

How to get better results from AI design tools

A practical cheat sheet of prompting techniques, visual language terms, and imperfection triggers to help you go from "good enough" to genuinely great.

1. Tell the AI what to avoid

AI tools are trained to please, which means they default to safe, polished, and generic. The fastest way to push past that is to add constraints. Telling the AI what you ****don't**** want is just as powerful as describing what you ****do**** want, especially in the early brainstorming stage.

Think of it like briefing a junior designer: if you don't set guardrails, they'll hand you the most average version of your idea.

Try adding phrases like these to your prompts

☐ **no drop shadows**☐ **avoid stock photo feel**☐ **no gradients**☐ **not corporate**☐ **avoid symmetry**☐ **no generic icons**☐ **not overly polished**☐ **avoid flat illustration style**

2. Ask for imperfections

AI is very good at producing glossy, perfect images. Sometimes a little too good. Images can end up looking uncannily smooth or staged. Adding imperfection terms brings in the kind of texture and realism that makes an image feel like it was actually captured, not generated.

These are the specific terms that signal realism to the model:

☐ **motion blur**☐ **film grain**☐ **chromatic aberration**☐ **lens distortion**☐ **fog**☐ **atmospheric haze**☐ **dust**☐ **slight asymmetry**☐ **imperfect focus**

3. Steal language from designers

This works especially well in tools like Claude or Stitch where you're prompting for layouts and UI. Instead of vague directions like "make this look professional," describe the visual properties directly: spacing, color values, font weights, and layout structure.

AI was trained on design documentation, CSS, and editorial language. It responds better to specifics.

✓ Specific and clear

- + "Minimal layout: #1A1A1A on white, single column layout with 80px vertical padding between sections"

✗ Too vague

- "Make this look professional and clean"

Same principle for image prompts:

✓ Extensive

- + "Candid medium shot of a woman in a quiet Paris cafe at golden hour, shot on a 50mm lens, shallow depth of field, soft film grain, warm highlights, muted shadows, natural window lighting"

✗ Too short

- "A woman in a cafe"

3.1 Use visual stack prompting

Instead of writing one sentence, structure your image prompt in layers. Each layer adds a different dimension to the output, and together they guide the model toward something coherent rather than a mix of random keywords.

Here are the six layers to build from:

☐**Subject**

What is it?

☐**Environment**

Where is it?

☐**Composition**

How is it framed?

☐**Lighting**

What mood?

☐**Rendering style**

How should it look?

- ☐ **Texture / finish**
 Film? CGI? Editorial?

Full example using all 6 layers

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"Futuristic botanist in a greenhouse [subject + environment], low-angle portrait [composition], neon humidity haze, rim lighting, cinematic shadows [lighting], Kodak Portra tones, editorial sci-fi aesthetic [rendering style], hyper-detailed skin texture, volumetric lighting [texture]"
```

3.2 Learn lens language

Specifying lens length is one of the easiest ways to change the mood and realism of an image. AI tools were trained on photography metadata and respond well to these references, even for non-photographic outputs.

- ☐ **24mm**
 Wide, immersive. Good for: Architecture, scenes, cinematic wide shots
- ☐ **35mm**
 Documentary feel. Good for: Street photography, casual brand imagery
- ☐ **50mm**
 Natural human perspective. Good for: Lifestyle images, people, everyday moments
- ☐ **85mm**
 Portrait compression. Good for: Headshots, product shots, editorial portraits
- ☐ **135mm**
 Luxury / editorial. Good for: Fashion, high-end product imagery

3.3 Control lighting explicitly

Lighting is often the biggest difference between an image that looks real and one that looks generated. Adding specific lighting language helps the model understand the mood, depth, and atmosphere you're going for.

☐ **Rembrandt lighting**☐ **Softbox lighting**☐ **Rim lighting**☐ **Practical lighting**☐ **Volumetric lighting**☐ **Overcast daylight**☐ **Moody tungsten lighting**☐ **Neon backlighting**☐ **Chiaroscuro**☐ **Bounce lighting**

3.4 Guide the model with materials and texture

This is especially useful for product images. By default, AI renders surfaces with a kind of "plastic smoothness" that looks unreal. Adding material descriptions gives surfaces weight, history, and credibility.

☐ **weathered leather**☐ **brushed aluminum**☐ **matte ceramic**☐ **condensation**

☐ **dust particles**☐ **imperfect skin texture**☐ **fabric weave**☐ **cracked paint**☐ **film grain**

REFLECT

Jot down what you're taking with you.

Use this space for the ideas, questions, and next steps you want to remember.

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