

Before Pressing the “Send” Key...Pause

We often say email creates a perfect opportunity to practice Precision Answering (PA). Compared to the rapid pace of meetings, email provides more time to check your thinking before responding. But as our inboxes continue to fill, it's easy even here to rush a reply. When you are responding to emailed questions—from senior management in particular—before you press the “Send” key it pays to do a quick check from the PA point of view.

For starters, just use the three basic criteria:

- 1) Did you answer the question that was asked?
- 2) Did you start with the core?
- 3) Did you keep it short?

If you are already doing this, here's a simple way to conduct a two-minute evaluation of your answering. Open your sent email and sort by recipient. Select someone who emails quite a few questions and who expects Precision Answering; your manager, for instance. Start with your most recent email from that person. Judge each separate answer you've given, using the three criteria above. After scanning several emails this way, some patterns should start to appear. What seem to be your strengths and weaknesses as an answerer? For example, do you tend to miss opportunities to give bullet-point answers? Instead of writing “I don't know but I can find out,” are you tempted to guess or speculate?

You can use this same technique for a quick self-assessment of your questioning. Choose someone of whom you ask a lot of questions: a direct report, a vendor, a customer, or even your own manager. Open your most recent email to this person. For each question ask yourself: 1) Should this question have been more precise? 2) Did you receive exactly the information you needed? 3) If not, was there something you could have done differently in the way you phrased your question? Reviewing several emails this way will give you a good impression of your ability to articulate questions in email, along with some ideas for improvement. For example, don't ask the same question two ways. Present questions in a numbered list, not a paragraph.

In response to the steady drip, drip, drip of email, it's tempting to sacrifice accuracy for speed. So when accuracy needs to be the top priority, stop. Reread what you've written. Don't just edit for spelling, grammar, and word choice. Edit for PQ and PA, too. Then press “send.”