

Email Etiquette

Why do you need email etiquette?

- Professionalism: by using proper email language you will convey a professional image.
- Efficiency: emails that get to the point are much more effective than poorly worded emails.
- Protection from liability: awareness of email risks will protect the potential from costly liability.

What are the email etiquette rules?

There are many etiquette guides and many different etiquette rules. Some rules will differ according to the nature of your business and the corporate culture. Below we list what we consider as the 31 most important email etiquette rules that apply to nearly all companies.

31 Most important email etiquette tips:

1. Be concise and to the point
2. Answer all questions, and pre-empt further questions
3. Use proper spelling, grammar & punctuation.
4. Make it personal
5. Use templates for frequently used responses
6. Answer swiftly
7. Do not attach unnecessary files
8. Use proper structure & layout
9. Do not overuse the high priority option
10. Do not write in CAPITALS
11. Don't leave out the message thread
12. Read the email before you send it
13. Do not overuse Reply to All
14. Mailings > use the bcc: field or do a mail merge
15. Limit abbreviations and emoticons
16. Be careful with formatting
17. Limit rich text and HTML messages
18. Do not forward chain letters
19. Do not request delivery and read receipts
20. Do not ask to recall a message.
21. Do not copy a message or attachment without permission
22. Do not use email to discuss confidential information
23. Use a meaningful subject
24. Use active instead of passive
25. Avoid using URGENT and IMPORTANT
26. Avoid long sentences
27. Don't forward virus hoaxes and chain letters
28. Keep your language gender neutral
29. Don't reply to spam
30. Use cc: field sparingly
31. Remember that your tone can't be heard in an email

1. Be concise and to the point.

Do not make an e-mail longer than it needs to be. Remember that reading an e-mail is harder than reading printed communications and a long e-mail can be very discouraging to read.

2. Answer all questions, and pre-empt further questions.

An email reply must answer all questions, and pre-empt further questions – If you do not answer all the questions in the original email, you may receive further e-mails regarding the unanswered questions, which will not only waste your time and your customer's time but also cause considerable frustration. Moreover, if you are able to pre-empt relevant questions, your customer will be grateful and impressed with your efficient and thoughtful customer service.

3. Use proper spelling, grammar & punctuation.

This is not only important because improper spelling, grammar and punctuation give a bad impression of you and the company; it is also important for conveying the message properly. Emails with no full stops or commas are difficult to read and can sometimes even change the meaning of the text. If your word processing program has a spell checking option, why not use it?

4. Make it personal.

Not only should the e-mail be personally addressed, it should also include personal i.e. customized content. For this reason auto replies are usually not very effective. However, templates can be used effectively in this way, see next tip.

5. Use templates for frequently used responses.

Some questions you get over and over again, such as directions to your office or how to subscribe to your newsletter. Save these texts as response templates and paste these into your message when you need them. You can save your templates in a Word document, or use pre-formatted emails. Even better is a tool such as [ReplyMate for Outlook](#) (allows you to use 10 templates for free).

6. Answer swiftly.

Customers send an e-mail because they wish to receive a quick response. If they did not want a quick response they would send a letter or a fax. Therefore, each e-mail should be replied to within at least 24 hours, and preferably within the same working day. If the email is complicated, just send an email back saying that you have received it and that you will get back to them. This will put the customer's mind at rest and usually customers will then be patient!

7. Do not attach unnecessary files.

By sending large attachments you can annoy customers and even bring down their e-mail system. Wherever possible try to compress attachments and only send attachments when they are productive. Moreover, you need to have a good virus scanner in place since your customers will not be very happy if you send them documents full of viruses!

8. Use proper structure & layout.

Since reading from a screen is more difficult than reading from paper, the structure and layout is very important for e-mail messages. Use short paragraphs and blank lines between each paragraph. When making points, number them or mark each point as separate to keep the overview.

9. Do not overuse the high priority option.

We all know the story of the boy who cried wolf. If you overuse the high priority option, it will lose its function when you really need it. Moreover, even if a mail has high priority, your message will come across as slightly aggressive if you flag it as 'high priority'.

10. Do not write in CAPITALS.

IF YOU WRITE IN CAPITALS IT SEEMS AS IF YOU ARE SHOUTING. This can be highly annoying and might trigger an unwanted response in the form of a flame mail. Therefore, try not to send any email text in capitals.

11. Don't leave out the message thread.

When you reply to an email, you must include the original mail in your reply, in other words click 'Reply', instead of 'New Mail'. Some people say that you must remove the previous message since this has already been sent and is therefore unnecessary. However, I could not agree less. If you receive many emails you obviously cannot remember each individual email. This means that a 'threadless email' will not provide enough information and you will have to spend a frustratingly long time to find out the context of the email in order to deal with it. Leaving the thread might take a fraction longer in download time, but it will save the recipient much more time and frustration in looking for the related emails in their inbox!

12. Read the email before you send it.

A lot of people don't bother to read an email before they send it out, as can be seen from the many spelling and grammar mistakes contained in emails. Apart from this, reading your email through the eyes of the recipient will help you send a more effective message and avoid misunderstandings and inappropriate comments.

13. Do not overuse "Reply to All".

Only use "Reply to All" if you really need your message to be seen by each person who received the original message.

14. Mailings > use the Bcc: field or do a mail merge.

When sending an email mailing, some people place all the email addresses in the To: field. There are two drawbacks to this practice: (1) the recipient knows that you have sent the same message to a large number of recipients, and (2) you are publicizing someone else's email address without their permission. One way to get round this is to place all addresses in the Bcc: field. However, the recipient will only see the address from the To: field in their email, so if this was empty, the To: field will be blank and this might look like spamming. You could include the mailing list email address in the To: field, or even better, if you have Microsoft Outlook and Word you can do a mail merge and create one message for each recipient. A mail merge also allows you to use fields in the message so that you can for instance address each recipient personally. For more information on how to do a Word mail merge, consult the Help in Word.

15. Limit abbreviations and emoticons.

In business emails, try not to use abbreviations such as BTW (by the way) and LOL (laugh out loud). The recipient might not be aware of the meanings of the abbreviations and in business emails these are generally not appropriate. The same goes for emoticons, such as the smiley :-).

16. Be careful with formatting.

Remember that when you use formatting in your emails, the sender might not be able to view formatting, or might see different fonts than you had intended. When using colors, use a color that is easy to read on the background.

17. Limit rich text and HTML messages.

Be aware that when you send an email in rich text or HTML format, the sender might only be able to receive plain text emails. If this is the case, the recipient will receive your message as a .txt attachment. Most email clients however, including Microsoft Outlook, are able to receive HTML and rich text messages.

18. Do not forward chain letters.

Do not forward chain letters. We can safely say that all of them are hoaxes. Just delete the letters as soon as you receive them.

19. Do not request delivery and read receipts.

This will almost always annoy your recipient before he or she has even read your message. Besides, it usually does not work anyway since the recipient could have blocked that function, or his/her software might not support it, so what is the use of using it? If you want to know whether an email was received it is better to ask the recipient to let you know if it was received.

20. Do not ask to recall a message.

Biggest chances are that your message has already been delivered and read. A recall request would look very silly in that case wouldn't it? It is better just to send an email to say that you have made a mistake. This will look much more honest than trying to recall a message.

21. Do not copy a message or attachment without permission.

Do not copy a message or attachment belonging to another user without permission of the originator. If you do not ask permission first, you might be infringing on copyright laws.

22. Do not use email to discuss confidential information.

Sending an email is like sending a postcard. If you don't want your email to be displayed on a bulletin board, don't send it. Moreover, never make any libelous, sexist or racially discriminating comments in emails, even if they are meant to be a joke.

23. Use a meaningful subject.

Try to use a subject that is meaningful to the recipient as well as yourself. For instance, when you send an email to a company requesting information about a product, it is better to mention the actual name of the product, e.g. 'Product A information' than to just say 'product information' or the company's name in the subject.

24. Use active instead of passive.

Try to use the active voice of a verb wherever possible. For instance, 'We will process your order today', sounds better than 'Your order will be processed today'. The first sounds more personal, whereas the latter, especially when used frequently, sounds unnecessarily formal.

25. Avoid using URGENT and IMPORTANT.

Even more so than the high-priority option, you must at all times try to avoid these types of words in an email or subject line. Only use this if it is a really, really urgent or important message.

26. Avoid long sentences.

Try to keep your sentences to a maximum of 15-20 words. Email is meant to be a quick medium and requires a different kind of writing than letters. Also take care not to send emails that are too long. If a person receives an email that looks like a dissertation, chances are that they will not even attempt to read it!

27. Don't forward virus hoaxes and chain letters.

If you receive an email message warning you of a new unstoppable virus that will immediately delete everything from your computer, this is most probably a hoax. By forwarding hoaxes you use valuable bandwidth and sometimes virus hoaxes contain viruses themselves, by attaching a so-called file that will stop the dangerous virus. The same goes for chain letters that promise incredible riches or ask your help for a charitable cause. Even if the content seems to be bona fide, the senders are usually not. Since it is impossible to find out whether a chain letter is real or not, the best place for it is the recycle bin.

28. Keep your language gender neutral.

In this day and age, avoid using sexist language such as: 'The user should add a signature by configuring his email program'. Apart from using he/she, you can also use the neutral gender: "The user should add a signature by configuring the email program'.

29. Don't reply to spam.

By replying to spam or by unsubscribing, you are confirming that your email address is 'live'. Confirming this will only generate even more spam. Therefore, just hit the delete button or use email software to remove spam automatically.

30. Use cc: field sparingly.

Try not to use the cc: field unless the recipient in the cc: field knows why they are receiving a copy of the message. Using the cc: field can be confusing since the recipients might not know who is supposed to act on the message. Also, when responding to a cc: message, should you include the other recipient in the cc: field as well? This will depend on the situation. In general, do not include the person in the cc: field unless you have a particular reason for wanting this person to see your response. Again, make sure that this person will know why they are receiving a copy.

31. Remember that your tone can't be heard in e-mail.

Have you ever attempted sarcasm in an e-mail, and the recipient took it the wrong way? E-mail communication can't convey the nuances of verbal communication. In an attempt to infer tone of voice, some people use emoticons, but use them sparingly so that you don't appear unprofessional. Also, don't assume that using a smiley will diffuse a difficult message.

Reference:

<http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/workessentials/HA012054101033.aspx>

<http://www.emailreplies.com/Index.html>