

Stuck on a problem: get just the answer, or the steps? — Study helper

Five-Minute AI Lessons · Oct 6, 2026

Problems you'll meet again: get the steps. Problems you won't: get the answer.

In a nutshell

- 1 When you ask AI about schoolwork, first decide **whether you want just the answer or the steps**. Ask the same question either way, and what comes back is completely different.
- 2 There's one rule for choosing — **will I have to do this on my own later?** If you'll have to do it yourself, get the steps. If you just need to know whether you got it right, get the answer.
- 3 Bonus: making AI go step by step helps AI solve better too. A 2022 study found that adding one line — **"Let's think step by step"** — made AI get a lot more math problems right.

Getting the answer vs getting the steps

Just the answer

- Grading what you already solved
- Short stuff: simple math, word meanings
- Fast, but little sticks with you



Explain the steps

- When you'll solve it alone again
- A type you keep getting wrong
- Slower, but you'll use it next time

One question decides it: will I face this problem on my own later?

Key idea: problems you'll meet again, get the steps; ones you won't, get the answer

In this situation: answer or steps?

Just the answer

When this one fits

- ✓ You finished a math workbook and want...
- ✓ You're writing a science lab report a...
- ✓ Your Spanish reading has one word you...

Explain the steps

When this one fits

- ✓ You've gotten the same type of proble...
- ✓ Tomorrow you have a graded in-class a...
- ✓ You just can't get a feel for why qua...

The rule

How to choose

- ✓ There's one rule
- ✓ If you'll meet the problem again, get...
- ✓ If you won't, just get the answer

Here are six situations. For each one, pick whether it's better to get just the answer or have the steps explai...

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Just three questions

Q1

What decides whether you get the answer or the steps?

- ① Whether I'll have to do this alone later
- ② How long the problem is
- ③ Which AI it is
- ④ How much time is left

Q2

You've gotten the same type wrong three times. What should you ask for?

- ① Just the right answer, fast
- ② To walk through it line by line
- ③ A different problem
- ④ Just grading

Q3

What should you do after getting the steps explained?

- ① Move to the next problem
- ② Copy it and hand it in
- ③ Solve it again, no peeking
- ④ Send it to a friend

Know the why, too

Q1

①

If AI won't be there with you tomorrow, what you need isn't the answer — it's steps that stick in your head. But if you only need to grade something, the answer is enough.

Q2

②

Getting it wrong three times is a sign that something in the middle is missing. Seeing the answer won't fill that gap.

Q3

③

Reading an explanation isn't the same as being able to solve it. Solve it once more without looking, and then it's yours.

**Problems you'll meet again: get the steps.
Problems you won't: get the answer.**



Tomorrow: Tables and data — the order for turning scattered info into a table, and a table into a graph.