How to Write Ridiculously Good Emails

(a.k.a. how to respect your audience and achieve your goals)

Most emails are poorly written- unclear, lacking organization, riddled with typos. When your future is on the line, your emails need to outshine the inbox competition. Texting, tweeting, LinkedIn messaging and all forms of social media are valuable and worthy of your thoughtful curation. After all, they all contribute to your reputation, or your personal brand. But email is probably still your best bet for productive correspondence with employers, alumni, and professors.

1. Recognize that what you write says a lot about you.

Want people to think you are mature, knowledgeable and reliable? Good news: you have control. Anything that you put out into the world forms an impression of your style that can make or break your future. Take time to revise and increase your chances of being memorable for the right reasons.

• Ensure that your writing displays your judgement, follow-through and ability to synthesize information into key points.

• Indicate your attention to detail and professionalism by making your writing error free, easy to follow, visually clean, and clearly stated.

2. Write with the reader in mind.

Include and describe information in the way that is most meaningful to your audience. What are your readers concerns or challenges? How can you make what you say relevant or helpful to them?

• Provide context – where you met, who you are, how you got their name, and your reason for reaching out. Give enough information, but remain concise and to the point.

• Make your "voice" mirror the recipient's tone, language and culture.

• Ensure that what you need is clear – to make a decision, to take certain actions, to respond by a certain time, or just to feel complimented or appreciated.

3. Make the subject line descriptive.

Make it searchable, informative, and directly related to the subject of your message. Do not hijack a thread; if you are starting a new conversation, start a new email.

4. Err on the side of being formal rather than too casual.

This demonstrates respect. There may come a time when you're comfortable enough to speak more casually with the recipient of your message, but it's always better to play it safe (and professional) than sorry.

• Use a proper salutation (Dear Mr., Ms., Dr., or Professor) and sign-off (Best, Thank you).

• Avoid abbreviations or slang.

• Write complete sentences, using correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, avoiding nicknames.

• Use exclamation points sparingly and hold off on emojis.

5. Put your "ask" or "action items" first, not last, and make them explicit.

It should be immediately clear to the recipient what you want. Don't make them work to figure it out. The military uses the acronym BLUF= Bottom Line Up Front. You can back this up with the background info.

•   Give your recipients all the information they need to take whatever action you're requesting. This includes giving contextual information, details, or data that is necessary, and presenting it in a logical, cohesive way.

•   If there is a deadline, say so. It will hurt you and the person you're contacting if you don't. If you don't need a response, say so.

6. Keep it as concise as possible.

Take your time writing and revising. If the reader will need to do a lot of scrolling, it is too long.

•   Limit each sentence to just one idea. Divide long, winding sentences into shorter ones.

•   Break your message into concise blocks of 2-3 sentences each. Short, bite-sized paragraphs are the most readable.

•   Use bullets or numbered lists when you have discreet points to make.

•   Omit unnecessary words & phrases, clichés, and passive voice. What can you cut and yet not lose meaning? When you aim for originality and clarity, the result will be tighter, more powerful, and to the point.

•   Do not forward a lengthy thread and say "see below." Do the work of summarizing relevant points for your recipient.

7. Do your part solving what you can and don't ask a million questions over email.

You will annoy your reader if you ask questions you could have looked up yourself. Instead, tell them the steps you've already taken before asking for clarification or their opinion.

•   Make questions specific vs. vague.

•   Rather than asking multiple questions, request a meeting or phone call to discuss. Asking a bunch of questions puts pressure on the recipient to spend a lot of time formulating a response. (Which means you might not get one.) You'll learn a lot more in a quick conversation. If you do this, provide your availability.

8. If it is important, let it breathe and get feedback.

Take a break (10 minutes or a day) and look at your draft with fresh eyes. You'll almost always be able to make it better. This is particularly important if you feel emotional about the topic. Write, wait, then take out the emotion.

•   Wait to type the address into the To line until you are ready to hit send. This avoids accidentally sending a draft.

Come by our drop-in hours (weekdays, 10:00-5:00, in DUC 110) to get feedback. We commonly give feedback on emails to employers, alumni, networking contacts and professors.