Email Etiquette: What You Need to Know

Using proper email etiquette when writing to your professor or another person in a professional capacity is a must and shows that you are professional and care about how you come across to others. For those that don’t know you already, this will be their first impression of you.

According to the University of Delaware (n.d.), when communicating professionally via email in a school or work environment, your email should follow the basic email etiquette rules found below:

• Use your school email and not your personal email, as it gives the recipient an idea of who’s sending the message. A personal email like hotboottiemama@mail.com is unprofessional and won’t make a positive impression.

• Fill in the subject line by mentioning what the email is for or in regards to. Subject lines are like headlines — they grab your reader’s attention; a few well-chosen words will let your recipient know at a glance what the email is about.

• Use a salutation or greeting. You should address your recipient by name and title and avoid beginning your email with “Hey” or just your request. It’s more polite to begin with “Dear Professor Smith” or “Hi Mrs. Jones.”

• Identify yourself in the first sentence of your email, and when contacting an instructor or administrator, you should also include your campus, class, and meeting time.

• Be polite, and don’t make demands or accuse; remember to use “please” and “thank you.”

• Keep your message short and to the point, and politely and respectfully ask your question or state your request. Make sure you are as clear and concise as possible about what it is you need or would like the recipient to do.

• Be nice and professional. Never send an email when you’re angry, and don’t use your email to argue or accuse. You want to be sure that you maintain a professional demeanor at all times and take ownership of your problem or issue if it’s being discussed in your email. Use “I may have missed your discussion about …” rather than “You didn’t tell us …”

• Use a polite closing, and make sure you end your email with something courteous like “Thanks,” “Thanks for your time,” “Regards,” “Sincerely,” “See you in class,” etc. You should always include your name after this closing.

• Check your grammar and spelling before sending your email, and be sure that you proofread your message. Professional email shouldn’t be written as though you’re texting a friend, so make sure you’ve used full sentences, proper grammar, and real (not informal or texting) spelling. Use “How are you?” rather than “How r u?” More formal writing is the acceptable professional style; it’s a sign of respect and shows the recipient that you can communicate at that level.

• It’s best not to write in all capital letters. It’s generally interpreted as SHOUTING, so it’s considered rude and unprofessional.

— T. Boone Pickens
(American business magnate and financier)
• Reflect on the tone of your message. When you are communicating via email, your words are not accompanied by gestures, voice inflections, and other verbal and non-verbal cues, so it may be easier for someone to misread your tone. Sarcasm and jokes can be misinterpreted in emails and may offend your audience. If you’re unsure about how your email might be received, try reading it out loud to a friend to see if they get the message you were intending to send.

• Don’t hit “Reply All” unless you really want all recipients of an email to receive the reply. Doing so can be annoying, as not everyone always needs to see all of the replies. Send individual replies instead.

When Should You Email and When Shouldn't You?

The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has some tips about sending emails including when to use email to communicate a message and when not to do so. While you may feel comfortable communicating in this way, the recipient of your message may not. Some guidelines listed by The Writing Center (n.d.) are found below.

Email is a good way to get your message across when:

• You need to quickly distribute information to a group of people, like a notice about class cancellation or a reminder about an upcoming event.

• You need to get in touch with a person who is hard to reach via phone or in person.

• You need a record of your communication. Emailing important information or messages may be necessary so you can refer back to what someone said in an earlier message, provide proof that you communicated something, or review the content of an important document.

• The information you want to share is not time-sensitive. An email is sent instantaneously, but this doesn’t mean the recipient will return an instantaneous response. For many people, reading their work email is a part of their job, and they only do it during regular business hours. Assume that it may take a few days for him/her to respond to your message unless your reader has promised otherwise. If a quick response is needed, make a phone call or have a face-to-face meeting instead.

Email is NOT an appropriate form of communication to use when:

• Your message is emotionally charged or could be easily misunderstood. If you would hesitate to say something to someone’s face, don’t write it in an email; if you’re angry or upset, you can quickly send something you may regret later.

• Your message requires discussion or is long and complicated. It’s better to schedule a face-to-face meeting if you need feedback from your instructor or you’re asking a question that requires more than a yes/no answer or simple explanation.

• Information is confidential. Keep in mind that your message is NEVER private and could be forwarded on to other people without your knowledge. Additionally, a backup copy of your email is always stored on a server even when you have deleted the message and think it is gone forever.

Email is a very popular way to communicate with others due to its ease and speed of use; however, its almost instantaneous transmission can create problems. When using email in a professional setting, remember that there are rules as to how and when you should do so. Content is always important and should be clear, concise, and error-free; email written like you text is unprofessional. You should always read your email before you send it so that you know you’re sending the error-free message you intend to send. Keep in mind that email can be forwarded to any and every one with minimal effort and time, so be sure that what you write in an email is something that you’d be all right seeing on Facebook (because you may find it there) or read by your mother or children (as they could see it too).

References


The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (n.d.) Effective e-mail communication. Retrieved from http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/effective-e-mail-communication/