ISTE-260: Exercise 3

Group 1
Part 3

Our group observed the email writing process with multiple students to see how much difficulty and thought went into the task of responding to professors and other acquaintances. We set up multiple semi-structured observations in which subjects were provided with certain scenarios in which an email had to be written. We observed the subjects while they completed three different tasks: writing an email to a professor, writing an email to a prospective employer, and writing an email to a friend/acquaintance. We selected those tasks because these are common in email writing and they all have a different process. For example, the email to a friend/acquaintance might be less formal than an email to a prospective employer.

Fig1. Subject composing professional email in office

We chose to observe our participants in their natural setting whether that's their office, classroom, or home. We decided to do this so that our subject was comfortable and mimicked their actual day-to-day email writing process.

First, we observed each of the subjects writing an email to a professor. Starting with the subject, the most common subject line text was, <name> <classname>-<classnumber>: reason for the email. For example: Joe Smith ISTE-260: Help with Homework #4. Each of the subjects started off their email text with a greeting. Some examples were: 'Hi Prof.<ProfessorLastName>', 'Hello Prof.<ProfessorLastName>', 'Greetings

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Prof.<ProfessorLastName>', and 'Dear Prof.<ProfessorLastName>'. This was followed by a few new lines and then the body of the email began. In the body part of the email, we saw the subjects basically just describe why they are sending the email to the professor. For example, one subject said "I'm having trouble with lab assignment 2, could I meet with you at 1:00 PM today? I'm not able to make your office hours today." After the body, the subjects commonly ended the email with a simple gesture of gratitude and their name. A couple specific examples from the study: 'Thank you, Joe Smith','Thanks, Joe Smith', 'Sincerely, Joe Smith', and 'Best regards, Joe Smith'.

The second task that we observed was writing emails to prospective employers. We noticed a difference in the time it took for the participants to proofread their statements. Students normally take longer to rethink certain sentences to see if they can sound more professional or polite when speaking with employers. One participant said that he waits a while after finishing his emails to employers just because he was nervous about saying something upsetting. He also said the email itself takes longer to write (at least 10 minutes more than normal) because he feels like he is at "a loss for words". Another participant reread her email almost obsessively while writing, to make sure it always "sounded okay".

The third task we observed was writing emails to friends/relatives. It was clear that this type of email was much different than the previous two (professional and professor). The subject wrote this email very quickly and didn't even read over it for spelling or grammar before sending. We also noticed that the subjects tended to use abbreviations in many cases such as 'lmk'.

The observations allowed us to format our questions in a way that would give us the most accurate and relevant data. We wanted to find people who have written emails and continue to write them frequently. We also wanted to ask participants if they get stressed, put off writing emails, and if they worry about spelling or grammar when writing to professionals compared to relatives. We also wanted to know their opinions on competitor's applications such as grammarly, Gmail's auto-response feature, and any other third party software. Finally, we thought it was important to find out if they already used email templates on a regular basis as well as what device they used to write the emails.

The most obvious challenge was to make sure that the spelling and grammar was correct. In the case of a subject for whom English was a second language, he expressed concern about choice of words and how they could be interpreted in a different way due to cultural differences. Another problem we observed was the ability to respond timely to emails, as some of them could be very urgent. One solution we could think of was writing an AI program that could read the subject's calendar and provide smart responses when the subject is

in a meeting, or training, or out of office. For grammar and spelling online services like Grammarly could be useful.

Interview Questions:

1. Do you write emails? If so, how many per week?

2. Have you used grammarly?

3. Do you ever use the auto-response feature on Gmail? Why or Why not?

4. Do you get stressed writing emails to professors? Why?

5. Do you ever put off writing emails? Why?

6. How do usually type or text when messaging family and friends? How does this contrast with how you write emails?

7. What type of device do you usually use when writing emails?

8. Do you worry about spelling and grammar in your professional email? Why?

9. Do you use any third party software or applications to write emails?

10. Do you have any standardized email templates for use in business communications?

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Appendix:

Nick's Observations:

19 year old, 2nd year Game Design student at RIT.

- Starts emails to people he knows with "Dear [lastname]
- Starts emails to people he doesn't know with "Greetings"
- Ends all emails with "Thank you, [full name]"
- Professor emails require no time to think over before sending
- Employer emails required at least 10 minutes to think about sending
- Participant says he is "sometimes at a loss for words" when he has to write to employers
- Doesn't write emails to acquaintances or relatives
- Kept all emails concise

John's Observations:

Interview with 62 year old Male

- Took much longer to read over email to prospective employer as opposed to friend/relative email.
- Didn't use any sort of template/signature when writing emails
    - This resulted in a much slower email writing process
- For writing an email to a close family member, used abbreviations such as 'lmk'

Yogi's Observations:

Subject is a 35 year old manager, interviewed at place of work

- He thinks for a while about who else to CC and what to put on the subject line.
- For important emails to new customers he prefers to compose the email in Word. He just feels comfortable writing in Word and copy-paste in Outlook.
- Occasionally does Google search for spellings.
- Goes over the email several times, correcting spellings and grammar.
- Refers to previous emails similar to the current situation and to get some ideas.
- The email isn't that long, 8-10 lines at most excluding greetings and signature.
- Signature is pre-formatted with name, title, address, phone number, and fax number.
- Sends the email and goes to "Sent" folder to make sure it is sent.

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Ellies' Observations:

    <u>19 year old, male computer science student</u>
    <u>20 year old, female engineering student</u>
    <u>20 year old, female web student</u>

- All start emails to professors with similar greetings "Hello <prof. lastname>" or "Dear <prof. lastname>"
- Emails to an employer would be sent with just a "Hello" or simple greeting before becoming acquainted
- Ending the email also didn't have many differences
    - Ends with a lot of "Thank you"s and "Best Wish"s
    - First and last legal names--very formal
    - The engineering student had a signature that she always sends with her emails that listed some of her other contact information
- The emails were always short and to the point unless one of the students had a more complicated question regarding a poorly explained assignment
- The emails didn't take too long to write or send but 2 of the participants did say they experienced stress because they were worried about sounding unprofessional
- The emails to employers took much longer for the web student to write due to the previously stated stress from sounding unprofessional and being unsure of what to say at all
- The computer science student expressed little to no stress when writing to the employer but did say he experienced a bit of anxiousness AFTER sending the email, waiting for what the response was more worrying
- All 3 subjects unanimously agreed that they use poor sentence structure and grammar when texting family members because they feel "weird" being so formal with relatives. Only with distant relatives are they more proper to leave a good impression
- Computer science student had used Grammarly before and said it wasn't as helpful as they hoped it would be and could be better.

Kathy's Observations:

    <u>20 year old, female student from the College of Arts and Sciences at RIT.</u>

- Emails to professors follow a specific format. There is a greeting, then a few lines explaining the email's purpose, followed by a thank you and the subject's name.
- Rather than signing an email with her full legal name, she used [first name nickname, last name initial] in her sample.
- Briefly proofreads her email one time.
- Says she used to write openings like "Good morning," but stopped because the email may be opened at a different time, and just use "Hello" most of the time.

- Subject explained she doesn't send "real" emails to family and friends and provided a sample of what usually gets sent to family and friends. Samples included a short title description such as "toothbrush", accompanied by either a picture insert or a link.
- Subject explains that this is because "we're probably already talking to each other in person or on a call when this happens, and the email just is a way to send relevant stuff to each other while we are on that topic".
- Had a lot of difficulty writing an email to a prospective employer. Constantly reread her writing while composing. Also took much longer to create.