

Building A NotebookLM Notebook at Carnegie Mellon University

Quick Start Guide for CMU Campus Partners

Purpose

This guide introduces Carnegie Mellon University's approach to building effective NotebookLM notebooks for assessment, institutional research, planning, policy review, accreditation, and other evidence-informed initiatives.

NotebookLM is most effective when used as a structured synthesis and drafting partner. It helps users explore information across multiple documents while keeping analysis grounded in evidence.

NotebookLM supports professional expertise. It does not replace professional judgment, decision-making responsibility, or data validation.

NotebookLM is a drafting and synthesis partner. Human expertise remains essential for interpretation, decision-making, and quality assurance.

About NotebookLM

NotebookLM is an AI-powered knowledge environment that allows users to upload documents and interact with them through natural language questions.

Unlike many AI tools, NotebookLM primarily works from the materials you provide rather than searching the open internet. This allows users to explore institutional information in a more focused and transparent environment.

NotebookLM can help you:

- Explore themes across reports and documents
- Summarize findings and key takeaways
- Draft presentations, reports, and briefing materials
- Identify patterns across qualitative and quantitative evidence
- Locate information quickly
- Support evidence-informed decision-making

What NotebookLM Is

- ✓ A synthesis partner
- ✓ A drafting assistant
- ✓ A tool for exploring evidence
- ✓ A searchable knowledge environment

What NotebookLM Is NOT

- ✗ A replacement for professional expertise
- ✗ A statistical analysis platform
- ✗ A substitute for reviewing source materials
- ✗ A fully automated decision-making tool

Step 1: Start with Intentional Inquiry

Before creating a notebook, define your purpose.

Strong notebooks begin with a clear inquiry rather than just a collection of files.

Ask yourself:

- What decision am I trying to inform?
- Who is the audience?
- What questions am I trying to answer?
- What evidence should be included?
- What would a successful outcome look like?

Step 2: Gather and Prepare Your Sources

NotebookLM works best when source materials are:

- Relevant
- Organized
- Purposefully selected

Primary Evidence Source Examples

- Survey results
- Open-ended comments
- Interview transcripts
- Focus group transcripts

Supporting Evidence Source Examples

- Assessment reports
- Dashboard exports
- Meeting notes
- Program reviews

Contextual Source Examples

- Strategic plans
- Accreditation standards
- Policies and procedures
- Benchmark reports

Avoid "Document Dumping"

- More documents do not automatically create better insights.
- Select sources intentionally and ensure they contribute to your inquiry.
- Quality is more important than quantity.

Step 3: Create a Notebook Guide

One of the most important components of CMU's NotebookLM workflow is the Notebook Guide.

A Notebook Guide functions as an instruction manual for the notebook. It helps NotebookLM understand:

- The purpose of the project
- The intended audience
- How evidence should be interpreted
- Source priorities and evidence hierarchies
- Analytical frameworks
- Reporting expectations
- Confidentiality and ethical considerations

A Notebook Guide promotes consistency, transparency, and trust.

Core Components of a Notebook Guide:

1. Purpose

Why does the notebook exist and what decisions will it support?

2. Sources

What evidence is included and which sources carry the greatest weight?

3. Interpretation

How should data be analyzed and what limitations should be considered?

4. Framework

What analytical lens should guide synthesis?

5. Guardrails

What confidentiality, ethical, and reporting standards should be followed?

Notebook Guide Resources:

Notebook Guide Template: bit.ly/3RXN01F

AI Prompt for Creating a Custom Notebook Guide: bit.ly/4ahPVsc

Step 4: Build Your Notebook

Navigate to notebooklm.google.com and create a new notebook.

Recommended Uploads:

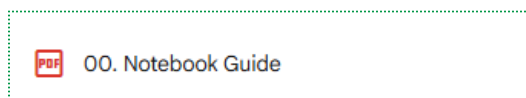
1. Notebook Guide
2. Primary evidence sources
3. Supporting documents
4. Contextual materials

After Uploading:

- Review source names
- Confirm all files imported correctly
- Remove duplicate documents
- Verify readability and formatting

Recommended Practice:

Insert “00.” ahead of the Notebook Guide title so that it shows up first and serves as a foundational source for interpretation and synthesis.



Step 5: Explore Your Notebook

Start broad; begin with curiosity rather than conclusions.

Example Starter Questions

- What major themes emerge across these sources?
- What findings appear most consistently?
- What opportunities and challenges are most evident?
- What evidence appears strongest?

Move Deeper

- What evidence supports this finding?
- Where do sources disagree?
- Which populations are represented most strongly?
- What additional questions should we investigate?
- What perspectives may be underrepresented?

NotebookLM provides citations to support evidence, so always review these before sharing findings or making decisions. Validation remains a critical part of the process.

Use Case Examples:

Student Affairs

- Analyze student feedback
- Review assessment findings
- Support orientation planning
- Identify trends across programs

Institutional Research and Analysis

- Compare findings across surveys
- Integrate qualitative and quantitative evidence
- Generate stakeholder-ready summaries
- Explore longitudinal trends

Academic Departments

- Review curriculum feedback
- Analyze program evaluations
- Support accreditation efforts
- Connect learning outcomes with assessment findings

Administrative Tasks

- Navigate policies
- Support onboarding
- Preserve institutional knowledge
- Create searchable archives

Data Privacy and Responsible Use

Before uploading materials:

- Follow CMU data governance practices
 - Use approved institutional AI tools when appropriate
 - Consider FERPA, privacy, and confidentiality obligations
 - Remove unnecessary identifying information when possible
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Resources/Links:

NotebookLM

notebooklm.google.com

CMU Approved AI Tools

www.cmu.edu/computing/services/ai/tools/index.html

Notebook Guide Template

bit.ly/3RXN01F

AI Prompt for Creating a Custom Notebook Guide

bit.ly/4ahPVsc

Final Reminder:

NotebookLM is most effective when used as an amplifier of professional expertise.

The goal is not to automate thinking. The goal is to create more capacity for inquiry, synthesis, reflection, and evidence-informed action.

- ✓ Start with purpose.
- ✓ Build intentionally.
- ✓ Validate findings.
- ✓ Use NotebookLM to support, not replace, your expertise.