“Can you just pull something together?”

“Have a look at this and do what you think is best.”

“We just need a quick summary, nothing major.”

For many autistic and ADHD people, these kinds of instructions don’t feel light or freeing. They feel like someone has handed you a box with no label and asked you to guess what’s inside, how heavy it is, and when they’ll want it back.

You want to do a good job. You probably *can* do a good job. But when you don’t know what “good” looks like to the other person, your brain may spin through multiple possibilities at once, trying to cover every angle. That’s tiring, and it can easily lead to overworking the wrong thing, freezing, or both.

This article is about vague instructions at work: why they can be such a problem for neurodivergent brains, why clarity is an access need rather than a luxury, and some gentle, practical ways to ask for the detail you need without feeling like you’re being difficult.

Even if you are not neurodivergent, there may also be some useful information and hints in this article, as vagueness helps no-one.

Quick Summary

- Vague instructions (“just sort it”, “whenever you can”, “make it better”) create extra strain for many autistic and ADHD people because we hold multiple interpretations in mind at once.
- This isn’t about being fussy. Clear outcomes, deadlines and formats mean we can actually use our strengths instead of guessing.
- Clarity is an access need: it’s part of making work environments more equitable for neurodivergent brains.
- You can ask simple questions like “What would a good outcome look like?”, “What’s the real deadline?” and “Is there anything you definitely don’t want?”.
- If it’s not safe to ask directly, you can still quietly define your own version of “good enough”, set internal deadlines, and check your understanding with small recap emails.

What “vague instructions” look like day to day

Vague instructions can sound friendly and flexible. In practice, they often leave a lot unsaid.

Phrases like:

- “Can you just pull something together on this?”
- “If you could sort that, that’d be great.”
- “Just a quick summary.”
- “Do what you think is best.”
- “Whenever you get a chance.”

might hide several unanswered questions:

- How long should this be?
- Who is going to read it?
- What decision will it support?
- What tone should it have?
- When do they actually need it?
- How polished do they expect it to be?

If your brain is wired for detail, pattern recognition and accuracy, it’s hard to ignore those gaps. You may find yourself:

- mentally generating multiple possible versions at once
- worrying about choosing the “wrong” one
- delaying starting because you’re not sure which direction to go

In my own work, I’ve noticed that if a task is described very broadly, my natural tendency is to hold several interpretations in my head at once. That “multi-track” thinking can be useful in analysis, but when I’m trying to decide *what to actually do*, it’s exhausting.

Why vagueness hits neurodivergent brains harder

Vague instructions are frustrating for lots of people, not just neurodivergent ones. But there are a few reasons they can be particularly hard for autistic and ADHD workers.

Holding multiple possibilities at once

Many of us are very good at seeing different angles. The problem is that when someone says “just summarise this”, our brain doesn’t narrow down to one neat option. It starts generating several:

- a one-page summary for a senior manager

- a detailed note for a specialist colleague
- a brief email for people who only need the headlines

All of those might be valid. Without more information, you have to guess which one the requester has in mind.

Past criticism and second-guessing

If you've been criticised in the past for "doing it wrong", "missing the point" or "overdoing it", you may be extra sensitive to choosing the wrong interpretation.

That can lead to:

- perfectionism ("I have to cover all possibilities")
- avoidance ("If I don't start, I can't get it wrong")
- overworking ("I'll write something that covers everything, just in case")

Executive function load

Deciding what to do is itself a task. When instructions are vague, you're not just doing the work; you're also designing the work from scratch.

For neurodivergent people with limited executive function resources, that can be the difference between "I can start this" and "My brain just shuts down."

Masking and fear of being "difficult"

If you've spent years masking at work, you may have absorbed the idea that you should be able to cope with vague instructions like everyone else appears to.

You might worry that asking for clarity will make you look:

- slow
- fussy
- needy
- high-maintenance

So you keep quiet, guess, and hope you've hit the target. Sometimes you do. Sometimes you don't. Either way, it costs more energy than it needed to.

Clarity is an access need, not a luxury

It might help to reframe clarity as something closer to step-free access.

Clear instructions don't just make life easier for you; they:

- reduce wasted effort
- make expectations visible rather than hidden
- help managers get what they actually want
- support consistency and fairness across a team

You are not asking for special treatment when you ask:

- "What does 'good' look like here?"
- "When do you really need this by?"

You're asking for information that lets you do your job properly. That's reasonable.

When I wrote my neurodiversity statement for work, I included a section that said, in essence:

> I work best when it is clear what is needed, by when, and in what format. Vague or open-ended instructions can create unnecessary strain, because I will often hold several possible interpretations in mind at once. Direct, specific feedback is very helpful, and I am always willing to revise work when I understand the priorities and rationale.

Framing it this way helped colleagues see that clarity isn't about me being pedantic. It's about giving my brain enough information to use its strengths.

Questions that gently pin down "what good looks like"

You don't have to interrogate people with a long list every time. Often, two or three questions are enough.

Here are some you can adapt, depending on the situation.

About the purpose

- “What will this be used for?”
- “Who is going to read this?”
- “Is this mainly for information, or is there a decision you need to make?”

Knowing whether you’re writing for a director, a colleague or the public will change the tone and level of detail.

About the format and depth

- “Roughly how long do you want this to be?”
- “Are you thinking bullet points, a short email, or a more detailed note?”
- “Do you want headlines only, or do you also need the reasoning behind them?”

This protects you from spending hours on a detailed report when they only wanted a few bullet points.

About deadlines

- “When do you actually need this by?”
- “Is there a meeting or decision date this needs to feed into?”
- “What would be a helpful checkpoint date for a draft?”

People often say “ASAP” when they really mean “within the next week”. It’s okay to gently pin that down.

About boundaries

- “Is there anything you definitely don’t want included?”
- “Are there examples of something similar you’ve liked before?”

This helps you avoid accidentally stepping on toes or including too much.

You don’t need to ask all of these every time. Think of them as a toolbox. Pick one or two that unlock the most uncertainty for *this* task.

Example scripts (so you’re not inventing it on the spot)

A few ready-made phrases you can copy/paste or adjust.

When you’re given a vague verbal request

> “I can definitely take a look at that. Just so I don’t miss the mark, can I check what you’re hoping for? For example, who’s going to read it and roughly how long you’d like it to be?”

When you’re replying to an email

> “Happy to pick this up. To make sure I aim it correctly, could you let me know:
> – who the main audience is
> – whether you’d like a short bullet-point summary or something more detailed
> – and when you need it by?”

When you suspect they haven’t fully decided what they want

> “It sounds like this is still a bit open, which is fine. How about I put together a brief outline or a very short draft, and we can check if it’s heading in the right direction before I go into full detail?”

This stops you investing a lot of energy into the wrong thing when they’re still working it out mentally.

When the other person really doesn’t know yet

Sometimes the problem isn’t that they’re being vague on purpose. It’s that they genuinely haven’t decided what they want.

You might hear:

- “I don’t know, just get started.”
- “We’ll know it when we see it.”

In those situations, you can protect your energy by:

- Agreeing a very small first step.
  “I’ll put together a half-page with the main options; we can choose a direction from there.”
- Setting a quick check-in.
  “I’ll send that outline by Wednesday so we can adjust before I go further.”
- Clarifying what “good enough for now” means.
  “For this first draft, is it okay if I focus on structure and headlines rather than perfect wording?”

That way, you’re not silently building a full cathedral when all they really wanted was a sketch of the floor plan.

When it’s not safe or realistic to ask for clarity

There are workplaces and managers where asking for detail is frowned upon or punished. You know your context best.

If it *doesn’t* feel safe to ask directly, you can still:

- Write your own brief.
  After a vague request, take a moment to jot down:
  – what you think they’re asking for
  – who it’s for
  – when you think they’ll want it
  Keep it short, but give yourself something concrete to work from.
- Send a low-key recap.
  “Just to confirm my understanding: I’ll do X by [date] focusing on [scope]. If that’s not quite right, let me know.”

- Avoid doing five times the amount of work just in case.
  Aim for solid and “good enough”, not perfect and all-encompassing, especially when nobody has defined “perfect”.
- Ask peers quietly.
  Colleagues who’ve been around longer may know what this manager normally expects from “a quick note” or “a summary”.

None of this makes the underlying culture okay. But it can reduce how much of your limited energy gets burned up by guessing.

A quiet closing thought

If vague instructions leave you frozen, overwhelmed or working far harder than anyone realises, it doesn’t mean you’re incompetent or awkward. It probably means your brain is doing extra work that nobody else can see.

Clear expectations are not a luxury for people like us. They are part of how we access work on something like an equal footing.

You are allowed to ask what “good” looks like. You are allowed to ask when something is actually due. You are allowed to say, “I want to make sure I don’t miss the mark.”

You don’t have to win every negotiation, and you don’t have to transform your workplace by yourself. If all that changes for now is that you ask one clarifying question you wouldn’t have asked last month, or you send one short recap email that stops a misunderstanding later, that’s already something.

You’re not being difficult. You’re trying to do your job well with the brain you have. And that is more than enough.

Andrew at Quietly Neurodivergent

I’m Andrew, the person behind Quietly Neurodivergent. I’m an autistic adult who spent many years trying to pass as “fine” – holding things together at work, showing up to meetings, hitting deadlines – and then unravelling in private. I know what it feels like to

look competent on the outside while running on fumes underneath.

By day I work with student data in higher education; by night (and very early mornings) I'm a part-time PhD student thinking about education, inequality and how people move through systems that were never quite built for them. I've also spent nearly ten years as a town councillor and I volunteer as a Beaver Scout Leader, which means I've had a lot of practice navigating meetings, forms, responsibilities and sensory/social overload at the same time. That mix of lived experience, community work and research shapes how I write here: practical, plain-English pieces that sit somewhere between "this is what it's like" and "here are some things you could try".

I'm not a clinician and I don't offer diagnosis, therapy or miracle fixes. What I can offer are honest accounts of what has and hasn't helped me with study, work and everyday life, alongside small, realistic tools you can adapt for yourself. If you recognise yourself in the phrase "quietly neurodivergent", this site is for you.

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