

How to Improve Your Email Etiquette



Email as a medium of communication has become an almost indispensable tool for business, educational, social and personal purposes. Its importance in the future will, in all likelihood, continue to grow at an almost exponential rate, despite the plague of spam that is choking the internet. Learn how to use email without offending anybody, how to format your messages, the right way to reply and forward, and a lot more here.

Recently, I started corresponding with an old family friend. From the start, I was shocked to find she regularly wrote her emails exclusively in all uppercase letters. I politely mentioned using all caps in an email is the equivalent of screaming in voice conversations and she said she appreciated the tip. Still, I couldn't help wondering how a professional could get by today without mastering one of the most basic tenets of email manners.

And that's not the only email etiquette breach that makes me scratch my head. Every time I have to scroll through 50 email addresses before reading a message from a friend who used the 'cc' rather than 'bcc' function, I find myself wishing that some kind of licensing or training were required before people were allowed to get on email.

Since that's never going to happen, here are a few ways to ensure your email style makes you look as smart as possible and doesn't annoy those on the receiving end of your messages.

Change the subject line every time you start a new conversation. Having descriptive subject lines helps people quickly scan their inbox to decide which messages to read first and also when searching for a message after a conversation has ended.

Don't use email when another medium makes more sense. Use email only when it's the best method. In many work cultures (as in *Yahoo!*), instant messaging is popular for quick conversations and sending links back and forth. If you know a friend is more likely to see a text message than an email, use text messaging. If you know someone is at home and might not check an email about a meeting change in half an hour, **the old-fashioned landline** might be the best choice.

Add a salutation. Always greet the person you're writing to. Otherwise, your email will come across as an order, specially if you're making a request.

Remind the recipients who you are. If you've met someone once or it's been awhile since you've reached out to them, remind them of previous encounters.

Answer questions inline. When someone sends an email asking several questions, train yourself to **reply inline**, inserting your answers directly beneath each question.

Be brief, but be clear. Spend time crafting a well thought-out email and get to the point quickly. Use bullets if you're making several points so the message can be quickly scanned. Put any deadlines in a bold font near the top and bottom of your message.

Use proper spelling, grammar and punctuation. This is not only important because improper spelling, grammar and punctuation give a bad impression of you, it is also important for conveying the message properly. E-mails with no full stops or commas are difficult to read and can sometimes even change the meaning of the text. And, if your programme has a spell-check option, why not use it?

Use active instead of passive. Try to use the active voice of a verb wherever possible.

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Use upper and lowercase text. Using all uppercase letters means SHOUTING and can be offensive.

Answer swiftly. Each e-mail should be replied to within at least 24 hours, and preferably within the same working day. If the email is complicated, just reply saying you have received it and you will get back to them.

Use the 'cc' function sparingly. Try to 'cc' only those who need to know and avoid 'cc'-ing long lists of people unless it is important everyone know who else received a message. Certainly don't use this function if you don't want people on the list to know the names of the other people receiving the same message.

Ask whether people prefer attachments or inline pasting. Many people dislike receiving attachments, but it's good to ask someone's preference if you're going to be sending documents back and forth. Consider tools that allow two people to share and work on a document together rather than attachments. I'm a big fan of **Google Docs** for this purpose.

Thank people in advance. You can reduce email overload if you simply thank people in advance. Then you won't feel compelled to send a useless one-word thank you email later.

Say no to chain letters and jokes. While a rare forwarded email evokes a smile or a warm feeling, they are mostly irritating. You may expect those from your close friends, but you may not want to receive them from professional contacts. Do be careful when replying to mailing list messages, or to messages sent to many recipients. Are you sure you want to reply to the whole list? And, remember to delete anything that isn't needed or is trivial.

Avoid shared email addresses. Do not share an email with a spouse or partner (either the personal or the business kind). Grown-ups should have their own email addresses.

Be polite. Terseness can be misinterpreted.

Don't reply to an email message when angry, as you may regret it later. Once the message has been sent, you will not be able to recover it.

Don't over-use punctuation such as exclamation marks ("!") as these are meant for emphasis. In

Practising email etiquette will help you and your recipients reduce email overload. Before you know it, better email habits will reduce the flurry of messages going back and forth, your messages will be clearer and have more meaning, and your recipients will be able to answer more thoroughly.

particular avoid more than one exclamation mark ("!!!"), especially if your email is quite formal. Also, over-use of the full-stop (e.g. "....") can make a message difficult to read.

Don't forward chain letters. We can safely say all of them are hoaxes. Just delete them as soon as you receive them, even without opening, to avoid viruses.

Watch out for viruses and other threats in attached files. Attached files are a common way to spread computer viruses. Just receiving an attachment cannot infect your

computer. But opening or running an attachment can.

Don't post your email address on websites and other public parts of the Internet unless you want to be deluged with *spam*.

Don't leave out the message thread. When you reply to an email, you must include the original mail in your reply; in other words click 'Reply', instead of 'New Mail'. If you receive many emails you obviously cannot remember each individual email. This means a 'threadless email' will not provide enough information and you will have to spend a frustratingly long time to find out the context of the email in order to deal with it. Leaving the thread might take a fraction longer in download time, but it will save the recipient much more time and frustration in looking for the related emails in their inbox!

Don't use email to discuss confidential information. Sending an email is like sending a postcard. If you don't want your email to be displayed on a bulletin board, don't send it. Moreover, never make any libellous, sexist or racially discriminating comments in emails, even if they are meant to be a joke.

Read the email before you send it. A lot of people don't bother to read an email before they send it out, as can be seen from the many spelling and grammar mistakes contained in emails. Apart from this, reading your email through the eyes of the recipient will help you send a more effective message and avoid misunderstandings and inappropriate comments.

Sign your name. Just because it's your account, doesn't mean it's actually you writing the email. Also, it's just good manners.

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