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Essential E-Mail Etiquette

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Avoiding common pitfalls when composing your messages

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Author: Wenkai Tay

When you were in school, someone probably taught you how to write a letter. Heck, somebody probably even taught you how to format a memo. But did anyone ever teach you how to write an e-mail message?

Chances are it's just something you picked up along the way. And it would seem that e-mail wouldn't be much different from any other form of correspondence. After all, the elements of effective communication are the same in conventional mail and e-mail; isn't good writing the same whatever the medium?

Yet there are important differences, and not understanding them could get you into trouble, or at least make you look a little silly.

E-mail is a more casual medium than snail mail, and taking an overly formal tone can make you look like one of those "ousted government officials" who require your assistance on a strictly confidential matter of great importance. But at the same time, sending e-mail is less personal than talking to someone over the phone, and informality has its risks. You can't convey changes in tone of voice or facial expressions over e-mail, nor can you get an immediate response. So just how casual is the medium? With e-mail, it's harder to get your point across and easier to be misunderstood.

Learning proper e-mail etiquette can help you be persuasive and inoffensive. You can increase your chances of writing winning e-mail messages by sticking to these basic rules.

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Think of an Appropriate Subject

Select a title for your e-mail that reflects its content. If you want to convey important information, make your subject as detailed and specific as possible, e.g. "Flower Arrangements for Ice Cream Social on 9/5."

If you wish to craft an attention-grabbing subject line, be brief and direct, e.g. "Save the Endangered Pink-Striped Frogs." Use active verbs and punchy words. However, avoid words like "Free" and "Money," and the overuse of all-caps and exclamation marks, such as "Win Free MONEY!!!" These messages could be mistaken for spam and deleted immediately.

Similarly, take care not to overuse the priority tags in your e-mail client. Don't send every message as high priority if they really aren't that important to your recipient. Abusing these tags can make you look a little desperate for attention.

Never leave your subject line empty. It's the first thing your recipient sees even before he or she reads the body of your message. If you leave it blank, it will appear as "(none)" or "(no subject)" in some e-mail programs. This leaves a poor impression.

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Address Recipients Properly

Italicize the book title in the paragraph below.

Dale Carnegie, author of How to Win Friends and Influence People, said that "a person's name is, to that person, the sweetest sound in any language." That's why when you're writing e-mail messages to people for the first time, it's best to address them by their names instead of using a generic "Dear Sir/Madam" -- that is, unless you are in fact working a Ponzi scheme or other con.

If you're sending a message to people you don't know, make an effort to look for your recipients' full names in the "Contact" or "About" sections of their Web sites. If at first you don't succeed, surf through more of the site to see if their names are featured somewhere else.

Spell their names correctly. Be careful when handling foreign names, especially those with accents on certain letters.

Don't be too casual during the first contact. Use the honorific + surname formula when addressing people for the first time, (i.e., address Laura Glover as "Ms Glover"). Wait for your recipients to use your first name before addressing them by their first names.

If it's not obvious from the name whether your recipient is male or female, don't guess. Just use the first and last name without an honorific.

Of course, make sure your message isn't spam. You can find a definition at this anti-spam site.

When you're sending a message to a group of people, particularly if they don't know each other, enter their addresses in the "BCC" line to protect everyone's privacy. You can enter your own address in the "To" line. If you are sending the message to a large number of people (more than a dozen) perform a mail merge that results in one message per person. Microsoft Word 2000 and later is capable of this technique; it can save your message from being mistaken for spam by filtering software that blocks messages with many addresses in the BCC field.

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Select an Appropriate Tone

The tone of voice you use in your e-mail depends on the level of formality you deem necessary. It's advisable to be a little more formal during the first contact. You can adopt a more casual tone in subsequent messages.

Use smileys, such as ":)", ":D" and ":P", judiciously to reduce the level of formality and to express a lighter tone. However, smileys should be avoided if you seek to convey a professional image. In any case, don't overuse them in any messages, as they can make you look like you never grew out of junior high school.

Don't fill your messages with acronyms like "OTOH," (on the other hand) "ROTFL," (rolling on the floor laughing) and "FWIW" (for what it's worth). If you're too busy to spell out anything in your message, consider sending it when you have more time. Messages that look like "Carol, ltns. Afaik report's due eod. Hth Bfn," (Carol, long time no see. As far as I know, the report is due at the end of the day. Hope that helps. Bye for now.) are difficult to read and best left to text-messaging teenagers.

Pick your fonts and colors carefully. Messages with overly large fonts can be annoying. Making every word in your message a different color is a bad idea. Writing a message in yellow may get you shot. And for recipients with clients that don't handle styled text, your message may come through completely garbled.

Also avoid the use of repeated exclamation marks! Nobody is that excited!

Don't use all-caps in your message text unless you really mean it. When you use them, it comes across as if you were screaming. SO DON'T DO IT!

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Avoid Irony and Sarcasm

Because of the impersonal nature of e-mail, it's hard to convey your true emotions. It's equally hard for the person on the receiving end to determine if you're trying to be funny or insulting.

In general, humor does not work well with e-mail. Don't be wry or ironic, because the other person could think you're being rude. Avoid humor especially when it could be interpreted as offensive. Reread your message carefully from your recipient's point of view to detect possible misunderstandings before they occur.

If you insist on using humor, use smileys to indicate that you bear no ill-will towards the recipient. You could also use tags like "<tongue firmly in cheek>" to indicate that you are not serious.

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Edit Your Message

Typos, missing punctuation, and grammar slips can be a big turn-off. Use your spell-checker to spot mistakes. Then read through your entire message once more, and look out for places where you could be misunderstood. If you don't address the message until you're ready to send it, you can avoid accidentally mailing it before you're ready.

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Keep Messages Pithy

Respect the fact that your recipients are busy people with inboxes that may well be bursting with unread mail. Don't assume that they will piously plough through your wordy e-mail. Write your e-mail so as to allow the reader to get the gist of your message by skimming through the text. When editing your e-mail, cut out unnecessary words. Keep sentences short and to the point.

If you're forwarding a message, especially one with a long string of correspondence, or responding to a string of messages, delete unnecessary information like repeated signature lines, long strings of angle brackets, i.e. "<<<<," and blank spaces. Make sure it's still clear who wrote what in the conversation.

Bold the next line

Attachments

Don't send attachments to people you don't know without asking first. Many people don't like to receive them, can't receive them, or won't be able to read your particular file format. If your mail client automatically adds a .vcf attachment to every message, turn this feature off. These little files can pile up in your recipients' attachment folders and may annoy them.

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In Summary

Never underestimate the power of a well-crafted e-mail. It can be an effective tool for communication. Put as much thought into writing an e-mail message as you would when writing a letter. Write it with your purpose and audience in mind, and always remember the essentials of e-mail etiquette.