

Choosing Your First AI Tool

SME Intelligence — Free Guide

A plain-English decision guide for small business owners. No hype, no jargon — just which tool to start with and why.

The Main Options at a Glance

Tool	Best For	Free Tier?	Paid Price	Strengths	Watch Out For
ChatGPT (OpenAI)	General-purpose, widest ecosystem	Yes (GPT-4o mini)	£16/mo (Plus) £20/user/mo (Team)	Huge plugin library, image generation (DALL-E), voice mode, custom GPTs, most tutorials online	Free tier trains on your data; Team plan needed for business guarantees
Claude (Anthropic)	Long documents, careful analysis, writing	Yes (limited)	£15/mo (Pro) Team plans available	200K token context (reads entire reports), careful/less hallucination-prone, strong at coding, clear data policy	Smaller plugin ecosystem, no image generation
Gemini (Google)	Google Workspace integration	Yes	Included in Google Workspace plans	Lives inside Gmail, Docs, Sheets; good at summarising Google Drive content; competitive on speed	Quality varies; tied to Google ecosystem; privacy concerns if not on Workspace business plan
Copilot (Microsoft)	Microsoft 365 power users	Yes (basic)	£24/user/mo (M365 Copilot)	Embedded in Word, Excel, Outlook, Teams; uses your M365 data with enterprise security	Most expensive; requires M365 E3/E5 or Business plan; quality in Excel still maturing

Which One Should You Start With?

If you just want to try AI for the first time...

Start with ChatGPT Plus (£16/mo). It has the biggest community, the most tutorials, and the widest range of uses. You'll find a YouTube video for almost anything you want to do. Once you're comfortable, you can evaluate whether a different tool fits your workflow better.

If you handle long documents, contracts, or reports...

Try Claude Pro (£15/mo). Its huge context window means you can paste an entire 50-page tender document and ask questions about it — no need to chop it into pieces. It's also noticeably more careful about making things up.

If your team lives in Google Workspace...

Start with Gemini. It's already in your Gmail and Docs. The "Help me write" feature in Gmail and the Sheets integration make it frictionless — no new tool to learn, no new login to manage.

If your team lives in Microsoft 365...

Evaluate Copilot for Microsoft 365 (£24/user/mo). It's pricey, but it works inside Word, Excel, Outlook and Teams with your existing data. Best if you have 5+ users and are already paying for M365 Business Premium or E3/E5.

What Can You Actually Do With These Tools?

Here are ten real tasks that small businesses use AI for every week:

#	Task	How It Works	Time Saved
1	Draft email replies	Paste the email you received, ask for a professional reply	5–10 min each
2	Summarise long documents	Paste the document, ask for 5 bullet points	30+ min per doc
3	Write job adverts	Describe the role, ask for a structured job ad	1–2 hours
4	Analyse spreadsheet data	Paste your data, ask for trends and insights	1–3 hours
5	Create social media posts	Describe your news/offer, ask for platform-specific posts	20–40 min
6	Proofread proposals	Paste your draft, ask for grammar and clarity fixes	15–30 min
7	Write meeting agendas	List the topics, ask for a structured agenda with time slots	10–15 min
8	Generate Excel formulas	Describe what you want to calculate in plain English	10–30 min
9	Research competitors	Ask for a summary of a competitor's public offerings	1–2 hours
10	Translate documents	Paste text, ask for translation with context notes	Depends on length

Data Safety: The One Thing to Get Right

The single most important decision is: **are you on a free consumer account or a paid business account?**

- **Free accounts** often use your inputs to improve the AI. That means your data could influence future outputs seen by other people. For personal experiments, that's fine. For client data, it's not.
- **Paid business accounts** (ChatGPT Team, Claude Pro, Gemini Business, M365 Copilot) contractually promise not to train on your data. This is the minimum standard for business use.

See our *Data Safety Quick-Check* cheat sheet for a full pre-flight checklist.

Getting Started: Your First Week

Day	Action
Monday	Sign up for a paid account on your chosen tool. Set a strong password and enable 2FA.
Tuesday	Try task #1 — draft 3 email replies using AI. Compare with what you'd have written.
Wednesday	Try task #2 — summarise a real document you've been putting off reading.
Thursday	Try task #8 — ask AI to write an Excel formula you've been stuck on.
Friday	Reflect: what worked? What felt awkward? Adjust your prompts next week.

Remember: AI is a capable assistant, not a decision-maker. You supply the facts, the judgement, and the final sign-off. AI supplies the typing.