

Impress Others and Get Understood More Easily When You Send Them E-mails

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

I believe strongly in the value of electronic mail in both corporate and personal domains. E-mail is cheaper and faster than a letter, less intrusive than a phone call, less hassle than a FAX. Using e-mail, differences in location and time zone are less of an obstacle to communication. There is also evidence that e-mail leads to a more egalitarian information structure.

Because of these advantages, e-mail use is exploding. By 1998, [30%](#) of adults in the United States and Canada had come on-line.

Sadly, in the twenty-plus years that I have been using e-mail, I have seen many people suffer unlucky accidents because they did not understand how to adjust their communication styles to this new medium. I wrote this document to try to help people avoid those problems.

This is not a document on the mechanics of sending e-mail – which buttons to push or how to attach a photograph. Those details are different for every different e-mail software package, and manuals for the program explain how to do them. I instead focus on the content of an e-mail message: how to say what you need to say. I don't think of this as e-mail etiquette (commonly called netiquette) because I don't think these guidelines merely show you how to be a decent person. These guidelines show you how to be more efficient, clear, and effective.

This is not dogma. There will be people who disagree with me on specific points. But, if there was only one right answer, there wouldn't be a need to write this guide. I hope, this guide will make you examine your assumptions about e-mail and thus help you increase your e-mail effectiveness. Then you can write to reflect your own personality and choice.

What Makes E-mail Different?

Electronic communication, because of its speed and broadcasting ability, is fundamentally different from paper-based communication. Because the turnaround time can be so fast, e-mail is more conversational than traditional paper-based media.

In a paper document, it is essential to make everything clear and unambiguous because your audience may not have a chance to ask for clarification. With e-mail documents, your recipient can ask questions immediately. E-mail thus tends, like conversational speech, to be sloppier than communications on paper.

This is not always bad. Suppose you just want to tell your co-worker that you are ready to go to lunch. It makes little sense to slave over a message for hours, making sure that your spelling is faultless, your words eloquent, and your grammar beyond reproach.

However, your correspondent also won't have normal status cues such as dress, diction, or dialect, so may assume based on your name, address, and – above all – skills with language. You need to be aware of when you can be sloppy and when you have to be meticulous.

E-mail also does not carry emotions nearly as well as face-to-face or even telephone conversations. It lacks vocal inflection, gestures, and a shared environment. Your correspondent may have difficulty telling if you are serious or kidding, happy or sad, frustrated or euphoric. Sarcasm is dangerous to use in e-mail.

Another difference between e-mail and older media are that what the sender sees when composing a message might not look like what the reader sees. Both your ears hear sound waves made by your vocal cords are the same as your audience's. The paper that you write your love note on is the same paper the object of your affection sees. But with e-mail, the software and hardware that you use for composing, sending, storing, downloading, and reading may be different from what your correspondent uses. Your message's visual qualities may be different when it gets to someone else's screen.

Thus your e-mail compositions should be different from both your paper compositions and your speech. I wrote this document to show you how to tailor your message to this new medium.

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Chapter 2 – Context

In a conversation, there is some minimum of shared context. You might be in the same physical location, and even on the phone you have, at minimum, commonality of time. When you create a document for paper, usually there is some context embedded in the medium. The text is in the proceedings of a conference, written on a birthday card, handed to your professor with a batch of Econ 101 term papers, or something similar.

With e-mail, you can't assume anything about a sender's location, time, frame of mind, profession, interests, or future value to you. This means, among other matters, that you need to be very, very careful about giving your receivers some context. This section will give specific strategies for doing so.

Useful Subject Lines

A subject line that refers clearly to the e-mail body will help people mentally shift to the proper context before they read your message. The subject line should be brief (as many mailers will truncate long subject lines), does not need to be one complete sentence, and should give a clue to the contents of the message. For example:

Subject: need 3 thrombos by Tues

Chris – I need three thromblemeisters for Thursday's demo in Boston. They need to be left-handed, and they need to be packed for shipping by Tuesday night.

Here the subject line summarizes nicely the most important details of the message. If your message is in response to another piece of e-mail, your e-mail software will probably preface the subject line with Re: or RE: . If your e-mail composition software doesn't do this, it would be polite to put in RE: by hand.

Subject: Re: need 3 thrombos by Tues

Pat – I've got two thromblemeisters already packed from last week's demo, but I don't have another working left-handed one right now. Can you cope with two lefties and one rightie?

For time-critical messages, starting with URGENT: is a good idea (especially if you know the person gets many e-mail):

Subject: URGENT: need left-handed thrombo

I've *got* to have another left-handed thromblemeister for the Boston demo, and I need it by tomorrow afternoon. Chris only has two, and I've got to have three. Chris *does* have a broken leftie, so if anyone could fix that one, or if they have one in their desk somewhere, I'd appreciate it very much!

For requests, starting with REQ: can signal this needs action:

Subject: REQ: turn in thrombos

Pat's call for a left-handed thromblemeister

turned up 12 working lefties that were lying around people's offices unused. Please take a moment to look around your area for thromblemeisters (rightie *or* leftie) that you are no longer using, and get them back to Chris.

If you are offering nonurgent information that needs no response from the other person, prefacing the subject line with FYI: (For Your Information) is not a bad idea, as in

Subject: FYI: donuts in break room

The donut fairy left a dozen doughnuts in the downstairs break room. First come, first served!

Information, Please

Do yourself a favor and remove the word "information" from your subject lines (and maybe from the body of your message as well). When I was the webmaster for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I got many e-mail that looked like this:

Subject: information

Please send me information about UIUC.

This gave me little clue about what the person wanted to know about: admission application deadlines? The number of students? The acreage? The number of buildings? Was I supposed to send paper documents or give URLs? The only action I could do with e-mail like this was ask for further context. Mail like this would have been much better as

Subject: UIUC history

Are there any Web pages about the history of the U of I?

Quoting Documents

If you are referring to previous e-mail, you should clearly quote that document to provide context.

Instead of sending e-mail that says:

yes

Say:

> Did you get all the left-handed thromblemeisters
> that you needed?

Yes

The greater-than sign (>) is the most conventional way to quote someone else's e-mail words, but your e-mail software may use a different convention.

Even if there are a fair number of words in your response, you still might need to quote the previous message. Imagine getting a response on Monday to some e-mail that you can't remember sending on Friday at all.

I talked to them about it the other day, and they want to see the other one before they make up their minds.

Your response would probably be favorably clear, "Huh???" It would be much easier for you to understand e-mail that said:

- > I've got the price quote for the Cobra subassembly
- > ready; as soon as I get a decision on the
- > thromblemeister selection, I'll be ready to go.
- > Have you talked to the thermo guys about whether
- > they are ready to go with the left-handed thrombo or
- > do they want to wait and check out the right-handed
- > one first?

I talked to them about it the other day, and they want to see the other one before they make up their minds.

This is substantially better, but now errs on the side of too much context. The first three lines have nothing to do with the question you need to answer. You should only include enough to provide a context for the message and no more. (Peter Kimble, my high school computer science teacher, now gives his students the heuristic that at least half of the lines in an email message should be their own.)

You need only enough context to frame the question you are answering:

- > Have you talked to the thermo guys about whether
- > they are ready to go with the left-handed thrombo or
- > do they want to wait and check out the right-handed
- > one first?

I talked to them about it the other day, and they want to see the other one before they make up their minds.

Remove Pronouns

The above example gives a good amount of context, but the response to it still takes a little effort to follow. A good rule is to look carefully at all pronouns in your first three sentences. If they don't refer to something clearly stated in the e-mail, change them to something concrete.

- > Have you talked to the thermo guys [about which handedness
- > they want]?

I talked to the thermo group on Wednesday, and they think the left-handed thromblemeister will probably work, but they want to evaluate the right-handed unit before they make up their minds.

Now the answer is clear and specific. And, since the response contains implicit yet clear references to the original message, and doesn't need less clearly quoted material. Responses like this, with the context mostly in the body of the message, are the easiest to understand. Unfortunately, they take the longest to compose.

If you want to quote a sentence that is in the middle of a paragraph, or wraps around lines. You can go ahead and remove everything but the part that you were interested in, inserting "[...]" if you have to take something out in the middle. You can also paraphrase by using square brackets, as above.

If the message isn't important enough to you to warrant the time to pare the original message down, include the whole content after your response, not before. If you put the

original message at the end, your readers don't have to look at it unless they don't understand the context of your response.

Summary

You may know what you are talking about, but your readers may not. Give them the proper context by:

Giving useful subject lines

Avoiding pronouns in the first three lines

Quoting the previous message

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Chapter 3 – Format

The underlying rules can standardize e-mail transmission, but you can use many different software programs to read e-mail. It's quite possible that the message you send won't look at all the same when displayed on your correspondent's screen. You therefore have to be careful about how you present your text. This section will discuss the problems that may arise from a mismatch between the sending and receiving software, and show how to avoid them.

Fancy Text

Some e-mail reading software only understands plain text. Italics, bold, and color changes will show up as control sequences in the text. You might send something like:

Hiya! Hey, I loved the presentation you gave to Jack this morning. Great Job!

but if your correspondent's software can't handle formatting, the message could show up as:

Hiya! Hey, I <I>loved<I> the presentation you gave to
Jack this morning. Great Job!

Web documents are difficult to read with older e-mail programs. You may have a choice of sending the web page as text or as HTML; keep your correspondent's abilities in mind when you make that choice.

Extended Character Sets

Back in the dark ages of 1982, when they write e-mail specs, they decide to encode e-mail in such a way that only 128 different characters – letters, numbers, punctuation, and so on – could be sent from one computer to another. This allowed some free space for error correction – something important when computers were calling each other with modems.

However, the net is a different place now. Characters like ä, ç, and Ø are now important for large numbers of e-mail users. So now there is a way of encoding data so 256 different characters can be represented, called "quoted-printable".

Unfortunately, the underlying transport is still limited to 128 different characters, so the e-mail gets converted to the more limited set, sent, then (we hope) converted back on the other end. If the receiving software doesn't know how to do quoted-printable (or if something gets munged somewhere), the extended characters will show up as an equals-sign and two letter/digit code:

La premi=E8re journe=E9 de nos deux voyageurs fut assez agr=E9able.
Ils =E9=taient encourag=E9s par l'id=E9e de se voir
possesseurs de plus de tr=E9sors que l'Asie, l'Europe, et
l'Afrique n'en pouvaient rassembler. Candide,
transport=E9, =E9crivit le nom de Cun=E9gonde sur les arbres.

So why do you care? After all, you might not ever use umlauts. You care because there are "special" characters that you probably will meet, that are NOT part of the standard extended character set, but which some software will allow you to insert. Even if your correspondent's software knows how to convert codes back to extended characters,

different computers have different symbols for the same codes. For example, the trademark symbol, bullet, and "curly" quotation marks are all legal characters in both Windows95 and MacOS, but are in different places in the character set. For example, Windows thinks that character number 241 is a ñ, while the Mac thinks that character number 241 is a Ò. Thus you have yet another reason to worry about what your correspondent's e-mail software is can handle.

Web Links

Some e-mail reading software will recognize URLs (Uniform Resource Locators, or web addresses) in the text and make them "live". While some software recognizes URLs from the "www.", most software recognizes URLs by the http:// at the front. Thus, if there is a URL in your e-mail, it is much safer to include the http://!

You should also be careful about punctuation – especially periods – just after a URL. For example, take the message

Hi – The URL is <http://www.webfoot.com/writings.html>. See if you like it!

The software on the receiving end may think the last period after the URL is part of the URL. Or, if the software doesn't recognize links, the reader may cut-and-paste too much. Either has the potential to lead to an ugly e-mail exchange, with your correspondent insisting the page doesn't exist and you insisting that it does. I will admit that it looks ugly, but it causes less confusion if there is at least a space after the URL:

Hi – The URL is <http://www.webfoot.com/writings.html> . See if you like it!

People who are cutting and pasting might also select too little. Since HTML files can have either the extension .html or .htm, this can also be a difficult mistake for your reader to catch. To make cut-and-paste mindlessly easy for people, I try to always put URLs on a separate line:

Hi – The URL is
<http://www.webfoot.com/writings.html>
See if you like it!

Yes, the period after the URL is now missing. Yes, this is ungrammatical, but I sure don't want to put it on the next line! I have found it worthwhile to trade grammatical perfection for easier cut-and-paste.

Some URLs are so long that they will get split into two lines:

Hi – The URL is
[http://www.webfoot.com/advice/translations/indonesian/email.
formality.html](http://www.webfoot.com/advice/translations/indonesian/email.formality.html)
See if you like it!

If your correspondent's e-mail software makes links live, perhaps it can't realize that formality.html belongs with the rest of the URL.

Hi – The URL is
[http://www.webfoot.com/advice/translations/indonesian/email.
formality.html](http://www.webfoot.com/advice/translations/indonesian/email.formality.html)
See if you like it!

If your correspondent is cutting and pasting, he or she may not see the last bit. What you can do is to put angle brackets around the URL. Some (but not all) e-mail software will recognize that stuff inside angle brackets and keep them together:

Hi – The URL is

[<http://www.webfoot.com/advice/translations/indonesian/email.formality.html>](http://www.webfoot.com/advice/translations/indonesian/email.formality.html)

See if you like it!

Punctuation and Quotation Marks

Another grammatical rule that I usually break is placing punctuation. American grammar rules say that punctuation belongs inside quotation marks, for example the period in the next sentence:

Bob said, "I love you madly."

That's fine when the stuff in quotes is normal speech, but can cause problems when discussing computer input. Consider:

When you get to the password box, type "smiley."

Is the period something that goes in the password box or not? I prefer to use British grammar rules and say

When you get to the password box, type "smiley".

This makes it clear that the period does not go in the password box. I could switch back and forth between the two styles, depending on whether I need to type the thing in quotes. But I would rather be consistent so if the period need to be in the password box, that will be clear.

If you can't bear to do such rotations, adjust the sentence so there isn't punctuation there:

When you get to the password box, type "smiley" and hit return.

or if you want to make it absolutely clear:

When you get to the password box, type

Smiley

and hit return.

Attachments

Some mailers support "attachments", where you can specify a document to send through e-mail. This allows people to share essentially any file in any format. GIF-encoded images, JPEG-encoded images, Word documents, WordPerfect documents, Photoshop files, Excel spreadsheets, and executable files are just a few of the types of documents that you can send.

If your correspondent has a mail reader that can handle attachments, this can work well

– a long attachment can be looked at later. However, if your correspondent's e-mail software doesn't understand attachments and you send a nontext file (like a Word document, a binary, a picture, or even compressed text), it will appear as lots of garbage. Pages and pages of garbage, usually.

Even if your correspondent has e-mail software that understands what attachments are, they still have to have software to read the document. Think of it this way: somebody can use the Post Office to send you any document. But if you send someone microfilm, they probably won't be able to read it. Even executable programs can't always be useful to your correspondent. Macintosh programs won't run on Microsoft Windows machines; Windows95 programs will not run on machines that only have DOS installed.

Also, even if your correspondents can receive and view the attachment you send them, they may not like to receive it. Suppose they are low on disk space or dial in from home to get their e-mail, they won't be happy to receive a 200MB video, no matter how funny it is.

It almost always better to post large documents on the Web and e-mail the URL instead of the file. If you don't have that choice, please e-mail your correspondents first and ask them if they can handle a large attachment of that format.

Summary

If you don't know what e-mail reader your correspondent has, play it safe.

Don't use formatted text

Be aware of special characters

Send web pages as text

Type in http:// before your URLs

Be cautious with attachments

Also bear in mind that punctuation doesn't mix well with URLs or quotations people should type.

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Chapter 4 – Page Layout

Words on a computer screen look different from on paper, and usually people find it harder to read on a screen than on paper. (I know several people who even print out their e-mail to read it.) The screen's resolution is not as good as paper's, there is sometimes flicker, the font may be smaller, and/or the font may be ugly. Your recipient's e-mail reader may also impose some constraints on formatting the mail, and may not have the same abilities as your e-mail software. This means that good e-mail page layout is different from good paper document page layout.

Shorter Paragraphs

Often e-mail messages will be read in a document window with scrollbars. While scrollbars are good, it makes it harder to track long paragraphs visually. Consider breaking up your paragraphs to only a few sentences apiece.

Line Length

Some software to read mail does not automatically wrap (adjust what words go on what line). This means that if there is a mismatch between your software's and your correspondent's in how they wrap lines, your correspondent may end with a message that looks like this:

I've got the price quote for the Cobra subassembly ready; as soon as I get a decision on the thromblemeister selection, I'll be ready to go. Have you talked to the thermo guys about whether they are ready to go with the left-handed thrombo or do they want to wait and check out the right-handed one first?

Besides, the "quoted-printable" encoding also contributes to the line-length problems. If a line is longer than 76 characters, it is split after the 75th character and the line ends with an equals sign. People whose e-mail reading software can understand quoted-printable encoding will probably have the lines automatically remade, but others will see ugly messages, like the following:

I've got the price quote for the Cobra subassemby ready; as soon as I get a=
decision on the thromblemeister selection, I'll be ready to go. Have you=
talked to the thermo guys about whether they are ready to go with the=
left-handed thrombo or do they want to wait and check out the right-handed=
one first?

There are even a few e-mail readers that truncate everything past the eightieth character. This is not the way to win friends and influence people.

You should try to keep your lines under seventy characters long. Why seventy and not, say, seventy-six? Because you should leave a little room for the indentation or quote marks your correspondents may want if they need to quote pieces of your message in their replies.

Terser Prose

How many times when you were in school were you told to write a 20-page paper? Probably a lot, and you got penalized for being terse. This training is not suitable for

e-mail. Keep it short. If they want more information, they can ask for it. (Also note that some of your correspondents may be charged by the kilobyte and/or have limits on how much disk space their e-mail can use!)

If you are sending a report to many people, then you may need to put more detail into the e-mail so you are not flooded with questions from everyone on the recipient list. (You should also ask yourself carefully if all the people need to be on the list.)

The fewer the people there are on the recipient list, the shorter the message should be. Books to thousands of people are tens of thousands of words long. Speeches in front of large groups are thousands of words long. But you'd tune out someone at a party who said more than a hundred words at a time.

I try to keep everything on one "page". Usually, this means twenty-five lines of text. (And yes, that means that this document is way, WAY too long for e-mail!)

Summary

In summary, keep everything short. Keep your lines short, keep your paragraphs short, and keep the message short.

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the latest major Net business opportunities.
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Chapter 5 – Intonation

Emotion is the most difficult thing to express in e-mail. People often get in trouble for typing exactly what they would say out loud. Unfortunately, without the tone of voice to signal their emotion, it is easy to misinterpret their intent.

While you cannot make your voice higher or lower, louder or softer to mean emphasis, there are games you can play with text to carry vocal inflection and emotion.

Light Emphasis

If you want to give something mild emphasis, you should enclose it in asterisks. This is the moral equivalent of italics in a paper document.

Instead of:

I said that I was going to go last Thursday.

Say:

I *said* that I was going to go last Thursday.

Or:

I said that I was going to go last *Thursday*.

Which of the two sentences above you choose depends on whether you are sure about the commitment you made or sure that you didn't mean Wednesday. (Restructuring the sentence to remove the ambiguity would be an even better idea.)

You can also capitalize the first letter only of words to give light emphasis:

While Bob may say that you should never turn it past
nine, this is not Cast In Stone. It will explode
if you turn it up to eleven, but anything under ten
should work just fine.

I like to use first-capitals to refer to things that are somehow dogmatic or reverential. Maybe this is a cultural holdover from all the capital letters that are used in the English Bible. It might not translate to other languages or cultures.

Strong Emphasis

If you want to show stronger emphasis, use all capital letters and toss in some extra exclamation marks. Instead of:

> Should I just boost the power on the thrombo?

No, if you turn it up to eleven, you'll overheat
the motors and it might explode.

Say:

> Should I just boost the power on the thrombo?

NO!!!! If you turn it up to eleven, you'll overheat
the motors and IT MIGHT EXPLODE!!

Note that you should use capital letters sparingly. Just as loss of sight can lead to improved hearing, the relative lack of cues to emotion in e-mail makes people hypersensitive to any cues that might be there. Thus, capital letters will tell the message

that you are shouting.

It is inappropriate to use all capital letters when you are calm. Don't do this:

HEY, I JUST WANTED TO SEE IF YOU HAD MADE ANY
PROGRESS ON THE PHROCKMEIJER ACCOUNT. STOP
BY AND SEE ME SOMETIME.

People will wince when they read that e-mail.

>>EXTREME!!<< Emphasis

If you want to highlight something, you can go wild:

If you are late this time, I swear on my mother's
grave that I will never, *never*, *NEVER*,
>>!!**NEVER**!!<< talk to you again.

Use this sparingly.

Mutter Equivalents

In person, there are many ways that you can signal that a communication is private and not to be repeated. You can lower your voice, you can look to your right and to your left either with your eyes or with your whole head, and you can lean closer to the other person. While these obviously make it more difficult for someone to overhear, these signals are so ingrained that we might use them even if there is nobody around for miles. Unfortunately, lowering your voice and moving your body is hard to do in e-mail.

I sometimes write what I think and then write down the sanitized version:

My boss got fired I mean resigned today, which
totally sucks err.. will lead to improved
relations between Engineering and Test.

A friend of mine uses double parentheses to mean "inner voice", what in the theater world is called an "aside":

My boss resigned ((got fired)) today
which is going to lead to improved
relations between Engineering and Test ((in
their dreams))

Something else that I will do sometimes to mean the "lowering of voice" is to type without any capital letters:

psssst!
hey wendy!
guess what?

I GOT THE JOB!!!! :-D :-D !!

I should warn you there is a minority that doesn't like the shortcuts I showed you. They argue that if Mark Twain could transfer emotion without resorting to such trick, then we should too. Well, I'm not as skilled a writer as Mark Twain, and usually don't have as many words to make my tone as clear as he did. I believe there is a greater danger of angering or offending someone by not using these shortcuts than there is of annoying someone by using them.

Summary

It is difficult for most people to express emotion well in a short message. Fortunately, you can use many textual tricks to help transfer the emotion:

Asterisks (for emphasis)

Capital letters

Punctuation

Whitespace

Lowercase letters

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Chapter 6 – Gestures

Not only does text lack the emotional cues that vocal inflection gives, text lacks cues from body language. There is no twinkling of the eyes to say you are kidding, no slapping the back of your hand in your palm to show urgency or frustration, no shoulders slumping to display discouragement.

While you are unable to accompany your words with hand or facial gestures, there are several textual stand-ins for gestures.

Smileys

A facial gestures can be represented with what is called a "smiley" or "emoticon": a textual drawing of a facial expression. The most common three are

:–)
;-)
and
:-(

(To understand these symbols, turn your head counter-clockwise and look at them sideways. You should see little faces.)

While people will have slightly different interpretations of the exact difference between the upper two, my personal opinion is that the upper one means more "I'm happy" and the lower one means more "I think I'm being funny". The last one is pretty universally understood as "I'm sad".

Typical examples:

Hey, guess what – I got the left-handed
thromblemeister spec done ahead of time! :–)
I'm on my way to fame and fortune now! ;-)

The second smiley, the ;-), indicates that you don't really believe that your boss will give you that big raise. It is similar to but not as fierce or trendy a rebuttal as a "NOT!" appended to the end of a sentence:

Hey, guess what – I got the left-handed
thromblemeister spec done ahead of time! :–)
I'm on my way to fame and fortune now – NOT!

There are a wide range of ASCII gestures available to you, from ill (%^P) to angry (>:–<) to astonished (:–o), limited only by your imagination. There are whole Smiley Dictionaries out there if you are feeling uncreative. (Note: I think that some of the Smiley Dictionary definitions of the basic smileys aren't a totally accurate reflection of the way I see smileys used, but your mileage may vary.)

Note that Japanese emotions are quite different.

Pause Equivalents

Imagine that you ask someone if you can turn the knob up to ten and a half. Suppose he says, "Well", then pauses for a long time, scratches his head, looks down at the floor, winces, grits his teeth, and says again, "Well", then pauses and says, "It might not explode". You'd get a sense of just how bad an idea it would be, while the text:

Well, it might not explode.

gives less information. I like to use lots of whitespace and typed-out vocalizations of "I'm thinking" sounds, as follows:

Weeeeellllll.... errr hem.

Wellll, it *might* not explode.

You can also use whitespace to make it more clear which words belong to which clause. For example, the following is very difficult to parse

Did you want to use a left-handed thromblemeister or a
right-handed one with a half-twist or a Jackadoody brocket?

You could instead haul out your high school notes on outlines:

Did you want to use
1. a left-handed thromblemeister
or
2. a right-handed one with a
a. half-twist
b. Jackadoody brocket

The only problem with using an outline like this is it invites people to send back messages that have nothing in them but the code for the answer they want, such as

2b.

To avoid that, you can use a structure like:

Did you want to use a
left-handed thromblemeister
or
right-handed one with a half-twist
or
right-handed one with a Jackadoody brocket?

This invites people to cut-and-paste the exact, full thing they want:

> a right-handed one with a Jackadoody brocket?

Creative Punctuation

I tend to use a lot of punctuation in what I call "comic book style". Instead of saying:

I am very confused and a little upset. Why did
you give my report to Jack instead of Jill?

I would probably say:

?!?! Why did you give my report to Jack
instead of Jill?!?

The question mark is kind of shorthand for a furrowed brow or a "huh?". The exclamation

mark is shorthand for amazement and possibly a scowl. The two together seem to mean astonishment.

There is a long and proud tradition of using punctuation as a place holder for swearing, e.g. That #%&#\$(*! You will also sometimes see an asterisk in place of important letters, usually the vowel, e.g. That son of a b*tch! or That son of a b****! or very rarely That s*n of a b*tch!. (In actual practice, this form of self-censorship is rare; it is more common for people to either use the whole word or omit it completely.)

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Chapter 7 – Status

Just as you have no guarantees about your correspondents' context, you can't determine much about their status. You can't look at their clothes, note their dialect and rate of speech, listen to the timbre of their voice, or count the wrinkles around their eyes. Your guesses about your correspondents' age, race, gender, marital status, affluence, intelligence, and education will be much less accurate than they usually would be in a face-to-face or even telephone conversation.

Your correspondents can't tell much about you either. They will probably do the same thing you will probably catch yourself doing – make assumptions on the flimsiest of pretexts.

I am emphatically not saying that it is good for people to make assumptions. But because there are so few status cues to draw upon, they will. You need to be aware of that, so that you can work on guiding their assumptions if you need to.

Cues They Will Use

Language

The biggest status cue is your competence with the language. If you have lots of misspellings, your subjects do not agree with your verbs, or you use the wrong word, people may assume that you are uneducated. From that, they may infer that you are not very clever. It doesn't matter that the correlation between language ability and intelligence is weak (especially among non-native speakers); lots of people will make that inference anyway.

Furthermore, some people are literally insulted by getting email with errors, especially typographical errors. They feel that it is disrespectful to send email with blatant errors. (Note that you can use this to your advantage. If you want to flaunt your superior status, you can insert some typos deliberately.)

I realize that in a perfect world, we would all have the luxury of faultless writing. However, we do not live in a perfect world. Good grammar is very hard for some people, just as painting portraits, solving partial differential equations, shoeing horses, and sinking putts can be very hard for others. This has always been true, but before the advent of electronic technology, people who were not very skilled at writing could do most of their communication verbally. This coping strategy is less possible now.

Spending more time crafting prose can improve the quality of the writing, but it is not possible to spend an hour on each email message if you need to send ten of them per day. Fortunately, grammar- and spell-checkers can help enormously. If high status is important to your message, you should definitely use them. However, there are certain classes of errors that grammar- and spell-checkers will not find. If you really want to boost your language-related status, you may have to commit yourself to some significant studying.

Personally, I would like my correspondents to spend their time on providing appropriate context instead of on perfecting their grammar. I would much rather get email that says:

There is 50 people with machien guns on Main Street
abt 1 mi aways wallking north and they not friendly so
getcher butts outta here protno!!!!

than one about the same situation that says:

You would be advised to leave the building promptly.

I can guess at proper grammar; I can't guess at proper context.

Return Address

Your correspondents will extract status cues from your domain. (If you aren't familiar with domain names, you might want to read the appendix on domain names and come back.) Any stereotype that is held about the organization that gives you your email connection will rub off on you. For example, if your email comes from:

ibm.com, people may presume that you are adult, computer literate, and somewhat stuffy.

aol.com, some people will presume that you are connecting from home and that your email is not work-related.

washington.k12.ia.us, people may think that you are under 18.

webtv.net, people will probably assume that you are not terribly computer literate.

Your correspondents will also look at your real name (if visible) and log-in ID. Unless your name has cues to the contrary, most people will assume that you match the dominant species of your organization and/or country. People will frequently assume that bpj@thromble.com is male but that barbara@thromble.com will be female – even though barbara could easily be a man named Peter Barbara. Unless the name is something like Smith, people are likely to assume that the author of any email coming from Taiwan is Asian. Unless the screen name is something like Jamaal, people will usually assume that authors of email coming from the U.S. are of European descent.

Your log-in ID gives even more subtle cues. Having a desirable email name – short and without numbers – can indicate that you were one of the first in your domain to get an email account. Thus, steve@thromble.com has probably been using computers longer than steve9672@thromble.com.

People may also make assumptions about your maturity and formality level. Your correspondent will probably take Barbara.J.Periwinkle@thromble.com more seriously than barbiedoll@thromble.com.

You can steer people's impressions very easily just by telling them who you are. You can do this by adding a signature with status cues:

Barbara J. Periwinkle
Vice-President of Legal Affairs
Itty Bitty Machines, Inc.

Or:

Peter Periwinkle
Kennedy Middle School
(Age 14)
Check out the Latvian Homepage at <http://www.latvia.org>!

Here, young Mr. Periwinkle gives the cue that he might be of Latvian origin.

It can also be effective to lead off a message with status information:

Hi, my name is Peter and I'm a student at Kennedy Middle School in White Plains. I'm doing a project at school on imaginary industrial equipment. Could you please send me the latest thromblemeister catalog?

Or:

Hi – I'm the Vice-President of Legal Affairs with Itty Bitty Machines. Could you please send me the latest thromblemeister catalog? I'm considering purchasing stock in your company.

Note that here the author not only gives a title and professional affiliation, but also shows off language facility by using big words: "considering purchasing" instead of "thinking of buying". Overuse of big words can sound pretentious, but in short messages can enhance status. Be careful, though, that you use the words properly, and that they aren't so obscure that your correspondent can't understand them.

Email Usage

The final thing that people will look at is your use of email. If you do not give proper context, type only in capital letters, or use extremely long lines, people may assume that you are highly inexperienced with the medium. They may also assume that you are too stupid or stubborn to learn, since those are errors that are usually pointed out very rapidly (and not always gently) by experienced users.

In addition to the composition of the email message, people will look at how appropriate the message was. Was it sent to the right person? Was it a reasonable question?

Do You Need To Worry About This?

How do you decide how much time you should spend on managing your status cues? That depends upon several things:

Do you know these people already? If you have had lots of contact with your correspondents already, their assumptions about your age, gender, status, and intellect will be pretty solid. Only the most serious abuse of grammar rules and email etiquette probably is likely to significantly affect your status with them.

Are these people likely to care? High-school English teachers are likely to care more about your grammar than pet food store owners. People who send lots of email will probably be more tolerant than people who have the luxury of spending an hour on every email message. The Diversity Training Manager is probably less likely to form impressions based on your race than the regional Dragon of the Klu Klux Klan.

What outcome depends on the message? If you are sending email to your boss, you probably should be careful about your grammar. If you are corresponding with salespeople who want your business, well, they are being paid not to care about your grammar. If you need a favor, people may be more willing to help you if you are able to project enough status to make them think that you might be useful to them in the future. What does their email look like? If they send you email with incorrect punctuation, poor spelling, and mangled subordinate clauses, they probably won't care too much if you do the same.

Do incorrect assumptions bother you? If you are a man named Patrick who doesn't mind

being mistaken for a woman, then go ahead and use "Pat" instead of "Patrick". If you don't care if people think you are a teenager, go ahead and use the handle "RadSkater".

Summary

Again, I do not endorse stereotyping, but generalizing is part of human nature. You need to be aware of what signals you may be giving your correspondents and how to counteract them if you feel they may be incorrect.

Language status can be improved by using grammar– and spell–checkers.

Signatures or self–introductions can reduce misconceptions.

Hopefully, reading this guide will make you more informed when composing future email messages.

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Chapter 8 – Formality

It has been my observation that formality is used to indicate the inability of a correspondent to make a reply. Take three situations where someone is not free to respond:

If you and the Queen of England have tea, one of you might ask about the other's health, but both of you are socially constrained from actually discussing recent surgeries. Thomas Jefferson is dead. It is not possible to ask him what the proper interpretation of the phrase "high crimes and misdemeanors" is.

If every member of a large audience tried to comment on a speech, there would be bedlam.

Conversations involving people with exaggerated status differences and those to audiences that are unborn, dead, and/or large tend to use very formal language.

Conversely, intimate discussions use very informal language. If you used the same language with your spouse that you used with the Queen, your spouse would probably wonder what he or she did to make you angry!

Thus you can control to some extent how many responses you get to your email messages by how formal your language is. Because email is so easy to respond to, people naturally tend to use very informal prose.

The informal tone encourages your correspondents to respond. This can be a very good thing if you want feedback. However, if your email address is in a very public place, you may well find yourself getting far more email than you are interested in.

So be cautious about the tone of your messages. If you want people to respond, be chatty and informal. But if you want to discourage people from sending you email, you should write much more formally.

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Chapter 9 – Greetings and Signatures

Every new medium develops its own protocols for opening and closing. Telephone conversations start with "Hello" and end with "Goodbye". Letters open with "Dear" and end with "Sincerely". Because email is so new, there aren't firm customs on how to open and close.

Many people do not give either a salutation or a signature. After all, while a letter can get separated from its envelope easily, it is difficult to separate an email message's body from its addressing information. The email message itself says who it is to and from.

However, that information might not be adequate for your needs. It might be difficult to find with some email reading software. It might be unclear or ambiguous. It might be inadequate for telling the receivers just why they are getting that message. Or, it might not convey the proper formality or status cues for your purposes.

I will give you my thoughts on openers and closers, but you need to think carefully about what you are trying to convey both explicitly and implicitly. You also need to take the culture and customs of all parties into consideration.

Greetings Salutations

Salutations are tricky, especially if you are crossing cultures. Frequently, titles are different for men and women, and you may not be able to tell which you are addressing. The family name is first in some cultures and last in others. Honorifics may vary based on status or age. So don't feel bad if you have trouble figuring out which salutation to use: it is a difficult problem.

In the United States, it is a bad idea to use "Sir" or "Mr." unless you are absolutely certain that your correspondent is male. Similarly, it is probably safer to use "Ms." instead of "Miss" or "Mrs." unless you know the preference of the woman in question.

In the United States, using someone's first name is usually ok. Thus, you can usually get away with a "Dear" and the first name.

Dear Chris:

Here you are covered regardless of whether Chris is male or female. (Beware of using a diminutive if you aren't certain your correspondent uses it. It might rankle Judith to be called Judy; Robert might hate being called Bob.)

If you are addressing a group of people, you can say "Dear" plus the unifying attribute. For example:

Dear Project Managers:

Or:

Dear San Jose Lasers Fans:

Do You Even Need A Salutation?

Given that email is relatively informal, frequently (in the United States) there isn't a problem with dispensing with names and titles altogether, especially if you are in a higher

status position than your correspondent:

Hello – I saw your web site and wanted to mention that I invented the thromblemeister on Feb 29, 2403, *not* on Feb 28, 2402.

I usually use a simple "Hi" for people that I already know:

Hi – Are you interested in getting together for sushi next week? I can bring all my wedding pictures and bore you to death. ;–)

"Good Morning" and "Good Afternoon" don't make a lot of sense with email, as the sun may have moved significantly by the time your correspondent gets around to it. "Good Day" sounds stilted to American ears (although it is common in other parts of the former British Empire). You may want to avoid "Greetings" in the United States: it reminds many people of the draft notices young men got during the Vietnam War.

Again, you must be careful about cultural differences. The East Coast of the United States is more formal than the West Coast (where I live). Germans are even more formal; they can work side-by-side for years and never get around to a first-name basis. Starting a message to Germany with Dear Hans might be a bad idea.

Identification

When I get email from strangers, I care more about what connection they have with me than how they address me. When you send email, particularly someone who doesn't know you, it would be good if you would immediately answer these questions:
How did you learn of your correspondent?

What do you want from your correspondent?

Who are you?

Why should your correspondent pay attention to you? (If you can't answer this question, you should wonder if you should even send the email.)

Putting some of that information in a signature is better than nowhere at all, but putting it at the top is better for several reasons:

If there is a problem with the transmission of the email, the end is much more likely to get lost than the beginning.

A lot of people get more than twenty messages per day, and so read them quickly. If you don't establish quickly who you are, your correspondent may delete your message before they get to the bottom.

Your identity is an important clue to the context of the message.

Good answers to the questions can take several forms:

Dear Ms. Sherwood: I am an editor at Very Large Publishing Company, Inc. I sat next to your husband on United last week, and he mentioned that you are interested in publishing a book based on your email guide. I have read your guide, and would be very interested in receiving a proposal from you.

Or:

My name is Dave Wilcox and I'm the legal counsel for Thromblemeisters Direct, Inc. We are deeply disturbed at the aspersions you cast upon us and on thromblemeisters in your email guide. Therefore, we order you to immediately cease and desist using any reference to thromblemeisters in your email guide. If you do not, we will be forced to file suit against you or your descendants if and when we and/or thromblemeisters come into existence.

Or even:

Hi – I am a novice email user and just read your email guide. I don't know if you are the right person to ask or not, but do you know what the French word for "Mister" is? If you can tell me the answer, I'll send you a funny postcard.

Some good friends of mine recently got email from my cousin for the first time. Unfortunately, not all of the email made it through. The message they got said only:

Dear Rich and Chris: I met you at Jim and Ducky's wedding.

But, because he identified where he knew Rich and Chris from immediately, it was enough information that they knew he was someone to pay attention to. They replied to him and communication is now going smoothly between them.

Signatures

Many email programs allow you to set up a default signature to be included at the end of every message. Many people use these signatures as an easy way to give their name and alternate ways of reaching them. For example:

Hi – when did you want to go to lunch?

Rebecca P. Snod whistle
Thromblemeisters Direct, Inc.
666 Beast Street
Styx, HI 77340
+1 (959) 123-4567 voice
+1 (959) 123-4568 FAX
snodwhistle@throbledirect.com W
becca@thromboqueen.net (personal)

Such an extensive amount of signature information in contrast to such a short question looks silly to me. I think much of the above signature is extraneous. If they got the email from you, they can reply by email, so don't need your FAX number or street address. (If they have to send a FAX or package, they can ask for addressing information.) They already have one email address in the message you sent, and don't need your other email address.

The name is perfectly reasonable to include, especially if

Your email messages don't include your full name in the From: line. (Send yourself email to see if your name is there or not.)

The name in the From: line doesn't match the name you actually use. (Christina might actually go by Chris, but her company might insist on using her full name as her email name.)

The email account is shared by multiple people. (My husband and I have a joint email account, for example.)

The telephone number is also a reasonable thing to include – if you are willing to be interrupted by a phone call. Emotions are easier to convey over the phone, and some people prefer phone to email for all circumstances.

If the message is business related, including the company name is a reasonable thing to do – even if the message is going to someone else in the same company.

One thing that is missing from Rebecca P. Snod whistle's signature, above, that I would like to see is her job title. Is she the vice-president of sales or the shipping clerk? That may have more of an influence on the correspondent than anything else.

So I would rewrite the above signature to be:

Rebecca P. Snod whistle
Chief Executive Officer, Thromblemeisters Direct, Inc.
+1 (959) 123-4567 voice

That signature is still overkill for arranging lunch, but it isn't always convenient to switch between having your signature included or not.

Some people put things purely for entertainment in their signature: artwork, philosophical sayings, jokes, and/or quotations in their signature. This can be ok, but don't overdo it. A good heuristic is to keep your signature at or under five lines long.

After setting up a signature that is included automatically, it is easy to forget about it. (After all, your email software might not show it to you, or it might be so routine that you never look at it again.) So whenever a piece of contact information changes, make sure to revisit your signature to make sure that it is still up-to-date. And, if you have an entertainment piece in your signature, change it every once in a while. It wasn't as funny the fiftieth time your coworker saw it as it was the first time.

One final note on signatures: they are a good way to let your correspondent know that all of the message got transmitted properly. There is no body language to signal that you are "done talking" and, unfortunately, email transmissions sometimes get interrupted.

Separators

Many people put pretty separators – lines, horizontal bars, and so on – around their signatures. For example:

Rebecca P. Snod whistle | CEO, Thromblemeisters Direct, Inc.
+1 (959) 123-4567 voice | +1 (959) 123-4567 fax

These are very pretty to sighted people, but imagine what it would be like for people who are so visually challenged that they have their computer read their email to them: "hyphen hyphen hyphen hyphen hyphen hyphen..."

That said, some email programs recognize "--" as a signature separator, and so can process the signature differently. (For example, some programs don't include the

signature in quotes.)

Technically, the signature is supposed to be two hyphens plus a space, but it's very common to see just two hyphens without the space.

Summary

If you are well-known to your correspondent, you can probably get away without including extra identification. In other cases, you should provide your correspondent with enough clues to figure out who you are, why you are writing, and why he or she should pay attention to you. Preferably, this information will be at the top of the message.

Greetings are difficult to do well, especially if you are crossing cultures and/or languages. In the United States, you can be pretty informal, but even in the U.S., you need to be careful that you aren't either making assumptions or using sensitive words.

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Chapter 10 – Summary

Here, then, is my advice for good email style:
Provide your audience with adequate context:

Use meaningful subject lines
Quote the email to which you are responding
Avoid pronouns

Be aware of page layout issues. Stick with:

Short paragraphs
Lines under seventy-five characters long
Messages under twenty-five lines long
Plain text

Find replacements for gestures and intonation:

Smileys
Asterisks
Capital letters
Typed-out vocalizations
Whitespace
Lower-case letters
Creative punctuation

Be aware of what cues people will use to form impressions of you:

Name
Domain name
Grammar, punctuation, and spelling
Formality
Signatures

Hopefully these suggestions will be useful to you as you start your emailing career! :-)

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Appendix 1 – Acronyms and Jargon

A number of new users have asked me to include a jargon/acronym page for email. Contrary to how you might feel, there is not a conspiracy out there to try to exclude you. Every group that spends any time together develops its own shorthand notation; it is not surprising that people forced to use the unnatural action of typing would be inclined towards acronyms. Some of these come from Usenet newsgroups, some of the more "gestural" ones come from Internet Relay Chat (IRC).

Obviously it would be nice of seasoned users to not pepper novices with an enormous amount of jargon, but on the Internet, nobody knows you are a newcomer.

Here are some of the most common acronyms and expressions:

BTW – By The Way

FYI – For Your Information

IMHO – In My Humble/Honest Opinion

RTFM – Read The Manual ("Manual" here refers to any documentation)

LOL – [I] Laughed Out Loud [at what you wrote]

RSN – Real Soon Now

ROTFL – [I am] Rolling On The Floor Laughing [at what you wrote]

<g> – grin

<hug> – hug

These are less common, but show up occasionally:

TTFN – Ta-Ta For Now

YMMV – Your Mileage May Vary (taken from a disclaimer that legally must be given any time automotive fuel efficiency ratings are used in U.S. advertisements)

TIA – Thanks In Advance (also sometimes written advTHANKSance)

Jargon that is sometimes used:

spam – Unsolicited email sent to many people simultaneously, usually commercial, but occasionally political.

bounce – A message that was returned to the sender, either because the email address was incorrect or because there was a configuration problem on the receiver's end. Can also be a verb: "I tried sending email to my Aunt Mabel, but it bounced. I guess she doesn't work there any more."

distribution list – A single email address that resends to many others, allowing a discussion to continue easily among a quasi-stable group of participants. Also called emailing lists or listservs (from LIST SERVERS).

bot – A piece of software that acts on behalf of and in place of a remote human (from roBOT).

mailbot – A piece of software that automatically replies to email.

listbot – A piece of software that manages distribution lists. Also called a listserver or majordomo (after the name of a common list server).

post – Send to a distribution list or Usenet newsgroup, i.e. to a quasi-stable group of people.

flame – An electronic message that is particularly hostile. Can also be a verb: "Whoeeee! I posted a rude cat joke to my company's cat-lovers mailing list, and wow, did I get flamed!"

lurk – To read messages anonymously (in either a mailing list or Usenet newsgroup) without posting.

ping – Test to see if the other person is there/awake/available. (This comes from a Unix test to see if a machine (or its net connection) was active or not.) "Lunch tomorrow? I may be busy with a client. Ping me at eleven thirty or so."

A term that I would love to see popularized is "NRN", for "No Response Needed". Sometimes, without body language, it isn't clear when an email-based conversation should be ended. While FYI often means that a response isn't expected, the primary purpose of FYI is to indicate that it's something of low importance.

To unravel jargon and technical Internet terms, see also the fine [Internet Literacy Consultants' Glossary of Internet Terms](#). There is also a [Dictionary of Computer Acronyms and Jargon](#). A simpler list is at [Harry Yeatts' acronyms page](#).

Appendix 2 – Domain Names

How To Read A Domain

The domain name is the thing that comes after the at sign (@) in an email address, like aol.com or arc.nasa.gov. The domain names have different words, separated by periods, that indicate different levels of organization. The size of the organization increases as you go left to right. The domain arc.nasa.gov, for example, is for Ames Research Center, which is part of NASA, which is one of many U.S. government entities.

If I wave my hands and simplify just a little bit, the left-most word is the name of the actual computer that handles the mail. Small organizations might only have one computer that does everything; larger organizations might have multiple computers. For example, Ames Research Center email addresses currently all go through mail.arc.nasa.gov.

If you get email from someone, and there is no at sign (@), then that probably means they have the exact same domain as you. For example, if pat@bogusname.com sends email to chris@bogusname.com, Chris might see only pat in the return address field.

If there seems to be something missing from the domain name, then your correspondent may share some domain information. For example, if pat@uno.bogusname.com sends email to chris@dos.bogusname.com, Chris might see only pat@uno in the return address field.

Three-Letter Top-Level Domains

The last word, also called the top-level domain, in a domain gives a clue to your affiliation. In theory, this is what three-letter Top-Level Domains (TLDs) mean:

TLD	Meaning	Examples
.com	Commercial business, a company	ibm.com, att.com, ford.com
.net	Network provider, Internet Service Provider	webtv.net
.gov	U.S. governmental agency	whitehouse.gov, nasa.gov
.edu	U.S. educational institution	uiuc.edu, stanford.edu
.org	Non-profit institution	redcross.org, sfopera.org
.mil	U.S. military	army.mil
.int	International	itu.int

The three-letter top-level domains (except for int) were once exclusively U.S. domains. They are still heavily U.S.-centric.

Two-Letter Top-Level Domains

If there is a two-letter top-level domain, that is a country code. Here are some examples:

TLD	Country	Examples
us	United States	city.palo-alto.ca.us, washington.k12.ia.us
uk	United Kingdom	cam.ac.uk, tvr.co.uk

my	Malaysia	parlimen.gov.my, jaring.my
de	Germany (Deutschland)	sgi.de
jp	Japan	www.hitachi.co.jp, www.nihon-u.ac.jp
to	Tonga	netsurf.to
tv	Tuvalu	internet.tv

An exhaustive list of country codes is at <http://www.ics.uci.edu/pub/websoft/wwwstat/country-codes.txt>.

Further Clues

Countries, especially the ones that are well-connected to the Internet, frequently have some meaningful structure in the next-to-last word in their domains. For example, ac is short for "academic" in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Japan. Oxford University, for example, is ox.ac.uk.

Universities in Europe frequently have the word "uni" in their domains somewhere, short for "university". Australia uses edu for its universities, as in usyd.edu.au.

Commercial entities frequently have co in the next-to-last word in their domain. For example, Hitachi Japan is at hitachi.co.jp.

United States two-letter domains usually have the two-letter state or territory abbreviation right before the .us. For example, the city of Palo Alto in California has the domain city.palo-alto.ca.us. (Remember that the scope increases as you go left to right: palo-alto.us.ca would be in Canada if it existed!) U.S. State and territory codes can be found at <http://www.usps.gov/cpim/ftp/pubs/201html/addrpack.htm#abbr>.

Children's schools in the United States frequently have the word k12 in them. (This is short for "Kindergarten through 12th grade", the U.S. terms for schools for students nominally ages 5–18.) Community colleges frequently have cc as the next-to-last word in the domain.

Canada also sometimes uses province codes; those can be found at <http://www.cdnnet.ca/info/application-form>.

The UK also uses

plc and ltd for businesses

gov for governmental sites

mod for Ministry of Defence

net for networks

nhs for the National Health Service

org for non-commercial organizations

sch for schools

(Note that unlike in the US, "school" in the UK means ONLY pre-university institutions, what in the US would be called K–12.)

France uses

asso for associations

barreau for barristers (lawyers)

cci for Chambers of Commerce

cesi for Centers of Secondary Industrial Education (if I translated it correctly)

dXXX department numbered XXX (geographic region sort of like a U.S. county)

gouv government

presse press (e.g. newspapers)
tm trademark

There are a bunch of subdomains that have been defined in the us domain, including:

fed.us for federal government
dni.us for Distributed National Institutes
nsn.us for Native Sovereign Nations for various Native American tribal entities
isa.us or Inter-State Authorities (like port authorities)
uscourt.gov.us for federal courts
state.XX.us for state government
tec.XX.us for technical schools (in state XX)
ci.YY.XX.us or city.YY.XX.us for city government (in city YY)
co.ZZ.XX.us or county.ZZ.XX.us for county government (in county ZZ)
cog.XX.us for Council Of Government, for cross-jurisdictional governing bodies (like water quality or regional transportation boards)
district.XX.us or dst for administrative districts that cross city or county boundaries (like school, water, or sanitation districts sometimes do)
lib.XX.us for libraries
mus.XX.us for museums
gen.XX.us for general, non-business state-wide organizations

These rules are not always followed. For example, the State of California uses ca.gov when it really should use state.ca.us. Also, some of these categories are extremely rare. I've never seen a dni or a tec, for example.

Now Wait A Minute!

You may have noticed that some sites that don't seem to match their extensions. The domain internet.tv is in Canada, not in Tuvalu. Why does America On-Line use aol.com instead of aol.net? Why is netsurf.to in the United States?

Basically, money. The countries of Tuvalu and Tonga have raised badly-needed cash by selling the rights to their extensions to outside parties, who then sell them to other bidders. (They think that the English word "to" and the common abbreviation "TV" for "television" are worth something as extensions.) And since .com is what people try first when looking for a company, many entities chose to use that instead of something in their country's two-letter top-level domain.

There are also some classes of organization that don't fit any of the domains particularly well. Individuals who want to put up a web page are not companies, nor non-profits, nor military. For-profit arts organizations don't fit comfortably in either .com or .org.

Take all domain names with a grain of salt. There are no penalties for taking a name in the "wrong" domain, so when people think it will get them some advantage, it happens.

Appendix 3 – Email Bibliography

Here are just a few resources that you can use to learn more about email. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and will always be under construction as new material appears.

Common Questions

Here is more information on some common questions:

[Finding Email Addresses](#) by Kaitlin Duck Sherwood

[Finding someone's email address](#) by David Alex Lamb (longer, more comprehensive than mine)

[Attachments](#) by Gregory Wasson for MacUser

[Is Electronic Mail More Like Speech or More Like Writing?](#) by [Kaitlin Duck Sherwood](#)

[Can I Use Outlook or Outlook Express with AOL?](#) by [Kaitlin Duck Sherwood](#)

Varied Collections

Mary Houten-Kemp's site, [Everything E-Mail](#), lives up to its name.

Heinz Tschabitscher runs [About.com's email site](#), and does so very well. His site has quite a lot of very good, well-organized information on it.

[Yahoo's Electronic Mail Category](#) covers everything and the kitchen sink. [Google's Email Help and Tutorials site](#) is a bit more focused.

There is an extensive guide to different programs for reading email at [Inter-Links](#). This site also has information on how to find email addresses.

[Jacobe Palme](#) has [a small review of email books](#).

The [Internet Business Forum](#) has a very professional set of [Email Tips and Techniques](#).

[Wingra](#) has a nice [list of links](#). It covers mostly techie-type things – protocols, standards – but there is a pretty comprehensive list of industry magazines as well.

[Adam Cogan](#) of [Superior Software for Windows](#) wrote up some [Rules to Better Email](#). I have some subtle disagreements with a few of the details of his rules, but on the whole they are very good.

There are a bunch of catch-all books that have a chapter or two on style/etiquette issues, but which tend to talk a lot about what email is, why it is wonderful, what features it has, and how to push the right buttons and pull down the right menus, using one or more of the emailers of the time to illustrate the concepts. These include:

[E-Mail for Dummies](#) by John R. Levine (and a bunch of others) covers a whole collection of email software and services.

IDG, 1997; ISBN: 0764501313; 300 pages

Using Email Effectively by Linda Lamb using the Unix mailx email reader in the examples.

O'Reilly and Associates, 1995; ASIN: 1565921038

[Using E-Mail](#), by Dave Gibbons and four others, covering a whole bunch of email programs.

Que, 1994; ISBN: 0-7897-0023-9

[The E-Mail Companion: Communicating Effectively via the Internet and Other Global Networks](#) by John Quarterman and Smoot Carl-Mitchell, using the Unix pine email reader.

Addison-Wesley, 1994; ISBN: 0201406586

There are also some interesting articles and books about the differences between oral and literate societies and the difference between post-printing press and "scribal" societies. I've got those in a [separate bibliography](#).

Style and/or Netiquette

I lump style and netiquette together here because many authors don't distinguish

between the two.

[I Will Follow...](#) covers a lot of the same material that [my guide](#) covers, but not in as much detail.

Paul McFedries has an [email primer](#) that is quite nice.

Albion.com has the [Netiquette Home Page](#), which has excerpts from the book [Netiquette](#) by Virginia Shea. The book is very thorough on how to be a nicer person, and tends to have a Usenet-oriented focus.

Albion Books, 1994; ISBN: 0963702513

[Tips on E-mail Netiquette](#)

Harvard Business School Publishing [The Ten Commandments of E-Mail](#)

[Electronic Mail Etiquette](#) (David Harris)

[Avoiding the Dark Side of Email](#) by [Jim Britell](#) is a thoughtful essay on the dangers of miscommunication in email and how to properly convey your message.

[Roadmap](#) by Rev. Bob Crispen talks about how to avoid flame wars.

[E-Mail Etiquette, With Some Rules to Extinguish Flame-Throwing](#) by [Larry Magid](#) has good, solid advice and a list of links to even more advice.

I disagree vehemently with some of the advice at [Business Netiquette International](#). If you don't like [my guidelines](#), you might like his.

The book [Elements of E-mail Style](#) by David Angell and Brent Heslop is an excellent book with a slightly different purpose from my guide. They talk about style a little bit, but most of the pages cover what I think of as "language mechanics" – spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, and so on.

Addison-Wesley Pub Co, 1994; ISBN: 0201627094; 157 pages

[E-Writing: 21st Century Tools for Effective Communication](#) by Dianna Booher is similar to [Elements of E-mail Style](#), but bigger and thicker. 314 of its 370 pages are devoted to writing -- on paper or in email.

Pocket Books, 2001; ISBN: 0743412583; 368 pages

There is a classic, tongue-in-cheek guide of what not to do at [Dear Emily Postnews](#).

[Writing Effective E-Mail](#) by Nancy Flynn and Tom Flynn is really kind of a workbook. It looks like it is good for use with a live training class. I don't agree with some of their statements about how important grammar is nor that email is no different than letters. They do cover all the basics briefly but pretty well.

Crisp Publications, 1998; ISBN: 1-56052-515-0; 82 pages

If you read [A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email](#), you'll be bored by [E-Mail Essentials](#) by Robert S. Want, as about half of it is [A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email](#). (I put the Beginner's Guide into the public domain, so yes, he can do that.)

[Better, Faster Email: Getting the Most Out of Email](#) by Joan Tunstall is a grab-bag of all kinds of email topics, including when to use email vs. phone, security, and finding mailing lists, and maintaining your address book.

Allen & Unwin; April 1999; ISBN 1864488999; 192 pages

[Easy Email](#), also by Joan Tunstall, is basically a very small, abridged version of Better, Faster Email.

Allen & Unwin; 2000; ISBN 1865082945; 192 pages

Collections of emoticons can be found at:

[SmileyDictionary.com](#)

[The Unofficial Smiley Dictionary](#)

[Helwig's Smiley Dictionary](#).

[Electronic Frontier Foundation](#)

There are also two books on emoticons:

[Smileys](#) by Dougherty Sanderson and David W. Sanderson

O'Reilly & Associates, 1993; ISBN: 1565920414; 93 pages

and

[The Smiley Dictionary](#) by Seth Godin

Peachpit, 1993; ISBN: 1-56609-008-3; 73 pages

[Wired Style: Principles of English Usage in the Digital Age](#) talks about issues that The Chicago Manual of Style doesn't cover yet: things like how to cite a web page, how to spell email, etc. Somebody had to write a spec for the language, and I guess they were

as good an outfit as any to write it. Be aware that they talk about how to translate net concepts to paper, not how to translate paper concepts to electronic media. Furthermore, most of the book is a huge glossary.

HardWired, 1997; ISBN: 1888869011; 158 pages

[Why Didn't You Say That in the First Place? : How to Be Understood at Work](#) by Richard Heyman. I haven't read this one yet, but it looks like a good book on paper document style issues.

Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997; ISBN: 0787903442 ; 192 pages

Geeky Technical Details

If you want information about the nitty-gritty nuts and bolts of exactly how the bits in your email message end up on someone else's screen, Carnegie-Mellon's [Project Cyrus](#) has a very good [overview of email standards](#).

The specifications for almost all of the Internet are called RFCs. I made a [search page](#) that uses Google to search all of the site that has RFCs and RFC drafts.

Want to know the difference between IMAP and POP? Look at Terry Gray's [Message Access Paradigms and Protocols](#).

Delivering Electronic Mail by Phillip Robinson is mostly geared to system administrators and other technojoys. (Out of print)

M&T Books, 1992; ISBN: 1558511709

[Effective E-Mail : Clearly Explained : File Transfer, Security, and Interoperability](#) by Brad Shimmin (with CD-ROM) is kind of "geek lite". It is somewhat technical, with a particular emphasis on how to cope with different file formats and attachments. There is also a nice section on security and how to send email to/through proprietary (non-Internet) systems. It uses Eudora for its examples.

Ap Professional, 1997; ISBN: 0126400601 ; 250 pages

My wish list for [The Perfect Email Program](#) by [Kaitlin Duck Sherwood](#)

Mailing Lists

[Liszt](#) is probably the biggest list of lists; go here if you are looking for a list.

[Where can I find a mailing list?](#) by Heinz Tschabitscher for About.com

[Email Discussion Groups and Lists](#) from [Impulse Research](#) gives common features (and commands) of emailing list software and gives pointers to where you can find a list on your favorite topic.

James Milles of Case Western Reserve University has a nice summary of [Mailing List Manager Commands](#) (for users, not administrators).

Sociology

[Miss Manner' Basic Training: Communication](#) by Judith Martin covers much more than email, but it has a very good chapter on when to use which medium.

Crown, 1997, ISBN 0-517-70673-3; 180 pages

[The 3 Rs of E-Mail : Risks, Rights and Responsibilities](#) by Diane B. Hartman and Karen Nantz. I have not read this book.

Crisp Publications, 1996; ISBN: 1560523786; 153 pages

Email compared to other new communications technology: [New Communications Technologies](#) by [Kaitlin Duck Sherwood](#)

Security

[E-Mail Security : How to Keep Your Electronic Messages Private](#) by Bruce Schneier is a very detailed, somewhat technical book. It talks about all the different ways people can spy on you via email, then goes into the nuts and bolts of encrypting mail.

John Wiley & Sons, 1995; ISBN: 047105318X; 384 pages

Spam

[Spamcon.org](#) has a lot of resources to combat spamming and to deal with spam.

Find out where spam comes from in [Spam Sources](#) by [Kaitlin Duck Sherwood](#)

[Stopping Spam](#) by Alan Schwartz and Simson Garfinkel is a book mostly for system administrator-types on how to cut down on unsolicited commercial email. There is some stuff for casual computer users as well.

O'Reilly & Associates, 1998; ISBN: 1-56592-388-X; 204 pages

[Removing the Spam : Email Processing and Filtering](#) by Geoff Mulligan is a guide for system administrators or Unix power users. It tells how to use sendmail and procmail to

get rid of spam. (I have not read this book yet.)

Addison-Wesley Longman, 1999; ISBN: 0201379570; 190 pages

I have heard of but not yet gotten a chance to review:

E-Mail by Stephen A. Caswell.

Artech House, 1988; ISBN: 0890063036

[Internet Messaging](#) by David Strom, Marshall T. Rose.

Harcourt Brace, 1998; ISBN: 0139786104 ; 400 pages

Policy

I am occasionally asked for guidelines in creating usage policies. I don't make policies, but here is what I've run across:

Jonathan Whelan's book [e-mail @ work](#) claims to be "for everybody", but I would say that it's optimized for people who haven't used email much and who are trying to decide if/how to bring email into their company. It has very good sections on setting policy and legal issues. It also covers email security and touches (very) briefly on managing email and writing better messages. Note: this is very definitely a British book. Some of the slang, companies, and acronyms won't make immediate sense to US readers; the legal aspects are discussed purely from a British legal perspective.

Baker & McKenzie has a long, thorough, and lawyerly [An Employer's Staff Email and Internet Policy](#).

Legal Research Group has [some information](#), including a sample policy for \$100.

[Should Your Company have an Internet Use Policy?](#) (InterActive Arts)

Kalton's (a British legal firm) has a good essay on [Email and Internet Policies](#).

[E-mail Answers](#) has some discussion of email security and legal liabilities.

Examples of and resources for developing U.S. educational Acceptable Use Policies

[Florida Atlantic University](#)

[Arizona State](#)

[University of Maryland](#) (various)

[various California policies](#)

[Odile Heisel's collection](#)

[Internet Learning Partners collection](#)

[E-Policy : How to Develop Computer, E-Policy, and Internet Guidelines to Protect Your Company and Its Assets](#) by Michael R. Overly. (I have not read this book.)

AMACOM, 1998; ISBN: 0814479960 ; 144 pages

Intel has a site with information about [their email training program](#).

Scholarly Work

Occasionally people ask me for more scholarly/academic work. I don't follow the literature closely, so you may have better luck looking for "Computer-Mediated Communication" or "Human Computer Interaction" in your favorite search engine.

Here is what I know about:

[Jacek Gwizdka](#) has an extensive [bibliography of email research](#). Go here first!

Dr. Carsten Sørensen has a [bibliography of Information Overload resources](#).

I bought two copies of the book [Connections : New Ways of Working in the Networked Organization](#) by Lee Sproull and Sara Kiesler because I found it so fascinating. They talk about how electronic communications alter the way people work.

MIT Press, 1992; ISBN: 0262691582; 212 pages Reprint edition

Eric Williams has written a scholarly paper on [Predicting E-Mail Effects in Organizations](#).

Long and Short Routes to Success in Electronically-Mediated Negotiations: Group Affiliations and Good Vibrations by Don Moore, Terri Kurtzberg, Leigh Thompson, and Michael Morris is a very interesting research paper that finds that email negotiations between strangers are more profitable for both sides if the parties have some personal communication before starting negotiations.

Research Paper #1484, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University.

John December hosts an index of [Computer Mediated Communication](#).

[Ronald Rice](#) of Rutgers has a long list of scholarly papers that he's been involved with; many of them have to do with computer-mediated communication.

[Email Overload: Exploring Personal Information Management of Email](#) by [Steve Whittaker](#) and [Candace Sidner](#) is an excellent study of how people really use email.

(Note: "overload" here is used in the techy sense of "overloaded operators", not in the sense of "overwhelmed".)

[Olle Bälter](#) did extensive observations of real-world email use for [his thesis](#). He makes recommendations for how to improve email use. Bälter also did a sophisticated [mathematical model of email use times based on keystroke-level analysis](#). Two interesting points from his research: having over thirty folders is a bad idea; so is periodically cleaning out old messages.

[E-mail as Habitat](#) by Nicolas Ducheneaut and Victoria Bellotti is a field study of how people at three different companies actually use email.

Interactions of the ACM, September/October 2001

Bälter and Sidner wrote a paper together on [Bifrost](#), a tool for organizing email messages by category.

Heylighen and Dewaele's [paper on formality](#) seems to support my thoughts on [context](#) and [formality](#). Their view of formality is slightly different from mine: their research suggests that language is more formal the less shared context the speaker and audience have. (Note: I'm still rolling their ideas around in my head; I may rewrite pieces of my email guide.)

Horvitz, Jacobs, and Hovel [report on their Baysean network for prioritizing incoming messages](#).

David Kirsch's [A Few Thoughts on Cognitive Overload](#) talks about the various forms of information overload and various coping strategies.

Unknown

I don't know what these books are about yet.

Simple Steps to E-Mail Success by Joy Van Skiver. Wrexpress; 1998; ISBN: 0964382423

History of Email

While electronic mail within one computer system has been around longer, Ray Tomlinson gets the credit for sending the first electronic mail message from one computer to another.

[Mail: the application that hadn't been thought of](#) by Peter H. Salus

[Ray Tomlinson and the Birth of E-mail](#)

[History of the Internet](#)

I want to make a brief mention of [the PLATO project](#), which I grew up using. By 1974, PLATO had e-mail, newsgroups, chat, and instant messaging, followed soon afterward by remote viewing of someone else's screen. I'm not exactly sure what the user base was, but I know that it could handle about 200 simultaneous users back then. I would guess that there were a few thousand regular users, maybe more.

Email Management Software

There are a bunch of companies developing software to help manage incoming email. I don't believe this is an exhaustive list, but it will get you started:

[Apex](#)

[Brightware](#)

[Corepoint/IBM](#)

[eGain](#)

[eShare](#)

[FaceTime](#)

[G2X Software](#)

[General Interactive](#)

[Genesys Laboratories](#)

[HP](#)

[Interactive Intelligence](#)

[Kana Communications](#)

[MATRAnet](#)

[MessageMedia](#)
[Micro Computer Systems](#)
[NetDialog](#)
[Novuweb](#)
[Quintus](#)
[RightNow Technologies](#)
[ServiceSoft](#)
[Siemens](#)
[SoundLogic](#)
[Talisma](#)
[Tacit](#)
[Webline](#)

These integrate email with more traditional call center software:

[Acuity/Quintus](#)
[Apropos](#)
[Atio](#)
[Clarify/NortelNetworks](#)

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Bring to you valuable & fresh information on
Internet business, and let you keep up with all
the latest major Net business opportunities.
<http://www.geeyo.com/ezones.html>
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