

The Ins and Outs of your Email Inbox and Outbox

Email has become an invaluable informal communication tool in most academic and professional settings. The tone, format, length, and content of the email message must suit the intended audience and the purpose of the communication. The following guidelines can help you communicate your email message clearly and effectively.

- **Use language that is professional and appropriate.** Unlike in a face-to-face conversation where body language and tone of voice can help convey the intended meaning, the tone in an email message is conveyed through the choice of vocabulary and format of the message.
- **Consider your audience.** Most professors and other professionals prefer a formal tone, so avoid the use of slang, MSN language, contractions, too many abbreviations, and emoticons.
- **Address the recipient formally** unless you are certain informality is acceptable.
- **Include a clear, meaningful subject line.** If the recipient knows briefly what the email is about, he/she is more likely to read it and respond to it.
- **Use traditional, easy to read typefaces** such as Times New Roman and Garamond. Avoid typing in UPPERCASE as it can be interpreted as shouting. *Italics* can add emphasis, but should be used sparingly. Using **bold** too frequently can be seen as aggressive.
- **Keep emails relatively short and to the point.** Avoid overly long sentences and dense paragraphs. They are harder to follow in electronic format. Readers who have to scroll down to get the entire message may find it too time consuming. Try to include only one topic in an email.
- **Use correct grammar, spelling and punctuation.** The reader is likely to treat your message or request more seriously if you can show that you have taken the time to make it error free.
- **Remember that emails may be read by more than just the intended recipient.** Your email might be forwarded to others or become part of an email chain. Email is a more permanent record of a conversation than a face-to-face meeting. Avoid sending sensitive or personal information via email since it is not a secure form of communication.
- **Be patient when waiting for a reply.** Some people check their emails infrequently.
- **Reply to emails that require a reply.** Answer all questions that were asked of you and try to anticipate follow-up questions. Sign your name and provide contact information.
- **Double-check the content and tone of your message before sending it.** Check the 'To' line to make sure you haven't accidentally included someone other than the intended recipient(s). Re-read your email one final time, and imagine what your reaction might be if you received it. Make changes if necessary.

References

University of Toronto. Email etiquette. Retrieved October 21, 2008, from <http://www.enough.utoronto.ca/computeruse/eetiquette.htm>

Zilm, G., & Entwistle, C. (2002). *The smart way: An introduction to writing for nurses* (2nd ed.). Toronto: W.B. Saunders.