Cochise College Center for Lifelong Learning

A.I. Power Prompting

Getting More From Every AI Conversation

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Introduction

Welcome to **A.I. Power Prompting.**[1] If you have used AI before, you already know the basics: type a question, read the answer. That works. But it is a bit like having a conversation with a brilliant expert and only ever asking yes-or-no questions.

Today is about learning to have the real conversation. The difference between a casual AI user and a confident one is not which tool they use. It is how they approach the entire interaction: from deciding whether to use AI at all, to writing a clear request, to evaluating what comes back, to staying sharp as the technology evolves.

This class is built around four skills that Anthropic (the company behind Claude) calls the pillars of AI fluency. We will cover all four, then spend the bulk of our time on the one that makes the most immediate practical difference: learning to communicate clearly with AI through a structured approach called **The Prompt Blueprint**.

What You Need

Everything we do today runs in a web browser. Go to `https://duck.ai`. No account is required: DuckDuckGo's AI Chat is free to use without signing in, and it works well for everything in this class. If DuckDuckGo is ever unavailable, Gemini (`https://gemini.google.com`) is a good fallback and also does not require signing in. Either way, all of the exercises in this class work fine.

Learning Goals

By the end of this session, you will:

- Describe the four pillars of AI fluency and apply each one in practice
- Use The Prompt Blueprint to write prompts that get consistently useful results
- Apply advanced techniques including chain-of-thought, few-shot examples, and the iteration loop
- Recognize and fix the most common prompting mistakes

Big Idea

A vague prompt produces a vague answer. But even a perfect prompt cannot save you if you asked the wrong question, chose the wrong tool, or accepted

[1] Written by George Self with assistance from Claude. It was formatted with LaTeX.

the answer without thinking critically about it.

Module 1: The Four Pillars of AI Fluency

Most people think of AI skill as a single thing: knowing how to write a good prompt. That matters, and we will spend a lot of time on it. But it is only one part of working well with these tools.

Anthropic identifies four pillars that together describe what it means to be genuinely fluent with AI. Think of them as four habits a confident AI user brings to every interaction.

Delegation: Knowing What to Hand Off

Delegation is the starting point. Before you open an AI tool, ask two questions: *Should* AI be involved in this task, and if so, *which* AI is right for it?

Not every task benefits from AI. A quick phone call, a task requiring confidential information, or something where a personal human touch matters most: these may be better handled without AI. Part of fluency is making that call deliberately rather than defaulting to AI out of habit.

When AI is the right choice, tool selection matters. AI tools are not interchangeable. Some are built for long-form writing and nuanced reasoning. Others specialize in image generation, data analysis, audio, or code. Using the wrong tool for a task produces mediocre results regardless of how well you write your prompt.

Ask yourself: Is this a task where AI adds real value?

Ask yourself: Which tool is actually suited to this kind of output?

Description: Communicating Clearly

Description is where most AI training focuses, and for good reason. It is the most immediately teachable skill, and improving it produces results you can see right away. Description means giving AI the information it needs to produce output that is genuinely useful to you, rather than a generic response that could apply to anyone.

We will spend the rest of this class on Description, using a structured approach called **The Prompt Blueprint**. For now, the key idea: the quality of the answer depends almost entirely on the quality of the information you provide.

Discernment: Evaluating What You Get Back

Discernment means reading AI output the way a careful editor reads a first draft. AI can produce confident-sounding text that contains errors, outdated information, or assumptions that do not match your situation. Fluent users do not accept output wholesale; they evaluate it before acting on it.

In practice, Discernment means:

- Checking factual claims, especially specific numbers, dates, and names
- Noticing when the tone or reading level does not fit your audience
- Catching places where AI made an assumption that does not match your situation
- Asking yourself: "Would I stake my reputation on this output as written?"

AI is a starting point, not a final draft. Your judgment is still the last step.

Diligence: Staying Engaged Over Time

AI tools change rapidly. A tool that was unreliable six months ago may be excellent today. A capability that did not exist last year may now be standard. Diligence means staying current rather than working from outdated assumptions.

Diligence also means staying attentive to the broader questions around AI: privacy, accuracy, and the appropriate limits of AI involvement in important decisions. Practical examples:

- Do not paste sensitive personal, financial, or medical information into a public AI tool
- Be cautious about using AI output in situations where errors have real consequences
- Periodically revisit how you are using these tools and whether your habits still make sense

The Four Pillars Together

These four skills reinforce each other. Good Delegation means you start with the right tool. Good Description means you give that tool what it needs. Good Discernment means you catch problems before they matter. Diligence keeps all three skills current as the landscape shifts.

Activity 1.1: Which Pillar Is This?

Read each situation below. Identify which pillar of AI fluency it primarily illustrates: Delegation, Description, Discernment, or Diligence.

1. A nonprofit director needs to generate an image for a fundraising flyer. She has been using Claude for writing tasks and opens it out of habit, but it cannot generate images. She switches to an image-generation tool and gets what she needs in two minutes.
2. A retired teacher asks AI to write a letter disputing a medical bill. The response looks polished, but he notices it states the bill was for a procedure in March; he actually received care in February. He corrects

the date before sending.

3. A small business owner asks: "Write a bio." The AI produces a generic two-paragraph response. She adds her industry, years in business, and target audience and gets something she can actually use.
4. A volunteer coordinator learned how to use AI for scheduling last year. She recently discovered that the tool now integrates directly with Google Calendar, cutting her workflow in half.

Module 1 Checklist

1. Described the four pillars of AI fluency in your own words
2. Identified at least one example of each pillar from your own experience with AI
3. Matched each situation in the activity to the correct pillar

Module 2: The Prompt Blueprint

Description (communicating clearly with AI) is where most people have the most room to improve, and where improvement pays off fastest. The Prompt Blueprint is a four-part structure that gives AI everything it needs to produce output that is specific, useful, and ready to work with.

Before and After: The Same Request, Two Ways

Read these two prompts and consider what each one is likely to produce.

Without the Blueprint:

```
Write an email about the meeting.
```

With the Blueprint:

```
You are a professional business writer. I manage a small landscaping company in Sierra Vista, Arizona with six employees. I need to reschedule a Monday morning team meeting because of a supplier appointment that came up unexpectedly. Write a brief email to my crew letting them know the meeting is moved to Wednesday at 7:00 AM. Keep the tone friendly and direct. No more than three short paragraphs. Do not include a subject line or signature since I will add those myself.
```

The second prompt will produce something you can send with minimal editing. The first will produce something generic that requires rewriting from scratch. The only difference is the information you provided.

The Four Parts of The Prompt Blueprint

Role: Tell AI Who to Be

Start by telling the AI who it is for this task. This one sentence sets the tone, vocabulary, and level of expertise for everything that follows.

Weak: *(no role given)*

Strong: "You are an experienced HR manager."

Strong: "You are a plain-language financial advisor explaining concepts to a non-expert."

Strong: "You are a marketing copywriter who specializes in small local businesses."

Strong: "You are a compassionate nurse explaining a diagnosis in terms a patient can understand."

Role framing is not about pretending or fiction. It is a signal that calibrates the AI's response toward a specific type of expertise and communication style. A "plain-language financial advisor" will explain compound interest very differently than a "financial analyst writing for institutional investors."

Background: Give Context About Your Situation

This is where most prompts fall short. Tell the AI the specific situation: who you are, who your audience is, what has already happened, and anything else that makes this task yours rather than a generic request.

Weak: "I have a difficult employee."

Strong: "I manage a team of eight at a small nonprofit. One employee has been consistently late to Monday morning meetings for the past month. I have spoken with her informally once, but the behavior has continued. I want to address it more formally now without damaging the working relationship."

The more specific the context, the more specific (and useful) the output. You are not limited to one sentence. Give AI as much background as it needs.

Request: State the Specific Task

Now tell the AI exactly what you want it to produce. Use a specific action verb and be precise about the goal.

Weak: "Help me with this." / "Tell me about this."

Strong: "Write a one-page memo." / "List five talking points." / "Summarize this in three bullet points." / "Draft a script for a two-minute phone call."

Action verbs that produce results: Write, Draft, List, Summarize, Compare, Explain, Outline, Analyze, Rewrite, Translate, Critique, Suggest, Create, Identify, Simplify.

Format: Specify How You Want the Answer

Finally, tell AI how you want the answer delivered. Without this, the AI makes its own formatting choices, which may or may not match what you need.

Length: "No more than 150 words." / "One short paragraph." / "A single page."

Format: "Use bullet points." / "Write in paragraph form." / "Use a table." / "Number each step."

Tone: "Professional but warm." / "Conversational, not formal." / "Direct and matter-of-fact."

Reading level: "Plain English, no jargon." / "Write for someone with no technical background."

Exclusions: "Do not include a salutation." / "Avoid bullet points." / "Do not suggest consulting a lawyer."

You Do Not Always Need All Four

For simple, low-stakes requests, a full Blueprint prompt is overkill. "Give me five ideas for a birthday dinner in Tucson" does not need a role or format instruction. Use the full Blueprint when the output actually matters: professional communications, important decisions, anything you plan to use or share.

Activity 2.1: Spot the Missing Part

Each prompt below is missing one of the four Blueprint elements. Identify which part is absent and explain what you would add.

1. `Write a thank-you note for a donation to my charity golf tournament. Keep it under 100 words and use a warm, personal tone.`
2. `You are a plain-language healthcare writer. Write a brief explanation of what a deductible is and how it works.`
3. `You are a career coach helping a mid-career professional. I am 52 years old and have spent 20 years in retail management. I am considering a career change into corporate training. Summarize the transferable skills I likely already have and what gaps I might`

```
need to address.
```

Activity 2.2: Upgrade a Weak Prompt

Take each weak prompt below and rewrite it using all four parts of The Prompt Blueprint. Work individually, then compare your version with a neighbor.

1. `Write a bio for my website.`
2. `Explain Medicare to me.`
3. `Help me respond to a bad review online.`

After writing your upgraded prompts, try one of them in DuckDuckGo and evaluate the result. Does the output reflect the context you provided?

Activity 2.3: Build One From Scratch

Think of a real task you need to get done this week: at work, at home, or in your personal life. Using The Prompt Blueprint, write a complete prompt for it. Try it in DuckDuckGo.

- **Role:** Who should the AI be?
- **Background:** What is your specific situation?
- **Request:** What exactly do you want it to produce?
- **Format:** How should it be formatted?

Module 2 Checklist

1. Identified the four parts of The Prompt Blueprint
2. Compared a weak prompt and a Blueprint prompt side by side
3. Identified the missing part in at least two example prompts
4. Rewrote at least one weak prompt using the full Blueprint
5. Tested a complete Blueprint prompt in DuckDuckGo and evaluated the result

Module 3: Advanced Techniques

The Prompt Blueprint gives you a strong foundation. The techniques in this module let you go further: getting better answers to complex questions, matching a specific tone, and refining output through conversation rather than starting over every time.

Chain-of-Thought: Show Your Work

For simple tasks, AI can answer directly. For complex ones (decisions, planning, multi-step problems), adding a chain-of-thought instruction produces a more thorough and reliable response.

```
Think through this step by step before giving me your answer.
```

This works because it prompts the AI to reason through the problem rather than jump to a conclusion. It is especially effective for:

- Planning decisions ("Should I take this contract?")
- Process questions ("How should I approach this conversation?")
- Anything where logic and sequence matter
- Situations where you want to see the reasoning, not just the result

Activity 3.1: Chain-of-Thought Planning

Try this prompt in DuckDuckGo:

```
You are a practical business advisor. I run a small bookkeeping
service with three clients. A fourth client has asked me to take on
their account, but it would require about ten additional hours per
week. I am already working close to capacity. Think through this step
by step before giving me your answer. What questions should I ask
myself before deciding whether to take on the new client, and what
are the key trade-offs?
```

Few-Shot Examples: Show AI What You Want

Sometimes the easiest way to describe what you want is to show it. A few-shot prompt gives the AI one or two examples before making your request, so it can match your style, tone, or format exactly.

Basic structure:

1. Show an example of the style or format you want
2. Then make your request

Activity 3.2: Tone Matching With Examples

Try this prompt in DuckDuckGo:

```
Here is an example of the tone I use in my customer emails: "Hi
Maria, just a quick note to say your quarterly report is ready.
Nothing alarming in there: a few items worth talking through at our
next meeting. Let me know if you want to chat before then." Using
that same tone, write a follow-up email to a client who missed our
scheduled phone call this morning.
```

Notice how the AI adapts to the example rather than using its default professional tone. This is one of the fastest ways to get output that actually sounds like you.

Negative Constraints: Tell AI What Not to Do

Just as useful as telling AI what you want is telling it what you do *not* want. Negative constraints prevent the most common formatting and tone problems before they happen.

"Do not use bullet points."

"Do not start any sentence with the word *I*."

"Avoid jargon and technical terms."

"Do not suggest that I consult a professional; I just want a plain-language explanation."

"Do not include a closing paragraph that summarizes what you just said."

"Do not make the response longer than it needs to be."

You can combine these freely with The Prompt Blueprint. They belong in the Format step.

The Iteration Loop: Treat the First Answer as a Draft

This may be the single most practical shift in how you use AI. Most people read the first response, decide it is not quite right, and either give up or start over with a completely new prompt. There is a better way.

The iteration loop:

1. Send your prompt and read the response
2. Identify specifically what is not right about it

3. Tell the AI what to change, in plain language
4. Repeat until you have what you need

Every follow-up message in a conversation builds on everything that came before. You do not need to repeat your context. You can simply say:

"Make it shorter."

"The second paragraph is too formal. Rewrite it."

"Add a sentence about our return policy."

"Give me three alternative versions of the opening line."

"What is missing from this that I should consider?"

"Now rewrite this for an audience that has never used the product before."

The Conversation Is the Context

Everything you say in a session accumulates. By the middle of a productive AI conversation, the AI has rich context about your situation, your preferences, and your goals. Use it. You can say: "Take everything we have discussed and write a one-page summary I can share with my team."

Discernment in Action

The iteration loop is also where Discernment kicks in. Each time you read a response, apply your own judgment: Is this accurate? Does it match my situation? Would I stake my reputation on this? Your critical eye is what turns a useful draft into something you can actually use.

Activity 3.3: The Iteration Game

Start with this deliberately weak prompt in DuckDuckGo:

```
Write a short bio about me for my business website.
```

Read the response. Without starting a new conversation, use follow-up messages to improve the output. You might say things like:

- "Make it more personal and less corporate-sounding."
- "I have been in this business for 22 years. Add that."
- "Cut it to three sentences."

- "What is missing that a strong bio usually includes?"

The goal: get to a result you would actually use, using only follow-up messages (no rewriting the original prompt).

Module 3 Checklist

1. Used chain-of-thought prompting and compared it to a direct answer
2. Used a few-shot example to match a specific tone or style
3. Applied at least two negative constraints in a prompt
4. Used the iteration loop to improve a response through follow-up messages

Module 4: Power Prompting in Action

The best way to make these skills stick is to apply them to something you actually care about. This module offers scenarios drawn from common work and personal situations. Work through one or two that are relevant to you, then bring it back to something from your own life.

Professional Communication

Activity 4.1: Handle a Difficult Situation by Email

1. Build a Blueprint prompt for this scenario (or one from your own work):
   A vendor has delivered a project two weeks late and the result has quality problems. You need to address the issue in writing without destroying the business relationship, but you also need to make clear that this cannot happen again.
   Your Blueprint:
   - **Role:** a professional business communicator
   - **Background:** the situation specifically
   - **Request:** write an email
   - **Format:** firm but professional tone, under 200 words, no threats, no apologies for the vendor's behavior
2. Try it in DuckDuckGo.
3. Iterate: use at least two follow-up messages to improve the result.

4. Apply Discernment: read the final output carefully. Would you send this as written?

Business Content and Marketing

Activity 4.2: Write Content for Your Business

1. Think of a real content need for your business or organization: a social media post, a short newsletter item, a description for your website, or an announcement for an event.
2. Build a full Blueprint prompt. Be specific in the Background step: your organization, your audience, and what you want them to feel or do after reading.
3. Try it in DuckDuckGo.
4. Follow up:
   ```
   Now give me two alternative versions: one that is slightly more
   formal and one that is slightly more casual.
   ```

Personal Life and Health

Activity 4.3: Prepare for a Doctor's Appointment

1. Ask:
   ```
   You are a plain-language health educator. My doctor recently told
   me I have pre-diabetes. I have my next appointment in two weeks.
   Explain in plain language what pre-diabetes means, what the most
   important lifestyle factors are for managing it, and give me a
   list of ten specific questions I should ask my doctor at the next
   appointment.
   ```
2. Follow up:
   ```
   Which of those questions are most important if I only have time
   for five?
   ```
3. Apply Discernment: which parts of this response would you want to verify with your doctor directly?

Remember: Use AI to prepare and understand, not to replace your physician's advice.

Module 4 Checklist

1. Applied The Prompt Blueprint to at least two scenarios from this module
2. Used the iteration loop to refine a response rather than starting over
3. Applied Discernment to at least one output before treating it as final
4. Identified at least two tasks from your own work or life you will apply this to this week

Wrap-Up

You now have a complete set of skills for getting consistently useful results from AI. The four pillars work together:

- **Delegation**: Make a deliberate choice before you start: is AI right for this task, and which tool fits the job?
- **Description**: Use The Prompt Blueprint to give AI what it needs: Role, Background, Request, Format.
- **Discernment**: Read every response critically. Check facts, evaluate tone, apply your own judgment before acting.
- **Diligence**: Stay current. These tools change quickly, and so should your habits.

The best way to improve is to experiment. Try the same request with and without a role. Add context you would normally leave out. Ask for a different format. Each experiment teaches you something about how AI responds to language, and that knowledge compounds quickly.

AI will not replace your judgment, your relationships, or your expertise. What it can do is handle the drafting, organizing, and research so that your time and attention go toward the parts only you can do.

Start with one real task. Build a Blueprint prompt. See what happens.

Appendices

Instructor Demonstration Guide

Demonstrated on the instructor's laptop using Claude (claude.ai) with a Pro account.

- **Projects**: A workspace with pre-set instructions and uploaded files that carry into every conversation. Demo: the instructor's "Linux Desktop Computer" project vs. a standard session: show how the project's pre-loaded context shapes the response without rewriting the Role and Background steps each time. For repeated tasks, Projects mean you never start from scratch.

- **Memory**: Claude remembers your name, business, and preferences across all future sessions. Demo: add a fact, then show how a new conversation reflects it automatically.
- **Document Upload**: Upload PDFs, Word docs, spreadsheets, or images and ask Claude to summarize, analyze, or answer questions. Handles very long documents in a single session. Demo: upload the *Medicare & You* handbook and ask: "Summarize this in five bullet points for someone who just turned 65 and is enrolling in Medicare for the first time."
- **Artifacts**: Structured output (documents, tables, forms) appears in a separate panel alongside the chat, ready to copy or download. To open the artifact panel, ask Claude to return the result as an HTML page. Demo prompt: "Create a one-page handout explaining how large language models work, written for a general adult education audience. Return it as an HTML page." Then follow up: "Add a section on prompt engineering."
- **Web Search (Pro)**: Claude searches the web for current information and cites its sources. Demo prompt: "What is the latest on the 2026 Arizona monsoon season?" Show the citations in the response.
- **Skills**: Saved, reusable instructions that activate with a single command. A Skill works like a Project that launches instantly: all the Role and Background steps are already written. Demo: use the Plain-Language Editor Skill with the sample paragraph below, then show the same request to a standard session without the Skill to contrast the results.

  Sample paragraph for the Plain-Language Editor demo:

  > *The implementation of the revised procurement protocols will necessitate a comprehensive reevaluation of our existing vendor engagement frameworks to ensure alignment with the updated compliance requirements promulgated by the oversight committee. Stakeholders are advised to facilitate the transition by coordinating with departmental representatives to effectuate the requisite modifications to operational procedures prior to the end of the fiscal quarter.*

- **Connectors**: Direct links to Google Drive, GitHub, and other services so Claude can read files already stored there without manual uploads. Demo: connect to Google Drive and summarize `grant_proposal.pdf` found there.

Popular AI Models

The Prompt Blueprint works with any AI. Different tools have different strengths; choosing the right one for a task (Delegation) often improves results as much as a well-written prompt.

- **ChatGPT (OpenAI)**: The most widely known AI and a reliable all-rounder. Strong at creative writing, complex reasoning, and a large library of user-created specialty tools. Best for general brainstorming and draft generation.
- **Claude (Anthropic)**: Known for natural, human-sounding writing and a very long context window, meaning it can read and analyze entire books or large document sets in one session. Best for summarizing long reports and professional writing.
- **DuckDuckGo AI Chat**: Not a model itself, but a free, no-login interface that gives access to several underlying models (including versions of ChatGPT and Claude) in one place. Best for a quick, private, and anonymous way to try different models without creating an account: the tool we are using in this class.
- **Gemini (Google)**: Built into the Google ecosystem with real-time web search and direct access to Google Docs, Drive, and Gmail. Best for researching current events and working with files already stored in Google Drive.
- **Microsoft Copilot**: Embedded in Windows and the Microsoft Office suite. Best for drafting Word documents, summarizing Outlook email threads, and analyzing data in Excel.

Quick Reference: The Prompt Blueprint

The Template

Copy and adapt this structure for any important prompt:

Role: You are a [role with relevant expertise and appropriate tone].
Background: [Describe your specific situation, audience, and relevant context.]
Request: [Action verb] + [specific thing to produce] + [goal or purpose].
Format: [Length] + [format] + [tone] + [any exclusions].

Useful Action Verbs

Create: Write, Draft, Design, Compose, Generate, Create, Develop

Analyze: Summarize, Analyze, Compare, Evaluate, Critique, Identify, Assess

Transform: Rewrite, Simplify, Translate, Condense, Expand, Rephrase, Convert

Plan: Outline, List, Suggest, Recommend, Organize, Prioritize, Plan

Explain: Explain, Describe, Clarify, Define, Illustrate, Walk me through

Weak vs. Strong: Side-by-Side

Weak: Write me a cover letter.
Strong: You are an experienced career coach specializing in mid-career transitions. I am a 55-year-old retail manager applying for a corporate training coordinator position. I have 20 years of team leadership experience but no formal training

credentials. Write a one-page cover letter that emphasizes my leadership experience as a direct foundation for a training role. Professional but warm tone. Do not mention my age or use phrases like “seasoned professional.”

Advanced Technique Quick Reference

Chain-of-thought: Add “Think through this step by step before answering” to any complex prompt.

Few-shot: Start with “Here is an example of what I want: [example]. Now do the same for...”

Iterate: Use follow-up messages: “Make it shorter.” / “The second paragraph is too formal.” / “Add a sentence about...”

Self-critique: Ask “What is weak or missing in this response?” after any important answer.

Negative constraints: Tell AI what not to do: “Do not use jargon.” / “Avoid bullet points.” / “No more than three paragraphs.”

Reframe for audience: “Now rewrite this for someone who has never used this product before.”

The Four Pillars at a Glance

Delegation: Should AI do this? Which tool is right for this task?

Description: Use The Prompt Blueprint: Role, Background, Request, Format.

Discernment: Read critically. Check facts. Apply your own judgment.

Diligence: Stay current. Protect sensitive information. Know the limits.