

5 Simple Rules for Better Email Business Communication

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I have been teaching with Frances Grimes in the Management Communications program here at Graziadio this fall and so business communication is on my mind.

Face-to-face business communication is difficult—attempting to read body language, facial expressions, and gestures (although some gestures speak for themselves), can be a challenge. Not to mention cultural differences that can blur the meaning to any one or all of the above.

Even more difficult can be written communication when there are no expressions and gestures to guide us. Add poor grammar, haphazard punctuation, and misspellings... well, we all know where that can lead. Then mix in the language of different cultures and disciplines, and you can really have a problem.

I once wrote an email to someone in another department who was handling our IT. Since we were just starting to develop audio and video, I needed extra help with a particular project. In the email I wrote that I just needed a download of the file in a new format for “audacity.” The recipient of the email responded not quite in the way I expected, offering to do something quite different than I requested.

In a brief conversation in the hallway, I later learned that as a non-native English speaker this person was a little hurt by my accusation “of having the audacity to attempt to make changes.” I had not capitalized the word “audacity” nor explained that Audacity is a software program I was using to edit audio, thus the miscommunication. I learned to consider my audience in writing an email and to always ask, “Is what I’m saying in the correct context for the recipient?”

Here are a few tips to improve your email business communication:

1. **Briefer is better.** Be simple and direct. You are not writing a paper for school or an academic article; you are trying to get information “to someone” or “from someone.” Make sure you state clearly and succinctly what you want and when you need it in as few words as possible, while still giving essential details. Use bullet points for details that you can list.
2. **Good grammar and punctuation are key.** A comma in the wrong place can change the meaning of what you are writing. Not using proper capitalization can confuse the importance of the subject. Poor grammar shows an indifference to the topic and is demeaning to the recipient of the email, but more than that, it diminishes the perceived intelligence of the author.
3. **Load the important information at the beginning.** Too often people only read what they see in the email window and ignore that there might be more. If they

scan the email and the important information is at the end, it may not be captured in their quick scan. How often have you heard, “You didn’t say that!” when you did—buried three lengthy paragraphs later.

4. **Read it over.** Change the word choice to precise language and listen for whether the words sound angry or indifferent or silly. The more important the topic, the more attention should be paid to the tone. Does the email sound stern or friendly, insulting or even angry. BY NOW, EVERYONE SHOULD BE AWARE THAT TEXT WRITTEN IN ALL CAPS IS CONSIDERED SHOUTING.
5. **Which leads to the final tip: Don’t hit send until you’re absolutely ready.** Once an email is sent, it is out there somewhere in the ether. Have you ever hit “Send” and immediately regretted it? Although some systems have a “Recall” feature, it does not always recall all the emails. Sometimes therapists suggest writing a letter and letting all your feelings out, but then not sending it. Whatever you do, do not do this in an email. Use a paper and pen so that it is a little harder to send. And when you reply to emails, take a moment to consider whether you mean to hit “Reply All” or “Reply” or even “Forward”—big differences with potentially very embarrassing consequences for clicking the wrong one.