NO PREP

Prompt Writing 101

How to Talk to AI

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

Name: Period: Date:

Prompt Writing 101: How to Talk to AI

The Difference Between a Question and a Prompt

Most people start using AI tools the same way they use a search engine — they type in a few words and hope for the best. Searching Google for "essay help" might return a list of links. But when you type "essay help" into ChatGPT, you get a generic response that is barely useful. This is not the AI's fault. The issue is that you have not given it enough to work with. A prompt is different from a search query. A query is a few keywords designed to retrieve existing information. A prompt is a set of instructions that tells an AI what to create, how to create it, and for whom. The quality of what the AI produces is almost entirely determined by the quality of the instructions you give it. Garbage in, garbage out — except with AI, even a small upgrade to your input can produce a dramatically better output.

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Context Is Everything

The single most important thing you can add to any prompt is context. Context tells the AI who you are, what situation you are in, and why you need something. Without context, the AI has to guess, and it will guess wrong or produce something too generic to be useful. Compare these two prompts. Prompt A: "Write a cover letter." Prompt B: "Write a cover letter for a 17-year-old applying for a part-time cashier position at a grocery store. I have no prior work experience but I was a team captain for my school's soccer team for two years. Keep the tone professional but not stiff, and keep it under 200 words." Both prompts ask for a cover letter. But Prompt B will produce something you could actually use. Prompt A will produce something that could have been written for anyone, which means it works for no one in particular. Context does not have to be complicated. You just have to answer the invisible questions the AI is asking: Who needs this? What is it for? What should it sound

like? How long should it be? The more of those questions you answer upfront, the better your results.

Specificity Beats Vagueness Every Time

Vague prompts produce vague outputs. This is one of the most consistent rules in working with AI. If you ask for "a poem," you will get a generic poem. If you ask for "a four-stanza poem written from the perspective of a teenager who just got their driver's license, using a hopeful tone and simple language," you will get something specific and usable. Specificity includes details about format, length, tone, audience, and purpose. "Explain photosynthesis" will get you a textbook-style paragraph. "Explain photosynthesis to a 10-year-old who loves soccer, using a metaphor involving a field" will get you something memorable and creative. The AI has enormous capabilities, but it needs direction. Think of yourself as a director giving instructions to an incredibly skilled but completely literal actor. The actor will do exactly what you say, no more and no less, so your instructions need to be good.

What Makes a Strong Prompt: The Core Elements

Strong prompts tend to share four core elements. First, they include a clear task — a verb that describes what you want the AI to do (write, explain, summarize, compare, list, analyze, rewrite). Second, they specify the format or structure of the output (bullet points, a table, a paragraph, a numbered list, a two-column comparison). Third, they include constraints — word count, reading level, tone, or what to leave out. Fourth, they include relevant background so the AI understands the situation. You do not need all four elements in every prompt. A simple request like "list five ideas" might not need a tone or format specification. But for anything longer or more nuanced — essays, emails, study guides, explanations — including all four will almost always produce better results than leaving them out.

Iteration: Prompting Is a Conversation

One of the biggest mistakes new AI users make is giving up after one attempt. If the first response is not what you needed, that is not a failure — that is a draft. You can keep talking. You can say "make it shorter," "change the tone to be more casual," "add an example," or "redo the second paragraph to focus more on the economic causes." AI tools are designed for back-and-forth conversation. This iterative approach is actually faster than trying to write the perfect prompt the

first time. Get a rough version, then refine it through conversation. Most power users of AI do not write long, perfectly crafted prompts on the first try — they start with a reasonable prompt and then shape the output through feedback. Treat the AI like a collaborator who needs direction, not a vending machine where you have to insert the exact right code to get what you want.

Common Beginner Mistakes

Several patterns consistently produce bad results. Using passive or unclear verbs is one — "help me with my essay" is harder for AI to act on than "rewrite the introduction to my essay to have a stronger hook." Another is asking for too many things at once. If you ask the AI to "write a summary, explain the main argument, list the counterarguments, and suggest how I could improve my essay," you may get a scattered response. Break complex requests into separate prompts. Forgetting to specify your audience is another common error. An explanation written for a college professor reads very differently from one written for a middle schooler. Always tell the AI who is going to read or use what it produces. Finally, many beginners do not tell the AI what they already have. If you are working on an essay and you want feedback, paste the essay into the chat. The AI cannot help you improve something it has not seen.

Why This Skill Will Follow You Everywhere

Prompt writing is not just a skill for school. Every major workplace now uses some form of AI tool — for writing, for data analysis, for customer communication, for coding, for design. The people who know how to get useful results out of these tools will be more valuable than the people who do not. A marketing employee who can prompt an AI to generate ten campaign ideas in five minutes has a real advantage over one who cannot. This is also a skill that compounds. The more you practice writing clear, specific prompts, the better you get at communicating your needs in general — to people, not just to machines. Prompt writing forces you to think clearly about what you actually want and how to express it, which turns out to be useful in almost every professional and personal situation you will ever face. The best way to develop prompt-writing skill is through deliberate practice. Treat every AI interaction as a low-stakes experiment. Write a prompt, evaluate the output critically, and ask yourself what specific information you withheld that could have produced a better result. Over time, this habit of reverse-engineering your own

prompts builds an instinct for what information AI actually needs — an instinct that transfers to every tool you will ever use.

Key Information: Prompt Writing 101

Concept	What It Means
Prompt	A set of instructions given to an AI telling it what to create and how
Context	Background information that helps the AI understand your situation and needs
Specificity	Including precise details about format, audience, tone, and length
Iteration	Refining AI output through follow-up instructions and conversation
Task verb	An action word (write, explain, summarize) that tells AI what to do
Constraints	Limits you set on AI output such as word count, reading level, or tone
Format specification	Telling AI how to structure the output (list, table, paragraph, etc.)
Audience	Who will read or use the AI's output — affects vocabulary and tone

Case Study: Marcus's Job Application Disaster

Marcus is a junior who wants to land a summer internship at a local marketing agency. He has heard that AI can help with cover letters, so he opens ChatGPT and types: 'Write me a cover letter for a marketing internship.' He pastes the result into his application without reading it carefully and hits submit. Three days later, he gets a rejection email. A friend who works at the agency tells him quietly that the letter mentioned experience with 'managing large client portfolios' and 'overseeing a team of analysts' — experience a high school junior obviously does not have. The AI had written a generic letter for a mid-career professional because Marcus gave it no information about himself. Marcus tries again for a different internship. This time he writes: 'Write a cover letter for a 17-year-old high school junior applying for a summer marketing internship. I have experience running our school's Instagram account, I created a fundraising campaign for the drama club that raised $800, and I am a strong visual thinker. Keep it under 175 words, professional but not stuffy.' The second letter gets him an interview.

1. What specific information did Marcus include in his second prompt that was missing from his first, and why did each piece of information matter?

2. Based on the reading, what broader lesson does Marcus's experience illustrate about why context and specificity are more important than simply "using AI"?

Multiple Choice

1. According to the reading, what is the most important element you can add to any AI prompt?

a) A specific word count requirement

b) Correct spelling and punctuation

c) A polite opening sentence placed before the request

d) Context about who you are and what you need

2. Which of the following best describes the "iterative" approach to prompting?

a) Writing one long, perfectly detailed prompt before actually starting

b) Using the AI's first response exactly as written

c) Refining the output through follow-up instructions and conversation

d) Copying the prompt from an online template library

3. Why does the reading say prompt writing is a skill that "follows you everywhere"?

a) Because AI tools are used in nearly every modern workplace

b) Because AI subscriptions are now mandatory for employees

c) Because prompting replaces the need to learn other job skills

d) Because teachers require AI prompts in most school assignments

Matching

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

Term	Definition
1. ___ Prompt	A) A limit placed on AI output such as word count, tone, or reading level
2. ___ Iteration	B) Including precise details about format, audience, length, and purpose
3. ___ Constraint	C) An action word like write, explain, or summarize that tells AI what to do
4. ___ Task verb	D) A set of instructions given to an AI to direct what it creates and how
5. ___ Specificity	E) The process of refining AI output through repeated follow-up instructions

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. A _____ is a set of instructions that tells an AI what to create, how to create it, and for whom.

2. The quality of an AI's output is almost entirely determined by the quality of the _____ you give it.

3. Treating prompting as a back-and-forth conversation is called the _____ approach.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain the difference between a search query and a prompt, and why that difference matters when using AI tools.

2. Choose one common beginner mistake described in the reading and explain specifically how it leads to poor AI output.

3. Why does the reading argue that learning to write good prompts also improves your ability to communicate with people?