

ASK TWO QUESTIONS

Before You Say Yes

Practice cases for deadlines, scope and credit at work



Free sample • Chapters 1 and 2 • Draft edition

Every person, case and workplace in this book is fictional. Otto and every other AI in it are fictional AIs: their replies are written for these practice cases, not predictions of how any real AI product behaves. The hours, days and times are practice numbers, not promises about real work.

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Two chapters of fictional practice. Read a chapter, try its exercises, then compare your answers with the key.

Chapter 1: The Friday Deadline

A note before we start: Alex, the Client, Otto and every case and workplace in this book are fictional. Otto is a fictional AI, and its replies are written for this practice case, not predictions of how any real AI product behaves. The hours are practice estimates, not promises about real work.

What you'll be able to do

By the end of this chapter you can:

- spot the fact a request depends on, and name the person who holds it;
- ask two short questions, each of the person who holds the answer, that ask for facts and not for agreement;
- test a plan against the numbers, counting time only when it is both approved and actually free;
- give the yes the numbers support, say what you still don't know, and leave each open decision with the person who owns it.

The core idea

A fast yes is a promise made on facts you don't have. Before you give one, find out which fact is missing and who holds it.

Most requests arrive as a question about you: "Can you get all of it done?" The answer, though, depends on facts that sit with other people: how much time is really free, how big each part is, who is allowed to change the date or the scope. Nobody is being careless. Each person holds a half of the picture, and the halves only meet when someone asks.

The move has three steps. Share the one fact the other side is missing, so the question becomes a planning question. Ask two short questions, each of the person who actually holds the answer, and ask for facts, not for agreement: how much, which, who, when. Then leave the decision with the person who owns it, and say what you will do until they decide.

Two answers pull against that move. A quick yes hides the choice that someone has to make. A flat no throws away the yes that would have worked. What you want sits between them: a yes the numbers support, or a plain statement of the gap and of the decision that would close it.

Two tests keep the arithmetic honest. Time counts only when it is approved and actually free. And an estimate is an estimate: say so out loud, and keep a spare hour unspent when you have one.

The case below is a live call with a Client, and it takes a few seconds. The second case is a hallway request with a different shape, so you can see what stays the same when the facts sit with two people.

Case 1: The Friday deadline

The situation

The video call is nearly over. You have already started reaching for the button that ends it when the Client leans toward the camera.

“One more thing. The demo is Friday at noon, and that isn’t moving. Can you get all of it done by Friday noon?”

All of it. You know what that means in outline. There is the core of the demo, the part that actually shows what it does. There is the handoff, which lets the Client’s people run it and explain it without you there. And there is the polish, which makes the whole thing look finished. You also know which of the three the demo can’t do without: the core and the handoff. The polish is optional. What you can’t say is how big all of that is, because nobody has told you how long each part takes.

What you don’t know is how long each part takes, or how much time there actually is before Friday noon. Alex, the delivery lead at the next desk, knows both, because Alex delivers the work and holds its calendar.

The Client is waiting, and the easy word is already on its way out: *Sure*.

This chapter is about the few seconds before that word. Before you say yes, ask two questions.

Where you are standing

It helps to lay out who knows what, because in most work conversations nobody holds the whole picture. Each person holds a half, and the halves don’t match up until someone asks.

Your half. Friday noon is fixed. The demo has three parts: core, handoff and polish. It needs the core and the handoff; the polish is optional. You are the person the Client asked. You don’t know how long any of the parts takes, or how much time is available.

Alex’s half. How long each part takes, how much time is actually free before Friday noon, and whether anything extra has been approved. The Client doesn’t have this, and neither do you.

The Client’s half. The Client owns the demo, its date and its scope, so the Client is the one who decides when the polish happens. The Client doesn’t know how big the job is, because nobody has added it up yet.

Look at what that means. The Client is asking for a promise that depends on facts the Client doesn’t have. You are about to give that promise, and you don’t have those facts either. Nobody here is being careless. The information simply sits in different places, and the question “Can you get all of it done?” doesn’t bring any of it into the open.

The tempting move, and what it costs

There are two tempting answers, and they pull in opposite directions.

The first is yes. “Sure, no problem.” Or the more heroic version: “If it has to be Friday, I’ll somehow make the polished version happen.” It feels generous and it ends the call on a good note. It is also a promise to fit an amount of work you haven’t sized into a window you haven’t measured.

If the work turns out to be bigger than the window, and in this case it is, that yes has three ways to play out. None of them is good:

- **The missing hours get borrowed.** They come out of an evening or out of another commitment, and nobody agreed to give them. The person who pays for the borrowed time is often not the person who said yes.
- **Something gets quietly cut.** When Friday gets close, the part that disappears is usually the one nobody watches, and here that is the handoff. The demo looks fine on your screen, and then the Client's people can't run it or explain it without you.
- **The date slips.** Friday noon was fixed. Only the person who owns the demo can move it, and they would be finding out too late to plan around it.

There is a quieter cost too. A fast yes hides the real decision. Someone has to choose what gives if the work doesn't fit, and the person who owns that choice is the Client. When you say "sure", you make the choice yourself without the facts, and the Client never finds out there was a choice to make.

The second tempting answer is *no*. "That's not possible." It sounds honest, but it throws away the yes that would have worked, and it leaves the Client with a problem and no information. A flat no is still a guess. You haven't measured anything yet either.

What you actually want is something in between: a yes the numbers can support. You can't find that yes without facts you don't have, which is why the next step is to ask.

The two questions

You only learn what you ask. So ask for the missing facts, not for agreement, and ask each question of the person who holds the answer. In this case both facts you are missing sit with Alex, so both questions go to Alex.

These two are this case's version of the fixed pair that opens the book (see "The move and the two questions"), and both are the case's own wording, word for word. The pair's second job is to find who decides and what they need from you. Here that is already settled before you ask anything: the owner of the demo, the Client, decides, and what the demo needs from you is the core and the handoff, which you know. (The case says the same thing itself. If you asked Alex "What do you need from me?", the answer would be "Which parts must be ready for Friday", and the case adds that you already know that.) So the second question goes to the last fact you're missing: how big each part is.

Question 1, to Alex: "How many hours do you have before Friday noon?"

You ask Alex because Alex holds the hours. The Client can't answer this. The Client would have to guess, and a guess from the person who wants the work is not a measurement.

The question asks for hours before a named time, not for a feeling that it will be fine. That separates the time that is actually free from the time someone hopes will turn up: the late night, the meeting that might get canceled, the colleague who could probably help. You want the first kind only.

Alex's answer: **"Five hours. Nothing extra has been approved."**

Question 2, to Alex: "How long does each part take?"

Five hours only helps if you know how big the work is, and that is also Alex's to say. You already know which parts the demo needs. What you don't have is their size.

Alex's answer: **"Core 3h, handoff 1h, polish 3h."** These are current estimates, not guarantees. Only now can you add them up: seven hours of work against five hours of time.

It's tempting to follow up with "Can you go faster if it's important?" In this case Alex's honest reply is that the estimates are current, and going faster isn't a plan anyone can promise. Asking the same question again with more urgency doesn't create hours. It only puts pressure on the person who has to deliver them.

Why these two, and why this person. Each question fills a missing fact, and each goes to the person who holds it. Here that is Alex both times, because Alex holds both facts, the hours and the length of each part. You could ask many other things: whether the deadline is real, whether the Client would accept Monday, whether anyone else is free. Some of those can matter in other situations. Here, though, the date is fixed, and asking questions that nobody present can answer only makes the call longer.

Two short questions that can actually be answered, one about how much time there is and one about how big the work is. With those answers, you can do the arithmetic.

The arithmetic

Here are the numbers, written out plainly. They are the current estimates, not guarantees, so it's worth saying that out loud when you use them.

What's available: 5 hours before Friday noon. Nothing extra has been approved.

The full version: core 3 + handoff 1 + polish 3 = **7 hours**. Seven hours of work against five hours of time. It's **2 hours short**. However much everyone wants the full version, that is a capacity problem, and nobody's goodwill closes it.

The essential version: core 3 + handoff 1 = **4 hours**. Four hours of work against five hours of time. **It fits**, with 1 hour to spare.

Now test the other plans against the same numbers:

- **All three parts by Friday noon.** 7 against 5. It only works if two extra hours are approved *and* actually free, and right now neither is true.
- **Core and handoff by Friday noon, polish decided separately.** 4 against 5. It fits, Friday noon is met, and the Client decides when the polish happens.
- **Core only by Friday noon.** It fits on paper, but the demo needs the handoff too, and cutting it isn't your decision to make.
- **Everything next week.** Friday noon is fixed. Only the person who owns the demo could authorize a new date.

One trap is left: the spare hour. It's natural to look at that one free hour and think, *I can squeeze some polish in*. But the polish, as estimated, is three hours, and one hour doesn't buy it. If there is a smaller improvement worth making, estimate it separately and offer it as its own thing. Don't let it slide into the promise as "the polish." You may also want to keep that hour as a buffer, because estimates are estimates.

The reply you would actually send

Here's the answer, back on the call with the Client. This is where you share the one fact the Client was missing, the size of the job, and hand back the decision that is theirs:

"Yes to core and handoff by Friday noon. That's four of the five free hours. The full version with polish is seven hours, so it doesn't fit as things stand. Can we decide on the polish separately?"

It's short, and it does four things:

1. It starts with *yes*, and the *yes* is real. The Client hears first what they will get.
2. It shows the numbers. Four of five hours fits, and seven doesn't. The Client can see why the answer is what it is without having to take your word for it.
3. It keeps the handoff visible. Nothing important goes missing quietly.
4. It hands the open decision to the person who owns it. The polish isn't refused. It gets its own conversation, and the Client leads that conversation.

After the call, tell Alex the plan, since those are Alex's hours. Also make a note of the few things you still don't know, because a workable *yes* still leaves some things to check:

- what the core and the handoff must contain for the Client to accept them;
- whether the polish can be accepted after the demo, and if so, when;
- whether Alex's five hours are uninterrupted and in the same time zone as Friday noon.

Until the Client confirms a later slot for the polish, that slot is a proposal and not a plan.

What changed: the replay

Practice gets more useful when you run the same situation again with one thing changed, a fact or the person you are talking to, and watch which parts of the plan move and which stay put.

Here is the change. **Two extra hours are explicitly approved *and* actually free before Friday noon.** Someone with the authority to approve them has done so, and those hours aren't being borrowed from another commitment. Everything else is the same: Friday noon is fixed, and the core is 3 hours, the handoff 1 hour and the polish 3 hours.

Run the arithmetic again:

What's available: $5 + 2 = 7$ hours.

The full version: $3 + 1 + 3 = 7$ hours. Seven hours of work now meets seven hours of time.

The full version fits.

The essential version: $3 + 1 = 4$ hours, out of 7. It still fits, and now there would also be room to schedule the polish before the demo. The Client still decides.

So the plan that was 2 hours short now works, and the reason it works is specific: two extra hours were approved and are free. Write down who approved them. If anyone asks later how seven hours fit into Friday, the answer is a name and a decision, not "we pushed through."

Both conditions matter. Permission alone isn't capacity. Someone can approve two extra hours while the calendar has no room for them, and on Friday the shortfall is still there. Free time alone isn't permission either. Hours that happen to be empty but that nobody approved are still borrowed. The replay only works when both are true.

Also notice what didn't change. The two questions are the same. The Client still owns the demo and still chooses between the full version and the essential one. The only change is that the reply now has a second option that actually balances:

"Friday noon stays. Core and handoff take four hours. With the two extra hours [name] approved, we have seven, so the full version with polish also fits. Which would you like?"

Without that approval, the same sentence would be a promise to find two hours that don't exist.

Case 2: The Wednesday pack

Invented for this chapter. Not one of the free practice cases.

The situation

On Monday at 16:00 your department head stops at your desk. "The quarterly review pack goes to the leadership meeting on Wednesday at 09:00, and that slot is fixed. Can you have all of it ready?"

The pack has three parts: the figures pages, a one-page summary and the speaker notes. You have counted your own calendar, and you have six free hours before Wednesday 09:00, none of them borrowed from anything else. You will build the pack.

What you don't know is how long each part takes. The analyst who planned the pack has sized them. You also don't know which parts the meeting needs, and only the department head can say. The estimates are current, not guarantees, and no extra hours have been approved.

The easy word is on its way out: *Sure*.

Where you are standing

You know that Wednesday 09:00 is fixed and that you have six free hours.

The analyst knows how long each part takes.

The department head owns the meeting, so decides which parts must be ready, and is the only one who could approve more time.

In Case 1 both questions went to one person. Here the two missing facts sit with two people, so each question goes to its own holder.

The two questions

Question 1, to the analyst: "How long does each part take?"

Analyst: "Figures 3 hours, summary 2 hours, speaker notes 2 hours."

Question 2, to the department head: “Which parts does Wednesday’s meeting need?”

Department head: “All three. The chair speaks from the notes.”

What changed

“Can you have all of it ready?” became a number: $3 + 2 + 2 = 7$ **hours** of work against **6** free hours. The full version is **1 hour short**, and the second answer rules out the smaller package: the notes are needed, so cutting them isn’t your call.

Test the plans against the same numbers:

- **All three parts, and find the hour somewhere.** 7 against 6. It works only if one extra hour is approved and actually free, and today neither is true.
- **Figures and summary only.** 5 against 6. It fits, but the department head just said the notes are needed.
- **Everything on Thursday.** Wednesday 09:00 is fixed, and only the department head could move it.

So the honest reply is neither yes nor no. It states the gap, shows the number and hands back the decision:

“Figures and summary will be ready by Wednesday 09:00, which takes five of my six free hours. The speaker notes take two hours and I have one left, so all three is one hour short. Can one hour be freed from my calendar, or can the notes be shorter? Tell me which, and I’ll plan around it.”

If the department head frees one hour, $6 + 1 = 7$ meets 7, and the pack fits with nothing to spare. Say that too. A fit with no spare hour is one the owner should know about, because any slip now lands on a part the meeting needs.

What stayed the same as Case 1 is the move: one missing fact each from the person who holds it, the arithmetic written out, and the open decision handed to the person who owns it. A gap is a result. Naming it early is what leaves time to close it.

Common mistakes

- **Answering the question instead of finding the missing fact.** “Can you get all of it done?” asks about you. The useful move is to ask which fact the answer depends on, and who has it.
- **Asking the person who wants the work.** The Client can’t size the job. A guess from the person who wants the work is not a measurement, so ask whoever holds the fact.
- **Asking for agreement instead of facts.** “Is that OK?” and “Can you go faster if it’s important?” add pressure and no information. “How many hours do you have before Friday noon?” gets a number.
- **Counting time that is only half-approved.** Permission alone isn’t capacity, and free time alone isn’t permission. Ask who approved it and whether the hours are really free.

- **Letting the spare hour slide into the promise.** One free hour doesn't buy a three-hour polish. Estimate any smaller improvement on its own and offer it as its own thing.
- **Cutting the part nobody watches.** When the work doesn't fit, the handoff goes quietly first. Keep it visible in the plan and in the reply.
- **Giving a flat no.** "That's not possible" is still a guess, and it throws away the yes that fits. Size first, then answer.
- **Deciding for the person who decides.** Choosing between the full version and the essential one, or between a borrowed hour and a shorter part, belongs to the owner. Give the choice and the numbers.

Scripts and phrasing

To the person who holds the fact:

- "How many hours do you have before [time]?"
- "How long does each part take?"
- "Are those hours uninterrupted, and in the same time zone as the deadline?"

To the person who owns the outcome:

- "Which parts does [the meeting, the demo] need?"
- "Who can approve more time, or move the date?"

When you answer the request:

- "Yes to [the essential parts] by [time]. The full version is [number] hours, so it doesn't fit as things stand. Can we decide on the rest separately?"
- "It fits if [number] extra hours are approved and actually free. Who can approve them?"

When you are pushed to go faster:

- "These are the current estimates. Going faster isn't a plan I can promise, so here is what I can promise."

When the numbers fit with nothing to spare:

- "It fits with no spare hour. If anything slips, who decides what moves first?"

When an AI tool said yes before you asked anyone. In this chapter's practice case the fictional AI planning assistant Otto says, "All three parts can be ready by Friday noon." Asking "Are you sure?" gets the same sentence back. This gets the assumption out:

- "What did you assume to make it fit?"

In the case, Otto answers: "I assumed you would work 2 extra hours on Thursday evening. No one approved that." Otto's reply is written for the practice case, not a prediction of how any real AI product behaves. The answer is a claim to check, not a plan.

Practice exercise

Do this on paper, then check yourself against the key below.

Part 1: who holds the answer? For each question, write who you would ask.

- a. How many hours are free before Friday noon?
- b. How long does the handoff take?
- c. Does the polish happen after the demo?
- d. Can Friday noon move?
- e. Are two extra hours approved?

Part 2: test the plan. Same case, one practice variant: Alex says “Six hours. Nothing extra has been approved.” and the polish estimate is 2 hours. The core is still 3 hours and the handoff 1 hour.

1. Does the full version fit? By how much?
2. How many hours are spare if you deliver only the essential version?
3. What would you add to your reply about the full version, and who decides?

Part 3: the reply. Write two sentences to the Client for the original case (five free hours, seven hours of work). They must say what you can deliver by Friday noon, show the numbers, and hand back the decision that is the Client’s.

Part 4: your own week. Think of a request on your desk right now, one where the word *sure* is already halfway out. Before you answer it, fill in these lines. A notebook is fine.

- **With / About / When.** Who is asking, what they are asking for, and when it’s due.
- **What I know.** Your half, as facts only: dates, hours, records, what was agreed.
- **What I’m missing.** Their half: what someone else knows that you don’t, and who holds it.
- **The one fact I’ll share.** The fact they need before they can decide, often one you have only just learned.
- **The two questions I’ll ask, and whom I’ll ask.** Ask for the missing facts, not for agreement. Keep them short and answerable: how much, how long, which, who. Next to each question, write the name of the one person who can answer it.
- **Who decides.** Who owns the date, the scope, the access or the record? It is often not the person asking, and often not you.
- **My next step.** A proposal, not a promise, until the person who decides confirms it.
- **If the other side is an AI tool.** What did it actually check, and what did it assume? Write down one thing you’ll verify before you rely on it.
- **After.** Once the conversation is over: what you learned, and what is still unknown.

If the numbers don’t add up on paper, they won’t add up on Friday either. It’s better to find that out now, while the person who decides still has time to choose.

Chapter exercise key

Part 1. a. Alex, who holds the hours. b. Alex, who holds how long each part takes. c. The Client, who owns the demo and decides when the polish happens. d. The owner of the demo, the Client. Only they could authorize a new date. e. Someone with the authority to approve them. The case doesn't name that person, so the question to ask is who.

Part 2.

1. Yes. $3 + 1 + 2 = 6$ hours of work against 6 free hours, so the full version fits exactly, with nothing to spare.
2. The essential version is $3 + 1 = 4$ hours, so $6 - 4 = 2$ hours are spare. (The polish is now 2 hours, which is why the full version just fits.)
3. Say that it fits with no spare hour and that the estimates are estimates. If anything slips, the Client decides what moves first. This variant is invented for the exercise; the case itself has five free hours.

Part 3. One version: "Yes to core and handoff by Friday noon, which is four of the five free hours; the full version with polish is seven hours, so it doesn't fit as things stand. Can we decide on the polish separately?" Yours may differ. A good one names what you can deliver, shows the numbers and hands the polish decision to the Client.

Part 4 has no key. It is your own week.

One-page summary

The move. Before you say yes, ask two questions, each of the person who holds the answer. Ask for facts, not for agreement.

The case (C01, fictional). The Client asks for all of it by Friday noon, and the date is fixed. You know the demo needs the core and the handoff. You don't know how long each part takes or how many hours are free.

The two questions, to Alex.

1. "How many hours do you have before Friday noon?" Five hours. Nothing extra has been approved.
2. "How long does each part take?" Core 3h, handoff 1h, polish 3h.

The numbers. Full version: $3 + 1 + 3 = 7$ hours against 5, which is 2 short. Essential version: $3 + 1 = 4$ hours against 5, which fits with 1 to spare.

The reply. Yes to core and handoff by Friday noon. Show the numbers. Keep the handoff visible. Hand the polish decision to the Client.

The replay. Two extra hours are approved and actually free: $5 + 2 = 7$, and the full version fits. Write down who approved them.

Case 2 (invented). Pack for a fixed Wednesday 09:00 slot: $3 + 2 + 2 = 7$ hours against 6, all three parts needed, so 1 hour short. Reply with the gap and the choice: free one hour, or shorten the notes.

Watch for. Asking the person who wants the work. Asking for agreement. Counting time that is approved but not free, or free but not approved. The spare hour sliding into the promise. The handoff cut quietly.

Say. "Yes to this part by then. The rest doesn't fit as things stand. Here is the decision I need from you."

Chapter 2: The Two-Hour Addition

A note before we start: Tomas, Morgan, the regional manager, the department head, Otto and every case and workplace in this chapter are fictional. Otto is a fictional AI, and its replies are written for this practice case, not predictions of how any real AI product behaves. The hours are practice estimates, not promises about real work.

What you'll be able to do

By the end of this chapter you can:

- tell a request from an authorized change to what was agreed, and say which one you have been handed;
- put the full plan next to the new request: the hours already allocated, the hours the request would add, and how many are short;
- ask two short questions, each of the person who holds the answer: what the request needs and by when, and who can approve changing the agreed scope;
- send the choice to the person who owns the scope as a proposal with two options, the exact piece that would move, an owner and a decision time, and write the decision down.

The core idea

A new request on a full plan is not a change to the plan. Before you say yes, find out what the request needs and by when, and who is allowed to change what was agreed.

Extra requests often arrive with a size attached: “nothing big”, “it should be quick”. The size is a feeling, and it describes the new work only. It says nothing about the plan the work lands on, and every added hour has to come from somewhere: an evening nobody agreed to give, a piece of the plan that quietly disappears, or a second plan that only the requester believes in. Nobody is being careless. Each person holds a half of the picture: you hold the hours, the requester holds what the work is for, and the scope owner holds the authority to move anything.

The move keeps the same three steps as the rest of the book. Share the one fact the other side is missing: the hours are already allocated, and to what. Ask two short questions, each of the person who holds the answer, and ask for facts: what does it need to show and by when, and who can approve a change. Then leave the decision with the person who owns it, and say what you will do until they decide.

Two tempting answers pull against that move. “Sure” spends hours that are not in the plan. “That’s out of scope” claims more than you know, because you may not know who owns the scope, and this book stays out of questions of entitlement or contract. What you want sits between them: show both plans on the same page, keep the agreed work intact and send the choice to the person who can make it.

Two tests keep the plan honest. A swap is not “something”: name the exact piece of agreed work that comes out, with its hours. And a proposal is not a plan until the owner has decided and the decision is written down.

The first case is a two-hour comparison page that turns out not to be needed for this delivery. The second is a table that is needed for Thursday, where the choice has to come out of the plan, and the person who can make it is not the person who asked.

Case 1: The two-hour addition

The situation

The plan is settled. You lead delivery on this project, five hours of work remain, and you know exactly what they are for. You are about to start the next piece when Tomas, one of the stakeholders, stops by with a request.

“Could you also add a comparison page? Nothing big. It should be quick.”

It sounds reasonable. It might even be a good idea. You do a rough estimate in your head: a comparison page is about two hours of work.

Here is what that request lands on. The five remaining hours are already allocated. Two hours go to the data section, two to the recommendations section, and one to the handoff, so whoever receives the work can pick it up without you. Data and recommendations together are the original core, four hours. Add the handoff and you get five. There is no empty slot.

What you don’t know is almost everything about the request itself. You don’t know why Tomas wants the comparison, what it has to show, or when it’s needed. You also don’t know who can approve a change to the agreed scope. It might be Tomas. It might not.

The easy word is already on its way out: *Sure*.

Chapter 1 was about a deadline. This one is about something quieter: a new request that arrives after the plan is full. The move is the same. Before you say yes, ask two questions.

Where you are standing

Lay out who knows what. Once again, nobody holds the whole picture.

Your half. Five hours remain, and all five are already allocated: data section 2 hours, recommendations section 2 hours, handoff 1 hour. The comparison page is your estimate, 2 hours, and it stays an estimate until someone says what the page must contain.

Tomas’s half. Why Tomas wants the comparison, what it needs to show and when it is needed. Tomas also knows who owns the scope, which you haven’t confirmed.

The scope owner’s half. The authority to change what was agreed: to swap something out, defer something or approve new time. You don’t yet know who this is.

And one thing you can’t assume: that Tomas knows the five hours are already spoken for. “It should be quick” is a statement about the new page. It says nothing about what the page would push out.

So the request is really a question about two plans at once, the one that was agreed and the one Tomas is imagining. Until someone puts them side by side, both can look fine.

The tempting move, and what it costs

Again there are two tempting answers, and again they pull in opposite directions.

The first is *yes*. “Sure, I’ll fit it in.” It feels helpful, and the request did sound small. But the arithmetic is not small. Four hours of core plus one hour of handoff plus two hours of comparison is seven hours of work, and five hours remain. A *yes* here is a promise to find two hours that aren’t in the plan.

Those two hours have to come from somewhere, and the options are familiar:

- **They get borrowed.** An evening, a weekend or another project pays for them, and nobody agreed to that.
- **Something gets quietly cut.** The usual casualty is the handoff, because it’s the part nobody watches until they need it. Look closely, though. Even dropping the whole handoff doesn’t make room. Data 2 plus recommendations 2 plus comparison 2 is still six hours in a five-hour budget, and now the person receiving the work gets no handoff at all.
- **Two scopes quietly exist.** Tomas believes the comparison is coming. Whoever agreed the original package believes the original package is coming. Both are working from a different plan, and neither knows it yet.

The second tempting answer is *no*, often in its most official form: “That’s out of scope.” It can feel firm and professional. But it quietly claims more than you know. You don’t know who owns the scope, so you don’t know that the answer is *no*. And “out of scope” can sound like a claim about rights or contracts when the real issue is simpler: two hours of work and no free hours to put them in. This book stays out of entitlement and legal terms. Whether anyone is *owed* the comparison is not a question these facts can answer. Whether it fits in five hours is.

What you want instead is an answer that shows both plans on the same page, keeps the agreed work intact and sends the choice to the person who can make it. To get there, you need two facts you don’t have.

The two questions

Before asking anything, share the fact from your half that Tomas needs: “The five hours we have left are already allocated: data two, recommendations two, handoff one.” That turns the conversation from “Can you do me a favor?” into “Here is the plan. Where would this go?”

Then ask for the missing facts, not for agreement.

Question 1, to Tomas: “What does the comparison need to show, and by when?”

You ask Tomas because the request is Tomas’s. Only Tomas knows what is behind it and what it’s for.

Tomas’s answer: **“Two vendors side by side. It’s for next month’s planning, not needed in this delivery.”**

That one sentence changes the shape of the problem. The comparison is real and useful, but it isn’t competing for these five hours at all. It belongs to next month.

Question 2, to Tomas: “Who can approve changing the agreed scope?”

This time you ask the same person, for a different reason. Tomas can’t approve the change, but knows who can, and asking directly saves you from guessing.

Tomas’s answer: **“Morgan owns the scope. I’m asking, not approving.”**

Now you know who decides. Notice what Tomas's answer also tells you: Tomas is asking, not approving. The request does not change the plan on its own authority. A request is not yet a change.

The questions that don't help

It's worth seeing the questions that feel natural and return nothing.

"Is it a small job?" Tomas: "It feels small to me." That is an honest answer, and it tells you nothing about the hours. How small a job *feels* to the person asking is not an estimate.

"Can you give me more time?" Tomas: "That isn't mine to give. Morgan would decide." Asking the wrong person for time doesn't create it.

"Could someone else build it?" Tomas: "Not that I know of." A reasonable thought, but nobody here can answer it, so it only makes the conversation longer.

Each of these asks for reassurance or a favor. The two useful questions, "What does the comparison need to show, and by when?" and "Who can approve changing the agreed scope?", ask for facts: what and when, and who decides.

The arithmetic

Here are the numbers, written out plainly. The hours are current estimates, and the comparison is estimated at 2 hours until its content is confirmed.

What's available: 5 hours remaining.

The agreed package: data 2 + recommendations 2 + handoff 1 = **5 hours**. Five hours of work in five hours of time. It fits exactly, with nothing to spare.

The agreed package plus the comparison: 5 + 2 = **7 hours**. Seven hours of work against five hours of time. It's **2 hours short**.

Now test each plan against the same numbers:

- **Add the comparison and keep everything.** $4 + 1 + 2 = 7$ against 5. It only works if two extra hours are approved *and* actually free. Neither is true right now.
- **Swap the recommendations section for the comparison.** Data 2 + comparison 2 + handoff 1 = 5. It fits on paper. But it removes work that was agreed, and only Morgan can approve that. It also leaves a named omission: the package goes out without recommendations.
- **Drop the handoff to make room.** $2 + 2 + 2 = 6$ against 5. It still doesn't fit, and the person receiving the work loses the transfer.
- **Keep the agreed five-hour package, and defer the comparison.** 5 of 5. It fits. The comparison isn't needed for this delivery, and Morgan confirms when, or whether, it gets scheduled and budgeted.

The last plan fits, and it's the only one that fits without anyone giving up something they were promised. That's not because the comparison doesn't matter. It's because Tomas told you it isn't needed yet.

The reply you would actually send

First, back to Tomas:

"Thanks, a two-vendor comparison makes sense for next month's planning. The five hours left on this delivery are already allocated: data two, recommendations two, handoff one. The comparison would add about two, which makes seven. Since it isn't needed for this delivery, I'll keep this package as agreed and take the comparison to Morgan to schedule."

Then a short note to Morgan, the person who owns the choice:

"Tomas has asked for a two-vendor comparison page, about two hours, for next month's planning. The five remaining hours are fully allocated: data 2, recommendations 2, handoff 1. Two options: (1) keep this package as agreed and schedule the comparison with its own budget for next month; or (2) if you want it in this delivery, name the two hours of agreed scope that move, for example the recommendations section. I'd suggest option 1. Could you decide by [date]?"

It's short, and it does five things:

1. It thanks Tomas and takes the request seriously. Nothing is refused.
2. It shows the numbers. Five of five is full, and seven doesn't fit.
3. It separates a request from an authorized change. Tomas asked. Morgan decides.
4. It offers two real options, each with its cost. The swap is on the table, and so is the omission it would leave.
5. It names an owner and a time for the decision, so the question doesn't drift.

After that, write the decision down where everyone working on the project will see it: the agreed package, the new request, and what Morgan chose. The easiest way for two people to end up working from two different plans is for the change to live only in a hallway conversation.

A few things are still open, even with a workable answer:

- what the comparison must contain for it to be accepted, beyond "two vendors side by side", and whether two hours is still the right estimate once that's clear;
- whether Morgan can approve new budget, or only scope, and who signs off if not;
- whether the handoff still needs its full hour, which only the person receiving it can confirm.

Until Morgan confirms, the plan for the comparison is a proposal and not a plan.

What changed: the replay

Now run the same case again with one condition changed, and watch what moves.

Here is the change. **The comparison didn't come from a person.** You open the client's brief and find it has been tidied by Otto, the client's fictional AI writing assistant. Otto's note

at the top reads: “Here is the tidied brief. I added a vendor comparison page.”

Everything else is the same. Five hours remain. They’re allocated data 2, recommendations 2, handoff 1. The comparison would take about 2 hours.

The arithmetic doesn’t move at all. The agreed package is 5 of 5. With the comparison it’s 7 against 5, 2 hours short. The swap is still $2 + 2 + 1 = 5$, and dropping the handoff is still 6 in 5.

What moves is the question of where the request came from. With Tomas, you knew a person wanted the page. With Otto, you don’t yet know that anyone did.

The questions that return nothing look familiar:

- “How long will the comparison take?” Otto: “I don’t have your estimates.” The hours are still your half.
- “Is this version final?” Otto: “It’s the latest version I produced.” Latest is not the same as confirmed.
- “Can you remove something else to make room?” Otto: “I can suggest cuts, but I can’t approve scope.” A tool can propose a swap. It can’t authorize one.

The two useful questions are about the source:

- **“Did the client ask for the comparison, or did you add it?”** Otto: “I added it while tidying. The client’s notes mention vendors once.”
- **“Has anyone confirmed this version of the brief?”** Otto: “No one yet. I drafted it.”

So the comparison page is not a request yet. It’s a suggestion that appeared in a draft nobody has confirmed. Treating it as agreed scope would mean giving up two hours of agreed work, or borrowing two hours, for something no person has asked for.

The plan that fits is the same one, for a different reason: keep the agreed five-hour package, don’t build the comparison, and ask Morgan, who owns the scope, whether the comparison is wanted at all. The swap now waits for more than approval. First someone has to confirm that the tidied brief is the brief.

What stays the same is the shape of the move. Share the fact the other side is missing, ask two short questions for what you don’t know, and leave the decision with the person who owns it. With a person, you ask what they need. With a tool, you also ask what it actually checked, and what it simply added.

Case 2: The regional table in the review pack

Invented for this chapter. Not one of the free practice cases.

The situation

It is Tuesday morning. You are finishing a pack for a department review on Thursday. Six hours of work remain, and all six are allocated: three for the charts, two for the commentary and one for the handoff, so that whoever takes the pack over can use it without you.

The regional manager stops at your desk. “Could the pack also have a table of regional totals? Nothing big.”

You do a rough estimate. The figures behind the charts already hold the regional numbers, so the table is about one hour. It stays an estimate until someone says what the table has to show.

Here is what the request lands on. Charts 3 plus commentary 2 plus handoff 1 is 6 hours, and 6 hours remain. There is no empty hour. What you don't know is what the table must show, whether it is needed on Thursday, whether any hours can be added, and who decides what moves.

The easy word is on its way out: *Sure*. Before you say it, ask two questions.

Where you are standing

Your half. Six hours remain, all allocated: charts 3, commentary 2, handoff 1. The table is your estimate, 1 hour, and nothing more.

The regional manager's half. What the table must show, and whether the pack needs it on Thursday. The regional manager asked, and does not own the pack.

The department head's half. The department head owns the pack, so the department head knows whether any hours can be added and what may move, and decides.

In Case 1 both questions went to the person who asked. Here the two facts sit with two people, so each question goes to its own holder.

And one thing is easy to assume and wrong to assume: that an hour is small enough to absorb. It is small as a piece of work. It is a whole hour of a plan with none to spare.

The two questions

Question 1, to the regional manager: "What must the table show, and is it needed for Thursday's review?"

Regional manager: "Three regional totals in one table, from the figures behind the charts. Yes, I need it in the pack for Thursday."

Question 2, to the department head: "Can any hours be added, and what would you want to see before something moves?"

Department head: "No hours can be added this week. Show me what moves and what the pack loses, and I'll decide."

The arithmetic

Write the hours out.

The agreed pack: charts 3 + commentary 2 + handoff 1 = **6 hours**, in 6 hours of time. Nothing to spare.

The pack plus the table: $6 + 1 = 7$ hours against 6. It is **1 hour short**.

The regional manager's answer fixes two things. The table is the three regional totals from figures you already have, so the estimate of 1 hour stands. And it is needed on Thursday, so it is competing for these six hours. In Case 1 the addition could wait for next month. This one cannot.

The department head's answer fixes the other two. No hour can be added, so the missing hour has to come out of the plan, and the department head is the person who decides which.

Now test each plan against the same facts:

- **Add the table and keep everything.** Charts 3 + commentary 2 + handoff 1 + table 1 = 7 against 6. It leaves a gap. It needs an hour that the department head has said cannot be added.
- **Drop the handoff to make room.** Charts 3 + commentary 2 + table 1 = 6 of 6. It fits on paper, and it breaks. Whoever takes the pack over gets no handoff, and nobody agreed to that.
- **Shorten the commentary from two hours to one.** Charts 3 + commentary 1 + handoff 1 + table 1 = 6 of 6. It fits on paper, and the table is in the Thursday pack. It needs the department head's approval, and it leaves a named loss: a shorter commentary.
- **Send the table in a note after Thursday's review.** The pack stays at charts 3 + commentary 2 + handoff 1 = 6 of 6, and the table's hour is found after the review, outside these six. It leaves out what the regional manager said is needed on Thursday, and only the department head can accept that.
- **Show the department head both of the last two options, each with what it costs, and ask for the choice.** It fits. Each option is 6 of 6, the cost of each is named, and the decision goes to the person who owns the pack.

What changed

In Case 1 the answer to the first question took the request out of the plan: the comparison was for next month, so the agreed package stayed as it was. Here the same question put the request into the plan, because the table is needed on Thursday. The second answer closed the easy exit. With no hours to add, the table can only go in by taking something out, and what comes out is the department head's choice, not yours and not the regional manager's.

The message you would actually send goes to the department head:

"The regional manager has asked for a table of three regional totals in the Thursday pack. It is about one hour, because the figures are already behind the charts. The six hours left are allocated: charts 3, commentary 2, handoff 1, and you said none can be added. Two ways to fit it: (1) shorten the commentary from two hours to one, so the table goes in and the cost is a shorter commentary; (2) send the table in a note after the review, so the pack stays as agreed and the regional manager does not have the table on Thursday. I'd suggest option 1, because the regional manager needs it on Thursday and the charts and the handoff stay as agreed. Could you decide by 16:00 today?"

It names the exact hour that moves, says what each option costs, and gives the department head a time. Until the department head decides, the table is a proposal and not part of the pack. One more open item: the estimate of one hour rests on the totals being in the figures behind the charts. If the regional manager's totals need figures that are not there, the hour is wrong and the choice has to be made again.

What stayed the same as Case 1 is the move: a request that sounded small, two questions put to the people who hold the answers, and the choice left with the person who owns it.

What differed is the ending. In Case 1 the new work waits. In Case 2 something has to give way: part of the agreed pack, or the table's place in Thursday's pack. The only open question is which one the department head picks.

Common mistakes

- **Treating “it should be quick” as an estimate.** Quick is how it feels to the person asking. The hours are yours to estimate, and the estimate stays an estimate until the content is clear.
- **Saying yes before finding the hours.** “Sure, I’ll fit it in” is a promise to find hours that are not in the plan. Borrowed evenings are not an answer, because nobody agreed to give them.
- **Cutting the handoff quietly.** The handoff is the part nobody watches until they need it. In Case 1, even dropping the whole handoff leaves 6 hours in 5, and the person receiving the work gets nothing. In Case 2 it makes the sum fit and takes away something nobody agreed to give up.
- **Answering “that’s out of scope”.** It sounds firm, and it claims more than you know. You may not know who owns the scope, and whether anyone is owed anything is not a question these facts can answer. The useful fact is that the hours are already allocated.
- **Asking the wrong person for time.** “Can you give me more time?” asked of Tomas gets “That isn’t mine to give.” Asking someone who does not own the scope does not create hours.
- **Asking for reassurance instead of facts.** “Is it a small job?” and “Could someone else build it?” return a feeling and a “not that I know of”. The useful questions ask what and by when, and who decides.
- **Taking Tomas’s ask for an approval.** Tomas said “I’m asking, not approving.” Until Morgan decides, the agreed plan stands.
- **Saying “something” will move.** “Something” is not an answer. “The recommendations section, two hours” is. Name the piece and its hours, or the owner has nothing to decide.
- **Grabbing the first swap that adds up.** Swapping recommendations for the comparison is $2 + 2 + 1 = 5$. It fits on paper and removes agreed work, which only the scope owner can approve.
- **Letting the change live in the hallway.** If the decision is written nowhere, two people end up on two plans. Write down what was agreed, what was asked and what the owner chose.
- **Treating what a tool added as a request.** In the replay nobody asked for the comparison page. Otto added it, and “the latest version I produced” is not a confirmed one.
- **Asking only the person who asked.** In Case 2 the regional manager knows what the table is for. Whether an hour can be added is for the department head, and asking the regional manager would only produce a guess.

Scripts and phrasing

Put the fact first, before the question:

- “The [five] hours we have left are already allocated: [data two, recommendations two, handoff one].”

When someone says it is quick:

- “It may well be quick. For now it is my estimate, [two hours], until we know what it has to show.”

To the person who asked:

- “What does it need to show, and by when?”
- “What would you look at to say it is done?”
- “Who can approve changing the agreed scope?”

To the person who owns the scope:

- “Can any hours be added, and what would you want to see before something moves?”
- “Two options: (1) keep [the package] as agreed and schedule [the addition] with its own budget; (2) if you want it in this delivery, name the [hours] of agreed scope that move. Could you decide by [time]?”

When “out of scope” is on the tip of your tongue:

- “I can’t say whether it is in or out. Here is what the [five] hours already cover. Who decides what moves?”

When the decision is made:

- “For the record: [what is agreed], [what was added or deferred], [who decided], [date]. It is written in [the place everyone will see it].”

When the other side is an AI tool and a page appeared that nobody mentioned, ask where it came from and whether a person confirmed it. Otto, the client’s fictional AI writing assistant, answers as written for the practice case, not as a prediction of how any real AI product behaves:

- “Did the client ask for the comparison, or did you add it?” Otto: “I added it while tidying. The client’s notes mention vendors once.”
- “Has anyone confirmed this version of the brief?” Otto: “No one yet. I drafted it.”

Otto’s answers are claims to check, not a plan. After them, the choice about the comparison is still the scope owner’s.

Practice exercise

Do this on paper, then check yourself against the key below.

Part 1: who holds the answer? For each question about the original case, write who you would ask, or whether you would ask it at all.

- **a.** What does the comparison need to show, and by when?
- **b.** Who can approve changing the agreed scope?
- **c.** Can the five hours be stretched to fit the comparison?
- **d.** How long will the comparison take?
- **e.** In the tidied brief, did the client ask for the comparison, or did Otto add it, and who can confirm the brief?

Part 2: a bigger table. A practice variant, invented for this exercise. In Case 2 the regional manager says the table must show the totals by month, so you now estimate 2 hours instead of 1. Everything else is the same: six hours remain, allocated charts 3, commentary 2 and handoff 1; no hours can be added; the table is still needed on Thursday; the department head decides what moves.

1. How many hours of work are there against how many hours of time?
2. Does shortening the commentary to one hour still make room?
3. What fits on paper now, and who decides?

Part 3: the note to Morgan. Write the note to Morgan in the original case. It must give the five hours and what they are allocated to, say what the comparison would add and where that leaves the total, offer two options with what each costs, make a suggestion, and ask for a decision by a time.

Part 4: two more replays. Run the original case again with one change each time.

1. Tomas says the comparison is small but cannot say what it must show for it to be accepted. What happens to the 2-hour estimate, and what do you ask?
2. Morgan says to cut the handoff to make room. Does that make room, and what do you ask next?

Part 5: your own week. Think of a request that arrived after your plan was already full, where *sure, I'll fit it in* is already halfway out. Fill in these lines before you answer.

- **With / About / When.** Who is asking, what they are asking for, and when it is due. If they haven't said when, that is your first question.
- **What I know.** Your half, as facts only. In this chapter: "Five hours remain, allocated data 2, recommendations 2, handoff 1."
- **What I'm missing.** What someone else knows and who holds it. Here: what the comparison is for and when it is needed (Tomas), and who can change the scope (also Tomas, as it turned out).
- **The one fact I'll share.** Here: "The five hours are already allocated."
- **The two questions I'll ask, and whom I'll ask.** Short and answerable. Here: "What does it need to show, and by when?" and "Who can approve changing the agreed scope?"

- **What would move.** If the new work goes in, name the exact piece of agreed work that comes out, with its hours. “Something” is not an answer. “The recommendations section, two hours” is.
- **Who decides.** Who owns the scope? It is often not the person asking, and often not you.
- **My next step.** A proposal with two options, an owner and a decision time.
- **If the other side is an AI tool.** Did a person ask for this, or did the tool add it? Has anyone confirmed the version you are reading?
- **The record.** Where will the decision be written down, so that everyone works from the same plan?

If a new request only fits by making something else quietly disappear, it doesn’t fit. Say so while the person who decides can still choose.

Chapter exercise key

Part 1. a. Tomas, because the request is Tomas’s. The answer is two vendors side by side, for next month’s planning. b. Tomas, who can say who decides but not decide: Morgan owns the scope, and Tomas is asking, not approving. c. Not Tomas, who said “That isn’t mine to give. Morgan would decide.” Morgan is the one to ask, and only with the numbers in front of Morgan: $5 + 2 = 7$ against 5. d. You. The estimate is your half, and Otto says “I don’t have your estimates.” It stays 2 hours until the content is clear. e. Otto, which says it added the comparison, and then Morgan, who owns the scope. Otto says no one has confirmed the brief, and a tool cannot confirm itself.

Part 2.

1. Charts 3 + commentary 2 + handoff 1 + table 2 = **8 hours** against 6, so 2 hours short.
2. No. Shortening the commentary by one hour gives charts 3 + commentary 1 + handoff 1 + table 2 = 7 against 6, which is still 1 hour short.
3. Dropping the commentary completely: charts 3 + commentary 0 + handoff 1 + table 2 = 6 of 6. It fits on paper and removes an agreed section, so the department head decides. Sending the table in a note after Thursday also fits the hours and leaves it out of the review. Combinations of smaller cuts can reach 6 too, for example a one-hour commentary with no handoff, and each needs the department head. Dropping the handoff alone does not work: charts 3 + commentary 2 + handoff 0 + table 2 = 7 against 6. This variant is invented for the exercise. The case itself has a table of about one hour.

Part 3. The note under “The reply you would actually send” is one version. Yours may differ. A good one says the five hours are allocated as data 2, recommendations 2 and handoff 1, says the comparison adds about 2 so the total is 7, offers two options (keep the package as agreed and schedule the comparison with its own budget, or name the two hours of agreed scope that move), suggests one, asks Morgan to decide by a time, and says nothing about who is owed what.

Part 4.

1. The 2 hours stay an estimate, and it could be more or less. The five hours stay as agreed, and the comparison is not scheduled yet. Ask Tomas what Tomas would look at to say it is done. If Tomas cannot say, take it to Morgan as a request that cannot be sized yet, and leave the package alone. “It feels small” is not an acceptance test.
2. Not by itself. Without the handoff it is $2 + 2 + 2 = 6$ hours against 5, still 1 hour short, and the person receiving the work loses the transfer. Morgan owns the scope and can still decide, so ask what else moves for the other hour. Ask the person who will receive the work whether the handoff still needs its full hour.

Part 5 has no key. It is your own week.

One-page summary

The move. When a new request lands on a full plan, ask two questions before you say yes: what it needs and by when, and who can change the agreed scope. A request is not yet a change.

The case (C02, fictional). Five hours remain, all allocated: data 2, recommendations 2, handoff 1. Tomas asks you to add a comparison page, which you estimate at 2 hours. You don't know why Tomas wants it, when it is needed, or who can approve a change.

The two questions, both to Tomas.

1. "What does the comparison need to show, and by when?" Two vendors side by side, for next month's planning, not needed in this delivery.
2. "Who can approve changing the agreed scope?" Morgan owns the scope. Tomas is asking, not approving.

The arithmetic. $2 + 2 + 1 = 5$ of 5. With the comparison, $5 + 2 = 7$ against 5: 2 hours short. Swapping recommendations out gives 5 on paper and needs Morgan. Dropping the handoff gives 6 in 5. The plan that fits keeps the agreed package and defers the comparison, and Morgan confirms when or whether it is scheduled.

The reply. Thank Tomas, show the numbers, take the comparison to Morgan with two options, an owner and a decision time. Write the decision down.

The replay. The comparison was added by Otto, the client's fictional AI writing assistant, while tidying, and no one has confirmed the brief. The arithmetic does not move. Ask whether the client asked for it, and who has confirmed the version.

Case 2 (invented). Six hours: charts 3, commentary 2, handoff 1. The regional manager wants a table of regional totals, about 1 hour, needed on Thursday. The department head says no hours can be added. 7 against 6, 1 short. Shorten the commentary to one hour, or send the table after Thursday, and let the department head choose.

Watch for. "It should be quick" taken as an estimate. A yes with no hours behind it. "Out of scope" said without knowing who decides. "Something will move" with no word on what. A request treated as a change.

Say. "What does it need to show, and by when? Who can approve changing the agreed scope?"

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Draft edition. The full book is not published or for sale.