



Association for Creative Business Writing

Write more effective business e-mail by this afternoon by Lynda McDaniel

We love e-mail because it's fast, easy, and virtually free. But it's notorious for incoherent messages that irritate, confuse, and swamp our inboxes.

Only to be deleted.

Think I'm kidding? Students, clients, and webinar attendees tell me they don't think twice about deleting e-mails they don't like the looks of.

Let's get the most out of the medium with a few tips, tools, and tricks of the trade.

Write more effective business e-mail by this afternoon:

- 1. Paragraphs:** Keep them short with only one topic per paragraph.
- 2. White space:** Just hit "enter" to make your e-mail more readable.
- 3. Background:** Skip it for business e-mail.
- 4. Bullets:** Break up copy and draw attention. Skimmers get a good idea of where you're headed and come back for more.
- 5. Numbers:** When you tell your readers you have six points to make, their brains register that number in a nanosecond. That improves your odds of having your readers respond to each item. And that means you won't need two or three more e-mails to finally get the job done. (Statistics show that 30 percent of all correspondence is to clarify previous correspondence—an amazing waste of time and money.)
- 6. Salutations,** especially for global e-mail: *Ms.* and *Mr.* work in more formal situations. Reserve first names until you know the person or have been introduced. *Sir* or *Madam* is out of date—use *Hello* or *Greetings* if you don't know recipients' names.
- 7. No LOL matter:** Skip the text-speak when writing to people other than family and friends. Sounds like a no-brainer, but it's more common than you'd think.

(more)

Write even more effective business e-mail by next week:

8. Subject line: It's your best hope of getting your e-mail opened. Take time to craft subject lines with benefits from your *readers'* perspective. My favorite example: An office manager sent an e-memo with this subject line: "*Carpet repairs today.*" No one opened it. But the real point of the memo was to tell everyone they got to leave early because of the repair. The subject line should have read: "*Early closing today*"? Now that's an e-mail that will get opened!

9. Subheads: Like little headlines, these divide copy into bite-sized sections that are easy on the eye. Subheads also pique the interest of skimmers.

10. "From" line: The importance of this is often overlooked. Keep it clear, straightforward, and consistent. I see crazy ones like ZAP or MISS JANE and hit "delete."

Write even more effective e-mail by next month:

11. Watch your tone:

- Forget about sounding important. Be conversational, especially in e-mail.
- Pretend you're writing to your best friend. (Works great when writing difficult messages.)
- Use contractions. For some reason "*I cannot open your attachment*" sounds harsher (unintentionally) than "*I can't open your attachment.*"
- Encourage with positive comments and phrasing.

☹ *We no longer offer free copies of our e-books.*

☺ *Our e-books are now available through our bookstore.*

12. Write to your readers:

Tell stories, benefits, and results through your readers' eyes. Engage them. Use the word "you" often. It's a proven magnet that keeps people reading.

13. End with impact:

- Not only do you want to leave a lasting impression, you need to make your expectations known. Give clear instructions for action. E-mail is particularly effective for this: hit reply, click a link, and/or download a document.
- Who does what? Let readers know who is supposed to respond, report back with new information, etc. State this early in the e-mail and again at the close.
- Say "Goodbye": When you don't know the recipients well, close your e-mails with *Sincerely, all the best, best, best regards*, etc. and use your name. Initials work for casual cohorts and colleagues.
- Remember your contact information. It's irritating to have to look up numbers—if we have them in the first place.

E-mail is a fast and effective communication tool when used with a little courtesy and lot of common sense.