Email Etiquette for the Professional Engineer: Surviving the Virtual World of Communication

“By requiring employees to use appropriate, business-like language in all electronic communications, employers can limit their liability risks and improve the overall effectiveness of the organization.”
-- Nancy Flynn and Tom Flynn, “Writing Effective Email”

Why Email Etiquette?

Email etiquette, put simply, is a set of guidelines recommended by business in response to the growing need for professional communication in the workplace. Because the current generation of engineers (mostly “twenty-somethings”) grew up using email, instant messaging, PDAs, and chat rooms, they tend to be conversational and casual in their use of email. This informality often calls into question the young engineer’s professionalism and communication skills.

Since the way we communicate via email says a lot about us, adhering to a few do’s and don’ts in the virtual world of communication will go along way in surviving the demands of the workplace.

Business Netiquette

Since there is no such thing as a private email, businesses have implemented email etiquette for three main reasons:

1. **Professionalism**—By using proper email language, employees and companies convey a professional image.
2. **Efficiency**—Emails that get to the point are much more effective than poorly worded emails.
3. **Protection from Liability**—Employee awareness of email risks protects the company from costly law suits.

Always be aware that communicating via email means that you are communicating in the public domain: there is no such thing as a private email:

- With some email systems, the email administrator has the ability to read any and all email messages.
- Some companies monitor employee email.
- Once an email is sent, you never know where it might end up—recipients might forward the message or circulate it without your consent.
Email Do’s and Don’ts

1. Follow the 3-Step Formula for Effective Emails

   1. Establish reader-focus immediately (informing or requesting?)
   2. Provide rationale
   3. End with a “welcoming closing”

**Establish reader-focus:** Email is used for two main purposes: to inform or to request. The first sentence of any email should establish reader-focus by stating clearly and concisely the information you want to convey or the request you are making. Avoid “writer-focused” sentences such as “I am writing to inform you that the parking deck will be closed on Monday,” or “I am writing to request a copy of your parking permit.” Instead get straight to the point by focusing on the reader: “The parking deck will be closed on Monday,” or “Please send me a copy of your parking permit so that we can process your request for a lot closer to your building.” If you are requesting information, do so using a “gentle command” such as “please,” “when you get a moment,” or the like. If you are sending information, you can sound less abrasive by framing the info with phrases such as “As you may already be aware” or “As stated in the company handbook, the use of email is limited to work-related correspondence only.”

**Provide rationale:** Once you have informed the recipient of why you are emailing him or her, you should provide a very brief rationale for the request or the info you are sending. The rationale should be in a separate paragraph and should be 2-3 sentences maximum.

**End with a “welcoming closing”:** Always end your email with a “welcoming closing” such as “Thank you for your immediate attention,” “If you need further information, please feel free to contact me,” or other similar salutations.

2. Plain Text vs. HTML

Most email software gives the user the ability to encode the text—usually using HTML—with **bold**, underline, *italics*, color, etc. The problem is that not everyone uses software that recognizes fancy formatting. Your best bet: stick with plain text.

You send a message that looks like this:

```
Reminder: *All students* must purchase *Rapid Prototyping of Digital Signals* no later than next week.
```

Your recipient gets something that looks more like this:

```
Reminder: <All students> must purchase <Rapid Prototyping of Digital Signals> <no later than> next week.
```
3. Avoid “Cutsie” Email Addresses

Your email address announces who you are. You may very well be daMan@yahoo.com or younghang@hotmail.com, but do you want your boss and colleagues to know you as such? Keep funny aliases/email addresses for personal correspondence. Create a new account for business/school/professional correspondence.

4. Configure “From” Headers to Reflect Your Real Name

This particularly applies to Georgia Tech students whose “From” header defaults to their gt#. The gt# is useless to the recipient and does not announce who actually sent the email. Configure the “From” header so that it contains your first and last name.

5. Always Sign Your Email

This seems obvious, especially if your “From” header contains your full name, but you should always sign your email so the recipient knows who sent the message.

6. Use Proper Punctuation and Grammar

Improper spelling, grammar, and punctuation reflect poorly on the sender—that’s you—and give a bad impression of the company for which you work. Emails written in all lowercase, with no punctuation, and abbreviations are difficult to read, and can distort or confuse the message you are trying to convey.

Business email should be formal.

Avoid anything that looks or sounds like it should be on an instant messenger or in a chat room:

| hey, Tom! wazup? thx 4 sending me the files :) |
| could u forward the latest version of the workbook i need to post it on the owl |
| BTW what should we do about those wires hanging in the lab???? |

7. Spell Check

Before you hit the send button, be sure to spell check your message. Typos, misspellings, and other egregious errors make you look unintelligent, careless, and unprofessional.

No one wants to receive poorly written emails that are taxing to read:

| I thougth that it was approptiate an very helpfull when you were giving immediate feedbek to each individaul on their oral communication skills. |
8. Use a Descriptive, Meaningful Subject (in the subject line)

Avoid vague subjects such as “Today’s meeting.” “11am eccess meeting” is more descriptive. Instead of “help with writing” try “appointment to review 2031 summary.”

9. Be Aware of Tone

Never send an email without pausing and re-reading what you wrote. It is easy to send quick, one-liners, that sound “to the point” but are perceived by the recipient as abrasive or rude. Since email does not convey your tone of voice or your body language, it is extremely important that the words you choose reflect the appropriate tone. Using “gentle commands” such as “please” and “welcoming closings” such as “thank you” and “feel free to contact me” will help establish a friendly, yet professional tone. Never use emoticons, exclamation points, silly punctuation, or all capital letters to convey information in the workplace.

10. Do Not Use all UPPERCASE

While using all caps in an email (or on-line in general) usually indicates shouting, that is not the only reason not to write in all uppercase.

Reading messages that are in all uppercase puts a strain on the eye and brain. The bottom line is, emails in all caps are difficult to read, and it makes you look LIKE YOU ARE YELLING!

11. Be Concise and Employ “Easy on the Eye” Formatting

Email is intended to be a quick medium and requires a different kind of writing than letters or memos. Long emails can be overwhelming to look at on the screen and discouraging to read. Use bullets or numbers to list information, when appropriate.

Avoid long sentences, long paragraphs worth of information, and long emails in general.

C.,
I'm attaching the official versions of the bylaws and the conference proposal guidelines for your new electronic recordkeeping system. This is a great idea. Just keep your eyes and ears open, so you can remind people to give you these electronic versions as things are developed. Christine's new initiative team is developing all kinds of stuff for a handbook. Make sure you get her to send you those versions electronically when they're finalized.

I spoke with S. about our membership database needs--he's a programmer and analyst. Anyway, he thinks that we don't really have a complicated task. In fact, he thinks that someone skilled in Microsoft Access could easily design something that suits our needs. He did just that in designing a database that interfaced with a form we use in our writing center to report on and record sessions, so I know it can be done. He interviewed me about our needs, and I roughed out a form, and he designed it. So, I suggest that you take the same approach by talking to C. and K. about what KIND of information they want to keep track of, and what problems they've had. Then, you really need to find someone with computer expertise to take it to the next level to design the database; we probably don't need to invest in expensive software--Access will probably do everything we need. I suggest you consider talking to J. since she mentioned at dinner that she had constructed just such a database for her Medieval group. J. loves to be involved in writing center stuff and she has tremendous computer skills. I'm sure she'd love to brainstorm with you, and she may even be willing to design the database with you. Also, the computer department on your campus probably has all the skills you need once you figure out what data you need to keep track of. Good luck and call or email me if you want to talk some more about this.

--M.
M.,

Thanks for sending the bylaws and conference guidelines.

SWCA needs to create a comprehensive database that merges the three existing ones:
--membership
--conference registration
--Southern Discourse

I’ll talk to K. and C. about what they’d like to see in the new database. In the meantime, I’ll start working on the basic functionality.

Talk to you soon,

C.

12. Create an Appropriate, Professional Signature

A signature is a small block of text appended to the end of your messages, containing your name, title and contact information.

- Include your name and title, contact information (phone, fax #s), company name, etc.
- Be short—between 4-7 lines
- NOT include “strings” (e.g., quotes)—what may be meaningful or funny to you may be offensive to others.

Aaron Smith
NTAC Internet
Sprint GMG Network Services
404-555-1234
smitha@sprint.com

13. Replies: To Quote or Not to Quote

When replying to an email, you can either insert your response after quoting from the original message or reply without quoting the original message (the original message can be included in your reply or you can leave it out entirely).
To Quote: If you find it necessary and appropriate to quote from the original message, only quote back the smallest amount you need to make your context clear. Avoid quoting back the entire message if your response is only something like “I agree.”

Quoting Christina Bourgeois <christina.bourgeois@ece.gatech.edu>:

> ECE 2031 Students,
> 
> Your feedback and constructive criticism about the technical communications component in this course is very important.

> 1. This semester, for the first time, we formalized the group presentations. I’d like to know if you thought the format (giving immediate feedback to each individual and to the group) was effective. What went well? What would you change?
> 
> The format for the presentations worked well, I think. Immediate feedback was probably more effective than written feedback handed back later. I like it the way it is now.

John Doe

Not to Quote: If you chose not to quote from the original message, be sure to either include the full message as part of your reply or find some way of phrasing your reply so that the recipient is clear about the context. The recipient may not recall the details of the original message, especially if he/she receives many emails per day, so include enough info in your reply to establish the context.

Professor Bourgeois—

For WA1 It took me about 5 hours in lab and about 4.5 hours in writing.
For WA2 it took me about 3.5 hours in lab and about 4-5 hours writing.

John Doe

> ECE 3042 Students,

> Your feedback and constructive criticism about the technical communications component in this course is very important.

> 1. For WA1 (Formal Report: Comparing Single-Stage NPN and PNP CE Amplifiers), how many hours did you spend working in the lab to collect the information needed for the report? How many hours did you spend actually writing the report?

> 2. Ditto question (1) for WA2 (Application Note: Designing a Pulse Width Modulator).

> Thanks for you comments. Please feel free to tell us your thoughts on any other aspect of the communications component.

Christina Bourgeois