

The Founder Guide

Start a real business this year with AI and a laptop

A free build-along from Claude, Actually. For the adult finally starting the thing they keep talking about.

Read this first (the fill-in part)

This guide is a template. Before you start, fill in four things. Write them here:

- **Your name / founder codename:**
- **Your budget:** \$ (any number works, see “Your budget is a dial” below)
- **Your launch deadline:** (the day the business has to be live, pick a real one)
- **Your weekly hours:** (if you have a day job, 8 to 12 a week is realistic)

That’s it. Everything else in here works the same whether your budget is five thousand dollars or fifty.

The Mission

Build a real business. From idea to launched product. Using the tools that will define the next decade of work: AI, a modern web stack, and a laptop.

This isn’t a class. It’s a job you’re giving yourself, with milestones and a launch date you actually have to hit. The work is the curriculum.

By the end you will have:

- Operated your laptop and your toolkit like a professional, not someone poking at it
- Used AI the way pros do, including knowing when it’s wrong
- Researched, validated, and chosen a business idea that’s yours
- Decided your own legal structure and made the business real

- Built a brand from scratch
 - Launched a website you own
 - Landed your first customers, or learned exactly why you didn't
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The one habit that matters most: catch the AI being wrong

Every phase, you log at least one thing the AI told you confidently that turned out wrong or off. Write it in your journal.

This is the most important thing in the whole guide. AI is fast and useful and confidently wrong all the time. Most people using it have not figured this out yet. By launch you'll trust the tool and check it at the same time, which is the entire skill. Everything else here is just the excuse to practice it on something real.

Your budget is a dial

The number doesn't change the lessons. It only changes how much room you have to spend. Pick the tier that's real for you:

- **Full (\$5,000-ish):** real operating budget, you can pay for a nicer site, a small ad test, the works.
- **Lean (\$300-500):** free or cheap tools only (Carrrd, Wave, free fonts), skip paid ads, scrappier launch. Same six phases.
- **Near-free (\$0-100):** use the laptop you already have, a free site builder, a free email, and your own network instead of ads. You can still launch a real thing. Plenty of businesses started here.

This is your own capital and your own risk, so spend it like it's yours, because it is. Two rules no matter the tier:

1. **Every dollar you don't spend is profit you keep.** Costs aren't free. They come out of the same pile, your pile.
2. **The computer is capital, not an expense.** Whatever laptop you use, log it in your books as a business asset. A computer belongs on the books, not against your operating

budget.

The milestones below are also a dial. Tie a real reward to each one, or just let hitting it be the reward. Either way you're the one keeping score, so make the score honest.

Your AI tools

You'll lean on two kinds of AI: a chat assistant for thinking, writing, and research, and an image tool for your logo.

You're an adult, so use whatever's best. Claude for thinking, writing, and pushing back on you. ChatGPT and its coding tool Codex. Whatever you already pay for. Set the accounts up on day one and treat that as Lesson One, not a chore.

The skill is the same no matter which assistant you use: ask a good question, argue with the answer, and catch it when it's wrong.

The Calendar

Plan for the build to take a couple of months at 8 to 12 hours a week alongside everything else in your life. Once it's running, you operate it on about 10 hours a week.

- **Phase 1, Laptop & Tools:** week one
- **Phase 2, Idea & Validation:** two weeks (the long pole, the hardest and most important)
- **Phase 3, Legal:** about a week
- **Phase 4, Brand:** about a week
- **Phase 5, Website:** two weeks
- **Phase 6, Launch:** two weeks
- **Wrap, retro, celebrate**

Your launch deadline (the one you wrote at the top) is the hard line. The business ships before it.

The Six Phases

Phase 1: Laptop & Toolset

Goal: Get fluent on your laptop and your AI/business toolkit before you build anything.

- [] Laptop set up and personalized (accounts, password manager)
- [] Core tools installed and explored: two browsers, a notes app, your AI assistant, and a free Google account (Docs, Sheets, Drive, Gmail run in the browser, nothing to download)
- [] Founder's Journal started (this is where your first "AI got it wrong" entry lives)
- [] Two hours on keyboard shortcuts and two hours of laptop tutorials (file management, multitasking)
- [] A project folder set up: **Business/** with subfolders **01-Research**, **02-Legal**, **03-Brand**, **04-Website**, **05-Marketing**, **06-Finances**
- [] A "learn to prompt" session: ask the same question vaguely, then specifically, then ask the AI to critique its own answer

Done when: you move around the laptop without thinking, you can ask the AI a good question, your journal is started, and your first AI mistake is logged.

Phase 2: Idea & Validation

Goal: Find and pick a real business that's *yours*, that you can start with your budget and run alongside your life.

This is the hardest and most important phase. The idea has to come from you. The AI is a brainstorming partner that pushes your thinking, not a vending machine you pull an idea out of. The best idea usually comes from combining what the AI suggests with something only *you* know: your interests, your skills, the problems you actually see.

Don't run one prompt and grab the first idea. Run several, argue with the answers, and write down what *you* think after each.

- [] Brainstormed at least 20 ideas (volume first, no filtering)
- [] Narrowed to 5 using the scoring rubric

- [] Market research on each finalist
- [] Interviewed at least 5 real people in the target market (real conversations, not surveys)
- [] Picked ONE idea with a 1-2 page written memo defending it
- [] Ran it through the three validation questions
- [] Defined your ideal customer in detail

Your brainstorming prompts (run at least three, defend the survivor):

1. Start from you.

Here's me: my interests are [...], skills I have or could learn fast are [...], I have [budget] and about 10 hours a week during school. Don't suggest generic ideas. Find business ideas that sit at the intersection of what I'm into and what people actually pay for. For each, tell me why it fits *me* specifically.

2. Volume.

I want an online business I can start with [budget] and run about 10 hours a week. Brainstorm 20 ideas. For each: what it does, who the customer is, why they'd pay, realistic beginner monthly revenue, and the main risk. Don't pad. Be honest about which are oversaturated.

3. Problems, not products.

Here are 10 problems or annoyances I or people around me actually deal with: [list them]. Turn each into a possible business. Which would people pay to make go away?

4. Stress-test my favorite.

My favorite idea so far is [idea]. Argue why it will fail. Be brutal. Give me the 5 most likely reasons it flops and what would have to be true to survive each one.

5. Who already does this.

For [idea], who are the existing players? Show me 5, what they charge, and where there's a gap a scrappy newcomer could win. Be specific, not "offer better service."

The scoring rubric (1-5 each): personal interest (will I still care in 6 months?), realistic with my budget, time-realistic alongside my other commitments, solves a real problem, online-friendly.

The three validation questions: Who *specifically* has this problem? What are they doing about it now? Why would they pay *you*? (Not "I'm cheaper." That's a race to the bottom.)

Done when: you can explain your business in one sentence, name your customer, and say why they'd pay. Killing a bad idea here counts as a win, not a failure.

Phase 3: Legal Foundation

Goal: Decide your structure, then make the business real. The decision comes before the paperwork, and the decision is yours to research and defend.

- ☐ Wrote a one-page memo comparing sole proprietorship, single-member LLC, and S-corp-later on cost, paperwork, liability, taxes, and complexity. Pick one and defend it.
- ☐ Slept on it and read the memo back to yourself cold before filing anything
- ☐ Verified your business name (state database, domain, social handles)
- ☐ Filed your chosen structure
- ☐ Got an EIN from the IRS (free, about 15 minutes)
- ☐ Opened a business bank account (business money never mixes with personal)
- ☐ Set up free bookkeeping and logged your laptop as your first business asset
- ☐ Checked whether your business needs a local license

Real numbers matter here. Costs vary by state, and some are bigger than people expect. For example, a California LLC owes an \$800 annual franchise tax from year one whether it makes money or not, while a sole proprietorship doesn't. Look up *your* state's real numbers (verify them, don't trust the AI's first answer), and let them change your recommendation. That's the point.

The legal prompt:

I'm starting an online business in [your state]. My business is [description]. Compare sole proprietorship, single-member LLC, and S-corp-later on cost, paperwork, liability protection, taxes, and complexity. Be honest about which makes sense for a first-time founder under \$50K first-year revenue. Tell me the real state-specific fees and which ones recur every year.

This is the one phase where the AI's confidence can cost you real money. Fees, deadlines, and forms are exactly the kind of thing it gets wrong with a straight face. When in doubt, confirm against your state's official site, and for anything with real tax or liability stakes, a short call with a CPA or attorney is cheap insurance.

Done when: you chose a structure and can defend why. Business filed, EIN and bank account in hand, and you know what you owe and when.

Phase 4: Brand Foundation

Goal: Build a brand that doesn't look like every other side hustle.

- [] One-page brand brief: what you do (one sentence), who it's for, what makes you different, voice (3-5 adjectives)
- [] Researched 10 competitors and screenshotted their branding
- [] Color palette (3-5 hex codes) and typography (1-2 free fonts)
- [] A logo (AI image gen, then refine): a transparent PNG and a square social version
- [] Turned your logo into a real vector file (SVG) so it stays sharp at any size
- [] 3 sample headlines and 3 sample captions in your voice
- [] Domain and matching social handles secured in one sitting so they line up

The brand prompt:

I'm building a brand for [business]. Target customer: [description]. Develop: (1) a one-sentence positioning statement, (2) three voice adjectives with examples, (3) five brand names with reasoning, (4) three taglines. Push back if my positioning is generic. I want to stand out, not blend in.

The logo prompt (image tool):

Create a clean, modern logo for [brand name], a [business] for [audience]. Style: [3 adjectives]. Colors: [palette]. It must work as a small profile picture and a large header. Show me 4 variations.

Make your logo real (turn it into a vector): The image the AI made is a *picture* of a logo, not a logo yet. A real logo is a vector file (it ends in .svg), math instead of pixels, so it stays razor sharp on a small profile pic and on a large sign, banner, or vehicle wrap. There's a free tool called Inkscape that turns your PNG into the real thing in about thirty seconds, and your AI walks you through every click:

I have a PNG logo. Walk me through turning it into a clean vector SVG with Inkscape (it's free), step by step, and also export a one-color version for stamps, embroidery, and print.

Keep that SVG safe. It's the master copy of your logo, and it's what a printer or sign shop will ask you for.

Done when: you have a logo (PNG and vector SVG), palette, fonts, and a brief someone else could create on-brand content from. Don't spend three days on a font. Set a deadline and ship.

Phase 5: Website Build

Goal: Launch a real website that doesn't look like a side hustle.

Core build (this is what "done" means): - [] Domain purchased and connected - [] Platform chosen (see the tree below) and set up - [] Pages: Home, About, Product/Service, Contact, Footer with legal links - [] Mobile-first: looks at least as good on a phone as on a laptop - [] All copy written by you (AI edits, you author). No placeholders. - [] A real email address on your domain - [] A way to take payment or capture a lead - [] Tested on phone, tablet, and laptop

Stretch (after it's live, not before): basic SEO, analytics, search console.

Platform decision tree: physical products → Shopify. Digital products or courses → Squarespace or Webflow. Service with bookings → Squarespace plus a scheduler. Portfolio or one-pager → Carrd (cheapest) or Squarespace.

The website copy prompt:

Copy for my business website. Business: [description]. Customer: [description]. Voice: [3 adjectives]. Write: (1) a hero headline (10 words max) and subheading (20 max), (2) a 3-paragraph About explaining why I started this, (3) a value proposition for the product page, (4) CTA button text that isn't generic. Read like a real person, not AI. No marketing speak.

Done when: a stranger finds your site, gets what you do in 5 seconds, and knows how to buy or contact you in 30. Before you paste in any AI-built code or copy, you have to be able to explain what it does. "Explain this" comes before "make it work."

Phase 6: Launch & First Traction

Goal: Get the first customer, or learn why you couldn't.

- ☐ Social accounts on at least 2 platforms
- ☐ First 10 pieces of content posted
- ☐ Soft-launched to your own network first (the people you interviewed in Phase 2)
- ☐ Direct outreach to at least 20 potential customers
- ☐ Lead capture live
- ☐ If your budget allows, one small paid-traffic test, results read: cost per click, per lead, per sale
- ☐ First sale OR a detailed write-up of why none happened and what you'd change
- ☐ A launch retrospective: what worked, what didn't, what's next

The launch prompt:

My business is launching: [description]. Customer: [description]. Marketing budget: [remaining]. Build a 30-day launch plan that (1) doesn't rely only on paid ads, (2) uses my network and social, (3) has specific daily actions, (4) measurable goals, (5) an honest take on whether it can hit them. Push back if my targets are unrealistic.

Done when: you launched. You got customers, or you learned exactly why you didn't. Either is a win. Failure with learning beats fake success.

Milestone Checkpoints (set your own bar)

Phase	Milestone	Done?	Your reward
1	Laptop & Toolset	☐	☐
2	Idea Validation	☐	☐
3	Legal Foundation	☐	☐
4	Brand Foundation	☐	☐
5	Website Build	☐	☐
6	Launch & Traction	☐	☐

You're keeping your own score, so keep it honest. A milestone counts when the work is done and visible, not when you feel like you basically did it. Hit it, mark it, take the reward you set. Miss it, no checkmark until the deliverable exists. No journal entry and no deliverable means the phase isn't closed, even if you spent the hours. The work has to be real enough that someone else could look at it. Anything the business actually earns is yours, on top.

How to Use AI (the real lessons)

1. **Co-pilot, not autopilot.** Think faster, don't outsource the thinking.
2. **Bad prompts get bad answers.** Be specific. Give context. Say what you want and what you don't.
3. **Pressure-test it.** Ask "what could go wrong?" and "what's the strongest counter-argument?" Never take the first answer as truth.
4. **Use the right tool for the job.** Different assistants are better at different things. Try more than one.
5. **Never paste AI output as final work.** Edit it. Rewrite it. Make it sound like you. AI-sounding content is obvious and turns people off.

6. **Verify, especially numbers and dates.** This is why you log one AI mistake a phase. By launch you'll trust the tool and check it at the same time. That's the whole skill.

The Show-Up Rule (optional, but it has teeth)

Nobody's going to make you do this. That's the whole problem with working for yourself, and the whole reason this rule exists. If you want it: two mornings a week, before a set time, write one line in your journal, your number-one task for the day, and do it before anything else. The point isn't the photo or the proof. It's that you set a line and held it when no boss was watching. Only two days, because you have a life. But on a standup morning, the time is the line. That's exactly how it works once a client is keeping time, and right now the client is you.

Final word

The person who comes out of this having actually built a real business, filed real paperwork, made real decisions, and used real AI tools will operate at a different level than the version of you that kept meaning to start.

You won't be impressed by AI. You'll know how to use it. You won't be scared of starting things. You'll have done it. You won't be intimidated by business. You'll get the moving parts.

That's the win. Revenue is the bonus.

Now go pick a name and start Phase 1.

Free from Claude, Actually. Use it, change it, pass it on.