



Faculty of Engineering
and Applied Science

COMPOSING PROFESSIONAL E-MAILS: FEATURES OF AN E-MAIL

E-mail is a unique medium of communication. In some cases, it is meant to replace a face-to-face conversation, and in others, it is meant to formally transmit written information. In spite of the variety of purposes, e-mails have a standard format. Not adhering to the conventions of e-mail writing can make the writer seem unprofessional. This document covers e-mails as a whole, and other resources in this series look at the three sections of an e-mail—the opening, the body and the closing—in more detail.

STANDARD FORMAT

The average e-mail resembles the one below:

To: b.gernet@mun.ca

Subject: Absence from class from May 21 to May 28

Hello Dr. Gernet:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Maecenas porttitor congue massa.

Fusce posuere, magna sed pulvinar ultricies, purus lectus malesuada libero, sit amet commodo magna eros quis urna. Nunc viverra imperdiet enim.

Regards,

Chris L. Martin, Term 3 Mechanical Engineering
Faculty of Engineering and Applied Sciences
Memorial University of Newfoundland
Tel: 555-313-2121 Email: christopherlmartin@mun.ca

SPACING

As you can see in the example above, sections of an e-mail are separated by one line. Each section is typically single-spaced. The one area where there is some disagreement is between the closing and the signature. Because most e-mails end with a printed name rather than the traditional, hand-written signature, some people leave a space like what would exist when actually signing a document. Others find that space redundant, so they do not separate these two parts. Neither would be considered incorrect professionally.

ALIGNMENT

In most types of English writing, the standard alignment is left. In the writing of e-mails, left is also the alignment used. No other alignment would appear normal to any reader.

LENGTH & PURPOSE

E-mails, unlike technical reports, are typically short. They have a single purpose. If you find your e-mail is long and covering multiple topics, you should consider breaking it into multiple e-mails. The longer an e-mail is, the more likely it is to not be read thoroughly and to not be fully understood. That said, some e-mails will be longer out of necessity. These should be the exception rather than the rule.

PRE-MESSAGE

This is the part of the e-mail that precedes any actual content. It displays to whom the e-mail was sent and what the e-mail is about.

RECIPIENTS

There are three fields here:

To: This is the primary recipient (or recipients) of the e-mail. The e-mail is directed to these people, and any required actions should be undertaken by them.

CC: These are usually people who are included as a courtesy, or who are required to receive the information but are not required to take any action. Essentially, they are getting a **Carbon Copy** of the e-mail.

BCC: People who are BCCed (**Blind Carbon Copied**) receive the e-mail, but other recipients do not see their names or addresses. This is often done to maintain privacy in situations where protecting e-mail addresses is important.

SUBJECT LINE

The subject line describes the topic of the e-mail. There is no situation where a subject line should be left blank. It should contain enough detail that someone could easily find the e-mail again using the subject line if doing a search. The subject lines are how we search for e-mails rather than the actual content.

OTHER FEATURES OF E-MAIL

The features listed below are more exclusive to electronic communications:

PRIORITY & READ RECEIPTS

When e-mails are very important, they can be flagged as such. A red flag (or exclamation point, depending on the program) will signify that the sender would like immediate action taken on the contents of the e-mail. By contrast, an e-mail can be set to low priority, but this feature is rarely used.

Another option that can be used is a read receipt. This notifies the sender that you have read the e-mail. A recipient can choose to ignore this, however, and not send along a read receipt. These receipts are seen as overbearing by recipients, so they should be used only in situations of the utmost importance.

ATTACHMENTS

Computer files, including pictures, documents, and forms, can be sent as e-mail attachments. Be mindful of the size: most e-mail programs or servers have a size limitation. If your attachment exceeds this size, it cannot be sent. In cases where there are multiple files or a small number of very large files, ZIP programs are used to reduce the file sizes. If the file size seems small (less than one kilobyte), you might accidentally be sending a shortcut rather than an actual file. This file will not be accessible to the receiver.

Sender often forget to include the attachment. This comes off as careless to the receiver, so you should double check e-mails for attachments before sending. In recent years, some e-mail programs have begun to analyze e-mail contents and will now ask the sender if the attachment was forgotten. Do not count on this failsafe as it is not 100% effective.

AUTOMATIC REPLIES

You might sometimes receive an automated reply to an e-mail. This can happen for two reasons: either the receiver is out of the office and informing you that they are not currently reachable, or they are telling you that they have received your e-mail but may be delayed in responding for some reason. You might choose to set up automatic replies temporarily for the same reasons at some point in the future.