

Prompt Templates: Heroes or Villains?

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November 2025



SoftEd

Abstract

Prompt templates promise consistency, efficiency, and ready-made shortcuts for getting perfect results from generative AI.

But spend any real time with ChatGPT, Copilot, or similar tools and you quickly discover they aren't databases or search engines — they're conversation partners. And conversations rarely stick to a script.

In this talk, I'll share why templates can be handy sidekicks but lousy stand-ins for real back-and-forth dialogue.

We'll look at the "greatest hits" of template design — role prompts, few-shot examples, formatting tricks — and ask when they save the day and when they slip into villainy: rigid, brittle, and misleading.

Understanding when templates help and when they hinder is key not only to working with generative AI today, but also to designing the agentic systems that will rely on adaptability tomorrow.

The takeaway?

Prompt templates have their place, but the real magic happens in the follow-ups, the clarifications, and the "huh?" moments.

Come ready to rethink whether your prompts should be superheroes — or whether you'd rather just have a good conversation.

6 Months B.C. (Before Certification Frenzy)

...we chatted with chatbots

I'm a business analyst starting on a new project. What information do you need from me in order to create a project charter for this new project?

Memory updated

To create a project charter for your new project, I would need the following key information:

- Project Objectives:**
 - What is the purpose of this project?
 - What problem is it solving or what opportunity is it addressing?
- Scope:**
 - What is included and excluded in this project?
 - What deliverables or outputs are expected?
- Stakeholders:**
 - Who are the key stakeholders (e.g., sponsor, customers, team members)?
 - Are there any specific roles and responsibilities already defined?
- Budget:**
 - What is the allocated budget or any financial constraints?
- Timeline:**
 - What are the major milestones or deadlines?
- Resources:**
 - What resources (e.g., team members, tools, technologies) are available or needed?
- Success Criteria:**
 - How will success be measured for this project?
- Risks and Constraints:**
 - What potential risks have already been identified?

“What’s in a project charter”
exercise from an agile course

Case Study: Online Coffee Ordering

We operate a chain of highly successful coffee shops operating nationally as part of a large retail chain called GreenMart. We have a large number of loyal customers as well as a not insignificant amount of foot traffic due to a variety of inner-city and suburban locations both standalone and linked to a number of our key stores.

Our coffee shops continue to attract existing and new customers and get great online reviews, however recently our customers have started to demand newer, faster and more efficient service approaches without compromising on quality. We have invested time and effort in conducting a customer survey which has identified that what our customers are really after, amongst other things, is the ability to save time ordering their beverages via their mobile devices before picking them up in the store. With our customer satisfaction at stake, it is now important to act on this newly gained knowledge and give our customers what they want!

Some important considerations to be aware of:

- Coffee has a shelf-life of 3 minutes; the drink must be in the customer's hand within 3 minutes of it being made or we have to waste it and remake the drink.
- Our shops sell a variety of hot and cold beverages (not only coffee); they may even sell small baked goods and other snacks.
- Don't forget that we also have "drop-in" customers (i.e., non-regulars).
- Do our coffee shops provide seating? If so, how will "sidewalk" customers be handled?
- Our coffee shops are part of a larger retail chain; what other opportunities could this offer, and what are some of the disadvantages?



"Create an image of a coffee shop inside a big-box store called GreenMart."

My very first BA-ish prompt

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You Can you propose a 10-question survey that can be distributed to Green Mart coffee customers to find out what they want and what we should prioritize in a mobile ordering app?

Here's a proposed customer survey focused on mobile ordering preferences:

1. How often do you visit GreenMart coffee shops? ☐ Daily ☐ 2-3 times per week ☐ Once a week ☐ 2-3 times per month ☐ Less than once a month
2. What is your typical wait time for your order during your visits? ☐ Less than 2 minutes ☐ 2-5 minutes ☐ 5-10 minutes ☐ More than 10 minutes ☐ It varies significantly
3. If GreenMart offered mobile ordering, how likely would you be to use it? ☐ Very likely ☐ Somewhat likely ☐ Not sure ☐ Somewhat unlikely ☐ Very unlikely
4. Which features would be most important to you in a mobile ordering app? (Select top 3) ☐ Saving favorite orders ☐ Customizing drinks ☐ Estimated pickup times ☐ Order status tracking ☐ Integration with loyalty program ☐ Multiple payment options ☐ Store locator ☐ Real-time menu updates
5. What would be your preferred advance ordering timeframe? ☐ 5-15 minutes before pickup ☐ 15-30 minutes before pickup ☐ 1-2 hours before pickup ☐ Schedule for next day ☐ No preference
6. What concerns would you have about mobile ordering? (Select all that apply) ☐ Drink temperature/quality ☐ App reliability ☐ Payment security ☐ Pickup confusion ☐ Order accuracy ☐ None ☐ Other: _____
7. When would you be most likely to use mobile ordering? ☐ Morning commute ☐ Lunch break ☐ Afternoon break ☐ Evening ☐ Weekends ☐ Special events/meetings
8. How much time would you expect to save by using mobile ordering? ☐ 1-2 minutes ☐ 3-5 minutes ☐ 5-10 minutes ☐ More than 10 minutes ☐ No time savings expected
9. Which rewards would encourage you to use mobile ordering? (Select all that apply) ☐ Extra loyalty points ☐ Exclusive mobile-only discounts ☐ Free items after X mobile orders ☐ Birthday rewards ☐ Early access to new items ☐ None of these
10. What else would you like to see in a GreenMart mobile ordering experience? (Open-ended)

Simple requests seemed to yield what I wanted

Case Study: Online Coffee Ordering

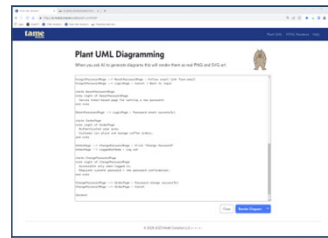
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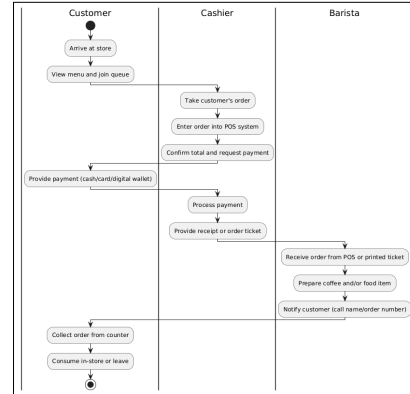
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- Do our coffee shops provide seating? If so, how will "take-out" customers be handled?
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(ok, this actually required generating PlantUML code then using a PlantUML renderer)



Draw a swimlaned activity diagram illustrating the as-is process for ordering coffee.



Even diagrams (through a few steps)

Then this “elevator pitch”...

All great but then...

Can you give me an elevator pitch to sell this app to senior management so they will fund the app?

Absolutely, here's an elevator pitch to convince senior management to fund the development of the mobile ordering app for your coffee shops:

“Imagine a coffee shop experience where every customer's precious time is valued, and quality remains uncompromised. With our new mobile ordering app, we're poised to revolutionize the way we serve our customers. This isn't just about convenience; it's about meeting evolving expectations and staying ahead in the competitive market.

Our loyal customers have spoken through surveys: they want faster, more efficient service without sacrificing the exceptional taste they know and love. This app will empower them to order and customize their favorite beverages and treats in advance, ensuring their orders are ready for pickup the moment they step in.

By investing in this app, we're not just meeting customer demands; we're also increasing revenue potential. Imagine the increased throughput during peak hours, reduced lines, and the ability to serve more customers in less time. Plus, the app can seamlessly integrate with our existing loyalty program, driving repeat business and enhancing customer engagement.

Our coffee shops are already beloved, but with this app, we'll elevate our brand further by embracing modern technology and offering an unparalleled level of service. With our industry-leading approach, we'll not only cater to our existing loyal base but also attract new customers seeking a hassle-free, top-tier coffee experience.

The time to act is now. By investing in this app, we'll solidify our position as an industry leader, enhance customer satisfaction, and unlock new revenue streams. Let's make our coffee shops synonymous with speed, quality, and customer-centric innovation. Together, we'll shape the future of coffee retailing.”

Remember, tailor this pitch to your company's specific goals and values, and highlight how the app aligns with those goals. Good luck!

Which elevator is this?

Give it a pattern

So don't just say "elevator pitch"—give it an example!

➤ *Too long! Can I get it in the Geoff Moore form For __ who __ the Green Mart Coffee App ...*

🌀 For coffee enthusiasts who crave both speed and quality, the Green Mart Coffee App is the game-changer you've been waiting for. This cutting-edge app empowers our loyal customers to pre-order their favorite beverages and treats, ensuring a seamless pickup experience that fits their busy lives. By investing in the Green Mart Coffee App, we tap into a new era of customer satisfaction and operational efficiency, poised to attract fresh business while delighting our existing patrons. Join us in shaping the future of coffee retailing – faster, smarter, and utterly irresistible.

But the language is really umm...marketing hype-y...

Another prompt...

Take this elevator pitch and rewrite it without the marketing hype language

Here's a neutral, concise version of the elevator pitch without marketing language:

The Green Mart Coffee App allows customers to pre-order beverages and snacks for quick pickup. The app helps reduce wait times and supports a more efficient ordering process. By introducing this service, Green Mart Coffee aims to improve customer convenience and streamline operations while maintaining product quality.

This version retains the key facts about the app's purpose, function, and goals, without promotional or exaggerated phrasing.

AAARGH!!! Now it lost the format!

Two more prompts!

Does “going around in circles” mean anything?

Please can you write in the For ___ who ___ the ___ is a ___ form?

Here's the same pitch rewritten in the "For ___ who ___ the ___ is a ___" format:

For coffee customers who want a faster and more convenient way to order, the Green Mart Coffee App is a mobile platform that lets them pre-order drinks and snacks for quick pickup.

Would you like me to include the operational or business efficiency aspect as well (for example, to reflect benefits for Green Mart, not just customers)?

🗨️ 🗑️ 🔄 🔄 ...

But I need to pitch it to management! I want management to underwrite the project. What's in it for them?

Here's a revised version tailored for management, in the requested "For ___ who ___ the ___ is a ___" format, emphasizing organizational value:

For company leaders who want to improve customer satisfaction and operational efficiency, the Green Mart Coffee App is a digital ordering platform that streamlines transactions, reduces wait times, and increases repeat business. It provides measurable gains in throughput and customer retention while supporting data-driven decisions on sales and inventory.

Would you like me to make it slightly more formal or board-presentation ready (e.g., 2-3 sentences with ROI emphasis)?

🗨️ 🗑️ 🔄 🔄 ...

(face-palm!)

All the Requirements

1. Format Requirement

- The pitch must follow the **Geoffrey Moore template**: “For [target audience] who [statement of need or opportunity], the [product/service name] is a [category/solution] that [key benefit or differentiator].”
- The format must be retained — not rewritten into a generic paragraph.

2. Audience Focus

- The pitch is **aimed at management or senior leadership**, not customers.
- It must clearly show **what's in it for them** — such as:
 - Improved efficiency or profitability
 - Enhanced customer satisfaction and retention
 - Competitive advantage or strategic alignment

3. Tone and Style

- Use a **neutral, professional tone** — no marketing hype or promotional adjectives.
- Avoid exaggerations or clichés (“game-changer,” “cutting-edge,” “revolutionize”).
- Keep the language **clear, factual, and outcome-oriented**.

4. Content Expectations

- Emphasize **business value** and **strategic rationale**:
 - How the project aligns with company goals
 - Operational impact (efficiency, throughput, data insights)
 - Measurable benefits (ROI, customer loyalty, sales growth)
- Keep it **short and direct** — one or two sentences that can be delivered quickly.

How did I get this? I said “here’s what I want...how do I ask you to produce this?”

“How do I get this again?”

Give me a single prompt template that incorporates all these requirements.

Here's a single **prompt template** you can reuse to generate an elevator pitch that meets all of your requirements:

Prompt Template:

Write an elevator pitch in the Geoffrey Moore format:

“For [target audience] who [statement of need or opportunity], the [product/service name] is a [category/solution] that [key benefit or differentiator].”

The pitch should:

- “Be directed at senior management or decision-makers (focus on why they should fund or support the project).”
- “Emphasize business value, such as efficiency, profitability, customer retention, or strategic alignment.”
- “Use a neutral, factual, and concise tone — no marketing hype, buzzwords, or emotional language.”
- “Be brief and self-contained (1–2 sentences).”
- “Avoid exaggerated terms like “game-changer,” “cutting-edge,” or “revolutionize.””
- “Clearly show what’s in it for management, not just customers.”



The result is a prompt template—a pattern we can use over and over again.

So let's test it

Case Study: Online Coffee Ordering

The Online Coffee Ordering System (OCOS) is a mobile pre-ordering platform that reduces in-store wait times, minimizes waste from remade drinks, and enhances profitability by streamlining order fulfillment and retaining time-conscious customers.

Here's a project outline.

Write an elevator pitch in the Geoffrey Moore format:

“For [target audience] who [statement of need or opportunity], the [product/service name] is a [category/solution] that [key benefit or differentiator].”

The pitch should:

Be directed at senior management or decision-makers (focus on why they should fund or support the project).

Emphasize business value, such as efficiency, profitability, customer retention, or strategic alignment.

Use a neutral, factual, and concise tone — no marketing hype, buzzwords, or emotional language.

Be brief and self-contained (1–2 sentences).

Avoid exaggerated terms like “game-changer,” “cutting-edge,” or “revolutionize.”

Clearly show what's in it for management, not just customers.



For senior management who need to improve operational efficiency and customer satisfaction across GreenMart's coffee shops, the **Online Coffee Ordering System** is a **mobile pre-ordering platform** that reduces in-store wait times, minimizes waste from remade drinks, and enhances profitability by streamlining order fulfillment and retaining time-conscious customers.

Another Test

The Package Problem

When our doormen receive packages, they need to notify us when the packages arrive. The old way was to place stickers on the mailboxes, letting us know when packages arrived. Of course, now we have an online system, but the doorman complain it is hard to use, and the email notifications aren't sent out until 10:00 PM, each evening.

The result is that we (the residents) often pick up our packages before getting the emails. Also, when we do this, sometimes the doorman don't clear the notification.

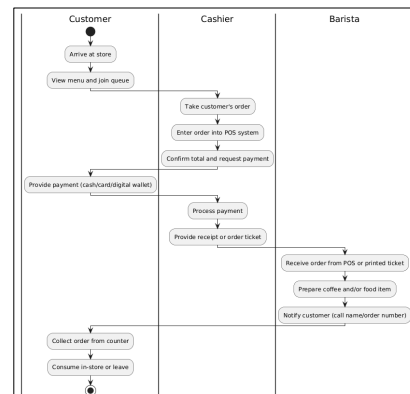
This leads to more than one occasion where a resident wonders "where is my package?" – but it has already been picked up.



For the HOA board who need to reduce resident complaints and improve communication between doormen and residents, the **Package Notification System Upgrade** is a **real-time package management solution** that ensures timely delivery notifications, minimizes confusion over picked-up items, and improves operational efficiency for building staff.

We learned to write certain patterns

Give me the steps of the main success scenario; do not give me alternate or exception scenarios yet. Give me this flow as a swimlaned activity diagram in plant UML.



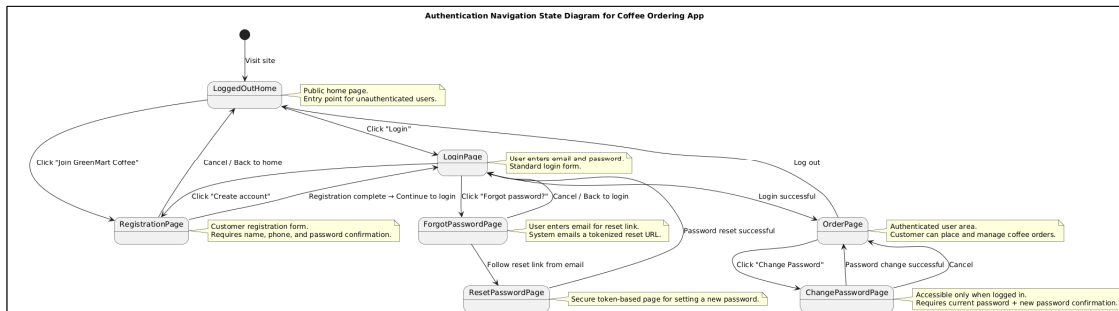
“How did I know to say all these things?”

Can you create a UI navigation map showing all of the authentication related pages: login, registration, forgot password, change password, et cetera?

Use standard web authentication good practices.

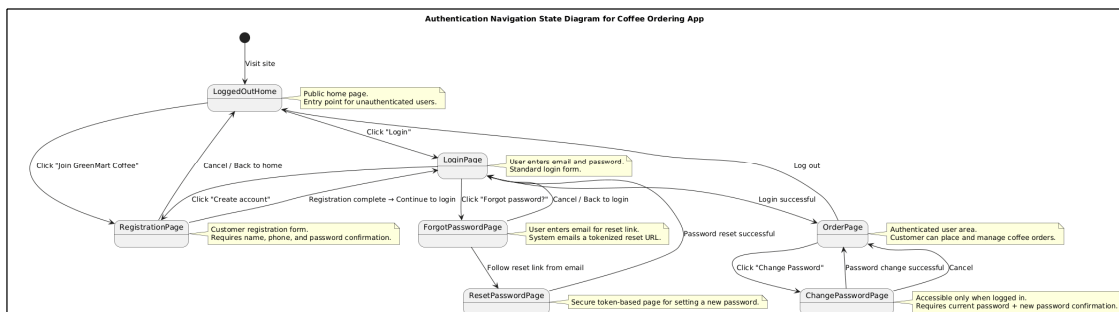
Draw this as a UML state diagram where each page is a state and the transitions from state to state are the user actions that cause progression from one page to another.

Have this state model begin with the logged out home page and once the customer logs in successfully they should be at the order page.



“How did I know to say all these things?”

“Been There. Done That.”

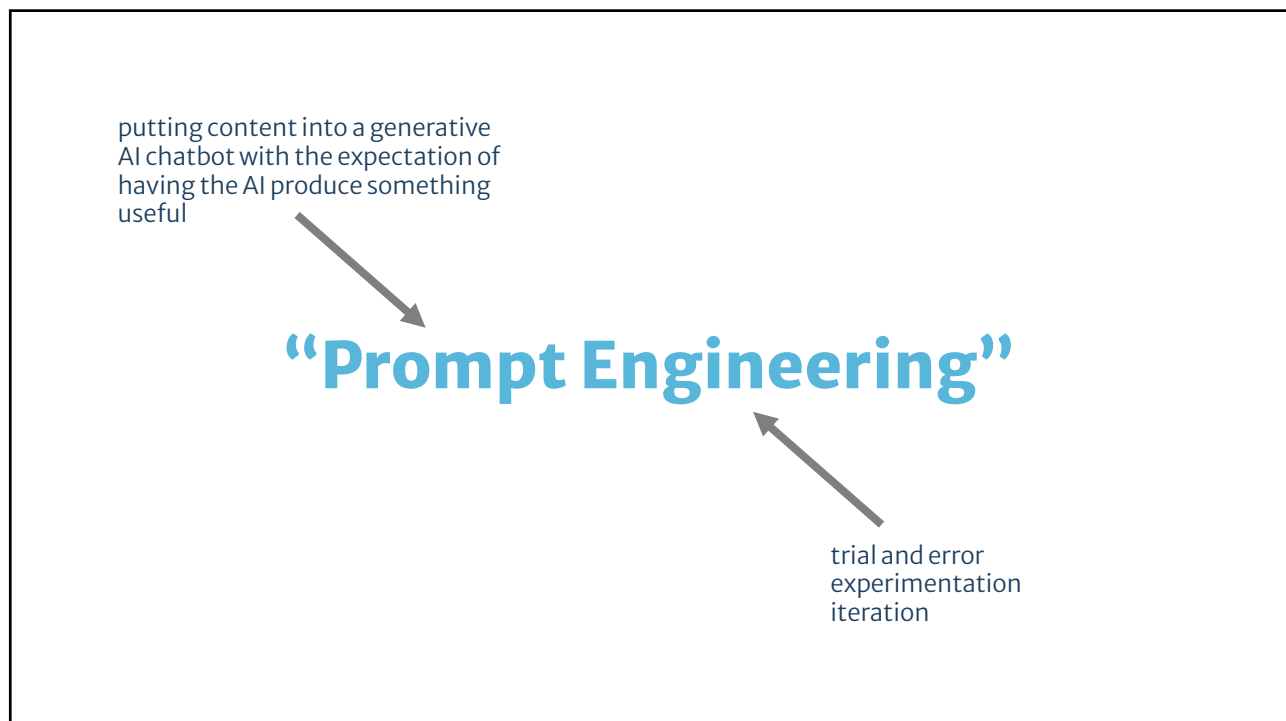
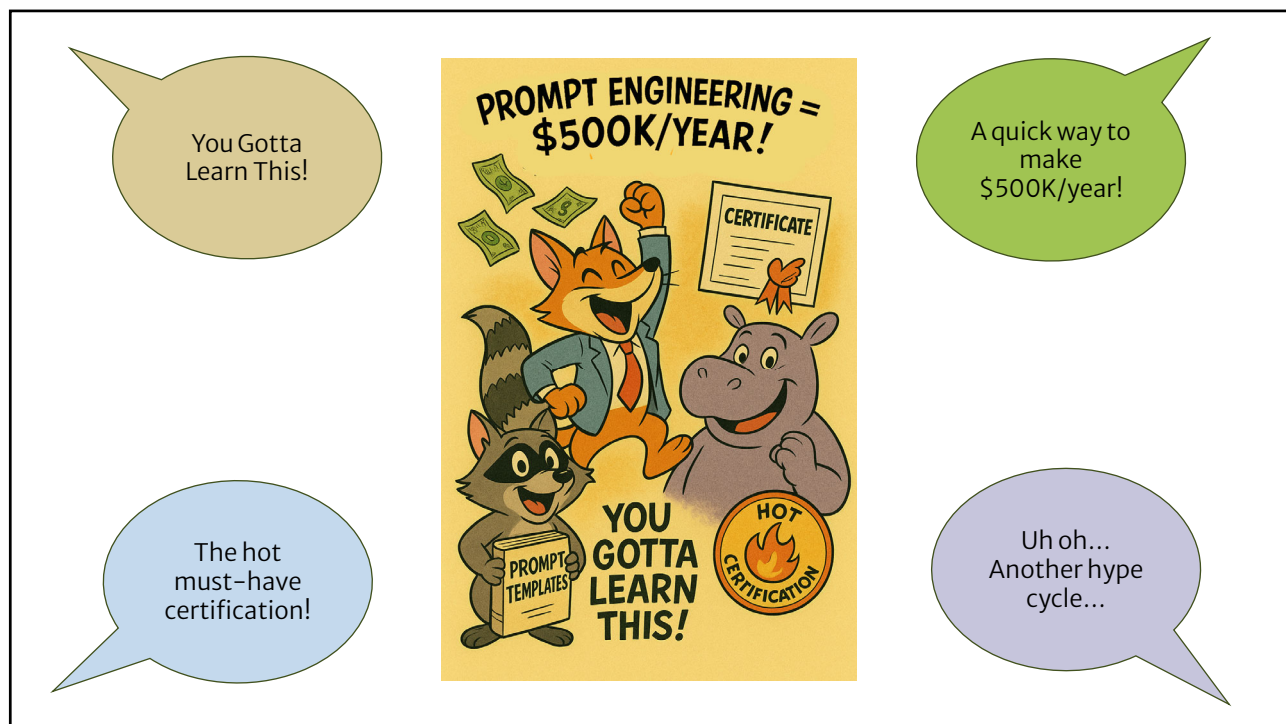


**I have templates.
Lots of people have templates.
So what's the problem?**

AI isn't

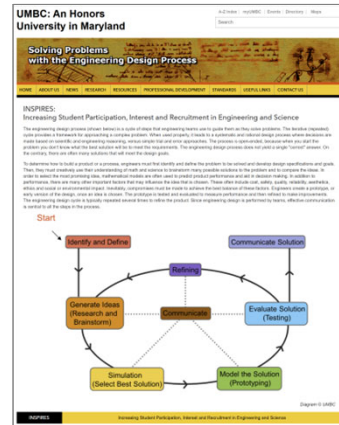
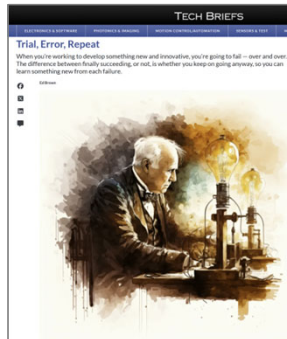
- a search engine
- a programming language
- a database
- a “vending machine”
(insert perfect prompt get perfect response)





Engineering = Experimentation? Yes.

**Build
Test
Learn
Refine**



sources:

<https://inspires.umbc.edu/edpf.html>

<https://www.techbriefs.com/component/content/article/48286-trial-error-repeat>

"Certified Prompt Engineer"



But the gold rush of 2023-4 was about prompt engineering as certainty:

- memorize these terms
- memorize these prompt templates
- memorize these template and pattern names

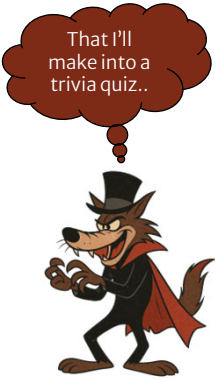


Remember the Patterns Push?



“Create a cartoon in the style of Chuck Jones with different animal contestants on a quiz show.”

And so we began to see the same in AI

	Pattern	Description	Example Template	
	Chain of Thought (CoT)	Encourages the model to explain its reasoning before answering.	“Let’s reason step by step: {question}”	
	ReAct (Reason + Act)	Guides the model through reasoning and action steps with intermediate decisions.	“Think step by step about the question, then choose an action from [search, calculate, answer].”	
	Self-Consistency / Debate Prompting	Asks the model to simulate multiple experts and reach consensus.	“Generate three possible answers with reasoning. Then decide which one is most consistent.”	
	Decomposition / Tree-of-Thought Prompting	Divides a complex task into sub-tasks to improve performance.	“Break this problem into smaller parts. Solve each one, then combine the results.”	
	Few-Shot Prompting	Provides examples of correct behavior before the question.	“Example 1: [input → output] ... Example 2: [input → output] ... Now, complete: {new_input}”	

I thought I was good. Can I be better?

(this talk was inspired by an actual live demo
that started with a student question
three months ago)

Idea First, Understanding Second, Name Later

 Generative AI for Business Analysis 4.0...
PDF

Go through all of the prompts in the Generative AI for Business Analysis course and find examples of different prompt types. Show the prompt, the type, an explanation of why the prompt fits the type, and where the prompt appears in the course.

Here's a breakdown of **prompt examples and types** drawn from the *Generative AI for Business Analysis 4.0* course (PDF). Each row lists the **prompt**, its **type**, **why it fits**, and **where it appears** in the course.

Prompt Examples and Types from the Course

Prompt (or Instruction)	Prompt Type	Explanation	Where in Course
"I'm a business analyst starting on a new project. What information do you need from me in order to create a project charter for this new project?"	Role Prompt / Context Prompt	The user gives the AI a role and context, framing the conversation around a business analyst's work.	p.10, <i>Understanding AI's Role in Business Analysis</i>
"Outline an app for ordering coffee from a coffee shop."	Zero-shot Instruction Prompt	Direct instruction with no examples; relies on the model's prior knowledge.	p.17, <i>Using AI to Jumpstart Project</i>
"Outline an app to solve this problem: [detailed description of GreenMart Coffee scenario]"	Few-shot / Contextual Prompt	Provides background context to improve specificity and relevance.	p.17, <i>Using AI to Jumpstart Project</i>
"Here are some requirement documents. Outline an app to provide a solution."	Document-Context Prompt / Retrieval-Augmented Prompt	The user provides real input data for AI to analyze; the model uses that content to generate the response.	p.17, <i>Using AI to Jumpstart Project</i>
"Can you look at this template and give me content for each of the sections?" (Business Analysis Canvas)	Template-Filling Prompt	The AI is asked to populate predefined structure fields (idea, stakeholders, benefits, etc.).	p.21, <i>Business Analysis Canvas</i>
"How did you figure the Costs section?"	Clarification Prompt / Conversational Follow-up	The AI is prompted to explain reasoning — fits Chain-of-Thought or Explain-Your-Work style prompting.	p.22, <i>Evaluating AI Outputs</i>

Start with something familiar.

Then have AI explain the new concept using the familiar content.

Can the templates help improve my prompts?

Which of these prompts can be improved and how would you improve them? Would these improvements mean changing to a different prompt type/template?

Below is a detailed evaluation of several key prompts from the *Generative AI for Business Analysis 4.0* course. For each, I describe how it could be improved, why, and whether that improvement would shift it into a different prompt type or template family.

1. "Outline an app for ordering coffee from a coffee shop."

Aspect	Analysis
Issue	Too general; lacks context about users, constraints, and purpose. The output could be generic or unrealistic.
Improved Prompt	"Outline the main user goals, system features, and success metrics for a mobile app that allows GreenMart Coffee customers to order drinks ahead for pickup. Assume customers already have loyalty accounts."
Improvement Type	Adds context and constraints; turns a minimal zero-shot prompt into a context-rich instruction prompt.
Prompt Type Change	From Zero-Shot → Contextual / Structured Instruction.

2. "Here are some requirement documents. Outline an app to provide a solution."

Aspect	Analysis
Issue	Doesn't specify how AI should use the documents (summarize, extract entities, or synthesize requirements).
Improved Prompt	"Summarize the key user needs and system requirements from these documents, then propose an app design that satisfies them. Present the result as a numbered outline grouped by user goal."
Improvement Type	Adds explicit steps and desired output format (summary + synthesis).
Prompt Type Change	From Document-Context Prompt → Decomposition Prompt / Multi-step Prompt (since it asks for sequential tasks).

3. "Can you look at this template and give me content for each of the sections?" (Business Analysis Canvas)

Aspect	Analysis
Issue	Assumes AI understands what kind of project is being discussed; lacks guiding context or evaluation criteria.
Improved Prompt	"Using the GreenMart Coffee ordering app project, complete the following Business Analysis Canvas. For each section (Idea, Stakeholders, Benefits, etc.), provide 2-3 concise sentences grounded in the project context."
Improvement Type	Clarifies project context, output style, and level of detail.
Prompt Type Change	Still a Template-Filling Prompt, but becomes a Contextual Template Prompt — same class, better structured.

4. "Give me a list of stakeholders for this app."

Aspect	Analysis
Issue	Produces shallow or inconsistent lists; doesn't instruct AI to define roles or relevance.
Improved Prompt	"List the primary stakeholders for the GreenMart Coffee app, grouped as (1) active users, (2) supporting roles, and (3) external stakeholders. For each, provide a one-sentence description of their role in the system."
Improvement Type	Adds classification criteria and explanations.
Prompt Type Change	From Enumeration Prompt → Structured Enumeration / Classification Prompt.

5. "Can you organize these stakeholders into a RACI matrix?"

Aspect	Analysis
Issue	Doesn't specify the tasks or responsibilities to be mapped, so output may be arbitrary.
Improved Prompt	"Using the stakeholder list above, create a RACI matrix for the development phase of the GreenMart Coffee app. Use columns for R, A, C, and I and rows for stakeholder roles. Include 5-7 representative project activities."

What did you just see?

Evaluate What You Have

Go through all of the prompts in the *Generative AI for Business Analysis* course and find examples of different prompt types.

Show the prompt, the type, an explanation of why the prompt fits the type, and where the prompt appears in the course.

Look for Improvements

Which of these prompts can be improved and how would you improve them?

Would these improvements mean changing to a different prompt type/template?

But also see if the "improvements" will improve the results (maybe they won't)

Test the Improvements

Run each of the improved prompts and see if the result is better.

So...

- Become familiar with the lists as *improvement opportunities*.
- Don't bother *memorizing* someone else's taxonomy
- Use AI to suggest the more sophisticated prompts
- Have conversations (they're called chatbots because...you chat)
- Develop your own style



All artwork in this presentation was created by Generative AI.
The prompts are available upon request.

THANK YOU!