

Netiquette: A Style Guide for Emails

No. 38 in the Writing Center Handout Series

Even though email is such a new form of communication, style and etiquette rules have already poked their heads into rule books—and for good reason. Communication is about ninety percent body language, eight percent tone of voice, and two percent content. With email you can't rely on the first 98 percent—we can't depend on email readers to interpret our subtleties or tone. It's best to spell it out, politely, especially if the readers are possible employers or people you want to impress. Here are some tips.

Write a clear subject line.

- It's the first thing people read. Think about how easy it is to delete emails when they say things like "Important" (important to whom?), or "Hey" (Hello! <DELETE>). If you want to ask a question to a company about a job offer you saw in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, don't write "Question," or "Job Offer." Try to give as much information as you can. Try, "Inquiry about receptionist job ad in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution."

Use greetings and closings.

- "Dear," "Sincerely," etc. If you are writing to someone you are not familiar with, use a title—obviously Mr. for a male recipient, and Ms. for a female, unless you know of another title such as Dr. or Professor.

Determine if the situation is formal or informal.

- If talking to your friends or family, emoticons [:)] and informal Instant Messenger-type abbreviations (lol, ttyl, etc.) are fine. People you are close to might tolerate your long, rambling emails, understand your slang, and appreciate your sarcastic sense of humor.
- With employers, teachers, or people in authority, you generally want to stick to a more formal writing style. To be safe, treat your emails like business letters you'd send through snail mail. Remember to use conventional English. Keep your message focused, but make sure to be polite. Say "Please" and "Thank you." Don't just ask for what you want and press "Send."

Make it easy to read.

- Reading from a computer screen is a lot more difficult than reading from a sheet of paper. Use short paragraphs and insert blank lines between each paragraph. When making points, consider using bullets to make them easier to follow. Don't WRITE IN ALL CAPS, or all lower case, or use strings of exclamation marks!!!!!! Also, since your email will be one of the heap of emails people receive daily, keep it short.

Proofread!

- Or, at least run the spell check. Remember, spell check doesn't catch everything. Be careful about your language—what may seem subtly humorous to you may seem insulting to others. Remember: tone is really difficult to convey through email. If you are trying to make a good first impression, read the message over several times to make sure the grammar and spelling are correct and that the message sounds appropriate. Once you hit the send button, you won't have another chance. Emails are often forwarded to many readers. You don't want to become infamous for your errors!

For more information on using internet sources, see

<http://www.emailreplies.com/>

<http://www.webfoot.com/advice/email.top.html>

The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed) 158-59



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