



By Joe Byerly

Emails- They are the bane of our existence, but they are how we communicate in the modern world. Each day, military leaders clean out their inboxes only to have them fill back up within hours. Unfortunately, quantity doesn't equal quality. Too often, the purpose of the email is buried, with the sender seeming to aim for length rather than substance. Unfortunately, many of these garbled messages create misalignment in organizations, waste time, money and in some extreme cases-lives.

Why does it matter? It matters because being able to *effectively* communicate through writing provides leaders and staff officers with understanding and the ability to act. Additionally, when we communicate *efficiently*, we give the person we're communicating with time back to focus on other things besides reading emails or multi-page SITREPs.

Eighty years ago, Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill faced a similar problem. Every day he received a large volume of typed reports in his black box from his War Cabinet. And as he pointed out in a 1940 memorandum titled *BREVITY*, “Nearly all of [the reports] are too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent in looking for the essential points.”

Fortunately for us, Sir Winston offered his staff four tips that can help us improve our communication skills today.

1. The aim should be reports which set out the main points in a series of short, crisp paragraphs
2. If a report relies on a detailed analysis of some complicated factors, or on statistics, these should be set out in an Appendix.
3. Often the occasion is best met by submitting not a full-dress report, but an aide-memoire consisting of headings only, which can be expanded orally if needed.
4. Let us have an end to such phrases as these: “It is also important to bear in mind the following considerations.....” or “Consideration should be given to the possibility of carrying into effect.....” Most of these wooly phrases are mere padding, which can be left out altogether, or replaced by a single word. Let us not shrink from using the short expressive phrase, even if it is conversationalized.

In other words

Less is more. When writing emails, brevity is better. A long email can overcomplicate an issue and your main message may get lost in the process.

I’ve learned that it is best to open emails with one or two sentences that describe the purpose of your correspondence. It also helps to let them know upfront if you are telling them for awareness or if you want them to make a decision. When you do it well, you don’t

need to write the letters “BLUF” because it will be inherent. If you have suspense, include it upfront. And then end your paragraph there.

So as many of us spend the next several weeks working from home, let us take a page from Churchill’s notebook.

Be brief. Be brilliant. Hit send.

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