Writing a Formal Email

Communicating through emails has become the norm in almost all formal dealings concerning college and workplace today, and for that very reason, requires careful planning and skill in its composition. This is not to say, however, that letters are completely obsolete. They are still used by companies, though the distinction between the two has disappeared over time. For instance, emails are now considered legal communication and a company can use them against you. That said, when dealing with a company as a consumer/end user, you will often stand a better chance of getting a response when writing a real letter. Nevertheless, whichever method you choose to employ for communication, there are certain crucial aspects to consider when writing a formal email or letter.

A formal email is essentially two or three paragraphs in a formal writing style, with a greeting followed immediately by the introductory paragraph. This first paragraph of your email should briefly establish who you are and what your purpose is for sending the email, and if the situation permits, it could also have an opening sentence such as 'Hope you're doing well', or 'Thank you for your prompt response'. Similarly, the second paragraph in an email should typically expand the theme and purpose further, by providing adequate explanation and supporting details. Getting straight to the point, albeit politely and succinctly, is best. You don't want to lose the recipient's attention by beating about the bush.

Next comes the conclusion of the email, which could start with what you expect from the recipient in terms of a response, and then thanking them for their time and consideration. If you plan to follow up, telling the recipient when and how you'll be following up is a good idea.

Finally, the email should close with an appropriate closing (more on how to close a formal email below), such as 'Best Regards', or 'Sincerely', followed by the sender's full name and surname.

Rules of Etiquette

Email address

Oftentimes, we send important formal emails from our unofficial email address, especially when we don't have one provided by the organization we work for or are representing. Sending a formal email using an unofficial email address is fine, however, it should still be your real name or a variation of it. Using nicknames and irregular characters such as random numbers or letters comes off as unprofessional and should be avoided.

Example

Fay00ar@hotmail.com or Papa's-princess123@hotmail.com is unacceptable

Farah.Ahmer001@hotmail.com or Farah_Ahmer123@hotmail.com is acceptable

Subject Line

The subject line is the first thing readers will look at in their inboxes. Using an accurate subject line that is neither too short nor too long, therefore, is imperative. A rule of thumb is to use keywords from the main text that relay the exact purpose of your email.

Example

A subject line such as 'Meeting' or 'Important' is for instance, too abrupt and vague to get the reader's attention. On the other hand, 'Meeting to Assign Responsibilities for the Test Day', or 'Important: Will Not be Able to Make it to the Appointment', are too long.

The above could be changed to 'Meeting: Test Day Responsibilities' or 'Appointment Cancellation' to acquire suitable length and precision.

Salutations

Salutations are an important part of emails and letters, for they are a representation of your communication skills, and need careful consideration depending on the recipient of the email. To put your best foot forward, use the recipient's name in a formal email. If you don't know the name,

do some research to find out – using the contact's name makes your letter appear more personal and conveys the right sentiment. If you have known the person in a professional capacity for a long time, simply using their name punctuated with a comma after it, will also do. It's best to use 'Dear', before the English honorific (Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. etc.). 'To whom it may concern' – if unavoidable, is generally the standard salutation and could be used if the sender is unsure about other salutations. However, 'To whom it may concern', should only be used as a last resort. It can come off as cold, overly formal, or even uninspiring to someone who is sensitive to how they are addressed in an email. If you tried but were unable to find the name of the recipient, then it's preferable to stick to their job/designation title after 'Dear' than to use the deadly 'To whom it may concern'.

It is also becoming more and more acceptable now to use 'Hi [name]' or 'Hi [honorific + last name], in formal communication, though that also depends on how you greet them when you meet them in person. Caution is advised though if you're addressing someone you don't know too well, or is from a different culture or nationality.

Using CC and BCC Correctly

The acronys CC and BCC stand for 'Carbon Copy' and 'Blind Carbon Copy' in the email world, with the CC option being more commonly used than its counterpart. However, there are some rules of etiquette that need to be kept in mind when using the two. The direct recipient(s) who are the target audience and are required to take action as a response to your email, should go in the 'To' field of the email list. People who are copied on the email for intimation and to be included in the loop, but are not necessarily expected to respond to the email, should be included in the CC field. The CC field which is common in formal emails is used to show the direct recipient of the email that other people are also aware of the correspondence.

The BCC field, however, is slightly tricky. As the name suggests, the BCC option is utilized if perhaps you don't want the multiple recipients copied in the email knowing each other's identity/email addresses, or in fact, that the email has even been sent to anybody but them alone. Although, it is unprofessional to pretend that you haven't copied someone else on the email when you have. Best to use the CC option unless you're sending a mass email with recipients who may

not belong from the same workgroup and would not prefer their identity shared in a clump like that.

Font

When sending formal emails, using standard fonts such as <u>Times New Roman</u> or <u>Calibri</u> are always the safest choices. Conspicuous fonts such as the <u>Comic Sans</u> or <u>*Lucida Handwriting*</u> look unprofessional and often come across as immature in a business or academic setting. Likewise, black, dark grey or blue are the advised color choices for fonts in formal emails.

Closing

Unlike salutations, there are several ways one can close a formal email. That said, the sender must consider the context particular to their email message as well as the recipient when making this choice so as to match the closing with the tone and content of the email, or else a pleasantly formal email can go awry in a matter of seconds. 'Regards', 'Sincerely', 'Best Wishes', 'Best, 'Thanks in advance', or 'Thanks', for instance, are suitable choices, though each comes with its own contextual application. 'Regards' can be used to close an email if the sender is writing to someone they don't know too well and the email itself is not out of the ordinary, falling in the daily humdrum of formal correspondence. 'Sincerely' is more suitable if the sender would like to display their reverence than use the more neutral 'regards'. It must be understood however, that 'sincerely' may come off as cold to some people, in which case 'As Ever' will seem more sincere. 'Best wishes' is yet another closing that's friendly yet formal, though if you feel that it gives a very greeting-card effect to your email, you can switch to the more common 'Best' as your sign-off. Similarly, 'Thanks in advance' and 'Thanks' share some subtle differences as well. 'Thanks in advance' is used when the sender is setting certain expectations in the body paragraphs of the email. However, if the email is crisper in its tone, then the 'thanks in advance' could be interpreted as passive-aggressive by the recipient. 'Thanks' as a closing, on the other hand, should be used when you expect the job to be done. Like 'regards', this sign-off is neutral, is not overtly warm, and is strictly businesslike in its tone.

Proofreading

Whether or not you're writing to someone you know well, grammatical mistakes, typos or other lapses in the email content can make you appear lackadaisical, implying to the reader that they're not important enough for the sender to make the effort of using correct language and grammar. To avoid this, always make sure you read your email carefully before sending, while also ensuring that the recipients' names are spelled correctly and that all the attachments (if any) are included in your email message.

Sample emails – bad and good examples

Hello,

I am applying for different graduate programs in Economicsy/MBA and you to fix my my motivation letter. I have attached the letter that I have written for the purpose. Suggest relevant changes to it since I have my deadline today.

Will be waiting for your response.
Thanks.

Regards,
Xyz

Time sent: 2.30 AM

In the above example, a student is emailing a Writing Tutor for the first time asking for help. Notice how the tone of the email is commanding instead of requesting, especially given the time that the student is asking for help. Adding a 'Please' before 'Suggest' would go a long way. The closing 'will be waiting for your response' gives off similar vibes, and the 'thanks' is a little presumptuous, since you don't know whether the tutor is available to help, and appears passive-aggressive rather than being a symbol of gratitude. In addition, the student has also not proofread their email, adding more damage to the message.

Here's how the Writing Tutor responded to the email:

Dear Xyz,

We would be more than willing to help you with the Letter. However, I would suggest you book an appointment with us and bring the Letter of Motivation with you so we can discuss whatever changes need to be made to it in person with you, for effective feedback. Please also note that the Tutors' working hours are 8.30 - 2.30.

You can book an appointment with us, using this link here.

Hoping to see you!

Best,
Abc
Writing Tutor

Time sent: 10:00 AM