How to Use an AI Coding Assistant (Step by Step)

AI Coding & Development · about 21 minutes · 2026-11-11

A fully illustrated 28-step guide to using an AI coding assistant well: prepare focused context, prompt in small verifiable pieces, read every diff, test real behaviour, then secure and document the code you keep.

Phase 1 — Set Up a Useful Session

1. **Open the relevant files, not the whole repository**
   Open the relevant files, not the whole repository.
2. **State the goal and constraints in one paragraph**
   State the goal and constraints in one paragraph.
3. **Paste the exact error and stack trace**
   Paste the exact error and stack trace.
4. **Agree on a style contract**
   Agree on a style contract.
5. **Match the mode to the task**
   Match the mode to the task.
6. **Set an explicit scope boundary**
   Set an explicit scope boundary.
7. **Keep secrets out of the prompt**
   Keep secrets out of the prompt.

Phase 2 — Generate and Understand the Code

8. **Request a plan before the code**
   Request a plan before the code.
9. **Ask for one function at a time**
   Ask for one function at a time.
10. **Request an explanation of the tricky lines**
    Request an explanation of the tricky lines.
11. **Ask it to copy the existing pattern**
    Ask it to copy the existing pattern.
12. **Diff every suggestion against your file**
    Diff every suggestion against your file.
13. **Check imports and version compatibility**
    Check imports and version compatibility.
14. **Reject code you cannot explain**
    Reject code you cannot explain.

Phase 3 — Test and Fix

15. Run the existing test suite first

Run the existing test suite first.

16. Write a test for the new behaviour

Write a test for the new behaviour.

17. Exercise the failure path explicitly

Exercise the failure path explicitly.

18. Measure performance if the code is hot

Measure performance if the code is hot.

19. Feed the real error back, not a guess

Feed the real error back, not a guess.

20. Cap the retry loop at three attempts

Cap the retry loop at three attempts.

21. Ask for a simpler rewrite

Ask for a simpler rewrite.

Phase 4 — Secure and Document What You Keep

22. Scan for injection and unsafe calls

Scan for injection and unsafe calls.

23. Verify any package it recommends

Verify any package it recommends.

24. Replace generated credentials and endpoints

Replace generated credentials and endpoints.

25. Comment only where the intent is unclear

Comment only where the intent is unclear.

26. Update the type hints and documentation

Update the type hints and documentation.

27. Record the prompt behind tricky code

Record the prompt behind tricky code.

28. Run a final clean build

Run a final clean build.

Sources

1. Anthropic — AI research and documentation
   https://www.anthropic.com/
2. Microsoft Learn
   https://learn.microsoft.com/
3. NIST — AI Risk Management Framework
   https://www.nist.gov/
4. Mozilla — web and browser resources
   https://www.mozilla.org/

Written as a checklist from https://www.howcompass.com/how-to/How-to-Use-an-AI-Coding-Assistant. Corrections: https://www.howcompass.co