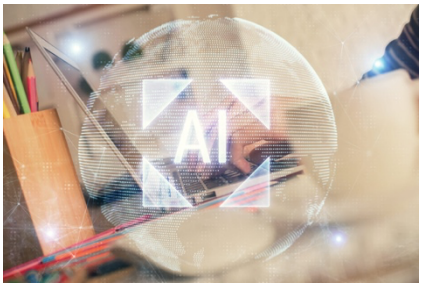
Prompting AI with Purpose



As an educator, you bring expertise, context, and judgment to your classroom that no AI tool can replicate. When using your AI tool of choice, ensure your expertise remains at the center. Recent research finds that over-reliance on AI weakens critical thinking and problem-solving skills. How you prompt AI determines whether it becomes a genuine thinking partner or simply a content generator. The difference lies in whether your judgment stays in the process.

This tool covers where AI fits in your teaching practice and how to prompt it with intention. You want to ensure your thinking, not AI's output, drives every instructional decision.

Prompting with Intention

Thinking-partner prompting isn't a formula, but a habit that you build. These practices will help you get more out of every AI conversation and keep your judgment at the center of the process.

- **Bring your context.** AI doesn't know your students, your school, or your professional history. The more relevant context you provide, the more useful the response will be. This includes sharing your state standards, curriculum materials, texts, or any resources central to your work. Don't start with a generic question when a specific one is available.
- **Name what you've already tried.** This prevents AI from offering you solutions you've already ruled out and pushes the conversation toward genuinely new thinking.
- **Ask AI to challenge you.** Invite pushback. Ask what you might be missing, what assumptions you're making, or what tradeoffs you haven't considered. This is where AI moves from content generator to thinking partner.
- **Follow up.** A single exchange is rarely enough. The most productive AI conversations develop through successive questions that narrow, deepen, or redirect the discussion.
- **Verify before you act.** AI can generate plausible-sounding information that is incomplete or inaccurate. Your professional judgment is the final check on anything AI produces.

AI in Your Teaching Practice

AI is most useful in teaching when it helps you think through decisions you are already making. It works best as a sounding board, a generator of alternatives, and a challenger of your own assumptions, not as a replacement for the instructional expertise you already bring.

Teachers are finding AI valuable across four core areas of their practice:

- **Planning and Unit Design** — Thinking through sequencing, identifying gaps in a unit, or exploring approaches you haven't considered

- **Differentiation** — Generating options for reaching diverse learners when your first approach isn't working
- **Assessment Design** — Pressure-testing whether your assessments actually measure what you intend them to measure
- **Professional Reflection and Goal-Setting** — Using AI as a thought partner to examine your own practice, set goals, and think through challenges you're navigating

The Difference Between Extracting and Thinking

There are two ways to use AI:

- Extracting — Asking AI for an answer and using what it gives you
- Thinking — Using AI to push your own reasoning further

The distinction is in how you prompt it. Extracting gets you content, and thinking with AI gets you clarity. Consider the difference in these two approaches:

Extracting	**Thinking**
Give me activities for teaching addition in 1st grade.	My 1st-graders are starting addition with sums to 20, and I want to move beyond worksheets. I'm considering using story problems in classroom contexts, but I'm not sure how to structure them to build toward independence. What should I be thinking through as I design the activities?
Give me activities for teaching fractions in 4th grade.	I'm designing activities for a 4th-grade fractions unit, and I'm debating whether to start with visual models or number lines. What trade-offs are there, and what questions should I ask myself before I decide?
Give me differentiation strategies for struggling readers.	I have a group of 7th-graders who understand the content when we discuss it in class, but consistently underperform on written assessments. I've tried sentence starters, and they aren't gaining traction. What factors should I be considering that I might be overlooking?
Give me differentiation strategies for high school theater students.	I have 11th-graders in theater with a wide range of performance confidence. Some students are shutting down completely during ensemble work, and it's affecting the whole-group dynamic. I've tried low-stakes improvisation exercises, and they aren't gaining traction. What factors should I be considering?

Notice that the thinking prompts don't ask AI for a finished product. They bring your existing knowledge and context into the conversation and ask AI to extend your thinking rather than replace it.