

Precision Email: Formatting Information for Action

Introduction

- Have you ever opened an email message from a colleague, knowing it was important, but seeing long paragraphs of text, you simply closed it for another time? Did that time ever come?
- Do you become paralyzed at having to compose an email that brings a colleague up to speed on a project you have been working on for a while?
- Do you ever just need a yes or no from a colleague and hope that they see and open your message knowing it is buried in their crowded inbox?

We spend a great deal of time writing, reading and responding to email. Some joke, that it should now be a percentage of our job description. This information sheet will get you started on the road to composing precise email messages so you can get the response you need and move your work towards success.

Learning Objectives

- Understand the attributes of an email and how to use them effectively
- Define the attributes of email and understand how they can be used to create precision email messages
- Identify the primary objective of your message and clearly present that to your audience

Email Attributes and Best Practices

Subject lines:

A good subject line will help your reader know how to respond to your message. Some tips:

- Never leave the subject line blank
- Be specific about the purpose of your message (i.e. “agenda for Wednesday’s evaluation meeting” vs “meeting agenda”)
- Prefix the subject with an action word which will make your message stand out for the recipient, but perhaps more importantly, will make you think about what you need from a colleague before adding to their workload.

We recommend these subject line prefixes and suffix:

| Subject Prefixes | Use | Example |
|------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| ACTION | Your recipient is required to take some action | ACTION-Contribute Agenda Items. |
| APPROVE | Requires approval from the recipient | APPROVE-Room Rental Fee |
| INFO | “For Your Information”, the message is not time-sensitive and requires no response. | INFO-Weekly Status Update |
| DECISION | Requires a decision by the recipient | DECISION-Fund Source for Fall Social |

| | | |
|---------|---|--|
| URGENT | Message is time-sensitive and should be read ASAP. Should be used rarely and only when it is urgent. | URGENT: Leak in S245 |
| REVIEW | Content needs to be reviewed or edited | REVIEW-Job Description New Coordinator |
| SECURE: | Use of this prefix, including the colon, will activate encryption on your email message if it gets sent or forwarded outside of UCSF. | Secure: Student grades for elective |

| Subject Suffixes | Use | Example |
|------------------|---|--|
| _____ by [date] | Insert this after one of the above prefixes when a reply or action is requested in the body of the message | APPROVE-Room Rental Fee by Oct 1 |
| ...[EOM] | The entirety of the message is in the subject line (no message in the body of the email). The letters EOM (End Of Message) is added to the end of the subject line. | Free cookies in the MSC right now! [EOM] |

Priority Message:

Overuse of the high importance tag (!) will lessen its effectiveness. Save high importance tag for issues that will have significant negative repercussions if they aren't read or responded to immediately.

Use of cc and bcc:

The "cc" (**carbon copy**) indicates that an email message is being copied to someone who is not the primary recipient. The term "bcc" (**blind carbon copy**) indicates that the email is being copied to someone without the knowledge of the primary or carbon copy recipients.

- Only place recipients who are asked to act on the subject line in the "to" field of your message.
- Use the "cc" for people you want to inform about the content.
- If you are replying to a message take the time to move addresses between the "to" and "cc" fields based on who needs to act and how just needs to know. DON'T be lazy and leave the addresses as originally sent if they are no longer relevant.
- The bcc should only be used for large event announcements where you paste the list of recipients into the bcc line, thus masking the list from the reader and maintaining a clean format for your message.

Key Point Up Front:

Open your message with a short statement that declares its purpose and answers the 5 W's: who, what, when, where, why.

Key Point: Effective January 2015, all employee performance evaluations will be based on the calendar year to align with industry standards.

Placing the Bottom Line Up Front helps your reader get the point quickly and focus on how it applies to their work. They often don't want to know all the thinking that went into the final decision. This statement should always answer the questions, "How does this message affect me?" The Bottom Line can certainly be followed by a Background section if necessary.

Keep it Short and Simple:

Be as short and simple with your language as possible. Write in a clear active voice and keep the entirety of message within one reading pane. Writing in an active voice moves the subject of the sentence before the verb and often uses fewer words to make the point.

Instead of: The date for this year's celebration was moved to Tuesday by the senior leadership. (14 words)

Try this: The senior leadership moved this year's celebration to Tuesday. (9 words)

Confidentiality and Secure email

- If you don't want your recipient to forward the content to others, tell them so up front in your message with a statement like "**Confidential: Please do not forward.**" Place the statement before your salutation and use it very sparingly. Remember that anything you put into email can be easily discovered so think very carefully about sending confidential information by email.
- When sending protected information to someone by email, including any data about a learner, use the university's secure email feature. To activate it, start the subject line with **Secure:** This will encrypt your message if it is sent outside of the UCSF email system.

Signatures

Email signatures are the last impression you make in your email message and provide context and professionalism to your content. They are the letterhead of the email universe.

Tips:

- Do separate your signature with an indicator, like this "-----" to show clear demarcation between the body of your message and the signature.
- Do keep the text to 3-5 lines.
- Do include your phone number. Maybe they will give you call and avoid the 12 replies that might follow your initial email message.
- Do stick to a single font.
- Do provide them context for who and where you are by providing your title and organization.

- Do include your email address. Best practice often states NOT to include your address in your signature, but if your message is forwarded to a 3rd party, your email address is likely to travel with your message unless placed in the signature line.
- Don't make excuses for poor writing, by signing off with "sent from my mobile"
- Don't include images in your signature, because they often appear as attachments. This limits a recipient from searching of "real" attachments they receive from you.

Example: -----

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References:

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- Sehgal, Kabir. "How to Write Email with Military Precision." Harvard Business Review. November 22, 2016. Accessed November 28, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/11/how-to-write-email-with-military-precision>.

Further resources

- [UCSF Smart Mail website: http://smartmail.ucsf.edu](http://smartmail.ucsf.edu) – includes list of UCSF newsletters
- [Sending Mass Email at UCSF: https://communicators.ucsf.edu/files/mass_email.pdf](https://communicators.ucsf.edu/files/mass_email.pdf)
- [Best Email Business Practices: http://communicators.ucsf.edu/resources/files/email_etiquette.pdf](http://communicators.ucsf.edu/resources/files/email_etiquette.pdf)
- [Email Charter: http://emailcharter.org/](http://emailcharter.org/)
- [Tips for Dealing with Email Overload: https://communicators.ucsf.edu/files/emai_overload.pdf](https://communicators.ucsf.edu/files/emai_overload.pdf)
- [Fixing Our Unhealthy Obsession with Work Email: https://hbr.org/2015/09/fixing-our-unhealthy-obsession-with-work-email](https://hbr.org/2015/09/fixing-our-unhealthy-obsession-with-work-email)
- Analyze your "After Message" for structure, readability and passive voice at *Analyze My Writing*. <http://www.analyzemywriting.com/>.