

Civility and Email - UCB Library Tips and Guidelines (3/05/02)

This document is the happy outcome of three gatherings of Library staff, sponsored by the Organizational Culture Committee in Spring 2002 on "Civility and Email." Margo Wesley, then Acting Director of the Staff Ombuds Office, led two sessions in which she provided information and facilitated discussion about things to think about when drafting, sending, or reading an email message. A third session was convened to enable participants to relate what we heard and learned to our everyday working environment. Thirty-eight Library staff contributed during one or more sessions. This document is offered to Cabinet, Roundtable and allusers in the spirit of building a collegial community that values clear and effective communication.

Things to keep in mind about people

- 75% of face-to-face communication is non-verbal. Clues we use to help interpret and assess intent and content (body language, facial expression, gestures, and tone of voice) are missing from email communication. Some techniques in formatting text can help (or hurt) how an email is read.
- If the reader is in doubt, they almost invariably fear the worst interpretation.
- People would rather be asked than be told.
- Putting it in writing can be a practical documentation, but it can also make people feel "documented."
- Use of jargon creates an in-group (and an excluded group).
- Not everybody wants to be drawn in.

Things to keep in mind about email technology

- Email is legally a public document; it is never really erased; it can be subpoenaed.
- Email is subject to technical breakdown.
- Email is very easy to forward. It can be edited by someone who is not the author and forwarded without the author's knowledge.

When *not* to use email

- if you are irritated or angry; hurt or confused
- to discuss something confidential, personal, or sensitive
- if something is really urgent
- if it's something really complicated (procedure or policy)
- to try to correct a misunderstanding
- to vent or feud
- to send bad news
- if its just as easy to go talk to a neighbor
- to avoid talking to someone

In a nutshell:

- If you have any strong reaction to an email you receive; go talk to the sender face-to-face.
- Email is new, and society is still figuring out what works and what doesn't – try to assume the best and "cut each other some slack."
- Don't say anything on email that you wouldn't say in front of a crowd.

“In brainstorming the pro’s and con’s of email, we notice that the exact same characteristics that make email great, can also get you into trouble...”

Pro’s

quick

available 24 hours / 7 days
(can use when convenient)

seems informal, takes the stigma off writing,
encourages sender to send

can reach a large audience

seems “private” – as close as the inside of your
own head

can be a time- saver
(e.g., send people background material before a meeting)

allows for group discussion and collaboration

easy to edit

easy to filter / file / organize

establishes a record

saves paper / postage

easy to move information from email to word
processing document and back

Con’s

easy to push “send” before you mean to

sets an expectation to work after hours

sets an expectation that everyone has read it

can be too informal – “feels impertinent”

invites jargon, which can confuse or restrict
audience to “those in the know”

spam

easy to send to “all” when you meant “you”

some may use it as a soapbox

if you only use email, you may leave out those
who don’t have access; don’t have confidence
in their writing skills

a public document; can be subpoenaed

can be “made public” with a simple forward

can be a time-waster
(too many lists where information isn’t actually on
target” but you dare not *not* read it)

on too many lists

get too many copies of the same information

easy for anyone to edit

not everyone wants to “be documented”

is less personal than a personal note
is less official than a typed memo

“Think about each part of an email, before you send it...”

Anatomy of an Email

- | | |
|---|---|
| Who is really interested?
Who needs to know?
To:
cc:
bcc: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• be careful to only respond to “all” when you mean to• respond just to the sender (not to “all”) when responding to someone who is scheduling a meeting• send it to a target audience (don’t use allusers if it’s really intended for a subset of readers)• only send message to people you have reason to believe will be interested – otherwise it can be unwelcome clutter, or even harassment.• don’t burden people with unnecessary cc’s or bcc’s• suppress long lists of recipients by putting them into bcc• know your email system’s habits (if a bcc recipient replies, their message may also reply to the original addressee!)• be aware that sending cc’s to supervisors increases the importance of an exchange – are you sure you need/want to? |
| What’s a useful
Subject line? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• always include a subject line• provide meaningful keywords (allows reader to sort; allows reader to delete messages based on subject, without having to open email)• keep it short• indicate if a response or action is necessary• is it time-dated material? say so.• if you are replying to a message, don’t change the subject line |
| How urgent is it? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• only flag items in cases where time to respond/act is very limited |
| When writing the text, what tone do I want to set? What should I emphasize? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• be gracious -- friendly, professional, polite• assume good intentions and best efforts on part of your readers• provide context, but don’t ramble• if action is needed, put this near the top• put summary statements at the top, followed by more detail below (allows people to scan to determine if its important to them)• better to ask for a favor than to tell someone to do something• re-read for accuracy; re-write to focus on central points• if in doubt, be formal and diplomatic• be brief but not curt• lend emphasis by <u>underlining</u> or using asterisks (probably best to avoid CAPS, since they can seem like shouting)• avoid jargon |