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How to Write Better Emails at Work

by Jeff Su

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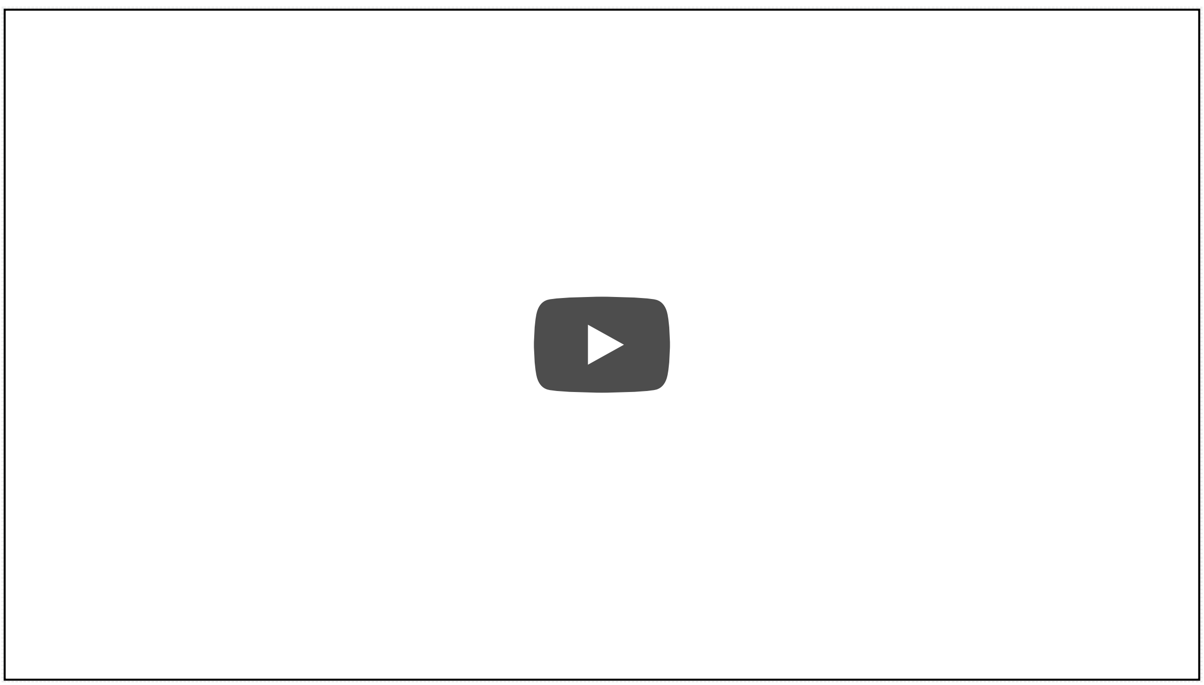

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Is writing a bad email going to ruin your career? No. But learning the unspoken rules for writing professional emails can improve how competent you appear in the eyes of your colleagues. In this HBR collaboration with YouTube creator Jeff Su, you'll learn how to better organize your email communications and avoid typical rookie mistakes.

0:00 — Why bother with email etiquette?
1:19 — Include a call to action in subject line
2:13 — One email thread per topic
2:48 — Manage recipients
3:27 — Start with the main point
4:30 — Summarize in your reply
5:10 — Hyperlink whenever possible
5:38 — Change default setting to "Reply" (not "Reply all")
6:06 — Change undo send options

Transcript

JEFF SU: OK, real talk. Making email etiquette mistakes in the workplace — it's not going to capsize your career. But learning the unspoken rules of writing professional emails will affect how competent you are perceived to be in the eyes of your colleagues.

And since there are no standardized training courses for this, in this video, I'm going to first share the very real benefits of getting good at emailing in the workplace, then dive into my top eight tips for professional email etiquette, many of which I learned the hard way during my first full-time job as a management consultant. So let's get started.

Hi, everyone. My name is Jeff, and I'm truly honored to be able to partner with Harvard Business Review for this video about a nerdy passion of mine: Email etiquette in the workplace. Think back to the last time you received a poorly written email. You might have had to reread it a few times to get the main point, and the action items might have been scattered all over the place.

Worst-case scenario, it led to an unnecessarily long back and forth email thread that could have been avoided had the initial email been properly planned out. Therein lies the beauty of well-crafted emails. Not only does it help you, the sender, come across as more capable by showcasing strong communication skills, but it also saves the reader so much of their time by only surfacing information relevant to them.

So without further ado, my first step is to have a call to action, when appropriate, in the email subject line. Most of us are familiar with a generic “action required” in subject lines, right? My recommendation is just to take it a step further and include exactly what you need the recipient to do and the estimated time it takes for them to do it.

For example, instead of writing “Action required, feedback for project X,” write “Five minutes — survey feedback for project X,” instead. This very small trick gives you a lot more context. It’s a survey for project X. I can get it done very quickly in between the two meetings I have. Or if it’s not appropriate to include the estimated time, be specific about the call to action. For example, instead of “spending estimates for Q4,” write “Elon to approve spending estimates for Q4.” So Elon knows what’s expected of him even before he opens the email.

Step number two: Stick with one email thread for the same topic. I’m going to be honest, I got called out for this by a colleague of mine, but I’m glad she told me. Basically, I used to send out separate emails for the same project whenever I had a new idea or follow-up question. But if you think about it from the recipient’s point of view, they’re missing the context from the original email thread and multiple new emails on the same topic just clog up their inboxes unnecessarily. So the general rule of thumb here is to stick to the original email chain for any given topic so everyone can refer to the same information.

Email etiquette tip number three: Explain why you added in or took out recipients in email threads. There are many situations you have to add someone in to the email thread to get their input, or take someone out to spare their inbox. A professional and easy way to do this is to add a sentence at the very top of the email clearly showing who you added in or took out. I like to add parentheses and italicize the font to separate it from the actual email body. This way, the readers know who the new recipients are immediately.

Tip number four actually addresses a very big pet peeve of mine, which is when senders include a lot information up front, but what they're really trying to get at or ask for is at the very end of the email. To avoid that, always include your main point first, followed by the context. Just compare these two emails:

> *"Hi Jane, my name is Jeff and I'm in the product marketing team. We're preparing a forecast deck for the big boss and he's looking for the revenue projection numbers for the secret electric car that's launching soon. Can I trouble you to pull that data for me?"*

> *"Hi Jane, may l please trouble you for the electric car revenue projection numbers? Context: the product marketing team is currently preparing a forecast deck for the big boss and we're hoping to use the projections to fight for more budget. It would be amazing to get numbers for 2025 to 2030 in a Google Sheets format."*

By pushing the context back, we're giving the other person the option to read the not so important part of the email. Oftentimes, when we're emailing someone more senior than us, we feel obligated to explain why we're emailing right at the beginning so it doesn't seem like we're bothering them. This is actually counterproductive because if the person is very senior, they probably just want to know what you're emailing them about so they can deal with it then move on with their own schedules.

Tip number five: If you receive an email with a lot of disorganized content, summarize the sender's main points for them in your reply. So if you receive an email from someone who clearly has not watched this video and they sent you a long, wordy, convoluted message you have to reread a few times, you want to do two things.

Number one, send them this video. Number two, take a few minutes to identify and bucket common themes from their email, and summarize their message in a few sentences before responding to whatever they're emailing you about. Not only does this help you confirm your understanding is correct, the other party will appreciate the extra effort you took to help them organize their thoughts.

Email etiquette tip number six: Hyperlink whatever possible. This is another pet peeve of mine. If you're sharing a link with someone over email, you really should take the extra few seconds to hit Command K on Mac or Control K on Windows and hyperlink the external website or video. Not only does this looks so much cleaner to the recipient than just pasting the big clunky link, but it also decreases the chances of you making a mistake by adding an extra letter or deleting one in the original URL.

Tip number seven: Change your default setting to "reply" instead of "reply all." This is honestly the risk-averse side of me talking. The way I think about it, let's say your reply to an email in a rush and you do make a mistake, the damage is contained to that one recipient because your default setting is to reply to one person instead of reply all. This is a standard setting on most popular email clients, and you can usually find this in the general settings section.

Email etiquette tip number eight: Change the "undo send" option to 30 seconds. So you might not know this, but Murphy's law when it comes to emailing in the workplace is that you will always catch your mistakes 10 seconds after the email is already sent. All jokes aside, I'm sure we've all been there. We send an email, we go into the sent email folder to read it from the other person's perspective, and we realize something is wrong.

Again, this is a standard setting you can play around with in all of the email apps. Instead of the default five seconds undo send, for example, update to 30 seconds for good measure.

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