

“Stop Reading Here:” How to Make Email Both Short and Detailed

Eric Krock

Efficient communication is a core skill for success in product management. Product managers must tell other employees enough information that they feel included rather than blindsided and have a chance to provide timely, relevant feedback, but not so much information that recipients feel overwhelmed. By writing emails with a summary at the top, followed by the statement “— Stop Reading Here (unless you’re curious)—,” followed by a detailed explanation, product managers can please both those who want less and more information.

Email is a good tool for quickly, cheaply broadcasting factual information to large groups of people. However, different people want different amounts of detail:

- **Some people just want a brief, one paragraph statement of the update or decision itself.** They don’t want to be bothered with details. If you write a long email, they’ll feel their time is being wasted. (Busy account managers who trust your decisions are a classic example.)
- **Others want to understand the details, background research, alternatives that were considered, and the justification for the final decision.** If you write a short email, they’ll be unhappy they didn’t get the complete understanding they wanted. (Opinionated sales engineers may fall into this category.)
- **Some people will object if you only inform them of the final decision.** If they don’t understand that their preferred alternative was considered and the reason it was rejected, they will assume their alternative was overlooked or ignored and will often “reply all” with an objection. That may force you to “reply all” yourself with more detailed follow-up email to prevent confusion, calls for the decision to be reopened, or a sense that the product manager is ignoring feedback or a seemingly-better alternative.

How can you please all these groups and prevent lengthy back-and-forth threads of objections from people who don't know all the details? Use the “— Stop Reading Here (unless you're curious) —” technique.

When you have to send an update email to a large group of people:

- Summarize the update as briefly as possible at the start of the email. Tell people the minimum amount of information they have to know. What was the decision? Who is affected? When does it take effect? Who do they contact for more information? Ideally, try to do this in a single paragraph that is no more than three to five sentences long.
- Then, put in a line reading “— Stop Reading Here (unless you're curious) —.”
- After that, explain the details behind the decision, the alternatives that were considered and why they were rejected, and so on. Provide a link to any internal wiki page that contains more information.

This approach pleases everyone:

- The busy people will stop reading and be grateful that they didn't have to finish reading the entire email with all the details just to make sure they weren't missing something important.
- The people who want the details will continue reading and be happy they got the full understanding they were seeking.
- The people who would have objected to the update or decision out of well-intentioned ignorance will continue reading, learn the reasons the decision was made, and usually accept it. If they still object, they will at least realize that their preferred alternative was considered and may contact you privately if they want to discuss it further. Either way, this almost always prevents an angry “reply all” that would waste the time of everyone on the email thread.

Of course, it's always better to communicate information in person or by video or audio conference calls when time and resources allow. But product managers and their stakeholders are usually very busy and don't have the luxury of communicating all updates by realtime interactive meetings.

When you have to communicate a decision or update by email, this approach can save time and prevent controversy based on ignorance. This way, you can keep your stakeholders informed and also respect their time.

Eric Krock is Co-Founder and Chief Marketing Officer at Voximate. You can read his [Agile Product and Project Management Blog](http://www.voximate.com/blog/) at <http://www.voximate.com/blog/>, subscribe via RSS at <http://feeds.feedburner.com/Voximate/>, and follow him on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/voximate>.