Common Prompting Mistakes

The traps everyone falls into: one giant prompt, no checking, private data in the chat, and believing every answer.

Introduction

Every prompting mistake in this series appears in this one lesson, together, because in real life they arrive together: a giant prompt, sent once, trusted blindly, with a phone number pasted inside. None of these mistakes means you are bad at AI. They are the default habits of every new user — and every one of them has a one-line fix.

Read this lesson as a checklist. Before you send anything important, run down it once. Ten seconds of checking saves ten minutes of fixing.

(Roman Urdu: Ye lesson aik checklist hai. Koi bhi ahem prompt bhejne se pehle is par aik nazar daalo — 10 second ki checking, 10 minute ki durusti bacha leti hai.)

Key points

- **Mistake 1 — The giant prompt.** Five tasks, three topics and a life story in one message. The AI does all of them shallowly. Fix: one task per prompt; split the work.
- **Mistake 2 — No checking.** Copying the first answer into homework, a post, or a decision. AI text sounds confident even when it is wrong. Fix: read it, check key facts against a trusted source, and never submit unread.
- **Mistake 3 — Private data in the chat.** Phone numbers, CNIC numbers, passwords, bank details, home address, other people's private messages. Fix: never paste them. Use placeholders ([MY NUMBER]) or leave them out entirely.
- **Mistake 4 — Believing invented facts.** AI tools invent statistics, quotes, prices and references that look perfectly real. Fix: "Do not invent statistics" in the prompt helps, but verification is the real guard — if a number matters, confirm it elsewhere.
- **Mistake 5 — Asking the AI to decide what only you can decide.** "Should I take science or arts?" The AI does not know your marks, your interest, your family situation. Fix: ask it to list pros and cons, then decide yourself.
- **Mistake 6 — One prompt, no follow-up.** Accepting a mediocre first answer as final. Fix: iterate (PE.8) — one precise correction at a time.
- **Mistake 7 — Copying style without understanding.** Pasted code, essays and answers you cannot explain will fail you at the viva, the test, or the job — the moment someone asks "why". Fix: the explain-back test — if you cannot explain it in your own words, you do not own it yet.

- **Mistake 8 — Same prompt, different tool, different result — and surprise.** Tools differ. A prompt tuned for one AI may behave differently in another. Fix: when you switch tools, test your best prompt once before trusting it.
- **Beginners get stuck because mistakes feel personal.** They are not. Every mistake in this lesson is the default first try — the AI industry itself designs for it, because short vague prompts are the easiest thing to type. The fix is a habit, not talent: one checklist pass before sending.
- **The most expensive mistake is the invisible one.** A wrong style is visible at once; a wrong fact looks perfect. That is why this lesson ranks checking above wording: a beautifully worded prompt that produces an unchecked, wrong fact is worse than a rough prompt whose answer you verified.

Examples

Example 1 — The giant prompt, split

Giant version:

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Write a story about a brave boy, make 10 MCQs on it, translate it to Urdu, and also tell me how to improve my English and give me a study plan for exams.
```

Split version (five prompts, each one job):

1. "Write a short story of 300 words about a brave boy, simple English, with a lesson at the end."
2. "Make 10 MCQs from the story above, answers separately at the end."
3. "Translate the story above into Roman Urdu."
4. "Check my English paragraph below and list my mistakes in a table."
5. "Make a 7-day study plan for my exams: 2 hours a day, physics, chemistry, biology."

Five good answers instead of one confused one. Splitting is not slower — re-doing a bad answer is slower.

Example 2 — The invented fact, caught

AI answer: "According to a 2023 survey, 87% of Pakistani students use AI daily."

That number looks exact, which is exactly why it is suspicious. A good reply is not "make it more accurate" — the AI will invent a new number. The right move: "Do not give statistics unless you are certain. If you are not certain, say so." Then check the claim yourself from a real source before repeating it anywhere.

Example 3 — The private-data prompt, fixed

Unsafe version:

```
Write a message to my bank. My account number is 0123456789 and my CNIC is 12345-1234567-1. Tell them my card is lost.
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Safe version:

```
Write a polite message to my bank saying my ATM card is lost and I want it blocked. Leave a blank line where I will write my account number myself. Do not ask me for any personal numbers.
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The AI writes the message; your numbers never enter the chat. This rule has no exceptions.

Example 4 — Before and after: asking the AI to decide for you

Before:

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Should I take science or arts after class 10?
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After:

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I am in class 10 in Pakistan. My marks are strong in maths and science, weaker in memorisation subjects. I like building things and I want a job that pays early. List the pros and cons of science and arts for someone like me, in a table, without recommending one. I will decide myself.
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The first prompt hands your decision to a stranger that knows nothing about you. The second uses the AI for what it is good at — laying out options clearly — and keeps the decision where it belongs: with you, who knows your marks, interests and family situation.

Example 5 — Before and after: the same prompt in a different tool

Prompt that worked in Tool A: "Write a 200-word story about a brave boy, simple English, with a lesson at the end."

In Tool B the same prompt gives a 400-word story with difficult words. That is not a failure — tools differ in how strictly they follow length and level. The fix is one test run in the new tool, then one adjustment ("under 200 words, class 6 level, no difficult words") before trusting it for real work. Never assume a tuned prompt ports perfectly.

Example 6 — The checklist in action, on one real prompt

Prompt to check: "Write about my shop and make a post."

Checklist pass:

- One task? No — "write about" and "make a post" are two jobs. Split them.
- Context? No — which shop, where, for whom? Add one line.
- Private data? Not yet — but do not add the shop's phone number into the prompt; add it yourself after.
- Format? No — post for what: WhatsApp, Facebook? Under how many words? Name it.
- Checking plan? Read before posting, check every price and timing yourself.

Ten seconds, five fixes, one usable post instead of one generic paragraph.

Real-world case — Where this is actually used

A school social-media team posts three times a week. Their rule is this lesson as a poster above the computer: one task per prompt, no phone numbers or CNICs in any chat, every price and date checked against the school notice before posting, AI lists options and humans decide. They have never posted a wrong fee or a leaked number — not because they are experts, but because the checklist catches the mistake before the post button does. Small shops use the same poster, with one extra line: "Never paste a customer's message or number."

Quick recap

- One task per prompt; split giant prompts.
- Check key facts; never submit an unread answer.
- Never paste private data — no numbers, no passwords, no CNIC.
- Invented statistics look real; verify numbers that matter.
- AI lists pros and cons; YOU decide.
- Iterate instead of accepting a mediocre first answer.
- The explain-back test: if you cannot explain it, you do not own it.

Common mistakes

1. **Thinking mistakes mean you are bad at AI** — they are normal beginner habits. Fix: use this lesson as a checklist until the fixes become habit.
2. **Fixing only the symptom** — rewording a giant prompt instead of splitting it. Fix: split first, wordsmith second.
3. **Checking easy answers and skipping hard ones** — the important answers are exactly the ones that need checking. Fix: the more it matters, the more you verify.

1. **Trusting the confident tone** — AI answers sound sure even when they are guessing, and the surer they sound, the less people check. Fix: treat confidence as style, not evidence. The check is the evidence.
2. **Sharing a prompt that still contains personal details** — a great prompt shared with a classmate still carries your name, school, or phone number if you pasted them in. Fix: before sharing, replace every personal fact with [BRACKETS].

Practice

1. Take the last 5 prompts you sent to any AI tool. Score each against this checklist (one point per mistake). Rewrite the worst one properly and send it again.
2. Write down your personal "never paste" list (numbers, passwords, addresses, other people's messages) and stick it where you study. One line, where you will see it.

1. Score your last 10 prompts against this lesson's checklist (one point per mistake). Take your worst-scoring prompt, fix every mistake, and send the fixed version. How many points did the score improve?

2. Write a "never paste" list for yourself: numbers, passwords, addresses, other people's messages, photos of documents. Put it where you study, and check your next 5 prompts against it.
3. Find one AI answer that sounded confident but was wrong. Write down: what made it sound confident, how you caught it, and what check you will run next time before trusting a similar answer.

Practice quiz

1. What is wrong with a giant prompt that asks five things at once?

- Nothing, AI handles it fine
- The AI does all five jobs shallowly — split it, one task per prompt
- It costs too much
- Giant prompts are banned

Answer: The AI does all five jobs shallowly — split it, one task per prompt

2. An AI answer gives an exact-looking statistic, like '87% of students'. What should you do?

- Quote it, exact numbers are always true
- Be suspicious: AI tools invent confident-looking numbers — verify from a real source before repeating it
- Ask the AI to make it more accurate
- Round it to 90%

Answer: Be suspicious: AI tools invent confident-looking numbers — verify from a real source before repeating it

3. What is the explain-back test?

- Explaining the AI to your teacher
- If you cannot explain a pasted answer or code in your own words, you do not own it yet — learn it before you use it
- Asking the AI to explain itself twice
- A test the AI gives you

Answer: If you cannot explain a pasted answer or code in your own words, you do not own it yet — learn it before you use it

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