

# Five Ways To Keep Your Tone In Check When Writing Business Emails



Matthew Held, CEO and Co-Founder of Manawa Networks

Posted: 10/09/2014 1:24 pm EDT

Do people still email despite the myriad of other communications options available today? Email remains the preferred choice for business communication.

According to the [Email Statistics Report \(2013-2017\)](#) issued by research firm, The Radicati Group, the number of sent and received daily business emails is expected to grow by 7 per cent to 132.1 billion by 2017 from a total of 100.5 billion in 2013. Furthermore, business email accounts will experience a 5 per cent average annual growth rate and reach 1.1 billion by the end of 2017. The majority of business email accounts will be deployed onsite followed by adoption of cloud business email services like Microsoft Office 365 and Google Apps.

Consumer email, on the other hand, is expected to decrease 4 per cent by 2017 from 82.4 billion in 2013 to 75.5 billion in 2017. Consumers are opting for messaging apps, instant messaging and social networking sites.

With the proliferation of electronic communication, good writing is now an essential skill in the digital age. Yet, good writing and basic email etiquette or 'netiquette' is hard to find in the business world. The following 5 tips will help you write great business emails and keep your tone and temper in check.

## 1. Choose the right words

Choosing words that express the right tone and emotion with clarity and brevity is an important part of good writing. Choosing the right words avoids the fear we all have of being misunderstood. A study in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#) shows that people misinterpret the meaning and tone of emails as much as 50 percent of the time. What's more, 90 percent of email recipients incorrectly believe they can interpret the tone of an email message. The resulting communication gaps often escalate into misunderstandings, resentment and frustration.

The English language depends on specific words to convey tone. This reveals the type of relationship like that of employee and boss, buyer and seller and prospect and sales person. David Shipley and Will Schwalbe, authors of "[Send: Why People Email So Badly and How to Do It Better](#)", say,

"the words you choose can be formal, casual, or somewhere in between; they can be literal or figurative; they can be precise or vague; understated, correct, or exaggerated; simple or complex; common or rare; prosaic or poetic; contracted or not."

For example, starting and ending an email is straightforward? Or is it? Examples of openings include "Yo", "Hiya", "Hey", "Sir/Madam," "Dear [first name]" or "Dear [misspelled name]". An inappropriate salutation can quickly change the tone and flow of the conversation towards the negative.

What about email endings? Examples include "Best", "All the best", "Best regards", "Best Wishes", "Sincerely", "Cordially", "Yours", "Love", "Love and Kisses" and "xoxo". All are acceptable for business communications with the exception of the last three.

The thing to remember with openings and closings is to make sure you are not being inappropriately informal or formal. An easy way to achieve this is to mirror the responses of the other person. You can move from formal to informal if the other person is doing the same. Once the relationship plateaus, stick to the same closing.

## 2. One subject line with one topic

Business people receive an average of 108 emails per day. It is crucial that subject lines be concise, specific and actionable allowing someone to prioritize the message. A good subject line summarizes the rest of the message and gets a faster response.

Jason Womack, author of [Your Best Just Got Better: Work Smarter, Think Bigger, Make More](#), offers some hints on how to write or respond with actionable email subject lines:

### Vague Subject Line:

Re: budget meeting  
Wilson project  
Seminar  
Newsletter

**Clear Subject Line:**

Draft agenda by 11/21/08 re: budget meeting.  
Fax Kira (415) 236-6045 signed contract: Wilson project  
Call Jason (805) 640-6401 to schedule Q1 '09 Seminar  
Email Sales team revised edits to Newsletter by 11/14/08

It is also helpful to keep to one topic because you risk the recipient missing your more important point if you have several topics.

**3. Put yourself in their shoes and pause before pressing send**

We have all sent an email message that we regretted. The general rule of thumb for staying out of trouble and preventing an escalation of emotionally charged emails is simple. Would you make the same comment to someone's face and stick around for a response? If not, then you should refrain from sending the email.

Shipley and Schwalbe provide an email exchange example between a lawyer in London, England and a secretary that got published in British newspapers. The lawyer, who specializes in computer law and electronic commerce, had lunch with a secretary at their law firm. The secretary accidentally spilled ketchup on his pants. Later, the lawyer sent the following email to the secretary:

"Hi Jenny, I went to a dry cleaners at lunch and they said it would cost £4 [about \$8] to remove the ketchup stains. If you'd let me have the cash today, that would be much appreciated. Thanks Richard."

When the lawyer did not receive a response, he had a colleague place a post-it note, reminding the secretary about the amount owed.

The secretary responded by email and copied hundreds of employees at their law firm:

"Subject: Re: Ketchup trousers.  
With reference to the email below, I must apologize for not getting back to you straight away but due to my mother's sudden illness, death and funeral I have had more pressing issues than your £4.

I apologize again for accidentally getting

a few splashes of ketchup on your trousers. Obviously your financial need as a senior associate is greater than mine as a mere secretary.

Having already spoken to and shown your email and Anne-Marie's note to various partners, lawyers and trainees in ECC&T and IP/IT, they kindly offered to do a collection to raise the £4.

I however declined their kind offer but should you feel the urgent need for the £4, it will be on my desk this afternoon. Jenny."

When in doubt, pick up the phone or speak face-to-face to avoid further embarrassment and misunderstanding.

**4. Avoid Emoticons in formal communication**

Emoticons are the little faces we make by arranging punctuation marks like parentheses, colons, and semi-colons. They are used to put a human face and add some emotion to faceless electronic communication. They are useful for text and instant messaging communication with people you communicate informally. They can be used in email with people you are comfortable and correspond with regularly. Emoticons should never be used if you are writing any formal message or if you want to compensate for a risky joke or sarcastic comment that may be misunderstood.

**5. Don't get too comfortable with attachments**

Email attachments are easy to send. Yet, the sender often forgets an attachment may contain a virus, takes up lots of space and is often not necessary or desired by the recipient. If you do send an attachment, ask for permission and clearly indicate in the subject or body of your message what it pertains to. Give it a meaningful file name that helps the recipient organize for future reference.

Email is a wonderful and powerful tool. It is quick, concise and highly effective when used properly. It is also an excellent tool that nicely compliments the phone, face-to-face meetings and instant messaging. Remember, you can't take back an email or instant message after you send it.