# KEEP THINKING

*A field guide to preserving your own intelligence in the age of AI*

## The problem, honestly stated

There's a particular kind of confidence you only feel on the internet. Someone explains an idea cleanly and a voice inside your head says, *obviously I could've said that.* The voice is calm. It's certain. And it is very often wrong.

In 2002, Leonid Rozenblit and Frank Keil at Yale asked people whether they understood how ordinary objects worked, a zipper, a toilet, a lock. Nearly everyone said yes. Then: *okay, write it out, step by step.* The certainty drained away in real time. They called it the illusion of explanatory depth: the feeling of understanding arrives long before the understanding does, and survives right up until the moment you have to produce an explanation yourself.

AI makes this trap enormously more comfortable. Ask a hard question and the machine hands you the finished artifact, the clean paragraph, the working code, and you read it and feel that warm click: *yes, exactly, that's what I meant.* That click is recognition disguised as knowing. You got the output without paying for it. The machine ran the test on your behalf.

This guide is a set of practices for making sure there is still a you doing the thinking the machine is meant to assist.

## The one test that never lies

Producing the thing is the only proof of understanding, more than reading it, nodding along, or saving it to a folder you'll never open. Before you accept that you understand anything, an idea, a plan, an AI answer, run the explanation test:

> *Close the tab. Explain it, out loud or on paper, to someone who doesn't know it. Where you stumble is where your understanding stops. Treat that as a map of what to go learn.*

## Twelve practices

**1. Write before you prompt.** Draft your own rough answer, three ugly sentences is enough, before asking AI anything that matters. You can't tell whether the machine improved your thinking if you never saw your thinking.

**2. Use AI to interrogate, not to conclude.** Ask it to attack your draft, list objections, find the weakest sentence. Keep the verdict-forming for yourself.

**3. Run the explanation test weekly.** Pick one thing you're sure you understand. Write it out step by step. Watch what happens.

**4. Read one thing slowly every day.** One essay or chapter, no skimming, no split screen. Comprehension is a muscle; the feed atrophies it on purpose.

**5. Recall before you look up.** Give yourself thirty seconds to retrieve the fact, the name, the argument before reaching for a search box. Retrieval is what keeps memory writable.

**6. Keep an ugly notebook.** Paper, unindexed, unshareable. First drafts of thoughts, wrong ideas, half-arguments. The point is thinking that no algorithm will ever grade.

**7. Do the arithmetic yourself sometimes.** Tips, estimates, sanity checks. Estimation is how numbers stay meaningful to you.

**8. Practice sitting with not-knowing.** When a question comes up at dinner, wonder about it for ten minutes before anyone reaches for a phone. Hypothesize. Argue. Then check.

**9. Make something weekly.** A paragraph, a sketch, a small tool, a meal from no recipe. The next time the voice says *I could've made that*, take it at its word, and find out.

**10. Guard one analog hour.** A daily block with no screen in reach. Unclaimed time is where your own thoughts get a turn to speak.

**11. Summarize before the machine does.** After a meeting or a chapter, write your three-line summary first. Then compare with the AI's. The gap between them is the most useful reading you'll do all day.

**12. Teach something monthly.** To a colleague, a child, an internet stranger. Teaching is the explanation test with witnesses, and nothing builds understanding faster.

## A closing note

None of this requires abandoning AI or any special talent. It asks you to be the kind of person who walks across the gap instead of being told it's there. The machine can hand you the answer. The understanding was always going to be yours to build.

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Want the structured version? **The Thinking Practice** is a 30-day program built on these ideas, one exercise a day, four weeks, measurable progress. Details on my website. And the weekly essays are free: **spelden.substack.com**