

Email has become the communication method of choice for many organisations because of its archival ability, record-keeping properties and convenience. It also allows near-instant communication between continents and across time zones. Because of its ease of use, it often gets abused through certain use policies or through commercial exploitation (e.g., spam lists).

To give you guidance as to the acceptable use of email in a professional business environment, certain rules when writing or replying to emails are suggested:

1. Subject

The subject field is the most **important** part of a professional email. It should contain enough information to allow the reader to make a judgement on the following:

- a. How important is this mail?
- b. What is it about?
- c. Do I need to do anything in response and when?

If it is a **meeting notice**, it should contain the topic of the meeting, date+time (including time zone for international communication), and venue if not a telecon/videoconference. Within organisations using email clients like MS Outlook, meeting notices are usually sent with a subset of the software that is linked to a calendar, and the email notice will include an Accept/Decline button with an option to respond the notice by reply email.

If the email is a request for a **review** of a document, then the Subject should include the topic of the request with a due date by when a response is required.

When an email list appears in an Inbox or on a mobile device, the user sees only the From, Subject and Date fields in most cases. A quick glance at all the Subjects and senders should be sufficient to provide information regarding whether an email is urgent, requires action (by when) or whether it is only for information. This allows the reader to **prioritise** and plan the responses in the most effective way.

Make sure your subject is free of errors. This line is the first impression the reader gets from you.

2. Using To: and Cc: (and Bcc:) fields

Contacts in the **To:** field are required to respond to an email because it is addressed **To** them.

Contacts in the **Cc:** field (carbon copy refers to the way of making a copy using a carbon sheet between two pieces of paper) are **only** requested to take note of the email (For information) and to respond only if they want. This field is also used as a 'filing' method when, e.g., copying another address of yourself (as backup), or copying your secretary of assistant for filing, etc.

The use of the **Blind carbon copy** field may be fun for private emails when you want to criticise someone and let someone else in on it without the knowledge of the rest, but it should not be used for professional communication. The main reason is that it is not transparent, and would usually imply bypassing the line of reporting, or gossiping about a certain conversation, all unprofessional behaviour.

3. Professionalism

Always **address** the person or group of person at the **start** of the email, so that there is no ambiguity as to the intended **recipients**. A simple “Hi” or “Hello” is vague and unprofessional and should be avoided. Rather use: “Dear Sir” or “Dear Prof Meyer”.

This is not the medium for a facebook or twitter-type post to a large group of friends. Tasks are often assigned using emails in a professional environment, and it should be clear who is assigned the responsibility for the requested actions.

Always **sign** your name **below** an email, making it clear who is sending the message. Although it may be possible to determine the name of the sendee from the email address, this is not always possible.

Use a spell/grammar checker to check your **spelling** and grammar.

Avoid using only **capital** letters. AN EMAIL THAT SHOUTS OUT AT YOU IS UNPROFESSIONAL!!

Irony can easily be understood, even if emoticons are used. Rather avoid it.

If you like forwarding **jokes** and other emails too your friends, use a private web-based email account rather than your work email address. Not only will this allow you to keep your work and private matters separate, remember that because work emails are backed up and archived on a regular basis, you could be compromising yourself through your email usage history in future.

4. Length of email

Emails should be kept as **short** as possible. Avoid long sentences and rather use bullet points. Be concise. If you want to address different topics, use separate emails, with the Subject of each clearly indicating each topic.

5. Forwarding/replying to emails

When **forwarding** an email, clean up some of the headers and footers to make it more concise. Change the subject heading to indicate that this is a specific reply to a previous string of emails. This allows the recipients to notice this reply amongst the other string of Fwd: Re: emails with the same subject, and focuses the attention on your specific reply. Add actions and due date to the subject if intended.

Do not “**Reply All**” to a group email by default. Reply only to the sender unless he/she has expressed the wish to use this forum for a group discussion where the whole To: field is included.

Don't forward emails of doubtful origin that may contain **viruses** or hoaxes. Apart from being potentially dangerous to your company's data integrity, unnecessary emails fill up space and clutter up the professional environment.

When sending emails with **attachments**, make sure that the size of the attachments is reasonable. Some email programs have built-in limits on attachment sizes.

Some email software doesn't include **previous messages** or attachments automatically when you reply to or forward a message. If you intend that a receiver should see the whole history of a conversation, make sure to include this email-trail.

6. Housekeeping

An Inbox could easily fill up with a long list of emails that are unrelated. One way of keeping the emails orderly is to create **subfolders** in your Inbox and to 'file' emails periodically. Having these folders also allows you to research all the related communication on a topic in one place. The search facility of especially gmail allows you to easily get all emails related to a certain topic no matter in which folder they lie, but this option is not always as easily available in other email clients.