

Effective E-mail Communication

What this handout is about

This handout is intended to help students, faculty, and University professionals learn to communicate more effectively using e-mail. It can help you determine when e-mail is and is not an efficient way of communicating and write e-mail that successfully conveys your message to your intended audience.

Background

Although e-mail 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 e-mail are still being worked out. Miscommunication can easily occur when people have different expectations about the e-mails that they send and receive. In addition, e-mail 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 e-mail for advertising purposes has clogged communication channels, preventing some e-mails from reaching their intended audience. Writers are challenged to make their e-mail stand apart from “spam” and to grab and hold the attention of their audience.

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

When is e-mail the appropriate form of communication to use?

E-mail is a good way to get your message across when:

- 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 e-mail is instantaneous, but that does not mean the writer can expect an instantaneous response. For many people, keeping up with their e-mail 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 e-mails 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 e-mail NOT an appropriate form of communication to use?

E-mail is not an effective means of communication when:

- 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. E-mail is NEVER private! Keep in mind that your message could be forwarded on to other people without your knowledge. A backup copy of your e-mail 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 e-mail.

Who is your audience?

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

A message like this one might be o.k. 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 e-mail 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.”

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 e-mail to communicate? How comfortable is your audience with using electronic communication—for example, when in their lifetime did they begin using e-mail (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 e-mail:

Subject Lines

E-mail subject lines are like newspaper headlines. They should convey the main point of your e-mail or the idea that you want the reader to take away from your e-mail. 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.” Think about the subject lines on the e-mail messages you receive. Which ones do you think are most effective? Why?

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 e-mail addresses a diverse group, try something generic, yet polite:

*To whom it may concern,
Dear members of the selection committee,
Hello everyone,*

Your closing is extremely important because it lets the reader know who is contacting them. Always sign off with your name at the end of your e-mail. If you don’t know the reader well, you might also consider including your title and the organization you belong to; for example:

*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 e-mail 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 e-mail can help get things done, especially if the person receiving the copy is in a supervisory role. For example, copying your boss on an e-mail 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 e-mail 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 e-mails to a group of people can be useful when you don't want everyone on the list to have each other's e-mail 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 e-mail 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.

Some additional tips for writing more effective e-mails

Think about your message before you write it. Don't send e-mails in haste. First, decide on the purpose of your e-mail 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 e-mail, 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 e-mails and may offend your audience. Similarly, be careful about how you address your reader. For instance, beginning an e-mail 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 e-mail 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 e-mail that caused confusion and took at least one more communication to straighten out? Miscommunication can occur if an e-mail is unclear, disorganized, or just too long and complex for readers to easily follow. Here are some steps you can take to ensure that your message is understood:

1. Briefly state your purpose for writing the e-mail 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 e-mail message, etc.) into the e-mail so that the reader has some frame of reference for your question. When replying to someone else's e-mail, it can often be helpful to either include or restate the sender's message.

3. Use paragraphs to separate thoughts (or consider writing separate e-mails 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 e-mail 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 e-mail. Ending your e-mail with the next step can be really useful, especially in work settings (for example, you might write "I will follow this e-mail 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.)

Proofread. Re-read messages before you send them. Use proper grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. If your e-mail 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.

Questions to ask yourself before sending an e-mail message

- Is this message suitable for e-mail, or could I better communicate the information with a letter, phone call, or face-to-face meeting?
- What is my purpose for sending this e-mail? Will the message seem important to the receiver, or will it be seen as an annoyance and a waste of time?
- How many e-mails does the reader usually receive, and what will make him/her read this message (or delete it)?
- Do the formality and style of my writing fit the expectations of my audience?
- How will my message look when it reaches the receiver? Is it easy to read? Have I used correct grammar and punctuation? Have I divided my thoughts into discrete paragraphs? Are important items, such as due dates, highlighted in the text?
- Have I provided enough context for my audience to easily understand or follow the thread of the message?
- Did I identify myself and make it easy for the reader to respond in an appropriate manner?
- Will the receiver be able to open and read any attachments?

Sample e-mails

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

E-mail from Student 1:

hey,

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

thx

E-mail 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 of Jane Doe’s E-mail:

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 teh 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 e-mails 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 e-mail them to her.

Version 2 of Jane Doe’s E-mail:

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

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the [UNC Libraries citation tutorial](#).

Terminello, Verna and Reed, Marcia G. *NetEffect Series: E-mail Communicate Effectively*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003.

Lamb, Sandra E. *How to Write It. A Complete Guide to Everything You'll Ever Write*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1998.

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