

E-Mail

E-mail is a major method of communicating. People use e-mail to send everything from birthday greetings to intergovernmental communications. A major problem with e-mail, however, is that there is so much of it. People regularly report getting 25–1000 e-mails a day. While it is easy for you to send an e-mail, it is not always easy to get your audience to open it and respond to it (Brogan). How do you fashion your e-mail so it doesn't sit unread in your recipient's in-box or, worse, is dumped altogether? To create effective e-mails, consider your audience and use the elements of e-mail effectively.

Consider Your Audience

Your audience (singular or plural) probably gets lots of e-mail daily. In addition the audience probably does not have a lot of free time. They may be willing to answer you, but they would like the answer to be one they can construct easily ("15"). To engage that "willing to help" characteristic, follow these guidelines:

- ▶ Arrange your e-mail so that the audience can quickly grasp what you want from them. Put the most important points at "the top" of the message.
- ▶ Personalize the e-mail with a quick personal comment ("Nice to see you last weekend") at the end. Add your name to the end, even if your "signature name" also appears (Type "Gwen" even if your signature name appears as "Gwendolyn P. Goldman") (Burstein; "15")
- ▶ Use the appropriate level of formality. Don't write as if the recipient were your best friend, if she is not. Don't use "text style" ("How r u?").

Use the Elements of E-mail Effectively

Pay close attention to how you handle e-mail elements such as the subject line, address, attachments, and paragraphs. This section explains best practices in the use of e-mail elements (based on "15"; Brogan; Burstein" E-mail: Shannon; Joshi: "ITS").

Write a Clear Subject Line

Experts who have studied e-mail find that the subject line is the most important item when trying to connect with the intended reader. Messages are often displayed in a directory that lists the sender's name, the date, and the subject. Many readers choose to read or delete messages solely on the basis of the subject line, because they can't possibly take the time to respond to so much mail. Your message will more likely be opened if the subject line connects with the reader's needs. If the subject line does not engage the reader, he or she will often simply delete the message unread. Here are some tips:

- ▶ Start with an information-bearing word. Say "Budget meeting scheduled Monday, 10 a.m. Rm103" rather than "Budget meeting" or "Meeting." Or "Hi—meet me after your class?" rather than "Hi."

- ▶ Keep the subject line relatively short. This tip could conflict with the previous one, so be judicious in your phrasing of the information-bearing word or phrase.
- ▶ People often open messages with RE in the subject line (so don't change the subject when you reply). In a subject line, state content—"Response to your 7-25 budget request."
- ▶ Make the subject line a short summary of your message. (Nielsen; Rhodes; "TTS")

Use the To and CC Lines Effectively

The To line should contain only the names of persons who you are asking to do something. In the CC line, list people who should know about the message, or who are getting the e-mail simply for information purposes ("ITS").

Check Addresses

Many e-mail addresses are remarkably similar. It is quite easy to make a typing mistake, so that the e-mail intended for jonessu goes instead to joness or jonesu. Although this is often a minor annoyance, it can be a major embarrassment if the content is sensitive or classified ("ITS").

Consider Whether to Send an Attachment

Attachments take more time to download and often easily become separated from the original e-mail. In addition, many attachments can't be opened at all by the receiver, especially if they were created in another platform or by an application not owned by the receiver.

If you do send an attachment, be sure that the document contains such information as a title and the name of the person who sent it. Sometimes this information appears only in the e-mail; if the e-mail is deleted, the attachment becomes difficult to make meaningful. If the attachment is long, consider posting it on a website, or company wiki (if that option is easily available to you) and sending your recipients an e-mail with the URL to that space ("TTS"). In order to avoid "losing" an attachment, or to ensure that there are no problems opening the document, paste the contents directly into the e-mail. Note, however, that this strategy makes the e-mail long, so in the introduction establish the context for the content. Be sure to give the attachment a meaningful filename. If the attachment is opened directly from the e-mail, the context for it is clear. But if the e-mail is gone and the attachment resides in a directory with many other files, the filename must be meaningful. Say "jonesresume" rather than "resume," or "ABCapplicationform" rather than "ABCaf."

Keep Messages Short and to the Point

Research has established that readers categorize e-mails. "To-do" messages require some action from the recipient. Often, these messages stay in in-boxes as a reminder to the recipient of work to do. "To read" messages usually are

TIP

E-mailing Reports

Often the goal of an e-mail is to send a report to an audience. Suppose the report is three pages long. It is too long to be effective in the body of the e-mail, and the e-mail program might strip out all the formatting you have inserted to help readers, like bold face.

If recipients decide to print the report, it is much easier to print the attachment, which is a word processing document and contains the report and any visual aids, but not all the To/From/Subject and other routing material contained in the e-mail.

How should you handle this?

Turn the e-mail into a cover letter. In several sentences name the report (and include its filename), its contents, and why the reader(s) are receiving it.

Hi all, attached is the First Quarter 2013 sales report (2013FQSalesNW) for the Northwest region. It condenses all the sales data by retail item. We will discuss this report at our meeting, Tuesday, July 22, 2014.

long documents that take time and effort to read. Although the content could be important, the length causes recipients to delay reading them. "Indeterminate" messages are those whose significance is not clear to the reader. Like long messages, these messages are usually not read, but left in in-boxes so that when there is time enough, the reader will make the effort to read the message and determine the significance (Rhodes).

Establish the Context

In the body of the e-mail, repeat questions or key phrases. Briefly explain why you are writing, then go on with your message. If a person has sent out 20 messages the day before, he or she might not easily remember exactly what was sent to you. Offer help. Remember that you are not in a dialogue in which the other person can respond instantaneously to your statements, so avoid the temptation to use one-line speeches. For instance, don't just write one word—"No"—but explain the topic you are saying "No" to. One respondent to an e-mail survey said, "X is unbelievable in that he never puts in the context of what he is replying to. He always comes up with these one-line responses, and I have no idea what it is that he's talking about" (Rhodes).

Remember to Use Paragraphs

E-mail's format has a kind of hypnotic quality that encourages people to write as if they were speaking. And, of course, in speech there are no obvious paragraphs. However, remember that e-mail is text that a person reads, so chunk into manageable paragraphs. Use keywords at the beginning of units in order to establish the context of the sentence or paragraph that follows.

Signal the End

Because e-mail exists in scrolling screen form, there is no obvious cue to its end, unlike a hard copy where you always know when you are on the last page. Therefore, signal the end by typing your name, with or without a closing. You may also use the words *the end* or a line of asterisks.

Avoid Mind Dumps

The point of e-mail is to satisfy the reader's needs as concisely as possible. Do not ramble. Plan for a moment before you start to write. If you have "on-line fear," the same strange emotional response that often makes people give awkward, rambling messages on an answering machine, type your message first on a familiar word processing program, when you have time to gather your thoughts and get them down coherently. Edit in the word processor, then upload and send (know the capabilities of your system).

Don't Type in All Caps

The lack of variation in letter size makes the message much harder to grasp and gives the impression that you're shouting.

Get Permission to Publish

E-mail is the intellectual property of its creator. Do not publish an e-mail message unless the creator gives you permission.

Be Prudent

Technically (and legally), the institution that provides you the e-mail service (such as your university or employer or governmental agency) owns the e-mail you are sending and receiving. As a result, any number of people can access individual e-mails if they have some reason to. Be careful about sending sensitive or personal information. In addition, remember that any e-mail is easily forwarded—and so is any attachment—without your knowledge. Although you might think that the sensitive meeting notes that you send to the committee chair will remain only on her computer, or that the personal comments you make about another person will stay buried in an in-box, it is all too easy for these messages to be forwarded, deliberately or accidentally, to others.

Use E-mail as a Cover Letter for Attachments

When you send a document as an attachment to an e-mail, briefly reference the document in the e-mail. The sample e-mail given in the following text illustrates how to handle this situation. The writer explains briefly aspects of the attachment to notice, then includes comments about a previous discussion on feasibility reports, and other professional and personal items for the future.

Dan,

See attached for the resume I sent to Dr. Franklin about a month ago. I generalized some of the items, removing specifics. You can be consistent in the way you modify the other resume contents—or discard if this isn't helpful!

Thanks for the extra details about the feasibility report. We've talked about writing it up on our four hour drive home, so you may have it even sooner.

Please do keep me posted about a potential visit.

Heading back to W soon—appointments at the bank are excellent excuses to get back early.

Laurel

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Figure 10.10 Email "Cover Letter"

Ethics and E-Mail

Being aware of the ethical guidelines for conduct when sending communications over the Internet is important in remaining professional and courteous. The most important thing to remember is "If it is unethical in real life, it's unethical in e-mail" (Brenner). Brenner suggests a number of actions that are unethical. They include intentionally omitted someone from a To list (for instance in an e-mail to a group), causing delay by intentionally sending a message late so that time-critical material does not reach the recipient in time, intentionally writing a vague e-mail in order to slow things down.

Since e-mail can be edited a number of commentators (Brenner, Lynmar) say it is unethical to delete wording in an e-mail that you have received so that when you send it on the message is changed. The ethical way to indicate wording deletions is to use ellipsis (...) or <snip>. It is also unethical to send on e-mails to people who not intended recipients unless you obtain permission from the original sender.

While it is not an ethical concern, you should be aware that e-mails don't go away. They are stored on a computer somewhere, especially if you use a company e-mail. Many companies have policies that state that the e-mail is the property of the company. In other words, confidential information cannot be guaranteed to remain confidential.

Another concern is sending inappropriately emotional e-mails. E-mails should retain a professional, courteous tone. The best advice is to think before you hit "send." Remember e-mail can be forwarded easily and your nasty comments could easily end up embarrassing you.