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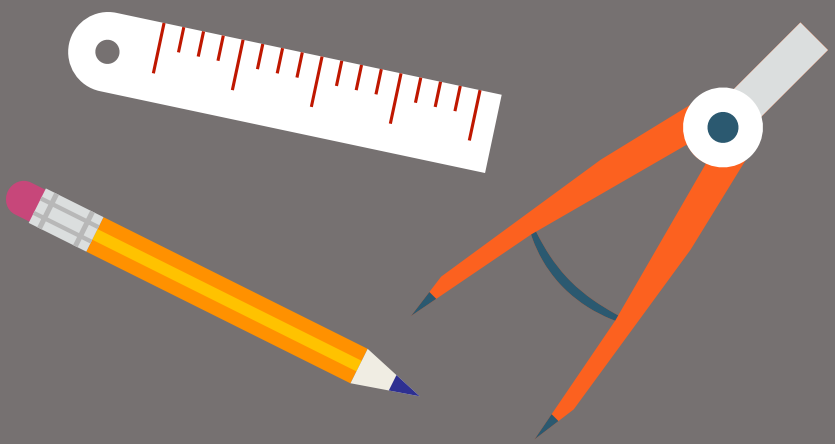
Writing Effective Emails

15 Tips to Make Them Better



PRACTICAL TOOLS

Writing Effective Emails:
15 Tips to Make Them Better

Email is a mainstay of business communication.

It's quick, doesn't waste paper and can command an instant response.

And it's efficient – as soon as you click "Send" you can move on to other work.

But most of us view emails as a more casual way of corresponding than, say, writing letters or memos on paper.

That can cause us to drop the professionalism in our writing for more conversational tones.

While it's OK to keep emails more casual than, say, business manuals, emails still need to be written professionally. It's tempting to be less concerned about proper spelling, word usage and spacing rules when punching out a quick email. But since we send them so often, ignoring solid writing style can lead to miscommunication.

Or worse – your unaddressed, poorly headed, vague email could get lost in the shuffle entirely. A quick glance over the Internet reminds us of all the nifty tools that can slice, dice, sort, toss and compartmentalize the emails we send, all with the touch of a button.

So don't let your email messages get confused with spam. You need to get info to someone (or several someones) fast, and it's important enough that you want their eyes on it.

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Stick with these 15 tips for sending emails that will get attention:

1. Double-check that your name is displayed properly in the From: field

Don't take it for granted until you are certain your name is accurate. If you change names through marriage, or if your title or credentials change, be sure those are properly reflected, too.

2. Keep the subject line short and specific

It should include just enough detail to let the recipient know why you're emailing. Aim for a maximum of six or seven words. For example:

- Vague: *next meeting*
- Clearer: *next meeting's agenda*
- Even clearer: *two additions to next meeting's agenda*

When possible, put the entire message in the subject line if it's short enough; for example: "Today's meeting moved to 3 p.m." Write EOM (end of message) at the end so the reader knows that's the entirety of the message, there's no need to respond, and the recipient doesn't need to save it.

3. Keep your subject line consistent

It's important to preserve the continuity of your email correspondence. When your email starts to make the rounds, tell recipients to keep the subject line when they're responding, whether individually or to "reply all," about the topic you initiated. It keeps the line of communication easier to follow, helps ensure your message is read promptly and makes filing and archiving easier for all involved.

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4. Include a greeting at the start of the message

This prevents it from sounding terse and impersonal, and it can reveal the tone of your message right up front. Avoid sounding too casual unless you know the person(s) you're addressing very well.

A good rule of thumb would be to mirror how the recipient greets you, especially if you communicate with people on different levels and for a wide range of reasons.

For example:

- For an informal note to one person, a "Hello," or a "Hi," would be appropriate: "Hello ____, I wanted to let you know our meeting time was moved from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m."
- For a more general note to a group, "Hello everyone," is fine: "Hello everyone, I wanted to let you know our meeting time was moved from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m."

5. Keep it personal with pronouns

For emails, avoid the overly general "To whom it may concern" type of subject line or greeting. You want to get your message read promptly, so address it as if you're talking to each individual personally, even if there are several people on the chain. For example:

- Instead of: Re: Need immediate feedback

  Use: Re: I need your feedback fast

- Instead of: Re: meeting at 2 p.m.

  Use: Re: Let's meet at 2 p.m.

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6. If you want an answer, ask a question

For quicker responses, use the subject line as a question, rather than a general statement the reader needs to open to answer. This gets the reader to almost automatically respond.

For example:

- Instead of: Re: Meeting at 2 p.m.

  Use: Re: Can we meet at 2 p.m.?

- Instead of: Re: Project report update

  Use: Re: Do you have an update on the project?

7. Follow regular business letter format in the body of your email

Make sure you're using proper punctuation and grammar, and proofread it for spelling mistakes or missed words (spell check doesn't always catch everything).

Keep in mind that although email is a little less formal than sending a letter the old-fashioned way, you shouldn't revert to sloppy, overly casual tones.

8. Stick to one message per email

It's hard to do because people figure if they've got the reader's attention for one subject, they might as well throw more in for convenience sake. This is likely to get your email merely scanned, and the valuable information could go right out the window.

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9. Stick to the facts

Make clear what you need and what action (if any) you need the reader to take. The more explanation you add, the muddier your message will be.

A good tip is to treat email as if you're sending a text message; the limited space forces you to include only the important stuff.

10. Make your email easier to read

Use fonts that look like printed letters rather than ones that look like fancy script. Fonts like Arial, Times New Roman, Calibri and Verdana are all plain enough to read easily.

Where you can, break paragraphs up into bulleted points or numbered lists. (A good rule of thumb: If you have more than three such lists in your email, you may be getting too verbose. Save the info that's not essential for another email.)

11. Watch your text style

Sometimes italicized, highlighted or boldface words don't translate in emails. What you think you're emphasizing might not be obvious to the reader.

If you can, hit the "preview" button to see what the email will look like. Or to play it safe, stick with underlining important points or words; it's a text, not a style feature, and should remain consistent.

12. Avoid typing in all-caps

This is still the electronic equivalent of yelling at your reader and makes even mundane messages sound threatening and ominous. Use the emphasis tools mentioned above if necessary.

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13. Close with consistency

How you close your email should be consistent with the overall tone of your message. And it should summarize what you want their response (if any) to be.

For example:

a. Use “Thanks for your time,” if you’re asking someone to do a task for you or follow up on something.

b. Use “Looking forward to hearing from you,” if you need to hear back on a subject from the person; it reinforces a return response in their minds.

c. Use “Sincerely,” or “All the best,” if it’s a more informal note or you’re just passing on information.

14. Proofread your email

Don’t rely on spell check. Even modern emailing autocorrect programs don’t catch everything. Words you misuse could get past and misspelled names or numerical typos are unique and will also slide by.

15. Be ‘electronically polite’

If you include someone’s name in the email or as a contact, Cc or Bcc them to let them know.

Use “reply all” selectively if you feel some people in your email message string don’t need to be continually updated or included.

This is especially important if you and one other person on the email string are arguing a point back-and-forth. Get everyone else out of the conversation.

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BONUS: Get To the Point! 3 Phrases to Avoid in Emails

Most people who send an email want or need a response. Cluttering your message with vague phrases could get your message stalled or deleted entirely.

Here are three phrases that cause readers to hit "delete" – and ones that really say what you mean.

1. **"Sorry to bother you …"** In most cases, the person who writes this isn't apologetic at all. She or he still wants something and is hoping to play on the receiver's compassion.

   Instead write: "Thank you for being patient." It focuses on the recipient's generosity and is more likely to get an agreeable response.

2. **"Whatever you think …"** This sounds like you've either given up on your idea or don't want to do the work to give a better one. So you put the ball in the recipient's court.

   Instead write: "I'm open to your ideas to work together on this." It shows you have an active interest in the outcome and want to come to the best solution, not just one that someone else makes because you don't want to commit.

3. "**Please advise …"** It's formal and demanding and suggests you can't make a decision. If you truly want direction, focus on exactly what you need: "Let me know if I should do X or Y."

   Instead write: "Let me know your thoughts on how we should go forward."

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