

# E-Mail Manners

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Follow a few simple rules to civility. According to a recent survey, the average executive spends one hour and 48 minutes each day reading and sending e-mail messages. That is plenty of time to act ill-mannered, whether you mean it or not. If you have got mail or you are sending it, a few considerate reminders are in order.

## State Your Topic

Always fill in the subject line. Flag your message with a succinct, informative header: "Boss's vacation schedule, summer 2001." If your problem is urgent, write "SOS." If it is a quick question, say so.

## Be Brief

Lengthy e-mails – more than a screen long – are daunting and annoying. If you want a quick reply, be concise. Break long thoughts into separate paragraphs or a numbered list. With friends you can be chattier. But consider that most readers are overwhelmed by a screen filled with solid type – no matter how juicy the news is.

It is okay to send a short note in answer to a long e-mail, as long as you acknowledge the information you received: "Thanks for that comprehensive update. I will do X, Y, or Z."

## Style Counts

E-mail has an easy, off-the-cuff quality. But style still matters. Spell-check notes before you hit "send." DO NOT WRITE IN ALL CAPS; it signifies shouting. Instead, use \*asterisks\* for emphasis. Likewise, avoid writing in all lowercase – it is hard to read.

## Include, Do Not Attach

Attachments are tricky. When possible, include information in the body of an e-mail rather than sending an attached document (unless you are using your company's e-mail network or sending a bulky file). Attachments can spread computer viruses and become corrupted in transit, making them impossible to read.

## Identify Yourself

Create a standard sign-off that is automatically attached to your business e-mails. Include your full name, title, phone number, address, and any pertinent information about your company. This will be helpful for people who may forget exactly who you are or what your company does.

## Answer Promptly

When a business e-mail begs a reply (to a question or a newsy update), do so within a few hours, definitely within the day. Answer personal e-mails within a few days or a week. Be consistent with your response time, so friends and colleagues will know what to expect. When you go out of town, program an "I am away" reply into your e-mail system.

## Keep Separate Accounts

Business e-mails are not private. According to a survey by the American Management Association, 38% of employers monitor and review employees' e-mail messages. Send anything that might be embarrassing from your personal account. If you do not have one, open a free account at Yahoo! or Hotmail. Create a separate account (or at least use a different screen name) if you are answering personal ads, visiting chat rooms, or ordering on-line. That way, junk e-mail will not clutter up your primary account.

### Be Very Careful What Your Say

E-mails seem fleeting – press a button and your message is off into the cyber-ether – but what you write is permanent. It can be printed, forwarded, and filed by your correspondent. It can be read aloud over the phone to friends and colleagues. Even worse, deleted business e-mails can be resurrected from your hard drive and used as evidence in a court of law. Never write anything in an e-mail that you would not want plastered on the front page of *USA Today*.

### Ignore Chain-Mail, Jokes, And Petitions

Almost no one likes them. Resist forwarding these unless they seem highly relevant.

### BTW, Avoid Abbrev. At Work

Last year Yahoo! posted a “netiquette” quiz on its site and found that only half the respondents knew that F2F meant “face to face” or that BCNU stands for “be seeing you.” Do not use shorthand, like LOL (“laughing out loud”) or ISO (“in search of”), or “emoticons” (those irritating little symbols made from punctuation keys) at work. It is unprofessional, and people may have no idea what you are saying.

### Do Use E-Mail . . .

- For quick questions
- For simple work issues
- For scheduling meetings and events
- For sending newsy updates to friends
- For R.S.V.P.ing
- To praise a group (especially when you want to cc others). But do not go overboard. Not all messages should be electronic.

### Do Not Use E-Mail . . .

- In lieu of thank-you notes or important invitations
- For controversial information
- For bad news or in place of a condolence note
- To convey anything that if forwarded or overheard could be harmful or embarrassing
- To call in sick or break a date
- To fire someone
- To offer a raise or promotion
- To persuade someone to help you

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