

Latest: [Learn Perl by experiment](#)

Next: [Essential iPhone tips and apps](#)

Prev: [2011 Scheme Workshop: Accepting Submissions](#)

Rand: [Programming with continuations by example](#)

How to send and reply to email

[\[article index\]](#) [\[email me\]](#) [\[@mattmight\]](#) [\[+mattmight\]](#) [\[rss\]](#)

The problem with email is that people think it's electronic mail.

Email is *not* mail in electronic form. You are not writing a letter.



Few send readable email or tap the deliberative potential of the medium.

For example, email should be formatted into points--not paragraphs.

And, you should not always reply above the message you were sent.

Many of the tips below are already widely followed in academia, where debate and discussion over email have been taking place for decades.

[You can consider the advice that follows the digital distillation of Florence Isaacs's excellent how-to on professional correspondence, [Business Notes](#).]

Email is not free

The opportunity cost of email makes a postage stamp look cheap.

You can reduce that opportunity cost by:

- not sending email;
- keeping it short;
- creating informative subjects;
- breaking your message into points;
- replying to points instead of emails;
- placing action items at the top;
- sorting points by priority;
- breaking long emails into multiple emails; and
- being polite.

When to send email

If you're asking a question, first check:

- [Google](#);
- [Quora](#); and
- maybe even [Twitter](#).

Also consider, *Can I wait to ask until I see her in person?*

If yes, wait until then.

Special advice for programmers

If you're a programmer, do not email this question:

What happens when I run the following code?

code here

If you want to know what happens, run the code.

Or, read the documentation.

Or, run the code through a debugger.

Or, instrument the code with print statements.

If that doesn't work, explain why in your email.

Keep it short

An email should be as short as possible.

Try living with the [five sentences rule](#) for a week.

Hone your brevity on twitter.

Subject

A subject should be informative, and about 72 characters or less.

If the entire email fits in the subject, put it in the subject.

If you think that's rude, it's not.

If you insist that it's rude, put "Thanks!" in the body.

If the email fits in the subject, it takes a click out of processing it, and raises the probability of a reply.

(If the recipient gets hundreds of emails per day, clicks add up.)

If the email doesn't fit in the subject, the subject should contain the most critical details, such as the date, time and location of a meeting, or the top action item and deadline.

For example, don't send "Save the Date" as a subject.

Send "*Event Title*, Save the Date: *Date*."

In short, the subject must provide enough information for the recipient to know how to prioritize and act on an email quickly.

Points, not paragraphs

Paragraphs work well for essays.

If your email is an essay, go ahead and use paragraphs.

If not, put a blank line after every point, which usually means after every independent thought, and certainly after every question.

For example, don't send the following:

I had some ideas about using X to do Y.
Is that possible? It doesn't seem possible to
do X without doing W. I also thought we might
be able to do A. I saw paper on B. Did you
read it? I really like Q because R, S
and T.

It should read:

I had some ideas about using X to do Y. Is that possible?
- It doesn't seem possible to do X without doing W.

I also thought we might be able to do A.

I saw a paper on B. Did you read it?

I really like Q because
(1) R;
(2) S; and
(3) T.

In short, shape the text to indicate the structure of your message.

Strategic whitespace makes a document less threatening to a reader.

Large blocks of text short-circuit reader attention.

Reply to points

If you want to have a discussion, don't put it on top of the message.

Reply to its points.

That is, don't do this:

You can't use X to do Y, but you can do Y with U and V.
You're right about X and W. Agreed - we might be able
to do A. I haven't seen the paper. Can you send it? Q
is nice, but R is too expensive and S will take too long.
T is feasible.

Your friend wrote:

> I had some ideas about using X to do Y.
> Is that possible? It doesn't seem possible to
> do X without doing W. I also thought we might
> be able to do A. I saw paper on B. Did you
> read it? I really like Q because R, S
> and T.

Try this instead:

> I had some ideas about using X to do Y. Is that possible?

No, but you can use U and V instead.

> - It doesn't seem possible to do X without doing W.

That's right.

> I also thought we might be able to do A.

Agreed.

> I saw a paper on B. Did you read it?

No. Can you send it?

> I really like Q because

I like it too.

> (1) R;

Too expensive.

> (2) S; and

That will take too long.

> (3) T.

That's feasible.

Exceptions

Feel free to reply on top if your reply is a single point, and not addressed to any specific part.

If you only want to address part of a message, delete any part not relevant to what you're responding to.

Place action items on top

If there are things that the recipient must do, place them up top instead of burying them in the body. Many email clients give a preview of the top part of the message, so these are likely to be seen.

That is, try sending the following:

Action item: Send nominees for X before date Y.

page of text on who is eligible for X

not:

page of text on who is eligible for X

Can you send nominees for X before date Y?

Sorting points by priority

Assume that only the top 5 lines of any email will be read.

Put anything critical in those lines.

For the remainder, points should be sorted by most to least important.

Reply to all or reply to sender?

When replying to an email, click reply to all.

After you've written the email, decide who in the recipients list is still a necessary recipient, and delete the rest.

Add anyone that has become relevant.

Breaking up emails

If you're emailing the same person about several distinct topics, it is usually a good idea to split the email apart into individually processable emails.

Manners

Don't forget to add "Please" or "Thank you" when and where appropriate.

A "Thanks!" often comes off as more sincere than "Sincerely."

Related posts

- [HOWTO: Peer review scientific work](#)
- [Electric meat](#)
- [A Ph.D. thesis proposal is a contract](#)
- [3 shell scripts that can improve your writing](#)

- [Recommended books and papers for grad students](#)

More resources

- The best book on writing professional emails has nothing to do with email. It's Florence Isaacs's [Business Notes: Writing Personal Notes That Build Professional Relationships](#). My wife bought it for me after I became a professor, and I've been using its templates and advice for all of my correspondence (digital or analog) ever since.
- [Philip Guo's](#) email tips.

[\[article index\]](#) [\[email me\]](#) [\[@mattmight\]](#) [\[+mattmight\]](#) [\[rss\]](#)

Latest: [Learn Perl by experiment](#)

Next: [Essential iPhone tips and apps](#)

Prev: [2011 Scheme Workshop: Accepting Submissions](#)

Rand: [Programming with continuations by example](#)