



AI Prompting Companion Guide

Intro: Why Prompting Matters

Modern AI systems like ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and countless other LLMs don't "think" the way humans do. They excel at one core task: predicting what comes next based on patterns learned from vast amounts of training data. When you type a prompt, the model analyzes your input, references its training data, and generates a response by predicting the best word, action, or other output that fits your request.

This means your prompt is not just a request. Your prompt is a set of critical instructions the model uses to shape its prediction. Vague or poorly structured prompts lead to generic, unfocused, or incorrect outputs, while clear, specific, well-structured prompts dramatically improve the quality, relevance, and usefulness of AI's output.

This guide outlines a **five-part prompting scaffold** to help you write sharp, useful prompts that enable collaboration with AI and ultimately deliver exactly what you're seeking from the machine. The five parts of a good prompt are:

1. Role
2. Task
3. Details
4. Format
5. Shot (output example)

The key insight: AI is a prediction engine, not a mind reader. The better your prompt is written and structured, the better the AI output will be.

The Iterative Mindset: Collaboration Over Perfection

Effective prompting takes trial and error and refinement. It's not often that your prompt will get you the ideal output with your first attempt:

1. **Draft** a prompt using the scaffold in a word-processing or notes program
2. **Run** the prompt by pasting it into your AI and evaluate the output
3. **Identify** what is missing, unclear, or off-target about the AI's output
4. **Refine** through collaboration - follow-up requests of AI to help improve its output
5. **Update** your original prompt in your writing program and save for next time
6. (optional) **Regenerate** your prompt by asking AI to give you the perfect prompt to get this exact final output you arrived at together during the session

The Five-Part Prompt Scaffold

This scaffold provides a repeatable structure for designing high-quality prompts. Each part addresses a different dimension of your request with clarity and specificity. Prompt scaffolds allow for easier and more effective refinement for incrementally better results each time they're improved and used again.

1. ROLE – Who Should AI Be?

What it does:

The Role tells the model which perspective, expertise, and tone to adopt as it processes and responds to your request. Its role helps the AI model focus on how it applies its training and other external resources to complete the task.

Why it matters:

Without a clear Role, the model may shift unpredictably between formal and casual, technical and simple, or expert and beginner-friendly. Defining a Role stabilizes output style and depth.

What to specify:

- **A Profession or domain:** "high school teacher," "marketing strategist," "software engineer," "medical researcher," "financial expert," etc.
- **Audience awareness:** "talking to beginners," "presenting to executives," "explaining to a 10-year-old"
- **Tone:** "friendly and encouraging," "direct and concise," "collaborative and interactive," "Authoritative and blunt," etc.
- **Famous Reference:** "Think like Steve Jobs," "Use simple yet poignant language like Ernest Hemingway," "Give me the unvarnished feedback of Gordon Ramsey (without the cussing)," "Measured and engaging like Dan Rather delivers the news," etc.

Example Role instruction:

"You are a reassuring, expert small business coach, who specializes in helping business owners see challenges and problems from a new perspective. You have the attitude and energy of Tony Robbins, who makes even beginners feel they are capable of great feats combined with the proven expertise and acumen of Mr. Wonderful from Shark Tank.

2. TASK – What Should AI Do?**What it does:**

The Task specifies the core action you want the AI model to perform. It outlines what job needs to be done in clear and simple terms.

Why it matters:

A missing or vague Task leads to rambling, unfocused responses. A strong Task centers the output on a specific action or deliverable. The task can be short and clear because the rest of the prompting scaffold provides all the supporting information needed to focus and refine its output.

Common Task verbs:

- Explain, summarize, define
- Rewrite, edit, improve, translate
- Brainstorm, generate ideas, outline
- Critique, evaluate, compare, rank
- Plan, schedule, draft, script

Example Task instruction:

"Summarize the three biggest AI safety concerns for a small business owner and suggest one practical step they can take for each concern."

3. DETAILS – What Context Does AI Need?**What it does:**

Details provide the context that the model cannot infer from the Task alone. The details are much longer than the task, specifying how the task should be performed. It provides more details about the audience, any constraints or key guidelines in how it both interacts with the user and also how it generates output. Details also include the task objectives and rationale, as well as any other relevant inputs or available resources and tools the AI can access.

Why it matters:

Details eliminate ambiguity and anchor the AI's response in your real-world needs. As you refine your prompt, the "details" section is often where the most improvements can be made. AI output often reveals what details were missing in the original prompt, allowing you to adjust the prompt for future, more accurate use.

Useful categories of Details:

- **Audience:** age, prior knowledge, role, language level of the user of the prompt
- **Session Guidance:** specific length of responses, when and how to pause for comprehension checks, and user feedback before moving ahead
- **Content inputs:** key information, resources, tools, and other inputs that could help AI
- **Environment:** where this will be used (classroom, TikTok video, board presentation, training PDF, poetry performance)
- **Objectives:** the specific, measurable outcome desired from this output

Example Details:

- "You are working with small business owners who are looking for AI to help them solve real day-to-day problems with their enterprise
- The objective is to show them how they can approach business challenges in new more constructive ways, including how AI can help to accelerate tasks
- Begin by asking for the business owner's name and their business. Wait for a response, then acknowledge and remember their name and business before moving on.
- Ask them to provide their first business challenge. Allow them to write as much as they like but always keep your responses short (no more than 6 sentences, per response)
- Always check for comprehension before moving forward. Wait for user confirmation before moving forward
- Ask questions one at a time. Avoid output with a lengthy word count and that asks the user multiple questions at once.
- Address each business challenge individually and completely before asking the user for their next problem
- Once the session has concluded per these instructions, and the user has no more problems to discuss, ask permission to provide a recap, which can be longer than the short responses used throughout the session. The recap should be complete but not overwhelming.

4. FORMAT – How Should the Output Be Structured?

What it does:

Format specifies the **structure and presentation** of the response so it is ready to use without extensive editing

Why it matters:

Without a clear Format, models default to long paragraphs of prose. Specifying Format gives you output that can be more easily processed and utilized by the end user

Example Format:

- Avoid jargon; rather, use short paragraphs with simple analogies to explain.
- Keep the tone reassuring and optimistic.

- When asking questions for comprehension, provide answer choices
- Take time to encourage and reassure the user by further clarifying or exploring any concepts the user is struggling with
- Use casual language and be conversational rather than rigid and formal.
- Draw from the roles given without taking on any harsh or critical tone

5. SHOT – Show an Example of good output

What it does:

A Shot provides **one or more examples** of the style, tone, or structure you want the model to imitate.

Why it matters:

Examples are often clearer than descriptions. Showing the model what "good" looks like allows it to recognize and replicate patterns in tone, depth, and structure. Examples **are not always needed**: particularly useful when asking AI to generate specific content, but less useful when using AI for collaborative learning

What examples can demonstrate:

- Tone (serious, playful, inspirational, direct)
- Structure (heading style, paragraph length, section flow)
- Depth (how much detail per point)
- Formatting (bullet style, numbering, table layout)
- Session flow (question, check-in, follow-up, check-in, quiz, etc.)

Example Shot:

AI: Hello. I'm your friendly small business coach. Please tell me your name and a little bit about your business

User: My name is Sam Johnson and I have a small printing business

AI: Nice to meet you, Sam. Let's get started. Can you tell me what your first business challenge is with your business?

User: I am struggling with overhead costs exceeding what we plan for each month. I have about 15 employees and printing is a business with many costs across both process and materials. I struggle to find where we are being most inefficient and can't pinpoint where we are losing money

AI: Let me ask you a few questions so I can get a better understanding of how your printing business runs...

[...]

Prompting Checklist

Before you submit any prompt or agent, ask yourself:

- **Did I define a clear Role?** (Who should AI be?)
- **Did I specify a concrete Task?** (What should AI do?)
- **Did I provide enough Details?** (Context, audience, constraints)
- **Did I specify the Format?** (Structure of the output)
- **Did I (need to) include a Shot?** (Example of what "good" looks like)