

Clear and Effective Email Communications

By Leslie J. Hall

E-mail is an amazing invention! We can communicate instantly with anyone, anywhere. It's quick, inexpensive, and a great tool for spreading information. However, as with any technology, there are pit falls.

E-mail is a form of sending a message just like a memo, letter or fax. Often, we forget that the same rules that apply to other forms of communication also apply to e-mail. Whenever you put anything in writing your credibility is at stake. Clarity of your message is as critical in e-mail as it would be in paper communication. Your communication (e-mail) to other individuals or agencies reflects the image of your entire organization. You get only one chance at a first impression. *Take the time to make it professional.*

Communicating is simple. You have a message. It needs to reach an audience. Before beginning any piece of writing, especially e-mail, ask yourself the following questions: What message am I trying to convey and who is the intended audience? In everything you write, always come back to these two things.

Additional questions to ask:

1. Who will be the main reader of this message and who will need a cc (carbon copy)?
2. Will the audience understand the message or request?
3. What background information do they need to understand?
4. What do I need the audience to do because of this message?
5. Have I stated the request clearly?

Why E-mail Is Special

The inherent problem with e-mail is that we feel like we are talking, but in actuality, we are still producing written communications. Because it feels conversational, we tend to be less concerned with basic grammar and spelling. The message may become less precise and more ambiguous. In addition, because of this feeling of informality, the writer may often say things that were better not documented. Legally, anything you write into an e-mail at work could potentially be part of a legal proceeding. Even when deleted, messages are often retrievable. E-mail is also different from other written forms of communication because you don't retain control of your message. It is easy for a reader to forward a message to others inside and outside your organization. It is also easy for the sender to mistakenly hit the wrong button and send the message to the wrong person. This dramatically increases the chances that your supervisor, a director/VP, or a person outside the agency will see your writing.

When To Use E-mail

E-mail is not always the appropriate form for a message. E-mail is best used for short, simple requests-- two to three short paragraphs. If you need to go longer, consider another form of transmission or an attachment. Some topics are not appropriate for e-mail.

The following issues are better discussed in person:

- Major decisions (e.g., policy changes)
- Any HR issues (especially sensitive ones like performance issues)
- Anything confidential
- Issues that need a lot of detail and explanation or might be easily misunderstood
- Delivery of unpleasant news
- Any especially emotional issue

Useful Subject Lines

The subject line is there to give the receiver a sneak peak at the content of the e-mail and helps them prioritize their response. Try to avoid generic or non-informative subject lines—give yours a little “oomph” and your message will better reach the reader. Also, don’t always use the same subject line. Many users keep e-mails and use the search feature on the subject line to locate information.

The subject line:

- Should be brief
- Should pertain to the subject
- Be targeted to the primary audience
- Does not need to be a complete sentence
- Not be vague, boring or cute

If you are sending non-urgent information that requires no response, put FYI as part of the subject line. (Subject: FYI-Donuts in the Break Room) For time-critical messages, adding ‘Urgent’ is a good idea, especially if you know the person gets a lot of e-mail. A phone call is probably better unless you are trying to reach a large group of people. (Subject: Urgent-Meeting with Director Changed) If you need a response, put “Response Needed” or “Reply Requested” in the subject line, and a deadline. (Subject: Please Reply Before Friday)

Take advantage of the electronic signature feature. Provide your name and phone number (and address if you frequently send e-mail outside your organization) so the reader can respond in a different format if they feel that is more appropriate. Also, the signature at the bottom signals the end of the document and helps the reader avoid scrolling farther down than necessary.

Copy With Care

CC stands for courtesy copy (or carbon copy). That means those listed in the cc line will receive an exact copy of the message, as well as all other replies when the sender hits *Reply All*. We frequently use e-mail just to keep people informed. This is easily accomplished by adding someone to the cc line. However, this may cause major confusion and closing of e-mail IN boxes.

Adhere to this general guideline for cc’s, if someone is listed in the TO box, then you expect a reply from them. Those listed in the cc box are not expected to reply, but are being offered this information as an FYI. Sometimes, a cc on an e-mail is an appropriate way to keep someone “in-the-loop.” Use it wisely.

Be very careful about selecting whom to include on a cc list. Stop and think: Why do I feel the need to include them? Does this person really need to know about this right now? Is any action required by this person? Does someone at their level really need to know about this? If so, is e-mail the best form of transmission? Does this person have an assistant or other staff that can relay this message in person? Directors and other high-level staff often receive the most e-mail and have the least time to respond. Be courteous of others' time. Be professional.

Remember, there is no confidentiality in e-mail. Blind cc means just that. There may be people included on an e-mail string without your knowledge. Never use e-mail for confidential or personal communication. A confidential flag on a message may keep the user from modifying it, but not always from forwarding it (or copying and pasting the text).

Reply All

Be VERY careful about hitting *Reply All*. Whenever you do, you are basically cc'ing all the people that originally received the message. Avoid e-mail "trigger finger" by double checking all addresses to which e-mails are being sent. Do they all really need to see this response? It can be very irritating to a reader to scan through messages that do not apply to them.

Consider drafting important messages in WORD. Write, review, spell/grammar check it, review your audience list first, then copy and paste the message into e-mail. This may help you slow down and think differently about how you write the message.

When you are on the receiving end of e-mail and the sender asks for a response, respond! **If you don't have the information they need, tell them when you will have it or where to find it.** Avoid confusion by always reply above or below the original message, never within it. If you are not asked for a response, you do not need to respond. Sending an e-mail to thank someone for a response is not always necessary. Should we add another e-mail to their IN box? Always read your e-mails carefully and follow instructions as asked.

Red Flags

When communicating through e-mail watch out for the following:

- Avoid typing in all capital letters. It is very hard to read. Typing in all caps does not get you more attention. (IT MAY SEEM LIKE YOU'RE SCREAMING.)
- Avoid typing without capitals. This makes you appear lazy. All the standard grammar rules still apply to e-mail.
- Avoid using different colors, different fonts, backgrounds, etc., in business e-mail. It is visually confusing and unprofessional. This is not the place to show your creativity (and it makes it a chore to read!)
- Be sure to include the original message (or at least a recap of it) in a reply. The context of your reply may be unclear without it.

- Avoid typing in one long paragraph. It is very hard to read. If you need a lot of background, add an attachment or refer the reader to where they can find other information.
- Be very careful about using words as weapons. Mistakes or lack of discretion can and will be turned against you. In an upsetting, emotional situation, face-to-face is the best method of communication. □ Use exclamation points sparingly in business writing. If you do, only use one! Put your enthusiasm and creativity into a well constructed message.
- Ask permission to forward information written by someone else. Don't assume that they would approve of your forwarding their work.
- It is very hard to be glib, humorous, or sarcastic in writing (e-mail or otherwise) because of the lack of vocal inflection, gestures, and shared environment. If the reader does not know your personality, they might misinterpret your message.
- **Never reply to spam, not even to unsubscribe.**

E-mail is a simple, helpful way to communicate. It can help you spread information and save you time. Just be aware of its limitations and pitfalls. Whenever you communicate, do it with care, tact, and professionalism.

Eight Tips for Writing Better E-mail Messages

1. Focus on your message and state it clearly.
2. Keep your messages short and simple. Add attachments as appropriate.
3. Remember your audience and double check TO and CC lists.
4. Use correct punctuation and grammar. Check your spelling.
5. Make use of subject lines. Don't change the subject line when replying to a message.
6. Use *Reply All* very carefully.
7. Use the priority feature judiciously.
8. Do not write anything in e-mail that you would not want your boss (or the local newspaper) to read.