



Email style book jumps on the Internet bandwagon

Book Reviews

by [Lorrie Faith Cranor](#)

The Elements of E-mail Style: Communicate Effectively via Electronic Mail
David Angell and Brent Heslop
1994
Addison-Wesley Publishing Company

Ever since the emergence of ``Information Superhighway'' as a household word, authors have been clamoring to get their Internet how-to guides on bookstore shelves. Everyone with a word processor and an America Online account seems to have some advice for the Internet novice. But while most Internet books supply only road maps and directions, I recently found a book that concentrates on style - email style. *The Elements of E-mail Style* goes beyond explanations of *how* to email and focuses on *what* to email.

Had I not first run across *The Elements of E-mail Style* in an IEEE Computer Society Press catalog, I probably would have assumed it was nothing more than a book about jargon and smileys. After all, shouldn't email correspondence follow the same style rules that traditional correspondence follows? But knowing that the IEEE Computer Society Press usually sells text books and technical manuals, I figured there must be more to this book. And, as it turns out, there is. *The Elements of E-mail Style* is

primarily a book on style. The email part seems to be mostly a gimmick to make the book stand out on a shelf full of style manuals.

The biggest problem with *The Elements of E-mail Style* is its basic premise: that there is a need for an email style manual. Try as they may, the authors - David Angell and Brent Heslop - fail to make their case that email is a unique form of correspondence that requires its own style rules. It is true that good email is written in an inverted pyramid style with the most important statements at the beginning. Sure good email should be free of gender bias, inflammatory remarks, plagiarism, misspellings, and grammatical errors. But this holds true for all business correspondence. In fact, most of the book's advice is applicable to all types of writing.

The few sections of the book devoted to issues peculiar to electronic communication contain more opinion than fact. For example, the authors suggest adopting an informal style for email messages, recommending that the writer "err on the side of being too informal and conversational rather than too formal." While it is certainly true that most email is informal, I find it hard to believe that people withhold formality for fear of offending the recipient. Like proper manners, formality in correspondence is a custom that is usually appreciated, despite its frequent absence. When sending email to someone with whom you have never previously corresponded, it is probably better to err on the side of being too formal, lest you offend the recipient with your presumption of familiarity.

I also differ with the authors on the use of tabs and white space. They state that because most computers use proportional width fonts, email correspondents should avoid consecutive spaces and use tabs to ensure proper alignment of indented paragraphs. They also explain that the two-space-after-a-period-rule is leftover from the days of monospaced fonts. While it is true that most printed text is proportionally spaced, screen text is usually monospaced by default. At least that is what the artists who came up with the book's ASCII art samples must have been assuming. Furthermore, tab characters do not always travel well between different types of computer systems.

I realize no book about email would be complete without mention of smileys, but I was disappointed to see Angell and Heslop tout smileys as a cure for ambiguous writing - especially after they had just spent over 100 pages emphasizing clear concise writing. While the authors did point out the inappropriateness of smileys for business

correspondence, their section titled "Punctuate Emotions with Smileys" - including a table of 29 popular smileys" - failed to point out that smileys are more decorative than communicative. Besides the obvious happy, sad, and winking faces, most smileys are too cryptic to be instantly meaningful.

But perhaps I should be easy on the authors, as they do not seem to be Internet veterans. In their acknowledgments section they thank representatives from three companies for giving them "access to the Internet for this project." This suggests that the authors may have learned about email specifically for this book.

To the authors' credit, they have written a concise, easy to understand style guide for modern correspondence. With a clean layout and interesting examples, this book is more up-to-date and accessible than the classic *Elements of Style*, even if it is less comprehensive. But the authors make it clear that comprehensiveness is not their goal. Rather, they focus "on the 20 percent of English grammar, usage, and mechanics issues that cause 80 percent of the problems." And except for the omission of any mention of split infinitives (this construction is not strictly grammatically incorrect, but is nonetheless avoided by many writers), the authors have indeed hit on most of the major grammatical problems that frequently occur.

If you are looking for a good style manual to help with all your writing, *The Elements of E-mail Style* is worth consideration. However, if you are looking for a good style manual to help you with your email, don't buy this book - or any other email-centric style book.