

CHAPTER FOUR

“Prompts are conversation starters: what and how you tell something to the AI for it to respond in a way that generates useful responses for you.”¹
—from *Effective Prompts for AI: The Essentials*, MIT Sloan (Aug 2023)

Prompts and Portals

Asking Better Questions

Every conversation with AI starts the same way: with a prompt. That’s just a fancy word for a question, an instruction, or even half a thought you type into the box.

It could be as practical as, What’s the best way to save for retirement? Or as personal as, How do I stop feeling so overwhelmed? Or as vulnerable as, Why am I like this?

And the machine responds—smoothly, quickly and confidently.

But here’s the part we should never forget:

Behind every AI response is a human prompt. And behind every prompt is something even more powerful—your **intention**.

The machine may be trained on trillions of words, but the spark that makes it useful—what turns cold code into a moment of insight—is the **question** you choose to ask and how it is framed.

This is the beginning of what many now call prompt engineering. It sounds technical—and yes, it’s become a skillset in itself—but at its heart, prompting is simply a new form of human literacy.

Literacy used to mean reading and writing. Later we added media, digital, even financial literacy. Now there’s another one on the list: learning how to talk with machines. Not because they’re alive—but because they can shape how we live.

And here’s the twist: Your question doesn’t just summon a response—it reveals your frame of mind.

Ask, “How do I make money fast?” and you’ll get something different than if you ask, “What’s the most sustainable way to earn income over time while helping others?”

The difference isn’t in the machine. It’s in you. Which is why prompting isn’t just a skill. It’s a mirror. And sometimes, a moral compass.

As becomes more polished we may be tempted to let it do the thinking for us. But prompts—good ones—pull us back into the driver’s seat. They remind us that we’re not just inputting data. We’re shaping the conversation. We’re scaffolding new thought. And in a future increasingly shaped by intelligent systems, the ability to ask better questions might be the new superpower.

Pause...

Take another breath here.

Think of a time you asked a question and soon regretted it—not because it was wrong, but because it did not reflect who you truly wanted to be.

This isn’t about perfection. It’s about awareness.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD QUESTION?

A good question does more than fetch an answer. It shows you how your own mind is built—the frame you’re using without even realizing it. It exposes your assumptions. It widens the lens just enough to let new light in.

Think of Socrates—not because he had answers, but because his questions made people stop and think twice. That’s the real power of a good question.²

Now fast forward 2,400 years and swap in the interface of a generative AI. Instead of a philosopher in a toga, we’re speaking with a machine trained on a huge—though incomplete—subset of humanity’s collective thought patterns.

So, what kind of question do you bring? The machine will always offer something. But whether that something helps you grow—or just confirms what you already believe—depends on the quality of the prompt.

“*What’s wrong with me?*” is technically a question—but it closes the door. “*What might I not be seeing clearly yet?*” keeps it open.

And that openness is where insight lives.

AI systems aren’t just computational engines. They’re mirrors of our cognitive patterns. They model our logic back to us, with all its brilliance... and all its blind spots.

A poorly framed question will often yield a reflection of your assumptions. A well-framed one may offer a glimpse of what's just outside them.

Pause...

Think back to a time you really didn't want to be wrong. Now imagine if, instead of defending your answer, you had asked a better question.

THE JOURNALIST'S ADVANTAGE: BORROWING THE 5WS AND H

Sometimes the best way to refine our prompts isn't to invent something new—but to return to what's worked.

Journalists have long used a simple framework to get to the heart of a story: Who, What, When, Where, Why—and How. These six small words form the backbone of good inquiry.³ Together, they offer direction, scope and depth. They help prompt thinkers—not just prompt engineers.

Try applying this structure to your next prompt:

- Who has the insight I need—even if they're no longer alive?
- What are the variables I haven't considered yet?
- When has this issue come up before in history?
- Where might the missing data live?
- Why does this matter to me—or to others?
- How can I frame this question in a way that allows for nuance, not just convenience?

Here's a quick litmus test for evaluating a question:

Is it open-ended, or does it nudge toward a specific answer?

Does it reveal curiosity, or mask a conclusion?

Is it framed with empathy, or with fear?

Suddenly, you're not just asking better questions. You're positioning yourself to receive better answers.

And this opens up a surprising opportunity: The ability to learn from those we can never meet—scientists, poets, philosophers and changemakers whose data lives on.

AI doesn't *channel* the dead.⁴ But it can surface echoes of their thought patterns, their structures of logic, even their metaphors. In that sense, a well-phrased prompt can unlock access to lifetimes of wisdom—if we learn how to listen across time.

So in a way, prompting lets us talk across time. A well-phrased question can surface the echoes of people long gone—scientists, poets, activists—whose logic and imagination still live in the data. This is prompting as intergenerational dialogue. This is *digital ancestor* work.

Calibration Pause...

Before issuing a query to AI, pause:

- *What worldview does this prompt assume?*
- *What voices are foregrounded—or silenced—by its phrasing?*
- *How might rewriting the prompt shift the response—and your own frame?*

The Question Before the Answer Or The Answer Before the Question?

We used to think knowledge was power. But in an age where machines can summon near-infinite information in milliseconds, we're learning something deeper: The real power is knowing what to ask. Even better, how and when to ask it.

A single question can reroute a conversation, reshape a career, repair a relationship—or open a door you didn't know was closed. And now, with AI systems waiting on our words, the question isn't just what we'll learn... It's who we'll become as we ask. These tools are mirrors. They won't just reflect your curiosity. They'll scale it.

If you prompt with fear, you may get caution.

If you prompt with empathy, you may get possibility.

And if you prompt with intention... you might just get a glimpse of your own wisdom.

So the future isn't just built by code. It's composed—by you and I, prompt by prompt—human beings learning to speak with clarity, humility and care.

¹ Effective Prompts for AI: The Essentials, MIT Sloan, Aug. 2023.

² Plato, dialogues of Socrates (e.g., Apology; Meno).

³ Kipling, Rudyard. "Six Honest Serving-Men" (1902) — popularizer of the 5Ws and H.

⁴ Lucia Becerra, et al. AI as a Bridge Across Ages: Exploring The Opportunities of Artificial Intelligence in Supporting Inter-Generational Communication in Virtual Reality. In Proceedings of the 2024 ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI). DOI: 10.1145/3710924.