

Readers commonly complain that writers “take too long to get to the point,” but the truth is, it’s natural for us to ease into a message. To avoid it, we need to think differently about how we structure information.

Aristotle taught us in “Poetics” that every story has a plot, with a beginning, middle, and end, which is the natural way that the brain thinks about information. That approach works well in children’s storytelling and mysteries, but not in most business communication.

In business, readers usually want to know the end first. What is your recommendation? What do you want me to do? We need to encapsulate the important information early, then provide details farther down. It’s the inverse order of how the brain usually thinks about information.

**Start with an effective subject line** (most are a waste of space). Choose specific words and use enough of them to tell the reader why this message is worth her time. Subject lines of one to three words are too vague.

Instead of *travel plans*, say *Need flight and hotel in Dallas, 4/27*.

Instead of *upcoming meeting*, make it *Points to cover at Fri. budget meeting*.

**Summary paragraph** – In email and most other types of messages, the first paragraph should be a synopsis of the most important points in the entire message.

- It is usually two to four sentences, depending on the overall length of the message.
- It includes anything the reader must know to understand the significance of the message.
- You leave the details in the body of the message and, if necessary, tell readers in the summary to read below for details.

*Here is an original opening paragraph:*

As we discussed in New York last week, please find attached the latest rendering of the proposed new logo for our construction equipment. The plan is to roll out the look on new products as they are introduced this year and next, with our BigDig backhoe being the first to display the new look.

*Here is a possible revision, containing key details that were in the middle and at the bottom of the original message:*

Attached—for your eyes only—is the latest version of our proposed new logo. Do not share these drawings because they are not final. Please do two things and get back to me no later than Friday, May 26:

- Review the concept and tell me if you have questions or concerns.
- Send me potential problems that you think might arise from the change, such as outdated wording or dealer complaints.

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Ken O'Quinn is a writing coach who teaches workshops in corporations and PR agencies throughout the world. Writing is the only thing he has wanted to do since eighth grade, so after a journalism career with the Associated Press and newspapers, he started Writing With Clarity. In addition to extensive work with corporate communications and PR specialists, he also helps other staff and managers at all levels to sharpen their professional writing skills. When he is not teaching, he enjoys fitness training, hiking, playing competitive softball, walking the ocean beach near his home, and reading nonfiction and fiction.