



Writing Effective E-mails

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Discuss how to write effective emails.

Writing Effective E-mails

E-mail Basics

Virtually everyone today uses e-mail to communicate at work and at home. It's fast, easy, and convenient, especially when you can access it from your computer at work and home, and handheld devices. Since we are using e-mail so frequently, and because we often read it off of very small screens, even the way we write e-mails is changing.

The Subject Line

If you are replying to an e-mail and the topic changes, make sure that you update the subject line. If you don't, and someone has lost interest about the initial topic or thinks the replies no longer apply to them and they stop reading a particular thread, they may miss important information.

Keep your subject line concise and descriptive. Remember that some screens are only about 1 ½ inches square. You want your subject line to be easily read so that someone also reads your message. Five to eight words are all that will fit on a small screen.

Formatting

You'll notice that various e-mail readers format messages differently. While you may be sending your e-mails using HTML and formatting them sensibly, they can be received as plain text and reformatted. In order for your message to remain clear to a reader, think about how they may be seeing it.

Attachments

Many handheld e-mail readers have restrictions about attachments. If you are sending attachments and expect a reply, you may have to set yourself a reminder to prod the reader to reply to you just in case they forget to check the attachments once they are back at their computer.

Use Spell Check!

Most e-mail programs have sophisticated spell check, so it is alarming to note the number of e-mails we receive with errors. Make sure you set up your e-mail to spell check before you send every e-mail. (You can usually find this in the program's options section.) While spell check doesn't catch every error, it can help you reduce the number of mistakes in your messages.

Covering Your Bases?

Some of us tend to send e-mails to a whole bunch of people to cover our bases, thinking that the more people who receive a message, the better it will be. However, we are inundated with e-mail and don't want to be bogged down. Rather than copying people, archive the message properly so that you can re-send it if others need it.

Reply All

This is a mild irritation to some and an extreme annoyance to others. If you receive an e-mail as a part of a group, do not reply to all unless you need to. Often people are included in a group e-mail just so that they receive the information. They do not need to be interrupted with a string of replies that do not apply to them personally.

Concise

Just like all business writing, make sure your messages are short. You need to convey meaning, naturally, but you do not want people scrolling through something that is actually better delivered in a memo or report. Keep your e-mails to one topic each.

Privacy

Remember that e-mail is not private and your message could be forwarded. If you are concerned about confidentiality or who might read your message, you may want to consider a different medium. Sometimes we can communicate much more information in a better way by making a phone call rather than sending an e-mail.

Shorthand

There is a whole language developing for e-mail and texting shorthand. While acronyms are common in business and pleasure usage, be cautious about work messages where you use shorthand or icons, and avoid them as much as possible.

Sending customers or your boss a message that says, “WFHABAUM; BTW I was ROTFL at your msg!” may not mean much to anyone but your closest friends. (Translation: Working from home; available by all usual methods. By the way, I was rolling on the floor laughing at your message!)

Test Your Knowledge

Managing E-Mail

Although e-mail can be great, it can also be a huge time consumer, especially if you are someone who interrupts your own flow of work to check your e-mail.

How do you manage your e-mail?

Here are some of our favorite tips for tackling the e-mail monster.

Check your email twice a day.

Try first thing in the morning and again after lunch, or find two periods that work for you. This will stop your e-mail from interrupting you over and over again, and allow you to get more done. You can set most e-mail programs up to check for new messages on your schedule and turn the notifications off altogether so that you get to your mail when it makes sense for you to do so.

For those of you who are addicted to your e-mail, this can be a hard switch to make. If you have trained people so that they know you answer e-mails 24/7, and always right away, you will have to adjust their expectations so that they know your new schedule. Try it for a week and then see just how much more relaxed your work pace becomes, and how much more you can accomplish.

Deal with each message right away.

Try to read an e-mail only one time, and decide what you want to do with it as you read it. Our rule of thumb is that if it takes three minutes or less, reply immediately. Any longer than that means that you need to set it up as a task or in your calendar or delegate it to someone else. Do not leave e-mails open to answer when you get a chance. When we do this, we tend to have multiple messages open, and then we have to re-read all those open e-mails to decide what to do with them.

Deal with it the right way.

Consider whether e-mail is the best way to deal with something, or whether another method is more efficient. E-mails that go to large groups of people, have multiple strings of replies, or include a lot of information are often best dealt with in a meeting or a conference call.

Spelling and Proofreading

Spelling Tips

People classify themselves as being good spellers or poor spellers. Good spellers probably didn't get that way without some work and attention, and poor spellers can learn techniques to help make them better spellers. Most of us have a few words that we regularly forget how to spell. However, that doesn't mean we can't produce letters, memos and reports that are word perfect.

Here are some tips for making your documents the best that they can be:

- Use a dictionary. It doesn't matter which form you use, but it is important that you be consistent.
- Use spell check on your computer, but don't rely on it totally since they often miss homonyms.
- Use the Internet or a telephone book to check spelling of names and addresses. However, there are sometimes errors in these sources, too. If you are not sure, simply call the office of the person you are contacting and ask.
- Proofread your work, and when possible have someone else proofread your work.
- Learn some little tricks to help you remember words that you use frequently but still spell incorrectly, like "i before e, except after c."
- Make a list of your most common spelling errors and learn how to spell those words correctly. Keep that list posted so you can refer to it when you need to.

Proofreading Tips

Proofreading carelessly can spoil a writer's best efforts. Proofreading is classic evidence that writing looks different to the writer and to the reader. Our brains really think that everything we do is correct, so we have a hard time recognizing our own errors.

To the writer, typographical or spelling errors may not mean all that much. So your finger slipped, or you always put two t's in "commitment." For the reader, an unfixed typo can transform the writer from a smart person into a careless writer in the twinkling of an eye.

It is impossible to read about "fist class work" or "shot meetings" without interrupting the flow of what you are reading. It may be unfair that proofreading matters so much, but it does.

If you can put yourself in the reader's position, you'll proofread obsessively, gripped by the fear that a mistake will turn you into a laughingstock! Learning some specific techniques, however, will help alleviate that problem as you become better at proofreading and create better documents.

Proofreading errors are different from punctuation or spelling or usage problems, and you fix them differently. Punctuation, spelling, and usage are knowledge problems, and you fix them by learning. Proofreading problems are usually a matter of seeing, and you fix them by learning to look.

The better you read, the worse you'll proofread, unless you are consciously aware of what you are doing. Good readers and fast readers guess what the words are as they read the text, and they just check in now and again to see if they are right. The more they can guess, the less they have to look and the faster and more efficiently they read.

To be a good proofreader, you have to go back to being a child again, or pretend that you are just learning to read in English. Look at every word as it comes along. Here are some principles to guide you.

- Read through once and ignore content. As soon as you start paying attention to what the text is saying, you'll start assuming what the words are, and stop looking for errors.
- Assume there's at least one error, so that you have something to find.

- Forget what you meant to say. Read the memo/letter as though you have never seen it before.
- Read backwards. This destroys comprehension, and your eyes can't trick you as easily.
- Don't try to do something else when you proofread. Stop tinkering with it and rewriting sentences; look for errors.
- Take your time. When you hurry, you guess and skim, and that usually doesn't work.
- Proofread a second time, paying attention to content. This is where you find those things spell check and reading backwards did not catch, such as, "The little cap pulls off it you put enough effort into it."
- Leave it alone overnight, so that you come to it again having fresh eyes to look at it.
- Read it aloud. It is more difficult for your eyes to skip over errors when you read aloud, because you will hear something out of whack.
- Try to have someone else proofread your work, particularly if the document is important or going to be released for the public.
- Make proofreading a game. Score points for yourself when you find an error!

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Writing Effective E-mail: Improving Your Electronic Communication, 1998, Book by Nancy Flynn and Tom Flynn*