

## **Avoid Garbage Plate E-Mails**

**By Robert T. Whipple MBA CPLP**

There is a stew called goulash that seems to improve when you add leftovers and ingredients. This characteristic is not the case with e-mail. Long and complex notes with many attachments and topics are a huge burden for any reader and make the information hard to find later. E-mails are more effective when they are short, crisp, and well focused. The subject line gives away the plot, and skilled writers stick to the main plot, resisting the temptation to go off on tangents. You can always write a second or third note, perhaps with a modified distribution, if related topics need to be communicated.

If your typical e-mail is more than eight paragraphs, you may be guilty of trying to pack too much information and detail into your notes. To see if you have this problem, just look in your “sent items” file. You might gain more attention to your notes by becoming more laconic. There is a tradeoff if you send too many short notes to the same distribution at the same time. This can be even more annoying than a single long note. Use judgment and consideration for the people on the receiving end. For particularly long items, consider sending a file as an attachment and just outline the contents in your note.

For e-mails with more than two topics, it is a good idea to lay out the agenda in a brief overview at the beginning of your note. For example:

In this note I will share:

1. The rationale behind our new vacation policy.
2. The actual details of the plan.
3. The communication plan for the rollout.
4. A list of questions and answers that will be helpful as you discuss this with employees.

Then use a subheading to delineate the start of each section or bold the first sentence that corresponds to each of the four topics in your outline. This simple courtesy lets readers know the overall plan for your note. Without it, they would start reading but not know where you were going or how extensive the information might be or where they are in the process as they read. This lack of guidance would be confusing for readers. Providing a “roadmap” also helps readers focus on each section as a separate but related topic.

Picture the difference between eating a well-laid-out meal with distinct courses and nicely arranged plates versus eating a “garbage plate” at the all-night diner. A garbage plate has everything you can imagine, from hot dogs to sauerkraut, potato salad, and macaroni salad, all piled high on a paper plate just dripping with the grease from the chili sauce. It’s even hard to hold the saturated plate together as you make your way to the table. Don’t let people reading your notes feel like they are trying to pick through a garbage plate.

Rambling on with too much detail or too many examples can cloud your message. You should state your point crisply and back it up with an example or two for clarity. Then it is time to move on to another point or end the note. If you have more than three arguments or examples to illustrate a point, the reader will become agitated. If a large volume of support data is required to back up your points, supply that in an attachment that can be opened by people who have the inclination to wade through it.

Using attachments is normally a positive for e-mail communication, but there are several cautions. Attachments can be stacked up by the dozens and have the impact of parasites clinging to the underbelly of an animal. Each attachment should have a specific purpose, and it must be clearly identifiable by its file name. People become annoyed if they have to claw through several attachments that are useless junk tacked on for “completeness.” It is better to err on the side of brevity. You can offer to send additional information. Most readers will not take you up on the offer. Attachments can also add up to excessive bandwidth usage. Some firewalls strip them automatically, and the reader never sees them, so know your audience. An alternative would be to put the data on a website for download and provide a link to it.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on [www.leadergrow.com](http://www.leadergrow.com).*

*Robert Whipple is also the author of **The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals**, and **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind**. Bob consults and speaks on these and other leadership topics. He is CEO of Leadergrow Inc. a company dedicated to growing leaders. Contact Bob at [bwhipple@leadergrow.com](mailto:bwhipple@leadergrow.com) or 585-392-7763.*