

Introduction to Email

Email as a medium of communication has become an almost indispensable tool for business, educational, social and personal purposes. Its importance in the future will, in all likelihood, continue to grow at an almost exponential rate, despite the plague of spam that is choking the internet.

Email has the advantage of regular postal mail in that it is delivered into the recipient's mailbox for them to read and reply to at their convenience, but without the lengthy time delay involved with 'snail mail'. Email also has the advantage of being quick and easy. It doesn't oblige the sender to engage in small-talk with the recipient, as telephones do. Using the phone to convey a simple message to a friend might involve a 10-15 minute conversation because no-one wants to appear rude by hanging up too soon. In an increasingly busy world, email allows the same message to be conveyed in a minute or two without implied rudeness.

Email is an electronic version of a written Memorandum. Remnants of the Memo can be seen in the header where the To: Cc: and Subject: fields closely emulate that of the traditional Memo. The term 'Cc' is retained because it still somehow makes sense to people even though the days of making an actual 'carbon copy' are long gone. Many people under the age of 40 will have never seen a sheet of carbon paper, such as was used in offices to make a copy in a typewriter of the original memo.

Email Etiquette

While academic staff (and people generally) don't deliberately penalise students who inflict poor email manners on them, it's a good idea not to irritate or offend the recipient unless you deliberately intend to do just that.

There are no 'official' rules governing electronic communication, though there have been attempts to establish one standard or another as the default, there is no common agreement. So beware people telling you there is one right way, they are assuming too much. As a general rule though, netiquette involves the same principles as plain old etiquette -- basic courtesy, respect and ethics.

By following the principles outlined below, the recipient of your email will be more likely to read and act, if not be favourably impressed by your message:

1. **Subject line to summarise the message.** Make the Subject line summarise the body of the e-mail. Ask yourself, 'will the recipient(s) know what this e-mail is about'. For example, Instead of Subject: Exam, say Subject: Location of 1508INT Exam, 23 July 05.
2. **Don't assume the recipient knows the background.** Include enough contextual information at the beginning of the e-mail for the recipient to know what the matter is about. If in doubt, put background information in. For example, don't say can I have an extension for my assignment?, instead say I refer to the CIT3622 assignment 1 that I handed in late. I was ill and have a doctor's certificate. May I ask for an extension on the basis that I was too ill to do it on time?

3. **Keep it concise.** Keep messages brief and to the point, but not so brief that it causes the problem outlined in the previous point. This includes deleting any irrelevant text when an email has been back and forth several times. No-one wants to scroll down through pages of text in order to reach the message they want to read. If the sense of the email will be lost by deleting that text, however, leave it in.
4. **Reply within 24 hours.** Try to reply within 24 hours, less if possible. In fact, get in the habit of replying immediately -- it is the polite thing to do, and the recipient will appreciate a prompt reply. It also makes you look efficient. The longer you leave it to reply, the more likely you will forget or have too big a log-jam of unanswered email.
5. **Allow time for a reply.** E-mail messages are not usually *required* to be answered immediately, though it is good practice if you do. Before sending a reminder, allow some time for a response, some times even a few days. Not everyone is online 24 hours a day.
6. **Use the BCC field when sending bulk email.** If you're sending email to a whole list of people, put their email addresses in the BCC field. That way, the privacy of the recipient is respected, and spammers cannot harvest the email addresses for their dastardly purposes.
7. **Don't shout at people or threaten them.** Don't use all capital letters, (UPPERCASE), or oversized fonts. The reader will likely feel they are being shouted at, or even threatened. If you must use UPPERCASE, use it very sparingly and only to emphasise a particularly important point. Ask yourself, 'if I was talking to the recipient face to face, would I be raising my voice to them?' One way to add emphasis is to enclose the word/phrase with an asterisk, for example "It is **important** not to shout at people by using UPPERCASE". Large sized fonts (greater than 12) are useful for people with visual impairment, but are not appropriate for general use.
8. **Avoid angry outbursts..** Don't send or reply to email when you are angry. Wait until you have calmed down, then compose the email. Once written and sent, it can't be recalled. Angry or intemperate email has a way of rebounding on the sender. As a guide, ask yourself, 'would I say this to the person's face?'
9. **Correct punctuate and grammar.** Use punctuation in a normal manner. One exclamation point is just as effective as five !!!!! Use correct grammar as with any written message.
10. **Layout message for readability.** Use spaces and breaks between paragraphs and long sentences to make it easier on the reader.
11. **Keep the thread.** When replying to an e-mail, use the reply option on the sidebar in your mail. This will keep the message in the "thread", and make it easier for the recipient to follow.
12. **Spelling.** Check your spelling! If you don't know how to spell something, look it up.
13. **Don't Reply to All unless necessary.** Think twice about sending a reply to everyone. Perhaps only selected people need to see this email. Sending it to everyone may simply be contributing to an already cluttered In-Tray.
14. **Acronyms, abbreviations, and emoticons** are OK within reason. As long as you don't overdo it, and the recipients can reasonably be expected to know what they mean, acronyms and abbreviations are OK to use in e-mail. Emoticons (for example ;-) a winking smiley face) are good when used in context. As a general rule, you probably shouldn't use them when talking to someone in authority unless you're sure.
15. **Forgetting attachments.** If the reason for sending an email is to send a file, remember to include it. Its easy to forget. One strategy is to attach the file before writing the email.
16. **Sharing large files.** Avoid sending file attachments larger than a megabyte unless it is directly necessary (like large work-related documents, spreadsheets and/or presentations). Most of the time, such attachments might have curiosity value for some but which end up clogging mail servers and in-boxes much to the annoyance of systems

administrators. If you want to share photos, videos etc, use Flickr or YouTube or any of the other many such services now freely available.

17. **Not Suitable For Work (NSFW) warning.** Some workplaces are tolerant of non-work related email, though not too many these days. Especially if the email you are sending contains 'adult' material be sure to include the NSFW warning in the subject line. Not doing this might get someone into trouble with their boss.
18. **Edit the superfluous text out of emails..** When you are sending email that has 'been around' in the sense that it has been replied to or forwarded many times, take the time to remove the angle brackets '>' from the message. Its irritating for many people to see text in such disarray. The easiest way is to copy and paste the text into a word processor, and use the search and replace function to remove any unwanted characters. The example below breaks both this rule and the one about shouting at people by using UPPERCASE:

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>> >>> >THE FOLLOWING IS TAKEN FROM A NEPALESE GOOD LUCK MANTRA. YOU'LL
>> > >>> >FIND IT TO BE WORTH READING AND WORTH SHARING:
>> > >>> >Do not keep this message. The mantra must leave your hands
>>                                     within                               96
>> > >>> >hours or you will suffer harm.
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19. **Chain Letters..** It is becoming more common, as more people use email for more varied purposes for it to be used for multilevel marketing, chain letters, pyramid schemes and other dubious purposes. The example above is one of the more benign examples of an implied threat as a way to motivate the recipient to take action. Another example is the chain letter that claims to be for the benefit of a dying child or promises to make you rich overnight if only you send it to five more people, and send \$10 to the person who sent it to you. Most people, myself included, find these email practices particularly annoying.
20. **Don't be over-familiar with the recipient..** Many people, me included are offended by strangers being over-familiar. For example I react badly to people I don't know addressing me as 'Dave'. Only friends and family call me that. As a rule, use the title or form of address that you would use in verbal communication.
21. **Illegal Activities.** These include libel (defamatory statements), discrimination (racial, sexual, religious, ageist etc), some adult material (child or violent erotica), illegal information (how to kill or injure people, incitement to violence, racial hatred etc). This advice does not apply to the vast majority of email users, who would never indulge in the aforementioned practices. But for those so inclined, not only are these likely to offend the recipient, people found engaging in illegal activities involving email are likely to have strong sanctions brought against them by the university and by the civil authorities.
22. **Email is not confidential.** It is almost laughably easy for the contents of your email to be read by others without your knowledge. So its wise to avoid saying anything you wouldn't write on the back of a postcard. Also, if you work within an organisation, rather than directly connected to an ISP (internet service provider) its becoming more likely that every email you send and receive is scanned for certain words that are 'deemed unacceptable'. Email with 'unacceptable' content is quarantined, and record is kept. People can be disciplined or fired if they send or receive too much such email. The organisation has every user sign an 'acceptable use' contract as a condition of their having an email account. That way, the employee can be deemed to have broken the contract, justifying disciplining him or her.
23. **Correct priority.** Avoid marking an email 'high priority' when it is really 'normal' priority