

Top Ten Mistakes to Avoid When Writing Email

By Karen Leland and Keith Bailey

As more and more people are writing emails to supplement traditional forms of business communication, an established etiquette is required to help insure that good manners are the rule, rather than the exception in cyberspace.

The simplest way of checking your email before you send it is to ask yourself, "How would I feel if I received this message?" As with letter writing, writing email correspondence is subject to misinterpretation since there is no tone of voice or body language for the reader to take cues from. With email one hundred percent of the tone comes from the words you use and how you use them. Below are the ten most common mistakes that are made when writing emails, and their solutions:

Mistake 1: Thinking e-mail is good for everything

Don't let convenience blind you, sensitive issues, confidential information, provocative subjects and areas of conflict are just a few of the messages that should be off-limits to email and dealt with via phone or face-to-face.

Mistake 2: Not writing e-mail from the reader's perspective

Could your message be misinterpreted? Could an innocent tongue-in-cheek remark be misconstrued? Re-read all your e-mails and become sensitive to their "tone" and how readers might interpret them.

Mistake 3: Forgetting about the importance of etiquette

It's always a good idea, no matter how rushed you are, to create a positive impression by using an opening and closing (for example, Dear Mr. Smith or Regards, Joe Black), correcting sloppy grammar and spelling, using a clear and descriptive subject line, and not using jargon and abbreviations that might mystify the reader.

Mistake 4: CCing the world

Often, people courtesy copy (cc) others as a means of cyber-gossip or to vent their frustrations. This leads not only to traffic jams in others' in-boxes, but in the worst case, defamation, and in the best case, hurt feelings. When writing e-mail, only cc those parties that are directly related to the situation or email message.

Mistake 5: Believing that an erased e-mail is gone forever

Even if you delete an e-mail message from your in-box, it is retrievable from the company's system, the recipient's computer, or from the recipient's company's network. With technical know how, e-mails can even be retrieved from your computer's hard drive. Learn to think of e-mail documents as permanent.

Mistake 6: Viewing instant messages as less 'formal' than e-mail

The nature of IM or chat is similar to a conversation where both parties are responding to one another in real time. Living up to their name, IMs happen in the moment and, unlike e-mail, they are reactive. The next thing you type depends on the message you receive. With their rapid-fire speed it's easy to forego discipline and make silly mistakes - such as making assumptions that have little or no facts behind them,

promises that can't be fulfilled or disclosing private company information.

Mistake 7: Assuming people have time to read your entire message

To be most effective, whenever possible, e-mail messages should contain all the most pertinent and important data in the first paragraph. Most of us have a short attention span when reading from a computer screen and if we think we know where the message is going, it's easy to save time and move onto the next message without having read the nugget of information buried in the last paragraph.

Mistake 8: Mismatching the sender's tone

One of the toughest aspects of writing e-mail is developing a feeling of rapport - especially if you don't know the person with whom you are corresponding. Writers with a formal, no-nonsense style usually like a similar response. For others who take a more chatty and expressive approach to their emails, respond in kind.

Mistake 9: Lack of a clear request

You know how frustrating it can be to read and reread an e-mail and not know what the sender really wants, "Is it an FYI or do I need to do something?" Email senders take note; specific requests are essential in email. Make sure yours are clearly defined, have a timeframe attached to them and include any necessary background information. If your email isn't a request label it an FYI.

Mistake 10: Not re-reading before you hit 'send'

As any contractor knows the rule is "measure twice, cut once." By reading your e-mail over before you send it you can catch and correct all sorts of mistakes before they get to the recipient and possibly create a bad impression or put you and/or your company in hot water.