



## Email Etiquette

### What is email etiquette?

Email etiquette refers to a set of dos and don'ts that are recommended by business and communication experts in response to the growing concern that people are not using their email effectively or appropriately.

Since email is part of the virtual world of communication, many people communicate in their email messages the same way they do in virtual chat rooms: with much less formality and sometimes too aggressively. Email etiquette offers some guidelines that all writers can use to facilitate better communication between themselves and their readers.

One overall point to remember is that an email message does not have non-verbal expression to supplement what we are "saying." Most of the time we make judgments about a person's motives and intentions based on their tone of voice, gestures, and their proximity to us. When those are absent it becomes more difficult to figure out what the message sender means. It is much easier to offend or hurt someone in email and that is why it is important to be as clear and concise as possible.

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### How do I know if I am using the correct etiquette?

There are a number of things to consider before clicking the "send" button on your email.

- How should I format my email?
  - To whom am I sending my email?
  - Can I send attachments?
  - How long should my email be?
  - Am I flaming someone? (And what does "flaming" mean?)
  - When should I not send an email?
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### How should I format my email?

You are most likely familiar with the general rules about formatting email but here are some tips to keep in mind.

Be sure that your email is formatted to wrap your text after about 70 characters. This keeps the email from looking disjointed. When you do not have a wrap around option for 70-80 characters then your email will mostly likely look like this:

Dear John,

I am really interested in leasing your apartment but I need just a little bit more information. Do you have time to meet with me tomorrow afternoon around three or so?

Usually, settings for character length will be found in the "preferences" option on the tool bar of your email client. Consult your help menu for more information.

Here are some additional formatting tips to consider.

- Try to keep the email brief (preferably to one page) so that readers do not have to scroll. \*\*\*
  - Return emails in the same day that you would a phone call.
  - Use capitalization and punctuation in the same way that you would in any other document.
  - Format your email to be sent in plain text rather than HTML because some email clients may not read HTML.
  - Write a salutation or greeting for each new subject email. \*\*\* However, if you exchange several emails over the same topic (for example, a meeting day and time) it is not necessary to include a greeting because it is as though you are carrying on a conversation. When we carry on conversations, we do not say hello each time we speak.
  - Be sure to write an appropriate and specific subject in the subject line so that the recipient knows what to expect. For example: "April 22 production team meeting agenda" instead of "meeting."
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### To whom am I sending my email?

It is always important to know who will receive your email, including the number of people you have on the mailing list. This helps you in two ways. First, it helps you think about the tone of your writing (see our handout on Tone in Business Writing at [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p\\_tone.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_tone.html) for more information).

For example, while you still want to follow the traditional rules of writing, emails that you send to your employer or professor may be more formal and brief than to a colleague or classmate. You will need to decide whether you need to use a person's title or if writing the first name is appropriate.

Second, if you send an email to more than four people regularly you should create mailing groups so that the recipients do not need to scroll through names before they can get to the content of the email. It also helps to keep some email addresses anonymous, as some perceive it as rude for their names and email addresses to be posted for strangers to see.

You will need to talk with the technical support in your office or use the "help" option on your computer if you do not know how to create a mailing group. A mailing group is a list of email addresses assigned to one name (like, newfaculty@sla.purdue.edu). You want to use names that make sense to you so that you can remember them. This is especially helpful when you are managing several mailing group lists.

Emails are public documents, despite the fact that you may send an email to someone privately. Therefore, only include those statements in email that you can openly defend should your message be circulated or shown to other parties. Using emoticons (smiley faces, winks, etc.), and other virtual gestures may be appropriate in some cases, but not in all cases! It is always essential to consider the type of relationship you have with the receiver of your message before including virtual non-verbals. If your relationship is more casual, then using the symbols is fine. If your relationship is more formal, then it is best to refrain from using them.

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## Can I send attachments?

Yes, as long as you are sure that your recipient can receive them. Sending attachments is a normal practice when you are submitting documents for review or exchanging information in the workplace. Here are some tips to consider before attaching a document.

- Title the document that you are attaching in a way that is easy for the recipient to find once he or she downloads it to his or her files.  
For example, if you are sending a document that is a goal statement then title it "goalstatement.doc."
- In the content of your email, tell your recipient what type of software was used to create the document, the year/version, and the title of the attachment.  
For example: "The file attached is called 'goalstatement.doc' and it is in MSWord 2000."
- Make sure that you do not send overly large attachments unless you are sure that your recipient's Internet connection and email client can handle them. For example, a user on a 56K dialup would have to spend a long time downloading a 5M PowerPoint file, whereas a co-worker on a fast work connection would have no problem.
- Don't send unnecessary attachments -- if you've already presented all of the relevant information in an email message, don't attach a Word document repeating the same information.

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## How long should my email be?

In general, the email should be approximately one page printed or the length of your computer screen before scrolling. However, there are times when email messages need to be longer to convey important information. Oftentimes organizations seeking to reduce their paper costs will use email as their primary source of communication. Longer emails generally consist of: Orientation schedules and information, memos, convention information, newsletters, and policy changes.

When you need to write a long email try to include three essential elements at the top of the email: (a) an executive summary at the top of the document, (b) how soon a response is required from the recipient(s), and (c) a table of contents.

### An executive summary

This is a short summary of everything in the email document including the main goal of the email or the "bottom line." \*

**For example:** "Welcome to ZDF Company. This email contains important information about your orientation week. You will find the five day schedule, names of the speakers, the menu, hotel arrangements, and testimonials from employees who previously participated."

### Required response

Because your reader is most likely going to read the first few lines of your document thoroughly and browse through the rest, if you need to have him or her respond by a certain time with certain information, that should be stated within the executive summary.

**For example:** "Please let me know by Wednesday whether you are attending the meeting."

### Table of contents

A table of contents allows the reader to pick and choose what sections of the email are most relevant to him or her.\* A person is most likely to comply with your requests when you make it easy for him or her to navigate your materials.

#### For example:

Table of Contents  
- Five Day Schedule  
- Speaker List  
- Menu  
- Registration Form  
- Hotel Arrangements

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## Am I flaming someone? (And what does "flaming" mean?)

Flaming is a virtual term for venting emotion online or sending inflammatory emails. \* It is best to avoid flaming because it tends to create more conflict and tension. Flames are virtual food fights (Angell and Heslop) and are unproductive and injurious to the parties involved.

What you say cannot be taken back. Misinterpretations happen very easily in neutral emails because there is a lack of nonverbal expression to cue the recipient about your motives and intentions. You can imagine how much misinterpretation can occur when you are expressing frustration and/or anger.

Things to consider before venting in email:

- Would I say this to this person's face?
- Am I putting the receiver in awkward position?
- How would I feel if I got this email message?

Usually, by the time you consider the above questions you will be calm enough to write your message with a different approach. Catching someone by surprise in a flaming message is a quick way to alienate your reader mainly because they will react with anger or embarrassment.

Below are some examples of flaming messages and then some suggestions on ways to re-word them in more sensitive and thoughtful ways.

| Flame/inappropriate message  | Not a flame/appropriate message   |
|--|---|
| "This project really sucks and I cannot believe that he is making us do this. I'm sick and tired of all these dumb assignments. He needs to get a life!" | "This assignment came at a tough time. I wasn't expecting so much work. I can't wait till the end of the semester." |
| "If you don't fix this problem then I am going to quit TOMORROW!!!!!!!!!! I am sick and tired of Martha's incompetence!!!"                               | "I'm growing increasingly frustrated by the current situation. Can we set up a time to talk about this more?"       |

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## When should I not send an email?

There are many subjects that are too sensitive to discuss over email mainly because misinterpretation could have serious consequences. Some topics that should generally be resolved outside of email are:

- Disciplinary action
- Conflicts about grades or personal information
- Concerns about fellow classmates/workmates
- Complaints

When it appears that a dialogue has turned into a conflict, it is best to suggest an end to the swapping of email and for you to talk or meet in person. If you receive a flaming email try to respond in a short and simple response. If that does not appease the flamer than make contact with him or her outside the virtual realm.

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## Sources

The following sources were used for development of this document.

\*Angell, David, and Heslop, Brent. *The Elements of Email Style: Communicate Effectively via Electronic Email*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994.

\*\*Bailey, Jr., Edward P. *The Plain English Approach to Business Writing*. New York: University Press, 1990.

\*\*\*Caudron, Shari. "Virtual Manners." *Workforce* 79.2 (2000): 31-34.

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HTML markup by Erin Karper

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