

Think first. Prompt second. Verify always

Twenty-two prompts and five drills from the Cal Poly AI Immersion Lab



Every prompt here does two things: it gets useful work out of an AI, and it keeps the judgment with you. Copy one, paste it into whatever AI tool you use, and change the parts in brackets. Then try the verification drill at the bottom. That is the whole method.

Ask before you answer

The best prompts make the AI interview you first. Context beats cleverness.

Verify what it tells you

Every answer is a claim. Ask where it stops being true and who could check it.

Keep the decision

Let the AI argue both sides. You decide. That is the founding premise of the Lab.

For the family table

Prompts to try tonight, with a student or a parent driving. No account needed beyond whatever AI tool you already use.

WARM-UP

The dinner-table interview

Interview me about my day like a curious journalist. Ask one question at a time. After five questions, summarize what you learned in three sentences and tell me one thing you found interesting.

Shows how AI works best when it asks before it answers.

WARM-UP

Explain it to my grandmother

Explain [a topic from my class this week] to my grandmother, who is sharp but has never used a computer. Use one everyday comparison, no jargon, under 150 words. Then list the two places where your explanation cut a corner.

The last sentence is the whole lesson: good AI use includes asking where it simplified.

VERIFY

Catch the confident mistake

Tell me five facts about [my hometown or my major]. Make exactly one of them false, and do not tell me which. I will guess, then you reveal it and explain how I could have checked.

A verification drill disguised as a game. Play it twice and you will never read AI output the same way.

JUDGMENT

Two sides, then mine

Give me the strongest case for [a family decision, for example whether a student should take a summer job or an internship] and the strongest case against. Equal length. Then stop. Do not recommend. I will decide.

AI as a sparring partner, not a decider. The founding premise in one prompt.

FUN

Roast my study plan

Here is my study plan for the week: [paste it]. Roast it gently, like a coach who likes me, then give me a version that a tired person could actually follow.

Feedback with warmth, which is what good mentors do.

FUN

Family motto generator

Our family values these three things: [three words]. Propose ten mottos under eight words each, in the voice of a Cal Poly Mustang. Mark the two you would put on a T-shirt and say why.

Low stakes, high laughter, and a quiet demonstration of iteration.

For students

Prompts that build the habit the Lab teaches: think first, prompt second, verify always.

TOURIST TO GUIDE

Where am I on the map?

I am learning [subject]. Ask me six questions to find out what I actually understand versus what I only recognize. Then tell me whether I am a tourist, a guide, or a native in this subject, and what one thing would move me up a level.

The Lab's Tourists, Guides, Natives taxonomy, applied to yourself.

STUDY

Teach it back

I am going to explain [concept] to you as if you were a first-year student. Listen, then grade my explanation on accuracy, clarity, and what I left out. Be specific. Do not fix it for me; point to what I should fix.

Learning happens in the correction, not the answer.

WRITING

Editor, not ghostwriter

Here is my draft: [paste]. Do not rewrite it. Mark the three weakest sentences, tell me why each is weak, and ask me one question about what I was trying to say in each.

Keeps the writing yours. Recruiters can tell.

VERIFY

Source or it did not happen

You just told me [claim]. Give me two ways a careful person would verify that without an AI, and rate your own confidence from 1 to 5 with a reason.

Turns every answer into a checkable one.

CAREER

The 90-second pitch

I am a [major] interested in [field]. Ask me five questions about what I have actually done, then draft a 90-second spoken introduction in my words, not yours. Flag any line that sounds like a résumé instead of a person.

The Communication Studies approach: say what you mean, in your voice.

For managers & family businesses

The prompts the Lab uses on Day One of an immersion: train the AI on your business, verify what it tells you, then reinvent a workflow.

TRAIN

Onboard the AI to my business

Before you answer anything, interview me about my business: what we make or grow, who buys it, what a normal week looks like, what keeps me up at night, and what words we use that outsiders would not. Ten questions, one at a time. Then write a one-page briefing you will use for the rest of our conversation.

Kompetenz starts with context. An AI that has not been onboarded gives generic advice.

VERIFY

Show your work

For the recommendation you just made, separate what you know from what you assumed. List the assumptions. Tell me which one, if wrong, would change your recommendation the most.

Response accuracy first. The advisor's standard, now yours.

DECIDE

Budget versus actual, in plain English

Here are two columns from my budget report: [paste]. Explain the three largest variances as if I were a new manager, name one plausible cause for each, and tell me which question I should ask my controller first.

A finance workflow the Lab builds against real data; this is the literacy version.

REINVENT

Map one workflow

Walk me through [a repeated task, for example weekly crew scheduling]. Ask what happens step by step, who touches it, and where it waits. Then draw the workflow as a numbered list, mark the two steps where an AI could help, and mark the one step where a human must stay accountable.

Personal productivity is the start. Workflow reinvention is the point.

CHANGE

The Tuesday morning test

I am introducing [tool or practice] to my team. Write the three sentences I will say on Tuesday morning: what changes, what does not, and who to ask when it breaks. Then list the two objections I should expect and how to answer them without being defensive.

A capable tool without an adopted practice is a demo, not a result.

JUDGMENT

What would I regret?

I am deciding [decision]. Do not recommend. Instead, describe the version of this decision I would regret in one season, and the version I would regret in five years. Then ask me which one I fear more.

Decisions in agriculture are measured in seasons. This prompt respects that.

Verification drills

Five-minute habits that make every prompt above safer. Do one a day for a week.

DRILL 1

Ask for the boundary

After any answer, ask: "Where does this stop being true?" A good answer names its limits.

Builds the habit of looking for edges.

DRILL 2

Two models, one question

Ask the same question in two different AI tools. Where they disagree is where you need a human.

Disagreement is information.

DRILL 3

Name the source

Ask: "What kind of source would settle this?" Then go find that source yourself.

The AI points; you verify.

DRILL 4

Reverse the request

Ask the AI to argue against its own answer. If it cannot, you were not asking a real question.

Tests whether the answer had any substance.

DRILL 5

The tired-person test

Ask: "Rewrite this so a tired person at 9 pm can act on it." If the rewrite loses something important, the original was hiding it.

Clarity is a form of honesty.

