
ProSeminar Top Tips Series

Writing E-mails

E-mails replace a variety of alternative forms of communication – letters, memos, comps slips, handwritten notes, telephone calls and even dropping by at a colleague's desk for a brief conversation. The style, tone and structure of e-mails reflect this range and therefore vary enormously. Choose the right style and tone for each particular e-mail depending upon its nature, your objectives and your relationship with the reader.

Here are some tips:

1. Choose a meaningful heading for the subject box

Choose a meaningful heading and enter it into the subject box. A good heading provides the recipient with a signpost to what they will be reading. This not only helps them to understand more easily what they are reading, it also helps them to decide if they want to read it.

A good heading is also useful for both writer and recipient when they want to find old e-mails using the search function. If I want to find a particular e-mail from Jane about a particular printing job, it's not very helpful if she's headed all her e-mails *Message from Jane* or even *Printing*. (As she works for the printer all her e-mails to me are about printing!) It is helpful if she's put a heading such as *Course Manuals: Speaking & Presentation Skills 16 Feb*.

Related Courses

- [Written Communication Skills](#)
- [Writing Reports & Proposals](#)
- [Time Management & Personal Effectiveness](#)
- [Managing Remote Teams](#)

All courses are run regularly at our London training venue and are also available on an in-house basis

If you are dealing with more than one topic in the e-mail, it's useful to include reference to both of these in the subject. For instance: *1. Third Quarter Figures 2. Meeting 23 Jan.*

If you are replying to someone's e-mail which hasn't got an appropriate heading, change the heading. Don't continue to use an old heading which no longer relates to the subject being discussed.

2. Adopt a style and tone appropriate to your purpose and relationship

Compare the two examples below.

Example 1

Dear Nigel

I was very pleased to have the opportunity of talking to you this morning about your interest in our course: 'Project Management: Tools & Techniques'.

The fees for our in-house courses are based on the following formula:

- Course fee: £xxxx per day
- Materials costs: £xx per participant
- Travel and accommodation: at cost

...
...

If you would like to proceed on this basis please let me know and I will get the course tutor to contact you to discuss mutually convenient dates

I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Yours sincerely

Example 2

Hi Penny

Hope you are well and thanks for your reminder.

I haven't been able to get through to John but we'll go-ahead with Coaching & On-job Training Skills as planned.

Please let tutor and participants know in the usual way. I'll try to follow up with Nick later.

Cheers

Example 1 is formal and friendly and appropriate to a new business relationship with a potential client (in line with the culture of the industry and the status of the two correspondents). The style is very much akin to that of a business letter.

Example 2 is informal and appropriate for a close working relationship with a colleague (either inside or outside the organisation). The style is more conversational and more like a telephone conversation or a handwritten note. The grammar is flexible. Not only does it employ contractions (*I haven't* and *I'll*) it also drops the implied subject of the verb – *Hope you are well* rather than *I hope you are well* and the definite article (the) – *Please let tutor and participant know* rather than *Please let the tutor and participants know*. The result is not only informal and personal but also more 'pacey'.

3. Chose appropriate greetings and sign-offs

In the above examples note the difference in greetings and sign-offs between the two styles. A range of options exists and also includes *Good Morning /Afternoon, Hello* or even *Thanks for this, John* for greetings and *Regards, Kind regards, Best wishes* etc for sign-offs.

Choose whatever you judge as appropriate to the relationship, the context and your objectives. It's good practice to include the individual's name in the greeting.

4. Structure your e-mail following the 5 C's

You can adapt the 5C's structure for writing business letters to e-mails

- Courtesy and context
- Content
- Continuation (what happens next)
- Closing courtesy

Look again at the two examples above to see how, though different, they both follow broadly the same structure.

In Example 2 the line *Hope you are well* mirrors the kind of greeting appropriate in a telephone conversation when you haven't spoken to the person for a couple of days. In this context it is appropriate. However it's hardly necessary or natural if this is the fourth e-mail you've exchanged that day. Given that this type of e-mail is informal and chatty, it can be appropriate and good for interpersonal relationships to include some ice-breaking chat such as you might have over the phone e.g. *Hope you had a good holiday, Hope you're not too upset about the footy last night* etc.

Related Articles

- [Grammar Rules OK](#)

ProSeminar Top Tips Series

Other items in the Top Tips Series include:

- Structured Delegation
- Criticism Skills
- [Making Meetings Work](#)
- Managing E-Mails
- [How to Get More Power](#)

Let us know if there are particular topics you'd like us to cover in this on-going series.

Example 2 doesn't employ a closing courtesy (except the sign-off). This isn't necessary in the context of the relationship and helps to keep the e-mail brief.

4. Use a clear and attractive layout

Make your e-mails attractive to the reader and lay them out well to support the structure.

Plain text and attractive fonts

E-mails composed in plain text often look ugly and don't do all they could to promote a professional image of your organisation. Where possible, use html or rich text formats so that you have a choice over your font and font colour. (You'll find the appropriate settings on the 'Options' tab in Outlook 2007.)



Paragraphs, sub-headings and bullet points

Write in short paragraphs – even shorter than you would use in letters. Use sub-headings to separate topics and distinguish them by numbering and underlining them as, for instance, in Example 3 below.

As you'll see, this example also makes use of a hyperlink to take the reader directly to a page on the writer's website. This makes accessing the information easier for the reader and also on this occasion obviates the need to add this particular document as an attachment.

Also look for the opportunities to use bullet points. It also helps layout if you indent your bullet point lists.

Example 3

Good Afternoon Helen

I was very pleased to hear that you are interested in taking forward the possibility of our running a Middle Managers Development Programme for your client's managers. I've been giving some thought to the various ways in which we could meet their needs.

Option 1 - the three-day in-house course

As requested, I'm providing a [PDF of our standard programme](#). This programme could be adjusted to meet the needs of the group with the possible addition/deletion of some topics.

...

Option 2 – Introductory Diploma in Management

The three-day programme could be adjusted and linked to the award of the Introductory Diploma in Management. Following the core programme, participants would undertake a four-week period of supported study and then complete an assignment of approximately 3,000 words. The course tutor

...

Option 3 – Modular structure

We could put together a programme comprising a series of modules (based around core topics such as managing people, finance for non-financial managers, project management etc).

...

5. Be wary of ambiguity

Think carefully about how what you are writing might be unclear to the reader or interpreted differently to how you intended.

Pronouns such as *they, he, this, that* might be understood as referring back to a different antecedent than the one you meant.

Time scales may need to be made explicit particularly if you are corresponding internationally. Thus *Can I have your answer by the beginning of next week* might mean by Saturday for a Saudi, Sunday for a Kuwaiti and Monday for a Frenchman. Deadlines are best expressed by day, date and time as, for instance, *I need to receive your reply by 17.00 GMT Friday 5 Feb.*

6. Re-read your emails before you send them and don't over-react

Always reread your e-mail before you send it. As well as checking proofing, structure and content, check your tone. Would it sound the way you intend it to the reader or could he/she interpret it as cold, hostile, defensive or abrupt. Ideally, leave your e-mail before sending it so that when you re-read it you see it through fresh eyes.

Don't send an e-mail you've written when you are still feeling angry or hurt by an e-mail you have received – take the time to calm down, then re-read it and re-edit your response accordingly. Even if you feel that the tone of an e-mail you have received is abrupt or hostile, don't over react to the tone in the response you make.

7. DON'T WRITE IN UPPERCASE

For some reason, convention has established that writing in upper case (except for headings) is equivalent to shouting. Whatever you feel about this convention is irrelevant - it's how your reader might interpret your use of uppercase that's important. In line with Point 6 above, don't overreact if you receive an e-mail in uppercase.