

How To Write Business E-mails

Author: Gina Cuciniello

First published in *Training Journal* May 1998. Reproduced with permission.

Training employees to write electronic mail effectively could save readers time and effort and even reduce stress related illnesses. Gina Cuciniello explains.

Frequent business users of electronic mail face a tidal wave of written words. They feel increasingly swamped by the quantity of written text they are expected to read every day. This feeling comes as no surprise when you consider an estimated one billion messages will be sent worldwide by the year 2000. Technological developments, instead of making our lives easier, can cause increased workloads and even lead to stress, as managers are now required to wade through volumes of technological mail each day; this includes mail which directly concerns them, indirectly concerns them and mail that does not concern them at all.

Instead of welcoming the correspondence, managers are beginning to dread the news of incoming mail and fear the task of untangling messages that are often irrelevant, longwinded or just plainly trivial. One American multinational has even taken the extraordinary step of banning the use of internal mail and gone back to promoting face to face communication within the organisation.

So how can the business e-mail writer make the message more reader-friendly and appropriate? The main problem lies with how the writer currently views the very medium of electronic mail to convey his or her message. The tone, language and structure used often resembles that of a telephone call:

- grammatically incorrect
- cursory
- disorganised
- full of irrelevancies

Striking an appropriate tone

Writers of business e-mails often aim for a cheerful, informal tone, irrespective of who the reader is and how well he, or she, is known to the writer. The tone used needs to be more formal but at all times polite. There is no excuse for rudeness in the form of abruptness. The writer should never forget that his e-mail message or lotus note can be distributed and hard copies circulated and kept on file for years. They can be read at any time by numerous people at different levels in an organisation and reflect well, or indeed badly, on the writer and the company he or she is representing.

Many writers assume that readers of e-mails expect the first paragraph to consist of social pleasantries and not to supply this would constitute a social blunder. This idea is misplaced. An opening sentence along the lines of "It was good to talk the other day" is sufficient before getting down to the main point of the message. A busy manager would far prefer that the information is conveyed in a direct meaningful way and not have to plough through distracting sentences before getting to the crux of the matter.

Structure and flow

In longer e-mails there is often evidence of unformulated thoughts and detailed working-outs of how conclusions have been reached. Disorganised ideas, long-winded and confusing sentences are rife, all implying that the writer has given little consideration to the poor reader trying to make sense of the information.

Of course, writing directly on to a computer screen has a major disadvantage: the speed with which it is possible to write a document does not encourage much thought to go into its very structure. But speed does not equate quality. If business communication today is about putting over ideas and information in a way that the intended meaning can be grasped quickly, then more time needs to go into planning the structure of the document. A well-structured e-mail will help the reader to understand the writer's ideas fully and follow the logic of the writer's argument.

The use of headings and bullet points will also make the text more digestible. Readers find information in large blocks of text difficult to take in, so breaking the text up with headings, bullets or numbered points will all help ease the task. Headings will guide the reader and prepare him for what is to follow, while the use of bullets make certain points jump out and become more memorable.

How can layout help the e-mail reader?

One of the main advantages of using electronic communication is the plethora of visual aids that the average computer can supply. The use of colours, boxes bold and italics can all help distinguish certain points in the text. They can create a visual impact and make the written message more attractive for the reader. Time spent thinking about the physical presentation will be time well spent.

However, the writer should bear in mind the possibility that documents may be transferred on to a hard copy form. Attention should always be given to the point at which one page ends and the next begins, or the recipient could be left with a document on their hands that has tables cut off and paragraphs broken up at inappropriate points.

A Paperless Office?

Electronic technology makes it easy for a writer to whisk off copies of documents at a touch of a button. Everyone is kept informed of new developments and therefore happy. However, readers may find themselves reading copies of correspondence that are not strictly relevant to them and become distracted and even irritated by the messages. Copy addressees need to be limited and lists should be amended each time a new document is circulated. More thought needs to go on whether the document is relevant to each addressee before transmission. The writer could, in fact, be doing the reader a favour by not sending him a copy.

With the number of electronic mail messages being sent increasing at such a phenomenal rate the need for some form of company guidelines on the usage becomes more and more evident.

Guidelines for writing e-mail

- keep sentences brief, crisp and simple
- make good use of headings, bullets and numbered points

- keep social banter to a brief opening sentence
- use boxes, colours, italics and bold highlighting to draw attention to key points and create a visual impact
- always edit documents to make sure spelling is consistent and sentences are grammatically correct
- form ideas clearly into a planned structure before starting to write and check that only relevant parties are sent copies