

Prompting Basics • Part 1: Reference Card

How to communicate with AI so it can actually help you • Aurorae Group, LLC

A prompt is not a search query. It's not a command. Think of it as a brief to a capable colleague who is new to your specific situation — someone smart and willing, who knows nothing about your organization, your audience, or your constraints unless you tell them. The clearer your brief, the better the result. The skill is learning to explain what you know.

The Core Principle: Think Like a Teacher

Modern AI models don't need magic words or special syntax. They need to understand what you're trying to do.

The most effective prompts are not the most cleverly structured ones — they are the ones that most clearly explain the task. If you know how to do something, write down how you'd teach someone else to do it. That's your prompt.

A useful test before you send any prompt: Could a smart new colleague, on their first week, produce what I'm looking for from these instructions? If not, add what's missing.

This doesn't mean longer is always better. It means more specific is always better. One sentence of genuine context outperforms a paragraph of vague instruction.

A Framework for When You're Stuck

You don't need a formula — but one can help you think through what the AI needs to know before you type.

Element	The Question It Answers	Example
Role	Who do you want the AI to be?	<i>"You are an experienced executive assistant skilled at summarizing meetings..."</i>
Context	What does the AI need to know about your situation?	<i>"I have rough notes from a 45-minute strategy planning meeting with five senior leaders..."</i>
Task	What specifically are you asking it to do?	<i>"Produce a structured summary with key decisions, open questions, and action items..."</i>
Format	How should the output be structured?	<i>"Three labeled sections, bullet points within each, concise"</i>
Constraints	What should it avoid or stay within?	<i>"Professional and concise. Flag unclear items rather than guessing."</i>

You don't need all five every time. Use what's relevant. The goal is to think through your brief before you type it — not to fill in a template mechanically.

A note on acronyms: If you've come across frameworks like RISEN, CRAFT, RTF, or RASCEF — these are variations on the same idea and are worth knowing. They're useful thinking prompts. The full reference is in Part 2 of this series. Don't let any formula substitute for actually explaining what you need.

Before & After: The Same Request, Two Ways

The prompt on the right takes about 60 extra seconds to write. The difference in output quality is significant.

Before: Weak Prompt	After: Strong Prompt
<p><i>"Summarize the meeting."</i></p> <p>What's missing: No role for the AI, no context about the organization or audience, no task specifics, no format, no tone guidance. The AI will guess at all of it.</p>	<p><i>"You are an experienced executive assistant skilled at turning meeting notes into clear, actionable summaries. I'm going to paste in rough notes from a 45-minute strategy planning meeting with five senior leaders. Please produce a structured summary with three sections: key decisions made, open questions that still need resolution, and action items with owner names and due dates where they were mentioned. Keep the tone professional and concise. If something is unclear in the notes, flag it rather than guess."</i></p> <p>What changed: Role assigned, meeting context provided, output structure specified (three clear sections), flagging instruction added for ambiguity. The AI now has what a capable note-taker would need to produce something genuinely useful.</p>

Five Things That Make Prompts Work

Principles, not rules. Apply judgment.

- **Be specific about the output.** Say what format, length, and audience you want. "A 3-paragraph email for a staff audience" beats "a communication."
- **Give enough context.** Don't assume the AI knows your organization, your role, or your constraints. It doesn't. Start with what matters most.
- **Assign a role when it matters.** "Act as a senior HR business partner" shapes tone, depth, and framing in ways a generic prompt does not.
- **Ask it to think before it answers.** For complex tasks, adding "think through this step by step before responding" consistently improves quality.
- **Iterate.** The first output is a draft. Treat it that way. Ask it to revise, shorten, adjust tone, or try a different angle. That's where quality is built.

Five Common Mistakes and Their Fixes

Most prompting problems come back to the same small set of habits. Recognizing them is most of the solution.

Mistake	What It Looks Like	The Fix
Too vague	<i>"Write something about our new policy."</i>	Specify the policy, the audience, the purpose, and the format. The AI cannot guess what 'something' means to you.
No context	<i>"Draft a communication about the leadership change."</i>	Tell the AI who you are, who the audience is, what the change is, and what tone is appropriate. It knows nothing about your organization.
Asking for too much at once	<i>"Write a policy, a staff email, a FAQ, and a manager talking points document."</i>	Break complex requests into steps. One clear task per prompt produces better results than four vague ones combined.
Accepting the first output	<i>Copying and sending the first draft without review or refinement.</i>	First outputs are starting points. Ask the AI to revise, sharpen, adjust tone, or try a different angle. Iteration is where quality is built.
Putting sensitive data in without thinking	<i>Including employee names, performance details, or compensation data in a free tool.</i>	De-identify before you prompt. Names, roles, and identifying details are rarely necessary for the AI to help. Use your organization's approved tools for sensitive content.

The more clearly you can explain a task to someone who doesn't know your context, the better your AI outputs will be — and the better you'll get at it. Part 2 of this series goes deeper on structures, techniques, and advanced prompt types.