

Writing Effective Emails

Making sure your messages get read and acted upon

Do people respond to your emails in the way you intend? Or do they seem to ignore them, or miss important information? And are you sure that you're making the best possible impression with your emails?

When you compose an email message, there are some simple rules that you can follow to ensure that your emails make a positive impression, and get you the response you want. We look at these here, and we'll illustrate the points we're talking about with both good and bad examples at the end of each section.

Subject Lines are Headlines

A newspaper headline has two functions: it grabs your attention, and it tells you what the article is about, so that you can decide if you want to read further. Email subject lines need to do exactly the same thing. Use a few well-chosen words, so that the recipient knows at a glance what the email is about.

If your message is one of a regular series of emails, such as a weekly project report, include the date in the subject line. And for a message that needs a response, you might want to include a call to action, such as "Please reply by November 7".

Remember that everyone tries to reduce the amount of "spam" email messages they receive. If you make appropriate use of the subject line, you increase the chances that your email will be read, rather than mistaken for spam and deleted without so much as a glance.

Finally, never leave the subject line blank. A newspaper always has headlines and emails with blank subject lines are usually spam and likely to end up in the "junk" folder.

Bad Example

Subject: Meeting

Hi Jim,

I just wanted to remind you about the meeting we have scheduled next week. Do let me know if you have any questions!

Best wishes,

Mark

This email is an example of poor communication for several reasons. Let's focus on the headline. As you can see, it's titled "Meeting".

Why is this a bad headline?

Well, there's no information about the meeting. If your calendar is full of meetings, you might even wonder which one Mark is talking about. And there's certainly no clarity about the subject, or when and where the meeting's being held.

What's more, the lack of specific information makes it look like a spam email. This email risks being directed to the junk folder instead of the inbox and/or being deleted and not read.

Also, the tone of the message is that of a friendly reminder. There's nothing wrong with that, but essential details are missing. If Jim hasn't heard anything about the meeting, or has completely forgotten about it, he'll have to write back for more information.

Good Example

Subject: Reminder of Meeting on PASS Process – 10am on 5 Oct.

Hi Jim,

I just wanted to remind you about the meeting we have scheduled for Monday October 5 at 10:00am. It's being held in conference room A, and we'll be discussing the new PASS Process.

If you have any questions, feel free to get in touch (x3024).

Best wishes,

Mark

This subject (headline) is very specific and means that the reader doesn't even have to open the email to get most of the relevant information. It also serves as a useful prompt, because every time the reader glances at his saved emails, he'll be reminded about the meeting.

Make One Point per Email

One of the advantages of email compared with traditional letters is that it doesn't cost any more to send several emails than it does to send one. So, if you need to communicate with someone about a number of different things, consider writing a separate email on each subject.

That way, your correspondent can reply to each one individually and in the appropriate time frame. One topic might only require a short reply, that he or she can send straight away. Another topic might require more research. By writing separate messages, you should get clearer answers, while helping other people manage their inboxes better.

If you do want to put several points in an email - perhaps because they relate to the same project - consider presenting each point in a separate, numbered paragraph. This makes each point stand out, significantly increasing the likelihood that each point will be addressed.

As with traditional business letters, each individual email should be clear and concise, with the purpose of the message detailed in the very first paragraph. Sentences should be kept short and to the point. The body of the email should contain all pertinent information and should be direct and informative.

Bad Example

Subject: Revisions For Sales Report

Hi Jackie,

Thanks for sending in that report last week. I read through it yesterday and feel that you need more specific information regarding our sales figures in Chapter 2. I also felt that the tone could be a bit more formal. The report is going to be read by our Executive Team, and needs to reflect our professionalism.

Also, I wanted to let you know that I've scheduled a meeting with the PR department for this Friday, regarding the new ad campaign. It's at 11:00, and will be in the small conference room.

Please let me know if you can make that time.

Thanks!

Monica

Monica used a good headline and she was pretty clear on the changes she wanted Jackie to make to that report. But what did she do wrong?

Well, the second paragraph about the meeting is pretty important but it is included in an email about revisions and not flagged in the subject line. If Jackie doesn't put it straight in her calendar, she'll have to remember that the meeting details were in the email titled "Revisions For Sales Report", which is not very logical.

Combining those two important communications increases the chance that either the meeting or the revisions will be forgotten, so it would be better to write two separate emails.

Good Example

Subject: Revisions For Sales Report

Hi Jackie,

Thanks for sending in that report last week. I read through it yesterday and feel that you need more specific information regarding our sales figures in Chapter 2. I also felt that the tone could be a bit more formal. The report is going to be read by our Executive Team, and needs to reflect our professionalism.

Thanks for your hard work on this!

Monica

AND

Subject: Friday 9 Oct: 11am Meeting w/PR Dept

Hi Jackie,

I wanted to let you know that I've scheduled a meeting with the PR department for this Friday, 9 October, regarding the new ad campaign.

It's at 11:00am, and will be in the small conference room. Please let me know if you can make that time.

Thanks!

Monica

By separating those two important communications, Jackie will be able to find what she needs quickly in her inbox.

As well as this, separating the two topics helps her keep her saved emails relevant. Once she's done with the revisions email she can delete it, but keep the meeting reminder email until the end of the week.

Specify the Response You Want

Make sure to include any call to action you want, such as a phone call or follow-up appointment. Then, make sure you include your contact information, including your name, title, and phone numbers. Do this even with internal messages. Remember, the easier you make it for someone else to respond, the more likely they are to do so!

Bad Example

From: reliablelandscapes@domain.com

Subject: Proposal

Lynn,

Did you get my proposal last week? I haven't heard back and wanted to make sure. Can you please call me so we can discuss?

Thanks!

Peter

There are several pieces of important information missing from this email:

- First, information about the proposal. What if Lynn got several proposals? Which one is the writer talking about? Also, did he send it by post or by email?
- Second, there is no information on how to get in touch. Where is his office number, his mobile number, or his business name? Lynn will have to find this herself
- Third, and most critically, he didn't give his full name and title at the bottom of the mail - despite the fact that his name doesn't form part of his email address.

Good Example

Subject: Checking On Reliable Landscapes Proposal

Dear Lynn,

I just wanted to check to check that you have received the landscaping proposal I emailed to you last week. I haven't heard back and wanted to make sure it went through.

Can you please call me by Thursday so we can discuss? This is when our discount offer expires, and I want to make sure you don't miss it!

The quickest way to contact me is by mobile phone.

Thanks!

*Peter Schuell, Owner
Reliable Landscaping, Inc.
555.135.4598 (office)
555.135.2929 (mobile)*

Peter has now given Lynn all the information she needs. She knows he emailed the proposal last week, that he'd like her to call him by Thursday, and that she should use his mobile phone to make contact quickly.

Most importantly, Peter included his name and title, so Lynn knows who he is, and put his contact information at the bottom.

Using EOM Headlines

When you have a very short message to convey, you can use the EOM, or End of Message, technique.

This is possible when you can put all the relevant information in the subject line, followed by the letters "EOM". This lets the recipient know that he or she doesn't even have to open the email; all the information is right there. The subject line is the whole message.

Example

Subject: Meeting on PASS Procedure: 10 Oct, 10am, Conf. Rm. A. EOM

Be a Good Correspondent

Make sure that you go through your inbox regularly and respond as appropriate. This is a simple act of courtesy and will also serve to encourage others to reply to your emails in a timely manner. If a detailed response is required to an email, and you don't have the time to pull together the information straight away, send a holding reply saying that you have received the message, and indicating when you will respond fully.

How frequently you should check your mail will depend on the nature of your work, but try to avoid interrupting a task you're working on to check your mail, simply because you wonder if something interesting has come in.

Always set your Out of Office agent when you're going to be away from your email for a day or more, whether on leave or because you're at meetings.

Internal Email

Internal emails, just like other emails, should not be too informal. Remember, these are written forms of communication that can be printed out and viewed by people other than those for whom they were originally intended! Always use your spell checker, and avoid slang.

With acknowledgements to www.mindtools.com