AI Explained Simply

The Plain English Glossary of AI Terms for Non-Technical Teams

40 essential AI and Copilot terms explained in plain English. No technical background required.

40 TERMS	PLAIN ENGLISH	FREE DOWNLOAD

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HOW TO USE THIS GLOSSARY

Your Plain English Guide to AI

You do not need to memorise every term here. Think of this as a reference you keep open when you are reading about AI, attending training, or trying to understand what your organisation is rolling out. The terms are in alphabetical order. The definitions are written for people who use AI at work, not people who build it.

> A note on Copilot: Many terms in this glossary refer specifically to Microsoft Copilot because that is the tool most UK organisations are currently rolling out. The AI principles behind them apply to other tools too.

A

AI (Artificial Intelligence)

Technology that enables computers to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence - like understanding language, recognising patterns, and making decisions.

AI Agent

A Copilot feature that automates a multi-step task on your behalf. You give it a goal and it works through the steps independently - for example checking your emails, summarising key actions, and drafting replies.

Algorithm

A set of rules or instructions a computer follows to solve a problem or complete a task. Think of it as a very precise recipe.

C

Chatbot

A computer programme that can hold a text-based conversation. Basic chatbots follow scripts. AI chatbots like Copilot Chat understand natural language and can respond to almost anything you type.

Context Window

The amount of text a model can read and consider at one time. A larger context window means Copilot can work with longer documents and remember more of your conversation.

Copilot

Microsoft's AI assistant, built into Microsoft 365. It can draft emails, summarise meetings, create presentations, analyse data, and much more - all from within the tools you already use.

Copilot Chat

The conversational interface in Microsoft Copilot. You type a request in plain English and Copilot responds. Available free or as part of a Microsoft 365 subscription.

D

Data

Information in digital form. When people talk about AI and data, they usually mean the text, numbers, or files that an AI model has been trained on or is being asked to work with.

Deep Learning

A type of machine learning that uses layers of mathematical processes to identify patterns. It is what powers most modern AI tools including the language models behind Copilot.

E

Embedding

A way of converting text or other data into numbers so an AI can process it. You do not need to understand how this works - it happens automatically behind the scenes.

EU AI Act

European legislation that regulates how AI systems can be used, particularly in high-risk settings. Article 4 requires all staff who use AI to have adequate AI literacy training - relevant if your organisation has EU customers or operations.

G

Generative AI

AI that creates new content - text, images, audio, code - rather than just analysing existing content. Copilot is a generative AI tool.

GPT

Short for Generative Pre-trained Transformer. The type of AI model that powers many modern language tools. Microsoft Copilot is built on GPT technology developed by OpenAI.

H

Hallucination

When an AI produces something that sounds confident and plausible but is factually wrong. Always check important facts from AI output against a reliable source. This is one of the most important things to understand about using AI responsibly.

Human in the Loop

The principle that a human should review and approve AI outputs before they are acted on, especially in important or regulated contexts. A key part of responsible AI use.

I

Information Governance

The rules and processes an organisation uses to manage data responsibly. In the NHS this includes strict guidelines about what patient data can and cannot be shared with AI tools.

Iteration

Refining an AI output by making repeated small improvements. If Copilot's first response is not quite right, you can follow up with more specific instructions to get closer to what you need.

L

Large Language Model (LLM)

The type of AI that powers tools like Copilot. Trained on enormous amounts of text, it can understand and generate human language. It does not know things the way a human does - it predicts the most likely next word based on patterns.

M

Machine Learning

A way of teaching computers by showing them many examples rather than writing explicit rules. The computer learns patterns from the data and applies them to new situations.

Microsoft 365 Copilot

The paid version of Copilot that integrates directly with your Microsoft 365 apps - Word, Outlook, Teams, Excel, and PowerPoint. Requires a paid licence on top of your Microsoft 365 subscription.

Model

The core AI system that processes your input and generates a response. Different models have different capabilities, sizes, and costs. Microsoft uses several models within Copilot depending on the task.

N

Natural Language Processing (NLP)

The area of AI that deals with understanding and generating human language. It is what allows you to type a question in plain English and get a useful answer.

Notebook

A Copilot feature that lets you feed it a large document or set of documents and then ask questions about them. Useful for summarising long reports, policies, or meeting archives.

O

One-Shot Prompting

Writing a single well-structured prompt that gives Copilot all the context it needs to produce a good result first time. More efficient than sending multiple corrections - and uses less compute energy.

Output

What Copilot produces in response to your prompt. Could be text, a table, a summary, a draft email, a list - depending on what you asked for.

P

Parameters

The internal settings of an AI model that determine how it behaves. You do not set these directly - they are fixed during training. Larger models have more parameters and are generally more capable but use more compute.

Prompt

The instruction or question you give to Copilot. The quality of your prompt directly determines the quality of the response. A vague prompt gets a vague answer. A clear specific prompt gets a useful one.

Prompt Engineering

The skill of writing effective prompts to get the best possible output from an AI. Not technical - it is about being clear, specific, and giving the AI the right context.

R

RCICO Framework

A prompting framework used in AI Workflow Lab training. Role, Context, Instruction, Constraints, Output. Structuring your prompt around these five elements consistently produces better results.

Responsible AI

Using AI in a way that is fair, transparent, accountable, and safe. This includes checking outputs, protecting personal data, and knowing when not to use AI.

S

Summarisation

One of the most useful things Copilot can do. Feed it a long document, email thread, or meeting transcript and ask it to summarise the key points, actions, or decisions.

System Prompt

Hidden instructions given to an AI before the conversation starts, usually by the organisation deploying it. These set the tone, constraints, and persona of the AI.

T

Token

The unit an AI model uses to process text. Roughly four characters or three quarters of a word. Models have token limits for both input and output, which is why very long prompts sometimes need to be broken into sections.

Training Data

The text, images, or other content an AI model learned from during its development. It shapes what the model knows and how it responds. It does not include your conversations with Copilot unless you have specifically opted into data sharing.

U

UK GDPR

The UK version of the General Data Protection Regulation. Governs how personal data must be collected, stored, and used. Relevant when using AI tools with any data that relates to identifiable individuals.

V

Vector Search

A technique that allows AI to find semantically similar content - not just exact keyword matches. This is what allows Copilot Notebooks to find relevant passages even if you do not use the exact words from the document.

W

Workflow Automation

Using Copilot Agents to automate a repeating sequence of tasks. For example: every time a new enquiry email arrives, Copilot reads it, categorises it, drafts a response, and flags it for review.

Z

Zero-Shot Prompting

Asking an AI to do something without giving it any examples. Most everyday Copilot use is zero-shot. Compare with few-shot prompting, where you give examples to help the model understand the format you want.

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

Put these terms into practice

Understanding the language is the first step. The next is using these tools confidently in your actual work. AI Workflow Lab offers practical Microsoft Copilot training for non-technical teams - live, hands-on, and built around the tasks you do every day.

- **Team Training**
  Live workshops and programmes for organisations who want their whole team using Copilot confidently.
- **Copilot for Me**
  Your personal self-paced programme. Learn at your own pace, earn your certificate.
- **Our Catalogue**
  Download our full training catalogue and see every programme we offer.

Book a free 30-minute consultation at www.theaiworkflowlab.com or email hello@theaiworkflowlab.com