

Chapter 3

How to Ask ChatGPT the Right Questions

(Prompting Made Simple)



Learning Goals

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

- ✓ Understand what a prompt is
- ✓ Ask better questions
- ✓ Get more useful answers
- ✓ Improve answers by asking follow-up questions

✓ Save time by giving ChatGPT enough information

What Is a Prompt?

A **prompt** is simply the message you type into ChatGPT.

Think of it as giving instructions to a very helpful assistant.

If your instructions are clear, you'll usually receive a much better answer.

There is nothing complicated about prompting.

You have been asking questions all your life.

With ChatGPT, you're simply asking them in a way that gives the AI enough information to help you.

Think of It Like This

Imagine asking a travel agent:

"I want to go on holiday."

They would probably reply:

"Where would you like to go?"

Now imagine saying:

"I'm retired, I enjoy nature, my budget is R15,000, and I'd like a quiet holiday in South Africa during spring."

Now the travel agent can give much better advice.

ChatGPT works in exactly the same way.

The more helpful information you provide, the better the answer usually becomes.



The Secret Formula

Whenever possible include these four things:

1. Tell ChatGPT what you want

Example:

"I need help writing an email."

2. Give some background

Example:

"I'm inviting friends to my retirement celebration."

3. Explain how you want the answer

Example:

"Please keep it friendly and under 150 words."

4. Ask for improvements if needed

Example:

"Can you make it a little warmer?"

A Simple Prompt Template

Whenever you're unsure what to type, use this pattern:

I want to...

This is for...

Please make it...

Anything else I should know?

This simple formula works surprisingly well for almost every situation.

Example 1

Poor Prompt

Tell me about gardening.

The answer could be about almost anything.

Better Prompt

I'm starting a small vegetable garden at home. What vegetables are easiest for beginners to grow in South Africa?

Now ChatGPT knows:

- You are a beginner
- You want vegetables
- You live in South Africa

The answer becomes far more useful.

Example 2

Poor Prompt

Write me an email.

Better Prompt

Please write a friendly email thanking my neighbour for helping me after my knee operation. Keep it warm and about 120 words.

Now the answer is personal and ready to use.

Example 3

Poor Prompt

Give me recipes.

Better Prompt

I'm cooking for two people. We enjoy chicken and vegetables. Please suggest three healthy dinners that take less than 30 minutes to prepare.

Notice how much more specific this is.

Don't Be Afraid to Ask Again

One of ChatGPT's greatest strengths is that you can continue the conversation.

If the first answer isn't quite right, simply ask again.

For example:

Make it shorter.

Explain that more simply.

Give me another example.

Can you use easier words?

Please make it more professional.

Add a shopping list.

Rewrite it for grandchildren.

You don't need to start over.

Simply continue the conversation.

ChatGPT Remembers the Conversation

Unlike a search engine, ChatGPT remembers what you've already discussed during the current chat.

For example:

You:

I'm planning a holiday to the Garden Route.

Later you can simply ask:

What should I pack?

ChatGPT understands that you're still talking about your holiday.

This makes conversations feel much more natural.

The Golden Rule

Instead of thinking:

"What should I type?"

Think:

"If I were talking to a helpful person sitting beside me, what would I say?"

That is usually the perfect prompt.

Practice Exercise

Try asking ChatGPT these questions:

1. Recommend three easy hobbies for retirees.
2. Suggest five healthy breakfasts.
3. Help me organise my weekly shopping.
4. Explain how solar panels work.
5. Plan a weekend trip within my budget.

Then ask ChatGPT to:

- Make the answer shorter.
- Add more detail.
- Explain it for beginners.

Notice how the answer changes.

Mini Challenge

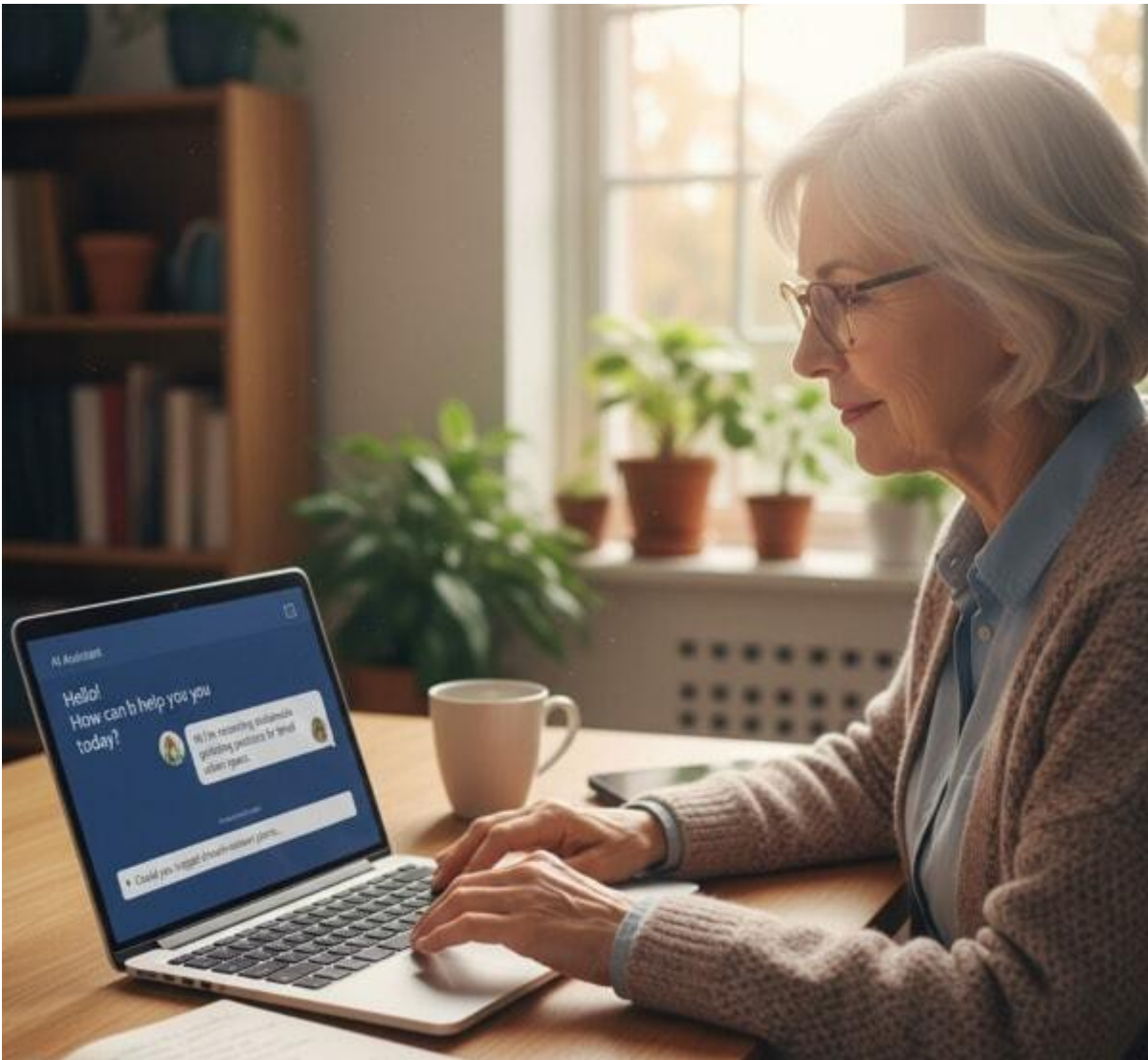
Choose something you genuinely need help with today.

Perhaps it's:

- Writing a letter
- Planning a meal
- Creating a budget
- Organising photos
- Understanding a new technology
- Planning a holiday

Use the simple prompt template from this chapter and ask ChatGPT for help. Then refine the answer with at least two follow-up requests, such as "Make it shorter" or "Give me more examples."

You'll quickly discover that improving a conversation is often easier than trying to write the perfect prompt the first time.



Quick Tips

- ✓ Be specific.
- ✓ Give background information.
- ✓ Ask for the format you want.
- ✓ Keep chatting until you're happy.
- ✓ There are no silly questions.

✓ The more context you provide, the better ChatGPT can usually help.

Common Beginner Mistakes

Many new users believe they need to use special computer language. You don't. Everyday English works perfectly well.

Another common mistake is asking very broad questions like, "Tell me about cars." Instead, narrow your request: "I'm looking for a reliable small car with low running costs."

Finally, don't stop after the first answer. ChatGPT is designed for conversation. If the response isn't exactly what you wanted, simply ask for a different version, more detail, or a simpler explanation.

Chapter Summary

Congratulations! You have learned one of the most valuable AI skills: asking good questions.

Remember these key ideas:

- A prompt is simply the message you type.
- Clear, detailed instructions lead to better answers.
- Include what you want, some background, and how you'd like the response presented.
- Use follow-up questions to improve the result instead of starting over.
- Think of ChatGPT as a friendly assistant you can have an ongoing conversation with.

Quick Prompt Library

20 Ready-to-Use Prompts

Simply copy a prompt into ChatGPT, replace the words in brackets if needed, and press Enter.

Everyday Life

1. Meal Planner

I have [ingredients] in my kitchen. Please suggest three easy meals for two people using these ingredients.

2. Shopping List

Create a shopping list for healthy meals for one week for two adults.

3. Weekly Planner

Help me organise my week. I need time for gardening, exercise, shopping, family and relaxation.

4. Cleaning Schedule

Create a simple weekly house cleaning schedule that takes no more than 30 minutes each day.

Health & Wellbeing

5. Healthy Eating

Suggest seven healthy breakfasts that are easy to prepare and suitable for someone over 60.

6. Exercise Ideas

Recommend five gentle exercises suitable for older adults who want to improve balance and flexibility.

(Always consult your healthcare professional before beginning a new exercise program.)

7. Better Sleep

Give me ten practical tips that may help improve sleep quality.

Money

8. Budget Helper

Help me create a simple monthly household budget using these expenses:

[List your expenses.]

9. Saving Money

Suggest twenty practical ways retirees can reduce everyday household expenses.

10. Understanding Financial Terms

Explain [financial term] in simple language with a practical example.

Travel

11. Holiday Planner

Help me plan a five-day holiday to [destination] with a budget of [amount].

12. Packing List

Create a packing checklist for a one-week holiday to [destination] during [season].

Family & Friends

13. Birthday Message

Write a warm birthday message for my [friend/grandchild/brother/sister].

14. Email Writer

Help me write a friendly email thanking someone for their kindness.

15. Conversation Ideas

Give me ten interesting questions I can ask my grandchildren during our next visit.

Learning

16. Explain It Simply

Please explain [topic] as if you were teaching someone who has never heard of it before.

17. Learn Something New

I would like to learn about [topic]. Create a simple seven-day beginner learning plan.

Hobbies

18. Gardening Help

Recommend vegetables that are easy to grow in South Africa and explain how to care for them.

19. Photography

Teach me five simple ways to take better photos using my smartphone.

AI for Everyday Tasks

20. Improve My Writing

Please improve the following letter to make it friendly, clear and professional:

[Paste your text here.]

Quick Prompt Formula

Whenever you don't know what to ask, remember this simple pattern:

I want to...

This is for...

Please make it...

Anything else I should know?

Pro Tip

If the first answer isn't exactly what you wanted, don't start over. Simply continue the conversation with follow-up requests like:

- "Make it shorter."
- "Use simpler words."
- "Give me another example."
- "Explain it step by step."
- "Turn this into a checklist."
- "Can you put it in a table?"
- "Rewrite it for beginners."

The best answers often come from a conversation, not a single question.

