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To: Jane Doe  
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### On why emails to me are best served “long form”

Dear hypothetical reader (here personified as “Jane”),

- i If you are reading this, chances are that you have come across the contact page on my website, where I explain that I think of email as a faster way to send letters, and **not** as an (in)glorious chat system.<sup>1</sup> This is an undeniably anachronistic stance, but one that can, nevertheless, be staunchly defended—as I now proceed to explain.
- ii In his best-selling book *Sapiens: A Brief History Of Humankind*, Israeli historian Yuval Harari dedicates an entire chapter to the appearance of agriculture—a process he poignantly dubs “History’s Biggest Fraud.”<sup>2</sup> The reason for so harsh a characterisation, is because even though agriculture was an innovation that brought tremendous benefits (in particular, it increased the caloric intake per capita, allowing sustaining a vastly larger population than hunting and gathering), it came at a severe cost: agriculture forced humans to spend most of their time doing work for which their bodies were (and are) ill-adapted, and moreover, it significantly reduced the breadth of their diet, which henceforth consisted mainly of a few staple crops. Besides making malnourishment a far more common ailment, this also left them much more vulnerable to the whims of Nature than they had been during the hunter-gathering era.<sup>3</sup>
- iii The reason I bring all of this up is because, as Harari also makes clear, the sort of trade-offs involved in the Agricultural Revolution were hardly an oddity—much to contrary, in fact: ‘The pursuit of an easier life resulted in much hardship, and not for the last time. It happens to us today.’<sup>4</sup> And one of the ways in which ‘[i]t happens to us today’ involves—you’ve guessed it—email. Harari discusses this over two paragraphs that are worth quoting in their entirety:

One of history’s few iron laws is that luxuries tend to become necessities and to spawn new obligations. Once people get used to a certain luxury, they take it for granted. Then they begin to count on it. Finally they reach a

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<sup>1</sup>See <https://frn.pt/contact>. Therein I also explain that my preferred form of received email is when ‘the body of the email should just state that you want to communicate to me something about some subject, and tell me to check the PDF attachment, which consists of a proper letter you have written, about said subject.’ The document you are now reading is an illustration of what I have in mind when I talk about “a proper letter.”

<sup>2</sup>Yuval Noah Harari, London: Vintage, 2015, §5.

<sup>3</sup>Farming societies have, until very recently, relied for the great bulk of their calorie intake on a small variety of domesticated plants. In many areas, they relied on just a single staple, such as wheat, potatoes or rice. If the rains failed or clouds of locusts arrived or if a fungus infected that staple species, peasants died by the thousands and millions’ Id., p. 92.

<sup>4</sup>Id., p. 98.

point where they can't live without it. Let's take another familiar example from our own time. Over the last few decades, we have invented countless time-saving devices that are supposed to make life more relaxed—washing machines, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, telephones, mobile phones, computers, email. Previously it took a lot of work to write a letter, address and stamp an envelope, and take it to the mailbox. It took days or weeks, maybe even months, to get a reply. Nowadays I can dash off an email, send it halfway around the globe, and (if my addressee is online) receive a reply a minute later. I've saved all that trouble and time, but do I live a more relaxed life?

Sadly not. Back in the snail-mail era, people usually only wrote letters when they had something important to relate. Rather than writing the first thing that came into their heads, they considered carefully what they wanted to say and how to phrase it. They expected to receive a similarly considered answer. Most people wrote and received no more than a handful of letters a month and seldom felt compelled to reply immediately. Today I receive dozens of emails each day, all from people who expect a prompt reply. We thought we were saving time; instead we revved up the treadmill of life to ten times its former speed and made our days more anxious and agitated.<sup>5</sup>

- iv That last paragraph, however, only covers half of the story: the missing part is that for all the *severe* costs that email, through 'revving up the treadmill of life', has imposed on us, the benefits have been paltry—at best. Here I can offer my own experience: I began using the internet in the late 1990s—and email especially felt like nothing short of a miracle come true. You could now communicate with people (literally!) half-way across the world, cheaply and almost unimaginably quickly—and you didn't even need for them to be available on the other side to "pick up!" In those days, however, 'unimaginably quickly' did *not* mean either instantaneous or ubiquitous: you had to connect via a (wired) dial-up connection, which was slow to connect, slow to use after you were connected to the internet, and while you remained connected, nobody could use the phone line. Which, in what email is concerned, meant that people did not just write 'the first thing that came into their heads,' but instead 'they considered carefully what they wanted to say and how to phrase it.' Granted, perhaps not so carefully as when writing actual snail mail, but still enough to make writing an email something that required time and consideration. Which meant that they 'expected to receive a similarly considered answer,' and thus did *not* 'expect a prompt reply'—a fact the receiver was well aware of, hence 'seldom [feeling] compelled to reply immediately.'
- v And then... the internet swallowed the world—and email went from borderline miraculous to an ubiquitous nightmare: it not only damaged productivity,<sup>6</sup> but also made us miserable.<sup>7</sup> To cut a long story short, email became a de facto chat program, that is always running: instead of a few large, structured texts, that actually conveyed something important, we now get many small messages, about the small minutæ of many different things—and we get them *all the time!* And the process has become so pervasive, that our brains keep

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<sup>5</sup>Id., p. 98f.

<sup>6</sup>Calvin Newport, *A World Without Email*, Portfolio/Penguin, 2021, §1,

<sup>7</sup>Id., §2.

worrying about incoming emails... even when we go on, say, internet-less vacations!!<sup>8</sup> And just as I said above, as if to add insult to injury, the benefits we obtained for all this trouble, have been minuscule. Hence, at least in what my personal usage of email is concerned, I decided some drastic changes were in order.

- vi So here is my trade-off: in exchange for having my email address available to the world, I unashamedly ignore those emails that are not written as if the sender was addressing me in a dead tree paper, snail-mailed, good old fashioned letter.<sup>9</sup> As any such missive inevitably requires time and effort to write, I can have some assurances that it will be worth my while to read, and perhaps to reply. There is also the expectation that it will diminish the number of received emails—thus helping to keep my inbox manageable.
- vii Now, to be sure, there are times when instant, “chat-like” communication is indeed required and/or adequate, but email is **not** the most suitable tool for that task—not by a very long stretch. It can, however, be used to arrange/schedule one such meeting,<sup>10</sup> using more suitable communication tools (e.g., video calls). But attempting to communicate with me, “chat like” style, *using email*, is doomed to failure.

With the very best wishes,

---Óscar Pereira

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<sup>8</sup>‘[A]nd while you’re at home at night, or over the weekend, or on vacation, you cannot escape the awareness that the missives in your inbox are piling ever thicker in your absence.’ (Id., p. 43.) In fact, this problem can become so serious that one company ‘ended up deploying an extreme solution,’ namely, ‘if you send an email to a colleague who’s on vacation, you receive a note informing you that your message has been automatically deleted—you can resend it when they return.’ (Id., p. 46.)

<sup>9</sup>There are, as I mention in my contact page (supra, n. 1), some exceptions to this rule—but they are very few indeed (the main one is notifying me of typos in my writings).

<sup>10</sup>This is actually another exception (see the previous note), for obviously this will require some exchange of emails that most definitely will *not* resemble a written letter. However, I am unlikely to accept scheduling a great many of these digital rendezvous—and accordingly, I do not foresee the number of such emails becoming anything close to overwhelming.