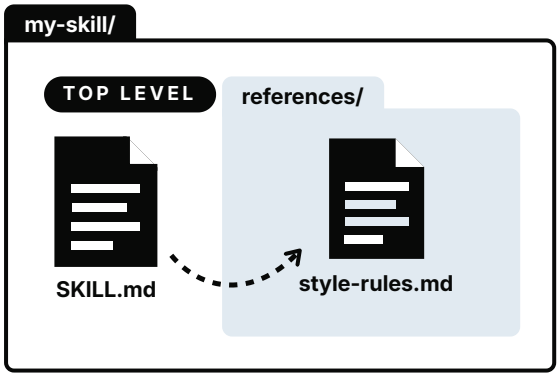
CLAUDE CHAT · CLAUDE CODE

5 hidden rules of Claude Skills

Claude Skills have limits you don't see until a skill stops working. Here are five things about skills in Claude Chat and Claude Code that you may not know, and what to do about each one.



1. Claude Code skills stay on your computer
2. The save card leaves reference files out
3. Long skills get cut short
4. Skill descriptions get dropped
5. Reference files get forgotten

FOR PEOPLE WHO ALREADY MAKE CLAUDE SKILLS

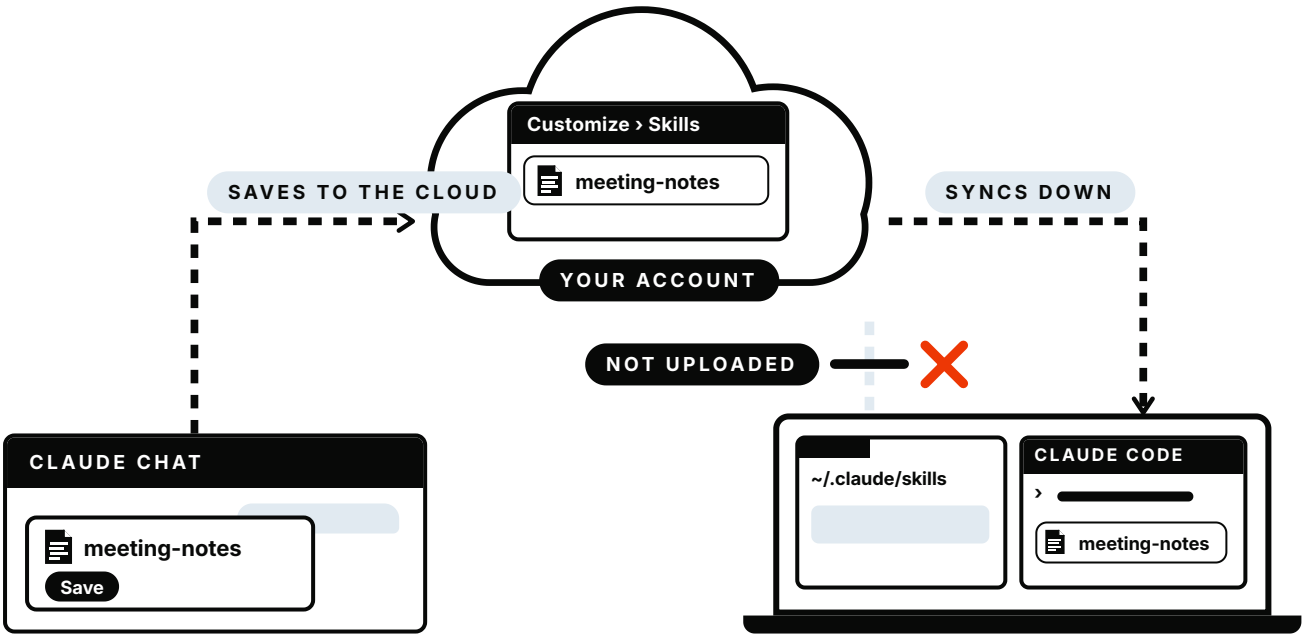
Alex Kerss

TIP 1

Claude Code skills stay on your computer

When you create a skill in Claude Code, it stays on your computer and doesn't go to the cloud. So Claude can make skills that it can't even use.

HOW SKILLS SYNC



TIP 1

PROBLEM 1

Change a skill in Claude Code and the change is only saved to your computer. A later sync down from the cloud can overwrite it.

PROBLEM 2

Next time you use the skill in Claude Chat, it's still the cloud version, not the one you just changed.

PROBLEM 3

Make a new skill in Claude Code and it never reaches the cloud, so Claude Chat won't see it or be able to use it.

••• TO GET IT INTO CLAUDE CHAT



In the Claude app: Customize › Skills › + › Create skill › Upload a skill.

••• TAKEAWAY

Make your skills in Claude Chat and not Claude Code.

TIP 2

The save card leaves reference files out

The SKILL.md file is the top-level file, but there can also be reference folders containing other markdown files that the SKILL.md file points to. When you ask Claude Chat to make a skill, it defaults to the **quick save card**, and that card only saves SKILL.md.

QUICK SAVE CARD VS PACKAGED .SKILL



Claude will make the skill, including pointers to the reference file, and it will even make the reference file, but the save card can't save it. In my test it put the routine into SKILL.md instead. Asking Claude to change a reference file in a skill you already uploaded fails the same way, because the save card only edits SKILL.md.

TIP 2

THE FIX: ASK FOR A PACKAGED SKILL

TO MAKE A SKILL WITH REFERENCE FILES

"Don't use the quick save card. Build it as real files, a SKILL.md and a references folder. Package both files and give me the file card."

TO CHANGE A REFERENCE FILE LATER

"Do not use the quick save card. Build the skill again as real files and package it as a **your-skill-name**.skill file."



Click update and the change comes through as **version two**, with the reference file changed too.

A **.skill** file, not a SKILL.md, is the one file that holds everything, so the reference file gets saved too.

••• TAKEAWAY

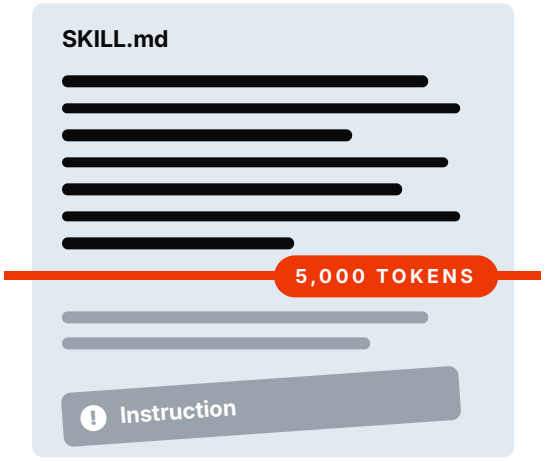
A plain ask can't save reference files. A packaged ask can.

TIP 3

Long skills get cut short

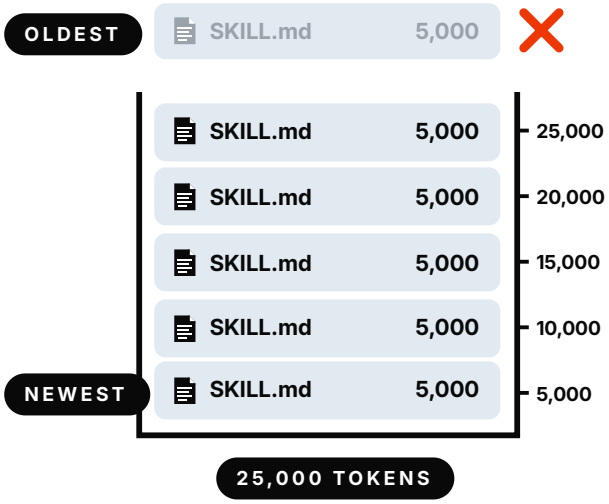
When a conversation gets too big, it compacts into a shorter summary. After compaction, Claude Code brings each skill back, but only up to a token limit. Anything beyond that gets cut off, including an important instruction at the end.

LIMIT 1 · EACH SKILL



The end of the file doesn't come back.

LIMIT 2 · ALL SKILLS



TIP 3

5,000 tokens

The most of each skill Claude Code brings back after compaction.

25,000 tokens

The most skill content it brings back in total. It starts with the newest skill and works backwards.

6th

With six skills at that limit, five come back. The sixth, the oldest one, gets left out.

Claude could load the full skill again, and it may well do, but there's no guarantee.

••• WHAT TO DO

1. Move your **most important instructions to the start** of your skill.
2. Keep each skill under the 5,000-token limit. **12,000 characters is about 4,500 tokens**, which gives you a useful safety margin.
3. Put that rule at the top of each skill file, so your skills don't gradually get too big as you make changes:

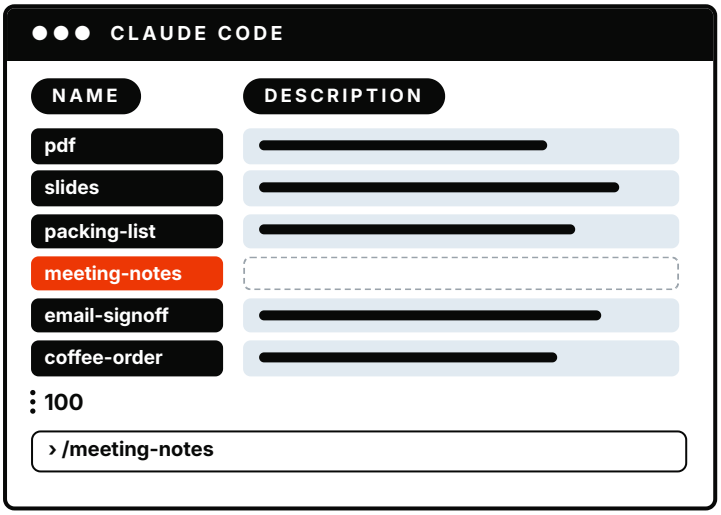


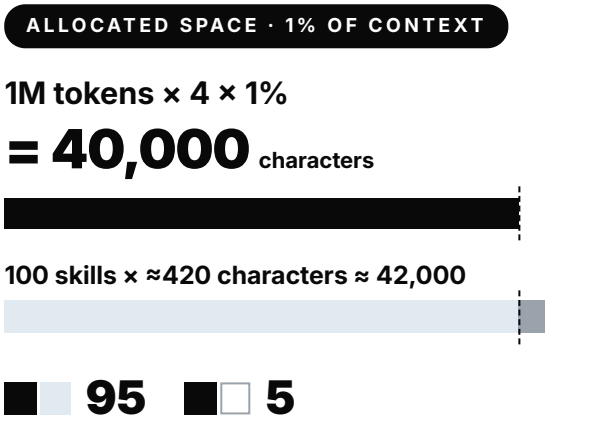
The overall limit still applies. Bring in too many skills, and after compaction the oldest ones can still get left out.

TIP 4

Skill descriptions get dropped

When you send a message, Claude looks through the skill descriptions to find one that matches. Skill names and descriptions share a small part of the context window. When there isn't room, descriptions get dropped, and then Claude may not know when to use that skill.





In this example, 95 skills keep their descriptions and 5 lose them, starting with the skills you rarely need.

1%

Of the context window, by default, for all skill names and descriptions.

1,536 characters

Each description is cut off after this, so if the key information comes at the end, Claude never sees it.

/meeting-notes

The name stays, so you can still use the slash command. Claude just may not pick the skill by itself.



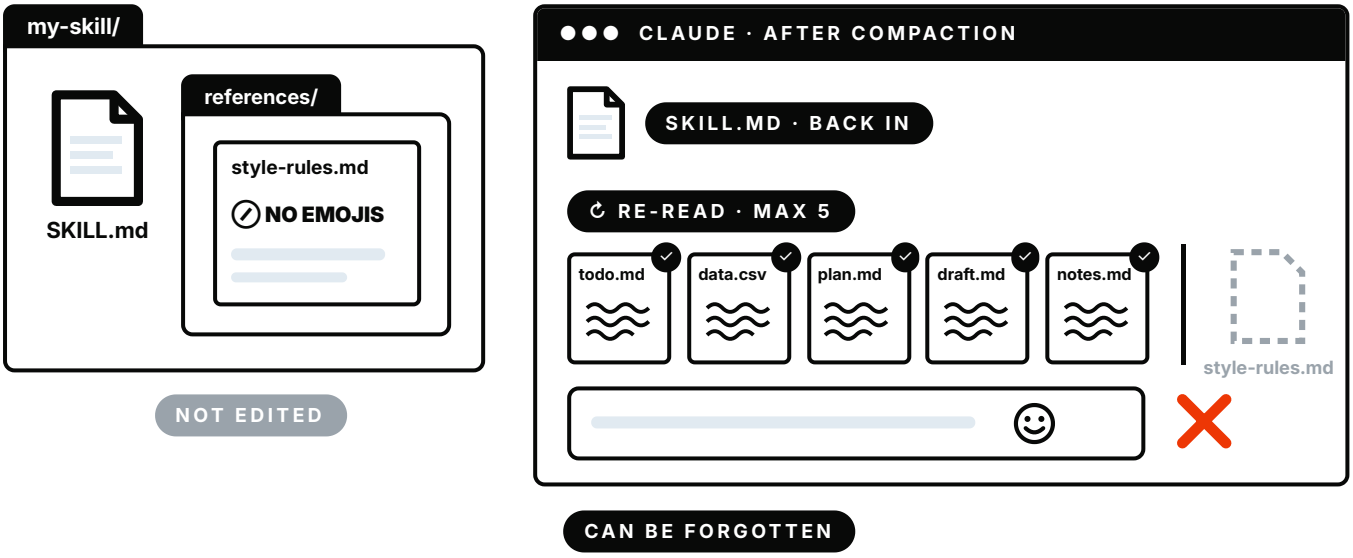
WHAT TO DO

1. **Keep your skill descriptions short.** Once they're shorter, all 100 skills would fit in that space.
2. **Put the most important information first** in each description.
3. **Turn off any skills you know you won't need.**

TIP 5

Reference files get forgotten

Say a skill needs to read a style rules file to know you don't want emojis. After compaction, the skill comes back in, and Claude Code also re-reads up to five of the files it's read or edited, the ones changed most recently. Your reference file may not be one of them.



5 files

The most Claude Code re-reads after compaction, picking the ones changed most recently.

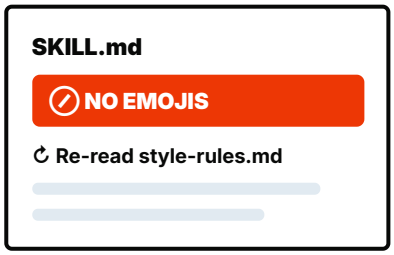
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Places left for the style rules file when five files Claude just edited take them all.

That's not to say the file won't be there. Claude might use the skill and read the file again. But reference files don't come back every time.

WHAT TO DO

1. If it's a really important rule, put it **at or near the top of the skill file**, so it comes back with the skill.
2. Add a line telling Claude to **re-read the style rules file** when it needs the detail.



ON ONE PAGE

The five rules and what to do

1 Claude Code skills stay on your computer

Make your skills in Claude Chat. To move one from Claude Code, zip the skill folder and upload it in Customize › Skills.

2 The save card leaves reference files out

Tell Claude not to use the quick save card, to build real files and to package the skill. Ask for a packaged skill again to change a reference file.

3 Long skills get cut short

Put the most important instructions at the start. Keep each SKILL.md under 12,000 characters, about 4,500 tokens.

4 Skill descriptions get dropped

Keep descriptions short, put the key information first, and turn off skills you won't need.

5 Reference files get forgotten

Put a really important rule at or near the top of SKILL.md, and add a line telling Claude to re-read the reference file.

SOURCES

Skills in Claude Code · code.claude.com/docs/en/skills

What survives compaction · code.claude.com/docs/en/context-window#what-survives-compaction

Use skills in Claude · support.claude.com/en/articles/12512180-use-skills-in-claude

The Claude Chat and quick save card results come from my own tests in the Claude desktop app on a Mac, November 2026.