

Writing Effective Email

Angelo Pitillo
apitillo@umich.edu

In this workshop, we'll work on language and cultural expectations to consider when writing effective, professional email. Email, in particular, poses unique challenges in terms of language because it is a hybrid of both spoken and formal written forms.

Academic + Professional Email Style

Q: Should academic/professional email be more like speech or more like writing?

Unlike other academic writing, such as conference proposals or papers for publication, email is not a genre that has a set form and features that are unique to it.

Features of email that are more like speech

Features of email that are more like writing

Think about these types of emails that we might write. Should they be more like speech or formal writing? How can you decide?

- ___ 1. Request for an information gathering meeting
- ___ 2. Request to set up an interview
- ___ 3. Request for research advice or support
- ___ 4. Invitation to an event or to give a talk

- ___ 5. Thank you for an interview
- ___ 6. Thank you for assistance
- ___ 7. Cover letter with attached CV/resume
- ___ 8. Update on your research progress for your advisor or mentor

Your Goals

What are your goals for your own academic or professional email?

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

Your Identity

What does your email address say about you? What does the **M** mean to others?
What identity do you wish to project in your professional emails?

Making a Positive Impression

What are some ways you can create a positive first impression in your emails?

Task One: Making a Positive Impression

Suppose that this email is addressed to a professor. How effective do you think this message is? Why?

Subject: An Inquiry
From: Marin Fuhrman
To: cqsf@umich.edu

Hi Laura,

My professor suggested that I get in touch with you to find out whether there might be a chance that we can collaborate on a project I want to start. In my project I want to bring together social work students and engineering students to create a team approach to developing and implementing international community development projects. My plan is to lay the groundwork for this project during the summer. I'd love to stop by your office this week to discuss the possibility of collaborating with you and will try to drop by Friday afternoon to chat. Looking forward to spending some time talking with you. See you soon! Thanks. :)

Marin

I never apologize.
I'm sorry, but that's just the way I am.
Homer J. Simpson

Sent from my iPhone

Notes:

Conversational Cooperation Principles

Research on conversational language has applications for email. For instance, the philosopher Paul Grice (1975) proposed four conversational maxims, or principles, that operate on the idea that successful communication in conversation happens when speakers follow cooperative principles.

Quantity: Information

- Be as informative as necessary for the communication purpose, but no more than that

Relation: Relevance

- Be relevant

Manner: Clarity

- Avoid ambiguity
- Use easily understandable words
- Be brief
- Be orderly

Quality: Truth

- Include only what you know to be accurate
- Do not say anything for which you lack evidence

Speakers might intentionally ignore or violate the principles for a reason (to convey humor or irony, for example), but if they *unintentionally* fail to follow these principles, communication can break down.

Task One Revisited:

How well does the message in Task One follow these rules of Conversational Cooperation?

Politeness Strategies

Together with these maxims, politeness strategies also come into play. According to Leech (1983) politeness rests on some important principles. A partial list is provided here:

- **Tact:** minimize cost to other (maximize benefit to other; e.g. don't ask too much)
- **Generosity:** minimize benefit to self (maximize cost to self; e.g. don't focus on how something will benefit you.)
- **Sympathy:** minimize antipathy (bad feelings) & maximize sympathy between self and other; e.g. *don't annoy people*; acknowledge that your reader may not be able to comply with a request)

Central to these maxims is the notion of "*face*" (as in "to lose face" or "to save face"). "Face" refers to a speaker's sense of preserving the *identity* they wish to project.

And, according to Bunz & Campbell (2004), writers use politeness strategies in email to create a positive impression, and *when they do, they receive more polite email responses.*

Making a Polite Request

Politeness Strategies are important when you are making requests. Following Grice & Leech, requests should be presented in a way that makes them seem less burdensome.

Task Two

Read this next message and underline the language the author chose in order to signal politeness in her message to professor Kim Campbell. Sentence numbers have been added for ease of discussion. Do you think this message is effective overall? Why or why not?

Subject: Summer Research Opportunity in MTRI

Dear Professor Campbell,

¹I am new PhD student in Remote Sensing here at the University and I am looking for a summer research opportunity in the Michigan Tech Research Institute. ²I have experience in remote sensing and GIS software, such as ERDAS Imagine, ENVI, Definiens Developer, and ESRI ArcGIS. ³My current research interest is in using remote sensing technologies to monitor the condition of bridges and to help improve efficiency of inspection and repair. ⁴To date I have done some research that integrates in-situ field sensors, “local” remote sensing data (such as infrared thermography), and stand-off remote sensing data (such as satellite imagery) to create a unique bridge signature that provides an overall assessment of bridge structural health. ⁵Results from this study demonstrate the capabilities of each technology and their ability to address bridge challenges. *Details of this work are available on my home page.* ⁶As such, my work has implications for the infrastructure problems we are currently facing in the U.S.

⁷I am very interested in your work in this area and I was wondering if we could talk about the possibility of working with your team at the Institute this summer. ⁸My resume and transcripts are enclosed for your review. ⁹I am available to meet MWF before noon and Thursdays after 3:00. ¹⁰I look forward to the possibility of talking with you at your earliest convenience.

_____ (Add a closing expression)

Katie Armstrong

Polite Requests

Some Useful Expressions for Making Polite Requests

Expressions with Modal Verbs *Requests for meeting with a potential employer at a conference*

<i>Would it be possible to . . .</i>	Would it be possible to set up a time to meet?
<i>Would it be possible for . . .</i>	Would it be possible for us to meet at the conference?
<i>Would you be able to . . .</i>	Would you be able to meet me some time?
<i>Could you . . .</i>	Could you find some time to meet me at the conference?
<i>I would appreciate . . .</i>	I would greatly appreciate having an opportunity to discuss the position.

Expressions with “wondering” *Requests for a meeting with an instructor/advisor on campus*

<i>I was wondering whether . . .</i>	I was wondering whether we could find a time to discuss revisions to my paper.
<i>I was wondering if . . .</i>	I was wondering if I could stop by your office to discuss my project.

Other Expressions

Task Three: Review Subject Lines, Greetings, Closings

Subject Lines

Check (✓) the subject headings that you think would be appropriate for an initial email message to obtain information about an internship with the “Michigan Tech” program. How did you decide?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. An Inquiry | <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Michigan Tech Research Opportunity Questions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Are you interested in hiring an intern? | <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Greetings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Summer Internship? | <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Summer Internship |

Greetings

Check (✓) the openings that you think would be appropriate for an initial email message to obtain information about an internship. How did you decide?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Hi! | <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Dear Professor Campbell: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. To whom it may concern: | <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Dear Kim, |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Dear Sir or Madam, | <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Dear Campbell, |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Dear Mr./Ms. Campbell: | <input type="checkbox"/> 9. Respected Kim Campbell: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Dear Dr. Campbell: | <input type="checkbox"/> 10. Honored Dr. Campbell, |

Closings

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| MOST FORMAL | Sincerely, |
| PRETTY FORMAL | Regards,
Warm/kind/best regards, |
| FORMAL/INFORMAL | Best,
Looking forward to hearing from you,
Thank you,
Thanks very much,
Thanks again, |
| INFORMAL | Cheers,
Ciao,
Have a great day,
Thanks |

Task Two Revisited:

Look back at Katie Armstrong’s message in Task Two. What closings do you think would be most effective?

Task Four

Discuss with a partner what information you would expect to find in an email cover letter sent to apply for an advertised internship position.

Next, read this cover letter written by a graduate student on the job market and answer the questions that follow. Paragraph numbers have been included on the left for ease of reference.

	<p>Subject: Application for the Health Policy & Planning (HPP) Internship Program</p>
1.	<p>Dear Ms. Roman:</p> <p>My professor, Dr. Jan Lee, suggested I contact you regarding the Health Policy & Planning (HPP) Internship Program. Dr. Lee is familiar with my background and felt I would be an excellent match for your internship program. I am currently a Master's student in General Epidemiology and have interests in a number of areas including health disparities in chronic disease, applied public health practice, and biomedical informatics.</p>
2.	<p>As you can see from my resume, after graduating from Washington University with a BA in Sociology and earning my Master's in Social Work from the University of Michigan, I served as a Social Worker in the Children's Developmental Services Agency in Greensboro, North Carolina where I was responsible for managing early intervention services for children birth to age 3. While my focus was on young children, inevitably I also learned much about the needs of their families and the surrounding community including the need for greater access to healthy foods and for land use planning that would allow open spaces to be used for such activities as recreation, restoration, vegetable gardening and creating a stronger sense of community. This work led me to my interest in health disparities and a desire to earn my Master's in Public Health.</p>
3.	<p>In addition to my experience as a social worker, my passion for helping families lead healthy lifestyles, and knowledge gained in my Master's programs, I bring to the table advanced computer skills (with cross-platform expertise in Windows and Mac); expertise in the MS Office suite of products; and familiarity with using databases to manage administrative and/or health care information. I believe all of my skills could be put to good use in your newly launched HPP Project Grow program that offers area residents the space, know-how, and inspiration to grow their own fresh, organic food.</p>
4.	<p>My attached resume provides more details of my background and experience. If you agree that I would be a valuable member of your internship team, please contact me at (123) 456-7890 or email me at kimlee@umich.edu. I know you are busy, so thank you for your time, and I look forward to speaking with you about the internship program.</p> <p>Sincerely, Kim Lee</p>

1. In Paragraph 1, what strategies does Kim use to establish herself as a good candidate for the position?
2. How is the type of experience/skill in Paragraph 3 different from that in Paragraph 2? In Paragraph 3, what knowledge of the internship position does Kim demonstrate?
3. What do you think of the concluding Paragraph 4? What politeness strategies has Kim used? Are there edits you would suggest? What, and why?

Thank you Email after a Job Interview

Task Five

Look over this “thank you” message template. What do you like about it? What changes might you suggest?

Subject _____

Dear _____:

Title Family Name

Thank you for your time and consideration during my interview on [DATE]. I enjoyed our discussion on [FOCUS OF THE DISCUSSION] and appreciated your [ING VERB TO INDICATE ACTIVITY].¹ During our discussion of [WHAT YOU DISCUSSED]² my interest in joining your team became even stronger. I am especially interested in the possibility of [ING_VERB THAT INDICATES THE INTEREST].³

¹Examples: taking time out of your very busy schedule/giving me a tour of the company

²Examples: your company needs, your interest in gaining a better understanding of the readability of your brochures

³Example: conducting analyses of your brochures using innovative focus group techniques

Paragraph Two: [Add information that is relevant to or highlights your ability to do the job or highlight something that you could not bring up during your interview.]

I appreciate your consideration and am excited by the prospect of working with you and ING VERB TO INDICATE WHAT YOU WOULD DO⁴ Enclosed is an additional copy of my resume for your convenience. I look forward to talking with you again soon.

⁴Examples: developing a marketing strategy with your team; contributing to the creation of medical brochures for patients

_____, (CLOSING SIGNAL)

Kim Lee

Task Six

What is your reaction to this next email? There are some weaknesses. How would you improve it?

Subject Line: Thank You for the Interview

Dear Ms. Smith:

Thank you for meeting with me this morning to discuss my qualifications for your internship.

After discussing the opportunity with you, I am confident that I am an excellent match for the internship. The similarities in my class projects that I just completed and the proposals that you have planned are noteworthy.

Unless I hear from you sooner, I will contact you the week of March 6 to follow up on a potential second interview, where I could further explain how I might contribute to your company. Should you require any additional information about my qualifications, please do not hesitate to contact me by email or phone at 716-123- 4567.

Best regards,

Jean Lee

Here is another sample. How effective is this one? Why?

Subject: Document Analyst position

Dear Mr. Barnett:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I appreciate having the opportunity to discuss my qualifications for the document analyst position at Information Science Consultants. After our discussion, I am certain I would be an asset to your team.

My solid education in Information Science and recent projects focused on document readability have allowed me to acquire the necessary background you said is important to succeed at Information Science.com. Specifically, my most recent project on the readability of medical brochures for heart failure patients has given me experience working with a variety of readability formulas, which could be useful for your current project on transplant patient discharge education.

Thank you again for your time and consideration. I look forward to discussing the position with you again soon.

Sincerely,

Chris deGrasse

Summary

With a partner discuss your key takeaways from today’s session. Would you like to share any of your observations with the group?

For more resources on ELI’s advanced English for Academic Purposes courses and other resources, visit our website at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli>