

Prompt and Context Engineering

Introduction

AI tools like ChatGPT and Claude are powerful assistants, but they only know what you tell them.

Prompt and context engineering is the skill of giving AI the right information so it can help you effectively. The core principle is simple: **better input leads to better output**. A vague request produces a vague response. A clear, well-structured request produces useful results.

Think of it like being a manager. When you delegate a task to a capable new team member, you don't just say "handle this." You explain what you need, why it matters, what format you want, and what constraints apply. The same principles apply when working with AI. And just like managing people, when results aren't what you expected, good feedback - specific and constructive - gets you back on track.

1. Be Specific About the Task

Why it matters: Vague instructions force AI to guess what you want. The more specific you are about the task, the less guesswork involved - and the more useful the result.

Bad prompt: *"Help me with this report."*

Good prompt: *"Review the executive summary of this report and suggest how to make it clearer for a non-technical audience."*

2. Provide Context

Why it matters: AI doesn't know your situation unless you explain it. Context includes background information, who the audience is, what you've already tried, and any constraints. Without it, AI makes assumptions that may not match your needs.

Bad prompt: *"Write an email about the deadline change."*

Good prompt: *"Write an email to our client (a small law firm we've worked with for 2 years) explaining that the project deadline is moving from March 15 to April 1 due to a delay in receiving their input documents. Keep it professional but warm."*

3. Define the Output Format

Why it matters: Telling AI what format you need saves time and ensures the output fits your workflow. Do you want bullet points, a table, a paragraph, a numbered list? Say so.

Bad prompt: *"What are the key points from these meeting notes?"*

Good prompt: *"Extract the action items from these meeting notes. List each one with the owner's name and due date in a table."*

4. Assign a Role or Perspective

Why it matters: Giving AI a role helps it adopt the right tone, depth, and expertise level. "Act as a financial analyst" produces different output than "act as a customer support agent."

Bad prompt: *"Give me feedback on my presentation."*

Good prompt: *"Act as a skeptical senior executive who has limited time. Review my presentation and point out where I might lose their attention or where my argument is weak."*

5. Break Down Complex Requests

Why it matters: Large, multi-part requests often produce incomplete or unfocused results. Breaking a task into steps gives you more control and better quality at each stage.

Bad prompt: *"Analyze our Q3 sales data and create a full quarterly review presentation."*

Good approach: *Start with "Summarize the main trends in this Q3 sales data." Then: "Identify any regions or products that underperformed compared to Q2." Then: "Draft an outline for a 10-minute presentation covering these findings."*

6. Provide Examples

Why it matters: Showing AI what good output looks like is one of the most effective ways to get what you want. Examples communicate style, format, and quality standards more clearly than descriptions alone.

Bad prompt: *"Write product descriptions for my online store."*

Good prompt: *"Write product descriptions for my online store. Here's an example of the style I want: 'The Horizon Backpack combines rugged durability with minimalist design. Water-resistant canvas, padded laptop sleeve, lifetime warranty. Perfect for daily commutes or weekend adventures.' Now write similar descriptions for these three products..."*

7. Iterate and Refine

Why it matters: Your first prompt is a starting point, not the finish line. When the output isn't quite right, apply these same principles to your feedback. Don't just say "try again" - be specific about what to change.

Bad feedback: *"This isn't what I wanted. Make it better."*

Good feedback: *"This is too formal for our team culture. Make the tone more conversational, and shorten the introduction - we can skip the background since everyone already knows the project."*

When Simplicity is Fine

Not every prompt needs elaborate setup. Simple questions deserve simple prompts. "What's the capital of France?" doesn't need context, role assignments, or format specifications.

With experience, you'll develop intuition for when a brief prompt will work and when more structure is needed. Generally, straightforward factual questions, quick clarifications, and simple follow-ups can stay short. Complex creative work, nuanced analysis, and tasks with specific requirements benefit from the techniques above.