AI Jargon Cheat Sheet

20 AI terms you'll hear this week, explained in plain language. With jokes, on purpose. When it comes to AI, you are not behind. You never were. It's the jargon that makes it feel like everyone else is in on something you're not.

Artificial Intelligence
Software that finds patterns in enormous amounts of data and guesses what comes next. Not thinking. Not understanding. Extremely good guessing, dressed up in two words that sound like science fiction so nobody has to say “really good autocomplete” out loud.

Generative AI
AI that makes things when you ask. Text, images, summaries, drafts. Think of a very fast intern who writes drafts, takes edits without sulking, and costs less per month than one lunch with a real one.

ChatGPT
OpenAI's model, and the one that started the mainstream conversation in late 2022. The name everyone's parents use when they mean AI. GPT stands for Generative Pre-trained Transformer, which explains nothing and sounds like a toy.

Large Language Model (LLM)
An AI system trained on huge amounts of text so it can read and write language. Claude, ChatGPT, and Gemini are all large language models, the way Honda and Toyota are both cars. It read more than your entire book club, and it actually finished the books.

Machine Learning
AI that learns by doing things over and over, instead of being told how. Like a new hire who learns by watching, not reading the manual. Faster, though. No awkward first week.

Training Data vs Fine-tuning
Training data is everything a model read while it was built, which is why it knows things without looking them up. Fine-tuning is sending the finished model back to school on your material so it picks up a specialty. Most businesses told they ‘need to fine-tune a model’ need nothing of the sort.

Prompting
The instructions you type to tell an AI what you want. The entire skill is being clear about what you want, which you've been practicing on employees, contractors, and at least one teenager for years.

Prompt Engineering
Writing better instructions to get better results from AI. For about a year it was a job title with a six-figure salary. Now it is something they expect you to already know.

Hallucination
When an AI states something false as if it were true. AI seeing something that was never there. It doesn't have eyes. A generous word for making something up.

Agentic AI
AI that works toward a goal instead of answering a question. Tell it what you want done. It figures out the steps, gets started and works through them without you approving each one. You don't watch it happen, and you're pretty sure it's as good or better than what you could have done.

Copilot
Microsoft's AI, built into Word, Excel, and Teams. It's a copilot, not an autopilot, you're still flying the plane. In practice it's more like someone leaning over your shoulder with suggestions you mostly ignore.

Gemini
Google's model. Used to be called Bard, before they decided that sounded too much like a guy at an open mic. Now it answers your question right in the search results, and Google's AI is eating its search engine.

AI Overview
Google's AI-generated summary at the top of search results, so thorough you never scroll down to see anything below it. All overview, no view. Great when you're the one searching. Rough when you're the business that used to be the view.

Automation
Making a process run without a person doing it every time. Your toaster's been automating breakfast since 1893. Nobody called it AI-powered toast. They just called it Tuesday.

Vibe Coding
Building software by telling the AI what you want in plain language and letting it write the code. You say exactly what you want, in order, or you get nothing back. The real skill is being specific. They called it vibe.

Slop
The flood of AI content nobody asked for and nobody reads. The internet's new landfill. Read it back with your name on it. If it still sounds like no one and everyone, it's slop.

Deepfake
A video, a voice, or a photo of you saying something you never said. Cheaper and harder to catch every month. Worth a real conversation with your team, before it's your name on the video.

AI Policy
What companies write when they realize their employees have been using AI without asking. Ranges from “use it responsibly” to thirty-seven pages of legal language nobody reads. This one is insurance bought the day after the fire.

Data Center
A warehouse full of servers, somewhere you'll never visit, doing work you'll never see. It runs hot enough that Microsoft and Google are paying to bring shut-down nuclear plants back online just to keep it running. None of it shows up in the chat window. It just asks what's on your mind.

Artificial General Intelligence (AGI)
An AI that could do any intellectual task a human can. It doesn't exist yet. The people most confident it's imminent are, overwhelmingly, the people trying to raise money to build it.

The full dictionary is free at carolroderick.ca/ai-glossary. From AI Jargon: A Dictionary for the Rest of Us by Carol Roderick, PhD. Listed in the AI guides of Virginia Tech University Libraries and Dalhousie University Libraries. Free to print and share.