



AI Tools Stack for Side Hustlers

25+ Tools Reviewed — What's Worth Paying For and What's Not

TEN STREAMS LAB

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1. Writing & Content AI

ChatGPT (OpenAI)

Pricing: Free tier | Plus \$20/mo

Best for: General writing, brainstorming, drafting emails, product descriptions, social posts. Free tier is genuinely powerful.

Pros: Versatile, huge context window, code-capable, image generation on Plus.

Cons: Can hallucinate facts, sometimes verbose, free tier throttled at peak hours.

Verdict: ■■■■■ — Start here. Free tier is 90% of what most side hustlers need.

Claude (Anthropic)

Pricing: Free tier | Pro \$20/mo

Best for: Long documents, nuanced writing, following complex instructions precisely. Often writes in a more natural tone.

Pros: 200k token context (can read entire books), excellent reasoning, less likely to refuse reasonable requests.

Cons: No image generation, free tier has daily limits.

Verdict: ■■■■■ — Excellent ChatGPT alternative. Many prefer Claude for writing quality.

Jasper AI

Pricing: Creator \$49/mo

Best for: Marketing teams wanting templates and brand voice training built in.

Pros: Brand voice feature, marketing templates, SEO integration.

Cons: Expensive — ChatGPT does most of this free with good prompting.

Verdict: ■■■ — Skip unless you're running a content agency and need the workflow tools.

Copy.ai

Pricing: Free (2,000 words/mo) | Pro \$36/mo

Best for: Quick marketing copy — product descriptions, ad copy, email subject lines.

Pros: Great templates, fast, good for e-commerce copy specifically.

Cons: Limited on free tier, output can be generic without good prompts.

Verdict: ■■■■ — Good free-tier value for e-commerce sellers.

2. Image Generation

Midjourney

Pricing: Basic \$10/mo | Standard \$30/mo

Best for: High-quality artistic images, product concepts, marketing visuals, POD design inspiration.

Pros: Stunning output quality, great for aesthetic/lifestyle shots, constantly improving.

Cons: Discord-based interface (awkward), no free tier, commercial rights require paid plan.

Verdict: ■■■■■■ — Worth it if you create visual products. \$10/mo Basic is enough to start.

DALL-E 3 (via ChatGPT Plus)

Pricing: Included in ChatGPT Plus \$20/mo

Best for: Quick image generation without leaving ChatGPT. Good for mockups and concept visuals.

Pros: Integrated with ChatGPT, good at text-in-image, easy iteration via conversation.

Cons: Not as artistically strong as Midjourney, limited generations per day.

Verdict: ■■■■ — Great if you're already paying for ChatGPT Plus.

Adobe Firefly

Pricing: Free tier | Premium \$4.99/mo add-on

Best for: Commercial-safe image generation (trained on licensed content). Great for sellers worried about copyright.

Pros: Built into Adobe Express and Photoshop, commercially safe, good quality output.

Cons: Creative ceiling lower than Midjourney, free tier limited monthly credits.

Verdict: ■■■■ — Best choice if copyright safety is a concern for your business.

Leonardo.ai

Pricing: Free (150 tokens/day) | Apprentice \$10/mo

Best for: POD designers — has fine-tuned models specifically for product designs, t-shirts, and illustrations.

Pros: Free tier is generous, excellent for POD-specific styles, model fine-tuning available.

Cons: Interface takes getting used to, commercial terms require paid plan.

Verdict: ■■■■■■ — Hidden gem for POD sellers. Free tier is excellent for testing.

3. Research & Analysis

Perplexity AI

Pricing: Free tier | Pro \$20/mo

Best for: Research with real citations. Unlike ChatGPT, Perplexity searches the web and shows sources.

Pros: Always up to date, cites sources, good at summarizing complex topics, Pro adds file uploads.

Cons: Not great for creative writing tasks, Pro tier pricey for casual users.

Verdict: ■■■■■■ — Free tier is a must-have. Better than Google for research questions.

eRank (Etsy SEO)

Pricing: Free tier | Basic \$5.99/mo

Best for: Etsy keyword research, listing optimization, competitor tracking.

Pros: Etsy-specific data (actual search volumes), free tier is usable, trend graphs.

Cons: Free tier limited to a few searches/day, data lags slightly behind real-time.

Verdict: ■■■■■■ — Essential for Etsy sellers. \$5.99/mo Basic pays for itself quickly.

Semrush / Ahrefs

Pricing: From \$129/mo

Best for: Serious SEO for your own website. Keyword tracking, backlink analysis, competitor research at scale.

Pros: Comprehensive, industry standard, massive data set.

Cons: Very expensive — overkill for most side hustlers starting out.

Verdict: ■■■■ — Wait until you have consistent web traffic. Use Ubersuggest (free) in the meantime.

4. Automation & Workflow

Zapier

Pricing: Free (100 tasks/mo) | Starter \$19.99/mo

Best for: Connecting apps without code. New Etsy sale → Google Sheet → Slack notification.

Pros: Huge app library (6,000+), reliable, beginner-friendly no-code interface.

Cons: Free tier very limited, gets expensive as tasks scale.

Verdict: ■■■■ — Free tier for simple automations. Check Make.com for better pricing.

Make.com (formerly Integromat)

Pricing: Free (1,000 ops/mo) | Core \$9/mo

Best for: Same as Zapier but more powerful and significantly cheaper. Visual workflow builder.

Pros: Much more generous free tier, lower cost at scale, complex branching logic possible.

Cons: Steeper learning curve than Zapier.

Verdict: ■■■■■ — Better than Zapier for most side hustlers. Start here.

Notion AI

Pricing: Add-on \$10/mo per member

Best for: If you're already in Notion, AI writing assistance and summarization built in.

Pros: Integrated into your workspace, good for docs and project planning.

Cons: Expensive add-on when ChatGPT does the same thing for less.

Verdict: ■■■ — Skip unless you live in Notion and value the integration.

5. Video & Audio

Descript

Pricing: Free tier | Creator \$15/mo

Best for: Edit video by editing the transcript. Remove filler words, overdub your voice, create clips.

Pros: Transcript-based editing is revolutionary, overdub feature, easy social clip creation.

Cons: Overdub quality can sound slightly AI, free tier watermarks exports.

Verdict: ■■■■■■ — Must-try if you do any video or podcast content. Free tier impressive.

ElevenLabs

Pricing: Free (10k chars/mo) | Starter \$5/mo

Best for: AI voiceovers for videos, ads, and content. Most realistic AI voice tool available.

Pros: Stunning voice quality, clone your own voice, multilingual support.

Cons: Free tier runs out quickly, voice cloning requires higher plan.

Verdict: ■■■■■■ — Game-changer for video without showing your face. \$5/mo Starter is worth it.

CapCut (AI features)

Pricing: Free | Pro \$7.99/mo

Best for: TikTok/Reels editing with AI auto-captions, background removal, and templates.

Pros: Free tier is genuinely excellent, huge template library, AI features keep improving.

Cons: Export quality limited on free tier, watermarks unless Pro.

Verdict: ■■■■■■ — Free tier is the best free video editor for social media. Essential.

6. Business & Productivity

Canva (AI features)

Pricing: Free tier | Pro \$14.99/mo

Best for: Design everything — social posts, PDFs, presentations, product mockups. AI background remover included.

Pros: Free tier is incredible, huge template library, AI features competitive, easy to use.

Cons: Pro templates locked on free, AI output can look generic without customization.

Verdict: ■■■■■■ — Non-negotiable for any online business. Free tier handles 80% of needs.

Otter.ai

Pricing: Free (600 min/mo) | Pro \$10/mo

Best for: Transcribing meetings, calls, and interviews. Automatic meeting summaries and action items.

Pros: Accurate transcription, Zoom/Meet integration, free tier is generous.

Cons: Accuracy drops with heavy accents or background noise.

Verdict: ■■■■■ — Great for client calls or interviews. Free tier is plenty to start.

7. Recommended Stack by Budget

\$0/month — Free Tier Power Stack

Tool	Use For
ChatGPT (free)	Writing, brainstorming, research
Perplexity (free)	Market research with cited sources
Canva (free)	All design work
CapCut (free)	Video editing for social media
Leonardo.ai (free)	AI image generation for POD
Make.com (free)	Basic automations
eRank (free)	Etsy SEO research

\$30-50/month — Growth Stack

Tool	Cost	Add When
ChatGPT Plus	\$20/mo	Immediately — GPT-4o is worth the upgrade
ElevenLabs Starter	\$5/mo	When making video content
eRank Basic	\$6/mo	When Etsy store has 10+ listings
Midjourney Basic	\$10/mo	When scaling POD designs

The Golden Rule

Only upgrade to paid when the free tier is actually limiting your revenue. Most side hustlers can run a profitable business on free tiers for 6-12 months. Spend money on tools after the tools can pay for themselves.