

How to Build a Prompt That Works | Four elements that turn a vague request into a focused one.

Most AI prompts fail for one reason: they are too vague. When you give AI a vague request, it fills in the gaps with its own assumptions — and its assumptions may not match your audience, your values, or your purpose. These four elements give you control. You do not need all four every time. But the more you include, the better the result.

ROLE Who AI should be	REQUEST What you want	AUDIENCE Who will read it	CONSTRAINTS What to avoid	
ROLE Tell AI who to be	AI does not have a fixed identity. You assign one. When you name a role, you unlock a specific way of thinking and speaking. A patient teacher sounds different from a medical professional. A newspaper editor sounds different from a pastor. Be specific about the role — the more precise you are, the more useful the response. Example prompts: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Act as a patient teacher explaining this to a church audience with no tech background."• "Act as a newspaper editor reviewing this paragraph for clarity."• "Act as a pastor preparing a short devotional for working parents." Weak: No role given — AI defaults to a generic, slightly academic tone that may not fit your audience. Strong: Role assigned — AI matches its voice, depth, and style to the person you told it to be.	Vague requests produce vague results. The more specific your request, the more useful the output. Name the format (list, paragraph, bullet points, email, script). Name the length (three sentences, one page, 200 words). Name the action (summarize, explain, compare, rewrite, simplify). One clear request produces one useful answer. Example prompts: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Write a 3-paragraph summary of what AI is and what it is not."• "List five practical tips in plain language — no technical terms."• "Rewrite this paragraph at an 8th-grade reading level." Weak: "Tell me about AI" — too broad. AI will pick a direction you may not want. Strong: "Write a 2-paragraph explanation of what AI is and is not, using plain language." — AI knows exactly what to produce.	AI adjusts its vocabulary, depth, and tone based on the audience you describe. A response written for a skeptical teenager reads very differently from one written for a church elder. Naming the audience is not optional — it is the single most reliable way to get a response that actually fits the people you are trying to reach. Example prompts: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "My audience is parents in a church setting, ages 35-65."• "Write this for a teenager who has never opened a Bible before."• "This is for a small group of retired adults who are new to technology." Weak: No audience named — AI defaults to a general adult reader, which may not be who you need. Strong: Audience specified — vocabulary, examples, and tone shift to match the actual people in the room.	
CONSTRAINTS Name what to avoid			This is where you protect the output. You can block specific language, formats, tones, sources, or approaches. If you are writing for a faith audience, this is	

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where you filter out secular framing, technical jargon, or theological positions you do not want included. Think of this as your guardrails. Set them before AI starts, not after.

Example prompts:

- "Avoid technical jargon. Avoid fear-based language. Keep it biblical in tone."
- "Do not use The Message translation. Use NKJV or ESV only."
- "Do not make medical claims. Do not suggest this replaces professional advice."

Weak: No constraints — AI will make its own choices about tone, sources, and framing. Some of those choices may not fit.

Strong: Constraints set — AI knows exactly what not to include, and you spend less time editing out things that do not belong.

See It In Action: Same Topic, Two Prompts

WEAK PROMPT

"Write an email about volunteering."

What happens: AI writes a generic email about volunteering with no context. Wrong tone, wrong audience, wrong purpose. It won't sound like your church.

STRONG PROMPT

"Write a 3-sentence email to a first-time church volunteer who just signed up for the food pantry. Warm tone. Thank them, tell them to arrive at 8am Saturday, and say someone will meet them at the side door. No church jargon."

What happens: AI produces a warm, specific email written for your church's voice. Ready to send with minor edits.

The bottom line: You are always giving AI instructions. The question is whether your instructions are clear enough to be useful. Role, Request, Audience, and Constraints put you in control of the result — not the algorithm.