

AI Tells Cheat Sheet.

The compressed Wikipedia signs of AI writing list.
Paste-ready. Print-ready. Updated 2026-05-04.

An AI tell is a language pattern that appears so consistently in AI output that it signals - consciously or not - that a machine wrote it.

Source: Wikipedia:Signs of AI writing (~15,000 words),
compressed and formatted for paste-and-go use in:

- Claude Project instructions
- ChatGPT custom instructions
- System prompts for Codex / Cursor / Lovable
- Manual proofreading pass

Companion files in today's pack:

- ai-tells GitHub repo - current SKILL.md + install notes
- Belt and Braces How-To (PDF) - the workflow guide

<https://github.com/kdgbalmer/ai-tells>

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AI with Kyle | aiwithkyle.com

How To Use This

This sheet has three uses. Pick whichever fits your workflow.

LAYER 1 - BEFORE YOU WRITE

Paste the word lists below into your Claude Project instructions, ChatGPT custom instructions, or any system prompt. Tell the model: 'Avoid the following words and structures.' This blocks most tells from being generated in the first place.

LAYER 2 - AFTER YOU WRITE

After you've drafted anything with AI, run a second pass: 'Check this draft against the following list of AI tells. Flag any matches and propose human alternatives.' Use the ai-tells repo for the current skill instructions.

MANUAL EYEBALL

Print this sheet. Stick it next to your monitor. Scan any AI-assisted draft against the lists for 60 seconds before publishing. Catches the 80% you missed.

Belt and Braces

The strongest setup is both layers together. The system prompt (belt) stops most tells from being generated. The skill file (braces) catches anything that slipped through. Both at once = your AI writing genuinely stops sounding like AI writing.

Canonical skill repo:

github.com/kdgbalmer/ai-tells

Use the repo version, not an old exported local file.

This list will date. The Wikipedia source is a living document maintained by editors who hunt AI for a living. Re-download this PDF or check the Wikipedia page every 3-6 months.

Vocabulary Tells (Tier 1)

High-confidence AI markers. Cut on sight unless context absolutely demands them.

- delve
- intricate
- nuanced
- underscore
- garner
- unwavering
- ecosystem
- tapestry
- robust
- leverage
- showcase
- bolster
- testament
- paradigm
- multifaceted
- vibrant
- foster
- ensure
- enduring
- journey
- pivot
- pivotal
- meticulous
- navigate
- realm
- elevate
- landscape
- harness

Vocabulary Tells (Tier 2)

Context-dependent. Cut where a plainer word works.

- crucial
- essential
- dynamic
- state-of-the-art
- dive deep
- key
- comprehensive
- innovative
- embrace
- unlock
- vital
- holistic
- transformative
- embark
- supercharge
- significant
- seamless
- cutting-edge
- dive into
- redefine

Vocabulary Tells (Tier 3 - Promotional)

Marketing / about-page language. Cut especially in customer-facing copy.

- boasts a
- in the heart of
- exemplifies
- serves as a reminder
- marks a turning point
- deeply rooted
- profound
- showcasing
- nestled in
- renowned for
- stands as a testament
- represents a shift
- indelible mark
- rich and
- enhancing
- commitment to excellence

Structural Tells

How AI structures sentences and sections. Cut on sight.

NEGATIVE PARALLELISM

Wikipedia's name for the most overused AI structure. Cut every instance unless it's a real human quote.

e.g. *It's not [a tool], it's [a thought partner].*

e.g. *You're not [an X], you're [a Y].*

e.g. *Not just [A], but [B].*

e.g. *It's not about [A]. It's about [B].*

BULLET-EVERYTHING

Two-sentence answers broken into bullet points. Markdown headers on a quick reply. Convert to flowing prose.

e.g. *Here are the key points:*

- Point 1

- Point 2

e.g. *## Quick Answer*

e.g. *[1 sentence]*

RULE OF THREE

Adjective-adjective-adjective triads for false comprehensiveness. Cut to one or two specific adjectives.

e.g. *creative, thoughtful, and deeply considered*

e.g. *fast, scalable, and reliable*

OUTLINE-LIKE CONCLUSIONS

Final paragraphs that follow the formula: 'Despite [challenges], [subject] continues to [vague positive outlook].' Cut and replace with a sharp specific kicker.

e.g. *Despite these challenges, the future looks bright.*

e.g. *While there are hurdles, the potential is enormous.*

TITLE CASE HEADINGS

Section headings where every word is capitalised when sentence-case is the convention. Convert to sentence case.

e.g. *## The Future Of Artificial Intelligence*

e.g. *## Building A Sustainable Practice*

INLINE-HEADER LISTS

- **Term:** description, repeated mechanically. Use only when truly listing definitions; otherwise convert to prose.

e.g. - **Speed:** *It's fast.*

e.g. - **Scale:** *It's scalable.*

EXCESSIVE BOLDFACE

Bolding every key term mechanically. Cut bold to <=2 instances per section, only on phrases the reader needs to find by skimming.

Tone & Opener Tells

Eager-intern energy. Cut the phrase. If the sentence collapses without it, cut the sentence.

Sycophantic openers

- "Great question!"
- "Certainly!"
- "What a wonderful question!"
- "I'd be happy to help."
- "I'm here to help."
- "Let me unpack that."
- "Absolutely!"
- "Of course!"
- "I love this prompt!"
- "I'd love to help."
- "Let me dive into that."
- "Buckle up."

Hedge / disclaimer phrases

- "It's important to note that..."
- "It's worth mentioning that..."
- "It's important to remember that..."
- "It is generally accepted that..."
- "It's worth noting that..."
- "It should be noted that..."
- "It's worth pointing out that..."
- "Many experts agree that..."

Forbidden transitions

- "Furthermore,"
- "Additionally,"
- "In conclusion,"
- "To summarize,"
- "All in all,"
- "When it comes to,"
- "Moreover,"
- "Interestingly,"
- "In summary,"
- "To wrap up,"
- "Ultimately,"
- "In the realm of,"

Knowledge-cutoff disclaimers

- "As of my knowledge cutoff..."
- "I may not have current information..."
- "Based on my training data..."
- "I cannot verify in real-time..."

Punctuation & Content Tells

Punctuation

Em dash overuse

Em dashes appearing more than 2-3 times per 500 words, or at every clause boundary. Replace most with commas, full stops, or hyphens with spaces.

Curly quotes

Smart quotes appearing where straight quotes are expected (markdown, plain text, code contexts). Convert to straight quotes.

Excessive ellipses (3-dot)

Trailing-off ellipses on every other sentence. Keep them for genuine pauses; cut the rest.

Content / analysis tells

Vague attribution

'Many experts say...', 'Studies have shown...', 'It is widely believed that...'. Either cite a specific source or delete the claim.

Superficial -ing analysis

Clauses that add no information: 'highlighting their significance', 'emphasizing their role', 'underscoring their importance'. Cut the entire clause.

Hedge stacking

'may potentially possibly suggest.' Pick the strongest verb that's still accurate.

Filler hedges

somewhat, relatively, arguably, perhaps, potentially. Cut where the claim still holds. If it doesn't hold without the hedge, the claim is too weak.

Empty intros

'In today's rapidly evolving landscape...', 'In the ever-changing world of...', 'In this article we will explore...'. Cut the entire opening paragraph.

Era-Specific (May 2026)

Tells shift as models update. This section dates fastest.

Active right now (cut these)

- Goblin / gremlin / raccoon / troll / ogre / pigeon - OpenAI hard-banned May 2025; if they leak through, you spotted a fingerprint
- 'It's not X, it's Y' - still rampant
- Markdown-bullet-everything - still rampant
- 'I'd be happy to help' openers - still rampant
- Title Case section headings - still rampant
- Em dashes at every clause boundary - reduced but still leak

Mostly trained out (verify before relying on)

- 'Delve' - peaked April 2024 after Paul Graham's tweet, now uncommon
- 'Tapestry' - peaked 2023, now rare
- 'Navigate the landscape' - reduced significantly

Before / After

BEFORE

In today's rapidly evolving landscape, it is pivotal to leverage innovative solutions that foster growth and drive impactful outcomes. This multifaceted approach ensures stakeholders can navigate complex challenges with confidence and maximize value across the board. It's important to note that collaboration, when underscored by clear communication, showcases our commitment to excellence.

AFTER

The world is changing fast. To keep up, we need practical solutions that drive real results. When we communicate clearly and work together, we can solve hard problems, create value, and build long-term success.

Density Score & Next Steps

Single tells happen in human writing too. What gives AI away is density - many tells clustered tightly. Use this rough rubric when auditing.

0-1 tells per 100 words	Light. Likely human or well-edited AI.
2-3 tells per 100 words	Moderate. Edit pass needed.
4-6 tells per 100 words	Heavy. Rewrite recommended.
7+ tells per 100 words	Unsalvageable. Start from scratch.

What this list does NOT do

- It does not detect whether text was AI-generated. AI detectors are unreliable - OpenAI killed their own classifier, Stanford 2023 found 7 detectors flagged 61% of human-written TOEFL essays as AI.
- It does not substitute for human editing. It catches surface tells. It cannot detect hollow thinking or missing voice.
- It does not produce style. It produces absence of AI style. You still need a voice guide for the affirmative side.

Update this list quarterly

Tells shift. The Wikipedia source is a living document maintained by editors who hunt AI for a living. Re-download this PDF every 3-6 months, or check the Wikipedia page directly:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Signs_of_AI_writing

Today's full pack at aiwithkyle.com:

- This PDF (cheat sheet)
- ai-tells repo - current SKILL.md + install notes
- Belt and Braces How-To (PDF) - the workflow guide

Stop sounding like a robot. - Kyle