

Say the whole thing

A message lands in Slack or Teams. It says “hey”, and nothing else. You stop what you’re doing and wait. This is the habit that fixes it, an honest answer to the objections, and what to do on Monday.

Written for a team, not for managers. You don’t need anyone’s permission to adopt it. Ten minutes to read, one conversation to agree.

A **Alex** 09:14
hey

It's 09:31. That's still all it says.

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What this is

A short guide to one habit: what goes in the first message when you need something from a colleague.

You already know the message it's about. Someone sends "hey", or "quick question", or "can we chat?", and then nothing. You stop. You watch the typing dots come and go. Whatever you were holding in your head has gone, and if the message came from your manager, you spend the gap wondering whether you're in trouble.

The fix is free. Put the ask, the context and the urgency in the first message, and send your hello *in* that message rather than *instead of* it. Everything that follows is either why that matters, an answer to a fair objection, or help getting your team to actually do it.

A "hey" on its own costs the reader twice.

Once when it arrives and breaks their concentration, and again while they wait for the second message that says what it's about. The sender saved a few seconds. The reader pays for both.

Where it came from

In August 2026, Ollie Parsley, who founded Don't Interrupt, wrote a [short post on LinkedIn](#) making this argument. It reached more than 220,000 impressions.

The number isn't the interesting part. What people wrote is. Most didn't reply to agree in the abstract. They replied to say what these messages had cost them: a weekend lost to a Friday afternoon "got a moment Monday?", a task that never came back after one ambiguous ping, an email read as criticism that took hours to shake off. Enough people described the same experience, unprompted, that it stopped looking like a pet peeve and started looking worth writing down.

The strongest push-back was that a rule like this makes teams cold. Section two answers that head on instead of brushing past it.

Who it's for

Anyone who works in Slack or Teams. If you receive these messages, you can raise it without sounding like you're complaining. If you manage people, you can start today and say why. If you run the handbook, section seven has policy text written to go straight into it.

The norm

Put the ask, the context and the urgency in the first message. That's the whole thing. Everything else explains why, answers an objection, or helps you roll it out.

A message that arrives as "hey", "quick question", "you got a sec?" or "can we chat?" and then stops is incomplete. It asks someone to down tools and wait without telling them what for.

What it costs

Gloria Mark and colleagues at the University of California, Irvine, have spent years watching people work. Getting properly back into an interrupted task takes somewhere over twenty minutes, and usually several other things get in the way first. Treat that as a rough finding from watching real offices, not a precise constant. You'll see very specific numbers quoted online, often credited to papers that don't contain them. The honest version is "over twenty minutes, and it depends".

The part almost nobody quotes is what recovery costs the person doing it. In their 2008 study, people who were interrupted finished the work in the same time or faster, by working harder. They also reported more stress, frustration, time pressure and effort.

People absorb interruptions by working harder and feeling worse.

Almost nobody counts how many times a day they get pulled out of their work, so nothing ever prompts anyone to fix it. The cost lands on the person, quietly, and keeps landing.

Why it's worse from a manager

An ambiguous message from a peer is annoying. The same message from someone who decides your objectives, your pay or your future arrives with a question attached that the sender never asked: *am I in trouble?*

No study we know of puts an identical message in front of people from a peer and from a boss and measures the difference, and we're not going to pretend otherwise. What we can say is that it fits what's well established: people read ambiguous information as a possible threat, and the less they know, the further that reading tilts. If you manage people, your messages carry a weight you can't feel from the inside. Fixing it costs you nothing.

Pleasantries belong in the same message

The most common objection, by a distance, is that this makes people cold. That warmth matters. That some teams build trust through a bit of small talk before business. That a rule banning “hello” produces robots.

All true, and none of it describes the rule. Nobody is banning warmth. The problem is warmth arriving *on its own*, with the actual request held back for another message. Here are two versions of the same request, sent by the same person on the same morning. Both are friendly. Only one is finished.

INCOMPLETE

3 minutes gone

A Alex 09:14
Morning!

A Alex 09:17
You free?

Still no idea what this is about. Nobody was unfriendly. The request simply never arrived.

WHOLE MESSAGE

one read, one reply

A Alex 09:14
Morning! Hope the move went alright. Quick one when you surface: could you check the Q3 figures before Thursday? Nothing needed today.

Same warmth, one message. They know what's wanted, by when, and that they can finish their sentence first.

Two separate things get tangled up here: whether your message says what you want, and whether it's friendly. You can have both, and you almost always should.

This isn't a fringe position among people who take async communication seriously. The well-known nohello convention explicitly allows pleasantries alongside the ask. Fully distributed companies such as GitLab, Automattic and Doist publish handbooks that put the substance in writing, and none argues for coldness. Take that as considered practice, not proof: none of them has published a controlled study showing it works, and we won't imply they have.

Urgency, and how to say it

Most no-context pings are a failed urgency signal. The sender needs to know whether it's alright to interrupt, can't tell, and interrupts in the one way that guarantees it. Say it out loud instead. Three levels cover almost everything, and even the bottom one carries a date.

Now

Someone's blocked, a customer is waiting, or something is on fire. Interrupt freely, and say why it can't wait.

Today

Needs an answer before the day ends, but not this minute. The reader finishes what they're doing first.

By a date

Not urgent, but still name the day: "this week", "before Friday", "sometime next week". Anything beats "whenever".

That last one catches people out. "No rush" and "whenever suits" feel polite, but they hand the reader a decision they can't make. They don't know what else is on your plate, so they either drop everything or forget it. Pair the reassurance with a day and both problems go. "Before Thursday, nothing needed today" is kind and answerable at once. Mean the day you pick, though: a date that was secretly "today" all along costs you the credibility of the whole system.

NO SIGNAL



Alex 14:02

Can you take a look at the deck?

Now, after this meeting, or Thursday? Someone has to guess, and guessing wrong costs one of them.

SIGNAL STATED



Alex 14:02

Can you take a look at the deck before 4? Client call at 4:30. If you're heads down, say so and I'll send it as is.

Today, not now, and the reader gets an out.

Some teams prefix a priority level instead, P1 to P5, so it shows in the notification without anyone opening it. That only holds if the top level stays rare: once everything is a P1, nothing is. Either way the sender picks the level, which moves a small decision to the person doing the interrupting.

The cheat sheet

Six pairs. On the left, what usually gets sent. On the right, the same request made whole.

"hey"



"Morning! When you get a minute: where does the brand kit live, Drive or Notion? Any time this week is fine."

"can we chat?"



"Can we grab fifteen minutes tomorrow to go through the launch plan? Nothing's wrong, I just want a second pair of eyes before it goes out."

"you around?"



"Are you around at 2 today? I need a yes or no on the budget line before I raise the PO. Five minutes, tops."

"quick question"



"Quick question: do we need sign-off for anything under £500, or is that just over? I need to know by Thursday."

"got a moment?"



"Got a moment today to unblock me on the staging login? I'm stuck until I have it, so it's a today thing rather than a now thing."

"we need to talk about the report"



"Can we go through the report together tomorrow? Two sections need reworking before it goes out on Friday, and I'd rather do it with you than guess."

Look at what the right-hand column does. It says **what**. It says **when**. And where the message could land as bad news, it says plainly that it isn't.

The "can we chat?" pair is the one worth copying. "Nothing's wrong" costs two words and saves the reader an afternoon of wondering. The last pair does the same job without the phrase. "We need to talk about the report" reads as a warning whatever you meant by it. Naming the two sections and the Friday deadline turns it back into work.

The other half: your status

A complete message fixes the sender's side. The reader's side matters just as much, because a lot of "hey" pings are a sender guessing whether now is a good time.

If your status shows you're in a meeting until three, with notifications paused, nobody has to guess. They can send the whole message, and you answer when you surface. If your status says nothing, or is stale, every colleague is left to find out the hard way.



Two examples of status text. Both tell the sender something useful. Neither needs a reply.

What makes a status worth reading

- **It's true.** A status that is "In a meeting" all day teaches people to ignore it.
- **It says when it ends.** "Until 15:00" lets a colleague decide whether to wait or ask someone else.
- **It says what to do if it's truly urgent.** That's the "Now" level from section three, written down in advance.
- **It's backed by Do Not Disturb when you mean it.** A status asks people to wait. Do Not Disturb stops the notification arriving at all.

Keeping that up by hand is the hard part.

Nobody remembers to set a status before every meeting and clear it afterwards. That's what Don't Interrupt is for: it sets your Slack and Microsoft Teams status, presence and Do Not Disturb from your calendar, your working hours and any manual overrides, and it asks Slack and Teams to clear them when the event ends. Changes land within about five minutes. By default, a status you've set yourself is left alone.

An honest note: if all you want is "In a meeting" in Slack, Slack's own Google Calendar and Outlook apps do that for free and are enough. Don't Interrupt goes further: Do Not Disturb, Microsoft Teams, working hours and weekends, rules on words in an event's name ("lunch"), and several workspaces on paid plans. There's a free plan to try it.

Where this doesn't apply

A rule that claims to fit everything fits nothing. Here are the edges.

Emergencies

When something is genuinely on fire, "call me now" is the right message. Don't compose a well-structured paragraph while the site is down.

Genuinely social messages

"How was the wedding?" isn't an incomplete request. It's a complete message with no ask in it, and it's doing real work. This is about transactional messages, not your relationships.

Thinking out loud

"Can I bounce something off you?" is honest when you don't yet know the question. Say that, rather than faking a precision you haven't got.

Teams that already work differently

If your team has its own rhythm and it's working, the burden of proof is on this guide, not on you. Take the part that helps and leave the rest.

Sensitive or personal conversations

Some things shouldn't go in a message at all: bad news about someone's job, a bereavement, anything with real emotional weight. Ask for the conversation and keep the content out of the chat window. Do it like this.

LEFT HANGING



Alex 16:40

Can we have a chat tomorrow? Not something I can put in here.

Right to keep the content out. Sent at the end of the day, it hands someone their whole evening to guess.

ASKED PROPERLY



Alex 16:40

Can we find fifteen minutes tomorrow morning? Nothing's wrong with your work, I want to talk about something personal and it's easier face to face.

Still no content in a chat window. It does stop the evening being ruined for no reason.

Who feels it most

This helps everyone a bit. It helps some people a lot, and they're usually the ones least likely to say so. People who find uncertainty hard are paying a real cost for an ambiguous message, and it's the ambiguity that does it, not how likely bad news actually is. Many people with ADHD describe an unexpected, unclear alert as harder to absorb and harder to recover from. Many autistic people find direct, explicit language easier to process than hints. None of this is true of everyone, and the National Autistic Society's own position is to adapt to what the individual prefers.

Adoption

You don't need a project for this. One conversation and one written line will do it.

1 Put ten minutes on the next team meeting

Describe what you've noticed, not what people are doing wrong.

2 Pick your urgency levels in the room

Now, today, by a date. Or a P1 to P5 prefix if one person fields most of the requests.

3 Pin one paragraph where the team already looks

The channel topic, the team charter, the handbook. The policy text on the next page is written for it.

4 Agree the reminder wording before you need it

Decide what you'll reply to an incomplete message, so the first person to do it isn't the one who seems rude.

5 Have the most senior person go first

If they keep sending "can we chat?", the norm is decorative.

Step four is the one teams skip, and it's the whole mechanism. It looks like this.

THE REPLY THAT MAKES IT STICK



Jo 11:20
hey



Alex 11:21
Morning! What's the ask?

Friendly, fast, and it teaches the norm without anyone being told off. Agree this one out loud, or the first person to send it will worry they were rude.

Policy text

Written to be pasted. Change the wording to sound like your team.

POLICY TEXT YOU CAN PASTE INTO A HANDBOOK

Communication norm: complete first messages

When you message a colleague with a request, put the ask, the context and the urgency in the first message. Don't send a greeting on its own and wait for a reply before saying what you need.

Pleasantries are welcome. Send them in the same message as the request rather than instead of it.

State urgency explicitly: now, today, or by a named date such as "before Friday". "Now" is for work that is genuinely blocked or time critical. Avoid "whenever", which leaves the reader to schedule your request for you.

Where a message could reasonably be read as concerning, say plainly that it isn't, for example: "nothing's wrong".

Keep your chat status honest, and use Do Not Disturb for focused work. A status that says when you'll be back, and how to reach you if it's truly urgent, is part of the same courtesy.

This applies to transactional messages. It doesn't apply to social conversation, to emergencies, or to sensitive personal matters, which are better handled in a conversation than in a message.

Replying "what's the ask?" to an incomplete message is an accepted and friendly response, not a criticism.

Pass it on

If this was useful, the quickest way to make it stick is to send it to the people you message most. Pin the policy text, or forward the page.

dontinterrupt.app/guides/say-the-whole-thing

What this guide isn't

Worth thirty seconds before you circulate it.

It isn't proof

The research cited here is real, and it doesn't show that adopting this norm improves anything. Nobody has run that study. The distributed companies whose practice is described publish handbooks, not trials. Treat the whole thing as a well-reasoned habit, not an evidenced intervention. If you want to know whether it worked for your team, ask them a few weeks in, and ask something specific: "how often do you get a message that makes you stop and wait?"

It isn't a clinical tool

Nothing here helps anyone diagnose, screen or label a colleague. Section six describes experiences people have reported, so that you write kinder messages. How someone reacts to a message tells you nothing reliable about their brain, and it isn't a way to work out what's going on in a colleague's head.

Nor is it the reason to adopt the norm. Adopt it because it's a better way to talk to people. That it helps those already carrying more is a reason to do it properly.

It isn't a rule for everything

The test is simple. If your message asks someone to stop and wait without telling them what for, it needs more in it. If it doesn't, you're fine.

Sources

- Mark, G., Gudith, D. & Klocke, U. (2008). *The cost of interrupted work: more speed and stress*. Proceedings of CHI '08, ACM.
- Gloria Mark's wider research on interruptions and attention, University of California, Irvine. The "over twenty minutes" figure is a rough recovery time reported from field observation, not a fixed constant.
- nohello.net, the "no hello" convention, which explicitly allows a greeting in the same message as the question.
- Published async-communication handbooks from GitLab, Automattic and Doist.
- National Autistic Society, guidance on communicating with autistic people: adapt to the individual's preference.
- Slack help centre, "Use the Google Calendar app" and "Use the Outlook Calendar app": the status they set does not include the name of the meeting.



Don't Interrupt

Don't Interrupt sets your Slack and Microsoft Teams status, presence and Do Not Disturb from your calendar and working hours, so colleagues can tell when to wait. Free to try.
dontinterrupt.app