

STORYLAB

Teaching Through Story

A Teacher's Guide to Prompting AI for Purposeful, Age-Appropriate Stories

This guide shows how to turn a learning goal into a clear instruction (a brief) that an AI assistant can use to produce a story worth telling in class. It explains what to include, why each element matters, and gives full worked examples that you can adapt to your own subject and learners.

Produced for the StoryLab project

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1. Why the prompt is the lesson plan

In StoryLab, a story is not decoration around a topic; it is the vehicle that carries the topic into a learner's memory. A well-made educational story lets a child feel a concept before they are asked to define it. They meet a character who faces a problem, they care about what happens, and the idea you are teaching becomes the thing that resolves the tension.

When you ask an AI assistant to write that story, the quality of what you receive depends almost entirely on the quality of what you ask for. The model is fluent and willing, but it cannot read your mind. A vague request produces a generic, forgettable story. A precise request, built around your actual teaching goal, produces something you can walk into class and use.

The most useful shift in thinking is this: stop writing a prompt and start writing a brief. A prompt is a single line. A brief is a short set of instructions that tells the assistant who the story is for, what it must teach, how long it should be, and what it must avoid. The rest of this guide is about how to write that brief well.

The one-sentence rule

If you can only remember one thing: name the learner and name the lesson. "Write a story" is a wish. "Write a 400-word story for 9-year-olds that teaches why we take turns" is an instruction.

2. From a prompt to a brief

Compare these two requests for the same lesson. Both ask for a story about honesty. Only one gives the assistant enough to work with.

A bare prompt

"Write a story about honesty."

Result: a flat tale with a moral stapled on at the end. The age is unknown, so the vocabulary drifts. The lesson is told, not shown. You will rewrite most of it.

A proper brief

"Write a 350-word story for 7 to 8 year olds about honesty. A child finds money in the playground. Show the decision through what the character feels and does, not through a lesson at the end. Simple sentences, warm tone, open question to the class at the close."

Result: a story you can read aloud tomorrow.

The second request is longer, but it took thirty extra seconds and saved you twenty minutes of fixing. Every element you add removes a guess the assistant would otherwise make for you.

3. The eight building blocks of a strong story brief

A complete brief answers eight questions. You do not always need all eight, but the first three are non-negotiable. Think of them as the spine of every request.

3.1 The learning objective (what the story must teach)

State the single idea, skill, or attitude the story should leave behind. Be concrete. "Teach about feelings" is too broad; "help learners recognise that a friend can feel left out even when no one meant to exclude them" is something a story can actually deliver. One story should carry one main idea. If you have three objectives, you probably need three stories.

Write it as an outcome, not a topic

Topic: "recycling" Outcome: "learners understand that sorting waste at home changes what can be reused"

3.2 The audience (who the story is for)

Give the age range and, where relevant, the language level. Age controls sentence length, vocabulary, attention span, and what kind of conflict feels real. A six-year-old and a fifteen-year-old need different stories about the same value. If your learners are reading in a second language, say so and name the level (for example CEFR A2 or B1); the assistant will then control vocabulary and sentence complexity accordingly.

- Age band: for example 6 to 7, 8 to 10, 11 to 13, 14 to 16.
- Language level if not native: for example "learners read English at CEFR A2, keep sentences short and avoid idioms."
- Anything specific about the group: mixed ability, newcomers, learners with attention or reading difficulties.

3.3 The narrative vehicle (genre and shape)

Tell the assistant what kind of story to write. The same lesson lands differently as a fable with talking animals, a realistic school story, a mystery, a science-fiction adventure, or a folk tale. Younger learners respond well to animals and simple fantasy; older learners want realism and stakes that resemble their own lives. If you want a specific structure (a problem-attempt-solution arc, a journey, a day in a life), name it.

3.4 The characters

Even a short story needs someone to care about. You can let the assistant invent the characters, but you will get a better fit if you say who the main character is and what they want. A character who wants something, and is blocked, creates the tension that makes a lesson stick. For inclusive classrooms, you can ask for diverse names and backgrounds, or for a character who shares a challenge your learners face.

Tip

Give the main character a want and an obstacle. "A shy new pupil who wants to join the football game but is afraid to ask" already contains the whole emotional engine of the story.

3.5 The setting and context

Place the story somewhere your learners recognise, or somewhere that serves the lesson. A story about cooperation set in a familiar classroom needs no explaining; a story about ancient trade routes needs the setting to do real teaching work. For Erasmus and European-

citizenship themes, a setting that crosses borders or brings cultures together can carry the message on its own.

3.6 Length and format

Always state a length, in words or in reading minutes. Without it you will get something either too short to matter or too long to read aloud. Also say what shape the output should take: a single story, a story split into chapters, a story with discussion questions at the end, a script for role-play, or a story with blanks for learners to complete.

- "About 300 words, one sitting."
- "Four short chapters, one per lesson."
- "End with three open questions for class discussion."
- "Write it as a short play with parts for five pupils."

3.7 Tone and register

Decide how the story should feel and how it should sound. Warm and gentle, funny and fast, calm and reassuring, adventurous and tense. Tone matters most for sensitive subjects: a story touching on loss, fear, or conflict should be handled with care, and you should say so explicitly. The register (formal or casual, how much dialogue, first or third person) shapes how close the reader feels to the character.

3.8 Constraints and safeguards

This block protects your classroom. Tell the assistant what to avoid and what rules to respect. The clearer your limits, the safer and more usable the result.

- Vocabulary: "avoid words above A2 level" or "explain any new term in the sentence where it appears."
- Themes to avoid: violence, frightening imagery, anything that could single out a child in your group.
- Cultural sensitivity: keep it inclusive, avoid stereotypes, represent a range of backgrounds respectfully.
- Safeguarding: no adult-child secrecy, no contact details, age-appropriate throughout. For young learners, keep characters and situations firmly within a child's safe world.
- Accuracy: if the story teaches a fact (a science process, a historical event), ask the assistant to keep it factually correct and flag anything it is unsure about.

4. Embedding the lesson: show, do not tell

The single most common weakness in AI-written educational stories is the moral bolted on at the end: "And so they learned that sharing is good." Children switch off at that sentence because the story has stopped trusting them to understand. Strong educational stories let the lesson live inside the action.

The technique to ask for is simple to name: make the concept the thing that resolves the conflict. If you are teaching the water cycle, the character should be a droplet whose journey is the cycle. If you are teaching empathy, the turning point should be the moment a character finally sees the situation through someone else's eyes, and that shift should solve their problem. When the idea is what makes the story work, the learner absorbs it without being lectured.

Phrases to put in your brief

"Show the lesson through what characters do and feel, not through a moral at the end."

"Make the concept the thing that solves the problem in the story."

"Leave the meaning open so the class can discuss it, rather than stating it directly."

5. A reusable brief template

Copy this template and fill in the brackets. You can delete any line that does not apply. Pasting the whole block into your AI assistant will give you a strong first draft almost every time.

Write an educational story for the StoryLab project.

Learning objective: [the one idea, skill or attitude the story must teach, written as an outcome].

Audience: [age band]; reading level [native / CEFR level]; group notes [mixed ability, newcomers, etc.].

Genre and shape: [fable / realistic school story / mystery / adventure / folk tale]; structure [problem-attempt-solution / journey / day in a life].

Main character: [who they are, what they want, what blocks them].

Setting: [where and when].

Length and format: [word count or minutes]; [single story / chapters / with discussion questions / as a script].

Tone: [warm / funny / calm / adventurous]; register [amount of dialogue, first or third person].

Teach by showing: make the concept resolve the conflict; do not add a moral at the end; leave room for class discussion.

Constraints: vocabulary [limit]; avoid [themes]; keep it inclusive and age-appropriate; keep any facts accurate.

Output: write the story, then list 3 open discussion questions and 1 short follow-up activity.

6. Worked examples

Each example below shows a weak prompt, a strong brief built from the eight blocks, and an excerpt of the kind of story the brief produces. Use them as patterns for your own subjects.

Example A: Science, lower primary (the water cycle)

Weak prompt

"Explain the water cycle as a story."

Strong brief

Objective: learners understand that the same water moves in a loop (evaporation, clouds, rain).

Audience: 7 to 8; native or A1.

Genre: gentle fantasy, a droplet with a name.

Character: Pip the raindrop, who wants to get home to the sea.

Length: 300 words; end with 3 questions.

Tone: warm, simple sentences.

Show the cycle through the journey; keep the science correct.

Story excerpt the brief produces

Pip lived in the wide blue sea, but one warm morning the sun shone so hard that Pip felt himself grow light. Up, up he floated, thinner than air, until he could not feel the water around him at all. "Where am I going?" he wondered. High above the fields, the air turned cool, and Pip met thousands of other tiny drops. They huddled together into a soft grey cloud. The cloud grew heavy. Too heavy. And then, with a happy rush, Pip was falling again, down toward a river that sparkled like a road. "I know this river," he laughed. "It goes home."

Why it works: the three stages of the cycle are the three parts of Pip's journey. No child is told to memorise "evaporation"; they watch it happen and can name it afterwards.

Example B: Social and emotional learning, lower secondary (empathy)

Weak prompt

"Write a story about not bullying people."

Strong brief

Objective: learners recognise that someone can feel excluded even when no one intended it.

Audience: 12 to 13; English at B1; mixed group with newcomers.

Genre: realistic school story, third person.

Character: Maya, new in school, wants to be invited to the lunch table but never asks.

Length: 450 words; end with 3 discussion questions and one role-play.

Tone: honest, not preachy; no villain.

	Show the turning point through a shift in perspective; no moral at the end.
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Story excerpt the brief produces

For two weeks Maya ate lunch by the window. The others were not unkind; they simply did not see her. They had known each other since they were small, and their table was already full of old jokes. Maya told herself she did not mind. Then one Thursday, Sara dropped her tray and Maya was the only one close enough to help. As they knelt picking up apples, Sara looked at her properly for the first time. "Wait," she said slowly, "do you always sit over there on your own?" Maya shrugged. Sara was quiet. She was remembering her own first week, in a different town, when no table had been hers either.

Why it works: there is no bully to blame, which is truer to most classrooms. The lesson arrives when Sara remembers her own experience; empathy is shown as an act of memory, and the open ending invites the class to finish the scene.

Example C: Citizenship and European values, upper secondary

Weak prompt

"Write a story about democracy."

Strong brief

Objective: learners understand that fair rules come from listening to people who disagree, not from the loudest voice.

Audience: 14 to 16; B1 to B2.

Genre: realistic, set in a student council in a European school with pupils from several countries.

Character: Tomas, who has the best idea but cannot get anyone to back it.

Length: 500 words; end with 3 questions linking the story to how decisions are made in the EU.

Tone: grounded, a little tense.

Show the value through process; keep it inclusive across cultures.

Story excerpt the brief produces

Tomas was sure his plan for the school festival was the best one, and he was probably right. The problem was that he kept saying so. Every time Lena from the Polish exchange group raised a worry, he cut her off. By the third meeting, nobody was listening to anyone; they were only waiting for their turn to talk. It was the quietest member, Amir, who finally changed everything, and he did it without proposing anything new. He simply asked each person, one at a time, what they were afraid would go wrong. For the first time, the room went still and actually heard the answers.

Why it works: democracy is shown as a behaviour (listening to dissent) rather than a definition. The closing questions can then connect Amir's move to how compromise works in real European institutions, which suits an Erasmus context.

7. Refining the draft: the second prompt matters as much as the first

A first draft is rarely the final story, and that is normal. The real advantage of working with an AI assistant is the conversation: you can give targeted feedback and get a better version in seconds. The skill is in being specific about what to change. Vague feedback ("make it better") produces vague results. Name the part, name the fix.

Useful refinement requests

- "The opening is slow. Start with Maya already alone at the window."
- "The ending states the lesson directly. Cut the last two sentences and end on Sara's silence."
- "Three words are above B1: replace them and keep the meaning."
- "Add more dialogue in the middle so it can be read aloud in parts."
- "Give me two alternative endings so the class can debate which is better."
- "Shorten to 250 words without losing the turning point."

Iterate in small steps

Change one thing at a time. If you ask for five changes at once, you lose track of which one improved the story. One clear instruction, read the result, then the next.

8. Common pitfalls and how to avoid them

Pitfall	The fix to put in your brief
The moral at the end	Add "show the lesson through the action; do not state it directly."
Wrong reading level	Always name the age and, for second-language groups, the CEFR level.
Too long to use	State a word count or a number of reading minutes in every brief.
A flat, conflict-free story	Give the main character a clear want and a clear obstacle.
Stereotyped characters	Ask explicitly for inclusive, varied, respectful representation.
Facts quietly wrong	Tell the assistant to keep facts accurate and to flag any uncertainty.
A story that could unsettle a child	Name sensitive themes to avoid and set a reassuring tone in advance.

9. Quick checklist (print and keep by your desk)

Before you send a story brief to an AI assistant, check that it answers these questions. The first three are essential; the rest sharpen the result.

- ☐ **Objective.** Have I named the one thing the story must teach, as an outcome?
- ☐ **Audience.** Have I given the age and, if needed, the language level?
- ☐ **Vehicle.** Have I chosen a genre and a shape that suit this lesson?
- ☐ **Character.** Does the main character want something, and is something in the way?
- ☐ **Setting.** Is the place either familiar to my learners or useful to the lesson?
- ☐ **Length.** Have I set a word count or a reading time, and a format?
- ☐ **Tone.** Have I said how it should feel and sound?
- ☐ **Show, not tell.** Have I asked for the lesson to live in the action, not the ending?
- ☐ **Safeguards.** Have I named what to avoid, and asked for accuracy and inclusion?

A final word

The assistant is a fast, capable writer, but you are the teacher. You know your learners, your curriculum, and what will land in your room. The brief is where your judgement meets the tool's fluency. Spend your time there, and the stories will be worth the telling.