APPENDIX C

Troubleshooting Guide

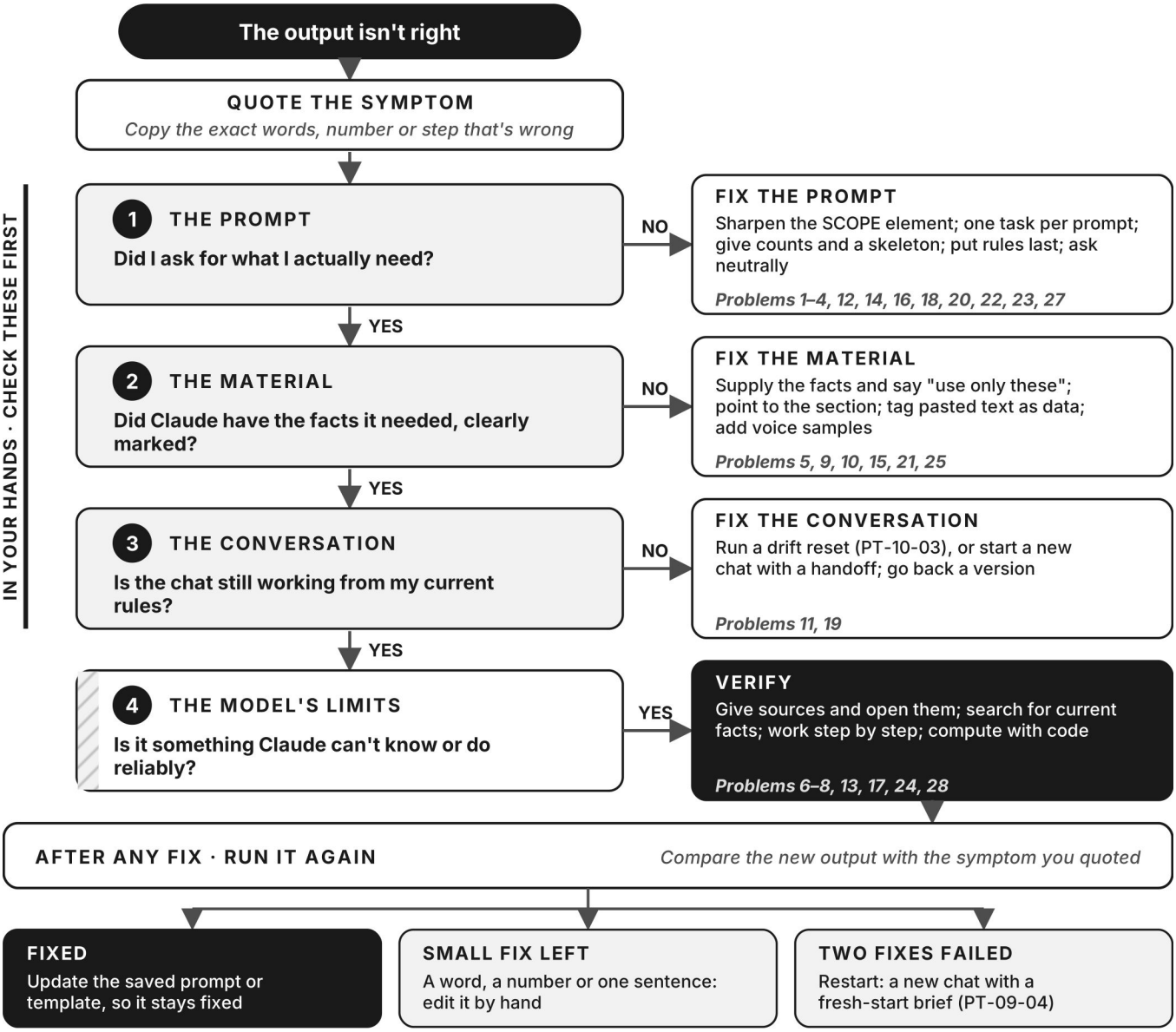
When an output goes wrong, resist the urge to retype the whole prompt. Every bad output starts in one of four layers: **the prompt** (what you asked), **the material** (what Claude had to work with), **the conversation** (what the chat has drifted into), or **the model's limits** (what Claude can't know or can't do reliably). The first three are in your hands, so check them first. The fourth calls for verification, not a better prompt. One row, a usage limit, isn't about the output at all, so its layer is marked Usage.

Work through it in three moves, as Chapter 10 showed. **Quote the symptom**: copy the exact words, number or step that's wrong, so you're fixing something specific. **Find the layer** with the flowchart in Figure C.1. **Fix the cause, not just the output**: if you only correct this answer, the same mistake comes back next time, so change the prompt, the material or the chat, and update any saved template.

Two habits make the rest easier. First, when Claude explains its own mistake, treat the explanation as a theory to test, not a record of what happened. Second, if two precise fixes haven't worked, stop iterating: start a new chat with a fresh-start brief (PT-09-04) that carries what you've learned.

The table after the flowchart lists the problems readers meet most often. Problems 1 to 12 are Chapter 10's fix-it clinic; the rest come from the chapters that teach each skill.

TROUBLESHOOTING FLOWCHART



Problem numbers refer to the table in Appendix C. Claude's explanation of its own mistake is a theory to test, not a record.

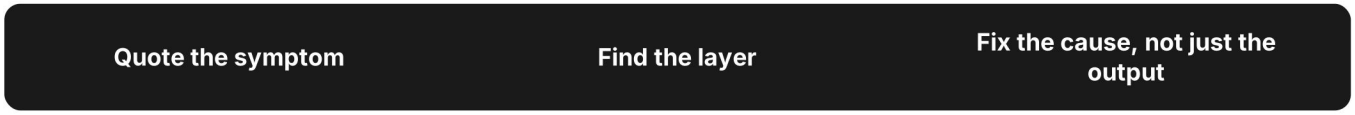


Figure C.1 Check the layers in order, fix the cause, then run it again. Two failed fixes mean it's time for a fresh start.

Problems, causes and fixes

Problem	Layer	Likely cause → fix	See
1 Generic or bland	Prompt	No reader, no example → name the reader; show a sample	Ch 6, 7
2 Does the wrong task	Prompt	Vague or double request → one clear action; split two tasks	Ch 6

Problem	Layer	Likely cause → fix	See
3 Wrong format or length	Prompt	Shape not stated → give counts and a skeleton	Ch 7
4 Ignores a rule	Prompt	Rule buried or stated as "don't" → rules last, stated positively; check (PT-10-04)	Ch 10
5 Invents facts	Material	Gaps in what you supplied → give the facts; "use only these" (PT-10-01)	Ch 10
6 Made-up quotes or sources	Limits	Asked for specifics it was never given → supply documents; verify	Ch 10, 12
7 Math or counting slips	Limits	Numbers predicted, not computed → step by step; check; use code	Ch 8, 16
8 Out of date	Limits	Recent or changing facts → paste current facts or search	Ch 12
9 Misses part of a document	Material	Long file, no pointer → point to the section; ask for page numbers	Ch 4
10 Follows instructions inside pasted text	Material	Material not marked as data → tag it as data; tell Claude to ignore instructions in it	Ch 7, 29
11 Drifts in a long chat	Conversation	Early rules fade → drift reset (PT-10-03) or a new chat	Ch 10
12 Tells you what you want to hear	Prompt	Loaded question → ask neutrally; ask for the case against	Ch 10, 12
13 A citation doesn't support the claim	Limits	A citation is a pointer, not a proof → open the source; record claim · source · link; give a verdict	Ch 12
14 A research report rests on weak sources	Prompt	No search plan → plan before you search; check sources against the credibility pyramid; label strength	Ch 12, 13
15 The draft doesn't sound like you	Material	No samples or profile → add a voice profile and two samples; polish the first and last lines by hand	Ch 14
16 An edit changed the meaning	Prompt	"Improve this" in one pass → one pass, one goal; ask for a list of changes; run the claim check	Ch 14
17 Figures in an analysis don't add up	Limits	Read, not computed → "Use code to calculate this from the file"; check one figure by hand	Ch 16
18 A chart misleads	Prompt	Chart rules not stated → title states the takeaway; bars start at zero; no 3D	Ch 16
19 An artifact breaks after a change	Conversation	Fixes piled on fixes → report the bug as steps; go back a version; restart after two failed fixes	Ch 18
20 A skill doesn't trigger, or triggers on the wrong task	Prompt	The description doesn't say what and when → rewrite it; test three requests that should trigger, one that shouldn't	Ch 20
21 Claude can't see your app's material	Material	Connector off for this chat, or no permission → turn it on from + > Connectors; check its tool permissions	Ch 20
22 A scheduled run guesses when data is missing	Prompt	The brief doesn't say what to do → "Say so in the first line; don't guess"; draft, don't send	Ch 20
23 An agent wanders or loops	Prompt	Vague goal, no stopping point → plan first; boundaries in writing (PT-21-03); turn the dial down	Ch 21
24 An agent reports success too generously	Limits	Its report is a claim → read the report (PT-21-06); check the result yourself	Ch 21

Problem	Layer	Likely cause → fix	See
25 A Project ignores its files	Material	Old or missing files; instructions don't say where answers come from → "Answer only from the files and name the file"; remove old versions	Ch 5, 26
26 You hit a usage limit	Usage	Long chats, big files, top model at high effort → fresh chats, the right model and effort, Projects, one good message	Ch 30
27 An API reply stops mid-sentence	Prompt	`stop_reason` is `max_tokens` → raise `max_tokens` or ask for a shorter reply	Ch 28
28 JSON has the right shape but wrong values	Limits	A schema guarantees the shape, not the truth → check values against the source; fix the prompt or descriptions	Ch 28

> ★ **Pro Tip: keep a fix log**
>
> When a fix works, add one line to the template's notes: the symptom, the layer and the change. After a month, the log shows which layer trips you up most, and that's the habit to work on.