge becomes your most valuable professional asset. See also: Codified Knowledge.

Token

The basic unit of text that an AI processes. A token is usually a word or part of a word. AI models have limits on how many tokens they can process at once, and many services charge by the token. When you see "this model supports 128,000 tokens," that's roughly equivalent to a 300-page book.

Training Data

All the information an AI system learns from before it ever talks to you. The quality and diversity of training data determines what the AI knows and how it behaves. Think of training data as the AI's education. Everything it learned in school, before it started talking to you.

W

Workslop

AI-generated content that looks polished at first glance but is actually generic, inaccurate, or soulless, requiring hours of human correction to actually use. As AI tools become more common in the workplace, avoiding workslop by providing excellent prompts and human oversight is a critical skill.
