

Writing a Formal Email

In the information age, email has become the dominant form of communication. Being able to write a polished, professional email is now a critical skill both in college and the workplace. Below are some key distinctions between formal and informal writing, as well as some guidelines to follow when composing a formal email to a superior (professor, current or prospective employer, etc.) or someone who does not know you.

Informal vs. Formal

Informal:

- Written to friends and family
- Accuracy and grammar (spelling and punctuation) are not important
- You can make up your own rules

Example:

Hi Anne,

I miss you so much! Can't wait to see you on Friday!! We haven't hung out in so long! I miss my bestie! Maybe we can go to the movies or dinner or just chill and watch TV and catch up...idc, whichever you want.

Love ya,

Jules

Formal:

- Written to a professor, colleague, boss, etc.
- Must always be professional
- Accurate grammar, punctuation, and spelling necessary

Example:

Dear Professor Johnson,

I was unable to attend class today due to a doctor's appointment. When you have a moment, could please let me know what I missed and what homework I need to have completed for Friday?

Thank you

Julia Smith

Email Format:

Salutation:

The salutation of a formal email is similar to the salutation of a letter. When writing to someone you do not know by name, you put “To Whom it May Concern.” When applying for a job, you would address the person by, “Dear Hiring Manager.” If you do know the recipient’s name, you put “Dear Mr./Ms. Smith.” For a formal salutation, you should not use the recipient’s first name or the informal greetings “Hello” or “Hey.”

Body Paragraphs:

It is important to remember that an email needs to be concise. The first sentence, known as the opening sentence, can be a greeting if the situation allows it.

- I hope all is well with you.
- Thank you for your prompt response.

However, for most formal emails it is best to get straight to the point. Depending on the subject, you should have a maximum of four paragraphs and each paragraph should contain a single point. It is also important to provide questions in order to prompt a response. At the end of your last paragraph you should provide a “thank you” or “call to action” depending on the subject of your email.

- Thank you for your assistance with...
- Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing back from you.
- Please feel free to call or email me if you have any questions.
- I would appreciate it if this could be taken care of promptly.

Closing:

Like the salutation, the closing of a formal email can be the same as the closing to a letter. However, unlike the salutation, there are more options for a closing.

- Thank you
- Best regards
- Sincerely your

The closing is then followed by your full name. It is also beneficial to add your job position (if applicable) and phone number under your name in the 4th paragraph.

Example:

Sincerely,
Julia
Smith
Student Body
President Menlo
College
(555) 555-5555

Characteristics of Successful Email Messages

Subject Headings: They contain guide-words. These headings help readers immediately identify the purpose of a message.

Single Topic: Good e-mails generally discuss only one topic. Limiting the topic helps the receiver act on the subject and file it appropriately.

Conversational Tone: The tone of the email messages is expected to be conversational because the communications are usually familiar with one another. This means ordinary words, and first person pronouns. Yet, the tone should also be professional. Although warm and friendly, e-mail messages should not be emotional or sarcastic. They should never include remarks that would not be said to the face of an individual.

Conciseness: As functional form of communication, e-mails contain only what is necessary to convey meaning and be courteous. Often they require less background explanation and less attention to goodwill efforts than do letters to outsiders.

Graphic Highlighting: E-mail messages should be designed for quick reading and comprehension. One of the best ways to improve readability is through graphic highlighting techniques. Spotlight important items by setting them off with

- Letters, such as (a), (b), and (c), within the text
- Numerals, such as 1,2, and 3, listed vertically
- Bullets- asterisks, black squares, raised periods, or other figures
- Headings
- Capital letters, underscores, boldface, and italics

Guidelines for Formal Emails

The English-speaking world often operates at a semi-formal level. Language is friendly and welcoming, but with some formal expressions. However, when dealing with people outside the company and people that the writer has never met, formal English is used. Formal emails are also used in business transactions: purchasing, ordering, booking, apologizing, etc. In certain larger companies, formal writing is frequently used in emails sent among colleagues, especially when corresponding with people at different levels of the organization.

The following are some guidelines to help you identify and use formal email writing style.

Openings and closings

There are a number of common openings and closings to an email which will show you whether the author is being formal, informal, or semi-formal.

Contractions

When writing formal emails, do not use contractions, such as I'm, he'd, you'll, etc.

Formal *I am writing to ask if you have seen the news from Jo.*

Semi-formal / Informal *I'm writing to ask if you've seen the news from Jo.*

Modal verbs

To make requests and give instructions, formal English frequently uses modal verbs: would, could etc. However, note that modal verbs are also used in this way in informal and semi-formal English.

Formal *Would you be able to deliver the report by tomorrow?*

Semi-formal *Can you deliver the report by tomorrow?*

Formal *Could you ask Pierre to come to the meeting?*

Semi-formal *Can you ask Pierre to come to the meeting?*

Questions

In preference to asking a direct question, formal emails frequently use indirect questions.

Formal *I wonder if you would like to join us for dinner on Tuesday.*

Informal *Do you want to join us for dinner on Tuesday?*

Formal *Could you see if the components have been ordered yet?*

Informal *Have the components been ordered yet?*

In addition to this, offers are often made using would.

Formal *Would you like to see the new prototype?*

Informal *Do you want to see the new prototype?*

Opening sentences

After the greeting, English emails normally begin with an opening sentence.

Common opening sentences for a formal email are as follows.

- *I hope that all is well with you.*
- *I was just emailing to request some assistance.* (The past tense is frequently used to make a sentence more polite.)
- *Thank you for your email of 12 March.*

Emails that omit this opening sentence are usually official correspondence between governments and individuals, or formal demands for payment, etc.

Formal and informal vocabulary

Formal emails tend to use slightly different vocabulary to informal emails. Informal emails often use phrasal verbs and sound more like standard spoken English.

Formal *I would like to request some assistance.*

Informal *I'd like to ask for some help.*

Formal *Once I have received the information from our suppliers, I will reply to Mr Braun's email.*

Informal *After I hear back from the suppliers, I'll get back to Mr Braun.*

Certain terms have a formal or informal equivalent. Try not to mix informal and formal styles in the same email.

Formal	Informal
Thank you	Thanks
I would like to apologize for ...	Sorry for ...
I would appreciate it if you ...	Can you ... ?
Would you happen to know ... ?	Do you know ... ?
Unfortunately, I will not be able to ...	I can't ...
I am unable to say whether ...	I don't know whether ...
I would rather not ...	I don't want to ...

- Do NOT write in all capital letters.
 - Use formal vocabulary and sentence structure. Do NOT use slang.
- Proofread the email at least twice and get a second opinion if possible

Exercises:

Formal vs. Informal

State whether the sentence would be classified as either formal or informal. If informal, change it to formal.

Example:

Hi y'all!

informal; To Whom it May Concern:

1.) I am pleased to inform you that you have won our grand prize.

2.) I hope all is well with your new career choice.

3.) I shouldn't have gone and missed with it!!

4.) I can't help you with that cuz it's too hard.

5.) Hi, how are you?

Putting It All Together

Find and correct the errors in the following emails:

1.)

Hello Professor Smith,

I'm sorry to tell you but im sick and will not be able to come to class. See ya Wednesday.

Jason

2.)

Dear Sally Blue,

I read online that you're selling business cards. I was wondering how much if i only wanted 500? Is color and a logo extra? Can I see an example before all are shipped or will that cost extra? You seem to have a great business so I hope you can help.

Thanks,

Jess Higgins

3.)

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a graduate from menlo college. I got a degree in business and would now like to use it. Your company looks interesting. Can I come in for an interview? I have alot of experience from my schooling and extra cirriculers. I think I can help the company alot. Please respond to my email to let me know.

Thanks,

Max Oates

[illegible]

EXERCISE:

Use the pattern below to write a complaint letter to the manager reporting that you have been given a malfunctioning product.

(Your Address)

(Your City, State, ZIP Code)

(Date)

(Name of Contact Person, if available)

(Title, if available)

(Company Name)

(Consumer Complaint Division, if you have no contact person)

(Street Address)

(City, State, ZIP code)

Dear (Contact Person):

- describe purchase
- name of product, serial numbers
- include date and place of purchase

- state problem
- give history

- ask for specific action
- enclose copies of documents

- allow time for action
- state how you can be reached

Sincerely,

(your name)

Enclosure(s)

Cc: (reference to whom you are sending a copy of this letter, if anyone)