AI BASICS · BEGINNER · 12 MIN READ

Prompting that works

A simple recipe for clear prompts, plus the follow-up moves that turn a so-so answer into a great one.

Pass the check (4 of 5) online to earn the “Prompt Builder” badge:
https://digitalbuilders757.com/university/study/prompting-that-works

A prompt is a brief, not a magic spell

A prompt is what you give the AI: your instructions, your question and any material to work from. Good prompting isn't about secret phrases. It's about giving the same information you would give a smart new teammate.

The GCCEF recipe

When an answer matters, cover these five things:

- Goal: what you want and why. 'Write a welcome email for new members of our robotics club.'
- Context: who it's for and what the AI needs to know. 'Members are 14 to 17, first meeting is Thursday at 4pm in Room 12.'
- Constraints: limits. 'Under 120 words, friendly, no emojis.'
- Examples: show what good looks like. Paste one email you liked.
- Format: how you want it back. 'Give me a subject line, then the email.'

Iterate: the second prompt is where the magic is

Your first answer is a draft. Tell the AI exactly what to change: 'Shorter, and move the meeting time to the first line.' Specific feedback beats starting over.

Ask the AI to ask you questions first: 'Before you write, ask me up to five questions you need answered.' This is the fastest way to surface what you forgot to say.

Ask it to check its own work: 'List anything in your answer you're not sure is true.'

Prompting for building

When you vibe code, prompts describe software. Describe what the user sees and does, not just the feature name. 'Add login' is vague; 'Add a sign-in page with email and password. After sign-in, show the user's name at the top of the dashboard. Signed-out visitors who open the dashboard go to the sign-in page' is buildable.

Build in small steps: one feature per prompt, test it, then the next. Big all-in-one prompts produce big tangled bugs.

System prompts and saved instructions

Apps that use AI often include a system prompt: hidden standing instructions that shape every answer (for example, 'You are a helpful tutor for 9th grade biology'). In assistants, custom instructions and project instructions work the same way for you: write your preferences once instead of repeating them.

Key terms

Prompt
What you give the AI: instructions, a question and any material to work from.

System prompt
Hidden standing instructions that shape every answer an AI app gives.

Iteration
Improving something in small rounds: try, check, adjust, repeat.

Few-shot prompting
Showing the AI one or more examples of what good looks like so it matches the pattern.

Custom instructions
Preferences you save once so the assistant follows them in every chat.

Context window
How much text a model can look at in one go: instructions, chat history, files and its own replies.

Try it: Upgrade a lazy prompt

1. Start with: 'Make me a workout plan.' Note the answer.
2. Rewrite it using Goal, Context, Constraints, Examples and Format.
3. Run the new prompt and compare.
4. Follow up with one specific change request and see how it adapts.

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

Prompting that works

5 questions. Circle one answer for each; 4 or more correct passes. Answers are at the back.

1. Which prompt is most likely to get a useful result?

A. Write an email.
B. Email please!!!
C. Write a 100-word email inviting parents to our science fair on May 3 at 6pm in the gym; warm tone; end with how to RSVP.
D. You are the best AI in the world. Please do your very best work and write me the most amazing, perfect, professional email ever!!!

2. Your first answer is close but too long. Best next move?

A. Delete the chat and start over with a longer, more detailed first prompt
B. Switch to a different AI and paste in the same first prompt
C. Accept it anyway
D. Tell it exactly what to change, like 'Cut to 80 words'

3. What is a system prompt?

A. Standing instructions that shape every answer an AI app gives
B. An error message
C. The first thing you type
D. A computer's start-up screen

4. When building an app with AI, which approach works best?

A. Describe the entire app in one giant, detailed prompt so nothing is missed
B. Build one small feature at a time and test each one
C. Never test until the end
D. Copy prompts from strangers without reading them

5. Including an example of what 'good' looks like in your prompt is called:

A. Zero-shot prompting
B. Fine-tuning the model
C. Few-shot prompting
D. Role prompting

Official sites

OpenAI prompting guide: https://developers.openai.com/api/docs/guides/prompting
Anthropic prompt engineering overview: https://platform.claude.com/docs/en/build-with-claude/prompt-engineering/overview
Google Gemini prompting strategies: https://ai.google.dev/gemini-api/docs/prompting-strategies

Last reviewed 2026-11-25. AI tools change fast; check each tool's own site for current features, plans and prices.

ANSWER KEY

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1. C: Write a 100-word email inviting parents to our science fair on May 3 at 6pm in the gym; warm tone; end with how to RSVP.
It gives the goal, context, constraints and what to include. Specific beats clever.

2. D: Tell it exactly what to change, like 'Cut to 80 words'
Specific feedback on a draft is the fastest path to a great result.

3. A: Standing instructions that shape every answer an AI app gives
System prompts are the background instructions an app gives the model. Custom instructions do the same for you.

4. B: Build one small feature at a time and test each one
Small steps make bugs easy to spot and easy to undo.

5. C: Few-shot prompting
Few-shot prompting means showing the model one or more examples so it can match the pattern.