

How to read email; and write email that people will read

Email is fundamentally a form of communication; it is about communicating thoughts and ideas. If you are not getting your message across then it is not succeeding. Unfortunately, there are a lot of things that people commonly do that make email hard (or boring) to read and hamper communication. If you want to write effective email, this document contains some rules and guidelines which can help. Similarly, there are hints on receiving and reading email so that you and your computer do not get burnt.

There are references for further reading at the end. These are strongly recommended.

Privacy/Security

Email is neither private nor secure. Although email is a very useful tool, email messages must be treated with caution.

- Consider carefully what you write; it is a permanent record and can be easily forwarded to others or intercepted on the way.
- Be careful about what you read; email forgery is trivially easy. Apply common sense “reality checks” before assuming a message is valid.
- Don’t assume that email is instant. Technical reasons may delay delivery or people may not be reading email at the time. If the matter is urgent, follow it up with a phone-call or a door-knock.
- Never open an attachment unless you know what it is and you are expecting it. Attachments are a major source of computer viruses and other nasty stuff.
- Don’t forward virus warnings. In most cases these are hoaxes or old news that only annoy others. If in doubt, talk to your system administrator.

Politeness

Email combines the worst features of written communication (in that you have none of the visual clues such as a smile) and of personal conversation (in that you can respond immediately without time for reflection). In the absence of other helpful clues, it is very easy to take offence. Courtesy is all that keeps it usable.

- Email should never contain material which might cause offence (racist, sexist, etc). Such material will usually lead to your email access being terminated; and is a permanent record which can be used in criminal prosecution.
- Flaming (sending strongly emotional email) is rarely appropriate. It is like throwing a tantrum and is unlikely to encourage a positive response.
- Responding to heated email should be done cautiously if at all; waiting till the next day is often wise. It is sometimes useful to write the response

you would *like* to send, then delete it and craft a more carefully worded reply.

- Flame wars easily get out of hand. A phone-call or a door-knock is often useful to stabilise an over-heated situation and to deal with things productively. If someone is really steamed up, there are probably other issues that need dealing with.
- Flaming in a public forum is never appropriate; it looks childish and will annoy most people.
- If you are flamed in an public forum it is generally wise not to respond (it is the flamer that looks silly).
- Use emoticons (smileys) if necessary to convey a tone of voice. “:-)” indicates that I am happy and smiling as I type; “;-)” and I am just kidding.
- Use emoticons sparingly: more than a couple in a message look tacky; they are never appropriate in formal or professional communication.
- Don’t assume that including a smiley will make the recipient happy with what you say or wipe out an otherwise insulting comment.
- Check all your incoming email before responding to a message. There may well be further information that changes things considerably.
- Re-read your messages at least twice before you send them; catching simple spelling errors and making sure the “tone” of the message is appropriate.
- DO NOT TYPE IN ALL UPPER-CASE. IT IS LIKE SHOUTING AND IS RUDE AND IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND.
- Don’t send attachments that your readers cannot read. For example, a Word document will not be readable by most people in our School. If in doubt, talk to the intended reader about what formats they can handle.

Distribution

Sending unsolicited email (especially any advertising) is known as spam. It annoys most people and obscures important messages.

- Target your address list carefully. Too broad a distribution is a form of spamming and will simply annoy most people who receive it.
- When replying, check (and usually trim) the list of recipients. Don’t reply to a list unless you are sure that your reply is relevant to the whole list.
- Never send chain letters via email.

Content/Style

The point of any form of communication is to communicate. If you want to get your message across:

- Write succinctly, keep messages short and to the point; anything beyond the first screenful is unlikely to be read.
- Use descriptive subject lines. Many busy people will only open messages with captivating subject lines. Think creatively.
- Focus on one subject per message, that way the reader can locate the message easily and deal with it appropriately.
- Use quoted material to give context when replying. A simple reply of “yes” may not be meaningful when read several days later.
- Do not over-quote. Omit whatever is not required to understand your reply. A couple of sentences is usually enough. If necessary, paraphrase the original email; indicating that it is a paraphrase (usually with “[]”).
- If it is necessary to include a lengthy quote, put your response before the quote (or it will not be noticed).
- If you include a “signature” (contact information, like a business card), keep it short and pertinent.

Format/Compatibility

If you want to communicate, it is useful to use the same language. There are many different mail programs (such as pine or outlook) running on a number of different platforms (such as Macintoshes or Unix computers). Messages do not necessarily translate well between different programs or platforms. If any of your readers use a computer or email program different from your own, the following points will be useful.

- Limit your text to “typewriter” characters (letters, numbers, basic punctuation). Copyright signs and even some punctuation marks may be unreadable for other people. Colours, bold and italics should be avoided.
- Asterisks can be used to make a ***stronger*** point. The underscore character can indicate underlined text.
- Limit the line length to 65–70 characters by hitting <Enter> at the end of each line, not just at the end of the paragraph. Otherwise some email programs will wrap the text at wrong points or not wrap it at all and the message will be unreadable.

Attachments

Compatibility issues apply as much to attachments as to messages. In general, the larger and more diverse the list of recipients, the more care needs to be taken with the format of any data that is sent.

- Never open an attachment unless you know what it is and you are expecting it.
- Be cautious about sending attachments; not all mail reading programs can handle them.
- Do not send large attachments to a large group of people. The sheer volume entailed in many copies of a large item can overwhelm mail systems. Consider sending a URL or some other reference instead.
- Be cautious about sending application-specific data. For example, a Word document will not be readable by most people in the School. If in doubt, talk to the intended reader about what formats they can handle.
- Be cautious about encoding formats. For example, a binhex encoded file from a Macintosh will be unreadable for many people. If in doubt, or if there appears to be a problem, talk to your local system administrator.

Further reading (strongly recommended)

- A very good *Beginner's Guide to Effective Email* by Kaitlin Sherwood is available at:
<http://www.webfoot.com/advice/email.top.html>
- An excellent article by Christopher Russo on dealing with difficult email (from the Usenix journal, *login*) is available at:
<http://www.usenix.org/publications/login/2002-02/pdfs/russo.pdf>
- RFC 1855 *Netiquette Guidelines* is available at:
<http://www.dtcc.edu/cs/rfc1855.html>
- The University of New South Wales' *Email Policy* is available at:
<http://www.dis.unsw.edu.au/policies/docs/Email.Policy.2004.pdf>

Acknowledgements

This document draws heavily on the *Further reading* articles, and on:

- <http://www.logan.net/help/netiquette.html>
- http://everythingemail.net/email_help_tips.html

Any suggestions for additions or changes to this document are welcome. Please send them to Geoff Oakley at geoffo@cse.unsw.edu.au.