

Chapter 6

E-MAIL

Your Everyday Chance to Build a Professional Image

LEARN HOW TO . . .

- Strategize e-mail to accomplish goals
- Apply the structured process
- Adopt the right tone
- Write internal communication messages
- Write to groups
- Create networking messages

Email remains the most pervasive form of communication in the business world; while other technologies such as social networking, instant messaging (IM), mobile IM, and others are also taking hold, email remains the most ubiquitous form of business communication.

—Email Statistics Report, 2014–2018,
The Radicati Group (www.radicati.com)

START WITH STRATEGIC THINKING

E-mail is serious business in today's workplace. This may surprise you if you haven't yet held a career position in your field and think e-mail is an antique form of communication. You probably didn't need it much in college, and I've yet to

hear of a course that covered it. But in fact e-mail is the nerve system that connects the business world. It's how we communicate in all directions, no matter what the nature of the organization.

Despite the inroads of instant messaging and social media tools in some business circles, we depend on internal e-mail to interact with colleagues, supervisors, subordinates, collaborators and services. When we deal with people outside—from clients and prospects to suppliers, partners, media, and industry contacts anywhere in the world—e-mail is usually the route of choice.

In fact, we typically turn to other communication channels only when we must: if in-person contact is essential, for example, or when the occasion demands more formality or even faster speed.

What could happen in a given company if everyone wrote good, clear, appropriate e-mails day in, day out? I am sure that efficiency and productivity would rise. Customers would buy more and behave more loyally. Relationships inside and outside would improve.

But more to the point, what will happen if *you* write strong e-mails each and every time? Your work life and career prospects will improve—perhaps dramatically. Supervisors, colleagues, and customers will find you capable, logical, credible, persuasive and professional, probably without knowing why.

You are what you write. The caliber of your e-mails adds up to create a total impression, and you have the power to make it a positive one. Not to mention, your e-mails will get the responses you want much more often, whether you're asking people to meet with you or supply resources or refer you to an employer or client.

The same principles apply if you're communicating for business purposes through other e-channels, including social media, so learning to write successful e-mails is time well spent. And the planning, writing and editing process is exactly the same as for major documents like proposals and business plans.

So here's how to write e-mails that work for you.

1. Commit the Time to Craft Your E-Mails Well

Do this without exception, because you can't know which messages are important. E-mail was the first medium with that most special and frightening feature: limitless forwardability. You may address a progress report to your immediate supervisor, but he or she might send it right on up the food chain. You may dash off a casual message to a buddy who ends up forwarding it to half his address list, or includes it as part of a long message thread to people unknown and inappropriate.

So never write anything you'd be embarrassed to find on the CEO's desk, a billboard, or the front page of a newspaper. Don't write anything you won't want dug up years from now, either, when you're up for CEO or running for office. E-mail has

another special feature: It's indelible. It may sleep, but it never dies. Invest in planning, drafting, and revising every message so it reflects your best writing in every respect. What you *don't* write can matter as much as what you *do* write.

That said, I acknowledge there are occasions when timing counts more than quality. If your boss calls from China to say he's signing a contract and needs the research results e-mailed *now*, don't labor over your wording. But here's the good news: The practice you give yourself when less pressured makes handling emergencies a snap.

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: USE E-MAIL TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

E-mail is one of the principal ways you can distinguish yourself because you do it constantly. If you get a reputation for being able to write concise, to-the-point e-mail that says only what needs to be said, people will always open your message and read it. Showing that you have the ability to summarize and wrap up is a fantastic way to show what a capable person you are. It should be a top skill for a person entering the business world to master.

—Leila Zogby, president of Leila Zogby Business Writer, Inc. (www.leilazogby.com)

2. Know When an E-Mail Is the Right Medium—and When It's Not

While “traditional” advice says to use e-mail for short messages and stick to one idea, in fact no one follows such rules. However, never forget that many people don't really like reading long documents on screen and resist scrolling. They tend to skim e-mails and will rarely print them out. Moreover, most people today read e-mails on their smartphones or other mini devices. So complicated messages full of ideas or instructions don't work well. Of course, you can attach a complex document—provided you're pretty sure the recipient will open it. Or you can link to online materials to provide backup detail.

Look for a communication channel other than e-mail when,

- The occasion calls for more formal documentation, with a potential legal aspect or a need to go on record. There are times you should protect yourself with a print document, such as when you're signing a contract, making a complaint, filing a claim or delivering a performance review.
- You're asking for something personally: a donation to a good cause or a reference, for example. Depending on your audience, e-mail may be fine, but in other instances a letter or phone call is better. Whatever written form you choose, craft the message to represent your best writing. E-mail may be easier to send—but that doesn't mean it's easier to write it well.

- The person you're addressing is e-mail averse. It's important to consider, for example, that many wealthy investors and donors to charitable causes are over 65 and, especially if they no longer work in office situations, may use e-mail minimally at best. Important audiences need to be addressed in their own terms. At the other end of the scale, many young people would prefer to sidestep e-mail in favor of texting or Facebook.
- The message should be delivered privately or in person. Don't criticize or fire someone by e-mail, send anything you don't want shared, or use it to break off a relationship. It's not only cruel and cowardly but apt to backfire on you in major ways.

SUCCESS TIP

SOME "ALMOST NEVERS"

Your business e-mails should almost never convey emotions, negative feelings, sarcasm and cute stuff.

Never send an e-mail when you're angry. It's something people won't forget or forgive and is guaranteed to bite you back. Take special care if you're writing to someone you dislike—you might ask a friend to check your message. Sarcasm, irony, and most humor don't belong

in e-mails. Write nothing that can be misinterpreted. And unless you absolutely know your reader will relate to them, put the emojis or emoticons way back on the shelf when you want to look professional and be clearly understood. Limit exclamation points, though their use is common in texting and e-mail now because these channels offer few ways to express enthusiasm.

In general, don't make e-mail a substitute for in-person contact. It's not a great relationship or team-building tool as compared to face-to-face interaction or even telephone calls. Like all written communication, it doesn't come with clues to meaning like facial expression, tone of voice, and body language. So never negotiate by e-mail or use it to engage in give-and-take situations. The medium's impersonality is leading some companies to mandate weekly e-mail-free days, or daily e-mail blackouts, forcing employees to pick up the phone or walk down the hall.

E-mail use is "exploding" Not only are workers wading through more clogged in-boxes, they're also checking frequently, an average of 74 times a day

—Professor Gloria Mark,
quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* ("A Company Without Email?")

3. Shape Your Message Based on Your Own Response Patterns

Are you impatient with meandering e-mails of dim purpose or those that require time to decipher? So is everyone. This tells you that relevance, conciseness and clarity count.

And all the human interaction factors do, too: sincerity, honesty and courtesy. We're the same people in the work setting as we are outside of it. Most of us want to feel included, respected and appreciated—liked, and maybe even cared about.

You've probably noticed that even the briefest work memo can convey subtle emotions when you're on the receiving end. Every message you send includes such a subtext, intended or not. Practice awareness of what you communicate in the emotional dimension. Think "golden rule" and you'll accomplish your goals and build good relationships far more easily.

4. Plan the Subject Line and Lead Paragraph Well

Crafting a strong opener is especially important for e-mail. Each message is a fight to keep the reader's finger from clicking Delete and her eye from moving back to its in-box scan. Write concise, to-the-point subject lines that clearly identify what the message is about. Puzzle out a way to put the important words on the left so they're not cut off in the in-box window. Here are a few successful subject lines I found in my e-mail box today:

USB DVD Drive \$26.99

Reader Favorites: Content marketing . . .

Deal Alert! Michaels.com

And here are a few that didn't get me to open the message:

Simple English is no one's mother tongue. It has to be worked for.

—Jacques Barzun in
Teacher in America

Last Chance to Register for . . .

Event of the Year! 30% Off . . .

Shocking News!

The first lines or paragraph of the message should go right to the bottom line and focus on why you're writing as well as answer the unspoken question: Why should the person care?

USE THE STRUCTURED PLANNING SYSTEM: GOAL, AUDIENCE AND TONE

To write successful e-mails—as with every written communication—approach the task systematically. This process will become second nature with surprisingly little practice. The process is explained in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. Here's how it applies to e-mail:

1. Define your *goal* as closely as you can, and consider your *audience* and its *characteristics*.
2. Figure out what *substance* will accomplish that goal with that particular audience, and put the elements in a logical order.
3. Decide what *tone* is appropriate to the reader, taking account of the person's status, personality, your relationship with him or her and the nature of your goal.
4. Based on the first three steps, figure out a direct, clear *opening*. For e-mail, that's the subject line, salutation, and first one or two sentences.
5. Follow through with the *middle*, which typically contains technical information, backup for your request, and the reasoning if you aim to persuade.
6. *End* strongly, making it clear what follow-up you want.
7. *Review, edit, and tighten*: Business e-mails (and I would say all your e-mails) must be concise and error-free with correct spelling, punctuation, and basic grammar. Poor writing interferes with comprehension and makes you look incompetent and uncaring.

Now let's apply this framework to a workaday e-mail.

You notice that you're not included in a flow of reports relating to a major department project, one you're not directly involved in but would like to be.

Here's how you should plan your message, preferably writing down the answer to each question as I do in this example.

Goal? Immediately, to be added to the distribution list. Long range, to be better positioned for interesting work that's important to the organization.

Audience? Primary: Your supervisor. Secondary: Possible higher-echelon executives who may make the decision.

Audience characteristics? What do you know about these people? You're writing for a range of personalities, but since they are all managers, you can safely assume they have a few things in common: self-interest in "getting the job done" and, one might hope, grooming new talent.

Tone? Must be very respectful. Even if your manager is a pal, you're asking for something, and his or her bosses may not even know you. But you don't want to sound artificially formal.

Substance? The question to always ask: What can I say that will make my case with this audience? Why should my targeted readers care?

VIEW FROM THE FIELD: TRY TO HIT THE E-MAIL MARK

It annoys me when an e-mail goes on and on, especially when it's a solicitation—getting a long complicated e-mail from someone I don't know and am not engaged with is a fast way to make me hit the delete button. So keep it simple. If you need to elaborate, send an attachment or have a conversation. Once in a while I get an e-mail that's fast, right to the point, doesn't include a lot of rhetoric or misspell my name, or approaches me in some way the person knows will be relevant to me. That shows they did their homework and figured out what's in it for the audience.

—Laurie Bloom, director of Marketing & Communications, Rivkin Radler LLP

Looking at the situation through the other persons' eyes always provides your best clues. *If you were the supervisors, why should you grant the request?* Don't write an e-mail asking for something until you have an answer, because that's essential to deciding what to include and what to leave out.

Knowing the company also tells you whether your request is a hard sell or not. Is information flow generally good, or is there a knowledge-is-power mentality? Are there rigid guidelines on pecking order entitlements, or flexible ones?

If you assume your request is an easy sell, you could simply say,

Dear Jack,

I'll appreciate having my name added to the Carter Project distribution list. I'm interested in seeing how it goes.

Thanks,

Jane

But this would be a mistake. You can't really predict whether the recipients will see the change as insignificant or as a departure from protocol. So you need to make a case. Think about possible advantages to the other parties. For example,

- The information will help you with your current work.
- You possess some special background or experience that means you might make a contribution.
- You hope to be involved in similar projects down the line and this will help you prepare for that.

Draft 1

Subject: Request to be added to Carter Project distribution list

Jack:

I'd like to ask if I can be added to the information distribution list for the Carter Project.

Since I'm currently working on several smaller-scale but similar projects, seeing how the challenges are handled will be helpful and could save me significant time. Also, the chance to review the materials will enable me to sharpen my thinking so I am better prepared to handle future large-scale initiatives.

As you know, I have a background in the medical imaging industry, so I might possibly have some useful thoughts to offer on Carter.

Thanks so much.

Jane

This brings us to Step 7, editing and revising. Here's how I'd rewrite my own draft after reviewing and thinking about it.

Draft 2

Subject: Information request, Carter Project

Dear Jack:

I'd appreciate it very much if I can be added to the Carter Project distribution list.

I'm working on several similar smaller-scale projects right now, and seeing how the challenges are handled will be a big help. Also, reviewing the materials will help prepare me for future large-scale projects when those opportunities arise.

Thanks so much for considering this request.

Jane

Is this version better? Why did I make these changes? Here's the reasoning, step-by-step, along with guidelines that apply to all e-mails.

Subject line: *Focus them tightly or your recipient may trash your message without reading it.* The subject line in Draft 1 is long and wordy—only part of it will probably show up on the reader’s screen. It needs to be tighter and more direct. Also, a good subject line enables you or the recipient to easily retrieve an e-mail in the future, which can be very valuable.

Salutation: *Pay attention to tone in salutations.* In Draft 1, using the name alone is abrupt, not appropriate to a request, especially when you’re addressing a superior.

The lead: *The first sentence in large part determines whether your message will succeed. Take time with it.* Draft 1 begins okay in that it gets right to the point, which, almost always, you want to do. But it’s a little obsequious, asking for permission to make a request. So I took out “I’d like to ask” and substituted words that set an appreciative tone.

Message substance: *Always aim for just the right amount of content to make your point—not too much and not too little.* Draft 1’s substance works reasonably for the purpose but on more careful consideration—which is easy once you have the draft in front of you—Paragraph 3, offering to help on the project, seems a bit arrogant. So I cut it, though should a conversation result from the e-mail, it’s a good point to hold in reserve.

The close: *End strongly by underlining your request—or whatever other purpose motivates your message, as specifically as possible.* In Draft 1, the very general ending doesn’t really close the natural circle of your message. In this case, you’re asking for a response to a request; at other times, your close might say, “Let me know when you’re available to meet with me” or “I look forward to hearing when the new system will be ready.”

Writing style: *Aim for simple, direct, conversational language that moves naturally to pull the reader through.* Draft 1 overall sounds rather stilted and clumsy. To instantly discover where the language needs attention, read the message aloud. Wherever it’s hard to read smoothly and rapidly, look for ways to reword.

You can also find wording that interferes with speed by searching out repetitions—for example, there are two phrases using *to* in the first sentence. Paragraph 2 also fails to meet the reading-aloud test and sounds “hedgy.” You may notice the word *help* appears twice, but that’s okay, because that’s your subject—asking for help.

Do you write telegraphic e-mails, leaving out words and relying heavily on abbreviations? Break the habit! You’ll get better results with cohesive messages that don’t require readers to fill in what’s missing or figure out what you mean.

Tightening the message: *A major goal of editing is to make complicated sentences simple.* So always look for alternative ways to say the same thing more directly and plainly, eliminate unnecessary words, and rephrase the thoughts. I did this with Draft 1, sentence by sentence, and ended up cutting about 25% in the process. Notice that once you cut words back, it becomes obvious that they aren't needed. You can always check your editing this way: If eliminating words or thoughts makes a message read less well or seem less convincing, don't do the cut or look for another way to say what you mean.

Review Chapters 4 and 5 for a full rundown on almost-grammar-free editing techniques that enable you to improve your own writing.

Half my life is an act of revision.

—John Irving, novelist

Review the total message for the big picture—what's coming across? In the case of our example, is Draft 2 respectful and polite? Have any negative feelings crept in? Does the content appear to make the case with clarity and logic? Does the message as a whole seem to proceed logically? Are the transitions good? Can anything be interpreted against the writer's interests?

Also important is this: Does the message read quickly and easily? The faster your writing reads, the better it works and the more convincing it becomes. Contemporary means short: words, paragraphs, sentences, and documents.

Compare Drafts 1 and 2 to see how much faster the second one flows, how much more convincing it seems, and how it projects a professional image for the writer while being very respectful.

Are you reluctant to take time for the kind of planning and editing I recommend? Know that if you can achieve what you want with your first draft you're unique: Professional writers don't expect to and nor should you. There's an old adage that writers like: "A writer isn't someone who writes but someone who rewrites."

And know that if you don't invest the energy, you're gambling against your own success.

The good news is that just a little practice will put you way out in front of the field—and once you've built the habit of writing it right, you'll find it doesn't take much time at all.

Build in the Right Tone

Here's a kind of challenge you may face whatever your career field, and it's not unlike the challenges you deal with when doing group projects in school.

As project coordinator, it's your job to pull together a team report. The group consists of your peers and a few subordinates, and each has been working on a

different section. The deadline is approaching, and you need to be sure the pieces come in on schedule.

Here are two possible ways of writing the e-mail.

Version 1

Subject: Assignments due!

Everyone on Martin Proposal Team:

As you know, I expect you to deliver your assigned part of the Martin proposal on Wednesday, April 3, by 2:00 p.m. via e-mail. Unless I hear otherwise from you, I'll expect you all to meet the deadline. Thanks.

John

Version 2

Subject: Due April 3: Martin Proposal Sections

Hi team—

I look forward to having all sections of the Martin Proposal on my desk by Wednesday at 2.

An e-mail attachment will be fine. If you're having any last-minute problems pulling your part together, give me a call ASAP.

The plan calls for me to review everything by the end of the week, so please be available to answer questions. Marian needs all the pieces in hand by Monday so she can edit the full proposal and make it cohesive in time to meet the client's April 12 deadline.

I know we'll have a great proposal and a good chance of landing this contract. Thank you, Mark, Jane, Eric, and Marie, for all your hard work on this.

Sincerely,

John

Which version would you rather get? I assume it's the second one, so let's analyze why.

There's nothing wrong with Version 1 technically. The spelling and grammar are correct, and it's clear and to the point.

The glaring difference from Version 2 is in the tone and its probable effect on the recipients.

The subject line in Version 1 is vague and at the same time threatening. It makes the writer sound like a teacher calling for essays and expecting the worst. The negative voice sustains throughout.

Version 2, on the other hand, takes the trouble to project a positive attitude and a team spirit. It gives a context for the proposal process, so the deadline doesn't seem arbitrary. It offers help with problems—better to find out any hitches now rather than later, no? It conveys enthusiasm for the result; reminds everyone that something important is at stake; and extends appreciation to each team member as an individual, treating everyone equally.

If you think the difference is trivial, consider: Which writer would you rather work for? Which would you work harder for: on this and future projects? Based on the messages, which person would you want to team with again?

Yes, it's essential to structure your messages well and use your editing and proofing tools to craft your language. But achieving the right tone is equally critical. *The complaint that employers most often make about how younger staff members write is failure to adopt the right tone.* So let's explore where tone comes from and how to control it.

Thanks to text messaging and the modern business tempo, with a boost from Twitter, many people have learned to get to the point quickly with the least possible number of words. But what can get lost in this minimizing is tone. Most noticeably, both respect and warmth are often glaringly absent.

Getting the tone right starts with how you think through your content.

In our e-mail example, Version 2's writer obviously thought not only about what she wanted but her recipients' needs and reactions. If I were in their shoes, she asked, what might I want to know? If I'm having a problem, what should I do? What would inspire me to a last final best effort? Can I feel that all my overtime work is appreciated?

As every good manager knows, there's everything to gain by making people feel included and important. Taking the time to write the thoughtful message is an excellent investment.

Many managers have trouble projecting warmth. But if you begin by looking at the situation from the other person's viewpoint, it will usually happen naturally. Consideration shows. But you may also have to consciously think about how to frame the message from the other person's point of view. For example, writing, "If you don't send your work in by Friday, you'll mess up the whole team project and it will be late" is very different from "Please send your work in by Sept. 5 so we can fit it into the final project and meet the deadline."

You can also choose language that reinforces the positive tone. What helps establish a friendly, persuasive, and even motivating tone? Writing tactics such as:

- Saying “please” and “thank you”
- Using polite salutations and closing words
- Using contractions (“I’m happy” vs. “I am happy”)
- Using the word *you* a lot—cutting back on *I*
- Adopting a consistent “you” perspective, the “what’s in it for me” (WIIFM)
- Using positive language and avoiding negatives
- Using names in the message body
- Generally conveying enthusiasm and confidence

Suppose you’re sending a report to a client and must write a cover note for it. You might say,

Frank—here’s the January progress report that you wanted. Regards, Ben

This short message sounds abrupt, barely courteous, and inappropriate to the relationship. It uses a “buddy voice” at best. What would work better? Perhaps the following:

Dear Frank,

I’m pleased to provide the attached report for January. If you have any questions, I’ll be happy to answer them and can also provide more details if helpful.

Best regards,

Ben

Is Version 2 unnecessarily long and wordy? True, it doesn’t contain much “real” information. Nevertheless, circumstances call for it. It sounds like the writer took the time to craft the short message carefully, which in itself shows respect, and it seems thoughtful. It is the tone a client expects from a supplier and, particularly, from someone who’s not at the top of the pecking order.

In all honesty, a recipient might not actually notice your careful e-mail—but he or she will definitely notice one that’s careless, breezy and blunt. Keep in mind that many clients are probably much older than your own age cohort and more formal to some degree in their lifestyle and expectations. Even if they are young, clients typically want the respect the relationship demands—and by the way, the same is true of many young bosses.

Let's look at one more example, a thank you note—famously difficult to write well—and how sentence structure affects the impact.

Dear Joan—thanks for inviting me to the networking event. I had a good time. Also I met a client prospect!—Regards, Ned

Not very convincing, is it? Here, we can fault the writing style. Ned's sentences are choppy and stilted, reminding us of a fourth-grade textbook. He forgot the sentence rhythm technique of alternating short sentences with long ones (see Chapter 3). He could have written,

Hello Joan,

I want to thank you for inviting me to the Celex networking event. It was great to meet so many new people who are part of our industry, and I even have a prospective client to follow up with. Thanks again for thinking of me. I very much appreciate it.

Sincerely,

Ned

An even better way to voice appreciation is to be very specific. Here's an e-mail I was happy to get from a business client.

I just wanted to say thank you for inviting me to the luncheon today. I really enjoyed the group. The presentation was interesting, but the highlight was one of the better question-and-answer sessions on the subject I have heard at any session. And I am extremely grateful for your introduction to numerous people, making sure that they knew what I did. You do go out of your way to help, and it was appreciated. Thanks.

Best regards,

Lewis

HANDLE E-MAILS ADDRESSED TO GROUPS

Marketing Campaigns

Marketers see e-mail as the most cost-effective way to reach their audiences: It costs virtually nothing and has a high rate of return when done well. It's a major

tool for “in-bound marketing” that aims to draw people to websites or other locations for more information or to execute a sale. Politicians use this potential too. Many regard Barack Obama’s e-mail campaigns, created by top copywriters, as a decisive factor in both his elections.

This book is concerned with everyday business communication rather than marketing campaigns, but here are some guidelines for e-mail promotion.

- Use clear, benefit-oriented subject lines, and convey a sense of urgency as appropriate:
 - Your Exclusive Promo Code Inside—Expires Today!
 - Announcing: How to Sell Without Selling (Special Offer)
 - 5 Top Social Media Dashboard Tools to Manage Your Social Account
- Keep messages short (under 100 words) and simple.
- Write in a friendly, casual style.
- Make the message visually accessible with white space and graphics.
- Frame the message in terms of *you* rather than *we*.
- Personalize by using first names.
- Employ power marketing words, such as *freebie*, *discover*, *surprise*, *proven*, and *thank you*.

See the section on persuasive writing for many more ideas that apply. You’ll find e-mail marketing a well-covered subject on the Internet, so a quick search will turn up more than you need to know.

E-Mail Newsletters

Sending an e-mail newsletter is another significant use of the medium. Many bloggers find it an effective way to distribute their blogs, either in whole or in part: as a “teaser” to lure readers to the full blog itself. Newsletters can be more complex and contain news, announcements, and multiple articles. This book’s advice on blogging, media releases and storytelling particularly relate to newsletter creation.

E-Mail and Customer Relations

Big and small organizations alike rely on e-mail to collect input, solve problems and maintain customer engagement. Whether they use it well is another story.

If a client has a problem with a service, he is likely to e-mail, since trying to get help by telephone is daunting. But customer service via e-mail only works for both parties if you

- provide an e-mail address, and preferably, a name, easily findable on the website or product;
- respond within 24 or at most 48 hours;
- answer each complaint or question directly—not with a form letter or by referring the writer to your FAQs;
- practice the utmost courtesy and consideration; and
- take responsibility for helping the customer and turning anger into satisfaction, a bad experience into a good one.

Think through what will turn the situation around: Technical help? A refund? A coupon for a future purchase? Use your writing strategies to convey empathy, an apology, explanation, and suggestion as appropriate.

SUCCESS TIP

E-MAIL KNOWS NO BOUNDARIES

Because e-mail (and all electronic media) leaps oceans and crosses national borders so readily, we forget that we're communicating cross-culturally. This can be a problem because even in its more formal moments, the American style tends to sound brusque and discourteous to people whose primary language is not English. So be scrupulously polite and considerate. Be aware of other countries' individual cultural norms—for example, whether requests are best made directly or indirectly and whether it's in order to express personal interest in your recipient.

To internationalize what you write,

- use short common words and short declarative sentences,

- cut the jargon and idioms,
- use lists when appropriate,
- phrase everything as straightforwardly as you can,
- avoid passive structures and those with *get* and *have*,
- don't pile up long strings of nouns, but
- write more formally though not in ways that sound unnatural in ordinary English (though the messages will often feel rather stark).

Remember that most businesses today must also consider internal audiences whose native language is not English, so the guidelines often apply.

CREATE E-MAILS TO NETWORK MORE EFFECTIVELY

E-mail can help you score opportunities and develop relationships and is especially important when you're looking for career opportunities. So let's apply the ideas to this situation.

Suppose you want to tap your school's alumni network for advice on your career path and perhaps even some direct job leads.

Your goals are clear, so think first about audience. Why might a graduate of your school take the time to talk to you? Here are a few reasons:

- Graduating from the same school gives you common ground and experiences.
- Many people like “giving back.”
- A request for advice is flattering and reinforces people's view of their own accomplishments, especially if they're relatively recent graduates.
- Some people appreciate building goodwill—you never know if someone might prove a good contact in the future.

Tone: Your tone should be respectful and appreciative. You are, after all, asking for a favor you're unlikely to return.

Content: Remind the recipient of your common bond. Bring it alive in some way. Make yourself sound worth helping because you'll likely be successful as well as a person who'd be good to know.

Here are two examples that someone I know received from fellow alumni requesting informational interviews, reproduced essentially as received. Which works better?

Sample 1

Subject: White University career network

Dear Ms. Lewis:

I'm a senior at White, majoring in science and anthropology. I was hoping you could tell me a little about your job—what does an average day entail and how did you get to where you are today? I'm interested in what working for a non profit is like.

Thank you and I hope to hear from you soon.

Sally

Sample 2

Subject: Requesting an informational interview

Dear Ms. Lewis,

My name is Jessica, and I too graduated from White. I obtained your name and contact information from the university's Career Network.

I am writing to request an informational interview. I am very interested in pursuing a career in high-level research and analysis—I hope on an international level. As a result, I would very much like to learn more about the work you do for FLU and your prior professional experiences.

Just to let you know a little bit about myself, while working on my degree, I was president of the International Club and active with the Speaker Committee. I spent a full year as an undergraduate in Dubai and interned at the National Association for Freedom.

I am ready to utilize my international background, and as I am brand new to this career path, any advice will be greatly appreciated.

I will be in your area on Thursday and Friday, July 27 and 28. If you are available either of these days and willing to meet with me for 15 minutes, I will be most grateful.

Thank you for your time, and I hope to speak with you soon.

Sincerely,

Jessica

Which e-mail would you probably respond to? If you agree that Jessica's e-mail is better than Sally's, think about why.

To begin with, Sally didn't take the trouble to carefully draft or proofread what she wrote. It comes across as off the top of her head and a bit illiterate, suggesting she is (1) not so smart, (2) not respectful, (3) not really appreciative, or (4) all of the above. Further, her note is very unspecific, so it's hard to understand what she wants to know. She shows also that she didn't trouble to make a good match between herself and her hoped-for information source.

Jessica, on the other hand, clearly thought the connection through and made the relevance of Ms. Lewis's experience to her own goals plain. Her gratitude is expressly stated, and a few significant details about her background are referenced.

Most important, Jessica sounds like a winner: a person who'd be interesting to talk to for half an hour—by phone if not in person—and worth your time. You'd even assume she'd present well to any contact you referred her to.

All this achieved by a solid, planned-out message that says the person did her homework and knows how to interact? Absolutely.

For good networking, follow through and always write to say thank you—few people do, and you'll stand out. If you find an opportunity through your contact, or accept one anywhere, write to let him or her know.

Use the same strategies to connect with people you meet or hear about from other sources as well—the woman you sit next to on an airplane, the man who mentions a colleague you should meet, someone you meet at a workshop. Savvy networkers follow through even years later by writing thoughtful, planned e-mails that trigger positive memories and positive responses. Or as appropriate, of course, use social media to maintain or revive contact.

The power of digital communication is there for you when you trouble to do it well.

SOME E-MAIL Q&A

Abbreviations: Y Not? Many people are unaccustomed to the abbreviations that are second nature to frequent texters and instant messaging. They may fail to fully understand your message, misinterpret it, disregard it, or read it resentfully. None of these outcomes is good.

An additional large number of people understand the abbreviations fine but do not like to see them in another medium—even e-mail.

Together, both groups probably include a lot of people important to you, such as clients, future employers and supervisors. Therefore, it's sensible to avoid abbreviating in general.

Attachments: When? Concern for computer viruses is one reason a fair number of people make it a rule not to open attachments. But when you have a lot to say, it's challenging to write a short e-mail. In the case of a report or other lengthy document, it can be impossible.

The best solution is to know your audience. Ask if necessary whether your recipient will open an attachment and prefers it. If the answer is no, then incorporate the material in the body of the e-mail, but use formatting to distinguish it from the e-mail message—for example, draw a line between the message and report, and give the report a clear headline. And make the rest of the document as readable as possible with subheads, some white space and so on.

Readers on the Go: How to Accommodate? Your e-mail may be read on a tiny screen while the reader is online at a checkout, taxiing to an appointment, or eating lunch. Your best strategy is nevertheless to write in complete sentences, not fragments, and avoid abbreviating. But use your awareness of smartphone readers to keep messages short and tight.

ETIQUETTE, SHMETIQUETTE—AN E-MAIL CHECKLIST

Do:

- Answer in a timely way—24 hours or less. People expect this with a medium geared for speed.
- Send only necessary messages. You need not have the last word, especially if it's just “got the message”; people appreciate hearing less rather than more.
- Include only what's needed, and write short messages. Speed readers may miss the point when you bury it.
- Use accurate subject lines to identify your message, change it when the discussion shifts, and make it audience directed and findable. Use “must-read” elements when justified—for example, “DATE CHANGE, Miller meeting.”
- Use a strong opening line—bottom line on top.
- Build in a clear close, circling back to what you hope to accomplish.
- Use graphic devices to support clarity and stay organized: numbers, bullets, sub-heads, and so on.
- Use an easy-to-read typeface in a substantial size—12 point as a rule.
- Use the signature to your advantage: Cite your most important contact points, such as your website, blog, and social media addresses—limit the length.

Do Not:

- Betray emotion: You will instantly be seen as unprofessional, and your viewpoint or ideas will be disregarded.
- Say anything ambiguous that could be interpreted against your interests.
- Employ sarcasm, irony, and humor in general, always open to misinterpretation.
- Include anything you'd cringe to see on the front page of the *New York Times*, your boss's desk, or your competitor's e-mail in-box.
- Say anything you'd be embarrassed to have forwarded to anyone.
- Use jargon and abbreviations beyond the minimal.
- Include philosophical ponderings: This is not the place.

And Never

- Write whole messages in italic, bold, or capitals.
- Use smiley faces or other emojis or emoticons unless it's a good friend.
- Forget to edit and proofread.
- Forget to take a big picture view of how your message will (or might) strike a reader and make him feel.

PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES

I. Request an Informational Interview

1. Write an e-mail requesting telephone or in-person time with a friend's relative who works in your chosen career, to ask for advice and possible job leads.
2. Exchange your draft with a classmate for reviewing and editing. Discuss results with each other, and revise if you agree with the suggestions.
3. Expect to be evaluated on both the quality of your own e-mail and the quality of written input you provide to your classmate.

II. Ask for a Special Favor

Write to a specific person to ask for a reference, connect you with someone she knows, or request a special assignment on the job. Then assume your request is granted, and write her a thank you note.

III. Group Work: Plan And Write a Communications Policy

1. Together, brainstorm how workplace supervisors should communicate in writing with younger employees: E-mail? Texting? Social media? Intranet? Other?
2. Draft an e-mail presenting your recommendations and reasoning to an older supervisor one of you works for—or once worked for. Begin by profiling the supervisor through asking questions of the group member who knows the person.

IV. Making a Request

Pair up. Student 1 acts as supervisor and Student 2 as a staff member who wants to attend an expensive conference. Student 2: Write an e-mail to “Supervisor” requesting authorization. Supervisor articulates his or her reaction to the e-mail—what worked and what didn't work. Together, rewrite the e-mail.

Then take on new roles. Student 1 becomes the requestor, and Student 2 assumes the role of a client prospect. Student 1 writes an e-mail asking for an appointment to demonstrate a product. Again, discuss the results and revise the e-mail.

Be prepared to present your thinking and ultimate written results to the class.

V. Write an E-Mail to a Friend Who Writes Poor E-Mails

Explain to your friend why he or she should take more care with e-mail, and share the most important points you learned from this chapter about how to write them well.

VI. Questions for Discussion

1. How do you think written communications like e-mails should take account of generational differences? Who has had a problem that relates to this? What did you learn?
2. What words do you typically use to communicate with a friend by e-mail that would be inappropriate when writing to your professor? A supervisor? A client?
3. How can you project a feeling of respect in an e-mail when the situation calls for it? Warmth?
4. In what e-mail situations is it suitable to “be yourself”—with little thought to content, wording, grammar, and punctuation?
5. Do grammar and punctuation matter anymore? Why or why not?
6. Should emojis or emoticons have a place in business communication? Debate: Half the group should argue for; the other half should speak against their use.