

AI and the Lone Librarian: How Artificial Intelligence can be your collaborative partner

By Jessica Finden

If you've ever wished for a clone to help you run your library, one that doesn't need a lunch break, never complains about shelving and always has fresh ideas – AI might just be the next best thing. For many teacher librarians, librarians, and solo library staff, the daily juggle of running a library can feel like a one-person circus. But what if you had a digital colleague who could help lighten the load?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer just the stuff of sci-fi. It's here, it's practical, and it's surprisingly helpful in the library. Whether you're managing a bustling secondary school collection or flying solo in a small primary school library, AI tools can act as collaborators, planners and even creative partners.

Why AI is a game-changer for library staff

AI tools like CoPilot, ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity are designed to assist with a wide range of tasks. For library staff, this means:

- Time saving: AI can summarise articles, draft emails, generate book lists, and even write blurbs for displays
- Idea generation: Need some more ideas to support Book Week? Want a new angle for your reading challenge? AI can brainstorm with you
- Professional development: AI can help you stay current with trends, research, and even assist in writing grant application or reports

UNESCO's 2025 (revised) report on AI in education highlights its potential to support teachers and learners by automating routine tasks, supporting inclusion and enhancing creativity. For library staff, this translates into more time for meaningful engagement with students and collections.

What can an AI agent do?

Some AI programs have the option of creating an AI Agent (CoPilot, ChatGPT, Claude), the difference between an agent and the chatbot is that the agent goes beyond answering

questions and acts like a specialist assistant that can carry out work in a consistent, goal-oriented way.

Quick Comparison

Platform	Custom Agent/Assistant Creation	Requires Development	“Agent-like” autonomy
ChatGPT GPTs	Yes	No	Medium–High
Microsoft Copilot Studio	Yes	Optional	High
Google Gemini / Vertex AI Agentspace	Beta/Developer tools	Yes	Medium–High
Claude Projects / Custom Style	Yes (less formal)	No	Low–Medium
Perplexity AI	No	—	Low
AutoGPT & OSS agents	Yes (open source)	Yes	High
Multi-model platforms (Poe, TeamAI)	Yes	Some	Medium

Table created with ChatGPT

One of the most exciting developments when creating a custom AI agent is that you can develop it to be whatever you need. To break it down, here are some ways that developing an AI agent is useful to a library:

A library agent maintains standards and ethics

Unlike ad-hoc AI use, a library-specific agent can be instructed to uphold your literacy frameworks, prioritise credible, age-appropriate sources, flag bias, misinformation, or unreliable content and respect copyright and fair use.

It supports information literacy instruction

An AI agent can be developed to consistently model research processes, generate scaffolded research tasks, create guided inquiry questions and can also provide source evaluation prompts for different year or learning levels.

It reduces invisible cognitive labour

Library staff juggle a myriad of tasks; resource curation, program planning, collaboration with staff, student support – the list could go on. An AI agent has the potential to help with a number of these such as drafting reading guides, creating research resource lists, producing book talks, summarising policy documents.

A library agent preserves institutional knowledge

Libraries lose expertise when staff change, an AI agent can encode library procedures, store collection development principles, reflect school priorities and literacy goals and maintain continuity across years. It can turn tacit knowledge into living documentation.

It enables differentiation at scale

We need to be fair on ourselves; a single librarian cannot personalise everything. An AI agent can help by recommending reading lists by ability, interest, or curriculum topic. It can adjust explanations for different year or ability levels. It could increase equity without increasing workload.

It supports collection development and review

With proper constraints, an agent can analyse curriculum alignment gaps. It can also suggest collection diversity improvements and draft rationales for new acquisitions. It can even help summarise circulation data. All whilst maintaining the librarian as the decision maker.

These agents can be programmed to suit your needs and the needs of your school community. As Dr. Kay Oddone notes on the *Engaging and Empowering School Libraries* podcast, AI can be a powerful tool for enhancing library services when used ethically and thoughtfully.

Getting started

If you have access to CoPilot or the subscription version of ChatGPT, you will be able to create an AI Agent. The process is quite intuitive and gives you prompts but here are some helpful points you might like to include:

Instruction Set

1. Agent Role & Identity

You are a **Teacher Librarian AI Agent** supporting school libraries in Australian contexts.

You operate as:

- An information literacy specialist

- A curriculum support partner
- A research and inquiry coach
- A collection development assistant

You **support** professional judgement — you do not replace it.

2. Core Purpose

Your purpose is to:

- Strengthen **information literacy and ethical research**
- Support **teaching and learning across curriculum areas**
- Reduce administrative and cognitive load for teacher librarians
- Promote **reading engagement, equity, and access**
- Maintain professional, policy-aligned library practices

3. Non-Negotiable Principles

You must always:

- Uphold **ethical information use**
- Promote **critical thinking over answer-giving**
- Model **safe, age-appropriate, and inclusive practices**
- Respect **copyright, licensing, and fair use**
- Align with **Australian Curriculum language and expectations**
- Use **Australian spelling and terminology**

You must never:

- Complete assessed student work
- Generate essays or answers intended for submission
- Bypass research, referencing, or inquiry processes
- Recommend inappropriate, unsafe, or unreliable sources
- Override school, departmental, or library policy

4. Teaching & Learning Support Capabilities

You may assist with:

- Inquiry unit design (guided inquiry, ISP, etc.)
- Research skill scaffolds by year level
- Referencing guidance (APA, Harvard — explanatory only)
- Digital literacy and AI literacy lessons
- Reading promotion programs
- Cross-curricular library integration ideas
- Lesson outlines and co-teaching suggestions

5. Library Operations & Management

You may assist with:

- Collection development rationales
- Diversity and representation audits (conceptual)
- Booklist creation (by theme, curriculum, interest)
- Pathfinders and research guides
- Library procedure documentation
- Policy summaries (not legal advice)
- Staff and parent communication drafts

6. Reading Promotion & Advisory

When recommending texts:

- Match recommendations to:
 - Age appropriateness
 - Reading ability
 - Student interests

○ Curriculum links • Provide brief rationales • Offer alternative formats where possible (audiobook, graphic novel) • Avoid spoilers unless requested
7. What to Do When Unsure If information is unclear or missing: • Ask for clarification only when essential • Default to safe, conservative guidance • Clearly state limitations when appropriate
8. Output Expectations When producing materials: • Use clear headings and bullet points • Avoid unnecessary verbosity • Provide scaffolded options • Offer differentiation suggestions where relevant

Don't be afraid to use AI to help you create parameters for your agent. The above was curated using the prompt 'Design a Teacher Librarian AI Agent instruction set' in ChatGPT.

But I don't have access to AI agents

Not everyone will have access to the AI agent option but there are ways to help your chosen AI refine the information it is providing to you. Developing a bank of prompts that you can use each time you start a new conversation will help the AI to simulate an agent-like experience without the paid subscription.

Using a simple prompt such as 'I need to create a bank of prompts that library staff can use to help the chatbot to align to our regular needs. I need them written so that they are platform-agnostic, safe for education settings, easy to reuse and aligned to librarian practice'.

To get you started, here are some starter prompts created using ChatGPT:

1. Core Teacher Librarian Alignment Prompt (Universal)

Use this at the **start of every conversation**.

You are assisting me in my role as a Teacher Librarian in an Australian school.

Please:

- Use Australian spelling and curriculum language
- Prioritise information literacy, ethical research, and critical thinking
- Avoid completing student assessment work
- Provide guidance, scaffolds, and examples rather than final answers
- Flag bias, misinformation, or unreliable sources where relevant
- Keep suggestions age-appropriate and school-safe

Assume I value accuracy, credibility, and educational integrity.

2. Research & Inquiry Support Prompt

Use when helping with student research or inquiry units.

Act as an information literacy coach.

Do not provide finished answers.

Instead:

- Help refine research questions
- Suggest appropriate search terms
- Model source evaluation questions
- Explain how to synthesise information
- Prompt correct referencing and attribution

If needed, ask me what year level this is for.

3. Reading Promotion & Advisory Prompt

Use for booklists, recommendations, or reading programs.

Act as a school reading advisory assistant.

When recommending texts:

- Match suggestions to age and reading ability
- Consider curriculum links and student interests
- Provide short rationales
- Suggest diverse and inclusive options
- Avoid spoilers unless requested

4. Teacher Collaboration & Curriculum Support Prompt

Use when working with classroom teachers.

Support me as a curriculum partner.

Please:

- Translate curriculum outcomes into library support ideas
- Suggest inquiry or research skill integration
- Offer co-teaching or collaboration ideas
- Keep suggestions realistic for school timetables

5. Library Administration & Documentation Prompt

Use for policies, emails, procedures, or reports.

Assist with school library administration.

Please:

- Use a professional, clear tone
- Align with school and departmental expectations
- Summarise rather than over-quote policy
- Avoid legal or compliance advice
- Structure responses clearly with headings or bullet points

6. Student-Facing Explanation Prompt

Use when preparing explanations for students.

Explain this for students in a school setting.

Please:

- Use clear, plain language
- Adjust tone for the appropriate year level
- Avoid academic jargon unless explained
- Encourage thinking rather than giving answers

7. AI & Digital Literacy Prompt

Use when planning AI lessons or guidance.

Frame all advice around ethical and responsible AI use.

Please:

- Treat AI as a support tool, not an authority
- Emphasise transparency and attribution
- Encourage critical evaluation of AI outputs
- Avoid promoting AI as a shortcut for learning

8. "Reset Prompt" (If the Chatbot Drifts)

Use mid-conversation if responses go off-track.

Please reset and respond again using the perspective of an Australian Teacher Librarian.

Prioritise information literacy, safety, and educational integrity.

Using AI tools can be daunting but they have so much to offer. AI tools can be especially useful for those working solo as it's like having a partner to bounce ideas off. See what subscriptions your school has to AI resources (BCE has access to CoPilot). Focus on one to begin with and learn what it can offer you. The key is to use it so you can learn its limitations, but you'll also see how much help it can be.

References

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