

Getting Started — Making AI Think With You, Not For You

A prompt is just a sentence, but a good one does four jobs at once: it gives the AI context (what's actually going on), a goal (what you want out of the exchange), a constraint (what limits apply — time, money, space, people involved), and a format (how you want the answer shaped, so you're not stuck untangling a wall of text). Leave any one of those out and the AI has to guess, and guessing is where flat, generic answers come from.

This chapter isn't tied to one area of life. It's a set of forty starter prompts you can use no matter what you're working on — for warming up a conversation, getting the AI to ask you questions instead of the other way around, or checking its own work before you trust it. Treat this chapter like a toolbox. The rest of the book uses these same moves, just aimed at specific tasks.

Learning to Ask Better Questions

1. I want your help with [topic], but first ask me three questions that would help you give a better answer.

2. Before you answer, tell me what assumptions you're making about my situation so I can correct any that are wrong.
3. I'm going to describe a problem. Don't solve it yet — just tell me what information is missing.
4. Rewrite my request in your own words so I can confirm you understood it before you answer.
5. What's the one detail about [situation] that would change your answer the most if I told you?
6. I only have two sentences to describe my problem. Here they are: [describe]. What follow-up questions do you have?
7. Act as an interviewer and ask me one question at a time about [goal] until you have enough to help me properly.
8. I'm not sure what I actually need help with regarding [general area]. Ask me questions to narrow it down.
9. Before giving advice, tell me what a person would need to know about me to give bad advice by mistake.
10. Summarize what you know about my situation so far in three bullet points, based only on what I've told you.

Getting Useful, Structured Answers

11. Answer in three parts: what you'd do first, what you'd do second, and what you'd skip entirely.
12. Give me your answer as a short table comparing [option A] and [option B] on cost, time, and effort.
13. Explain [topic] to me in plain language, then give me the one technical term I should still learn.
14. Give me a one-paragraph answer first, then a longer version underneath if I want more detail.
15. I want a checklist, not a paragraph. Turn your answer to [question] into 5–8 short, actionable steps.
16. Answer as if you're explaining this to a smart friend who has never dealt with [topic] before.
17. Give me the short version of your answer in one sentence, then explain your reasoning below it.
18. Structure your response as: the quick answer, the reasoning, and one thing that could change the answer.
19. I want two versions of this answer: one for if I have a lot of time, and one for if I have very little.
20. Answer with the most important point first, not last — I might stop reading halfway through.

Getting Honest, Balanced Answers

21. What's the strongest argument against the suggestion you just gave me?
22. Give me your honest opinion on [plan], including the parts you think are weak.
23. If a skeptical friend heard this plan, what's the first thing they'd question?
24. Tell me what could go wrong with [plan] that I haven't mentioned.
25. Rate your confidence in that answer from 1 to 10, and explain what would raise or lower it.
26. Give me one argument for [option A] and one equally strong argument for [option B], even if you'd lean one way.
27. What would someone with the opposite opinion on [topic] say, and what's the best version of their case?
28. Is there a simpler explanation for [situation] than the one you just gave me?
29. What information would make you change your answer to [question]?
30. Play devil's advocate on my plan to [plan] for a moment, then tell me if the objections actually hold up.

Personalizing and Double-Checking

31. Here's more about my situation: [add details]. Does that change your earlier answer, and if so, how?
32. I have [constraint, e.g., a tight budget / limited time / a small space]. Adjust your last answer around that.
33. Give me three ways to customize this plan depending on whether my priority is speed, cost, or comfort.
34. Which parts of your answer are general advice, and which parts are actually specific to what I told you?
35. Is any part of your answer something I should double-check with a real source before relying on it?
36. Give me a version of that answer written for someone with [relevant detail, e.g., young kids / a disability / a strict schedule].
37. What's a common mistake people make when trying to do what I just asked, so I can avoid it?
38. If I only have time to do one thing from your answer this week, which one matters most?
39. Turn your suggestion into a version I could hand to someone else — like a partner or roommate — so they understand it too.
40. Ask me one more question that would help you refine this answer before we move on.