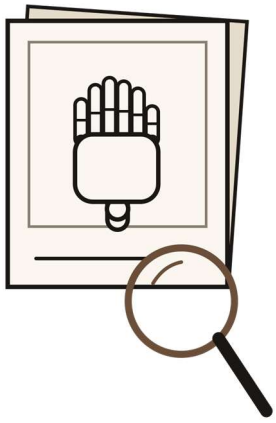
HOW TO SPOT AI



The obvious stuff, the sneaky stuff, and the stuff it keeps getting wrong.

SOMETHING'S OFF

A photo that's a little too perfect. A video where the hands don't quite… hand.

Trust that feeling. AI tools learn by studying millions of things people made, then making new things that *look statistically like them*. They're great at the shape of a thing and shaky on the substance, the details a human gets right because a human was actually there.

This zine is a field guide to those details.

THREE GROUND RULES

1 **One tell proves nothing.** Look for a cluster.

2 **Tells age fast.** The tools improve every few months. Habits outlast tricks.

3 **Humans make weird stuff too.** Don't accuse a real person over a hunch.

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HOW THE MIMIC WORKS

AI copies the shape, not the reason.

Picture a parrot that has read the whole internet. It predicts what usually comes next: the next word, the next pixel, the next frame. That's the whole trick. It doesn't know *why* a hand has five fingers or why a shadow falls left. It only knows that things usually look like this.

WHERE THE MIMIC SLIPS

TOO SMOOTH

It averages away the rough edges that make things human: pores, typos, opinions, mess.

TOO GENERIC

It reaches for the most likely answer, so it lands on the most common one. Stock phrases, stock faces, stock sunsets.

NO REAL WORLD

It has never held a cup or walked through a door. So it fumbles counting, physics, lettering and how things connect.

Human work is specific because it comes from somewhere. AI work is plausible because it comes from everywhere.

WRITING: THE WORDS

Chatbots lean on a small set of polished, important-sounding words. One is normal. A pile of them is a fingerprint.

delve · tapestry · a testament to · navigate the landscape · realm · seamless · robust · elevate · unlock · leverage · foster · pivotal · vibrant · game-changer · in today's fast-paced world · it's important to note · let's dive in

THE MOVES IT REPEATS

- **The fake reveal.** "It's not just a tool, it's a revolution."
- **Everything in threes.** Fast, simple, and powerful. Every. Single. Time.
- **Dash-itis.** Long dashes dropped in for drama, two or three to a paragraph.
- **The question opener.** "Ever wondered why your coffee tastes better at home?"
- **Hype with no receipts.** "Incredible," "essential," "transformative," and nothing to back it up.

Plenty of people say "delve." Writers used dashes long before chatbots. It's the pile-up that gives it away.

WRITING: THE SHAPE

Task: review the taco place down the street. (Both are made-up examples.)

WRITER 1 · HUMAN

Went Tuesday, line out the door by 6:15. Al pastor is the move, they shave it right off the spit. Green salsa is HOT, ask for the mild if you're a coward like me. Cash only, which, come on.

WRITER 2 · AI

Nestled in the heart of the neighborhood, this vibrant taqueria offers a delightful culinary experience. From flavorful tacos to friendly service, it's a testament to authentic cuisine. A must-try destination!

Which tacos? What day? You could paste Writer 2 onto any restaurant on earth.

SHAPE TELLS

- × **Same rhythm every line.** Even paragraphs, even sentences, no gear changes.
- × **Bullets and headings** for things that didn't need them.
- × **A neat bow at the end.** "Ultimately…" "In conclusion…"
- × **Confident but vague.** No names, dates, prices or smells.
- × **Sources that vanish** when you search for them.

Quick test: could this text be about anything else if you swapped one noun? Then nobody was really there.

IMAGES: FACES & BODIES

Newer tools have mostly fixed hands, so don’t stop there. Zoom in on the small stuff, where the mimic gets lazy.

HANDS

Extra or fused fingers. Rings that melt into skin. Grips that don’t actually hold.

EYES

Pupils of different shapes. Light reflections that don’t match from eye to eye.

SKIN

Poreless, airbrushed, a plastic glow. Call it the *AI sheen*.

TEETH & EARS

Too many teeth in a row. Earrings that don’t match side to side.

HAIR

Strands that dissolve into the background or fuse with a collar.

GLASSES & TEXT

Frames that don’t connect. Small print on shirts or signs that turns to mush.

WHY IT HAPPENS

The model has seen a million photos of hands but has never *had* one. It knows what a hand looks like from the outside, not how one is built.

IMAGES: THE WORLD

The subject gets all the attention. The background is where the fake falls apart.

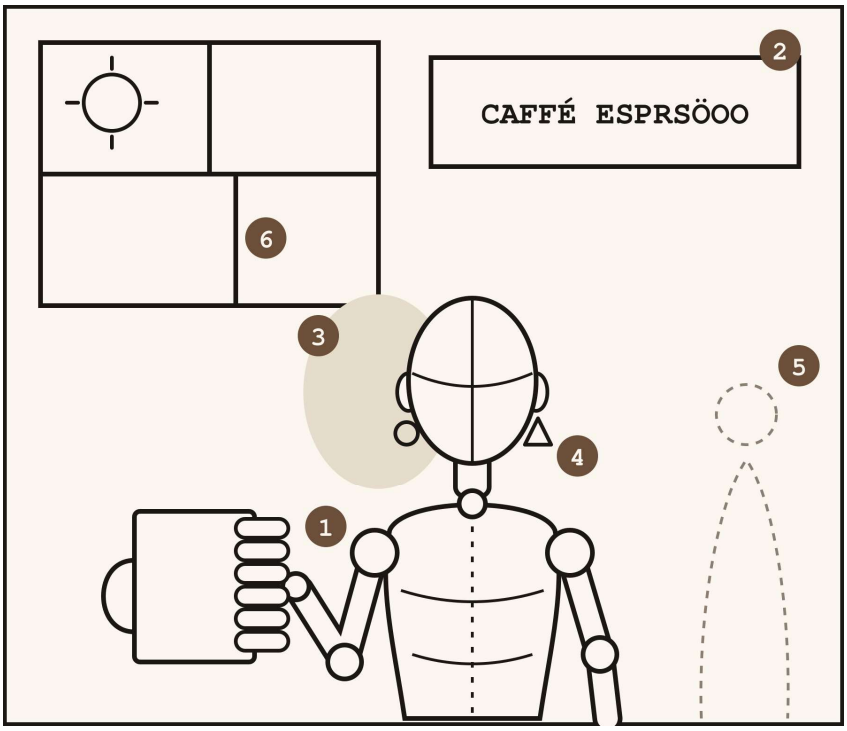
Look at	What gives it away
Light	Shadows pointing different ways. A bright face in a dark room with no lamp.
Reflections	Mirrors, windows and puddles that show a slightly different scene.
The crowd	Background faces that smear into blobs. Clones in the crowd.
Logic	Three-legged chairs. Stairs to nowhere. Windows that don’t line up floor to floor.
Edges	Things that blend where they should just touch: a hand into a cup, a strap into a shoulder.
Too perfect	Centered, cinematic, golden hour everything. Real photos are messier.

THE BIG ONE

Real events get photographed by lots of people from lots of angles. A fake usually exists **once**, posted by one account.

SPOT THE SIX TELLS

“Me at my favorite café!!”



A sketch of a suspicious photo. Not a real one.

1 Six fingers, and the hand isn’t really holding the mug.

2 The sign is almost a word.

3 Sun’s on the left, so is the shadow.

4 Earrings don’t match.

5 Background person, melting.

6 Window frame doesn’t line up.

VIDEO

Video is just images in a row, so every image tell applies. Then motion adds new ways to slip: the model has to keep the world consistent from frame to frame, and it often can’t.

MORPHING
Faces, logos or objects that quietly change shape mid-shot.

WEIGHTLESS PHYSICS
Water like syrup. People who walk without weight. Things passing through things.

CONTINUITY
A button, a ring or a person in the back that comes and goes.

MOUTHS
Lips a beat off the words. Teeth that blur into one white strip.

DREAMY CAMERA
Impossibly smooth glides and slow motion, like an ad for nothing.

SHORT & CROPPED
Clips of a few seconds. A blurred or cropped corner where a watermark was.

TRY THIS

- Play it at 0.25× speed.
- Pause on fast moves.
- Watch the background, not the star.

VOICES & SCAMS

A few seconds of someone talking online can be enough to clone their voice. Listen for flat emotion, no breathing, odd pauses, a name said wrong, or background noise that's too clean. But be honest: **your ears can be fooled.**

THE SCAM RECIPE

URGENCY	MONEY	SECRECY

"Grandma, I'm in trouble, don't tell Mom." "It's your CEO, I need this wire sent before noon." See all three at once? Stop.

WHAT ACTUALLY WORKS

1. **Hang up and call back** on a number you already have.
2. **Pick a family code word** today, offline, and never post it.
3. **Ask something only they'd know.** Not anything that's on their socials.
4. **At work, verify through a second channel** before moving money or data.

A voice can be faked. A callback can't.

THE HABIT

Next year's tools will fix half the tells in this zine. These four steps will still work.

1 PAUSE	Feeling outraged, amazed or scared? That's the point. Fakes are built to be shared fast. Slow down first.
2 ZOOM	Hands, text, edges, background. For writing: look for one real specific detail.
3 SOURCE	Who posted it first? Run a reverse image search. Does a real news outlet have it? Are there other angles?
4 CLUSTER	One tell = maybe. Three tells = probably. No source + three tells = don't share it.

LOOK FOR LABELS

Some apps add an "AI-generated" tag or Content Credentials. No label doesn't mean it's real.

DON'T TRUST DETECTORS

AI checkers often flag real human writing, especially from non-native English speakers.

When in doubt, don't share it out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I’m Luke Allis, a writer, educator, and instructional designer who spends a good portion of my professional life working with emerging technology, including artificial intelligence.

I’ve spent over a decade creating educational content, and I’ve learned that recognizing AI-generated material takes more than spotting obvious mistakes. It requires critical thinking and knowing what to look for.

I founded The Black Root Press to amplify human creativity, particularly the voices of trans and nonbinary artists. This little zine is part of that mission. I believe technology has its place, but it should never replace the human voices, experiences, and creativity that make art meaningful.

Explore our publications and open calls for submissions:

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