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Emails People Actually Answer, in 5 Days

In five short sessions, rewrite the emails you already send so they are clear in four seconds and easy to reply to in one.

5-day guide · 5 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was built with the Self-Directed Learning Framework (SDLF): every chapter gives you a short starting action, the one idea you actually need, a fully worked example, a checklist, and exercises done on your own real emails — no filler, no re-reading required.

This is a general writing structure, not a set of templates to paste. Your organisation's norms, your relationship with the reader and your industry's conventions all override what is here — a law firm and a startup do not sound alike, and neither is wrong. Work through the chapters in order; each takes 20–30 minutes.

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CHAPTER 1 OF 5 · DAY 1 · 25 MIN

The Subject Line Is the Whole Email

> **Outcome:** "My subject lines say what the email is about and what kind of thing it is."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Open your sent folder and read only the subject lines of your last ten emails. Count how many you could act on without opening the message.

The minimum you need to know

A subject line has one job: let someone decide, without opening it, what this is and when it needs them. That means it should carry a **topic** and, where it matters, a **type** — a question, a decision, an action with a date, or pure information. "Quick question" and "Following up" carry neither and are invisible in a list of sixty. Length matters because phones truncate around 35–45 characters, so the useful words go first. Avoid the two traps at the ends of the range: a vague subject makes the email easy to skip, and an artificially urgent one ("URGENT", "ASAP") works exactly once before people stop believing you. If an email genuinely contains no ask, say so in the subject — "FYI:" or "No action needed:" is a kindness that gets your future emails opened.

Worked example: four subject lines rewritten

"Quick question" → "Question: which supplier for the March print run?" — now it is answerable in one line. "Following up" → "Still need your sign-off on the Q1 budget (was due Friday)" — states the object and the stake. "Meeting" → "Decision needed by Thu: move the team meeting to Wednesdays?" — type, deadline and topic in eleven words, with the important ones at the front. "Update" → "FYI, no action: warehouse move finished Tuesday" — explicitly releases the reader. Each rewrite is longer, and each is faster to deal with, which is the trade that matters.

Checklist

- ☐ Subject names the specific topic, not the general area
- ☐ The kind of email is clear: question, decision, action with a date, or FYI
- ☐ The most useful words are in the first 40 characters
- ☐ No manufactured urgency — "URGENT" reserved for things that are
- ☐ Emails needing nothing are labelled so the reader can skip them guilt-free
- ☐ Subject updated when a long thread drifts onto a new topic

Exercises

1. Rewrite the subject lines of your last five sent emails using topic plus type.
2. Find one thread in your inbox where the subject no longer matches the content, and rename it.
3. Write three subject lines for an email you have to send today, then pick the shortest one that still says everything.

CHAPTER 2 OF 5 · DAY 2 · 25 MIN

Deleting the First Paragraph

> **Outcome:** "My emails start with the point, not with a run-up to it."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Take any email in your sent folder and delete its entire first sentence. Read what is left. Most of the time it is better.

The minimum you need to know

Almost every weak email begins with a paragraph that exists only because the writer had not decided what to say yet: "I hope this email finds you well. I am reaching out because I wanted to touch base regarding..." The reader's eye slides straight past it looking for content, which means your real opening is wherever the content actually starts. Put it first. A working opening does one of two things: it states the ask, or it states the context in a single line and then the ask. One line of warmth is fine and often right — "Hope the launch went well" costs nothing and means something if it is specific. What does not work is **generic warmth plus throat-clearing plus a delayed point**. And if you are writing to someone who does not know you, the first line has one extra job: say who you are and why you, specifically, are writing to them.

Worked example: one email, before and after

Before: "Hi Marta, I hope you're doing well and that the week has been going smoothly. I wanted to reach out and touch base with you regarding the matter of the supplier contracts that we discussed at some point last month, as I believe there may be some outstanding items that still require attention from your side before we are able to proceed further." — 61 words, no ask. After: "Hi Marta — the supplier contracts need your signature before we can place the March order. Two documents, both attached. Could you send them back by Thursday? Happy to walk through the changed clauses if that's easier." — 38 words, the ask is in the first sentence, the deadline is explicit, and the offer of help removes the most likely reason for delay.

Checklist

- ☐ The point appears in the first sentence or the second
- ☐ No "I hope this finds you well" as a substitute for having a point
- ☐ Warmth, if included, is specific enough to be true
- ☐ A stranger gets told who you are and why them, in one line
- ☐ Context that the reader already has is cut, not restated
- ☐ The email reads sensibly when only the first two lines are read

Exercises

1. Rewrite one of your own emails so the ask is in the first sentence, and compare word counts.
2. Delete every instance of "just", "quickly" and "I wanted to" from a draft and see whether anything was lost.
3. Write an opening line to a stranger that says who you are and why them, in under twenty words.

CHAPTER 3 OF 5 · DAY 3 · 30 MIN

One Email, One Ask

> **Outcome:** "Each email I send asks for one thing, and the reader can see exactly what it is."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Find a sent email that asked for two or more things. Check whether you got answers to all of them. Usually you got the last one.

The minimum you need to know

An email with four questions in it reliably gets one answered — usually the easiest or the last. This is not rudeness; it is how people read on phones. The fix is structural: **one email, one ask**, and where that genuinely cannot work, make the asks impossible to miss by numbering them and giving each its own line. The ask itself needs three parts to be actionable: **what** you want, **who** is doing it, and **by when**. "Let me know your thoughts" has none of the three. "Could you confirm the delivery date by Wednesday?" has all three in nine words. Where several people are on the copy line, name the person who owns the action — an ask addressed to everybody is an ask addressed to nobody. And put the ask somewhere the eye lands: its own paragraph, near the top, not trailing off the end of a long one.

Worked example: a four-question email restructured

The original asks, in one dense paragraph, about the venue, the catering budget, whether Tom is presenting, and if anyone has the attendee list. It gets a reply about Tom and nothing else. Restructured: the subject becomes "3 decisions needed for the May offsite (by Fri)". The body opens with one line of context, then three numbered lines, each naming an owner: "1. Venue — Priya, can you confirm Hall B or the annexe? 2. Catering — is €35 a head still the cap? 3. Attendee list — Sam, do you have the current version?" The fourth item, whether Tom is presenting, is pulled out entirely and sent to Tom as its own email, because it is a different conversation with a different person. All three numbered items come back within a day.

Checklist

- ☐ The email has one ask, or a short numbered list where each item has an owner
- ☐ Each ask names what, who and by when
- ☐ The ask sits in its own paragraph, not at the end of a long one
- ☐ Anything aimed at a different person has been split into its own email
- ☐ "Let me know your thoughts" replaced with a specific question
- ☐ People who only need to know are on CC, and the email says what they need to do: nothing

Exercises

1. Take a multi-ask email from your sent folder and split it into the emails it should have been.
2. Rewrite three vague asks into the what/who/when form.
3. Send one numbered-ask email today and note how many items come back answered.

CHAPTER 4 OF 5 · DAY 4 · 30 MIN

Tone When the News Is Bad

> **Outcome:** "I can write a refusal, a delay or a correction without either grovelling or picking a fight."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Write the sentence "We will not be able to do this" and then write it three more ways. Notice which versions add words without adding clarity.

The minimum you need to know

Difficult emails fail in two opposite directions: **over-softening**, where so many hedges and apologies pile up that the reader is unsure whether they have been told no, and **compression**, where a two-line refusal reads as contempt because email strips out the tone your face and voice would have supplied. One structure handles almost all of them: **state the outcome, give the reason in one sentence, offer what you can actually offer.** Outcome first, because burying it makes the reader hunt for it. One reason, because a stack of justifications reads as defensiveness. An offer, because their real question is "so what happens now?" Apologise once, for the specific thing, then stop. And when you are angry, write it and do not send it — the version you write the next morning is always shorter.

Worked example: a missed deadline, three ways

Too soft: "So sorry to be a pain, I know this is really annoying and I feel terrible about it, but there may possibly be a slight delay, though I'm hoping it won't be too bad and I'll do my absolute best..." The reader still does not know when the work is coming. Too blunt: "Report will be late. Ill last week." Accurate, and it reads as if the reader's problem is not the writer's concern. Working version: "The report will be with you Thursday rather than Monday — I was out sick last week and the data pull slipped with it. Sorry for the change. If Monday is fixed for the board pack, I can send the finished sections and the numbers on Monday and the analysis on Thursday. Which would you prefer?" Outcome, one reason, one apology, and a real choice handed back to the reader.

Checklist

- ☐ The outcome is in the first sentence, not the last
- ☐ One reason given, not a stack of justifications
- ☐ Apology made once, for something specific, then dropped
- ☐ An alternative or a next step is offered, not just the bad news
- ☐ Nothing is blamed on a vague "the team" or "circumstances"
- ☐ Written while angry means held overnight and re-read before sending

Exercises

1. Rewrite a real refusal you sent recently using outcome, one reason, one offer.
2. Take an over-apologetic draft and cut every apology but the first.
3. Write the hardest email you are currently avoiding, save it as a draft, and re-read it tomorrow before deciding.

CHAPTER 5 OF 5 · DAY 5 · 25 MIN

Following Up Without Nagging

> **Outcome:** "I have a follow-up rhythm that gets answers without damaging the relationship."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Find the oldest unanswered email in your sent folder. Decide right now whether it needs a follow-up, a different channel, or dropping.

The minimum you need to know

Silence usually means the email arrived at a bad moment, not that the answer is no. A good follow-up assumes that and makes replying easier than it was the first time. Three things make it work. **Timing**: give it enough room to be reasonable — commonly three to five working days for a normal request, sooner if there is a real deadline, and say what the deadline is. **Restating**: reply in the same thread so the original is right there, and repeat the ask in one line rather than writing "just bumping this" and making them scroll. **Lowering the bar**: offer a version that takes them ten seconds — a yes/no, two options, or an explicit "if it's easier, I'll assume X and proceed." That last one is the most effective sentence in professional email, because it lets a silent reader stay silent and still move the work forward. After two follow-ups, stop emailing: change channel, ask someone else, or let it go. A third chase converts a busy person into an annoyed one.

Worked example: a two-step follow-up that worked

Original on Monday: a request for sign-off on two contracts, no reply. Thursday, same thread: "Hi Marta — bumping this one. I need your signature on the two attached contracts before we can place the March order. Is Friday realistic, or should I push the order to the following week?" That is the ask restated, plus an easy out that is still an answer. Still nothing by Tuesday. Second and final follow-up: "No rush if you're buried — but I need to tell the supplier something today. Unless I hear otherwise by 4pm, I'll move the order to the 12th and we can sign this week." Reply came in eleven minutes. The default did the work: silence became a decision instead of a blockage, and nobody had to feel chased.

Checklist

- ☐ Follow-up sent in the original thread, not as a fresh email
- ☐ The ask restated in one line so nobody has to scroll
- ☐ A reasonable interval waited — usually three to five working days
- ☐ An easier version offered: yes/no, two options, or a stated default
- ☐ Maximum two follow-ups before changing channel or letting it go
- ☐ Tone stays neutral — no "as per my previous email"

Exercises

1. Write a follow-up for your oldest unanswered email using the restate-plus-easy-out structure.
2. Add a stated default ("unless I hear otherwise, I'll...") to one pending request.
3. Pick one chase you have sent twice and decide its fate: different channel, different person, or drop it.

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