

Fionn Tobin

The best AI tools right now (2026)

A working shortlist of the best AI tools by task in mid-2026: writing, research, images, video, voice, music, meetings and automation. What actually beats what, in plain English.

who it's for
time needed
cost

complete beginner
2 minute read
free

a free guide

The AI landscape moved fast this year. Sora got shut down, Udio can no longer export, and Perplexity went free, so this is the mid-2026 picture, not last year's.

How to read this: Claude is the default for the thinking work, which is writing, reasoning and coding. Everything below is either Claude, or the one spot where something genuinely beats it.

Think, write, build

- **Daily driver, thinking partner and writing: Claude** (Opus 4.8 or Sonnet 4.6). The most natural writer, the strongest reasoning, and the one that sounds least like AI. If you want a single app that also does voice and image generation in the same thread, ChatGPT (GPT-5.5) is the smoother all in one.
 - **Coding and building apps: Claude Code**. For non-coders who want to build a real web app in plain English, Lovable. For an editor you live in all day, Cursor.
-

Find things

- **Research, sourced answers, and a Google replacement: Perplexity**. Clickable citations, fast, and it went fully free in March, with the Comet browser included.
 - **Long, cited reports: ChatGPT Deep Research** for structure and length, Claude when a wrong fact would be costly. Use Perplexity to find the sources, then verify.
-

Make media

- **Images: Nano Banana 2** (Google) for speed, value, and getting text inside the image right. GPT Image 2 when typography or infographics have to be perfect.
- **Video: Veo 3.1** (Google) for the best prompt following and built-in audio. Kling 3.0 for cheap volume, roughly \$3 a clip.
- **Voiceover, cloning and dubbing: ElevenLabs**. For dubbing a talking-head video, HeyGen.
- **Music and jingles: Suno**. Exports and commercial rights start at \$10 a month. Udio is streaming-only now, so it cannot export.
- **Slide decks: Gamma**. A newer conversational option worth watching is Claude Design.

Run the business

- **Meeting notes: Granola.** It records the call with no bot joining, and the notes land seconds after you hang up.
- **Automation and agents: n8n** for power and value, or Make for an easier visual builder. Zapier if you need the most app connections.
- **Notes and second brain: Notion.** It is now Claude-agent powered, so it doubles as the memory your AI reads and writes.

Four shifts worth knowing in 2026

- **Sora is gone.** OpenAI shut it down in April.
- **Udio disabled downloads** after its label deal. It is streaming-only now.
- **Perplexity is free**, including its Comet browser.
- **The image leaderboard turned over.** Midjourney and DALL-E are out, Nano Banana and GPT Image are in.

Tools move fast, so treat this as a June 2026 snapshot. When something on this list stops being true, the page gets updated.

This guide lives at <https://fionntobin.com/guides/best-ai-tools-2026> and gets updated when the tools change. More free guides: <https://fionntobin.com/guides>