

9: Emails

Chapter Objectives

The purpose of this chapter is to:

- Identify content appropriate for professional emails
- Demonstrate how audience influences email content
- Exemplify the important components of professional emails
- Explain ethical dilemmas posed by electronic communication

Employees send memos to communicate brief, internal messages to a large audience, such as to announce a meeting, organizational change, policy or procedural update, or other important information.

We send emails for **internal** and **external communication**. Emails can be brief or lengthy and are quite malleable for most purposes. Emails are useful tools for messages that are longer than a memo and to conduct business outside the organization. Many businesses send automated emails for regular communication, such to disseminate monthly reports. Many companies have synchronous chat networks so colleagues can exchange information quickly and easily, especially among small groups and teams.

Email often serves to exchange information within organizations. Although email may have an informal feel, remember that when used for business, it needs to convey professionalism and respect. Never write or send anything that you wouldn't want read in public or in front of your company president.

Is Your Email Appropriate?

Ask the following questions to determine if an email is appropriate:

- Is your message long, emotionally-charged, or does it contain highly-confidential information? If so, it may be more appropriate to communicate via a letter, a phone call, or a face-to-face meeting.
- How many emails does the recipient receive each day and what will make them read (or delete) your message?
- Will your recipient deem your email message important, an annoyance, or waste of time?
- Does the formality and style of your writing fit the expectations of your audience?
- How will your message appear when it reaches the receiver? Is it easy-to-read? Have you used correct grammar and punctuation?
- Did you divide your thoughts into discrete paragraphs and highlight important items, such as due dates, in the text?
- Did you provide enough context for your audience to easily understand and follow the thread of your message?
- Did you identify yourself and make it easy for the reader to respond appropriately?
- Will the receiver be able to open and read any attachments?

Deciding whether it is appropriate to send an email requires you to consider your **rhetorical situation**. If you recall from earlier in the text, your rhetorical situation refers to your purpose for writing a document and the audience who will receive the message. The questions above offer practical strategies for analyzing your rhetorical situation.

Also keep in mind that business writing is a general term to refer to many different types of documents. As you continue working through this text, remind yourself of the conventions for each type of document. How does a memo differ from an email? When should each be used? What about a letter? Why choose an email rather than a letter? Or vice versa? Again, understanding your rhetorical situation will help you make appropriate decisions about the types of documents to choose. Here are some additional thoughts to help you.

When Is an Email an Appropriate Form of Communication?

- You need to get in touch with a person who is hard to reach via telephone, does not come to campus regularly, or is not located in the same part of the country or world (for instance, someone who lives in a different time zone).
- The information you want to share is not time-sensitive. The act of sending an email is instantaneous, but that does not mean the writer can expect an instantaneous response. For many people, keeping up with their email correspondence is a part of their job, and they only do it during regular business hours. Unless your reader has promised otherwise, assume that it may take a few days for him/her to respond to your message.

- You need to send someone an electronic file, such as a document for a course, a spreadsheet full of data, or a rough draft of your paper.
- You need to distribute information to a large number of people quickly (for example, a memo that needs to be sent to the entire office staff).
- You need a written record of the communication. Saving important emails can be helpful if you need to refer back to what someone said in an earlier message, provide some kind of proof (for example, proof that you have paid for a service or product), or review the content of an important meeting, deadline, memo.

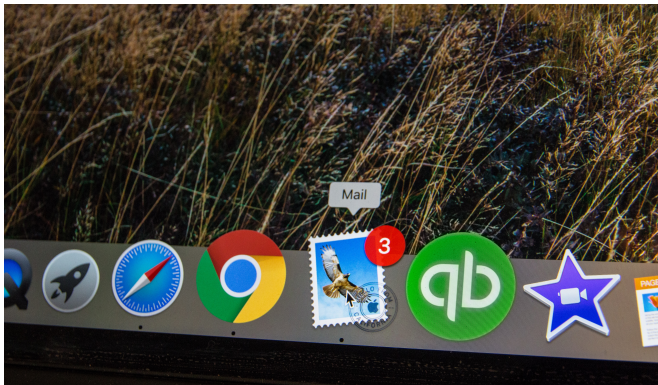
When Is an Email Not an Appropriate Form of Communication?

- Your message is long and complicated or requires additional discussion that would best be accomplished face-to-face. For example, if you want feedback from your supervisor on your work or if you are asking your professor a question that requires more than a yes/no answer or simple explanation, you should schedule a meeting instead.
- Information is highly confidential. Email is NEVER private! Keep in mind that your message could be forwarded on to other people without your knowledge. A backup copy of your email is always stored on a server where it can be easily retrieved by interested parties, even when you have deleted the message and think it is gone forever.
- Your message is emotionally charged or the tone of the message could be easily misconstrued. If you would hesitate to say something to someone's face, do not write it in an email.

As you can see from the complexity noted above, although email is a valuable communication tool, its widespread use in academic and business settings has introduced some new challenges for writers.

Because it is a relatively new form of communication, basic social conventions for writing and responding to email are still being worked out. Miscommunication can easily occur when people have different expectations about the emails that they send and receive. In addition, email is used for many different purposes, including contacting friends, communicating with professors and supervisors, requesting information, and applying for jobs, internships, and scholarships. Depending on your purposes, the messages you send will differ in their formality, intended audience, and desired outcome. Finally, the use of email for advertising purposes has clogged communication channels, preventing some emails from reaching their intended audience. Writers are challenged to make their email stand apart from “spam” and to grab and hold the attention of their audience.

So—how do you know when sending an email is the most effective way of getting your message across? When is a brief message okay, and when it is more appropriate to send a longer, more professional-sounding email? How should a writer decide what style of writing is appropriate for each task? How can you prevent your email from ending up in the junk pile? Keep reading for answers to these questions.



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Rhetorical Situation: Who Is Your Audience?

People have different opinions about the form and content of emails, so it is always helpful to be aware of the expectations of your **audience**. For example, some people regard email as a rapid and informal form of communication—a way to say “hello” or to ask a quick question. However, others view email as simply a more convenient way to transmit a formal letter. Such people may consider an informal email rude or unprofessional.

Email To a Friend

A message like this one might be acceptable to send your friend, but not to your professor:

Hey Joan,

Do you know what the assignment is about? Can U help me?

~M

Although it may be obvious to you that you wouldn't send such an email to your professor, let's carefully examine what assumptions this message makes about the reader and his/her expectations.

The **tone** of this message is very casual; it assumes that the reader knows who the sender is and has a close personal relationship with the sender. Because it contains an ambiguous reference to "the assignment," this message also assumes that the reader is familiar with the subject matter at hand (for instance, it assumes the reader will know which course and which particular assignment the sender is referring to). In this message, the writer also makes an implicit assumption about the reader's familiarity with the slang that is often used when sending an instant message or text message. If the reader is not familiar with this type of slang, the "U" in "Can U help me?" might be confusing, or it might even be taken as a sign that the writer is too lazy to type out the word "you."

Avoiding Misinterpretation

Making assumptions about your audience's expectations increases the risk that your message or its tone will be misinterpreted. To ensure that your message has its intended effect, use the following questions to help you think about your audience and their needs:

- Who is your audience? How often does your audience use email to communicate? How comfortable is your audience with using electronic communication—for example, when in their lifetime did they begin using email (childhood or adulthood)?
- What is your audience's relationship to you—for example, is the reader your teacher? Your boss? A friend? A stranger? How well do you know him/her? How would you talk to him/her in a social situation?
- What do you want your audience to think or assume about you? What kind of impression do you want to make?

Important Components of an Effective Email

Subject Lines

Email subject lines are like newspaper headlines. They should convey the main point of your email or the idea that you want the reader to take away from your email. Therefore, be as specific as possible. One word subjects such as "Hi," "Question," or "FYI" are not informative and don't give the reader an idea of how important your message is. If your message is time sensitive, you might want to include a date in your subject line, for example, "Meeting on Thurs, Dec 2."

Greetings and Sign-offs

Use some kind of greeting and some kind of sign-off. Don't just start with your text, and don't stop at the end without a polite signature. If you don't know the person well, you may be confused about how to address him/her ("What do I call my TA/professor?") or how to sign off (From? Sincerely?). Nonetheless, it is always better to make some kind of effort. When in doubt, address someone more formally to avoid offending them. Some common ways to address your reader are:

Dear Professor Smith,

Hello Ms. McMahon,

Hi Mary Jane,

If you don't know the name of the person you are addressing, or if the email addresses a diverse group, try something generic, yet polite:

Dear members of the selection committee,

Hello everyone,

To whom it may concern,

Your ending is extremely important because it lets the reader know who is contacting them. Always sign off with your name at the end of your email. If you don't know the reader well, you might also consider including your title and the organization you belong to:

Mary Watkins

Senior Research Associate

Bain and Company

Joseph Smith

UNC-CH, Class of 2009

For your closing, something brief but friendly, or perhaps just your name, will do for most correspondence:

Thank you,

Best wishes,

See you tomorrow,

Regards,

For a very formal message, such as a job application, use the kind of closing that you might see in a business letter:

Sincerely,

Respectfully yours,

Cc: and Bcc: ('carbon copy' and 'blind carbon copy')

Copying individuals on an email is a good way to send your message to the main recipient while also sending someone else a copy at the same time. This can be useful if you want to convey the same exact message to more than one person. In professional settings, copying someone else on an email can help get things done, especially if the person receiving the copy is in a supervisory role. For example, copying your boss on an email to a nonresponsive co-worker might prompt the co-worker to respond. Be aware, however, that when you send a message to more than one address using the Cc: field, both the original recipient and all the recipients of the carbon copies can see all the email addresses in the To: and Cc: fields. Each person who receives the message will be able to see the addresses of everyone else who received it.

Blind copying emails to a group of people can be useful when you don't want everyone on the list to have each other's email addresses. The only recipient address that will be visible to all recipients is the one in the To: field. If you don't want any of the recipients to see the email addresses in the list, you can put your own address in the To: field and use Bcc: exclusively to address your message to others. However, do not assume that blind copying will always keep recipients from knowing who else was copied—someone who is blind copied may hit "reply all" and send a reply to everyone, revealing that he/she was included in the original message.

Additional Tips for Writing More Effective Emails

Think about your message before you write it. Don't send emails in haste. First, decide on the purpose of your email and what outcome you expect from your communication. Then think about your message's audience and what he/she/they may need in order for your message to have the intended result. You will also improve the clarity of your message if you organize your thoughts before you start writing. Jot down some notes about what information you need to convey, what questions you have, etc., then organize your thoughts in a logical sequence. You can try brainstorming techniques like mapping, listing, or outlining to help you organize your thoughts.

Reflect on the tone of your message. When you are communicating via email, your words are not supported by gestures, voice inflections, or other cues, so it may be easier for someone to misread your tone. For example, sarcasm and jokes are often misinterpreted in emails and may offend your audience. Similarly, be careful about how you address your reader. For instance, beginning an email to your professor or TA with "Hey!" might be perceived as being rude or presumptuous (as in, "Hey you!"). If you're unsure about how your email might be received, you might try reading it out loud to a friend to test its tone.

Strive for clarity and brevity in your writing. Have you ever sent an email that caused confusion and took at least one more communication to straighten out? Miscommunication can occur if an email is unclear, disorganized, or just too long and complex for readers to easily follow.

A Note on Clarity

Here are some steps you can take to ensure that your message is understood:

1. Briefly state your purpose for writing the email in the very beginning of your message.
2. Be sure to provide the reader with a context for your message. If you're asking a question, cut and paste any relevant text (for example, computer error messages, assignment prompts you don't understand, part of a previous email message, etc.) into the email so that the reader has some frame of reference for your question. When replying to someone else's email, it can often be helpful to either include or restate the sender's message.
3. Use paragraphs to separate thoughts (or consider writing separate emails if you have many unrelated points or questions).
4. Finally, state the desired outcome at the end of your message. If you're requesting a response, let the reader know what type of response you require (for example, an email reply, possible times for a meeting, a recommendation letter, etc.) If you're requesting something that has a due date, be sure to highlight that due date in a prominent position in your email. Ending your email with the next step can be really useful, especially in work settings (for example, you might write "I will follow this email up with a phone call to you in the next day or so" or "Let's plan to further discuss this at the meeting on Wednesday").

Format your message so that it is easy to read. Use **white space** to visually separate paragraphs into separate blocks of text. Bullet important details so that they are easy to pick out. Use bold face type or capital letters to highlight critical information, such as due dates. (But do not type your entire message in capital letters or boldface—your reader may perceive this as “shouting” and won't be able to tell which parts of the message are especially important.)

Re-read messages before you send them. Use proper grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. If your email program supports it, use spelling and grammar checkers. Try reading your message out loud to help you catch any grammar mistakes or awkward phrasing that you might otherwise miss.

Sample Email

Use what you've just learned to explain why Student 2's email to Professor Jones is more effective than the email written by Student 1. How does the tone of the messages differ? What makes Student 2's email look and sound more appropriate? What are the elements that contribute its clarity? If you were Professor Jones and you received both emails, how would you respond to each one?

Email from Student 1

hey,
i need help on my paper can i come by your office tomorrow
thx

Email from Student 2

Hi Dr. Jones,

I am in your ENGL 101 class on Thursdays, and I have a question about the paper that is due next Tuesday. I'm not sure that I understand what is meant by the following sentence in the prompt: "Write a 10 page paper arguing for or against requiring ENGL 101 for all UNC freshmen and provide adequate support for your point of view."

I am not sure what you would consider "adequate" support. Would using 3 sources be o.k.?

Can I come by your office tomorrow at 2:00 pm to talk to you about my question? Please let me know if that fits your schedule. If not, I could also come by on Friday after 1:00.

Thank you,
Tim Smith

Here are two versions of an e-mail from a supervisor, Jane Doe, to a group of her employees. Which version do you think is most effective? Why?

Version 1

Subject: tomorrow

As you know, tomorrow afternoon we'll be meeting to discuss the status of all of our current projects. Donuts will be provided. Be sure to arrive on time and bring along the materials you have been working on this week—bring enough copies for everyone. Some of these material might include your calendars, reports, and any important emails you have sent. Also, I wanted to remind you that your parking permit requests are due later this week; you should turn those in to Ms. Jones, and if she is not at her desk when you stop by, you can email them to her.

Version 2

Subject: Materials for Wed. Staff Meeting

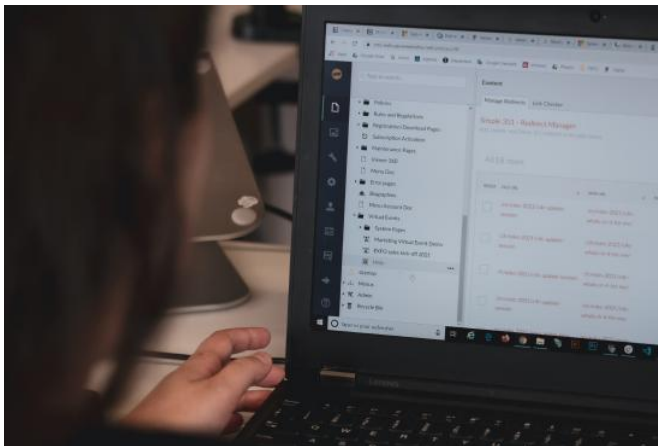
Hi, everyone—

For tomorrow's 3 p.m. staff meeting in the conference room, please bring 15 copies of the following materials:

- Your project calendar
- A one-page report describing your progress so far
- A list of goals for the next month
- Copies of any progress report messages you have sent to clients this past month

See you tomorrow—

Jane



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Ethical Dilemmas Posed by Electronic Communication

Since emails can contain a lot of personal data, you should take steps to protect your privacy and that of your email recipients. For example, you might use encryption software, or an email server that encrypts your email between your computer and the server, to prevent your personal data from being distributed to the general public. However, the server (and government agencies) can access your data without your knowledge via the server's encryption key. To combat this, Andy Yen recommends you create your own encryption keys, so you own the data and access to the content.

Your employer may require you to sign a confidentiality agreement, in addition to following their code of conduct or ethics. Confidentiality is a safeguard that protects you and your employer from betraying the trust of your readers, clients, colleagues, and supervisors. For example, confidential messages could include proprietary knowledge your organization owns, the financial data of a client, or your own medical or personnel records.

You are ethically and contractually obligated to protect this data when you create internal reports and external promotional materials. For ethical reasons, during written and oral presentations, you should relay all information (positive and negative) to

present an accurate picture of the subject. You should never intentionally mislead your audience, even if the purpose is to persuade them to buy a product, or support a policy or procedure change.

Keeping accurate records will help protect you and your organization against questions about confidentiality and other ethical breaches. The rules and regulations vary by industry and individual company policies. For example, many private and public offices have certain legal requirements for electronic record keeping. This "paper trail" can protect your interests and document customer service issues.

General Emailing Tips

- Proper salutations should demonstrate respect and avoid mix-ups in case a message is accidentally sent to the wrong recipient. For example, use a salutation like "Dear Ms. X" (external) or "Hi Barry" (internal).
- Subject lines should be clear, brief, and specific. This helps the recipient understand the essence of the message. For example, "Proposal attached" or "Your question of 10/25."
- Close with a signature. Identify yourself by creating a signature block that automatically contains your name and business contact information.
- Avoid abbreviations. An email is not a text message, and the audience may not find your wit cause to ROTFLOL (roll on the floor laughing out loud).
- Be brief. Omit unnecessary words.
- Use a good format. Include line breaks between sentences or divide your message into brief paragraphs for ease of reading. A good e-mail should get to the point and conclude in three small paragraphs or less.
- Reread, revise, and review. Catch and correct spelling and grammar mistakes before you press "send." It will take more time and effort to undo the problems caused by a hasty, poorly written email than to get it right the first time.
- Reply promptly. Watch out for an emotional response—never reply in anger—but make a habit of replying to all emails within twenty-four hours, even if only to say that you will provide the requested information in forty-eight or seventy-two hours.
- Use "Reply All" sparingly. Do not send your reply to everyone who received the initial email unless your message absolutely needs to be read by the entire group.
- Avoid using all caps. Capital letters are used on the Internet to communicate emotion or yelling and are considered rude.
- Test links. If you include a link, test it to make sure it is complete.
- Email ahead of time if you are going to attach large files (audio and visual files are often quite large) to prevent exceeding the recipient's mailbox limit or triggering the spam filter.
- Give feedback or follow up. If you don't get a response in twenty-four hours, email or call. Spam filters may have intercepted your message, so your recipient may never have received it.

All links live as of July 2021.

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