How to Use AI to Find Fake References

A practical guide for researchers, students and peer reviewers

Aron Bijl, MSc | November 2026

A fake or "ghost" reference is a citation to a publication that does not exist. AI can produce convincing-looking fake references, but we can also use it to find them and check whether real publications actually support the claims made.

For peer reviewers: Check your journal's rules on AI use before sharing unpublished or confidential manuscripts.

How to do it

1. Open an AI assistant such as ChatGPT (chatgpt.com), Claude (claude.ai) or Gemini (gemini.google.com). Start a new conversation. Turn on web search if the assistant has a separate option for it.
2. Copy the entire instruction in the box below into the message field. Use the attachment button to add the article and its reference list, or paste them after the instruction. To check only whether references exist, add just the reference list.
3. Send the message. The AI should return a list of the references, links to the publications and an explanation of any problems it found.

Copy and paste the following instruction into the AI chat:

> Act as my independent epistemological auditor: a reviewer who checks whether references exist and whether their evidence supports the statements made. Do not rewrite my text or add new references.
>
> **1. Check every reference.** Search by DOI (if given) and separately by title, authors and year. Use a scholarly database such as Crossref and, where possible, the original publisher or library catalogue. Check the author names, title, year, journal or book, pages and DOI. Look for corrections, withdrawals and retractions. Give me the link to the original record and say whether the reference is correct, contains errors or could not be verified.
>
> **2. Check what each reference actually says.** If I have provided the article, identify every statement that cites a reference. Read the full cited work, not just its abstract. Check whether its results and methods support the exact statement, including any numbers and conclusions. Say whether it is supported, partly supported, not supported or cannot be checked. Quote a short passage and give its page, section or table. Flag important factual statements without references and seek independent supporting or contradictory research for major conclusions.
>
> **3. Give me a report.** List every reference in a table, including those with no problems. Show the reference as written, the source link, verified details, errors or retractions, the statement it is cited for, whether the evidence supports it, and the relevant passage and location. Tell me what needs correcting or checking. If given only a reference list, report on the references alone.
>
> If you cannot search the internet or access a full publication, say so and tell me what is missing. Never use retracted findings as evidence. Do not invent titles, authors, links, quotations or page numbers. A failed search does not prove a reference is fake. If you cannot finish the whole document in one reply, list what remains unchecked.

What to do with the results

Open the links and check the AI's findings and quoted passages against the original publications. If it could not read a cited work, provide a copy if permitted. For important findings, repeat the check in a new chat, preferably with a different AI, without showing it the first result. Correct the errors or ask the author for the original source. The final judgment remains yours.

Further information: aronbijl.com/research

A more comprehensive AI auditor skill may be made available there in the future.