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English Language Center

Email Messages Guide: How to Write Successful Email Messages

created by

The Vanderbilt University English Language Center

2019

updated November 12, 2019

vanderbilt.edu/elc/

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What are our Email Messages Guide resources?

Our Email Messages Guide resource series was developed as a way to provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners at Vanderbilt University the opportunity to better write email messages, also referred to as *e-mail(s)/email(s)*, to communicate daily. In this guide, we address three questions:

- What do we typically use email for in an academic setting?
- How do we achieve an appropriate tone with our professors, supervisors, and peers?
- How can email be used more strategically to reach our academic goals?

What do we typically use email for?

In this guide, we will explore emails used to:

- make a range of requests
- schedule meetings
- apologize

We will also discuss the structure, tone, and language used for each purpose.

“Email” can be used as both a countable and uncountable noun. See the following [Oxford Learner’s Dictionary definition](#) to help you:

- 1) “(also formal **electronic mail**) [uncountable] a way of sending messages and data to other people by means of computers... in a network
- 2) [*countable, uncountable*] a message sent by email”

Before you begin writing emails, consider when it is better to organize a face-to-face meeting. Use the following chart to help you decide when it is best to communicate in person or through email:¹

Use Email When:	Communicate in Person When:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate feedback or interaction is not required • You are sharing relatively straightforward information • You need a record of sending the information • Your audience is in multiple locations or time zones • You want to reduce the risk of incorrect information passing from person to person • If the content is not interpersonal in nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You require immediate feedback or interaction with your audience • You need to share complicated or detailed information • A record of the message is unnecessary • It is efficient to gather your audience in one place • You are problem-solving or brainstorming in a group • If the content is interpersonal in nature, for example, discussing a concern or criticism • Tone and body language are important

Email is a great tool for setting up meetings, sending files, extending invitations, making announcements, and other short message needs, but is not a substitute for all in-person communication. Often, we combine emails and face-to-face meetings, for example, when we email to schedule a meeting or to confirm decisions made in a meeting.

If you decide that sending an email is appropriate, consider the following about email communication that distinguishes it from face-to-face meetings:

- Our emails are typically one screen or less in length (based on a word processing document length). If your email will be longer than a one screen length, it is better to write an email to schedule a meeting.
- Email can feel impersonal, so if you wish to thank someone or discuss a sensitive personal matter, a handwritten note or face-to-face meeting is preferable.

¹ *Business Communication Essentials* by Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman, 2004, Pearson Prentice Hall, p. 49
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- It can be difficult to collaborate or have a deep discussion using email. Time spent drafting multiple complex messages to share ideas could be reduced by having an in-person meeting, instead.

In addition to expectations for when to email and when to meet in person, there are other unspoken guidelines to emailing in our academic setting. As you prepare to start emailing in this context, consider the following advice:

- Be sure to use your university email, for example: `firstname.lastname@vanderbilt.edu`. Also see the [Vanderbilt University Student Computing Policy](#).
- It is a good idea to set up an automatic email signature block (a block of text automatically added to the bottom of your email) in your email settings with information such as your name, your major or university classification (sophomore or PhD candidate), your university department, and contact information. Imagine that your signature block is a business card, and include all the information you would print on such a card. See the [ELC's Pronoun Guide](#) for more advice about email signature blocks.
- Assume that anything you write in an email is public information. Avoid writing something in an email or attachment that you would not be comfortable saying in person or showing all (or any part of) to anyone.
- For your protection, avoid including or attaching sensitive information such as your passport number, student ID, social security number, or driver's license number. See the Federal Trade Commission's advice about [Online Security](#) or the National Cyber Security Alliance's [Online Safety Basics](#) site. As you become increasingly familiar with your coworkers, professors, lab group, cohort, etc. on campus, observe trends in their email style. Note when they use CC (carbon copy) to include their peers or supervisors, and you can begin to follow their lead.
- If, for example, you are gathering information or making a decision and you are unable to respond to an email within 24–48 hours, send a quick note letting the sender know that you are considering your response with a clear timeline for a full reply.
- If you have sent an email and have not received a response, wait for an appropriate amount of time, which can be between 48 hours and 2 weeks, before sending a follow up email. For example, if you have been emailing back and forth with someone regarding a time-sensitive topic, 48 hours may be enough waiting time, but 2 weeks would be an appropriate waiting time to follow up on a job application with someone you have not met before.
- Ask permission before including information about someone else in an email. For example, it may appear rude to discuss a peer's research or share information about them without their knowledge.

An undergraduate email signature block example:

[First Name] [Last Name]
 Vanderbilt University
 Class of 2021
 firstname.lastname@vanderbilt.edu
 +1 (555) 234-5678
 Preferred Pronouns: he, him, his

Email Ethics

Alongside these expectations for emailing, Vanderbilt has a set of principles articulated through guidelines for behavior. When drafting emails, consider how you can exemplify our ethical principles and honor code. The following resources can help guide you:

- [The Vanderbilt Community Creed](#)
- [Vanderbilt Computing Privileges and Responsibilities: Acceptable Use Policy](#)
- [The Vanderbilt Honor System](#)

If you receive an email that you think does not follow these principles and/or is hostile or abusive, avoid responding to that email. For more university information about reporting this type of email, see the [VU Student Handbook](#) section about [Complaints and Grievances](#).

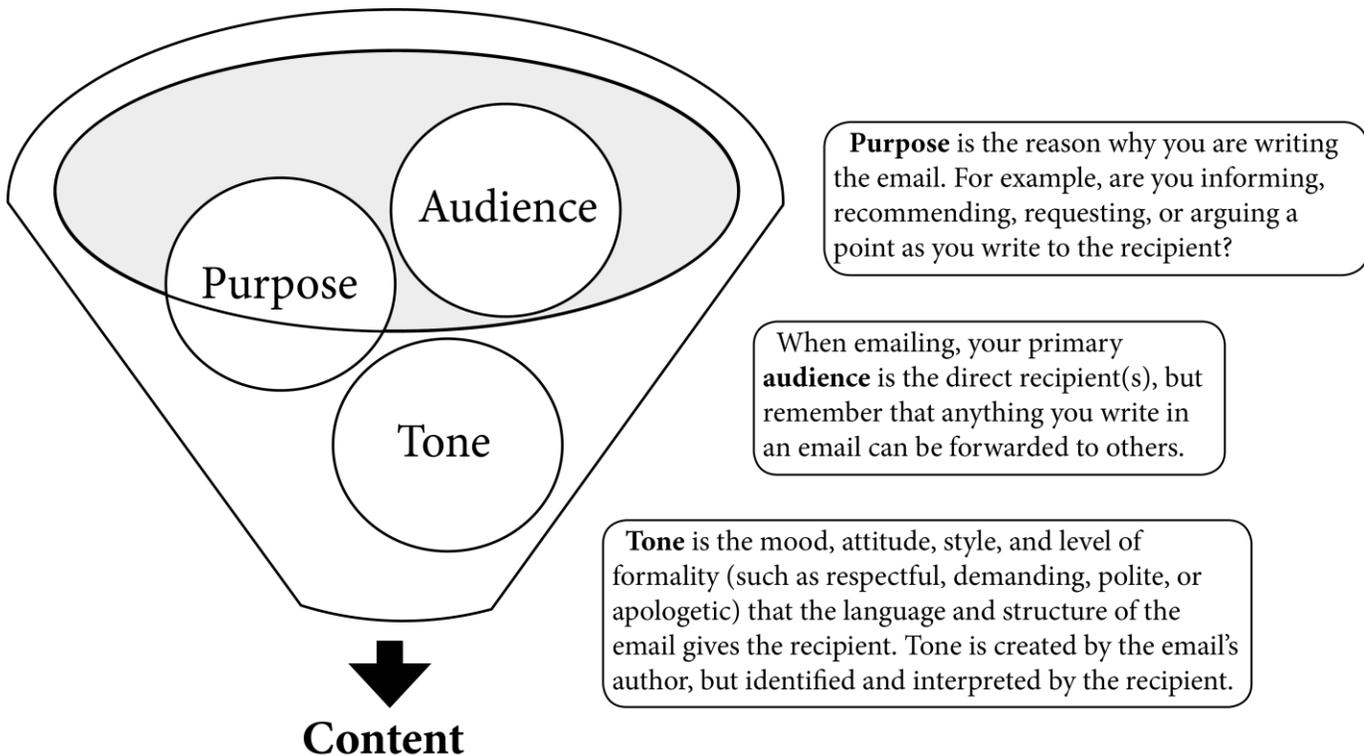
At this point, we will focus on tone and structure to deliver the most appropriate message to the recipient. The following sections will help you choose an appropriate tone before structuring your email for different situations.

How do we achieve an appropriate tone with our professors, supervisors, and peers?

Achieving an appropriate tone in writing means using words that express your perspective, and sometimes emotion, about the topic of your email message so that your audience will understand it as you intended. This section will help you identify and adopt an appropriate tone as you write emails. We do not use the same language when addressing a supervising professor as we do with our peers, and expectations for tone may change as our relationship with the email recipient develops.

For a more detailed explanation, including examples and sample emails, see our [Reading Cues for Shifting Tone](#) resource.

Purpose, audience, and tone work together to determine the content of your email: what information you include, what words you choose, and the structure.



Purpose

Now that you have a deeper understanding of how purpose, audience, and tone work together to shape your email's content, you can use the following questions and tips to hone your emailing skills:

- Is email the right way of communicating this message?
- What are my goals for this email?
- What do I want the recipient to know, do, or think about after receiving my email?²
- Is my goal S.M.A.R.T.? ([S.M.A.R.T. goals](#) are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely)

What information/value is my email adding to this conversation?

Avoid sending messages that are unnecessary, such as messages that offer no further content or have no clear purpose.

Is this the right time to send this email?

Send emails that allow enough time for the recipient to answer. For example, when planning a meeting, offer times 3–5 days in advance to give the recipient enough time to respond.

Am I the right person to send this email?

As you develop understanding your role in your cohort, department, or lab group, you might notice that some subjects are best handled among peers and other matters are best handled by your superiors.

Audience

What is my relationship to the recipient?

The formality of the email you send should reflect the relationship you have with the recipient. For a more detailed explanation, including examples and sample emails, see our [Reading Cues for Shifting Tone](#) resource.

What do my recipients need or expect, and do they have different needs or expectations?

Even though you are working within the expectations of our academic context, the recipient might not be. If possible, take what you know about their background and expectations into account when you decide which cultural conventions to follow.

What information does the recipient already know, and what do they need to know?

In what context will the recipient read and evaluate my email?

If you are writing to someone about an ongoing project or situation, be sure to include enough background information for them. If the situation is too complex for a 1-screen-length email, perhaps it is best to meet in person to discuss the situation.

Consider what recipient's response will be: will they likely be supportive, hostile, or neutral?

Tone

Does the formality of my language and tone match the situation?

Ask yourself whether your request is routine or unusual. Unusual or challenging requests are often written with more formal language. Routine or repeated requests are often presented more informally.

Is my email urgent or of low priority to the recipient?

Ask yourself whether the subject matter is serious, neutral, or lighthearted. Serious topics could include discussing absences or asking for a letter of recommendation. Neutral topics could include sending an attachment or confirming a meeting time. Lighthearted topics could include wishing a colleague luck at a conference or sending a congratulatory note.

² *Writing That Works: Communicating Effectively on the Job* by Oliu, Brusaw, & Alred, 2010, Boston: Bedford, p. 7
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Does the tone of my language match the situation?

Avoid using emoticons (emojis) in professional emails, as it is considered too casual.

Does my email prioritize the recipient's needs and schedule?

Show the recipient that you value their work by prioritizing their schedule.

Did I choose language that supports and encourages or language that criticizes?

Avoid using all caps in your emails because it will seem as if you are yelling at the recipient.

Email Structure

How can email be used more strategically to reach your academic goals? In addition to adjusting tone, we structure our emails in regular patterns which can be adjusted as needed. See the following examples and their structures to help you decide which framework to use. You can also consider mixing these structures to fit your needs.

General Email Structure³

A general email structure is commonly used for situations such as requests, sharing information, and asking questions.

In this example, your professor has recommended an article connected to your research paper. After reading the article, you are unsure about how to connect it to your work, so you need to email your professor to request a meeting.

Specific and concise subject line

Greeting with a name and title (the greeting is formal because this professor always signs her emails with her formal title, which signals Student Name to do the same)

Tip: Be sure you are not asking for information that is readily available. Notice how this student shows they have already done research by asking a specific question

Include a timeline when possible

This polite conclusion matches the formality of the email

This closing is neutral and formal enough for the situation

Signature Block

Give context and explain the purpose of the email

Tip: Notice how this email uses the polite past (past continuous tense for the request)

Tip: Try to give at least 3 time frames that you are available to show that you are prioritizing the recipient's schedule

³ *Technical Communication* (12th Ed) by Markel & Selber, 2018, Boston: St. Martin's, pp. 379-380
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Indirect Email Structure⁴

Also known as the bad-news structure, this type of email is commonly used for difficult requests and sharing negative information, such as requesting an extension, notifying the recipient of an absence, or making a formal complaint.

In this example, you are expected to be present for a lab experiment, but a pipe burst at your home, flooding your kitchen. You must stay at home until the plumber arrives, and the syllabus says that you should email your professor in advance in case of a lab absence. For these reasons, you need to immediately inform your professor of your absence via email.

Specific and concise subject line → Subject: Lab Absence

Tip: Notice how this student shows they respect the lab rules as part of the apology. Also, the tone of the apology matches the severity of the situation → I am writing to let you know that I am having an emergency at home with a burst pipe. I have looked at the syllabus, and I recognize that I am expected to give notice before an absence when possible, so I apologize for the late notification.

Suggest a solution or next step → I can come to campus as soon as the situation here is under control. I would like to apologize for any inconveniences caused by my absence.

Polite conclusion → Thank you,
Student

This closing is neutral and formal enough for the situation → --

Signature Block → Student Name
Research Fellow
Departments of Biochemistry and Chemistry
Center for Structural Biology
Vanderbilt University
student.name@vanderbilt.edu
(555) 123 - 4567
Preferred Pronouns: he, him, his

Greeting with a name and title (using Hi is more informal, but this student uses the professor's title because he has not emailed the professor before) → Hi Prof. Nguyen,

Begin with an apology and an appropriate excuse → I am writing to let you know that I am having an emergency at home with a burst pipe. I have looked at the syllabus, and I recognize that I am expected to give notice before an absence when possible, so I apologize for the late notification.

Tip: Try to give a time frame for your solution or next step → I can come to campus as soon as the situation here is under control. I would like to apologize for any inconveniences caused by my absence.

Notice that in each of these email samples, the overall email and all the paragraphs are short. Try to find a balance of keeping your emails as short as possible, but as long as necessary to achieve your purpose.

Summary

Our Email Messages Guide resource series was developed as a way to provide EAL learners the opportunity to better write and edit emails. Each email you send is unique because of the recipient, the situation, and your personality. As needed, refer back to this guide to develop your email communication skills.

We hope this guide will provide you with strategies for productive email communication. If you have questions, please contact elc@vanderbilt.edu.

Find this guide and more online at: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/email-messages-guide/>

⁴ *Navigating Academia: Writing Supporting Genres* by Swales & Feak, 2011, University of Michigan Press, pp 37-38
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