DAY 18 · Part 2 · How We Got Here

Is grabbing a calculator when you don't know the smarter move? — AI that uses tools

Five-Minute AI Lessons · Sep 24, 2026

Noticing you don't know and grabbing a tool is a kind of smart, too.

In a nutshell

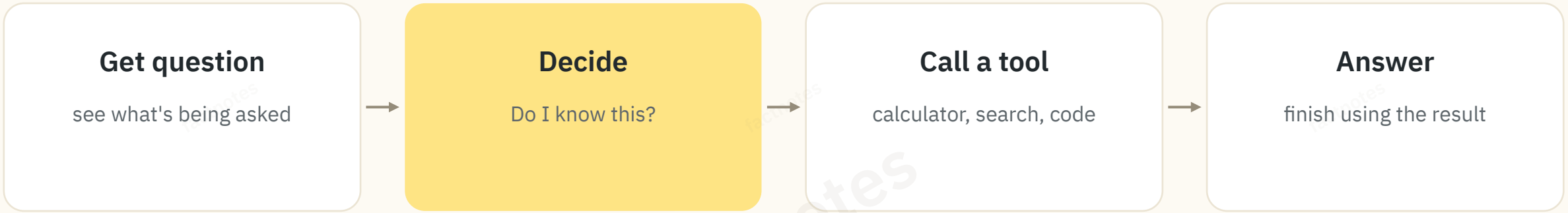
1. AI's main job is adding the next word, so it's weak at **things you need to know exactly**, like big multiplications or today's weather. So people hooked up tools next to it: a calculator, search, running code.

2. The important part isn't the tools, it's **choosing for itself when to grab one**. Since 2023, models can say 'I need a calculator now' in a set format, get the result back and finish the answer.

3. So a good AI isn't one that knows everything. It's **one that notices it doesn't know and grabs a tool** — the same call you make when you use a calculator on a test.

In one picture

Four steps to grabbing a tool



It used to take a person saying 'search for it.' Now the model does the second box on its own.

Key idea: a good AI isn't one that knows everything, but one that grabs a tool when it doesn't know

Experiment · Pick one

Answer directly, or grab a tool?

Answer directly

When this one fits

- ✓ Someone asks: "What's 3 plus 4?"
- ✓ Someone asks: "What's 'apple' in Span…
- ✓ Someone asks: "What's the opposite of…

Use a tool

When this one fits

- ✓ Someone asks: "What's 847,293 times 6…
- ✓ Someone asks: "Is it raining in Londo…
- ✓ Someone hands over a 1,000-row grade…

The rule

How to choose

- ✓ There's just one rule
- ✓ If it already knows it and can hardly…
- ✓ Using a tool when you don't need one…

Here are six questions. Pick what an AI should do. Each pick gets graded right away, and once you've done them…

Try it yourself in the web lesson · next-token.net/en/learn/day-18/

Quick check

Just three questions

Q1

What does it mean for an AI to 'use tools'?

① It memorizes whole answers
② It calls a calculator, search or code on its own
③ It switches to a bigger model
④ It makes its answers shorter

Q2

Which of these questions is better handled with a tool?

① What's 'cat' in Spanish?
② What's the opposite of 'big'?
③ What's 847,293 times 6,184?
④ What's 3 plus 4?

Q3

Who decides whether to call a tool?

① The power button
② The user, every time
③ The internet line
④ The model itself

Know the why, too

Q1

② When the model says 'I need this tool now,' the tool runs outside, and the model takes the result and finishes the answer.

Q2

③ Big multiplications almost always come out wrong when you're just stringing words together. The other three are things it already knows.

Q3

④ It used to take a person telling it, but now the model looks at the question and decides for itself. That's today's key idea.

Noticing you don't know and grabbing a tool is a kind of smart, too.

Tomorrow: AI that sees and hears — how do pictures and sounds get put in the same place as words?