

Email Etiquette

FOR MOST PEOPLE WHO HAVE ACCESS to personal computers, email has rapidly overtaken 'snail mail' as the preferred means of sending written communication, both business and personal. The near-immediate delivery and low cost of email are hard to beat, but the technology does have limitations when it comes to typographic finesse. Here are some dos and don'ts to ensure that your electronic communication is received with its message intact.

Fonts and Formatting

It's tempting to format outgoing email with different fonts, point sizes and colors, and to punch up your text with the use of italics and boldface. Unfortunately, what you send is not necessarily what your recipient gets.

Some email programs don't read special formatting, including fonts that your reader's computer doesn't have. And many allow the user to set preferences for plain text instead of rich text, which includes styling. The result: your carefully formatted email is reduced to plain text, or worse,

littered with 'alien' characters (more on that below).

What's the solution? First, stick to system fonts, such as Arial, Times, Verdana, Trebuchet or Geneva, which virtually all users have. And, unless you're certain that the recipient can read your formatting, keep it simple and use only keyboard characters and styling that won't get lost in translation. For emphasis, try surrounding your important text with *asterisks*. ALL CAPS is another option, but one to be used sparingly. Remember that CAPS are considered SHOUTING in the cyberworld!

SAFE CHARACTERS

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
0123456789 %&?!()*@
-_.:;'" /<>=+

Safe Characters

One of the most puzzling occurrences in emails is the occasional appearance of strange, unfamiliar characters in the text, often foreign or mathematical in nature. We can usually read around them, but even so, what are they and how did they get there?

This can occasionally happen to non-standard keyboard characters when they're sent from one email program to another. These characters include such typographic niceties as 'smart' quotes and apostrophes, en and em dashes, and bullets. These characters and others like them are not always encoded or translated consistently from one email program to another. The result? Your carefully formatted curly quotes, ligatures and ellipses can turn into something unrecognizable to your recipient's inbox.

The solution is simple: play it safe and stick to the standard keyboard characters (see illustration). While this means using 'dumb' straight quotes and double hyphens instead of correct dashes, at least your message will arrive in a readable form. (But don't forget: when copying and pasting text from an email into a designed piece for print, reformat these 'dumb' characters to adhere to the principles of good typography!)

Signatures and Attachments

Other points of good email etiquette include using a signature and being savvy about attachments. A signature is a short block of copy that identifies you and includes your contact information. Most email programs allow you to set up one or more signatures to choose from, or to select a default signature that will automatically appear at the bottom of every email you send.

Usually used for business, signatures can be a great time-saver if you use them appropriately. Remember to include your signature in each subsequent email to the same recipient so no one has to search for the email with your phone number. Another tip: don't include images and logos in your signature. These are often filtered out by spam filters and could result in your addressees not getting your email at all.

As for attachments, keep them to a minimum and keep an eye on their size: between 50K and 2MB is best. In fact, emails with attachments that are 50K or less are often screened out by spam filters as a means of virus control. For attachments over 2MB, check with the intended recipient before sending and ask for confirmation afterwards. Sometimes mailboxes have maximums on the size of acceptable attachments; others are too full to accept them at all.

And, a final tip: proofread your email carefully. Once you hit SEND, there's no turning back!