

Stylistic Guidelines for E-Mail

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Abstract—E-mail style has received little attention from corporations and other institutions. The absence of stylistic guidelines may create problems: communicating inappropriately with some audiences, losing sight of the message purpose, or wasting company resources in other ways. To solve such problems, technical communicators can use their unique abilities to promote e-mail formats that consider the strengths and limitations of the medium in addition to the traditional concerns with audience, purpose, and content of messages.

WHEN business and industry address e-mail concerns, they concentrate primarily on connectivity or on privacy issues. However, companies must also address style, an area taken for granted in letter or memo writing. Firms generally regard letters as external documents, reserving memos for internal communication. Although styles differ from company to company, such variations follow well-defined conventions. Letters, for example, may be full-blocked, blocked, or semi-blocked. Memos begin with the addressee, the sender, the date, and the subject; even with slight changes in the order of these elements, they remain recognizable as memos.

E-mail, on the other hand, is used for both external and internal communication. Without clear stylistic conventions, e-mail users are left to their own devices. As a result, they may neglect to consider their audience and send messages lacking salutations or complimentary closings to international customers who expect such niceties. In other instances, they may use these formalities inappropriately, e.g., informal greetings in formal situations or polite closings for casual messages.

A literature review shows little, if any, attention to this problem. One source states the following about e-mail style:

Because this is a relatively new form of correspondence, the conventions for it are not as well-established as those for traditional letters and memos, and you may find a variety of formats being used by organizations [1].

Worse, such variety often exists within the same organization, leading to inconsistencies in style and waste of company resources.

Moreover, employees often neglect to consider the strengths and limitations of the medium. Thus, even if company policy dictates that e-mail messages be treated as memos, screen or window space and other mechanical constraints suggest

the need for further guidelines to ensure more effective and efficient styles for electronic communication.

Another source [2] finds that 70–80% of written communication by engineering managers and design engineers could be sent by e-mail. Even if this projection is high, current trends indicate that industry can expect increased reliance on electronic communication, making its effective and efficient use a major concern. As e-mail usage proliferates, therefore, companies must realize that more productive use of the medium is essential and must establish consistent guidelines for their employees. Technical writers, who are uniquely situated in the workplace to meet this need, can help companies choose suitable styles for more efficient use of electronic correspondence.

By raising such issues for technical writers in business and industry to consider, this paper encourages them to use their communication skills to establish appropriate styles for their companies. To do so effectively, technical writers must counteract the prevailing view of e-mail messages as electronic memos or telephone calls. Instead, they must influence industry to examine the effects of the medium on the message and the ways in which the medium interacts with traditional considerations of audience, purpose, and content.

EFFECT OF THE MEDIUM ON THE MESSAGE

It does not take long for the e-mail user to discover the strengths and limitations of the medium. Major strengths, of course, include cost savings and speed. In lean economic times, e-mail may represent one means of improving productivity. One aerospace company, for example, now uses e-mail to send information from senior management simultaneously to all employees. Its goal is to avoid the omissions, errors, and filters of its previous system—weekly meetings of project managers, who then transmitted information with varying degrees of accuracy in a series of follow-on meetings [3].

However, in some companies, potential benefits may be lost if the medium is used without effective guidelines and users send messages indiscriminately because it is easy to do so. For example, the present writers often receive messages preceded by a dozen or more screens of distribution lists. Such sweeping use of e-mail is not uncommon. Ironically, widespread distribution originally was lauded as a way to break down hierarchic barriers to communication within a company [4]. But along with easier access, the medium allows users to waste recipients' time with messages that are too lengthy or unnecessary. Further, some e-mail messages may reflect negatively on the company. Thus, it is important for business and industry to set policy for e-mail style and usage in order to maximize productivity and prevent such potential pitfalls.

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Electronic Mail Etiquette	
1.	Cover only one subject per message, which facilitates replies, forwarding, and filing.
2.	Use upper and lower case text, because MESSAGES IN ALL CAPITAL LETTERS HAVE THE EFFECT OF SHOUTING.
3.	Be diplomatic: criticism is always harsher when written, and electronic messages are easily forwarded.
4.	Be calm: you may have misinterpreted the implied criticism or missed the ironic humor in a message; don't send a message while you are still hot under the collar. (Networkers call this "flaming.")
5.	To signal your humorous intent, use the "sideways smile," :-)
6.	Don't use the academic networks for commercial or proprietary work.
7.	Be extremely careful about executing any programs that you receive over the network, since they may contain viruses that erase or, by propagating themselves, disrupt the network.
8.	Don't send anything electronically that you wouldn't want to see on page one of The Chronicle of Higher Education....
9.	Don't use LISTSERVs for personal mail. It is seen by everyone on the list.

Fig. 1. Many e-mail users receive minimal stylistic information.

At times, these pitfalls are intensified by writers who see e-mail simply as another form of conversation or "talking on paper," a view that continues with the statement that e-mail "thrives because of its rapidity and fluidity: the e-mail writer performs as a speaker . . ." [5]. Here, the source fails to fully consider the purpose and the medium. The purpose, in most companies, is a business rather than a social one. For example, Nordstrom specifies that employees are to use e-mail only for "legitimate business purposes" [6]. Further, the medium makes a "talking on paper" attitude a dangerous viewpoint. Many unsuspecting e-mail users have discovered that, unlike oral conversation, e-mail messages can provide a permanent record, as evidenced by the court cases involving e-mail privacy [6].

In many instances, companies have focused on the technical aspects of electronic messaging to the near exclusion of style. For example, in examining a typical e-mail users' manual, such as the Arizona State University guide, we found 100 pages of technical information on using e-mail but only a one-page list (see Fig. 1) that addresses "Electronic Mail Etiquette." This list reminds users to be diplomatic and calm, to cover only one subject per message, to use upper and lower case rather than all capital letters, and to remember that other readers may view their messages. For further stylistic conventions, writers at this institution are on their own.

If we look carefully at the nine rules in Fig. 1, we find an attempt, conscious or not, to link the medium to audience, purpose, and content. Certainly, the guide considers audience convenience in the first rule—directing users to limit their messages to one subject—but neglects to carry it a step further and recommend one screen or window per message. Rules 2, 4, 8, and 9 also concern the audience in part. Interestingly enough, Rule 4 addresses both the receiver and sender of the message as audience.

This aspect of e-mail style, flaming (a hacker term that refers to angry or otherwise unsuitable wording), is one of the few that has received wide coverage in the literature. One source suggests, for example, that if an e-mail user must send an emotional response, it is better to start with a warning phrase such as "flame on" [7]. Another advises e-mail users to ask themselves whether they would say in person what they plan to say electronically and to "keep editing until the answer is yes" [8]. Many writers include *smilies* or *emoticons*, symbols like the one in Rule 5 above, to indicate purpose to the audience. An online file called *The Unofficial Smilie Dictionary* makes these symbols readily available [8].

Computer industry sources provide similar rules of e-mail etiquette to business users, reminding them to watch their language and giving other advice that relates primarily to audience and the medium, though the writers may not refer directly to these areas of communication:

Scrutinize your address list. People have lost their jobs by accidentally forwarding messages to the wrong person. A little care will assure that you're not sending an employee evaluation to another employee, or a nasty note about the boss to the woman herself [9].

Despite the importance of such advice, companies do not routinely train their employees in e-mail style.

The rules in Fig. 1 represent a good beginning, but more information is necessary. In the early years of this century, when memos emerged as a new form of business communication, the major purpose was to make communication systematic, cheaper, and more efficient [10]. With the ongoing replacement of paper memos by electronic messaging, companies seem to have overlooked the original advantages of the memo format.

An examination of electronic messages at several firms shows a similar disregard for consistency in e-mail style. These messages include a series of disconnected meeting notes headed "Interoffice Memorandum," a customer-satisfaction reminder (with a long distribution list), a "While You Were Out" message, and a meeting announcement. Many of these messages are electronic memos, similar in style to paper ones. Others add personal salutations and closings to memo style, as shown in Fig. 2. (All figures in this article that show e-mail messages are modified versions of actual communications. Names and other identifiers are changed where necessary to protect privacy.)

Here, the content and purpose of the letter is business oriented, and the audience consists of two other company employees in addition to John Doe. However, the format and general tone seem to contradict these aspects of the message. This combination of memo format, informal and incomplete salutation and closing, and letter style ("Well, that's all for now") seems representative of the general confusion as to appropriate e-mail style.

Earlier studies have examined style relative to other e-mail issues. Specifically, Sproull and Kiesler [11] focused on the effects of the technology on behavior within organizations, looking at e-mail's role in empowering people by providing information. Among the data these researchers collected was information about the following eight message attributes:

```

Date: 04-Apr-1994 04:09pm EDT
From: Sally Brown
      UXUXU
To: John Doe
CC: Frank James
   Betty Green

Subject: Paranoia
=====

John,
This is probably stating the obvious, but I don't
want to get burned in this YZY 22.0 install.

I want to make sure we document (yes, in
writing) to them a couple of things:
- all data stored between the 22.0 install and the
22.1 install/upgrade will be deleted.
-support for the system will be 8:30-5 EST only.
. . . .

Well, that's all for now. If I think of anything
else, I'll pass it on.

Sally
    
```

Fig. 2. Writer appears undecided as to appropriate e-mail style.

- 1) Length: number of lines in the text of the message.
- 2) Opening: number of words in the salutation.
- 3) Closing: number of words in the closing.
- 4) Positive effect: words that express positive feelings.
- 5) Negative effect: words that express negative feelings.
- 6) Politeness: courteous words.
- 7) Energy: format that adds emphasis to the message.
- 8) Topic: either work or nonwork.

The first five of these attributes can be looked at in a different way—as a departure point for examining the influence of the e-mail medium on the message and for recommending effective conventions in these areas.

MESSAGE LENGTH

Conventions for memo and letter writing have long preferred a one-page format. With e-mail, the number of message lines available to writer and reader may vary with the software and hardware used. E-mail users often find that many communication programs use so much of the screen or window for menus and other “housekeeping” items that limited space remains for the message. Although writer and receiver can always scroll down to the next screen, restricted screen size is a limitation of e-mail that organizations should seriously consider. Writers must weigh the inconvenience to the audience of scrolling back and forth to write, to read, and to refer to previous screens or windows when responding. Research does indicate that recipients will scroll down if the message is important or interesting enough [12], but we believe both writer and reader can be served best if they limit each message and response to one screen or window, whenever possible.

SALUTATION AND CLOSING

Many e-mail users indicate they are unsure of the salutation and closing format to employ. They are concerned about appearing too informal in business communications or, conversely, too formal in addressing colleagues, inside and outside the organization; to compensate, they may combine styles.

```

>>>MAIL 80.26<<<From:: XXXXX at ASUACAD
***Top of File***
Date: Mon, 7 Jun 94 09:52:32 MST
From: XXXXX@ASUACAD
To: ZZZZZ@ASUACAD
Subject: Source of Smith Article

From: Mary Doe

Hi, Renee. I hope your summer will be both
productive and restful (if those two can co-exist).
Could you tell me which issue of XYZ journal the
John Smith article you gave me was in?

Since having lunch with you, a few things have
changed slightly. I still work 49% of the time at
the School of WWW but, in addition, Bill Jones
has hired me 50% as Program Coordinator.
We've got some good activities planned for the
year, and I hope you and I will get a chance to
get together at them and compare notes.

--Mary Doe
    
```

Fig. 3. Message attempts to combine styles of formal business memo and informal friendly note.

The e-mail message in Fig. 3 shows a style that combines the formality of a business memo (writer-inserted From: line and closing) with the informality of a friendly note (“Hi, Renee”). Some writers circumvent this problem by using memo format for both internal and external messages. Others avoid salutations and closings; they begin with the message and end the communication when they complete the message. Still others adapt their salutations and closings to the style of the recipient, a ploy that is effective only if one is responding to an earlier e-mail communication.

These different styles may not only confuse senders and recipients, they may also offend. Here, the audience and its level of e-mail sophistication must be considered. Depending on organizational culture, people higher on the corporate ladder or international recipients may expect to be addressed formally, as may customers or potential customers of the company. On the other hand, in some business environments, coworkers may expect to be addressed personally.

Signature presents another problem, depending on the organization’s e-mail program. If the program provides a clear sender name in addition to a coded ID (such as XXXXX@ASUACAD in Fig. 3), an added signature is redundant [13]. Sherblom finds such redundancy to appear more frequently in upward communications and in some horizontal communications among managers. Fig. 4 is an interesting example of memo style with added signatures, effectively illustrating Sherblom’s point by addressing faculty horizontally, as colleagues. However, as Fig. 3 showed, some organizational e-mail programs give only coded ID’s and addresses. Such TO: and FROM: lines are confusing to most e-mail users.

Considering these factors, we recommend a modified memo format for most internal and external messages. This format would provide the TO: and FROM: lines commonly found in memos, unless the organization’s e-mail package inserts full names rather than electronically coded ID’s. Fig. 5 changes the message in Fig. 2 to show an example of this format, used when a program provides only indecipherable ID’s and addresses. These are not definitive rules but suggestions to

```
>>>MAIL 90.01.00<<< From: IDMDG at
ASUACAD
***Top of File***
Date: Fri, 1 Apr 1994 17:03:32 MST
From: "Lattie Coor, Milton Glick, Robert Barnhill"
<IDMDG@ASUACAD>
Subject: Kudos
To: A S U F a c u l t y
<AARBH@ASUVM.INRE.ASU.EDU>
```

As you are aware, every 5-8 years The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching issues its Classification of Institutes of Higher Education. We want you to be among the first to know that the Carnegie Foundation will announce that Arizona State University will now be classified as a Research I University.

This represents an important milestone in ASU's evolution as a major research university. This step recognizes the quality and productivity of the ASU faculty, staff and students. We congratulate and thank you and your

Fig. 4. Message addresses faculty as colleagues, combining memo style and signature block.

```
>>>MAIL 80.26<<< From:
XXXXX at ASUACAD
***Top of File***
Date: Mon, 7 Jun 94 09:52:32
MST
From: XXXXX@ASUACAD
To: ZZZZZ@ASUACAD
Subject: Source of Smith Article

From: Mary Doe
To: Renee Horowitz

I hope your summer will be both
productive and restful (if those two can co-
exist). Could you tell me which issue of
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Fig. 5. Message no longer requires a salutation or a closing.

provide a basis for developing e-mail styles. For example, some companies may want to modify these guidelines for international audiences and set policies to respond to the expectations of that audience.

Since e-mail programs automatically date messages, this information should not be repeated. As to the SUBJECT: or RE: line, many programs ask for this information during the setup stage. They also repeat the original subject designation in your reply, unless you choose to change it.

In addition to avoiding possible confusion or offense, another advantage to the style we recommend is its response to Sproull and Kiesler's finding that e-mail senders tend to use more words for the closing than for the salutation. They attribute this difference to social and psychological factors and hypothesize that "reminders of the presence of other people are relatively weak" in e-mail communication and so people "focus relatively strongly on themselves and on what they want to say and less strongly on their audience" [11].

A bit of cautionary advice is essential here: most e-mail programs allow users to identify their most frequent addressees by nicknames to expedite sending messages. Ordinarily, these nicknames do not appear on the outgoing message but are merely for the convenience of the sender. Stories abound (possibly apocryphal) of disastrous results because some users assign derogatory nicknames to their correspondents. One such incident describes a person "who had a private shorthand for each of the computer addresses of his production team members. One day, sending a routine memo to the group, he accidentally let the nicknames—of which the mildest were 'Turkey' and 'Fruitcake'—wander into the text" [14].

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE WORDS

Nicknames are not the only words that express positive or negative feelings. As Fig. 1 has shown, the use of positive and negative words within the document is one of the few areas addressed by e-mail manuals at our university. The manuals caution users to be diplomatic, telling them that "criticism is always harsher when written, and electronic messages are easily forwarded." Here, too, the medium may cause unexpected problems. We interpret the last part of the statement as a somewhat cryptic reminder that the process of sending a letter or memo conventionally gives the writer more time to consider audience and purpose and thus change the wording or withdraw the communication before it goes out. With e-mail, however, transmission involves pressing one or two keys; many programs do not offer an "Are you sure?" option before the user irrevocably and instantaneously commits the message. Sproull and Kiesler hypothesized that uninhibited e-mail messages result from the same distancing between writer and audience to which they attributed the differences in length of salutation and closing.

CEO's of several major corporations have discovered the negative effects of uninhibited e-mail messages. John Akers, former head of IBM, complained about the quality of IBM products and employees in the form of meeting notes that were later forwarded by e-mail. The manager who transmitted the information "apparently thought he was circulating the notes just to people in his area. But, through the magic of IBM's extensive electronic-mail network, the word quickly spread through the company" [15]. Akers followed his critical talk with an e-mail message of his own that did little to compensate for his original words.

IBM recently discovered another problem resulting from the instantaneous character of the medium. Their difficulty became public when they transmitted a follow-up message that asked e-mail users who erroneously received a proprietary message to destroy it. Here, the second e-mail communication compounded the negative result of the first one because recipients considered it ludicrous [16].

Microsoft's Bill Gates, on the other hand, found his memo concerning fears for the future of the company and containing negative views of his competitors to be even more costly:

Bill Gates may wind up in the Guinness Book of Records as the author of the world's most expensive memo. A secret memo to top staff at Microsoft Corp. was leaked to the press—and that has cost him \$315 million [17].

Gates' memo, which appears to have been distributed by e-mail, caused an 8-1/8 point drop in Microsoft stock on the day the memo became news.

In a more recent instance of an e-mail message that resulted in negative publicity for a major corporation, a Kmart senior vice-president urged high-level executives to quit if they are not ready to make the changes he wants. The message tone was harsh and emotional, including this threat: "If I trace any negativism to any of you I will personally write up and conduct a constructive-action interview and put you on probation" [18].

These are not isolated examples of problems caused by failure to weigh positive versus negative words. Many of these problems arise because people may use company e-mail for personal messages. One computer columnist emphasizes the differing views of management and employees on this subject [19]. Several years ago, Jim Seymour used the advantages of e-mail as a selling point to justify a local area network for one company. When he returned to the firm recently, employees were enthusiastic about e-mail; they used it "to set up lunch appointments, and one guy even posted a message for everyone, trying to sell his Chevy Suburban!" [19]. The same day, Seymour spoke to the company's Vice-President for Management Information Services about e-mail. This executive said, "We're going to have to put some controls on this thing." People use it to make lunch dates "and one clown actually tried to sell a used car on the network" [19].

Seymour contends that sending such e-mail notes within a company is no different than posting messages in the company cafeteria and that only Theory X authoritarian managers object to these employee morale builders. Others feel that such personal messages waste company resources [20] or happen because e-mail diminishes the conventional "boundary between work and play" [11]. These differing opinions underline the fact that many companies do not have a policy relating to personal e-mail communications. In any case, users must remember their messages may be read by persons other than the intended audience and that they have no privacy protection at all [21]. With the possibility of an unexpected audience to compound positive or negative word choices in e-mail, writers must not allow the ease of transmission to erase social conventions.

SUBJECT HEADINGS

Although Sproull and Kiesler's list of e-mail attributes includes "topic," they use this term solely to differentiate between work- and nonwork-related messages. Another aspect of topic, however, is the subject line of the message.

Business and technical communicators understand that the subject line of a memo should describe its content clearly enough for the audience to know immediately what the memo is about. Many memo writers, however, dash off messages with brief, general subject headings. This practice may force the receiver to skim the memo, looking for clues as to its importance.

The same considerations apply even more strongly to e-mail, for the volume of electronic messages received by both managers and employees makes it imperative that subject headings clearly indicate the content of the message. Otherwise, the message may be electronically zapped without the cursory glance most recipients give an unwanted paper memo before they throw it away. When an engineer at one major company returned from vacation, for example, he found over 1,000 e-mail messages waiting for him [22]. Although this individual established a program that set his priorities according to the job title of the sender, it also looked at message subjects. At some companies, employees are so overloaded with the e-mail equivalent of chain letters and junk mail that they have developed programs to recognize such messages and delete

TABLE I
VAGUE SUBJECT HEADINGS SHOULD BE IMPROVED

VAGUE SUBJECTS	IMPROVED SUBJECTS
Staff Meeting	Change in Staff Meeting Schedule
XX Forms	Final Test Stages for XX Forms
Travel Request	Travel Request Pilot Program
Bulletin Board	Bulletin Board Pilot Program - For Evaluation
XXX Status Report	XXX Status Report, Week Ending Jan. 21, 1994
Research	Research on E-mail Styles
Strategic Planning Retreat	Cancellation of Strategic Planning Retreat
Smith Article	Source of Smith Article Needed
Brown Bag Series	Woman-to-Woman Brown Bag Series

them [23]. Programs designed to filter e-mail are now available from major software companies [9]. Such programs may be searching for certain key words on the subject line. If the subject heading does not clearly indicate its importance to the recipient, the message will go unread. Table I lists vague subject headings and shows how they can be improved.

CONCLUSION

As professional communicators, we must address all of the above issues and set stylistic standards for e-mail. Computer scientists, telecommunications experts, and management-information specialists have concentrated on connectivity and other technical standards; these are certainly essential concerns. However, as shown above, stylistic issues also are important because they affect resources and productivity.

Stylistic conventions will not be easy to establish [24]. Despite government interest in and concern with the information highway, it is unlikely that we will see, or want to see, the equivalent of the 1912 President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency that attempted to codify memo format [10]. Further, through trial and error, many e-mail users have developed styles with which they are comfortable and may resist the idea of standardized formats. On the other hand, companies frequently do update the look of their correspondence, reports, and other written documents.

Today, when the concept of quality improvement no longer refers exclusively to manufactured products but includes every aspect of a company's business, firms also must establish stylistic standards for e-mail correspondence. Technical writers, who often are the catalysts for format changes to make company publications more effective, must lead the way in

formulating e-mail styles. In this way, they will help industry conserve company resources and improve productivity.

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