

**JOHN SEELY**

**OXFORD**  
GUIDE TO  
**EFFECTIVE  
WRITING &  
SPEAKING**

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The Oxford Guide to  
**Effective Writing  
and Speaking**



The **Oxford** Guide to

# Effective Writing and Speaking

How to communicate clearly

Third Edition

John Seely

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## Preface to first edition

A book like this, which covers a wide range of topics, has to draw on the knowledge and experience of many different advisers. I have been fortunate to receive the help of readers who have given great time and care to commenting on early drafts of the manuscript and advising how it might be improved. In particular, I should like to thank Brigid Avison, Alison Baverstock, Tim Cracknell, David Elsmore, Jacky Hart, Caroline Hartnell, Andrew Heron, and Samantha Manning in the UK, while Dr Nelson Ong of New York offered an American perspective. They will probably recognize where their advice and comments have produced changes in the final text. For this I am deeply grateful, but, of course, the final responsibility is my own.

I should like to thank the staff at Oxford University Press who have patiently supported this project, in particular Kate Wandless and Kendall Clarke, for their encouragement and advice.

Closer to home, Katherine and Timothy Seely gave excellent and critical 'consumers' comments', especially about the communication needs of students and those seeking and gaining their first jobs. (I knew those long years of parenting would pay off eventually!) My debt to my wife, Elizabeth, is immeasurable. Although we have both worked as writers and editors for many years, I can only say that this time I was even more vague and abstracted than usual, but she bore it with great good humour. As ever, she read the manuscript with a critical eye and made many trenchant and invaluable comments, and it is with gratitude that this book is dedicated to her.

## Preface to second edition

I have taken the opportunity of this new edition to make a number of changes. I have added a new chapter on emails, and have made extensive revisions to the chapter on job applications reflecting current practice. In addition, there are numerous small changes throughout the book designed to bring the text up to date.

## Preface to third edition

In the revisions and additions for this edition I have focused on two areas in particular. The use of digital media for both informal and formal communication has taken over much of the territory where print media once held sway. This edition aims to reflect these developments, especially in Chapters 3, 24, and 27. I have also taken the opportunity of this new edition to rework the whole of Section D, with the aim of providing a more thorough and, I hope, realistic perspective on the processes of writing. Elsewhere, numerous changes have been made to update advice and examples.

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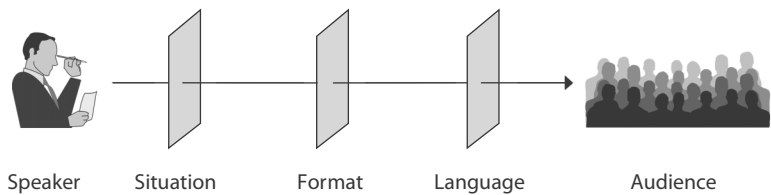
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# 1

# Introduction

At times the process of communicating with other people in speech or writing can seem straightforward and simple. At other times we may find it difficult and complicated. *The Oxford Guide to Effective Writing and Speaking* is organized so that readers can look at writing and speaking in four different ways. Three of them are shown in the diagram below:



At one end we have the speaker (or writer), with ideas to communicate. At the other is the audience—the people who are waiting to receive the speaker’s message. In between are three screens through which the message has to pass. Each of these screens corresponds to a major section in this book.

## Situation



Before we can begin to frame our message effectively we have to consider the situation within which we are communicating. In particular we have to find answers to these questions:

- **What?**

Exactly what is my subject matter?

- **Who?**

With whom do I wish to communicate?

- **Why?**

What is my purpose in communicating?

- **When and where?**

Are there features about the place and time which affect how I should write or speak?

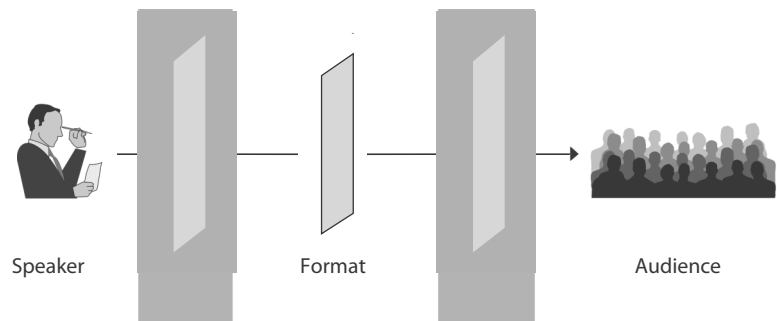
- **How?**

What type of communication am I aiming at—narration? description? exposition? argument?

These five questions are the subject matter of section B, *Getting the message across*.

## Format

The format is the particular type of communication demanded by the situation.



In Section A, *Communicating in everyday life*, we look at the most important formats in which people may have to communicate:

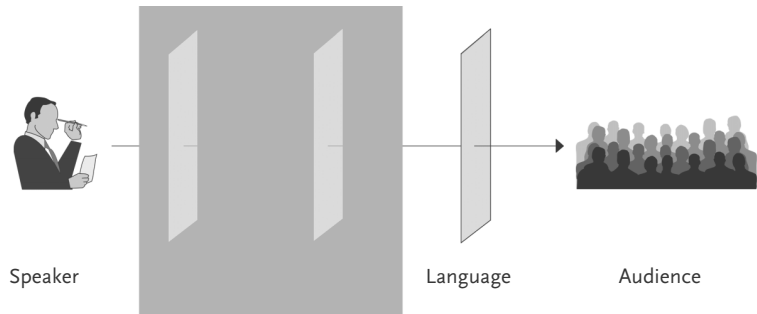
- 2 **Business letters**

- 3 **E-writing**

- 4 Job applications
- 5 Organizing a meeting
- 6 Presentations
- 7 Reports
- 8 Essays, papers, and dissertations
- 9 The media

## Language

None of this is any use, of course, unless we have a good control over the medium of communication: the English language.



Section C, *Communication Tools*, provides guidance on:

### 15 Talking about English

The different ways in which it is possible to describe the language.

### 16 Introduction to grammar

The basics of English sentence structure.

### 17 More about grammar

The structure of complex sentences.

### 18 Vocabulary

### 19 Spelling

### 20 Punctuation

### 21 Speech

The technicalities of effective spoken communication.

## Process

Situation, format, and language provide us with a lot to consider before communicating. Indeed, if we tried to think about all of them at the same time, we should probably give up the whole business. We need a strategy to tackle these things in a logical and structured way.

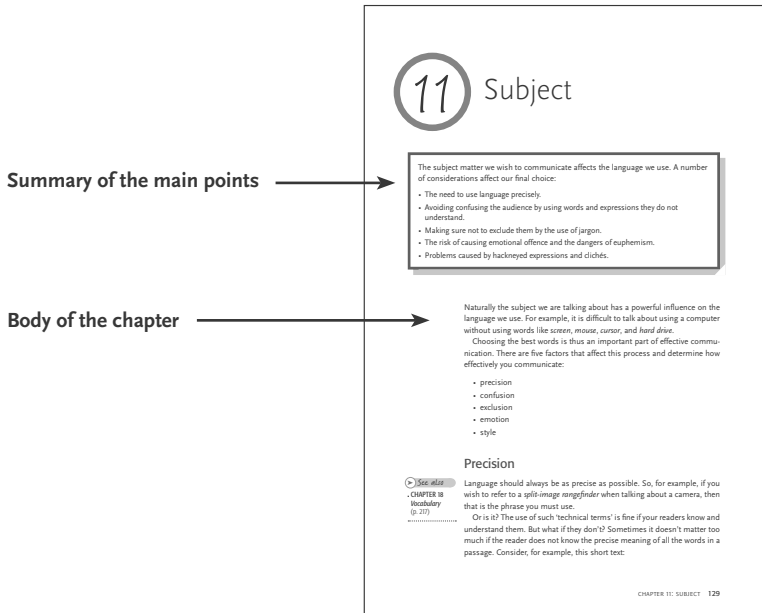


Section D, *The process of writing*, covers the main stages of writing:

- 22 Getting ready to write
- 23 Making notes and summaries
- 24 Research
- 25 Planning and drafting
- 26 Editing and Revising
- 27 Presentation

## Chapter pattern

Each chapter in the book follows a similar pattern:



**You try boxes**  
 Many chapters contain these. They give you an opportunity to check your understanding of the points covered.

You try

The writer of this report probably did not think he was using jargon. What do you think? If it is jargon, how could it be made more 'reader-friendly'?

These principles underpinning effective performance appraisal have wider relevance than simply improvements in individual performance. They are also concerned with the development of a participative organizational culture by contributing to the broader goals of creating satisfying, effective jobs, encouraging the involvement of people in the organization, and the development of people.

Failure to view the performance appraisal strategically as an important element in an involved organizational culture committed to the development of its individual members has resulted in problems. The early emphasis on the feedback principle, i.e. letting people know how they are performing, neglecting the involvement of the individual in the process, cast appraisers in the uncomfortable role of judge and often resulted in damage to individual development and involvement and commitment to the organization.

See page 374 for comments.

**Cross references**  
 Where a topic is mentioned that is also covered elsewhere in the book, you will find a See also box beside the main text.

See also

CHAPTER 18  
 Vocabulary  
 (p. 217)

### Emotion

There are situations in which we may not wish to use the most technically accurate language because it could hurt or offend our audience. For example, when breaking the news of a death to a close friend or member of the family, many people avoid blunt words such as *died* and prefer expressions such as *passed away*. This use of language is referred to as **euphemism**.

Euphemistic language is commonly used by people when talking about death, certain kinds of illness (e.g. cancer), sex, and other bodily functions such as excretion. It even affects the language used to describe certain parts of the body. For example, that part which is most accurately referred to as the *bally* is much more frequently called the *stomach* (inaccurate) or *tummy* (euphemistic).

We should, however, be wary of excessive use of simple or childish language. Doctors are sometimes accused of underestimating the linguistic maturity of their patients and of using unnecessarily euphemistic language. [Any problems with the waterworks, Mrs Green?] This can not only be insulting, but may simply lead to further confusion, as in the famous story of the doctor who was explaining to a patient how to use a suppository and told him to 'place it in the back passage'. 'I did as he said,' the patient told a friend, 'and put it just outside the back door, but I might as well have stuck it up my arse for all the good it did.'

**Guidelines**  
 The main practical points of the chapter are set out as a series of numbered guidelines, for quick reference.

### Guidelines

#### Language skills and education

- 1 Think carefully about the audience's language skills, especially when writing or speaking:
  - for children
  - for speakers of English as a second or foreign language
  - for a general audience who may include a wide range of readers
  - about subjects where it is vital that every word is clearly understood—for example in matters of public safety
- 2 Make written text more readable by keeping sentence length down. 15–20 words per sentence is often considered to be a good average to aim for.
- 3 Difficult and 'long' words (three syllables or more) contribute to the difficulty of a text. When aiming for simplicity, either use shorter words or make sure that difficult words are explained or set in a context which helps the reader.

#### Knowledge and understanding

- 4 Make a careful assessment of:
  - how much your audience is likely to know about the subject
  - what background information you need to provide
- 5 In speech, check that you have got the knowledge level right by monitoring the reactions of your audience. In writing, consider the possibility of providing additional background information in a 'skippable' introduction or an appendix to which readers can refer.

#### Relationship with the audience

- 6 Decide how well you and your audience know each other and how close or distant you wish to be when you address them. This will determine how formal or informal your tone should be.
- 7 Make sure that your
  - vocabulary
  - use of long or contracted forms (e.g. *is not/ isn't*)
  - choice of pronouns (e.g. *I* or *we*)
  - standard or non-standard grammar
 support the decision you have made about tone.





# Communicating in everyday life

## 2 Business letters

The structure and presentation of formal and informal business letters. How to make sure that you control the all-important element of tone in your letters.

## 3 E-writing

How to make the best use of email by thinking about purpose, context, format, and structure. Using attachments. How to develop a conscious email strategy. How to write for intranets and the web, taking account of the differences between web documents and more traditional formats. The importance of incorporating clear navigation features.

## 4 Job applications

How to research and construct a CV that is designed to meet the requirements of a particular job application. How to write a letter of application to accompany it. The importance of proper preparation for a job interview. How to analyse your strengths and weaknesses as a candidate and prepare for awkward questions.

## 5 Organizing a meeting

The aims, competences, and constitution of formal meetings. How to prepare an agenda, chair a meeting, and control the proposing and seconding of motions and the votes on them. How minutes should be prepared and ratified. How to run an informal meeting.

## 6 Presentations

Preparing a successful presentation: thinking about your audience; organizing the structure; making effective use of visual and other aids. Delivering the presentation, using prompts, making sure that you address your audience directly, and dealing effectively with questions and interruptions.

## **7 Reports**

Brainstorming, researching, and planning a business report. The structure of a report: executive summary, introduction, body of the report, conclusions, recommendations, appendices, and bibliography. Other organizational devices. Addressing your readership.

## **8 Essays, papers, and dissertations**

Preparing an extended piece of writing for college or university: generating ideas, doing research, ordering your material. Writing style and the use of quotations and references. The particular requirements of the undergraduate research project and the post-graduate dissertation. The importance of controlling structure and mastering academic register.

## **9 The media**

Writing a press release: studying how newspaper reports work; organizing your material in the right order and format to ensure maximum effect. How to prepare for and undertake an interview with press, radio, and TV interviewers.

# 2

## Business letters

### Structuring the letter

The key to writing an effective business letter is to have a clear definition of your purpose in writing. This should then be reflected in the structure of your letter. This normally contains three parts:

- 1 An **introduction** which sets out briefly the subject matter and purpose of the letter.
- 2 The **body of the letter** in which you develop and explain your purpose. This is normally divided into a number of paragraphs, ordered so that each covers a different aspect of your subject and each follows on logically from the one before.
- 3 The **conclusion** in which you re-emphasize your purpose, possibly spelling out what you would like to be done about it.

### Getting the tone right

It is important to consider carefully the person who will read your letter—even if they are unknown to you—and write in a suitable **tone**. This should be neither casual nor too formal. In particular it is important to avoid pomposity and jargon.

### Letter layout

Letter layouts vary considerably, but all have the same key features.

### Greeting and ending

For most business letters there is a limited choice of greeting and ending, according to the degree of formality you wish to present.

It may seem strange to place business letters ahead of the more common forms of 'written' communication: email, text, and tweet. However, this has been done for a number of good reasons:

- Although printed letters are much less used than they once were, their structure, layout, and conventions still form a foundation for formal business communications. Many formal emails are, in effect, just business letters transmitted electronically.
- The very fact that in a wide range of situations printed formal letters have been replaced by electronic communications makes them

even harder for many people to write. People become attuned to the more informal, conversational approach that emails and texts tend to encourage, and as a result often find that they flounder when faced by the challenge of this unusual form.

Letters have an importance and permanence that are comforting and reassuring. Even when we transact business by phone, we like to ‘have something in writing’ to confirm what we have agreed: a business letter. Employers still often lay great stress on the letters written by those applying for jobs.

The result of this ‘special’ status of letters is that they can prove quite difficult to write. Some writers, faced with having to write a job application, freeze up and cannot even think of a first sentence. So much seems to hang on what we write—our whole personality, career, life so far will be judged when the letter is opened and read!

Yet there is nothing inherently ‘special’ about letters. They are just another technology of communication, outdated, expensive, and rather time-consuming. The general rules we apply when using any other form of communication still hold. We still have to consider:

► *See also*

• CHAPTER 10  
*Audience*  
(p. 117)

• CHAPTER 12  
*Time and place*  
(p. 137)

• CHAPTER 13  
*Purpose*  
(p. 143)

- our purpose in writing
- our audience
- the conventions which govern the ways in which letters are usually set out (and which our audience will expect)

The conventions of letter-writing are placed last in this list because they are often given undue importance; it would be mistaken to believe that once you have mastered them, you know how to write a good letter. Knowing how to structure the body of the letter and being sure that you have adopted the right tone are far more important.

In this chapter the focus is on what are often called ‘business’ letters, letters we write to people we do not know or to those whom we know but with whom we have a business relationship rather than a personal one. They are usually letters written ‘to get something done’.

## Structuring the letter

If you find a particular letter difficult to write, it may well be because you have not worked out clearly in your mind what its purpose is.

Begin by asking yourself these questions:

- 1 Why am I writing this letter—what has led up to it?
- 2 What do I hope to get out of it (my maximum aims)?
- 3 What do I expect to get out of it (my realistic aims)?
- 4 What is the best way to achieve this?
  - What information do I need to provide?
  - What arguments do I need to use?

Leaving aside for a moment the precise way in which the letter should begin, most business letters have a clear three-part structure:

- 1 An introduction in which you outline what the letter is about.
- 2 The body of the letter in which you explain step by step the detail of your 'argument', or 'story'.
- 3 A conclusion in which you set out what you want to achieve.

## Introduction

The introduction to a letter has to fulfil these requirements:

- **It must state clearly what the letter is about.**

This enables the recipient to make an initial decision about what to do with it: deal with it now? put it in a heap of mail to be dealt with at an appointed time? pass it on to someone else? One way of doing this is to give the letter a heading immediately after the salutation:

Dear Mr and Mrs Green,  
Account No: 12345678: Confirmation of Personal Overdraft

- **It should indicate why the writer is writing it.**

A heading such as the one quoted above only gives a general idea of the subject matter. The introduction should go on to spell out the writer's purpose:

I am pleased to confirm the renewal of your Personal Overdraft of £1000.

These two functions can be expressed in a simple sentence or two. In fact in the example given, the heading is not strictly necessary because the following sentence repeats most of the information it contains. It could be rephrased to read:

I am pleased to confirm the renewal of your personal Overdraft of £1000 on account number 12345678.

Essentially, that is all the introduction has to do. When you have read it, you should have a clear idea of what the letter is going to be about and enough information to be able to decide how to tackle the rest of it.

## Body

The letter now has to move steadily and convincingly towards the conclusion (in which you will explain what you want done, or reinforce the significance of the information you have set out). The more clearly

information is expressed, and the more tellingly different items are linked, the better the letter. To see how this can work, we will look at a sequence of letters about the same subject. First, here is the body of the letter we have already quoted:

You can overdraw up to your limit whenever you want, but you should not be permanently overdrawn by the whole amount. Please remember that personal overdrafts are repayable on demand. Details of interest and charges that apply to this overdraft are enclosed.

Personal Overdraft Protection has been arranged for Mr Green, and a monthly insurance premium of £8.00 will be collected from your account on the first working day of each month. Your protection certificate, which includes details of cover, is also enclosed.

Each of these paragraphs has a clear topic. The first is about using the overdraft facility and the second concerns overdraft protection, an insurance protecting the user against being unable to repay the overdraft in the event of illness or unemployment.

Unfortunately Mr and Mrs Green hadn't requested this insurance and didn't want it. Their letter of reply followed a similar pattern:

Dear Mr Bates,

Account number 12345678: Confirmation of Personal Overdraft

Thank you for your letter of 1st October, in which you say that Personal Overdraft Protection has been arranged at a rate of £8 per month.

We don't recall asking for this protection. If we did, it was by an oversight and we do not wish to have it. We shall be grateful if you will arrange to stop it and make sure that no deductions are made for it.

If this protection is a condition of the overdraft facility, then we do not wish to have the overdraft facility. It certainly isn't worth £96 p.a. before use. We only ever use it by accident when we forget to transfer money from our Deposit Account. It would be much more satisfactory if you offered the service of automatically topping up one account from another when it gets below a certain level.

Here the heading and first paragraph introduce the subject matter and link it to Mrs White's previous letter. The second paragraph deals with the subject of the unrequested insurance. The third moves the discussion on to a related but different topic. It introduces what is clearly the writer's main complaint.

Of course, such letters can have considerably more material in the body than is the case here. But the approach should be similar. Each paragraph is about a separate topic, or aspect of the main topic, and leads logically on to the next.

You will find more about paragraphing in Chapter 25: Planning and drafting, and more about presenting an argument in Chapter 14: Different ways of communicating.

## Conclusion

The main point of the conclusion is to underline the purpose of the letter and, sometimes, to spell out the action the writer would like taken. In the bank's letter, the final paragraph read:

If you require further information regarding your Personal Overdraft, please contact me and I will be happy to answer any queries you may have.

This isn't necessarily asking for any further action, but it is intended to leave the reader feeling positive towards the writer, which is always a useful aim. The Greens, however, had other uses for the conclusion to their letter:

We look forward to receiving your confirmation that the Overdraft Protection has been cancelled.

No doubt about that!

You  
try

Some time later in the negotiations between Mr and Mrs Green and the bank, an assistant manager wrote them a letter apologizing for what had happened:

Dear Mr & Mrs Green,

Your letter of 13th October has been referred to me.

I take this opportunity to apologize, unreservedly, for our error in this connection.

Upon examination it would appear that our letter of 1st October, referring to insurance cover on your overdraft, was sent in error.

I can assure you that at no time have insurance premia been debited to your account.

I believe a colleague has now sent an amended renewal letter to you, confirming your facility has been marked forward at its existing level.



You mention that you would like to explore the possibility of our setting up an automatic transfer between your Current Account and your Deposit Account.

I can confirm that such a facility is, occasionally, extended to our customers.

This facility would need to be agreed by a member of the Bank's management and should you wish to pursue this option I would suggest that you contact a member of our Customer Facing Staff.

I again apologize for any inconvenience caused to you following the issue of our letter of the 1st October and look forward to hearing from you if I may be of any further assistance in this or any other matter.

Yours sincerely,

James Bates

Assistant Personal Accounts Manager

This letter differs from the two quoted so far. It is not divided into paragraphs; instead each sentence is separated out as if it were a paragraph in its own right.

- Does this make it easier or harder to follow?
- If you wanted to organize it into three or four paragraphs, how would you do so?

You will find a sample answer on page 373.

## Getting the tone right

▶ See also

• CHAPTER 10  
Audience  
(p. 125)

So far the writing of letters has been treated as if business letters were directed to, and received by, anonymous 'recipients'. Of course they are not; they are received and read by individual human beings with thoughts and feelings. What makes such letters difficult to write at times is that although one is aware of this obvious fact, one has no idea of who will actually read the letter.

▶ See also

• CHAPTER 18  
Vocabulary  
(p.233)

This is why business letters sometimes fall back on jargon, over-formality, and even pomposity. There is a touch of this in the bank's second letter, quoted above. Here are some of the expressions it uses, with 'translations' alongside:

Expression	'Translation'
our error in this connection	The mistake we made
your facility has been marked forward at its existing level	your overdraft arrangement has been renewed
This facility would need to be agreed by a member of the Bank's management and should you wish to pursue this option I would suggest that you contact a member of our Customer Facing Staff.	You would need to arrange this with one of our Managers. If you would like to do this, please ask one of our staff.

Some writers are afraid of becoming too informal and offending the reader. But this should not be a real risk. The gap between writing and speaking is not so large. Imagine that instead of writing the letter, you are communicating the same subject matter face to face, speaking to a complete stranger. It is unlikely that you would offend by being too informal. You would adopt a neutral tone, and take care to explain clearly and simply what you had to say. A letter should do exactly the same thing. If you wouldn't normally say to a customer, 'should you wish to pursue this option I would suggest that you contact a member of our Customer Facing Staff', then don't write it either!

To avoid excessive formality and pomposity:

- **Avoid using the passive.**

(e.g. 'Our letter was sent in error.') Use a personal pronoun and the active form instead. ('We sent you that letter by mistake.')

- **Avoid jargon whenever possible.**

Terms like 'Customer Facing Staff' and 'your facility has been marked forward at its existing level' may mean something to the writer, but they are likely to alienate the reader.

- **Use shorter sentences rather than longer ones.**

(It is difficult to be pompous in short sentences!)

To avoid unsuitable informality:

- **Don't let your own feelings get the better of you.**

It is easy—especially when you are making a complaint and/or feel that you are in the right—to cause offence. You may wish to do so, but if you do, you are less likely to get satisfaction.

- **Don't try to be too clever.**

Some writers get carried away with their own sentences and don't know when to stop. It is very easy for them to cause offence just because they

like to 'hear the sound of their own voice'. For example, they start sounding off about how the recipient's organization ought to be managed. Such gratuitous 'advice' is likely to cause offence and very unlikely to further your cause.

- **Be clear and to the point, but don't be too blunt.**

## Letter layout

There is a considerable choice of how to set out a formal letter. Different organizations have different styles governing:

- the positioning of the recipient's address
- the punctuation of the address
- the spacing and alignment of paragraphs
- the spacing and alignment of the ending ('Yours sincerely/Yours faithfully' and signature)

The examples given on pages 17 and 18 are only two of many different possible styles, therefore, and are presented as illustrations. The numbers in them refer to the list below.



- 1 Your address
- 2 The name, title, and address of the recipient
- 3 The date
- 4 Reference(s)
- 5 The greeting
- 6 The first paragraph
- 7 Other paragraphs
- 8 The ending

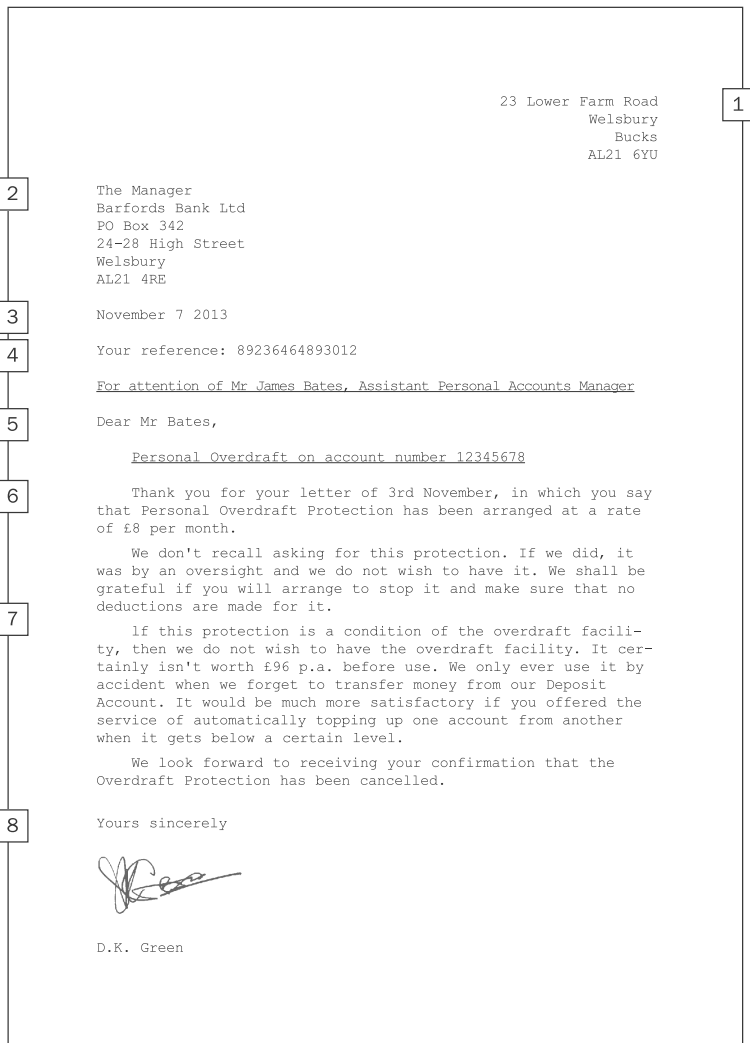
## Greeting and ending

In British English there is a fairly simple choice of greeting and ending for business letters. Presented in descending order of formality it is:

Greeting	Ending
Dear Sir,	Yours faithfully,
Dear Madam,	A. B. Capstick
Dear Sir or Madam,	

Greeting	Ending
Dear Mr Green,	Yours sincerely, or Kind regards, Alan Capstick (or Alan)
Dear Mrs Green,	
Dear Miss Green,	
Dear Ms Green,	
Dear Alan,	Yours sincerely, Moira (or, commonly: With best wishes, Yours sincerely, Moira, or Regards, Moira, or Best wishes, Moira)

1	 <p><b>BARFORDS BANK LTD</b> Welsbury</p> <p>PO Box 342, 24-28 High Street, Welsbury AL21 4RE Telephone: (01987) 546473 Fax: (01987) 546023</p>		
2	<p>Mr and Mrs D.K. Green 23 Lower Farm Road Welsbury Bucks A L21 6Y U</p>	<p>Our Ref: 89236464893012 Ext No: 7513</p> <p>3rd November 2013</p>	4
5	<p>Dear Mr and Mrs Green,</p> <p><b>Account No. 12345678: Confirmation of Personal Overdraft</b></p>		3
6	<p>I am pleased to confirm the renewal of your Personal Overdraft of £1000.</p> <p>You can overdraw up to your limit whenever you want, but you should not be permanently overdrawn by the whole amount. Please remember that personal overdrafts are repayable on demand. Details of interest and charges that apply to this overdraft are enclosed.</p>		
7	<p>Personal Overdraft Protection has been arranged for Mr Green, and a monthly insurance premium of £8.00 will be collected from your account on the first working day of each month. Your protection certificate, which includes details of cover, is also enclosed.</p> <p>If you require further information regarding your Personal Overdraft, please contact me and I will be happy to answer any queries you may have.</p>		
8	<p>Yours sincerely,</p>  <p>James Bates Assistant Personal Accounts Manager</p>		



Increasingly the 'Dear Sir ... Yours faithfully,' formula is being abandoned in favour of the less formal 'Yours sincerely,' versions. 'Dear Sir ... Yours faithfully,' is retained for very formal occasions: threatening letters from government departments, banks, and lawyers, for example. In the past it was acceptable to address an unknown correspondent as 'Dear Sir', regardless of gender, but not today. So unless you know the gender of the person you are addressing (in which case you probably know them well enough to use their name and 'Yours sincerely') you are forced to use the rather awkward 'Dear Sir or Madam'.

The drawback of the 'Yours sincerely' formula is that you have to have a name to address it to. Here three problems can arise:

- 1 You do not know the recipient's name. In this case, you are forced back on to using a job description, real or invented: 'Dear Personnel

Manager', 'Dear Fellow-sufferer', or whatever. If you are happy with that, all well and good. Otherwise you have to resort to 'Dear Sir or Madam ... Yours faithfully'.

- 2 You have a surname but no first name, only initials. So you do not know whether you are addressing a man or a woman. Unless you are happy with 'Dear A. B. Capstick ...', you have to use a job description, or use 'Dear Sir or Madam ...', as above.
- 3 You know that the recipient is a woman but do not know how she likes to be addressed. (Not, incidentally, the same as knowing her marital status—some married women prefer to be addressed as 'Ms'.) Here it is best to play safe and use 'Ms'.

The other awkwardness that can arise is whether to address the recipient as 'Dear Mrs Green', or as 'Dear Lynda'. If you have met or spoken to them, then generally there is no problem: use a first name. For many people, however, this is not acceptable if they have never met or spoken to the person concerned, although for others, especially younger writers, this is not a problem. If, when addressing a person you do not know at all, you feel that a first name is too informal and a title plus surname is too formal, you can try the intermediate position of 'Dear Lynda Green', although for some that is a rather artificial compromise.

## Guidelines

- 1 Before you begin writing a business letter, define clearly your purpose in writing. Make sure that you have a clear idea of:
  - the events that have led to your writing the letter
  - your maximum aims (the most you can hope to achieve)
  - your realistic aims (what you expect to achieve)
  - the information you need to explain in the letter
  - the arguments you need to deploy
- 2 The **first paragraph** of the letter should introduce the subject matter and either state or imply your purpose in writing.
- 3 The **body** of the letter should consist of one or more paragraphs. It should develop clearly and logically the argument and facts of the case. If there is more than one paragraph, each paragraph should focus on a separate aspect of the subject matter and there should be clear links between the paragraphs.
- 4 The **final paragraph** should leave the reader in no doubt about your attitude towards the subject of the letter. It may, for example, spell out what you would like to see happen. It should be positive and unambiguous.

- 5 Although the reader of your letter may be unknown to you, it is important to achieve a suitable **tone** in your writing. So, as far as possible, **avoid**:
- jargon
  - too many long sentences
  - using the passive
  - letting your feelings get the better of you
  - trying to be too clever
  - being too blunt
- 6 Adopt a letter layout that is clear and consistent.
- 7 If you are writing to someone whose name and title you do not know, use the greeting *Dear Sir or Madam*, and the ending *Yours faithfully*, signing yourself with your initials and surname.
- 8 If you are writing to a named person, address them as *Dear Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms—*, and end *Yours sincerely*, followed by your first name and surname.
- 9 If you have met them or spoken to them by phone, or otherwise feel that you have some acquaintance with them, address them by their first name and sign yourself *Yours sincerely*, using your first name.

# 3

## E-writing

Increasingly we write to be read on screen rather than on paper. This chapter looks at the ways in which this affects *what* we write and *how* we write it.

### Email

Email is a medium which has revolutionized the way in which we communicate with each other. It is relatively new and very popular. It is frequently influenced, and sometimes replaced, by social media and texting. Partly as a result of this, it can be used without sufficient thought. In particular it is important to consider:

- 1 Why you are using email.
- 2 The ways in which emails differ from letters and telephone conversations.

These affect:

- how the email is 'topped and tailed'
- the structure of the email
- how attachments are used
- how the email is formatted

- 3 How to use emails as effectively as possible. This involves:

- perspective
- reflection
- response
- organization

- 4 Email etiquette:

- formality
- formatting
- emotion
- initialisms
- context

### Writing for intranets and the web

Increasingly organizations and individuals are replacing paper documents with information and ideas published on intranets and the web. It is important to recognize that the two media are different and require different approaches to writing.

When writing for the web, we need to be aware of:

- 1 How the different format affects the way in which people read:
  - the importance of line length
  - the impact of different textual and graphic elements on reading
- 2 Web users' expectations: the difference between 'grazing' books and 'browsing' websites.
- 3 The implications of this for the writer:
  - writing shorter more self-contained sections
  - the need for variety
  - adopting a pyramid structure
- 4 The importance of structure and navigation:
  - the positioning and use of menus
  - the effective use of hyperlinks
  - achieving easy navigation routes

## E-writing? What's that?

The computer has changed writing irrevocably. This chapter focuses on forms of writing which exist almost wholly on computers:

- Email
- Writing for organizational intranets
- Writing for the web: websites and blogging

There is no widely accepted term covering these forms, so I have chosen 'e-writing'.

## Email

Email has revolutionized business and personal communication, making it possible to communicate cheaply and almost instantly with people anywhere in the world. You can send any type of message, from a single word to a book-length document complete with pictures and sound files. The recipient can respond at once, or think carefully before replying. You can communicate just with one person or with a large group, every member of which can participate as much or as little as they wish.

Emails inhabit a space somewhere between personal meetings, telephones, and letters. They share advantages with each of these means of communication. Like face-to-face meetings they are instant and direct and

allow a number of people to participate. Like telephone calls they are quick and inexpensive. Like letters they allow those involved to keep a permanent record of messages sent and received. But they also have disadvantages. Like letters they rely on written language. When you send them you cannot monitor the recipient's reaction to your message and then modify your message; when you receive them you may misjudge the sender's tone, because you only have words on the screen to go by. One of the great advantages of emails is that they are quick to send. On the other hand, as in a face-to-face or telephone conversation, it is easy to say something that we soon regret. By contrast, letters take longer to compose and seem to allow more time for reflection before sending. And because emails are a fairly new technology, the 'rules' governing them are less well established—different people have different ideas about the conventions and etiquette of the medium.

The situation is further complicated by the popularity of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Many people now use Facebook rather than email to communicate with 'friends'. And for short messages (up to 140 characters) you can rapidly tweet your thoughts to your 'followers'. Mobile phone texting, too, is frequently used instead of email for short, instant messages. All these media have two important features: they are very rapid and they are generally very informal.

It is easy to carry social media habits over into more formal uses of email. While it is, of course, possible to be very informal in email, you should remember that email is also used for more formal communications between people who do not know each other. Similarly it is too easy to hit the 'Send' button on an email that is ill-considered and even rude, and which you may well later regret. Your use of email needs to be calibrated with these things in mind.

## What are you using email for?

Emails are used for a wide range of different purposes. Imagine that you weren't able to send a particular email. What would you do instead? The answer is usually one of these three:

- Make a telephone call, or
- Write a letter, or
- Send a fax.

The answer you choose tells you something about *why* you want to send an email:

- **Telephone call**

If you want an immediate response (and if you would like to be able to judge a person's reactions to what you have to say) you are likely to use the phone. On the other hand, if you don't want to interrupt someone

who is busy, or if they aren't answering the phone, for whatever reason, then you will probably use email.

- **Letter**

As we saw in the previous chapter, letters have a particular place in communications between organizations and individuals: they are permanent, often formal, and 'important'.

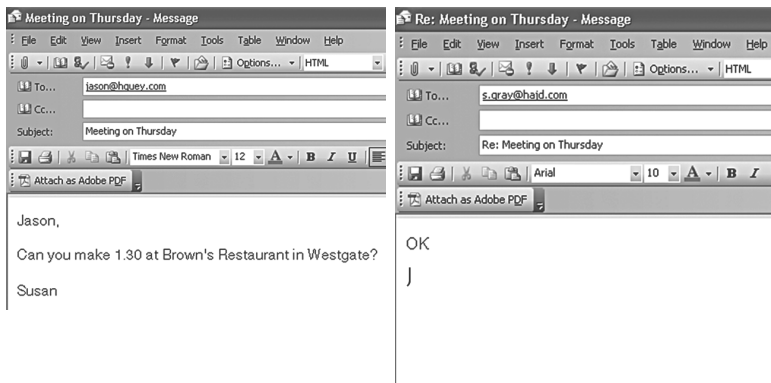
- **Fax**

In the past, if you wanted a speedy response, but the message (and possibly the response) needed to be in visual form, you used a fax. To a large extent this has been replaced by email, with or without attachments. However, in some organizations a fax can still be a useful way of 'jumping the queue' of emails waiting to be answered.

So here there are three variables: time, permanence, and visual elements. But other factors also affect how you use an email.

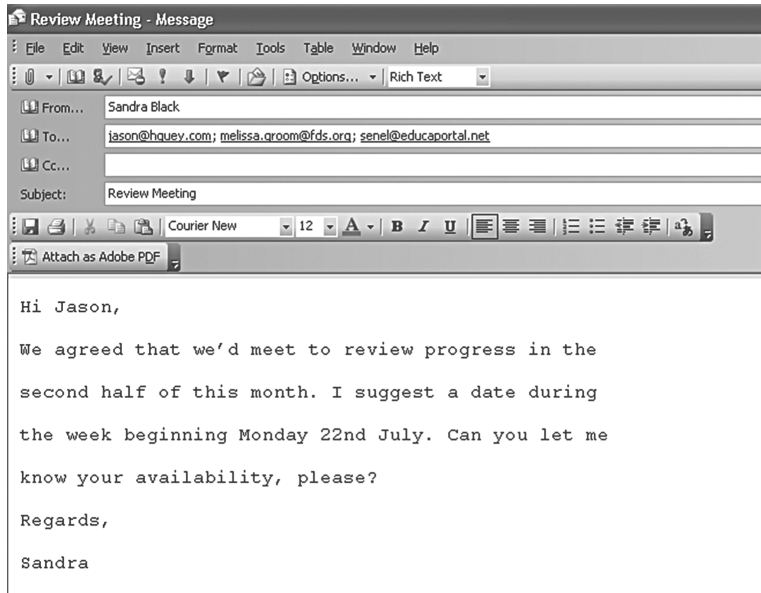
**1 Is the email a one-off, or part of an extended exchange of messages?**

In the first case, you have to make it clear at the beginning of the message what it is about. The 'Subject' line will help with this, but usually the first sentence or two also need to offer some kind of explanation. On the other hand if the email is part of a sequence, then this is unnecessary. For example:



**2 Is this exchange of messages just between two people, or is it part of a group communication?**

In the exchange illustrated above, there were only two people involved, but email is also used to communicate with groups of people. Suppose Sandra was trying to set up a meeting involving a group of people working for different organizations. She might email them like this:



There is more about the question of 'Reply to all' later in this chapter (see 'Your message in its context', p. 33).

There are more people to consider here, so Sandra can't just suggest a time; she has to ask people when they are free to meet. The others have a choice about how they reply to her message: they can either hit the 'Reply' button, or they can choose to 'Reply to all'.

### 3 Is this a business message, or a personal one?

As with other forms of communication, the relationship between the sender and recipient of a message affects its content, form, and tone. Here there are similarities between letters and emails. Once a letter or email has been sent the writer has no control over who will read it. Emails are even more likely than letters to be read by people other than the intended recipient. Some organizations routinely monitor emails going to employees. Errors occur and an email can end up in the inbox of someone completely unknown to the sender. This is why many people prefer to use the telephone—or even arrange a face-to-face meeting—if they have anything confidential to discuss.

## What difference does it make?

Some people contend that it doesn't make any difference who you are emailing, or why, or what the circumstances are. Email is a new medium of communication, they argue, and it has its own rules; if you use email you don't have to concern yourself with the conventions that apply to other forms of communication. Spelling, punctuation, and conventional grammar are all old hat.

It is true that email is a relatively new and much more relaxed form of communication. Nevertheless it remains a way in which one person communicates with another. And people are still people. So if you wish to communicate effectively with people you still need to be aware of:

.....  
▶ These are dealt with at length in Section B: 'Getting the message across' (p. 115).  
.....

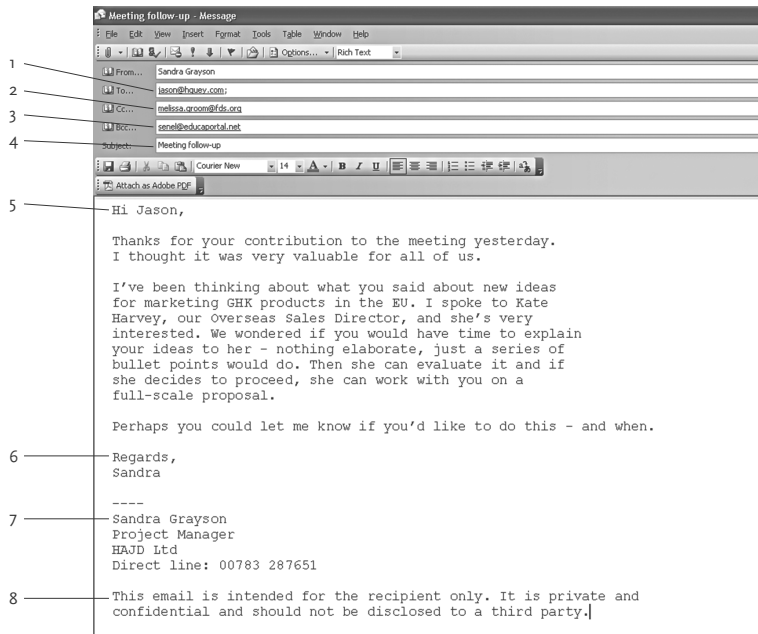
- audience
- situation
- purpose

These considerations affect these aspects of emails:

- Topping and tailing
- Structure
- Attachments
- Formatting

## Topping and tailing

When you compose an email you have to consider the frame within which your message is set. This consists of a number of elements illustrated in the following document.



### 1 To

The person you are addressing.

### 2 Cc

Anyone you want to receive a copy. Jason will see that Melissa has been sent a copy.

### 3 Bcc

Blind copy. Senel will receive a copy, but Jason and Melissa won't know. (And Senel will know that they don't know.) Blind copying can be useful, but you need to be aware of its implications and the implied message that you are sending to the person receiving the blind copy.

### 4 Subject

A brief description of what the email is about – for ease of reference.

### 5 The greeting

There is a much bigger range of possibilities in an email than in a letter. You can treat an email just like an electronic letter, using 'Dear Jason'. On the other hand, because an email is a cross between a written letter and a conversation, this can seem quite formal: a bit like saying 'Good morning' to a close friend. So many people choose to open with the kind of greeting they would use in speech: 'Hello', or 'Hi'.

### 6 The closing salutation

Much the same applies here. 'Regards', 'Kind regards', and variations on them are frequently used.

### 7 Signature

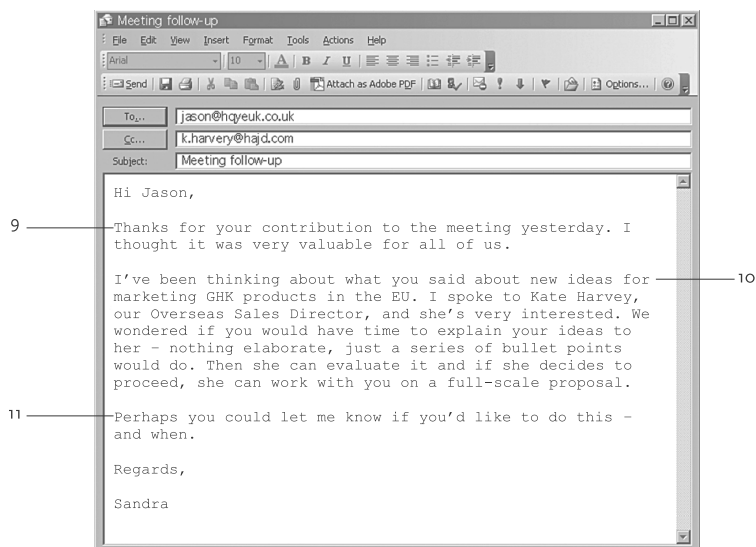
Email applications allow you to use a signature block, which can contain whatever you care to include. It is commonly used for business titles, phone numbers, and publicity material.

### 8 Warning

Many organizations add a legal warning, in case the email falls into the wrong hands.

## Structure

As we've seen, an email can vary in length from one word to thousands. Short emails are often relaxed, informal, and unstructured. But longer messages usually need a clear structure. As with letters, the structure often consists of three main parts:



## 9 Introduction

You explain briefly what the message is about. This can be done purely in the 'Subject' line, but sometimes this may make the message appear somewhat abrupt. A short introduction is a good way of beginning your interaction with the recipient.

## 10 Body

The main part of the message.

## 11 Conclusion

This spells out whatever action you would like the email to lead to. It also rounds off your interaction with the person you are emailing.

# Attachments

If your message is rather longer than this, you may prefer to write it as a separate document and attach it to a covering email. Attaching separate documents has a number of advantages:

- 1 You can send documents that already exist in digital form, or you can compose a document specially for the purpose. Either way the document itself is separate from the email and can be distributed separately from it.
- 2 If you are composing the document specially for the purpose you can take advantage of the formatting that is available in your word processing software—different fonts and sizes, different font formats (bold, italic, and so on), spacing, and visuals. Some of this is possible in an email but can cause problems—see Formatting, below.
- 3 If you are working with others on a document, you can each add your own alterations, suggestions, and comments to an original document but using a word processing feature such as Microsoft™ Word 'Track changes'.

There are, however, a few disadvantages:

- Large files can take a long time to upload and download. This can delay the receipt of other messages and waste space on the receiver's computer system. Indeed, many organizations' IT systems will not allow the downloading of a large file and simply bounce it back. This can be avoided, to some extent at least, by compressing files before sending.
- There can be problems when you transfer files from one platform to another (for example from Windows to Apple), although this is much easier than it used to be.
- Attachments can carry computer viruses, so care is needed when opening them.

## Formatting emails

By default, emails usually work in plain text mode. This means that you cannot use formatting features such as bold and italic text, or different fonts and font sizes. With most email clients it is also possible to use HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) which does allow you to format in the same way that a web page is formatted. This allows you to construct messages that are better set out and clearer to read, and which can be colourful and elaborate. But there are also disadvantages. The most important are:

- HTML messages make bigger files and so take longer to download;
- the recipients may not have suitable fonts on their systems and so the message may not display properly;
- not all recipients have an email client that can read HTML messages.

So when in doubt it is better to stick to 'penny plain' text emails.

## Getting the most out of email

Email is quick, effective, and convenient. But it does have some drawbacks. It is so direct and immediate that it is all too easy to read and respond to important messages without proper thought. We have all pressed the 'Send' button only to regret the action seconds later. But once a message has been sent it cannot be recalled.

### An email strategy

If you adopt a conscious strategy for handling emails, you stand a much better chance of avoiding any problems. A sensible strategy has four main elements:

---

#### Perspective

▶ *See also*

• CHAPTER 10  
*Audience*  
(p. 117)

---

However unusual or special any particular email may appear, it always exists in a context. It was either sent by someone you know and have corresponded with before or it came from a stranger. If it is from someone you know, then the context is a personal or professional relationship (or, sometimes, a mixture of the two). There may well be a particular issue or group of issues that help define that context further. All this should help you define your audience and purpose fairly clearly, and these are the key elements that determine how you should compose your message.

If the sender is unknown to you, this in itself is a significant part of the context. The subject matter will help define things further, but the key point in interpreting the situation is that you do not know this person or how they think or express themselves. You need to bear this in mind when reading and responding to the message.

---

## Reflection

It is easy to respond to emails emotionally rather than rationally. If you feel under pressure, or your relationship with the sender has some rough edges, it is very tempting to blast off a response to an irritating email without proper thought about how this will affect the person(s) at the other end, or your relationship with them.

As the poet Horace said, *Semel emissum volat irrevocabile verbum*. Once a word has escaped it cannot be recalled. It is far better in such situations to wait until later and then compose a more considered reply. Alternatively, compose a message that expresses how you feel, but then save it in the Drafts folder. After you have had time to cool down, return to your draft and consider whether this wording is really what you want your correspondent to receive.

---

## Response

When you do respond, bear in mind that, like you, the other person probably leads a busy life. Keep your message as short as is feasible, and structure it so that it is easy to read and understand. When you have finished the message, read it through for sense and errors. If your email application includes a spell checker, keep it switched on, so that you can spot careless mistakes. (There is a strange theory that in emails spelling, punctuation, and grammar don't matter. They do. The fact is that many people will judge you by these external signs, just as they do in letters or speech, so there is no reason to be slack just because it's an email, although, of course, what you do in a personal email is a matter of personal style.) When you are happy that the message represents clearly what you want to say—and represents you as a person—then hit 'Send'.

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## Organization

One of the drawbacks of the growth of email is the sheer number of messages we receive every day. Many of them are junk, or only of brief importance, and can be discarded. Others need to be kept while a particular subject or project is relevant. These need to be stored for a period and can then be thrown away. A third group have long-term importance and will need to be stored more or less indefinitely, for example for legal reasons.

So it is important to have a system for organizing your emails. Most email applications offer a folder system so that you can store messages about the same subject, or from the same person in a named file. Many also offer a filtering system so that messages will automatically be placed in the relevant folder as soon as they arrive. These are useful features. Even so it is necessary to check through folders of messages periodically to identify those which can now safely be thrown away, and those which need to be archived.

## Email etiquette

Email does encourage a more relaxed way of writing than other more traditional forms of communication. Nevertheless a number of conventions have been established, which are often referred to as email etiquette.

## 1 Salutation and formality

Some email users are unsure about how to address the person to whom they are sending their message. Should they treat the email like an electronic letter with a formal salutation and farewell? Or is it more like a note you leave on someone's desk, with their first name at the top, underlined, followed by a short message, and ending with your first name?

As was suggested earlier, the answer depends on the way you see your relationship with the other person. If it is someone you don't know and do not wish to offend or irritate, it is best to play safe and use a fairly formal tone, opening with 'Dear Mr X ...' and ending with 'Yours sincerely ...' With someone you do know and have fairly frequent contact with, you can adopt a much more informal tone, opening with just their first name and ending with yours. There are many variations of formality and informality in between.

## 2 Formatting

As pointed out earlier, you can compose an email in HTML. This is useful if you wish to include any of the following:

- a) Emphasis (using bold or italic text)
- b) Bulleted lists
- c) Numbered lists

One further point to remember about formatting is that it is safer not to write dates in a purely numerical format: the date '5/7/05' means different things to different people. To a reader in the US it is 7th May, while to someone in Britain it is 5th July.

## 3 Emotion

As we have already seen, it is easy to respond over-emotionally to an email. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as 'flaming'. It can be avoided in the ways already suggested: taking time to reflect, not sending messages off straightaway, and so on. You should also do everything you can to avoid your message being at all ambiguous. Jokes and irony can be very tricky when composing an email message. Some writers try to get round this by putting brief explanations in brackets:

'and if I don't hear from you by the end of the week I shall get on to your father (only joking)...'

Some emailers use what many people refer to as acronyms (or 'text-speak'), but which are in fact initialisms. These can please or irritate depending on your age and experience. On the whole these are a form of jargon that is best avoided, especially in more formal emails.

Initialism	Meaning
AAMOF	As a matter of fact
AFAIK	As far as I know

Initialism	Meaning
ASL	Age, sex, location
ATB	All the best
B	Be
B2B	Business to business
B4	Before
BFN	Bye for now
BTW	By the way
C	See
CUL8R	See you later
FAQ	Frequently asked questions
F2F	Face to face
F2T	Free to talk
FWIW	For what it's worth
FYI	For your information
GAL	Get a life
GR8	Great
HAND	Have a nice day
H8	Hate
HSIK	How should I know?
HTH	Hope this helps
IMO/IMCO/IMHO	In my opinion/in my considered opinion/in my humble opinion
IOW	In other words
JIC	Just in case
JK	Just kidding
KISS	Keep it simple, stupid!
KIT	Keep in touch
L8R	Later
LOL	Laugh out loud
MOB	Mobile
MSG	Message
MYOB	Mind your own business
NE	Any
NE1	Anyone