E-mail Etiquette

Many people forget that an e-mail message is a business document. You should treat it as if you are writing a memo or any other written document.

Why do you need e-mail etiquette?

Every department and school in the District needs to implement e-mail etiquette rules for the following reasons:

- Professionalism: by using proper email language you and the organization will convey a professional image.
- Efficiency: emails that get to the point are much more effective than poorly worded emails.
- Protection from liability: employee awareness of email risks will protect your department or school from costly law suits.

Keep it brief

If possible, try to keep your message all on one screen, which is about 25 lines or less. That forces you to be concise. More of your messages will actually be read because it's easier for the reader to skim over it quickly for content.

Greeting

The salutation in an e-mail doesn't have to be as formal as a business letter. However, it should show respect for others and use titles as necessary. It's best to not say "Hi, Cheryl" to someone you've never contacted before. Then again "Dear Ms. White" may sound too formal.

Each situation will need to be evaluated on its own, but in general, use the following as a guide: If you normally address a person as Miss/Mrs./Ms./Mr. Smith then address the person that way in e-mail. If you normally call the person by first name then just use that. If you are unsure, stick to the formal salutation. It's the safest bet.

When you get a response from the person, your next e-mail can be less formal if that is how the person ended the message. At that point, you may want to just use the person's name "Cheryl". This is true for anyone you are already know. There is no need to add "Hi" to the person's name. It's not necessary; however, you can judge this based on your organization's culture.

Use templates for frequently used responses

Some questions you get over and over again, such as directions to your office. Save time by keeping the texts of the responses as templates and paste these into your message when you need them. You can save your templates in a Word document, or use pre-formatted emails.

Answer e-mails in a timely manner

People send an e-mail because they would like to receive a quick response. If they did not want a quick response they would send a letter or a fax. Therefore, each e-mail should be replied to within at least 24 hours and preferably within the same working day. If the email is complicated, just send an email back saying that you have received it and that you will get back to them. Be sure to get back to them within your department or school's timeline. This will put the sender's mind at rest.

Answer *all* questions in your reply

An email reply should answer all questions. If you don't answer all the questions in the original email, you will receive further e-mails regarding the unanswered questions, which will not only waste your time and the sender's time but also cause considerable frustration. Besides, if you are able to answer all relevant questions in the first place, the sender will be grateful and impressed with your efficiency and thoughtfulness.

Do not attach unnecessary files

By sending large attachments you can possibly bring down the e-mail system. Whenever possible try to compress attachments and only send them when they are necessary. Make sure you have a good virus scanner in place since your recipients will not be very happy if you send them documents full of viruses!

Do not overuse the high priority option

If you overuse the high priority option, it will lose its function when you really need it. Even if e-mail has high priority, your message will come across as slightly aggressive if you flag it as "high priority." Use it wisely.

Do not request delivery and read receipts all the time

This will almost always annoy your recipient before he or she has even read your message. Besides, sometimes it doesn't work anyway since the recipient could have blocked that function, or his/her software might not support it. If you want to know whether an email was received it is better to ask the recipient to let you know if it was received.

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Threads

Once you send that first e-mail, you will probably get a response. If you want to reply to that response what should you do? The wrong thing to do is to start a new e-mail message. This breaks the link (called a "thread") between the original message and your soon-to-be-created response. Without the link, it can get difficult for the users on each end to follow the sequence of messages, especially after several exchanges. This becomes an even larger problem when several people may be replying to messages and trying to follow the thread of exchanged information. The correct thing to do is to reply, which is essentially the same thing as creating a new message, but maintains the thread.

Reply to all

The 'Reply to all' button is just a button, but it can generate tons of unnecessary e-mails. For example, if I send a dozen people an e-mail asking if they are available at a certain time for a meeting I should get a dozen replies and that's it. However, if each person hits the "Reply to all' button, not only do I get a dozen replies, but so does everyone else for a total of 144 messages!

That's not saying that the 'Reply to all' button should not be used. It should just be used with care.

The subject line

Be courteous to your readers by using the subject line. It should briefly describe the message to help your readers decide whether it is something they need to read immediately or can wait a bit.

Don't send an e-mail message that covers more than a single topic. You are not being efficient by putting more than one subject in an e-mail. Don't expect your readers to respond to all your issues—most likely they will concentrate on just the first one or two.

Make sure your subject line matches the message content. This is especially true if many e-mails have been exchanged and now it has evolved into a different topic. Don't leave the "Re: …" or "Fw: …" on your message if it has taken a turn to something else. Please change the subject line to match the new content.

Use proper spelling, punctuation, and grammar

This is not only important because improper spelling, grammar and punctuation give a bad impression of you and the District, it is also important for conveying the message properly. E-mails with no periods or commas are difficult to read and can sometimes even change the meaning of the text.

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Use regular capitalization

Writing with all capital letters throughout your message is equivalent to shouting. Not capitalizing at all may appear careless or too informal.

THIS LOOKS LIKE YOU ARE SHOUTING
this looks like you are careless or too informal

Forwarding messages

Get the original sender's okay before forwarding the e-mail, unless you are sure the original sender would endorse your forward. The original sender may not want that message going to anyone else and would probably appreciate being asked.

Distribution lists

When sending the message to a long list of people who may not know each other, use the blind copy feature (Bcc). This will hide all the e-mail addresses and offer the individuals on the list some privacy.
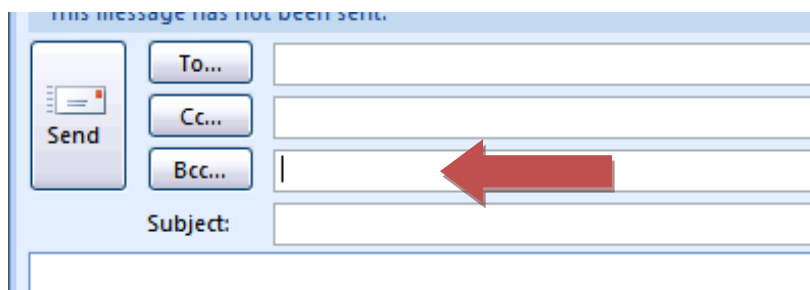
E-mail emotions and abbreviations

All the smiley faces (:-), :(, :b) and friendly abbreviations (LOL, BTW, and TTFN) that are frequently used in e-mail don't belong in business.

Fonts

Use a crisp, easy-to-read font in a dark color. Do not use any script font or any light colors, especially yellow and pink. Red is also difficult to read when it's used in the whole message. Make it easier for your readers to read your message. Otherwise, it might not get read at all.

Hard to read on screen
Hard to read on screen
Nice crisp font
Nice crisp font

Plan, draft, revise, and edit your e-mail

For any long, complex, or information-packed e-mail, you will need to plan it out as you would with any written document you would write for business such as a memo or report. Write the draft, revise and edit it. If it's too long, it might be better to attach a document and just use the email as a short cover note.

Use the Pre-Planning Questionnaire to help you plan your document and checklists for revision and editing to help with your draft.

Paragraph Headings

If you are writing a long e-mail message, you might want to use headings. However, use all capital letters for headings in case the recipient will not receive your formatting.
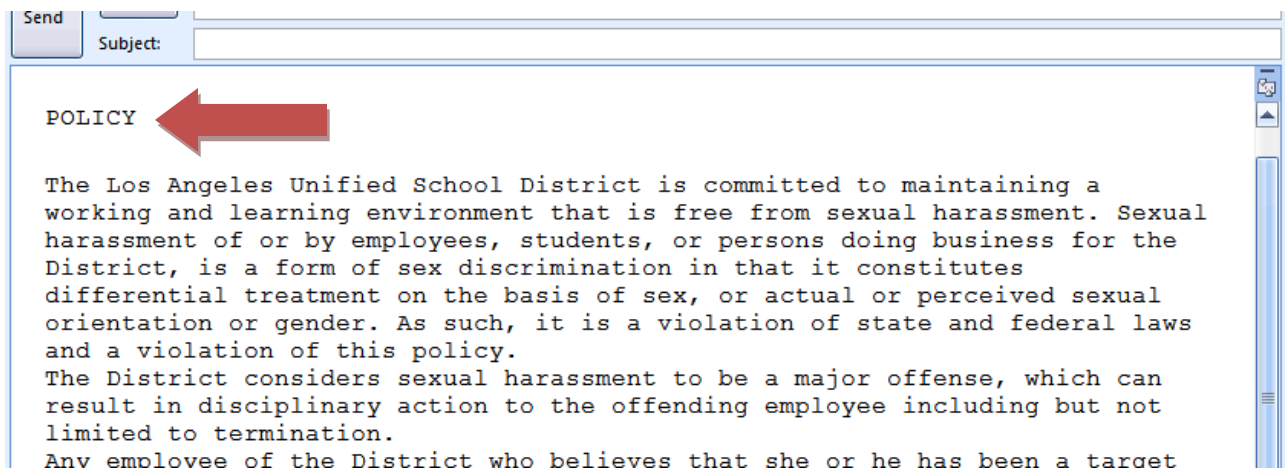
Closing

Take a few seconds to say, "Best regards" or some other closing and offer your name. Save the informal closings for your friends: Cheers, Hugs, Namaste, etc.

Include a signature even when forwarding or replying to email. Make it easy for your readers to have your contact information on hand so they don't have to look for it if they need to contact you or refresh their memories on who you are.

Include your title, department or school name, and e-mail address in the signature. Keep it to four lines and don't add any quotes or images because they take up too much space, especially if you include a disclaimer after your signature.

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Privacy

In business all e-mail correspondence belongs to the organization. There is just no such thing as private e-mail. With some e-mail systems, the e-mail administrator has the ability to read any and all e-mail messages.

Some organizations monitor employee e-mail. The reasons for this range from management wanting to make sure users are not wasting time on frivolous messages to making sure that District secrets are not being leaked to unauthorized sources.

E-mail software is like all software in that occasionally things go wrong. If this happens, you may end up receiving e-mail meant for another person or your e-mail may get sent to the wrong person. Either way, what you thought was private is not private anymore.

Remember, there is no such thing as private e-mail. Think about that before hitting "send" on your next message. Make sure you are fine with anyone, including your school or department head, reading the message. If your message contains inappropriate language or attachments, you could be disciplined. Don't send anything by e-mail that you would not want posted on the bulletin board. If it's safe enough for the bulletin board, it's safe enough for e-mail. Finally, if you are debating whether or not to send something personal by e-mail, either deliver it by hand or send it by snail mail.

Know When Not to Use E-Mail

Never send a message when you're angry. Think about the situation first, and then respond. Ask yourself, "Would I say this to the person's face?" "Can I be sure I won't regret this when I see it in my send-box?" If the answer is no to either of those questions, then don't send it. Remember each message is a record of your words—you don't want a permanent record of something you wish you hadn't written.

Avoid sending an e-mail when you need to give corrective feedback, either personal or performance-related. Even though it's nice to receive praise in an e-mail ("John, these copies look great!"), corrective feedback won't be well-received in this way ("Mary, you could have done better on this"). Such comments can easily be misinterpreted. Because the writer's intended tone is so difficult to determine in e-mail, criticism almost always sounds worse from the computer screen than face-to-face. If you have something corrective to say, do so in person.

If you are dealing with a sensitive issue or a confidential matter, do NOT use e-mail. Not only can the I.T. department see all your e-mails, but hackers could potentially tap into your system and steal information. You must protect employees' private personal information such as home address, home phone, social security number, date of birth, medical information, etc. It's the **law**!

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