

The Insight Chain

Prompting as a process — and how one conversation threads all five skills together

The vending machine and the conversation

Here is how most people use an AI, and there is no shame in it because it is the obvious way: **one prompt in, one answer out**. A vending machine. Insert the question, collect the output, walk away. Call this **prompting as performance** — you perform the request, you receive the deliverable, done.

It works — for fetching. But watch what it quietly assumes: that the thing you wanted was *an answer*. When the thing you actually want is **understanding**, a single prompt-and-answer gives you the one thing that looks like learning and isn't: a finished output you didn't build. This final piece of the course is about the other way to use the tool — **prompting as process** — where insight is not delivered in one turn but **constructed across several**, each answer becoming the raw material for a sharper next question. Learning was never one prompt feeding one answer. It is a chain.

Start with an experiment on yourself

You want to know whether your essay's argument holds up. Compare two ways of asking.

The vending-machine way — one prompt:

YOU: "Is my thesis argument any good?"

AI: "It's reasonably clear but would benefit from more evidence and a stronger counter-argument section." ← generic, forgettable

The chain way — each answer feeds the next question:

1. "Summarise my argument back to me in your own words."
→ now you can see whether it even landed – and whether YOU can recognise it
2. "What is the single strongest objection to it?"
3. "Which of my assumptions does that objection actually target?"
4. "Don't fix it – ask me the one question that would help me see the fix."

The first way hands you edits you'll forget by tomorrow. The second walks you to the exact weak joint in your own reasoning — a thing you will *recognise* in every argument you write from now on. Same tool, same five minutes. One gave you a deliverable; the other built you a piece of understanding you now own. That difference is the whole module.

Two honest modes: fetch and build

This is not "chains good, single prompts bad." That would be a lie, and this course has been about not being lied to. There are two legitimate modes, and the skill is knowing which one you are in.

Fetch mode is one prompt, one answer — and it is exactly right when what you need is a fact, a format, a quick transformation. "Put this in APA." "What's the capital of Chile?" "Reword this sentence." Reaching for a chain here would be silly over-engineering. Respect fetch mode; you'll use

it every day.

Build mode is a deliberate chain — and it is what you need when the goal is to *understand*, to decide, to create something that didn't exist. Here, a single prompt-and-answer is the booby prize you met in the judgement module: you get an output and learn nothing. The trap is that most people run **fetch mode by default, even when the situation is a build**. Because fetching feels fast and building feels slow — and the cost of the mistake (understanding you never gained) is invisible.

The durable insight (write this down)

In build mode, each answer is not the finish line — it is the raw material for your next question.

The output is an input. Insight is not fetched in one turn; it is constructed across several, by you, one link at a time. Ask first: am I fetching, or building? If you're building, do not stop at the first answer — that's where the work begins.

How a chain grows

A chain is not a list of tricks to memorise. It is a single motion repeated: **get something, then do something to it**. You open with a first answer; you probe it; you make it argue back; you widen and then narrow it; you check what it claimed; and finally you synthesise — in your own words — the thing you have built. Each link is small. The understanding is the sum. And crucially, the last link is always yours: the AI can hand you material at every step, but the moment where it all clicks into *your* understanding is a thing only you can do.

The thread: every link is a skill you already have

Here is why this is the last piece and not a sixth one. A good chain is not a new set of techniques — it is **the five skills of this course, performed in sequence as one conversation**. You have been learning the links all along. The chain just strings them together.

YOUR MOVE IN THE CHAIN	THE SKILL IT IS
"Explain the part I didn't actually follow."	Reading vs. Meaning — don't accept the fluent surface; make sure there's meaning under it.
"Show me a source for that claim, and I'll check one."	The Reference Chain — pull on what it hands you before you trust it.
"What would a critic, or a different school, say?"	The Lens & the Smudge — surface the standpoint hiding in a confident answer.
"Don't answer — challenge my reasoning and make me judge."	The Judgment Gym — stimulate your <i>dømmekraft</i> ; don't let it simulate for you.
"Give me the questions I'm not asking — then I'll pick."	The Scope Finder — expand the problem, then contract it yourself.

Run those five moves on a single topic and you have not just gotten an answer — you have interrogated it, grounded it, re-framed it, been challenged by it, and widened then narrowed it. What comes out the other end is understanding *you built*. That is the aha the course has been pointing at

the whole time: not a moment that arrives, but a structure you assemble.

The move that turns a tool into a teacher

After every answer, resist the reflex to stop. Ask one more thing: “**what should I do with this answer, rather than take it?**” Probe it, challenge it, check it, or build on it. The single question that converts an AI from a vending machine into a teacher is the one you ask *after* it has already answered.

Prompt patterns for building a chain

Not a menu of techniques — just the shape of the motion, so you can start today:

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OPEN “Give me a first take on X – I'm going to push on it.”
PROBE “Explain the step I didn't follow. Don't move on yet.”
CHALLENGE “Argue the strongest case against what you just said.”
WIDEN “What questions about this am I not asking?”
CHECK “Which claim here is weakest, and how would I verify it?”
SYNTHESISE “I'll now explain it back; tell me where I'm still wrong.”
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Notice the last move puts *you* back at the centre. A chain that never ends in your own words is just a longer vending machine.

The whole series, on one line

Five skills, one habit of mind. Fluency isn't meaning. Form isn't grounding. Confidence isn't objectivity. A verdict isn't your judgement. And a tidy problem isn't the right one. The thread that lets you act on all five is this: **don't stop at the first answer**. Ask again, ask better, ask *with* the machine rather than *of* it — and do the final thinking yourself. That is what it means to be confident with AI: not trusting it more, and not refusing it, but knowing exactly how to make it work for the one thing that matters — your own understanding.

Try it yourself: the companion widget

The **Insight Chain** widget lets you build a chain link by link and watch it grow. At each step you choose: keep building, or grab the answer and go. Build a full chain on a learning goal and you'll see the whole series reassemble as one conversation — every link badged with the skill it came from. And one scenario will reward you for *not* building a chain at all, because you'll be in fetch mode, and knowing the difference is the point.

Reflection questions

1. Think of the last time you used an AI for something that mattered. Were you fetching or building — and which did the task actually call for? What would the chain version have looked like?
2. The temptation to stop at the first answer is strongest exactly when you're tired or rushed — which is often when the task matters most. What personal cue could remind you to ask one more question?
3. Which of the five skills is your weakest link in a chain — the move you skip? What would practising it as a prompt look like this week?

4. A chain must end in your own words. Why is that final synthesis the one step you can never let the AI do for you — even though it easily could?

A closing note: you started this course wanting AI to give you good answers. You're ending it able to build good understanding — which is a rarer and more durable thing, and one no future model will take away from you, because you'll own the process, not just the output. The performance was never the point. The process was. Now go put it to work, and keep testing everything here against what you find — including this.