

## Composing Effective E-mails

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While e-mail is the most convenient, and probably the most widely used, form of business communication today, many people do not know how to use it well. Because it's an extremely quick and easy way of getting in touch with others, it's easy to overlook the basics of business correspondence, such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation. But it's important that you maintain high standards, however you communicate with others. The style you use for an e-mail message will, clearly, depend on the recipient, but take some time to consider who you are writing to and what you want to say, as well as how you want to say it. It's extremely important that your company's image or reputation is always enhanced, never diminished.

### What You Need to Know

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**I don't have a lot of time to spend on e-mails. I tend to write informally and just tell people what they need to know or ask the questions I need answered. Is this a problem?**

While most people would not object to a succinct, straightforward e-mail, being impolite is never appropriate. No matter how busy you are, it doesn't take much to address and close messages properly, or to say "thank you" if you're asking for help. Obviously it's fine to use a casual tone with people you know very well or work with very closely. However, when you are contacting people for the first time or trying to attract new business, it clearly makes sense to be courteous and a bit more formal.

**I want to use e-mail to ask a rather complicated question of a colleague who has a very short attention span. What's the best way to get him to read it and respond?**

Start by using a powerful subject line and then set out an overview of your question, taking care to highlight exactly what you need to know and when. Summarize all the key information you need to share with your colleague and then attach a document with background facts and figures. If your question is based on a series of events or has supporting evidence, state all of this separately in an attachment, and tell him what you've done. If he receives a lot of e-mail correspondence, he may not even notice you've attached something, so add a reminder. Once you've sent the e-mail, follow up politely after a few days if you haven't heard anything from your colleague. Send the e-mail again, stressing the importance of his response. If he has an assistant and the e-mail is urgent, you could also ask him or her to draw it to their boss's attention.

## What to Do

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### Convey the Subject of the E-mail Clearly

With the enormous popularity of e-mail, many people in business now receive an extremely high volume of messages each day. To deal with this potential flood, they have to prioritize and decide what's most important. To make sure that your e-mails get noticed and read, it's vital that each one has a clearly identified subject.

Most popular e-mail packages include a subject line, so use that to state as concisely as possible what your message is about. Examples include:

- new meeting date
- price changes on restocked items
- monthly sales report
- XYZ project update
- new managing director appointed

These indicate clearly and concisely what the e-mail is about. When writing a business e-mail, try to avoid using "Hello" in the subject line, even if you're on friendly terms with the recipient. It's not specific, has no sense of urgency, and may be annoying to some people, to the point where they'll put off reading the message. You should also avoid leaving the subject field blank, as this is equally unhelpful.

A series of e-mails may cover a subject that develops and changes over a period of time, such as the content of a new brochure or the status of a project. To make sure that everyone is reading the latest version and is able to keep track of the changes, add a date or version number to the title. For example:

- new brochure copy: draft 3
- project status: August
- revised personnel guidelines: effective March

### Using Concise Language

E-mail is, after all, supposed to be a *short* form of communication. The recipient should be able to understand what you are trying to say in the first few lines, and the entire message should be brief and to the point.

It can be difficult and inconvenient to follow long passages of text on a small computer screen, which is where most e-mails are read. If you need to provide a lot of detail, send a document as a separate

attachment or tell the recipient to contact you for more information. When sending an attachment *isn't* possible, you might try breaking your message into small sections with a heading before each one. This will make it easier to read and digest, and more convenient for your correspondents to pick out relevant information.

For instance, you may be planning a new project and would like your correspondent to be a contributor. To save them the time it would take to wade through a dense paragraph, give a brief overview of the project and then highlight key points:

**Your role**

To revise our annual product catalog, working with teams in-house on content and delivering a final PDF to the printer.

**Your budget**

\$1600 (40 hours at \$40 per hour)

**Your deadline**

Final PDF delivered no later than October 1st.

## Maintain High Standards of Punctuation and Spelling

Although e-mail is often used as an informal means of communication, in a business context it has the same status as a letter or other printed material. Once it is sent to a customer or vendor, it reflects on the image of you and your company, so you don't want a message riddled with spelling errors and bad grammar. It pays to take a few minutes to check your message for mistakes and sense before you send it. Many popular e-mail programs include spellcheckers, but if your system doesn't have one, try preparing your message in a word-processing program. Then check it and copy the final version into your e-mail.

The popularity of text messages and their abbreviated style of writing is beginning to creep over into e-mail. It's easy enough to understand a message along the lines of "C U at 10" or "mtg off," but it's best not to include this type of abbreviation in messages to external clients or contacts. Remember also to use upper and lower case letters in your business e-mails. Writing a message completely in lower case gives an impression of something written in haste and with little thought. It implies that you don't want to take the time to do things properly, because the recipient isn't important enough.

Lastly, try not to use a lot of acronyms. They may be understood by your colleagues, but they can be meaningless to other people. If they're essential or completely unavoidable, explain the meaning of each acronym the first time it is used, so that your correspondent can comprehend what you are talking about.

## Employ an Appropriate Style

Clearly, you won't want to use the same style for every e-mail that you compose. You will probably feel most comfortable using a friendly, chatty tone when you're writing to a colleague or friend. However, it's appropriate to adopt a more formal style in your business e-mails, especially when you're contacting someone for the first time or dealing with a customer or an external contact.

For colleagues or regular, familiar contacts, you could open with "Hi," "Hello," or just a name ("Emma" or "Kyle"). In more formal e-mails, you would use "Dear Mr./Mrs./Miss/Ms..." or "Dear Matthew/Dear Olivia" if you're on first name terms with the recipient.

At the close of the e-mail, tailor your sign-off to your relationship with the recipient.

<b>informal</b>	<b>more formal</b>	<b>very formal</b>
Bye for now	Best	Yours
Thanks	Best wishes	Sincerely
Tnx	All best	Yours sincerely
More later	All best wishes	Yours truly
All the best	Many thanks	
Later	Regards	
See you	Kind regards	
	Best regards	

E-mail styles, like all other forms of communication, will differ from country to country. If you have frequent contact with international correspondents, keep in mind that some cultures are more formal than others. Pay attention to the tone and style of the messages your contacts send to you, so you can reply in an appropriate manner. This way you will be less likely to cause any offense or embarrassment.

## Request the Action or Information You Need

While some of your e-mails are geared to providing information to the recipient, others make a request for action or information. If you need something from someone, make sure that you phrase your request clearly so that they know exactly what you want. For example, "Could you please send me the latest sales report by November 22nd," or "Please go over this material with Jeremy, Lisa, and Eric and let me have your views by Thursday afternoon."

If a number of people are contributing to a project, you may need to break down your request into separate instructions for each individual, so that everyone understands their role. For example:

*For the team to deliver the new product by September we need to meet the following targets:*

*Elena: complete the software by May*

*Elizabeth: get the test results by July*

*Ryan: request additional funding from the Financial Director by June*

## **Clarify the Urgency of Your Message**

It's a good idea to make clear whether your e-mail is routine, important, or urgent. With the heavy flow of e-mail traffic in most offices, people need to prioritize their reading and response, so state the level of urgency.

Some e-mail packages allow you to highlight the level of priority, but, if you do use this facility, don't abuse it. It's easy to mark every message as urgent or highly important in the hope that it will receive immediate attention. However, if you do this too often people will start to disregard your messages, even if one of them actually is urgent. Use this ranking system carefully and honestly, and you'll get the results you need. To overcome possible inertia on the part of the reader, you might tailor your subject line to include an indicator such as "product review: decision needed by Thursday." This is informative and gives the recipient clear guidelines.

Also, avoid using too many capital letters, especially in the body of your message, to indicate urgency and importance. This makes the message difficult to read on screen and, again, recipients can become immune to the technique. Also, the use of too many capital letters in e-mails is regarded by some people as "virtual shouting" and your correspondents may misread your mood and respond in kind.

## **Send Attachments to Provide Detail, If Appropriate**

E-mail attachments can take the form of documents, photographs, audio, or video material. Sending attachments with your message is an easy way to get detailed information to your correspondent, but you should use this facility with caution.

Some attachments can take a great deal of time to transfer and the recipient may have problems downloading them, particularly if they don't have an Internet connection that allows fast transmission of large amounts of data. Bear this in mind if you have suppliers who have small businesses or who work from home. Video clips, PDF files, spreadsheets, and photographs can pose difficulties for dialup Internet users, so before you send attachments, check with your correspondents that their systems can handle them.

## **Flag Up Contact Details**

Some e-mail programs allow you to include a signature at the end of your messages. This could actually be a scanned version of your signature, but it's usually a few lines that give additional information about you, such as your job title, mailing address, telephone and fax number, and Web site address. Adding an electronic signature is particularly useful when you are contacting someone for the first time, as it provides the recipient with some extra context about what you do or who you work for. This function can also be used to advertise a new product. You can draw your correspondents' attention to it by mentioning where they can find out more about it on your Web site.

## **What to Avoid**

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### **You Drop Your Standards**

E-mail messages can be created in an instant, and sometimes you may forget that you are in a business situation, where the impact on the recipient is crucial. Make sure that you take the time to review what you have written before sending your message. Abbreviations, acronyms, minimal punctuation, and unchecked spelling save time in the short term, but poor standards can damage your or your company's reputation.

### **Your Messages Cannot Be Read Easily**

It is especially important that information in an e-mail must be concise and clearly laid out, as these messages are normally read on a computer screen. Use upper and lower case letters and a legible typeface for clarity and avoid using too many capital letters. If your message is lengthy, guide the recipient by using headings for different topics, or include attachments.

## **Where to Learn More**

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### **Web Sites:**

Albion.com: [www.albion.com/netiquette](http://www.albion.com/netiquette)

CC Consulting: [www.crazycolour.com/os/emailedge\\_02.shtml](http://www.crazycolour.com/os/emailedge_02.shtml)

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