Email Etiquette
By Dawn Rosenberg McKay, About.com Guide

Part 1: Why Is It Important?

Of all Internet activities, email is the most popular. Almost 88 percent of all Internet users in the U.S. use email. This information comes from a survey conducted by the UCLA Center for Communication Policy (The UCLA Internet Report: Surveying the Digital Future. UCLA Center for Communication Policy. 2001). According to the same survey, approximately 90 percent of those who use the Internet at work use it to access business email.

There are two reasons I decided to write an article about email etiquette. The first one is the sheer number of people using email, especially those using it for business communications. Since you are reading this article which appears on the Web, there's a good chance you use email to communicate with others, including your boss, colleagues, clients, or prospective employers.

So, what's the second reason? Well, as the Career Planning Guide here on About, I receive a lot of email. A lot of it is well written. A lot of it isn't. Some messages go on and on and on, until finally the question is asked. Sometimes the length is necessary -- other times the writer could be more concise.

Some messages get right to the point ... a little too quickly. The writer wastes no time asking for what he or she needs without bothering to be polite. Some of my younger readers (I assume) use what I can only describe as some sort of shorthand, i.e. "Can U plz send info on careers?" This may be appropriate for communicating with your buddies through instant messaging, but not for writing to someone you've never met. Besides, being a little more specific might help me find the information faster.

Sometimes there are glaring errors, such as misspellings and very poor grammar. While this annoys me some, I can only imagine what a prospective employer would think when receiving a poorly written message. Because your correspondence says a lot about you, you should be aware of some basic email etiquette, sometimes known as netiquette.

Part 2: Manners and Tone

Mind Your Manners

What three words have a total of only 14 letters yet carry a great deal of meaning? People may not notice these words when they're there, but if you forget to use them, you'll come across looking disrespectful and ungrateful. Give Up? These very powerful words are "Please" and "Thank You." Please take my advice. You'll thank me later.

This isn't something that especially bothers me, but there are others who are very sensitive to being addressed by their first names. When in doubt, use Mr., Mrs., or Dr. (if appropriate). When you are replying to an email and the sender of the original message has used his or her first name only, then you could safely assume it's okay to use that person's first name as well.

Don't Use that Tone With Me

Tone is a difficult thing to explain. Remember when your parents would say "Don't use that tone of voice with me, young lady (or young man)?" Your feelings come across by the way you say something. It is easy to change your tone when you're speaking. When you are writing it's very hard to do it. Whenever I write an email, I read my message over several times before I hit send. I want to make sure I come across as respectful, friendly, and approachable. I don't want to sound curt or demanding. Sometimes just rearranging your paragraphs will help.
If you're writing to someone you've communicated with before, you might want to begin by saying "I hope you are well." Email writers often use emoticons to convey a certain tone. For those of you who don't know what these are, emoticons are little faces made up by arranging parentheses, colons, and semi-colons. Use good judgement here. If you write to someone frequently and you have a less formal relationship, then emoticons are okay. If, however, you're writing to a prospective employer, stick to words only.

Avoid writing your message using all upper case letters. It looks like you're shouting. Don't use all lower case letters either. Some people say it will make it seem like you're mumbling.

Part 3: Be Concise and Professional

And Your Point Would Be...?

When possible, be brief. Most people don't have a lot of time to spend on email, so if you want your recipient to pay attention to your message, make sure you get to your point as quickly as possible. However, don't leave out important details. If providing a lot of background information will help the recipient answer your query, by all means, include it. You may even want to apologize for being so wordy at the beginning of the message.

Plz Don't Abbvrt.

My teenage nieces send me email using all sorts of abbreviations -- U instead of you, 2 instead of to or too, plz instead of please, and thanx instead of thanks. That's fine for personal email. Business email should be more formal. Of course, commonly used abbreviations such as Mr. and Mrs., FYI (for your information), inc., and etc. are fine.

What's In a Name?

Take a look at your email address. What does it say about you? Are you a sexymom@isp.com? Maybe. But do you want a prospective employer to think so? Consider getting a more formal address. Perhaps your first initial and last name would be good. If you're really attached to your address and don't want to change it, consider adding a second one for professional use only. If your ISP (Internet Service Provider) only provides a single address, look into getting a free account. If you're currently working, you may have a company email account. Do not use this address for job hunting purposes. Use a personal account only.

Part 4: Spelling, Grammar, and Attachments

Spelling Counts... Grammar Too

Use your spell checker. That is what it's for. Don't rely entirely on the spell checker though. If you are using the wrong spelling for a particular use of a word, i.e. two vs. to vs. too, the spell checker won't pick up your mistake. Don't try to guess the spelling of a word. Look it up. Personally I use Merriam-Webster Online.

Good grammar is important. As you can see, I believe in using a conversational tone when writing. It sounds friendlier. Contractions are okay. Slang is not. Under no circumstances should you use offensive language.

Don't Get Too Attached

Attachments are the bane of my existence. I receive them often but I don't open them unless I know the sender. And even then, I hesitate. As one of my colleagues said recently, "I don't open attachments unless they're from my own mother." Another colleague responded: "I don't open attachments especially if they're
from my mother." Attachments often carry viruses which the sender usually doesn't even know he or she is sending to you. As a matter of fact, the sender may not even know he or she is sending you an email. There are many viruses that cause your email program to send everyone in your address book an infected file.

If you need to send someone an attachment, you can contact the recipient first to ask if it's okay to send it. If you're sending a resume, it is better to paste it right into the email message itself. While we're on this topic, let me remind you that when sending email, avoid using hypertext markup language, or HTML. Not every email program can interpret it, and what the recipient winds up with is an unreadable mess. Use plain text only. Sorry, you will have to change that beautifully formatted resume into something a little less fancy.

Make a Good First Impression

I love email. It's much less intrusive than a phone call and faster than a letter. It may be your introduction to someone you've never met before. Take your time putting together a well-written message. Once you hit the send button you won't have another chance.

Source:  http://careerplanning.about.com/od/communication/a/email_etiquette.htm