



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

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Much of a lawyer'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 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 tips that follow will serve you well in whatever professional setting you find yourself.

### *The Basics*

#### 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.

#### *Appropriate salutations include:*

- Mr./Ms. [Insert Surname],
- Dear Mr./Ms. [Insert Surname],
- Hello Mr./Ms. [Insert Surname],
- Hi Mr./Ms. [Insert Surname],
- Good Morning/Afternoon/Evening,

#### *Appropriate closings include:*

- Sincerely,
- Best,
- Best regards,
- Regards,
- Thank you,

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<sup>1</sup> Composed by Luci Hague & Alex Winkelman. Revised by Charlotte Kelley & Charlie Thau in 2020.

## 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] P  
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.*

### ***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 are 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. Additionally, if this is your first time emailing

with someone and you know they are receiving tons of emails, consider putting your name in the subject line to immediately remind the recipient who you are.

*Examples of potentially effective subject lines:*

- Today's schedule
- 2/10 discussion: following up
- Assignment for Monday and class next week
- M. Johnson – Question from today's class

## **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

## 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.
- **Word choice is especially important** because it's impossible to hear inflections and tone in an email as would happen in an ordinary conversation. Select your words carefully and make sure they're tailored to the message you want to convey.

## *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.

## *Email Memos*

### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EMAIL MEMOS AND TRADITIONAL MEMOS

Legal professionals are transitioning away from traditional, formal memo documents to email memos. Although email memos are similar to traditional memos, there are some important differences:

- 1) **Scope:** An email memo is typically shorter than a traditional memo. Email memos are usually meant to provide a comprehensive understanding of a legal issue while omitting the formalities of the classic 1L memo. For instance, lawyers might omit a formal brief answer, statement of facts, and conclusion in an email memo.
- 2) **Audience:** You may be asked to send an email memo to your supervisor or the client. Because email memos typically lack the formality of a traditional memo, you should ask your supervisor to clarify his or her expectations. For example, a supervisor might want to see formal citations and sophisticated legal analysis, whereas a client might just prefer the practical answer to his or her question.
- 3) **Formatting:** Keep readability in mind when writing an email memo and be cognizant of formatting differences between email platforms and Microsoft Word. If you feel more comfortable writing your email memo in Word and then transferring the text to email, make sure that this hasn't made your work product look unprofessional.

### WRITING AN EMAIL MEMO

- 1) **Recite the research question:** This ensures that you and your supervisor or client are on the same page about your assignment and refreshes the supervisor or client's recollection of your assignment's exact parameters. The language you use can be simple: "Dear Jill, you asked me to look into: \_\_\_\_."
- 2) **Give an abbreviated "brief answer":** Answer the question succinctly in as few sentences as possible before diving into more detailed analysis. Most supervisors or clients will want their answer up front. This does not mean, however, that you have to comply with the formalities of a traditional brief answer. Usually, one, two, or three sentences will suffice.

- 3) **Follow a similar, but abbreviated, memo format:** Employ the tools of legal organization and analysis that you would use in a traditional memo but keep it brief. If an email memo starts to become too lengthy, reconsider the medium.
- 4) **Offer more help at the end of your email:** Supervisors and clients may have follow-up questions, and you want to show eagerness to help them. Ending an email memo with something to the effect of: “Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions” can send a positive message about your work ethic.

### *Tips for Common Emails*

#### NETWORKING EMAILS

Reaching out to legal professionals whose careers you admire can be an important first step in finding employment. Attending networking events or doing online research are useful ways of initially connecting with legal professionals. The next step is often reaching out over email to arrange to meet up for coffee and discuss their career. See below for tips for drafting networking emails:

- 1) **Remind them where they met you.** Often legal professionals will have met a lot of prospective employees at networking events and it’s helpful to remind them who you are. A good start to a networking email is: “Dear Jill, It was so nice to meet you at [event] on [day].” It is also helpful to highlight any memorable topics you two discussed to further jog their memory: “I really enjoyed discussing [topic] with you.”
- 2) **Ask to connect over the phone or over coffee.** Asking to get together is a great way to show your interest in their career. Be sure to give them options (i.e. connecting over the phone, in person or sticking to email). If they agree to meet with you it is best to prepare in advance a short list of questions that you want to ask them.
- 3) **Give them times that work for you.** To avoid a long back-and-forth about when you both are free, it is helpful to provide the times you are available in the initial email. Be sure to give them at least three days or time slots during which you are available so they can choose the time that is most convenient for them.

#### ASKING FOR ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE ON A RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

Your supervisor has assigned you a research project. You have checked all the relevant legal databases and have asked others for help, but you’re still not sure you’re on the right track. Instead of spending more time spinning your wheels it is often best to reach out to the assigning supervisor for more guidance. See below for tips on how to effectively ask for help:

- 1) **Remind them of the assignment.** Your supervisor might not remember the exact assignment he or she gave you so consider starting your email by reminding them of the research question: “Dear Jill, on [day] we met in your office and you asked me to look into [research question]. Restating the research question will also give the supervisor a chance to assess whether you have understood the assignment correctly.
- 2) **Show your work.** List the steps you have taken so far on the assignment (i.e. used certain search terms in Westlaw, asked a librarian, etc.). You want your supervisor to know that you put effort into the assignment before asking for more guidance. Listing

what you have already done will also avoid a situation where the supervisor suggests searching places you have already exhausted.

- 3) **Offer to discuss in person or over the phone.** Some supervisors prefer to discuss more complicated research questions in person, so it is always helpful to provide them with this option, instead of clogging their inbox with many back-and-forth emails.

### ASKING FOR AN EXTENSION

Life happens. Unexpected events sometimes come up that prevent you from meeting a deadline. Below are some tips for drafting emails asking a supervisor for an extension on a project:

- 1) **Remind them of the assignment.** Again, it is always best to assume your supervisor does not know the exact contours of what you are working on (unless you have very recently discussed the assignment).
- 2) **Describe the circumstances, but don't overwhelm them with detail.** Your supervisor needs to know a brief description of the circumstances that prevent you from completing the project, but they don't need to know your whole life story. Keep it simple.
- 3) **Offer alternatives.** It is best to avoid simply saying you can no longer complete the assignment and therefore it is the supervisor's problem to replace you. If you have the time, describe some of the steps you have taken to find someone else to take over the project or offer an alternative deadline that works better for you.
- 4) **If no one gets back to you, pick up the phone.** If the project is especially important and time-sensitive, consider calling the assigning supervisor if you haven't heard back from them. This will avoid a situation in which your supervisor misses your email, assumes you are still working on the assignment and is surprised later on when the assignment is unfinished.

### *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.

- Joe Regalia, *A Young Attorney's Most Important Writing: Emails*, ABA FOR LAW STUDENTS (September 17, 2017), <https://abaforlawstudents.com/2017/09/14/young-attorneys-important-writing-e-mails/>.
- *How to Write Networking Emails as a Law Student or Graduate*, NEW ENGLAND LAW, (2017), <https://www.nesl.edu/news/detail/how-to-write-networking-emails-as-a-law-student-or-graduate>.
- Wayne Schiess, *E-Mail Like a Lawyer*, MICH. BAR. J. (Sept. 2010), <https://www.michbar.org/journal/pdf/pdf4article1741.pdf>.