

The Four Stages Nobody Tells You About

By Austen Tucker · 2026

Everyone's obsessed with finding the perfect prompt. The magic words that unlock 10x productivity. The template that finally makes AI "work."

I'm here to tell you: you're optimizing the wrong thing.

The people getting actual value from AI aren't the ones with the best prompts. They're the ones who moved through four predictable stages as fast as possible. And most people get stuck at stage two, wondering why everyone else seems to be lapping them.

Here's the map nobody's giving you.

Stage 1: It's Just Another Tool

You treat AI like a search engine with a personality. You ask it questions. Sometimes it's useful. Sometimes it hallucinates. You copy-paste the output, use it if it's good enough, discard it if it's not.

What this looks like:

- You judge AI by its first response
- You compare it to Google, Stack Overflow, autocomplete
- You use it sporadically when you remember it exists
- You get frustrated when it doesn't "just work"
- You tell people "AI can't do X" after one failed attempt

What this looks like in practice: You open a chat and type: "Here are my todos: finish the deck, email Sarah, review contracts. What should I do first?" Claude answers. Tomorrow you open a new chat and do it again from scratch. The list lives nowhere. The context resets every time. You're using a \$20/month tool as a slightly smarter sticky note.

How to level up: Pick one recurring task. Use AI for it every single day for two weeks. Not because it's perfect—because you need reps. Start noticing why outputs fall short. Stop asking "Can AI do this?" Start asking "How do I need to structure this for AI to be useful?"

The shift: from "AI can't" to "I haven't figured out how yet."

Stage 2: Prompt Obsession

You've discovered that wording matters. Now you're convinced everything is about the prompt.

You collect templates. You obsess over phrasing. You spend twenty minutes crafting the perfect prompt for a task that would've taken ten minutes to do yourself. You're in every Discord, every Subreddit, chasing the mythical "perfect prompt" that'll unlock the value you keep hearing about.

What this looks like:

- You have a folder of saved prompts
- You think success is about finding the right words
- Every interaction feels artisanal—you're hand-crafting every request
- You treat prompting like a dark art instead of a repeatable process
- You're spending more time optimizing prompts than doing actual work

Here's the uncomfortable truth: this stage feels productive. You're learning. You're experimenting. But you're also stuck in artisan mode, treating every task like it needs bespoke craftsmanship.

What this looks like in practice: You've built a prompt. Categories, priority levels, a specific output format you like. You paste it in every morning with your updated list. It feels like a system. It's not — it's a ritual. You are the database. Every session, you're reconstructing state from memory and copy-paste. Forget to include something? It doesn't exist.

How to level up: Stop collecting prompts. Start extracting structure. What makes a good prompt good? Not the words—the shape. The order. The constraints. The output format you're requesting.

Build a template. Use it ten times. Refine the template based on what breaks.

Stage 3: Invisible Prompts

You've stopped thinking about prompts. Now you're building workflows where AI is embedded so deeply that end users don't even see it.

You've got templates. You've got scripts. You've got structured processes where the prompt is just infrastructure. The people using your systems don't need to know how to prompt—they just use the tool, and it works.

What this looks like:

- You build automations, not one-offs
- You measure outputs, not inputs
- You think in systems and repeatable processes
- You've stopped admiring clever prompts and started instrumenting results
- Your AI workflows are as boring and reliable as your database queries

This is where most people think they want to be. It's not. This is table stakes for actual productivity.

What this looks like in practice: Your todo list lives in a persistent artifact. You have a template for updating it. You don't hand-craft anything — you feed it new inputs and the format handles itself. Other people could use this. You've stopped thinking about the prompt and started thinking about the process.

How to level up: Start treating inputs as data, not natural language. Stop asking "How do I phrase this?" Start asking "What structured data does the system need?" Instrument everything. What's working? What's breaking? Where's the variance?

The shift: from "how do I use AI" to "what does the system need to produce consistent results."

Stage 4: Prompts as Data

You've stopped thinking about AI as a tool. Now it's infrastructure. A data pipeline. Prompts are inputs. Outputs are data. The system iterates based on feedback loops, evaluation metrics, and structured learning.

You're not manually improving prompts anymore. You're designing systems where better data automatically produces better results. You're thinking about AI the way you think about databases, caching layers, CI/CD pipelines.

What this looks like:

- New team members inherit system intelligence automatically
- Your AI effectiveness scales without individual heroics
- You're running evals, measuring drift, tracking quality over time
- You treat context, prompts, and outputs as versioned, instrumented data
- The organization learns faster than any individual

This isn't about being smart. It's about building systems that compound. Systems where getting better is automatic, not manual.

What this looks like in practice: A script maintains your todo list in a markdown file. Your AI has it in context automatically. You don't open a chat and paste anything — you just say "mark the deck done, add a call

with Sarah on Friday" and the file updates. The state persists. The system runs. You stopped using AI and started operating one.

What mastery looks like: The work gets better without you personally getting better. That's the unlock.

Why Most People Get Stuck

Stage 2 feels like progress. You're learning! You're experimenting! You're part of the community!

But you're also stuck in a local maximum. Every task requires you. Every output requires your personal touch. You've turned yourself into a bottleneck.

The 10x leap isn't better prompts. It's better systems. Systems that don't need you to be in the loop every time. Systems that get better as they run, not just when you tinker.

And here's the part nobody wants to hear: moving from Stage 2 to Stage 3 feels bad. It feels like you're regressing. You're building infrastructure instead of shipping outputs. You're instrumenting instead of optimizing. It's boring. It's not sexy.

But it's the only way forward.

How to Move Faster

The speed at which you move through these stages determines how much value you actually extract from AI.

Stage 1 ' Stage 2: Start paying attention. Track what works. Notice patterns.

Stage 2 ' Stage 3: Stop crafting. Start systematizing. Build templates, workflows, and repeatable processes.

Stage 3 ' Stage 4: Instrument everything. Measure. Iterate based on data, not intuition.

The people who got to Stage 4 first didn't have better prompts. They had better systems. And better systems come from moving through the boring middle stages as fast as possible.

You can't skip steps. But you can stop spending years in Stage 2, convinced that the next perfect prompt will be the one that changes everything.

It won't.

The shift from prompts to systems is where the leverage is. Everything else is just setup.

The uncomfortable truth: Most people will read this, nod along, and go right back to collecting prompts.

Don't be most people.