

Prompt Engineering 101

How to write prompts that get dramatically better results from any AI tool — ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude, Gemini, or anything else. The skill that separates average AI users from power users.

"The quality of what AI gives you is almost entirely determined by the quality of what you ask. Prompt engineering isn't a technical skill — it's a communication skill. And it's learnable in an afternoon."

WHY YOUR PROMPTS ARE PROBABLY UNDERPERFORMING

WEAK PROMPT

"Summarize this report."

AI gives you a generic paragraph that restates the obvious. You still have to read the whole thing anyway.

STRONG PROMPT

"Summarize this report for a CFO who has 2 minutes. Lead with financial impact, flag the top 2 risks, and end with a recommended action."

AI gives you something you can actually hand to the CFO. Done.

WEAK PROMPT

"Write an email to a client."

AI writes something so generic it could be from anyone, to anyone, about anything.

STRONG PROMPT

"Write a concise, professional email to a mid-market CFO following up on a cybersecurity assessment proposal we sent 10 days ago. Warm but direct. End with a specific ask for a 20-minute call."

AI writes a draft you send with minor edits, if any.

THE CRAFT FRAMEWORK — FIVE ELEMENTS OF A GREAT PROMPT

C

Context

Tell it who you are, what situation you're in, and any background it needs. AI has no memory of your world — you have to bring it in every time.

R

Role

Tell it what role to play. "Act as a senior financial analyst" or "You are an expert technical writer" shifts tone, vocabulary, and depth dramatically.

A

Audience

Who is this for? A board member, a new hire, a technical engineer, or a skeptical client all need completely different language and structure.

F

Format

Specify the output structure. Bullet points, numbered steps, a table, a short paragraph, an executive summary — if you don't say, AI guesses.

T

Task

State the actual goal clearly and specifically. Not "help me with this" but "write / analyze / compare / summarize / rewrite" with a concrete outcome.

CRAFT IN ACTION — A COMPLETE EXAMPLE

FULL PROMPT

All 5 elements

"You are a senior management consultant [Role] writing for a private equity firm's operating partner who is short on time and skeptical of vendor claims [Audience]. We just completed a 90-day IT assessment of a portfolio company and found three critical gaps in their cybersecurity posture [Context]. Write a one-page executive summary [Format] that leads with business risk in dollar terms, summarizes the three findings, and recommends a prioritized 60-day remediation plan [Task]."

Result: A polished, audience-calibrated draft that would take a junior analyst half a day to write from scratch.

THE ITERATION MINDSET — YOUR FIRST PROMPT IS A DRAFT

- 1 Start broad, then refine.** Your first prompt doesn't need to be perfect. Get something on the page, then follow up: "Make it shorter," "Rewrite the opening to be more direct," or "Add a section on budget implications." You're directing a draft, not ordering a finished product.
- 2 Ask it to critique its own output.** After a first draft, try: "What's weak about this response and how would you improve it?" AI will often identify gaps you hadn't noticed — and fix them immediately.
- 3 Give it examples of what good looks like.** Paste in a piece of writing you like and say: "Match this tone and structure." AI calibrates to examples faster than it does to adjectives like "professional" or "conversational."
- 4 Stay in the conversation.** Don't start a new chat for every task. Each message builds on the last — AI has context from everything earlier in the conversation. Use it: "Now rewrite that for a different audience" or "Apply the same structure to this new document."

Advanced Techniques & Common Mistakes

The techniques that separate occasional AI users from people who get genuinely remarkable results — and the mistakes that silently limit almost everyone.

SIX TECHNIQUES THAT UNLOCK DRAMATICALLY BETTER RESULTS

TECHNIQUE 1

Chain of Thought

Add "Think through this step by step before answering." This forces the AI to reason out loud before concluding — dramatically improving accuracy on complex or multi-part problems.

Use when: analyzing a situation, making a recommendation, solving a multi-step problem, or any task where logic matters.

TECHNIQUE 2

Persona Stacking

Assign multiple lenses at once: "You are a CFO reviewing this from a risk perspective AND a sales leader reviewing it from a client objection perspective. Give me both views."

Use when: stress-testing a proposal, preparing for a difficult meeting, or getting balanced analysis on a decision.

TECHNIQUE 3

Negative Constraints

Tell it what NOT to do: "Do not use bullet points. Do not include caveats. Do not exceed 150 words." Constraints are often more powerful than positive instructions for shaping output.

Use when: AI keeps defaulting to a format you don't want, or output keeps coming back too long, too hedged, or too generic.

TECHNIQUE 4

Few-Shot Examples

Show it two or three examples of the output you want before asking for the real thing: "Here are three subject lines I like: [examples]. Now write 10 more in the same style."

Use when: tone, voice, or format matters and describing it in words isn't working. Examples outperform adjectives every time.

TECHNIQUE 5

Ask for Alternatives

"Give me three completely different approaches to this, each with a different tone and structure." AI defaults to one interpretation — forcing alternatives surfaces options you wouldn't have thought to ask for.

Use when: writing headlines, positioning statements, email subject lines, executive summaries, or any creative work.

TECHNIQUE 6

The Reverse Prompt

Before writing a word, ask: "What information do you need from me to do this task as well as possible?" AI will ask clarifying questions that surface gaps in your own thinking — often the most valuable step.

Use when: starting a complex project, writing a strategy document, or any time you're not sure where to begin.

THE FIVE MISTAKES THAT SILENTLY LIMIT MOST PEOPLE

MISTAKE 1

Treating the first response as final. The first output is almost never the best output. The real value of AI is in the conversation — refine, redirect, and push back. Most people stop one iteration too early.

MISTAKE 2

Not providing enough context. "Write a proposal" tells AI almost nothing. Your industry, client type, deal size, competitive situation, tone preference — none of this exists in AI's world unless you put it there.

MISTAKE 3

Asking multiple unrelated questions in one prompt. "Summarize this, then suggest improvements, then rewrite it for a different audience, then create a subject line." Each task competes for attention. Break complex tasks into sequential prompts for cleaner results.

MISTAKE 4

Accepting hallucinated facts without checking. AI states incorrect information with the same confident tone as correct information. Any specific fact, statistic, name, date, or citation in AI output needs verification before you publish or present it.

MISTAKE 5

Using the same prompt style for every task. A prompt that works for creative writing will underperform for data analysis. Match your prompting approach to the task — structured and constrained for analytical work, open and exploratory for creative work.

SAVE THIS

The universal upgrade: take any prompt you use regularly and add these four words to it — **"Think step by step."** On complex or nuanced tasks, this single addition improves output quality more reliably than almost any other change. It works on every major AI platform.

TDG TAKE

The Ducats Group perspective: Prompt engineering is the highest-ROI AI skill your team can develop right now — and it costs nothing but practice. Organizations that invest 30 minutes training their teams on these fundamentals see measurable improvements in output quality within a week. The gap between a mediocre AI user and a power user isn't the tool. It's knowing how to talk to it.