Free AI Tools: Feature Comparison Guide

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A practical comparison of the free tiers of popular AI tools for business and training use.

Part 1: Specialist AI Tools

These three tools serve distinct purposes. Napkin.ai converts text into professional visuals. Perplexity.ai is an AI-powered research engine that provides cited answers. NotebookLM is Google's source-grounded research assistant for analysing your own uploaded documents. All offer generous free tiers.

Feature	Napkin.ai	Perplexity.ai	NotebookLM
Primary Purpose	Text-to-visual generator (diagrams, infographics, flowcharts)	AI-powered search & research engine with cited answers	Source-grounded research assistant (upload your own docs)
Who Makes It	Napkin AI (startup)	Perplexity AI	Google (powered by Gemini)
Free Tier Cost	Free forever	Free forever	Free forever (Google account required)
AI Model Used	Proprietary visual AI + NLP	GPT-3.5 Turbo, Gemini Flash, Perplexity Experimental (rotating)	Google Gemini (latest version)
Usage Limits (Free)	500 AI credits/week (~1 credit per word selected)	Unlimited basic searches; limited Pro Searches per day	50 chat queries/day, 100 notebooks, 50 sources per notebook
Web Search	No	Yes – core feature; real-time web search with source citations	Yes – can search web for sources; Deep Research (10/month free)
File Upload / Import	PPT, Word, PDF, HTML, Markdown (unlimited on free)	Limited file uploads on free tier	PDFs, Google Docs, Slides, websites, YouTube videos, audio, pasted text
Visual Output Types	30+ types: flowcharts, mind maps, timelines, infographics, funnels, Venn diagrams, org charts, matrices, comparisons and more	None – text/citation focused	Mind maps, infographics, slide decks, video overviews
Audio / Podcast	No	No	Yes – Audio Overviews (AI podcast, 3/day free); Interactive mode; 4 formats: Deep Dive, Brief, Critique, Debate
Video	No	No (paid only)	Yes – Video Overviews (narrated slide deck style)
Study / Learning Tools	No	No (educational research only)	Yes – flashcards, quizzes, study guides, Learning Guide tutor

Export Formats	PNG, PDF (unlimited free); SVG, PPT on paid plans. Watermark on free exports	Copy text; share links; no file exports on free	Share via link; download audio; export slides (PPTX); watermark on free
Collaboration	Real-time co-editing, commenting, Teamspace	Shared threads (limited on free)	Share notebooks via public link; viewers can interact
Mobile App	View only on mobile; create on desktop only	Yes – iOS and Android	Yes – iOS and Android (offline audio)
Citation / Sources	No	Yes – inline citations with every answer (core differentiator)	Yes – all responses cite your uploaded sources
Best For	Turning text into professional visuals for presentations, reports, and social media	Quick research with sourced, cited answers; fact-checking; exploratory search	Deep analysis of your own documents; study aids; generating podcasts and summaries from your materials
Key Limitation	Not a data visualisation or BI tool; no numerical chart generation from datasets	Free tier has no access to advanced models, image/video generation, or Research mode	Grounded only in your uploaded sources (won't search broadly unless using Deep Research); no offline editing

Part 2: Free AI Chatbot Comparison

The four major AI chatbots all offer free access with varying limits. ChatGPT now runs GPT-5.2 but caps usage at 10 messages per 5 hours before falling back to a lighter model. Gemini provides generous image generation and Google integration. Microsoft Copilot is deeply embedded in Windows and Edge. Claude offers the strongest free-tier feature set with file creation, Projects, and app connectors – all ad-free.

Feature	ChatGPT (Free)	Google Gemini (Free)	Microsoft Copilot (Free)	Claude (Free)
Made By	OpenAI	Google	Microsoft	Anthropic
AI Model	GPT-5.2 Instant (falls back to GPT-5.2 Mini after cap)	Gemini 2.5 Flash (with limited access to Thinking 3 Pro)	Latest OpenAI model (GPT-powered)	Claude Sonnet 4.5
Message Limits	~10 messages per 5-hour rolling window on main model; then unlimited on Mini	Usage-based limits; roughly 5 Thinking prompts/day; unlimited Fast model	Soft daily limits; throttled during peak; varies by feature	Dynamic capacity; rolling window resets every few hours; varies by demand
Web Search	Yes – built-in browsing	Yes – real-time Google Search integration	Yes – Bing-powered web search	Yes – built-in web search
File Upload & Analysis	Yes – PDFs, Word, spreadsheets, code files (tighter limits than paid)	Yes – documents and images (limited vs paid)	Yes – limited file upload and analysis	Yes – documents, images, code files; 200K token context window
Image Understanding	Yes – upload and analyse images	Yes – multimodal input including images	Yes – visual input via camera/screenshots	Yes – image upload and analysis
Image Generation	Yes – 2–3 images/day (DALL-E)	Yes – up to 100 images/day (Nano Banana)	Very limited – ~1 image/day on free	No native image generation
Code Assistance	Yes – write, debug, explain code	Yes – code generation and debugging	Yes – basic code help	Yes – strong coding support; Claude Code (light use on free)
File Creation	Limited – can output code/text files	Limited – basic document drafting	No direct file creation on free	Yes – Excel, Word, PowerPoint, PDF creation from Feb 2026
Voice Mode	No (paid only)	Yes – Gemini Live (free)	Yes – voice input available	No (paid only)
Memory / Personalisation	Limited memory on free	Gems (custom personas) available	Remembers preferences in session	Memory and Projects available; compaction for longer chats
Custom GPTs / Gems	Can use GPT Store GPTs; cannot create own	Basic Gems available	No custom creation on free	Projects feature available on free (since Feb 2026)
Deep Research	No (paid only)	5 Deep Research reports/month on free	No (paid only)	No (paid only)

Connectors / Integrations	Limited third-party integrations	Google Workspace (limited on free)	Microsoft ecosystem (limited on free; no internal data access)	App connectors: Notion, Slack, Google Workspace, Figma and more (since Feb 2026)
Ads	Yes – ads testing on free tier in US (since Feb 2026)	No ads currently	No ads currently	No ads – Anthropic committed to ad-free experience
Data Privacy	Conversations may be used for training (can opt out)	Data may be used for improvement; limited controls on free	Uses public web data; no internal org data access on free	Conversations may be used for training on free (paid users can opt out)
Mobile App	Yes – iOS, Android	Yes – iOS, Android	Yes – iOS, Android; built into Windows/Edge	Yes – iOS, Android, Desktop app
Context Window	Standard (not disclosed publicly for free)	Up to 1M tokens on paid; reduced on free	Not disclosed	200K tokens
Paid Upgrade	Go $8/mo, Plus $20/mo, Pro $200/mo	Google AI Pro $19.99/mo, Ultra ~$42/mo	M365 Personal $9.99/mo, Copilot Pro $20/mo	Pro $20/mo, Max $100–$200/mo
Best Free-Tier Strength	Access to frontier GPT-5.2 model; strong general-purpose assistant; GPT Store	Generous image generation (100/day); Google ecosystem integration; Deep Research access	Seamless Microsoft/Windows integration; Bing search; always available in Edge	Strongest writing and analysis; file creation; ad-free; Projects and connectors on free tier
Key Free-Tier Weakness	Strict 10-msg/5hr cap; ads on free tier; falls back to weaker Mini model	Low Thinking/Pro prompt limits; no advanced model on free; limited file handling	Very restrictive image generation; limited features vs paid; no file creation	No image generation; no Opus model access; strict dynamic usage caps

Key Takeaways

These tools complement each other rather than compete directly. A practical workflow might use Perplexity for research, Claude or ChatGPT for writing and analysis, Napkin for creating visuals from that content, and NotebookLM for deep-diving into your own source materials and generating audio summaries. All free tiers are subject to change – providers regularly adjust limits and features.

Disclaimer: *Features and limits are accurate as of March 2026 but are subject to frequent change by providers. Always verify current capabilities at the official websites.*