CONTEXT

The handoff prompt (and when to /compact vs /clear)

Free guide. No signup. 1 min read Checked 2026-10-23.

From @learningwithcole

Long chats get worse because Claude re-reads the whole conversation every turn. Anthropic's engineering team calls the drop in recall as the context grows **"context rot"** (source).

3 commands

- `/context`: see what's filling the context window (a coloured grid by category)
- `/compact focus on <thing>`: summarize the chat but keep what you name. Example: `/compact focus on the login bug`
- `/clear`: start fresh with an empty context. `/resume` brings the old chat back.

My 3 rules

1. **Same task, getting messy?** Use `/compact` with a focus.
2. **New task?** Use `/clear`. Don't drag old context into new work.
3. **Clearing mid-project?** Use the handoff prompt below first.

The handoff prompt (copy-paste)

Prompt

```
Before I clear this chat, write a handoff note for a fresh session. Use exactly these
headings:
DONE: what we finished (files + one line each)
NEXT: the next 3 steps, in order
DON'T TOUCH: files, decisions or approaches we ruled out, and why
GOTCHAS: anything that tripped us up (errors, commands, env quirks)
HOW TO VERIFY: the exact command(s) that prove it works
Keep it under 200 words. Save it to HANDOFF.md.
```

Then `/clear`, and start the new chat with: *"Read `HANDOFF.md` and continue from NEXT step 1."*

Links this guide cites

anthropic.com/engineering/effective-context-engineering-for-ai-agents