

E-Mail Netiquette Guide

Guidelines for a better E-Mail Communication

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„THE GREATEST STRENGTH A MAN CAN ACHIEVE IS GENTLENESS“

MONTY ROBERTS

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§1 Netiquette

Netiquette describes a respectful and courteous behavior with humans in Email communication. However, not only the right tone is considered by the term Netiquette, but also the structure, form, correct spelling, punctuation and grammar of the text, which recipients were addressed (To/CC/BCC) or how long it took until one replies to an Email.

1.1 What is Email?

Email can be best described as a mixture between written and spoken communication. It is much faster than conventional letters on the postal way, but slower than the spoken word and it also contains no non-verbal cues, like in face to face communication.

So what is actually Email and which rules do apply to its usage? Are the rules different than those of the spoken or handwritten word?

Although there are no distinct rules for Email handling, everyone should be aware that Emails transport more than just the digital characters and words.

It is more formal than SMS or Chat while being more comfortable than conventional letter-mail. It is capable to conclude the next contract of a company and can even communicate the whole company culture outwards. It is nowadays so commonly used, that people use it for their daily business and private communications without any further thinking.

1.2 Email Communication

Emails neither transfer facial expressions, gestures, pitch of the voice, speaking rate nor other non-verbal cues from the sender to the receiver. The inner voice, which the sender often hears clearly and unambiguous is not transferred when hitting the send button and is unheard by the recipient. This makes this medium prone to misunderstandings and misinterpretations, especially when emotions or ambiguity, like irony or sarcasm, are communicated.

Therefore, Email is classified as a rather lean communication medium, compared to face to face communication with other people, because it does not transmit such cues and also does not provide the possibility of an immediate feedback from the communication partners. Thus, an ironic annotation, a sarcastic comment or a hastily written Email can trigger quickly an emotion at the receivers' side, which was not intended by the sender.



Although there are auxiliary means like smileys :-)) or Emoticons ☺ to overcome the limitations of Email to clarify the emotional meaning intended by the sender, but even those might get wrong interpreted or perceived as inappropriate from the receiver.

Communication over Email must therefore be considered carefully with all of its advantages and disadvantages to convey the right message and prevent misunderstandings.

1.3 Why is Netiquette important?

Every human has a need for self-esteem, respect and courtesy. These fundamental needs do not end with electronic communication and should especially be considered in today's omnipresent communication via Email.

Emails withdraw from the senders' control after sending and start their own life. They can be forwarded, stored, cited, printed or processed in numerous other ways on the computer and can sometimes quickly reappear surprisingly, e.g. in case of legal aspects.

Therefore, Emails should always be considered as forever, even if they were deleted from the senders or recipients mailbox long time ago. There is always somewhere a copy of it. Hence, an uncourteous or in anger written Email can have far reaching consequences for the sender and even for the whole organization. Consequences which were not obvious at the time of sending the email. A printed out Email including the official company signature may then quickly appear more formal as intended.

§2 Email Netiquette Guidelines

The following Email Netiquette guidelines and rules and guidelines are a summary taken out from recent literature and more than 20 years of experience in writing Emails of the author. The mentioned rules and guidelines can be adapted by organizations or individuals for their own needs and can as well build the basis of an organizational Email policy.

2.1 Recipient (To:)

The recipient is usually the first field you will fill out when you start composing a new Email and appears typically topmost in most of the common Email programs, like Microsoft Outlook, Mozilla Thunderbird or Apple Mail. You should keep in mind the following aspects:



- ✓ Is the recipient correct?
- ✓ Who is the person behind the Email address?
- ✓ On which device will the recipient read your Email?
- ✓ Is it important for the recipient when you reply?
- ✓ Does the recipient understand your (technical-) terminology?

The auto completion feature comes in most often very handy, but be aware that it *really* completed the right address of the recipient. There might be probably nothing worse than sending an Email, which was intended for you work colleague “Tomson” to your client “Thomson”. Especially if the contents include internals from the company or you wrote a devaluing comment about a customer (or even this customer!). A good approach is to leave this field empty until you finished writing the content part of the Email.

Visualize the person behind the Email address. This helps to find the right tone, the right jargon and a proper formatting of the text. Be aware, that not only the plain text of your Email communicates, but also non-verbal aspects, like the time until you write the response and the lingo you have chosen. Especially the latter one should be selected with care, so that it can be assured that the recipient understands you. Avoid slang or abbreviations you are familiar with, but not necessary the recipient. It is in your responsibility that they understand you, not vice versa.

2.2 Carbon Copy Recipient (CC:)

This functionality of Email is often a trigger for discussions and should be therefore used with care. The carbon copy (CC) field is the pendant to the carbon paper, which was used in the past to create a copy of a hand written or typewritten text. Due to the fact that the sender was only able to create about five readable copies with a carbon paper, he or she considered well who should receive a copy of the message. Nowadays it is possible to send copies to any number of recipients without much effort and loss of quality. Thus, ask yourself the following questions before you send your email and have filled out the CC field:

- ✓ Is the information important for the recipient(s)?



However, not only to send an Email to any number of persons can be achieved with relatively ease, but also to use the “reply to all” functionality. It might quickly generate a huge number of Emails, which can get annoying as well as overcharging for the recipient. Imagine you wrote an Email to 20 persons in CC with the question to write an comment to your composed message. If all 20 persons hit the “reply to all” button for each email they received, a number of 421 Emails would be produced in each inbox and a total of 16,421 Emails were transferred by the Email System¹. Imagine further, that each Email would produce an interrupt of two minutes at the receivers’ side who earns in average \$ 2,000 per month, this Email traffic would then cost about \$ 3,500 for the employing organization². Therefore, you should always respect the time of others and use this functionality only when it really makes sense to do so. Hence, avoid to reply to all with one line messages just to say “Thanks”. Everyone knows that you are courteous and will be probably more grateful if you avoid another Email in their inbox.

2.3 Blind Carbon Copy Recipient (BCC:)

The blind carbon copy field (BCC) functions the same like the CC field. The only difference is that it hides the additional recipients to the main recipient.

Take the same care as with the CC field and use it sparingly, as it appears quickly “political” if it is used. Furthermore it is considered uncourteous to hide recipients of others.

2.4 Subject

Probably everyone knows such subject lines like “Update”, “Meeting”, “Error” or even a complete missing subject. Latest after the third message with such a subject line, nobody knows what was meant, not to speak of the challenge of finding such Emails ever again after a while. Try to always ask yourself the following questions:

- ✓ Does the subject line describe the contents of your Email precise enough?

¹ Example taken from: Shapiro, N. Z., Anderson, R. H., & Rand Corp, S. M. C. A. (1985). *Toward an ethics and etiquette for electronic mail*.

² Despite the fact, that this example might appear unrealistic high, it shows that unmindful Email communication might cause work interruption at the recipients’ side, which on the other hand creates costs for organizations.



Visualize once again the recipient and select a subject line, which makes it easier for him/her to grasp the meaning of your message and of course to find it again when using the search facility of the Email program. After all you want that the recipient read your Email and responds to it in a timely manner. Thus, choose your subject line thoughtful. Nevertheless, avoid unneeded prioritizations, like for example ALL IN CAPS, exclamation mark repetitions (!!!!), red flags, bold or colored formatted subjects. If your message has really such a high urgency, you should probably think about other communication channels instead of writing an Email.

2.5 Email Text

The text is the heart of your Email and needs therefore your special attention. Emails seldom transport just the plain text of a message, but often also the emotions of the sender during composition or the relationship between the sender and receiver. If it is now considered that Emails tend to get evaluated rather negative during reading, it is likely that misunderstandings occur. Consequently, no Email should leave your computer without a respectful greeting and salutation, your correct Email signature and a prior conducted spell, punctuation and grammar check. Likewise the effect of “please” and “thanks” should not be forgotten, especially if the cooperation of the recipient is required – do not presume it as granted.

Never forget that *everything* in your Email communicates. What you consider as unimportant can be seen as essential to the recipient of your Email and could potentially draw the wrong picture of you during the communication. Therefore, please take note of the following points:

- ✓ Is a greeting present?
- ✓ Is a salutation present?
- ✓ Is the correct Email signature attached?
- ✓ Is the core statement in the first sentences visible?
- ✓ Is the spelling, grammar and punctuation correct?
- ✓ Is the text well-structured and the language understandable for the recipient?



- ✓ Is the language unambiguous / without ambivalent statements?
- ✓ Is a “Please” and “Thanks” present?

Now please compare the following Email texts, visualize yourself in the particular situation and evaluate what emotions come up in yourself during reading:

2.5.1 Email without Netiquette

From: Peter
Subject: Project proposal rejected!

Your project proposal has been rejected, because we decided to take another system.

--
Kind Regards
P. Peter (CEO)

2.5.2 Email with Netiquette

From: Peter
Subject: Project Proposal Intranet System

Good day Mr./Mrs. ... ,

Thanks a lot for working out a project proposal for an implementation of a new intranet system and sending it to us. Good Work!

Unfortunately I have to send you a refusal for this project nevertheless, as we decided to use SharePoint as our new intranet solution.

This system makes from an economic point of view at the moment more sense compared to an own implementation.

Thanks again for the good work, which helped us to make this decision.

Best Regards
P. Peter

--
Kind Regards
P. Peter (CEO)



§3 Netiquette Cheat-Sheet

- Reply in a timely manner – answering late or not at all is considered uncourteous and is also recognized like this from the recipient.
- Write your Emails with full attention and not in between a meeting or when you are talking to another person.
- Use the full potential of your writing skills.
- Remember the human behind the Email address.
- Be selective with the copy recipients.
- Use a concise and meaningful subject line, which picks up the contents of your Email and makes the recipient curious to open and read your Email.
- Write natural and friendly, like you would talk to a person who you respect.
- Respect the time of the recipient.
- Begin each message with an adequate greeting, despite how brief your Email may appear to you.
- Consider which level of formality is adequate.
- Do not forget to say “Please” and “Thank You” as we all want to be treated with respect and dignity.
- Send positive Emails – this is even possible with negative messages. It is not the message which appears negative, but the way of how a message is delivered.
- Avoid to use emoticons and smileys in business Emails – the more precise you express yourself, the less you need such auxiliary means.
- Keep professional and avoid abbreviations (FYI, LOL, IMHO, etc.)
- Consider your Emails as forever, even if it was deleted by you or the recipient – there always exists a copy somewhere.
- If a phone call or a personal conversation feels more appropriate, it is likely that it is so.
- Spelling, spelling and again spelling.
- Never write an Email to the wrong Person.
- Format your Email with meaningful paragraphs and insert after about 80 Characters a line break. Hence, your Email keeps even on small screens readable and scrolling from left to right is avoided.
- Write a maximum of 8 sentences per paragraph.



- Do not write novels, keep briefly and succinctly.
- Refer to attachments in the text and be aware of its format and size – not everybody has Microsoft Word installed or has the necessary bandwidth to download a 20 Mega-bytes attachment.
- Use a standard font, which is available on all Computers (e.g. Times New Roman, Arial, Tahoma, Helvetica, Verdana).
- Cite or shorten prior received Emails in a correspondence to increase understanding – no worries, nothing gets lost, because prior recipients have the full texts of the Email communication as well.
- Read out loud your Email prior sending.
- Laugh when you write your Email.
- Emails communicate your reputation, similar to the clothes you wear.
- CAPITAL LETTERS are considered as shouting – avoid it.
- Not all humans are able to see red and green (dyschromatopsia), avoid therefore these colors.
- Avoid character repetitions (!!!).
- Do not ask actively for Email confirmation, this appears supercilious.
- Business related Emails are company documents, thus, property of the company.
- Do not write “Good Morning” or “Good Evening”. You do not know, when the recipient will read your Email.
- Verbalize emotions, e.g. “I am happy” or “This makes me in the moment angry ...”
- Avoid to send jokes via Email, despite how funny you find them.
- Think twice before you hit the send button and listen to your gut feeling.
- Do not write any Email when you feel strong emotions – if in doubt, print it out and read it on the next day one more time.
- Be forgiving with the mistakes of others.
- Emails do not suite well for disputes.
- End each message with a positive sentence.
- Avoid clichés at the end of your Email, e.g. “Let me know if I can help you” or “I hope this answers your questions”.



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