EVERYONE · 6 MINUTE READ

AI research tools side by side: choosing and checking

> Many assistants now offer a research mode; choose by the sources you need and the control you want, then check every key claim yourself.

What it is

Guide 08 explains deep research: a mode that searches many sources over several minutes and writes a report with links to them. This guide compares how six assistants offer it, plus one tool that works only from your own documents.

The modes differ in three practical ways: whether they show you a **research plan** before starting, which **sources** they can reach (the web, files you upload, your email or shared drives), and how much you can steer them while they work.

Think of choosing between researchers at an agency. All can write a report; what matters is which libraries each can enter, whether they share their plan first, and how easily you can check their notes.

Why it matters

- The right tool depends on where your information lives, not on which tool is "smartest".
- Some modes reach your work email and files: useful, and a data risk.
- A visible plan lets you correct the direction early.
- Every tool can misread or misquote a source, so the checking routine stays the same.

How to do it

1. **Use** only the research tools your organisation has approved.
2. **Decide** which sources the question needs: public web only, your own files, or both.
3. **Pick** a mode that reaches those sources (see the table).
4. **Write** a brief with question, scope, preferred sources and format (see guide 08).
5. **Review** any plan or clarifying questions, and correct them.
6. **Check** the key claims with the routine in the example below.
7. **Decide** yourself, and note which sources you relied on.

Example

The tools, as their makers describe them (as of November 2026; check the maker's page):

Tool	Mode name	Plan or questions first?	Your files and apps
Claude	Research	Not stated on the help page	Gmail, Calendar, Docs and other enabled connectors
ChatGPT	Deep research	Shows a plan you can edit; may ask questions	Uploaded files, enabled apps (read only); can limit to chosen sites
Gemini	Deep Research	Shows a plan you can edit	Uploaded files; Gmail and Drive once connected; you can switch off web search
Grok	Search, and multi-agent mode for harder questions	Not stated; multi-agent mode shows each agent's reasoning	File and PDF uploads; searches the web and X posts live
Microsoft Copilot	Researcher agent (work accounts)	May ask clarifying questions	Work files, emails, meetings and chats you can already access
Perplexity	Research	Not stated on the help page	Not stated on the help page

Gemini Notebook	Chat with your notebook	Answers only from sources you add	Uploaded files, Google Docs, Slides, web links; can search for new sources

Gemini Notebook is Google's current name for NotebookLM. Use it when you need a grounded answer, one built only from documents you chose (see guide 37).

A checking routine for any report:

```
1. List the 3 to 5 claims my decision depends on.
2. For each, open the cited source. Does it say this,
   in these words, for this date and place?
3. Note the source type: official, independent,
   seller's own marketing, or anonymous.
4. Ask the tool: "Which claims rest on a single source?
   Which sources disagree?"
5. Mark anything I could not confirm as unconfirmed.
```

Common mistakes

- **Choosing by reputation.** Fix: choose by which sources the question needs.
- **Leaving work sources switched on for a public question.** Fix: switch off email and drive sources you do not need.
- **Skipping the plan.** Fix: when a plan appears, read it; one comment can save a wasted report.
- **Treating "no answer found" as "no answer exists".** Fix: some sources sit behind logins or paywalls the tool cannot read.

Try it this week

1. Pick a non-confidential question, such as "what are the rules for [topic] in [country]?" (2 minutes).
2. Find which of these tools your organisation has approved and which sources it can reach (3 minutes).
3. Run the question with a short brief, reviewing the plan if one appears (do something else while it works).
4. Apply the checking routine to three claims and note how many held up (10 minutes).

Going further

- ChatGPT reports include an activity history and can be downloaded as Markdown, Word or PDF.
- Gemini can turn a finished report into an audio overview or export it to Docs.
- Claude's Research mode can use connector tools without asking each time, so keep them read-only (see guide 40).
- Perplexity chooses its models for you in Research mode and says most tasks take under three minutes.
- Research modes use up your allowance faster than normal chat, or have their own limits; check your plan.

Key words

- **Research mode**: a setting that searches many sources and writes a report.
- **Research plan**: the steps a tool proposes before it starts, which you can sometimes edit.
- **Source**: where information comes from, such as a web page, file or email.
- **Grounded answer**: an answer built only from sources you provided, with references to them.
- **Unconfirmed claim**: a point you could not trace to a reliable source.

Sources

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