

## Email: Structure and Use\*

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

A **subject line** that pertains clearly to the email 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 cut long subject lines), does not need to be a complete sentence, and should give a clue to the contents of the message. For example:

Subject: need 3 reports by Tues

Chris - I need three reports for Thursday's conference demo in Boston. They need to be printed and the graphics must be in color. Have them packed for shipping by Tuesday night.

Here the subject line summarizes nicely the most important details of the message. For time-critical messages, starting with URGENT: is a good idea (especially if you know the person gets a lot of email).

### Email Layout

Words on a computer screen look different than on paper, and usually people find it harder to read things on a screen than on paper. 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 email reader may also impose some constraints upon the formatting of the mail, and may not have the same capabilities as your email software. This means that good email page layout is different from good paper document page layout.

**Shorter Paragraphs:** Frequently email messages will be read in a document window with scrollbars. While scrollbars are nice, it makes it harder to visually track long paragraphs. Consider breaking up your paragraphs to only a few sentences apiece.

**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.

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

Dear Project Managers:

Or:

Dear UNITAR staff:

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:

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\* Retrieved from <http://barney.gossamer-web.com/cgi-local/public/director.cgi?CODE=11474866738547&LINK=/library/000511ab.htm>

Hello - I saw your web site and wanted to mention that there is an error on page 2.

A simple "Hi" is usually fine for people that you already know. "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.

Again, you must be careful about cultural differences. The East Coast of the United States is more formal than the West Coast. 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 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?

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 Direct, Inc. We are unhappy with your mention of our company in your email guide. Therefore, we order you to immediately cease and desist using any reference to Direct, Inc.

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?

### 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:

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)

Or with less information:

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

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.