



WRITING, CLEAR AND SIMPLE

10 TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE E-MAIL MESSAGES

PLUS
HOW TO WRITE
E-MAIL THAT SUCKS:
AN INCOMPLETE GUIDE

BY ROY JACOBSEN

Follow these ten tips (plus one more for good measure) to help ensure that your messages do what you want them to do.

Since its inception as a tool used by a few computer users in the mid-60, e-mail has risen to be a dominant business communications medium. Surveys show that workers spend anywhere from 30 minutes to four hours a day writing, reading, and answering e-mail.

Yet, so many of the billions of messages flooding the Internet don't live up to their potential. The messages are often mixed or unclear, and they fail to accomplish what their senders intend.

Follow these ten tips (plus one more for good measure) to help ensure that your messages do what you want them to do.

1. BE SURE E-MAIL IS THE RIGHT MEDIUM

Think for a moment about the message: Is e-mail the best medium for what you want to say?

- Is it a sensitive topic?

Some topics, such as performance matters, are best handled with a face-to-face conversation.

In an e-mail exchange, you miss all the non-verbal cues and the human interaction that, in some circumstances, can be invaluable.

- Is it confidential information? It's all too easy for an e-mail message that you might consider a private communication to be forwarded on to hundreds or thousands of unintended recipients.
- Is it complex? E-mail is well suited for relatively simple messages, but if you need complex formatting, tables of data, and charts to deliver your message, then e-mail is not the medium to use.
- Is it a personal message? Sometimes the best thing to do is to pick up a pen and a nice note card and write your message out by hand. Remember how you felt the last time you received a hand-written thank you note? Isn't it worth a stamp and an envelope to make someone else feel that way?

The best advice is to ask yourself this:

“How would I want to receive this information?”

2. NAIL DOWN THE PURPOSE OF THE MESSAGE

Virtually every message has one of three main purposes: to inform, to inquire, or to influence. This overall purpose determines how you write the message.

- If you are writing to inform, identify the key points your recipients need to know. Be sure to put yourself in their place and provide them with the information they need, and not just what you want to tell them.
- If you are seeking information, identify your questions. Be sure you've identified all of them, and don't ask for information you really don't need.
- If you are trying to influence, call for action and identify the desired outcome. Again, put yourself in your recipients' shoes and give them good reasons to do what you're asking.

3. WHAT'S THE ONE MAIN POINT?

Don't use a single e-mail message for multiple messages. Very few people read e-mails word-for-word from beginning to end. They look at the subject line, and if you're lucky, the first few lines to

decide if it's worth reading any further. Then they scan the message for main point. Once they find it, they frequently stop reading.

4. SET THE TONE

Think about the purpose and main point of the message as well as who's receiving it.

The topic and your relationship to the recipient will help you choose a tone for the message.

A casual, humorous tone is fine when you're writing to a long-time acquaintance about an upcoming lunch meeting, but you'll want to use more formal language if you're responding to a customer complaint.

5. USE THE INVERTED PYRAMID

Once you have figured out what your main point is, follow the example of newspapers and put that main point at the very beginning of your message. (Journalists call this structure the Inverted Pyramid.) The rest of your message can provide details that support or expand on that main point.

Put some white space between the paragraphs. Use numbered or bulleted lists for individual points.

6. GIVE YOUR MESSAGE VISIBLE STRUCTURE

Remember, people scan e-mail messages, so make them easy to scan. A long, continuous block of text is hard to read. If your message is long, break it into paragraphs, with each paragraph containing a single main idea. Keep sentences and paragraphs short.

Put some white space between the paragraphs. Use numbered or bulleted lists for individual points.

7. WRITE AN INFORMATIVE SUBJECT LINE

Be sure your subject line gives people a reason to read your message. Write something that will catch their attention and let them know what the contents are about. Things like “Important!” or “Hey, Frank” won’t cut it. Subjects like “Acme Project kickoff meeting” or “Need your input on marketing budget” are descriptive, specific, concise, and clear.

One last note about subjects:

If you’re participating in an e-mail thread, and the topic changes, change the subject line to match.

8. CHECK THE ATTACHMENTS

If you include an attachment, be sure your recipient knows what it is and why you're sending it. Be sure it's been scanned for viruses, and that it's in a format the recipient is able to open. Also, be aware that some e-mail systems, spam filters, and anti-virus software automatically block some types of files. Finally, check one more time that you really did attach the right file before clicking "Send."

9. DOUBLE-CHECK SPELLING AND GRAMMAR

In many cases, we exchange e-mail messages with people we seldom, if ever, meet face to face. No matter how careful you are with the previous points in this list, a message riddled with misspelled words and grammatical errors will put a serious dent in your credibility and professional image.

10. ADDRESS IT WITH CARE

Have you added everyone necessary to the To: and CC: lines? Are you sending this to anyone who doesn't need to or shouldn't receive it?

Be very cautious about using the BCC: line. For example, if a BCC recipient clicks “Reply To All,” everyone who originally received the message will know about the BCC recipient, a piece of information you were originally trying to conceal.

Ask yourself
“What’s the
likelihood that
I’ll regret this
tomorrow if I
click ‘Send’
now?”

PLUS ONE: DON’T CLICK SEND UNTIL YOU DO A PRE-FLIGHT CHECK

Your message is ready to go, but before you click “Send,” perform a “pre-flight” check:

- Ask yourself “What’s the likelihood that I’ll regret this tomorrow if I click ‘Send’ now?” It might be a good idea to let the message rest in your Drafts folder for a while.
- Re-read it to see if you’ve left out any key information, or added anything that you can leave out. While you’re at it, be sure it conveys the right tone.
- Be sure that your audience will get the main message if all they read is the first paragraph.

Don’t let your e-mail messages be ineffective time-wasters for you and your readers. Follow these 10 (plus one) tips, and help ensure that your messages get results.

BONUS—HOW TO WRITE E-MAIL THAT SUCKS: AN INCOMPLETE GUIDE¹

E-mail is an essential part of the modern communications toolkit. If you want your e-mail messages to almost-but-not-quite-completely fail to live up to their potential, here are some tips you can follow at your own peril:

1. Don't bother with a meaningful subject line. Don't write a subject like "Here's the contract information you asked for," "Agenda for staff meeting," or "I need you to review the attached document." Write a subject line like "Hi!", or "Wazzup?" Even better, leave it blank. People love mysteries.
2. Meander around for a while, telling some amusing anecdotes, or offering your thoughts on the performance of the team in the big game, or asking if the recipient saw *Desperate Housewives* last night, before getting to the point of your message.

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Big words are a
great way
impress—nay,
intimidate—
people with your
smartness.

3. email is informal, so, like, things like spelling punctuation grammar and standard english usage dont matter, you know?
4. IF YOUR MESSAGE IS VERY IMPORTANT, PUT IT IN ALL CAPITAL LETTERS SO YOUR RECIPIENT WILL FEEL LIKE YOU'RE STANDING INCHES AWAY, SHOUTING, WITH YOUR SPITTLE SPLATTERING HIS OR HER FACE. BECAUSE YOU DO THAT IN REAL LIFE, DON'T YOU?
5. If you're not sure how... I don't know... maybe if you... those dot-dot-dot thingies... they're called ellipses... anyway, you can use them instead of doing the work of figuring out the best way to say what you want to say.
6. Structure of any sort—paragraphs, bulleted lists, numbered lists, headings and subheadings—is overrated. Just dump everything into one big glob of text.
7. Throw in lots of big, obscure words like obfuscation, disintermediation, and penultimate. Big words are a great way impress—nay, intimidate—people with your smartness. And they're a lot less likely to question you if they can't figure out what the hell it is you're saying.

8. If you're replying to a number of questions, be sure to answer only a few of them. Leave the rest for people to figure out on their own. It's good for them, the lazy slackers.

Reader suggestions:

“Make sure every e-mail you send is sent as "High Priority" so people know to read them. And while you're at it, make the subject in ALL CAPS as well just to emphasize how important your message is. Do this every time, so that the recipient knows how superior you truly are.”

—Faraz

“Use a multi-color animated manga GIF background, preferably leaving your message intelligible, in order to show your üBerHaXor skills.”

—John Willemse

“Make sure to add anyone and everyone on the To: line. People like receiving emails that have absolutely nothing to do with them. Nobody likes feeling less important and knowing they don't have to respond by being placed on the CC: line or being left out all together.”

—Atifa

“Please, please, please, when you forward me one of the silly email jokes that isn't funny and that I don't have time to read, please leave in every header from every previous person who forwarded it so that I have to scroll down forever and ever.”

—Liz Strauss

“Please use 'Reply All' for company-wide e-mails and appointments so that we can all get more e-mail. It's fun for everyone to know that your telephone isn't working or that you can't attend the company picnic next week.”

—Julie

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roy Jacobsen is a writer, editor, and writing coach. He has more than 20 years of experience writing and editing in a number of fields, including the health food industry, agricultural economics research, and computer software.

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Jacobsen lives in Fargo, North Dakota, and has written his share of e-mails that sucked.

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