

Five Practical Lessons on Using AI Wisely in Law and Life



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Curiosity about AI is everywhere now. In my world as a litigation attorney, I see the same mix of interest and unease that many of you feel at work, at home, and even in parish life. We hear that AI can make us more efficient, but we also hear about “hallucinations,” privacy risks, and overreliance on a machine that has shocking gaps in its knowledge of human beings.

Used well, though, AI can sharpen our thinking, deepen our service to others, and even become a tool for growth in virtue, not a replacement for judgment. These five lessons come from tested workflows in my own legal practice, but they apply just as much to a marketing campaign, a school project, or planning a family budget.

1. Design the assignment first

When I first started using AI, my instinct was to say, “Write a draft,” and see what happened. The results were usually bland, sometimes wrong, and often more work to fix than to write from scratch. I eventually realized I needed to treat AI like a junior colleague. That meant designing the assignment first: Who is the audience? What tone do I want? What sources should it rely on? What structure should it follow? In AI terms, this is a “metaprompt,” but in ordinary terms, it is simply outlining in a new medium.



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Practical advice

- Before asking AI to draft, write a short brief: audience, purpose, tone, key points.
- Tell it what to avoid (for example, “no legal advice,” “no confidential details”).
- Reuse good instructions so each new draft starts on solid footing.

2. Let AI apply changes, not decide them

AI can be helpful in two roles: firstdraft generator and patternlevel editor. The second role is often safer and more powerful. Once you know what needs to change—tone, reading level, structure, citations—you can ask AI to apply those changes consistently across a document. The key is to remember that AI follows rules; it does not create them. You set the standards. You specify the edits. You decide what must stay untouched. Then you review the results with a critical eye, the same way you would with a human assistant.

Practical advice

- Use AI to “translate” a draft: more formal, more conversational, or simpler language.
- Give concrete examples of the change you want, then ask it to apply that pattern.
- Always read the revised version yourself before sharing it with anyone else.

3. Build guardrails from your past mistakes

Over time, I noticed the same AI errors popping up: shallow analysis, missed sources, loose paraphrasing, or incomplete answers. Rather than getting frustrated, I began turning those failure modes into instructions. For example, I might say: “List all assumptions,” or “Flag any uncertain legal points instead of guessing,” or “Cite specific paragraphs from the document I uploaded.” These guardrails do not remove error, but they pull problems forward, where I can see and correct them while it is still easy.

Practical advice

- After each AI use, note what went wrong and update your instructions.
- Require citations to real sources for any important factual or legal point.
- Ask AI to tell you what it does not know, not just what it claims to know.

4. Systematize repetitive work

In law, many tasks repeat: intake forms, case summaries, timeline charts. The same is true for much work: meeting notes, lesson plans, and email updates are classic repetitive tasks. For these, structured inputs work far better than opened prompts. Rather than saying, “Summarize this case,” I use an intake template: parties, key dates, issues, goals, constraints. Then I ask AI to generate the output from that structure. The more consistent the input, the more consistent the output.

Practical advice

- Create a simple checklist or form for tasks you repeat often.
- Feed AI the same structure each time and ask for the same kind of output.
- Keep improving the template as you see what helps and what confuses.

5. Keep human judgment nonnegotiable

This may be the most important lesson. AI can spot patterns and generate text, but it cannot love, it cannot take responsibility, and it cannot stand before God for the decisions we make. In both law and life, human judgment is the control point. A sound workflow ends with human review. That means verifying facts, testing the reasoning, weighing tradeoffs, and asking, “Is this true? Is this fair? Does this serve the person in front of me?” Used this way, AI becomes a helpful tool, not a hidden master. Always remember, a wise workflow with AI always ends with human judgment.