



## EMAILING PROFESSIONALLY<sup>1</sup>

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Nowadays, much of a lawyer's (or any professional's) correspondence transpires over email. Accordingly, emailing professionally is vital to a lawyer's success. In this handout, you will find a set of general guidelines for emailing professionally—some basics and some additional tips to help you develop your professional identity through email.

Of course, what follows is general advice and may not apply in your agency/firm/organization. Nothing can replace your diligent effort to determine office culture and, specifically, how it relates to emailing. Still, we are confident that practicing the emailing "do"s and "don't"s that follow will serve you well in whatever professional setting you find yourself.

### *I. The Basics: "Do"s & "Don't"s*

#### CHOOSE A PROFESSIONAL EMAIL ADDRESS

Often, your agency/firm/organization will choose your email address for you. However, if it does not, make sure you choose a professional email address. As a general rule, keep it simple; your name (and *only* your name) will typically suffice.

Examples of professional email addresses include:

- harbaugh@umich.edu
- jimharbaugh@umich.edu
- jharbaugh@umich.edu
- jim.harbaugh@umich.edu
- jim\_harbaugh@umich.edu

Examples of unprofessional email addresses include:

- queteepielolz@umich.edu
- iluvmichfootball@umich.edu
- maizeandblue4lyfe@umich.edu
- puppiesforlunch@umich.edu
- lawiz4loozers@umich.edu

#### USE PROFESSIONAL SALUTATIONS & CLOSINGS

A salutation sets the tone for any type of correspondence. A closing is a reader's last impression of a writer. Accordingly, a writer's choice of salutation and closing are essential to establishing and maintaining a professional tone in a writer's correspondence. Determining what qualifies as an appropriate salutation/closing requires a careful mix of common sense, awareness of organizational culture, and awareness of your audience. And, in your initial correspondence with an individual, always err on the side of formality. Below are some general guidelines.

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<sup>1</sup> Composed by Luci Hague & Alex Winkelman

*Appropriate salutations include:*

- Mr./Ms. [Insert Surname],
- Dear Mr./Ms. [Insert Surname],
- Hello Mr./Ms. [Insert Surname],
- Hi Mr./Ms. [Insert Surname],

*Inappropriate salutations include:*

- Hey,
- Sup,
- Yo,
- Heyo,

*Appropriate closings include:*

- Sincerely,
- Best,
- Best regards,

*Inappropriate closings include:*

- Peace out,
- Adios,
- Kisses,

CREATE A PROFESSIONAL SIGNATURE BLOCK

It is common practice for a professional to include a signature block after the body of her email. Typically, a signature block includes the professional's name, title, phone number, email address, agency/firm/organization name, agency/firm/organization address, and a confidentiality disclaimer. See below for an example of a professional signature block. As always, however, the example below is but one of many styles in which a professional can format a successful signature block.

Jim Harbaugh [Name]  
Head Football Coach, General Counsel [Title]  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor [Organization Name]

5555 State Street [Address, Line #1]  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 55555 [Address, Line #2]  
Phone: (555) 555-5555 [Phone Number]  
Fax: (666) 666-6666 [Fax Number]  
Email: Lharbaugh@umich.edu [Email Address]

*This e-mail is confidential and may be privileged. Use or disclosure of it by anyone other than a designated addressee is unauthorized. If you are not an intended recipient, please delete this e-mail from the computer on which you received it immediately.*

***II. Style: Email as a Part of Professional Identity***

EMAIL STYLE: BASIC POINTERS

- 1) If you have previously received an email from the person with whom you've been in contact, it's usually safe to mirror the sender's choices in salutation, closing, and sentence length. For example, if the person to whom you're sending an email has previously signed off with his or her first name, unless you have a reason to address the person by his or her title and last name, you can begin your next email with a salutation and the person's first name. When in doubt, however, it's generally better to err on the side of formality—especially if the email is your first communication with someone.
- 2) If you expect to send emails to multiple recipients, know your supervisor's preference about when to send emails with the CC function and when to use the BCC function.
- 3) Be judicious with use of the "Reply All" function, even if you're one of many recipients of an email. Unless there is a clear reason for every recipient to receive the text of your email, consider whether it may be appropriate to reply to the sender individually.

- 4) In order to avoid sending emails too early, leave the recipient email address blank until you're satisfied with the substance and style of the email. Then, insert the recipient's email when you're ready to send the email out.

## EMAIL FORMATTING

### **a. Subject Lines**

Effective subject lines can be useful in previewing the substance of an email, and may be especially helpful if your email addresses two or more distinct subjects. When in doubt, keep subject lines as concise as possible so that they can be read quickly and so that the recipient's screen can display the entire line. Consider asking whether your supervisor has a preference for what to include or leave out in email subject lines.

*Examples of potentially effective subject lines:*      *Examples of likely ineffective subject lines:*

- Today's schedule
  - 2/10 discussion: following up
  - Assignment for Monday and class next week
- [No Subject]
  - RE:
  - Document

### **b. Font Choices**

Keep your font choice simple. It's usually safest to opt for the default font in your email application. Remember that special fonts and characters may be distorted in the sending process. Even if you find an uncommon font more visually appealing, it may detract from the substance of your message and may be distracting to the recipient. Use of colorful text is likewise inadvisable because it may make the email more challenging for the recipient to read.

*Examples of likely effective font choices:*

- Calibri
- Arial
- Times New Roman
- Garamond

*Fonts worth avoiding include:*

- Comic Sans
- *Any script font*
- A font that appears in capital letters
- Papyrus

### **c. Emoticons and Hashtags**

Despite their common use in informal communications, emoticons and hashtags are generally inappropriate in a professional setting. Moreover, several email applications may distort the ☺ or ☹ symbols, and replace the emoticon with a "J" or other letter or symbol. Unless the organizational culture of your workplace is distinctly emoticon-friendly, you're likely better off avoiding emoticons altogether.

## EMAIL SUBSTANCE

- Breaking up longer text lists into bulleted or numbered lists may be an effective choice if you want the recipient to focus on each item individually.
- Headings may be useful organizational tools if your email addresses several different topics.
- Punctuation matters. An exclamation point at the end of a sentence may be useful to convey enthusiasm in a less formal context, but it may be inappropriate in an office setting.

Use your judgment depending on the relative level of enthusiasm in your office culture and the frequency with which your colleagues and supervisors use (or don't use) exclamation points.

- Be sure to spell-check emails just as you would spell-check a document. If you're sending a particularly important email, consider drafting the text in a word processing application and printing it to proofread separately.
- Consider breaking up long sentences. If your supervisor is reading your email on a phone or other handheld device with a small screen, long sentences and sentences with semicolons may be more challenging to follow.
- Because it's impossible to hear inflections and tone in an email as would happen in an ordinary conversation, word choice is especially important. Select your words carefully and make sure they're tailored to the message you want to convey.

### ***III. To Email or to Call?***

Despite its usefulness, email is not always the most effective method of communication with a supervisor or colleagues. The choice may reflect an organization's particular culture. If you're just starting a new position, try to get a sense of when your colleagues use email and when they prefer to pick up the phone or stop by another's office. If you have a particularly simple question, it may be easier to stop by your colleague's desk instead of taking the time to type and send your email.

Email may be useful if you want to establish a record of asking a certain question, or if the response will likely contain information that you need to reference in the future. If the information is especially important, consider saving the email to its own file folder or printing a hard copy for your records.

### ***IV. Other Resources***

There are many useful resources available regarding the professional use of email and methods of using email to enhance your professional success. As with any document, use judgment and discretion about which guidance may be most helpful for your professional context.

- Joyce E.A. Russell, *Career Coach: How to use e-mail effectively, wisely, and professionally*, Aug. 30, 2010, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/27/AR2010082704679.html>.
- Wayne Schiess, *E-Mail Like a Lawyer*, Mich. Bar. J. (Sept. 2010), available at <https://www.michbar.org/journal/pdf/pdf4article1741.pdf>.