

The Rules of Engagement

A byte-sized guide to proper email practices

Down to business

A large part of business and work-related interaction is based on impressions. The image that you project often needs to be a notch more mannerly and formal.

Like a large part of business interaction, emails are bound by certain rules-of-engagement. Emails have become part-and-parcel of the corporate realm, commonly used as the primary mode of communication in many companies. They are also used as a prominent first point-of-contact alternative to a hotline.

Considering its expansive usage, the knowledge of good email etiquette is important. Even if you've been emailing for years, the following list may contain useful gems to get you writing more professionally.

Rule #1: Be professional - use proper formatting, structure and language

By default, emails are a form of formal communication. Don't engage your contacts like you would on IRC or instant messengers. That means avoid short cuts, internet lingo or worse, alternating capital letters, as illustrated in this sentence: *"heya! HoW r U?! Im finez. I tink u'll like my proposalz fer da company's new email policies! Thanx a mil!"* As far as possible, keep your language (spelling, grammar and punctuation) flawless.

Upon its wide inception, emails borrowed the format of the orthodox written letter. Unless you are sure that the person you are emailing is on casual terms with you, always format your emails like you were taught to write formal letters in school. Include your salutations, line-breaks, and sign-off. Do note that actual signatures are often omitted. Just be sure to state your name clearly. Here's a quick and condensed example:

Dear XXXX,

I am delighted to inform you that we have surpassed our targets by a million dollars for this quarter.

*Yours sincerely,
Alotof Mani
Finance Department*

Rule #2: Be clear about the "TO", "CC" and "BCC" functions

Recipients of your email message can be put into three different fields.

Use the **"TO"** field to send to person you are directly addressing.

The **"CC"**, or carbon copy field, is for recipients who are not the immediate addressees, but whom you would like to send a copy of the message to. For example, if you are sending a quotation to a client and you would like to keep your manager in the loop, you would insert the client's email address in the **"TO"** field and your manager's in the **"CC"** field.

The **"BCC"**, or blind carbon copy field, is for sending a copy of a message to a recipient without letting those in the **"TO"** and **"CC"** fields know. One common use of this field is when you intend to send a message to multiple addresses, but want to preserve the confidentiality of all your recipients from each other. You would then include all of their addresses in the **"BCC"** field.

Rule #3: Be prompt with replies

Emails were designed to be quick messengers, with messages received almost the second they are sent. When an enquiry is sent, it usually means the sender is awaiting a response or acknowledgement as soon as possible unless otherwise stated. Even if it is not required, it is a good habit to acknowledge an email to let the other party know that you have read his or her message.

Rule #4: Be to-the-point

It doesn't help if a reply is prompt but a good half-hour is needed to digest its contents. To facilitate immediate reaction, keep your emails focussed and concise. Craft them so the key points can be easily retrieved, not buried in a heap of needless words.

That being said, don't overdo your conciseness to the point where you appear to be robotic.

Rule #5: Document your important messages

Because email messages can be stored and referred to with the time and sender clearly specified, they have a crucial function in documentation. Not only does it serve as a journal of your correspondences to help you remember information relayed to you, it is (in a virtual sense) evidential documentation in 'black-and-white'. It will work for you if someone contradicts a prior agreement with you. But it also means that you must be careful to keep with the promises you make.

That is by no means the most extensive list of tips for good email etiquette. A simple search on the internet will provide you with pages and pages of email etiquette as documented by professionals through their experience. The points mentioned here are, however, the most pertinent pointers, comprehensive enough to get you crafting proper emails.

The crux of the matter is that communication is a most essential tool at work regardless of industry or trade. But crafting good emails shouldn't be a technical adherence to rules.

Good emails, like all other forms of human-interaction, should come from a deeply-developed communicative sensitivity. Simply put, good communication is knowing how to say what, with respect to whom. That way you will reinforce the different impressions you would want others to perceive of you and provide a platform for better relationships to be forged, professional or not.