

ER | ELENA RAILEANU
CAREER COACHING

a guide to

SAY IT SO IT LANDS

Professional communication that gets results. How to write emails and messages that get read, understood, and answered.

Most workplace problems don't start with bad intentions. They start with a confusing email, a message that sounded harsher than it was meant to, or a request buried in paragraph four.

As a former journalist, I spent years writing for every kind of audience. The rule never changed: a good message is one that can be read, understood, and appreciated by anyone who receives it. This guide, adapted from my professional communication workshop, shows you how to write emails and messages that get read, understood, and answered.

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1. The four questions every reader asks

When your email lands in someone's inbox, they decide in seconds whether to read it now, later, or never. Without realizing it, they ask four questions:

1. **Who is the sender?** Do I know this person, and do I need to deal with them now?
2. **What does the subject line say?** What is this about, and how urgent is it?
3. **What is the main request?** What do you actually want from me?
4. **How should I respond?** Do I need to reply, by when, and with what?

If your message makes them work hard to answer any of these, it moves to the bottom of the pile.

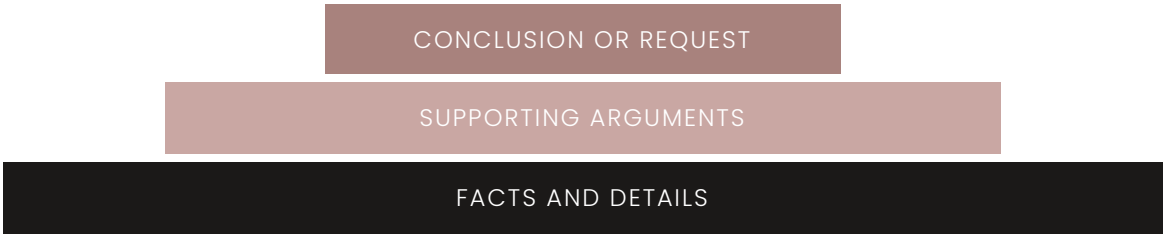
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2. Lead with the ask: the Pyramid Principle

In school, we learned to write like an essay: introduction, body, conclusion. The point comes last. That works for a term paper. It fails in an inbox, where your reader may never reach the end.

Imagine someone stops you on the street and says: “I am tired and hungry. I want to buy an apple. Can you give me $5?” You spent the first two sentences wondering what they want. Now flip it: “Can you give me $5? I want to buy an apple. I’m tired and hungry.” You know the request instantly, and everything after it makes sense.

This is the core of **the Pyramid Principle**, developed by former McKinsey consultant Barbara Minto. Put your conclusion or request at the top, then the arguments that support it, then the facts behind those arguments.



ESSAY STYLE

“I used to do only HR. Now I also do payroll, accounting, and business operations. I feel like I keep getting more responsibilities, and I’m getting close to burnout. Can we talk about my workload?”

PYRAMID STYLE

“Can we meet this week to rebalance my workload? I’m close to burnout. Over the past year my role has grown from HR to also covering payroll, accounting, and operations.”

3. Before and after: two real-world emails

The report that's running late

BEFORE · SUBJECT: REPORT

"I've been working on the report you wanted by Friday. I realized I was missing some data. Patrick worked on a similar project before and has the numbers, but he's out until Monday. Sam said he could review my FAQ section, but not until Tuesday. Sasha will finish her customer interviews by Wednesday, and it would be great to include some of her anecdotes. If I include all of that, I'll have it ready next Thursday at the earliest. Is that okay?"

AFTER · SUBJECT: MOVE REPORT TO NEXT THURSDAY?

"Hi Yash, can I send you the report next Thursday instead of this Friday? That way I can include Patrick's data, customer stories from Sasha, and Sam's review of the FAQ. Thank you, Jose"

The meeting that needs to move

BEFORE · SUBJECT: MEETING TODAY

"Nia called to say she has a conflict and can't make the 10:00 meeting today. Anuj doesn't mind later or tomorrow, but not before 9:30. Samir won't be back from the conference until tomorrow. The room is booked tomorrow but free Wednesday afternoon. Wednesday at 2 seems to work for everyone."

AFTER · SUBJECT: MOVE TODAY'S MEETING TO WED 2 P.M.?

"Can we move today's meeting to Wednesday at 2 p.m.? Nia and Samir can both attend then, it works for Anuj, and the room is free."

Same information. Half the words. The reader knows exactly what to say: yes or no.

4. Why this works: how the brain reads

We group things

Try to remember this number: 24712365. Hard. Now see it as 24, 7, 12, 365: hours in a day, days in a week, months in a year, days in a year. Easy. Our brains look for groups. When you organize your message into clear groups, like “why this matters” and “what we could try,” your reader remembers it.

Our memory is limited

Psychologists have long observed that we can only hold a handful of items in working memory at once, often cited as about seven. You can multiply 3 by 4 in your head instantly. Try 543 times 76, and you run out of room. An email with seven separate requests is the 543 times 76 of inboxes. Keep each message to one topic, and send separate emails for separate asks.

Reading is linear

Your reader takes in one sentence at a time, like walking in the dark without knowing what comes next. Give them the destination first, and every sentence after it has a place to land.

> A WELL-STRUCTURED EMAIL
>
> **Subject: Idea to make onboarding faster**
> I think we should simplify our onboarding so new hires feel welcome and get productive sooner.
>
> **Why it matters:** onboarding takes four to six weeks, new hires are confused about our tools, and they lose time looking for help.
>
> **What we could try:** one checklist per new hire, a buddy for their first month, and scheduled training sessions.
>
> Could we discuss it at our next one-on-one?

5. Write for your audience, not yourself

Before you write, ask three questions: What does my reader need to know? How should I organize it for them? What will convince them?

A novice writer writes in the order things come to mind. A skilled writer writes in the order the reader needs them. Imagine explaining a new time-off policy to your team.

WRITING FOR YOURSELF

"Per the revised policy framework, accrual methodology has transitioned from a calendar-year basis to a per-pay-period model, effective with the next cycle, subject to the carryover provisions outlined in Section 4.2."

WRITING FOR YOUR READER

"Good news: starting next month, you'll earn time off every paycheck instead of all at once in January. That means you can take a vacation earlier in the year. Unused days still roll over. Details are in the attached policy."

The second version uses plain words, leads with what the reader cares about, and connects to their experience.

6. Ten rules for messages that land

1. Be humble

You can always be wrong. It isn't about you. It's about your audience. Write the way you'd want to be written to.

2. Be resilient

A good message survives being forwarded and retold without being misunderstood. Picture it on a billboard in Times Square with your name on it: would you still send it? And after an important call, send a short recap email. Don't rely on anyone's memory for details that matter.

3. Be concise

- Never use a big word when a simple one will do.
- Put a clear directive in your subject line, like "Action required: approve budget by Friday."
- Cut the fluff. You can be polite without "I hope this email finds you in good health and high spirits."

- Stick to one topic. If your email gets forwarded, the next person shouldn't have to dig for the part that matters to them.

4. Get the tone right

Starting many sentences with "I" can sound self-centered. Starting with "You" can sound accusatory. Swap negative framing for positive: instead of "It's frustrating when you don't listen," try "I appreciate it when I can finish my thoughts."

When a conversation is going sideways, mirror the other person's last few words as a question. It shows you're listening and gently invites them to rethink. ("Two paper copies?" "Store it anywhere?") More often than not, they'll arrive at a better answer on their own.

5. Skip the apologies

"Sorry I'm being so emotional" and "Sorry I'm talking so much" make the moment about your shortcomings. Try "Thank you for being so patient with me" or "Thank you for listening. I care a lot about this." You elevate the other person instead of shrinking yourself.

And remember that saying "I'm sorry" isn't the same as apologizing. A real apology includes what you'll do differently next time. An apology without change doesn't rebuild trust.

6. Keep it clean

Leave out emotional exclamations: "I can't believe this!", "This is ridiculous!", "This is incredibly frustrating." They add heat without adding information.

7. Be timely

When you send matters. Respect your reader's schedule. A late-night email can feel like pressure, and a Friday 5 p.m. request rarely gets the attention it deserves. Most email tools let you schedule a message to arrive at a better time.

8. Stay professional

Even when you're frustrated, especially when you're frustrated. See the rewrites in the next section.

9. Check your grammar and punctuation

Punctuation changes meaning. "Let's eat, Grandma" and "Let's eat Grandma" are very different invitations. So are "You did what?" and "You did what?!!!" Read your message out loud, use a grammar checker like Grammarly, and go easy on exclamation points.

10. Never write hungry

Hunger, fatigue, and stress make us irritable and impatient. If a message matters, eat something, take a walk, and read it again before you send it.

7. Professional rewrites for tense moments

What you want to say	What to send instead
You keep stepping on my toes, doing your job and mine.	**We ended up duplicating work. Can we agree on where each of our responsibilities starts and ends?**
None of this makes sense to me.	**To make sure I understand, could you share more context on this?**
That timeline is impossible.	**To set a realistic timeline, can we break this into milestones together?**
This meeting is a waste of my time.	**I need to prioritize other work during that time. If my input is essential, I'm available on Slack.**
You're not doing your job right, and it's creating more work for me.	**A few tasks need some changes, which is creating rework. Would it help to go over them together?**
I have no idea how to answer that.	**That's outside my area of expertise. I'll check with my team and get back to you.**
Can you stop being disrespectful?	**I understand you're frustrated. I'm happy to continue this conversation when we can keep it respectful.**
You never gave me clear instructions.	**This is my best work with the information I had. Is there somewhere I can find more guidelines for next time?**
This meeting is pointless.	**Should we postpone until we have more details and a clear agenda?**
I already told you that's not possible.	**That isn't possible right now. If anything changes, I'll let you know right away.**

8. How to keep getting better

Great communicators do three things consistently: they **read a lot**, they **write a lot**, and they **listen to others**. Notice which emails you answer first and why. Borrow what works.

And remember that every message, written or spoken, carries three layers: the **story** (what you're saying), the **sound** (how it comes across), and the **sentiment** (what it says about you). Before you send, check all three.

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9. Your before-you-hit-send checklist

1. Is my request or conclusion in the first sentence?
2. Does the subject line say what this is and what I need?
3. Is this email about one topic only?
4. Did I group details so they're easy to scan?
5. Would this survive being forwarded, or posted on a billboard?
6. Did I cut fluff, big words, and unnecessary apologies?
7. Is the tone calm, positive, and professional?
8. Did I read it out loud and check punctuation?
9. Is this the right time to send it?
10. Have I eaten?

The Pyramid Principle was developed by Barbara Minto in her book The Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing and Thinking.

ready for your next step?

LET'S WORK TOGETHER

Book a strategy call with Elena

One-on-one help with your interviews, resume, salary negotiation, or next career move.

Book your strategy call

Sign up for the next networking session

Two hours, live, with a small group. Practice real conversations and leave with scripts you can use the next day.

Save your seat

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