

## The Smart Shortcut

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Thandi and Jackson had been friends since Grade 8. Thandi loved problem-solving and always asked questions, while Jackson was creative and confident, especially when it came to technology. By the time they reached Grade 11, artificial intelligence tools had become a normal part of school life.

One afternoon, while working in the computer lab, Jackson leaned closer to Thandi. “Why struggle?” he whispered, grinning. “AI can do this whole assignment in seconds.”

The assignment was important: a research project on climate change that counted toward their final marks. Thandi hesitated. She had used AI before to help explain difficult topics, but she had never let it do the work for her.

“Isn’t that cheating?” she asked quietly.

Jackson shrugged. “Everyone’s using it. If we don’t, we’ll fall behind.”

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That evening, Thandi logged into the AI tool Jackson had recommended. She typed in the topic, and within seconds, a complete project appeared—perfectly written, well-structured, and confident.

Her heart raced. “This is dangerous,” she muttered.

Meanwhile, Jackson proudly copied the AI’s work without reading it carefully. He submitted his project early, feeling relieved and impressed by how easy it was.

Thandi tried to rewrite the AI’s answers in her own words, but she still relied heavily on what the tool gave her. She told herself it was only “help.”

Neither of them noticed that the AI had included outdated facts and made up a few sources that didn’t exist.

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A week later, their teacher, Mr Naidoo, returned the assignments with a serious expression.

“Class,” he said, holding up a stack of papers, “I am concerned.”

Jackson’s smile faded. Thandi’s stomach tightened.

Mr Naidoo explained that several projects contained identical language and fake references. He reminded them that AI tools could make mistakes and that blindly trusting technology was risky.

Jackson's project was flagged for plagiarism. He received a zero.

Thandi's paper wasn't copied word-for-word, but the teacher could tell she didn't fully understand what she had written. She was asked to redo the assignment and explain her sources.

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After school, the two friends sat under a tree near the sports field.

"I messed up," Jackson admitted. "I thought AI was smarter than us."

Thandi nodded. "It's powerful, but it doesn't care if the information is wrong. And it doesn't take responsibility—we do."

They did some research and learned about the dangers of AI: false information, bias, privacy risks, and how over-reliance could weaken critical thinking skills.

"It's like having a calculator," Thandi said. "Useful—but if you never learn maths, you're stuck."

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Determined to do better, they worked together on the redo assignment. This time, they used AI differently.

They asked the tool to explain concepts, then checked facts using trusted websites and textbooks. They discussed ideas, debated answers, and even disagreed—something AI had never done.

Jackson realised he enjoyed learning more than copying. Thandi felt proud explaining the topic in her own words.

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By the end of the year, Thandi and Jackson started an AI awareness club at school. They taught other learners how to use technology responsibly, creatively, and critically.

"AI is fast, but it isn't wise," Jackson told new members.

"The real danger isn't AI itself—it's forgetting to think for ourselves," Thandi added.

Every afternoon, they reminded others that technology should support human thinking—not replace it.