Controlling the Format

Get the answer in the shape you need: tables, lists, steps, length limits and tone — format is part of the prompt.

Introduction

Two students ask the AI the same question. One gets a 500-word essay. The other gets a neat table they can paste into their notes. The difference is not luck — the second student asked for the format. **Format is not decoration.** It decides whether the answer is usable: a table for comparisons, steps for instructions, bullets for revision, a paragraph for an essay.

Most people write the task and forget the shape. Then they spend ten minutes reformatting the answer by hand. Ask for the shape first, and the answer arrives ready to use.

(Roman Urdu: Format sajawat nahi hai — ye tay karta hai ke jawab kaam ka hai ya nahi. Table muqable ke liye, steps hidayat ke liye, bullets yaad karne ke liye.)

Key points

- **Always name the shape.** Table, bullet list, numbered steps, short paragraphs, email, story, dialogue — say it in the prompt, plainly.
- **Tables are for comparisons.** Two or more things side by side (two phones, three plans, four countries) belong in a table with named columns.
- **Numbered steps are for processes.** Anything the reader must DO in order — a recipe, a setup, a solution — belongs in steps, one action per step.
- **Bullets are for revision and lists.** Facts to remember, points to cover, items to buy — bullets scan faster than paragraphs.
- **Control length with numbers, not adjectives.** "Brief" means nothing fixed; "under 100 words", "exactly 5 points", "3 rows" mean something exact.
- **Control tone the same way.** "Formal", "friendly", "simple English", "Roman Urdu" — tone is a format choice too. Name the audience and the tone follows.
- **Ask for sections when the answer is long.** "With these headings: Introduction, Causes, Solutions" stops the AI from wandering and makes the answer skimmable.
- **One format per prompt.** "Table and essay and poem" is three shapes fighting. Pick the shape your real use needs.
- **Beginners get stuck choosing between table, list and steps.** Use this shortcut: comparing things = table; doing things in order = numbered steps; remembering things = bullets; explaining why = paragraphs. If you still cannot decide, ask what you will DO with the answer — paste it, follow it, or revise from it.

- **Format the answer key separately, always.** For MCQs and tests, "answers separately at the end" is not a detail — it is what makes the test usable. Without it, students read the answer while reading the question.

Examples

Example 1 — Comparison as a table

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Compare a bicycle and a motorbike for a student in Pakistan. Give the answer as a table with these columns: Option, Monthly cost, Speed, Best for. Add one short line under the table with your recommendation.
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What you will get: a clean table with two rows and your columns, plus a recommendation line — ready to paste into notes or a presentation, no reformatting needed.

Example 2 — Instructions as steps

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Explain how to make a cup of chai, as numbered steps, one action per step, simple English, no more than 8 steps.
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What you will get: 8 short steps in order ("1. Boil water..."), each one action. Compare that with asking "how to make chai" and getting a paragraph you must untangle yourself.

Example 3 — Same facts, three shapes

Topic: why exercise is good.

- Revision shape: "Give 5 bullet points on why exercise is good for students, each under 12 words."
- Essay shape: "Write 3 short paragraphs on why exercise is good for students: introduction, two benefits with examples, conclusion."
- Test shape: "Make 5 MCQs on why exercise is good, with 4 options each and the answer key at the end, separately."

Same facts, three tools. The format you name decides which tool you receive.

Example 4 — Before and after: revision notes that fit on one page

Before:

```
Summarise photosynthesis.
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After:

```
Summarise photosynthesis for class 9 revision as: 5 bullet points, each under 15 words, then a 2-line summary. Simple English only.
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The first answer may be a page long. The second fits on a revision card — because the format (5 bullets, word limit, summary) was part of the prompt, not an afterthought.

Example 5 — Before and after: an email with all its parts

Before:

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Write an email to my teacher about leave.
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After:

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Write a formal email with: a subject line, a greeting, 3 short paragraphs (reason, dates, request), and a polite closing with my name. Under 120 words. Reason: fever. Dates: 28 and 29 October. Request: permission for 2 days leave.
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An email is a format with parts. Naming the parts (subject, greeting, paragraphs, closing) is what turns a paragraph into an email you can send.

Example 6 — Format that stops a mixed-up test

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Make 10 MCQs on fractions for class 7. Each question has 4 options labelled A, B, C, D. Put all questions first, then a separate section headed "Answer Key" with only the question number and the correct letter, no explanations. After the key, add a separate section "Explanations" with one line per question.
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Three sections, in order, each with its own rule. That structure is why the test is printable and markable — a single mixed block of questions and answers is not.

Real-world case — Where this is actually used

A tutor in Lahore prepares worksheets from one prompt pattern: topic in, table out for comparisons, steps out for methods, MCQs out for tests — each with its answer key kept separate. Parents use the same idea for shopping: "as a table with item, price, and shop" turns a chatty list into a list they can actually shop from. The content barely changes; the format is what makes it useful.

Quick recap

- Name the shape in every prompt: table, steps, bullets, paragraph, email.
- Tables compare, steps instruct, bullets list, paragraphs explain.
- Length and tone are format choices — give numbers and audiences, not adjectives.
- Long answers need named sections.
- One format per prompt.

Common mistakes

1. **Forgetting the format entirely** — then reformatting by hand for ten minutes. Fix: add one format sentence to every prompt.
2. **Asking for two shapes at once** — "a table and a detailed essay" gives a messy mix. Fix: pick the shape you will actually use.
3. **"Brief" and "detailed" without numbers** — the AI's brief is 300 words, yours is 50. Fix: "under 100 words" or "exactly 5 points".

1. **Naming the format but not its columns or count** — "Give it as a table" still leaves the columns to guess. Fix: name the columns and the number of rows or points in the same sentence.
2. **Asking for a format the job does not need** — a poem about a maths formula, or a table for a story, fights the content. Fix: match the shape to the use (see the shortcut in the key points above).

Practice

1. Take one long answer an AI gave you recently. Rewrite the prompt with a named format (table, steps, or bullets) and compare: how much reformatting did you save?
2. Ask for the same topic in three shapes (bullets, table, steps). Write one line on which shape fits which real use — revision, comparison, or doing.

1. Take a long paragraph answer you received. Re-ask for it as a table with columns you name yourself. Time how long reformatting would have taken by hand, versus asking for the table first.
2. Ask for the same topic in two shapes — steps and bullets — and write one line each on which shape you would use for doing the task and which for revising it.
3. Build a test prompt with three separate sections (questions, answer key, explanations) on a chapter you studied. Check: are the answers really separate, or did any leak into the questions?

Practice quiz

1. Which format fits comparing two phones side by side?

- A story
- A table with named columns
- A poem
- One long paragraph

Answer: A table with named columns

2. How should you control the length of an answer?

- Write 'brief' and hope
- Give a number: 'under 100 words' or 'exactly 5 points'
- Write in capital letters

- Ask twice

Answer: Give a number: 'under 100 words' or 'exactly 5 points'

3. What should you do when an answer will be long?

- Let the AI choose the structure
- Ask for named sections with headings, so the answer stays skimmable
- Split it into 10 chats
- Accept whatever shape comes

Answer: Ask for named sections with headings, so the answer stays skimmable

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Watch the video lesson: https://youtu.be/A94OjdFTp8Q

Read online: https://scopetreasure.com/notes/pe-answer-format · More free tools and notes at https://scopetreasure.com