LLM verbosity cheatsheet

Rambling is a prompting problem. Specify the **shape** before the content. A number beats "be concise."

They ramble because they are trained to be thorough, they hedge when the world is uncertain, and you did not tell them to stop.

Read critically first. Prompt precisely second. A tight answer can still be wrong.

Structure — force the shape

Say	When
Return this as a numbered list, one line each.	Checklist, not an essay
Hierarchical bullets — main points, sub-bullets for detail.	Real categories, not flattened prose
Numbered list, each with a 2–3 sentence explanation.	More than a label, less than a section
Format as a table: [columns].	Comparing options; cells kill hedges
TL;DR first, then the details.	Buried conclusions
Answer, then reasoning — not the other way around.	Model thinks out loud before committing
Problem → Solution → Example. Nothing else.	Stop a fourth section
Give me a decision, not a menu of options.	You want a call, not A/B/C

Tone and audience — density, not just length

Say	When
Explain like I'm a [6th grader / 10th grader / PhD in the field].	Vocabulary target; better than "simply"
Simple language, no jargon.	Handing it to someone else
Busy executive with 30 seconds.	Impatient, not uninformed
Text message to a colleague, not a report.	Spoken register
No corporate jargon or buzzwords.	Kill "leverage / synergy / unlock"
I already know the basics of X — skip the intro.	Default padding

Length — cap it

Say	When
Under 100 words.	“Concise” is not working
One paragraph, max.	Prose with a ceiling
A single sentence if at all possible.	Test whether the honest answer is short
Only what changed — don’t recap.	Mid-conversation; most underused

Failure patterns

Pattern	Say
Hedging	Single best answer, then the main exception.
Yes-man	Push back. Argue the strongest case against this first.
Generic advice	Specific to [team, budget, deadline, tools], not best practices.
Buried lede	Recommendation in the first sentence. Context after.
Re-explaining	Just the new question. Skip the recap.
Over-commented code	Just the code. Comment only the non-obvious parts.
False balance	Where does the evidence point? Don’t false-balance.
Scope creep	Answer only what I asked. Flag extras in one line at the end.
Everything is important	Rank by importance. Don’t list in the order they occurred to you.