Writing Better Instructions

Turn vague requests into crisp, actionable directions

Estimated reading time: 7 minutes

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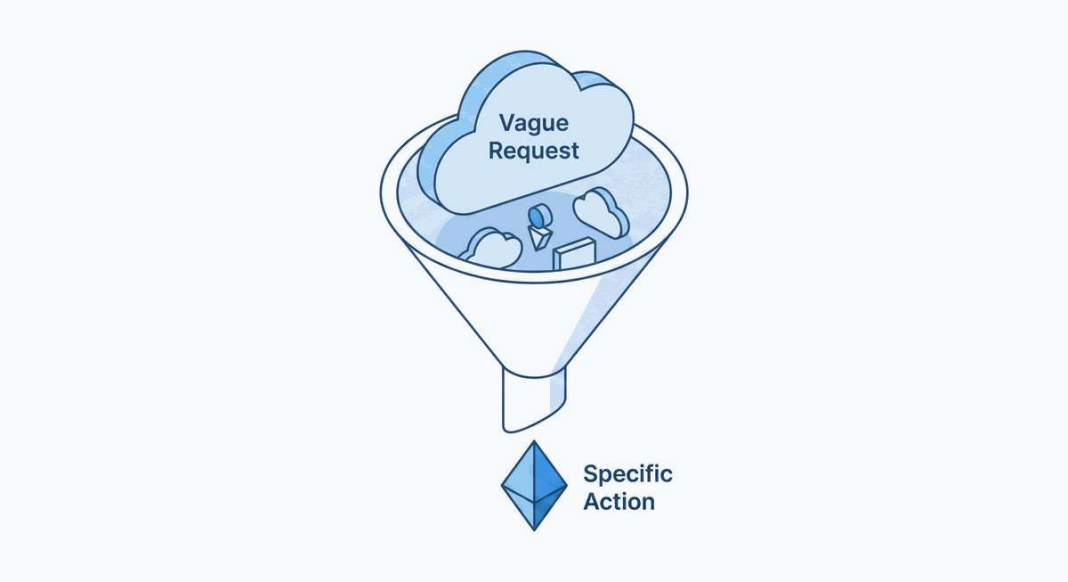
1. Why vague prompts fail

Vague prompts usually get vague answers. If you ask the AI to write something interesting, it has to guess what interesting means to you.

Good results come from direction, not from hope.

> **Common mistake: assuming the AI shares your taste, standards, or goals.**



2. Add role, context, and constraints

Three layers make instructions sharper and more dependable.

Role

Tell the AI who it should act as.

- Examples: A senior marketer, a strict editor, a local travel guide.

Context

Explain the situation in one or two useful lines.

- Example: I am launching an organic soap brand for teenagers.

Constraints

Say what the AI should avoid or limit.

- Examples: Do not use jargon, keep sentences under 15 words, use grocery-store ingredients only.

3. Ask for a structure

By default, the AI writes plain text. If you want something easier to use, ask for a format.

Useful formats

- Tables: great for side-by-side comparison.

Example prompt

```
Present the data in a table with columns for Pros, Cons, and Price.
```

- Headings: useful for longer explanations.

Example prompt

```
Use H2 headings for main points and bullet points for details.
```

- Step-by-step lists: useful for tutorials.

Example prompt

```
Break this down into numbered steps.
```

4. Before and after

A rewrite often shows the difference more clearly than theory.

Scenario: Planning a trip

Before (average):

Example prompt

```
I'm going to Tokyo for 3 days. What should I do?
```

After (excellent):

Example prompt

```
Act as a local tour guide in Tokyo.
Create a 3-day itinerary for a couple who loves history and food but
hates crowds.
Avoid major tourist traps like Shibuya Crossing.
Format this as a table with columns: Time, Activity, and Estimated Cost.
```

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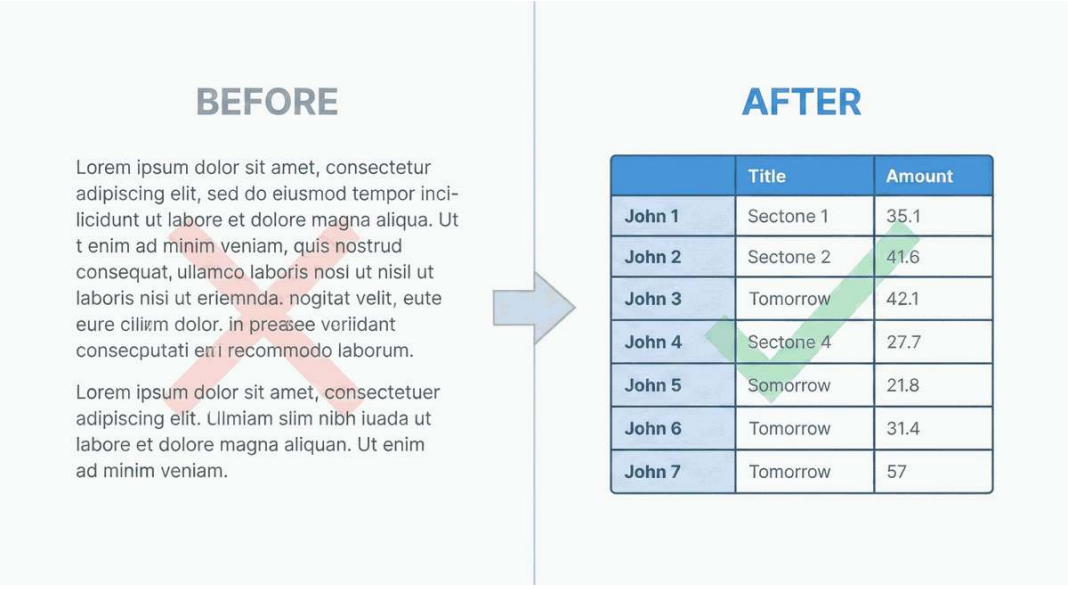

5. A simple framework

Use the R-C-O framework to remember the essentials.

- 1. R = Role: who is the AI?
- 2. C = Context and constraints: what matters here?
- 3. O = Output: what shape should the answer take?

Example prompt

```
Act as a [Role]. Given [Context], please write [Task]. Make sure to
[Constraint]. Format the answer as [Output].
```

6. Practice exercise

Fix a weak prompt

Take the weak prompt below and rewrite it using the R-C-O framework.

Weak prompt:

Example prompt

```
Help me prepare for an interview.
```

Better version:

Example prompt

```
Act as a hiring manager for a tech company. I have an interview for a
Project Manager role. Ask me 5 common interview questions, one by one,
and wait for my answer before you critique it.
```

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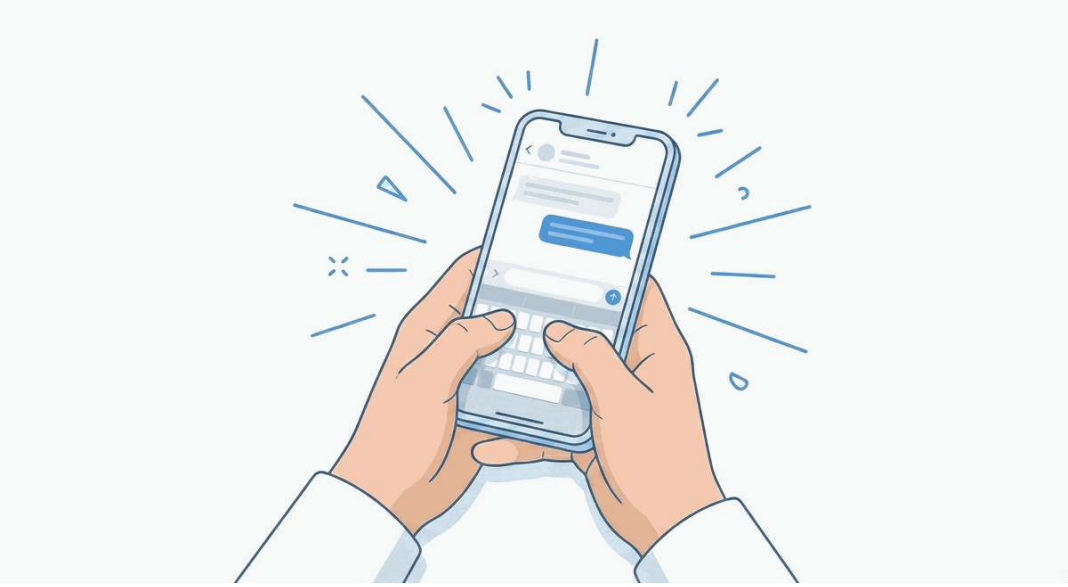

7. Quick checklist

- ■ Did I assign a role?
- ■ Did I explain the context?
- ■ Did I set limits?
- ■ Did I request a format?