

Fog Creek Incoming Email

BE VERBOSE AND EXCESSIVELY POLITE

You may have a natural tendency to be terse and brief when you send an email. Fight this temptation, because it often comes across as rude or curt, even when that's not what you meant. People will be much happier if you are unnaturally verbose, use a lot of polite padding, and basically sound like an apologetic announcer on the Tokyo-Osaka train trying to explain a three-minute delay.

"The tone of emails is always difficult to express. Most often, by over-exaggerating your tone, you'll accomplish the simplest of tones."

Although it is not sufficient in itself, one easy way to elevate the tone of your messages is to add an exclamation point to each email. Many of our snippets already use exclamation points liberally, so this is kind of built-in, but you might consider even doing this in your business and personal email communications. There's something about an exclamation point that relieves the tonelessly hostile tone of an email. It's sort of like being on stage or on camera. You have to exaggerate your emotions to get them across to the audience. That's what we're going for here.

Example:

Q: Does FogBugz support Unix?

A (BAD): Yep!

A (GOOD): Thank you for writing to us and for your interest in FogBugz. Yes, we support most flavors of Unix, especially the latest Linux distributions. Is there a particular distro you are interested in? I can check if it's officially supported for you, and even if it isn't, we've been able to get FogBugz running on most of our customers' systems. *

Example 2:

Q: I couldn't get Copilot to work. Please refund my money.

A (BAD): Your money has been refunded.

A (GOOD): Thank you so much for letting us know about this problem! I'm very sorry that Copilot did not work out for you, and I have already processed a refund to your credit card. If there's anything we can do to try and debug the problem, please let me know and I'll have a programmer get on it right away. If there's any other way we can be of assistance, please let me know. *

Example 3:

Q: How do I make FogBugz do x? I wanted to have the same Category and Assigned to on all new tickets. Is there a quick add ticket that I can set these defaults, maybe in a snippet?

A (BAD): To force the assigned to value, customize your Workflow. To force the category value, use a BugMonkey customization like this: <some_link>

A (GOOD): Thank you for writing us! There are a few ways to address this problem in FogBugz. Before we dive in, I'd like to make sure I have the entire picture so I can provide the best

recommendation. Can you please elaborate on the kind of problem you are trying to solve by forcing these values?

REPLY TO ALL EMAIL, NO MATTER HOW TRIVIAL

Inbox overload has encouraged a new style of email where it's not always considered necessary to reply to a message.

This is not our style. At Fog Creek we reply to ALL non-automated messages sent to us. Every time someone sends an email to Fog Creek is a chance to reach out and make a personal connection to that person. These personal connections are why people like us and buy our software and say nice things about us to friends.

We don't want to be AT&T or American Airlines: we want you to think of us as a bunch of nice people you may have exchanged emails with at one time.

Some emailers may not be expecting a reply, because so few other companies actually respond to any of their email and people are used to getting email from big companies that start out with DO NOT REPLY TO THIS MESSAGE WE DON'T WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU in all caps.

When they get a personalized reply from us, even if it's a snippet, we've exceeded their expectations and might win a fan for life.

Email is like a politician shaking hands. Politicians shake hands with everyone they can find. A lot of people, when they're in the voting booth, will far prefer the candidate that they have personally met and touched. That's why we respond to all email. We don't care if people are just emailing to sell us anthrax. If it's an email addressed to Fog Creek and it's not actually mass-produced automated email, we will reply to it, full stop. If a human being took the time to type out a message to us, we ALWAYS reply.

Reply to email that says, *"No need to reply..."*
Reply to email that says, *"I just wanted to let you know x."*
Reply to email that says, *"You guys suck!"*

Reply to email quickly. If you are looking at an email but it is going to take you several hours to find out the answer to a question, send an email saying, *"I'm looking into it and will get back to you at such and such a time."* Reply to the thank-you email they send when we solve their problem, even if it's just to say, *"Glad to be of help, I'm here until 5 if you have any other questions."*

Reply to all email. It's really simple. We reply to ALL email.

*Ok, it's not *quite* that simple. Some RARE caveats:*

Very occasionally, we receive a troll email that is basically an attack. Replying to these in any way only serves to encourage. Don't feed the trolls. If you're unsure as to whether an email counts as a troll email, assign it to your team lead and forget about it.

In the decade since [Joel blogged about customer service](#), some people have adopted a similar ethos and reply to all email. There's no need to out-polite our customers, empirically determine what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object, or insist on having the last word. You'll know this when you see it.

* This example is good, stylistically. Technically, it's outdated and inaccurate :)