

What is AI?

Data (Use and Access) Act 2025, section 135

"AI system" means "a machine-based system that, from the input it receives, can infer how to— (a) generate predictions, digital content, recommendations, decisions or other similar outputs, or (b) influence a physical or virtual environment, with a view to achieving an explicit or implicit objective".

OECD AI Principles (May 2024) (endorsed by the Law Commission)

An "AI system" is "a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments. Different AI systems vary in their levels of autonomy and adaptiveness after deployment."

EU AI Regulation 2024/1689, Article 3(1) (June 2024)

An "AI system" is "a machine-based system that is designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy and that may exhibit adaptiveness after deployment, and that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments".

US Code, Title 15, 9401(3) (January 2021)

"The term "artificial intelligence" means a machine-based system that can, for a given set of human-defined objectives, make predictions, recommendations, or decisions influencing real or virtual environments. Artificial intelligence systems use machine and human-based inputs to— (A) perceive real and virtual environments; (B) abstract such perceptions into models through analysis in an automated manner; and (C) use model inference to formulate options for information or action."

Information Commissioner's Office (October 2022)

Artificial Intelligence is "an umbrella term for a range of algorithm-based technologies that solve complex tasks by carrying out functions that previously required human thinking. Decisions made using AI are either fully automated, or with a 'human in the loop'."

Different types of AI

Discriminative



Sorts, classifies or retrieves information from existing data, typically deciding what is most relevant rather than creating new content. Examples: Westlaw Edge/CoCounsel, spam filters in Gmail, and risk-scoring models used in financial fraud.

Generative



Produces new outputs guided by learned patterns and user prompts. Examples: OpenAI's ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, and Google Gemini.

Embodied



Situated in physical systems that sense and act in the real world. Examples: Tesla Autopilot, Nest thermostats.

Assistive (Software)



Embedded in applications which help users to interact or complete tasks, without necessarily generating novel content. Examples: Siri, Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant.

Machine Learning



A type of AI that learns and improves from examples without every instruction being explicitly programmed. By detecting patterns in data and building algorithmic models, machine learning allows predictions, classifications, and other outputs. Discriminative systems typically apply it to sort or classify information, while generative AI employs it to produce new content.

Decision-making



Systems that make or shape decision-making. They may be data-driven or rule-based and operate with varying degrees of human oversight. Examples: automated CV-screening tools, welfare fraud detection and immigration case prioritisation systems deployed by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Home Office.