Brief Decoder

Facilitator guide

Your job: get each person's reading of a vague brief out into the open, show how many different problems were hiding in the same words, and help the team commit to one workable problem everyone can act on. The activity rests on one move: surface the different readings *before* anyone solves.

The one thing the team should learn: a vague brief is not the problem — acting on it too early is. The brief holds several different problems using the same words, and until the team surfaces the readings and chooses one, everyone is quietly building something different.

WHEN DO I USE THIS?

The right moment

GOOD FIT

A brief is open to more than one reasonable reading; you're about to build from something you only half understand; a request arrived with no clear definition of done. The test: could two sensible people read this brief and set off building different things?

WRONG TOOL

You need to check people heard a message the same way › Echo Test. You suspect the problem itself rests on a shaky claim › First Principles. The brief is clear and you just can't start › Start Before Ready.

The one test before you start: could two sensible people read this brief and build different things? If yes, this is the tool. If the brief is already concrete, there's nothing to decode — go and solve it.

WHAT WILL THE TEAM LEAVE WITH?

What you'll leave with

WHAT YOU GET

The different ways the brief was being read, side by side. One concrete problem everyone agrees to solve. And a shared definition of what "done" means — specific enough that no two people could read it differently.

WHY IT MATTERS

The team sees, for the first time, that it was never solving one unclear problem — it was solving several different ones hidden in the same brief. The work stops going in different directions, because everyone is finally building the same thing.

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PART 1 BEFORE THE ACTIVITY

get ready

1 · WHAT IS MY JOB HERE?

Your job

You are running this to one outcome: one workable problem the team owns, concrete enough that two people couldn't read it differently. Your job is to:

- keep each reading **private** until the reveal — so the differences are real, not bent toward the first voice
- hold everyone to writing **the problem, not a solution** — solutions hide the differences
- refuse the hunt for the **"right" reading** — there isn't one; the team chooses one and names the rest
- push past **"chosen" to concrete** — a chosen-but-vague problem still reads several ways

THE ONE RULE

Surface the different readings before you solve. A brief everyone reads differently isn't a problem yet. Private interpretation keeps the differences honest; skip it and one reading sets the direction for the rest.

2 · WHO DOES WHAT?

Roles

Who	What they do
You (facilitator)	Run the flow, keep interpretation private until the reveal, hold the team to one concrete problem, and capture it. You do **not** supply the "right" reading — you guide the team to choose one.
Participants (a team)	The people who'll work from the brief. Interpret it privately, compare the readings, choose one, and make it concrete.

Say this to the team before you start (in your own words): "We're not solving the brief yet. First we're working out which problem it's actually asking us to solve — because right now we may each be reading it differently. Write privately first; we'll compare after." Don't assume anyone read the app page.

3 · HOW DO I START?

Opening script — 2 minutes

Say this in your own words. Do not read the app page out loud.

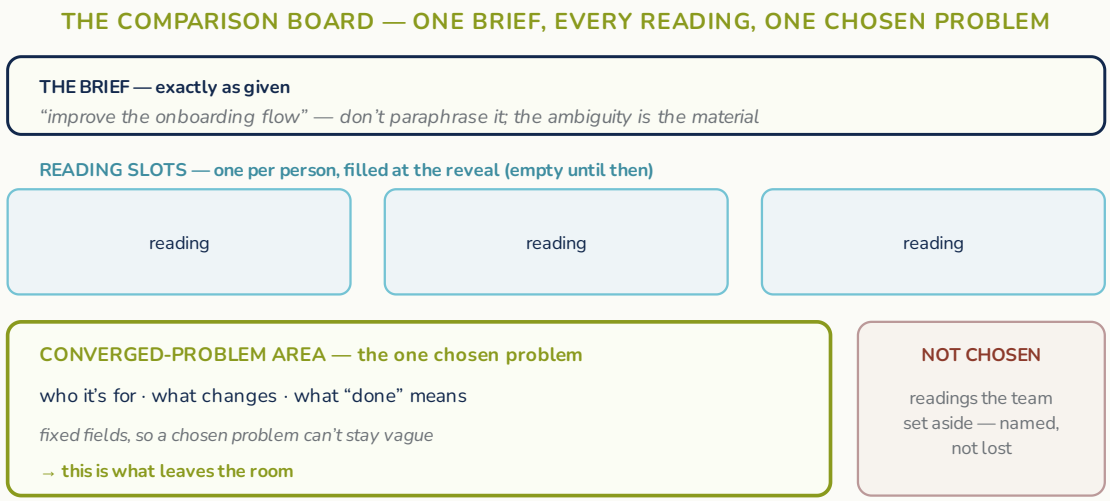
SAY

"We've all got the same brief in front of us. It feels clear enough — but briefs like this often hide several different problems, and we don't notice until we're weeks in and building different things. So before we solve anything, each of us is going to write down — privately — the problem we think this brief is asking us to solve. Not how we'd fix it: the problem. Then we'll put them side by side and see how close we really are."

4 · HOW DO I PREPARE?

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Setup and materials



One board runs the activity: the **brief** across the top (exactly as given), a row of **reading slots** filled only at the reveal, a highlighted **converged-problem area** with fixed fields (who · what changes · done), and a **not-chosen margin** for the readings set aside. Kit: interpretation cards, sharpening prompt cards, dry-wipe pens.

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What	Why it's there
A real, vague brief	One the team is about to act on — vague enough you're not certain what it's asking. If it's already concrete, there's nothing to decode. This is the critical ingredient.
Interpretation cards (blank)	One per person, plus spares. Each writes the problem they read in the brief — privately. These are what you compare.
The comparison board	Brief slot, a row of reading slots, a converged-problem area (who · what changes · done), and a not-chosen margin.
Sharpening prompt cards	Prompts that turn the chosen reading into a concrete problem. Used in step 5.
Starter-brief cards (optional)	Example vague briefs — use one only if the group has no real brief of its own.

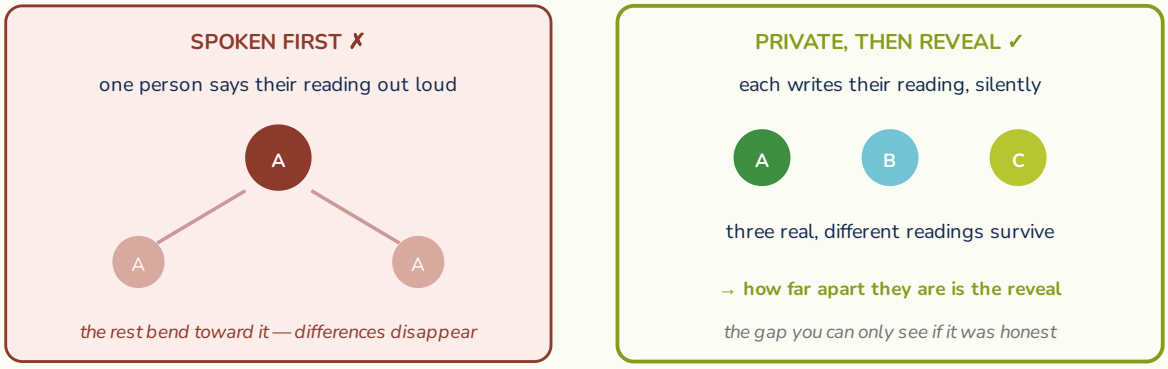
Get the right people in the room. The people who'll actually work from the brief — they're the ones whose readings will otherwise drift apart. 45–60 minutes, a team and one facilitator.

5 · WHAT IS THE ONE SETUP MOVE?

Keep interpretation private — the move it all rests on

This tool lives or dies on one preparatory move: each reading is written privately and held until everyone is done. If one reading is spoken first, the rest bend toward it and the differences — the whole point — disappear before it's seen.

WHY PRIVATE FIRST — SPOKEN-FIRST KILLS THE DIVERGENCE



How to hold it: cards written silently, face-down until everyone has finished, then revealed together. If someone starts to say their reading aloud, stop them gently: "hold it — write it first, we'll all show at once." The clean simultaneous reveal is what makes the differences honest.

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PART 2 DURING THE ACTIVITY

run it

Before you begin — 30-second check

- ✓ The brief is genuinely vague — two sensible people could build different things from it
- ✓ The people who'll work from the brief are in the room
- ✓ Interpretation cards are ready; the board has the brief up, exactly as given
- ✓ You are ready to hold interpretation private until everyone has written

6 · WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Run the activity

Read the brief › Write your version › Compare the readings › Choose one reading › Make it workable

1. Set up
2 min

Put the brief in front of everyone, exactly as given. Don't paraphrase it — the ambiguity is the material.

2. Write your version
6–8 min

Each person privately writes the problem they think the brief is asking them to solve — in one or two plain sentences.

> **Hold the rule:** write the problem, not a solution. Private and silent. If people confer, the differences stop being real.

3. Compare the readings
10–12 min

Lay every version side by side. Before anyone explains their reading, ask: "what differences do you notice?" Then read each one aloud, without discussion. When they're all up, don't rush to talk — give the room 15–20 seconds to simply look at how differently the same brief was read. Let that land before anyone explains it away.

> **This is the reveal — protect it.** Three people read the same brief and wrote three different problems. That surprise is the whole point; a facilitator who moves too fast talks over it. Let the silence do the work.

4. Choose one reading
10–12 min

Decide which problem to solve, and which readings you're not choosing. There's no "correct" reading — guide them to the best fit, not a search for the right answer. Name what's set aside.

> **If they say "they're all important":** ask "if you could only work on one of these this sprint, which would create the biggest difference?" That usually unlocks the choice.

5. Make it workable
8–10 min

Sharpen it with the prompt cards: who it's for, what changes, what "done" looks like. Push until two people couldn't read it differently.

> **Protect this step.** It's the one that gets squeezed — a chosen-but-vague problem still reads several ways.

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6. Commit 4–6 min	Lock the one problem and who owns it. Photograph the board before anyone leaves.

These times are indicative and will depend on the nature of the problem and the size of the team. Compare (step 3) overruns; make it workable (step 5) gets squeezed — protect it. If time runs out, cut the compare discussion, never the sharpening: a rough concrete problem beats a polished vague one.

While you run — when to step in, when to stay out · a principle, not a step

STEP IN

People confer during private writing → the differences must be real.

Someone writes a solution, not a problem → redirect.

The team hunts for the "right" reading → guide them to choose one.

The chosen problem still reads two ways → sharpen again.

STAY OUT

The readings are far apart → how far apart they are is the point.

Choosing means dropping a good reading → that's the trade-off.

People debate which problem best fits → that's the work.

The room goes quiet while people write → let it.

The clearest tell it's working: someone looks at the readings side by side and says "no wonder we were drifting — we weren't even solving the same problem." That's the reveal landing. If every reading is identical, the brief wasn't actually ambiguous — you don't need this tool.

Stay on the brief, not the people. This tool is about what the words are actually asking — not whether people communicated well or heard each other (that's Echo Test). Keep every question pointed at the brief: "what problem does this ask for?", never "did we understand each other?"

PART 3 AFTER THE ACTIVITY

make it stick

7 · HOW DO I FINISH?

Closing script — 2 minutes

SAY

"Look at where we started — the same brief, and every one of us wrote a different problem. If we'd just started building, we'd each have built a different thing and only found out weeks later. Now we've got one problem, in writing, that none of us can read two ways — and we've named the readings we chose not to solve. That's what we build from. Next vague brief that lands: don't start on it — decode it first."

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8 · DID WE GET A GOOD RESULT?

Check your run

A GOOD RUN

One workable problem: who it's for, what changes, what "done" means — no two people could read it differently. The readings not chosen are noted and parked.

A HOLLOW RUN

A "tightened" brief that still reads many ways: "make onboarding better and smoother." No who, no "done". Still several problems — each person walks out building a different thing.

WHAT LEAVES THE ROOM

HOLLOW RUN ✗

"Make onboarding better and smoother for users."

no who · no "done" · still several problems. Each person still builds a different thing.

GOOD RUN ✓

"Reduce onboarding from 9 steps to 5 for new free-trial users."

Done = a user reaches first value without help.

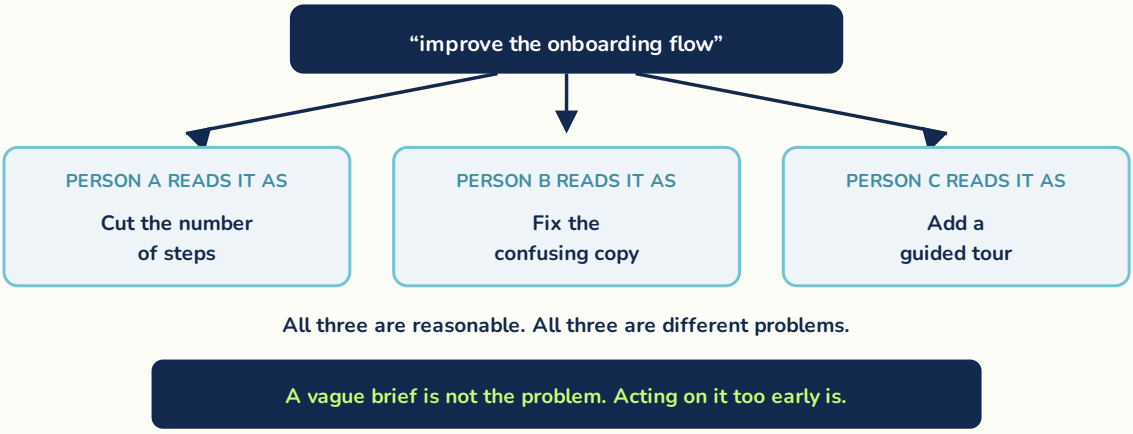
who · what changes · done — no two read it differently

9 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

The idea underneath

A vague brief allows several reasonable readings of the same words. People fill the gaps with their own reading, so a team can start confidently and still be building different things. There was never one problem waiting to be found — the brief held several, and the team's job is to surface them and deliberately choose one. Acting before that choice is the real mistake.

ONE BRIEF — SEVERAL DIFFERENT PROBLEMS



All three are reasonable. All three are different problems.

A vague brief is not the problem. Acting on it too early is.

Before people leave — the finish check

- ✓ Every reading was written privately, then revealed together
- ✓ The differences were seen — the team felt how differently the brief was read
- ✓ One reading was chosen, and the not-chosen ones named and parked
- ✓ The chosen problem is concrete: who · what changes · done
- ✓ Two people couldn't read the final problem differently
- ✓ The board has been photographed, and an owner named

10 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

Build the habit — 30 seconds

THE HABIT

"Before solving a vague brief, have everyone state the problem on their own — if the versions differ, you haven't got a problem yet."

The lasting change: the team stops treating a vague brief as a problem to start on, and starts treating it as a set of readings to choose between. One private question — "what problem is this asking *me* to solve?" — surfaces the differences before they become wasted work.

Appendix · Reference

You should not need this while you run the activity. Read it before, or use it if something goes wrong.

11 · A WORKED RUN

Watch the reveal land

The brief: “improve the onboarding flow.” Three people privately write the problem they think it’s asking them to solve, then the readings are compared.

Person A “Cut the number of steps — it’s too long.”
Person B “Fix the confusing copy — people don’t understand it.”
Person C “Add a guided tour — people don’t know where to start.”
Facilitator “Same brief. Not one of you wrote the same problem. If we’d started building yesterday, what would each of us have built?”

The reveal: there was never one problem waiting to be found. The brief held several, and until the team chose and sharpened one — *reduce onboarding from nine steps to five for new trial users, done when they reach first value unaided* — everyone was quietly building something different.

12 · WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

Recovery guide

What happens	What to do
Every reading is identical	The brief wasn’t actually ambiguous. You don’t need this tool — go and solve it.
“They’re basically the same”	Read each one aloud again. If they lead to different work, they’re different problems — the wording hides it. Ask what each person would actually build first.
Readings are wildly far apart	Good — that’s the point. Don’t panic; choosing one is exactly the work to do now.
The team wants to solve all the readings	Name them as separate problems and sequence them. This run sharpens one; the others wait.
No one can choose between two readings	Take it to whoever owns the brief, or pick the one that best fits the real intent and note the other.
The chosen problem stays vague	Run the sharpening prompts hard — who, what changes, what “done”. Stop only when two people couldn’t read it differently.
Time runs out before sharpening	Cut the compare discussion, never the sharpening. A rough concrete problem beats a polished vague one.

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Watch for: people confer before writing. One reading spoken aloud and the rest converge on it — the differences disappear before it's seen. Keep the writing private and silent; reveal together. This is the single most common way the reveal is lost.

13 · WHAT GOES WRONG MOST OFTEN?

Common mistakes

Mistake	Why it kills the reveal
Writing solutions, not problems	Solutions hide the differences — they look different even when they answer the same problem, and similar even when they answer different ones. Hold everyone to stating the problem first.
Conferring before the reveal	One reading spoken aloud and the rest converge on it. Private and silent first.
Hunting for the right answer	There's no correct reading buried in the brief — the team chooses one.
Stopping at "chosen"	A chosen-but-vague problem still reads several ways. Make it concrete.

14 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

When	Use this
Before — on a vague brief	**Brief Decoder** (this tool) — usually the first move on a vague brief.
After — you have a chosen problem but suspect it rests on a shaky claim	**First Principles** — test whether the problem itself holds up.
Instead — the issue is whether people heard a clear message the same way	**Echo Test** — check shared understanding of a clear message.
Instead — the brief is clear and you just can't start	**Start Before Ready** — begin when the brief is clear but you're stuck.

Rule of thumb: Brief Decoder stays loyal to the brief and the problem — what the words are actually asking. It never asks whether people understood each other (Echo Test) or whether the problem rests on a shaky claim (First Principles).

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