Effective Email

DEBRA GRAHAM
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY
HUMAN RESOURCES TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT
Why is email important?

Emails convey more than mere words—they convey tone and personality. That personality may create both positive and negative perceptions.

Since the writer doesn’t have the benefit of immediate feedback, your email may be misinterpreted, and you would never realize the problem.

If you follow basic rules of email etiquette, you will likely face fewer misunderstandings.
The Basics

- Use standard English rather than “text” language.
- Proofread your message to ensure correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- Make your subject line specific and directive.
  - Do this,
    - SUBJECT: Department travel requests due no later than 28 Feb 201X
  - Instead of this,
    - SUBJECT: Travel
- With each new subject email, begin with a salutation.
- Capitalize appropriately. Don’t use all capital letters to convey emotion.
- Select a font, font color, and design that reads easily and conveys a professional, businesslike tone.
- Keep the email concise. Text within the reading pane will probably be read. Text below the reading pane may be overlooked.
- Return emails within the same time in which you would return a phone call.
Readability

- Use paragraphs to help the reader quickly understand your point. Large blocks of text are difficult to process, and some readers will give up or merely scan the text.

- When you are conveying directions or want to emphasize important points, number your directions or bullet your main points.

- Remember, when actions must occur in sequence, use a list rather than bullets.
Tone

- Appropriate tone can be hard to discern and convey over email.
- Misunderstood tone usually just results in some mild awkwardness. But at worst, it can damage a professional relationship.
- Here are steps you can take to minimize missed connections:

1. Figure out the style.
   - Consider a person’s communication style. Does this individual tend to write short, to-the-point emails with no salutation? Perhaps she loves sprinkling messages with exclamation marks and smiley faces. Or maybe the person has no qualms about stray typos.
   - Taking note of it can guide your approach in a response. Be aware of the varied writing styles of different individuals to avoid misunderstandings.

2. Less is more.
   - Keep emails simple and professional.
   - Unless you’re extremely close to the recipient, sarcasm and joking are likely to confuse people. And when discussing a delicate topic, sarcasm can do a world of damage. Be straightforward. If you still feel like you need to lighten the mood, pick up the phone.

   - No matter how clear you strive to be, sometimes confusion occurs. When you’re really stumped and don’t want things to become more tangled, it’s perfectly fine to come right out and ask “Sorry, I think we may have misunderstood each other. Did I say something that offended you?” or “Sorry, I think my message may have been confusing. What I meant was…”
   - A moment of awkwardness is much better than hurt feelings and long term misunderstanding.
Addresses

- Use email lists so that readers do not have to scroll too far to get to the actual message.
- To personalize each message or to prevent participants from seeing other recipients, put each address in the BCC: field.
Avoid discussing private concerns and issues

It’s fine to directly address one of the recipients

As the thread progresses, change the subject line to reflect new content,

When conflict arises, disengage and contact the person directly either face-to-face or on the phone
Long Messages

- Create a quick summary of the issue and make that your first paragraph. This summary should contain all the main components of the email.
- If necessary, place a “table of contents” in the email. An example of this:
  - “This email contains
    1. Budget projections for the last quarter
    2. Actual performance of the last quarter
    3. Proposed adjustments
- Confine messages to one subject. Each subject should have a separate email.
- If you need a response, put the request and deadline in the subject line.
  - SUBJECT: Nominations for Staff Member of the Year  Respond NLT 28 Feb 201X
- Create headings for major sections to allow readers to go quickly to items of interest.
- Attach long documents rather than place the content into the email.
Write from Your Reader’s POV

- Place important information up top—in the subject line and beginning paragraphs.
- Confine the email’s content to “the least the reader needs to know” rather than supplying details and background in which the reader has no interest.
- When forwarding emails:
  - Remove unnecessary addresses
  - Delete messages in the thread that don’t add value (“Here you are!” “FYI”)
  - Restate important details in your forwarding message. Don’t make recipients scroll down to find relevant information
  - Start new email subject when thread has moved beyond its original topic. Remember, many people save and sort emails by topic.
Be Sensitive

- Deliver disappointing news at the beginning of the message. Succeeding paragraphs can supply the details.
- Avoid blaming statements. Remember, emails can always be forwarded!
- Avoid ambiguous statements.
- Before sending a sensitive message, read the message out loud to a trusted coworker. Ask your colleague how they might “hear” the news.

Some messages are not meant for email!

- Arguments or debates should not be carried out electronically.
- Reprimands and corrections should be done face-to-face.
Don’t Surprise or Manipulate Your Reader

- Avoid sending email regarding an urgent problem or concern at the end of the day or week. Unless there is an opportunity to address the issue, the reader may fret unnecessarily.

- Avoid sending anyone a list of concerns that have never been voiced. The reader may feel intimidated or overwhelmed.
Maintain Control

- Before you send a sensitive email ask, “Would I say this to their face?”
- If you receive an email that offends you, think through the message and calm down before responding with your own email.
- Read your own response through twice and look for anything that the reader might misinterpret or find provoking.
Feeling Defensive?

- Empathize and agree with the sender.
- Thank the sender for bringing an issue to your attention.
- Explain your perspective without blaming.
- Don’t get bogged down in petty details and minor arguments.
- Apologize if necessary.
- Review your response for professional tone.
The Most Effective Emails

- Use standard English and correct punctuation and spelling
- Convey a professional and respectful tone
- Place important information in the subject line and inside the reading pane
- Use paragraphs to focus the reader on important points and make reading the email easier
- Use sensitive language that avoids provoking or confusing the recipient