

http://blog.guykawasaki.com/2006/02/the_effective_e.html

The Effective Emailer

from a posting by **Guy Kawasaki**

Because of my recent post about schmoozing, you might think I'm a warm, fuzzy, and kum-baya kind of Guy. Most of the time I am, but I have strong feelings about email etiquette and what it takes to get your email read--and answered. As someone who gets dozens of emails every day and sends a handful of emails every day to get strangers to do things ("digital evangelism"), I offer these insights to help you become a more effective emailer.

1. **Craft your subject line.** Your subject line is a window into your soul, so make it a good one. First, it has to get your message past the spam filters, so take out anything about sex and money-saving special offers. Then, it must communicate that your message is highly personalized. For example, "Love your blog," "Love your book," and "You skate well for an old man," always work on me. :-) While you're at it, craft your "From:" line too because when people see the From is from a company, they usually assume the message is spam.

2. **Limit your recipients.** As a rule of thumb, the more people you send an email to, the less likely any single person will respond to it, much less perform any action that you requested. (Thanks, Parker, for mentioning this.) This is similar to the Genovese Syndrome (or the "bystander effect"): In 1964, the press reported that thirty eight people "stood by" while Kitty Genovese was murdered. If you are going to ask a large group of people to do something, then at least use blind carbon copies; not only will the few recipients think they are important, you won't burden the whole list with everyone's email address. Nor will you reveal everyone's email address inadvertently.

3. **Don't write in ALL CAPS.** Everyone probably knows this by now, but just in case. Text in all caps is interpreted as YELLING in email. Even if you're not yelling, it's more difficult to read text that's in all caps, so do your recipients a favor and use standard capitalization practices.

4. **Keep it short.** The ideal length for an email is five sentences. If you're asking something reasonable of a reasonable recipient, simply explain who you are in one or two sentences and get to the ask. If it's not reasonable, don't ask at all. My theory is that people who tell their life story suspect that their request is on shaky ground so they try build up a case to soften up the recipient. Another very good reason to keep it short is that you never know where your email will end up--all the way from your minister to the attorney general of New York. (courtesy of Jonathan) There is one exception to this brevity rule: When you really don't want anything from the recipient, and you simply want to heap praise and kindness upon her. Then you can go on as long as you like!

5. **Quote back.** Even if emails are flying back and forth within hours, be sure to quote back the text that you're answering. Assume that the person you're corresponding with has fifty email conversations going at once. If you answer with a simple, "Yes, I agree," most of the time you will force the recipient to dig through his deleted mail folder to figure out what you're agreeing to. However, don't "fisk" either (courtesy of Brad Hutchings). Fisking is when you quote back the entire message and respond line by line, often in an argumentative way. This is anal if not downright childish, so don't feel like you have to respond to every issue.

6. **Use plain text.** I hate HTML email. I tried it for a while, but it's not worth the trouble of sending or receiving it. All those pretty colors and fancy type faces and styles make me want to puke. Cut to the chase: say what you have to say in as brief and plain manner as possible. If you can't say it in plain text, you don't have anything worth saying.

7. **Control your URLs.** I don't know what's gotten into some companies, but the URLs that they generate have dozens of letters and numbers. It seems to me that these thirty-two character URLs have almost as many possible combinations than the number of atoms in the universe--I don't know how many URLs a company intends to create, but it's probably a smaller number than this. If you're forwarding an URL, and it wraps to the next line, it's very likely that clicking on it won't work. If you really want someone to click through successfully, go through the trouble of using SnipURL to shorten it. SnipURL also provides the functionality of showing you how many people have clicked on the link.

8. **Don't FUQ (Fabricate Unanswerable Questions), I.** Many people send emails that are unanswerable. If your question is only appropriate for your psychiatrist, mother, or spouse, then ask them, not your recipient. When I get this type of message I go into a deep funk: (a) Should I just not answer? But then the person will think I'm an arrogant schmuck; (b) Should I just give a cursory answer and explain that it's not answerable? (c) Should I carefully craft a heartfelt message probing for more information so that I can get into the deep recesses of the sender's mind and begin a long tail of a message thread that lasts two weeks? Usually, I pick option (b).

9. **Don't FUQ, II.** There's one more type of unanswerable message: the open-ended question that is so broad it should be used in a job interview at Google. For example, "What do you think of the RIAA lawsuits?" "What kind of person is Steve Jobs?" "Do you think it's a good time to start a company?" My favorite ones begin like this: "I haven't given this much thought, but what do you think about...?" In other words, the sender hasn't done much thinking and wants to shift responsibility to the recipient. Dream on. The purpose of email is to save time, not kill time. You may have infinite time to ask essay questions but don't assume your recipient does.

10. **Attach files infrequently.** How often do you get an email that says, "Please read the attached letter."? Then you open the attachment, and it's a dumb-shitake Word document with a three paragraph message that could have easily been copied and pasted into the email. Or, even worse, someone believes that his curve-jumping, paradigm-shifting, patent-pending way to sell dog food online means you'll want to receive his ten megabyte PowerPoint presentation? Now that lots of people are opening messages with smartphones--sending files when you don't have to is a sure sign of bozosity.

11. **Ask permission.** If you must ask unanswerable questions or attach a file, then first seek permission. The initial email should be something like, "May I tell you my background to explain why I'm contacting you?" Or, "May I send you my PowerPoint presentation to explain what our company is doing?"

12. **Chill out.** This is a rule that I've broken many times, and each time that I did, I regretted it. When someone writes you a pissy email, the irresistible temptation is to retaliate. (And this is for an inconsequential email message--no wonder countries go to war.) You will almost always make the situation worse. A good practice is to wait twenty-four hours before you respond. An even better practice is that you never say in email what you wouldn't say in person--this applies to both the sender and recipient, by the way. The best practice is to never answer and let the sender wonder if his email got caught in a spam filter or didn't even matter enough to merit a response. Take my advice and do as I say, not as I have done--or will do. :-)

Addendums (ie, stuff that should have been in here in the first place, but I was too dumb):

- Per Russell Willis and Grace Lee, add a good signature. That is, one that includes your name, title, organization, email address, web site, and phone. This is especially true if you're asking people to do something--why make it hard for them to verify your credibility or to pick up the phone and call you? Also, I often copy and paste people's signatures to put them into the notes field of an appointment. The email client that I use, Entourage, won't let you easily copy the sender's info from the header, so I have to create a forward, copy everything, and then delete the forward.
- Never forward something that you think is funny. The odds are that by the time you've received it, your recipient already has too, so what is intended as funny is now tedious. However, I do have the Neiman-Marcus recipe for cookies...

Also

<http://www.43folders.com/2005/09/19/writing-sensible-email-messages/>

Writing sensible email messages

As we've seen before, getting your inbound email under control will give you a huge productivity boost, but what about all the emails you send? If you want to be a good email citizen and ensure the kind of results you're looking for, you'll need to craft messages that are concise and easy to deal with.

First: Understand why you're writing

Before you type anything into a new message, have explicit answers for two questions:

1. Why am I writing this?
2. What exactly do I want the result of this message to be?

If you can't succinctly state these answers, you might want to hold off on sending your message until you can. People get dozens, hundreds, even thousands of emails each day, so it's only natural for them to gravitate toward the messages that are well thought-out and that clearly respect their time and attention. Careless emails do not invite careful responses.

Think through your email from the recipient's point of view, and make sure you've done everything you can to try and help yourself before contacting someone else. If it's a valuable message, treat it that way, and put in the time to making your words count.

Get what you need

Although the possible topics and content of messages are theoretically endless, I'd propose that there are really just three basic types of business email.

1. Providing information - "Larry Tate will be in the office Monday at 10."
2. Requesting information - "Where did you put the 'Larry Tate' file?"
3. Requesting action - "Will you call Larry Tate's admin to confirm our meeting on Monday?"

It should be clear to your recipient which type of email yours is; don't bury the lede. Get the details and context packed into that first sentence or two whenever you can. Don't be afraid to write an actual "topic sentence" that clarifies a) what this is about, and b) what response or action you require of the recipient.

Since the Larry Tate meeting on Monday has been moved from the Whale Room, could you please make sure the Fishbowl has been reserved and that the caterer has been notified of the location change? Please IM me today by 5pm Pacific Time to verify.

This isn't the place to practice your stand-up act. Keep it pithy, and assume that no one will ever read more than the first sentence of anything you write. Making that first sentence

strong and clear is easily the best way to interest your recipient in the second sentence and beyond.

Write a great Subject line

You can make it even easier for your recipient to immediately understand why you've sent them an email and to quickly determine what kind of response or action it requires. Compose a great "Subject:" line that hits the high points or summarizes the thrust of the message. Avoid "Hi," "One more thing...," or "FYI," in favor of typing a short summary of the most important points in the message:

- Lunch resched to Friday @ 1pm
- Reminder: Monday is "St. Bono's Day"—no classes
- REQ: Resend Larry Tate zip file?
- HELP: Can you defrag my C drive?
- Thanks for the new liver—works great!

In fact, if you're relating just a single fact or asking one question in your email, consider using just the subject line to relate your message. As I've mentioned before, in some organizations, such emails are identified by adding (EOM)—for end of message—at the end of the Subject line. This lets recipients see that the whole message is right there in the subject without clicking to the view the (non-existent) body. This is highly appreciated by people who receive a large volume of mail, since it lets them do a quick triage on your message without needing to conduct a full examination.

Sadly, good email subjects have become something of a lost art, especially among more recent additions to the Interweb. It's a pity, because you're far more likely to get a favorable response from a busy person when they can quickly grok your message.

Brevity is the soul of...getting a response

It's completely depressing to check your email at 4:55 in the afternoon to discover a gothic novel of a message waiting for you, spilling down your screen the distance of 2 or 3 scrolling pages. It's certainly not the kind of thing that excites the desire to engage and respond. I mean just look at all that!

So, although—in typical Merlin fashion—I have only anecdotal evidence and hunches to prove this point, I'd wager that there's one visual trick most likely to improve your message's success: fit it onto one screen with no scrolling. There's a reason those web ads placed "above the fold" cost a lot more than the ones stuck down at the bottom; it's the only part of the page that you're virtually assured that anyone will see.

Whenever you can, try to distill your beautiful epistle down to just one or two points about a given topic, and then whittle that down to the point where there's plenty of white space left underneath your closing. Got more to say? Put it in separate emails with—again—excellent

Subject lines, and a descriptive, concise opener.

What's the action here?

If your message includes any kind of request—whether for a meeting, a progress update, a pony ride, or what have you—put that request near the top of the message and clearly state when you will need it. Do not, under any circumstances, assume that your overwhelmed recipient will take the time to sift through your purple prose for clues about what they're supposed to be doing for you.

Depending on the style of your team and the volume of mail they create, you might even consider adding functional text headers to the top of the body outlining the exact nature of the message.

This email is: actionable fyi social
Response needed: yes up to you no
Time-sensitive: immediate soon none

Sure, it's geeky, but how many minutes have you wasted panning through a sloppy "project update" email only to completely miss the changed deadline or work request buried in the penultimate paragraph?

Remove the guesswork from your messages by thinking of them like friendly, civil work orders; you must not be afraid to ask for what you want, especially if you have any desire to actually have the recipient give it to you.

More good ideas

- **Make it easy to quote** - Power email users will quote and respond to specific sections or sentences of your message. You can facilitate this by keeping your paragraphs short, making them easy to slice and dice.
- **Don't chuck the ball** - Emails to a thread are like comments at a meeting; think of both like your time possessing the basketball. Don't just chuck at the net every chance you get. Hang back and watch for how you can be most useful. Minimize noise.
- **A reminder never hurts** - If you're following-up or responding to an email that's more than a few days old, provide context right at the opening. For example, "You wrote in February asking to be notified when the new asthma inhalers are in stock; here's a link to the items we've now made available on our site..."
- **Never mix, never worry** - Unless your team really prefers to work that way, do not mix topics, projects, or domains of life in a given email. Inform everyone of Baby Tyler's adorable antics in a different message than the one with the downsizing rumors and budget warnings.
- **No thanks** - I'm not married to this one, but I know a lot of people who swear by it. In more informal settings and in high-volume mail environments, it's not necessary to respond with a "Thanks" email whenever someone does what you asked. Save your

gratitude for the next time you pass in the hall; a one-word “Thanks” email can be cruffy and unnecessary. On the other hand, don’t hesitate to thank someone for their time if they’ve truly done you a proper.

- **RTFM** - If you’re asking for help, make sure you’ve exhausted all the documentation and non-human resources you have at your disposal. When you do ask for help, be sure to quickly cover the solutions you’ve already tried and what the results were.
- **Skip the overture** - If you’re writing to a busy person with an actual question or request, resist the desire to swoon for 2,000 characters. Either write a fan letter or a useful email, but mixing them can seem tacky and disingenuous. Just go ahead and ask Gary Gygax for his autograph already.

[Thanks to Cory for exchanges and thoughts that contributed to this.]

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40 Responses to “Writing sensible email messages”

1. Tommy Weir Says:

September 19th, 2005 at 8:20

All good stuff. I would add that having a range of signature files available is also a useful thing to set up. Different levels of contact details depending on what your relationship is with the recipient of the email.

2. david Says:

September 19th, 2005 at 9:57

These are great tips! Thanks! Here are a few others that might augment yours nicely:

1) Use To: and CC: lines to differentiate between people who have action items in an email and people for whom this is merely informative:

I use this with my team, and my manager uses this as well. I filter mail by whether I’m on the To: line or the CC: line and know which ones I need to act on and which ones to read/review.

2) Change the subject if the thread has changed or if the original subject was too vague, but include the original subject parenthetically:

If I'm included on a thread from someone with a subject like "FW: Help, please?" and a reply from me is needed, I usually change the subject to something clearer, but include the original subject so that it's clear to all that I'm not starting a completely new thread. I.e. I might change the aforementioned subject to "Samples needed for UK Customer (was RE: Help, please?). The same thing can be done for threads that have wavered from their original theme, or if forwarding a poorly named email or thread to someone else – i.e. "Pls. review/approve these requests (was FW: Can you do this?)?"

Thanks again, there are some wonderful tips in here that I think I'll start working towards today!

David