

How to write emails to busy people

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This memo is a guide to writing emails to busy people. In addition to describing the purpose of emails, it outlines a formula for writing emails that increase response rates to emails and reduces confusion. Examples are also provided.

1 Every email is a request

Every time you send an email, you are asking the recipient to spend time reading it, and/or asking them to give you one of the following: an acknowledgement, an approval, an immediate favor, or a commitment for a future action.

Emails that clearly communicate your request are more frequently answered.

Emails that do not have a clear request (i.e., the reader doesn't know what to do with the email), often trigger clarification emails, or even a non-response. Your goal should be to avoid this, by providing the reader with all of the information they need to make a decision about your request.

One way to send clear emails is to restrict it to five lines of text. The five lines should be structured to provide the reader with a clear 'to-do', along with some clarifying information. An example is below, followed by an explanation of the structure.

2 An example five line email

- Subject: Request for review of dissertation draft.

Dear Prof. X,

Would you have time in the upcoming weeks to review the latest changes to the dissertation?

As a brief overview, I have substantially re-worked the introduction, and updated the methods section as you requested.

I have also conducted the additional robustness checks as recommended by Prof. Z, which do not affect the main result.

Track changes has been turned on so you can see the edits, and about 20 pages have been updated in the attached file.

Yours,
Y

3 The structure of the five line email

1. The subject line is often the most important one, as it is the first thing people see. Communicate in about five words the exact nature of your request. That is, state directly the action you need from the reader. Vague subject lines like "Free next week?", "Update", or "Hey" do little to inform the reader about the nature of your request.

2. After the appropriate salutation, the next line should be a repetition of your subject line in more detail. Repetition serves not only as a reminder about your request, but also puts the most important information up front. This saves time, and allows the reader to make a quicker decision about your request.
3. The remaining three lines should serve to answer the first question or two that the reader would have about fulfilling your request. Usually, those question(s) are: “How much time/effort will this take?” Provide the details that answer this question.
4. Lines should be short - about what comfortably fits across the screen of a laptop computer.
5. Any additional information should be placed in an attachment.

The end result should be a very clear ‘to-do’ for the reader. It should also contain enough information to allow the reader to make an informed ‘yes’ or ‘no’ decision about your request. These two features should expedite their responses to you.

There may be temptation to hide your request in vague language or to bury it in a long email because you fear that your request will be rejected. This is not a recommended approach as it violates people’s expectations about communicating - to send and receive clear, honest, and informative messages.

Additional examples follow.

4 A personal example

- Subject: Free for lunch next Thursday to catch up?

Hey,

I’ll be in town next week, and I will have a brief free window from 10:00 to 1:00 on Thursday - do you have time for lunch then?

It’s been a while, and I don’t know when I’ll be back, so I thought I’d see if you were free.

Things have been generally good, but there’s a lot of drama I can fill you in on - stuff that should stay off email.

I’ll be staying at the Marriott downtown and will be limited to cabs/Uber as I will not have a rental.

Hope to see you then.

5 A second academic example

- Subject: Request for travel sponsorship to conference *Z*.

Dear Prof. *X*,

Would you approve my request for travel funds from the department so I can attend conference *Z*?

The approval entails getting your signature on a departmental form.

I am asking because my proposal on project *W* was selected for a paper presentation at the conference (Nov 1~7), and I will have a chance to get visibility for the work.

If you are in the office any time other than Monday or Thursday morning until 11:30, I could bring the paperwork that requires your signature.

Yours,
Y