

Writing Effective E-Mail: Top 10 Tips

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Summary: This document offers 10 tips to help you write effective professional e-mails. The informal notes you exchange with your friends don't have to meet any particular standards, of course, but if you want to **be taken seriously by professionals**, you should know formal e-mail etiquette.

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1. Write a meaningful subject line.

Recipients **scan the subject line** in order to decide whether to open, forward, file, or trash a message. Remember -- your message is not the only one in your recipient's mailbox.

 Subject: "**Important! Read Immediately!!**"

What is important to you may not be important to your reader. Rather than brashly announcing that the secret contents of your message are important, write an informative headline that actually communicates at least the core of what you feel is so important: "Emergency: All Cars in the Lower Lot Will Be Towed in 1 Hour."
[I have my e-mail filter set to trash e-mail messages with more than one exclamation mark in the subject line. Anyone who shouts at me is being abusive, trying to sell me something, or both. --DGJ]

 Subject: "**Meeting**"

The purpose of this e-mail might be a routine request for a meeting, an announcement of a last-minute rescheduling, or a summary of something that has already happened. There's no way to know without opening the message, so this subject line is hardly useful.

 Subject: "**Follow-up about Meeting**"

Fractionally better -- provided that the recipient recognizes your name and remembers why a follow-up was necessary.

 Subject: "**Do we need a larger room for meeting next Fri?**"

Upon reading this revised, informative subject line, the recipient immediately starts thinking about the size of the room, not about whether it will be worth it to open the e-mail.

My e-mail accounts get dozens of virus-bearing junk mails each day, often bearing a vague title such as "That file you requested," or no title at all. You'll get a faster response if your recipient can tell from the subject line that it's a real message from a real person.

2. Keep the message focused and readable.

Often recipients only read partway through a long message, hit "reply" as soon as they have something to contribute, and forget to keep reading. This is part of human nature.

If your e-mail contains **multiple messages that are only loosely related**, in order to avoid the risk that your reader will reply only to the first item that grabs his or her fancy, you could **number your points** to ensure they are all read (adding an introductory line that states how many parts there are to the message). If the points are substantial enough, **split them up into separate messages** so your recipient can delete, respond, file, or forward each item individually.

Keep your message readable.

- **Use standard capitalization and spelling**, *especially* when your message asks your recipient to do work for you. If you are a teenager, writing a quick gushing "thx 4 ur help 2day ur gr8" may make a busy professional smile at your gratitude... but there comes a time when the sweetness of the gesture isn't enough. i dont think u want ur prof r ur boss 2 think u cant typ LOL ;-)
- **Skip lines between paragraphs.**
- **Avoid fancy typefaces.** Don't depend upon bold font or large size to add nuances -- many people's e-mail readers only display plain text. In a pinch, use asterisks to show *emphasis*.
- **Don't type in all-caps.** Online, all-caps means shouting. Regardless of your intention, people will react as if you meant to be aggressive.

3. Avoid attachments.

Put your information the the body of your e-mail whenever possible. Attachments

- are increasingly dangerous carriers of viruses
- take time to download
- take up needless space on your recipient's computer, and
- don't always translate correctly (especially for people who might read their e-mail on portable devices).

Instead of sending a whole word processor file, just **copy and paste the relevant text** into the e-mail (unless of course your recipient actually needs to view file in order to edit or archive it).

[I'm annoyed when people send bulk e-mails with attached pdf or Word documents that contain nothing more than a few paragraphs of ordinary text. I'd much rather get a plain text message, with a link to where I can download the full version if I want to enjoy all the colors and typefaces. Sending a 1MB attachment to hundreds or thousands of employees is a huge waste of digital resources. -- DGJ]

4. Identify yourself clearly.

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.



To "flame" someone is to write an abusive personal attack. If you find yourself writing in anger, take a break. Take some time to cool off before you hit "send." Don't "flame" without weighing the consequences.

The "flame" is a long-established Internet tradition.

When groups of people gather, they signal status by who gets the comfy chairs, who can talk and who must listen, etc. Online communities don't provide these physical signals, so the words you use become even more important.

Flaming anyone who (intentionally or otherwise) threatens the cohesion of the group helps online communities **uphold hierarchy, define membership, and forge allegiances.**

But the relationship between boss and employee (or professor and student) is not primarily social. Because the **power differential** complicates the situation, the rules of etiquette are stricter.

-  If you **flame your boss or your professor**, that message will probably surface someday when you're up for promotion or you want a letter of recommendation.
-  If you **flame an underling or student** (especially in public), then you damage that person's trust in your leadership, and you probably won't get that person's best work in the future.

Praise in public, criticize in private. If you want to complain about someone, do it in person or by telephone, so there won't be a permanent record.

-- DGJ

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.

Unless you are Donald Trump, **praise in public, and criticize in private.** Don't send anything over e-mail that you wouldn't want posted -- with your name attached -- in the break room.

E-mail is not secure. Just as random pedestrians could easily reach into your mailbox and intercept the envelopes that you send and receive through the post office, a curious hacker, a malicious criminal, or the [FBI](#) can easily intercept your e-mail. In some companies, the e-mail administrator has the ability to read any and all e-mail messages

(and may [fire you](#) if you write anything inappropriate).

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 too busy to help you now," 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 e-mail is not private, it is good form to ask the sender before forwarding a personal message. If someone e-mails 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?"

Sometimes E-Mail is Too Fast!

A colleague once asked me for help, and then almost immediately sent a follow-up informing me she had solved the problem on her own.

But before reading her second message, I replied at length to the first. Once I learned that there was no need for any reply, I worried that my response would seem pompous, so I followed up with a quick apology:

"Should have paid closer attention to my e-mail."

What I meant to say was "[I] should have looked more carefully at my [list of incoming] e-mail [before replying]," but I could tell from my colleague's terse reply that she had interpreted it as if I was criticizing *her*.

If I hadn't responded so quickly to the first message, I would have saved myself the time I spent writing a long answer to an obsolete question. If I hadn't

responded so quickly to the second message, I might not have alienated the person I had been so eager to help.

--DGJ

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