In our previous session, we explored one of the most important parts of AI literacy — **the Security and Ethics of AI Use**. We talked about how AI tools can be incredibly powerful in the workplace, but that power comes with responsibility.

We looked at **data privacy**, and why it’s crucial to be careful about what we share with AI systems. Remember that simple rule — *if you wouldn’t post it on a public bulletin board, don’t feed it to AI*. Once data is shared, we often lose control over where it’s stored or how it’s used.

We also discussed **security risks** — like automation errors, bias, and overreliance — and how important it is to keep humans in the loop. AI can help us make decisions, but it shouldn’t make them *for* us. The key takeaway was simple: **trust, but verify.**

And finally, we explored **ethics** — how fairness, transparency, and accountability must guide every use of AI. The Cambridge Analytica case showed us how easily data misuse can cross ethical boundaries and impact real people’s lives.

So — now that we know how to use AI safely, let’s talk about how to use it *effectively.*

Today’s session is all about **prompt engineering**. And before we get into the details, here are the learning objectives for today:

1. **Understand the basics of effective prompts** — how clarity, context, instruction, and format shape AI outputs.
2. **Learn strategies for better prompts** — including role prompting, step-by-step reasoning, and iterative refinement.
3. **Recognize common prompt mistakes** and how to avoid them.
4. **Build a practical prompt library** that you can reuse in your workplace.

You’ve probably heard the saying: *‘Garbage in, garbage out.’* That phrase applies perfectly to AI. The quality of your output depends entirely on the quality of your input. If your prompt is vague, incomplete, or confusing — the AI’s response will be too. But if you give it a clear, detailed, and well-structured prompt, the results can be surprisingly accurate and useful.

Think of it like giving directions. If you tell someone, ‘Go over there and do something,’ you probably won’t get what you want. But if you say, ‘Walk two blocks east, turn left at the café, and pick up the blue folder on the counter,’ you’ll get a much better result.

In the same way, a well-designed prompt guides the AI toward the outcome you need — whether that’s writing an email, analyzing data, summarizing a report, or brainstorming ideas.

Over the next 20 minutes, we’ll break this down step-by-step. We’ll start with the **basics of good prompting**, then explore **effective strategies**, look at **common prompt fails**, and finally **build a prompt library** you can take into your work.

By the end of this session, you’ll see that prompt engineering isn’t just a technical skill — it’s a communication skill. It’s about thinking clearly, asking precisely, and collaborating effectively with AI.”

Alright, let’s start by looking at the foundation of every interaction with AI — the prompt itself. A “prompt” is simply what you tell the AI to do. But how you say it makes a world of difference. Think of prompting as a conversation, except one where the listener doesn’t understand tone, nuance, or what you *meant*. It only knows exactly what you *typed.* So, the clearer and more structured your message, the better the result.

The first element of a good prompt is clarity. Ambiguous prompts confuse AI. If you ask, “Write something about health,” you’ll get something vague and generic. But if you say, “Write a 100-word summary explaining the importance of regular exercise for office workers who sit most of the day,” that’s clear. You’re giving direction, audience, and purpose. When in doubt, be specific. Don’t assume the AI knows what you mean — spell it out.

The second element is context. AI doesn’t actually know your situation — it only knows what you tell it within the prompt. Let’s say you ask, “Draft a policy on data use.” Without context, it won’t know if you mean a school, a hospital, or a law firm. But if you add, “Draft a short, plain-language data use policy for a small healthcare clinic handling patient information,” the AI instantly tailors its response. Context gives the AI background knowledge it wouldn’t otherwise have, and that background often makes all the difference between a generic answer and one that’s genuinely useful.

The third ingredient is instruction. Tell the AI exactly what task you want done — and in what style or tone. For example, instead of saying “Explain AI,” you might say, “Explain AI in simple terms to a group of accountants.” You can go even further and say, “Explain AI in simple terms to a group of accountants. Use a friendly, confident tone, and include one short analogy.” The more precisely you define the instruction, the more the AI can deliver what you expect.

The fourth and final element is format. This tells the AI how you want the output to look — whether that’s a list, a paragraph, a table, or bullet points. For instance, instead of “List some benefits of AI,” you could say, “List five benefits of AI in bullet points, with one sentence of explanation for each.” You’ll notice the result is far more structured and ready to use. If you want something visual — like a table comparing pros and cons — tell it explicitly. Format gives the AI output shape and organization.

Now let’s put all these pieces together: clarity, context, instruction, and format. Suppose your original prompt was, “Write about AI in education.” That’s vague. If you reframe it as, “Act as an educational consultant. Write a 200-word summary explaining how AI can personalize learning for high school students. Use clear, non-technical language and finish with a short bullet-point list of potential risks,” suddenly you’ve built a strong, detailed prompt. You’ve provided clarity about the topic, context about the audience, instruction about the tone, and format for the structure. That’s what we call a well-engineered prompt.

A good way to test your prompt is to imagine handing that same sentence to another human. Would they know exactly what to do? If the answer is yes, you’ve probably written a strong prompt.

Let’s pause for a moment. Think about your own job — what kind of prompts do you usually type into AI tools, if any? Are they short and vague, or detailed and specific? After today’s session, I encourage you to take one of those shorter prompts and rework it using these four ingredients. You’ll be surprised at how much better the AI performs.

Now that we’ve covered the core ingredients of a good prompt — clarity, context, instruction, and format — let’s go a bit deeper. This next part is all about strategy. Knowing *what* to include in a prompt is one thing, but knowing *how* to guide the AI toward the best possible output is another. This is where effective prompting strategies come in. These techniques help you get smarter, more accurate, and more creative results — and they’re especially useful when you’re using AI for real work tasks like writing, summarizing, analyzing, or problem-solving.

The first strategy is something called *role prompting.* This simply means telling the AI to “act as” a specific person or professional. Why does this work? Because it helps the AI understand the perspective, tone, and level of detail you want. For example, you could say, “Act as a human resources specialist and write an email to staff explaining the new hybrid work policy.” Or, “Act as a marketing strategist and outline a 3-step campaign to promote a new eco-friendly product.” When you assign a role, the AI aligns its language and focus with that persona. It’s a powerful shortcut to getting relevant, context-aware responses. You can even combine roles — for instance, “Act as both a teacher and a data analyst” — to get balanced, interdisciplinary insights.

The second strategy is *step-by-step prompting.* This approach is especially useful when dealing with complex or multi-part tasks. Instead of asking the AI to do everything at once, you guide it through smaller steps. For example, rather than saying, “Write a full business proposal,” you could start with, “List the key sections of a business proposal.” Once it lists them, you can follow up with, “Now draft the introduction section,” and then, “Expand on the financial summary.” This not only improves quality but also gives you more control over the output. You can check and adjust at each step, ensuring the AI stays on track.

Another benefit of step-by-step prompting is that it helps the AI reason more logically. For instance, if you ask it to “Explain how AI could improve patient care in hospitals,” you might add, “Think step-by-step through the main challenges hospitals face, and explain how AI could address each one.” This encourages structured reasoning instead of a flat, surface-level answer.

The third strategy is *iteration and refinement.* Think of prompting as a dialogue, not a one-time command. The first response you get from an AI model is rarely the best — and that’s completely normal. The real skill lies in knowing how to refine it. For example, you might start with a general prompt, get the AI’s first answer, then follow up with, “That’s good — can you make it more concise and include an example?” Or, “Rephrase that in a more professional tone suitable for a report.” Every time you give feedback, you’re teaching the AI what you want. It’s like sculpting — each prompt refines the shape of the output until it fits your goal perfectly.

You can also use iteration to explore different perspectives. Let’s say the AI gives you an answer that’s a bit one-sided. You can ask, “Now provide the opposite viewpoint,” or “What are the possible risks or downsides?” This helps generate balanced, nuanced results — which is particularly valuable in workplaces where decisions require critical thinking.

One advanced form of iteration is called *prompt chaining.* This means using the output from one prompt as the input for the next. For instance, you could first ask the AI to summarize a report, then feed that summary into a second prompt like, “Now write three discussion questions based on that summary.” Prompt chaining helps build more complex workflows without overwhelming the model with a single, overloaded request.

All these strategies — role prompting, step-by-step prompting, iteration, and chaining — share a common mindset: treat AI as a collaborator, not an oracle. You’re not just asking it for answers; you’re guiding it through a thought process. The clearer your guidance, the more aligned the results will be with your intent.

Before we move on, take a moment to reflect. When you’ve used AI before — maybe to write an email, brainstorm ideas, or summarize a document — did you ever go back and adjust your prompt to improve the answer? That process of refining, adding detail, or changing the instruction is exactly what skilled prompting looks like. It’s not about getting it perfect the first time — it’s about knowing how to steer the tool until it delivers what you need.

In the next part of the session, we’ll look at something just as important — prompt fails. We’ll explore some of the most common mistakes people make when using AI, why they happen, and how you can avoid them to keep your prompts sharp and effective.

Now, what happens when prompting goes wrong. These are what we call *prompt fails.* They’re the moments when AI gives you something completely off track, confusing, or just plain wrong. The good news is, almost every time that happens, it’s because of how the prompt was written — not because the AI is broken. Once you learn to spot these patterns, they become easy to fix.

One of the most common prompt fails is *being too vague.* A short, open-ended prompt like “Write about leadership” or “Summarize this document” doesn’t give the AI enough direction. You might get something generic that sounds fine at first glance but lacks depth, focus, or relevance. The fix here is simple — be specific. Add who the audience is, what tone you want, what format to use, and what you’re trying to achieve. Remember, AI can’t read your mind. It only knows what you tell it.

Another major issue is *overloading a prompt* — trying to do too much at once. If you ask the AI to “Write a press release, analyze customer feedback, and create a marketing slogan” all in one go, it’s likely to get confused or miss parts of the task. The solution is to break large requests into smaller, sequential prompts. This makes the results more accurate and easier to refine.

Then there’s *missing context.* This happens when people assume the AI already knows what they’re working on. For example, if you say, “Write a summary of our report,” the AI doesn’t know what “our report” is. Unless you include the content or explain what it’s about, it has to guess — and that’s when hallucinations or inaccuracies can creep in. A better approach would be to include a short excerpt or background statement so the AI can work from real information.

And finally, one of the easiest mistakes to make is *not reviewing the output critically.* Even the best prompts can produce responses with factual errors, biased language, or overly confident statements. A well-engineered prompt is only half the equation — the other half is human judgment. Always read what the AI gives you with a critical eye, check its accuracy, and, if needed, feed it back with clearer corrections.

Prompt fails are valuable learning moments. Each time something goes wrong, it’s a clue about what the AI misunderstood — and how you can guide it better next time. So don’t think of a bad response as a failure; think of it as feedback.

To wrap up this session, remember that prompt engineering is both a skill and a mindset. It’s about thinking clearly, communicating precisely, and guiding AI in a structured way. By understanding the basics, using effective strategies, avoiding common failures, and building a prompt library, you’ll be able to get more reliable, accurate, and useful outputs from AI in your work. Take a few minutes after this session to experiment with creating your own prompts, save the ones that work, and start building your library. Over time, it will become an invaluable tool for leveraging AI effectively and responsibly in your professional tasks..