

E-Mail Etiquette

E-mail has become the communication medium of choice for many of us. It's quick and easy and an indispensable tool for most of us in our daily work. But the informal nature of email sometimes leads to confusion or hurt feelings or worse. Below are some guidelines for email etiquette that might help you avoid some of the more common pitfalls:

- **Clarity** – This is probably the most important consideration when you send an e-mail message. Here are some points to keep in mind:
 - Be brief but clear. In our fast-paced society, long messages often go unread. Say only what is necessary to get your point across.
 - Don't forget writing conventions of grammar, punctuation and spelling. It's important that our messages present us as professionals and professionals are careful when they write. It also sets a good example for our students. As a language arts teacher, I talked to students a lot about writing for an audience and the difference between formal and informal language. While it may be okay for students to be less formal when they instant message their friends is not okay for general audiences. We owe it to our audience to make our writing as clear and error-free as possible.
 - Avoid abbreviations unless you are sure your reader knows what they mean. This is another case where you must know your audience. If you're not sure that your reader knows that BTW means "by the way," spell it out.
 - Read the message before you send it. If you've been brief but clear, it will only take an extra minute to read what you wrote and it may save you some embarrassment. And, while you're at it, use your spell check.
- **Emoticons** (the smiley faces made with punctuation marks and all their variations) Experts on email etiquette disagree about the use of emoticons. Some like them because they help readers understand the writer's intent. Others think they are silly and unprofessional. I think they can be useful when you really want someone to see you "smile when you say that." Once again, make sure the recipient understands what they mean.
- **Shouting** – Beginners often make the mistake of pressing the caps lock and then typing in all uppercase letters. On the Internet, this is perceived as shouting (as well as being very difficult to read). Try using other formatting for emphasis. If you are sending a message to someone within our First Class system, you can be assured that any formatting you use (bold, italics, font colors, etc.) will display properly. Be aware that this may not be the case if you are sending to someone with a different mail program.
- **Privacy** – One of the most important things we can teach our students is that nothing they do online is private. Because email is so quick and easy it also seems transitory but it is surprisingly permanent and once you send it, you have no control over who sees it. A good rule to teach students is never write anything in an e-mail that you wouldn't want to see on the front page of your local newspaper. Teachers also must be very careful about including confidential student information in an email. Sometimes it's better just to pick up the phone.
- **Signature** – Believe it or not, not everyone knows who you are from your email address alone. Our friends at Apple tell us that they often receive requests for help from teachers who don't identify themselves or their schools. The easiest way to make sure everyone knows who you are is to create a signature file. You can do this in the First Class preferences. Your signature should contain your name, position, and school and maybe your school phone number and URL for its web site. You can choose to have it automatically added to each message or you can add it yourself by clicking on the signature button.
- **Attachments** – One of the most useful email features is the ability to send other documents along for the ride. This can be a convenient way for you to share documents with colleagues or with students. Be careful about sending large attachments. They can take a long time to download and some recipients

may use mail systems that restrict attachments. If you are sending an attachment, let the recipient know in the body of your message what the attachment is and why you are sending it. Attachments are notorious for spreading viruses and it's wise not to open one unless you know what it is and who sent it.

- **Subject line** – The subject line is there for a reason; please don't leave it blank. It is very important that your subject lines be meaningful. People who receive hundreds of emails a day scan those subject lines before deciding which emails to read and respond to. A meaningful subject line also helps when you are organizing your messages or trying to search for and retrieve an old message.
- **cc-ing** – If you decide to cc your message to someone, please state in the message why you are doing so, especially if the cc recipient is not expecting the message. Be clear about who is expected to act on the message and who is receiving it just for information.
- **Replying** – This may seem obvious but... it's important that you reply to your messages as quickly as possible. This may be difficult if you receive a lot of mail (I often think I could make a full time job of just answering my email) but it's polite to at least acknowledge that you received it. I often send a quick, one-line reply saying I received the message and will send a longer reply later, after I've given the matter some thought. I then flag the message so I remember to attend to it when I have time. Be thoughtful also about whom you reply to. If the message has been sent to several people, it may be appropriate to reply only to the sender. On the other hand, your reply may contain information that everyone needs to have. You should also be thoughtful about how much of the original message you quote. It's helpful to your reader to be reminded of what the conversation is about but quoting a long message just to add "thank you" at the end is annoying.
- **Forwarding** – If you decide to forward a message to someone else, let the sender know so he or she will expect a reply from that person and not be confused by it. It's also a good idea to let the person you are forwarding the message to know why you are forwarding it. I often add a line or two to the top of a forwarded message, explaining why I think it's important that the recipient see that message. Think carefully before you forward jokes or other junk mail. Some people may enjoy receiving them but some of us just delete them without reading them and silently curse the sender.

Email can be a powerful communication tool in the classroom. A large percentage of your students are already using email at home. We educators have a responsibility to teach them email etiquette and to model that behavior ourselves. Following the guidelines above will help you and your students communicate more effectively and responsibly.

Resources

"Dynamoo's Email Etiquette." Dynamoo 01 Dec. 2003 <http://www.dynamoo.com/technical/etiquette.htm>

"Email Etiquette - Tips for Professional Email." About, Inc. 01 Dec. 2003
<http://careerplanning.about.com/library/weekly/aa072502a.htm>

"Email Etiquette." 01 Dec. 2003 <http://www.emailreplies.com/>

"Harness Email: Email Etiquette." Learn The Net 01 Dec. 2003
<http://www.learnthenet.com/english/html/65mailet.htm>

Harris, David. "Electronic Mail Etiquette." 01 Dec. 2003 <http://www.cs.queensu.ca/FAQs/email/etiquette.html>

Pirillo, Chris. "E-mail Etiquette (Netiquette)." Writers Write 01 Dec. 2003
<http://www.writerswrite.com/journal/dec99/pirillo1.htm>