AI FOR IMPACT
boulevardlabs | JMU

PRACTICAL EXERCISES FOR BUILDING AI CAPABILITY

30-Day AI Skills Challenge

30 practical exercises for becoming better at working with AI.

UNDERSTAND • PRACTICE • COLLABORATE • ASSESS

AI for Impact | BoulevardLabs + James Madison University

A PRACTICAL AI FOR IMPACT RESOURCE

How to Use This Challenge

AI fluency is not built by memorizing prompts or watching demonstrations. It develops through repeated practice: trying a task, observing what changes the result, questioning the output, and learning when human judgment matters.

This 30-day challenge is designed to help you build durable habits that transfer across AI tools. Most exercises take 10–20 minutes and can be completed with any general-purpose AI assistant available to you.

The five habits you will practice

- **Context** — giving AI the information it needs without overwhelming it.
- **Iteration** — improving an output instead of treating the first answer as final.
- **Evaluation** — comparing approaches, tools, and outputs against the actual goal.
- **Verification** — knowing when an answer needs evidence, checking, or escalation.
- **Application** — fitting AI into real work while keeping human judgment in control.

USE APPROVED TOOLS AND APPROPRIATE INFORMATION

Do not paste confidential, proprietary, personal, classified, regulated, or otherwise restricted information into an AI system unless your organization has explicitly approved that use. When in doubt, use a fictional or sanitized example for the exercise.

A SIMPLE RULE FOR ALL 30 DAYS

Do the exercise first. Then ask yourself what changed, why it changed, and whether the result actually became more useful. The learning is in the comparison.

TRACKER

30-Day Challenge Tracker

Check off each challenge as you complete it. You do not need to complete the days consecutively; consistency matters more than perfection.

DAY 1 – 15		DAY 16 – 30	
☐ 1	Change the Context	☐ 16	Trace the Evidence
☐ 2	Improve a Bad Prompt	☐ 17	Separate Fact from Inference
☐ 3	Change the Audience	☐ 18	Ask What It Is Least Certain About
☐ 4	Set Better Constraints	☐ 19	Test the Summary
☐ 5	Ask AI What It Needs	☐ 20	Stress-Test a Recommendation
☐ 6	Change the Output Format	☐ 21	Find a Task AI Should Not Do
☐ 7	Make AI Ask First	☐ 22	Map a Recurring Workflow
☐ 8	Critique Its Own Answer	☐ 23	One Input, Three Outputs
☐ 9	Challenge the Assumptions	☐ 24	Turn a Process into a Checklist
☐ 10	Ask What Is Missing	☐ 25	Analyze a Small Dataset
☐ 11	Create a Counterargument	☐ 26	Draft, Then Apply Human Standards
☐ 12	Compare Two AI Tools	☐ 27	Create a Decision Brief
☐ 13	Cut It in Half	☐ 28	Use More Than Text
☐ 14	Generate, Then Rank	☐ 29	Transfer the Skill
☐ 15	Check a Known Fact	☐ 30	Build Your Human + AI Workflow

WEEK 1

Context & Communication

Learn how the way you frame a task changes what AI gives back.

DAY 01 Change the Context

SKILL FOCUS · CONTEXT

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Give AI the same task twice. Change only the context. What changes?

DO THIS

1. Choose a simple task, such as drafting a short email, summarizing a topic, or generating ideas.
2. Ask AI to do it with minimal context and save the result.
3. Ask again, adding the audience, goal, constraints, and relevant background. Compare the two outputs.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Which parts improved because of the additional context? Did anything become unnecessarily specific or less useful?

STRETCH IT

Try removing one piece of context at a time. Which detail had the biggest effect?

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 02 Improve a Bad Prompt

SKILL FOCUS · ITERATION

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Start with an intentionally weak prompt. Improve it in three rounds.

DO THIS

1. Write a vague prompt such as "Help me write this report."
2. Round 1: add context. Round 2: add constraints. Round 3: define the desired outcome or format.
3. Compare all four outputs: the original plus the three revisions.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Which revision produced the biggest improvement? What did that teach you about the information AI actually needed?

STRETCH IT

Ask AI to explain why the final prompt was more effective than the first.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 03 Change the Audience

SKILL FOCUS · AUDIENCE AWARENESS

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Give AI one piece of information. Ask it to explain it to three different audiences.

DO THIS

1. Choose a short, non-sensitive source or topic.
2. Ask AI to explain it for a beginner, a knowledgeable colleague, and a senior decision-maker.
3. Compare tone, detail, vocabulary, and emphasis.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did the facts stay consistent while the communication changed? Which audience required the most judgment about what mattered?

STRETCH IT

Add a fourth audience with a very different need, such as a customer or technical specialist.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 04 Set Better Constraints

SKILL FOCUS · CONSTRAINTS

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to solve the same task with and without clear constraints.

DO THIS

1. Choose a task that could produce many possible answers.
2. First ask for a result with no limits. Then repeat with constraints such as length, deadline, budget, tone, format, or available resources.
3. Compare the usefulness of the outputs.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did the constraints improve focus, or did they restrict useful possibilities?

STRETCH IT

Ask AI which constraint had the greatest impact on its answer.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 05 Ask AI What It Needs

SKILL FOCUS · PROBLEM DEFINITION

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Before giving AI the full task, ask what information it would need to do the task well.

DO THIS

1. Describe the task at a high level without providing all the details.
2. Ask: "What information would you need from me to produce a strong result?"
3. Answer only the relevant questions, then have AI complete the task.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did AI ask for information you would not have thought to provide? Did it ask for anything unnecessary?

STRETCH IT

Repeat with a second task and see whether the questions change appropriately.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 06 Change the Output Format

SKILL FOCUS · COMMUNICATION

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to present the same information in three different formats.

DO THIS

1. Use one short source or idea.
2. Ask for the output as a paragraph, a table, and a concise executive summary.
3. Compare which format makes the information easiest to use for different purposes.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did changing the format alter the emphasis or meaning? Which format made weaknesses easier to notice?

STRETCH IT

Ask AI to recommend the best format for a specific audience and explain why.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 07 Make AI Ask First

SKILL FOCUS · CLARIFICATION

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Tell AI not to answer until it asks clarifying questions.

DO THIS

1. Give AI a task with intentional ambiguity.
2. Add: "Before answering, ask me up to five questions that would materially improve the result."
3. Answer the questions, then compare the final output with what you would have received from the original prompt.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Which questions actually mattered? Did any reveal assumptions hidden in your original request?

STRETCH IT

Limit AI to only two questions. Which two should it prioritize?

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

WEEK 2

Iteration & Critique

Treat AI as an interactive collaborator, not a one-shot answer machine.

DAY 08 Critique Its Own Answer

SKILL FOCUS · SELF-CRITIQUE

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to critique its own answer.

DO THIS

1. Give AI a task and save the first response.
2. Ask: "What are the weakest parts of your answer, and what would you improve?"
3. Have it revise the answer based on that critique.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did it identify the same weaknesses you noticed? Did the revision actually fix them?

STRETCH IT

Ask it to critique the revised version again. Does the critique become more specific or just repetitive?

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 09 Challenge the Assumptions

SKILL FOCUS · CRITICAL THINKING

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI: "What assumptions are you making?"

DO THIS

1. Give AI a problem, recommendation, or analysis.
2. After it responds, ask it to list the assumptions behind its answer.
3. Classify each assumption as supported, uncertain, or missing important context.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Which assumption most affected the result? Could a different assumption produce a different recommendation?

STRETCH IT

Change one assumption and ask AI to rebuild the answer.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 10 Ask What Is Missing

SKILL FOCUS · COMPLETENESS

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to identify important information that is missing from its own response.

DO THIS

1. Ask AI to analyze a problem or produce a recommendation.
2. Then ask: "What information do you not have that could materially change this answer?"
3. Review whether the missing information should be gathered before acting.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did the answer originally sound more certain than the available information justified?

STRETCH IT

Provide one missing piece and observe how much the answer changes.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 11 Create a Counterargument

SKILL FOCUS · PERSPECTIVE

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to build the strongest case against its own recommendation.

DO THIS

1. Give AI a question with competing options.
2. Ask it for a recommendation and rationale.
3. Then ask it to make the strongest credible case for the opposing view.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did the counterargument expose weaknesses or tradeoffs the first answer ignored?

STRETCH IT

Ask AI to identify what evidence would help resolve the disagreement.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 12 Compare Two AI Tools

SKILL FOCUS · TOOL AWARENESS

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask two AI tools the same question. Compare what they emphasize.

DO THIS

1. Use the exact same prompt in two approved AI tools or models.
2. Compare structure, assumptions, omissions, detail, and confidence.
3. Decide which answer is more useful for the task and explain why.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did one tool appear "better," or was it simply better suited to this task?

STRETCH IT

Repeat with a different kind of task. Does your preferred tool change?

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 13 Cut It in Half

SKILL FOCUS · PRIORITIZATION

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to make its own answer 50% shorter without losing what matters.

DO THIS

1. Generate a detailed response to a useful task.
2. Ask AI to cut the response roughly in half while preserving the essential content.
3. Compare what was removed, retained, or reframed.

WHAT TO NOTICE

What did AI decide was essential? Would you make the same choices?

STRETCH IT

Now ask for a 25% version. At what point does compression start damaging usefulness?

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 14 Generate, Then Rank

SKILL FOCUS · EVALUATION

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to generate several options, then evaluate them against explicit criteria.

DO THIS

1. Choose a problem with multiple reasonable approaches.
2. Ask AI for five distinct options.
3. Give it three criteria and ask it to rank the options. Then make your own ranking.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did AI rank the options the same way you did? Which differences came from values or context the model did not have?

STRETCH IT

Change the criteria and see how the ranking shifts.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

WEEK 3

Verification & Judgment

Practice recognizing uncertainty, checking evidence, and keeping human judgment in control.

DAY 15 Check a Known Fact

SKILL FOCUS · VERIFICATION

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI about something you can independently verify from a reliable source.

DO THIS

1. Choose a factual topic with an authoritative reference available to you.
2. Ask AI for a concise answer and note any claims that matter.
3. Check those claims against the authoritative source rather than asking AI to verify itself.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Was the answer correct, partially correct, outdated, or overly confident?

STRETCH IT

Repeat with a fact that has changed recently and compare how freshness affects reliability.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 16 Trace the Evidence

SKILL FOCUS · SOURCE EVALUATION

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to separate what it can support from what it is inferring.

DO THIS

1. Give AI a question that involves evidence or reasoning.
2. Ask it to label key statements as supported by provided evidence, inferred, or uncertain.
3. Check whether those labels match your own reading of the source material.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did AI clearly distinguish evidence from inference, or blur the two?

STRETCH IT

Ask it what additional evidence would strengthen the uncertain claims.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 17 Separate Fact from Inference

SKILL FOCUS · REASONING

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Take an AI-generated paragraph and classify each claim.

DO THIS

1. Generate a short analysis or explanation.
2. Mark each sentence or claim as fact, interpretation, inference, recommendation, or opinion.
3. Ask AI to do the same classification and compare.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Where did you and AI disagree? Which categories are easiest to confuse?

STRETCH IT

Rewrite the answer so factual claims and interpretation are visibly separated.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 18 Ask What It Is Least Certain About

SKILL FOCUS · UNCERTAINTY

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to identify the parts of its answer that deserve the most caution.

DO THIS

1. Ask AI a multi-part question.
2. After it answers, ask: "Which parts of this response are you least certain about, and why?"
3. Use that response to decide what should be checked first.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did the uncertainty it identified match the actual risk of being wrong? Remember that self-reported confidence is not proof of accuracy.

STRETCH IT

Ask what evidence would reduce the uncertainty for each weak point.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 19 Test the Summary

SKILL FOCUS · QUALITY CONTROL

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Have AI summarize a source, then compare the summary against the original.

DO THIS

1. Choose a short document you are allowed to use and know well.
2. Ask AI for a concise summary.
3. Compare it to the original for omissions, overemphasis, distortion, and missing context.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Was the summary accurate but still not useful because it missed what mattered?

STRETCH IT

Tell AI what mattered most and ask it to revise. Compare the difference.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 20 Stress-Test a Recommendation

SKILL FOCUS · DECISION SUPPORT

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI for a recommendation, then deliberately try to break it.

DO THIS

1. Give AI a decision scenario with several factors.
2. Ask for a recommendation and the reasoning behind it.
3. Then ask what could make the recommendation wrong, what tradeoffs it ignores, and what information would reverse it.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did the second pass make the recommendation more useful, or simply more cautious?

STRETCH IT

Create a "decision threshold": what would need to be true before you would act?

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 21 Find a Task AI Should Not Do

SKILL FOCUS · BOUNDARIES

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Choose a task and make the case for why AI should not handle all of it.

DO THIS

1. Pick a real or hypothetical workplace task.
2. List the steps and identify where stakes, sensitivity, accountability, uncertainty, or human relationships matter.
3. Decide which parts AI may assist and which parts should remain human-led.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did you find a place where AI would add speed but increase risk or reduce quality?

STRETCH IT

Rewrite the workflow so AI assists without owning the consequential step.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

WEEK 4

Applied Work

Use AI in practical workflows while defining where the human role matters.

DAY 22 Map a Recurring Workflow

SKILL FOCUS · WORKFLOW AWARENESS

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Take one task you do regularly and map where AI could assist.

DO THIS

1. Write the task as a sequence of steps from input to final output.
2. Mark which steps involve retrieval, summarization, drafting, comparison, transformation, judgment, or approval.
3. Identify one step where AI could assist and one step that should remain human-led.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did AI fit the workflow naturally, or were you trying to force it into the task?

STRETCH IT

Ask AI to suggest an alternative workflow, then compare it to yours.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 23 One Input, Three Outputs

SKILL FOCUS · REUSE

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Use one source to create three useful outputs for different purposes.

DO THIS

1. Choose a non-sensitive memo, note set, article, or fictional source.
2. Ask AI to turn it into three different outputs, such as an executive summary, action list, and audience-facing message.
3. Review whether each output preserved the same underlying facts.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Where did the transformation add value? Where did it introduce interpretation?

STRETCH IT

Add a fourth output with a very different audience or purpose.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 24 Turn a Process into a Checklist

SKILL FOCUS · STRUCTURE

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to convert a process into a usable checklist.

DO THIS

1. Provide a short, approved process description or use a fictional one.
2. Ask AI to turn it into a checklist with clear action steps and decision points.
3. Review it against the original process for missing steps, invented steps, or misplaced emphasis.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did the checklist make the process easier to follow without oversimplifying it?

STRETCH IT

Ask AI to identify which checklist steps require human judgment rather than simple completion.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 25 Analyze a Small Dataset

SKILL FOCUS · ANALYSIS

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Give AI a small synthetic dataset and ask it to identify patterns.

DO THIS

1. Create or use a simple fictional table with 10–20 rows, such as response times, categories, or monthly counts.
2. Ask AI to identify patterns, outliers, and possible explanations.
3. Separate what the data directly shows from what AI is merely hypothesizing.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did AI confuse correlation, pattern, and explanation?

STRETCH IT

Ask for three alternative explanations for the same pattern.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 26 Draft, Then Apply Human Standards

SKILL FOCUS · QUALITY

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Use AI for the first draft, then refine it against standards you define.

DO THIS

1. Ask AI to draft a short piece of work you can safely practice on.
2. Create a five-point quality checklist for audience, accuracy, usefulness, tone, and completeness.
3. Revise the draft yourself or with AI until it meets the checklist.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Which improvements required human standards rather than better generation?

STRETCH IT

Give the checklist to AI before drafting and compare the new first draft.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 27 Create a Decision Brief

SKILL FOCUS · SYNTHESIS

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Ask AI to turn information into a short decision brief, then examine what it chose to emphasize.

DO THIS

1. Provide a fictional or approved scenario with several facts, options, and constraints.
2. Ask for a one-page decision brief: issue, options, tradeoffs, risks, and recommendation.
3. Review what was omitted and whether the recommendation reflects your actual priorities.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Which parts were synthesis and which parts required judgment?

STRETCH IT

Remove the recommendation and ask AI to present only evidence and tradeoffs. Which version is more useful?

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 28 Use More Than Text

SKILL FOCUS · MULTIMODAL AWARENESS

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Use a multimodal AI capability if available; otherwise simulate the exercise with a described visual.

DO THIS

1. Provide an approved image, chart, diagram, screenshot, or document page to an AI system that supports it.
2. Ask AI to describe, extract, or interpret something useful from it.
3. Compare the response with what you can directly observe in the source.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Did AI notice useful details? Did it invent or misread anything?

STRETCH IT

Combine the visual with a short text instruction and see how added context changes the result.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAYS 29–30

Adapt & Integrate

Transfer what you learned to unfamiliar tools and design a complete Human + AI workflow.

DAY 29 Transfer the Skill

SKILL FOCUS · ADAPTABILITY

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Repeat a familiar challenge using an AI tool or interface you have not used for that task before.

DO THIS

1. Choose one skill from Days 1–28 that you now understand well.
2. Perform the same task in a different approved AI tool, model, or interface.
3. Focus on transferring the method rather than recreating the exact wording of your old prompt.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Which parts of the skill transferred easily? What changed because of the tool?

STRETCH IT

Write the three principles you would carry into any unfamiliar AI system.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

DAY 30 Build Your Human + AI Workflow

SKILL FOCUS · INTEGRATION

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Redesign one real task as a complete Human + AI workflow.

DO THIS

1. Choose a recurring task with enough complexity to benefit from assistance.
2. Define the goal, inputs, AI contribution, human contribution, verification step, and final accountability.
3. Run a safe version of the workflow and revise it based on what actually happened.

WHAT TO NOTICE

Where did AI add value? Where was human context, judgment, or verification essential? What would you change before using the workflow again?

STRETCH IT

Write one sentence for each: what AI should do, what the human should do, and what should always be checked before completion.

REFLECTION What did this exercise teach you about how you work with AI?

AFTER 30 DAYS

What Changed?

The point of the challenge was not to master one AI product. It was to build habits that help you work more deliberately with whatever AI tools come next.

Rate yourself now

CAPABILITY	STATEMENT	RATING (1–5)
Context	I can give AI the information it needs without assuming more information is always better.	1 2 3 4 5
Iteration	I can diagnose and improve a weak AI output instead of starting over immediately.	1 2 3 4 5
Evaluation	I can compare outputs or tools against the real task rather than the demo or brand name.	1 2 3 4 5
Verification	I can recognize when claims, sources, summaries, or recommendations require checking.	1 2 3 4 5
Judgment	I can distinguish what AI can contribute from what still requires human context and accountability.	1 2 3 4 5
Adaptability	I can transfer these skills to an unfamiliar AI tool or model.	1 2 3 4 5

Three questions to keep using

- What does AI need from me to do this task well?
- What part of this output should I question, verify, or refine?
- What still requires human context, judgment, standards, or accountability?

KEEP PRACTICING

Repeat the exercises that exposed the biggest gaps. AI capability grows through deliberate use, comparison, reflection, and adjustment—not through one perfect prompt.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Where to Go Next

The 30-Day AI Skills Challenge is one part of the AI for Impact resource set. Use the other resources to deepen your understanding, practice collaboration, and identify where your capability is strongest or needs work.

AI Fluency Field Guide

Build the foundational understanding behind effective AI use: core concepts, terminology, limitations, context, verification, and human judgment.

Human + AI: The Collaboration Lab Workbook

Practice how AI contribution and human contribution work together across generation, summarization, interpretation, decision-making, context, forecasting, and refinement.

AI Capability Self-Assessment

Identify capability gaps across verification, source evaluation, context awareness, prioritization, responsible use, decision judgment, and tool evaluation.

The tools will keep changing. The goal is to build skills that travel with you.