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Writing Effective Emails

Getting People to Read and Act on Your Messages

Email has long been a core tool for business communications, but a 2013 [survey](#) by Sendmail, Inc., found that it has caused tension, confusion, or other negative consequences for 64 percent of working professionals.

So, how can you avoid your emails doing this? And how can you write emails that get the results you want? In this article and video, we look at strategies you can use to ensure that your use of email is clear, effective and successful.

Writing Effective Emails

The average office worker receives **around 80 emails each day**. With that volume of mail, individual messages can easily get overlooked. Follow these simple rules to get your emails noticed and acted upon.

1. Don't overcommunicate by email.
2. Make good use of subject lines.
3. Keep messages clear and brief.
4. Be polite.
5. Check your tone.
6. Proofread.

1. Don't Overcommunicate by Email

One of the biggest sources of stress at work is the sheer volume of emails that people receive. So, before you begin writing an email, ask yourself: "Is this really necessary?"

As part of this, you should use the phone or IM to deal with questions that are likely to need some back-and-forth discussion. Use our [Communications Planning Tool](#) to identify the channels that are best for different types of message.

Also, email is not as secure as you might want it to be, particularly as people may forward emails without thinking to delete the conversation history. So avoid sharing sensitive or personal information in an email, and don't write about anything that you, or the subject of your email, wouldn't like to see plastered on a billboard by your office.

Whenever possible, deliver **bad news** in person. This helps you to communicate with empathy, compassion, and understanding, and to **make amends** if your message has been taken the wrong way.

2. Make Good Use of Subject Lines

A newspaper headline has two functions: it grabs your attention, and it summarizes the article, so that you can decide whether to read it or not. The subject line of your email message should do the same thing.

A blank subject line is more likely to be overlooked or rejected as "spam," so always use a few well-chosen words to tell the recipient what the email is about.

You may want to include the date in the subject line if your message is one of a regular series of emails, such as a weekly project report. For a message that needs a response, you might also want to include a call to action, such as "Please reply by November 7."

A well-written subject line like the one below delivers the most important information, without the recipient even having to open the email. This serves as a prompt that reminds recipients about your meeting every time they glance at their inbox.

Bad Example	Good Example
Subject: Meeting	Subject: PASS Process Meeting - 10 a.m. February 25, 2014

If you have a very short message to convey, and you can fit the whole thing into the subject line, use "EOM" (End of Message) to let recipients know that they don't need to open the email to get all the information that they need.

Example

Subject: Could you please send the February sales report? Thanks! EOM

(Of course, this is only useful if recipients know what "EOM" means.)

3. Keep Messages Clear and Brief

Emails, like traditional business letters, need to be clear and concise. Keep your sentences short and to the point. The body of the email should be direct and informative, and it should contain all pertinent information. See our article on **writing skills** for guidance on communicating clearly in writing.

Unlike traditional letters, however, it costs no more to send several emails than it does to send just one. So, if you need to communicate with someone about a number of

different topics, consider writing a separate email for each one. This makes your message clearer, and it allows your correspondent to reply to one topic at a time.

Bad Example	Good Example
<p>Subject: Revisions For Sales Report</p> <p>Hi Jackie,</p> <p>Thanks for sending that report last week. I read it yesterday, and I feel that Chapter 2 needs more specific information about our sales figures. I also felt that the tone could be more formal.</p> <p>Also, I wanted to let you know that I've scheduled a meeting with the PR department for this Friday regarding the new ad campaign. It's at 11:00 a.m. and will be in the small conference room.</p> <p>Please let me know if you can make that time.</p> <p>Thanks!</p> <p>Monica</p>	<p>Subject: Revisions For Sales Report</p> <p>Hi Jackie,</p> <p>Thanks for sending that report last week. I read it yesterday, and I feel that Chapter 2 needs more specific information about our sales figures.</p> <p>I also felt that the tone could be more formal.</p> <p>Could you amend it with these comments in mind?</p> <p>Thanks for your hard work on this!</p> <p>Monica</p> <p>(Monica then follows this up with a separate email about the PR department meeting.)</p>

It's important to find balance here. You don't want to bombard someone with emails, and it makes sense to combine several, related, points into one email. When this happens, **keep things simple** with numbered paragraphs or bullet points, and consider "**chunking**" information into small, well-organized units to make it easier to digest.

Notice, too, that in the good example above, Monica specified what she wanted Jackie to do (in this case, amend the report). If you make it easy for people to see what you want, there's a better chance that they will give you this.

4. Be Polite

People often think that emails can be less formal than traditional letters. But the messages you send are a reflection of your own **professionalism**, values, and attention to detail, so a certain level of formality is needed.

Unless you're on good terms with someone, avoid informal language, slang, **jargon**, and inappropriate abbreviations. Emoticons can be useful for clarifying your intent, but

it's best to use them only with people you know well.

Close your message with "Regards," "Yours sincerely," or "All the best," depending on the situation.

Recipients may decide to print emails and share them with others, so always be polite.

5. Check the Tone

When we meet people face-to-face, we use the other person's **body language**, vocal tone, and facial expressions to assess how they feel. Email robs us of this information, and this means that we can't tell when people have misunderstood our messages.

Your choice of words, sentence length, punctuation, and capitalization can easily be misinterpreted without visual and auditory cues. In the first example below, Emma might think that Harry is frustrated or angry, but, in reality, he feels fine.

Bad Example	Good Example
Emma, I need your report by 5 p.m. today or I'll miss my deadline. Harry	Hi Emma, Thanks for all your hard work on that report. Could you please get your version over to me by 5 p.m., so I don't miss my deadline? Thanks so much! Harry

Think about how your email "feels" emotionally. If your intentions or emotions could be misunderstood, find a less ambiguous way to phrase your words.

6. Proofreading

Finally, before you hit "send," take a moment to review your email for spelling, grammar, and punctuation mistakes. Your email messages are as much a part of your professional image as the clothes you wear, so it looks bad to send out a message that contains typos.

As you proofread, pay careful attention to the length of your email. People are more likely to read short, concise emails than long, rambling ones, so make sure that your emails are as short as possible, without excluding necessary information.

Our article on **writing skills** has tips and strategies that you can use when proofreading your emails.