How to Talk to AI: A Field Guide for Humans

By Christopher Tavolazzi | FogSift

The Problem

You're talking to AI wrong. Not morally wrong—strategically wrong.

Most people treat AI like a search engine. They type "write me a marketing email" and get generic slop. Then they complain that AI "doesn't work."

The problem isn't the AI. The problem is the conversation.

The Core Principle

AI is a conversation partner, not a vending machine.

You wouldn't walk up to a consultant and say "fix my business." You'd explain the context, the constraints, the history, the goals. Then you'd have a back-and-forth until you arrived at something useful.

AI works the same way.

The Five Laws of Effective AI Communication

1. Context Is King

Bad: "Write me a tagline."

Good: "I run a consulting business that helps small manufacturing companies find inefficiencies in their operations. My clients are typically plant managers who are skeptical of outsiders. Write me a tagline that speaks to their skepticism while promising practical results."

The difference? Context.

2. Show, Don't Just Tell

Bad: "Write in a professional tone."

Good: "Here's an example of writing I like: [paste example]. Match this voice."

AI learns from examples faster than instructions.

3. Iterate, Don't Regenerate

Bad: *reads output* "Ugh, that sucks." *clicks regenerate*

Good: "This is close, but the second paragraph is too formal. Make it more conversational while keeping the technical accuracy."

Regenerating throws away progress. Iterating builds on it.

4. Think Out Loud

Bad: "Give me a marketing strategy."

Good: "I'm thinking about my marketing strategy. My current approach is X, but it's not working because Y. I've considered A, B, and C. What am I missing?"

When you share your thinking, AI can engage with your actual reasoning—not just guess what you want.

5. Assign a Role

Bad: "Review my code."

Good: "You are a senior software engineer conducting a code review. Focus on security vulnerabilities and performance issues. Be direct about problems—don't sugarcoat."

Role assignment activates different "modes" of AI behavior.

The Prompt Framework

Here's a simple framework for any AI interaction:

```
CONTEXT: What's the situation?
ROLE: Who should the AI be?
TASK: What specifically do you need?
FORMAT: How should the output look?
CONSTRAINTS: What should it avoid?
```

Example:

> *CONTEXT: I'm preparing for a job interview at a fintech startup.*
> *ROLE: You are an experienced hiring manager in fintech.*
> *TASK: Give me the 5 most likely technical questions I'll face.*

> *FORMAT: List each question, then explain what they're really testing for.*
> *CONSTRAINTS: Focus on practical scenarios, not textbook trivia.*

Common Mistakes

The Lazy Ask

"Write me something good."

AI can't read your mind. Vague inputs = vague outputs.

The Kitchen Sink

"Write me a 5000-word comprehensive guide covering every aspect of..."

Overwhelming requests produce overwhelmed outputs. Break big tasks into smaller chunks.

The One-Shot Expectation

Expecting perfect results on the first try.

Plan for 3-5 iterations. The first response is a starting point, not a finish line.

The Privacy Dump

Sharing sensitive information (passwords, financial data, personal identifiers).

AI isn't a secure vault. Treat every conversation as potentially public.

Quick Wins

For Writing:
"Write a first draft. I'll refine it. Prioritize [X] over perfection."

For Analysis:
"Here's my data. What patterns do you see? What questions should I be asking?"

For Learning:
"Explain [topic] to me like I'm [familiar with X but not Y]."

For Debugging:
"Here's my code and the error. Walk me through your debugging process step by step."

For Brainstorming:
"Give me 10 ideas for [X]. Include 3 safe options and 3 wild ones."

The Meta-Skill

The real skill isn't prompting. It's thinking clearly about what you want.

AI forces you to articulate:
- What problem am I actually solving?
- What does success look like?
- What constraints matter?
- What context is relevant?

These questions are valuable whether you're talking to AI, a colleague, or yourself.

Start Here

1. Pick one thing you've been trying (and failing) to get AI to help with.
2. Apply the CONTEXT-ROLE-TASK-FORMAT-CONSTRAINTS framework.
3. Iterate 3 times before judging the result.

That's it. No magic. Just clear thinking and good conversation.

FogSift helps people cut through noise and find signal.

$20 gets your problem into the queue. We pick two per day.

→ fogsift.com/queue
