9 ways your emails might be disrespectful — and how to fix them

Tags: Articles, Communication, Email

For better or worse, email is still one of the primary ways people communicate at work. It can be efficient, but it's also impersonal; readers can't see your face, hear your voice, or respond in real-time. Here are nine common email habits that can cause you to come across — unintentionally — as dismissive, impolite, or pushy, plus tactics to try instead.

"Listen, as your life coach, I have to tell you - you come off a bit yappy."

1. Cutting out the "niceties"

You may think it's more efficient or authoritative to skip the "fluff" and get down to business. Or, you may be tempted to treat an email like you would a text or chat — especially if the recipient is someone you know well or message often, like a direct report. But a minimalist message can easily come across as blunt or condescending, like a command barked from above. (And here's a news flash for those who try to warm it up by signing off with their first initial: It doesn't work.)

It won't take you any more time to use the person's name, but it will get their attention and make them feel more respected. Likewise, saying "please" and "thank you" when making requests shows your appreciation, and may even raise your chances of getting a prompt response.

Poor:

"Send me the file you mentioned in our 1-on-1, so I can pass it to the finance team.

—G"

Better:

"Hi Lucy,

Please send me the file you mentioned in our 1-on-1, so I can pass it to the finance team.

Thank you,
Gameli"

2. Writing uninformative subject lines, or none at all

A complete (yet brief) subject line is the ultimate sign of respect for your recipient's time. It lets them know what you've sent and what they should do by when — all before they've even opened the message. That way, they don't have to sift through their torrent of emails to figure out what's significant and how to reply.

Many people write vague, useless subject lines (e.g., "Doc scanned" or "I thought you'd be interested"), but even seemingly "good" lines often leave out at least some important information.

Poor:

- Could you please approve this slide deck? (*Approve it by when?*)
- Slide deck for Allied Sales Conference (*What do I do with it?*)
- Need this back ASAP (*What is it?*)

Instead, try starting your subject line with an indication of the type of message you're writing:

- Announcement of …
- Request for …
- FYI …
- Please review …
- Urgent …
- Low priority …

Then fill in everything the recipient needs to know in order to take action.

Better:

> Urgent: Please review sales conference slides by Tuesday

3. Sending emails that are too long or require too much back-and forth

You've barely hit "send" on an email to Phyllis before she fires one back with yet another question. And then you see an email from Harpreet — a wall of text. *Sigh.* Now you'll either spend precious time wading through these messages or, if you're in a hurry, put them off.

Don't be like Phyllis or Harpreet.

If your question or issue is so complex that it requires more than a couple of paragraphs or exchanges (e.g. you need to reach an agreement or solve a tough problem), consider whether a phone or in-person conversation might be a faster and better way to address it.

Also remember that you don't need to include everything you know about a subject in your email. If you find yourself writing an essay, ask yourself: What's relevant for my audience? What do they really need to know to take action? Stick only to that information. One way to make your email easier to scan and understand is by organizing your message into a bulleted or numbered list and using bold text for key dates or questions.

For more, see How to write emails that pass the 10-second test.

4. Including too many (or the wrong) people

There's no harm in adding a few more people to your recipients list — transparency, right? Maybe sometimes. But also consider when you might be wasting the additional recipients' time, or even causing harmful misunderstandings.

For example, say you email Misha (an individual contributor who doesn't report to you) to ask for the status of a report you're waiting for. If you include Misha's manager or teammates, it could send the signal that you don't trust Misha to do the work without others holding her accountable.

Before hitting "send," read over your recipients list and ask yourself:

- Are there others who need to see this message?
- Are there people I've included who *don't* need to see this message? If so, what's a better way to convey the information they need (e.g. a phone call, meeting, or separate email)?

5. Routinely sending emails during off-hours

What's the problem with sending a message at 11 p.m.? The person will just read it in the morning.

Not so fast. Many people set their phones to receive alerts when email rolls in. So off-hours work emails may interrupt their personal time and even make them feel obligated to reply — especially if you're in a position of power relative to them. If you make a habit of sending after-hours emails to your direct reports, you could sabotage their work/life balance by implying that they should be "on call."

Sometimes, emergencies happen and you really do need to communicate after hours. The rest of the time, once you leave work, step away from your email! You might consider establishing formal email off-hours for your team (with a different mode of contact for emergencies). If you do, set a good example for your direct reports by sticking to these boundaries. If you have an idea that just can't wait, write it as a draft email and hit "send" the next day.

6. Writing unhelpful out-of-office messages

In those frenzied last few minutes before you go on vacation, you may be tempted to simply flip your status to "away" and list when you'll return. But consider the person who gets your auto-reply: What if they have an urgent ask or need information before you get back? Instead of leaving them in limbo, include whom to contact for different needs in your absence.

Poor: "I will be away from my desk from July 10 to July 22. I will respond to your message when I return."

Better: *"I will be away from my desk from July 10 to July 22. I will respond to your message when I return. In the meantime, if you have a sales question, contact Kristen Chapman at XX. If you need information about the Allied Sales Conference, contact Ari Green at XX."*

Note:It's equally inconsiderate to direct inquiries to a colleague who doesn't know they're coming or how to respond. So, before you add someone's contact information to your out-of-office message, ask them if they can cover certain requests, prep them with what they'll need, and let them know what really can wait until you're back.

7. Circulating gossip

"Did you see how Karl looked yesterday? Do you think he's sick? He was out for three days last month and I heard him say something about 'medication'…"

Stop. Hit "delete." If there is a place for gossip at work, it definitely isn't email, since you can't know your recipient's state of mind when they encounter your message. You could easily come across as inconsiderate of the person's time (if, say, they're working feverishly on an important deadline when your message comes in) or untrustworthy (if they think, *Wow, what's being sent about me?*).

Besides, once an email is out of your hands, it can be forwarded with the press of a button and read by people you didn't intend. And your company ultimately oversees your work email, so don't write anything that would damage your standing if read by IT or HR.

8. Using an unprofessional tone

These days, even in business writing, plenty of people express enthusiasm using exclamation points, emojis, all-caps words, or a "Hey" greeting. In some situations, flourishes and informalities like these are welcome signs of friendliness and familiarity. But in others, recipients may find them irritating and unprofessional.

When writing an email, ask yourself: What's the appropriate tone for this audience? Consider the person's role (e.g., peer, client, executive) and how well you know them as you determine your answer. When in doubt, err on the side of formality.

Also, use humor with caution. Jokes typically need context from facial expressions, voice cues, or body language, which can't be easily conveyed in writing. So, what you might think is a hilarious aside could easily be seen as a slight by your reader. And consider language barriers. While you don't want to dumb-down messages sent to those who may not be perfectly fluent in your language, try to steer clear of slang or idioms (e.g. it's raining cats and dogs), which may confuse or feel exclusionary.

9. Sending emails without proofreading them first

The occasional typo is unavoidable, but "sneding emails that looks like thias" not only makes you seem unprofessional but also shows disrespect for your reader by implying that you dashed off your message without thought or consideration.

If your email program has a spelling and grammar check function, turn it on — but don't let it lull you into a false sense of safety. Checkers won't catch incorrect uses of words (e.g., "you're" instead of "your") or typos that spell real words (e.g,. "thongs" when you mean "things"). And software certainly won't save you from the ultimate email insult: Misspelling someone's name (e.g., Josh instead of Jash or Audrey instead of Audra).

So, take an extra minute to check for mistakes before you click "send." As you're reading through, also take the opportunity to check for unfinished thoughts and proper tone (see No. 8). For more, see After writing an email, read it back as if you're the recipient.