

Exploring Data Through NotebookLM

Quick Start Guide for CMU Campus Partners

Welcome!

You've recently been given access to a NotebookLM notebook designed by institutional researcher(s) at Carnegie Mellon University.

NotebookLM is an AI-powered tool that allows you to explore documents through a conversational interface. Rather than searching through files manually, you can ask questions in plain language and receive responses grounded in the notebook's sources.

Whether the notebook contains reports, policies, presentations, meeting notes, research materials, survey results, or other resources, NotebookLM can help you quickly locate information, identify themes, and better understand the content.

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

Think of NotebookLM as a research assistant that helps you interact with information more efficiently.

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
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Step 1: Take a Look Around

Before jumping into the chat, spend a few minutes exploring what's available.

Start by reviewing the sources that have been included in the notebook. These are the documents NotebookLM uses when answering questions. Understanding what's included will help you ask better questions and interpret responses more effectively.

You may also notice notes, summaries, briefing documents, mind maps, timelines, or audio overviews that have already been generated. These can be helpful starting points, especially if you're new to the topic.

The goal isn't to read everything. Just get a sense of what information is available and how the notebook is organized.

★ *Notice the Notebook Guide* ★

You will notice a document called a "Notebook Guide," likely at the top of the source list.

A Notebook Guide is a document intentionally created to help NotebookLM understand the purpose and context of the notebook.

Think of it as a roadmap for the AI.

While the other sources provide the content, the Notebook Guide helps explain how that content should be interpreted. Depending on how the notebook was built, the Guide may describe:

- The purpose of the project
- The intended audience
- Important definitions or terminology
- How different sources should be prioritized
- Analytical frameworks or areas of focus
- Reporting expectations or guardrails

You do not need to read the entire Notebook Guide before using the notebook, but it can be helpful if you want to better understand how the notebook was designed or why it responds in a particular way.

In many cases, the Notebook Guide serves as the "instruction manual" behind the scenes, helping NotebookLM provide responses that are more relevant, consistent, and aligned with the goals of the project.

Step 2: Start with Broad Questions

When you're ready to begin, resist the urge to jump directly into highly specific questions.

Start by asking NotebookLM to help you understand the big picture.

Questions like:

- What are the major themes across these sources?
- What are the most important takeaways?
- What should someone new to this topic know?
- What findings appear most consistently?

These types of questions help establish context before you dive into the details.

Step 3: Follow Your Curiosity

This is where NotebookLM becomes particularly useful.

As interesting ideas emerge, keep asking follow-up questions. Think of it less like a search engine and more like a conversation.

You might ask:

- Can you tell me more about that?
- What evidence supports this finding?
- Did different sources describe this differently?
- Has this changed over time?
- What seems most important here?

Often the most valuable insights come from the second, third, or fourth question rather than the first.

Step 4: Use the Citations

One of NotebookLM's strengths is that it shows where its information comes from.

When a response catches your attention, click into the citations and review the original source material. This helps provide context and allows you to verify information for yourself.

For important decisions, presentations, reports, or recommendations, always go back to the original sources rather than relying solely on AI-generated summaries.

Step 5: Turn Information into Insight

As you explore the notebook, think about what the information means for your work.

Ask yourself:

- What surprised me?
- What confirms what I already suspected?
- What deserves additional investigation?
- What actions or conversations might this inform?

The goal is not simply to find information. The goal is to better understand it.

Final Reminder:

NotebookLM is incredibly good at helping people navigate large amounts of information, identify patterns, and surface relevant content quickly.

At the same time, it is still important to use your own judgment. Responses are only as strong as the sources available in the notebook, and context always matters.

Think of NotebookLM as a knowledgeable assistant. It can help you explore, synthesize, and learn from information more efficiently, but your expertise remains essential for interpreting and applying what you discover.

Resources:

Notebook Guide Template: bit.ly/3RXN01F

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

NotebookLM: notebooklm.google.com

CMU Approved AI Tools: www.cmu.edu/computing/services/ai/tools/index.html