

Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

No One Reads My Messages All the Way Through

How to Write More Concisely, Make Requests
and Decisions Clear, and Stop Sending Emails
That Need Their Own Table of Contents



We've got a problem. But relax. It can be solved—
and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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Requests and Decisions Clear, and Stop
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INTRO

At 4:47 on a Thursday afternoon, a project coordinator sends an email titled "A Few Thoughts Before We Move Forward." It contains eleven paragraphs, three attachments, a carefully worded explanation of the current situation, and an impressive number of phrases beginning with "Just to clarify." The actual request is simple: someone needs to approve a revised delivery schedule before noon on Friday. Unfortunately, that request appears somewhere between a discussion of previous arrangements and an explanation of why the original schedule was optimistic. The following morning, the coordinator receives a reply: "Thanks, very helpful!" No approval. No decision. Just a cheerful acknowledgment from someone who has apparently enjoyed the email as a piece of recreational literature.

If this sounds familiar, you may already have developed a complicated relationship with your Sent folder. You spend time composing thoughtful messages, checking the details, anticipating questions, and making sure nobody could possibly misunderstand what you mean. Then somebody misunderstands anyway. They answer the least important question, overlook the deadline, or ask for information that was sitting patiently in paragraph seven. Your first instinct is to explain everything again, preferably in greater detail. Perhaps the original message wasn't thorough enough. Perhaps you should add headings, bold text, or a particularly determined sentence asking people to read the entire email. Before long, you are writing follow-up messages about earlier messages, and your actual work has become a supporting character in the ongoing drama of your inbox.

The trouble is that writing something and communicating something are not quite the same achievement. A message can be accurate, grammatically correct, polite, and impressively comprehensive while still being difficult to act upon. You know what matters because you have been living with the problem. Your reader arrives halfway through the story, often between meetings, with several competing demands and no special enthusiasm for becoming a detective. They must work out which information matters, why they are involved, whether you expect a response, and what a useful response would look like. When those answers are difficult to find, even a diligent reader may reach the end without knowing what to do next.

This is partly a problem of attention, but it is also a problem of design. We tend to write messages in the order our thoughts occur to us. First we describe what happened, then what we discovered, then what somebody else said, and finally what we need. That sequence makes sense from inside our heads. It may be completely unsuitable for the person receiving it. Consider a museum coordinator who needs confirmation that a borrowed exhibit can arrive two days earlier than planned. The receiving institution doesn't necessarily need the complete history of negotiations, transport difficulties, and calendar adjustments. It needs to understand the proposed date, the practical implications, and the decision being requested. The history may still matter, but it shouldn't require archaeological equipment to reach the question.

Of course, some people genuinely don't read properly. They skim essential instructions, ignore perfectly clear requests, and respond with extraordinary confidence to questions nobody asked. Others are overloaded, distracted,

or working in organizations where decisions require approval from seventeen people, three of whom are permanently unavailable. Better writing cannot fix every one of these problems. It won't give somebody additional authority, resolve a conflict of priorities, or make an unwilling manager suddenly eager to take responsibility. What it can do is remove unnecessary obstacles. When your message is clear and appropriately structured, you have a better chance of distinguishing a communication problem from a problem that needs a different kind of solution.

There is another important complication: shorter isn't automatically better. "Please sort this out" is wonderfully concise, especially if you're trying to win a competition in the discipline of transferring responsibility without providing information. Unfortunately, the recipient still needs to know what "this" means, what outcome is expected, and which constraints matter. A good message isn't one that has been reduced to the smallest possible number of words. It contains enough information to enable appropriate action without forcing the reader through material they don't need. Sometimes that means four sentences. Sometimes it means several carefully organized paragraphs. And occasionally it means recognizing that a difficult conversation shouldn't be conducted through an expanding collection of emails at all.

We also make communication harder because we want to protect ourselves. We add qualifications so nobody can accuse us of being careless. We include background information to demonstrate that we've considered every possibility. We soften requests until they are almost invisible because we don't want to sound demanding. These are understandable habits, particularly when writing to senior colleagues, clients, or people with whom relationships are

already strained. Yet the attempt to avoid misunderstanding can produce exactly the uncertainty we fear. A recipient who cannot tell whether you're making a recommendation, requesting permission, or simply thinking aloud is unlikely to respond in the way you intended. Professionalism should make meaning easier to recognize, not require the reader to obtain a license in corporate translation.

Throughout this book, we'll explore what makes messages useful rather than merely well written. You'll learn to identify the purpose of a message before drafting it, make requests that people can actually answer, and present decisions without burying them under unnecessary background. We'll examine why email threads become miniature administrative civilizations, why urgent labels eventually lose their power, and how status updates can describe impressive amounts of activity without revealing whether anything has been accomplished. You'll also learn when more detail is necessary, how to communicate difficult information without creating avoidable conflict, and when the most effective next step is to stop composing and speak to someone.

These skills matter because unclear communication has costs beyond an untidy inbox. A missed instruction can delay a shipment. An ambiguous approval can send a team in the wrong direction. A poorly framed question can produce days of discussion when one decision was needed. Sometimes the consequences are simply annoying; other times they affect money, relationships, customer expectations, or people's ability to do their jobs. This doesn't mean every email deserves the editorial attention of a major publishing house. It means the effort you put into a message should reflect what depends on it. You can be quick when a

situation is simple and more deliberate when misunderstanding carries significant consequences.

Try a small experiment with a message you're preparing to send. Before worrying about the greeting or whether a particular phrase sounds sufficiently professional, imagine the recipient closing it after reading. What should they know that they didn't know before? What, if anything, should they do? Can they do it with the information you've provided? If you cannot answer those questions, the difficulty may have started before you typed the first sentence. You don't need to build a checklist for every routine exchange, and you certainly don't need another productivity system that requires more maintenance than the work itself. A moment of purposeful thinking can reveal whether you're communicating a clear intention or merely exporting your unfinished thoughts.

There is no promise here that everyone will start replying promptly or that your inbox will become a peaceful sanctuary. People will still overlook details. Projects will still change. Some decisions will remain uncomfortable, and some colleagues will continue treating "Reply All" as a public broadcasting service. But you can become more deliberate about what you send, more precise about what you ask, and more realistic about what words alone can accomplish. You can also stop assuming that a failed interaction always requires a longer explanation. Sometimes the missing ingredient is a clearer question, a different recipient, a conversation, or an honest acknowledgment that the decision hasn't been made.

The goal is not to become the person who writes the shortest emails in the company. That is a peculiar ambition, and it offers remarkably little comfort when nobody

understands them. The goal is to make your messages easier to understand, respond to, and use. Your reader shouldn't have to reconstruct your intentions from scattered clues, and you shouldn't have to spend your evenings explaining what your afternoon emails were supposed to mean. If someone needs your full reasoning, give it to them. If they need a decision, make that decision visible. And if a message only requires a straightforward answer, resist the temptation to turn it into an eleven-paragraph monument to your professional dedication.

Your emails do not need their own table of contents. They need a reason to exist, a reader who can recognize that reason, and a sensible next step.

That is a much more useful standard than hoping somebody eventually makes it to the final paragraph.

Chapter 1 - Sent, Seen, Understood, Done: Four Very Different Events

At 9:06 on Tuesday morning, the manager of a regional catering company sends an email to twelve employees announcing a change to the weekend delivery schedule. The message is carefully written. It explains why the change is necessary, identifies the affected routes, and asks drivers to confirm their revised departure times. By lunchtime, nine people have opened it. Four have replied. Two have sent thumbs-up reactions. The manager feels reasonably confident that the situation is under control. On Saturday morning, one driver arrives at the old departure time, another reports to the wrong loading bay, and a third explains that he thought the email was merely announcing a proposal. The manager opens his Sent folder, locates the original message, and announces the traditional workplace defense: "But I told everyone!"

He did. That much is beyond dispute. The email exists, its recipients are correctly listed, and the timestamp provides convincing evidence that the message was sent before the problems occurred. Unfortunately, none of those facts proves that the recipients understood what was required or accepted responsibility for doing it. Email software is excellent at documenting the movement of information between accounts. It is considerably less talented at confirming the movement of meaning between human beings. This is an unfortunate limitation, considering that understanding was probably the whole point of sending the message. We have created systems capable of delivering correspondence across continents in seconds, yet we still

cannot reliably determine whether somebody understood which loading bay to use.

The first useful distinction is between delivery, attention, understanding, and action. These are separate events, although workplace conversations frequently treat them as interchangeable. A message can reach someone's inbox without being noticed. It can be noticed without being opened. It can be opened without being read carefully, read carefully without being understood, and understood perfectly without producing the action you expected. Each possibility represents a different kind of difficulty. If you respond to all of them by writing longer emails, you may be improving the wrong part of the process. It's rather like responding to every complaint about a restaurant by expanding the menu, even when the actual problem is that nobody has unlocked the front door.

The message you wrote is not the message they received

When you write about something you've been managing for days, your mind supplies enormous amounts of invisible context. You remember the discussions, understand the terminology, and know which decisions have already been made. The reader might possess only a fraction of that information. A sentence that seems completely unambiguous to you can require several assumptions from someone else. Consider the instruction "Use the updated allocation for the western locations." You know which allocation is updated, which locations count as western, and where the relevant figures are stored. A colleague who has recently joined the project may know none of those things. The sentence is perfectly grammatical. It is also a surprisingly effective method of generating questions.

This gap between what you know and what the reader knows becomes particularly troublesome when messages rely on shared history. Phrases such as "as discussed," "following our previous agreement," and "the usual procedure" create an impression of clarity without necessarily providing it. They work when everyone genuinely shares the reference point. They fail when different participants remember different conversations, or when a familiar process has quietly changed. The writer assumes the missing information is obvious, while the recipient tries to reconstruct it from whatever fragments are available. If the recipient guesses correctly, nobody notices the weakness. If the guess is wrong, the resulting confusion may be blamed on carelessness rather than on the ambiguity that made it possible.

There is also a difference between recognizing individual words and understanding their practical implications. In the catering example, a driver might understand that the schedule has changed without realizing that the new departure time applies to his particular route. Another might recognize the new time but assume it remains subject to confirmation. Someone else may know exactly what is required but have a previously approved commitment that prevents compliance. These are not identical problems, and they cannot all be resolved by repeating the original announcement. Before correcting a misunderstanding, you need some idea of what was actually misunderstood. Otherwise, every explanation risks becoming a more elaborate version of the same unsuccessful message.

The reader's circumstances matter as well. A warehouse supervisor may encounter your email while handling an unexpected delivery. A regional manager might review it on

a phone between appointments. Someone working across several projects could open it simply to determine whether immediate attention is needed. These people are not necessarily treating your work with disrespect. They are making decisions about attention under competing demands. If the purpose of your message is difficult to identify, they may postpone it until they have more time. Unfortunately, "when I have more time" is not a particularly reliable appointment in a crowded calendar. It tends to be rescheduled indefinitely without anyone receiving a cancellation notice.

That is why the opening of a message carries practical importance. The reader needs enough information to classify what has arrived. Is it an announcement, a question, an instruction, or a request for a decision? Does it require action from this particular person? Is there a genuine deadline? These questions often arise before the reader considers the details. A message that conceals its purpose forces the recipient to work through the explanation merely to discover whether the explanation matters. That effort may seem small from the author's perspective, but repeated across dozens of communications it becomes an irritating tax on attention.

What a reply actually confirms

A particularly dangerous moment occurs when somebody responds with a reassuring but vague acknowledgment. "Got it," "Sounds good," and "Noted" are familiar expressions, but their exact meaning depends on context. "Got it" may mean the person has received your information. It might mean they understand the instruction. It does not necessarily mean they have agreed to carry it out, checked whether it is feasible, or completed anything. A cheerful

reaction icon is even less informative. The thumbs-up symbol has somehow acquired responsibility for representing everything from genuine approval to "Please stop sending me notifications." This is an unreasonable burden for a small digital hand.

For routine matters, an acknowledgment may be entirely sufficient. If you tell a colleague that a meeting room has changed and they respond "Thanks," there is usually no need to demand a formal declaration of comprehension. The effort of confirming understanding should match the consequences of getting something wrong. A revised delivery process affecting multiple locations deserves greater care than a casual notice about where spare stationery is kept. In higher-stakes situations, it can be reasonable to ask people to confirm a specific responsibility or report a practical obstacle. The important distinction is between checking meaningful readiness and collecting ceremonial replies that make a spreadsheet look reassuring.

Return to the weekend deliveries. Instead of asking all twelve employees to "confirm the update," the manager could ask each affected driver to confirm the departure time assigned to their route and flag any conflict before the schedule becomes final. This does not require an elaborate questionnaire or a mandatory essay about transport logistics. It provides a way to discover whether the recipient understands the relevant instruction and can follow it. If one driver reports a scheduling conflict, the manager learns about a real obstacle while there is still time to address it. A general acknowledgment would not have exposed that problem.

Yet even this approach has limits. People can confirm an instruction and later forget it. Circumstances can change. A

supervisor can misunderstand the assignment despite replying confidently. Communication cannot eliminate every operational failure, and attempting to guarantee perfect compliance through endless confirmations would create its own problems. The purpose of checking understanding is to reduce important uncertainty, not to establish a system in which every human interaction requires three signatures and a witness. You need evidence appropriate to the decision, not paperwork designed to create the comforting appearance that misunderstanding has become technically impossible.

Another issue arises when messages go to several people simultaneously. If a manager writes, "Can someone update the customer information before Friday?" each recipient may assume another person will handle it. Everyone receives the request, perhaps everyone understands it, and nobody takes ownership. The failure occurs at the point where a general expectation should become an individual responsibility. This is why identifying an appropriate owner matters when action is required. Adding more recipients does not automatically improve the likelihood of completion. Sometimes it simply increases the number of people who can truthfully say they saw the request and reasonably explain why they thought somebody else was responsible.

Find the point where communication stopped working

When a message produces an unexpected result, resist the temptation to immediately rewrite everything. First, reconstruct what happened. Did the intended recipient actually receive the information? Did they recognize that the matter concerned them? Did they interpret the instruction correctly? Did they have the authority, resources, and opportunity to act? These questions help distinguish a

writing problem from a delivery problem, an ownership problem, or a failure in the surrounding process. You don't need a formal investigation for every minor misunderstanding. A short conversation often reveals which part of the exchange broke down.

Suppose a purchasing assistant sends a request for an invoice correction and receives no response. A second email written in stronger language may achieve nothing if the supplier's original contact has left the company. The difficulty is not insufficient emphasis. Similarly, an employee who understands an instruction but lacks access to the relevant database does not need a more beautiful explanation of the instruction. They need access, a suitable alternative, or a revised assignment. Identifying the actual obstacle prevents you from spending time polishing words that were never responsible for the failure. It also reduces the likelihood of unfairly blaming recipients for problems outside their control.

You can apply this thinking to your own work by looking at one recent exchange that required an unnecessary follow-up. Examine what the follow-up actually clarified. If you had to explain which document was relevant, the original message may have relied on hidden context. If you had to establish who should respond, responsibility may have been unclear. If the recipient needed another department's approval, the task may have been assigned before it was ready. Each observation points toward a different improvement. The goal is to learn from the friction, not to create an extensive dossier proving that your first email was technically defensible.

Sometimes the uncomfortable discovery is that the original message was clear, and the recipient simply did not

act. That possibility matters too. Communication is a shared activity, but responsibility is not infinitely transferable. You can provide accurate information and reasonable expectations without becoming accountable for every choice another person makes. A recipient may disagree with a decision, prioritize something else, or avoid an unpleasant obligation. Those situations require appropriate management, negotiation, or escalation rather than endless editorial revision. Better writing helps make the underlying disagreement visible. It cannot always resolve it.

In more serious matters, particularly those involving contractual obligations, safety, or formal authorization, an ordinary email acknowledgment may not satisfy the necessary requirements. Written approval, documented procedures, or other controls may be appropriate. The important point is to understand what your message is supposed to accomplish and what evidence of completion is genuinely required. Treating an opened email as formal authorization when it isn't can be more damaging than any stylistic mistake. Likewise, forcing formal approval procedures onto trivial everyday exchanges wastes time and encourages people to ignore controls that ought to carry weight.

A useful communication system therefore does more than transport text. It helps people recognize the relevance of information, understand what is expected, and take appropriate action or identify what prevents them from doing so. Your writing plays an important role, but it operates inside that larger system. When you see the whole process, your choices become more precise. You stop responding to every failure with additional paragraphs and start looking for

the specific missing connection between the message and the intended result.

The next time someone says, "I already sent that," the statement may be completely true. It may even be supported by an impressive collection of timestamps, delivery confirmations, and archived correspondence. But the practical question remains: what happened after it was sent? If the recipient was supposed to do something, did they understand and accept that responsibility? If they needed to make a decision, did they possess the information and authority to make it? If the message was purely informational, was its meaning sufficiently clear?

Your Sent folder can prove that you finished composing a message. It cannot prove that everyone else finished the work the message was meant to start. Recognizing that distinction is the beginning of a more useful way to communicate.

Chapter 2 - The Email That Ate Your Afternoon: Why Everything Somehow Seems Essential

Nobody deliberately sits down to write an email that consumes fifteen minutes of someone else's working day. Most unnecessarily long messages begin with excellent intentions. You want to be thorough. You want to prevent confusion. You want colleagues to appreciate the work you've already completed, and you would strongly prefer not to receive six questions about details you could have explained in advance. So you include a little background, a few supporting arguments, and some information about alternatives. Then you remember an important exception. Before you know it, your straightforward request has grown into a substantial document with a greeting attached. You have created something comprehensive, responsible, and exceptionally difficult to approach without arranging for refreshments.

Consider Leah, who manages three shared office locations. She needs approval to replace the electronic visitor badges used at reception. The existing badges are wearing out, and the replacement must work with the current access system. Leah has contacted four suppliers, examined their specifications, discussed compatibility with the building contractor, and compared delivery arrangements. She has done precisely the kind of preparation her manager should appreciate. Then she writes an email explaining the entire process. It includes supplier introductions, notes from telephone conversations, a history of the existing system, observations about badge colors, and a paragraph

concerning a demonstration that was cancelled because somebody at the supplier's office had misunderstood the appointment. At the end, she asks her manager to select a supplier.

The manager replies, "Which one do you recommend, and what's the cost difference?" Leah is annoyed. Both answers were somewhere in the email. The cost difference appeared in paragraph eight, while her preferred supplier was described as "potentially representing the most appropriate solution" near the conclusion. She spent two hours organizing information that her manager apparently ignored. But the manager's response reveals something important: the message contained a great deal of material without making the decision easier. Leah transferred the record of her investigation instead of delivering its useful result. Her manager now has to perform the final sorting operation that Leah was in the best position to complete.

This happens because we confuse information that is relevant to our work with information that is necessary for the reader's work. Almost everything Leah included had some connection to the replacement badges. The supplier calls had happened. The cancelled demonstration was real. The color options existed. None of that automatically meant those details deserved space in a message requesting financial approval. Relevance is a much broader category than usefulness. A detail can belong to the history of a project without affecting the decision currently being made. If we fail to distinguish those categories, every message becomes an attempt to carry the entire project across someone's desk.

Why deleting a perfectly good paragraph feels irresponsible

The emotional obstacle to concise writing is surprisingly powerful. Once you've worked hard to gather information, removing it from a message can feel like throwing away part of your effort. You spent forty minutes investigating a supplier's maintenance arrangements. Surely the recipient should know that? Perhaps. But if every supplier offers essentially identical maintenance and the distinction does not influence the decision, that investigation may have served its purpose without needing to appear in the email. Research can be valuable because it helps you eliminate uncertainty. Its value does not depend on reproducing every discovery for the next person.

There is also the fear of being challenged later. Suppose Leah recommends the cheapest supplier, and the replacement badges develop problems. Someone might ask whether she considered compatibility, delivery reliability, or warranty conditions. By including absolutely everything in the original message, she hopes to demonstrate that no aspect was overlooked. This desire for protection is understandable, particularly in workplaces where decisions are criticized with impressive enthusiasm after the outcome becomes known. Unfortunately, a message that contains every supporting detail can make significant risks harder to notice. The fact that an issue appears somewhere in a lengthy email does not mean the decision-maker has been helped to evaluate it.

The solution is to distinguish a decision brief from its supporting record. Leah can retain the supplier quotations, compatibility notes, and correspondence in appropriate project documentation. Her approval request can identify the recommendation, meaningful differences, cost, and any unresolved risks. If the manager needs further evidence, the