

Write great emails—8 easy tips

You can learn to write effective, clear and concise emails—emails that get read. By following a few simple steps you can transform the way you communicate. Too often our emails are filled with either too much, or not enough information.

Because we tap them out quickly, often to get some task off our list or idea out of our head, we don't pay attention to where we place the information so our email gets read and acted upon. We don't pay attention to the tone—sounds okay to me, you're thinking, and we don't take the time to proof what we have written before we hit the send button. Oh no, did I actually send that out with the boss's name spelt wrong?

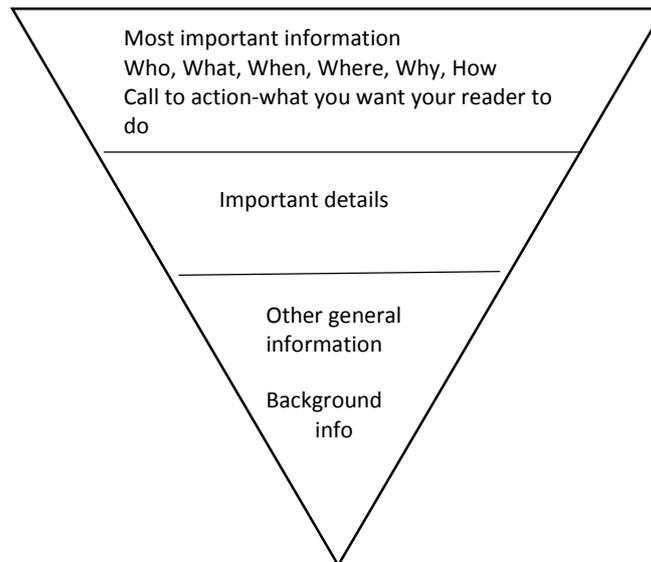
There is an art to writing great emails but once you have the hang of it you will never look back. You will get all your questions answered, you will reduce the number of emails in the trail and your recipient will know exactly what you want them to do.

1. Subject line: Make your email subject line specific. A bad example is "Proposal", a good example is "Checking on Reliable Landscapes proposal." If the recipient had several proposals and saw the first example how would they know which proposal was being referred to? If you are referring to a meeting put the meeting details in the subject line: "Meeting Monday 2pm Green Room."

Recipients scan the subject line in order to decide whether to open, forward, file or delete. Write a subject line that accurately describes the content. Don't leave it blank. You want to get the recipient thinking. Be informative not vague.

2. Order your information: You want the most important information—the 'who, what, where, when why and how' questions answered up front. This is the inverted pyramid writing triangle, traditionally used by journalists. Your reader should be able to read the first part of the email and know what you want them to do, think, see or feel.

We have become skim readers. Our inboxes fill rapidly. Assume your readers have limited time. You want your audience to get their information in the first couple of paragraphs so if they don't read to the end of the email they still know what needs to be done. Your call to action "this report is due by"... "Please confirm your attendance at the meeting", should be in the top part of the triangle.



3. One point per email: If you have a number of different points to make that are unrelated, often it is best to send separate emails. You can't put all your important information jumbled together in the first paragraph. Your reader will have to work too hard to sort it out and probably only half of the things will get attended too. The goal is to minimise the amount of communications going back and forth between parties.

4. Write with clarity and brevity: Use plain English writing principles. Short sentences (15-25 words), easy-to-understand language and correct grammar and spelling. These all combine to increase the readability of your document. Get to the point. Write to express not impress.

5. The tone of your email: The word choices you make affect the tone of your email. If you always use negative words or phrases, your emails will start to sound terse, or condescending. Tell people what they can do not what they can't do. For example instead of saying, "don't be late for the meeting," say "please arrive 5 minutes early." "Do not hesitate to call me" is used so often. Why do we use it? Why don't we simply say, "Please call me."

Accentuate the positive. People are more likely to respond to a positive request than a negative comment. We all like to be told what we can do not what we can't do!

If you need to emphasise a point, use bold instead of all capitals. Capitals are read as shouting and deemed to be rude.

If you feel you have to use an emoticon to soften a statement or to ensure the reader won't be offended, rewrite your sentence! Use your words to express your sentiment. Don't use emoticons in business emails.

6. Use headings and lists: This helps the email recipient to see things at a glance. Headings and lists stand out. Don't underline headings because they can be confused with links. Bold works well.

If you have a number of points to make put them in a list. The recipient can respond by referring to the corresponding list numbers or answer in a different colour next to each point. This way you are more likely to get all your points responded to.

There is nothing more frustrating than asking several things and having only half of them answered. The object of good communication is to reduce the number of communications going back and forth on the same subject.

7. Proofread:

- Check for grammar and spelling mistakes-remember the computer isn't always correct
- Check you have addressed it to the correct people
- Check you have attached documents
- Is the subject line going to make the recipient read the email?
- Does the structure make it easy to read?
- EMAIL IS NOT PRIVATE- Assume it is public. Would you be prepared to have the email tacked to the outside of your door for everyone to see, or forwarded to someone else?

If you would like more information or training on how to write better emails, please [contact me](#).

Sue Avison is Director of Say it Once – Business Writing for Success.