

# TIPS FOR WRITING PROFESSIONAL EMAILS

- Excerpted from Jerz's Literacy Weblog (<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/e-text/email>)

*Follow these email etiquette tips in order to write more effective email.*

## 1. Write a meaningful subject line.

Before you hit "send," take a moment to write a subject line that accurately describes the content, giving your reader a concrete reason to open your message.

If your subject line is vague — or even worse, if it's blank — you have missed your first opportunity to inform or persuade your reader

## 2. Keep the message focused.

Be direct and to the point. It is human nature for people to scan or just read partway through a long email before replying or closing the email. This means they didn't get your whole point if there was too much content to read through.

Try to keep you email to one or two items/topics and at about five sentences. The longer your email is, the less people will read.

Be polite. Even if don't want to.

To help your reader focus on your message: keep your text readable:

- Proofread, especially when your message asks your recipient to do work for you. All-caps comes across as shouting, and no-caps makes you look like a lazy teenager. Regardless of your intention, people will respond accordingly.
- If you are in middle school, a gushing statement "thx 4 ur help 2day ur gr8!" may make a busy professional smile — or shudder. Often, the sweetness of the gesture won't be enough. u want ur prof r ur boss 2 think u cant spl? LOL ;-)
- Write short paragraphs, separated by blank lines. Most people find unbroken blocks of text boring, or even intimidating. Take the time to format your message for the ease of your reader.
- Avoid fancy typefaces. Don't depend upon bold font or large size to add nuances. Your recipient's email reader may not have all the features that yours does. In a pinch, use asterisks to show \*emphasis\*.

## 3. Avoid attachments, unless they are necessary.

Rather than forcing you reader to download an attachment and open it in a separate program, you will probably get faster results if you just copy-paste the most important part of the document into the body of your message.

Obviously, if there is a specific document that they need to download or if the attachment is too large to paste into the email content, then you need to make attachments.

Each email is its own judgement call. Recognize that attachments

- Consume bandwidth (do you want your recipient to ignore your request so as to avoid paying for a mobile download?)
- Can carry viruses
- Don't always translate correctly for people who read their email on portable devices.
- May require your recipient to have certain software installed (such as Microsoft Publisher or Apple's Pages)

#### **4. Identify yourself clearly.**

If you telephoned someone outside your closest circle, someone who probably wouldn't recognize your voice, you would probably say something like "Hello, Ms. Wordsworth, this is Sally Griffin." A formal "Dear Ms. Wordsworth" salutation is not necessary for routine workplace communication.

When we send text messages to our friends, we expect a lot of back-and-forth. But professionals who use email don't enjoy getting a cryptic message from an email address they don't recognize.

While a routine email does not require a formal salutation such as "Dear Ms. Wordsworth," ask yourself whether the person you are writing knows you well enough to recognize your email address.

When contacting someone cold, always include your name, occupation, and any other important identification information in the first few sentences.

If you are following up on a face-to-face contact, you might appear too timid if you assume your recipient doesn't remember you; but you can drop casual hints to jog their memory: "I enjoyed talking with you about PDAs in the elevator the other day."

#### **5. Be kind — don't flame.**

Think before you click "Send."

If you find yourself writing in anger, save a draft, go get a cup of coffee, and imagine that tomorrow morning someone has taped your email outside your door. Would your associates and friends be shocked by your language or attitude?

Or would they be impressed by how you kept your cool, how you ignored the bait when your correspondent stooped to personal attacks, and how you carefully explained your position (or admitted your error, or asked for a reconsideration, etc.).

Don't pour gasoline on a fire without carefully weighing the consequences. Will you have to work with this person for the rest of the semester? Do you want a copy of your bitter screed to surface years from now, when you want a letter of recommendation or you're up for promotion?

**Don't Do This:** @!\$% &\*@!! &(\*!

Go ahead... write it, revise it, liven it up with traditional Lebanese curses, print it out, throw darts on it, and scribble on it with crayon. Do whatever you need in order to get it out of your system, but then delete your angry words and think about how to calmly resolve the situation. **Just don't hit "Send" while you're still angry.**

## Yes, You Can Do This:

*From: Clair Haddad*

*To: Ann O. Ying*

*Subject: Re: Ongoing Problems with Project I'm not sure how to respond, since last week you told Sue that you didn't need any extra training, so I cancelled Wednesday's workshop. I can CC Sue in on this thread if you like, since she's the one who will have to approve the budget if we reschedule it. Meanwhile, I can loan you my copies of the manual, or we can look into shifting the work to someone else. Let me know what you'd like me to do next.—Original Message —*

*From: Ann O. Ying*

*I tried all morning to get in touch with you. Couldn't you find a few minutes in between meetings to check your messages? I'm having a rough time on this project, and I'm sorry if this is last-minute, but I've never done this before and I think the least you could do is take some time to explain it again.*

If your recipient has just lambasted you with an angry message, rather than reply with a point-by-point rebuttal, you can always respond with a brief note like this, which casually invokes the name of someone the angry correspondent is likely to respect (in order to diffuse any personal antagonism that may otherwise have developed) and refocuses the conversation on solutions (in this conversation, Ann has already dug herself into a hole, and Clair has nothing to gain by joining her there).

## 6. Proofread.

If you are asking someone else to do work for you, take the time to make your message look professional.

While your spell checker won't catch every mistake, at the very least it will catch a few typos. If you are sending a message that will be read by someone higher up on the chain of command (a superior or professor, for instance), or if you're about to mass-mail dozens or thousands of people, take an extra minute or two before you hit "send". Show a draft to a close associate, in order to see whether it actually makes sense.

## 7. Don't assume privacy.

A good motto: praise in public, and criticize in private. Don't send anything over email that you wouldn't want posted — with your name attached — in the break room.

Email is not secure. Just as random pedestrians could reach into a physical mailbox and intercept envelopes, a curious hacker, a malicious criminal, and your IT department can probably read any and all email messages in your work account.

If you stretch the truth in an email (downplaying a problem, leaving out an important detail, etc.), you're creating a written record that your recipient can (and will) use to determine whether

- you are uninformed about the truth
- you are informed but deliberately misrepresenting the truth
- your confused and conflicting emails mean you aren't a reliable source for determining the truth

## **8. Distinguish between formal and informal situations.**

When you are writing to a friend or a close colleague, it is OK to use “smilies” :-), abbreviations (IIRC for “if I recall correctly”, LOL for “laughing out loud,” etc.) and nonstandard punctuation and spelling (like that found in instant messaging or chat rooms).

These linguistic shortcuts are generally signs of friendly intimacy, like sharing cold pizza with a family friend. If you tried to share that same cold pizza with a first date, or a visiting dignitary, you would give off the impression that you did not really care about the meeting. By the same token, don’t use informal language when your reader expects a more formal approach. **Always know the situation, and write accordingly.**

## **9. Respond Promptly.**

If you want to appear professional and courteous, make yourself available to your online correspondents. Even if your reply is, “Sorry, I’m on my way to a meeting and can’t respond immediately. You will hear from me by tomorrow morning,” at least your correspondent won’t be waiting in vain for your reply.

## **10. Show Respect and Restraint.**

Many a flame war has been started by someone who hit “reply all” instead of “reply.”

While most people know that email is not private, it is good form to ask the sender before forwarding a personal message. If someone emails you a request, it is perfectly acceptable to forward the request to a person who can help — but forwarding a message in order to ridicule the sender is tacky.

Use BCC instead of CC when sending sensitive information to large groups. (For example, a professor sending a bulk message to students who are in danger of failing, or an employer telling unsuccessful applicants that a position is no longer open.) The name of everyone in the CC list goes out with the message, but the names of people on the BCC list (“blind carbon copy”) are hidden. Put your own name in the “To” box if your mail editor doesn’t like the blank space.

Be tolerant of other people’s etiquette blunders. If you think you’ve been insulted, quote the line back to your sender and add a neutral comment such as, “I’m not sure how to interpret this... could you elaborate?”