

How to Ask, How to Get: A Simple Guide to Effective AI Prompting

Generative AI is a powerful tool, but the quality of its answers depends almost entirely on the quality of your questions (or "prompts"). A vague prompt will give you a vague answer. A specific, detailed prompt will give you a specific, useful answer.

Use these principles to get better results from Microsoft Copilot and Google Gemini.

Key Principles for Better Prompts

1. Be Specific and Clear - Don't be afraid to write a few sentences. State exactly what you want, the topic, and any important details.

- **Vague:** "Write about the American Revolution."
- **Better:** "List the top 5 key causes of the American Revolution and write one sentence explaining each."

2. Provide Context - The AI doesn't know your audience or your goal unless you tell it.

- **Vague:** "Explain photosynthesis."
- **Better:** "Explain photosynthesis to me **like I'm a 5th grader**. Use a simple analogy to help me understand."

3. Assign a Role - This is a powerful way to shape the AI's response; tell it *who* to be.

- **Vague:** "Review this email."
- **Better:** "**Act as a professional career coach**. Review this cover letter and provide three suggestions for making it sound more confident."

4. Define the Format - Tell the AI *how* you want the information presented.

- **Vague:** "Give me some ideas for a project."
- **Better:** "Generate ideas for a marketing class project. **Present them in a table** with three columns: 'Idea,' 'Target Audience,' and 'Potential Challenge.'"

5. Iterate and Refine - Your first prompt is just the beginning. Think of it as a conversation. Use follow-up prompts to guide the AI to the perfect answer.

- "That's a good start, but can you **make it more formal**?"
- "**Elaborate on your third point**."
- "That's too complex. **Simplify it** and remove the technical jargon."

6. Ask for Clarification - If your prompt is complex, it's helpful to tell the AI to ask you questions. This prevents it from making wrong assumptions and helps it deliver a more accurate response.

- **Example line:** "Before you answer, do you have any questions for me to clarify my request?"

A Simple Prompt "Blueprint"

Try to include these four elements in your prompt:

- **Role:** Who the AI should be. ("*Act as a...*")
- **Task:** What you want it to do. ("*Write a...*" "*Summarize...*" "*Compare...*")
- **Context:** The "who, what, why" behind the task. ("*This is for...*" "*The audience is...*")
- **Format:** How you want the output to look. ("*In a bulleted list...*" "*As an email...*")

Examples: Putting It All Together

Example 1

- **Vague Prompt:** "Write an email about the meeting."
- **Effective Prompt:** "**Act as a project manager.** Draft a follow-up email to my team about the meeting we just had. **Summarize the three main decisions** we made and **list the action items** in a bulleted list, assigning each one a name (Dave, Kiran, Jen)."

Example 2

- **Vague Prompt:** "Summarize this." [pastes text]
- **Effective Prompt:** "I'm going to paste a long article. **Summarize the key findings in five clear bullet points** for my boss, who is not an expert in this field."

Example 3

- **Vague Prompt:** "Help me study."
- **Effective Prompt:** "**Act as a history tutor.** I have an exam on World War II. **Ask me ten short-answer questions** to test my knowledge on the main events of the Pacific theater."

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