

APA Utah Spring Conference · April 9, 2026 · 3:30–4:30 PM
Beyond ChatGPT: Strategic AI Use for Planning Professionals

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Presentation



Handout



APA Utah Spring Conference · April 9, 2026 · 3:30–4:30 PM · Manzanita / Pinion Room

Beyond ChatGPT: Strategic AI Use for Planning Professionals

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PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Land Planning Consultant

- 50+ years of experience
- First 20 years in Southern California
- Recent 30 years in Utah and the Mountain West
- Specializing in design and entitlements
- Master plans, site plans, TOD, traditional neighborhood plans
- Geneva — 1,750-acre mixed-use redevelopment on the Geneva Steel Mill site in Vineyard, UT

AUTHOR

9 books written in 18 months
5 published — AI-assisted works

- Narrative novels covering the New Testament
- Tech noir murder mystery set in the world of Deepfakes

Using AI every day — in professional practice and writing for more than 18 months.

AI IN PRACTICE

I.

Why this Matters.

PART I • AI PRIMER

The Question.

Not “Should we use AI?”

But,

“How do we use it professionally,
safely, and effectively?”

This Session.

Focus on real planning applications,
not theory.

Large Language Models (LLMs)

The technology behind ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Copilot

TRAINED ON

Massive Amounts of Text

Hundreds of billions of words from the internet, books, and documents — learning statistical patterns between words and ideas.

THE RESULT

Fluent, Coherent Text

Generates contextually appropriate language — whether that language is accurate or not.

TOOLS YOU MAY KNOW

ChatGPT • Claude • Gemini • Copilot

All are LLMs. Different companies, different training data, different strengths — same underlying technology.

How They Actually Work

In plain terms

01

You Type a Prompt

Your question, instruction, or request is submitted to the model.

02

The Model Predicts

Selects the statistically most likely next word — based on patterns learned during training.

03

A Response Is Generated

Fluent, coherent text — but it is prediction, not knowledge. Not reasoning. Not truth.

KEY INSIGHT: Pattern-matching at enormous scale — not thinking, not reasoning, not knowing.

A Useful Mental Model for Planners

Think of AI as an extremely well-read assistant who has absorbed millions of documents —

- ***Has read millions of documents***
- ***Has no lived experience***
- ***Has no professional judgment***
- ***Has no accountability***

It can sound authoritative without being authoritative.

— A drafting partner, not a research authority

Sounds authoritative

Does NOT mean it is authoritative

Has read everything

Does NOT mean it understands everything

Best as a drafting partner

NOT a replacement for your expertise

Your professional judgment is irreplaceable.

AI IN PRACTICE

II.

Where AI Genuinely Excels.

PART II · AI PRIMER

Where AI Genuinely Excels.

Leverage these Strengths in your Practice

SYNTHESIZE & SUMMARIZE

- Condenses large volumes of text

RESTRUCTURE & CLARIFY

- Improves clarity and flow

GENERATE ALTERNATIVES

- Provides multiple approaches

TRANSLATE FOR AUDIENCES

- Technical → public-facing language

ANALYZE DATA

- Identifies patterns in comments and documents

AI IN PRACTICE

III.

The Hallucination Problem

PART III · AI PRIMER



AI Will Confidently Fabricate

Critical for planners to understand

- *Zoning codes*
- *Court cases*
- *Statue citations*
- *Statistics*

01 Sounds completely credible — fluent, specific, authoritative. No warning flag.

02 **AI does not know it is wrong. There is no internal fact-check.**

03 This is the single biggest professional risk for planners using AI.

Never trust an AI citation without independently verifying it.

Limitations

Also critical for planners to understand

01

MAY NOT BE NOT CURRENT

- Mainstream AIs—Claude, ChatGPT, Copilot, etc.—can access current internet data

02

NOT NEUTRAL

- Reflects bias in training data and does not signal that bias

03

SAFE FOR

- Concepts, summaries, best practices

01

VERIFY

- Codes, statutes, legal references, current data

Never trust an AI citation without independently verifying it.

USING AI FOR ZONING AND LEGAL MATERIAL

AI is highly effective for:

- *Summarizing zoning codes*
- *Comparing ordinance sections*
- *Identifying patterns across regulations*
- *Organizing legal and policy language*

But AI may:

- 01 Misstate or invent citations
- 02 Omit key provisions
- 03 Misinterpret context

Professional Rule

- Use AI to speed up understanding
- Not to replace verification

Always confirm against the source document.

What This Means for Your Practice

AI is a research and first draft tool — not a final product tool

You are always the expert — AI is the assistant

Your professional standing and reputation are on the line, not the AI's

Verification, critical review, and editing are non-negotiable

Warning: As you use AI more, confidence grows — and the temptation to skip verification grows with it.

IV.

Prompts

- *Your most important AI skill*
- *The quality of your output depends on the quality of your prompt*
- *Better prompts → better results*
- *Garbage in, garbage out*

Your Prompt Determines Everything

A vague prompt

produces a vague, generic output

A well-crafted prompt

produces a focused, useful, professional-quality output

The difference between frustrating and powerful AI

is almost always the prompt

Think of AI as a very capable, very literal assistant — it needs clear, specific instructions.

The Key Elements of an Effective Prompt

ROLE

Tell AI who it is

"I am an Associate Planner at the City of St. George..."

TASK

Be specific

"Revise this section for clarity and plain language."

FORMAT

How should it look?

"Bullet points, under 300 words, clear and concise."

CONTEXT

Explain the situation

"I am preparing a Staff Report for a 35.3-acre rezoning..."

AUDIENCE

Who will read this?

"Write so the general public will understand."

CONSTRAINTS

What to avoid

"Do not add new recommendations. Keep my structure intact."

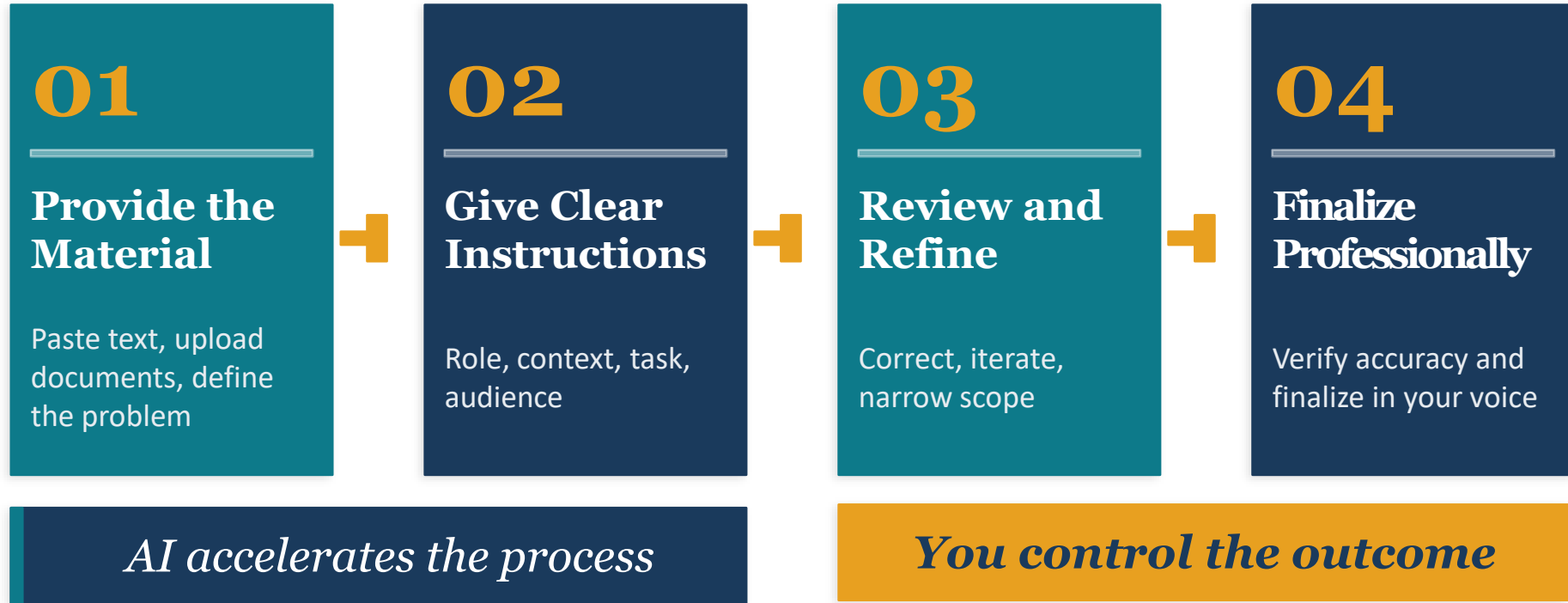
Prompting Tips for Planning Work

Practical Prompts

- “Summarize these public comments into key themes with examples.”
- “Rewrite this staff report section for a general audience.”
- “Identify inconsistencies between this ordinance and this concept plan.”
- “Provide three alternative approaches to this recommendation.”

THINK IN TASKS, NOT QUESTIONS

A Simple Workflow for Planners



Upload Documents and Illustrations

It dramatically improves your prompts

Rather than describing what you have — give AI the actual document or image.

More accurate context

AI works from your actual content, not your description of it

Better, more tailored output

The more relevant material you provide, the more specific and useful the response

Works with documents and images

Staff reports, public comment letters, maps, diagrams, charts, and illustrations

Upload + Prompt: Planning Examples

Combine uploads with specific written instructions

STAFF REPORT

Upload a draft → Ask AI to revise it for a specific audience (public, commission, council)

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Upload comment letters → Ask AI to summarize key concerns and identify common themes

MAP OR DIAGRAM

Upload a figure → Ask AI to identify what might be unclear to a lay audience

MULTIPLE DOCS

Upload several documents → Ask AI to compare, synthesize, or identify gaps between them

Think of uploaded materials as the foundation of your prompt.

V.

Case Example

A live planning project — from prompt to professional memo

AI PRIMER · APPLIED EXAMPLE

The Project

Example Town → Example County, Utah

THE CLIENT

**138-acre property
in Example Town,
UT (incorporated)**

Seeking deannexation to develop in
unincorporated Example County

THE VISION

**1,238-acre mixed-
use development**

Commercial, hotel, restaurants, multi-
family, townhomes, and single-family
lots

THE TASK

**Identify all
ordinance
permitted
development
alternatives**

Review the Example County Land Use
Ordinance and summarize viable
paths forward

Building a Strong Initial Prompt

The prompt that started it all

YOU

I am a professional land planner specializing in conceptual design for subdivisions and master planned communities.

My client owns ~138 acres in Example Town, UT and is requesting deannexation to develop in unincorporated Example County. He will also purchase ~1,100 additional acres. I've uploaded a concept plan and a property exhibit for reference.

Please review the Example County Land Use Ordinance (URL provided) and summarize the development alternatives available — different zones, PUD, or other paths — in outline form for my review.

ROLE

Established professional identity and specialization

CONTEXT

Project background, location, and deannexation scenario

UPLOADS

Two exhibits provided for AI reference

TASK + FORMAT

Specific ask: ordinance review in outline form

What AI Returned

A structured outline of development alternatives

Based on the Example County Land Use Ordinance and uploaded exhibits, four primary development paths are available:

AI

Alternative 1 — Planned Unit Development (PUD): Allows for mixed-use, flexible design, phased development, and unified infrastructure planning. Best fit for the proposed program.

Alternative 2 — Multiple Use District Development (MUD): These zones are typically intended to allow a combination of residential, recreational, and limited commercial uses while maintaining overall land planning flexibility across large acreages in a large-lot rural residential development.

Alternative 3 — Conventional Zoning: Zone the property using established districts (commercial, multi-family, single-family). More predictable, but less flexible.

Alternative 4 — Rural Residential or Agricultural Development: The least intensive development path would involve zoning the property into agricultural or rural residential districts.. Although technically possible, this development pattern would not support the type of mixed-use village concept illustrated in the 2022 concept plan.

AI read the ordinance URL, analyzed the uploaded exhibits, and returned a structured outline — in minutes.

Refining Through Iteration

Each follow-up sharpens the output

CORRECTION

YOU

All property on the March 6 exhibit is within Example. The yellow areas owned by Example County will also need to be deannexed. Please revise and reprint.

Caught an error after the first response — AI revised the entire memo accordingly

SCOPE CHANGE

YOU

Eliminate Alternatives 3 & 4: Multiple Use and Rural Residential / Agricultural Developments. We will not be doing that. Please revise and reprint in entirety.

Narrowed the scope — AI removed the alternative and reprinted cleanly

FORMAT REQUEST

YOU

Please provide the final response in its entirety as a .docx file.

AI delivered a fully formatted Word document ready for the client

Going Deeper—And AI Going Further

The conversation becomes collaborative

YOU

You provided advantages of using a PUD. Are there any disadvantages? Please format them the same way.

Disadvantages: Requires detailed upfront planning — More complex approval process — Greater reliance on developer performance — Risk of scope creep over time

AI

YOU

For PUD you provided a Purpose and Key Characteristics. Please do the same for Conventional Zoning.

AI WENT FURTHER

AI

If you want, I can also give you a balanced “Disadvantages” section for Conventional Zoning — formatted the same way — so the memo remains consistent. That will strengthen the document for your client.

Key moment: AI proactively offered an improvement you hadn’t asked for.

Your reply: “Yes, please.”

What This Example Shows

Applied AI in professional planning practice

01 A rich prompt produces a rich result

Role, context, uploads, task, and format — all combined in a single opening prompt

02 AI reads what you give it

The ordinance URL and uploaded exhibits gave AI the real context it needed

03 Iteration refines the output

Corrections, scope changes, and format requests were handled cleanly and completely

04 AI can be a proactive collaborator

It offered an improvement unprompted — one that genuinely strengthened the client memo

From a single conversation: a professional client memo, structured alternatives, and a production-ready .docx file.

What This Demonstrates

- A strong prompt produces a strong result
- AI works best with actual material
- Iteration is where value is created
- AI can become a collaborative partner

Final Thought

- AI will not replace planners
- But planners who use AI effectively will outperform those who do not
- Your judgment is the profession



Go Forward and Prosper

Use AI wisely

Apply it where it
improves clarity,
efficiency, or insight

Lead with
professional
judgment