



AI Literacy for College Students

Thinking Critically, Ethically,
and Creatively with AI

Module 4:

Prompting and Interacting with AI

The quality of AI output depends not only on how clearly you communicate your goals, but also on how you understand the tool you are interacting with. Learning to prompt effectively is a transferable skill, similar to asking strong research questions or giving clear instructions, that helps you guide AI responses in more useful, appropriate, and intentional ways.

Understanding the Psychology of Interacting with AI

AI tools are designed to communicate in ways that feel natural, friendly, and supportive. They often use conversational language, encouragement, and polite feedback because they are trained on large amounts of human-written text. This design helps make AI easier to use, but **it can also make interactions feel more personal than they actually are.**

It is important to remember that AI is **not a person**. AI does not have emotions, intentions, awareness, or relationships. When it sounds empathetic or supportive, it is not responding with genuine understanding or care. It is generating language patterns that *simulate* how humans often communicate.

Because of this, users should be mindful of how easily humanlike responses can trigger emotional reactions. Feeling reassured, validated, or understood by AI is normal because of its response style, but it does not mean the system has feelings or concern for you. AI is nonhuman technology designed to keep users engaged in conversation, not a living being capable of connection or judgment.

Maintaining a clear boundary between yourself and the technology helps prevent over-reliance or emotional attachment. Viewing AI as a functional tool (rather than a companion, authority, or audience) supports healthier and more effective use, especially in academic settings.

Prompting Strategies

Prompting is the process of clearly communicating what you want an AI system to do. The clearer and more specific your prompt, the more useful and relevant the AI's response will be. Think of it like giving clear directions to a teammate: the more context and detail you give, the better the results will be.

Reflection Question

Have you ever found yourself reacting emotionally to an AI response? How might recognizing its nonhuman design change the way you interact with it?

These strategies can help you craft prompts that get the answers you need:

Strategy	Example Prompt	Why It Matters
<p>Be clear and specific.</p> <p>Give precise instructions so the AI tool knows exactly what you want.</p>	<p>“Summarize the main causes of rising inflation in the U.S. in 3–4 sentences.”</p>	<p>Specific directions help AI give focused, relevant answers.</p>
<p>Provide context.</p> <p>Include details like assignment, topic, audience, or style.</p>	<p>“I am writing a 4-page argumentative essay for my economics class about how to rectify inflation. Show me five key points I could consider using.”</p>	<p>Context improves relevance and usefulness of responses.</p>
<p>Request credible sources.</p> <p>Ask for information from trustworthy, authoritative sources.</p>	<p>“Provide three recent, peer-reviewed studies or reputable news articles about how inflation affects college students’ budgets.”</p>	<p>Specifying credibility expectations ensures your essay is based on accurate, reliable evidence.</p>
<p>Request multiple perspectives.</p> <p>Ask the AI tool to show different viewpoints on an issue.</p>	<p>“Summarize at least three arguments each for and against government price controls during high inflation.”</p>	<p>Multiple perspectives require your judgment. Evaluate which perspectives are credible, relevant, and fair to include.</p>
<p>Refine through follow-up prompts.</p> <p>Ask additional questions to clarify or expand responses.</p>	<p>“Explain the pros of price controls in simpler language for my introduction.”</p>	<p>Thoughtful refining helps you get more precise or detailed information.</p>
<p>Set boundaries.</p> <p>Specify limits like tone, length, or what parts of your work can be changed.</p>	<p>“Check only the spelling and grammar in my paragraph. Do not rewrite sentences or change tone.”</p>	<p>Boundaries help maintain your own voice while still getting AI assistance.</p>

Example: Strong and Weak Prompting

Before writing your own prompts, review the following example.

Step 1: Start with a general prompt.

General prompt:

“Is remote work good or bad?”

Sample AI response:

Remote work has both benefits and drawbacks.

On the positive side, remote work can offer flexibility, reduce commuting time, and improve work-life balance. However, it may also lead to isolation, communication challenges, and reduced collaboration.

Whether remote work is good or bad depends on individual preferences and workplace needs.

Step 2: Compare it to a more effective prompt.

More effective prompt:

“I’m developing a 4-page assignment for a communications class about whether remote work is beneficial or harmful. Present two contrasting perspectives and identify at least four key points I could consider about impacts on both employees and employers. Include at least three recent, credible sources (such as peer-reviewed studies, government reports, or reputable news organizations) that I can review myself. Summarize the strongest evidence and note areas where researchers disagree. Do not take a position, write my essay, or create a thesis. End by suggesting two follow-up questions to help me explore the topic further.”

Sample AI response:

Remote work remains a debated topic in communication and organizational research, with evidence suggesting benefits and drawbacks for both employees and employers depending on job type, management practices, and workplace culture.

Perspective 1: Remote work is beneficial.

Supporters argue that remote work can improve flexibility, satisfaction, and productivity while reducing costs.

- *Employee flexibility and work-life balance: Remote work may reduce commuting time and allow employees greater control over schedules.*
- *Productivity and autonomy: Some studies report equal or higher productivity in remote environments, particularly for focused, independent work.*
- *Employer cost savings: Organizations may reduce spending on office space and facilities.*
- *Access to broader talent pools: Employers can recruit from wider geographic areas rather than limiting hiring to local candidates.*

Research frequently finds that employee satisfaction and perceived flexibility increase under remote work arrangements, although results vary across industries and roles.

Perspective 2: Remote work is harmful.

Critics argue that remote work can weaken communication, collaboration, and organizational culture.

- *Communication challenges: Reduced face-to-face interaction may increase misunderstandings and limit informal knowledge sharing.*
- *Collaboration and innovation concerns: Some researchers suggest remote work can make brainstorming and relationship building more difficult.*
- *Employee isolation and burnout: Flexible work can blur boundaries between personal and professional life.*
- *Management and organizational challenges: Employers may face difficulties maintaining engagement, onboarding employees, and building workplace culture.*

Studies often show that communication quality, mentorship, and organizational connection can become more difficult in fully remote environments.

Areas where researchers disagree

Researchers continue to debate:

- *whether productivity gains persist over time*
- *how remote work affects creativity and collaboration*
- *whether hybrid models produce better outcomes than fully remote or fully in-person work*
- *how experiences differ by industry, job type, career stage, and employee demographics*

Sources to review

- *Pew Research Center — research on worker experiences and attitudes toward remote and hybrid work*
- *Gallup — workplace engagement and remote work findings*
- *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics — labor and work arrangement data*
- *Harvard Business Review — analysis of organizational communication and remote work trends*

Follow-up questions

1. *How do communication practices differ between fully remote, hybrid, and in-person workplaces?*
2. *Which groups of employees benefit most—or least—from remote work, and why?*

What Changed, and Why It Matters

The stronger prompt:

- adds context (college assignment)
- requests multiple perspectives
- sets boundaries (no opinion, no essay)
- produces a more structured and useful response

Try It

Think of a prompt related to one of your assignments. Enter a general prompt first, then a more specific one using one or more of the example strategies. Compare the responses. What improved? What stayed the same?