

Electronic Communication Etiquette 101:

Statistically, we've barely had written communication at all—the species is over 5 million years old¹, but writing was only invented about 5100² years ago. For the overwhelming majority of our existence, communication has primarily been verbal.

Even after written communication was developed, for most of those 5100 years, there were very few variations on it- signal fires, smoke signals, mirrors, or flags might be used to speed the rate at which a message was transferred, but until the early 1800s, there were no significant advances in delivering a message- the same carrier pigeons which mythically delivered the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo³ were also used to communicate the results of the ancient Olympics 2500⁴ years earlier.

The invention of the telegraph and telephone ushered in a new age of electronic communication, and by the 1950s, roughly two-thirds of US homes had at least one telephone.⁵ While this was a significant change over communicating by postal service or telegram, it would still be another 50 years before the Internet age truly provided the common person with a myriad of communications options.

However, those options carried with them a whole new set of challenges—the etiquette for communication by letter or phone is long established, but as new forms of electronic communication continue to be released, there are many differing expectations on how they should be used.

In the first half of this paper, I will propose suggested times for responding to an electronic communication, based on the method used, if that communication is personal or professional, and if the communication is occurring during or after business hours.

The second half of this paper will concentrate on email, with a specific aim of removing ambiguity from messages.

First, however, we need to define terms. For the purposes of this paper, we shall limit ourselves to the following commonly-used technologies:

Email

¹ When Humans Became Human- <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/26/science/when-humans-became-human.html>

² The Evolution of Writing- <https://sites.utexas.edu/dsb/tokens/the-evolution-of-writing/>

³ Enduring lessons from the legend of Rothschild's carrier pigeon- <https://www.ft.com/content/255b75e0-c77d-11e2-be27-00144feab7de>

⁴ The Secret Life of Pigeons- <http://www.cbc.ca/natureofthings/features/pigeons-and-us>

⁵ Telephones in the 1950s- <https://www.techwalla.com/articles/telephones-in-the-1950s>

Invented in 1971,⁶ or 1978,⁷ or preceded by any number of systems from the '60s⁸, this is the form of communication with which most people are familiar. At its simplest, a user writes a message, addresses it to another user, and the message is sent from one server to another, where it is delivered and can be read by the recipient.

Email has evolved to allow multiple recipients, who may or may not be able to see who received it, support extensive formatting, embedding of images, and attachments.

While email has become the de-facto method of communication for businesses, its popularity is dropping⁹, both at work and at home¹⁰.

Instant Messaging

While various methods existed with earlier time-sharing computer systems to send messages in real time, such as Bitnet Relay¹¹, the release of ICQ in 1996 is generally considered to be the first modern example of instant messaging¹².

While early email clients only looked for new messages at a set interval, an instant messaging client allowed for near-real-time communication. Because it was "instant," there was a much greater expectation that the message was received than with email- you could tell if the person you were communicating with was currently online or not, and with many systems, you can see if they have read the message, or if they are typing a response.

Modern instant messaging clients support access to the same account from multiple devices, limited formatting of messages, and the embedding of images, although the amount of flexibility is largely dependent on the instant messaging client used.

SMS / Texting

Although the Short Message Service (SMS) was invented in 1992¹³, it wasn't until 2007 that people sent more text messages than phone calls¹⁴. As cell phone plans provided unlimited texting, and smartphones became ubiquitous, it would become enough of a preference over phone calls that pop-

⁶ A brief history of email: dedicated to Ray Tomlinson <https://phrasee.co/a-brief-history-of-email/>

⁷ The Man Who Invented Email- <http://techland.time.com/2011/11/15/the-man-who-invented-email/>

⁸ History of Email- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_email

⁹ Is Messaging Going to Kill E-Mail?- <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-messaging-going-to-kill-e-mail/>

¹⁰ Consumers Are Still Email Obsessed, But They're Finding More Balance- <https://theblog.adobe.com/consumers-are-still-email-obsessed-but-theyre-finding-more-balance/>

¹¹ RELAY: Past, Present and Future- <http://web.inter.nl.net/users/fred/relay/relhis.html>

¹² A Brief History of Instant Messaging- <http://mashable.com/2012/10/25/instant-messaging-history/#rIRsBS0z1Pqr>

¹³ Text message turns 20- but are their best years behind them? -

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2012/dec/02/text-messaging-turns-20>

¹⁴ A Brief History of Mobile Texting - <https://www.advantagetec.com/2016/01/a-brief-history-of-mobile-texting/>

culture observer “Weird Al” Yankovic even addressed the phenomena in his 2014 song *First World Problems* – “Some idiot just called me up on the phone, what!? Don't they know how to text? OMG!”¹⁵

While the original protocol for SMS only supported 160 characters and was intended to be between two individuals¹⁶, changes to the protocol¹⁷ and customizations made by specific manufacturers allowed for longer messages, group messaging, and the sending of images, audio and video, and business card attachments.

Phone

As of a January 2017, 95% of all Americans now own a cell phone¹⁸, and just over 50% of US homes rely exclusively on cell phones over landlines- only 6.5% of homes have only an landline, and only 3.2% have no phone service at all.¹⁹

Many of us envy those 3.2%- with cell phones being so ubiquitous, there's been a growing expectation that people will provide their own cellular service for business purposes²⁰, and that they'll answer that phone when it goes off.

¹⁵ “First World Problems” - <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/weirdalyankovic/firstworldproblems.html>

¹⁶ RFC 5724- URI Scheme for Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) Short Message Service (SMS) - <https://www.ietf.org/rfc/rfc5724.txt>

¹⁷ Mbuni User Guide- http://mbuni.org/userguide.shtml#Section_.1.1.1

¹⁸ Mobile Fact Sheet- <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile/>

¹⁹ Most US households have given up landlines for cellphones -

<https://www.theverge.com/2017/5/4/15544596/american-households-now-use-cellphones-more-than-landlines>

²⁰ Dilemma of the Month: Professional Work on Your Personal Cell- <https://www.comstocksmag.com/qa/dilemma-month-professional-work-your-personal-cell>

Which brings us to our first proposal for responsiveness:

		Time of Day		
		During Business Hours	After Business Hours	Personal
Type of Communication	Phone	Answer immediately if possible. Listen to voicemail and respond as soon as possible.	Listen to voicemail and respond as soon as possible. If phone call is followed by text/email from the caller, review as soon as possible.	Depends largely on the caller, but you should answer immediately if you are making plans with the caller, or if they call back multiple times.
	Text	Answer immediately if required. Answer within 2 hours if not urgent.	Check for new texts every 2 hours. Respond immediately if required, otherwise, wait until next business day.	Check for new texts several times a day. Check more often when conversing with someone. If asked a question, respond immediately, even if you defer giving the answer until later.
	Instant Message	Answer immediately if required.	Not expected to check outside of work hours.	Unless there's an expectation to be using the client, not necessary to check more than once a day. If in a conversation, should continue to check or notify the user that you're signing off. If asked a question, respond immediately, even if you defer giving the answer until later.
	Email	Read as soon as possible. Respond within 2 hours if required.	Check for new messages every 2 hours. Respond immediately if required, otherwise, wait until next business day.	Unless there's an expectation to respond to a specific message, not necessary to check more than once a day. If a response is requested, should take no more than 24 hours to reply.

Preface

This is the expectation for salaried employees, to whom it's been made clear that they are expected to deal with work issues outside of your normal hours.

Yes, many hourly jobs have begun to rely more and more on electronic communication to disseminate information, but despite that 95% statistic, it's not reasonable to expect every employee to have a cell phone and be checking it constantly.

If you are a manager and need to reach an hourly employee, the phone should be your primary method of communication—don't expect that they saw your text or read something sent to a work-only email address. It's probably worth following up a voicemail with a text message to reinforce that you're trying to get in touch with them.

Even with salaried employees, if you choose to adopt this proposal, you should share it with them so that everyone is clear on the expectations.

During business hours, the escalation of priority is as follows:

Email -> Instant Message -> Text -> Phone

This is based on the frequency at which I expect you to check each method, and how quickly you need to respond.

If I need an answer right now, I shouldn't expect that I'll get it if I just send an email—I might put together an email which contains all the details that I need addressed, but I then need to follow that up with a higher priority form of communication to make sure that you know to read it.

Calling someone directly should ideally be reserved for when you need to get their complete focus, or ensure that they have received the message. However, this does NOT apply to cold-calling a business- in that situation, no response is required.

In the event that you have to call someone, and they don't answer, I personally prefer to send a text message explaining what the issue is, then a longer email describing the whole problem. Don't leave a voicemail, as most people don't want to listen to them, or may not be in a position to hear it.

A text message saying "there's a problem, check your email in a few minutes for all the details, then please call me" is much more likely to get a response than just a single phone call and voicemail.

Finally, if it's an emergency during a period when someone might be sleeping, you may have to call them back multiple times to wake them up- even if you phone, text, and email, I recommend calling five times in a row every 30 minutes until you either get an answer or the issue has passed the point where a response can resolve it.

Outside of business hours, the escalation of priority is as follows:

Instant Message -> Email ->Text -> Phone

Although there isn't much change in the order, there's a significant change in expectation.

If you expect a response outside of business hours, you should clearly state that, however you contact the person.

You shouldn't be expected to install an instant messaging client on your phone, it's capable of receiving text messages, so if anyone really needs to get in touch with you, they can do that.

Likewise, unless identified as an emergency, you shouldn't be expected to respond to emails outside of business hours. You should still probably check email every couple hours to make sure that someone with different expectations hasn't sent you something, but if someone doesn't indicate that they need an immediate reply, you shouldn't feel obligated to provide one.

Because text messages and phone calls imply more of a need for immediate interaction, you should check for text messages every couple hours, and respond as appropriate. If the sender is unclear on the priority, don't be afraid to ask "Do you need a response to this right now, or can it wait until tomorrow." Similarly, if you aren't available to work on something right now, you should manage that expectation- "I won't be able to get to a computer for another hour, is that going to be a problem, or should I try to contact someone else to help you?"

That information may not be received kindly, particularly if you were supposed to be on call or knew that there was something important happening during your off hours, but it's better to be clear that you're not available than to have people think you're working on a problem when you aren't.

Personal communications are tricky

With work, it's a bit more clear-cut- you're being paid to do a job, and your manager has hopefully used this proposal as company policy, and shared it with you.

But with friends and family, it's a very different situation—whereas your boss is hopefully only calling you because there's an emergency, a phone call from a friend could run the range from "I can't find you, what entrance are you at?" to "Whatcha doin'?"

In general, the expectation is dependent on context—if you're in a situation where someone has a reasonable expectation of a reply, such as trying to meet up at an unfamiliar place, after asking a question in a text or instant message conversation, you should do your best to respond, even if that response is "I can't respond right now." Ideally, you will provide a time when you can respond.

But if you are contacted randomly, then there's less expectation of an immediate answer. Yes, if someone sends "We're going to order pizza, do you want any," it's better to try to respond than have them wait 20 minutes for an answer before giving up, but unless you knew that they were going to include you, it's not the end of the world if you are driving and can't respond.

When outside the context of expecting an immediate reply, it's polite to at least check for new messages a few times a day. Responding to texts would be the highest priority, followed by emails, phone calls,

and instant messages. And if something does require a response, it should be addressed within 24 hours.

As with most things, “how would I feel if I sent this and didn’t get a response” is probably your best gauge for how urgently you should respond.

In the second half of this paper, we turn now to the specifics of writing and responding to email to eliminate ambiguity.

People that are expected to respond should go on the "To" line. People that you are keeping informed should go on the CC line.

Right

To: QualityAssurance
CC: businessStakeHolder
Subject: What's the status of bug 1978?

Wrong

To: QualityAssurance, businessStakeHolder
Subject: What's the status of bug 1978?

The first example makes it clear that we are expecting QA to respond with the status, not the business stake holder. By putting both names on the "To" line, the business stakeholder may think that they were supposed to respond, particularly if they were engaged by QA in the testing process.

And keep in mind that while we used “QualityAssurance” and “businessStakeHolder” as our recipients, in reality, that’s going to be Mary Strong and Bob Mayberry- by separating them onto “To” and “CC”, it becomes clear who you expect to respond.

If someone needs to know that you're responding, but doesn't need to continue to be copied on the chain, move them to the BCC line.

Right	Wrong
To: Sales, Client From: Leads Subject: Introductions	To: Sales, Client From: Leads Subject: Introductions
Body: Sales, please meet Client. They need to get pricing for shipping.	Body: Sales, please meet Client. They need to get pricing for shipping.
To: Client Bcc: Leads From: Sales Subject: RE: Introductions	To: Client, Leads From: Sales Subject: RE: Introductions
Body: Nice to meet you, Client. Can you please let me the type of objects your shipping, along with the destinations?	Body: Nice to meet you, Client. Can you please let me the type of objects your shipping, along with the destinations?

One of the biggest complaints about email is that people receive too much of it²¹. One way to fight that is to remove people from conversations that they don't need to be involved in by moving them to the BCC line

In this example, the person who generated the lead and makes the introduction only needs to know that someone from Sales responded, they don't necessarily need or want to see the entire interaction. By moving them to BCC, you make it clear that you contacted the client, and then you can conduct business without filling their mailbox.

If you aren't sure how to use BCC (many email clients hide it), then contact the client directly, and either forward that message to Leads, or contact Leads separately to tell them that you reached out to the client.

²¹ 5 Ways Email Makes Your Employees Miserable - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jacobmorgan/2013/10/15/5-ways-email-makes-your-employees-miserable/#ca222e61caa8>

When emailing more than one person, if you're expecting a specific person to handle/respond to an issue, call them out specifically

Right

To: Operations
CC: Tech
From: Sales
Subject: RE: Clients's reporting restrictions.

Body: Operations: Please disable any access to Client's reports until further notice. If you are unsure how to do this, contact Tech.

Wrong

To: Operations, Tech
From: Sales
Subject: RE: Clients's reporting restrictions.

Body: Please disable any access to Client's reports until further notice.

The wrong version of this email makes it ambiguous if Operations or Tech is expected to make the change. This can easily lead to a situation where both assume the other is supposed to do it, at which point no one does it. Or both go to do it, wasting at least one person's time.

By specifically calling out that we expect Operations to make the change, but CCing Tech, it's clear who is supposed to do the work, and if Tech does need to assist Operations, it's not coming out of the blue- they have the email chain so they can see why the request was made and that it was authorized.

Don't just "loop in" other people. Contact them first and see if they need to be on the chain before adding them, and if you do add them, use the rules above so that everyone else isn't included.

Right

To: Account Rep
From: Client
Subject: Change to logo
Body: Can you please replace our logo on our web site with the attached file?

To: Developer
From: Account Rep
Subject: FW: Change to logo
Body: My client wants to put this logo up, are you able to do that?

To: Account Rep, Sales
From: Developer
Subject: FW: Change to logo
Body: The logo can be updated by them directly using the web interface, however, I see it's in the wrong format. I know that we can have Designer change it for them, but I don't know what the cost is.

If the client isn't able to figure out the web interface, have them contact me.

Sales, what do we usually charge for this?

To: Account Rep, Designer
BCC: Developer
From: Sales
Subject: FW: Change to logo
Body: The cost will be \$50, but I don't know when Designer is available. Designer, when can you have this done?

To: Account Rep
BCC: Sales
From: Designer
Subject: FW: Change to logo
Body: I can get this done by Friday

To: Client
From: Account Rep
Subject: RE: Change to logo

Wrong

To: Account Rep
From: Client
Subject: Change to logo
Body: Can you please replace our logo on our web site with the attached file?

To: Client, Developer, Designer, Sales, Ops
From: Account Rep
Subject: RE: Change to logo
Looping in the rest of the team-- guys, can we make this happen?

Body: You can upload the logo using your web interface, however, it's currently in the wrong format. If you like, we can change the format for you-- there will be a one-time charge of \$50, and we can complete the work by Friday.

If you need help using the web interface, just let me know and I will have someone from our tech team help you.

To: Account Rep
From: Client
Subject: RE: Change to logo
Body: Thanks- I can have someone here make the change to the graphic, but I do need help using the web interface to upload it.

To: Client, Developer
From: Account Rep
Subject: RE: Change to logo
Body: Client, meet Developer-- they will walk you through the process of uploading your new logo.

Yes, the second chain is much longer, and more work for Account Rep. But that's the amount of work that needs to happen to get the Client the full answer. Also note that as Developer hands off to Sales who contacts Designer, they're BCCing-out the person who did the previous hand-off—the developer sees that Sales responded, and now knows that it's \$50 to change a logo, but they're spared the details of learning the Designer's schedule.

Instead of 4 people receiving 5 messages (and Ops isn't even involved with this!), each person receives just the messages they need to contribute to the solution- and saves time overall.

You also wind up avoiding this situation:

In particular, don't "loop in" someone who might not give an answer that you don't want to hear:

Right

To: Sales, Development
CC: CEO
From: Account Rep
Subject: RE: Service charge change.
Body: My client wants to set the service charge to \$1 for all their events-- I was able to change it manually, but it won't let me save it as a default for new events-- what do I need to do to make this work?

To: Sales, Account Rep
CC: CEO
From: Development
Subject: RE: Service charge change.
Body: That's a system-wide setting. Changing it will affect all our clients.

To: Development, Account Rep
CC: CEO
From: Sales
Subject: RE: Service charge change.
Body: We also aren't making any money at \$1- when you factor in the credit card processing fee, we're losing money.

To: Development, Account Rep, Sales
From: CEO
Subject: RE: Service charge change.
Body: Guys, this is a special exception-- this client is going to be putting on a charity event that we're sponsoring.

Sales- We're going to eat the difference on this, but we're getting a tax break.

Account Rep- Until Development is able to get the change through, please continue to manually adjust the service charge.

Development- Please code in an exception so that this client can have this as a default. What's your ETA for getting this live?

Wrong

To: Sales, Development, Client, CEO
From: Account Rep
Subject: RE: Service charge change.
Body: Guys, Client needs the service charge changed to \$1. We did it manually for existing events, but the system won't let me save it as a default. Help!

To: Account Rep
CC: Sales, CEO
From: Development
Subject: RE: Service charge change.
Body: The system won't let you save it as a default because it's below the minimum threshold. That's a system-wide setting.

To: Account Rep, Development, Client, CEO
From: Sales
Subject: RE: Change to shipping rates
Body: At \$1, we're not making any money on the ticket. We're actually losing money when you factor in the credit card processing fee.

To: Account Rep
BCC: Development, Client, Sales
From: CEO
Subject: RE: Change to shipping rates
Body: Please see me in my office ASAP.

People generally don't examine everyone on the "To" line before replying—they probably see a couple key names, and if they see the CEO in particular, they're probably not reading farther and starting to respond.

Take a look again at the "Wrong" chain-- did you notice that Sales included the Client when they responded that they're not covering costs with the proposed service charge?

Another related issue is how the recipient is presented—if the email client hides the email address in favor of putting up a friendly name, you don't know if "Information Technology" is it@yourcompany.com or it@clientscompany.com.

This can easily lead to a situation where you think you're talking to your own IT group, but in reality, are talking to the client's. Very embarrassing when you send something like "Client's IT group can't handle this, but ours could do it in their sleep."

When adding people to a long email chain, remove old messages that shouldn't be shared with the group. For example, consider this request:

To: Developer
From: IT
Subject: Fwd: proposal

See below- what's the URL?

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Client
Subject: Fwd: Fwd: proposal
To: IT

Hey IT,

Do you have the URL structure of the checkout complete page? They're trying to do some sort of conversion tracking.

Begin forwarded message:

... 150 lines earlier...

From: Agency
To: ArtistManagement, Client
Subject: RE: proposal

Hey AritistManagement,

Can you confirm how payment will be made? As part of our recent deal, we've extended you a credit of \$3K, will you use that for this transaction, or do you want to make other arrangements?

There is absolutely no reason that a request for a URL should have contained terms of a contract between companies that don't even work for us directly.

If something's a priority, say so. Likewise, if something *isn't* a priority, also say so.

How many times has this happened to you?

To: Tech
From: SalesRep
Date: Saturday, May 12, 8:03AM
Subject: Need page updated
Body: Client X needs to disable special handling. Please let me know when it's done.

To: SalesRep
From: Tech
Date: Saturday, May 12, 9:15AM
Subject: RE: Need page updated
Body: Just woke up and saw this. I need to double check a couple things, will get back to you.

To: SalesRep
From: Tech
Date: Saturday, May 12, 9:48AM
Subject: RE: Need page updated
Body: I dug through the database, and they have special handling applied to the following list of things: (...). Do you need this on all of them, or just on some? We explicitly set this for X on Friday, so I don't want to disable it until we're sure that it's done.

To: Tech
From: SalesRep
Date: Monday, May 14, 10:35AM
Subject: Need page updated
Body: Just change it on the third one.

The tone of this email implies that it needs to be handled immediately, and it's not clear until the response comes through 50 hours later that it didn't. In the meantime, not only did a tech spend a half hour working on this on Saturday, they probably put off doing anything else for an hour waiting for a response.

Compare that to the following:

To: Tech
From: SalesRep
Date: Saturday, May 12, 8:03AM
Subject: FOR MONDAY- Need page updated
Body: Client X needs to disable special handling. Please let me know when it's done.

By simply adding two words, FOR MONDAY, the sales rep makes it clear that this doesn't need to be handled over the weekend, and the tech didn't just waste 45 minutes on their day off. By putting it in the subject, the tech can even decide if they want to open the message in the first place.

Similarly, if you need something right away, don't assume that someone will get that from your message:

To: SalesRep
From: Tech
Date: Tuesday, June 12, 7:50PM
Subject: Sales numbers for Client
Body: I'll need to get a year-over-year breakdown for these guys going back to 2012.

To: SalesRep
From: Tech
Date: Tuesday, June 12, 9:50PM
Subject: RE: Sales numbers for Client
Body: When are you going to get this to me? The client is waiting.

This is the exact opposite of the first example-- the language gives no indication that this has to be handled tonight or that someone is waiting to use the results. By simply including that in the first email, the tech would have known that this couldn't wait, and that in fact a client was expecting to get it right away. This is a great example of our next point:

If it's really important, don't wait for someone to respond electronically.

The whole first section of this paper was about expectations on response time. Given what you learned there, what can you say about this email chain?

To: SalesRep
From: Tech
Date: Saturday, June 13, 7:05AM
Subject: System issue?
Body: Is there a problem with the system? My report is timing out.

To: SalesRep
From: Tech

Date: Saturday, June 13, 7:30AM
Subject: RE: System issue?
Body: Report still isn't running. Tried clearing cookies and cache and it's not working.

To: SalesRep
From: Tech
Date: Saturday, June 13, 7:33AM
Subject: RE: RE: System issue?
Body: I rebooted and it's still not working.

To: SalesRep
From: Tech
Date: Saturday, June 13, 7:35AM
Subject: RE: RE: RE: System issue?
Body: Also not working in Chrome or Safari.

To: SalesRep
From: Tech
CC: CEO, CTO
Date: Saturday, June 13, 7:43AM
Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: System issue?
Body: I'm still having the issue, when is this going to be fixed?

Note the day of the week and time the emails are going out—doesn't it seem likely that Tech is asleep then? Further, sending the same thing again and again just means that Tech has that many more emails to read before they can start to troubleshoot.

Also, CCing Tech's boss and the head of the company may seem like a way to light a fire under Tech, but is likely to backfire on SalesRep when they read through it and see that they were being impatient.

This also leads to two key points:

Don't forward a message that you don't understand under the assumption that the person receiving it knows what's going on

So you don't waste everyone's time, take 5 minutes and write a proper description of the issue from the start.

Imagine receiving the following:

To: SalesRep
CC: Client
From: Tech
Date: Saturday, June 13, 7:35AM
Subject: Fwd: Commission total wrong
Body: Tech, can you please fix?

First, this assumes that the client is correct, and that the total was calculated incorrectly. Next, it assumes that it's a technical issue.

In this case, the client might have incorrectly calculated their commissions, or someone else might have made a change to their commission structure.

But in either case, Tech doesn't have the information necessary to tell exactly what the problem is, or if it's even their issue.

Imagine instead the following:

To: SalesRep

CC: Client

From: Tech

Date: Saturday, June 13, 7:35AM

Subject: Fwd: Commission total wrong

Body: Tech, client X had 14 sales for a total of \$1250. They were supposed to receive a commission of 12% + \$100 per sale, for a total of \$1550, but this report (URL) only shows a commission of \$300. You can see the commission values set here (URL)—can you please look into the calculation to see why the number is wrong?

This makes it clear that the SalesRep understands how the Client is arriving at the number they did, and explains to the Tech where the values are set, and most importantly, where they're showing up incorrectly—in a system that might have multiple versions of the same report, knowing which one is wrong is very important.

Conclusion:

Both of these sections effectively boil down to the same basic concept- respecting other people's time. When you set clear expectations, provide sufficient information, take responsibility, and respond in a timely fashion, you can remove much of the frustration associated with electronic communication, which in turn will make it that much more of a useful tool.