

May Community Center Computer Class

Building Better AI Prompts

How small changes make a prompt clearer, more specific, and more useful

Purpose of This Handout

In this activity, the goal is to learn how to build a stronger AI prompt by moving from a broad beginner prompt to a more focused, useful, and interactive prompt.

The Four Prompt Examples

Prompt	Prompt Text	What Changed?	Why It Helps
1	Tell me about Excel.	The prompt is broad and general.	It may produce a response, but the response could be too long, too advanced, or not focused on what the learner needs.
2	Explain Excel to someone who has never used it.	The prompt adds an audience: a complete beginner.	The AI now knows to use simpler explanations and avoid assuming prior knowledge.
3	Explain Excel to someone who has never used it. Use everyday language and one familiar analogy. Explain only worksheets, rows, columns and cells. Do not discuss formulas yet.	The prompt adds style, an analogy, a clear topic limit, and something to avoid.	The AI is more likely to give a focused, beginner-friendly answer instead of covering too much at once.
4	After explaining each concept, ask me one simple question to check whether I understand it. Don't continue until I answer.	The prompt adds an interaction rule and a comprehension check.	The AI becomes more like a tutor because it checks understanding before moving forward.

What Each Improvement Teaches Us

Prompt 1: Start Broad

- **Prompt:** Tell me about Excel.
- **Discussion:** This is a beginner-level prompt because it names a topic but gives no details about the audience, purpose, length, tone, or focus. It is easy to write, but it gives the AI too much room to decide what matters.

Prompt 2: Add the Audience

- **Prompt:** Explain Excel to someone who has never used it.
- **Discussion:** This prompt improves the response by telling the AI who the explanation is for. A beginner audience changes the vocabulary, amount of background information, and pace of the explanation.

Prompt 3: Add Style, Scope, and Limits

- **Prompt:** Explain Excel to someone who has never used it. Use everyday language and one familiar analogy. Explain only worksheets, rows, columns and cells. Do not discuss formulas yet.
- **Discussion:** This prompt is stronger because it tells the AI how to explain, what to include, and what to leave out. Everyday language makes the answer accessible. A familiar analogy gives the learner something to connect with. The topic limit prevents the AI from moving too quickly into advanced material.

Prompt 4: Add Interaction and Checks for Understanding

- **Prompt:** After explaining each concept, ask me one simple question to check whether I understand it. Don't continue until I answer.
- **Discussion:** This final prompt turns the AI response into a step-by-step learning conversation. Instead of giving all the information at once, the AI is asked to pause, check understanding, and continue only when the learner is ready.

Class Discussion Questions

1. What problem might happen if a prompt is too broad?
2. How does naming the audience change the answer?
3. Why is it useful to tell the AI what not to include?
4. How does asking the AI to pause and check understanding support learning?

Student Practice

Choose a simple topic you know something about, such as recycling, soccer, photosynthesis, or budgeting. Write four versions of a prompt that improve step by step.

Version	Your Prompt	What did you improve?
1		Topic only
2		Audience
3		Style, scope, and limits
4		Interaction or comprehension check

Exit Ticket

In one or two sentences, explain which prompt improvement you think is most important and why.

Helpful Analogies for Understanding Prompt Improvement

1. The stylist can certainly do that—but you have left almost every decision up to the stylist. A stronger request would be:

“Take about an inch off, leave it longer on top, trim around the ears, and don’t cut the sideburns too short.”

The stylist did not suddenly become more skilled. You simply gave them better instructions.

That’s what happens with AI. A vague prompt forces the AI to make decisions for you. A specific prompt tells it what you want.

2. **Ordering food:** A broad prompt is like saying “bring me lunch.” A more precise prompt is like saying “bring me a turkey sandwich on wheat bread with no onions and a side of fruit.” The second request is more likely to match what you actually want because it includes details and limits.

3. **Giving a teacher an assignment request:** A broad prompt is like asking, “Can you help me with my project?” A stronger prompt is like asking, “Can you help me write an introduction for a science project about plant growth using simple language?” The clearer question helps the teacher give better feedback, and the same idea applies when asking AI for help.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why not just use a simple prompt?

A simple prompt is a good starting point, especially when you are exploring a topic. However, if you want an answer that fits a specific learner, purpose, or task, a more detailed prompt usually gives the AI better direction.

2. What is the most important detail to add to a prompt?

One of the most helpful details is the audience. When the AI knows who the response is for, it can adjust the vocabulary, examples, amount of explanation, and level of detail.

3. Why should a prompt include limits?

Limits help the AI stay focused. For example, saying “do not discuss formulas yet” keeps the explanation centered on the beginner concepts the learner is ready for.

4. Is a longer prompt always better?

No. A better prompt is not just longer; it is clearer. Good details tell the AI the audience, goal, style, scope, and any rules for the response. Extra details that do not matter can make the prompt confusing.

5. How does asking the AI to check my understanding improve learning?

It turns the answer into a conversation instead of a one-way explanation. When the AI pauses to ask a question, the learner has a chance to show what they understand before moving to the next idea.