

Hey You! Or To Whom It May Concern

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ABSTRACT

In the past most formal communication took place in the format of a letter. Many of us will have received training or guidance on how to complete a letter correctly during our school days. In more recent years letters have been replaced with the more informal email, instant messenger and text messaging. While these methods have many benefits, we have generally not given guidance as to how to effectively use them in a business situation. I have seen a number of examples where the sender has not taken care about the content of their message and it has resulted in an error that irritates the receiver and in the worst cases could be potentially offensive. This paper will look through some examples of these faux pas and suggestions of how to avoid them.

INTRODUCTION

Email has become one of the main formats for delivering written communication. This provides many benefits including speed of delivery and the ability to easily store an electronic copy of the text. However, as most people started using email as a tool to communicate informally many people have not adjusted their style to account for using the medium in the business world. This paper suggests some simple tips to improve the content of emails to ensure that they are appropriate for their audience and are less likely to upset the recipient.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Most people will start an email with an address to the recipient for example 'Dear John' or 'To Jane'. This is an appropriate way to begin the correspondence. It is important to ensure that the name that is used is correct and also that it is spelled correctly. If you have received an email previously from the recipient check the signature that they use. This should contain their full name. Also check how they refer to themselves throughout the message. It is appropriate to use either of these forms of the name.

I personally see this issue a lot. Here is an example of an email that I may send:

Dear John,

Please can you confirm that you have received the data?

Thank you

Kath

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My signature states 'Kathryn Wright' and I refer to myself as 'Kath'. I would only expect to receive emails with either of these versions of my name.

Here is an example of type of response that I have received to this message:

Dear Katherine,

I can confirm that the data has been received.

Regards

John

As you can see my name is spelled in a different way to any option that I have used. I have received responses with my name spelled in multiple different ways for example 'Katherine', 'Kathy' and 'Catherine'.

If I receive a response to a message with an incorrectly spelled name it gives the impression that the responder has not properly read the message. This in turn does not give me any confidence in the response received as I do not know if the message has been fully read and understood. This example is a very simple email however, if the message has more detailed content this may be cause for concern.

If you have not seen the recipients' name in writing it is safer not to use the name for example start the message with 'Hi' or 'Hello'.

HIM OR HER?

We now spend more time working globally than we have in the past. This can also raise issues when working with emails. When you are dealing with people from other countries they may have names that you are not familiar with. This can make it difficult to identify gender. I have seen a number of messages where someone is referred to as 'she' when they are actually a male. Some people could take offence at this error.

Dear Louise,

Leigh is scheduled to perform the task this week. Can you please confirm that she is still available?

Regards

Vicky

In order to avoid this issue, firstly try to find out the persons' gender. This can be done by speaking to them on the phone or by asking another contact who knows them.

If you cannot find out the gender of the recipient then try to avoid referring to them by gender, use their name or 'they' or 'them' instead which can be used to refer to either gender.

Dear Louise,

Leigh is scheduled to perform the task this week. Can you please confirm that they are still available?

Regards

Vicky

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LANGUAGE

In most situations English is the primary language used in the pharmaceutical industry. This makes it easier for native English speakers, however, there are a large volume of workers in the industry for whom English is a second or even third language.

Taking this into account, when writing an email, proper English should be used. I have seen a number of instances where local dialect phrases have been used. For example:

Dear Mark,

What dae you want us to dae wi the data you gie us?

Regards

Bob

This is obviously a very extreme example, however I have seen examples using some of the words used above. This example would be difficult enough for people who are native English speakers who do not live locally, therefore could be near impossible for foreign colleagues to interpret. This email should have been written as:

Dear Mark,

What would you like us to do with the data which you sent to us?

Regards

Bob

This can now be understood easily by anyone who can speak English.

Particularly if the content is important, it is necessary to make sure that the statement is clear and easy to interpret in order to ensure that the correct message is understood.

EMOTICONS AND SMILIES

Most people started to use emails in a personal situation prior to using them in a business scenario. In these personal messages it is common to make use of emoticons or smilies to help convey feelings. In a business mail these are often inappropriate.

There are two things to take into account when deciding whether to use emoticons, firstly your relationship with the recipient, are they well known to you? And secondly the purpose of the mail, is it a chatty message or is it communicating an important piece of information?

If you are dealing with someone that you do not know very well the use of these gestures may be construed as unprofessional and potentially result in your work not being taken seriously.

Any written communication can and often is saved as proof of an event or decision. Therefore using emoticons on any email that is discussing important decisions or events should be avoided as this will appear unprofessional.

Below is an example of a message to recipient that is well known to the sender that would be inappropriate:

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Dear Fred,

I would like to introduce myself as the lead programmer on study 1.

I would like to confirm that we should calculate age using the formula:

Visit date – date of birth/365.25

This will make life easier ☺

Regards

Tom

This message is being used to document a decision and is also the first communication between the two parties. Therefore the use of the emoticon is not appropriate.

Below is an example of an appropriate use of the smile:

Dear Sarah,

Sorry I will need to re-arrange our coffee meeting as I will be on holiday tomorrow ☺

Thank you

Nicky

This message is in essence a personal message between colleagues who are well known to each other therefore the use of the smile is appropriate.

OTHER POINTS

SIGNATURES

Many people use a blank email template to write their messages. For example:

Dear Jack,

Please call me to arrange a meeting.

Regards

Sophie

In this example Sophie is expecting Jack to call her, however there is no information contained within the message to indicate to Jack how to do this.

It is very easy to set up a standard signature on an email account that contains the contact details of the sender. This makes it a lot easier for the recipient to respond using the correct medium. As demonstrated below.

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Dear Jack,

Please call me to arrange a meeting.

Regards

Sophie

Sophie Smith
Statistical Programmer

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Avenue Road
City
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REPLYING

Many emails are sent to large groups of people to ensure that everyone receives the same message. There are then often hundreds of replies sent as every recipient replies to everyone who received the original message. This in turn clogs up peoples' inboxes and can lead to people being so overloaded with mail that they miss the important messages.

If the replies are only of relevance to the original sender then the responder should ensure that they only reply to the relevant people. Only use 'reply all' if everyone on the list needs to see the response.

CONCLUSION

Emails have become a very useful method by which to communicate information in writing. In order to use the tool to its full advantage users should ensure that they follow a few simple rules:

- 1) Check the recipients' name and ensure that it is spelled correctly. If their name is not available try to avoid typing their name until you do know the correct spelling.
- 2) Check the recipients' gender and ensure that you address them correctly. If their gender is not available then use non-gender specific terms such as 'they'.
- 3) Avoid using local dialect. Ensure that you use proper English so that it can be easily understood by anyone who is required to read and understand the message.
- 4) Be careful when using emoticons. Only use them in informal situations with people that are considered friends. Use in formal communication can be deemed unprofessional.
- 5) Add a signature with your contact details to the bottom of your message. This makes it easier for the recipient to respond using the appropriate method, without having to search for contact details.
- 6) Only use 'reply all' if all recipients require to see the response.

If these rules are followed, most of the issues that I have seen could be avoided and thus result in a more productive outcome to email messaging.

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