

How to write effective emails

Email is still one of the go-to forms of communication in professional situations. It's also still one of the most misused. Far too many emails remain unclear, poorly formatted, badly written, superfluous or, at worst, easy to be misunderstood and/or cause offense.



So how can you become an email master? Start following these basic principles.

1. Identify why you're writing an email.

What do you want your audience to get out of the communication? What do you want to get out of it? For example:

- *You want a prospective customer to understand your new service.*
- *You want management to accept your proposal to upgrade the customer service IT system.*
- *You want your customers to understand the IT team will be working new hours.*

Be sure the subject is important. Junk emails and unnecessary communications are annoying, rude and presumptuous. Send only mission-critical messages from work email accounts.

2. Identify your audience.

Effective communication depends on your audience members, so it's important to spend time thinking carefully about them upfront. Who are they? What are they expecting? What do they already know? What new information do you have to tell them? What questions will they likely have? What cultural differences might be important to your writing approach?

Know your audience on a practical level, too: spelling a recipient's name wrong, flubbing a title or mixing up a name with someone else's is a major faux pas. You should also take care to narrow down your audience as much as possible. If it's feasible, send emails to no more than three recipients at a time. Mass emails are not only ineffective, but impolite.

3. Write smart subject lines.

To maximize your response rate, write a short subject line that includes a priority stamp and a brief, comprehensive description of the email's contents:

- *“Urgent: Can you RSVP for today’s conference call?”*
- *“Requires response: Need sales numbers for Tuesday’s presentation.”*
- *“FYI: Here’s the latest creative brief from marketing.”*

4. Begin your email with a greeting.

Emails to people you don't know well can sound blunt or rude without a greeting. However, for emails to close colleagues or superiors, consider skipping the greeting and getting right down to business.

5. Introduce yourself and your topic.

Start your body text with one or two lines that tell your recipient who you are (if necessary) and why you are asking for their time:

“This is Ray from marketing. I’m contacting you because I’m hoping you can provide me some data to help with our new sales campaign.”

If the email is long, you should consider including your main point and any requested actions in the introduction. Bold your main point and follow it with a call to action. You can include supplementary details later in the email.

6. Keep your question or request brief.

Short, targeted requests with low response barriers achieve results.

Poor: *“I’m preparing for the presentation next week. What topics should I cover?”*

Better: *“I’m preparing for the presentation next week. Which 2 of the following 5 topics are most important to cover?”*

If you can’t sum up your question or email topic in a couple of lines, you either need to do more homework so you can explain the issue succinctly or split the email into multiple communications, because you’re likely trying to cover too much in one message.

Startup manager [Rie Langdon](#)
explains

how she changed her approach to email in order to get responses from busy people.

7. End with a call to action.

Effective emails tell recipients what to do next. Action steps that pre-empt questions or concerns work best:

“If you have the sales numbers, please go ahead and start the report. If you don’t, please contact Ron for the numbers, then proceed with the report.”

“If you understand the directions, please finish the project by May 30. If you have questions, please call me directly.”

8. Sign off politely.

Include a warm signoff, followed by your name, email address and phone number. Contact information prominently displayed in your email signature encourages timely or even immediate responses.

9. Review your email before you send it.

Proofread for typos and grammatical errors. Check that you've written an email with active language, strong verbs, and precise words to enable fast scanning and response. Format your email simply, without extraneous colors, fonts or pictures.

And don't forget to check your email's tone. Sarcasm and humor can be — and often are — misinterpreted. Also, if you're including informalities like exclamation points, slang, abbreviations, or emoticons/emojis, ask yourself: Are those appropriate for my audience? In some professional situations, flourishes like this can be viewed as friendly and enthusiastic, but in others they may be received as unprofessional.

10. Avoid sending sensitive, inappropriate or personal information by email.

If you wouldn't say it in public, it doesn't belong in an email. The same goes for sensitive personal issues. Sending a sensitive or non-professional email to someone you trust does not guarantee it won't be seen by someone it wasn't intended for. Save personal and sensitive discussions for in-person, private settings.

Next: [How to process emails effectively](#)