

6 Email Mistakes You Should Never Make

By Josh Gordesky

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We all could use a friend to show us how we can improve our business writing skills. You've probably sent thousands of emails without anyone saying anything about your writing style, but that silence doesn't mean you write perfect emails. In fact, you could be making mistakes that diminish your credibility and waste your time.

For instance, think of the number of conference calls you've led, even though you could send the same information in an email. How many meetings have swallowed hours of time rehashing topics someone already summarized in an email?

Keep this list of email mistakes near your computer and refer to it before you hit send:

Mistake 1: Your email is too long

If the reader has to keep scrolling to view unstructured thoughts, the email can come across as unimportant, patronizing or careless.

Solution: Set a 300-word limit and stick to it. A 300-word limit forces you to clearly state your purpose and eliminate needless words. Provide your readers with a reasonable amount of information.

Mistake 2: Your email is too vague

People decide which emails to read, file or delete at iPod speed. iPod speed is the time it takes to look or listen to the first few seconds of a song, presentation or email and choose to keep it or move to the next one.

Solution: Write emails that fit in the preview pane and have a meaningful subject line and first sentence. Assume your reader will view your email on a phone or in a preview pane. The subject line must be short and appealing. As the topic changes, edit the subject line and first sentence to keep them current and help them stand out in a crowded inbox.

Mistake 3: Your email is too self-centered

Readers want to see ideas and solutions that relate to them, not musings from the writer. When an email contains a lot of "I did this" or "I think that," the reader will get bored and move on to something else.

Solution: Count the number of times you write I and you in an email. If you have more I sentences than you sentences, change them to you sentences.

For instance, the following sentence is writer focused: "I will send you the report tomorrow." This sentence is reader-focused: "You will receive the report tomorrow."

Mistake 4: Your email is too boring

A huge block of text in an email gives most readers the same painfully bored feeling that Ben Stein gave students in "Ferris Bueller's Day Off."

Solution: Write short paragraphs (two to three sentences) along with a few longer ones to give your text a balanced, visually appealing look. In addition, vary your sentence length to break up a potentially Stein-like monotone sound for your thoughts. Finally, list important ideas with bullet points.

Mistake 5: Your email is too passive

Readers regard passive voice with the same disdain as someone who gives a limp-fish handshake.

Solution: Use active voice. In a sentence with passive voice, the subject receives the action of the verb. For instance, in this passive sentence the pizza receives the action: "The pizza was eaten by the man."

The active-voice version of this sentence is: "The man ate the pizza." Notice how active voice communicates the main point more quickly, clearly and succinctly than passive voice.

Mistake 6: Your email is too heavy

Some writers use emails to cover themselves by including every spreadsheet, PowerPoint presentation, Word document or link known to man. All of these attachments can confuse the reader and make him feel like he is buried in data.

Solution: Include only need-to-know information. Whether your reader is sitting at a desk or riding on a train, she only wants to see the need-to-know visuals, not the nice-to-know ones. You don't meet the needs of the reader when you send the Library of Congress in attachments and links.

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