Corresponding by Email

Increasingly, individuals and organizations are turning to electronic mail (email, also written e-mail) for workplace communication. Email is quick and cheap; a message can go out on the internet to the other side of the world in a few hours at most, and the cost is literally pennies.

A letter or memorandum on a computer monitor, however, is not the same as on paper. To begin with, format is much less important. While email systems vary, most tend to produce an address block resembling an inter-office memorandum. The “From” line contains the sender’s name and email address, the “To” line has the recipient’s name and email address, and the “Subject” line suggests the main topic of the message. The address block may also include “carbon copies” going to other persons or groups:

From: Foster Goodwill, fgoodwill@intergate.ca
To: Herb Linguini, hlinguini@customsoft.ca
Subject: Monday’s Meeting
cc: bjones@customsoft.ca

Because some people receive dozens of emails every day, they appreciate a subject line that indicates how much priority the message deserves:

URGENT: Questionnaires needed by Friday
JOKE: Bill Gates goes to Heaven

Obviously, the second message can wait.

The message itself is usually much less formal in appearance than a standard business letter. For example, it often lacks a “Dear Herb” salutation; the writer may settle for

Herb—

or

Hi, Herb!

—or nothing at all. For a first email to a person you don’t know, however, it’s often wise to fall back on formality:

Dear Mr. Linguini,

If Mr. Linguini signs his reply with “Herb,” you can assume he prefers to be called that in future correspondence. If it’s “Herbert Linguini,” then continue to address him as “Mr. Linguini.”

The body of the message should follow the usual pattern of orientation, information, action—which is even more important in this medium than on paper. Imagine yourself firing off email messages all morning, on a wide range of topics. After lunch you get a reply to one of them:

I completely agree.
Agree with what? Until you go back to check your original message, you may have no idea what this agreement is about. Your correspondent has made your job harder than it has to be.

Another hazard is to include the whole text of the other person’s message, which may be very long, only to add:

I completely agree.

A better approach is to summarize the other person’s message (orientation) and then comment on it (information and action):

Hi, Foster,

And thanks for your note about Monday’s meeting, asking about the new deadline for proposals. We’ve moved it back to November 2. That should give you a little more time. Let me know how your research is going.

Best wishes,
Herb Linguini
hlinguini@pesto.ca

You can also copy just a short, relevant excerpt from the previous message:

Hi, Foster--you wrote:
>I need some advice about the proposal deadline.

The message still contains a complimentary close (Best wishes or Cheers or Regards), a signature, and the writer’s email address. These are not absolutely essential, but your message may seem brusque without them.

Some email users like to use an elaborate “sig. file.” This automatically pastes in a block of text that includes their name, email and “snail mail” addresses, quotations, and so forth. When the signature is longer than the message, something’s wrong. If you need a sig. file, keep it as brief as possible:

May Flowers, Manager, Carmichael Custom Software
mflowers@customsoft.ca

Foster Goodwill, Communications Department
fgoodwill@capilanou.ca 604-983-7585

In some cases, a sig. file may have to be long because you expect the reader to correspond with you by regular mail, to phone, or to consult your Web page. In such cases it should still include only the bare minimum:

Foster Goodwill, Instructor, Communications Department
Capilano University, 2055 Purcell Way
North Vancouver BC V7J 3H5
604-983-7585
http://www.capilanou.ca/dept/cmns/index.html
Drawbacks of email communication
When you write email, you should also understand the limitations of the computer
monitor. Its resolution isn’t very good compared to print on paper, and the screen itself
may be too bright or dim for comfortable reading.

As a result, when you read from a monitor your reading speed drops by as much as 30
percent. Furthermore, proofreading becomes harder, especially in a long message. Many
messages are a solid block of text on the screen, without gaps between paragraphs; this
discourages careful reading.

Some people make matters even worse by writing everything in capital letters. THIS
LOOKS LIKE SHOUTING, and you should avoid it.

When you do need to emphasize a word or phrase, set it off with *asterisks* or
_underscores_. Some emailers like to use “emoticons” or “smileys,” little symbols that
try to convey the writer’s feelings. :-) is supposed to be a smiling face, while :-( conveys
unhappiness. Others write <G> for “grin” or <VBG> for “very big grin” to convey a
joke or light-hearted remark. These are very crude aids to understanding, and don’t
belong in serious workplace messages.

Many email users are fond of abbreviations, but use them only when you’re sure your
reader understands them. Some common email abbreviations include:
  IMHO (in my humble opinion)
  IMNSHO (in my not so humble opinion)
  IIRC (if I recall correctly)
  FYI (for your information
  LOL (laughing out loud)
  ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing)
  YMMV (your mileage may vary)

Effective email is courteous email
Keep your email messages as short and clear as possible. Break up text into short
paragraphs (usually not more than five or six lines), with white space between them.
This will make your reader’s job easier. You will also find it easier to proofread your
message before sending it.

Does it matter? Some computer users think the value of email lies in its speed: you just
dash off a note and send it without worrying about spelling or grammar. You don’t
worry about errors in the reply either.

We think that for workplace messages, you should indeed worry. A typo or punctuation
error could change the whole meaning of the message. Consider the implication of the
hyphen in the following:
  I resent your message
  I re-sent your message
None of this matters when you’re writing to old high-school friends, but at work it matters—a lot.

**Answer when you’re calm**

We also recommend that you pause before replying to any message that upsets or puzzles you. It’s very tempting to send an instant, angry reply, and soon you find yourself in a “flame war”—an electronic barrage of insults. Then, after you’ve exchanged rude remarks, you may find out that it all started from a misunderstanding.

Worse yet, you may have sent your message to many others with no involvement in the dispute; they will not be happy that you are wasting their time.

Flame wars and hasty comments are more than bad manners. You may find yourself being sued for libel, all because you let your temper run away with your good sense.

One of the surprises of the computer era is that email demands greater sensitivity and empathy with your reader than ordinary writing. Whenever you correspond through your computer, be especially careful to put yourself in your reader’s shoes, anticipating any problems your reader may have with your message.

**Website about writing email:**

Email Etiquette
http://owl.English.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_emailett.html