

How to write effective emails

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Whether you email a few close teammates or thousands of customers, your recipients likely have one thing in common: they don't have a lot of time to spend reading your message. Your job as the sender is to make your reader's job as easy as possible. This how-to guide will help you make the most of your emails. You'll learn how to develop effective messages that your recipients will read, understand, and act on.

Writing subject lines

The subject line is arguably the most important part of any email because it's the first thing your readers will see. And if your subject line doesn't grab their attention, it could be the only thing they see before moving your email to the trash. The key to an effective subject line is to include the key information while keeping it as short as possible.

- **Specificity:** Make subject lines specific to give your audience a clear idea of what the emails contains. Avoid vague language like "Feedback Request" or "Meeting Notes" and use verbs that tell your readers what to do with your message. For example, "Review Target State by July 15" is much more likely to get a response than "Document Review Request."
- **Length:** Depending on your readers' device and email tool, they may only be able to see the first few words of your subject line before they open the message. Keep your subject line to 50 characters maximum – ideally less. Additionally, put the most important information at the front so even if the subject line is cut off, your readers still get an idea of what your message's purpose is.
- **Abbreviations:** Using abbreviations is a great way to help keep your subject line short, but make sure you only use ones that your audience will understand. While "Q4 SLT KPIs" is shorter than "4th Quarter Senior Leadership Team Key Performance Indicators," it may look like gibberish to your readers, and your message may end up unopened or in the trash. Below are some subject line abbreviations that are commonly understood in the business world. Use them to help your readers quickly see the purpose of your email.

Abbreviation	Meaning	Use when...	Example
<AR>	Action Required	Your message asks the recipients to complete a task	<AR> Review Quarterly Report by May 25
<EOM>	End of Message	Your entire message is included in the subject line	Jane out 9-11 today <EOM>
<FYI>	For Your Information	Your message is informational only and does not require any action	<FYI> SharePoint Update Complete
<PYR>	Per Your Request	Your message is a follow-up to a previous request	<PYR> Q1 Leadership Meeting Slides

Avoiding blocks of text

Even if your language is perfect, too much text could still derail your email by overwhelming your readers. Breaking up that text, on the other hand, can help your readers quickly scan and understand your message. Try to keep your email short, and use bullets, tables, and section headings to break up longer messages.

- **Length:** The easiest way to avoid blocks of text is to keep your email short. Emails are not the place to explain every point of a complex discussion. If you see your email growing longer and longer, a meeting might be a better way to communicate. If you have to memorialize your topic in writing, consider attaching a document with the details and only hitting the key points in your email. See “Adding attachments and hyperlinks” in this guide for more tips.
- **Formatting:** While you may want to keep your email short, that’s not always possible. But you’re not out of luck. You can use formatting to help keep your email readable despite its length. Use bullets for lists and tables for tabular data. Keep your paragraphs short, and if you have a lot of them, separate them with section headings in bold.

Highlighting key information

Your colleagues are busy, so many of them won’t read your entire email. And in many cases, they don’t need to. Make your emails easy to scan by highlighting any key points with strategic formatting and clear language.

- **Formatting and placement:** Use bold text to draw attention to any key information. However, be careful not to use this formatting too much. If half an email is in bold, none of it will seem important. Additionally, place any key points as early as possible in your email so that if your audience stops reading, they’ll still understand the basics.
- **Action items:** In many cases, your email’s key information will be an action item. In addition to the tips in the previous bullet, be sure to include a deadline for every action item. If you don’t have a firm date in mind, make one up. Action items without due dates will go to the bottom of your recipient’s to-do list and stay there.
- **Clear language:** If your readers can’t understand your email quickly, they will likely ignore it. Use the simplest words possible to get your meaning across, and make any requests clear by telling your readers exactly what you want them to do. For example, if you say, “Please send me either your changes or approval by Tuesday, March 12,” your readers know you want a reply whether they have changes or not. If you say, “Let me know if you have any changes,” they might only reply if they have edits – and they likely won’t meet your March 12 deadline.

Adding attachments and hyperlinks

One way to keep your email's length manageable is to use attachments and hyperlinks. These tools allow you to direct your readers to detailed information without adding it to the email body. Use attachments and hyperlinks wherever possible, but be sure to name and format them correctly.

- **Attachments:** If you're including attachments, be sure to refer to them in the email body so your readers understand what they are. You should also name any attachments clearly, especially if you have multiple. Your readers should be able to see which attachment is which without having to open them. Finally, don't include too many attachments, which can overwhelm both your readers and your email tool.
- **Hyperlinks:** Rather than including messy raw URLs, use descriptive hyperlinks. Hyperlinked text should be specific and lead straight to the right information. Do not hyperlink vague text like "click here." Instead, use something like "2022 spring conference registration form." Be sure to format your hyperlinks so that they're recognizable (usually blue and underlined) and clickable.

Choosing recipients

It won't matter how well written your email is if you don't send it to the right people. Make sure to use the To, Cc, and Bcc fields appropriately, and remember that your job doesn't end when you've sent your initial email. In any responses, think carefully about whether to use "Reply" or "Reply all."

- **To, Cc, or Bcc:** When choosing your recipients, make sure you include everyone who will be impacted by your message either directly or indirectly. Once you've chosen your audience, use the guidance below to decide how to divide them between the To, Cc, and Bcc fields.

Field	Meaning	Use when...	Example
To	To	Your email is directly addressed to the recipient	You are asking a teammate to review a report you've written, so you include them in the To field.
Cc	Carbon copy	Your email is not directly addressed to the recipient but you want to keep them aware	You Cc your boss in the example above because you want to keep them aware of the report's progress.
Bcc	Blind carbon copy	You don't want the recipients to see who else is receiving your email	You are sending an email to colleagues who have failed a required security training to let them know they must retake it. You Bcc them to avoid any potential embarrassment.

- **Reply or Reply all:** We've all been on the receiving end of a "Reply all" thread that gets out of hand. It can start innocently enough with a simple staff-wide announcement about a promotion, but then it can quickly escalate to dozens of congratulatory messages that fill up the inboxes of every staff member in the organization. Before you respond to an email, think carefully about whether everyone on the thread needs to see your reply – or just the original sender. If the entire audience would benefit from your response, use "Reply all." Otherwise, stick to "Reply."

Putting it all into practice

To wrap up, we'll look at two example emails: one that follows the advice of this how-to guide and one that does not. Which email would you rather read?

Subject: Preparation Steps for June 21-23 Architecture Team Meeting in Chicago

To: Architecture Team; Administrative Assistants

The Architecture team meeting is coming up soon. In preparation for the team meeting, please remember to reply to the meeting invite to help us get an accurate head count. You should also send me your slides and complete the registration form (<https://2022Q2ArchTeamMeetingRegistrationForm.org>). I am looking forward to seeing you all and hearing your presentations. These tasks should be completed by Friday, June 10.

The agenda for the meeting will include... *(Imagine that the email goes on to discuss the meeting invite in detail for three more paragraphs.)*

Subject: <AR> Due June 10: Prep for Arch Team Meeting

To: Architecture Team

Cc: Administrative Assistants

In preparation for the team meeting next week, please remember to **complete the following by Friday, June 10:**

- Reply to the [meeting invite](#)
- Add your slides to the [Q2 Architecture Team Meeting Deck](#)
- Complete the [registration form](#)

For more information, review the [meeting agenda](#).

Let's review the two messages. Did you notice the differences below?

- **Subject line:** The first message's subject line was long (69 characters) and didn't include a verb or deadline. The second message's was shorter (44 characters), clearly indicated that action was required, put the deadline at the front, and used commonly understood abbreviations.
- **Recipients:** The first message included both the Architecture team and the administrative assistants in the To line, which may lead the administrative assistants to think that they also need to prepare for the meeting. The second message moved the administrative assistants to the Cc line so they will understand that the message is only an FYI for them.
- **Action items:** In the first message, the action items and deadline were buried in a paragraph. In the second message, the action requested and deadline (complete the following by Friday, June 10) were emphasized with bold text in the first sentence.

- **Bullets:** The first message included a big block of text that was hard to scan. The second message used bullets to clearly indicate that there were three action items for readers to complete.
- **Links:** The first message only included one link, and it was a messy raw URL that wasn't recognizably formatted. The second message used clearly formatted hyperlinks to point to all the resources readers need to complete the action items. Additionally, the second message used a link to the meeting agenda to avoid adding a lot of extra text, which make the first message longer and harder to read.

Whenever you draft an email, remember to think about what you would want to see as a reader with a busy schedule. If you make your message clear and scannable, highlight key information, and double-check your recipients, you're well on your way to an effective email.