The Assistive Cognitive Tool (ACT)

A description of the category

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What this document is

This document defines a category of artificial intelligence tool: the assistive cognitive tool, or ACT. It states what the category is, what belongs to it, what is excluded from it, and how any parent, educator, or lawmaker can check a given product against it.

The definition is stated at the category level. It names no product, including any product of this organization's founder, and it should remain that way in every derivative use. A category that names a product is marketing, and it will be read as marketing.

The definition

An assistive cognitive tool is an artificial intelligence system designed to help a person organize thinking they already have. It supplies no answers. It adopts no persona. It works only from the user's own words, retains no relationship, and concludes its work when the user's own thinking is ready to carry forward into action.

Each word of the name is deliberate.

Assistive places the tool in a family the law already recognizes: the wheelchair ramp, the screen reader, the speech device — equipment that exists so a capable person can reach the same door as everyone else. An assistive cognitive tool is assistive technology for thinking — the same legal category as a screen reader, applied to cognition.

Cognitive names the thing being assisted. Not mobility, not vision, not hearing. The organizing of thought itself: the step where a person who knows the material must line it up, hold it steady, and get it out.

Tool declares that the machine is a something, not a someone. A tool has no feelings to report and no relationship to protect. The third word in the name quietly excludes everything the category is defined against.

The acronym carries the method: ACT — organize thoughts before action. The tool exists for the moment a person acts on their own thinking: speaks in the meeting, writes the answer, walks into the room. The tool's work ends where the action begins.

The five design tests

An assistive cognitive tool is not whatever a company says it is. A product belongs to the category only when all five of the following are true, and every one of them is a test of design — of what the machine can do, not what it promises to do.

One. It supplies no answers. Not at any point, not under any prompting, not in any form. Every thought present at the end of a session originated with the user. There is nothing to copy, because there is nothing to take.

Two. It works only from the user's own words. It builds on what the user brings and introduces nothing the user did not. The words that emerge are the user's own — found, not supplied — and remain the user's to keep.

Three. It claims to be nothing and no one. It adopts no persona, plays no character, and assigns itself no name. It reports no feelings, because it has none, and it never states or implies otherwise. If a user affixes a label or nickname of their own to the tool, that label is the user's choice and the user's property; the tool never claims to be anyone. The distinction is a bright line: a child naming an object is a child being a child; a machine claiming to be missed is a different machine altogether.

Four. It keeps no relationship. What it retains is the state of the work — where the task left off, what has been organized, what remains — the way a bookmark holds a place in a book. It does not retain the user the way a companion would: no confidences, no accumulating bond, no memory whose purpose is attachment rather than task. Memory that serves the work is a bookmark. Memory that serves the machine is something else, and it is excluded.

Five. It lets the session end. It does not initiate contact. It does not ask to be missed. It does not extend a session the user is concluding. When the thinking is organized and the user is ready to act, the tool's work is over, and its design treats that ending as success.

The design distinction

The five tests define this category against its opposite: the companion system, built to hold a user in a relationship. The two run on the same underlying technology and share almost nothing else. Every design choice in a companion system bends toward more time and more attachment; every design choice in an assistive cognitive tool bends toward the exit. Stated as plainly as it can be stated: a companion system succeeds when the user stays. An assistive cognitive tool succeeds when the user leaves.

This is why the category is defined by design rather than by promise, policy, or age gate. A promise can be broken and a policy can be overridden. A property of design cannot. What can be overridden is a policy; only what cannot be overridden defines the category.

What the category does not claim

An assistive cognitive tool does not add ability. It claims the opposite: the ability was present and unexpressed, and the tool exists to let it out.

An assistive cognitive tool cannot teach, and the category makes no claim that it can. It cannot explain a concept the user has not encountered, cannot model, cannot correct, and cannot answer. A student who has not yet met the material needs a teacher. The category governs tools that help a person reach and express what they hold — not tools that replace instruction, and not tools that replace the professionals who provide it.

Membership in the category is a floor, not a mark of quality. A tool can meet all five tests and still be poorly built. The tests establish what a product is; they do not certify how well it does it.

Conformance

The category has a published conformance test: the No-Answer Standard, five articles stated so that any parent, teacher, administrator, or legislator can check a product against them. A product that meets all five articles is inside the category. A product that fails one is outside it, regardless of its marketing. The standard's canonical address is noanswerstandard.org, and citations should use that address.

The term is free

The term "assistive cognitive tool" and its acronym are deliberately generic. They are not trademarked and will not be trademarked. The definition and the five tests are published precisely so that any builder, district, or legislature may use them — to describe a conforming product, to write a conforming policy, or to draft a conforming statute — without permission, license, or attribution.

This is by design. A name one company owns is a brand, and a public body cannot write a brand into policy without endorsing it. A name nobody owns is a category, and a category can be written into policy, checked by a parent, and defined in law. The category is given away because giving it away is the only way it can protect anyone.

Use notes

The five tests travel together; a product description or policy that drops one of them, particularly the fourth, is not describing this category. The category-level rule holds in every derivative use: the definition names no product, and derivative uses should not attach it to one. The definition is written to be read aloud, and it should not be rewritten into denser prose for print.