



**ENGINEERING
PROGRAM IN TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATION**
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Email Tips Avoiding Pitfalls

Disclaimer: *The Program in Technical Communication tries to ensure that the information is provided on this website is helpful and accurate. It is important to recognize that the content provided are general and that satisfying the requirements of specific contexts, such as classroom assignments or workplace situations, may involve some modification, supplementation, or adaptation.*

Author: *Dr. Eric Kumpf, Program in Technical Communication, University of Michigan*

Email Tips

Avoiding pitfalls

Email is easy, ubiquitous, and convenient, but engineers must ensure that they are communicating within the boundaries of the medium, using it effectively. Email is good for many types of communication, but not all. The list below contains guidelines to consider when you are using email.

1. Is email the best medium?

Because email is so easy we may be tempted to overuse it when other mediums may be better for the occasions.

Would the topic be better handled with a face-to-face chat, a phone call, or a letter (handwritten or typed)?



2. Don't let the convenience and informality of email lower your competence in writing by causing you to forget to proofread.

A mistake or two may be forgiven in this casual medium, but as Roger Parker writes in *Looking Good in Print*, "errors have exceedingly high visibility."

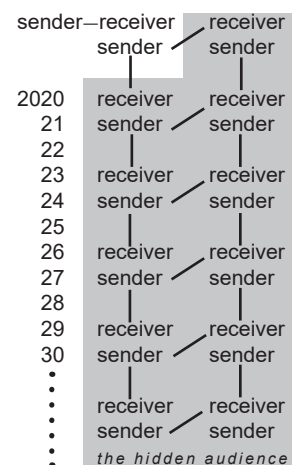
Does your writing skill reflect your care as an engineer?

3. Mind the uncontrollable potential network of email.

What you intend for one reader may be forwarded to others: the hidden and unintended audiences.

The figure at right shows that an original message (top, left) may be intended for one receiver, but that receiver may become a sender, forwarding the email and beginning the potential for a viral spread.

The continuing years (left column) show that emails can live indefinitely.



4. Greetings: context-appropriate.

The informality of the email medium can cause us to misjudge our audience, assuming a familiarity and equality that may not exist.



Delastyle

Hi Nancy!

Nancy,

~~Nancy;~~ A salutation punctuated by a semi-colon is grammatically incorrect.

Hey Girl!



Pinterest

Dear Dr. Jacob,

Dr. Jacob,

~~Hey Professor!~~

~~Hello:~~

~~Greetings!~~

Subsequent emails in the same thread may clip or omit salutations.

Casual

Yep! Got it! Thanks!

Nancy—File recv'd; thanks!

Formal

Dr. Jacob—File recv'd; thanks!

Mark Jefferson

TIP: Acknowledge receipt of emails, attachments.

5. Tone: context-appropriate

Emails (and writing) often lack the nuances of speech (volume, body language) that influence their reception by the reader.

Check emails before sending to ensure that the tone is appropriate.

Abrupt: Get me the revision by Thursday.

Polite: Please be sure to get me the revisions by Thursday.

or

I would appreciate if you get me the revision by Thursday.

6. Avoid all-caps; instead, use all-caps sparingly for effect

No

IF YOU WANT TO ATTEND THE JANUARY MEETING, WE NEED YOUR REGISTRATION FORM BY DECEMBER 15.

Extended all-caps gives the impression of shouting. Moreover, the consistent height of the letters in all-caps hurts readability.

Yes

If you want to attend the January meeting, we need your REGISTRATION FORM by DECEMBER 15.

7. Text should be visually accessible—use frequent paragraph breaks.

No

Hi Laura ~ The total contribution you've made for this tax year is \$7200. The maximum contribution for the year is \$11000 plus an additional \$1000 if you are age fifty or older. If Craig wishes to contribute the maximum, he can contribute \$48 for the rest of the year ($\$1200$ less $7200 = 4800$). If he can get the Salary Reduction Agreement form to me by Tuesday we can take advantage of the last three months in this tax year (4800 divided by $3 = \$1600$). Next year's maximum is $\$1200$ plus an additional $\$2000$ if age fifty or older. Our tax year begins with the December pay period (the check that's issued on January 1.) I hope this information is helpful. Best Wishes ~ Pierre

The email samples above and right are from:
Chan, Janis Fisher. *E Mail: A Write It Well Guide*. Oakland, CA: Write It Well. 2008.

TIP: In email, paragraphs may be only one sentence long.

TIP: Long email texts oppose the informality and brevity of email. For long texts, consider sending them as attachments.

Yes

Hi Laura,

The total contribution you've made for this tax year is \$7,200. The maximum contribution for the year is \$11,000 plus an additional \$1,000 if you are age 50 or older.

If Craig wishes to contribute the maximum, he can contribute \$4,800 for the rest of the year ($\$1,200$ less $7,200 = 4,800$). If he can get the Salary Reduction Agreement form to me by Tuesday we can take advantage of the last three months in this tax year ($4,800$ divided by $3 = \$1600$).

Next year's maximum is \$1,200 plus an additional \$2,000 if age 50 or older. Our tax year begins with the December pay period (the check that's issued on January 1.) I hope this information is helpful.

Best Wishes,
Pierre

8. Principle of Reciprocity: acknowledgement

Often, senders may want to know whether the receiver indeed received the email, especially if the context is time-sensitive. Acknowledgements are courteous. The thread below follows the principle of acknowledgement.

1 Dr. Kumpf,

Thank you for meeting with me yesterday to check a draft of my lab report. I've made your recommended changes. Would you check the attached draft to see whether I have revised the summary sufficiently?

Gladys Probert

3 Gladys,

Good job on the revision! My comments are in the Review function in the attached Word file.

Eric Kumpf

2 Gladys,

Recv'd your file, but cannot look at it this evening; will plan to check it before noon tomorrow.

Eric Kumpf

4 Dr. Kumpf,

Thank you for checking the revision. I still have more work in other areas of the report and plan to submit it on time.

Gladys Probert

9. Present a professional image

Avoid clipped words, slang, and textual features you may later regret.

No

FROM: designer43@aol.com
To: c. reilly@bcm.com

i am sosorry i didnt get these to yu mon or tues, retrieving txt files isnt much trble & i told paul i would do it, they want these files for their archives so as longas i don't run into any tech probs i can ge them 2 u t-day. Cant make RTF files frm Quark finals, can make ASCII txt files, will they do u any good atthis point. ill plan on getting them to u ASAP I u can still use em.

Freddy

No

Ms Reynolds:
Attchd inclds nms & adds of all sbcncrctrs in this prjct & \$\$ of assessment, pr yr req.
Carrie

No

Lorna:
I'll pass this on to the head honcho, but in the end gotta say that's life here in the Big A. I'm guessin there won't be any more probs but with deadlines hanging fire I hear ya.
Jeff

No

Sarah Johansen,

You said you'd get me the experiment results yesterday and THEY'RE NOT HERE YET!!! You never get me anything I ask for on time. How am I supposed to meet my lab deadlines if you're always late with the data????? You've got to get them to me TODAY!!!!

Bethany O'Reilly

Yes

Bethany,

→→ I apologize for the delay, but our equipment was being serviced by the technicians for six hours yesterday. I should have notified you earlier about the delay.

Sarah Johansen

Email samples on this page are from:

Chan, Janis Fisher. *E Mail: A Write It Well Guide*. Oakland, CA: Write It Well. 2008. p.42.

10. Reply within 24 hours

Speed is an advantage of using email, which suggests the courtesy of replying to an email within 24 hours.

Your professional reputation is built in part by how quickly you respond to emails: some people are known by their quick replies; others by their slow replies, or whether they reply at all.