

Is grabbing a calculator when you don't know the smarter move? — AI that uses tools

Five-Minute AI Lessons · Sep 24, 2026

Noticing you don't know and grabbing a tool is a kind of smart, too.

In a nutshell

1

AI's main job is adding the next word, so it's weak at **things you need to know exactly**, like big multiplications or today's weather. So people hooked up tools next to it: a calculator, search, running code.

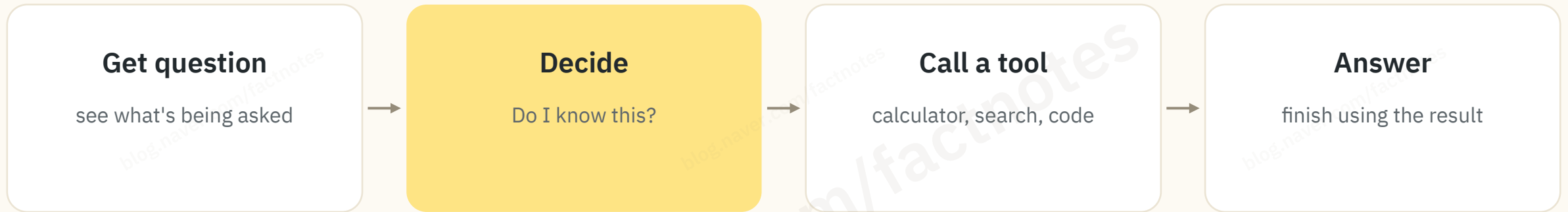
2

The important part isn't the tools, it's **choosing for itself when to grab one**. Since 2023, models can say 'I need a calculator now' in a set format, get the result back and finish the answer.

3

So a good AI isn't one that knows everything. It's **one that notices it doesn't know and grabs a tool** — the same call you make when you use a calculator on a test.

Four steps to grabbing a tool



It used to take a person saying 'search for it.' Now the model does the second box on its own.

Key idea: a good AI isn't one that knows everything, but one that grabs a tool when it doesn't know

Answer directly, or grab a tool?

Answer directly

When this one fits

- ✓ Someone asks: "What's 3 plus 4?"
- ✓ Someone asks: "What's 'apple' in Span..."
- ✓ Someone asks: "What's the opposite of..."

Use a tool

When this one fits

- ✓ Someone asks: "What's 847,293 times 6..."
- ✓ Someone asks: "Is it raining in Londo..."
- ✓ Someone hands over a 1,000-row grade...

The rule

How to choose

- ✓ There's just one rule
- ✓ If it already knows it and can hardly...
- ✓ Using a tool when you don't need one...

Here are six questions. Pick what an AI should do. Each pick gets graded right away, and once you've done them...

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Just three questions

Q1

What does it mean for an AI to 'use tools'?

- ① It memorizes whole answers
- ② It calls a calculator, search or code on its own
- ③ It switches to a bigger model
- ④ It makes its answers shorter

Q2

Which of these questions is better handled with a tool?

- ① What's 'cat' in Spanish?
- ② What's the opposite of 'big'?
- ③ What's 847,293 times 6,184?
- ④ What's 3 plus 4?

Q3

Who decides whether to call a tool?

- ① The power button
- ② The user, every time
- ③ The internet line
- ④ The model itself

Know the why, too

Q1

②

When the model says 'I need this tool now,' the tool runs outside, and the model takes the result and finishes the answer.

Q2

③

Big multiplications almost always come out wrong when you're just stringing words together. The other three are things it already knows.

Q3

④

It used to take a person telling it, but now the model looks at the question and decides for itself. That's today's key idea.

**Noticing you don't know and grabbing a tool
is a kind of smart, too.**



Tomorrow: AI that sees and hears — how do pictures and sounds get put in the same place as words?