



Composing Effective Email Messages

Even though email messages may seem transitory, attention to detail is just as important for these documents as for any other type of business writing. Too many people, particularly younger professionals accustomed to using email, IM, and text messaging for personal communication, assume that business email is automatically less formal. Some seasoned business professionals even advocate a general disregard of punctuation, grammar, spelling, and other conventions in email writing because paying attention to details takes too much time.

However, this approach fails to consider a number of important factors, all of which can hurt your career:

1. First, sloppy writing may require less time for writers, but it usually demands *more* time from readers who are forced to dig the meaning out of misspelled words and confusing sentence. Remember, the goal of communication is to get our readers to do what we want the first time we tell them, so it's up to us to make sure our emails are clearly written.
2. Second, people who care about effective communication often judge the quality of your work by the quality of your writing. Since this group includes the vast majority of senior executives (as in, the people who decide whether or not you get promoted), think carefully about the reputation you're creating with your email. Remember that you represent more than just yourself at work. You represent your department, your committee, your team to co-workers. Make sure the impression you're giving truly reflects you as a professional, the right impression.
3. Third, customers who write to us for information and help do not have the expertise to figure out what our incomplete and poorly written messages mean. You represent your business to customers, clients, potential investors. In short, to the world. Carefully craft emails that focus on giving readers what they want to know.

A student once sent the following email to Ms. Hurley:

WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON? THIS SUCKS!!!! WHAT AM I
SUPPOSED TO DO NOW?

The student wasn't upset with anything Ms. Hurley had done (the network was down temporarily so the student couldn't log on to the class website), yet the all caps (equivalent to yelling), the inappropriate language, the multiple exclamation marks, and the incomplete information (exactly what the problem was isn't stated) resulted in a poor message that could've left a bad impression of the student on Ms. Hurley. If she weren't the instructor but a customer, you can see how she could've been offended or angered.

4. Finally, at the click of a mouse, email messages can travel to places you never imagined, including the CEO's computer screen, a newspaper, a lawyer's office, or a thousand websites and blogs. A careless or angry colleague might forward your message to a senior manager, or an executive recruiter who has pegged you as a budding star might run across your shabby email and decide you're not so hot after all. You don't need to compose perfect words of art to tell people that lunch will be served in the conference room, but as a general rule, the time you save with sloppy email writing won't make up for the damage it can do to your career.

As an employee, you have a responsibility to follow your company's email guidelines. Organizations expect their employees to use email in a responsible, businesslike manner. Thus, many companies actually train their employees in email use. At the very least, most organizations develop email guidelines to help you reduce unnecessary communication and confusion. Typical email guidelines include the following:

- **Restrict email usage to appropriate content.** In most organizations, email is used to sharing information such as goals, schedules, research, company news, and the like. An electronic message is not the medium for delivering tragic news or for disciplining people. Such messages should be reserved for face-to-face interactions.
- **Avoid sending personal messages at work.** In countless incidents, employees have been dismissed for sending personal email, including messages that criticize their company, discuss starting a new business, or mentioning a new position with another company. Moreover, many companies now archive all email; therefore, that ill-considered message you zap out in a careless moment might live for a long time, whether personal or business related.
- **Respect the chain of command.** In many companies, any employee can email anyone else, including the president and CEO. However, take care that you don't abuse this freedom. For instance, when corresponding with superiors, don't send an email complaint straight to the top just because it's easy to do so. Your email will usually be more effective if you follow the organizational hierarchy and give each person a chance to address the situation in turn.
- **Pay attention to email hygiene.** Email hygiene refers to all the efforts the companies are making to keep email clean and safe, from spam blocking and virus protection to content filtering. Make sure you understand what your employer expects from you, and follow those guidelines. For example, to reduce

the chances that spammers can find company email addresses, some companies no longer put employee email addresses on their websites.

Of course, company policies can't cover every aspect of email or every situation. The extraordinary case of email is also its greatest shortcoming: it's far too easy to send too many needless messages. Think twice before you create new messages, and think three times before you forward any. The things that annoy your recipients are the same things you find annoying – unfunny jokes, vacation photos, messages that have been forwarded so many times that they have multiple screens full of useless header information, messages you've already read five times, angry complaints full of inappropriate language – so don't contribute to the problem. Let common sense be your guide.

The subject line in an email might seem like a minor detail, but it's actually one of the most important parts of every email message because it helps recipients decide which messages to read and when. Missing or poorly written subject lines often result in messages being deleted without even being opened. To capture your audience's attention, make sure your subject line is both informative and compelling. Do more than just describe or classify message content. Use the opportunity to build interest with key words, quotations, directions, or questions.

Ineffective Subject Line	Effective Subject Line
July sales figures	Send figures for July sales
Tomorrow's meeting	Bring committee report to Friday's meeting
Marketing report	Need budget for marketing report
Employee parking	Revised resurfacing schedule for parking lot
Status report	Store room remodeling is on schedule

If you are exchanging multiple emails with someone on the same topic, be sure to periodically modify the subject line of your message to reflect the revised message content. Most email programs will copy the subject line when you click on Reply, so you need only revise it. When numerous messages have identical subject lines, trying to find a particular one can be confusing and frustrating. Moreover, some messages sharing the same subject line may actually have nothing to do with the original topic. Modifying the subject line with each new response will save you time and make it easier to locate a message at a later date.

Finally, never let your emotions get the best of you when you're composing email. A message that contains insensitive, insulting, or critical comments is called a flame. If you're upset about something or angry with someone, compose yourself before composing your email. Emails can last forever, so not only can they be easily stored away and circulated to people you never intended but for years after you've sent it. If you are tempted to send an angry or gossipy email, wait an hour or even overnight before sending it. Ask yourself, "Would I say this to my audience face to face?" You can ruin your reputation with an email that never really goes away.

The table below lists a number of other helpful tips that will help ensure that your email messages are both effective at their purpose and at establishing you as a knowledgeable professional when it comes to using this vital business tool.

Tips for Effective Email Messages	
<i>Tip</i>	<i>Why it's important</i>
When you request information or action, make it clear what you're asking for, why it's important, and how soon you need it. Don't make your reader write back for details.	People will be tempted to ignore your messages if they're not clear about what you want or how soon you want it.
When responding to a request, either paraphrase the request or include enough of the original message to remind the reader what you're replying to.	Some business people get hundreds of email messages a day and much need reminding what your specific respond is about.
If possible, avoid sending long, complex messages via email.	Long messages are easier to read as printed reports or web content.
Adjust the level of formality to the message and the audience.	Overly formal messages to colleagues are perceived as stuffy and distant. Overly informal messages to customers or top executives are perceived as disrespectful.
Answer your email promptly. Don't let unread messages pile up in your in-basket.	You'll miss important information and create the impression that you're ignoring other people.
Never type in all caps.	ALL CAPS ARE INTERPRETED AS SCREAMING.
Don't over format your messages with background colors, colored type, unusual fonts, and so on.	Such messages can be difficult and annoying to read on screen.
Remember that messages can be forwarded anywhere and saved forever.	Don't let a moment of anger or poor judgment haunt you for the rest of your career.
Use the "return receipt requested" feature only for the most critical messages.	This feature triggers a message back to you whenever someone receives or opens your message. At best, many readers consider it annoying. At worst, others consider this an invasion of privacy.
Make sure your computer has up-to-date virus protection.	One of the worst breaches of netiquette is unknowingly infecting other computers because you haven't bothered to protect your own system.
Pay attention to grammar, spelling, and capitalization.	Some people don't think email needs formal rules, but careless messages make you seem careless and unprofessional and can annoy your readers.
Avoid unorthodox spelling such as U (you) and xtreme (extreme) and IM-speak such as LOL (laughing out loud) and TTFN (ta-ta for now)	Besides being too informal, the unusual spelling is confusing if the reader doesn't recognize these words.

In conclusion, writing effective business email requires following a few simple rules. Doing so is worth the time in meeting the goal of your email while building goodwill with your reader.

source: taken mostly verbatim from John Thill and Courtland Bovee, Excellence in Business Communication (Prentice-Hall)