

Staff Email: effective email at work

Introduction

Do people reply to your emails in the way you expect them to? Do they even reply at all? Do they sometimes miss important information?

We're all busy. Just like you, your recipients receive a lot of email and don't always have time to read long, overly complex and verbose emails. Often they will only read partway through a long email, hitting Reply as soon as they have something to contribute, and reading no further. We're all guilty of this from time to time.

So how can you make sure your emails will be read, will be understood, and that you get the response you need?

Before you start...

Do you need to send an email at all?

Is your message overly long or complicated, or does it require discussion? Is it urgent? It might be better, and quicker, to pick up the phone, have a Microsoft Teams call, or go and speak to the person concerned face to face.

Is your message confidential or does it contain sensitive information? Email is never really private. Your message could be forwarded to others, either deliberately or accidentally.



Remember that email correspondence is subject to Data Protection/Freedom of Information legislation – keep emails professional, courteous and only include relevant information.

What is the purpose of your email?

Stop and think. What is your main message? What do you want the recipient(s) to do after reading your message?

Subject Lines

First impressions count. Just like a newspaper headline, subject lines are what grab the recipient's attention.

- The subject line should tell your recipient what the email is about at a glance and should ideally summarise your message.
- Never leave the subject line blank, even in internal communications. Important emails may be overlooked, considered as spam, or deleted without reading.
- Including 'Urgent' in the subject line should only be used in cases of genuine urgency.
And avoid the use of 'Important'. Contrary to what you'd expect, the more recipients see this, the less likely they are to pay attention to it.
- If your email is one of a regular series, e.g. minutes of meetings, include the date in the subject line, for example: 'Minutes of holiday cover staffing meeting, 03/02/20'.
- If your email needs a response, you might want to include the respond by date in the subject line, for example: 'Review of training documentation – please respond by 11/06/20'.

Message content

- Emails should be clear and concise. If your email is too long, your recipient may not read all, or any, of it – so try to keep the total word count down.
- Get to the point quickly. Put the information recipients **must** have if your communication is to be successful in the opening sentence or paragraph.
- Try to make just one point per email. If communicating with one individual about several different topics, consider writing a separate email for each. Your recipient will be less likely to miss important information and more likely to respond.
- If covering several points on one topic, try presenting each point in a separate paragraph, perhaps bulleted or numbered, to make each point stand out.
- If sending an announcement, be sure to answer who, what, when, where and why if necessary.
- If you don't already use one, consider including an email signature including relevant contact information. Remember, you can have more than one signature, e.g. one for internal email and one for external email. See our separate guide on [creating signatures in Outlook](#).

Writing style

- Use plain English - see www.plainenglish.co.uk/ for guidance.
- Formal or informal? Adopt the right tone. For example: 'Dear Professor Bloggs' or 'Hi Joe'? 'Regards' or 'Best wishes'?
- Remember that your email could be forwarded to others outwith your department or section, so think twice before making it too informal.
- If possible, avoid overly technical or specialist terminology when writing for the wider University community.
- Use the active voice rather than the passive. For example: 'You'll find guidelines on how to use the RIS on the Pure web page' instead of 'Guidelines on how to use the RIS can be found on the Pure web page'.
- Speak directly – take ownership of your content where appropriate. For example: 'We remain committed to the program and the benefits it brings to you' instead of 'The Directorate remains committed to the program and the benefits it brings to its users'.
- Use standard punctuation and grammar, particularly for emails to external recipients. Email is not texting, messaging, blogging, or tweeting.
- Avoid underlining text – recipients may mistake underlined text for hyperlinks.
- Avoid overuse of UPPERCASE – it's harder to read than mixed case writing.

Before you send

- Check you have used the To, Cc, Bcc fields appropriately:
 - **To:** Include those who need to act on the email content
 - **Cc:** Anyone who needs to be kept informed about the matter discussed in the email
 - **Bcc:** It's best to avoid Bcc as far as possible. Why? Other recipients cannot see who you have included in Bcc and if a Bcc'd recipient replies to all, it may reflect badly on you.
- Have you addressed your email to the right person/people? Outlook's auto complete function can make it all too easy to select the wrong recipient.

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- Read through what you've written. Does it make sense?
 - Proofread and run a quick spelling and grammar check, particularly if your email is to go out with your section or to an external recipient.
 - Make sure you make it clear if you need a response or some other action, and give a 'respond by' date and time if required.
 - If you are sending an attachment, make sure you have attached it and that it is the right one.
 - If you are responding to an email, use **Reply** or **Reply All** as appropriate. Don't **Reply All** unless absolutely necessary – not everyone needs to be included in the email loop of clarifications and thanks.

Are you a good respondent?

- Respond to emails from others in the same way you would like them to respond to you.
- Even if you are pressed for time, try to avoid responding with quick, one or two word responses. 'I agree' or 'Do it' may be meaningless to the recipient without context.
- If you don't have time to respond in detail immediately, consider sending a holding reply. Indicate when you hope to respond in more detail – and make sure you do. You may want to flag the email in Outlook so that you don't lose track of it.
- Email is not the best medium for problem/resolution discussions – it's very easy to misinterpret the tone of email correspondence and you may end up generating further confusion or tension. It might be better to speak to the sender by phone, a Microsoft Teams call, or in person in order to clear the air.



Quick summary

1. Make the subject line count – it should summarise your message.
2. Put your main point/s in the first sentence or paragraph.
3. Put key information at the top of the message.
4. Be clear and concise – get straight to the point and avoid preamble.
5. Try to stick to one topic per email.
6. Use plain English and standard punctuation and grammar – particularly if your message is for an external recipient.
7. Adopt the right tone for your recipient.
8. Call to action? If you expect a response, make that clear.
9. Add a signature.
10. Proofread, edit and sanity check before you send! Things to look out for – misspelled words, grammar, punctuation, recipient address, attachments, web addresses.