ChatGPT Part 1: Your First Effective Prompts

ChatGPT can help turn an idea into a first draft, but the value of the result depends on the direction in the request. A prompt can name the goal, provide relevant context, set constraints, and ask for a useful format. These four parts make the task easier to understand and the answer easier to review. This guide is a practical teaching aid, not an official OpenAI formula, and clear direction does not guarantee accuracy.

1. State the Goal

Begin by naming the action ChatGPT should take, such as drafting, explaining, summarizing, or comparing. Add the result you need and the reader when that audience changes the answer. “Help with the launch” does not tell the model whether to write an email, plan a meeting, or identify a delay. A focused goal turns the request into a task that can be judged against a clear outcome. Ordinary language is enough; the goal is useful direction, not a magic command.

Example: “Write something about the delay” names neither a reader nor a result. “Draft a short update for my manager about the delayed training launch” makes both clear. The second request gives ChatGPT a useful starting point, while leaving the facts to be supplied. It states the action without pretending that the date or cause is already known.

At work: Maya uses the Goal step to request a short update email for her manager about the delayed training launch. She names the manager as the reader and an update email as the result. The draft now has a purpose, so she can check whether it explains what changed. The result is a draft focused on what the manager needs to know.

2. Add Context

Add facts that change the answer, including who will read it, what happened, why it happened, and what comes next. Separate confirmed information from what is still unknown so ChatGPT is not invited to fill gaps with guesses. Include relevant dates, names, responsibilities, and limits only when they help the task. Extra background can distract from the request or expose information that is not needed. Use only details that are appropriate to share under workplace rules.

Example: “The launch is delayed” leaves the reader unsure what changed. “The training launch moves from October eighth to October fifteenth because captions need a final review” gives a date and a supported reason. Adding “I will send corrected files to the content team by October twelfth” states the next action without claiming the review is already complete. The reader can identify both the new date and the work that remains.

At work: Maya uses the Context step to give three checked facts: the date moves from October eighth to October fifteenth, caption review remains, and corrected files are due to the content team by October twelfth. She labels the review as unfinished instead of saying it is complete. Her manager can see what changed, why it changed, and what comes next. Maya checks each date against the project notes before the details enter her message.

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3. Set Constraints

Constraints describe boundaries for length, tone, language, audience, and content. “About ninety words” is easier to assess than “not too long,” while “calm and accountable” gives a clearer tone than “make it sound good.” State which facts may be used and which claims must not be added. A constraint can narrow the draft without dictating every sentence.

Example: A request might set a short update near ninety words and a calm, accountable tone. It can also say to use only confirmed dates and not to invent a cause, promise, or owner. Those boundaries make a draft easier to evaluate and correct. The result can be checked for length, tone, and unsupported additions.

At work: Maya uses the Constraints step to keep the update near ninety words and the tone calm. She tells ChatGPT to use only the confirmed dates and caption review, with no added cause, promise, or owner. When the draft claims the delay will never happen again, she removes that unsupported promise. Her revised message keeps the facts and leaves out the promise.

4. Choose the Format

Name the shape that will help the reader act, such as an email, one paragraph, checklist, table, or short list. For an email, request a subject line and the key points; for comparing dates or options, a table may be easier to scan. A format is useful when it clarifies the information rather than decorating it. You can request one answer or several alternatives when the best approach is not yet clear. If the response is hard to use, ask for the same facts in a more suitable format.

Example: A manager who needs a quick update may benefit from a subject line and one short paragraph. A colleague comparing three launch dates may prefer a table with the date, reason, and next action. The form should make the decision easier, not hide missing information. The reader can find the change and next step without searching through a long message.

At work: Maya uses the Format step to request an email with a useful subject line and one short paragraph. The email places the new launch date, reason, and next step where her manager can scan them quickly. She checks the format against the facts before sending the message. Her manager can scan the three key points and see what action comes next.

Conclusion

Use the four parts as a starting point: state the goal, add context, set constraints, and choose a format. ChatGPT can help produce a first draft, but clearer prompting does not guarantee accuracy. Check names, dates, reasons, and promises against reliable notes or sources, then refine the draft if its tone or shape misses the need. Follow workplace rules and avoid sharing confidential details unless an approved account and company policy allow it.

Sources

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