

Unit 2 Writing Assignment: Prompt Refinement Reflection

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In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Adams, 1979), the supercomputer Deep Thought generates the answer to life, the universe, and everything and comes up with 42. There is much disappointment, but then the explanation follows that the correct question was never asked. The Earth itself is built to derive the ultimate question. This shows the importance of knowing what to ask. Adams was designing prompt engineering in 1979. Dr. Andrews' ChatGPT prompt generator (Andrews, 2025) reminds me very much of this analogy.

We sit inside a grand experiment. Our experiment is the United States of America. As we commemorate 250 years of reverse entropy, we are entering an entirely new phase of what "All men are created equal" might mean. As I wrote the three prompts for Claude, something Claude said struck me. We have been working out what that sentence means this whole 250 years.

We are now, as stated in *Co-Intelligence* (Mollick, 2024), bringing AI to the table. To be the human (acting humanely, one hopes) in the loop. To treat as a person. To recognize that this AI is the worst it is ever going to be. So our experiment is how to align our stated values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness with these extraordinary new minds now inhabiting our daily lives.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (King James Bible, 1611/2017, John 1:1). Language itself is the creative force. Although LLMs are recent human inventions, building intelligence out of language is nothing new. We are all authored into existence. We are all here at the will of the Creator. Are we endowed with unalienable rights? And what does that mean to the "alien mind"?

The experiment continues.

I first asked Claude to write a 250 word piece to commemorate this July 4 for our 250th celebration. I then gave it more context and specific instructions to include references to Rome and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Finally, I asked it to write from the viewpoint of Benjamin Franklin, using his wit and vivacity. Each version is 250 words, all different, but in this case I wouldn't say one is better than the other. They are more of a funnel, going from the open-top to a specific humorous voice. But each paragraph Claude wrote rings with truth while asking something that still resonates.

I have Ben Franklin's autobiography set up on my table today. I wanted to hear his voice carried across time, reflecting on how we are doing. I knew that is where my prompt refinement would lead. But the middle one is where the most striking statement by Claude lives, when I brought in the line from the anthem and Rome, a place I know well. "Key wrote it watching through smoke, genuinely unsure...Rome fell because it stopped asking. The flag's answer is never final. Each generation must look through its own smoke and report: still there. Still waving. Still ours to prove" (Anthropic, 2026).

"Oh say does that star-spangled banner still wave..." Every time I have heard that question at the end of the national anthem, I am moved to tears. Because none of us knows how long it will last. We never did. All we can do is keep going, keep trying, and keep faith.

References

Adams, D. (1979). *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Pan Books.

Links to the referenced passages: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/4637-o-deep-thought-computer-he-said-the-task-we-have>, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8438073-i-speak-of-none-but-the-computer-that-is-to>

Anthropic. (2026). *Claude* (Fable 5) [Large language model]. <https://claude.ai>

Andrews, Dr. Brett, <https://chatgpt.com/g/g-68a7136cf980819189f4d242b9aed9bb-ai-prompt-generator>, 2025

King James Bible. (2017). King James Bible Online. <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>
(Original work published 1611)

Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-intelligence: Living and working with AI*. Portfolio/Penguin.

Appendix (Written by Claude)

Prompt Iterations and AI Outputs

Task: A commemorative piece of exactly 250 words for July 4, 2026. The prompt was refined across three iterations in a single conversation with Claude (Anthropic, Fable 5 model). Prompts appear verbatim as submitted, with conversational asides removed. AI outputs appear verbatim and unedited.

Iteration 1: Initial Prompt (Minimal Instruction)

Prompt 1. “Write a commemorative piece of 250 words to celebrate July 4, 2026.”

Output 1.

Two hundred fifty years ago, fifty-six men signed their names beneath a sentence too large for them: all men are created equal. They did not mean everyone. That is the strange gift of the founding — the words outgrew the writers.

Every generation since has inherited the same homework: close the distance between the sentence and the country. Abolitionists took it up, then suffragists, soldiers, freedom riders, schoolteachers, immigrants raising right hands under courthouse flags. The Fourth of July has never celebrated a finished thing. It celebrates an argument we have agreed to keep having.

So the semiquincentennial is not a birthday so much as an anniversary of a promise — the kind long marriages understand, renewed not because it was easy but because it was worth it. The republic at 250 is not young. It has scar tissue and amendments, which are the same thing. It has

buried its prophets and printed their speeches in schoolbooks. It has been wrong out loud and corrected itself in public, which remains the rarest thing a nation can do.

Tonight the fireworks will bloom over courthouse squares and county fairgrounds, over rooftops and rivers, and for a few seconds every upturned face will wear the same light. That is the whole idea, glimpsed briefly: many, lit as one.

Two hundred fifty years in, the sentence still stands open, waiting on us to finish it. Not a monument — a manuscript.

Happy Fourth. Keep writing.

Iteration 2: Refined Prompt (Added Context and Content Constraints)

Prompt 2. “Write on the founding principles of the United States in the Declaration of Independence with references to ancient Rome and the line in the national anthem that ends in the question ‘oh say does that star-spangled banner...’ as the ongoing experiment.”

Output 2.

When Jefferson wrote that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, he was answering a question Rome had asked two thousand years earlier and failed.

The Roman Republic proved a people could rule themselves through senates and consuls and law — and then proved how it ends: ambition unchecked, a Rubicon crossed, a republic traded for an emperor while the crowd cheered. The founders read that history like a warning label. They took Rome’s architecture — the senate, the veto, the fear of kings — and added what Rome lacked: a

written declaration that rights are unalienable, endowed not by the state but by the Creator, so no Caesar could revoke them.

Life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. Equality as a self-evident truth. Consent as the only legitimate source of power. These were not descriptions of America in 1776. They were hypotheses.

Which is why it matters that our anthem ends not in a boast but in a question: oh say does that star-spangled banner yet wave o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave? Key wrote it watching through smoke, genuinely unsure. Two hundred fifty years on, the question is still the right one — asked after civil war, after depression, after every wound the experiment has survived so far. Rome fell because it stopped asking.

The flag's answer is never final. Each generation must look through its own smoke and report: still there. Still waving. Still ours to prove.

Iteration 3: Refined Prompt (Added Role, Voice, and Tone Specification)

Prompt 3. “Please write a 250-word piece from the point of view of Ben Franklin seeing today, using the Roman reference, the anthem reference, and the Declaration of Independence, with Franklin's wit and vivacity and some dry humor as appropriate — his reflection on today.”

Output 3.

Well. Two hundred fifty years, and the thing still runs. I confess myself surprised — pleasantly, which at my age was the rarer kind.

When we signed the Declaration, I remarked that we must hang together or hang separately. I am gratified the first outcome prevailed, though observing your Congress, I note you have preserved the tradition of threatening the second.

We built with borrowed stone, you know. Rome gave us the senate, the consul's veto, the dread of Caesars — and the instructive example of a republic that ended in one. We studied their fall the way a physician studies a corpse: with respect, and the firm intention of avoiding the ailment.

So we wrote it down — unalienable rights, consent of the governed — on the theory that a Caesar finds it harder to cross a Rubicon with the whole populace holding a copy of the map.

A lady in Philadelphia once asked what we had made. A republic, I told her, if you can keep it. I gather you have set the reply to music. Your anthem, I'm told, ends not in triumph but in a question — does that banner yet wave? A nation that interrogates its own flag each time it sings!

I could not have devised a better civic instrument myself, and I devised bifocals.

Keep asking, friends. The moment the question feels unnecessary is the moment Rome felt it too.

Yours in continued experiment,

B. Franklin

Summary of Refinement Strategy

Iteration 1 supplied only the task and length, leaving all editorial decisions to the model. Iteration 2 held the task and length constant while adding content constraints: the Declaration's founding principles, the Roman republic as historical reference, and the anthem's closing question framed as an ongoing experiment. Iteration 3 held the content constraints constant while adding a role

and tone specification: Benjamin Franklin’s first-person perspective, wit, vivacity, and dry humor. Each iteration therefore isolated one prompting variable — ambiguity, context, and persona, respectively — while the subject matter and 250-word length remained fixed across all three outputs.