

E-Mail Tips

E-mail represents you as a person.

Many people regard e-mail as midway between written and spoken communication, and are therefore less careful about organization and typing than they are when they write a letter. Remember that everything that you produce and then show to others is a reflection of you as a person, and makes you look either competent or not so competent in their eyes.

“Communication between humans is approximately 90% body language, 8% tone of voice, and 2% what you say. With email, you remove the first 98%. Be aware of this when you write emails. Be very obvious with your meanings, since subtleties will be lost or completely misunderstood. Remember this too, when reading others’ emails. Their grasp of the language, or their haste in composing the email, may have given it a ‘virtual tone’ that may come off as derogatory or aggressive. Reread it and see if you are simply misinterpreting the words.”¹

Once you click “Send,” it’s too late for changes. Writing and delivering an e-mail message takes a lot less time than it does to write and deliver a letter, but immediacy shouldn’t mean haste. Because of the immediacy of e-mail, you may tend to be less careful, and mistakes will often be sent off and be read before you realize that you said something that you shouldn’t have said. Before sending your message, it is best to make a draft copy, do something else, and then come back to the draft copy and re-read it carefully.

“I never fill in the TO email address until I am completely through proofing my email and I am sure that it is exactly the way that I want it. This will keep you from accidentally sending an email prematurely. In the past, I have accidentally clicked on the SEND icon, when I really meant to click on the ATTACHMENT icon.”²

Content and language accuracy

The immediacy of e-mail puts us in an impatient mood, and induces mistakes. Check the accuracy of such data as phone numbers, dates, street and e-mail addresses.

Read your message once more to catch grammar and spelling problems. Be sure to use the ISP’s spelling checker. Then read the message again, because spelling checkers don’t catch all mistakes (homophones, for example, like *there* and *their*); nor do they catch punctuation mistakes. If your ISP doesn’t have a spelling checker, get an account with an ISP that does have one.

Register and tone

Many studies have been made on the register (the degree of formality) and tone of e-mail, and they all agree that e-mail messages tend to be more informal than letter messages. However, you should always consider who is going to read your message. If you are sending e-mail in a professional capacity, resist the temptation to be less formal than you would in a letter.

Don’t use emoticons (those simple drawings like ^.^ that express attitude about what you are saying) in messages to adults, especially if the relationship between you and your correspondent is a professional or formal one. Instead of emoticons, use effective language to express your attitude and emotions. (It’s interesting that the great majority of emoticons are in messages from females.)

Tag words like “ha-ha” and abbreviations like “LOL” (Laugh Out Loud) should also be avoided in formal, professional correspondence. (Correspondence with your teacher is considered formal.)

AVOID USING ALL CAPS. THE READER WILL THINK YOU’RE SHOUTING.

Think twice about the appropriateness of your salutation. Formal salutations are safest. “Dear Mr. (or Ms.) X” is always safe. “Dear Sir/Madam,” or “Dear Tara Baker” (when you know the name) are common salutations for when the writer doesn’t know the gender of the receiver. AFTER the reader uses your first name, it is usually all right to respond with the reader’s first name — unless the reader is significantly older or in a higher position. The ending (“Mr. Baker” or “William Baker” or “Bill”) in a message will usually let you know whether the person prefers to be addressed by you. If the message is signed “Mr. Baker” or “William Baker,” for example, you should definitely reply with the salutation “Dear Mr. Baker.” If it’s Bill, you can probably start your reply with “Bill.”

Also be careful about the words you use to close your message. Avoid such informal expressions as “See you next time” and “Bye-bye.” Instead, use “Sincerely” or “Regards” (when the reader is someone you don’t know or to whom you want to be polite but don’t want to express any emotion), “Warm/Warmest regards” (for expressing warmth), or just “Thank you.”

Business courtesy expert Baldrige says, “Business e-mails often sound like dogs barking at each other. We should soften our rhetoric. Note the difference between someone writing, ‘Send that info at once,’ and someone writing, ‘I’d really appreciate your sending that to me as soon as possible. Thanks.’ The person who receives the second message is going to feel much better about taking action than the first one. Phrases like, ‘It would be really helpful if,’ or ‘I hate to bother you with this extra work, but it would really help us if’ or ‘I can’t thank you enough for the hard work you put into this,’ soften up the recipient of the message.”³

‘Gonna’ and ‘wanna’: Avoid this spelling, even in personal correspondence. It’s Itaewon English.

Replying

Reply to e-mail within two days, even if you can't satisfy the writer before then. If a satisfactory reply will take you longer than two days, send a brief note letting the writer know that you received the e-mail and will get back to him/her by a certain date.

Copy and paste the original passage(s) that you are replying about. (Copy only the relevant parts.) This will preserve the original context. In your message, be sure to clearly distinguish the original passage from your reply. The conventional way to do this is to use a greater-than (>) symbol at the beginning of the original passage.

Most e-mail messages require an acknowledgement, especially ones that provide some sort of information and/or an attachment. Even if you think that you don't need to continue communication with the sender, the sender wants to know whether you got the information or attachment; and the sender deserves a thank-you.

Copies

Be sure to send a copy of your e-mail to everyone that needs to know the contents. If you leave someone out, that person will feel ignored or even threatened.

Common Problems

Garble

The Korean word for garble is *ggaevin keulssi* (like ^\$#@*^&). If you send e-mail from a han'gul-base ISP (Internet Service Provider), han'gul-base e-mail provider (like Hanmail), or han'gul OS on your computer, at the recipient's end garble replaces the han'gul and sometimes even replaces English. This problem occurs most frequently in the SENDER and SUBJECT headings. Be sure to write your name in English as the SUBJECT heading, so that the recipient can see who it's from without having to re-set his language to Korean. (A more basic method of avoiding this problem is by opening a truly international e-mail account, like Yahoo!, Gmail or Hotmail, and setting your SENDER language to English.)

Spam suspicions

Many ISPs will not deliver your message, or will send it to the recipient's spam box, if your SENDER or SUBJECT seems suspicious. Avoid SUBJECT headers like "Hi!" or "I need your help."

Do whatever you can do to let the message receiver know that the message is from you, and what your message is about. If the SENDER information is not clear, the receiver won't know whether the message is spam or legitimate.

Giving the wrong impression with your e-mail address

Give the reader a good impression by using a mature, professional address. Don't use silly ("ibbuni4u") or humorous or immature ("nihilisto609") names; avoid using a name with sexual connotations, like Candy or Cookie. The most appropriate name is some approximation of your name.

The salutation

Incorrect: "Dear My Friend," "Dear my colleague." Drop the "my." Also, use the recipient's name rather than "friend" or "colleague."

When you don't know the reader's gender, you may start with Dear *Full Name*; in a less formal situation (in an e-mail to the customer service department of a company, for example), you can just say "Greetings!"

It is also acceptable to start out with no greeting at all, as long as the words that you start with resemble an opening. For example, you can start with "I came upon your informative Web site the other day and thought that you might be able to help me with..." or "Thank you for your message of [date]..."

Be careful of register. Don't start with "Hi!" in professional correspondence, or in a letter to a person who is older than you or in a higher position, unless you are absolutely certain that the person won't be annoyed.

The opening

Face to face, we often say "How are you?" without really expecting an answer, but it does not seem strange. In written correspondence (letters and e-mail), however, it seems strange. And if you follow immediately with "I am fine," it will give the recipient the impression that you are a primary or middle school student just beginning to learn English.

Here are a few openings that you might find useful.

Thank you for your recent letter about. . . (First correspondence)

I was delighted to get your recent letter. . .

It was good of you to get back to me so quickly. . .

It's always a pleasure to hear from you. . . (A personal relationship has already been established.)

I hope this message finds you well. (A personal relationship has already been established.)

The closing

Never write "See you." It's meaningless. (Yes, I know you occasionally catch Mr. H saying it. That's because his students are corrupting him.)

Here are a few closings that you might want to try.

The best of luck to you with your [project, audit, visit to X. . .].

I'm looking forward to seeing you [again, at the next conference, next semester. . .]
Looking forward [to your reply, to hearing from you again soon. . .]
Give my best/warmest regards to [everyone in the office, your family. . .]

The ending

For formal e-mail, use formal endings. Instead of chummy endings like “Be good” and “Take care” and “Cheers,” “Bye!”, or the childish “Bye-bye,” use formal endings like “Regards,” “Best regards,” and, if the professional relationship is also personal, “Warmest regards.”

Punctuation: parentheses

In any writing that you do, always provide a space before an opening parenthesis and after the closing parenthesis.

Requests

If you want to make a request that includes lots of details and will require a substantial effort to satisfy, first send a message that describes the request in general and asks whether the person is willing to comply. Then, if the person agrees, send the actual request. Presenting all the details before the person has agreed to do it makes your request presumptuous.

Avoid seeming presumptuous

Can you identify three presumptuous phrases in this sentence? “I’ll drop by your office when I get time and have a coffee with you.”

“I will. . .” instead of “Can I. . .?”

“. . . when I get time. . .,” expecting the one you are blessing with your visit to adjust his/her schedule to your schedule, which is busier than his/hers.

“. . . and have a coffee. . .,” implying to the receiver of your visit that you must be given a cup of coffee.

Avoid huge attachments

A huge attachment may be too much for the receiver’s mail box, and may prevent other mail from being delivered to this mail box.

For more tips...

- “Email Etiquette” site (<http://www.emailreplies.com/#rules>)
- The Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab: “Tone in Business Writing” (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_tone.html)
- “Business E-Mail Basics”: <http://www.onlinenetiquette.com/business-email-basics.html>
- “Email”: <http://email.about.com/od/netiquettetips/>
- “Email Etiquette”: <http://www.emailreplies.com/>

Sources

¹ “Email Etiquette” http://www.emailaddresses.com/guide_etiquette.htm

² “Tips for Professional Email” http://careerplanning.about.com/od/communication/a/email_tips.htm

³ <http://www.chembio.niu.edu/electrochem/Baldrige.htm>