Prompt engineering in 2026: beyond prompts, context engineering

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Writing a good prompt matters, but in a real system the prompt is only part of what the model sees. Context engineering is the wider job: deciding everything that goes into the model's context for a given call.

TL;DR The short version

- Context engineering is deciding everything that goes into the model's context for a call, not just the prompt.
- Be specific about task, audience and format, and show good examples rather than long descriptions.
- Test prompt changes against a fixed set of inputs like software, and treat text from documents and web pages as untrusted.

Read online, listen to it, or change the text size: https://blogs.iictp.org/prompt-engineering-and-context-engineering

What goes into context

- Instructions and role.
- The user's request and recent conversation.
- Retrieved documents and tool results.
- Examples of the desired output.
- Constraints and output format.

Principles

- **Be specific.** State the task, the audience and the format.
- **Show, don't just tell.** A few good examples beat a long description.
- **Keep it relevant.** More context is not better context; irrelevant text can mislead the model.
- **Order matters.** Put the most important instructions where the model will weigh them.
- **Version it.** Prompts are code: review, test and track them.

Test the prompt like software

Keep a set of inputs with expected qualities, run every prompt change against it, and look at regressions as well as improvements.

Treat outside text as untrusted

Documents and web pages can contain instructions aimed at the model. Separate trusted instructions from untrusted content, and never let retrieved text widen what the system is allowed to do.

Related credential: AI Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Anthropic. Prompt engineering overview. docs.anthropic.com.

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