

HOW TO REVISE AN EMAIL SO THAT PEOPLE WILL READ IT

- "People think that the first draft is the big event and that revision is cleaning up afterward. But the first draft is really setting up the chairs, tables, and cups, and revision isn't cleaning up after the party, it is the party."
- "All first drafts are terrible. I don't care if you're Shakespeare."
- "What comes out unfiltered from anyone's mind is mud."

The first two quotations come from writing professors whose names I've since forgotten (and they were quoting other people whom they'd forgotten). The last one is one I just made up myself. But regardless of the source, the advice is sound: no email should be clicked-to-send without revision.

I've found that for your average email, the number of revisions largely depends on the number of recipients. Here's my experience:

- 1 to 5 recipients = 2 to 4 revisions
- 5 to 10 recipients = 8 to 12 revisions
- Company-wide or to Executive Committee = 30 to 50 revisions

Even the simplest email to one person benefits from a couple of extra passes. If it's going to the management committee, expect everyone to have changes (and changes to those changes).

Here's a checklist to consider when revising:

- 1. Delete redundancies.** Say it once. That's enough. If you're repetitive, the reader will stop reading and start skimming. (Like you probably just did.)
- 2. Use numbers and specifics instead of adverbs and adjectives.** "The project is currently way behind schedule on major tasks," is not as clear as "The project is 3 weeks late delivering hamburger buns to Des Moines." (If you don't have numbers, still get rid of the adverbs and adjectives.)
- 3. Add missing context.** Does your reader know that hamburger buns in Iowa are required for the company to collect \$37 million? If you're not sure, remind them.
- 4. Focus on the strongest argument.** Should those hamburger buns get shipped because the delay is embarrassing for the company, because it's costing children their lunch, or because it's costing the company tens of millions of dollars? Maybe all three, but one of those reasons (and it depends on your reader) will be enough to get buns on the road.
- 5. Delete off-topic material.** The best emails say one thing and say it clearly. One-subject emails also make it easier for the recipient to file the message once they've taken action, something anyone who uses Outlook to manage tasks appreciates.
- 6. Seek out equivocation and remove it.** "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" works for Dickens, not status reports.

7. Kill your favourites. Is something in your text particularly pithy, amusing, or clever? Chances are, it's not. If it sticks out, it's probably a tap-dancing gorilla in boxer shorts — hilarious when you thought of it, embarrassing when it gets in your manager's inbox.

8. Delete anything written in the heat of emotion. Will this sentence show them who's been right about the hamburger buns since the beginning? Yes? Cut it.

9. Shorten. Remember the reader struggling to digest your message on the run — a BlackBerry or an iPhone gets about 40 words per screen. What looks short on your desktop monitor is an epic epistle on their mobile device.

10. Give it a day. With time, what seemed so urgent may no longer need to be said. And one less email is something everyone will thank you for.

Do you agree that even late-night emails sent from the bar should be revised before sending? (Have you ever seen one the next day?) Have you bravely sent something unrevised only to have it come flying back at you? Yup — not the best. So revise, revise, revise!

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<http://blogs.hbr.org/silverman/2009/04/how-to-revise-an-email-so-that.html>