

GUIDE

How to write image prompts that work

Describe the subject, setting, light and framing in a clear order. Then refine one thing at a time.

Updated November 13, 2026

Contents

The basic structure ····· 5

OpenAI's prompting guidance ····· 5

Practical habits ····· 5

Sources ····· 6

A good image prompt reads like a brief to a photographer, not a list of keywords. Two vendor prompt guides agree on the shape: name the subject, the setting, the light and the framing, then refine one thing at a time. This guide condenses both, checked 2026-11-13.

The basic structure

Black Forest Labs' prompt guide suggests this order as a habit, not a rule:

1. **Image type and medium.** One opening sentence that sets the look: "High-angle black and white photograph with a grainy film texture."
2. **Subject.** Who or what, and what they are doing. Describe relationships directly when they matter: "one looking relaxed and the other asleep."
3. **Setting.** Where it happens and what surrounds the subject.
4. **Light.** The source, direction, quality and color: "soft golden rim light."
5. **Framing and detail.** Shot size, angle, lens feel, depth of field, and small specifics.

The guide also notes a longer prompt is useful for several subjects, a specific layout or text in the image, and that quality tags such as "masterpiece" can be omitted.

OpenAI's prompting guidance

OpenAI's image prompting guide gives parallel advice (read 2026-11-13):

- Start with the image you need, then describe the subject, composition, style and constraints.
- For edits, identify what should change and what must stay the same.
- Refine one thing at a time and inspect the result.
- For photorealistic goals, request "photorealistic" or "real photograph" explicitly and describe framing and texture; camera specifications are cues, not guarantees.
- Specify people and actions directly: body framing, relative scale, gaze, interaction with objects.
- When a prompt leaves design decisions open, try higher complexity settings where the API offers them.

Practical habits

1. **Write the brief once, reuse it.** Keep a note of the prompt that produced each keeper. Small wording changes change the result.
2. **One change per iteration.** If the background is wrong, fix the background in the next prompt and restate the constraints that must stay. OpenAI's guide warns that "same style as before" can carry context, but critical constraints should be restated if the result drifts.
3. **Describe negatives as positives.** BFL's technical prompting page recommends replacing negative prompts with positive descriptions of what you want.
4. **Quote exact text.** If the image must contain words, quote the required copy and say how many times it should appear (OpenAI guide).
5.

> **Keep a style sheet.** For consistent work across images, save your lighting, palette and framing words and reuse them. See our guide on keeping a consistent style.

Sources

All sources below were fetched and checked on 2026-11-13.

- OpenAI image prompting guide, accessed 2026-11-13.
- OpenAI image generation guide, accessed 2026-11-13.
- Black Forest Labs, Building a Good Prompt, accessed 2026-11-13.
- Black Forest Labs, Prompting Basics, accessed 2026-11-13.

Frequently asked questions

How long should a prompt be?

Start with a sentence and add detail as you review results. Vendor guides suggest a clear structure matters more than length.

Sources

platform.openai.com — https://platform.openai.com/docs/guides/image-prompting
docs.bfl.ml — https://docs.bfl.ml/guides/prompting_unified_building.md
docs.bfl.ml — https://docs.bfl.ml/guides/prompting_unified_basics.md