

Sam's e-mail message is, admittedly, concise, but the message is fuzzy. Furthermore, Sam's message doesn't contain any supporting detail. Engineers are critical thinkers who require substantiation of any claims.

Something strange happens to people when they compose e-mail. Even if an engineer brings great discipline to the art of writing formal documents, that same discipline usually vanishes in the writing of e-mail. When composing e-mail, people get very sloppy. Many busy people write e-mail as a stream-of-consciousness exercise, just blasting out messages. Some of my own e-mail messages have as much coherence (and I'm a professional writer) as the chaotic brain pattern I experience just before falling asleep.

People have much lower expectations from e-mail than from formal documents. Consequently, many people write e-mail to those low expectations, forfeiting all the knowledge they have about good writing. The first rule of writing work-related e-mail is, therefore, as follows:

Use the same discipline in writing e-mail as you do when writing formal documents.

The preceding rule will sound trite until you give it a try. The same discipline includes running e-mail through a spell-checker, capitalizing normally, and even putting the pronoun *I* in uppercase.

Note that I'm only talking about work-related information. I'm not saying that messages like the following deserve any discipline at all:

To: EngTeam

Subject: Lunch

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Lunch at Mary Chung's at noon today?

--Sam