NO PREP

AI Image Generators

Crafting Effective Prompts

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

AI Image Generators: Crafting Effective Prompts

What Image Generators Actually Do

AI image generators like Midjourney, DALL-E, Stable Diffusion, and Adobe Firefly create images from written descriptions. You type a prompt, and the AI produces a visual — a photograph, painting, illustration, or completely surreal scene — based on the words you gave it. These tools have become remarkably capable in a short period of time. In 2022, the state of the art produced hands with seven fingers and faces that looked like melting wax. By 2025, the leading tools can produce photorealistic images that are nearly indistinguishable from photographs. What most people do not understand about image generators is that they are not retrieval systems. They are not searching a database of images to find the closest match. They are generating entirely new images pixel by pixel, guided by your prompt. This means the quality of your

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The Building Blocks of an Image Prompt

An effective image prompt typically includes several categories of information. The first is subject: what is in the image? Be specific. "A dog" will produce a generic dog. "A golden retriever puppy sitting in autumn leaves, looking up at the camera" will produce something specific and compelling. Include the main subject, any important secondary elements, and the relationship between them. The second building block is style: what should the image look like artistically? Options here are almost unlimited. You can specify photorealistic, watercolor, oil painting, flat vector illustration, charcoal sketch, digital art, anime style, film noir, 1980s retro, Pixar-style 3D, editorial illustration, and hundreds of others. Without a style specification, the AI will default to whatever style it has seen most frequently in its training data, which

is usually a kind of generic digital art or photorealism. Specifying style is one of the most powerful levers you have in image generation.

Lighting, Composition, and Mood

Three additional elements dramatically improve image quality: lighting, composition, and mood. Lighting descriptions borrowed from photography and cinematography produce remarkable results. Terms like "golden hour lighting," "studio lighting with soft fill," "dramatic side lighting," "neon glow at night," and "overcast diffused natural light" all push the image in specific directions. Lighting sets the entire emotional register of an image, and most beginners forget to specify it at all. Composition refers to how the subject is framed and positioned in the image. Terms from photography work well here: "close-up portrait," "wide establishing shot," "aerial view looking down," "dutch angle," "extreme close-up on the eyes," or "centered symmetrical composition." Mood describes the emotional atmosphere: "melancholy," "triumphant," "playful," "tense," "serene," or "haunting." These three elements (lighting, composition, mood) are what separate competent image prompts from genuinely effective ones.

Technical Quality Modifiers

Many image generation tools respond to technical quality descriptors that act as shortcuts for high-quality output. Terms commonly used include "highly detailed," "8K resolution," "sharp focus," "professional photography," "award-winning," "masterpiece," "photorealistic," "studio quality," and "ultra HD." These terms signal to the AI that you want high-quality, detailed output rather than a rough or stylized result. Similarly, negative prompts — telling the AI what you do NOT want — are a powerful tool in many image generation systems. If your outputs keep producing blurry backgrounds, you can add "no blur" or "sharp background" to your negative prompts. If faces are coming out distorted, "no distorted faces" or "realistic face anatomy" helps. If you keep getting extra limbs (a classic early AI problem), "correct anatomy, five fingers" in your prompt or negative prompt will guide the AI toward human anatomy. Learning to use negative prompts is one of the fastest ways to improve your output quality.

Iteration and Variation

Like text prompting, image prompting is rarely a one-shot process. The first generation gives you information about what the AI is interpreting from your words, which lets you refine your prompt for the next attempt. If the image came out too dark, add lighting specifications. If the style is not what you wanted, add a more specific style reference. If the composition is wrong, describe the framing more precisely. Most image generation tools also offer variation options — you can take an image you like and ask the AI to generate similar versions with slight variations. This is useful when you have a promising direction but want to explore it further. You can also use image-to-image features in some tools, where you provide an existing image as a reference and the AI generates something in a similar style or composition. These features turn prompting into a creative dialogue rather than a binary success-or-fail transaction.

Ethical Use and Copyright Considerations

AI image generators have created significant ethical and legal controversy. The tools were trained on vast amounts of images from the internet, many of which were created by human artists who did not consent to their work being used as training data. This means the tools have absorbed the styles of specific artists, and users can generate images "in the style of" a living artist, which many artists find threatening to their livelihoods. From a practical standpoint, there are several things to keep in mind. Images generated by AI tools are generally not copyrightable under current law — you cannot legally claim ownership of an AI-generated image the same way you can claim ownership of something you made by hand. Using AI to generate images of real people, especially in fabricated or damaging scenarios, raises serious ethical and potentially legal issues. And using AI to generate images that closely mimic a specific living artist's style for commercial purposes is ethically questionable even where it may currently be legal. These are evolving areas of law and ethics, and how they resolve will shape the creative industries for decades. Aspect ratio and canvas size are also worth specifying in many image generation tools. A square image (1:1) is appropriate for social media profile photos. A landscape ratio (16:9) works better for desktop wallpapers or presentation backgrounds. A portrait orientation (2:3 or 4:5) suits phone wallpapers and Instagram posts. Many tools default to a square output if you do not specify, which may not serve your

intended use. Adding 'landscape orientation' or 'vertical portrait format' or a specific ratio like '16:9 widescreen' can save you from needing to crop or reformat an otherwise perfect image. Reference artists and historical art styles are another powerful tool in image prompting. Rather than describing a style abstractly, you can reference specific artistic movements or periods: 'in the style of Art Nouveau,' 'Baroque oil painting composition,' 'Bauhaus geometric design,' '1920s propaganda poster aesthetic,' or 'Impressionist color palette.' These references tap into patterns the AI learned from millions of images in those styles. Similarly, referencing specific photographers' compositional approaches — dramatic lighting reminiscent of noir cinema, high-contrast street photography composition — gives the AI very specific visual direction. The richer your visual vocabulary, the more precisely you can direct an image generator toward what you actually envision. Color temperature is another useful image prompting concept: 'warm tones' suggests oranges, reds, and yellows associated with fire and sunlight, while 'cool tones' suggests blues and grays associated with shadow and cold. Specifying color temperature adds another layer of intentionality to your image prompts and can dramatically change the emotional impact of an otherwise identical composition.

Key Information: AI Image Generation Prompting

Prompt Element	What It Controls
Subject	What is in the image — main subject, secondary elements, relationships
Style	Artistic medium and aesthetic — photorealistic, watercolor, anime, etc.
Lighting	Emotional register and atmosphere — golden hour, studio, dramatic side light
Composition	Framing and perspective — close-up, wide shot, aerial view, dutch angle
Mood	Emotional atmosphere — melancholy, triumphant, serene, haunting

Prompt Element	What It Controls
Quality modifiers	Technical quality signals — highly detailed, sharp focus, 8K resolution
Negative prompts	What to exclude — no blur, correct anatomy, no distorted faces
Variation features	Generate similar versions of a promising result to explore a direction

Case Study: Keisha's Poster Project

Keisha needs a custom image for her school project poster about ocean conservation. She tries AI image generation for the first time and types: 'ocean.' The AI produces a generic blue image that looks like a desktop wallpaper. She tries 'ocean with fish' and gets something slightly better but still generic. She is about to give up when her teacher shows her how to build a more complete prompt. Keisha rewrites her prompt: 'Underwater ocean scene, photorealistic style, a sea turtle swimming through a coral reef filled with colorful tropical fish, dramatic underwater lighting with rays of sunlight breaking through the surface, wide establishing shot looking up toward the surface, vivid and hopeful mood, highly detailed, sharp focus.' The AI generates a stunning image that is exactly what she envisioned — the kind of image that would cost hundreds of dollars from a stock photo service or a professional photographer. She is stunned that a few extra sentences made such a dramatic difference.

1. Identify at least four specific prompt elements Keisha included in her revised prompt and explain how each one changed the image that was generated.

2. Keisha's first prompt was just one word: 'ocean.' Based on the reading's explanation of how image generators work, why did that produce such a generic result?

Multiple Choice

1. According to the reading, what is the most powerful single lever for controlling the artistic look of an AI-generated image?

    a) Adding quality modifier terms like 'highly detailed' and '8K resolution'

    b) Specifying the artistic style

    c) Specifying the lighting

    d) Using negative prompts to remove unwanted elements

2. What are negative prompts in AI image generation?

    a) A feature that generates a lower-quality draft before the final image

    b) Critical feedback typed into the chat after a bad result

    c) Instructions telling the AI what you do NOT want in the image

    d) Prompts that produce images with dark or negative themes

3. What does the reading say about the copyright status of AI-generated images under current law?

    a) They are fully owned by whoever prompted the AI to create them

    b) They are automatically in the public domain and free for anyone to use commercially

    c) They are generally not copyrightable by the user the way handmade work is

    d) They are owned jointly by the user and the AI company

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Composition	A) A term like 'highly detailed' or '8K' that signals high-quality output to the AI
2. ___ Style	B) An instruction telling the AI what to exclude from the generated image
3. ___ Negative prompt	C) Generating similar versions of a promising image to explore a creative direction further
4. ___ Quality modifier	D) The artistic medium or aesthetic — photorealistic, watercolor, anime, oil painting
5. ___ Variation	E) How the subject is framed and positioned — close-up, wide shot, aerial view

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. AI image generators are not _____ systems — they generate new images pixel by pixel rather than retrieving existing ones.

2. Lighting terms like 'golden hour' and 'dramatic side lighting' come from _____ and cinematography and set the entire emotional register of an image.

3. Without a style specification, AI image generators will default to whatever style appeared most frequently in their _____ data.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain why specifying style in an image generation prompt is so important. What happens when you leave it unspecified?

2. What is the ethical controversy around AI image generators described in the reading, and why do many artists object to how these tools were built?

3. How is prompting for images similar to prompting for text, and how is it different? Use specific details from the reading to support your answer.