PDHonline Course G158 (2 PDH)

Effective Email for the Technical Professional

2012

PDH Online | PDH Center

5272 Meadow Estates Drive
Fairfax, VA 22030-6658
Phone & Fax: 703-988-0088
www.PDHonline.org
www.PDHcenter.com

Effective Email for the Technical Professional

Introduction

The value of electronic mail in the technical and engineering fields is without question. Email is cheaper and faster than a letter, less intrusive than a phone call, and less hassle than a facsimile (FAX). When using email, differences in location and time zone are less of an obstacle to communication. The internet can be used to instantly transmit drawing revisions to project team members located anywhere on the planet. Almost all drawing files and project documents are now sent via email attachments or downloaded from servers via File Transfer Protocol (FTP). Coupled with digital photography, email allows real-time project field conditions to be easily visually, as well as descriptively, conveyed over vast distances. There is also evidence that email leads to a more friendly information structure. Because of these advantages, email use is exploding.

Unfortunately, a large number of technical professionals do not understand how to adjust their communication styles to this new medium. This course will hopefully help these individuals in avoiding those problems. This course is not a "how to" on the mechanics of sending email - which buttons to push or how to attach a photograph. Those details vary with each email software package, and are better handled by information provided for the specific program. Instead, the focus of this course is one of the content of an email message: how to say what you need to say. The guidelines presented herein show you how to be more efficient, clear, and effective.

The course content is not doctrine. If there were only one right answer, there would not be a need to create this course. It is hoped this learning session will make you examine your assumptions about email and thus help you maximize your email effectiveness. You then you can write to reflect your own personality and choice.

What Makes Email Different?

Electronic communication, because of its speed and posting ability, is fundamentally different from paper-based communication. Because the turnaround time can be so fast, email is more conversational than traditional paper-based media.

In a paper document, it is essential to make everything completely clear and unambiguous because your audience may not have a chance to ask for clarification. With email documents, your recipient can ask questions immediately. Email thus tends, like conversational speech, to be more informal than communications on paper. Needless to say, the maintenance of technical accuracy contained in email should never be compromised.
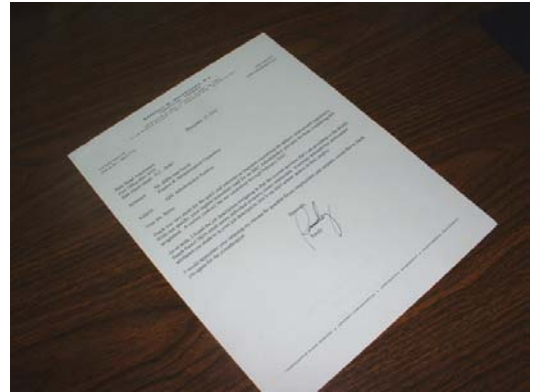
The email structure must be approached on a level based upon the context of the message. It makes little sense to slave over a message for hours, making sure that your spelling is faultless, your words eloquent, and your grammar beyond reproach, if the point of the message is to tell your co-worker that you are ready to go to lunch.

However, your correspondent also will not have normal status cues such as dress, diction, or dialect, so may make assumptions based on your name, address, and - above all - facility with language. You need to be aware of when you can be more or less informal and when you should be meticulous.

Email also does not convey emotions nearly as well as face-to-face or even telephone conversations. It lacks vocal inflection, gestures, and a shared environment. Your correspondent may have difficulty telling if you are serious or kidding, happy or sad, frustrated or euphoric. Sarcasm is particularly dangerous to use in email.
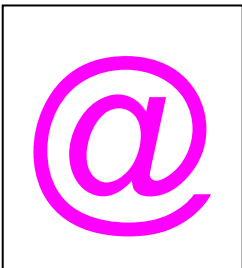
Another difference between email and conventional media is that what the sender sees on the screen when composing a message might not look like what the reader sees on the receiving screen. Your vocal cords make sound waves that are perceived basically the same by both your ears and those of your audience's. The paper that you write your construction progress report on is the same paper that your client sees. However, with email, the software and hardware that you use for composing, sending, storing, downloading, and reading may be completely

different from what your correspondent uses. Your message's visual qualities may be quite different by the time it gets to someone else's screen.

Thus, your email compositions should be different from both your paper compositions and your speech. This course is written to teach you how to tailor your message to this new medium.

Context

In a conversation, there is some minimum of shared context. You might be in the same physical location; even on the phone you have, at a minimum, commonality of time. When you generate a document for paper, usually there is some context embedded in the medium: the text is in the content of a specification, written on a legal pad, given as hardcopy to a co-worker for assistance, or something similar.

With email, you can't assume anything about a sender's location, time, frame of mind, profession, interests, or future value to you. This means, among other things, that you need to be very, very careful about giving your receivers some context. This section will give specific strategies for doing so.

Useful Subject Lines

A subject line that pertains clearly to the email body will help people mentally shift to the proper context before they read your message. The subject line should be brief (as many mailers will truncate long subject lines), does not need to be a complete sentence, and should give a clue to the contents of the message. For example:

```
Subject: Need 3 SCRs by Tuesday

Chris – I need three SCRs for Thursday's demo in
Charlotte. They need to be 30 VDC with 3A sensitive
gate, and they need to be packed for shipping by Tuesday
night.
```
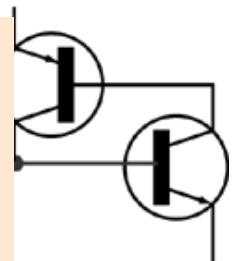
The subject line above summarizes nicely the most important details of the message.

If your message is in response to another piece of email, your email software will probably preface the subject line with Re: or RE:. If your email composition software does not do this, it would be advisable to put in RE: manually.

```
Subject: Re: Need 3 SCRs by Tuesday

Pat – I've got two SCRs already packed from last week's
demo, but I don't have another functional
30 VDC right now. Can you cope with two 30s and
one 50?
```

For time-critical messages, starting with URGENT: is a good idea (especially if you know the person gets a lot of email):

```
Subject: URGENT: need 30 VDC SCR

I've *got* to have another 30 VDC SCR for the Charlotte
demo, and I need it by tomorrow afternoon. Chris only
has two, and I've got to have three. Chris *does* have a
30 that will not fire, so if anyone could troubleshoot
that one, or if they have one in their desk somewhere,
I'd really appreciate it!
```

For requests, starting with REQ: can signal that action is needed:

```
Subject: REQ: turn in SCRs

Pat's call for a 30 VDC SCR turned up 2 functional 30s
that were lying around people's offices as samples.
Please take a moment to look around your area for SCRs
(30 or 50 VDC) that you are no longer using, and get
them back to Chris.
```

If you are offering non-urgent information that requires no response from the other person,

> Subject: FYI: donuts in break room
>
> A vendor left a dozen doughnuts in the downstairs break room. First come, first served.

prefacing the subject line with FYI: (For Your Information) is not a bad idea, as in

Information, Please

Do yourself a favor and eliminate the word "information" from your subject lines (and maybe from the body of your message as well). Nothing is more nebulous than an email that looks like this:

> Subject: information
>
> Please send me information about the Brooks Project.

This gives very little indication as to what the person wanted to know about: Project schedule? Cost year-to-date? The number of safety incidents? The contractors? The current weather conditions? Is a paper document response desired? A telephone report to be made? A return email ok? The only thing that can be done is to respond via email and ask for elaboration. Mail like this would have been much better as:

> Subject: Brooks Project History
>
> Have there been any inclement weather impacts to the schedule?

Quoting Documents

If you are referring to previous email, you should explicitly quote that document to provide context. Instead of sending email that says simply:

```
Yes
```

Say:

```
> Did you get all of the 30 VDC SCRs that you
> needed?

Yes
```

The greater-than sign (>) is the conventional way most software uses to quote someone else's email words, but your software may use a different convention.

Even if there are a fair number of words in your response, you still might need to quote the previous message. Imagine getting a response on Monday to some email that you can't quite remember sending on Friday:

```
I talked to them about it the other day, and they want
to test the other one before they make up their minds.
```

Your mental response would probably be, "Huh???". It would be much easier for you to understand email that said:

```
> I've got the price quote for the Paragon subassembly
> ready; as soon as I get a decision on the
> SCR selection, I'll be ready to go.
> Have you talked to the component group about whether
> they are ready to go with the 30 VDC SCR or
> do they want to wait and check out the 50 volt
> first?

I talked to them about it the other day, and they want to
test the other one before they make up their minds.
```

This is substantially better, but now errs on the side of too much context. The first three lines have nothing to do with the question being answered. You should only include enough to provide a context for the message and no more.

You need only enough context to frame the question being answered:

```
> Have you talked to the component group about whether
> they are ready to go with the 30 VDC SCR or
> do they want to wait and check out the 50 volt
> first?

I talked to them about it the other day, and they want to
test the other one before they make up their minds.
```

Remove Pronouns

The above example gives a good amount of context, but the response to it still takes a little effort to follow. A good rule is to look very carefully at all pronouns in your first three sentences. If they don't refer to something explicitly stated in the email, change them to something concrete.

```
> Have you talked to the component group [about which voltage
> they want]?

I talked to the component group on Wednesday, and they
think the 30 VDC SCR will probably work, but they want to
evaluate the 50 volt rectifier before they make up their
minds.
```

Now the answer is very clear and specific. And, since the response contains implicit yet clear references to the original message, less explicitly quoted material is needed. Responses like this, with the context mostly in the body of the message, are the easiest to understand. Unfortunately, they take the longest to compose.

If you want to quote a sentence that is in the middle of a paragraph, or wraps around lines, go ahead and remove everything but the part that you were

really interested in, inserting "[...]" if you have to take something out in the middle. You can also paraphrase by using square brackets, as above.

If the message isn't important enough to you to warrant the time to pare the original message down, include the whole thing <u>after</u> your response, not before. If you put the original message at the end, your readers don't have to look at it unless they don't understand the context of your response.

Summary
You may know what you are talking about, but your readers may not. Give them the proper context by:

- Giving useful subject lines
- Avoiding pronouns in the first three lines
- Quoting the previous message

Format

The underlying rules governing email transmission are highly standardized, but there are a large number of different software programs that can be used to read email. It's quite possible that the message you send won't look at all the same when displayed on your correspondent's screen. You therefore have to be careful about how you present your text. This section will discuss the problems that may arise from a mismatch between the sending and receiving software, and show how to avoid them.

Fancy Text
Some email reading software only understands plain text. Italics, bold, and color changes will show up as control sequences in the text. You might send something like:

Hey, I was *impressed* by the presentation you gave this morning. **Great Job!**

but if your correspondent's software can't handle formatting, the message could show up as:

Hey, I was <I>impressed<I> by the presentation you gave this morning. <B>Great Job!<B>

Web documents may be particularly difficult to read with older versions of email programs. You may have a choice of sending the web page as text or as HTML; keep your correspondent's capabilities in mind when you make that choice.

Extended Character Sets

Back in the dark ages of 1982, when the email specifications were being written, the decision was made to encode email in such a way that only 128 different characters - letters, numbers, punctuation, and so on - could be transmitted from one computer to another. This allowed some free space for error correction - something important when computers were calling each other with modems.

However, the net is a different place now. Characters like ä, ç, and Ø are now important for large numbers of email users. So now there is a way of encoding data so that 256 different characters can be represented, called "quoted-printable".

Unfortunately, the underlying transport is still limited to 128 different characters, so the email gets converted to the more limited set, transmitted, then (hopefully) converted back on the other end. If the receiving software doesn't know how to do quoted-printable (or if something gets corrupted somewhere), the extended characters will show up as an equals-sign and two letter/digit code:

```
La premi=E8re journe=E9 de nos deux voyageurs fut assez agr=E9able.
Ils =E9=taient encourag=E9s par l'id=E9e de se voir
possesseurs de plus de tr=E9sors que l'Asie, l'Europe, et
l'Afrique n'en pouvaient rassembler.  Candide,
transport=E9, =E9crivit le nom de Cun=E9gonde sur les arbres.
```

So why do you care? After all, you might never need to use weird characters. You should care because there are "special" characters that you probably will encounter, that are NOT part of the standard extended character set, but which some software will allow you to insert. Even if your correspondent's software knows how to convert codes back to extended characters, different computers have different symbols for the same codes. For example, the trademark symbol, bullet, and "curly" quotation marks are all legal characters in both Windows and MacOS, but are in different places in the character set. For example, Windows thinks that character number 241 is a ñ, while the Mac thinks that character number 241 is a Ò. Thus you have yet another reason to worry about what your correspondent's email software is capable of.

Web Links

Some email reading software will recognize URLs (Uniform Resource Locators, or web addresses) in the text and make them "live". While some software recognizes URLs from the "www.", most software recognizes URLs by the http:// at the front. Thus, if there is a URL in your email, it is much safer to include the http://.

You should also be careful about punctuation - especially periods - right after a URL. For example, take the message

```
Hi – The URL is http://www.PDHcenter.com. Go there and
earn your professional development hours easily.
```

The software on the receiving end may think that that last period after the URL is part of the URL. Or, if the software doesn't recognize links, the reader may cut-and-paste too much. Either has the potential to lead to a disrupted communication. It looks odd, but it causes less confusion if there is at least a space after the URL:

```
Hi – The URL is http://www.PDHcenter.com . Go there and
earn your professional development hours easily.
```

People who are cutting and pasting might also select too little. Since HTML files can have either the extension .html or .htm, this can also be a difficult mistake for your reader to catch. To make cut-and-paste mindlessly easy for people, try to always put URLs on a separate line:

```
Hi – The URL is
http://www.PDHcenter.com
Go there and earn your professional development hours
easily.
```

Yes, the period after the URL is now missing. Yes, this *is* ungrammatical, but you sure don't want to put it on the next line! It is worthwhile to trade grammatical perfection for easier cut-and-paste operations. Some URLs are so long that they will get split (wrapped) into two lines:

```
Hi – The URL is
http://www.PDHcenter.com/course123/location6/quiz
question14.answerb.html

Check the answer to quiz question 14 for correctness.
```

If your correspondent's email software makes links live, it is probably not capable of realizing that question14.answerb.html belongs with the rest of the URL.

```
Hi – The URL is
http://www.PDHcenter.com/course123/location6/quiz
question14.answerb.html

Check the answer to quiz question 14 for correctness.
```

If your correspondent is cutting and pasting, he or she may not see the last bit. What you can do is put angle brackets around the URL. Some (but not all) email software will recognize that stuff inside angle brackets should be kept together:

```
Hi – The URL is
<http://www.PDHcenter.com/course123/location6/quiz
question14.answerb.html>

Check the answer to quiz question 14 for correctness.
```

Punctuation and Quotation Marks

Another recommended departure from grammatical rules is the placement of punctuation. American grammar rules say that punctuation belongs *inside* quotation marks, for example the period in the next sentence:

```
Bob said, "The next project phase will be very difficult."
```

That's fine when the phrase within the quotes is normal speech, but can cause problems when discussing something such as computer input. Consider:

```
When you get to the password box, type "prototype."
```

Is the period something that goes in the password box or not? The preferred use is that of British grammar rules which appears as

```
When you get to the password box, type "prototype".
```

This makes it clear that the period does *not* go in the password box.

You could switch back and forth between the two styles, depending on whether the phrase or term in quotes was to be typed or not, but it is better to be consistent so that if the period *is* supposed to be in the password box, that will be clear.

If you can't bear to do such gyrations, modify the sentence so that there isn't punctuation there:

```
When you get to the password box, type "prototype"
and hit return.
```

or if you want to make it absolutely clear:

```
When you get to the password box, type
           prototype
      and hit return.
```

Attachments

All email software supports attachments, where you specify a document to send through email. This allows technical professionals to share essentially any file in any format. Microsoft Word® documents, WordPerfect® documents, Microsoft Excel® spreadsheets, digital photographs, and executable files are just a few of the types of documents that can be sent.
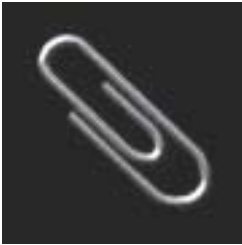
This can work very well: a long attachment can be looked at later. However, if your correspondent's email software is not attachment compatible and you send a non-ASCII text file (like a Word document, a binary, a picture, or even compressed text), be advised that it will appear as lots of garbage. Pages and pages of garbage, usually.

Even when your correspondent has email software that recognizes attachments, they still have to have software to read the document. Think of it this way: somebody can use the Post Office to send you any kind of document, such as a drawing. But if you send someone an AutoDesk® AutoCad™ file, they may or may not be able to read it. Even executable programs can't always be useful to your correspondent. Macintosh® programs won't run on Microsoft Windows® machines; Windows98® programs will not run on machines that only have Unix® installed.

Furthermore, even if your correspondents can receive and view the attachment you send them, if they are low on disk space or dial in from home to get their email, they may not be happy to receive a 200MB AutoCad™ file, no matter how important it is.

It is almost always better to post large documents on the Web and email the URL instead of the file. If you don't have that option, email your correspondents first and ask them if they can handle a large attachment of that format.

Summary

If you don't know what email service your correspondent has, play it safe.

- Don't use formatted text;
- Be aware of special characters;
- Send web pages as text;
- Type in http:// before your URLs;
- Be cautious with attachments.

Also bear in mind that punctuation doesn't mix well with URLs. Specific quotations of things people should type can also be problematic.

Page Layout

Words on a computer screen look different from those on paper, and usually people find it harder to read things on a screen rather than on paper. Some technical professionals even print out their email to read it. Until recently, a screen's resolution was not as good as paper's; the font may be smaller, and/or the font may be unpleasant. Your recipient's email service may also impose some constraints upon the formatting of the mail, and may not have the same capabilities as your email software. This means that good email page layout is different from good paper document page layout.

Shorter Paragraphs

Frequently email messages are read in a document window with scrollbars. While scrollbars are nice, it makes it harder to visually track long paragraphs. Consider breaking up your paragraphs to only a few sentences apiece. Look at any good webpage and you will notice that webmasters use very short paragraphs, many of which are composed of only one sentence.

Line Length

Line wrap is the way software adjusts what words go on what line. Your recipient may see differing line wraps (or no line wraps at all). This means that there is a mismatch between your software's and your correspondent's in how they wrap lines. To temper this, you should attempt to keep your lines as short as possible.

Concise Communication

In academia students are usually penalized for being terse; however, long-winded prose is not appropriate for email. Keep it short. If your recipients want more information, they will request it.

If you are sending a technical report to many people, then you may need to put more detail into the email so that you aren't flooded with questions from everyone on the recipient list. You should also carefully evaluate the number of people that really need to be on the list. The fewer the people there are on the recipient list, the shorter the message should be.

Try to limit your composition to a single screen. In most cases, this means twenty-five lines of text. This course would be highly unsuitable as the body of an email.

Summary

Keep everything brief. Keep your lines short, keep your paragraphs short, and keep the message short.

Tone of voice

The most difficult thing to convey in email is emotion. Professionals frequently get in trouble for typing exactly what they would say out loud. Unfortunately, without the tone of voice to signal their emotion, it is easy to misinterpret their intent.

While you cannot make your voice higher or lower, louder or softer to denote emphasis, there are games you can play with text to convey vocal inflection and emotion.

If you want to give something mild emphasis, you should enclose it in asterisks. This is the equivalent of italics in a paper document.

Instead of:

```
 I said that I was unhappy with the environmental impact from
 this project.
```

Say:

```
 I *said* that I was unhappy with the environmental impact
 from this project.
```

Or:

```
 I said that I was unhappy with the *environmental impact*
 from this project.
```

Which of the above two you choose depends upon whether you are adamant about your opinion or adamant that you didn't mean the project's safety impact. (Restructuring the sentence to remove the ambiguity would be an even better idea.)

You can also capitalize the first letter only of words to give light emphasis:

> While the relief valve should be set at a margin
> above the process operating pressure, this is not
> mandatory. It should Never be set Above the Maximum
> Allowable Working Pressure of the vessel.
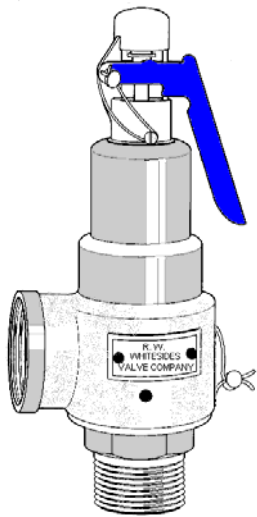
Individuals tend to use first-capitals to refer to things that are somehow categorical or otherwise special.

Strong Emphasis

If you want to indicate stronger emphasis, use all capital letters and add some extra exclamation marks. Instead of:

> > Should I set the relief valve above the maximum allowable
> working pressure?
>
> No, in so doing you can allow the process to exceed the
> vessel's safe operating limit.

Say:

> > Should I set the relief valve above the maximum allowable
> working pressure?
>
> NO!!!! In so doing you can allow the process to exceed the
> vessel's safe operating limit!

Note that you should use capital letters sparingly. Just as loss of sight can lead to improved hearing, the relative lack of cues to emotion in email makes people hyper-sensitive to any cues that might be there. Thus, capital letters will convey the message that you are shouting.

It is totally inappropriate to use all capital letters in a situation where you are calm. Don't do this:

```
HEY, I JUST WANTED TO SEE IF YOU HAD MADE ANY
PROGRESS ON THE BROOKS PROJECT SCHEDULE.  STOP
BY AND SEE ME SOMETIME.
```

People will wince when they read that email.

Extreme Emphasis

If you *really* want to emphasize something, capitalize it and enclose it in double angle brackets:

```
<<NEVER>> set the relief valve
pressure <<ABOVE>> the vessel's
maximum allowable working pressure.
```

Mutter Equivalents

In person, there are a number of ways that you can indicate that a communication is private and not to be repeated. You can lower your voice, you can look to your right and to your left either with your eyes or with your whole head, and you can lean closer to the other person. While these obviously make it more difficult for someone to overhear, these signals are so ingrained that we might use them even if there is nobody around for miles. Unfortunately, lowering your voice and moving your body is hard to do in email.

You may find it helpful to write what you really think and then write down a sanitized version:

```
My boss got fired I mean resigned today, which
*totally* sucks err.. will lead to enhanced
relations between Engineering and R&D.
```

Some individuals use double parentheses to denote "inner voice", what in the theatre world is called an "aside":

> My boss resigned ((got fired)) today which is going to
> lead to enhanced relations between Engineering and R&D
> ((in their dreams)).

Something else that can sometimes denote the "lowering of voice" is to type without any capital letters:

> psssst!
>   hey wendy!
>   guess what?
>   I GOT THE JOB!!!!

Be warned that there is a minority that doesn't like the shortcuts shown here. They argue that if Mark Twain could convey emotion without resorting to such devices, then we should also. This notwithstanding, most believe that there is a greater danger of angering or offending someone by not using these shortcuts than there is of annoying someone by using them.

Summary

It is difficult for most people to express emotion well in a short message. Fortunately, you can use a number of textual tricks to help convey the emotion:

- Asterisks (for emphasis)
- Capital letters
- Punctuation
- Lower-case letters

Gestures

Not only does text lack the emotional cues that vocal inflection gives, text lacks cues from body language. There is no twinkling of the eyes to say you are kidding, no slapping the back of your hand in your palm to show urgency or frustration, no shoulders slumping to display discouragement. While you are unable to accompany your words with hand or facial gestures, there are several textual stand-ins for gestures. These include facial gestures represented with what are called "smileys" or "emoticons" which are created by typing a sequence of characters. Although originally intended mostly as jokes, emoticons are actually required under certain circumstances in high-volume text-only communication forums. The use of smileys or emoticons in technical communications is not deemed appropriate.

Status

Just as you have no guarantees about your correspondents' context, you can't determine much about their status. You can't look at their clothes, note their dialect and rate of speech, listen to the timbre of their voice, or count the wrinkles around their eyes. Your guesses about your correspondents' age, race, gender, marital status, affluence, intelligence, and education will be much less accurate than they usually would be in a face-to-face or even telephone conversation. Your correspondents can't tell much about you either. They will probably do the same thing you will probably catch yourself doing - make assumptions on the flimsiest of pretexts. It is not good for people to make assumptions. But because there are so few status cues to draw upon, they will. You need to be aware of that, so that you can work on guiding their assumptions if you need to.

Clues They Will Use
Language-The biggest status cue is your competence with language. If you have lots of misspellings, your subjects do not agree with your verbs, or you use the wrong word, people may assume that you are uneducated. From that, they may infer that you are not very clever. It doesn't matter that the correlation between language ability and intelligence is weak (especially among non-native speakers); lots of people will make that inference anyway. Furthermore, some people are literally insulted by getting email with errors, especially typographical errors. They feel that it is disrespectful to send email with blatant errors.

In a perfect world, we would all have the luxury of faultless writing. However, we do not live in a perfect world. Good grammar is very hard for some people, just as designing spur gears, solving partial differential equations, extracting data from a surveying instrument, and performing circuit analysis can be very hard for others. This has always been true, but before the advent of electronic technology, people who were not very skilled at writing could do most of their communication verbally. This coping strategy is less possible now.

Spending more time crafting prose can improve the quality of the writing, but it is not possible to spend an hour on each email message if you need to send ten of them per day. Fortunately, grammar and spell-checkers can help enormously. If high status is important to your message, you should definitely use them. However, there are certain classes of errors that grammar- and spell-checkers will not find. If you really want to boost your language-related status, you may have to commit yourself to some significant studying.

Many would like their correspondents to spend their time on providing appropriate context instead of perfecting their grammar. Preferred email would say:

> There is overpressure in the collyum indicating a
> runaway Rxn this not well situation
> getcher butts outta here protno!!!!!

rather than a Star Trek's Mr. Spock version about the same situation that would say:

> You would be advised to leave the
> reactor building promptly.

One can guess at proper grammar; one can't guess at proper context.

E-mail Usage-Another observation that individuals will make is your use of email. If you do not give proper context, type only in capital letters, or use extremely long lines, people may assume that you are highly inexperienced with the medium. They may also assume that you are unwilling to learn, since those are errors that are usually pointed out very rapidly (and not always gently) by experienced users. In addition to the composition of the email message, recipients will look at how appropriate the message was. Was it sent to the right person? Was it a reasonable question?

Is Status an Important Consideration?

How do you decide how much time you should spend on managing your status cues? That depends upon several things:

- Do you know these people already? If you have had lots of contact with your correspondents already, their assumptions about your age, gender, status, and intellect will be pretty solid. Only the most serious abuse of grammar rules and email etiquette probably is likely to significantly affect your status with them.
- Are these people likely to care? High-school English teachers are likely to care more about your grammar than engineering colleagues. People who send lots of email will probably be more tolerant than people who have the luxury of spending an hour on every email message.
- What outcome depends on the message? If you are sending email to your boss, you probably should be careful about your grammar. If you are corresponding with technicians who are awaiting you engineering evaluation, well, they are being paid not to care about your grammar. If you need a favor, people may be more willing to help you if you are able to project enough status to make them think that you might be useful to them in the future.

Summary

Stereotyping is not endorsed but generalizing is part of human nature. You need to be aware of what signals you may be giving your correspondents and how to counteract them if you feel they may be incorrect.

- Language status can be improved by using grammar and spell-checkers.
- Hopefully, studying this course will make you more informed when composing future email messages.

Formality

Conversations involving people with exaggerated status differences and those to audiences that are large, tend to use very formal language. Conversely, intimate discussions use very informal language.

Thus you can control to some extent how many responses you get to your email messages by how formal your language is. Because email is so easy to respond to, people naturally tend to use very informal prose.

The informal tone encourages your correspondents to respond. This can be a very good thing if you want feedback. However, if your email address is in a very public place, you may well find yourself getting far more email than you are interested in.

So be cautious about the tone of your messages. If you want people to respond, be chatty and informal. But if you want to discourage people from sending you email, you should write much more formally.

Greetings and Signatures

Every new medium develops its own protocols for opening and closing. Telephone conversations start with "Hello" and end with "Goodbye". Letters open with "Dear" and end with "Sincerely". Because email is relatively new, there are no established customs on how to open and close.

Many people do not give either a salutation or a signature. After all, while a letter can get separated from its envelope easily, it is difficult to separate an email message's body from its addressing information. The email message itself says who it is to and from.

However, that information might not be adequate for your needs. It might be difficult to find with some email software. It might be unclear or ambiguous. It might be inadequate for telling the receivers just why they are getting that message. Or, it might not convey the proper formality or status cues for your purposes.

Some thoughts on openers and closers will be provided, but you need to think carefully about what you are trying to convey both explicitly and implicitly. You also want to take the customary procedures or standard techniques of all parties into consideration.

Greetings

Salutations-It is a bad idea to use "Sir" or "Mr." unless you are absolutely certain that your correspondent is male. Similarly, it is probably safer to use "Ms." instead of "Miss" or "Mrs." unless you know the preference of the woman in question. Using someone's first name is usually ok. Thus, you can usually get away with a "Dear" and the first name.

> Dear Chris:

Here you are covered regardless of whether Chris is male or female. Beware of using a diminutive such as Bob for Robert or Judy for Judith if you aren't certain your correspondent uses it.

If you are addressing a group of people, you can say "Dear" plus the unifying attribute. For example:

> Dear Project Managers:

Or:

> Dear Department Architects:

Do You Even Need a Salutation?- Given that email is relatively informal, frequently there isn't a problem with dispensing with names and titles altogether, especially if you are in a higher status position than your correspondent:

> Hello – I saw your web site and wanted to mention that the Hoss double acting pile driver was first produced beginning on Nov 29, 2003, *not* on Nov 29, 2004.

You can use simply "Hi" for people that you already know:

> Hi - Are you interested in getting together for a technical evaluation of the compressor next week? I can bring all the previous test data to assist us.

"Good Morning" and "Good Afternoon" don't make a lot of sense with email, as the sun may have moved significantly by the time your correspondent gets around to it. "Good Day" sounds awkward. You probably want to avoid the term "Greetings" as it tends to lack sincerity and is somewhat archaic.

When receiving email from strangers, consider the connection they have with you rather than how they address you. When you send email, particularly to someone who doesn't know you, it would be good if you would immediately answer these questions:

- How did you learn of your correspondent?
- What do you want from your correspondent?
- Who are you?
- Why should your correspondent pay attention to you? (If you can't answer this question, you should wonder if you should even send the email.)
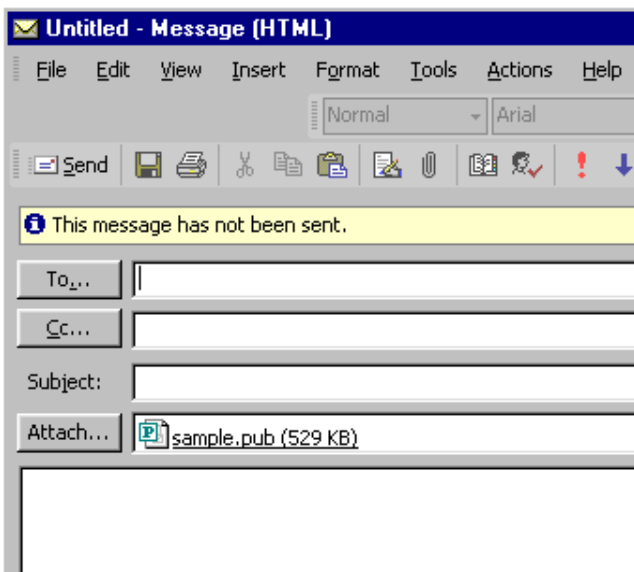
Putting some of that information in a signature (explained momentarily) is better than not providing it at all, but putting it at the top is better for several reasons:

- If there is a problem with the transmission of the email, the end is much more likely to get lost than the beginning.
- A lot of people get more than twenty messages per day, and so read them quickly. If you don't establish quickly who you are, your correspondent may delete your message before they get to the bottom.
- Your identity is an important clue to the context of the message.

Good answers to the questions cited in the bullets on page 24 can take several forms:

```
Dear Ms. Wilson: I am the Party Chief at Southwest Surveying
Services, P.A.  In a conference of local developers last week,
your name was mentioned as being the contact for Sun Properties. I
have reviewed you development plan and would like to offer a proposal
to conduct the initial planning and layout of your new subdivision.
```

Or:

```
My name is Forrest Williams, AIA and I'm the Managing Architect for
Peterson, Baker & Williams, LLP. We are deeply disturbed at
the incorrect coverage you gave to our firm in your recent
publication. A complete description of the errors and the correcting
information is contained in the attached MS Word document. We would
request that you print corrections in the very next issue of your
magazine.
```

Signatures

Most email programs allow you to set up a default signature to be included at the end of every message. Many people use these signatures as an easy way to give their name and alternate ways of reaching them. For example:

```
Hi - when did you want to go to lunch?

     Rachel C. Davenport, P.E.
     Consulting Engineer
     Peterson, Baker & Williams, LLP
     1139 Technical Parkway
     Gender, New Jersey 23456
     (667) 123-4567 voice
     (667) 123-4568 FAX
     rcdavenport@pbwengineers.com (work)
     rachel@networksys.net (personal)
```

Such an extensive amount of signature information in contrast to such a short question is illogical. Much of the above signature is extraneous. If they got the email from you, they can reply by email, so they don't need your FAX number or street address. (If they have to send a FAX or package, they can ask for addressing information.) They already have one email address in the message

you sent, and don't need your other email address.

The name is perfectly reasonable to include, especially if

- Your email messages don't include your full name in the From: line. (Send yourself email to see if your name is there or not.)
- The name in the From: line doesn't match the name you actually use. (Christina might actually go by Chris, but her company might insist on using her full name as her email name.)
- The email account is shared by multiple people.

The telephone number is also a reasonable thing to include - if you are willing to be interrupted by a phone call. Emotions are easier to convey over the phone, and some people prefer phone to email for all circumstances.

When the message is business related, including the company name is a reasonable thing to do - even if the message is going to someone else in the same company.

The fact that Rachel's title is supplied may have more of an influence on the correspondent than anything else.

So a rewrite of the above signature might look something like:

```
Rachel C. Davenport, P.E.
Consulting Engineer, Peterson, Baker & Williams, LLP
(667) 123-4567
```

That signature is still overkill for arranging lunch, but it isn't always convenient to switch between having your signature included or not.

Some people put things purely for entertainment in their signature: artwork, philosophical sayings, jokes, and/or quotations in their signature. This is really not appropriate in important technical communications. It is a good ideal to keep your signature at or under five lines long.

After setting up a signature that is included automatically, it is easy to forget about it. (After all, your email software might not show it to you, or it might be so routine that you never look at it again.) So whenever a piece of contact information changes, make sure to revisit your signature to make sure that it is still up-to-date.

One final note on signatures: they are a good way to let your correspondent know that all of the message got transmitted properly. There is no body language to signal that you are "done talking" and, unfortunately, email transmissions sometimes get interrupted.

Summary

If you are well-known to your correspondent, you can probably get away without including extra identification. In other cases, you should provide your correspondent with enough clues to figure out who you are, why you are writing, and why he or she should pay attention to you. Preferably, this information will be at the top of the message.

Greetings are difficult to do well. You can be pretty informal but you need to be careful that you aren't either making assumptions or using sensitive words.

Signatures are optional but generally should be limited in scope.

Course Summary

Here, then, is the advice presented in this course for good technical email style:

- Provide your audience with adequate context:
    - Use meaningful subject lines
    - Quote the email to which you are responding
    - Avoid pronouns

- Be aware of page layout issues. Stick with:
    - Short paragraphs
    - Short lines
    - Messages under twenty-five lines long
    - Plain text

- Attempt to find replacements for gestures and intonation:
  - Asterisks
  - Capital letters
  -
  Typed-out vocalizations
  - Lower-case letters
  - Creative punctuation

- Be aware of what cues people will use to form impressions of you:
  - Name
  - Grammar, punctuation, and spelling
  - Formality
  - Signatures

Hopefully the material covered here will be useful to you as you continue your emailing experience.