Corresponding essay: **E14** “Agents Don't Know When To Stop”

SIX STOP SIGNALS, WRITTEN DOWN IN FULL, WITH AN OWNER AGAINST EACH

The Stopping-Rule Table

Take the agent workflow you most want to ship. Write the six criteria down a column and fill in a real threshold, a named owner and an action for each. Mark whether each is enforced by code, by a human process, or merely hoped for.

BRING One agent workflow you are deciding whether to ship

1. The six stopping criteria

Edit the example threshold to a value you would defend. Name the owner - even if several names are the same name. State what happens when the criterion fires.

Criterion	Threshold for this workflow	Owner (named)	Action when it fires	Enforced by code / process / hoped for
Goal met - the user's actual goal is achieved				
Verification passed - the required checks have all cleared				
Budget reached - a time, cost, token or tool-call ceiling is hit				
Marginal value collapsed - iterations no longer improve the result				
Stuck loop detected - a repeated state or path fingerprint recurs				
Human handoff - a consequential or ambiguous decision crosses a threshold				

2. Tier the rule by action class

Stopping rules are calibrated to how much rope an agent has earned. List your action classes and mark which criteria each must satisfy before the action proceeds.

Action class	Reversible or consequential	Cheap criteria that apply	Hard stop or handoff required	Owner
Low-stakes reversible work				
Production mutation or infrastructure change				
Payment, legal filing or external publication				
Customer-data deletion or credential change				

3. Notes - the model-says-done rows

Look at every cell marked "hoped for". Those are the unlocked doors. Write what you will turn into code or process before the workflow ships.

Companion worksheet to **Essay 14 · Agents Don't Know When To Stop**, in the series **Architecting the AI Coworker**. · Dr Peter McCann Strain · Fill this in against one real agent, action class or vendor.

Series Companion + all 22 worksheets: **Release_v12/Series_Companion.pdf**