

The Margin Protocol

Write in the middle. Argue at the edges.

A printable companion to Sahil feat. Claude: five rules, a four-pass editing protocol, a paper version of the margin machine, a credit-ledger template and prompts for reflection.

¶ Keep a pen nearby.
This guide is meant to
be written on.

Why a margin?

Readers have always written in books: corrections, objections, a small hand pointing at the line that matters. The margin is where a text meets a second mind and has to defend itself.

This guide uses that picture for working with AI models. The centre column holds what only the human can bring: experience, stakes, taste and the decision to publish. The margin is where the model is useful: questions, alternatives, structure, and the sentence that sounds true but has nothing under it.

The model can argue in the margin. It does not sign the page.

What this guide is: a personal working method. What it is not: research, a standard, or a claim about how everyone should use these tools.

A practice, not a finding.

Five rules for the margin

1. The centre is mine.

Experience, stakes and the final yes or no stay with the person whose name is on the work.

2. Margins argue.

Ask for the strongest objection before you ask for polish. Applause is cheap.

3. Fluent is not verified.

Every number, name, date and quote is checked against a primary source before publishing.

4. Credit what happened.

State plainly what the tool did. Neither hide it nor inflate it.

5. Leave room to be wrong.

Label opinion as opinion, hypothesis as hypothesis, speculation as speculation.

The four-pass protocol

Pass 1 — Centre

Write the rough version yourself, badly if necessary. Get your actual view on the page before any model sees it.

Pass 2 — Margin

Ask the model to argue, not edit: "What is the strongest objection? What am I assuming? What would someone who disagrees say?"

Pass 3 — Shape

Now ask for structure and clarity. Accept changes that sharpen your meaning; reject ones that change it.

Pass 4 — Proof

Close the model. Check every fact yourself. Read it aloud. Ask: is it true, useful, fair, and mine to say?

Pass 4 is the one people skip. Do not skip it.

The margin machine, by hand

The website runs five pattern checks. On paper, circle each of these and write a question beside it.

☐ Absolutes

always, never, everyone, all, obviously, proves

Is there truly no exception?

☐ Unsourced evidence

studies show, experts say, a bare %

Which source? Which year? Which sample?

☐ Vague words

very, things, a lot, revolutionary, unlock

What, exactly? Give one example.

☐ Hedges

maybe, I think, probably, seems

Is the doubt real? What would settle it?

☐ Borrowed voice

delve, tapestry, in today's world, testament to

Would you say this out loud?

Patterns are not errors. A flagged word can be exactly right. The point is to look twice.

Credit-ledger template

For any piece made with an AI tool, tick who did each part. Then write the credit line underneath in plain words.

	Me	AI	Both	–
The idea	☒	☒	☒	☒
Research & sources	☐	☐	☐	☐
Structure	☐	☐	☐	☐
First draft	☐	☐	☐	☐
Editing	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fact-checking	☐	☐	☐	☐
Decision to publish	☐	☐	☐	☐

If “AI” is ticked for fact-checking or publishing, the ledger is not finished.

Credit line:

Questions worth asking a model

“What is the strongest argument against this paragraph?”

“Which sentence here makes a factual claim I have not sourced?”

“What am I assuming about the reader that may not be true?”

“Rewrite this more plainly — and tell me what meaning was lost.”

“Who would be hurt or misrepresented if this were published as is?”

“What would make this wrong in five years?”

“Which line sounds like me, and which sounds like you?”

After you publish

What did the margin catch that I would have missed?

What did I reject, and why?

Which part of this is irreplaceably mine?

What will I do differently in the next duet?

This guide was drafted with Claude from Sahil Tayal's brief and reviewed by him. Write: sahil@sahiltayal.com