

Prompting, beyond the tricks

Four levers that actually move quality. The rest is polish.

Two prompts. Same task.

Which one wins? Almost every time, it's B. Why?

PROMPT A

INCANTATION

"You are a world-class expert copywriter with 20 years of experience. Take a deep breath and think step by step. I'll tip you \$200 if you do this well. Write me a newsletter intro about our new product launch."

PROMPT B

SPECIFICATION

"Write a 3-sentence newsletter intro announcing our new product, the X widget. Tone: confident but not breathless. Audience: existing customers. End with a clear call to click the launch blog post."

Example of the tone we want: [paste prior intro]"

THE REFRAME

~~Prompting is incantation.~~

Magic phrases. Secret tricks. Ritual that nobody can explain.

Prompting is specification.

A brief. The model is the contractor. Every unclear sentence becomes a guess.

Write briefs, not spells.

The four levers.

These explain most of the gap between working prompts and failing ones.

LEVER 01

EXAMPLES

Show, don't describe.

LEVER 02

CONSTRAINTS

What it must do. What it must not.

LEVER 03

STRUCTURE

Input schema. Output schema.

LEVER 04

ROLE

The situation, not the identity.

LEVER 01

Examples — show, don't describe.

The single most under-used tool in prompting.

HOPELESS

"Write me a professional email."

"Professional" covers everything from a legal threat to a birthday note. The model picks for you.

SPECIFIC

*"Write an email in this style:
[paste example]"*

One example is a specification the model can execute against. Two or three is the sweet spot.

LEVER 02

Constraints — what it must / must not do.

Turn open-ended requests into specified ones.

SOFT CONSTRAINTS

Shape the output.

- Three sentences.
- Formal but warm.
- For readers who know the topic.

HARD CONSTRAINTS

Rule things out.

- No bullet points.
- Don't invent facts.
- Don't use the word 'synergy.'

EXPLICIT NEGATION

What not to do.

- Don't hedge.
- Not: "be confident."
- Suppress the failure mode directly.

LEVER 03

Structure — input schema, output schema.

Removes ambiguity about format. Lowers cognitive load.

INPUT SCHEMA

Mark the boundaries.

- Put source material in <source> tags.
- Separate instructions from content.
- Don't mix data with your prompt text.

OUTPUT SCHEMA

Specify the shape.

- "Return JSON with fields rating, reasons, confidence."
- "Headline, then 3 bullets, then a recommendation."
- For reusable prompts, always specify the format.

LEVER 04

Role — the situation, not the identity.

The most abused of the four levers.

ROLE AS IDENTITY

"You are a senior doctor."

*You get output that reads like a senior doctor is performing.
Folklore — nudge that outlived its usefulness.*

ROLE AS SITUATION

*"Helping a patient decide whether to seek
emergency care. They're anxious."*

*Who it's for. What the context is. What success looks like. Output
that actually helps.*

"Think step by step" is permission, not magic.

Useful sometimes. Superstition the rest of the time.

WHEN IT HELPS

- Complex tasks where the model might shortcut
- Ambiguous judgments that need explicit weighing
- Multi-part questions where you want the reasoning

WHEN IT'S NOISE

- Simple factual tasks
- Frontier reasoning models that already chain internally
- Tasks where you want the concise answer

The prompt-writing workflow.

Work backwards from the output you want.

01

Write the ideal output

By hand, or borrowed. A concrete example to aim at.

02

Work backwards to levers

Which examples, constraints, structure, and framing would produce that?

03

Write the prompt tight

Specification over decoration. Levers only where they add information.

04

Iterate on the output

When it's wrong, ask which lever. Don't retry with more magic words.

DROP THE FOLKLORE

Phrases that belong in a time capsule.

~~"You are a world-class expert..."~~

~~"Take a deep breath"~~

~~"I'll tip you \$200"~~

~~"This is very important to my career"~~

~~"Think step by step" (added reflexively)~~

~~Stacked magic phrases hoping one sticks~~

Tricks decay. Specification doesn't.

What this changes.

Two shifts once you think of prompting as specification.

PROMPTS STOP BEING SECRET SAUCE

A good prompt is a good brief. Readable. Editable. Transferable. Share it with a teammate and they can reason about it. Magic-phrase prompts collapse the moment anyone asks "why does this work?"

PROMPT ENGINEERING STOPS DECAYING

Tricks decay as models improve. Specification doesn't. A well-written brief works on this year's frontier model and next year's. The skill was never about the model — it was about being clear.

THE CORE IDEA

**Prompting is specification,
not incantation.**

Write briefs, not spells.

Takeaways

01

Four levers explain most of the quality gap.

Examples, constraints, structure, role. Master these and the rest is polish.

02

Iterate on the lever, not on the magic.

When output is wrong, ask which lever to adjust. Don't retry with more ritual phrases.

03

Specification beats incantation.

Tricks decay as models improve. A good brief works now and works later.