

A Guide to E-Mail Etiquette¹

(from **Electronic Mail** – Office of the Secretary of State, Division of Archives & Records Management)

Know your audience.

Be aware of the culture and conventions of your e-mail recipients. Communication and especially e-mail conventions may vary between groups. Remember that different users have different levels of experience with technology applications like e-mail. Be patient and supportive with new users

Proofread.

Spelling and grammar mistakes can be just as distracting in an e-mail message as they are in written communications. Take the time to proofread your messages, especially messages that are used to communicate or document agency business.

Keep messages brief and to the point. Make your messages “concise” not cryptic. Shorter paragraphs have more impact and are more likely to be read by busy people. Most people can only grasp a limited number of ideas within a single paragraph, especially on a computer screen.

Format messages for easy reading.

White space enhances the look and clarity of an e-mail message, and blank line only adds a byte to the message so do not be stingy. Lengthy messages are almost always read in hard copy form and should be prepared accordingly (e.g., with cover sheets, headers, page numbers and formatting).

Do not over-distribute e-mail.

Every message you send creates work for someone else who must read, consider, and deal with the message. It may be better to post some messages on an electronic bulletin board in order to reduce the number of copies routed to individual users.

Respect the privacy rights of others.

Do not invade privacy. Do not forward or distribute messages without permission. Do not read other people’s mail. If you receive someone else’s mail, e.g., because the sender entered a wrong address or you happen upon a PC or terminal someone failed to log-off of, use the same consideration you would with traditional mail. Inform the appropriate party, see that the mail is returned, and notify your network administrator

Be aware of differences across e-mail systems.

Others may not have the same e-mail features or capabilities you have, in which case, avoid special control characters like bold, underline, and special fonts; even tabs can differ. With the exception of binary (program) files, keep your lines under 80 characters; if possible do not exceed 72 characters. Be sure that your editor inserts carriage returns at the end of each line if not, enter a hard return. Be extra careful with graphics. Whenever possible, find out in advance what e-mail features and software tools your recipients have.

¹ *This Guide to e-mail Etiquette incorporates conventions and similar guidelines compiled by: Gargano, Guide to Electronic Communication and Network Etiquette, (1989); Goode and Johnson, "Putting Out the Flames: the Etiquette and Law of E-Mail." ONLINE, (1991); Krol, The Whole Internet User's Guide and Catalog, (1992); and Robinson, Delivering Electronic Mail, (1992).*

Cite the appropriate references and context of a message.

Reference any related e-mail message or posting, and the event, topic, or issue that your message refers to, in order to avoid being taken out of context and misinterpreted. Take the time to back up your statements with references to documents or articles just as you would in written material.

If a message is referencing an earlier note, include enough of the original message to make the message clear.

Identify yourself.

Especially if you are acting on behalf of an organization or professional association, or if you have relevant background or expertise in a matter, identify your affiliation, title, background and expertise in your e-mail message. Include your e-mail address in the message and any attachments to it.

Separate opinion from non-opinion.

So that readers do not confuse personal opinion with agency policy or position, use labels and explanatory notes to distinguish opinion from fact. If necessary, include a brief disclaimer.

Respect copyright and license agreements.

Copyright laws are applicable to e-mail networks. Some software that is available for public retrieval through the Internet requires a valid license from the vendor in order to use it legally. Posting information on networks is similar to publication. Be careful to cite references.

Label messages that are meant to be humorous and be careful with sarcasm.

Use established conventions or explanatory notes to alert the recipient that a message is meant to be taken humorously. Facial expressions, voice inflection and other cues that help recipients to interpret a message are absent from e-mail. You cannot always control when and in what context a message will be read. The wrong party might read it at the wrong time or. The reader might not understand your intention.

Avoid sending e-mail in anger or as an emotional response.

It is best not to send these kinds of messages over e-mail. Such situations are better worked out in person or in another forum. If you do send such a message, be sure to warn readers of your intent with the use of established conventions or explanatory notes. (These messages are often called "*flames*".)

Do not be hasty.

If a message or posting generates negative feelings, set it aside and re-read it later. An immediate response is often a hasty response. Do not rule out the possibility that a misunderstanding or misinterpretation might occur. This is common with e-mail because of the lack of physical cues.

Avoid putting text in all capital letters.

Most users suggest that you avoid putting all text in caps because it may seem ANGRY or HARSH. Upper-case text is often interpreted as having extra emphasis.

Be careful what you say about yourself and others.

As a general rule of thumb, do not commit anything to e-mail that you would not want to become public knowledge. Think twice before posting personal information about yourself or others. There is always the chance that a message could end up in someone else's hands.

Be aware that e-mail messages are often retained on system backup tapes and disks in central computing facilities after they are deleted from the mail system.

Do not be fooled by the illusion of privacy.

Assume that your message could be around for a long time. It is easy to copy, store (electronically or in hard copy), resurrect, and forward anything you write in e-mail.

Do not send abusive, harassing, or bigoted messages.

This is inappropriate and counter-productive for obvious reasons and reflects badly on the individual and the entire organization. Even on wide area networks, e-mail can usually be traced to the originating machine and user. Systems on the Internet are actually liable for the misdeeds of their users.

Re-read your mail for content and tone before you send it.

On many systems, once you send a message you are committed to it, and cannot retract it.

Try to keep messages to a single subject; use subject entries.

The subject line of an e-mail message serves a number of important purposes: (1) it enables busy people to discern the subject of a message and when it must be read; (2) it is used to index the message in mailboxes and file folders; (3) it may be used to identify what messages are "records" and need to be transferred to a central record-keeping system in the agency.

Only post messages when they are relevant.

Do not make messages "urgent" when they do not need to be.

Most of us learned the lesson of "*the boy who cried wolf*" quite some time ago. In today's world, this lesson rings true for the misuse of priority mail notices. These notices will soon become meaningless with overuse.

