

Write Effective Emails— Get the Response You Want

How many emails do you send in a day? 20? 50? More? Writing emails has become such a common form of communications—both personal and business—that we may automatically assume that receivers perfectly understand and accept what we write.

But the way you write your emails can be misunderstood or even provoke unintended frustration. Do you consider how the tone, length, and style of your emails may cause a negative reaction? A hasty accusation or rebuttal can become a permanent record that will come back to haunt you. Understanding the basics of written communication and common sense rules for sending emails will save you from making a poor impression, jeopardizing an important relationship, or even undermining your professional success.

We were once hired to resolve some serious team communication issues when one manager badmouthed another to a colleague via email. He selected "reply all" by mistake. It cost the organization money and embarrassment and took quite a while to rebuild trust.

We have clients who read only the first part of an email and miss an important meeting or detail, or a required response.

In our customer service trainings we hear about email misunderstandings with customers—such as policy change announcements, special offer details, or proposed solutions. Be extra careful when contacting customers through email. Provide a clear idea of your purpose in the email subject. Add essential background for them to understand your message. Include contact information in case they have questions.

Here are more guidelines to help you write more effective emails:

- Keep messages short. Place subjects in order of importance.
- Address only one topic or key question per email. Readers appreciate brevity.
- Remember that emails are not confidential and have a long shelf life. They may come back to bite people, businesses, and presidential candidates.
- Check the accuracy of your recipients' addresses, especially when you respond to emails with multiple recipients.
- When you respond to a group email, ensure your message will be appropriate and inoffensive to all listed. "Reply all" all only when necessary.
- Call or meet face to face when the subject is controversial or sensitive. Emails are not always the best way to communicate, especially when resolving conflicts.
- Use proper punctuation, word choice, and correct grammar.
- **AVOID USING ALL CAPITALS.** The words may read like you are angry. It is better to say, "This is urgent (or important)," then add a brief statement.
- Give your messages attention-grabbing subject lines. We all appreciate concise subject lines that clearly state the message's information or importance.

- Provide context for forwarded messages. The information can help the recipient know the message's background and what to do with it.
- Know your audience. People have different styles of communication, both verbal and written. There are two basic styles, "fast communicators" or "slower communicators." Fast communicators want short to the point messages. State the main issue or action required in the first sentence. Keep details to a minimum. Slower communicators need both background and details. Make sure you provide them step-by-step explanations. They will appreciate attached pictures, diagrams, and documents. If you regularly send emails to a team, combine both approaches. Begin with a short "executive summary" for the fast communicators and add more detailed documentation in attachments for the slower communicators.

We hope all these tips will help you to improve your emails—to your boss, team, stakeholders, and customers.