

AN e-BURST OF INSPIRATION FROM THE BEST BOOKS

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**WRITING E-MAILS
THAT HAVE A
CLEAR PURPOSE**



Press Delivers *elements*

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Writing E-mails That Have a Clear Purpose

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We've become a nation of scanners. We screen every incoming message for relevance and importance, and if we decide to read it, usually give it a rapid review and stop as soon as we feel we've gotten the gist. Beyond the fact that there are so many demands on our attention, we don't like reading a lot of text on screen, and there are physical reasons for this—it tires our eyes.

Take this into account in crafting your e-mails. Here are some things to keep in mind.

E-mail Do's

- Put the bottom line on top. Don't make people guess why you're writing or what you want.
- Take the time to write strong subject lines that work as leads and clearly identify the subject—which shouldn't need saying again but it does. People will delete anything frivolous, irrelevant, and unclear.
- Make e-mails short and stick to one subject. People read quickly and distractedly—if you ask two questions in the same e-mail, often you'll get a response to only one. Buried points and subtleties will also be overlooked.
- When you have a major goal to accomplish, you might plan a series of e-mails rather than trying to jam a lot of information into one. If you need to spell out to a group what's involved

in various stages of a project, for example, consider covering one area at a time.

- Use attachments when your subject is necessarily long and complex, unless you know the person or company won't open it. In that case, separate the body of the message graphically from the "cover letter" aspect by using a headline or bold lead-in.
- Think short and concise in every possible way: words, sentences, paragraphs.
- Aim to avoid making the reader scroll. People don't like to and won't.
- Make sure your text size is readable on screen. It should never be smaller than 10 point; 12 point is better. Also ensure that your line length doesn't exceed 60 characters, or it may run off the end of the recipient's screen.
- Organize clearly and simply. Bullet points and numbered paragraphs are useful for people who might not read to the end of the e-mail. When you use numbers, start with a sentence such as "Here are three items that need your attention." You can also put this information into the subject line, such as, "Two Questions re Finch Contract."
- Follow up. Don't rely 100 percent on cyberspace. When an e-mail is important to you, check that it was received. Rarely will people mind. It's risky to assume that they got your message, given the increasing number of filters that might identify your message as spam or high risk.

E-mail Don'ts

- Don't forget to ask for what you want at the end, even if you have to repeat.
- Don't use fancy graphics that require HTML; many people don't have the option or won't use it, and your message may look terrible. Some corporate spam filters also reject such messages.

- Don't use a color other than black for your typeface, a fancy typeface, or a background with a design on it for business e-mail. Not only does it look unprofessional, but it also makes reading the message more difficult and these elements may not display properly on the recipient's screen.
- Don't use all capitals, which make it look as if you're shouting and make the message hard to read, too. And avoid using all italics, which are also hard to read.
- Don't use e-mails for subtle messages—and keep away from sarcasm, irony, and for the most part, humor. It is easy to take such things the wrong way when voice and visual clues are absent.
- Never, ever e-mail anything you don't want to see on your boss's wall or on anyone else's computer anywhere in the world.
- Don't let emotion, anger, or criticism rear their heads in e-mails. Breaking up, resigning, or firing someone via e-mail is *very bad form*.
- Never click Send without proofreading, checking to be sure the e-mail is addressed to the person you want to send it to, and reviewing your attachments. If you often forget to attach documents you intend to, writing a reminder sentence into the e-mail is helpful, such as, "Report 5A attached." It helps you remember to attach it and also helps the recipient, in case he or she fails to notice the attachment itself.

Know What You Want To Say, and Who You Seek to Say It

Let's look at something that most people hate doing but can really make you look good if done well: regular reports to your boss on your work progress or what you've been doing all week.

Goal—Think past the idea that your goal is simply to get an onerous task out of the way. You want to demonstrate that you've used

your time well, made progress on your current project, and get the support you need (supplies, equipment, resources, discussion).

Audience—The “what’s in it for me?” idea is always important. So why does the boss impose this task on you and your colleagues? Distrust? No...he or she hopes to hear you are performing well. In a department with more than a handful of staff members, a supervisor simply can’t observe what everyone is doing and track the big picture. And he or she can’t hold enough meetings to interact one on one and drag any problems or questions to the surface.

Ultimately, too, your boss needs to report on collective progress to someone higher up the ladder. Your reports may also be essential for billing clients.

Tone—One more thing that just about everyone you write to has in common—feeling strapped for time. Almost every e-mail you write will be read by an impatient and distracted person. This affects your presentation approach: You’ll want to be businesslike, efficient, and tight.

Content—What does your goal and audience analysis already tell you to cover in your progress report, regardless of the specifics of your job?

- A rundown of how you used your time (a proportional approach is probably fine)
- If your work is project-oriented, what progress you’ve made, and whether you’re on schedule
- Any problems you’re encountering
- Any help you need to do your project, or job, well

Organize—The content map is logical; try using that order.

Begin with a strong lead—In an e-mail, that’s the subject line, plus the first sentence or so of the message. Some subjects call for a

catchy subject line. That's when you're competing for attention. This is not one of those occasions. Your boss will not respond favorably to "What Willie Did the Week of March 14th." You're better off with "Progress Report: Week of March 14."

The middle and end will flow naturally because you've got your message planned, so let's start with the message lead and see where it takes us.

Dear Sam:

Here's my progress report for the week of March 14.

General Allocation of Time:

50% on the Wise-Allen project.

25% closing out the details on the Fineman project.

10% participating in meetings and industry networking.

10% training and supervising the interns.

5% working on the database reorganization.

Personal-Time Activities:

After-hours social meeting with Rod Blaine of SatSun, a good prospect for our services.

Spoke on international commerce careers at the high school Tuesday night.

Major Project Progress:

Wise-Allen is on target in most respects: The supplies have been ordered, the staff is briefed, and the working plan is three-quarters developed. Obtaining additional staff support is running late, however.

Fineman should be wrapped up within the 10-day framework.

New Contacts:

Met and talked at some length with Brad Savitch, VP of Manson Inc., at the JVNC meeting on Wednesday, and plan a follow-up call to request a meeting. His firm may be interested in our international support service.

Intern Program:

The interns are doing productive work and having a good experience helping with the database work. I met with each of them for 15 minutes to check things out.

Problems:

As noted above, there have been delays in getting the help we need from HR. We need time from specialists for the technical aspects of Wise-Allen—I'll attach a list—which could cause serious delays in completing this stage of the project. Would you consider placing a call to HR to let them know this is important, or drop them a note? Thanks.
—Bill

Now we have a draft of the e-mail. Next...

Evaluate—What comes across overall—what would be your impression of the writer? If the message doesn't meet the stated goals, or doesn't seem right for the audience, you'd adapt or change it at this point. Notice we added in a "Personal Activities" section because in the course of drafting the memo, it seemed like a good opportunity to remind Sam that this employee goes above and beyond the standard work-hour framework and expectations. But whether you should do this depends on the personality of your recipient.

Of course, you may work in an office that demands far more detail or provides a form to fill out, especially if billable hours must be

documented. Adapt the ideas to your own environment and the people you work with and for. Even company guidelines can be applied with imagination. Take your activity reports seriously, and you'll see opportunities to give a strong impression of your capabilities and advance your long-range goals.



If you liked this Element, you might like the book by Natalie Canavor and Claire Meiwitz, *The Truth About the New Rules of Business Writing* (ISBN: 978-0-13-715315-2).



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