Grey Matters
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GREY MATTERS / A PRACTICAL STARTER GUIDE

Working with AI on What Matters to You

A human way to learn, plan, challenge, decide, create and build — with a little help from AI.

Start with something you care about.
Have a conversation. See what becomes possible.

You do not need to be an AI expert. You do need curiosity, a little scepticism, and a willingness to keep asking questions.

Seven ways to begin • Real Grey Matters examples • Ready-to-use prompts • A simple way to decide when to check more carefully

AN EDITABLE READER RESOURCE

A standalone guide. No Grey Matters background needed. This practical companion draws on the experiences told in The Things We Can Now Attempt; you can use either resource first. Prompts are suggested starting points, not transcripts of exact conversations. Read the companion story: The Things We Can Now Attempt.

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Start with something that matters

The interesting question is not “What can this AI do?” It is “What would I like to try?”

A difficult book. A family trip. A garden idea. A choice you keep putting off. A story you want to bring to life. The best starting point is already in your life.

At Grey Matters, we found seven useful ways of working with AI. They are doors, not separate boxes: one project often moves through several.

Seven doors you can walk through

LEARN	Understand a hard idea by asking again, differently. We worked through challenging physics books, one question at a time.
PLAN	Turn hopes and constraints into a workable route. Our Hawaii trip needed more than a list of nice places.
EXPAND THINKING	Ask what you have missed or got wrong. Our Bitcoin exploration focused on what might change our minds.
MONITOR	Keep track of meaningful change, not every headline. We built a routine for watching important developments.
DECIDE	Compare real options while keeping the choice human. Our camper-van search involved space, weight and trade-offs.
CREATE	Bring something imagined into view. Snolphin began with a child’s sketch and became a character.
BUILD	Turn useful work into something you can keep and improve. Our projects eventually included books, research and a website.

The George test If you need twelve acronyms to explain what you are trying to do, try a simpler explanation. George, our Westie, is a demanding audience — particularly before biscuits.

These seven doors are not stages to complete in order. Choose one; a real project may move across several. The companion case study shows how that happened in Grey Matters, but your starting point can be much smaller.

Your first decision

Choose ONE thing that matters to you. Write it down in a sentence beginning: “I would like to…” That is enough to start.

Have a better conversation

You do not need special commands. Give the AI context, then make it earn your confidence.

Four moves that work surprisingly well

1 ASK	Explain what you want, why it matters, what you already know and what is getting in the way.
2 SPAR	Ask for other explanations, uncomfortable questions, missing information and alternative routes.
3 TEST	Ask what might be wrong, what is uncertain and how you could check the important parts.
4 TRY	Choose one small next step. Ask for something you can use: an explanation, a shortlist, a plan or a sketch.

Try this prompt as written

COPY / ADAPT

I want to make progress with [something that matters to me]. Here is the situation: [a few sentences]. I already know [what I know], and I am unsure about [what is confusing]. Help me explore the options in plain English. Ask me one useful question at a time. Point out assumptions, uncertainties and anything I should check myself. Do not decide for me.

Example: learning something difficult

When we read difficult physics, the breakthrough was often not a clever answer. It was being able to ask the same question in five different ways without embarrassment.

LEARN / FOLLOW-UP

Explain that idea first as if I am encountering it for the first time, then with a real-world analogy. Tell me where the analogy breaks down. Ask me two questions to see whether I have understood it.

A useful habit If an explanation still makes no sense, say so. “I don’t understand that bit” is a perfectly good follow-up. AI has no right to be offended.

Plan something. Then make a decision.

Two everyday projects taught us that an impressive-looking answer is not necessarily a workable one.

The holiday: turn a wish list into a real plan

Our Hawaii journey involved several islands, travel between them, accommodation, activities and room for the unexpected. A list of attractions would have been easy. A plan we would actually enjoy needed priorities, time and realistic travel assumptions.

PLAN / STARTING POINT

I want to plan [trip or project]. Our priorities are [top three]. We need to work around [budget, dates, mobility, family or other constraints]. Give me two practical approaches, identify the awkward trade-offs, and show what I should verify directly before booking or committing.

The camper van: make the trade-offs visible

A vehicle might look perfect in a showroom but fail once you account for passengers, water, bicycles, equipment and legal weight limits. AI can organise the questions; manufacturer figures and real measurements still have to settle the facts.

DECIDE / STARTING POINT

I am choosing between [option A] and [option B]. What matters most is [criteria, in order]. Build a comparison showing benefits, drawbacks, assumptions and information still missing. Mark any fact that needs verification from an authoritative source. Then show how the conclusion changes if my priorities change. Leave the final decision to me.

A five-line decision note

My aim	What am I actually trying to achieve?
Must-haves	What cannot be compromised?
Choices	What are the realistic options?
Uncertainties	Which facts, costs or consequences need checking?
My decision	What did I choose — and what might change my mind later?

Stretch, watch and create

AI becomes much more interesting when it helps you question a view, notice a change or turn an idea into something real.

Expand thinking: challenge the answer you like

Our Bitcoin work wasn't an exercise in asking tomorrow's price. It was an attempt to understand competing explanations and keep revisiting the reasons for holding a view. The useful question was, 'What would make us change our minds?'

EXPAND THINKING

Here is a view I currently hold: [your view]. Give me the strongest alternative explanation. What evidence supports each? Which parts are uncertain? What new information would genuinely change the balance? Do not simply agree with me.

Monitor: fewer headlines, more meaning

A daily flood of news tells you what happened. It is less good at telling you what really changed. Our strategic monitoring became useful when we defined what mattered, how often to review it and what would count as a meaningful shift.

MONITOR

I care about developments in [topic] because [reason]. Help me define five things worth watching, what would count as a material change, which sources are worth checking, and the questions to ask at each review. Separate confirmed developments from interpretation. Tell me when nothing important has changed.

Create: keep the spark human

Snolphin started with a child's imaginary creature. AI helped create pictures and possibilities, but the idea belonged to the child. Similarly, garden visuals helped us explore a future space before anyone built it.

CREATE

Here is my rough idea: [describe it or add a sketch]. Give me three directions I could take it, each keeping these essential features: [list]. Do not replace the original idea with something generic. Ask what I like before developing the next version.

Our test Did the AI expand your options without taking over the purpose? If so, that is collaboration. If it has quietly changed what you wanted, bring it back.

Know when the work needs more structure

A conversation about a book is different from publishing an important claim or changing a live system. Use the lightest discipline that fits the consequences.

Three levels — and when to step up

CONVERSATIONAL	Learning, ideas, a quick explanation or a first sketch. Talk, question, explore. No ceremony required.
STRUCTURED	Planning, a consequential choice or ongoing monitoring. Record priorities, assumptions, options and what you decided.
GOVERNED	Work that others rely on, is public, difficult to reverse or involves AI taking action. Fix a baseline, define what must not change, check the result and keep human approval.

You can move up a level as work grows, then ease off again when the consequential part is finished. Don't make a holiday itinerary behave like a space launch.

Our five-step discipline, in plain English

EXPLORE FREELY	Think, discuss, challenge, try directions. Not every thought is a decision.
PERSIST DELIBERATELY	Write down what you agreed outside the chat, where you can find it again.
BUILD DELIBERATELY	Make one clear change or usable output, keeping the starting version safe.
VERIFY ADVERSARIALLY	Look for errors, omissions and overclaims. Check the result, not just the AI's report.
FREEZE DECISIVELY	Choose what you accept, note the limits, and keep a copy you can recover.

What "keep a record" means in normal life A dated note, a document saved as version 2, or a comparison table is often enough. You do not need a software repository to remember a decision.

Check what deserves your trust

AI can sound sure even when something is mistaken. Different kinds of mistakes need different checks.

Four useful checks

DOES IT WORK?	Technical: does the plan, link, document, spreadsheet or process actually function?
ARE THE NUMBERS RIGHT?	Numerical: do the calculations reproduce known cases? Check inputs, units and arithmetic.
DOES IT MEAN WHAT WE THINK?	Conceptual: is it answering the real question, or has an assumption quietly changed?
IS THE CLAIM JUSTIFIED?	Evidence: are the sources good enough for the conclusion, or have we mistaken a possibility for a fact?

These checks came from work as different as financial decision models, cosmology research and building the Grey Matters website. A simulation can do exactly what its author intended while telling us nothing conclusive about the physical universe. A spreadsheet can be mathematically sound while answering the wrong question.

Ask for a challenge, not reassurance

REVIEW / STARTING POINT

Review the attached answer or draft as a sceptical reader. List the three most important things that could be wrong or misleading. Separate facts from assumptions and interpretations. Tell me what evidence is missing, what I should check myself and where a qualified person is needed.

A fresh AI conversation, or a different model, can spot problems. It is not a substitute for a qualified human professional where expert judgement is needed. Two AIs agreeing is not independent proof.

Higher stakes, stronger checks For health, legal, significant financial or safety decisions, use credible primary sources and appropriate professionals. AI should help you prepare better questions, not quietly become the authority.

Take something useful away

The real test is not whether the conversation was enjoyable. Did it help you understand more, decide better or make something worth keeping?

Your reusable one-page project card

COPY / FILL IN

MY PROJECT: [one sentence]
WHAT MATTERS: [why I care; what success would look like]
WHAT I KNOW: [facts, experiences, constraints]
WHAT I NEED HELP WITH: [learn / plan / think / monitor / decide / create / build]
WHAT MUST STAY HUMAN: [my decisions, permissions, judgement]
WHAT TO CHECK: [uncertain facts, sources, other people affected]
NEXT SMALL STEP: [one concrete thing to try]
DECISION NOTE: [what we agreed, date, and where I have saved it]

When AI is about to act, add four questions

- Am I clear about what it is allowed to change — and what it must leave alone?
- Can I inspect the result somewhere safe before it becomes public or consequential?
- Is there a genuinely workable way back if the change goes wrong?
- Who makes the final decision, and what will we check after the action?

If one answer is uncertain, stop and resolve it first. Permission to attempt a task is not permission to improvise around a failed safeguard.

A 20-minute experiment

Pick one of the seven doors. Use one prompt in this guide. Ask a challenging follow-up. Save one useful output or decision. Then ask yourself: What did I learn? What still needs checking? What would I do differently next time?

The point The subject is not the transferable asset. The collaboration is. Start with what matters to you. Let the method grow only when the work needs it.

Grey Matters • exploregreymatters.ai • If you try this approach, we would welcome hearing what helped and what did not.

Scope note: these are practical starting prompts informed by one ongoing human–AI collaboration, not a proven universal method. Personal circumstances, safety and high-stakes claims require their own judgement and checks.