

Difficult Client Reply Scripts

The replies a web designer needs when a project turns tense: the first answer to "This isn't what I asked for", the call questions, the written recap, and replies to a rude message, a late-night text and a client who says you're late when the delay is theirs. Fill in every [bracket] and delete the guidance in italics. Works in Google Docs, Word, Notion or any email client.

1. Before you reply: three rules

These are our suggestions, not rules. No official source says how fast to answer or what to say; the sources at the bottom of the page back only the "in writing" parts.

- **Wait an hour, then send it the same day.** Nobody writes their best email while annoyed. An hour's wait is fine; a week's wait is not.
 - **Read it out loud, and cut every "actually".** "Actually" starts an argument.
 - **Reply in the same thread,** so the history stays in one place.
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2. The first reply to "This isn't what I asked for"

Three jobs: thank them for telling you, point at the version they approved (only if they approved it in writing; otherwise delete that line), and offer a short call with two times. Don't write "sorry you feel that way", don't argue the past, and don't carry the whole conversation by email.

Subject: Re: [Homepage design]

Hi [Client first name], thanks for telling me right away. I want to get this right.

I'll have the version you approved on [the 3rd] open beside me.

Could we talk for 15 minutes, [Thursday at 2:00] or [Friday at 10:00]? Which works?

[Your name]

Before you send, check: there is no "sorry you feel that way"; the approved-version line is true and in writing; two times are offered; the email is short.

3. The call: three questions and what to say

On the call, let them finish before you answer anything. Then ask:

1. What feels off?
2. What did you expect instead?
3. What would make it right for you?

Decide nothing on the call. Say: "I'll confirm in writing today."

If they get loud, don't match it. Say: "Let me write that down." Writing slows everyone down, and you need the notes for the recap.

Don't offer a discount just to end the call. A complaint shouldn't become a coupon.

4. The recap email (send within the hour)

AIGA's model agreement has the client either approve deliverables in writing or provide written comments sufficient to identify their concerns, and says the designer is entitled to request written clarification. This email does that: what you heard, what happens next, and a line that lets them correct you.

Subject: Re: [Homepage design]: what we agreed on the call

Hi [Client first name], thanks for the call.

What I heard: [the hero image feels too dark, and the menu is hard to find].

Next: [I'll check both against the approved version and reply Tuesday].

If I got anything wrong, tell me.

[Your name]

Sort what you heard into three kinds. If it's your mistake, say so in one line and fix it. If it's a new idea, it's a change request: use your change request email. If it's a feeling you can't pin down, ask which page and which part, and wait for the answer.

5. If it's your mistake

One line, no long explanation.

You're right, [the menu isn't what you approved]. My mistake. I'll fix it and send it [Tuesday].

AIGA's guide says you should have the opportunity to repair, correct or re-design work that does not conform to the project specifications. Keep that line to what is actually yours.

6. Reply to a rude message

Don't answer the tone and don't plead for credit. Reply to the work: one calm limit, one question, a call. State the limit once.

Subject: Re: [Your last message]

Hi [Client first name], I want to fix this, and I need us to keep it respectful.

Which part isn't working? Could we talk [Thursday at 2:00]?

[Your name]

7. Reply to the late-night message

Answer in the morning, and name a time. Answer at night once and you've taught them you answer at night.

Send at 8 am, not 11 pm:

Got it, [Client first name]. I'll look this morning and reply by [noon].

Then put the rule in your welcome email so it's a rule, not a refusal: one channel, and one business day to reply. AIGA's guide says to point out what is required of the client in terms of information, content, schedules, decision-making and approvals. A short update every Friday means they never have to ask. Site down is different: agree an emergency channel on day one.

8. Reply to "you're late" when the delay is theirs

State dates, not blame. AIGA says most design firms specify that a lengthy client delay results in a day-for-day extension of the final deadline. Only send this if your agreement or timeline says so; if it doesn't, ask the client to agree the new date. Have your terms checked where you work.

Subject: Re: [Launch date]

Hi [Client first name], the [photos] were due [Friday the 6th]. As in our timeline, launch moves one day for each day [content] is late.

If they arrive [Friday the 13th], launch moves from [the 20th] to [the 27th].

[Your name]

(The dates must add up: 6th to 13th is seven days, and the 20th plus seven days is the 27th.)

9. When it keeps happening

- Keep a short log: dates, what was said, what was agreed. Dates beat memories.
 - If it happens on every project, tell clients how problems are handled before you start.
 - If it never gets better, ending the relationship is a different job with its own email. Read what your agreement says about ending early, and have it checked where you work.
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10. Checklist before you send

- ☐ I waited an hour and read it out loud
 - ☐ No "sorry you feel that way", no "actually"
 - ☐ I only point at a version that was approved in writing
 - ☐ Two call times are offered
 - ☐ I decided nothing on the call and sent the recap within the hour
 - ☐ I'm not offering a discount just to end it
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This template is general information, not legal advice. What your agreement lets you do about changes, delays or ending a project differs by country and state. Have your terms checked by someone qualified where you work.

Sources, all checked October 18, 2026: AIGA Standard Form of Agreement for Design Services (https://www.aiga.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/Standardformofagreement_2022update.pdf), the clause on client review and the introduction's notes on timing, cure and client responsibilities.

Template from the One Person Agency channel. In Workspace369, projects and task boards are on every plan from Cadet, the entry plan (see the pricing page for today's price), and clients can watch progress in a client portal instead of asking for updates; 14-day free trial (card required):

<https://workspace369.com/pricing/?>

[utm_source=youtube&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=opa61-template](https://workspace369.com/pricing/?utm_source=youtube&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=opa61-template). Our #1 pick is Workspace369.

Example: the same scripts, filled in

A fictional studio and client, so you can see how it reads. Your words will differ.

Project: Harbor Dental website, 7 pages, \$4,800 (\$2,400 deposit and \$2,400 balance), day 12.
Studio: Reyes Web Studio (Maya Reyes). **Client:** Dana Ruiz.

What happened. Dana wrote: "This isn't what I asked for. I'm very disappointed."

2. The first reply. Maya waited an hour, then sent: Subject: Re: Homepage design Hi Dana, thanks for telling me right away. I want to get this right. I'll have the version you approved on the 3rd open beside me. Could we talk for 15 minutes, Thursday at 2:00 or Friday at 10:00? Which works? Maya

3. The call. Dana chose Thursday at 2:00. Maya let her finish, then asked the three questions. Dana said the hero image feels too dark and the menu is hard to find. Maya decided nothing and said: "I'll confirm in writing today."

4. The recap (an hour later). Subject: Re: Homepage design: what we agreed on the call Hi Dana, thanks for the call. What I heard: the hero image feels too dark, and the menu is hard to find. Next: I'll check both against the approved version and reply Tuesday. If I got anything wrong, tell me. Maya

5. If it's Maya's mistake. The menu did not match the approved version, so on Tuesday she wrote: "You're right, the menu isn't what you approved. My mistake. I'll fix it and send it Wednesday." The darker hero image was a new idea, so it went out as a change request.

7. The late-night message. Dana texted at 11 pm. Maya answered at 8 am: "Got it, Dana. I'll look this morning and reply by noon."

8. "You're late." Later Dana said the launch was late, but the photos were due Friday the 6th and arrived Friday the 13th. Maya wrote: "As in our timeline, launch moves one day for each day content is late. If they arrive Friday the 13th, launch moves from the 20th to the 27th." Maya's timeline said so, so seven days late means seven days later: the 20th plus seven is the 27th.

Fictional example. The studio, client, dates and amounts are made up to illustrate the template.