

# What's the secret to writing a good email?

We all receive many, many emails every day. According to [an analysis of email traffic](#), *business emails account for 55% of all emails sent*. Email facilitates our working life but, as anyone who has accidentally “replied all” with a personal message knows, sometimes it complicates it too. How do we make best use of this medium?

## Plan to be remembered

Your email is important, so make it easy for readers to:

- Know at a glance what it is about;
- File it away; and
- Retrieve it quickly when needed.

This means you need to *think carefully about what you write in the subject line*. Make your subject brief but descriptive. Keeping in mind that the receiver could forward this email all over the world, make sure to use standard formatting and avoid personal comments.

### Effective subjects:

- ✓ Tomas Edison request for reimbursement September 2015
- ✓ Announcement: Behaviour change webinar Oct. 5, 2015

### Ineffective subjects:

- ✗ Plans
- ✗ MUST READ ARTICLE
- ✗ Follow up to our recent conversation

## Expect to be misunderstood occasionally

Even the greatest writers can be misunderstood; expect that you will be too. You can minimise misunderstandings by re-reading your email before sending, checking for *vague words, unclear phrases, ambiguous questions, overly-long sentences*, and general

### How to format a professional email

- ✓ Use a standard font, e.g. Arial, Times New Roman, Calibri, Helvetica, and Verdana
- ✓ Avoid email subjects and text written all in capital letters
- ✓ Avoid special background templates, such as colors and textures
- ✓ Consider using the occasional **bold**, **highlighted**, or underlined text to highlight key points
- ✓ Break long paragraphs into lists
- ✓ Stick to the essential information; if you want to have a conversation, pick up the phone
- ✓ Edit for typing and grammar errors
- ✓ Think carefully before using emojis such as 😊 😞

rambling. Aim for short sentences with simple words. *Don't rely on cultural references, idioms, inside jokes, and slang, because they can be misinterpreted.* Be particularly careful if you are writing in a *language you are not fluent in*, or if the recipient will read it in a language that they are not fluent in.

### **When are emotions unprofessional?**

There is a fine line between being authentic and being unprofessional. When you write, always *remember who your audience is*. Your tone should be friendlier with peers, and more formal with acquaintances, the public and, depending on your relationship, colleagues more senior than yourself. *Take your cue from the person you're writing to*. Does s/he use exclamation points, informal language and emojis? If so, then you can use them too.

### **How should an email be formatted?**

Emails are most effective when they are short. Aim to keep your message within a *single screen of reading*. Break up long text into *bullet points*. Use bold, italics, underlining, or highlighting to draw attention to your main points – but do not over-do it, or you will weaken the impact. *Avoid writing in all capital letters*, as this can be interpreted as shouting. It is also helpful to *limit yourself to one or two specific requests or questions per email*. Concise demands are more likely to get a quick response. Also, being targeted allows your recipient to address and file your emails efficiently.

### **Who should receive your email?**

Before hitting “send”, always *double and triple-check who you are sending it to*. Have you copied all the people you should? Have you not copied those you shouldn't? Are you sending it the correct person and at their preferred email address? Microsoft Outlook allows you to recall messages you have sent in error, but you can rarely do this quickly enough to avoid the recipient receiving it. Make sure you *know your office's policies* on internal vs. external emails and your protocol for copying other people. *Avoid blind copying* unless it is absolutely necessary, as this can give the impression that you are indiscrete.

### **When is email not appropriate?**

The biggest trick to email is knowing when your message is best written down, and when it is best delivered in person. *Emails do not convey tone very well*. They are easily misinterpreted. If what you have to say is in any way sensitive, nuanced, or emotional, it is always better to pick up the phone or to visit the person and speak face-to-face. *People are almost always more empathetic when dealing directly with another person* rather than a computer screen.

### **For more information**

- [How to write an email that people won't delete](#)
- [15 tips for writing effective email](#)
- [Writing effective emails](#)