

## **E-MAIL BEST PRACTICES**

**INTRODUCTION:** This Berglund Center tip is intended to help you improve your e-mail communications. We reviewed a new book: Dawn-Michelle Baude, The Executive Guide to E-Mail Correspondence. We think it one of the two or three best works we have read on electronic communication and wish to pass on a few of the author's many valuable tips.

**E-MAIL IS DIFFERENT:** First and foremost, E-mail is not simply a traditional form of correspondence delivered electronically. It is a new form requiring different modes of expression and formatting, particularly within a business environment where speed is critical.

**USE PARAGRAPHS:** White space, says the author, is as important as text. The eye must be able to scan quickly. Break up those blocky paragraphs.

**USE LEAN PARAGRAPHS:** Topic sentence, brief content, transition if any. One-sentence paragraphs are ok, even desirable.

**USE HEADINGS:** If the message is unavoidably complex, use headings so the reader can scan.

**GET TO THE POINT:** Many writers do not use useful e-mail headings; many readers ignore them. Your first sentences should tell the reader what the message is about, and list any actions or responses that you are requesting. If answering a previous request, give the answer first, then explain if necessary.

**BE LESS FORMAL:** Save complex salutations or closings, paragraph indents, rococo vocabulary or long sentences for personal e-mails or better yet, snail mail. Less is definitely more in e-mail.

**CONSIDER EMOTIONAL IMPACT:** E-mail can seem cold and distant. Beware of being too blunt. Email sarcasm or irony may be taken literally as visual and voice cues are lacking. Soften prose without diluting meaning. No flaming or personal criticisms. Postpone replies to e-mails that have riled you.

**CUT THE THREAD:** Do not keep forwarding long chains of correspondence unless you refer to their content. Snip.

**PROOFREAD AND CORRECT:** As in conventional writing, clean prose shows a regard for the reader and inspires confidence. There is no excuse for not running spell check! Occasional errors are ok.

**CONCLUSION:** Baude offers a wealth of examples, tips, and discussions of style, language and formatting. Anyone writing frequent e-mails could benefit from this work. It is, however, somewhat repetitive as are many publications

aimed at busy audiences. The author holds an MFA, a DES and a PhD in English, has been a Fulbright scholar, and teaches at the American University of Paris.

### **Added Tips:**

These are my own tips, based on working with a lot of email, and with many student writers of email.

**Use your university email address:** Commonly students prefer to use email addresses that they created before they got to school, so as not to lose touch with friends. But on campus, your Profs and employers will likely get your email address from the university list. An email address like *Skatrbuy* to which an academic paper is attached does not initially encourage confidence.

**Read your email regularly:** For whatever reason, perhaps because your university address is not your main email, many students wait days to get to their mail. This is particularly frustrating for employers and Profs trying to communicate time-bound information. If you are not reading that email regularly, you will appear lazy and unreliable. By the same token, reply within a reasonable period, certainly 24 hours or less.

**Be careful with long catchy signatures:** Many of us like to use long signatures that incorporate some element of our personality, an aphorism we find particularly powerful, or a long quotation from a respected source. However, these are not appropriate in a business environment, and Pacific is, like it or not, such an environment. Moreover, these quickly become boring to those who frequently receive email from you.

**Use a full signature:** Sometimes Pacific addresses do not convey much information and if you merely sign "Jeffrey" you will be surprised how many Jefferies may be in your prof's classes.

**Remember, Email, YouTube, Facebook, etc., is forever!** While it is true that you can delete messages, remove photograph and video clips, etc, there are specialty firms which take daily "snapshots" of much of the web, including all of the above, and archive them. (I have heard that G-Mail archives have turned up on searches, though I do not know this to be a fact.) But it is true that potential employers and other agencies contract with these firms to do "deep searches." If you once launch something into cyberspace, it is still out there, circling around, waiting for the worst possible time to re-enter your personal orbit. Be thoughtful with your messages and postings.

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