

THE AMPLIFIED MIND

Thinking Clearly in the Age of AI

FIRST-YEAR WRITING PROMPTS

Paul Alden | May 2026 | theamplifiedmind.ai

"Essential reading for anyone wanting to engage meaningfully with AI in their life."

Professor Grant Schofield PhD, Director, Human Potential Centre, Auckland University of Technology

About These Prompts

These six writing prompts are designed for use in first-year composition courses, honors seminars, first-year experience programs, and capstone writing assignments accompanying The Amplified Mind. Each prompt is grounded in specific chapters and asks students to apply the book's frameworks to their own experience, their field of study, or the broader professional world they are entering.

These prompts are designed to generate genuine student thinking. They resist AI-assisted responses because they ask students to draw on personal experience, specific observations, and honest self-assessment. Faculty are encouraged to make this design explicit to students as itself an illustration of the book's central argument.

Prompt 1

The Moment of Exposure

Personal Narrative / Analytical Essay | Chapters 1, 2, 3 | Suggested length: 800 to 1,200 words

The *Amplified Mind* describes a moment the author calls the moment of exposure: when a professional is asked to explain reasoning that originated outside their own mind and discovers they cannot reconstruct it. Write a personal narrative essay describing your own version of this moment. It does not need to involve AI. It might involve a test you could not pass despite believing you understood the material, a presentation where someone asked a question you could not answer, or a task you could complete with assistance but not independently. What did that moment reveal? What did you do with what it revealed?

What your response should address:

- A specific, concrete narrative of the moment itself, not a general reflection
- An honest account of what the experience revealed about the gap between your apparent and actual understanding
- A connection to at least one concept from the book, fluency distortion, cognitive offloading, or authority transfer
- A reflection on what you changed or would change as a result

Faculty note: This prompt is designed to be personal and specific. Resist the impulse to generalize. The strongest responses will be grounded in a single, vividly described experience.

Prompt 2

The Five-Minute Rule

Analytical Essay / Argument | Chapters 5, 7, 11 | Suggested length: 900 to 1,400 words

In *The Amplified Mind*, Paul Alden proposes what he calls the five-minute rule: before consulting any external source including an AI system, spend at least five minutes working with the problem independently. Write an analytical essay arguing for or against adopting this practice as a formal recommendation for students at this institution. Your argument should engage honestly with the strongest counterarguments. What would be gained by widespread adoption of this practice? What would be lost or made more difficult? Is five minutes the right threshold, and why or why not?

What your response should address:

- A clear argument either for or against the five-minute rule as an institutional recommendation
- Engagement with the strongest counterarguments to your position
- Evidence drawn from the book's framework, specifically the concepts of productive versus generative effort and desirable difficulties
- A concrete proposal for how the practice should or should not be implemented, with specific reasoning

Faculty note: Encourage students to take a genuine position rather than hedging. The strongest essays will commit to an argument and defend it with specificity.

Prompt 3

Two Professionals

Comparative Analysis / Future-Oriented Essay | Chapters 2, 5, 11 | Suggested length: 1,000 to 1,500 words

The *Amplified Mind* describes two professionals who use identical AI tools but whose cognitive capabilities diverge significantly over time. One consistently generates structure before consulting the system. The other begins with the system. Write a comparative analysis essay imagining these two professionals five years into their careers in a field you are studying or plan to enter. What does each one's professional life look like? What can each one do that the other cannot? Where does the difference become visible, and what does it cost the one who built their expertise through substitution rather than amplification? Be specific about the field you choose and the types of decisions it requires.

What your response should address:

- A specific field of study or profession, not a generic knowledge worker
- Concrete descriptions of what each professional can and cannot do five years in

- The specific moments or situations in that field where the divergence becomes consequential
- A clear argument about which approach produces greater long-term professional capability and why

Faculty note: Ask students to choose a field they genuinely care about. Vague field choices produce vague essays. The more specific the professional context, the stronger the analysis.

Prompt 4

The EMT Analogy

Analytical Essay / Disciplinary Application | Chapters 1, 2, 3, 9 | Suggested length: 900 to 1,300 words

One of the book's most powerful illustrations is drawn from the author's 36 years in the fire service. He describes how emergency medicine training shifted from diagnostic thinking, where practitioners built clinical pictures from observation before applying protocols, to protocol-driven training, where algorithms precede and structure clinical judgment. Write an analytical essay applying this analogy to your own field of study. What is the diagnostic equivalent in your discipline? What does the protocol-driven version look like, and is it already happening? What would be lost if the generative stage of thinking in your field were to move outside the practitioner's mind?

What your response should address:

- A clear description of what diagnostic thinking looks like in your specific field
- An honest assessment of whether and how protocol-driven or AI-assisted equivalents are already emerging
- A specific analysis of what would be lost if the generative stage were consistently offloaded
- Your own position on how practitioners in your field should navigate this tension

Faculty note: This prompt works best for students with a clear disciplinary interest. It is particularly effective in pre-professional programs including business, engineering, nursing, education, and law.

Prompt 5

Institutional Convergence

Chapter 8 describes institutional convergence: the phenomenon where many professionals consulting the same AI systems arrive at pre-aligned conclusions before any group discussion, producing the appearance of diversity while reflecting underlying uniformity. Write a research-informed analytical essay examining whether this phenomenon is already visible in a field, industry, or institution of your choosing. You may draw on publicly available examples, current events, or your own observation. What evidence suggests convergence is occurring? What are its consequences? What structural responses, not cultural ones, might counteract it?

What your response should address:

- A specific field, industry, or institution as the focus of analysis
- At least two concrete examples of possible convergence, drawn from research, news, or observation
- A clear distinction between cultural responses, such as encouraging dissent, and structural responses, such as designing workflows that require genuinely independent analysis
- Your own assessment of whether the convergence you describe is consequential and why

Faculty note: This prompt is well-suited to students interested in business, policy, journalism, or organizational studies. Encourage students to move beyond surface-level observations to structural analysis.

Prompt 6

The Amplified Mind Commitment

Reflective Essay / Personal Statement | Chapters 11, 14 | Suggested length: 700 to 1,000 words

The final chapter of The Amplified Mind places the central responsibility on the individual: the choice to generate before retrieving, to use AI as a critic rather than a creator, and to maintain authorship of thought in an age when authorship can be easily surrendered. Write a reflective essay articulating your personal commitment to this challenge for your time at this institution. Be specific about what you will and will not do. Be honest about where the commitment will be hardest to keep and why. Be clear about how you will know whether you are keeping it. This essay is not a promise. It is a serious attempt to think clearly about the most significant intellectual challenge of your generation.

What your response should address:

- A specific, actionable commitment, not a general aspiration
- Honest identification of the specific contexts where the commitment will be hardest, a particular course, a particular type of assignment, a particular time pressure
- A concrete method for evaluating whether the commitment is being kept
- A genuine engagement with the difficulty of the challenge rather than a performance of virtue

Faculty note: This prompt works best as a capstone assignment after students have read the full book. It is also effective as an orientation activity if students have read at least the introduction and final chapter. The strongest essays will be honest rather than aspirational.

Using These Prompts

These prompts are designed to resist AI-assisted responses by grounding students in personal experience, specific disciplinary contexts, and honest self-assessment. Faculty are encouraged to make this design explicit to students. The irony of using these prompts in a course organized around The Amplified Mind is itself a teaching opportunity.

For questions about these prompts, to request additional resources, or to inquire about a virtual or in-person author visit, contact Paul Alden at pfalden@gmail.com or visit theamplifiedmind.ai/educators.