



Prompt Hygiene: Tips and Tricks for Getting Better Results from AI

AI tools are only as useful as the instructions you give them. City staff who learn to write clear, specific prompts will get more accurate, higher-quality outputs.

The prompting advice in this article covers general best practices that work across AI tools like ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, and Azure OpenAI Service. Claude uses the same core principles but has features that change how you work with it in practice. For Claude-specific guidance, see "Using Claude: A Hands-On Guide for City Staff and Officials" on the FLC AI Hub.

Below are practical tips for writing better prompts, organized by the most common mistakes local government staff run into.

What Is a Prompt?

A prompt is any instruction or question you type into an AI tool. It tells the AI what you want, who you're writing for, and what format the output should take. A vague prompt produces a vague result. A specific prompt produces content you can actually use.

Tip 1: Tell the AI Who It's Writing For

AI tools don't automatically know your audience. If you're drafting a newsletter item for residents, say so. If you need a briefing for council members, include that. The same information reads very differently depending on who needs to understand it.

Instead of: *"Write something about the new parking ordinance."*

Try: *"Write a short paragraph explaining the new parking ordinance for residents who may not be familiar with city code. Keep the language simple and avoid jargon."*

Tip 2: Give the AI a Role

Telling the AI to act as a specific type of writer or expert anchors the tone and approach. This is especially useful for communications tasks.

Example: *"You are a city communications officer writing for a municipal newsletter. Draft a 150-word announcement about the upcoming public hearing on the FY2026 budget."*

This technique works well for press releases, FAQ documents, public notices, and council reports.

Tip 3: Be Specific About Format and Length

If you need a bulleted list, say so. If you need a one-page summary, specify the page length. If the output needs to stay under 200 words for a social media post, say so upfront. Otherwise, AI tools default to whatever format seems most common for the request, which may not match what you need.

Useful format cues to include:

- Word or character count
- Number of bullet points
- Reading level (e.g., "write at an 8th grade reading level")
- Tone (formal, conversational, urgent, neutral)
- Structure (headers, paragraphs, numbered steps)

Tip 4: Provide Context and Source Material

AI tools generate better outputs when they have something to work from. If you're asking the tool to summarize a long document, paste the relevant text directly into the prompt. If you're drafting a public comment response, include the original comment. Don't ask the AI to guess at details it couldn't possibly know.

Example: *"Here is the text of our city's public records request policy [paste text]. Please summarize it in plain language for residents in 3–4 sentences."*

Tip 5: Never Enter Sensitive or Private Information Into a Public AI Tool

Before typing anything into an AI tool, ask yourself whether that information belongs outside city systems. Resident names, addresses, case numbers, financial records, and personnel files should stay out of public AI prompts.

Most consumer-facing tools send your input to external servers, where it could be stored or used to train future versions of the tool. Even if the output never leaves your desk, the input already has.

If your city has purchased an enterprise AI platform through a formal procurement process, that tool typically includes data privacy protections that consumer tools don't. Those protections let staff use it for more sensitive tasks. Before entering confidential information into any tool, verify that your IT or legal team has reviewed the vendor's data handling terms.

Tip 6: Break Complex Tasks into Smaller Steps

Asking AI to do too many things at once often produces a muddled result. If you need a full communications plan, start by asking for an audience analysis. Then ask for key messages. Then ask for a draft. Building up in steps gives you more control over the final output and makes it easier to catch errors along the way.

Tip 7: Review and Edit Every Output

Like people, AI tools make mistakes. They can misstate facts or misquote figures. Sometimes they produce language that sounds plausible but is wrong. Treat AI-generated content as a first draft, not a finished product. Before publishing or distributing anything the AI produced, verify the facts against source documents and review for tone and accuracy.

That's especially important for anything related to legal requirements, budget figures, or official city policy.

Tip 8: Refine Your Prompts Through Iteration

If the first result isn't what you needed, don't start over. Ask the AI to revise. You can say things like "make this shorter," "use a more formal tone," or "add a sentence about how residents can submit public comments." Each revision brings the output closer to what you need. Most AI tools retain context within a session, so you can keep refining without re-entering your original instructions.

Quick Reference: Prompt Checklist

Before submitting your prompt, ask yourself:

- Have I identified the audience?
- Have I given the AI a role or context?
- Have I specified the format and length?
- Have I included any source material the AI needs?
- Am I asking for one thing, or too many at once?

AI tools work best when you treat them like a capable but uninformed assistant. The clearer you communicate what you need, the less time you'll spend cleaning up what you get.