

# Guide to Writing Effective Emails

## Know Your Purpose

- Why am I sending this?  
If you don't know why you're sending an email, you shouldn't send one. Writing emails without knowing what your purpose is wastes both your time and your recipient's time.
- What do I need from the recipient?  
Are you asking for information? If so, be as specific as possible about the information you need and the format you need it in. This helps avoid confusion.
- What action do I want the recipient to take?  
Do you need an attachment? Are you asking for a deadline to be extended? Be honest in your expectations and try to convey those expectations in a polite but sincere way.
- What is the time frame I'm expecting for a response?  
Email is great for shorter-term communication, usually in the window of 24-48 hours. Business that is more urgent should be conducted by phone. Do not expect a reply right away, and do not email a request or question if you need the answer in less than 24 hours.

## Use the "One Thing" Rule

- Make your email about "one thing," or only one topic.
- **The less you include in your emails, the better.**
- If you have multiple issues to address, send a separate email for each one. Keeping separate emails for multiple topics also helps keep your inbox and your thinking more organized; instead of trying to answer multiple questions in one email, your recipient can focus on each topic individually, which ultimately gives you the best response.

## Practice Empathy

- Think about the way your recipient may read the words you write.
  - How would I interpret this sentence as someone reading it?
  - How would this make me feel if I received it?
- Most people:
  - Are busy: don't have time to guess what you want, and want to read and respond to your email quickly
  - Appreciate compliments: saying something positive about a person or their work is never a waste of words.
  - Like to be thanked: if the recipient has helped you in any way, be sure to thank them, even if it's their job to help you.

## Write a Relevant Subject Line

- The subject line is the first part of your email your recipient will see. Keep the subject line brief, but make it specific enough that your reader knows what the email will include before he or she opens it. Vague subject lines like "Hey" or "Question" aren't helpful and will likely annoy your reader, making them less likely to help you.
- If you're emailing an instructor, include the course name and number in the subject line. If you're emailing about a job, include the job listing title and number, if provided.

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## Keep Introductions Brief

Not every email needs a formal introduction.

- If you've emailed/contacted the person before, just a reminder of who you are ("I'm a student in your Tuesday and Thursday ENG 111 class this semester") is fine.
- If you've never contacted this person before, explain how you knew to contact them in the first place ("I looked up the technical support email on BCC's website. I am a student at BCC and I'm having problems with my Outlook account.") or mention people you may have in common ("I'm Professor X's new assistant and she suggested I reach out to you for advice.")

One sentence is usually enough for an introduction. If you need to provide more explanation than that, it might be better for you to go see the person you are contacting face-to-face.

## Limit Yourself to Five Sentences

Use enough sentences to say what you mean, and nothing more. "Less than five sentences is abrupt and rude, more than five sentences wastes time." Being concise is best in emails to keep your reader focused and to make sure you communicate effectively.

Sometimes an email will have to go over five sentences; that's okay. Make sure to include the main idea of the email in the first few sentences, and only give relevant details. If the email will be longer than five sentences, consider using bullet points to keep facts concise and easy to read.

## Follow a Standard Structure

After you get used to composing emails, you'll establish a natural structure for your emails that will make communicating more efficient. Your structure should include the following:

- Greeting: "Hi," "Dear," or "Hello!"
- a compliment or pleasantry: my personal favorite is "I hope this email finds you well!" You can also include more personalized compliments, such as "Your presentation in our last class was really informative" or "I appreciate the help you provided during our last meeting." You *always* want to follow your greeting with a compliment: there's no reason **not** to, and it can only make the person you're emailing feel better (remember **empathy**)
- the reason for your email: You can sum this up in one to two sentences, starting with "I'm emailing to ask you about..." or "I was hoping I could have your assistance in..."
- a call to action: This is what you want your recipient to do; "Could you send me the file by Thursday?" or "Please let me know if you can help by Friday." This gives your recipient an idea of what you want them to do and a timeline by which you need it done.
- a closing message: This can repeat the call to action and also make your reader feel more inclined to assist you. "Thank you for all your help" or "I'm looking forward to hearing from you!" are good closing lines.
- Sign-off: "Thanks," "Best wishes," or simply "Sincerely," followed by your name

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Having a structure like this can help streamline the process of emailing and make it less time-consuming.

## Use Short Words, Sentences, and Paragraphs

Concise writing is key to writing good, effective emails. Using short words and sentences shows you respect your recipient and his or her time. Writing concisely also makes you seem more considerate, as it shows you took the time to make sure your reader understands your message. Avoid big blocks of writing, either by breaking them into paragraphs or using bullet points.

Before you send your email, trim down as much as you can. This will help you ensure that the email you send is the best version.

## Use the Active Voice

Active voice focuses on the subject taking the action, usually a person. The passive voice focuses on the object being acted upon.

- Active voice: I threw the ball.
- Passive voice: The ball was thrown (by me).

Fun tip: My favorite way to tell if a sentence is passive or active is to add “by zombies” to the end of the sentence. If the sentence no longer makes sense, it’s active voice. If it still makes sense, it’s passive voice.

- I opened the door “by zombies.” → doesn’t make sense, so it’s **active**
- The door was opened “by zombies.” → still makes sense, so it’s **passive**

## Proofread Email

Read your email aloud to yourself, checking for spelling and grammar mistakes.

- Is my request clear?
- Could there be any misunderstandings?
- How would this sound if I were the recipient?

Delete any unnecessary words, sentences, and paragraphs as you proofread, which will help trim down your email.

## Do NOT Use:

- Emoticons
- Slang or chat abbreviations (LOL, tbh, omg)
- Colorful fonts and backgrounds

## Write Like You Speak (Within Reason)

Email is not as formal as writing a business report or even a phone call. Writing as you speak lets you come across as more friendly and personable, and it also keeps your emails short: not many people talk in paragraphs.

If you wouldn’t say something to someone in-person, don’t say it in an email. Using “please” and “thank you” when appropriate also help to make your reader more inclined to assist you - they’re also just common manners.

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## Email Practice: Emailing a Professor About Missed Class

You were absent in ENG 111 on Wednesday and think your instructor gave out instructions about an assignment coming up next week.

Before emailing your instructor, you should...

**(Try to find the information yourself on Moodle; usually assignments are posted on Moodle as well as handed out in class. Ask classmates about the assignment if you can contact them or know them outside of class. Look at the syllabus to see if it gives any more information.)**

If you find the information you need on Moodle, should you email your instructor? (No.)

You cannot find the information you need on Moodle, so you begin to compose an email to your instructor. Why are you emailing your instructor?

**(To get more information about the assignment you missed in class.)**

What do you need from your instructor?

**(Details about the assignment, requirements, how should it be turned in, etc.)**

What action do you want your instructor to take?

**(To give you information about the assignment or to email you the handout.)**

What is the time frame you expect your instructor to respond?

**(~24 hours but before next class on Friday; not too urgent because it's due next week.)**

This is a real email sent by a writing tutor to a real student. Use it as a guide for the structure of your emails until you establish your own style and flow.

Writing Center: APA Guide ← Subject line tells reader what this email is about before she opens it

Hannah Anderson  
Thu 3/2, 5:09 PM  
[Redacted]

[Redacted] ← Greeting: the student's first name, which I used because I have contacted the student before

I hope this email finds you well! ← Pleasantry: my personal favorite, but make sure it sounds like something you'd say

This is the Purdue OWL website for the APA Style Guide, with examples and instructions for ANYTHING APA that you may encounter during your psychology course. I hope it helps you out! (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/1/>)

Good luck! I look forward to reading the draft of your reflection paper soon. ← Closing message

Sincerely, ← Sign-off

Hannah Anderson  
Professional Tutor, Writing Center ← Signature - note: if you don't have a title, that's okay - just make sure to "sign" your name at the end of the email

The reason for the email and the call to action, all wrapped up in two sentences:  
- reason: provide a resource  
- call to action: recommend use