

The Prompting Ladder: Basic vs. Strategic Prompts

You commented PROMPTS. This framework is from Allie K. Miller's AI-First Academy, here's the full breakdown plus a template.

Four levels, one framework

Same exact request, written four different ways, gives four completely different results. It's called the prompting ladder: basic, refined, customized, strategic. Most of us have only ever used level one, the generic one.

The four levels, explained

BASIC

One line. Quick, but the same generic answer anyone would get.

REFINED

Add a few specifics and the format you want back.

CUSTOMIZED

A role, real numbers, your tone, your audience, examples to follow.

STRATEGIC

Name the exact finished thing you need back, right inside the ask.

What strategic actually got me

I asked AI to plan an event, named the occasion, who was coming, and the budget, and asked for at least 25 ideas before recommending one. It handed back 30, and the one it picked was specific enough to actually book.

Try it this week

Take one thing you keep asking AI for at a basic level. Add who it's for, what's already true, and the finished thing you need back. That's the whole shift.

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The six-part structure

Use this for anything at the customized or strategic level. Task is the only part that's never optional.

Task

The one thing you want, in one clear line. Name the outcome, not the topic. "A status update" is a topic. "Ready to paste into Monday's deck" is an outcome.

Requirements

The rules the answer has to follow: your timeline, your budget, the format you want it back in. This rules out answers you'd have to reject anyway.

Context

The background that makes the answer yours: who you are, what you're actually trying to do, what you've already tried. Without it, the AI is guessing at a stranger's situation.

Resources

What the AI's allowed to use to help: web search, an attached document, or asking you a question before it answers instead of guessing.

Warnings

The mistakes you want it to avoid, named upfront. Cheaper to say it once here than reject three drafts for the same reason.

Examples

One or two examples of what good actually looks like, in your own words. It matches your standard instead of guessing at one.

A real strategic prompt (mine)

Here's the exact same request, written at the bottom of the ladder and the top of it. This is the real one I ran, not a cleaned-up version.

BASIC — what I'd have typed without thinking about it

"Help me design a movie night experience for adults."

STRATEGIC — Task

Help me design a wildly memorable backyard movie night experience for adults that feels more like an event than just watching a movie outside.

Requirements

Come up with at least 25 different concepts before recommending the best one. The total budget must stay under \$750, setup should take less than 4 hours, and everything should work for a group of 12-16 people.

Context

I'm hosting friends in my backyard for my birthday. Most of us are in our 30s and 40s, and I want something playful and unexpected, not a kids' birthday party and not an overly fancy dinner party. I'm willing to DIY some things, but I don't want to spend the entire day setting up.

A real strategic prompt (continued)

Resources

Use web browsing to find currently available products, rentals, decor ideas, and inspiration. Prioritize things I could order online or buy locally. Ask me questions if knowing more about my backyard, guests, or preferences would materially improve the result.

Warnings

No themes that depend on copyrighted characters or movie franchises. Avoid anything that requires professional installation, creates a fire hazard, or will be ruined if there's a little wind.

Examples

A strong idea is this specific: "Turn the backyard into a retro 1970s drive-in with inflatable lounge chairs arranged like cars, individual snack trays, vintage concession signage, wireless headphones, and a Polaroid-style 'ticket booth' photo station."

WHAT CAME BACK

30 concepts, and the one it recommended was specific enough to actually book.

Your template + next steps

Fill-in-the-blank template

Copy this into Claude, ChatGPT, or Gemini. Delete any section you don't need for the task in front of you.

Task: [the one thing you want, in one clear line]

Requirements: [timeline, budget, format you want it back in]

Context: [who you are, what you're trying to do, what you've tried]

Resources: [web search, an attachment, or asking you questions first]

Warnings: [the mistakes you want it to avoid]

Examples: [one or two examples of what good looks like]

Try it yourself

1. Pick one thing you keep asking AI for at a basic level, on repeat.
2. Copy the template above.
3. Fill in Task first, that's the only part that's never optional.
4. Add Context and Requirements, that's what gets you to customized.
5. Name the finished thing you want handed back, right in the Task line, that's what gets you to strategic.
6. Run it, and compare it to what you'd have gotten from the one-liner.

Source: this framework, the prompting ladder and the six-part structure, is from Lesson 2 of Allie K. Miller's AI-First Academy. I'm a student in the course, not the author of the framework, just sharing what's actually landing for me.