

Prompting 101: Getting Reliable Results from AI

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A prompt is not a magic spell — it is a work order. The difference between a vague answer and a usable one is almost always the quality of the instruction, not the intelligence of the model. Professionals treat prompting like briefing a capable new colleague: enough context to act, clear constraints, and a defined shape for the result.

THE FIVE INGREDIENTS OF A STRONG PROMPT

» Role

Tell the model who to be: “You are a paralegal summarizing contracts for a small-business owner.” Role sets vocabulary, caution level, and perspective.

» Context

Paste the relevant facts. Models can't read your mind or your inbox — what isn't in the prompt doesn't exist.

» Task

One clear verb: summarize, compare, extract, rewrite, critique. Stacked tasks produce muddled output.

» Constraints

Length, tone, audience, what to exclude, and how to handle uncertainty (“if you are not sure, say so”).

» Format

Specify the container: a table, five bullets, JSON, a one-paragraph email. Format instructions are followed remarkably well.

COMMON FAILURE PATTERNS

Most bad results trace to three habits: asking multiple questions at once, omitting the source material and hoping the model “knows,” and accepting the first draft. Ambiguity in, ambiguity out. The fix is iteration — treat the first answer as a probe, then tighten: “shorter,” “cite which paragraph supports each claim,” “rewrite for a ninth-grade reading level.”

PROFESSIONAL HABITS

Keep a personal prompt library of instructions that worked. Version them like code. For anything recurring — weekly reports, support replies, content outlines — a tested, saved prompt turns the model from a novelty into infrastructure. That is precisely how SMI's automation systems use models: fixed, tested prompts under human review, not improvisation.

INVESTIGATOR'S TAKEAWAYS

- Brief the model like a competent new hire: role, context, task, constraints, format.
- One task per prompt; stack requests and quality collapses.
- Include the source text — never assume the model knows your facts.
- Iterate: the first answer is a draft, not a verdict.
- Save and reuse prompts that work; consistency comes from tested instructions.