



THE BRIEF METHOD

Don't prompt AI. Brief it.

Project managers brief people every day. AI assistants need the same five things, and a review afterwards. Give all five and the output stops being generic.

Background

B

What does it need to know first?

The project, the people, the constraints, what has been tried, what changed this week. The part most people skip, and the one that matters most.

Weak: "Write a status report."

Strong: "PMO, 30 projects, CIO reads Friday. Three projects red this week due to a vendor delay. Updates attached."

Role

R

Who should it be while it works?

The role sets the standard of judgment and the vocabulary. A senior program manager writes differently from "a helpful assistant".

Weak: "You are an assistant."

Strong: "You are a senior program manager preparing a one-page summary for a CIO who reads for decisions."

Intent

I

What is the output for?

Which decision should it support? A risk summary for a board is a different document from one for a new team member.

Weak: "Summarize the risks."

Strong: "Give the CIO what changed and the one decision we need from her on the vendor delay."

Expectations

E

What is the quality bar? What is out of bounds?

Length, tone, must-include, must-exclude, must-never-invent. Mark gaps as gaps.

Weak: (nothing)

Strong: "Do not invent any number not in the updates. Mark gaps as gaps. Plain English. Lead with what changed."

Format

F

What shape should it take?

A memo with these headings. A table with these columns. A list of questions. Most rework comes from leaving this out.

Weak: "Keep it short."

Strong: "One page. Headings: What changed, Decisions needed, Risks to watch, Next week. Max five bullets each."

Then: Review

Read the output critically. Add the missing background, tighten an expectation, fix the format. Run it again. Two rounds beat any single perfect prompt.

AI drafts. You decide. The project manager stays accountable for the result.



A blank brief to copy

BACKGROUND

[Project, stakeholders, constraints, what has been tried, what changed this week. Attach or paste the source documents.]

ROLE

[Who the assistant should be. Seniority, function, who the audience is.]

INTENT

[What this output is for. Which decision it supports.]

EXPECTATIONS

[Length. Tone. Must include. Must leave out. Never invent anything not in the sources; mark gaps as gaps.]

FORMAT

[Headings, table columns, bullet limits, page length.]

REVIEW

After you answer, list the assumptions you made and the gaps in my background so I can improve this brief and run it again.

Ten briefs a project manager writes every week

TASK	THE LINE THAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE
Weekly status draft	"Lead with what changed since last week. Never invent a number."
Meeting actions and decisions	"Output only decisions, actions with owner and date, and open questions. No transcript."
Risk register clean-up	"Flag risks with no owner, no date or no response. Suggest wording for vague ones. Do not add new risks."
Steering paper	"One page. The decision requested in the first sentence. Options with cost and time impact."
Stakeholder email	"Audience is a nervous sponsor. Calm, specific, one ask. Under 150 words."
Schedule review	"List activities with no predecessor, no successor or constraints. Ask me before assuming anything about logic."
Lessons learned	"Group by cause, not by phase. Each lesson must have a change we would make next time."
Vendor comparison	"Use only the criteria I gave. Mark any criterion you cannot assess from the documents as 'not evidenced'."
Interview preparation	"Ask me the ten hardest questions for this role, one at a time, and critique each answer."
Onboarding a new PM	"Write a one-page orientation to this project from the attached documents. Flag anything that looks out of date."

Brief responsibly

- Only use platforms your organization has approved, with data they are approved for.
- A named person reviews AI output before anyone relies on it.
- Never automate a decision about people, money above a threshold, regulators or safety.
- Keep a note of where AI was used in a deliverable.