



# What Did You Just Say!? Clear Communication Strategies for a Virtual Age

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# Why Are We Writing Emails in the First Place?

- Our emails at work have a business purpose
  - To ask for or share assistance or information
  - To move things forward
  - To introduce ourselves
  - To connect with a colleague



# Who Is Our Audience?

As a Research Administrator, our emails can have a broad audience

Research  
Administration  
colleagues at our  
institution

Non-Research  
administration staff in  
other institutional  
business offices

Researchers

Colleagues outside of  
our institution

Funders

Collaborating  
institutions



These are a diverse group of folks with different ages, races,  
genders, and backgrounds

# Why This Matters

As much of the work of research administration moves online, so too does our communication.

- We may not be in the same building, city, or even state as our colleagues.

Communicating virtually, especially by writing, can lead to misunderstandings that are quick to escalate.

- These misjudgments can negatively impact our work relationships, leading to worse outcomes, slower processes, and lowered job satisfaction.





# Agenda

In this workshop we will

- Examine our implicit biases, and how those impact even our virtual communication
- Work collaboratively to develop email communication strategies that will help to avoid misunderstandings and mistakes
- Use real-life research administration examples to demonstrate how clear, concise, and collegial communication can improve your workday and work relationships.





# Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to

- Evaluate written communication to ensure that it is clear, concise, and meets business needs in a way that will be understood by your colleagues.
- Identify and correct phrases likely to lead to misunderstandings in written communication.

The background of the slide is a dense, overlapping collage of small, rectangular sticky notes in various colors including blue, green, yellow, and pink. Each sticky note features a large, bold, black question mark, creating a visual theme of inquiry and uncertainty.

# What Did They Mean by That?

Diversity in the Research Administration Field and the  
Impacts of Implicit Bias on Written Communication



# Diversity in Research Administration

Discussing the longitudinal Research Administrator Stress Perception Survey (RASPerS) Survey, Caban et. al. found that:

[C]ompared to the working age population in the United States, white RAs are overrepresented, while, Hispanic and African Americans are underrepresented and Asians are slightly underrepresented. There is, furthermore, a significant retention threat in those underrepresented minority groups, specifically that African American, Hawaiian, Native American and Asian identifying respondents were more likely to state that they would look for another role within two years. (Caban et. al. 2020, p. 34)



## Impacts of a Lack of Diversity in Staff

“Appointing a diverse group of new employees is only half of the battle: the other challenge is keeping them. In low numbers, people with few role models can feel marginalized and out of place, and struggle to create strong networks and find effective mentors and sponsors” (p. 7).

# What Is Implicit Bias?

## **What is bias?**

- Bias consists of attitudes, behaviors, and actions that are prejudiced in favor of or against one person or group compared to another.

## **What is implicit bias?**

- Implicit bias is a form of bias that occurs automatically and unintentionally, that nevertheless affects judgments, decisions, and behaviors. Research has shown implicit bias can pose a barrier to recruiting and retaining a diverse scientific workforce.

Source: <https://diversity.nih.gov/sociocultural-factors/implicit-bias>

## **Affinity bias**

It is human nature to gravitate towards individuals who look like us, therefore, we prefer people who look like us.

## **Halo effect**

The tendency to think everything about a person is good because you like that person.

## **Perception bias**

The tendency to form stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups that make it impossible to make an objective judgement about members of those groups.

## **Confirmation bias**

The tendency for people to seek information that confirms preexisting beliefs or assumptions.

## **Group think**

This bias occurs when people try too hard to fit into a particular group by mimicking others or holding back thoughts and opinions. This causes them to lose part of their own identities and causes organizations to lose out on creativity and innovation.

Source: Dalton, Shamika. "Minimizing and addressing implicit bias in the workplace: Be proactive, part one." *C&RL News* 79.9 (2018): 478.

# How Implicit Bias Impacts the Workplace






# Mitigating Implicit Bias

**Think of counter-stereotypic examples:** Identify research administrators of diverse backgrounds at your institution and in your area

**Perspective-taking:** Imagine what it is like to be a person who experiences people questioning your ability or skills because of your social identity

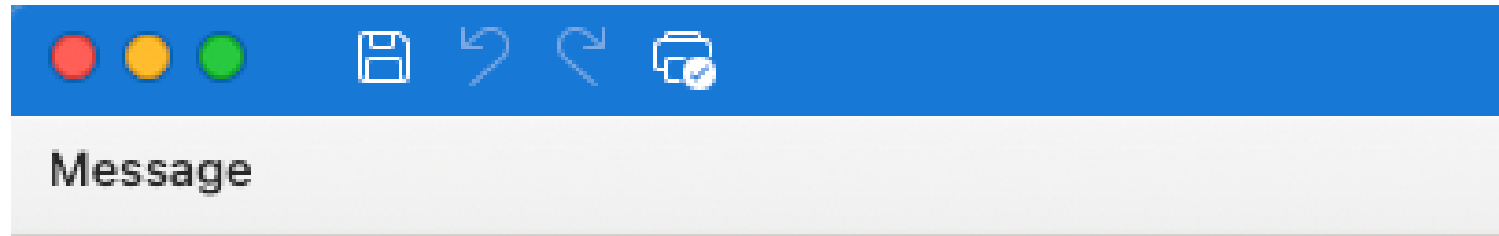
**Interrupt automatic biased thoughts:** Identify when you may be most influenced by implicit bias (e.g., writing an email) and create an action plan

**Education:** Take advantage of institutional and professional education about implicit bias



# What in the World Are They Trying to Say?

How Clear Communication Improves Research Administration Outcomes



**<no subject>**



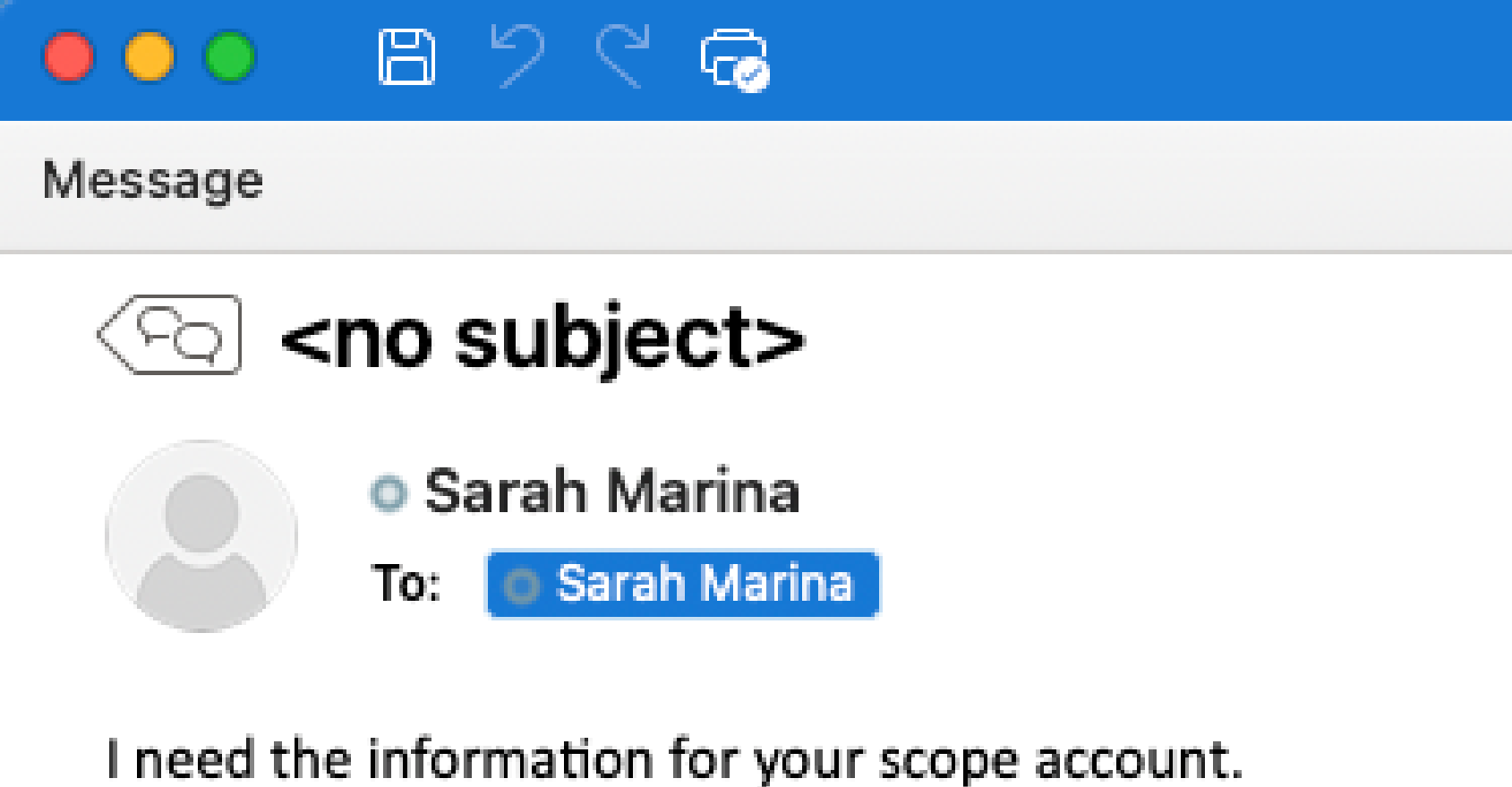
**Sarah Marina**

To: **Sarah Marina**

I need the information for your scope account.

What's  
Wrong with  
This Picture?





## What's Wrong with This Picture?

- **No Subject:** What is this email about?
- **No Information:** What information? What scope?
- **No Deadline:** When do you need this by?
- **No Kindness:** No salutation, no thank you

## Scope for Proposal 452563



Sarah Marina

To: Sarah Marina

Today at 12:56 PM

Hi Sarah,

I hope you're doing well. I'm writing to ask for the budget details for your scope on proposal 452563 for Dr. Jordan. We'll need your budget, including out years, as well as Dr. Jordan's biosketch.

The deadline for this proposal is September 15<sup>th</sup>, so we've set a deadline of September 1<sup>st</sup> for receiving these materials.

Please let me know if you have any questions, and thanks so much for your help!

Best,

Sarah

--

Sarah Marina  
Director, Research Administration Enterprise  
Office of the Vice Provost for Research

# A Clearer Option

# 5 C's Effective Communication



**BE *CLEAR***



**BE *CONCISE***



**PROVIDE A  
*COMPELLING*  
REQUEST**



**BE  
*CURIOUS***



**BE  
*COMPASSIONATE***



# Be Clear

01

It's essential to be clear about what you want and need from a given interaction. To do this, you first have to **know** what you want and need!

02

If your colleague must spend time figure out your meaning, they may not be correct, and will have less time to help you.

03

Tip: If you're using an acronym or term that your colleague may not be familiar with, either avoid it or define it.

# Be Clear – Unclear Example

Subject: ...Thoughts!?

Hi,

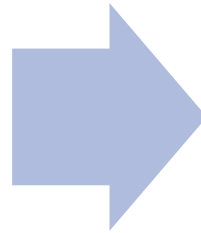
I need someone to help with this in making changes. We need access to the data but its in three different places and I'm not sure how we can get the access in time for a presentation. An excel or a powerpoint to show what we're talking about maybe? In general all of this stuff is on hold with LMNOP. I want us batting 1,000 on this so we need to get it right.

Bill

## Be Clear – Activity

---

1. Make a list of items that need clarification in this email



2. Rewrite this email for clarity, looking out for any implicit bias along the way



# Be Clear –Activity

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2. Rewrite this email for clarity, looking for any implicit bias along the way

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Bill

A C  
Ex

**Subject line**

Subject: Annual Data Reporting: Can I get your thoughts?

**Beth is**

Hi Beth,

**The context  
is now  
clearly**

I've been asked to help in making changes to how we approach annual data reporting. I'm working on getting access to the data, but it's in several different places which is creating challenges. Additionally, everything is on hold with

**The acronym**

the Local Mountain National Omni Project (LMNOP)

**Beth doesn't  
have to love**

I'm writing to to you to ask for your help in creating a presentation about these issues, as well as a suggested approach for moving forward. Could you let me know your thoughts on what method we should use for presenting? This is high profile, so I want to make sure that we do a great job.

**Bill has  
added a  
polite  
closing.**

Best,  
Bill

means.

# Be Concise

01

Eliminate disclaimers and apologies (unless you've done something meriting an apology!) and replace them with a statement of thanks

02

Reduce unnecessary details and explanations. Think about why you're sharing something, and if it's not essential, cut it.

03

Start at the end rather than the beginning. Let people know what you'll need from them, not the journey you took to get there.

# Be Concise – Too Much Detail Example

Subject: Inquiry about RFP 342553 from Sample University to the National Science Foundation Due on 10/4/23

Hello Dr. James

I hope you're doing well!!! I am a research administrator at Sample University, working in several different departments. This proposal is being submitted by the biology department, with faculty from many of our departments, making it truly interdisciplinary. As a part of this proposal I've been asked to reach out to you with questions on behalf of our team, after which we'll submit.

The history of our program is really quite impressive. We have a long and storied history in both research and training, dating back to our founding in 1845. From there to today we've been leaders in biology and in many other fields, leading to our R1 status and membership in several professional organizations.

For this proposal, in response to RFP 342553, we have a list of questions for you. First, you state that the PI must be an institutional official? What level of official would qualify? We have a President, Provost, several Vice-Provosts, Center Directors, and we'll need to choose among them. Secondly, when do you anticipate funding beginning? Our program will run out of funds with our fiscal year, which ends July 1<sup>st</sup>, so we really want to make sure we're on track to get funding before then. Lastly, will this RFA be released again? We may not be able to get it in on time due to one PI's maternity leave and another's recovery from an illness.

Thank you for your time and attention to this project! We at Sample University love working with NSF. Have a great day and rest of the year.

Best,

Jen, Sample University

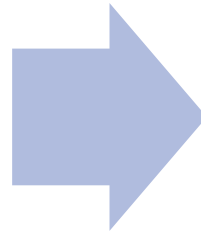
**282**  
**words**



# Be Concise Activity

---

1. Make a list of items  
could be removed in  
this email



2. See how many  
words you can strike  
while still maintaining  
clarity and warmth

# Be Concise – Activity

1. Make a list of items that items that could be removed from this email
2. See how many words you can strike while still maintaining clarity and warmth

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Best,

Jen, Sample University

A C  
Ex

99  
words

All of the  
excess detail  
has been

Jen's polite  
closing now  
underscores  
what she is  
requesting  
right now,  
rather than  
distracting  
with  
references to  
NEXT YEAR.

Subject: Inquiry about RFP 342553

Hello Dr. James

I hope you're doing well. I am a research administrator at Sample University and am writing with questions concerning RFP 342553 on behalf of a research team.

Our questions are as follows:

- Is a Vice Provost for Research an appropriate institutional official to serve as PI? If not, please indicate what level of official would be appropriate.
- Do you have an anticipated notification date for awarded proposals?
- Do you anticipate that this RFP will be released again?

Thank you in advance for your answers to these questions.

Best,

Jen, Sample University

# Be Compelling

01

State openly what you want or need as an outcome of the communication

02

Don't hint. Make statements rather than trying to lead the other person to guess what you need.



# Be Compelling – No-Ask Example

To: D'Andre, Steve, Linda, Juan, Christine

Subject: Upcoming Proposal

Hello all,

A meeting is needed for Dr. Staub's grant. Someone should schedule a meeting with the group of PIs involved. At that meeting we should have some kind of help documents, I think?

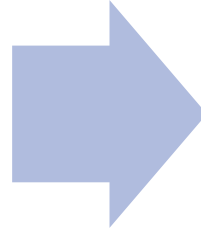
Thanks!

Sam

# Be Compelling Activity

---

1. With a partner,  
determine what the  
asks of this email  
are



2. Rewrite this  
email to make it  
more compelling

# Be Compelling

## – Activity

1. With a partner, determine what the asks of this email are
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Thanks!

Sam

A Com  
Ex

**Each person  
has received  
a clear ask,  
directed to**

**Sam has  
expressed  
the plan as a  
statement  
rather than  
as a  
question.**

To: D'Andre, Steve, Linda, Juan, Christine

Subject: Upcoming Proposal

Hello all,

I would like to schedule a meeting to discuss Dr. Staub's grant with her and her team. Steve, please look at the availability for the group on this email, as well as Dr. Staub and her Co-PI, Dr. Jones, and find a time for us to meet for an hour on Zoom next week.

Christine, please draft a checklist and outline for the proposal based on the RFA and sent it to D'Andre to review. Juan, please draft a timeline and have Linda review. I'd like both documents reviewed and available for the meeting.

Thanks!

Sam

# Be Curious

01

Ask about what you don't know

02

Ask about what is important to the other person or what they need

03

Avoid asking "Why?" questions if there is a chance the question might seem more like an interrogation than like curiosity

04

Avoid being overly curious if someone says something passive-aggressive:

- "Is your watch broken?"  
(asked to make you feel guilty for taking more time than the other person would like)
- "No, thanks for asking – it's working just fine!"



# Be Curious – No There There Example

Subject:

Hey there,

I got a request from NIH. Can you take care of that for me?

Best,

x

# Be Curious Activity

---

1. With a partner,  
discuss what additional  
things you might want to  
know or need to learn



2. Jot down some ways  
to ask good questions

## Be Curious – Activity

1. With a partner, discuss what additional things you might want to know or need to learn
2. Jot down some ways to ask good questions

Subject:

Hey there,

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Best,

x

A C  
E>

**Angie starts  
with a  
reassurance  
that she will**

**Angie  
expresses**

**Angie makes  
it clear and  
simple for  
Dr. X to  
know how to  
share the  
new  
information.**

Subject: Your NIH Question

Hi Dr. X,

Thanks for reaching out for help! I would be happy to help you with this request from NIH or find the right person who can.

To help me do that, could you please share the type of request, as well as any information NIH has sent you. If it's available, please also send the deadline you were given to return the requested information.

Please email or call me at 614.435.5363 with any questions or more details.

Best,

Angie

# Be Compassionate

When someone is being unhelpful:

01

Keep in mind that they are probably carrying a heavy burden. Think about how your communication can lighten that burden, how it can de-escalate the situation. Keep an eye out for implicit biases that might be affecting the situation.

02

Don't put labels on their reasons for their words or actions. Instead, describe what has happened, what the effect was of what has happened, and what you need to happen now

03

Ask them what outcome they are trying to produce and what ideas they have for how you could collaborate to achieve that outcome together

04

Convey that you see them and hear them. Replay what you hear them saying and ask them if you have it right, and if you've caught everything that is important



# Be Compassionate Example – Angry PI

Subject: RE: FW: FW: Proposal Draft

I am absolutely livid right now! I have been trying to get this proposal out the door for weeks, and all I find is useless red tape. Why is no one able to help me with this?

I don't understand any of these issues? Every time I think we've solved it, something else pops up. Now someone says I need to route something, somewhere? All I want is to get this grant submitted so I can make sure my graduate students maintain funding, is that so much to ask?

I need someone to stop playing hot potato and actually help me get this done, today!!! I'm in class until 3pm, and have to pick up my child at 5, so I've got a short window to fix this. If

Clark

# Be Compassionate Activity

---

1. With a partner,  
discuss how compassion  
might shape your  
communication



2. Draft a response to  
the PI with your partner

# Be Compassionate – Activity

1. With a partner, discuss how compassion might shape your communication
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Clark

Compass  
E

Scott starts

Scott

Scott

Scott

**expresses  
that he is  
open to  
hearing  
anything  
else Clark  
needs or  
wants him to  
understand.**

Subject: Your Proposal

Dear Clark,

I am so sorry that we haven't been able to effectively help you to submit your proposal. I hear you that you don't understand what is going on, and how important it is to get this proposal submitted today. I will take point on make sure that happens with my team.

I hear you saying that routing is the issue holding the proposal up. I suggest that you and I meet via zoom at 3:15 so that I can show you how to approve this proposal so we can get it out the door. I've reviewed your proposal in our system, and once we get the routing done I will be able to submit today.

Please let me know if I'm missing anything above. Again, I'm sorry that this has been such a frustrating process. Once it's complete I would appreciate meeting with you to go over what happened so we can make sure to provide better service moving forward.

Best,

Scott

# Conclusions

- Clarity, concision, being compelling, curious, and compassionate are all intersecting issues
- Badly written emails can create confusion or give offense to anyone, and when you add implicit bias you multiply the potential for adverse outcomes
- Regional differences also show up, both within the US and across global borders – in appropriate form of address, in how to be polite, in how to address those above and below you in hierarchy, in what jokes make sense
- Knowledge of someone is more important than any of these tips, especially in terms of formality





# Takeaways

What was the  
most useful thing  
you learned in this  
session?

What new actions  
will you take  
because of what  
you learned?

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