Writing Professional Emails in the Workplace

Increasingly, universities and colleges are emphasizing the development of communication skills. In addition to **discipline-specific knowledge**, employers also expect post-secondary graduates to have **strong written and oral communication skills**.

Writing emails in the workplace requires a specific set of skills. Learning conventions related to structure and style will enable you to convey your message to your audience professionally.

When to send an email

Email is one of many available communication technologies in the workplace, but it is not always the most appropriate one. When considering the method of communication, consider your **message**, your audience's likely **reaction** to the information, and the **size of your audience**. In general, email is good for **positive or neutral news** and **sharing information**. Sometimes other methods of communication (face-to-face, phone, instant messaging, video conferencing, etc.) may be more appropriate.

- If you are terminating someone's position, face-to-face is the best way to communicate that information
- If your audience is located in different cities or countries, and you are delivering good news and are excited to see your colleagues' reactions, video conferencing may be a better choice than email

Types of email in the workplace

There are two primary types of email in the workplace:

1. **Request-and-Reply Emails**
   Most emails in the workplace fall into this category. Request emails usually expect a **reply**. This kind of email could ask questions, specify tasks people need to complete, or ask colleagues to acknowledge or comment on policies, meetings, or projects. A sample request-and-reply email can be found near the end of this page.
2. **Confirmation Emails**
   This kind of email creates a **permanent**, **written record** of a conversation that has taken place. For example, if you and a colleague discussed collaborating on a project over lunch, you might send them an email with the details of that conversation. This gives you both a record of the conversation and allows for the conversation to continue, if needed.

Essential email components

Helpful tip: Conventionally, email components should be **left-justified** (i.e., not indented). The exception is for **bulleted** or **numbered lists**, which should be **offset** in order to make it easier for the reader to see important information.

An important design concept in workplace communication is **graphic highlighting**, which means that you should use white space and **bulleted/numbered lists** to make important or detailed information easier to access. Emails are meant to be **concise**, so you should avoid lengthy sentences and paragraphs.

Subject line

The subject line of your email should offer your reader the **purpose** of the email, but it should also be **brief**. If your subject line is vague, people may ignore your email, or it may be sent to the junk/spam folder.

- **Vague:** Budget
- **Specific:** Budget Revision Request

Greeting

Choosing a greeting may appear to be an easy task, but you have to gauge the appropriate level of **formality**. Emailing a coworker with whom you are friends to ask a brief question is different from emailing your supervisor with a work-related request. Below are some greetings that straddle different levels of formality:

More formal:

- Dear [Name],
- Hello [Name],
- Good morning/afternoon [Name],

Less formal:

- Hi [Name],
- Hey [Name],

Body

Depending on how your audience will **react** to the information in your email, you will need to decide whether to structure your email body using the **direct** or **indirect** method of communication. Either way, paragraphs in an email, when there is more than one, should be **clear** and **concise**. They are generally much shorter than paragraphs in an academic essay, for example.

The Direct Method of Communication

Except in the cases listed below, use the direct method of communication when constructing an email. This method is used when your reader is **already informed** about the subject and/or will already be **supportive** of the information provided. The content of your email will provide the following pieces of information, in this order:

1. Main point/decision/request
2. Background or context for the main point of the email (if required)
3. Closing paragraph – summary, action items, polite closing

The Indirect Method of Communication

While you want to avoid delivering really bad news by email (**face-to-face** is the preferred method for sensitive subjects), if you are delivering information that your reader **may not immediately support** or that they need to be **educated** about, your email should be structured according to the indirect method of communication. This gives the reader time to consider rationale or background before encountering the main message:

1. Background or context for the main point of the email (always included in the indirect method)
2. Main point/decision/request
3. Closing paragraph – summary, action items, polite closing

General Tip: The level of **formality** in your tone will vary based on the recipient of your message. In general, emails in the workplace are **less formal than academic writing** but **more formal than spoken conversation**. While first-person references and contractions are usually acceptable in emails,
jargon and **slang** should be avoided (as should **humor**, which may be misinterpreted).

Sign-off

As with the greeting, you need to choose an appropriate sign-off for your audience:

More formal:

- Sincerely,
- Thanks/Thank you,
- Best,
- All the best,
- Best regards,
- Kind regards,

Less formal:

- Talk soon,
- Cheers,
- See you,
- The direct method of communication

Sample email

The following example represents a standard **request and reply email** in the workplace. Note that because this news would likely be seen as either neutral or positive, the writer has chosen to use the **direct** method of communication.

From: mandypenney@uni.edu
To: All Staff <staff-list@uni.edu >
Subject: Reactions to Casual Dress Policy

Dear Staff,

Human resources is considering implementing a casual dress policy in the workplace. Please provide feedback on the questions below as management considers changing its current policy.

Increasingly, staff are noting that they would feel more comfortable and productive in the work environment if they were able to dress casually. However, there is no agreement on what constitutes an acceptable level of "dressing down" at our company. Here are some questions to consider:

1. What can be considered casual dress while remaining professional?
2. Should our policy restrict body art such as tattoos or piercings?
3. What policies should we implement if clothing is deemed offensive?
4. Should we institute a casual dress policy?

Your input would be greatly appreciated. Your opinions can then be discussed at the managers' meeting on October 1. Please respond to the above questions by September 29. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to email me at mandypenney@uni.edu. Thanks!

Best,
Julia Ali
Human Resources Specialist
XY Genetics, Inc.