Guidelines for using AI to Search for Research Funding Opportunities

Goal: Practice using an AI assistant to identify, evaluate, and shortlist relevant research funding opportunities.

Background

AI tools can speed up the search for grants, fellowships, and calls for proposals — but they work best when you give them a clear, well-structured prompt. This exercise walks you through building that prompt step by step, then critically evaluating what the AI gives you back.

Step 1: Define Your Research Profile

Before touching an AI tool, write down:

1. **Research topic/field** (e.g., "climate-resilient agriculture in semi-arid regions")
2. **Career stage** (e.g., PhD candidate, early-career researcher, senior academic)
3. **Institution type & location** (e.g., public university in Kenya)
4. **Type of support needed** (e.g., seed grant, PhD fellowship, conference travel funding, full research grant)
5. **Budget range** (rough estimate, e.g., $5,000–$20,000)
6. **Timeline** (when do you need funding to start?)

Step 2: Build a Structured AI Prompt

Using the profile above, construct a prompt.

A weak prompt looks like this:

"Find me research funding."

A strong prompt looks like this:

"I am an early-career researcher based at a public university in Kenya, working on climate-resilient agriculture for smallholder farmers in semi-arid regions. I am looking for grant opportunities (in the $5,000–$20,000 range) open to African-based researchers, with application deadlines in the next 6 months. Please list funders, grant names, eligibility criteria, approximate funding amount, and deadlines. Prioritise opportunities from African or pan-African organisations before international ones."

Task: Write your own version of this prompt using your real research profile from Step 1.

Pretoria Office: 134 Pretorius Street, Pretoria, 0002, South Africa. Private Bag X41, Pretoria, 0001, South Africa. Tel: +27 12 302 2000
Cape Town Office: The Yacht Club, 2 Dockrail Road, Foreshore, Cape Town 8001, South Africa. Private Bag X9182, Cape Town, 8000, South Africa. Tel: +27 21 466 8000
Pietermaritzburg Office: Old Bus Depot, Mbubu Road, Sweetwaters. PO Box 90, Msunduzi, 3200, South Africa. Tel: +27 33 324 5000

Step 3: Run the Search & Capture Results (10 min)

Ask AI to run your prompt and request it to record the results in a simple table:

Funder	Opportunity Name	Contact details (emails, webpage, etc)	Eligibility	Amount	Deadline	Fit (1–5)

Step 4: Verify and Cross-Check

AI-generated funding leads can be outdated, incomplete, or occasionally invented.

A Hallucination is a reality.

For each opportunity listed:

1. Ask the AI to **search the web** for the funder's official page to confirm the opportunity still exists and check the current deadline.
2. Visit the funder's official website directly — never rely solely on the AI's memory for deadlines or eligibility.
3. Note any discrepancies between what the AI said and what you find on the official site.

Reflection question: Did the AI get any details wrong or outdated? What does this tell you about how to use AI in your funding search process?

Step 5: Refine the Search

Pick one opportunity that seemed like a partial fit and ask the AI a follow-up question, such as:

"This grant seems focused on [X], but my project is more about [Y]. Can you find similar funders whose scope is closer to [Y]?"
This teaches the skill of **iterative refinement** — treating the AI as a conversational research assistant rather than a one-time search engine.

Key Takeaway

AI is a strong **first-level discovery tool** for narrowing a broad universe of funders down to a shortlist — but it is not a substitute for verifying details on official sources before investing time in an application.