



Email Communication

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How many emails do you send and receive each day? Too many to count? Maybe 10, 15, or 20? Some people log nearly 100 emails passing through their mailbox each day! With that much electronic communication coming and going, it's important to make sure we communicate clearly what we have to say.

Since email relies on the written word alone, with no body language or voice tone to modify the message, our communication needs **clarity**, **brevity**, and **sensitivity**. Let's look at each of these in turn.

Clarity – Above all we must say what we mean and mean what we say. Choose your words carefully, and organize your thoughts before you begin. Give your email a quick proofread before you hit “send” just to make sure you've not repeated yourself or left anything out.

Brevity – Consider how much information is necessary to convey your message. Do you really need to tell the whole history behind your message, or will a summary be just as good? The amount of explaining you need to do depends on how familiar the recipient is with your message. Brevity is the handmaiden of clarity in that focused communication is clear communication. Stick to the point, and when you're finished, just stop.

Sensitivity – The level of formality in your email depends on how well you know the recipient. A formal business style should be used for people you've never met, but the communication should still be natural in tone. If you're communicating with a co-worker or colleague, the tone should certainly be less formal and more friendly, even jocular.

Here are some guidelines for **formal** business emails (to people you don't know):

1. Write in a natural style. Do not use an old-fashioned, ceremonious style.
Say Thank you for your letter, dated 14 June, not We have received your letter of the 14th of this month.



2. Do not use very informal language. Do not write *Hi!* or *Hello!* or *Ciao, John!* Write *Dear John* or *Dear Mr. Smith*.
3. Do not use text-message abbreviations such as *I hope I can c u soon* or *Yr order is waiting 4 u*.
4. Do not use slang. Write *Someone in the office can help*, not *A guy here can help*.
5. Do not use “emoticons.” Emoticons are symbols which people often use in Internet chat, such as :-) (happy), :-((sad).

Here are some guidelines for **informal** business emails (to people you know well):

1. Feel free to write as if you were speaking to the person. Say *I was wondering if you could give me a hand*, not *I would like to request your assistance*.
2. Do not use text-message abbreviations. In nearly every case, abbreviations are more difficult to read than full words and sentences. You don't want your recipient to have to decode your message in order to understand it.
3. Use slang. Feel free to use common business slang such as *touch base*, *keep me in the loop*, and *shoot me an email*. As long as the slang is common in your office, it will be easily and accurately understood.
4. Use “emoticons,” but sparingly. Emoticons are great for clarifying your feelings, but can easily be overdone. Use them, but not too much. Got it? ;-)

It takes awareness and practice to write with clarity, brevity, and sensitivity. Following the above guidelines will help your email communicate accurately and effectively what you have to say.

Further reading

Emmerson, Paul, (2004), *Email English*. Oxford: Macmillan

Littlejohn, Andrew, (2005), *Company to Company*. 4th Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge UP