

Week 1 take-home: the top 20, the stories, and the research

What's All This Artificial Intelligence About? · Tuesday, October 6, 2026 · safeai4seniors.com/start

Everything on this page was checked against the original source in the week before class. Where a survey gives a number, the number is quoted exactly as published. Where it doesn't, the use is shown as *documented* rather than measured.

The top 20 things people over 50 are using AI for

Ranked by measured use among adults 50+ where a survey gives a number (1–13), then by documented use (14–20).

#	What	In plain English	Where the number comes from
1	Talking to Alexa or Siri	Weather, timers, a song, a phone call	51% of adults 50+ in the past year (U-M Poll, 2025)
2	Autocorrect and predictive text	The AI already in your phone, fixing typos	48% of adults 50+ (AARP, 2025)
3	Looking things up	A plain-English question instead of a hunt through links	38% of 50+ (AARP); 20% of 65+ via a chatbot (Pew, Feb 2026)
4	Trivia, jokes, recommendations	What to read, what to watch	37% of 50+ "for entertainment" (U-M Poll, 2025)
5	Smart doorbells and cameras	Devices that recognize people and motion	35% of 50+; nearly all found them useful (U-M Poll)
6	Brainstorming ideas	Gifts, party themes, what to say	About 2 in 10 adults 60+ (AP-NORC, July 2025)
7	Health questions before the doctor	Understanding a result or a diagnosis to prepare	14% of 50+ (U-M Poll); 11% of 65+ (Pew)
8	Planning a trip	Itineraries, deals, "three days in..."	16% of 50+, up from 8% a year earlier (AARP Travel, Mar 2026)
9	Company and connection	A chat partner; companion devices	12% of 50+ "for social connection" (U-M Poll)
10	Making pictures and poems	An image, a card, a caption, a verse	11% of 50+ "create text or images" (U-M Poll)
11	Recipes, meals and workouts	"What can I make with these three things?"	7% of 65+ / 14% of 50–64 (Pew, Feb 2026)

#	What	In plain English	Where the number comes from
12	Writing letters and emails	Thank-you notes, complaints, notes to grandchildren	34% of all adults write emails with AI (AP-NORC)
13	Keeping up with the news	Summaries and explainers	8% of 65+ / 13% of 50–64 (Pew, Feb 2026)
14	"Is this a scam?"	Paste the message and ask	Tens of millions of checks a week, all ages (OpenAI, Sept 2026) — documented, not measured for 50+
15	Explaining confusing paperwork	A bill, an insurance letter, a report, in plain English	Documented (OpenAI, Sept 2026; AARP caregiving, Oct 2025)
16	Translating languages	Conversation, labels, forms	74% of 50+ <i>interested</i> — the highest of any use (AARP); documented use in SF (Mission Local, Mar 2026)
17	Learning something new	A patient tutor for any subject or hobby	67% of 50+ interested (AARP, Jan 2026)
18	Writing your life story	Memories into a memoir or family book	Documented (NY State Office for the Aging; Ancestry "AI Stories")
19	Restoring photos and family history	Colorize, sharpen, read old handwriting	Documented (MyHeritage: 10M+ uses; FamilySearch AI reads 2.3B handwritten pages)
20	Naming the bird or plant in a photo	Point the phone, get the name	Documented (Cornell's Merlin app: 12M+ people in 2024)

Three numbers to know. 23% of adults 65+ have used an AI chatbot, nearly double a year earlier — Pew Research Center, 5,119 adults, February 2026. AI use among adults 50+ went 9% → 18% → 30% from 2023 to 2025 — AARP Research, 2026 Tech Trends. 81% of adults 50+ want to learn more about AI, and only half feel sure they could spot it being wrong — University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging, 2,883 adults 50–97, 2025. (These surveys define "AI use" differently; that's why the numbers don't match each other.)

The four stories

The cassette (1978 → 2023). Paul McCartney, 81, and Ringo Starr, 83, used an AI audio tool to lift John Lennon's voice off a home cassette the band had abandoned in 1995. "Now and Then" went to number one. The AI separated what was already on the tape; it invented nothing. — Smithsonian Magazine, Nov 3, 2023.

The binders (Chula Vista). Randy Seaver, 82, a retired aerospace engineer, turned 38 years of family research into ancestor biographies, songs and audio "podcasts" using Claude, NotebookLM and Suno, so his relatives would actually open them. He documented every step

on his blog, *Genea-Musings* (Aug 2025; Apr 2026), and taught the method to the Southern California Genealogical Society in April 2026.

The letters (San Diego). Felicita Trueblood, 75, had 50 pages of her great-grandfather's Yiddish letters (1927–34) that nobody in the family could read. An AI built for old handwriting translated them in a month and corrected a family legend about how he died. — Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Sept 10, 2026.

The memory with no photograph (Barcelona). Emelia Lozano Gonzalez, 72, described picking wildflowers in the 1950s for her little sister's funeral; the Synthetic Memories project turned her words into a deliberately blurry image. The project insists: it is not a photograph. — MIT Technology Review, Apr 10, 2024; The World/PRX, May 21, 2024.

The research behind "AI needs experience"

Knowledge peaks late. In a study of 48,537 people, different abilities peaked at different ages: processing speed in the late teens, vocabulary (stored knowledge) in the late 60s or early 70s. — Hartshorne & Germine, *Psychological Science*, 2015. *What it does not say:* that "the brain" or "intelligence" peaks at 70. Speed and working memory peak early.

Judgment is the skill. 758 consultants at a top firm were given AI. On tasks the AI was good at, quality rose about 40% and speed 25%. On a task chosen to be outside the AI's competence, AI users were 19 percentage points *more* likely to get it wrong — because the answer sounded right. The AI also helped the lower-skilled half more (43% vs 17%): it raises the floor; it doesn't supply judgment. — Dell'Acqua, McFowland, Mollick et al., Harvard Business School working paper, 2023; *Organization Science*, 2026.

The checking habits improve with age. A random sample of 247 adults reasoned about real newspaper conflicts and real "Dear Abby" letters. The 60-to-90 group scored higher than the 25-to-58 group on seeing multiple perspectives, seeking compromise, expecting change, and acknowledging the limits of their own knowledge — at every level of education and IQ. — Grossmann, Na, Varnum, Park, Kitayama & Nisbett, *PNAS*, 2010 (U.S. sample; a 2012 follow-up found the age gain among Americans but not among Japanese participants).

AI is bottled experience. In the largest workplace AI study to date (5,179 customer-support agents), the assistant had been built from what the most experienced workers did; beginners improved 34%, experienced workers barely changed. Experience was the source, not the beneficiary. — Brynjolfsson, Li & Raymond, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2025. And from a 2024 study of 25 retirees learning ChatGPT: "Our life experience could help us critically evaluate ChatGPT's answer." — Li et al., *Chinese CHI*, 2024.

Useful AI, minimal exposure, human verification. · Trust it for words. Check it for facts. · Same three moves, new tool.