

Sunday Patriot-News, May 10, 2009, page F1.

## Email Etiquette: Is it a capital offense to use CAPS?

*By Steven Birmingham*

With the growth of the middle class in the 18th century, people with little writing experience suddenly found themselves writing to the rich. With the growth of e-mail in the 20th century, people with little writing experience suddenly found themselves writing to one another. In both cases, this created demand for how-to guides. In both cases, the demand was met not by language experts, but by self-appointed gurus. John Walker and Thomas Sheridan, both actors, wrote the leading style guides of the 18th century. Where did these untrained authors get their rules? They simply made them up. The same thing is happening today, so what you've heard about e-mail probably is wrong.

"Writing with caps means you're shouting," the gurus say. Really? Reading about the banking industry's TARP might make you want to scream, but does reading those letters make you hear a scream? A friend in Europe sent me the message "HAPPY BIRTHDAY," and I don't think he was yelling. Capital letters work WELL for emphasis, and a Microsoft paper shows they aren't hard to read like the cap-haters claim. Sure, writing long messages in all caps is lazy, but avoiding caps altogether is crazy.

"Make messages as short as possible" we're told. A study done by the U.S. military found most messages were four or fewer lines long, and many of those short messages were unclear. Most people need to be on guard against unclear messages, not lengthy ones. Unless you've been told you're too verbose, make your goal writing the most effective messages possible instead of writing the shortest messages possible.

"Smiley faces convey emotion" they say. Nonsense. We've been debating what the Mona Lisa's smile means for 500 years. A recipient can't determine what your e-mail smile means in the five seconds it takes to read a message. The original emoticon :-) invented at Carnegie Mellon University in 1982 to indicate a joke, can now also mean happiness or even sarcasm. A Syracuse University study found these symbols can make you seem more friendly, but they can't unambiguously signal your mood. Face-to-face, we often don't know what someone's smile or wink means. E-mail is no different.

"Respond promptly," e-mail etiquette guides proclaim, so millions of Americans let themselves be interrupted every time a new message arrives. Checking e-mail is "like a hand grenade" to the brain, according to a prominent doctor who studies attention disorders. The vast majority of correspondents expect a response within 24 hours, so minimize the explosions and maximize productivity by checking e-mail a few times per day on a schedule.

Pennsylvania is well-represented in the battle to replace foolishness with fact. At Lehigh University, Professor Liuba Belkin conducts experiments to validate theories about how people write and interpret messages. **EganEmailSolutions.com** in Reading offers well-researched books, training and consulting. The Communication Gym in the Harrisburg area and Bucknell University's Small Business Development Center have sponsored fact-based seminars on getting the most out of the medium. With so many resources in our own backyard, we're in a good position to become better e-mailers. What you've heard about e-mail probably is wrong, but a little retraining can make it right.