Tips for Effective Email Communication

One of the most important aspects of email communication is also among the easiest to forget—your emails establish a reputation; they go out under your name. Your emails may be your only method of contact with most of the very diverse, very busy GS student body and, as such, offer an excellent opportunity to build a relationship with your constituents.

The following tips are designed to help you put your best face forward, by conveying clear and succinct messages to a distracted, often largely disinterested audience.

Designing Your Email

Most of your constituents will be reading your emails on a relatively small screen—a computer kiosk somewhere on campus, a laptop, or a smartphone—which means that you don’t have a large canvas with which to work.

Using white space—also known as negative space—can open up the limited space available to you. The emptiness of white space helps draw the reader’s eye to the text that is there, as in the example below.

white space

Organizing Your Content

You cannot expect that your readers will devote considerable time, much less considerable attention, to your message. Your goal should be to craft an email that is useful to even the most hurried reader.

- **Develop an ordering principle.** The DOS News emails are in chronological order. The Center for Career Education arranges its emails by information type (events, internships, job postings, etc.).

  No matter what particular principle you use, a clearly intelligible ordering principle will make your email easier to read (and create).

- **Get to the point.** Your most important information should be placed first. The inverted pyramid taught to high school journalists is a simple and obvious structuring device that may be useful (your emails should be simple and obvious, too).

Essential information

Helpful information

Optional information
Greetings. Occasionally greetings are necessary or helpful, but in most cases readers skim past them. If you choose to include a greeting, place your most important information in the next paragraph.

- **Keep it short.** Your paragraphs should be short—ideally, 2-3 lines long at most. Each paragraph should cover no more than one idea.

- **Write simple, informative subject lines.** Most people will not even open your email, but a clear subject line can still provide them with some information: for example, “Gala tickets are now on sale!”

- **Use bullet points, not sentences.** Bullet points use white space to present information in chunks. Chunks are easier to digest than sentences.
  
  - **Event information.** Put event information in chunks. Vertical information is easier to skim.

    Orientation will be held Mon., Aug. 31 at 9 a.m. in Lerner Hall.

    Orientation
    Mon., Aug. 31, 9 a.m.
    Lerner Hall

- **Link back to your website.** Links are the currency of the Internet; readers perceive them to be imbued with value and will scan your emails for something to click on. Linking effectively will keep your messages clear and concise, and establish your emails as a reliable source of information.

  - **Link to more information.** Readers usually need only a small amount of information to determine whether or not something is pertinent to them. Provide that small amount in the email, and link back to your website for a more in-depth description.

  - **Link to complex information.** Going to a website requires a certain commitment; users are prepared to expend more time and attention than they devote to simply checking their email.

    Consider the example of an online survey. Your email should explain the survey briefly and link to your website. Your website should have technical instructions on how to complete the survey, a summary of the issue, explanation of next steps, etc.

    If questions arise, it’s always easier to point people to a website than to refer back to an email.

  - **Link, don’t attach.** Attachments pose a security risk and often hang up or crash your browser. If your information definitely has to be in a document—if, say, it’s an official form—upload it to your website and link to it. Otherwise, try to incorporate the content into your website.
Sending Your Emails

Your emails will likely be broadcasts, to large audiences; however, each member of your audience will perceive that your message was sent directly to him/her. Most of the dissatisfaction related to email stems from confusion, and the question asked is usually not “Why are you sending this?”, but “Why are you sending this to me?”

While you can’t resolve the dichotomy between your broadcast email to a mass audience and your reader’s perceived individual email from you, it’s important to be aware of the tension between the two, as well as your audience’s expectations, while sending your emails.

- **Develop a strategy in advance.** Determine when your emails will be most effective (for example, Mondays are not ideal, since your emails are likely to be overlooked as people return to work/classes). Adhering to a regular email schedule greatly reduces reader confusion.

  While it’s easy to schedule regularly occurring emails, event emails can be more difficult. Consider how much lead time your readers will need and how broad the event’s appeal is when developing your email strategy.

  The most common complaint about email is that one receives too much of it, and multiple messages about an event in which a reader has no interest can quickly exhaust patience and goodwill.

- **Coordinate your efforts.** Work with other GSSC members to avoid sending emails on the same day, if possible.

- **Acknowledge the audience.** Ensure that people understand why they’re receiving your email (“Dear Ladies and Gentlemen of General Studies” is a good example).

- **Test your messages.** Different email clients render messages differently—testing your messages in multiple email accounts can ensure that your Cubmail formatting doesn’t look strange in Gmail, and will also help you to catch typos or other errors.

**General Tips**

- Use standard fonts (Arial, Verdana, Times New Roman, etc.); otherwise, your text might not display properly.

- Use all caps sparingly, if at all; use bold text and white space to emphasize important information.

- Don’t use a background.

- Don’t center your text (even headings). People read emails vertically, not horizontally.

- If you do have to present information horizontally, use tables, not tabs or spaces.
HTML Emails

The tips above, while useful for HTML emails, are largely applicable to plain- or rich-text emails created in Cubmail or other email clients. If you’re interested in designing an HTML email and would like some outside insight or assistance, please don’t hesitate to contact the GS Communications Dept.

Contact Us

We are always happy to help out with questions about an email campaign.

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