

16 Tips for Using Email More Effectively

Originating email

1. Make the subject line informative and specific so that busy readers can scan their inboxes and determine how quickly they must attend to this message. Avoid using “FYI” or any other vague terms.
2. Avoid subject line phrases that certain spam filters might block, such as “free” or “congratulations.”
3. Restrict yourself to one subject per message. Send multiple messages if you want to cover multiple subjects. That way, messages can be filed and followed up by topic. Readers can respond more quickly and easily if messages are not overly complex.
4. Consider what style of conversation to use for your audience. Try a casual or friendly tone if you have an ongoing relationship with your readers. Welcoming emails are easier to read and more apt to be answered quickly. Use a more formal style when your readers are unknown to you, or when your audience will expect formality, such as important customers, or those from cultures where a more formal style is especially appreciated.
5. Try to keep all emails to one page or to a single screen. Provide pointers for more information. However, keep in mind that in some cases, readers will become frustrated if they have to click in multiple places for the whole story. Balance the desire for brevity against the need to communicate a comprehensive picture in a single email. If in doubt, poll a sampling of intended recipients for their preferences, especially if your emails are part of an ongoing series of communications.
6. Make sure that your intended meaning is clear, especially to audiences who speak another native language, or to those who come from different organizations. Ambiguity may result in confusion, frustration, bad information—or any combination. Investing the time up front will pay many dividends later on.
7. Avoid overly negative messages that may be misconstrued. When surfacing issues, be as objective as you can in stating the problem, the likely source, implications and suggested solution. If you suspect that your email may convey a negative or overly emotional tone, wait a few hours to send. Or better yet, test with a few people whose opinions you value, and revise as needed.

8. Indicate if a message may be forwarded, and to whom. In some cases, you may want to restrict other readers; in other cases, messages can be shared freely. State your preference clearly.
9. If your company uses different options to designate various levels of confidentiality, make sure you know what these are and remember to apply the appropriate designation.
10. Never assume that because you have sent a message it has been read—even when the recipient has indicated as such with a read receipt. Many emails are opened, quickly read, filed away, and easily forgotten. Some never arrive at their destination, and some get caught in a black hole only to finally emerge a day or two later. If a response is crucial, call recipients before sending, or immediately after, stating when you need a response and requesting that they notify you immediately if they have not received the email.

Replying to email

11. No matter how busy you are, take the time to reply promptly to email from someone who is seeking a response from you in particular. Even if you don't have time to compose a thorough reply, take a few seconds to say so, and let the sender know when s/he can expect a more thoughtful response. Otherwise, the sender may assume disinterest on your part, whether or not that's the case.
12. When determining how much of the original message(s) to include in your replies, consider what content is needed so that the reader can send a speedy response. Don't make your readers wade through a lot of extraneous content to find the relevant material. Provide just enough context to enable a well-thought-out response—and no more. Take the time to scroll down and delete content that doesn't provide important information. Long emails can clog up inboxes very quickly!

Forwarding email

13. When forwarding an email, indicate your reason, rather than simply forwarding it and hoping that readers will somehow derive the significance. Add a few words to the subject line, rather than simply clicking “forward.”
14. If in doubt about the authenticity or accuracy of the message, verify the content before forwarding. Beware of hoaxes that purport to be virus alerts. Do not forward any “chain mails” to colleagues or clients. (Keep them for personal friends, if you feel compelled to send them on at all.)

15. Unless you are absolutely sure the originator won't mind, refrain from forwarding a sensitive message. Otherwise, ask first, and pass along any important restrictions or caveats that may apply.

16. Do not extract text from someone else's messages and pass it off as yours. Indicate your sources and provide any context necessary for your readers to derive the intended meaning.