Articles in Law Reviews & Other Academic Journals

Scholarship & Research

2011

Email Etiquette

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WRITER'S BLOCK

EMAIL ETIQUETTE

BY DAVID H. SPRATT

Think back - when did you last receive a handwritten letter, one that was painstakingly crafted, replete with pleasantries and, cue gasp, correct grammar and punctuation? For many, I imagine, it has been quite a while. With the prevalence of email and text messages, letters generally, and more specifically, handwritten letters, appear to be going the way of the Dodo Bird. As newer methods of communications flourish, however, what seems to be lacking from these methods is good, old-fashioned courtesy and professional etiquette.

Email and text messaging are frequently and increasingly used by lawyers to communicate with colleagues, clients, and even judges. Email is unquestionably efficient. Unfortunately, speed and spontaneity often result in rushed, ill-thought messages full of typos and unintended tones and void of pleasantries, correct grammar, and punctuation.

In approximately 850 words, this column provides a few pointers on how to achieve better email etiquette (and accordingly, how to win friends and influence people).

Consider Your Audience

To ensure that your email has the correct level of formality, think about the person to whom you are writing. When we send an email to a friend, family member, or someone in our personal capacity, in many instances, we are basically sending an electronic post-it note. In most of circumstances, informality is acceptable. Abbreviations, like LOL ("laugh out loud"), are perfectly acceptable. Emoticons (☺) work fine, as do all capital letters, slang, incorrect punctuation, spelling, and grammar.

Morning. Wanna meet for a mimosa BEFORE work?
Love u. ☺

When an email is written for professional purposes, however, the same formalities should be used as when writing a formal business letter. Correct grammar and spelling, including complete sentences and appropriate punctuation, are necessary; slang, shortcuts, and any of their compatriots should be readily avoided.

Dear Susan,
I write in response to your email of July 29, 2011. Unfortunately, I am unable to meet with you next week to discuss settlement. I am available, however, on August 5, 2011. Please let me know if you are available, and we can pick a mutually-acceptable time. Have a nice afternoon.

Include Pleasantries

Email is not accurately expressive. Intended tone and inflection do not often convey. As a result, email recipients often read negativity and aggression into an email, failing to give the writer the benefit of the doubt. To avoid the issue of unintended tone, take time in each email to include a brief pleasantry. The payoffs are staggering.

As a law school writing professor, I encounter students who are overextended, frustrated, and sleep-deprived (character traits I trust many reading this column appreciate). For years, students would send me emails like this:

I must meet with you about my memo. I am available only on Monday at 1:17 p.m.

Receiving curt, rushed emails neither endeared me to the student nor made me want to accommodate the student in any way. Had the student taken a few seconds to include a pleasantry, however, my reaction would have been much more positive. For example:

Dear Professor,
I hope you are enjoying the beautiful weather this weekend. Although I know you are busy, is there a good time that I could meet with you about my memo? Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to meeting with you.

To combat the trend of unprofessional emails, this year we introduced a formal presentation on email etiquette into our first year legal writing curriculum. The results were significant: professors and teaching assistants started receiving emails from students that expressed appreciation, leading to quicker and more thorough responses. Everyone was happy. Taking the time to establish rapport with your reader can go a long way to achieving your desired outcome. Sometimes good guys (or gals) do finish first!

There is one caveat: email threads sometimes complicate the need for formality; in a series of emails, the pleasantries understandably become less and less necessary.

Think Before You Send

Admit it. We have all sent an email that we later wished we could recall, either because we were angry (or possibly because we shouldn't have been emailing after attending a Virginia Wine Festival—again, another plug for Virginia wine!). Because it is so easy to fire off an email, messages can be particularly impulsive and sometimes offensive. To avoid angry, sarcastic emails, write, wait, re-read, and re-think BEFORE hitting "send."

Email Confidentiality

Also before hitting "send," check to see that you have sent the email to the correct person. For example, you might have both an opposing counsel and a client named "Elaine." Sending confidential information intended for the client to the opposing counsel could have disastrous consequences. Similarly, be careful with using "Reply All" if you really do not mean to reply to everyone who received the initial email.

Return Receipt Requested and High Urgency

Both are incredibly annoying. Use these features sparingly, if at all. Enough said.

As always, well-proofread, grammatically correct questions, comments, and suggestions (as long as they contain a brief pleasantry) at dspratt@wcl.american.edu are welcomed.