

Etiquette for Excellent E-mail

by Helen Wilkie

My thesaurus defines etiquette as: manners, accepted behavior, rules of conduct, decorum, good form, courtesy, propriety, formalities, niceties. If we follow such etiquette in dealing with e-mail, the technology will be a communication tool instead of a nuisance. This article offers ideas to help you do that.

Get to the point quickly

In today's business world, we're all very busy, and our attention spans are short. We're not interested in anything that wastes our time. So if your e-mail message begins in a longwinded, rambling way, your important message may be deleted unread.

The first sentence of your message you must tell your reader why you are writing, what the message is about and, if possible, why they should read it. Here's an example of how not to do it:

As you know, during our annual retreat last month, there was considerable discussion around the newly developed strategy for international expansion. We all agreed to give consideration to our parts in the implementation plan and advise the other team members of our plans. This e-mail is my response to that agreement.

Let's try that again:

As discussed at the retreat, I attach the schedule and plans for my group's part in implementation of the international expansion strategy.

Give your message structure

- Follow this simple template:
 1. Reason for writing
 2. Point by point discussion
 3. Close
- Make good use of bullet lists, which make the information pop right off the page or screen and into the reader's mind already formed as a complete thought. That's why I used them here.
- If you are sending attachments, clearly define in the body of the message exactly what they



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are and what they contain.

Make your subject line work for you

The subject line can be the deciding factor in whether your message is opened and read, or consigned to the trash unread.

First, make it specific. If you send me an e-mail with a subject of weekly update meeting, that doesn't tell me much. If the meeting is a week away and I have lots of other things to think about, I might easily decide to read this later, or not at all.

But what if the subject line read, change of date and venue for weekly update meeting? That's altogether different. I certainly want to know where and when the meeting takes place, so it's in my interest to read it now, and I probably will. Use a subject lines that spark the reader's interest.

A useful technique is to insert a word or code at the end of the subject line indicating what, if anything, is required of the reader. For example, you could add FYI. Of course, be sure people know what FYI means, especially if you are corresponding with people in other countries. If you have any doubts you can just write *for your information*, or *information only*. When appropriate, you could add *action required*, *response required* or even *urgent*. Any of these will help determine the reader's actions regarding the e-mail.

If you are sending a message to a list of people and require action from only one, use your subject line again to say so. Write *action required by Jennifer only* or even just *action Jennifer*. That prevents everyone else jumping in with comments and copies to everyone else, creating a storm of e-mail that serves no purpose.

Make it reader friendly

First, the salutation. Do you need one? What should it be? How formal or informal should it be?

Since no specific protocol has established itself around this, the best answer is: it depends. Traditionally, in paper correspondence, when you're writing to someone outside your company you write a letter, which starts with a salutation of *Dear Mr.* or *Dear Ms.*, or if you know the person better perhaps *Dear Bob*. This is a good guideline to carry over to e-mail.

You might also simply incorporate the name into the opening sentence. For example, *Certainly John, I'd be happy to speak at your conference.*

Break your e-mail messages into smaller paragraphs than you would for a printed message—one or



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two sentences perhaps, with two line spaces between paragraphs. This is strictly a matter of making it easy on the eye. It's hard to read a screen full of words, and this extra space just makes it that little bit easier.

Don't write in block capitals. Readers perceive that as shouting, so it's not a good thing to do in business correspondence. Also, spam filters often interpret words in all caps as spam triggers. So if you don't want to be caught in the junk file, don't use all caps.

On the other hand, don't drop capital letters altogether and write everything in lower case. That is not only ungrammatical, but also difficult to read.

Use attachments with care

Attachments can carry viruses and worms and other nasty surprises. So if you send attachments to strangers, why should they trust you enough to open them?

My personal rule is that I never send unsolicited attachments to people who don't know me. Because of the nature of my profession and my business, I often prospect for new clients via e-mail introduction. I have several pieces of information about my speaking and training services that I want people to have. So I simply explain briefly who I am and why I'm writing, and then I tell them I never send unsolicited attachments, but if they reply giving me permission I'd be happy to send them. Most people do, and they tell me they appreciate my consideration, which gets the relationship off to a good start.

An alternative to an attachment is to provide a link to the information on a website. Many organizations have their own intranets, and pages can be used for this purpose. Internal blogs can serve the same purpose. So then in your message you'd just say, The list of participants and their duties is in the pdf file at the following link: and then just insert it in its own separate line.

Again, when you do send attachments, make sure you define them within the body of the e-mail.

Beware the SEND button

There's no shortage of horror stories of e-mail messages that have been sent to the wrong person, or to a whole group of people who were never meant to see them. This can cause at the very least embarrassment and at the worst loss of jobs or even legal action.

One of the problems is that words on a screen carry a much higher emotional charge than the same words on paper. That's the finding of a study done a few years ago, and my own experimentation



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found it to be true. So if you receive a message from someone that offends you, or you find your fingers itching to send back a scathing reply, print the message. Read it from the printed page, and you'll be surprised how much less offensive it can seem. This of course also gives you time to calm down and respond in a more businesslike manner.

One last thing, if you receive an e-mail because you are on a list and you want to reply to the sender, don't hit the **reply all** button. That can create a storm of messages flying around willy nilly to everyone, whether they need to know or not.

E-mail is an excellent technology. If we follow some simple etiquette guidelines such as those in this article, we will make it a boon to our workdays instead of the bane of our work lives.

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