A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email

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There are now mirror sites in/at: Sweden Finland UWC, United Arab Emirates,
Argonne, Webcom, and Primenet. The original is at Webfoot. These are all in
English still; I'd be thrilled to death to link to translations as well.

Contents

Introduction

I wrote this document to try to help people to write better email. This is
not a document on the mechanics of sending email, but instead focuses on the
content of email: how to say what you need to say. These are my personal
opinions, formed by using email for the past twenty years.

This is not dogma - you should write to reflect your own personality - but
will hopefully make you think about things you didn't think about before,
and help you maximize your email effectiveness.

Why Is Email Different?

Electronic communication, because of its speed and broadcasting ability, is
fundamentally different from paper-based communication. Because the
turnaround time can be so fast, email is more conversational than
traditional paper communications.

In a paper document, it is absolutely essential to make everything
completely clear and unambiguous because your audience may not have a chance
to ask for clarification. With email documents, your recipient can ask
questions immediately. Email thus tends, like conversational speech, to be
much sloppier and more ambiguous. (See also a quick essay on formality that
I am trying to figure out how to work in to this document...)

This is not always bad. It might not be a worthwhile expenditure of energy
to slave over a message, making sure that your spelling is faultless, your
words eloquent, your grammar beyond reproach, if the point of the message is
to inform the recipient that you are ready to go to lunch.

Granted, you should put some effort into keeping your subjects agreeing with
your verbs, spelling correctly, avoiding mixing metaphors, and so on. But if
The Rules that Mrs. Grundy laid down in seventh-grade English get in the way
of effective communication, throw them out.

However, because of the lack of vocal inflection, gestures, and shared environment, email is not as rich a communication method as a face-to-face or telephone conversation. Your correspondent may have difficulty telling if you are serious or kidding, happy or sad, frustrated or euphoric. (Sarcasm is particularly dangerous to use in email.)

Thus your email compositions should be different from both your speech and your paper compositions. There are a fair number of documents on electronic email out there, but when I finished the original version of this document, they mostly talked about the nuts and bolts of how to get text from your fingers to your correspondent's screen. Those that did discuss email content tended to be really brief on the subject of email style, and gave little motivation for why the style is different. That's why I wrote this document: to address email style.

Since I wrote this, I have found two documents which cover a lot of the same ground. If you want more and/or a different perspective, see:

    * The Internet World article Learning The Ropes by Andrew Kantor (Aug
      1994?)
    * The book Elements of E-mail Style by David Angell and Brent Heslop

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Go on to Context

Ducky

If you have any other words of wisdom about using email to its fullest, or want to argue with me about something, by all means, send me email! :-)
Note, however, that I only use plain-vanilla UNIX mailx, so asking me technical questions about how to use pine or Eudora is a waste of your time.

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A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email - Context

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In a conversation, there is some minimum of shared context. You might be in the same physical location, and even on the phone you have, at minimum, commonality of time. When you generate a document for paper, usually there is some context embedded in the medium: the text is in the proceedings of a conference, written on a birthday card, handed in to your Econ 101 professor with a batch of other Econ 101 term papers, or something similar.

With email, you can't assume anything about your correspondent's location, time, frame of mind, mood, health, marital status, affluence, age, or

gender. This means, among other things, that you need to be very, very careful about giving your reader some context.

Useful Subject Lines

A subject line that pertains clearly to the email body is a good way to get people in the right context to receive your message. It should be brief (as many mailers will truncate long subject lines), does not need to be a complete sentence, and should pertain to the subject.

If you are responding to email, your mailer should preface the subject line with "Re:" or "RE:" (for REgarding). If your mail program doesn't do this, it would be polite to put in the "RE:" by hand.

If you are offering non-urgent information that requires no response from the other person, prefacing the subject line with "FYI:" (For Your Information) is not a bad idea, as in

        Subject: FYI: donuts in break room

For time-critical messages, prepending "URGENT:" is a good idea (especially if you know the person gets a lot of email):

        Subject: URGENT: meeting w/CEO moved

For requests, prepending "REQ:" can work:

        Subject: REQ: current budget est

Do me a favor and eliminate the word "information" from your subject lines, and maybe from the body of your message as well. (This is one of my pet peeves, sorry.) As webmaster for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I got a lot of email that looked like this:

        Subject: information
        Please send me information about UIUC.

This gave me very little clue as to what the person wanted to know about: admission application deadlines? The number of faculty? The acreage? The number of buildings? Am I supposed to send paper documents or give URLs? The only thing I could do with email like this was ask for further context. Mail like this would have been much better as

        Subject: UIUC history
        Are there any Web pages that pertain to the history of
        the U of I?

Quoting Documents

If you are referring to previous email, you should explicitly quote that document to provide context.

Instead of sending email that says:

        yes

Say:

> Are you going to have the left-handed thromblemeister specs
        > done by Thursday?
        yes

The ">" here is a relatively standard convention for quoting someone else's
words.

Imagine getting a response on Monday to some email that you think maybe you
sent on Friday:

        I talked to them about it the other day, and they want to see
        the other one before they make up their minds.

(Huh???)

You'd probably be much happier with:

        > I've got the price quote for the Cobra subassembly
        > ready; as soon as I get a decision on the
        > thromblemeister selection, I'll be ready to go.
        > Have you talked to the thermo guys about whether
        > they are ready to go with the left-handed thrombo or
        > do they want to wait and check out the right-handed
        > one first?
        I talked to them about it the other day, and they want to see
        the other one before they make up their minds.

This is substantially better, but now errs on the side of too much context.
You shouldn't have to wade through gobs of extraneous stuff to get to the
meat of the message. You should include just enough to provide a context for
the message and no more. (Peter Kimble, my high school CS teacher, now gives
his students the rule of thumb that at least half of the lines in an email
message should be their own.) If you must include the whole message that you
are replying to, include it after your response.

You would probably be even more pleased with:

        > Have you talked to the thermo guys
        I talked to the thermo group on Wednesday, and they
        think the left-handed thromblemeister will probably
        work, but they want to evaluate the right-handed unit
        before they make up their minds.

Note that here there is the right amount of context, and the answer is very
clear and specific. A good rule of thumb is to look very carefully at all
pronouns in your first three sentences. If they don't refer to something
explicitly stated in the email, change them to something concrete.

If the sentence is in the middle of a paragraph, or wraps around lines, go
ahead and remove everything but the part that you were really interested in,
inserting "[...]" if you have to take something out in the middle. If you
need to substitute a value for a pronoun, go ahead but put the value in
square brackets:

        > [The thermo guys] want to evaluate the
        > right-handed unit
        Fine. The right-handed unit should be here
        by Thursday; I'll phone them the minute it hits

my desk.

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A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email:
Page Layout

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Words on a computer screen look different than on paper, and usually people
find it harder to read things on a screen than on paper. (I know some people
who go so far as to print out their email to read it!) The screen's
resolution is not as good as paper's, there is sometimes flicker, the font
may be smaller, or the font may be ugly. Your recipient's mail reader may
also impose some constraints upon the formatting of the mail. This means
that good email page layout is different from good paper document page
layout.

Shorter Paragraphs

In addition to the above-mentioned problems, frequently the mail will be
read in a document window with scrollbars. While scrollbars are nice, it
makes it harder to visually track long paragraphs. Consider breaking up your
paragraphs to only a few sentences apiece.

Line Length

Most software to read mail does not automatically wrap (adjust what words go
on what line). This means that if the software you use to write mail wraps
your words for you, your recipient may end up with a message that looks like
this:

        I've got the price quote for the Cobra subassembly ready; as soon as
I get a decision on the thromblemeister selection, I'll be ready to go. Have
you

It is even worse with some mail readers - they truncate everything past the
eightieth character. This is not the way to win friends and influence
people.

A good rule of thumb is to keep your lines under seventy-five characters
long. Why seventy-five and not eighty? Because you should leave a little
room for the indentation or quote marks your correspondent might want if
he/she is going to quote a piece of your email in his/her reply.

Terser Prose

We spend twelve to twenty years being rewarded for being verbose in our
writing. (How many times when you were in school were you told to write a
N-page paper?) This is not appropriate for email, and the fewer people who
are getting the email, the terser you should be. If they want more
information, they can ask for it. (Also note that in some places, people get
charged by the byte and/or have limits on how much disk space their email
can use!)

My rule of thumb is that you should try to keep everything on one "page". In
most cases, this means twenty-five lines of text. (And yes, that means that
this document is way, WAY too long for email!)

Some mailers support "attachments", where you can specify a document (or
even a binary file) to send with your mail. If your correspondent has a mail
reader that can handle attachments, this works very well: a long attachment
can be looked at later. However, if your correspondent can't handle
attachments and you send a non-ASCII file (like a Word document, a binary, a
picture, or even compressed text), be advised that it will appear as just so
much garbage. It might be better sometimes to post the document on the Web
and email a URL.

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credit would be nice but is not necessary.

A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email:
Intonation

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While you cannot make your voice higher or lower, louder or softer to denote
emphasis, there are games you can play with text to convey vocal inflection.

Light Emphasis

If you want to give something mild emphasis, you should enclose it in
asterisks. This is the moral equivalent of italics in a paper document.

Instead of:

        I said that I was going to go last Thursday.

Say:

I *said* that I was going to go last Thursday.

Or:

I said that I was going to to go last *Thursday*.

Which of the above two you choose depends upon whether you are adamant about the committment you made or adament that you didn't mean Wednesday. (Restructuring the sentence to remove the ambiguity would be an even better idea.)

You can also capitalize the first letter only of words to give light emphasis:

While Bob may say that you should never turn it past nine, this is not Cast In Stone. It will explode if you turn it up to eleven, but anything under ten should work just fine.

I tend to use first-capitals to refer to things that are somehow dogmatic or reverential. This is probably a holdover from all the capital letters that are tossed around in The Bible.

Strong Emphasis

If you want to indicate stronger emphasis, use all capital letters and toss in some extra exclamation marks. Instead of:

> Should I just boost the power on the thrombo?
No, if you turn it up to eleven, you'll overheat the motors and it might explode.

Say:

> Should I just boost the power on the thrombo?
NO!!!! If you turn it up to eleven, you'll overheat the motors and IT MIGHT EXPLODE!!

Note that you should use capital letters sparingly, as it conveys the message that you are shouting. It is totally inappropriate to use all capital letters in a situation where you are calm. Don't do this:

HEY, I JUST WANTED TO SEE IF YOU HAD MADE ANY PROGRESS ON THE PHROCKMEIJER ACCOUNT. STOP BY AND SEE ME SOMETIME.

Oooooooh, I HATE that.

EXTREME Emphasis

If you really want to emphasize something, you can go wild:

If you are late this time, I swear upon my mother's grave that I will never, *never*, *NEVER*, >>!!**NEVER**!!<< talk to you again.

Use this sparingly.

Mutter Equivalents

In person, there are a number of ways that you can indicate that a
communication is private and not to be repeated. You can lower your voice,
you can look to your right and to your left either with your eyes or with
your whole head, and you can lean closer to the other person. While these
obviously make it more difficult for someone to overhear, these signals are
so ingrained that we might use them even if there is nobody around for
miles. Unfortunately, lowering your voice is hard to do in email.

While it is a bad idea to assume that nobody will ever ever see the email
you send, what I do in cases like this is to write what I really think and
then write down the sanitized version:

        My boss got fired I mean resigned today, which
        totally sucks err.. will lead to enhanced
        relations between Engineering and Test.

"Erasure marks" - either ^H or ^? - can also be used here:

        My boss got fired I mean resigned today, which
        totally sucks^H^H^Hwill lead to enhanced
        relations between Engineering and Test.

A friend of mine uses double parentheses to denote "inner voice", what in
theatre-speak is an "aside":

        My boss resigned today ((yeah, like I believe
        that story)), which is going to lead to enhanced
        relations between Engineering and Test ((yeah,
        like you believe *that* story))...

Something else that I will do sometimes to denote the "lowering of voice" is
to type without capital letters and maybe use parentheses:

        psssst!
        hey wendy!
        guess what?

        I GOT THE JOB!!!! :-D :-D !!

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A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email:
Gestures

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While you are unable to accompany your words with hand or facial gestures,
there are several ASCII stand-ins for gestures.

Smileys

A facial gestures can be represented with "smiley": an ASCII drawing of a
facial expression. The most common three are

        :-)
        ;-)

and

        :-(

(To understand these symbols, turn your head counter-clockwise and look at
them sideways.)

While people will have slightly different interpretations of the exact
difference between the upper two, my personal opinion is that the upper one
means more "I'm happy" and the lower one means more "I'm kidding".

Typical examples:

        Hey, guess what - I got the left-handed
        thromblemeister spec done ahead of time! :-)
        I'm on my way to fame and fortune now! ;-)

The second smiley, the ;-), indicates that you don't really believe that
your boss will give you that big raise. It is similar to but not as fierce a
rebutal as a "NOT!" appended to the end of a sentence:

        Hey, guess what - I got the left-handed
        thromblemeister spec done ahead of time! :-)
        I'm on my way to fame and fortune now - NOT!

There are a wide range of ASCII gestures available to you, from ill %^P to
angry >:-< to astonished :-o, limited only by your imagination. There is a
whole Smiley dictionary out there if you are feeling uncreative. (Note: I
personally think that some of the Smiley Dictionary definitions of the basic
smileys aren't a totally accurate reflection of the way I see smileys used,
but your milage may vary.)

Pause Equivalents

Imagine that you ask someone if you can turn the gain up to ten and a half.
He says, "Well", then pauses for a long time, scratches his head, looks down
at the floor, winces, grits his teeth, and says again, "Well", then pauses
and says, "It might not explode". You'd get a sense of just how bad an idea
it would be, while the text:

        Well, it might not explode.

gives less information. I like to use lots of whitespace and typed-out
vocalizations of "I'm thinking" sounds, as follows:

        Weeeellllll....   errr   hem.

        Wellll, it *might* not explode.

You can also use whitespace to make it more clear which words belong to
which clause. For example, the following is very difficult to parse

        Did you want to use a left-handed thromblemeister or a
        right-handed one with a half-twist or a Jackadoody brocket?

You could instead say:

        Did you want to use
                a left-handed thromblemeister
        or
                a right-handed one with
                        a half-twist
                or
                        a Jackadoody brocket?

or

        Did you want to use
                a left-handed thromblemeister
        or
                a right-handed one with a half-twist
        or
                a right-handed one with a Jackadoody brocket?

as appropriate. My mom goes one step further, and suggests hauling out Mrs.
Grundy's notes on outlines:

        Did you want to use:
                1. a left-handed thromblemeister
        or
                2. a right-handed one with a
                        a. half-twist
                        b. Jackadoody brocket

Creative Punctuation

I tend to use a lot of punctuation in what I call "comic book style".
Instead of saying:

        I am very confused and a little upset. Why did
        you give my report to Jack instead of Jill?

I'd say:

        ???!??! Why did you give my report to Jack
        instead of Jill?!?

The question mark is kind of shorthand for a furrowed brow or a "huh?". The
exclamation mark is shorthand for amazement and possibly a scowl. The two

together seem to mean astonishment.

There is a long and proud tradition of using punctuation as a placeholder for swearing, e.g. That #%&#$(*! You will also sometimes see an asterisk in place of important letters, usually the vowel, e.g. That son of a b*tch! or That son of a b****! or very rarely That s*n of a b*tch!. (In actual practice, this form of self-censorship is rare; it is more common for people to either use the whole word or omit it completely.)

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A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email - Summary

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Here, then, are my rules of thumb for good email style:

    * Provide your audience with adequate context:
        o Use meaningful subject lines
        o Quote the email to which you are responding
        o Avoid pronouns
    * Be aware of page layout issues. Try to use:
        o Short paragraphs
        o Lines under seventy-five characters
        o Email under twenty-five lines
    * Find replacements for gestures and intonation:
        o Smileys
        o Asterisks
        o Capital letters
        o Typed-out vocalizations
        o Whitespace
        o Lower-case letters
        o Creative punctutation

Hopefully these suggestions will be useful to you as you start your emailing career! :-)

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A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email - Jargon

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A number of new users have asked me to include a jargon/acronym page for email. Contrary to how they might feel, there is not a conspiracy out there to try to exclude them Every group that spends any time together develops its own shorthand notation; it is not surprising that people forced to use the unnatural action of typing would be inclined towards acronyms. Some of these come from Usenet newsgroups, some of the more "gestural" ones come from Internet Relay Chat (IRC).

Obviously it would be nice of seasoned users to not pepper novices with an enormous amount of jargon, but on the Internet, nobody knows you are a newcomer. You'll get hit with these eventually, so I'll try to soften the blow.

Here are some of the most common acronyms:

   * BTW - By The Way
   * FYI - For Your Information
   * IMHO - In My Humble/Honest Opinion
   * TIA - Thanks In Advance (also sometimes written advTHANKSance)
   * RTFM - Read The Manual ("Manual" here refers to any documentation)
   * LOL - [I] Laughed Out Loud [at what you wrote]
   * ROTFL - [I am] Rolling On The Floor Laughing [at what you wrote]
   * RSN - Real Soon Now
   * YMMV - Your Milage May Vary (taken from a disclaimer that legally must
     be given any time automotive fuel efficiency ratings are used in U.S.
     advertisements)

A term that I would love to see popularized is "NRN", for "No Response Needed". Sometimes, without body language, it isn't clear when an email-based conversation should be ended. Peter Wone suggests that "NRSVP" for "non respondez-vous s'il vous plais", or "pleast do not respond" is easier to guess than "NRN".

To unravel jargon and technical Internet terms, see the fine Internet Literacy Consultants' Glossary of Internet Terms.

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