



Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Family History Research

A beginner's guide for family historians

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools—such as ChatGPT and similar programs—are becoming increasingly visible in genealogy and local history research. Used thoughtfully, they can be helpful assistants, but they should never replace traditional evidence-based research. This guide outlines how AI may be used and the key cautions to keep in mind.

What AI *can* help with

AI is particularly useful for **support tasks** rather than for discovering new facts. Common applications include:

- **Transcribing and summarising** historical documents, letters, diaries, or wills.
- **Explaining terminology**, old occupations, legal phrases, or Latin used in parish records.
- **Providing historical context**, such as migration patterns, gold-rush conditions, or colonial administration.
- **Organising information**, for example, turning notes into timelines, tables, or draft narratives.
- **Suggesting research strategies**, repositories to consult, or alternative spellings of surnames.

For Australian researchers, AI can also assist in explaining the structure of colonial records, parish systems, or state-based archives.

What AI *cannot* reliably do

AI does **not** search archives or databases unless explicitly connected to them. It does not **know** your ancestors, nor does it verify facts.

Importantly, AI may produce **hallucinations**—statements that sound confident and plausible but are incorrect or entirely invented. These may include:

- Made-up birth, marriage, or death details
- Incorrect attributions to historical records
- Invented quotations or sources.

Because of this, **AI output should never be treated as evidence.**

Checking sources and avoiding errors

All information generated by AI must be independently verified. Good practice includes:

- Treating AI responses as **clues or hypotheses**, not conclusions
- Checking every factual claim against primary or reliable secondary sources
- Asking AI *where* information might be found, rather than accepting what it states
- Maintaining your own citations using recognised genealogical standards.

If a source cannot be located independently, it should not be used.

Ethical and practical considerations

- Be cautious when working with **living people's information**.
- Avoid uploading sensitive or private material.
- Remember that AI reflects biases present in its training data, including gaps in Indigenous, migrant, and working-class records.

In summary

AI can be a valuable research assistant—saving time, clarifying language, and helping organise material—but it is not a researcher. Sound family history still depends on careful source evaluation, corroboration, and critical judgement. Used wisely, AI can support these traditional skills rather than replace them.