

AI Prompting: Best Practices and Applications

General Prompting Best Practices

Understanding AI Models and Effective Prompting

Why Prompts Matter: AI language models like Claude, ChatGPT, and others work by predicting the most likely next words based on patterns learned from training data. The quality and specificity of your prompt directly influences the relevance and usefulness of the response. Think of prompting as giving directions - the clearer and more detailed your instructions, the better the AI can help you reach your destination.

Key Principles for Effective Prompting

- 1. Be Specific and Detailed
 - Provide context, constraints, and desired outcomes
 - Specify the format, length, or structure you want
 - Include relevant background information
- 2. Use Examples
 - Show the AI what you want with positive examples
 - Include negative examples of what to avoid when helpful
- 3. Break Down Complex Tasks
 - Ask for step-by-step reasoning
 - Divide large requests into smaller, manageable parts
- 4. Iterate and Refine
 - Start with a basic prompt, then add clarifications
 - Build on previous responses to get closer to your goal

Good vs. Bad Prompt Examples

Bad Prompt:

"What's this essay about?"

Good Prompt:

"I'm analyzing a 19th-century essay for my American Literature class. Can you identify the main argument and three key pieces of evidence the author uses? Please explain how each piece of evidence supports the central claim."

Bad Prompt:

"Help me with my homework."

Good Prompt:

"I'm working on a comparative analysis of two poems about war. I've identified that both use nature imagery, but I'm struggling to articulate how each poet uses it differently. Can you help me brainstorm 2-3 specific differences in their approach to nature imagery? I want to develop my own thesis, so please ask me clarifying questions rather than providing a complete analysis."

Bad Prompt:

"Write my conclusion paragraph."

Good Prompt:

"I've written an analysis arguing that Poem X uses repetition to show the speaker's growing desperation. My evidence includes [specific examples]. Can you help me brainstorm ways to conclude this argument that connect back to the broader theme of loss in the poet's work? I want to write it myself, but would like suggestions for the direction."

Why These Principles Work

AI models perform best when they can:

- Understand your goal clearly (specificity helps focus responses)
- Access relevant context (background information improves accuracy)
- Follow clear constraints (parameters prevent irrelevant tangents)
- Build on structured information (examples and formats guide output style)

Applying AI to Poetry Analysis

When AI Can Be Helpful in Poetry Study

Brainstorming and Exploration:

- Identifying literary devices you might have missed
- Exploring historical or cultural context
- Generating questions for deeper analysis
- Checking your understanding of complex passages

Example Prompt: "I'm reading Whitman's 'The Wound Dresser' and notice he uses a lot of present-tense verbs even when describing memories. Can you help me brainstorm why this might be significant? What effects might this create for readers?"

Clarifying Technical Elements:

- Understanding poetic forms and structures
- Explaining unfamiliar literary terms or allusions
- Identifying patterns in rhythm, rhyme, or syntax

Example Prompt: "Can you explain the difference between internal rhyme and slant rhyme, and then help me identify which one appears in these specific lines: [quote lines]? Please show me exactly where you see the pattern."

Research and Context:

- Understanding historical background
- Learning about the poet's biography and other works
- Exploring critical perspectives or interpretations

Example Prompt: "I'm analyzing Natasha Trethewey's 'Pilgrimage.' Can you provide context about her background and how her personal history might inform this poem? I want to understand the biographical elements before I develop my own interpretation."

When AI Is NOT Helpful (or Potentially Harmful)

Generating Original Analysis

- Writing thesis statements for you
- Providing complete interpretations without your input
- Creating arguments you haven't thought through yourself

Replacing Close Reading

- Substituting AI analysis for your own careful attention to the text
- Accepting AI interpretations without checking against the poem
- Using AI to avoid engaging directly with difficult or ambiguous passages

Final Writing Stages

- Writing full paragraphs or papers
- Creating conclusions without your own synthesis
- Polishing prose in a way that obscures your voice

While AI can do all of these things well, it will not produce a Yale-quality assignment that you will be proud of. Offloading critical thinking might seem easier, but you want to use these tools in a way that supplements your learning and makes it more efficient, not replaces it altogether.

Ethical Use Guidelines for Poetry Analysis

DO:

- Use AI to enhance your understanding, not replace it
- Cite when AI has influenced your thinking
- Verify AI responses against the actual text
- Let AI help you ask better questions about the poem

DON'T:

- Submit AI-generated analysis as your own work
- Let AI interpretations override your own reading experience
- Use AI to avoid the challenging work of interpretation
- Rely on AI for creative or original insights that should be yours

Sample Workflow: Ethical AI Integration

1. Read and annotate the poem yourself first
2. Identify questions or confusing elements
3. Use AI to clarify context, form, or technical elements
4. Develop your own thesis and arguments
5. Optionally use AI to test your ideas or brainstorm counterarguments
6. Write your analysis in your own words
7. Acknowledge any AI assistance in your process

Remember: The goal is to become a better reader and thinker, not to outsource the intellectual work that makes you a better scholar.