Demystifying Agentic Workflows: It's Not Magic, It's Method

The Big Picture

Agentic workflows sound complex, but they're just breaking big tasks into smaller, focused steps — with each step handled by a specialised "agent" (which could be an AI prompt, a tool, or even you).

Think of it like a kitchen: - **Chef (you)**: Orchestrates the whole meal - **Prep cook (Agent 1)**: Chops all vegetables - **Saucier (Agent 2)**: Makes the sauce - **Grill cook (Agent 3)**: Handles the protein - **Plater (Agent 4)**: Assembles and presents

Each "agent" has **one job**, does it well, and passes results to the next.

Real Example: Creating a Case Study for Students

Let's build a business case study about sustainability. Instead of one massive prompt, we'll use an agentic workflow.

The Task

"Create an engaging case study about sustainable business practices for second-year business students"

Traditional Approach (One Big Prompt)

```
"Write a complete case study about sustainable business practices
for second-year business students including company background,
challenges, solutions, discussion questions, and teaching notes."
```

Problem: Too broad, generic output, hard to refine

Agentic Approach (Sequential Specialised Steps)

Step-by-Step Agentic Workflow

Step 1: Planning Agent

Role: Break down the task into subtasks

Prompt:

```
List the essential components needed for a business case study
on sustainability for second-year students. Format as a
numbered checklist.
```

Output:

```
1. Company profile and context
2. Sustainability challenge/dilemma
3. Stakeholder perspectives
4. Financial implications
5. Potential solutions with pros/cons
6. Discussion questions
7. Teaching notes
8. Further reading
```

Human orchestrator decides: Use items 1-6 for students, 7-8 for teachers

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Step 2: Company Creation Agent

Role: Generate realistic company details

Prompt:

```
Create a fictional mid-size Australian retail company facing
a sustainability dilemma. Include:
- Company name and history
- Size (employees, revenue)
- Current sustainability problem
- Why it matters now

Keep it realistic for Perth/WA context.
```

Output:

```
Company: "Coastal Threads"
- Founded 1995 in Fremantle
- 450 employees, $80M revenue
- Fast fashion retailer, 25 stores across WA
- Problem: Pressure to reduce textile waste while maintaining
  affordable prices
- Trigger: New WA textile waste regulations coming 2026
```

Human orchestrator decides: Good foundation, proceed

Step 3: Stakeholder Agent

Role: Develop multiple perspectives

Prompt (includes context from Step 2):

```
For Coastal Threads (Fremantle fast fashion, 450 employees,
$80M revenue, facing textile waste regulations), create 4
stakeholder perspectives on the sustainability challenge:
1. CEO perspective
2. Environmental group perspective
3. Employee perspective
4. Customer perspective

Two sentences each, showing conflicting priorities.
```

Output:

```
CEO: "We need to balance sustainability with profitability.
Moving too fast could price us out of the market."

Environmental group: "Coastal Threads contributes 2000 tonnes
of textile waste annually. They must act now, not wait for
regulations."

Employees: "We support sustainability but worry about job
security. Will eco-friendly mean fewer stores and redundancies?"
```

```
Customers: "We want sustainable fashion but can't afford
premium prices. Why should we pay more when big brands don't?"
```

Step 4: Solution Generator Agent

Role: Create realistic options

Prompt (includes context from Steps 2-3):

```
Given Coastal Threads' situation and stakeholder concerns,
generate 3 potential solutions with one pro and one con each.
Make them realistic, not perfect.
```

Output:

```
Solution A: Clothing buy-back program
- Pro: Reduces waste, builds loyalty
- Con: Expensive logistics, storage issues

Solution B: Partner with local recycling startup
- Pro: Supports local innovation, shares costs
- Con: Unproven technology, dependence risk

Solution C: Gradual shift to sustainable materials
- Pro: Long-term viability, premium market entry
- Con: Higher costs immediately, customer resistance
```

Step 5: Question Design Agent

Role: Create engaging discussion questions

Prompt (includes all context):

```
Create 5 discussion questions for second-year business students
analysing Coastal Threads' sustainability challenge. Include:
- 2 analysis questions
- 2 application questions
- 1 evaluation question

Link to business concepts they'd know.
```

Output:

```
1. Using stakeholder theory, whose interests should take
   priority? Why?
2. Calculate the break-even point for Solution A if setup
   costs are $500K and each returned item saves $3.
3. How might Porter's Five Forces change if Coastal Threads
   goes fully sustainable?
4. Design a marketing campaign for Solution B that addresses
   customer price concerns.
5. Which solution best balances the triple bottom line?
   Justify with evidence.
```

Step 6: Integration Agent

Role: Assemble final case study

Prompt:

```
Combine the information into a 2-page case study format:
- Opening paragraph setting scene
- Company background
- The challenge
- Stakeholder views
- Three options
- Questions for discussion

Write in engaging narrative style for students.
```

Output: [Complete formatted case study]

The Power of This Approach

Why It Works Better

Traditional (One Prompt)	Agentic (Sequential)
Generic output	Specific, detailed output
Hard to refine	Easy to adjust one step
All-or-nothing result	Build quality incrementally
AI does everything	Human guides at each step
Black box process	Transparent workflow

Key Principles

1. **One Task Per Agent**

   - Each prompt has a single, clear focus
   - Easier to get quality output

2. **Context Flows Forward**

   - Output from Step 1 $\rightarrow$ Input to Step 2
   - Each step builds on previous work

3. **Human as Orchestrator**

   - You decide what to keep/modify
   - You control the flow
   - You can loop back if needed

4. **Tools When Needed**

   - Agent 2 could search for real WA regulations
   - Agent 4 could use a calculation tool
   - Agent 6 could format as PDF

Try It Yourself: Assignment Feedback Workflow

Here's a workflow you can implement today for providing assignment feedback:

Agent 1: Structure Checker

Review this assignment structure. List what sections are
present and what's missing based on requirements:
[paste requirements and student work]

Agent 2: Clarity Analyst

Identify the three least clear paragraphs in this assignment
and explain why they're confusing:
[paste student work]

Agent 3: Strength Finder

What are the two strongest arguments or points in this
assignment? Quote specific sentences:
[paste student work]

Agent 4: Improvement Suggester

Based on these issues [paste Agent 2 output], suggest
specific improvements without rewriting the student's work.

Agent 5: Feedback Compiler

Combine this feedback into a constructive comment:
- Strengths: [Agent 3 output]
- Structure issues: [Agent 1 output]
- Improvements needed: [Agent 4 output]

Tone: Encouraging but specific

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Advanced Patterns

Loop Patterns

Sometimes you need to iterate:

```
Agent 1: Generate idea
Agent 2: Critique idea
Agent 3: Improve based on critique
[Loop back to Agent 2 until satisfied]
Agent 4: Polish final version
```

Parallel Patterns

Multiple agents work simultaneously:

```
        → Agent 2A: Research perspective A
Agent 1 → Agent 2B: Research perspective B  → Agent 4: Synthesise
        → Agent 2C: Research perspective C
```

Quality Control Pattern

Add verification agents:

```
Agent 1: Create content
Agent 2: Fact-check content
Agent 3: Check for bias
Agent 4: Verify alignment with requirements
Agent 5: Final polish
```

Common Misconceptions

"Agents are autonomous AI entities"

Reality: In our context, an "agent" is just a focused prompt or tool doing one specific task.

"It's too complicated for everyday use"

Reality: You probably already do this! Breaking down "write an essay" into research $\to$ outline $\to$ draft $\to$ edit is agentic thinking.

"You need special software"

Reality: You can do this in any AI chat by writing sequential prompts. Copy-paste is your orchestration tool.

"It takes longer than one big prompt"

Reality: Initial setup takes longer, but you get better output and can reuse the workflow repeatedly.

When to Use Agentic Workflows

Good For:

- Complex, multi-step tasks
- Tasks requiring different expertise
- When quality matters more than speed
- Repeatable processes
- Teaching/demonstration
- When you need transparent reasoning

Skip For:

- Simple, single-answer questions
- Quick drafts or brainstorming
- When "good enough" is fine
- One-time tasks
- Tight time constraints

Your First Agentic Workflow: Email Response System

Try this simple workflow for responding to complex student emails:

```
Email from student: [complex question about assignment and extensions]

Agent 1 - Parser:
"List the specific questions/requests in this email as bullets"

Agent 2 - Policy Checker:
"Which of these requests relate to standard policies: [list from Agent 1]"

Agent 3 - Empathy Agent:
"What underlying concerns might this student have based on their email?"

Agent 4 - Response Drafter:
"Draft a response addressing: [Agent 1 list], noting policies [Agent 2],
acknowledging concerns [Agent 3]. Tone: professional but warm."

Agent 5 - Reviewer:
"Check this draft for clarity and completeness: [Agent 4 output]"
```

Key Takeaways

1. **Agentic = Specialised Steps**: Break complex tasks into focused subtasks
2. **You're the Orchestra Conductor**: Guide and quality-control each step
3. **Context Flows Forward**: Each step builds on previous outputs
4. **Start Simple**: Try a 3-step workflow before building complex chains
5. **It's Not Magic**: It's just organised, sequential problem-solving

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Quick Reference Card

Basic Agentic Pattern

```
Step 1: ANALYZE - What needs to be done?
     ↓ [output becomes input]
```

```
Step 2: GENERATE - Create initial content
    ↓ [output becomes input]
Step 3: EVALUATE - Check quality/accuracy
    ↓ [output becomes input]
Step 4: REFINE - Improve based on evaluation
    ↓ [output becomes input]
Step 5: FORMAT - Present in final form
```

Your Starter Workflow Template

```
Agent 1: "Break down [TASK] into 5 sequential steps"
Agent 2: "Do step 1: [specific instruction]"
Agent 3: "Do step 2: [specific instruction] using [Agent 2 output]"
Agent 4: "Do step 3: [specific instruction] using [Agent 3 output]"
[Continue as needed...]
```

Remember

Agentic workflows aren't about replacing human intelligence — they're about **amplifying** it through organised, thoughtful processes. You remain in control, making decisions at each step.

The magic isn't in the agents. The magic is in the **orchestration**.

Ready to try? Start with the email workflow above. Time yourself — you'll be surprised how much better your output is with just 5 extra minutes of structured thinking.