Business Email Etiquette

Dragoş V. Iliescu

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Preface

Email is currently the most used communication channel in the business environment. Although personal communication has steadily shifted to social media and instant messaging in the 21st century, business still relies heavily on email for sending messages across long distances in a short time.

Business email etiquette encompasses a set of rules indicating effective, proper and polite ways to behave when using the email as a communication channel. The rules of etiquette are centered on how messages should look and what they should contain, so this book is built around email appearance and contents.

The first chapter of the book will provide a general overview of email as a communication channel, guiding readers through some of the key moments in email history, stating a few facts about where email stands today and defining the concept of email etiquette. The second chapter will present rules the of email appearance, starting from how an email address should be structured, then moving on to the subject field, salutations and closings, font, message spacing and finishing with the signature. The third chapter will take the reader through what an email should contain, mentioning the style and tone in which an email is written, enumerations, use of emoticons and abbreviations. Replying to emails is a vital part of etiquette, which is addressed in the fourth chapter of this book, and it is followed by some suggestions for handling specific situations in the sixth chapter.

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About the Author

Dragos Iliescu is a trainer and instructional designer, with a professional background in training, e-learning instructional design and training management positions. He takes an interest in all things related to adult learning and has obtained various certifications related to this field, such as E-learning Instructional Design, Technology Enabled Learning, Training and Gamification. He has authored several books on training, telemarketing and customer service topics and he's always looking forward to continue learning and improving the skills he's developed over the years.

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1 General Information

1.1 A Brief History of Email

The history of telecommunications first began through human imagination. The first evidence to support this statement comes from Ancient Greek mythology, where gods were capable to simultaneously talk to each other over great distances. The transition from imagination to reality was long and strenuous, as it took people over 2000 years to reach the communication levels of performance of Ancient Greek gods. The spark that lit the development of communications was the evolution of electricity in the 19th century, from intellectual curiosity to stable and reliable resource for the inventions of electric engineering.

The first major step in reducing the time a message needed for travelling over long distances took place in the middle 19th century, through the invention of the telegraph. A few decades later, the telephone appeared. By the beginning of the 20th century, it was developed into the first network that facilitated conversations over thousands of kilometers.

After that, discoveries and inventions continued at an unprecedented pace, and telecommunications evolved in the last century at a greater speed than any other field of study. These evolutions led to an ever increasing efficiency of human communication, as the coverage of telecommunication channels expanded and the cost for their use decreased.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the telephone and the telegraph dominated telecommunications. The advantage telegraphy held over telephony was that it kept a record of the message. It did, however, come with one great disadvantage: the message was binary coded, which meant the persons at either end of the line needed extra knowledge and skills for coding and decoding it. The telex was developed as a response to this disadvantage. Communicating over the telex meant using a device similar to a typewriter for sending a message over long distances, without any further coding. All aspects considered, it's safe to call it the direct predecessor of email. It developed into an extensive network of printers similar to a telephone network, and it functioned successfully until the 1980s, when it was gradually replaced by the fax machine.

The device that forever changed the course of telecommunications is, without any doubt, the digital computer, a machine that was able to process very complex information and made the switch from binary to digital coding. The first computers appeared in the 1930s and they evolved steadily until the 1970's, when technological evolutions led to reduced size and cost of these devices, making them available to an increasing number of institutions. This, in turn, led to the creation of the first computer network, under the coordination of the US Department of Defense. The network was named ARPANET and was initially created as a connection between the Department of Defence and a few academic institutions.

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This is where what we would later call email was invented. It appeared more on accident than on purpose, as nobody ever asked for or financed a project that aimed at sending messages between computers. The father of e-mail, computer scientist Roy Tomlinson, stated that he thought of sending messages between computers because "it seemed like a neat idea". Tomlinson's neat idea became reality in 1971, when he sent the first email between two computers placed in the same room. He used the "@" symbol then for the first time, to separate the name of the machine from that of the network.

Sending messages in the manner Tomlinson discovered became the new standard in ARPANET a few years later. The term *electronic mail* was coined to describe this new way of communicating. The short version we use today was not documented until the early 1980s.

Computers gradually became smaller and cheaper and, by the beginning of the 1980s, they also became personal, leaving the exclusive club of government organizations and corporations and making their way into people's homes. From this point on, the use of email started growing at a very fast pace.

By the end of the 1980s, some providers offered email services for companies and individuals for a cost. At the beginning of the 1990s, the global system of interconnected computer networks which we now refer to as *The Internet* was developed. In the same period, the first free email service was introduced, rushing the growth of user numbers. This growth pushed email among the most popular communication channels of the 21st century, a position it still retains today.

1.2 Email Today

At the time of publication of this book, most studies place email among the most widely used communication channels, along with text messaging, instant messaging and social media. The number of worldwide email users has increased over the past years and studies show that they will continue to do so over the following years, to the disadvantage of other written communication channels, such as letters or faxes.

One quarter of all email addresses are work addresses, but the projected growth of work addresses is much higher than that of personal ones. This can be a clue to the consolidation of email's position as the dominant channel in the business environment, while personal communication has steadily shifted towards instant messaging and social media.

An email user handles around 100 messages each day. Three quarters of these are received messages. If we were to spend one minute reading each email and three minutes composing each mail we send, we would need 150 minutes just to handle the messages for one email address. But most users have at least two addresses, a personal one and one for work. The second address brings the same informational charge and the time doubles to 300 minutes. These figures come to prove that there is currently an excess of emails and it will only get worse in the near future. Email users will need to develop the ability to prioritize in order to keep it efficient.

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Recent evolutions in mobile technology have given users an unprecedented degree of mobility for accessing email, as they can now carry it in their pocket and check it from almost anywhere. The number of mobile email users is also growing.

To sum it all up, we can state that email is and will remain one of the most important communication channels, particularly in the business environment, where most communication takes place through this channel.

1.3 How Email Works

The term *electronic mail* was by no means chosen randomly. Email's functionality is, in many aspects, very similar to that of a postal system. When you hit the *send* button, the message is broken up into data packages that get sent through virtual space by cables, radio waves or satellite. At the end of its journey, the message reaches a server, the equivalent of a post office, where it is hosted as unread mail until it is accessed by the user. The greatest difference between email and classic mail is the duration of this entire process. An email needs, on average, about a minute to arrive anywhere in the world.

Email addresses have a hierarchical structure, as do postal addresses. If you read them backwards, they indicate the internet top-level domain (.com, .net, .info, .eu), which is the highest level in the hierarchical Domain Name System of the Internet. This is followed by the name of the domain that hosts the email server (usually the name of an organization), which is separated by the name of the user through the "@" symbol.

As far as structure is concerned, email is split into three big categories: local mail, hosted mail and webmail. The term local mail is used to describe email servers that are hosted internally by an organization. Hosted mail is accessible to members of an organization but isn't hosted internally; there's a third party handling the administration of the email servers. Finally, webmail refers to the email services that can be accessed directly over the internet, such as Yahoo, Gmail or Windows Live. These are usually free to use and the email account also comes with an instant messaging account. Local email and hosted email are the standard in the business environment, while webmail is more commonly used for personal accounts.

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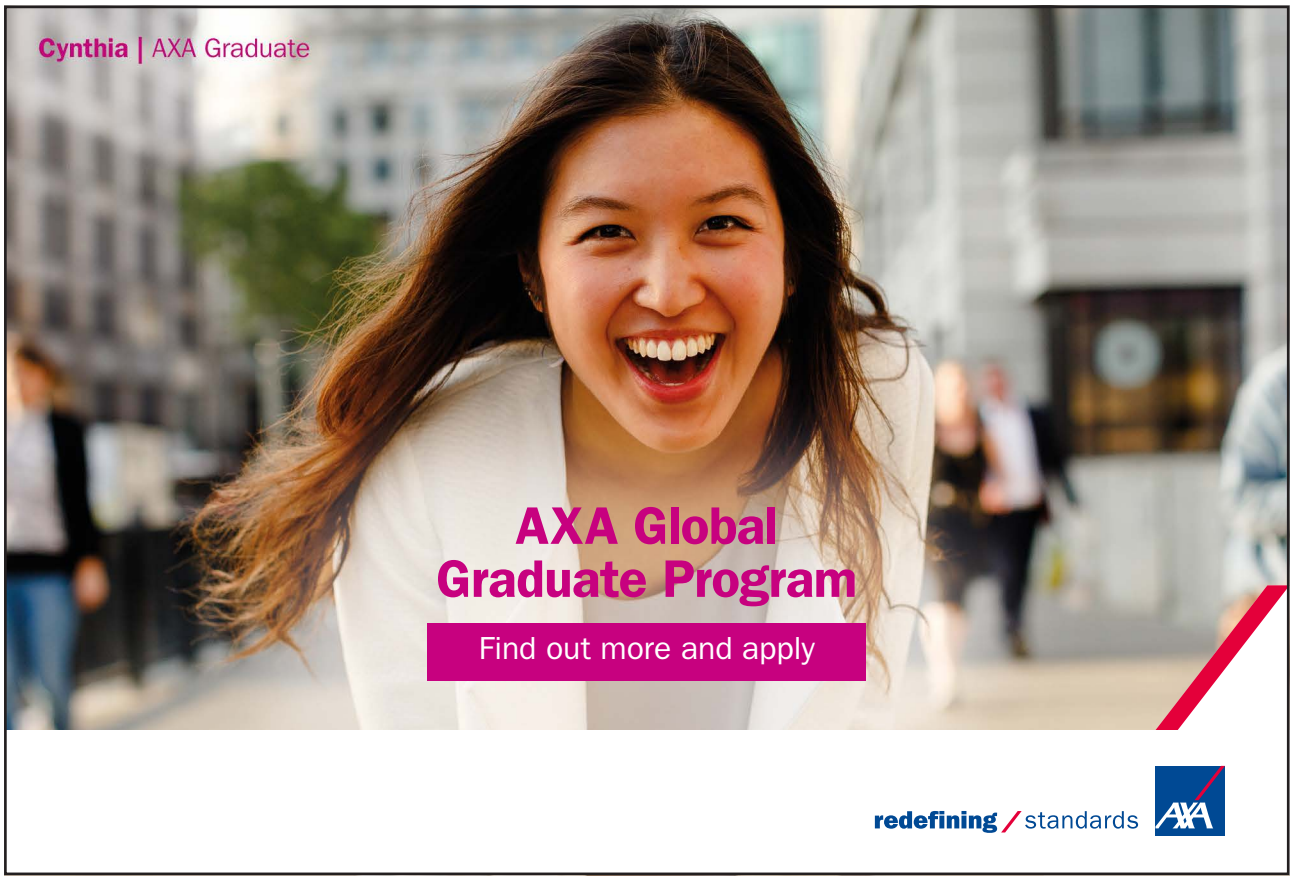
1.4 Why Email is Popular

We've seen that email is the preferred communication channel in the business environment and that it's consolidating its position. Below is a list of reasons why this is the case and why people choose email over other communication channels:

- it's written; email can be kept as a record of what's been communicated, it can be archived and accessed at a later date
- it can hold attachments; email isn't restricted to just text. It can also be used to convey sounds, videos or images. This gives communication an ampler dimension
- it's fast; it only lasts about a minute for an email to reach any destination. This makes it one of the fastest communication channels
- it's cheap; the costs implied by using email are very small and evolutions in technology make them drop steadily. The terminals (computers or mobile devices), the internet subscription and the server hosting plan are the only costs for using email at this moment
- it's flexible; email can be accessed from anywhere and it allows its users to send messages to almost anybody



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Email distinguishes itself from other written communication channels in organizations by its adaptability to both formal and informal communication. Formal emails have a predefined structure and a clearly defined purpose, while informal emails have no real value for the organization's objectives, but play a vital role in keeping a healthy social environment.

David Shipley and Will Schwalbe, authors of *Send. Why People Email So Badly and How To Do It Better* identified six main uses for email.

a. Making Requests

The most frequent use of email is making requests, which appear as a result of needs or wishes. Email has made it a lot easier to ask for things, as it lacks the unpleasant tension implied by making the request face to face.

I need…
Would you please give me…
Can you please… ?

b. Providing answers

Requests made by email usually get answered through the same channel. Answers confirm that the massage was received and offer a resolution to the request.

Yes, we can…
I don't know if…
There's no way to…

c. Providing Information

Emails that provide information send messages that are or might be of interest to the recipient. They don't usually require an answer and are sometimes marked by the FYI acronym (which stands for "for your information") either in the subject line or at the beginning of the message. The fact that the information is written can turn emails into valuable sources that can be kept for future reference.

I'd like to bring to your attention that …
I want to inform you that …
For your information, …

d. Thanks

Manners teach us that we should thank somebody when they do something for us. We can thank people through email, although it's better to thank them in person for very personal or delicate favors, or at least over the telephone.

Thank you for …
You have my gratitude

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e. Apologies

The need for apologies usually appears in delicate moments, when we've done something wrong and we wish to show our regret. Email isn't always the best channel for this type of interaction, but may be used for making formal apologies for mistakes that don't have any major repercussions.

I apologize for …
I'm sorry that I …
I regret what I've done.

f. Socializing

The informal side of emails is well illustrated by messages which only aim to strengthen the relationship between people. We can include here messages that ask people how they are or how they feel, jokes, funny pictures, presentations, songs or videos that have little informational value, but are an important part of socializing and helping people maintain good relations.

How have you been?
How's it going?
How was your weekend?

1.5 Defining Etiquette

Now that we have a clearer picture of what email is we can proceed to clarify the meaning of etiquette, the second key word in the title of this book.

Mirriam-Webster's Dictionary defines etiquette as "the rules indicating the proper and polite way to behave". Etiquette is made from a set of rules and guidelines that dictate how an individual should behave in certain groups.

The unprecedented multitude of means of interaction that the internet has provided for its users determined the development of a specific culture for this environment. Internet developed its own norms, values and rules and adopted English as its main language. Email functions within the boundaries of this culture.

Email etiquette is subscribed to business etiquette, which in turn is subscribed to social etiquette. Social etiquette can differ from one culture to the next or form one country to another, while business etiquette tends to be multicultural in nature.

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The 18th edition of *Emily Post's Etiquette. Manners for a New World*, a reference for proper behavior since the 19th century, specifies that etiquette has four main features:

- It is fluid, not constricted to a strict set of rules. Time and space influence how people behave and etiquette is adapted to these two dimensions.
- Etiquette is for everybody, not just to for elites. Good manners cost nothing.
- It is current. The guidelines of etiquette are not based on history or tradition; even though the principles are timeless, guidelines adapt constantly as society changes.
- Lastly, it is unpretentious. Polite persons don't patronize others.

The key element of etiquette is that it regulates human actions, so that they are considerate towards other members of society. Etiquette was developed in the spirit of being mindful to how the other persons in a group understand things and relate to one another.

1.6 Understanding Email Etiquette

Since the internet developed its own culture, it also had to develop its own etiquette. Thus, a new term was coined: netiquette. Netiquette is defined as "the rules of etiquette that apply when communicating over computer networks, especially the internet" (Dictionary.com). The guidelines of netiquette are directed towards the specific realities of communicating over the internet, such as the eye-straining backlight of computer screens, the excess of information or the speed with which written communication unfolds.

Before we ask ourselves how we should send an email that sticks to all of netiquette's guidelines, we first need to ask ourselves whether email is the most suitable channel for communicating in the respective situation. As email etiquette is subscribed to social etiquette, we must bear in mind that an email, even when it's impeccably written, can be inappropriate in a situation that requires another communication channel, such as a face to face or telephone conversation.

We've pointed out a few situations when email isn't am appropriate channel below.

- The message is confidential. Email is not a safe communication channel because virtually anyone can access the content of the emails we send. Besides, we can never know what will happen with the message after it's reached its recipient, who could forward it to third parties.
- The message brings bad news. Social etiquette teaches us that bad news should be delivered in person, as a sign of respect to the person receiving them.
- The message is too complex. An email should not contain more than one idea. When it must, it's better to send the content as attachments, followed by details provided over the telephone or face to face, so you can make sure the information was understood.

Email is a useful addition to direct human interaction, but it can't substitute it. In some situations, direct contact is either necessary or even unavoidable.

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2 Email Form

2.1 Email Address Local Parts

Before you start worrying about how you should write the content of your email, you should first think about the local part of your email address, namely the text before the "@" sign. This coincides with the username for that mailbox.

As far as work addresses are concerned, the local part will most likely follow a standard arrangement that is decided by members of the IT department. As far as personal email addresses go, users can choose virtually any name, as long as it's not already taken by someone else.

The email address local part makes a statement about you, maybe just as much so as the content of the email does. The generally accepted form of local parts varies, depending on its primary use (work or personal) and on its type (individual or group).

The most commonly used local part for work email addresses has following format: first name, dot, last name. The first name comes in front and it's separated from the last name by a period. This in turn is followed by the domain name and the top-level domain. Using my own name as an example, the email address built in such a manner would look like this:

dragos.iliescu@work-email.com

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Another common form of work email local parts is the exclusive use of the first name. This is particularly popular within small organizations, where it's unlikely that two people would have the same first name.

dragos@work-email.com

There are a several other accepted, although less popular forms for local parts. We've listed them below:

- initial of the first name, last name: *diliescu@work-email.com*
- initial of the first name, period, last name: *d.iliescu@work-email.com*
- first name, initial of last name: *dragosi@work-email.com*
- first name, period, initial of last name: *dragos.i@work-email.com*
- initials: *di@work-email.com*

All forms of organizational email put the first name at the beginning. This is good to take into account in case of intercultural conversations with people with uncommon names, such as Cevahir Ozel, Orsik Kori, Heikki Nurmi or Brynjar Bryndísardóttir. If you want to keep it formal, the last name in the email address local part is also the last name of that person and you can have an educated guess as to how you should address them.

It's not very likely that more persons would have the exact same first and last names inside an organization, such as, for example, Mark Jones. However, there are maybe tens or hundreds of thousands of people named Mark Jones worldwide. When creating their personal email address, they can't all use the standard *mark.jones@personal-email.com.*

Persons with common names will find it more difficult than others to get their email address looking by the book. So, the following exceptions are usually practiced and accepted in the case of personal email:

- placing the last name in front of the first*: iliescu.dragos@personal-email.com* or *iliescudragos@personal-email.com*
- adding numbers at the end of the local part: *dragos.iliescu02@personal-email.com*. If you must do this, it's preferred not to use more than one or two digits, as the address would get too complicated. That means that you might not get the correspondence you're expecting, if someone has to type the address down and gets it wrong.
- using other symbols for separating the first name from the last name. The trouble with this is that it's unsupported by some email providers*: dragos_iliescu@personal-email.com* or *dragos-iliescu@personal-email.com*

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Even if personal email addresses aren't constricted to such a strict set of rules as work addresses are, here are a few elements you should bear in mind when choosing your username:

- never insert adjectives, nouns or names of famous characters in your local part. Usernames like bigboss83, godess666, delicate.princess or batman123 won't ever be taken seriously if you will use them to communicate with people you don't know, as they indicate their users might be quite immature. They might work just fine if you're under 14, but their efficiency gradually drops as the age of users increases.
- keep your local parts short. If you have a middle name besides your first and last name, it's best to leave it out. The longer the address, the higher he chances it gets misspelled at some point.

Besides individual addresses, it's common practice in the business environment to use group addresses. They deliver the same message to a greater number of recipients that might be interested in it. The local part is usually named by the element everyone in that group has in common. For example, if all the persons in the group are part of a department, the address will borrow the name of the department and would be something like: *accounting@work-email.com* or *it@work-email.com*

Group addresses are also created in companies that handle multiple projects, by naming the group after the specific project and including everyone involved. If possible, you should avoid group addresses that are made of acronyms, as they might get confusing.

General email addresses are a subcategory of group addresses, as they don't distribute messages meant for an individual or group, but those meant for the organization itself. These are a part of the company's projected image towards its customers and suppliers. They are impersonal and the messages can be directed to one or more persons. The most common forms for the general email address are *contact@work-email.com* or *office@work-email.com.*

Whenever you create a new email address, you are invited to choose a sender name which will be displayed in the inbox of the receiver. This name will appear in the "from" section of the email client of the receiver. Most people read this name before seeing the actual email address of the sender. You should take care that the sender name you choose coincides with the name in the email address. For example, for the *dragos.iliescu@work-email.com* address, the correct associated name is Dragos Iliescu. Any difference between the address and the sender name will cause confusion.

We've mentioned earlier that it's best to leave out the middle name from the address local part. So, for someone whose name is James Richard Hutchinson, the email should be james.hutchinson@work-email.com. However, confusions might arise if friends and family call him Richard, and he chooses this for his sender name. You'd have James Hutchinson's email sending Richard Hutchinson's message, and that would be confusing.

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Based on this same principle, it's unacceptable to use someone else's name than that mentioned in the address local part. If Jenny Jones sends you an email using Michael Mardsen's address, then you would really be at a loss. What's more, these messages might not even reach their destinations, as security filters could classify them as spam.

In some companies, those who hold positions that imply a lot of interaction with persons from other companies, whether clients or suppliers, also add the name of the company to their sender name. So, when James Hutchinson sends an email, what appears in the inbox looks something like this:

James Hutchinson (Name of Company)

This practice is particularly useful when there is a large volume of correspondence between companies or when a first contact is established by a new person inside a company that already has established previous contact.

2.2 Subject

The subject field is of crucial importance for how the email will be received. Most of the times, it makes the difference between the recipient reading it or discarding it.

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I wanted **real responsibility**

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for Engineers and Geoscientists
www.discovermitas.com

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The subject of an email has to be brief and clear. It's recommended that it doesn't span over more than 35–40 characters (spaces included), as this is thought to be the ideal length that lets the title be entirely visible in the received mail subject section of most email client applications.

A subject spelled out as:

It is our pleasure to invite you to the 4th annual edition of the Email Etiquette Conference

will only get displayed as:

It is our pleasure to invite you to the…

The person reading this subject will have no idea what it is about and might dismiss it as unimportant. Another scenario is that they might be driven by curiosity to open it, even if they have no idea what it's about. If they are disappointed, they might close the message before getting a chance to read and understand all of it.

Some people have the habit of writing the entire message in the subject field whenever they are in a hurry. Ironically, instead of speeding things up, this practice only manages to slow them down, as they are very difficult to read. If you were to write the following text in the subject line:

I'll be waiting for you in my office at 7 p.m. to talk about the unacceptable behavior of two of our employees

then the recipient would have to scroll through the message to read all of it. Some people might find such emails offensive or inconsiderate and conflicts can arise.

At the other extreme, we have messages with no subject at all. These are always a surprise. The only clue as to the possible content is the sender's name, so many such messages remain unread.

Another condition for a subject to draw the recipient's attention is that it has to be clear and as specific as possible. Vague subjects such as *Question*, *News* or a blank subject field may be brief, but aren't clear enough for the recipient to understand what they're about. For example, instead of using just *Question* in your title, you could write *Question Regarding the Last Payment*; this title is brief enough and it's also specific.

Since email also plays the role of an information archive, some companies choose to add certain internal reference codes in the subjects of their emails. Such a subject can look something like this:

XZT12 Payment Report

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These codes make it easier to search for information on a certain topic, if you need to access it at a later date. The only trouble with this system is that the recipients in other organizations will not know what it means, unless they are told. So this system might make things easier for people who know what this coding is about but more difficult for those who don't.

The last thing you have to check is that your subject is spelled correctly and that it sticks to the rules of writing titles as far as orthography is concerned.

2.3 Salutations and Closings

In the business environment, email differs greatly from other forms of written communication. This difference is mainly given by the fact that it's less formal, simpler and shorter and the specific rules of email etiquette are built around these characteristics. Email has drawn out its own conventions, and the implicit rule for using this channel is to *write as you speak*. The transition from a formal style to an informal one in written communication marked the appearance of a new, semi-formal style, which is halfway between the two. The semi-formal style is used when the formal style is not necessary and the informal style is not appropriate. This means that the following text (representative to the formal style):

I am submitting the attached document with high hope that it complies to all stipulated requirements and that you will grant your approval.

would become:

Please approve this document if it meets all requirements.

Email has kept some elements from the structure of letters, including the salutations and closings. The salutations are written on a separate line, at the beginning of the message, and are followed by a comma.

Salutations and closing formulas differ depending on the context in which they're sent and on how you relate to the recipient of the message. A brief categorization of opening formulas has them as either individual or collective. There's also a specific set of salutations and closing formulas for the formal, semi-formal and informal styles.

Formal Style
Salutations: *Dear David, Dear Mr./ Mrs. Jones, To whom it may concern, Dear all, All* Closings: *Sincerely, Cordially, Yours Sincerely, Regards, Best regards*

The most commonly used salutations of semiformal communication are "hello" or "hi", which are more common to face to face than it is to written communication. This emphasizes email's "write as you speak" characteristic.

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It's also common to use just the first name of the recipient (James, John etc) and then get straight to the subject.

Semi-Formal Style

Salutations: *Hello David, Hello, Hi, David*
Closings: *Thank you, Thanks, Best, All best, Best Wishes, Your,*

The informal style is commonly used between friends or close colleagues, so salutations and closings are usually omitted in informal emails. If they exist, there are no rules as to their form.

The current trend is to keep email communication as informal as possible. The semi-formal style is easier and faster in business communication, and it helps those using it focus more on the content than on the form of the message.

The key to choosing salutations and closings form a specific category is to know exactly who you are addressing, what you relationship you have with those persons and how they will interpret the tone you set.

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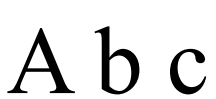
2.4 Font

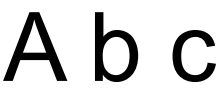
The font is the typeface of a text. Most software applications let you use tens or hundreds of fonts and you even have the possibility to add new ones. Email is not an exception, as you can use a virtually unlimited array of fonts in the body of your message. However, a series of problems can arise from this. Many users give in to the temptation of using eye-catching, sophisticated fonts as a way to express their feelings or their personality.

Business email etiquette advocates the use of a simple, sans serif font. The serif is a small line attached to the end of a stroke in a letter.

Example of a serif font: Times New Roman



Example of a sans serif font: Arial



Serif fonts are traditionally used for facilitating the reading of great bodies of printed text. On computer screens, the small lines might make the letters unclear.

Most organizations limit their employees' creativity as far as the used font is concerned, encouraging people to use a standard font that is a part of the overall image of the brand. In this case, the employees' options are reduced to choosing the size, color and highlighting options.

The color code for emails is quite strict. Black is the generally accepted color for the text in the body of an email. Dark blue is also accepted, but it's not used as often. Any other colors should be chosen very carefully or, better yet, completely avoided. Red might be interpreted as highlighting a negative fact, and green highlighting something positive. However, not all email users can actually see the colors. If they have their email set to plain text, the color will not display. Other colors, such as light blue, yellow or orange will be very hard to read on a white background (used by most email client applications).

However you choose to use color, you should be consistent from the beginning to the end of the message. It's not recommended to begin with one color and continue with another.

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As far as size is concerned, 10 to 12 point font is preferred. A larger font might appear aggressive and a smaller one would be difficult to read. The consistency rule also applies to font size: you should keep the same size throughout the message.

Highlighting text can be done with bold, italic or underlined characters.

Bold characters are used to point out key words or concepts. However, they shouldn't be used to highlight entire paragraphs, as that would become tiring for the eyes.

The meeting has moved to ***Monday, 12.04, at 7 p.m.***

Please note that that the telephone number for the accounting department has changed since 01.04. The new number is ***012345.***

Underlining has lately become associated with dynamic links to web addresses or email addresses that can be accessed by a click. This has reduced the use of underlining as a highlighting feature, so as to avoid confusion.

You can contact us at www.website.ro/contact

Italic text is used to highlight words from other languages, jargon or for citing text, leaving out the quotation marks. Its perceived visual effect is not as powerful as that of bolded characters, so it might not be the best choice to highlight important words.

One last aspect worth mentioning as far as the font is concerned is correct use of capital letters. You can use capitals:

- at the beginning of the first word in a sentence;
- at the beginning of a name;
- at the beginning of principal words in a title;
- at the beginning of proper nouns and most adjectives formed from proper nouns;
- for various acronyms.

Some people choose to capitalize all the letters of words, in order to highlight important words or phrases inside a message. However, this is usually a very bad idea, as those reading the message will interpret it as shouting.

WHERE DID YOU GO YESTERDAY?

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2.5 Paragraph Spacing

People don't really read emails carefully; most of the times, they only skim-read them. This is mainly because they are flooded with information every day and they need to sort what's important to them from what's not. There's also a second reason: it gets quite difficult to closely read a large amount of text in an email because of the backlight of computer screens, a great cause of eye strain.

For these two reasons, putting your message in one big block of text and sticking to the paragraph spacing rules of printed text might make your recipients miss parts of it.

Paragraph spacing gives readers an overview of the main ideas in the text without them having to read all of it. One line of space between the main ideas in the text should be enough to help them with this. It's also recommended to keep the text short enough so recipients can see all of it without scrolling, otherwise they might miss information you placed at the end of the text.

2.6 Signature

The last subject we're going to address as far as the form of emails is concerned is the signature, which is also called the signature block.

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When email is used to make the first contact between people who have never met face to face, the signature is a substitute for a business card. Its function is to provide useful information about the sender and their position within their company, as well as contact details.

Signatures are usually six lines long and contain the following information:

- first and last name;
- function or position within the company;
- phone number;
- email address;
- company address;
- social media links (if they are relevant for your company)

Here's an example of how an email signature could look:

Dragos Iliescu

Trainer

Telephone: 123456789

Email: dragos.iliescu@workemail.com

www.workaddress.com

19 Happiness St., Townsville

It's best to keep the signature as short as possible, so any unnecessary elements such as quotes or pictures should be left out. Furthermore, adding a picture (of the company logo or anything else) in your signature will result in your message being categorized as unsafe by certain spam filters and it might not reach its destination.

Some companies choose a rather aggressive approach to promoting their products or services and include information about these in the signature. The decision to do this should be analyzed by the marketing strategist, and if the long-term effects of this practice are beneficial for the company, then the etiquette guidelines mentioned before can be overridden.

Signatures are most useful when the email exchange is made between two persons who had little or no prior contact; in case the persons already know each other or have already worked together, the signature can be replaced by the first and last name or just by the first name, depending on how formal the relationship with the other person is.

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3 Email Content

3.1 Writing Style

Carefully read the two versions of the message below. Which one do you think is more appropriate for a business email?

a) *I am submitting the attached document with high hope that it complies to all stipulated requirements and that you will grant your approval.*
b) *Please approve this document if it meets all requirements.*

If you chose option "b", you should know that it is indeed the more appropriate one for email communication.

The first option is very formal. It might be appropriate if you are emailing members of institutions that are used to communicating in this manner, but it is an exception as far as emails are concerned. A message this formal would most likely have to be sent by letter or other means of written communication, not email.

The second option is better suited to email communication as far as writing style is concerned. It illustrates the before mentioned principle of email communication: *write as you speak.*

Business email communication is usually on the border between the formal and informal writing styles, in what we have called the semi-formal style.

The semi-formal style should be as easy as A – B – C: the message has to be *accurate* and provide sufficient details on the information it contains; it also has to be *brief* and to the point, written in short sentences that leave out any useless information and it has to be *clear*. Messages that don't need any additional clarification are the most effective. So, if you have a message that is accurate, brief and clear, you can rest assured that the writing style is appropriate for email communication.

There is a great temptation to use jargon in emails; while your colleagues will understand it, some business partners might not. Jargon is usually accurate, brief, but it's by no means clear for everybody, just for a small group of people. Carefully read the message below. Are there any expressions you don't understand?

We're looking to land and expand with a huge corporation. This means we're going to have to do some heavy lifting, get our ducks in a row and push the envelope before they'll even consider us. Keep me in the loop with what you come up with.

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While aiming to make email faster and easier, sometimes jargon accomplishes the exact opposite: the message doesn't get across as intended and confusions are made. Using simple words that anyone can understand is always a good idea when emailing people outside your organization.

3.2 Tone and Punctuation

In the absence of direct verbal communication, the tone of emails is given by punctuation. If words are what you say, punctuation is how you say it. We've taken down a reminder of the main punctuation marks and their uses in the English language.

Symbol	Name	Use
,	comma	used to indicate a separation of ideas or of elements within the structure of a sentence.
.	period	indicates a full stop, placed at the end of declarative sentences and other statements thought to be complete, and after many abbreviations.
:	colon	used after a word introducing a quotation, an explanation, an example, or a series.
;	semicolon	used to connect independent clauses and indicating a closer relationship between the clauses than a period does.
…	ellipsis	the omission of a word or phrase necessary for a complete syntactical construction but not necessary for understanding.
" "	double quotation marks	used primarily to mark the beginning and end of a passage attributed to another and repeated word for word, but also to indicate meanings or glosses and to indicate the unusual or dubious status of a word.
!	exclamation mark	used after exclamations and vehement commands.
?	question mark	written at the end of a sentence or phrase to indicate a direct question.
( )	brackets	used in matched pairs within text, to set apart or interject other text.

Table 1: Main punctuation marks in English

The use of excessive punctuation is a frequent mistake in business emails. If punctuation is a reflection of the tone of voice, then we can say that excessive question marks denote major irritation, excessive exclamation marks indicate shouting and excessive suspension points, frustration. Each of these non-verbal elements is closely linked to an emotion; they should not appear in business emails, as business communication frowns on excessive displays of emotion.

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3.3 Enumerations

If you need to insert enumerations in your email, you can choose to sort them in one of two ways: numbered or alphabetized if they are in a logical or chronological succession, or bulleted if there is no relation between the listed elements.

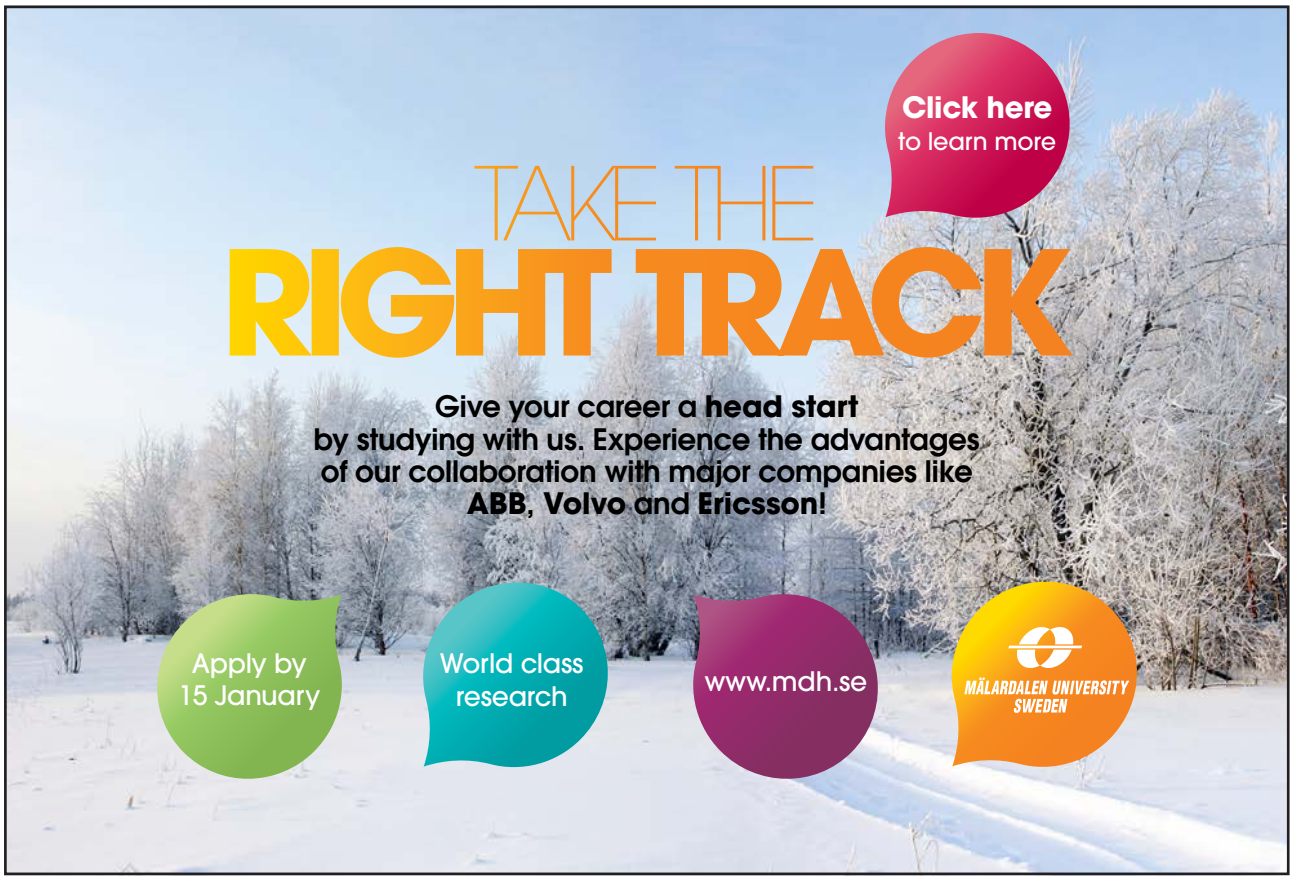
How to record a payment:

1. *access the "payments folder"*
2. *write down the amount*
3. *send the updated document to accounting*

Supplies needed:

- *20 folders*
- *10 pens*
- *15 cardboard boxes*

Using these two rules for enumerations will help recipients understand their purpose and content better.



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3.4 Emoticons

Emoticons, also known as smileys, are pictorial representations of facial expressions that communicate emotions by substituting nonverbal language in written communication. They are more commonly used in instant messaging than in emails.

Emoticons are made by placing ASCII symbols together, so that they look like a certain facial expression. Some email, instant messaging and social media applications also use images to illustrate facial expressions.

Below are a few examples of ASCII emoticons and their meaning:

:-) smile

:-(sadness

:-)) laughter

:-((cry

:D grin, big smile

:-? confusion

The list could easily be extended to over one thousand entries, as their meaning is not universal and most email and instant messaging client applications use their own coding for each representation of facial expressions.

Email isn't the most suitable channel for using of emoticons. You should avoid using them in business emails because:

- you can't know for certain that the other person understands their meaning, or that they perceive them the same way you do.
- it denotes an emotional involvement, which is not appropriate in business email. Business communication frowns on displays of emotion.
- you can't know if the other person considers the use of emoticons offensive; using an emoticon takes the communication to an informal level, which is not always appropriate.

After stating these reasons, we can safely say that using emoticons in business emails is always a bad idea, as they tend to complicate communication rather than simplify it.

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3.5 Attachments

A big advantage email has over other communication channels is the option to attach files. You can send almost any file type by email, but you need to make sure you answer three questions before attaching:

- Is the attachment relevant? An attachment can be sent by itself or as an addition to the message in the body of the email.
- Can the recipient open it? You need to make sure that they have installed the software needed for running or viewing the attachment.
- Finally, keep in mind that most organizations have restrictions regarding the maximum size of attachments. So, the third and last question would be: is the size of the attachment appropriate? It's usually a safe bet to keep your attachment under 10 megabytes, although limitations may vary greatly from one organization to the other.

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4 Replying to Emails

4.1 Reply, Reply All and Forward

Before we start unfolding the guidelines for replying to emails, we must first understand the important difference between the reply, reply all and forward functions.

The *reply* function is used for providing a response to a received message. If you are not the only recipient of the email, you should use the *reply all* function, as other people might also be interested in your response. The most common mistake people make is to use the reply function when they should use reply all. This usually leads to certain information being omitted, which in turn leads to repercussions of varying severity.

Emails are *forwarded* when you need to inform a third party that has for some reason been left out of the initial conversation about what's been discussed.

4.2 Response Time

The response time is a delicate subject for senders. A long response time can be interpreted as lack of interest or even lack of respect.

You should set a response time of two hours for any email you receive. Even if you can't answer the request in this timeframe, you should at least respond by stating the estimated duration for handling the request. If you know beforehand that you won't be able to answer the request in this timeframe, you should use an automatic message, such as an auto-reply, to inform senders that they shouldn't expect a fast answer.

4.3 Auto-Replies

Take a look at the three auto-reply examples below. Which one would you use?

I will be out of office between 15.08 and 23.0.

I am on vacation until the 23rd of august. For urgent matters, please contact my colleague Mary at mary@email.info.

Thank you for your e-mail. I am out of office until 23.08.2014, therefore I am not able to check my email on a regular basis. For urgent matters, please contact my colleague Mary at mary@email.info.

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The last option is the longest, but it is also the most appropriate. There are three elements that you should consider when writing your out of office auto-reply. The first is the interval of absence, with a specified date of return. Secondly, you should specify your availability during the period of absence. You might have limited access to your email or no access at all. If you mention that you have some access, this could lead senders to think that they might get a reply even before your return. In the closing of your out of office auto reply, you should offer different alternatives for contact. This means that you should let someone else in the company in charge of handling emergencies in your absence.

4.4 Sent From Mobile

Recent evolutions in technology have made access to email available to anybody anywhere by mobile. Mobile email user numbers are rising fast, so we feel it's important to mention some rules regarding how you should reply form a mobile device.

Most mobile phones have an auto-correct feature. You'd better make sure it's turned off when sending your message, as it might lead to unfortunate content errors.

You might be tempted to use texting abbreviations in emails, but all the rules regarding the form and content of emails still apply. Using abbreviations might therefore be a bad idea, as it could obscure the meaning of your message.

When replying to emails from you mobile phone might lead to some spelling errors, because it's uncomfortable to write with a mobile keypad or using a touchscreen. Most people understand this, so you can get a free pass if you write at the end of your message "sent from mobile" and the optional "please excuse the brevity".

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5 Specific Situations

The general guidelines of etiquette outlined in the previous chapters should be taken into account whenever you're sending an email. However, there are specific situations when these guidelines should be adapted to the context and to the recipient. For example, you're not going to email a customer as if he were a colleague, nor will your emails to your boss have the same tone as those you send your suppliers. With these distinctions in mind, we will proceed to pointing out a few key elements for the effective adaptation of business email etiquette to specific groups of recipients.

5.1 Emailing Customers

The most important thing you need to know when emailing customers is that you should always let them set the tone of the conversation. This means that, if a customer sets a formal tone, you must write in a formal manner as well and shouldn't try to direct the conversation to a more informal style. On the other hand, if the customer is extremely informal, you should set your writing style to to semi-formal, as an informal style is inappropriate in this context.

Communication with your customer should be clear and completely free of any elements of jargon. Any displays of emotions, whether written or in the form of emoticons, are barriers in the communication process.

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The old adage "the customer is always right" should always be on your mind. Don't rush to contradict them, rather try to make your point in using a neutral, diplomatic approach.

You have to be extra careful regarding the way you write when you're emailing customers. You have to project the image of someone they can trust, so make sure that you email has no spelling or grammar mistakes before hitting send.

5.2 Emailing colleagues

When emailing colleagues, sticking by the rules can backfire. If you have a close relationship with your colleague, sending a formal email might give the impression that you're upset with them and this can cause conflicts.

Another way in which emailing colleagues can go wrong is to send delicate messages to multiple recipients. For example, when reminding someone that they've missed a deadline, you can add that person's manager to the discussion (which will most likely cause some tensions) or just send them a friendly reminder.

Many people wish they had a predefined set of rules that would ensure a successful and efficient communication with their bosses, but the unfortunate truth is that there is no such thing. Some managers and supervisors prefer a formal style and place great emphasis on their social status while others just want the facts without any sugarcoating. The best thing to do in this case is to adapt to what the manager wants and to their specific communication style.

5.3 Emailing suppliers

The most important thing to bear in mind when you email suppliers is that your message needs to be as clear as possible. You want them to provide a product or service that you need, so jargon, emoticons or using a formal style would only get in the way. You also need to be careful not to sound condescending, as that could incite some negative reactions on their part.

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6 Examples of Common Mistakes

Sticking to the guidelines outlined in the previous chapters of this book can bring you multiple benefits: it can help you send a clearer message across to the recipients of your emails, it can project a better image of you and of your company, and it can help you achieve your goals in a faster and better way.

However, it's not very easy to be perfectly aligned to business email etiquette, especially if you already do some things differently or you have your own habits that might be a little off track when compared to these guidelines. Knowing the rules is the first step, but sending effective emails takes some practice.

In this chapter, we will use examples to illustrate frequent mistakes that go against etiquette guidelines and that people often make when writing business emails. If you want to put your newly acquired knowledge about email etiquette to the test, try and figure out for yourself what each set of examples has in common as far as etiquette guidelines are concerned before reading the explanation. Each set of examples is associated to a common mistake people make when sending emails. You might even find that some of the examples outlined here are very similar to what you can find in your inbox on a daily basis.

6.1 Too Personal in Content

Example 1:

Hi,

The password to my Paypal account is m1ccu54. Please login tomorrow and make the payment I asked you to. You should find all the information you need inside the account.

Call me if you run into any trouble.

John

Example 2:

Hello James,

I've made an awful mistake: I've accidentally deleted the entire client list for today's purchases. I tried to recover it but there's no way to get it back. I'm thinking of telling the boss that it was a computer error, maybe he'll let me off the hook. What do you think? Any other ideas about how I can cover up this mess?

Best,

John

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Example 3:

Mary,

Jane just told me she just received another job offer from the competition! She doesn't want anyone else finding out just yet, as it's not a sure thing, but it sounds great! The salary is twice what she's getting here and she'll move on to a higher position. I'm so excited for her!

Joanne

Email is not a secure communication channel; therefore it should never be used to send confidential information. Virtually anyone can have access to information sent via email, so sending passwords, bank account numbers or personal secrets is never a good idea. The consequences for doing that can be very unpleasant. If your financial information falls into the wrong hands, you could lose your money, and if a secret reaches the wrong person, then it's no longer a secret. The most reliable channel for sending such information across is face to face communication, so try to opt for that whenever possible.

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6.2 Too Cordial

Example 1:

Dear Jack,

I have carefully revised the content of the document you have sent yesterday and I would like to inform you that I have identified an error in the fourth paragraph. Please proceed to changing the word "snowing" to "showing", as was originally meant.

The rest of the document meets all of the criteria we have mutually agreed upon and we are available to proceed with signing the contract once you will have sent us the revised edition of the document

Cordially,

John Roberts

Example 2:

Dear Mrs. Smith,

I am submitting the attached document with high hope that it complies to all stipulated requirements and that you will grant your approval to proceed to the next step in our collaboration.

With best regards,

Mark Jones

Example 3:

Mr. White,

I have been researching our choices for mobile data providers over the past week, and I thought it appropriate to provide you with an update of my progress. I am currently pursuing two possible providers, Mobile Data One and Go Mobile. I will go over the pricing of each plan at the meeting on Tuesday. Both of the options I listed are similar in terms of data speed.

I will try to get some further suggestions from our colleagues in the IT department.

Respectfully,

Jane Grayson

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Email has been moving away from formal communication for some time. While there still are some who appreciate a carefully crafted message, which echoes the rules that formally apply to letters, most people in the business environment just want a brief and clear message. They usually lack the time to read complex emails and try to make sense of them, so a short message is usually prefered as it helps them manage their time, which is usually their most precious resource, in a more efficient manner.

Today, formal emails might seem pretentious or downright arrogant. Since building a business relationship relies heavily on mutual trust, these types of emails are an obstacle in doing business the right way, as the person using this type of language might seem suspicious. persons who are to formal in their emails can be viewed either as old-fashioned, arrogant or distant, and none of these are traits people want to find in their business partners.

6.3 Too Emotional

Example 1:

John,

What happened today between you and Mark????? I'm expecting a professional behavior from you both and what you have done does not qualify as that!!!!!!!!!! Please explain!!!!

Regards,

Simon

Example 2:

Hey Mary,

We just won a new client!!!!!!!!!! It's the biggest car manufacturer in our area !!!!!!! Yeeeeeey!!!!!

I can feel those pay-raises coming soon! We deserve this, after all our hard work.

Hooray for us!!!

Example 3:

John,

I've found out some awful news! Our top clients want to leave us for the competition! :((((((

What should we do? I am terrified! Could this mean that we migh lose or jobs? :(((((

Stacy

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There's no place for powerful emotions in business communication. While some displays of mild emotions are acceptable, displaying powerful emotions such as dispair, anger or elation can become a serious obstacle in establishing or maintaining functional business relations between people.

Emotions are usually communicated through body language or the tone of voice, rather than words. In emails, powerful emotions are communicated throught the excessive of some punctuation, such as question marks, exclamation marks, or suspension points, or through the use of certain emoticons.

Emotional emails will probably generate emotional replies, so they should be avoided so as not to give rise to unnecessary conflicts.

6.4 Too Crowded

Example 1:

Dear all, I want to let you know that this month's salaries will be transferred today by 06:00 pm. Let me know if there are any questions. John

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Example 2:

Lilly,

The communication procedure with our client has changed. From now on, please follow these steps: finish the weekly report by Thursday evening; send it to Mary early on Sunday and wait for her approval; finish the daily report by the end of the day, and send them together to Mr. Smith and Mrs. Jones. Please put me in CC so I can be up to date at all times. Let me know if you have questions.

Joe

Example 3:

Dear Frank,

I got your message but have a few questions. Should we implement the changes starting today or tomorrow? Will you be able to give us some guidance before we begin? Who else will be involved in the process? Also, can you tell us if there are any other changes we need to consider in the near future?

Best regards,

Mike

A crowded email might cause the recipient to miss some important points in your message. Readers only skim their messages, they don't always read them carefully, so it's best to make each idea stand out by inserting line spacing after each paragraph and bullets or numbering for enumerations. If you have more than one question you need answered in the message you send, then you should write each question as a separate paragraph. This encourage your recipient to reply by writing the answer right answer your question, which is easier for him and makes it easier for you to read the reply.

6.5 Too Informal

Example 1:

Hey Jim,

Thanks for the documents you've sent yesterday :D We got them this morning. I must admit I was getting quite anxious to receive them :))

Best,

John

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Example 2:

Mark,

How's it hangin'? I'm looking for a quick fix for an issue, I need a guy to take care of some papers for me. Can you help me out with this? You're like the best guy I know who can do this job. Tell me that you can take a few hours to look over this.

Tx!

Example 3:

Hyia Leslie,

Gosh, I am really sorry I didn't answer your call last night. You see, I have this terrible problem with my foot, it just swells up for no reason for time to time and freaks me out every time this happens. I called an ambulance and it got sorted out eventually, but it was too late to call you back. Maybe we can have that chat today.

Thanks!

Mary

While the use of formal language might not be appropriate for business emails, an informal tone and content is not very effective either. It's best to keep your emails somewhere in the middle, in what can be called the semi-formal style.

Emoticons are usually characteristic of informal written communication, so they should be avoided. The same goes for informal words or phrases that are usually spoken between close friends or certain groups.

However, an email can be informal not only because of its tone or words, but also because of its content. It's usually very inappropriate to start discussing intimate or medical issues in business emails.

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6.6 Too Many Mistakes

Example 1:

Dear Sarah,

Id like you to jion us on friday for our monthly staf meeting. Teh meeting will kick off at 9 am and its estimated duration is of 4 hors. Please respond by Thursday .

Best regards,

John

Example 2:

dear Michael,I' ll send you the document you requested , By the end of the day .Please let me know where you want it sent .

Best,

John Roberts

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Example 3:

Dear Mr. Jones,

It our pleasure to be invite you to second edition of Effective Communication Techniques Conference, organized by the National Association of Email Etiquette. The conference is held on the March 3, at the Central Conference Building in Shenzen.

You can enter by stating a unique code issued for you: DEFG34. In order to be confirming you presence, please respond to invitation by February 15.

Thank you!

The ECTC Team

There are three major types of mistakes that typically appear in emails: spelling mistakes, orthographic and language mistakes. Each of the three sends out a different message.

Spelling mistakes should be somewhat of a rarity today, when almost any word processing application and email client application has an auto-correct function. However, emails sent from mobile phones are more prone to this type of mistake than those you send from your computer. When someone has too many spelling mistakes, it usually means they were in a hurry or that they were very careless when sending out the message. Orthographic mistakes might mean the same thing; however, if the same mistake reoccurs, it usually means that the sender isn't familiar with the correct usage.

Lastly, when there are obvious language mistakes, it means that the sender is not a proficient speaker of the language in which the message was sent.

All three types of mistakes have a great impact on the sender's credibility and extra efforts should be made to avoid them.

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7 Final Steps

Before we sign off, we will present a five step process that should help you stick to the rules and guidelines of business email etiquette.

First you need to *prepare* your message. You must make sure you know what you want to say and who you wish to send it to. Then you should proceed to *structuring the message*: what is the main idea, what do you want to start with and how will you order the ideas inside the message? Once you've answered these questions, you should advance to the *editing* stage, where you make sure that the ideas are intelligible and the text is written correctly. If you want your message to accomplish the desired results, you should *optimize* it, cut long sentences short and avoid any possibility of misunderstanding. At the end, you need to *proofread* your text. Always read your email at least once before hitting "send".

Stick by the guidelines and follow these steps before sending each message and most of your emails should turn out great.

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