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Send

The Essential Guide to Email for Office and Home

DAVID SHIPLEY
and
WILL SCHWALBE

Alfred A. Knopf New York 2007
We are often so focused on what we want to say in an email that we give too little thought to the mechanics—especially when we are replying to a message rather than initiating one. This is because the To, Cc, and Bcc fields and the Subject line are built into our email programs, so we consign them to a default mode: simply hit one of the Reply buttons, and everything is filled in for you.

This lack of mindfulness also applies to the other basic elements of our emails. Whether or not to forward an attachment or attach flags; what font, point size, and color to use; how to greet someone or close—all these choices tend to get less attention than they deserve. This is a shame, because taking a few seconds to think about how you want to build your email can make all the difference.

Let’s go through the building blocks of an email, from the top down.
You’ve written a brilliant email outlining your suggestions for a project at work. We mean “perfect.” Not a flaw. Funny. Direct. Detailed. Precise.

Then you send it to a colleague who thinks, “This is nice. But what does it have to do with me?” Or you forget to include one of the people it most concerns, and all your efforts go up in smoke because now that person isn’t speaking to you.

We’re not talking about mistakenly directed emails here. We’re talking about your everyday, run-of-the-mill, poorly directed ones.

These come in many varieties. Include too many people in your To field, and no one feels obligated to respond. Go over or around someone in your To field, and you can wind up undermining your objective. Bother an important contact with an inappropriate request, and your subsequent emails may not be answered. When you email the sales director for New England with an Atlanta request, you wind up irritating the person you emailed—and, eventually, the person you didn’t. The message is either “I don’t know what you do” or “I think you’re one of those people who will do whatever I ask them, even if it’s not your job.” Both are bad.

At the risk of stating the obvious, even the most elegantly phrased email won’t get you what you want if it doesn’t go to the right person: the person who can act on it. Here are some other things to keep in mind.
Too Many

Beware of putting too many people in the To line. If you ask six people to bring a document to a meeting, there's a chance that all six will do it—and there's a chance that no one will, unless you remember in the body of the message to assign specific tasks to each person.

To wit:

To: Joe, Rosa  
Subject: The meeting  
From: Andy

Can one of you remember to bring the pie chart to the Sara Lee meeting?

So, who's going to bring it?

To: Joe, Rosa  
Subject: The meeting  
From: Andy

Joe: Please bring the pie chart to the Sara Lee meeting.
Rosa: Can you please REMIND Joe to bring the pie chart to the meeting?

Patrick Lencioni, the author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, told us, “When I send an email to one person, there’s a 95 percent chance I’ll get a reply. When I send to ten people, the response rate drops to 5 percent. When you add people, you drastically decrease the exclusivity and make people feel they don’t need to read the email or do
what you ask.” He calls this the electronic version of the Freeloader Effect.

It’s just human nature: an individual is far more likely to do as instructed in an email if he or she is the only person in the To line.

**To Is Not Cc**

Don’t confuse the To field with Cc. For example, if you want to thank one person—but you want other people to know about it—put the other people in the Cc line. If you cram them all in the To field, the person being thanked is likely to feel slighted.

Let’s say that you want to acknowledge Tom, one of several people on a committee assigned to draft a document, for having worked late.

Here’s an example of what *not* to do:

**To:** Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Thomas Jefferson  
**From:** Second Continental Congress

Thank you for staying so late to finish the Declaration.

Here’s what you should have done:

**To:** Thomas Jefferson  
**Cc:** Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston  
**From:** Second Continental Congress

Thank you for staying so late to finish the Declaration.
Private Addresses

Guess which of these addressees stands to profit from knowing the email addresses of the others?

To: Elvis@Graceland.gov; Amelia@Earhart.com; BigJim@Hoffa.net; JD@Salinger.com; HotTips@nationalenquirer.com

When you write a lot of people at once, keep in mind that you are sharing private email addresses with the world—addresses that the recipients may not want to share. (The flip side, of course, is that mass emails you receive can be a great way to add to your list of contacts.) Get a tech wizard to teach you how to repress individual names on a group email list—or put everyone in the Bcc field to preserve their anonymity. And be sparing of group emails.

The Best Address

Many of us wear several hats, and the popularity of multiple email addresses reflects this. Before you send, make sure you're directing your email to the best possible address. (How often have we heard something like this: “I can’t believe you sent the message to that AOL account. I hardly ever check it.” Or worse: “I can’t believe you sent that message to my office. Don’t you know they read everything?”) This isn’t just to ensure that the addressee gets the email (and that the email doesn’t get him fired)—it’s also to get
your message to someone when he's most likely to be thinking about the issues your email raises. There's a balancing act here between finding people where they'll be checking and finding them when they'll be in the right state of mind.

It's often obvious which email address corresponds to the relevant part of the recipient's life.

**Bill@Microsoft.com**: Here's a plan to destroy viruses.

**Bill@Gatesfoundation.com**: Here's a plan to destroy malaria.

**Bill@hotmail.com**: Wanna come over for beers on Friday?

When it isn't obvious, you can ask—or send to all the addresses you have, bearing in mind these two rules:

*You usually can't go wrong by replying to the address from whence the message came—as long as you're sticking to the same type of subject.*

*Never send anything to a business email address that the recipient would be embarrassed to have the entire company read.*

**The Order**

More people than you think care about hierarchy. Make sure you put the names in your To field in the proper order, generally according to rank.
It should look something like this:

To: Commander in Chief, General, Colonel, Captain, Lieutenant, Sergeant, Corporal, Private

But what if you're writing to a lot of privates? You can go by seniority, familiarity, sensitivity (maybe you want to put the person who cares most about this stuff first), or relevance to the task at hand. When in doubt, you can alphabetize—or decide not to sweat it.

The Accidental To

With email, we are all accident-prone. With the slip of a finger, it's easy to send a message that's half-baked—or even raw.

What's more, if you've used email for, say, more than a month or two, chances are that you have been involved in a redirect or a forwarding misadventure. You think you're replying to someone, but really you're forwarding an email; you think you're forwarding an email, but really you're replying to one; you think you're replying to one person, but really you're replying to everyone; you think you're starting a fresh email string, but you aren't, and what lurks below from previous emails may be mortifying.

Autofill poses another danger. If you have two people in your address book whose names start with the same letters, your email program makes it re-
markably easy for you to send the message to the wrong person. Say, for instance, you’re a comedian and you want to send your latest Top 10 List to Letterman, but you don’t look at the screen when you’re typing in the addressee’s name and it goes to Leno. So Dave doesn’t get the list and Jay thinks you’re an idiot.

Mailing lists can magnify the potential for disaster. In the middle of a computer training session in 2006, the admissions director at the University of California at Berkeley’s law school sent the following message to as many as 7,000 applicants: “I’m writing to congratulate you again for being admitted.” For the 6,500 of those who hadn’t been admitted, this came as a surprise. As did the subsequent retraction that came via email twenty minutes later.

“I was fooling around with the program,” the admissions director told the San Francisco Chronicle. “I hit the ‘send’ button and immediately all the blood drained from my head.”

At least the admissions officer realized instantly that he had screwed up and had a chance to correct his error. That’s not always the case. For example, every once in a while David gets an email from a certain public relations person. Two years ago, this individual accidentally forwarded David a copy of his correspondence with a client who had written an Op-Ed article that had been rejected by David. (Politely rejected, we should add.) The note discussed David’s editorial judgment and character with
a salty forthrightness that would have both enlivened the original Op-Ed piece and made it unpublishable in a family newspaper.

While David looks with care at every Op-Ed piece (and has, in fact, accepted other articles that have since come to him via this public relations person), it would be dishonest to say that a flash of annoyance doesn’t cross his mind whenever this particular name pops up in his inbox. If David were in another field of work, this person’s emails might go unread.

Cc:

If you just want to make sure people are kept in the loop, then they don’t belong in the To field at all; they belong in a...Cc.

What a Cc says is simply this: I want you to know what’s going on, even though you probably don’t have to do anything about it. Because its purpose is so murky, a Cc is a political and hierarchical minefield.

A Correct Cc

To: Little Brother
Cc: Big Sister
From: Dad

Please feed the lizard.
Little Brother knows it’s his job. Big Sister knows not to do it—and might even remind Little Brother. Had she been in To and not Cc, the lizard might have been fed twice—or not at all.

Picking Sides

When you Cc, think carefully each time about whom you want in and whom you want out, no matter whether you’re initiating or replying. Just because someone was in on the email exchange from the start doesn’t mean that person should be there forever. But if someone is trying to exclude from a conversation someone else who by rights should be part of it, a Cc can set everyone straight. What do we mean? Here’s an example of a supervisor writing to a customer (Adrian) who had tried to circumvent a service representative (Leontine):

To: Adrian
Cc: Leontine
Re: The marketing campaign

I’m sorry you aren’t satisfied with Leontine’s response.
But I’m afraid it does represent the company’s position.
I hope you will appreciate that it’s best if you keep corresponding directly with her.
Sincerely,
The Supervisor

Leontine’s supervisor could have done this without a Cc, but including Leontine told both the client and Leon-
tine that she had her superior's full support. (In some delicate cases, this would be better handled with a phone call.)

**Dropping and Adding as You Go**

Unilaterally dropping or adding a Cc in an ongoing email conversation can alter a group dynamic or create suspicion. When in doubt, you can always ask somebody—by phone, in person, or by email—if he minds whether you do or don't Cc a particular person on a piece of correspondence.

If you think that someone should be liberated from an email chain, offer to set that person free:

**To:** Marcie  
**From:** Lucy  
**Re:** Halloween Special

There may be dozens more emails about the logistics for the upcoming show. Let me know if you still want to be Cc'd on all of them, or if you'd rather we didn't clog your inbox.

Or if you want to add someone:

**To:** Charlie Brown, Pigpen, Snoopy, Woodstock  
**Cc:** Schroeder  
**From:** Lucy  
**Re:** Halloween Special
Hey guys, we’re adding Schroeder to these emails because he’s going to be playing piano on the show.

Note: Lucy called Charlie Brown before sending out this second email; she knows that he has low self-esteem, and she didn’t want him to take it personally when she unilaterally added Schroeder to the chain.

**Escalation**

If you Cc someone’s boss on a complimentary email, it’s a way of enlarging the compliment. If you Cc someone’s boss on a complaint, it makes the reprimand much worse. Add the legal or the human resource departments on a Cc, and, if you are the boss, you’re sending the message that the recipient’s days are numbered; if you’re an employee, you’ve probably just started a war. Ditto if either party Cc’s the press, the Better Business Bureau, or a government entity.

**DEFCON 1**

**To:** Saddam Hussein

**From:** George W. Bush

Please let in the weapons inspectors.

**DEFCON 2**

**To:** Saddam Hussein

**From:** George W. Bush

**Cc:** U.N. Security Council

Please let in the weapons inspectors.
DEFCON 3

To: Saddam Hussein  
From: George W. Bush  
Cc: United Nations Secretary General, NATO, European Union, Joint Chiefs of Staff  

Please let in the weapons inspectors.

Going Public

Never forget that a Cc has the power to publicly shame someone, whether that’s your intention or not.

Here’s a cautionary tale concerning a president of the China division of EMC—a $10 billion—a-year multinational. One evening in May 2006, the executive found his office locked, which prompted him to send the following email to his secretary:

You locked me out of my office this evening because you assume I have my office key on my person. With immediate effect, you do not leave the office until you have checked with all the managers you support.

At some point between composition and hitting the Send key he felt compelled to Cc others in the company.

His secretary replied:
I locked the door because the office has been burgled in the past. Even though I’m your subordinate, please pay attention to politeness when you speak. This is the most basic human courtesy. You have your own keys. You forgot to bring them, but you still want to say it’s someone else’s fault.

She in return Cc’d EMC’s entire staff in China. The email exchange quickly found its way into China’s press and became a source of national debate because the boss was from Singapore—and his behavior stirred up local fears of cultural imperialism. It also managed to touch upon perennially sensitive issues, from gender politics to office hierarchy—whose job is it really to lock the doors?

Eventually, the boss felt compelled to resign. But what if he hadn’t Cc’d that first email? What if he’d just sent it to his secretary and no one else? (Of course, there’s the question of whether he should have sent it at all . . . but that’s a different section of the book.) Then he would not have turned a minor and private fit of pique into a public reprimand—a loss of face that drove the secretary to defend herself in an equally public way.
Note to CEOs

If you are the supreme boss, you can make life easier for others if you remember to Cc the appropriate people on the ladder between you and the person you’re writing. This tactic encourages transparency and cooperation throughout the ranks.

This can work the other way, too. We had a discussion about this. David initially thought that if he received a note from his CEO, he didn’t need to share it with his immediate boss. His reasoning? It would seem untoward, as if he were bragging about a relationship with the big boss.

Will mounted a convincing argument that it’s your responsibility to let your immediate boss know if you’re corresponding with his or her boss—something best done by phone, in person, or via a separate or forwarded email. (If you were simply to add your direct boss as a Cc on the reply, it might look like a reprimand to the big boss for not having included your direct supervisor.) The key is to keep one’s supervisor up-to-date with what’s going on. How would you feel if one of your subordinates was carrying on an email exchange with the CEO and you didn’t know about it? While nobody wants a braggart around, it’s far worse to keep your boss in the dark or give the impression that there are back-channel communications going on. Knowledge is power; whom you share yours with lets them know what you think of them and how important they are.
The Anatomy of an Email

Why They’re There

Make it clear in your emails to people outside your organization why you’ve chosen your Cc list.

To: Bride and Groom
From: General Manager, Fancy Hotel
Cc: Flora, Nicolas

I’m so pleased you’ve chosen our hotel for your wedding. I’ve Cc’d Flora, who handles our flower arrangements, and Nicolas, our executive chef, who makes our cakes.

Both of them will be in touch with you directly.

When you’re replying to an email from another company that has unfamiliar Cc’s, never Reply All until you know the identity and job title of every person in the Cc field. This is time-consuming to discover—but worth it. Imagine being in a small meeting with a group of people from another company and not knowing who some of them are and what jobs they do? Would you feel comfortable speaking freely? Or would you be so circumspect that nothing meaningful could be discussed? Imagine what might have happened if the general manager at Fancy Hotel had not told the bride and groom who the Cc’s were. They might have written something like this and hit Reply All:
To: General Manager, Fancy Hotel  
From: Bride and Groom  
Cc: Flora, Nicolas  

We are so excited about having our wedding at your stunning hotel, but we will bring our own flowers and make our own cake. No offense, but whoever does your flowers is color-blind—and the cake sample we had on our visit tasted like it came out of a box!

Reply or Reply All?

Let your recipients know in your email whether they should reply only to you or “Please Reply All.”

The Politics of the Cc

Nobody likes to be left out. But you can’t include everyone on everything. This is why Cc’s are among the most troublemaking aspects of email. Below is a case study—there’s no right answer or wrong answer, just options with different implications that depend on the personal politics.
The Case

You, Sophie, are a chief surfboard designer. You receive an email from a junior colleague, Cy, who copies Ilya, the head of production, and Sam, the head of sales. He does not copy Evie, the head of your graphics department, who should be in charge of the actual drawing.

To: Sophie  
Cc: Ilya, Sam  
From: Cy  
Re: “Cowabunga”

Is this word still cool? Or not? Should it be on the board?

You think Evie should be part of this.

Here are five options:

Option One: The Simple Add (in which you Reply All and add Evie without comment).

To: Cy  
Cc: Ilya, Sam, Evie  
From: Sophie  
Re: “Cowabunga”

Not really. I think it’s kind of nerdy. Others?
Option Two: The Add with Comment (in which you Reply All and add Evie, but comment on that).

To: Cy  
Cc: Ilya, Sam, Evie  
From: Sophie  
Re: “Cowabunga”

Not really. I think it's kind of nerdy. Others? I've added Evie to get her take.

Option Three: The Forward (with no heads-up to the original sender).

To: Evie  
From: Sophie  
Re: “Cowabunga”

Cy sent me the below. What do you think?

Option Four: The Forward with Cc (back to the original sender).

To: Evie  
From: Sophie  
Cc: Cy  
Re: “Cowabunga”

Cy sent me this. What do you think?
Option Five: The Bounceback to Sender (suggesting he resend).

To: Cy
From: Sophie
Re: “Cowabunga”

I think you should include Evie in this discussion.

The Analysis

Option One: The most efficient response when there are no complicating factors (everyone gets along; maybe Evie was left off by accident; Evie isn’t likely to be offended either way).

Option Two: Basically the same as One, except that it alerts the group to Evie’s presence. Cy may see it as a rebuke, however, since it reminds everyone that he forgot to include Evie.

Option Three: Could be seen as conspiratorial—Evie might be mad now that her original exclusion hasn’t been publicly rectified; Cy might be mad if he later discovers his email was forwarded.

Option Four: Less conspiratorial than Option Three, and Cy could see this as keeping him in the loop. But he still might feel reprimanded for neglecting to include Evie.
Option Five: By far the safest course, as it gives Cy an opportunity to say, "Oops, I forgot," or to explain what may be a good reason for not including Evie. But also the slowest course—this is the only option that doesn’t succeed in getting the message to Evie immediately so she can give her opinion.

If time is of the essence, this may be a moment to pick up the phone and get Cy’s verbal OK to go with option One or Two.

Bcc:

The Flattering Bcc

By their very nature, blind carbon copies are sneaky things. They should be handled with extreme care. Bcc’s should almost never be used for communication within your organization for the simple reason that you don’t want to talk behind the backs of the people with whom you work. On rare occasions, though, Bcc’s are a defensible way of signaling your faith in a colleague. If you are writing to your boss and you Bcc someone on your team, it can show that person that you value his confidence.
To: Speed Racer  
From: Pit Boss  
Bcc: Tire Changer  

Dear Speed: We are going through tires too fast. You have to take the curves slower. The guys in the pit are going nuts.

Inside v. Outside

Bcc’s can be useful when corresponding with parties outside your organization. Let’s say, for example, that you need to keep your boss abreast of your negotiations with another company. If you Cc her on all relevant correspondence, your counterpart’s boss will probably feel the need to get involved in the deal. Before you know it, your boss will be dealing with the problem she wanted you to handle. A Bcc can help you avoid this problem.

To: Foreign Minister, Russian Federation  
From: U.S. Secretary of State  
Bcc: The President of the United States  

Sergei,  
Think we can resolve that caviar trade dispute on our own?  
Condi
Informing Without Escalating

A Bcc to your attorney lets him know what’s going on but doesn’t bring the situation to a boil the way it would if the other side knew you were considering legal action.

To: Milo@Miloscupcakes.com
From: Miriam@Miriams cupcakes.com
Bcc: Lawyer@Miriams cupcakes.com

Dear Milo,

Congratulations on opening your very own cupcake shop. We couldn’t help but notice that your cupcakes taste a heck of a lot like ours. You didn’t happen to take our secret recipe by accident, did you?

If a Bcc seems too slimy, you can always forward your just-sent email directly to the person whom you might have Bcc’d, with an “FYI” or an “I thought you might want to know this” added to the top. This approach also ensures that you won’t get entangled in a Reply All disaster. Keep in mind: If someone who has been Bcc’d hits Reply All, both his (potentially snotty) answer and the fact that he was secretly included in the correspondence are revealed to everyone.
The ABC's of Cc's and Bcc's (and Forwarding)

Cc: I want you to know and I want the others to know that I want you to know.

Bcc: I want you to know and I DON'T want the others to know that I want you to know.

Forward: I want you to know and I may want to add something to the original message and I may or may not want the others to know that I want you to know, but if it so happens that I don't want them to know I want you to know I want to take no chances that they might accidentally find out due to a Reply All slip of the finger.

From:

Most of the time, you can let From take care of itself. But every now and then you'll want to give it some thought. Here are two instances:

1. The From line tells your recipient where the message is coming from and where his reply should go. If you have several email addresses and want the reply to go to all of them, put those addresses in the Cc field—and request that
the person you’re emailing hit Reply All so that you’ll receive the reply on all your accounts.

2. Remind yourself to email from, and direct email replies to, an appropriate address—work for work, play for play. And keep in mind that your address can hurt you. Make sure that yours creates the right impression. Prospective employers and college admissions officers, for instance, look at email addresses. Probably best, then, not to send your résumé from BeerGuzzler@campus.edu if you want to get that job or that acceptance letter. (Unless you’re looking for work at Schlitz or hope to matriculate at an institute of brewing.) Also, most email programs allow you several aliases, so you don’t necessarily have to set up a new account—as long as you can keep your aliases straight. This is especially important to remember if you have email for different aliases or several accounts coming into the same inbox. (You can send messages from one account, but have replies go automatically to another.)

Subject Lines

The Subject line is the most important, most neglected line in your email. How important? Well, here, in the box below, is an assortment of real Subject lines, which we received on an average day not so long ago. We chose not to include anything involving erectile dysfunction or business opportunities from Nigeria.
Obviously, there's an element of slight unfairness here. Emails have a context, and the name in the From field might offer you a clue to what these Subject lines are about. That said, we found the first set pretty damn mystifying.

Twelve Useless Subject Lines That Don't Tell You Anything

What to do?
???????
Re: FYI
Two things
Great news
Urgent
Tomorrow
""
Status
How is this?
Quick question
We would like your assistance
Twelve Useful Subject Lines
That Tell You What You’re In For

Rescue Event 4/29 in New York
Comments on the Strat Plan
Join us at the Merc
Tom and Andy’s itinerary
Flap copy due
Mom’s birthday
Expenses approved
Acquisitions meeting agenda
Missing subscription documents
National Geographic is interested
Movie this weekend with Swift?
Next year’s school schedule

A Subject line is how you tell yourself what you’re saying. If you’re having trouble coming up with your Subject line, it’s a pretty good indication that something’s wrong with your message.

Will, for example, got tangled up while trying to send an email after an important sales meeting. Because he hadn’t
budgeted enough time for the meeting, it had ended abruptly—so he felt he needed to send an apologetic email. Still, a lot had been accomplished—so he felt he needed to send an email recapping the progress that had been made. And he had told the group that he wanted a follow-up meeting—so he felt the need to send an email suggesting a new date and venue.

But what to put in the Subject line? Apologies for the hasty ending? Action plan? Next meeting?

Or a combination of these? Though Will didn’t know for certain that the group had been offended, he didn’t want to take any risks. An apology would have to be in the Subject line. But it couldn’t be the only item—that would fail to capitalize on the great work that had taken place. Making the next meeting the lead item would send the signal that Will was big on meetings but lax at follow-up—but it was the item that required the most immediate response, so he couldn’t take a chance on its getting lost in the body of an email.

When Will realized he was trying to do too much in one email, he decided to send two instead:

The first had a Subject line that read “Apologies and Recap of 7/26 Mtg.”

The second, sent immediately after the first, had a Subject line that read “Next Sales Mtg. on 8/5.”

Our feeling about Subject lines is this: always use them. Make sure they say something informative. Make sure they don’t sound like spam. Make sure they reflect not only the first item in your message (“your lunch order”) but its entire content (“your lunch order and your court date”).
And make sure you use specific names that are identifiable to the recipient. (Don’t say, “Meeting”; say, “Kaleigh’s meeting.”)

Remember, email is ruthlessly democratic. It’s hard to tell what’s important and what isn’t. Your Subject line is one of the few cues you can offer a correspondent to let him or her know when and how to read your message. If we hadn’t titled this section, for instance, how easily would you have found it?

Oh, and asking people not to read the email you just sent them—Subject: Recall Last Message—is an invitation for them to read it and then to disseminate its contents as widely as possible. In fact, a friend deliberately marketed a book by sending out an email blast about it, followed immediately by an email requesting, in its Subject line, that people not read the initial message. It worked like a charm. Book sales surged.

Same Subject, Different Lines

Re: Meeting

or

Re: Dividing Up Europe
Re: Crimea in February?
Re: Yalta Conference
Re: Caviar, Cigars, Martinis
Help for the Handheld

More people than ever before are checking their email on handhelds, which can chop off the ends of Subject lines. That’s why shorter is better and the first words are key to telling your recipient what you’re after.

Softball Dinner at The Brown Derby

The above gets the subject of a message across on a tiny screen. “Softball dinner” may be all that appears, but if you’re on the team and awaiting dinner plans, it’s all you need to catch your attention. By contrast:

You are invited to an end-of-season softball dinner . . .

This Subject line will likely be reduced to “You are invited,” leaving its recipient temporarily mystified.

Stay Current

Subject lines need to be updated over the course of an email correspondence, not only to give people an accurate picture of what to expect but also for important legal reasons that we’ll discuss later (see page 209). Before you send a new reply, make sure the Subject line matches your message and tells the recipient if the most recent email differs from all those that came before it. This is particularly important when a thread veers off radically from where it started.

For example:
To: Tom
From: Ann
Re: Time for Your Colonoscopy

Pirates of the Caribbean VIII or Spiderman XIV?

This email might be opened more quickly if it read:

To: Tom
From: Ann
Re: Movie rental for tonight?

Pirates of the Caribbean VIII or Spiderman XIV?

Re to Infinity

Don’t fall into the “Re:, Re;, Re:” trap. These were useful in the early days of email when it was harder to re-sort your inbox and you needed a way to figure out how far along in a conversation you were. Now that you can easily sort by sender and date sent, those proliferating Re’s just look like a tic.
How CAN You Tell If a Message Comes from a Handheld or a Desktop?

Answer: You usually can’t—unless someone adds “Sent from a handheld” at the bottom of the message. There is one exception, though. If the sender is using Microsoft Outlook and he replies from a handheld, the Subject line will show “Re” with a lowercase e; if he replies from a desktop, it will be with an uppercase E—“RE.”

Avoid Hyperbole

There are few things as deflating as a message that does not live up to its billing. “Great News” should be great.

To: Arvid
From: Lance
Re: Great news

I finally remembered the name of that cereal I loved as a kid.

Versus:

To: Arvid
From: Lance
Re: Great news

Paul Allen wants to buy us out.
Even more deflating is the message that directly contradicts its enthusiastic Subject line. Here’s an actual email that came to Will:

**To:** All Employees  
**From:** H.R.  
**Re:** MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND HOLIDAY!!!!!!!

The Friday before Memorial Day weekend is a full working day. If you leave early, you need to mark it as a vacation day.

**Subject Line as Message**

The email Subject line is increasingly, and rightly, being used as if it were a text message. “The meeting is at 6” can be the entire email and fit in the Subject line. If you do this, it’s a courtesy to add EOM (“End of message”) after your brief burst of information.

**To:** Pluto  
**From:** The Universe  
**Re:** You aren’t a planet anymore. EOM

A perplexing (and related) development are those really short messages that begin on the Subject line and then are continued in the body of the email—even though the sender could have fit the whole thing in the Subject line. Maybe it’s a habit that comes from texting and instant messaging, which lend themselves to short bursts. But in email
it's annoying—like opening a big box only to find a puny gift.

To: Message Splitters
From: Perplexed Readers
Re: Why on earth do . . .

. . . you do this?

A Good Subject Line Can Make All the Difference

A colleague of Will's wanted to get in touch with Craig of Craigslist. For those of you who aren't currently seeking an apartment, a new sofa, or advice on dog training or romance, Craigslist is a largely free online classified advertising service. Lots of people send Craig emails.

So Will's colleague did a Web search and found that Craig had recently given an interview in which he had said, "Storytelling is important." She made sure to put a reference to "storytelling" in the Subject field of her email to him ("Re: Yes, storytelling is very important"). Craig replied within minutes. While Craig does have a reputation for responding to thousands of emails, it does seem likely that the note from Will's colleague got such a positive response—they're going to try to have coffee when she's next in San Francisco—because it was neither perfunctory nor dull.

Subject lines done. EOM.
The ability to attach documents, spreadsheets, and images in many formats is one of the blessings of email. But people attach too much and too often—from files you don’t need to vacation pictures you don’t want to look at.

Before you send an attachment, you should ask yourself if it is really necessary to do so. Could you just as easily put the material you want to send in the body of the email? Or could you put the information on a shared drive or Web page and give your recipient directions to it or a link that he or she can click on in the body of the email?

To: Reader  
From: Will and David  
Re: Attachments

We’ve provided something fun for you to see at www.ThinkBeforeYouSend.com/attachments

Here’s the case against attachments. They hog valuable server space. They can be hard to view on handhelds. They bear viruses. And some people set their filters to catch messages bearing attachments. So use only when necessary—and please don’t get in the habit of attaching your corporate logo or a graphic representation of your signature to every email you send out.

If you do decide to send an attachment, tell your recipients what’s in it in the Subject line or the body of your
email—that way he can decide whether it’s worth opening. To make things even clearer, find useful names for your attachments. (Contrast “Franscisresume.doc” with “Resume.doc.”) And remember: you wouldn’t fill someone else’s closets with your stuff without asking; don’t crowd his computer memory with mysterious gigantic files (anything over one MB), which he may or may not want—and may not even be able to open.

The Eleven Most Common Types of Attachments

The extension of a file—the three or four letters after the period in the file name—often refers to the program that creates and uses that type of file. The extension generally describes the way a file’s data are coded in the computer’s memory. Most formats are understood by a variety of applications; some work only with one company’s applications.

- **.xls**: a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.
- **.ppt**: a Microsoft PowerPoint slide show.
- **.doc**: a Microsoft Word file. As with .xls and .ppt files, .doc files can also be created and opened with free, open-source software like OpenOffice.
- **.exe**: an executable file; that is, a file that will run some program when opened in the Windows operating systems (Mac applications have the
extension .app). These files should never be sent without the permission of the recipient, and never opened unless you know who sent them, because they have the power to infiltrate and cause mayhem in your computer and any computer networked with it.

- **.dat**: a file containing only raw data, typically unformatted text that includes carriage returns.
- **.pdf**: Adobe’s proprietary file format that generally makes the memory allocation of a document smaller. Adobe Acrobat generates .pdf files whose printouts look the same regardless of the source of the original document. Microsoft Word will also produce .pdfs (under Print, on Macs). Compression with .pdf is optimal for text documents and generally poor for pictures. Text documents typically consist of large fields of white, which can be abbreviated in the computer's memory. This format is best for portability across different platforms. Open-source programs like Cutepdf can also make .pdf files.
- **.jpeg, .jpg**: an image. The extremely popular .jpeg (Joint Photographic Experts Group) format reduces the file size of images by irretrievably stripping them of some (mostly imperceptible) information. This format is best for compressing high-resolution images. The extent of the compression can be controlled by Photoshop, for example.
• **.gif**: another image format, mainly used for photographs, developed by CompuServe for sending images (and animation) across networks. The .gif format will only support 256 colors, whereas most digital images today have over 16 million colors. This can lead to a loss of information. The .gif is most useful for figures and diagrams with only a few colors: the format is currently losing popularity.

• **.bmp, .png**: two other image formats that are more common today than .gif for digital photographs and the like. The .bmp was developed for Windows but many Mac programs support it as well. The .png format typically achieves .gif-like compression, but it does not have limitations on the number of colors it can represent. Both are useful for medium-grade resolution.

• **.tiff, .tif**: Tagged Image File Format, a format that typically achieves little or no compression, so file sizes tend to be large. Like .pdf, .tiff does not discard information from the file (e.g., detail or color in a picture), whereas .jpeg and .gif do. The .tiff is useful for high-resolution images. Another format—with the extension .eps—is also good for high-resolution images. Adobe Photoshop and Microsoft PowerPoint both allow saving files as .tiff, .gif, .jpeg, .eps, .bmp, .png, .pdf, and other formats.
• **.htm, .html**: HyperText Markup Language. A file in this format is one that is designed to be viewed with a Web browser like Firefox. Most Web pages are in this format, and pages saved to your computer will often be in .html. Html is a tagged language—meaning that it is essentially glorified typesetting—and Web pages increasingly make use of more highly elaborated languages such as Java. Html became the benchmark format for Web pages because it standardized protocol for hyperlinks and allows great flexibility. Browsers allow easy viewing of the source script of .html Web pages.

And beware: it’s possible for people to rename file extensions in order to sneak them past firewalls. What looks like a harmless .pdf may be an evil .exe.

**Urgent, Notify Sender, and Follow-up Flag:**

You should avoid them all. Your email should speak for itself. Urgency and the desire for a response or a follow-up can easily be conveyed in the Subject line and the text of the message itself.

Most programs allow you to choose these options when you’re building your email. The first usually attaches an
exclamation point or a red chili pepper to your message. The second asks that the recipient click on a box to confirm that she or he has received the email. The third not only attaches a flag to the message line in your inbox but also can send the message to the top of the queue, if the recipient is sorting accordingly.

The problem with all these options is that they're presumptuous. As such, they can backfire.

Before you use them, answer the following:

**Urgent?**

!

To you or to them? People who routinely add Urgent to their emails are like the boy who cried wolf—if everything is urgent, then nothing is urgent.

**Notify Sender?**

*Microsoft Office Outlook*

Wagman, Zachary has requested a read receipt be sent when message has been read. Do you want to send a receipt?

- [ ] Don't ask me about sending receipts again

Do you really want to freeze my email and prevent me from doing anything else until I click on the box you attached to your message that lets you know I’ve received it? (Or, if I check the box that refuses to let you know, leaves
you in doubt as to whether or not I’ve opened it?) To make matters more irritating, if the recipient agrees to the notification, he is, in effect, acknowledging the email, and the clock immediately starts ticking on his response. It’s like being served with a subpoena. (Perhaps the only thing more annoying are those Web-based programs—Plaxo comes to mind—that demand that your contacts update your address book for you. It’s the equivalent of asking someone to come over and write his name and address in your Rolodex.)

People who attach Notify Sender boxes often find that recipients, out of justifiable annoyance, do read the email but refuse to let the senders know. Keep this in mind: the box requests notification; it’s not a requirement.

Add Flags?

Are you certain that your email is more important than everyone else’s? If not, save flags for July 4 (or another national holiday).

Despite the advice of countless efficiency experts, many people use flags to mark emails they’ve received and read but want to answer later or reread, turning their inboxes into another to-do list. People who attach flags to emails they send, though, may find their flagged email lost in a sea of flags already hoisted by their recipient, whereas an
unflagged email would have shown up in the place new email traditionally lands.

Font, Size, and Color

In a recent survey, many employers said they would not interview a candidate if they didn't like the font on his application or cover letter. Even more said they would voice displeasure to a colleague if they objected to that coworker's choice of font.

Now that every computer comes with an enormous list of font choices, it's tempting to try to convey tone, and express individuality, by choosing a more unusual font than Arial (the United Kingdom's favorite) or Times Roman (the U.S. choice). Papyrus, American Typewriter, and Impact, to name just a few, all offer an immediate effect, infusing words with added meaning.

Compare the Times Roman:
I have arrived.

The Broadway:
**I have arrived.**

The Chalkboard:
I have arrived.

And the Blachmoor:
**I have arrived.**
The first states a fact; the second shouts about it; the third gives a homey effect; and the fourth indicates to the recipient that a necklace of garlic, a silver bullet, and a wooden cross should be kept close at hand.

As tempting as it is to play with the full range of fonts available, it is wise only if you are in a very creative field and writing to people who relish eccentricity. Common sense tells you as much: the medium should never overwhelm the message.

Common sense also tells you that what you write should be readable. Twelve-point type is the norm for business, eight-point is way too small, and sixteen-point and above is inappropriate unless you’re writing for cue cards (or for someone who is visually impaired). In addition, what you see on the screen may not be what your sender sees. If you have any concerns, highlight a portion and check it against your font menu before you send it. And hope your recipient has a compatible system.

When it comes to color, stick with black because it’s simply the easiest to read. The exception is if you’re replying to someone and you need the language you’ve added to be easily differentiated from theirs. In these instances, go with blue or red. (Some programs do this automatically.)

As for backgrounds or electronic wallpaper—neither is appropriate for a serious message.
Openings

Yo:

Hiya:

Hey, sport:

Fellow residents of Planet Earth:

Sir/Madam:

Dear [Your first name here]:

Dear [Shortened version of your first name here]:

Dear [Your misspelled first name here]:

Dear [Someone else’s name here]:

Dear Reader:

The greeting. It’s your first, and probably most important, opportunity to show your correspondents what you think your relationship is to them. An inappropriate salutation colors all that follows. You can lose them at “hello.”

The Cold Call

People you don’t know are always Mr. and Ms. However, the habit of addressing people by their full name—as Mr. Kevin Bacon, for example, instead of simply Mr. Bacon—is one that makes every piece of correspondence that carries it
look like a mail-merge document (the bastard child of a form letter and an address book). You would never greet someone in that manner—"Hello, Mr. Kevin Bacon"—so you shouldn’t start an email or a letter that way.

There should be no double standards. Men are Mr., and women are Ms. and not Rita or Sweetie. This seems painfully obvious, but we’ve heard enough stories from women who were addressed informally while their male counterparts were addressed appropriately to think that it bears repeating.

To younger people: if you’re writing someone older than you are, it’s a good idea to address that individual formally from the get-go. To older people: it’s not inevitably a sign of disrespect if a younger person sends you an email without a salutation, or with an overly informal one. Keep in mind that many parents and even teachers now encourage kids to address adults by their first names. But you don’t have to suffer in silence—if you object, and feel comfortable saying so, let your overly chummy correspondent know.

And if you are going to use mail-merge, get it right. Will recently received an email asking for a donation addressed: Dear <$ Name $>. David has received letters at work addressed to Mr. Ed (as in Op-Ed).

Honorifics

Use titles where appropriate—Dr., Senator, Cardinal, Professor, Commodore, Viceroy, and so on. You are free to ignore all uses of Ph.D. (Word of advice: If you have one,
don’t put it after your name in a letter. It will generally do you more harm than good.)

Dear

As for the matter of which word should introduce the name, “Dear” is always acceptable and always correct. Back when letters were still the main form of communication, there were more variations on this. “My Dear” was used when addressing a close friend or lover. (Some correspondents were strict about never backsliding to “Dear” once a “My Dear” relationship had been established.)

And for centuries “Sir” or “Madam,” without anything following, was the proper form of address, particularly when you were writing to someone you did not know. Lord Nelson, in his letters, usually addressed his friends and contacts as “Sir” or as “Dear Sir”—in his entire correspondence, only a few letters are addressed to people by name, and these are clearly to close friends. Addressing a person by his first name is a relatively recent development, and the mark of an increasingly casual culture.

For some reason, people who would never in a letter write “Jim” or “Bob” or “Mr. Smith” with no introductory word beforehand feel no hesitation in doing so in an email. Email is a more urgent form of communication, and we have many more emails to answer every day than letters. But it strikes us as rude to bark out someone’s name like that, even in an email, especially if you don’t really know your correspondent. Similarly, “Hey,” “Hi,” and “Yo”—whether
solo or preceding a name—should be employed with caution. When Jack Kerouac began a letter with the greeting “Sebastian! You magnificent bastard,” he was clearly writing to a friend.

**Mr. or Ms.?**

Every now and then, you will encounter someone with a gender-neutral name, like Pat or Alex or Chris. In those cases, it’s fine to write, “Dear Pat Riley” or “Dear Pat Schroeder.” In the age of Google, though, there’s really no reason you can’t do a little bit of research to get the sex right.

**Many People**

Another frequent email problem is how to address multiple recipients. (When it is one recipient, with many Cc’s, then only the recipient needs to be addressed.) Here, the choice of a greeting is particularly important because with it you offer the first clue as to why all these people—some presumably of different rank—have been grouped together to receive something from you.

“Dear Colleagues” is bland and acceptable, as is “Dear Friends” or “Dear Coworkers” or “Dear Customers” or “Dear Shareholders” and the like. “Dear Colleagues Who Volunteered to Help with the Blood Drive” provides information about what is to come. “To Those Who Laughed During the Memorial Service” not only provides informa-
tion but also sets the tone. There is almost never cause now to write a letter with the classic opening “To Whom It May Concern,” which has pretty much gone the way of “Dear Comrades.” (“To Whom It May Concern” merely gives the recipient the opportunity to decide that she or he isn’t much concerned about the subject of your letter, and that it can therefore be deleted at once.)

If there’s no succinct way to address the group, there is a one-word salutation that is inoffensive, cordial, and not too casual: “Greetings.”

Who Are You?

Email addresses, unlike return addresses on envelopes, often give no clue to the sender’s identity. (Sometimes this is intentional; sometimes it isn’t.) BERLIN20014@PROVIDER.ORG won’t tell you what to call the person who lives at that electronic address. (Many of us breathed a sigh of relief when CompuServe faded from prominence—those numbered addresses were wildly disorienting.) And just because you get an email from nic@send.edu doesn’t mean that you can write, “Dear Nic” if you’ve never met him—or her. In fact, Nic might not even be the sender’s name; it could be the name of the sender’s cat or a random group of letters. In these cases, “Greetings,” all by itself, has to do. If the recipient is sensitive to this salutation, he or she will sign the return email in a way that lets you know how to address your next one.
How to Say @ in Many Languages

English speakers call “@” the “at” symbol. Some languages have followed suit; others, however, have had different ideas. Here are a few examples, courtesy of the Web site Herodios.com.

Czech (Czech Republic): Závinač, which means a herring wrapped around a pickle.

Danish: Snabel-a, “elephant’s trunk.”

Dutch: Apestaartje, “little monkey’s tail,” though sometimes Apeklootje, a rude word for another part of the monkey’s anatomy.

Hebrew: Shablul or Shablool, “snail,” or Shtrudl, “strudel.”

Hungarian: Kukac, “worm or maggot.”

Italian: Chiocciola, “snail.”

Mandarin Chinese (Taiwan): Xiao Lao Shu, “little mouse,” or Lao Shu Hao, “mouse sign.”

Russian: Sobachka, “doggie.”

Thai: Ai tua yiukyiu, “wiggling worm.”

First Names

At some point in a relationship, you will probably make the jump to first names. An exception is if you have a droll relationship with someone in the manner of English schoolmasters who tend to call each other Mr. and Miss or Mrs.
over the course of a lifetime. A clear indication that it’s OK to move to the first-person familiar is if the person signs her or his email with a first name only, or puts the first name at the bottom of the message. Or you can take the first step.

If you’re nervous but also believe that your correspondent might not be offended by your using his or her given name, then one tactic is to write, “Dear Pat (if I may).” Of course, there’s something a bit disingenuous about the phrase “if I may,” since you already have, but it nevertheless implies an element of respectful caution. If your correspondent then writes back using your first name, you will know that the liberty was welcome.

Keep Your Distance

How many times have you received something like this from someone you’ve never met?

To: Arturo Toscanini
From: Bill Jones

Dear Artie,
Can I schedule an appointment to tell you about our new batons?
Bill

If someone in our overly flat (and overly familiar) world has taken liberties with your name—addressed you with an inappropriately familiar salutation in a job application,
say—just write back formally, using full names and honorifics. Perhaps then that person will realize he has misjudged his subject.

You might write back thus:

Dear Mr. Jones,
Thank you, but I'm not interested.
Arturo Toscanini

And if someone replies formally to your informal overture, take the hint.

As You Were

Once you've made the move to first names, however, it is a mistake to go back to more formal address. It clearly implies a cooling of the relationship. If you do this purposely, it will signal that something so serious has taken place that you no longer consider yourself even remotely friendly with your correspondent.

Going Without

There are many times when it makes sense to send a salutation-free email. A note that was sent without a salutation is always entitled to a salutation-free answer. If a sender doesn't greet you in an email asking for the location of the meeting, it's OK simply to respond with the information, especially as the addition of a greeting might imply criticism at her lack of one.
(It's important to keep in mind that every company has its own internal, and informal, rules. In some places, a "Dear" is often part of an internal email; in others, you rarely see it. And many places really do use "Hi," "Hey," and first-name shout-outs "WILL!" "DAVE!" "ZIDANE!")

Emails among colleagues are generally understood to be part of an ongoing conversation and do not require a greeting. This is especially true when the colleagues are peers. It’s less true when you’re at the middle level and you’re writing to someone at the head of the organization, but again, even this differs from corporate culture to corporate culture. (For instance, at George Soros’s institute, most everyone—even some senior employees—addresses the boss as "Dear Mr. Soros" in emails; at companies like TIAA-CREF, GE, and Viacom, people internally tend to be addressed by first name.)

Obviously, another time to dispense with greetings is when you are responding to a friend who is so close that there is no chance that you will offend him or her. It’s also acceptable to omit greetings in an email that is part of a longer chain. If you write, "Dear Mary," and she responds, "Dear Phil," and you then want to respond to her response, you can just launch right into it, so long as the previous content is sent with your new response. Your initial "Dear" carries over to all subsequent emails from you in the chain, and the same applies with her. If you met Mary on the street, you would greet her by saying, "Hello, Mary." She might say, "Hello, Phil." If she kept repeating your name, or you hers, then it would be, at best, peculiar and, at worst, exasperating. And so it is with email chains.
We must confess that, at the end of the day, when we’re trying to respond to everyone who’s written us, we’ve been guilty of writing back without a salutation to people who probably deserve one. But we’ve also learned to recognize this omission for what it is—a manifestation of our fatigue and impatience, and a sign that it might be best to log off for the day or get a cup of coffee and start anew.

**Sign-offs**

Email tends toward informality. It usually lets you know who the sender is—it’s right there in the From line. For these reasons, many people, and many corporate cultures, don’t use sign-offs, particularly for ongoing or internal communications.

That said, we shouldn’t give up on sign-offs just yet. They tell each party something about the nature of the relationship. They also give you an opportunity to let your recipients know how you wish to be addressed. And they can evoke that comforting feeling of writing (and receiving) an actual letter.

There are two parts to the sign-off: the word or words that precede your name, the closing, and the way in which you present your name, the signature.

**Closings**

“Best,” “All best,” “Best regards,” “Best wishes,” “Regards,” “Sincerely,” “Cordially,” “Sincerely yours,” “Yours,” “Love,”
"Love and kisses," "xxoo"—all these are traditional complimentary closings used in letters and emails. And all of them, except, of course, for the last three, can be used in formal business writing.

It's a matter of personal style. "Sincerely" is the coldest of the lot, appropriate when you are writing to someone you don't know well. "Best" and "Best wishes" are, at the moment, among the most common in email—safe, all-purpose ways of bringing a note to an end. Many people dispense with closings entirely, leaving only a first name (if that's what they want to be called), or a first and last name, or even just their initials, to close the message.

What's most important is to make sure that you aren't being inappropriately formal or informal. If someone is repeatedly sending you emails ending "Warmly," and you are repeatedly replying with ones signed "Sincerely," then the two of you probably have different ideas about the nature of your relationship. Also remember that, as with first names and cordial greetings, once you escalate a relationship, you send a message if you de-escalate. A correspondent who has been meriting an "All best" may wonder what she did wrong if she suddenly finds herself demoted to a "Sincerely yours."

That leaves the problem of trying to keep track of where you are with each person. There are two simple ways to do this. One is to pick a closing and stick with it once you reach a plateau in your relationship. We both like "As ever," because it means exactly that: whatever you were before, you still are. It's inherently reassuring.

The other strategy is to mirror. But that doesn't help you
when you start a fresh exchange, and it can get you in deeper waters than you want. You can quickly find yourself at “Warmly” when you are really only feeling “Sincerely.” Complicating this is the sense that when someone is being overly warm to you, it can feel churlish not to return the emotion.

This is particularly thorny at the intersection of gender, friendship, and business. Some people do routinely use “Love” as the closing for all but their most formal correspondence. For others, the word means what it says. It’s like that tricky area of social kissing between people of the opposite sex in business situations. Hard to know when it’s welcome—or not—and hard to discontinue once you’ve established the custom. Our advice: start slowly and stick with something safe . . . like “As ever.”

**Mirror, Mirror**

Mirroring or echoing the actions of your correspondent is a great way to overcome email’s distancing effects. Whether it’s a greeting or a closing, you need to look for ways to build rapport with your correspondent by sounding like him or her.

This is common sense, but it’s also embedded in our biology. Scientists have discovered cells in the brain that they’ve dubbed “mirror neurons.” Say a monkey observes you throwing a ball. (It happens to us all the time.) Cells in the monkey’s brain will fire in the same way they would if he were throwing the ball himself.
Michael Arbib, a computer scientist at the University of Southern California, has proposed that these same neurons played a role in the development of language, and this theory makes sense. Language is the representation of action—without action. When someone signs, "Warmly," it registers even at a glance, and creates a warm feeling. When you sign, "Warmly," and your correspondent fails to mirror, you may feel a chill.

An experiment conducted by the French psychologist Nicolas Guéguen shows how deeply rooted this impulse is. Guéguen had the idea to test whether a person was more likely to respond to an email sent by another person who shared his or her first name than to an emailer who didn’t. He sent fifty university students a lengthy survey. Half the group received the survey from someone they were led to believe shared their first name. (If you were Cary, the email came from Cary; if you were Audrey, the email came from Audrey.) The other half received the survey from someone with a different first name. In all cases, the domain name was the same (their university.com). And the results? Seventy-two percent of those in the same-name group filled out their surveys as compared to 44 percent in the different-name group. We tend to respond to those with whom we have something in common.

Remember the benefits of mirroring as they apply to all aspects of your email correspondence: word choice, length, sentence structure, and speed of
response. Mirroring is important with regard to content, as well. You don’t want to respond to a detailed, meaty email with only frothy pleasantries. Worse, if you reply to the substance of an email but don’t mirror the pleasantries, you set a very hostile tone.

To wit:

To: Mike  
From: Clarissa

Greetings, Mike! Hope this finds you well. I’m just writing to find out when Noah’s television show will start airing. Things have been wild here; hope you aren’t too crazed at work.
All best, Clarissa

To: Clarissa  
From: Mike

Dear Clarissa,
July 7.
Sincerely, Michael

Mirroring has a cousin: consistency. Mike’s email would seem all the colder if he had an uninterrupted history of long and cordial emails to Clarissa. (And there was that time at the Christmas party . . . )

Oscar Wilde exchanged a lifetime’s worth of affectionate and entertaining letters with his dear friend Robert Ross. So when Wilde wrote to Ross, “The
entirely business-like tone of your letter just received makes me nervous that you are a prey of terrible emotions, and that it is merely a form of the calm that hides a storm,” Wilde wasn’t being paranoid. Ross was, almost certainly, upset with Wilde. And he conveyed this not with anger but with a lack of his customary warmth.

If you are given to garrulous and friendly correspondence, you will make your recipients anxious if your messages suddenly shorten and take on a more formal cast.

**Signing**

You should keep two things in mind if you choose to type your name at the bottom of your emails.

First, as with greetings and closings, how you present your name tells the recipients how you see yourself in relation to them. Henry Ford is different from Henry or Hank.

Second, your signature tells people how you like to be addressed. It’s a good way for an Elizabeth, say, to let others know whether she likes to be Liz or Liza or Beth—or Eliza-beth. That’s why initials can be maddening to a confused recipient.
Signature Block

If you want people to find you easily, a plain-text signature block, without the useless image of your actual signature, but with your full name, title, and contact information, is helpful, especially if the person to whom you’re responding has provided you with this information. At some companies this is mandatory; at others it’s discouraged, particularly among customer service reps. (In many email programs, you can create a signature block by going to “Preferences” and then looking for “Signature.”)

As a general rule, if you are writing to someone, and you want something from her, and you want her to get back to you, it’s both smart and courteous to include all your contact information at the end of your email text. If you’re writing to someone, and you don’t want that person to have all your contact information, remember to remove your signature block before you hit Send.

The Elements of a Signature Block

Full name
Title
Organization
Address
Phone number
Fax
Email address
At one book publisher in England, employees are encouraged to list their favorite book in their signature block. Other people append quotations, song lyrics, their zodiac sign, and their beloved football team ("Go Wolverines!"), in addition to the other information or instead of it.

Some companies now use this space to plug—and even show pictures of—their products. ("Look for our newest yogurt flavor this summer!")

For instance, people who travel a lot can cut down on confusion by telling their recipients exactly where they are. Tony Wheeler, the founder of the *Lonely Planet* guidebooks, does this. Alerting people that he's emailing from an Internet café in Togo lets them know why they shouldn't expect to hear from him in the next five hours—or why he's not going to be able to make it to a dinner party in Buenos Aires.

**Disclaimers**

The last decade has been characterized by the growth of Starbucks, organic foods—and email disclaimers at the bottom of messages you receive from lawyers, accountants, and other handlers of sensitive information. We think that these disclaimers have gotten out of control and we suggest, particularly to lawyers, that your ability to disclaim *concisely* will reflect well on your abilities. Some companies
have tried to use cuteness to make up for the cumbersome nature of their disclaimers: “Now folks, here’s the legal stuff.” If you take this approach, make sure it reflects your corporate culture. Or better yet, work on trimming down that language.