

Before Hitting “SEND”

Ten Tips for More Effective Email

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Many of us spend hours every day reading (or at least scanning) incoming email, responding as necessary, and writing outgoing email. Here are ten tips for more effective professional email.

1. **Ask yourself: Is email the best method to communicate this?**

Should you be communicating by email, or would it better to talk on the phone or face-to-face? Too often, an email is sent when a phone call — or a walk down the hall — would be preferable. Communicating directly, without the barrier of email, can help you build a relationship, iron out confusion, and discover (and address) a problem that you might otherwise not even know about.

Email is not appropriate if you need to deliver bad news. Email is not appropriate if the issue is sensitive or complicated. If you start out with an email and find yourself going back and forth with your reader, email was not the right choice. Pick up the phone. You’ll likely resolve the issue much faster.

2. **Keep your email short**

Many readers won’t scroll down past the first screen of text. If possible, keep each email no longer than one screen length. Put the most important information right up at the top. (And, thinking about screen length, remember that many of your readers are using a smartphone or other mobile device with a small screen.)

If possible, break up a long email covering several topics into two or more emails. If you send separate emails for separate topics, your emails will be easier for your reader to file or forward as necessary.

3. Make your subject lines work for you and your reader

Faced with an overflowing inbox, we scan the subject lines. If your email doesn't have a subject line, it may never be read.

Readers use the subject line in deciding what to read and what to ignore (or put off for another day). Make sure your subject line is substantive and informative, and keep it short. If there is a deadline, put it in the subject line. If you need the reader to take some action, put it in the subject line.

If you are involved in a long email exchange and the topic of your discussion changes, change the subject line. It will make your email easier to search and file.

If you pull up someone's email address from an old email (as we all do), re-write the subject line to reflect your new email's purpose and content.

4. Use formatting to make your email easier to read and respond to

Formatting affects readability.

Keep your paragraphs short. Use white space. If your email is longer than a few paragraphs, use headings and bullets as appropriate. If you have questions for your reader, use a vertical list (or bullets) so that your reader can easily respond by inserting answers after each question.

5. Attachments

If you're sending a large attachment, check with your reader first to make sure he or she won't have a problem downloading it.

Give your attachments names that make sense to your reader. Names that your scanner produces, like Scan1.pdf or 2011_08_05_12_37_07.pdf, are meaningless and require too much of your reader's time and effort.

Before you hit "Send", make sure the attachment is the one you intended to send, and make sure it is actually attached.

6. Watch your tone

Email can often come across to the reader as abrupt and demanding. Read through your email before pressing the "Send" button. Consider adding a "How are you?" at the beginning and a "please" when you ask for something.

And add a “Thanks” at the end. Short polite words don’t add a lot of text and they can take the edge off of what might otherwise be seen as an insensitive tone. You might even use an exclamation point after your “Thanks!” — but don’t overdo it with two or three or four exclamation points. They might be appropriate in a text message, or a personal email, but not in a work-related email.

Also, if you are using ALL CAPS, be aware that in an email it signifies yelling. Is that what you mean?

7. Beginnings and endings matter

Start your email with your reader’s name. Depending on your relationship with the reader, use his or her first name or use Mr. Smith or Ms. Jones. If you are on a first-name basis, you can say “Hi Joe” or “Good morning, Jill” or you can just use your reader’s first name. Some people use what is customary in a letter, starting with “Dear Jill”.

Don’t end your message abruptly. Add a “Thanks” or a “Best regards” or the like. Then use your name (first name only, if appropriate) and insert a signature block if your email system doesn’t do that automatically.

The signature block should contain all your contact information, even if you know the reader well. Picture your email being read at the airport, with the reader about to board a plane. Make it easy for her to contact you quickly. Include at a minimum:

Full Name
Position
Firm/Company Name
Phone Number
Email Address
Website URL

8. Be careful and professional

Read through your email before hitting “Send”. It may even be a good idea (when possible) to print out your email before sending it.

Are you sending it to the right person? Watch for mistakes that Auto Correct can create. You don’t want your email to become the story of the day on a popular blog or your local newspaper.

If you selected “Reply to All”, ask yourself if all these people need to see this email.

If you’re sending your email to many people, consider putting all the names in the BCC line rather than in the TO or CC line. Just put your own address in the TO line and use BCC for all the other addresses. Using BCC this way is good email etiquette: You are not revealing everyone’s email address to all the other recipients. It also will help recipients who read your email on a mobile device. They won’t need to scroll through all those names to get to your message.

Are there typos (and punctuation errors) that spell check wouldn’t catch? Some are embarrassing mistakes that can damage your credibility. Some can change your meaning, such as a “now” that has turned into a “not”.

Text shorthand like “OMG” and “LOL” are not appropriate in a professional email.

Have you included all promised attachments?

If you marked this email as “Urgent”, is that appropriate?

9. Sending long email strings

Make sure you know what’s in the long string, and make sure the information in the string is something your reader should be receiving. This is especially important if you are writing to someone outside of your firm or company.

10. The “e” in email can stand for “evidence” and “eternal”

Before hitting “Send”, review the email one last time. It could become evidence in a case or it could wind up on a blog or on a newspaper front page (online or in print). It could be forwarded to your boss. If any of these possibilities are troubling, edit the email or delete it entirely and pick up the phone instead.

About the Author:

Marilyn Bush LeLeiko presents workshops in writing skills and Effective Email programs for lawyers, accountants and other professionals. During the summer she conducts workshops for law firm summer associates. Marilyn also provides one-on-one coaching, in person and by telephone. To learn more, visit LawWriting.com.