



■ STUDENT GUIDE

From idea to evidence

The questions to answer, and the AI prompts to test your business idea, part by part.



By Bruce Rowe

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How to use this guide

This guide takes you through five parts, from finding a problem worth solving to pitching what you've learned. Each part gives you the questions to answer about your idea, and AI prompts that test your answers properly.

1 Answer the questions yourself first

Write your answers down. Mark each one as something you **know**, because you have evidence, or something you **assume**.

2 Ask AI to challenge your answers

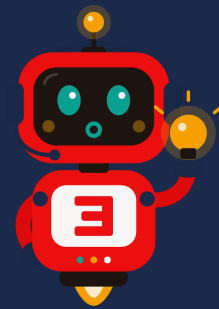
Copy a prompt, fill in the **[brackets]**, and paste it into your AI of choice, such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini or Copilot.

3 Go and get evidence

AI helps you think. Only real people can tell you if you are right. Take what the AI raises out into the world and test it.

THE ONE RULE

Don't ask AI to agree with you. Ask it to challenge you.



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Remember

Your AI can be confidently wrong, and it tends to agree with you. Treat what it says as a sharp question to go and check, never as evidence.

Evidence comes from people. Talk to them, watch them, and ask them to pay.

Set up your AI thought partner

Use this once at the start of every new chat or project. It tells your AI to challenge you instead of cheering you on.

0 The thought partner setup

Use it when: you start a new chat or project about your idea.

I'm a student founder testing a business idea, and I'm preparing to pitch it. Act as my critical thought partner, not my cheerleader.

For everything I share with you:

1. Point out what I'm assuming without evidence.
2. Give me the strongest honest argument against my idea.
3. Tell me what evidence would change your mind.
4. Suggest the cheapest way to test it in the next 7 days.

Be direct and specific. Don't praise my idea unless I've shown real evidence. If you're unsure about a fact or a number, say so and tell me how I could check it. Ask me questions when something is unclear.

My idea: [describe your idea in 3 to 5 sentences]

Who it's for: [your customer]

What I've done so far: [conversations, tests, numbers]

Build your second brain

- **One project per idea.** Most AI tools let you create a project or a custom assistant. Keep everything about your idea in one place so your AI learns your business as you do.
- **Record every conversation.** Ask permission first, then transcribe it and add the transcript to your project.
- **Keep a decision log.** What you believed, what you tested, what happened, and what you decided. There's a template on the last page.
- **Re-run the prompts after every round.** Your answers should get sharper each time.

Use AI well

- **Check every number.** Treat AI facts and figures as guesses to verify, not evidence.
- **Watch for flattery.** If your AI agrees too easily, push back with the lines below.
- **It can't replace customers.** AI can't tell you what your customers think. Only they can.
- **Protect people's privacy.** Remove names and personal details before you paste a transcript into AI.

WHEN YOUR AI GOES EASY ON YOU, PUSH BACK

"What am I missing?"

"Be harsher. What would a sceptical customer say?"

"Which of my claims has the least evidence?"

"What would have to be true for this to work?"

"Give me three ways this fails."

PART 01 OF 05

Ideation

Are we solving the **right problem**?



Ideation is more than coming up with ideas. It starts with the problem. Separate the problem from the solution you'd like to build.

What makes a problem worth solving?

Real

People feel it and can describe it

Frequent

It happens often

Painful

They already work around it

Widespread

Many people have it

OFTEN SKIPPED

Worth paying for

Someone will pay to fix it

Prove each one with evidence from the people who have the problem.

Start with the problem, not the solution

SOLUTION-FIRST

"I want to build an app."

The risk: you build something before proving anyone needs it.

PROBLEM-FIRST

"What is hard for people today?"

The opportunity: understand the need before you choose the solution.

FROM THE FRED STORY

Educators told me what they wanted. I agreed with them, and I never asked the students. A digital platform was only one possible solution, and I treated it as the answer.

Bruce Rowe, Co-founder and CEO, FRED

Your questions: ideation

If you can't describe the problem without mentioning your solution, you haven't found the problem yet.

— Four questions before you build

- 1 What problem are we trying to solve?
- 2 Who experiences it?
- 3 Why does it matter enough for them to act?
- 4 Are enough people affected, and do they care, for this to scale? This one decides if you have a business.

— Apply it to your idea

- 5 What problem am I solving, and for whom?
- 6 What evidence do I have that it matters to them, rather than simply believing it does?
- 7 Am I solving it for enough people who care, so this can scale?

TIP

Write what you know separately from what you assume. Include a rough number for how many people have this problem.

— Know or assume?

WHAT I KNOW, AND HOW I KNOW IT	WHAT I ASSUME

AI prompts: ideation

Run these after you've answered the questions yourself. Paste your own answers in, not a summary of what you hope is true.

1.1 Separate the problem from the solution

Use it when: you've written your problem statement.

Here is my problem statement: **[paste it]**. Rewrite it so it doesn't mention my solution at all. Then tell me: (1) whether the problem still sounds real and important without my solution, (2) three other ways someone could solve it, and (3) whether I've fallen in love with my solution.

1.2 Stress-test the problem

Use it when: you want to know if the problem is worth solving.

Score my problem from 1 to 5 on each of these: real, frequent, painful, widespread and worth paying for. For each score, tell me what evidence I've given you and what's missing. Be strict: if I haven't shown evidence, score it low. Then tell me which test is my weakest and how to check it this week.

My problem: **[problem]**

My customer: **[who has it]**

My evidence so far: **[what you've heard or seen]**

1.3 Hunt my assumptions

Use it when: you have answers to the questions on the previous page.

List every assumption hidden in my answers below. Put them in a table with three columns: the assumption, how risky it is if I'm wrong (high, medium or low), and the cheapest way to test it. Put the riskiest first.

My answers: **[paste your answers]**

1.4 Argue against me

Use it when: you're feeling very sure about your idea.

Make the strongest honest case that this problem isn't worth building a business around. Then tell me exactly what I'd need to hear or see from real customers to prove you wrong.

My idea: **[idea]**

1.5 Check the scale

Use it when: you need to know if enough people have the problem.

Help me estimate how many people have this problem: **[problem]**, among **[customer group]** in **[place]**. Show your reasoning step by step and label every number as a guess. Then tell me how I could check each number myself, using real sources or conversations. Don't present guesses as facts.

PART 02 OF 05

Empathy

Do we truly understand the **people**?



Your assumptions are not your customer's reality. Get out of your head and into their lives.

Five ways to get closer

1 Speak to them

Ask about the last time it happened. Don't ask if they like your idea.

2 Watch them

Shadow them and look for the workarounds.

3 Understand their limits

Time, money and other priorities.

4 See how they solve it today

Ask them to show you the tool or the hack.

5 Look for evidence against you

Talk to people who disagree.

Immerse yourself

Knock on doors

Observe

Run workshops

Go where your customers are.
Watch what they do.
Understand why.



Jobs, pains and gains

Jobs

What are they trying to get done?

Pains

What gets in their way?

Gains

What would make life better?

Fill these in with your customers' own words, and mark each line as **heard** or **assumed**. The assumed lines are your list of things to test. Based on the customer profile in the Value Proposition Canvas by Alex Osterwalder.

Your user is not always your buyer

Map who uses it, who pays, who recommends it and who approves it. Then empathy map every one of them.



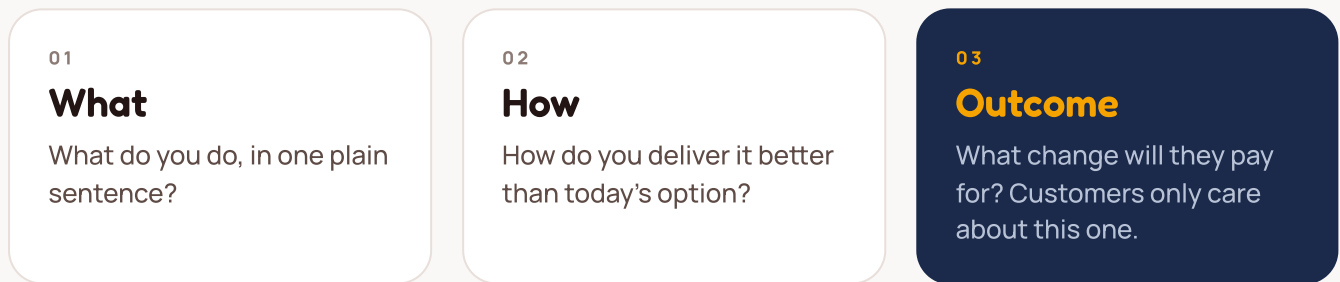
FROM THE FRED STORY

FRED sells to five stakeholders: students, educators, parents, funders and channel partners. I would not recommend that to anyone. If you can, have **one buyer** only.

Bruce Rowe, Co-founder and CEO, FRED

Be clear on your value

Most pitches spend all their time on the first two. Customers only care about the third.



YOUR ONE-LINER

We help **[who]** **[do what]**, by **[how]**, so that **[outcome]**.

Then test the sentence on a real customer.

Your questions: **empathy**

Write down what you need to learn, not just what you think you know.

- 1 Have I spent enough time with my customer, or am I relying on assumptions?
- 2 Who uses it, who pays, and who else must say yes?
- 3 What are my customer's jobs, pains and gains, in their own words? Which did I hear, and which am I assuming?
- 4 What outcome will they actually pay for?

— Your list of 3

List the next three people you'll speak to, and what you need to learn from each. Include at least one person who might disagree with you.

WHO I WILL SPEAK TO	WHAT I NEED TO LEARN FROM THEM

— AI prompts: before your conversations

2.1 Write better interview questions

Use it when: you're about to talk to customers.

I'm going to interview **[type of customer]** about **[problem]**. Write 8 interview questions that ask about their real past behaviour, not their opinions or my idea. For example, "Tell me about the last time..." instead of "Would you use...?". Cover what they do today, what it costs them in time or money, and what they've already tried. Don't mention my solution.

2.2 Catch my leading questions

Use it when: you've written your own interview questions.

Here are the questions I plan to ask customers: **[paste your questions]**. Flag any that are leading, hypothetical, or that invite people to be polite about my idea. Rewrite each flagged question so it asks about a specific past experience instead.

AI prompts: empathy

AI can help you prepare for customer conversations and make sense of them. It can't have them for you. Ask permission before you record anyone, and remove names before you paste a transcript.

2.3 Analyse a conversation

Use it when: after every customer conversation. Remove names first.

Here's a transcript of a customer conversation, with names removed: **[paste transcript]**. Pull out their jobs, pains and gains, using their exact words as quotes. Then: (1) point out anywhere I led them or put words in their mouth, (2) list what this conversation supports and what it contradicts in my assumptions: **[paste your assumptions]**, and (3) tell me the best follow-up question I didn't ask.

2.4 Find the patterns

Use it when: you've had at least five conversations.

Here are my notes from **[number]** customer conversations: **[paste notes]**. Which pains came up again and again, and which came up once? Where do people disagree? Rank the pains by how often and how strongly people raised them, with quotes. Tell me honestly if I don't have enough conversations yet to draw conclusions.

2.5 Map who uses, pays and approves

Use it when: you need to know who really decides.

My idea: **[idea]**. Identify the user, the buyer, the influencer and the approver. For each one, describe their main job, pain and gain, and what would make them say no. Then challenge me: am I relying on more than one buyer? How could I make the buying decision simpler?

2.6 Test my value one-liner

Use it when: you have a first draft of your one-liner.

Here's my value sentence: "We help **[who]** **[do what]**, by **[how]**, so that **[outcome]**." Critique it as a busy customer would. Is the outcome something they'd pay for, or is it just a feature? Is it specific enough? Give me three sharper versions, then tell me what to ask a real customer to see which one lands.

MAKE IT A HABIT

Run prompt 2.3 after every single conversation, then prompt 2.4 once you have five or more. Watch how your jobs, pains and gains change.

PART 03 OF 05

MVP

What is the **smallest** way to learn?



Your first product is an experiment: the smallest version of a solution that lets you test a critical assumption with real customers. It's not a cheap or unfinished product.

Not a miniature dream

Don't build a smaller version of everything.

A learning tool

Build only what you need to test a key assumption.

A decision maker

Use the evidence to improve, pivot or stop.

Building tech?

There has never been a better time. AI coding tools like Claude Code let you build and test something working in days. Then use AI to **attack** your product, not only to build it.

Not a tech product?

You don't need an app to test an app idea. Try a mock-up, a manual service, a short workshop or a landing page.

FROM THE FRED STORY

We built a full product before we had enough direct evidence about the student experience. The first year told us the lessons weren't engaging enough. Building quickly is not the same as **learning** quickly.

Bruce Rowe, Co-founder and CEO, FRED

Your questions

- 1 What is the riskiest assumption in my idea right now?
- 2 What's the smallest experiment I can run next to test it?
- 3 What result would tell me I was wrong?

AI prompts: MVP

Use AI to keep your first build small, and to find the holes in it before your customers do.

3.1 Find my riskiest assumption

Use it when: before you build anything.

Here's my idea and what I've learned so far: **[paste]**. Which single assumption, if it's wrong, would sink the whole idea? Explain why. Then rank the next four riskiest. Don't let me start with the one that's easiest to build.

3.2 Design the smallest test

Use it when: you know your riskiest assumption.

My riskiest assumption is: **[assumption]**. Suggest 3 experiments that could test it within 7 days for almost no money, from least to most effort. At least one must need no code at all, such as a mock-up, a manual service, a workshop or a landing page. For each one, tell me exactly what I'd do, who I'd test it with, and what I'd measure.

3.3 Set the pass mark first

Use it when: just before you run an experiment.

I'm about to run this experiment: **[describe it]**. Before I start, help me decide what result counts as success and what counts as failure, as specific numbers. For example: "5 out of 20 people pay a deposit." Challenge me if my pass mark is too easy. Then list the ways I might fool myself when I read the results.

3.4 Attack my product

Use it when: you have something people can see or use. This is Jack's method.

Act as a sceptical first-time user of my product: **[describe it, or paste your landing page text]**. Find every hole: what's confusing, what's missing, why you'd stop using it, and why you wouldn't pay. Then switch roles and act as a competitor. How would you beat me? Be specific and harsh.

3.5 Cut my build down to size

Use it when: you're building a tech product and the list keeps growing.

Here's everything I want my product to do: **[feature list]**. I need to test **[riskiest assumption]** in one week. Cut this down to the smallest set of features that tests that assumption. Tell me what to fake, what to do by hand, and what to leave out completely, and explain each cut.

PART 04 OF 05

Pivot or persevere

What does the **evidence** say?



Let the evidence decide. Every experiment should end in a decision: persevere, pivot or stop.

Persevere when

- Customers show the problem without prompting
- They use it again, or pay
- Many people have it

Pivot when

- They like it but won't change
- The people who need it can't pay
- Too few people have the problem

Three risks every idea carries

Students usually test feasibility first, because building feels like progress. Test the one you know least about first.

Desirability

Do enough people want it?

Viability

Will enough people pay?

Feasibility

Can you build and deliver it?

WHERE MOST STUDENTS START

FROM THE FRED STORY

With FRED, the model was the issue, not a feature. Selling school by school didn't scale, so we moved towards funders and channel partners. Hold onto your purpose. Stay open to changing your **route**.

Bruce Rowe, Co-founder and CEO, FRED

Five cheap experiments for this week

Pick the one that tests your riskiest assumption.

01

Interview

Ask 10 people about their last experience of the problem.

02

Landing page

Describe your offer and count the sign-ups.

03

Fake door

Add a button for a feature that doesn't exist yet.

04

Manual service

Deliver the result by hand first.

05

Pre-sale

Ask for a deposit or a signed letter.

Every experiment ends in a decision:

Persevere

Pivot

Stop

Your questions

- 1 Which of the three risks do I know least about?
- 2 Which experiment tests my riskiest assumption this week?
- 3 What result would make me stop?
- 4 Who pays, and how can delivery scale?
- 5 Am I seeing real persevere signals, or am I just hoping?

4.1 Pick this week's experiment

Use it when: you know your riskiest assumption.

My riskiest assumption is [assumption]. Choose the best of these five experiments to test it: interview, landing page, fake door, manual service, pre-sale. Explain why, design it step by step for this week, and tell me what result would make me persevere, pivot or stop.

AI prompts: pivot or persevere

Use AI as the honest friend who reads your results without wanting your idea to work.

4.2 Read my results honestly

Use it when: an experiment has finished.

Here are the results of my experiment: [what you did, who with, what happened, the numbers]. My pass mark was: [pass mark]. Judge the evidence against these signals. Persevere: people show the problem without prompting, use it again or pay, and many people have it. Pivot: they like it but won't change, the people who need it can't pay, or too few have the problem. Tell me if I'm reading the results too kindly, then recommend persevere, pivot or stop, with your reasons.

4.3 Audit the three risks

Use it when: you need to choose what to test next.

For my idea, [idea], rate how much I really know about desirability, viability and feasibility, based only on this evidence: [evidence]. Tell me which risk I know least about and design one cheap test for it. Call it out if I've been testing feasibility just because building feels like progress.

4.4 Challenge my business model

Use it when: you think you know who will pay.

Here's how I plan to make money: [who pays, how much, how often, and how you'll reach them]. Find the weakest link. Work through a rough example, labelling every number as a guess: what it costs to win and serve one customer, and what they pay. Then suggest two other models, such as a different payer or a partner channel, and tell me how to test them.

4.5 Run a pre-mortem

Use it when: you're about to commit time or money.

Imagine it's 12 months from now and my business has failed. Based on my idea and evidence, [paste], write the 5 most likely reasons why. For each one, give me the early warning sign to watch for now, and one thing I could test this month to reduce the risk.

PART 05 OF 05

Apply it

Your next 30 days: **evidence**, not just slides



Don't spend your time making your slides look better. Spend it learning what makes the business better.

1

Immerse

Talk to real potential customers. Knock on doors, observe, run workshops.

2

Test

Run the smallest experiment on your riskiest assumption.

3

Learn

Improve your idea, or pivot. Use what you discover to sharpen your pitch.

Then go around again. Every loop should leave you with better evidence.

A simple 30-day rhythm

WEEK 1	Immerse	Have at least 10 customer conversations. Observe them in their world. Fill in jobs, pains and gains.
WEEK 2	Test	Pick your riskiest assumption and run one cheap experiment on it, with a pass mark set in advance.
WEEK 3	Learn and go again	Read the results honestly, decide, adjust your idea, and run the next experiment.
WEEK 4	Pitch	Build your pitch around what you learned, with real quotes and real numbers.

A suggested rhythm. Go around the loop as many times as you can.

Four questions to take away

- 1 Am I solving a real problem for a clear customer?
- 2 Am I solving it at scale, for enough people?
- 3 Have I immersed myself in their world?
- 4 What's the smallest experiment I can run next?

AI prompts: get **pitch** ready

When you pitch, explain what you learned from the people you want to serve, not just what you plan to build.

5.1 Turn my evidence into a story

Use it when: you start building your pitch.

Here's my decision log: what I believed at the start, what I tested, what I learned and what I changed: **[paste]**. Help me shape a pitch that shows what I've learned, not just what I plan to build. Use this structure: the problem in my customers' words, what I believed, what the evidence showed, what changed, and what I'll test next. Use my real quotes and numbers. Don't invent any.

5.2 Grill me like a judge

Use it when: you have a draft pitch.

Act as a tough pitch judge who has just heard my pitch: **[paste your pitch or summary]**. Ask me the 10 hardest questions you'd ask, one at a time, focusing on evidence: who the customer is, how many people have the problem, who pays, and what I've actually tested. After each answer, tell me whether it was convincing and why.

5.3 Check my claims

Use it when: the night before you pitch.

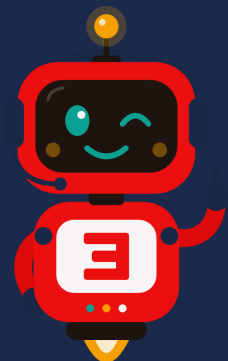
Go through my pitch line by line: **[paste your pitch]**. Label every claim as backed by evidence I've gathered, a reasonable assumption, or unsupported. For each unsupported claim, tell me how to back it up, or what to cut.

YOUR SECOND BRAIN

Record, transcribe and log everything from now on. By pitch day, your AI project should know your customers almost as well as you do.

Don't just pitch your idea.
Show what you've learned.

Understand the problem. Immerse yourself in the customer. Test small. Learn fast. Adapt.



Your evidence log

One line per experiment or round of conversations. This is the story you'll tell when you pitch, and the log you paste into prompt 5.1.

WHAT I BELIEVED	HOW I TESTED IT	WHAT HAPPENED	MY DECISION

My decision: persevere, pivot or stop. Keep going around the loop: immerse, test, learn.

BUILD YOUR MINDSET. UNLOCK YOUR FUTURE.

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