

Prompt Failure Diagnostic Sheet

A One-Page Failure Diagnosis Tool

Use this immediately when AI output is wrong, weak, or untrustworthy. Do not rephrase the prompt. Do not change models. Diagnose first.

Step 1: Identify the Failure Symptom

- Sounds reasonable but says nothing specific
- Confident but likely wrong
- Invents facts, sources, or details
- Too long / rambling
- Wrong level of detail
- Off-topic or adjacent to the task
- Refuses or hedges excessively

If none apply, your problem is not prompting.

Step 2: Map to the Failed Pillar

SYMPTOM	LIKELY CAUSE	FIX
Vagueness	Weak TASK / missing CONTEXT	Add specifics and situational context
Overconfidence	Missing GUARDRAILS	Add uncertainty flagging instructions
Hallucination	No source constraints	Restrict to provided documents only
Rambling	Missing OUTPUT SHAPE	Add explicit length/format constraints
Wrong detail level	Weak CONTEXT	Specify audience and depth
Off-topic drift	Weak TASK	Tighten scope, exclude adjacent topics
Generic output	Missing CONTEXT/ROLE	Add concrete context, strengthen role

Step 3: Apply the Correct Fix

ROLE failed →

- Specify expertise and perspective
- Explicitly state what the model is not

CONTEXT failed →

- Add only information required for correctness
- Remove irrelevant background

TASK failed →

- Define what "done" means
- Replace vague verbs with executable actions

OUTPUT SHAPE failed →

- Constrain format, length, and structure
- Force scannability (bullets, tables, limits)

GUARDRAILS failed →

- Prohibit speculation and invention
- Require uncertainty to be stated
- Restrict allowed sources

Bad output is not an AI failure. It is a specification failure.

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