

Chapter 5

Building a Relationship and Deciding the Level of Formality

You will learn that

- establishing a good relationship can lead to useful meetings and collaborations
- although English uses *you* in both formal and informal relationships, it adopts other devices to show respect toward the recipient of an email
- you should adopt an appropriate level of formality when dealing with people of different cultures

In most areas of language you can make fairly literal translations from one language to another and produce something that is reasonably comprehensible in the target language. This is not the case with proverbs and idioms and is certainly not the case with typical salutations and standard phrases in email. If you make a literal translation, you will either confuse or amuse your recipient.

What the experts say

Within the academic world, and even in an informal society such as that in North America, addressing academics using titles such as Dr and Professor, may make the recipient more willing to help you. Using titles may also help to differentiate you from those students whose emails resemble text messages to friends rather than requests to top academics. You may also get a more successful outcome to an email request if you use some apologetic or slightly deferential language such as “Sorry to bother you but ...”, “I wonder if you could ...”, “I know you must be very busy but ...”.

David Morand, Professor of Management, School of Business Administration Pennsylvania State University—Harrisburg

In Senegal salutations are very important, we always begin an email with salutations asking about the family, and how life is going. If it's a person you've never talked before, you'll try to find some links (parents or friends). And we always finish by formulating wishes (praying to Allah). If someone goes directly to talk about business, he or she is seen as a materialist or an opportunist.

Ibrahima Diagne, IT specialist, Senegal

We tend to ascribe other people's behavior to their personality, instead of looking at the situation and the context in which their behavior occurs. We might excuse our own actions more easily (“I was tired; I felt a cold coming on.”). ... Behavior is oftentimes more because of reaction to a context than because of fundamental personality traits.

Andy Hunt, author, Pragmatic Thinking and Learning: Refactor Your “Wetware”

In my younger days as a researcher I made the mistake of being rather arrogant in my communication, which I believe cost me a few interesting projects that I could have been part of. I am now very conscious that good relationships are part of the key to having a successful career in academia. I try very hard to be both constructive and sincere—not an easy thing to do in a foreign language (i.e., English) but which I have learned from some of the emails I have received from native-speaking colleagues.

Anonymous

5.1 Use common interests to establish and cement a relationship

When you call someone on the phone, you probably begin by asking *how are you?*. You are not necessarily interested in the answer, but it is just a formality at the beginning of a phone call. Some people also ask this question at the start of an email—again they may not be expecting an answer, but it just acts as a friendly start rather than being too direct.

If you have a good relationship with your recipient, then they are more likely to carry out your requests and do so more quickly than they might if you are totally anonymous to them. My tactic after a few email exchanges is to reveal / announce some personal information.

This could be at the beginning of the email, for instance:

Hope you had a good weekend. I spent most of mine cooking.

So how was your weekend? We went swimming—we were the only ones in the sea!

How's it going? I am completely overloaded with work at the moment.

Or it could be the end of the email:

Ciao from a very hot and sunny Pisa.

Hope you have a great weekend—I am going to the beach.

These little exchanges only take a few seconds to write (and to be read, i.e., by the recipient). Also, by making comments such as these, you might discover that you have something in common (cooking, swimming), and this will give you something to “talk” about in your emails.

I have found that such exchanges “oil” the relationship. Also, if in the future there are any misunderstandings, then these are likely to be resolved more quickly and with a better outcome than there might be with an anonymous interlocutor.

However, it is really important not to take this to extremes. One of my colleagues complained that a student, who she hardly knew, began his email to her saying:

I saw your status on Facebook. It seems you had a nice time in Venice!

Although Facebook is public and was specifically designed to let people into your private life (or at least that part of your private life that you want them to have access to), some users of Facebook find the idea of people who they hardly know looking at their pages and then commenting on them as being quite distasteful. It is a bit like being stalked. So, be careful to respect people's privacy and not be invasive.

5.2 Maintain a friendly relationship

Whenever you write an email, always be aware that there is probably more than one way to interpret what you have written and that this other way may cause offence. So, before you send your email, check for potential misinterpretations, and rewrite the offending phrase.

For example, here is what appears to be an inoffensive reminder.

For your reference I remind you that it is VERY important to always specify your current workstation IP address.

However, this sentence has various problems:

- *For your reference* could be interpreted as sounding like someone who has been contradicted and is now giving their point of view in quite an aggressive way
- *I remind you*—the present tense in English is sometimes used to give a sense of authority or formality. It thus sounds very cold and unfriendly
- *VERY*—rather than using capitals, consider using bold. Also, it sounds rather like a teacher talking to a naughty (badly behaved) child

Here are two different ways of rewriting the sentence:

Just a quick reminder—don't forget to specify your current workstation IP address. Thanks!

I'd just like to remind you that the IP address of a workstation must always be specified.

The first alternative is informal and friendly. The second is more formal, but uses three tricks to make it soft:

1. a contracted form (*I'd rather than I would*) which gives the phrase a less authoritarian tone
2. the passive form—this then makes the *IP address* the subject of *specified* (rather than the implicit *you must specify*)
3. *a workstation* rather than *your workstation*—this makes the message sound that it is not directed personally at the recipient

5.3 Adopt a non-aggressive approach

If you have something negative to say, it is advisable not to adopt an aggressive approach. Aggression is more likely to aggravate the situation than solve it. Compare:

AGGRESSIVE	NON-AGGRESSIVE
You have sent us the wrong manuscript.	You appear to have sent us the wrong manuscript. It seems we've been sent the wrong manuscript.
I need it now.	I appreciate that this is a busy time of year for you but I really do need it now.
I have not received a reply to my email dated ...	I was wondering whether you had had a chance to look at the email I sent you dated ... (see below)

When you revise your email before hitting the “send” button, make sure you remove anything that is not strictly necessary, particularly phrases that might annoy the recipient. Recipients do not like to be treated like schoolchildren or be made to feel guilty; thus, in most contexts the phrases below should be deleted:

This is the second time I have written to request ...

I am still awaiting a response to my previous email ...

As explained in my first email,

As clearly stated in my previous email,

In summary: Use a more roundabout, softer approach and include an introductory phrase that in some way tones down any aggression. If possible empathize with your reader’s situation.

5.4 Be careful of your tone when asking people to do something for you

One of the most common reasons for writing an email is to get someone to do something for you. You are more likely to achieve your aims if you adopt a friendly and positive approach and if you don’t sound too direct (i.e., as if you were giving someone an order). Here is an example of a request written in various ways from very direct (using an imperative) to overly cautious and extremely polite. You can choose the one you feel is the most appropriate:

Revise the manuscript for me.

Will you revise the manuscript for me?

Can you revise the manuscript for me?

Could you revise the manuscript for me?

Would you mind revising the manuscript for me?

Do you think you could revise the manuscript for me?

Would you mind very much revising the manuscript for me?

If it's not a problem for you could you revise the manuscript for me?

If you happen to have the time could you revise the manuscript for me?

When you translate from your own language into English, you may lose the sense of politeness that the version in your own language had. Thus, it is possible that an email that sounds courteous in your language might sound quite rude when translated into English.

Another problem is that when you write in English, you may be less worried about how your email might be interpreted than you would if you were writing to a colleague of your own nationality. For many non-native speakers, writing in English is like writing through a filter: the way you write seems to have much less importance than it would if you were writing in your own language.

Below is an email from one co-author of a paper to another co-author.

Here is a first version of the manuscript. Read and check everything: in particular, you have to work on the introduction and prepare Fig 1.

You should send it back to me by the end of this month at the latest.

I ask you to suggest also some referees that would be suitable for reviewing the paper.

The above email was written by an Italian researcher to her Canadian co-author. If this email were translated into Italian, it would sound absolutely fine, and the recipient would have no reason to be offended. But in English it sounds like a series of orders given by someone very high in a hierarchy. Thus, the Canadian co-author might have been a little surprised or offended by the tone. The problems are due to the use of

the imperative (*read and check*)—this gives the impression that the sender is not a co-author on an equal level to the recipient, but rather quite an aggressive professor giving instructions to a student

have to—this sounds like a strong obligation rather than a request

should—again, this sounds like an order

The email could be improved as follows:

Here is a first version of the manuscript. Please could you read and check everything. In particular, it would be great if you could complete / revise the introduction and also prepare Figure 1.

Given that our deadline is the first week of next month, I would be grateful to receive your revisions by the end of this month.

The editor might ask us to suggest some referees to review our paper, so if you have any ideas please let me know.

However, when you are giving a formal list of instructions these will generally be quicker and easier to follow in the form of imperatives (i.e., the infinitive form of the verb without *to*). So the first rather than the second sentence below would be more appropriate in a list of instructions:

Attach your application form to your email.

The application form should be attached to the email.

This approach will not be rude

- if you have a friendly introductory phrase before a list of commands
- if the rest of the mail is friendly

If in doubt, use *please*.

5.5 Use appropriate language and don't mix levels of formality

Below is an email written by a PhD student to a professor. Much of the email is formal, as is appropriate given the student / professor relationship. However, the parts in italics are very informal, and are thus inappropriate.

Dear Professor Anastasijevic,

I hope you *have been having a really good time* since our meeting in Belgrade. I have started to prepare for my period in your *lab* and first of all I'm trying to get the visa!

I would be very grateful if you could kindly tell me how to obtain the DS2019 document in order to request the visa.

I would like to thank you in advance and *have a great Xmas*.

Cheers,

Lamia Abouchabkis

The following email from one of my PhD students sounds very strange with its incredible mixture of polite English mixed with chatroom / text message style.

Dear Professor Adrian

I am pleased that you enjoyed my presentation. Dunno how much it is useful and meaningful.

I am happy if u r ok wid it.

Best regards

It is always worth remembering who you are writing to, and that not all people of every generation write in the same way.

5.6 Show your recipient respect and motivate them to reply

Poor spelling and text message writing may not be acceptable to many recipients. They tell the recipient “I am sorry but I could not be bothered to find 30 seconds to check my spelling or to write words in their full form because I have more important things in my life.” Below is an email I received from a student I had taught the previous year.

Subject: hlep with cv

Hi pfof Wallwoark

how r u? do u remember me? u said in your lessons that we could send u r cvs for correction. in attachment is mine. pls I need it for tommorow nigh if poss. thankx u.

You need to change your email writing style depending on who you are writing to (their age, position, nationality). Also, just because a professor may have been informal and friendly, it does not mean that you should write to him / her in a casual way. A more suitable version would be:

Subject: help with CV

Dear Professor Wallwork

I attended your scientific papers course last year. I am the student from Russia who told you about Russian writing style. I was wondering whether you might have time to correct my CV (see attached). Unfortunately, I need it for tomorrow - my professor only told me about it today. I know it is asking a lot but if you could find 10 minutes to correct it, I would really appreciate it.

Please let me know if you need any further information about how Russian academics write.

Best wishes

The revised request is better because:

- it reminds me who he is and that he once did a favor for me
- the student acknowledges that his request may be asking me “a lot” but he shows his appreciation of what I might be able to do for him
- he offers to return the favor

Clearly, there does not need to be an exchange of favors. The email could have been written as follows:

Subject: help with CV

Dear Professor Wallwork

I attended your scientific papers course last year - it was really useful and since then I have had two papers published. Thank you!

I seem to remember that during your course you offered to correct our CVs for us.

So although it is a year later, I was wondering whether you might have time to correct my CV (see attached). Unfortunately, I need it for tomorrow - my professor only told me about it today. I know it is asking a lot but if you could find 10 minutes to correct it, I would really appreciate it and I am sure it would make a significant difference to my chances of getting the post.

Thank you very much in advance.

5.7 Be careful how you use pronouns

Unlike most languages, English uses the same word *you* for everyone. It is not possible to show more respect by capitalizing the y (i.e., *You, Your*)—this form does not exist in English. Thus, the phrase below is incorrect:

I believe Your paper would help me in my research. Thank You in advance for any help You may be able to give me.

Christopher Robin, a character in A. A. Milnes’ famous stories about Winnie the Pooh, said:

If the English language had been properly organized ... then there would be a word which meant both “he” and “she,” and I could write, “If John or Mary comes, heesh will want to play tennis,” which would save a lot of time.

In modern English this problem has been resolved by using “they.” In Anglo countries there are some rules regarding the use of politically correct language which help to make the communication more neutral and avoid the likelihood of offending anyone.

The masculine pronoun should not be used to refer to a generic person who is not necessarily or specifically a man.

GENERALLY INCORRECT	CORRECT
Someone called for you but <i>he</i> didn’t leave <i>his</i> name.	Someone called but <i>they</i> didn’t leave <i>their</i> name.
This should enable the user to locate <i>his</i> files more easily.	This should enable <i>the user</i> to locate <i>his / her</i> files more easily. This should enable <i>users</i> to locate <i>their</i> files more easily.

As can be seen from the examples:

- *they / their* can be used with reference to singular subjects (e.g., *someone, a person, some guy*)
- *he / she* and *his / her* can be used as an alternative to *he* and *his*

The simplest solution is often to make the subject plural and then use *they* and *their*.

5.8 Note any differences in style and level of formality between English and your language

The English language has increasingly become more and more informal. Below are three examples of salutations from letters written by Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the USA, in the late eighteenth century.

Your faithful and affectionate Servant,

I am, my dear friend, Your's affectionately,

My best wishes attend you, being, with sincere esteem, Sir, Your most obedient and very humble servant,

Such phrases today would sound ridiculous in an email, even in a very formal letter. However, similar phrases exist in many languages of today. For example, a French person in a formal email might say *Would you accept, sir, the expression of my distinguished salutation* (10 words), or an Italian might say *In expectation of your courteous reply, it is my pleasure to send you my most cordial greetings* (17 words). Such phrases in English sound extremely pompous and would probably be rendered as *I look forward to hearing from you* (7 words) or simply *Best regards* (2 words).

In fact, most languages in their written form tend to be more formal than written English. This formality shows itself not just in the choice of words and expressions but also in the length of sentences and paragraphs. Below is an email to a professor from a Bangladeshi who wishes to become a research student. The parts in italics would be considered much too formal by most Anglos.

Dear Professor *Dr William Gabbitas*,

With due respect I would like to draw your attention that at present, I am working as an assistant professor in the Department of Engineering, Islamic University, Kushtia-7003, Bangladesh. I am *highly* interested in continuing my further studies in the field of reducing fuel emissions. I am therefore, very much interested to continue my higher studies for Ph.D. degree in your university under your supervision. I am sending *herewith* my bio-data *in favor of your kind consideration*.

I would be grateful if you would kindly send me information regarding admission procedures and financial support such as grants available from your government, university, or any other sources.

I would very much appreciate it if you would consider me for a position as your research student.

I am eagerly looking forward to your generous suggestion.

With warmest regards.

Sincerely yours

Hussain Choudhury

The above email might be appropriate for sending to academics who are accustomed to using such formal language themselves. However, a more appropriate version, for example, for sending to a professor in the USA, would be:

Dear Professor Gabbitas

I am an assistant professor in the department of Engineering, at the Islamic University in Bangladesh, where I am doing research into reducing fuel emissions. I would be very interested to continue my studies for a PhD under your supervision. From my CV (see attached) you will see that I have been working on very similar areas as you, and I feel I might be able to make a useful contribution to your team.

I would be grateful if you would kindly send me information regarding admission procedures and any financial support that might be available.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Hussain Choudhury

In any case if it's your first contact with someone, it's generally best to use a formal style, particularly if you are writing to someone in a country whose culture you are not very familiar with. This is especially true of Eastern countries such as Korea and Japan, but even in Europe certain countries (e.g., Germany, Italy) tend to be much more formal than others.

5.9 Add a friendly phrase at the end of an email

There are various phrases that you can use at the end of an email, particularly if you think the rest of the email may be a little strong. These include the following:

Have a nice day.

Have a great weekend.

Keep up the good work.

5.10 Judge whether the email you have received is formal or informal and reply accordingly

Most people try to match the level of formality of the email that they have received. But this entails knowing how to recognize just how formal an email is. There are various clues.

FORMAL: LONG AND COMPLEX SENTENCES

If a phrase is long and / or complex, this is generally a sign of greater formality.

FORMAL	LESS FORMAL
<i>We have pleasure in confirming the acceptance of your abstract for . . .</i>	<i>This is to confirm</i> that your abstract has been accepted for . . .
<i>Should you</i> need any clarifications, please do not hesitate to contact us.	<i>If you</i> have any questions, please let us know.
<i>You are requested</i> to acknowledge this email.	<i>Please</i> acknowledge this email.
<i>It is necessary that</i> I have the report by Tuesday.	<i>Please</i> could I have the report by Tuesday.

It is important to be aware, however, that some short sentences (e.g., the first example sentence below) are not always the most informal and can also come across as rather cold. Writing in a telegraphic style can obscure the meaning from your reader, so always try to write complete and comprehensible sentences.

The examples below show how a simple concept, such as acknowledging receipt of a mail, can be expressed in many different ways from completely detached to quite warm.

- I confirm receipt of your fax.
- This is just to confirm that I received your fax.
- Just to let you know that your fax got through.
- Thanks for your fax.

FORMAL: MODAL VERBS

The four modal auxiliaries *may*, *can*, *could*, and *would* are often used to make a request sound more courteous and less direct. Compare the following pairs of sentences:

- May* I remind you that we are still awaiting your report on manuscript No. 1342/2 . . .
We are still awaiting your report on manuscript No. 1342/2 . . .
- Can* you kindly check with her that this is OK.
Check that this is OK.
- Could* you please keep me informed of any changes you plan to make to the presentation.
Keep me informed of any changes you plan to make to the presentation.

Would you like me to Skype you?

Do you want me to Skype you?

In a similar way, *won't be able to* is often preferred to *cannot*, and *would like* or *wish* to *want*. Both *cannot* and *want* tend to sound too abrupt.

I'm sorry but I *won't be able to* give you any feedback on your manuscript until next week.

We regret to inform you that we *will not be able to* offer your students any special rate for attending the congress.

The modal verb *may* is extremely useful whenever you want to give your mail a formal tone:

I would be grateful for any further information you *may* be able to give me about . . .

You *may* also check the status of your manuscript by logging into your account at <http://manuscript.zzzx.com/account>.

To whom it *may* concern.

May I thank you for your help in this matter.

Note: The use of *shall* as a future auxiliary and *should* as a conditional auxiliary is outdated in English, and their use is a sure sign of formality. In the examples below, the first sentence in each pair is very formal, and the second sentence is normal English.

We *shall* give your request our prompt attention.

= We *will* deal with your request as soon as possible.

I *should be glad if you could* send the file again, this time as a pdf.

= *Please could you* send the file again, this time as a pdf.

FORMAL: NOUNS

The English language is essentially verb based. Many other languages are noun based. When there is a predominance of nouns rather than verbs, it gives an email a feeling of distance and formality:

Please inform me of the time of your *arrival*.

Please let me know when you *will be arriving*.

To the best of our *knowledge*.

As far as we *know*.

For more on this topic, see 5.4 in the companion volume *English for Writing Research Papers*.

FORMAL: MULTI-SYLLABLE WORDS

Generally, a clear indication of formality is given by the number of syllables in a word—the more there are, the more formal the email is likely to be. If you speak French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, or Spanish, a good tip is if the multi-syllable word in English looks similar to a word that you have in your own language, then it is probably formal in English. Compare the following pairs of verbs. The first verb is multi-syllable and formal, and the second is monosyllable or a phrasal verb:

advise / let someone know, apologize / be sorry, assist / help, attempt / try, clarify / make clear, commence / start, consider / think about, contact / get in touch, enter / go in, evaluate / look into, examine / look at, inform / tell, perform / carry out, receive / get, reply / get back to, require / want, utilize / use

The same also applies to nouns, for example, *possibility* vs *chance*.

OMISSION OF SUBJECT AND OTHER PARTS OF SPEECH

A clear sign that an email is informal is when the subject of the verb and / or the auxiliary are missing. An email is even more informal when articles, possessive adjectives, etc. are also missed out in telegraphic style (last example).

INFORMAL	FORMAL
<i>Been</i> very busy recently.	<i>I have been</i> very busy recently.
<i>Appreciate</i> your early reply.	<i>I would appreciate</i> your early reply.
<i>Hope</i> to hear from you soon.	<i>I hope</i> to hear from you soon.
<i>Speak</i> to you soon.	<i>I will speak</i> to you soon.
<i>Looking</i> forward to your reply.	<i>I am looking</i> forward to your reply.
<i>Will</i> be in touch.	<i>I will</i> be in touch.
<i>Just</i> a quick update on . . .	<i>This is just</i> a quick update on . . .
Have forwarded Carlos <i>copy</i> of <i>ppt</i> to <i>personal</i> email too.	I have forwarded Carlos <i>a copy</i> of <i>the presentation</i> to <i>his personal</i> email too.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Some abbreviations are perfectly acceptable even in a formal email, such as *re* (regarding) and *C / A* (bank current account). Others, however, such as *ack* (acknowledge, acknowledgement), *tx* (thanks), and *rgds* (regards), should be used with caution—they give the impression that you could not find the time to write the words out in full.

SMILEYS

A smiley (see page 40) is a clear indication of informality. I strongly suggest that you use them only if your recipient has used them first. There are some people, particularly of older generations, who find smileys annoying. Also, avoid using

them with anyone when you want to make a difficult request seem lighter. For example:

Please could you send me the revision tomorrow :)

The above request for someone to revise a long document within a very short time-frame is not helped by having a smiley, which may actually make the recipient angry as he / she will certainly not be happy to do such a long task in such a short time.

5.11 An example of how a simple request can lead to a possible collaboration

Below is a string of emails between one of my students, Katia Orlandi, and the author of a paper, Olaf Christensen. As usual, I have changed their names and some details for reasons of privacy. Note how

- the string of emails becomes less and less formal
- they quickly build up a good relationship by showing interest in each other's work and countries
- they end up with a potential collaboration

Dear Dr. Christensen,

I'm a PhD Student at the Department of Engineering, at the University of Pisa in Italy.

I am doing research into energy-saving solutions for p2p overlay networks (e.g., Red BitTorrent).

I'm writing to you because I'm interested in your paper:

J. Breakwater and O. Christensen, "Red BitTorrents? The answer to everything".

I would appreciate it very much if you could send me a copy by email. By the way, I have found your previous papers really interesting; they have been a great stimulus to my research.

Thanks in advance.

Regards

Katia Orlandi

Hello Katia

Attached is our paper which we are going to present at the Fifth International Workshop on Red Communications next June.

I see you are from Pisa ... a small but beautiful city. I have been there (to see the Leaning Tower, of course).

Let me know if you have any questions about the BitTorrent work.

Olaf

Dear Dr. Christensen,

Thank you so much for your quick reply. I have already read half the paper - really useful.

Yes, Pisa is a great city, though I am actually from Palermo in Sicily. I see you work in Denmark; I was in Copenhagen this summer; it was really beautiful.

I am actually going to the Red Communications conference too! It would be great to meet up.

Ciao

Katia

Hi Katia

Out of curiosity I looked you up on your webpage at your department's website. You seem to have done a lot of research in the same area as our time. I was wondering whether you might be interested in working on a new project that my prof and I are setting up. In any case, let's arrange to meet at the Red C conference ... By the way, it's Olaf, I am not used to being addressed as Dr. Christensen :).