



# Become a better emailer

*... and make everyone happy*

**A11** Articles series: Communication

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**This article does not concern itself with technical wizardry. It is, instead, a feature on the art of communication. It assumes a basic knowledge of Outlook, Outlook Express or an equivalent program, but little else.**

Its first purpose is to help you handle this form of communication well, more for the benefit of those you are emailing than yourself. For example, your indiscriminate use of the email scattergun may be fun for you but causes the rest of us problems – such as too much mail in our ‘Inboxes’.

Ask the ten questions given below, follow the advice, and life will be better for everyone. Christians need to help each other and be good witnesses to those outside the faith.

The second purpose is to provide you with the basis for a set of guidelines for use in your church or mission agency, setting out accepted behaviour, or ‘netiquette’ as it is usually called. You are welcome to use this article as a basis for anything you write yourself, though some acknowledgement to this website would be appreciated.

## Three key issues

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The first three questions look at what you send, who you send it to, and when you do it.

### *Question 1*

#### **Am I sure email is the best means to use?**

This has to be the first question. Asking it may stop your fingers reaching for the keyboard and enable you instead to pick up the phone or a pen, or to put your coat on and visit. It all depends on whom you want to contact, when, and for what purpose.

Email has many things going for it. It:

- is quick, easy and cheap, and rapid in transit;
- is sent at a time to suit the sender and read at a time to suit the recipient;
- offers the recipient time to consider a reply;
- is capable of carrying detailed documents.

On the other hand, it:

- lacks character – it reduces messages to a basic format;
- is impersonal – with no chance to note immediate reactions and adapt;
- can be tedious for some decisions (when one telephone call might have sorted it);
- is capable of being misused or intercepted;
- depends on the recipient opening their mail (and having email in the first place!).

Christians need to consider the personal aspect carefully. Email is ideal for a quick comment to, or regular communication with, someone you know well. But in a church setting some will find it a cold means of contact when a face-to-face or a hand-written note might be more appropriate. Consider, for example:

- someone you manage on the church staff whom you need to criticise;
- a suffering member of the congregation whom you need to comfort;
- the work colleague who deserves an apology from you;
- the person whom you simply prefer not to talk to face-to-face.

Email is one means of communication, and a very effective one much of the time. But it is not the best one in all circumstances. Even when it seems best for you, put yourself in the recipient's shoes and consider how it will come across to them. Asking this question first may stop a few emails in their tracks.

### *Question 2*

#### **Do I really need to send this to these people?**

Many people find it all so easy and fun that they send twice the number of emails they need to. That is bad news for available bandwidths, and unnecessarily time-consuming for all recipients.

- 1 Don't copy other people in without very good reason. You only clog up their 'Inboxes', take up their time, and perhaps make them miss a more important message that is waiting for them.
- 2 Be the person who terminates the discussion, rather than continuing a chain of responses. Do be courteous, but there really is no need to say thank you for every email you receive, including the one thanking you for your last one!
- 3 Avoid the 'Reply to All' button unless really necessary. Check all the emails

you receive and suggest this idea to your multi-copy senders.

- 4 Never, ever send on an email to all your contacts when requested. These messages are almost always hoaxes, dangerous items, or mass-signature petitions. It is irresponsible to pass on messages whose truth you have not verified and, in any case, to clog up the network with such things. Delete the message and tell persistent friends (ever so politely and not by email!) that you do not welcome this kind of thing.
- 5 Just because you found a cute picture or an inspiring thought for the day does not mean that everyone else will be delighted to have it too. So never originate a message to all your contacts unless there is an excellent reason (a change of your own email address, for example). If there is a rare occasion when you believe you need to mail everyone, ensure your contacts lists are up-to-date so that you are only telling people who need to know.

Another issue arises when sending an email to A but copying it to B and C. Is it clear whether the copies for B and C are simply for information, or whether you want them to respond too? If the latter it may be better to include them on the 'To' line rather than the 'Cc' line. In any case, it is a good idea to explain why you are sending copies.

Even if the copies went for information alone, what if B or C reply in a way that makes A uneasy? This calls for some clear management if it becomes a problem.

### *Question 3*

#### **Do I have to deal with it now?**

Email can be stressful because there is this feeling you have to respond at once. If you have your program set to check every few minutes and warn you audibly every time a new message arrives, this can be a recipe for getting no other work done. So decide when and how to check emails at times to suit you. You do not have to have the icon set to blink at you, or the sound on. Be in control of your email, rather than letting it take you over.

It is important to respond to messages reasonably quickly, but not necessarily immediately. If you see a message but need time before you can reply (eg. to think or to research), it is helpful to send a one-line response saying thank you and you will be back by a date/time (be sure to keep to this). Although this adds one more email (see Q1 above), it is helpful for the original sender and takes the pressure off you. But much depends on whom it is from and how

the two of you work together. With staff colleagues or those you know well, you may well have agreed systems that apply.

On the other hand, it is frustrating when people fail to check their emails regularly. For example, if you are a church office-holder or committee member who has given out your email address, bear in mind that the church office may contact you, needing an immediate response. The weekly opening of emails on a Sunday afternoon is not

going to be good news if the office mailed you the previous Monday.

This problem often arises when there is communication between Group A who work full-time for a church or organisation, and are on broadband, and Group B who are church members or volunteers and on dial-up. If this becomes an issue, there needs to be some appropriate agreement in a way that fits both groups.

## Five questions on composing the email

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These represent the main points of 'netiquette'.

### *Question 4*

#### **How can I help the recipient?**

In the early days email was fun and very informal. You used note form and did not bother much about grammar or spelling. It is very different now when used for business. It is mainstream communication and presentation matters a great deal.

The following suggestions are written with official business in mind. Ignore or adapt them as necessary for friendly contact in the family or between close friends.

- 1 Aim for really short paragraphs with a clear line space between them. Large blocks of text are difficult to read on screen.
- 2 Keep numbered points starting on separate lines. Formatting options are limited (unless you have Outlook set to use Word as your email editor) but still keep it clear.
- 3 Keep the whole email as short as possible. Deal with the main points without going into chatty detail.
- 4 Spell-check it properly. If, as above, you use Word as your email editor in Outlook, this can be automatic.
- 5 Read it through carefully before it goes off and check it just as you would a written letter.
- 6 Make sure it is polite and creates a good image. It should not read too brusquely unless to people with whom you agree to correspond in that mode. Your email creates an image of your church or mission, and your faith.

- 7 If you are covering more than one topic, some people prefer you to send separate, short messages so they can file each one appropriately.

In general, put yourself in the shoes of the recipient: would they enjoy receiving this? And be tolerant of others who may be newcomers to emailing. You were, once. Some people still are.

### *Question 5*

#### **Might I come to regret what I have sent?**

There are ethical issues that commercial organisations often major on in their guidelines, but which churches and missions might think they can ignore. However, it is always wrong:

- to pretend to be someone else when sending an email;
- to forward illegal or inappropriate material of any kind;
- to disregard copyright or data protection regulations;
- to copy or forward confidential messages;
- to be abusive;
- to obtain someone's personal information by devious means.

All of us need to be reminded of such things.

Don't copy or amend anyone else's emails without authorisation, and then only with acknowledgement. Only forward messages if you know the sender would approve. And never forget that any email can be intercepted anywhere in the world; treat it like a postcard rather than a sealed letter.

Never send an email in anger or you start or continue what are known as 'flame wars'. If you receive a message that you find threatening in some way, wait a day before replying. And when you do, leave it as a draft for some time and then read it again before sending it, or ask someone else to check it through. Never put such a message in the 'Outbox' when it is not ready to go. You are likely to do an automatic send/receive, forgetting it is there. Keep it as a draft. Look again at Q1 at this point!

With all messages, pause for a minute before you press the 'Send' button and think carefully. This email may be kept for years (even if you delete your copy immediately), it may be printed out and circulated to people you do not know, or it may be forwarded to a whole mailing list. So be very careful. Is anything open to misunderstanding? Could that joke misfire? You want to be reasonably informal but have you been over-familiar? Unlike face-to-face communication email does not allow immediate correction if there is a misunderstanding by the other person.

If in doubt, wait, or delete what you have written and use a different means of communication.

### Question 6

#### **Do I really need these special features?**

Use special features sparingly.

- 1 Use the high importance exclamation mark only on rare occasions. Frequent use annoys people and may produce the opposite reaction from that intended. Some heavy users of email equate the exclamation mark with spam.
- 2 Never tick the box to request an automatic receipt. Many people do not have their email switched to send it without asking them, and find such requests somewhat pedantic. If you need to know someone has received the mail, ask them nicely within the text of the message for a quick reply.
- 3 Never type in capitals to make a point – this is a standard email sin. It is regarded as rude (the normal term is 'shouting') and messages are then difficult to read.
- 4 Beware using coded letters or even 'emoticons' (such as 'smileys') unless emailing between friends.
- 5 Avoid scanned images (such as your written signature or a church logo) as these take up file space.

A more controversial point is the use of text formatting such as bold, italic and colour. Most people have their email editor set to receive in what is known as 'HTML' and can see all this, but some net users believe very strongly that, to keep viruses from spreading and file sizes small, all emails should be sent in plain text. They and others (eg. users of web-based mail systems) will receive only the words you use without the formatting, or get it as annoying attachments.

It is also worth remembering that some formatting assumes the recipient has a PC with Windows, and this will not always be the case.

General advice: if you want to continue using HTML:

- use special formatting sparingly;
- always use a standard font such as Arial or Times Roman (since everyone has these);
- ensure your anti-virus program checks your incoming and outgoing mail; update the software at least weekly.

### Question 7

#### **Have I used helpful tops and tails?**

Consider the top and tail of your message with care.

- 1 Make sure you have set your software to show your real name in the 'From' line if you have a jokey email address. Send yourself an email and see what it looks like.
- 2 What you put in the 'Subject' line is important: for someone with 30 emails arriving in their 'Inbox', it helps if it clearly communicates what this message is about.
- 3 If emailing a distribution list be sure to use the blind copy or 'Bcc' line, never the 'To' or 'Cc' lines. Otherwise you are broadcasting all the email addresses to each recipient and, more dangerously, to anyone who intercepts the mail. Spammers love this. Those who print out the email and find a full page of addresses do not. Possible exceptions: small lists when everyone needs to be able to email comments to everyone.
- 4 Emails are less formal than written letters but the use of 'Dear Jim' as a greeting is now much more common than it was. 'Hi, Jim', 'Hello, Jim', or just 'Jim' are all fine if that is how you would speak anyway. 'Hi' sounds a bit odd from a formal person in a formal email.

- 5 You don't usually sign off as a letter, however. It is normal to be less formal than any kind of 'Yours ...' .
- 6 What is helpful, though, is a 'signature' – the proper title for standard lines you put into your email editor and then add to the end of each message. This is similar to your headed paper and should give useful information. You can set up a different one for internal messages.
- It is unhelpful when someone fails to give their postal address or telephone number if a postal or phone response may be required. Putting your full name and church/mission first allows you to sign just your Christian name in the message itself. Keep it short – some say as few as four lines. A good signature creates a positive impression. If it includes a short message it is good to change it regularly.
- 7 Some organisations now add a 'disclaimer' to the signature, covering themselves should the email fall into the wrong hands. This is something to consider for larger organisations, but OTT for individuals. If you use one, avoid filling one side of A4 with the wording. Find some good examples from emails you have received and aim to simplify as much as you possibly can. Otherwise your recipients use an extra sheet of paper every time they print out one of your emails. You may want to ask your legal adviser to check your final wording.

### *Question 8*

#### **Have I checked attachments and reply formats?**

- 1 A common fault is to promise an attachment, then forget to attach it! So check before clicking 'Send'.
- 2 Beware large attachments, or too many files linked to one email. You may have 8mB broadband – your recipient may have something much slower. So a large PowerPoint file, or a photograph in a large file format, may strangle their system or fail to download.
- 3 Set your anti-virus software to scan outgoing mail, and set it to be automatically updated, so you do not pass on a virus with the attachment.
- 4 Avoid unusual formats for attachments or many people will have problems opening them.

- 5 Do not send a blank email with an attachment. This is likely to be deleted by a spam filter.
- 6 Ideally you should not send attachments in Word, but first save the file into 'rtf' (Rich Text Format – which your word processor program allows as an option) or 'pdf' (Portable Document Format – which means you need extra software).

The dangers of Word attachments include the following.

- It is relatively easy for a recipient to discover a little about the changes you have made to the document, and this might prove embarrassing.
- Not everyone uses Word.
- Many Word documents include macros (computer code) which change the document whenever it is opened. An example might be a date. Some believe it is bad manners to send material which contains such macros.
- The recipient can then edit the document and send it on to others without your permission. This is specially dangerous if the document is a sensitive one.

Having said that, most don't bother about this and Word attachments are very common.

The final bullet point can only be sorted by coding the document into pdf (eg. by the use of the full Adobe Acrobat or one of the free programs now available on the market). Many people have downloaded the free Adobe Acrobat Reader to enable them to read and print pdf documents, but they cannot code into this format with this.

When replying to messages you can often choose whether to set your software to show the original message or not. It is important to help your recipient follow the 'thread' (the term that is used) but there is no point in sending back the whole of the first message. So set the software to show the original text, include the key lines with your reply and delete the rest. Otherwise replies get longer and longer, and take up more file space each time.

If you are replying to several detailed points you may prefer to type your reply within the original to show what you are responding to. Check your software is set to use a different but readable colour such as a blue (if using HTML), or to show the original text with a margin line or mark.

## Two final questions for yourself

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These are included here for completeness, but this article can only outline the issues.

### *Question 9*

#### **Am I too gullible?**

This article is not the place to tackle in any detail the issue of spam and threats such as viruses and spyware. But an outline of the key points insofar as they relate to emailing is in order. Bear in mind that Christians appear to be more gullible than most people, and there are plenty of people out there eager to cause everyone real problems.

- 1 Never believe scare emails you receive just because they have come from someone you know and trust. These may be false alarms, deliberate scares or scams. Check them out on the various hoax sites (such as [www.sophos.com/virusinfo/hoaxes](http://www.sophos.com/virusinfo/hoaxes)) and you will usually find they are groundless. Having said that, there are some genuine scams around at the moment, such as telephone calls about prizes you are supposed to have won and, of course, emails purporting to come from people with huge funds they need to access if only you will kindly help them.
- 2 Beware 'phishing' emails. These are those that seem to come from a bank or building society saying they need you to resend your password and other details. You will find your account is quickly emptied if you reply with the information. Your real bank will never ask you for such details.
- 3 Never open any attachment you receive, whoever it has come from until you have scanned it with your anti-virus program and be highly suspicious of any unusual file names. Ensure your anti-virus software is set to scan all incoming and outgoing emails, and is automatically updated every week at the very least.
- 4 Have a system for dealing with spam if it is a problem. There is a wide range of available means on the market. If necessary, take advice on prevention (eg. choosing an unobvious email address) and on cure.
- 5 Never reply to spam emails saying you wish to come off the mailing list. This simply confirms your email address is genuine and traffic to you will increase.

- 6 Distrust any email received from anyone you do not know with a message that you would not have expected. If in any doubt, delete it, then empty your 'Deleted' box.
- 7 If you are not well protected with proper software, you should have the view browser in your email program switched off. But it is better to be fully protected.

### *Question 10*

#### **Am I handling my email files effectively?**

This is another question that deserves a more thorough answer than will be possible now, but here are some basic points to bear in mind so that you keep in control of your email filing system. The author aims to prepare a more technical article in due course which will explain how to follow some of these guidelines for those unused to email folder management.

- 1 Only print out a paper copy of a message if you really need to. Avoid the temptation to print every email onto paper. If you do print, beware printing out the same text several times because people have replied with the original text they are replying to still on the email.
- 2 Only keep the email (whether sent or received) on your computer if you really need to. There is no point in keeping hundreds of emails that simply thank you for yours, or provide information that will be out-of-date in a few days' time. Enjoy using the Delete button!
- 3\* If your emails are important, ensure you regularly export them to a file which you then back up in an appropriate way.
- 4 Create a set of folders within your email program so that you can store each email in an appropriate place, enabling you to find it again quickly and see emails relating to the same theme or to/from the same person all in the same folder.
- 5 As soon as you have dealt with an email in your 'Inbox', delete it or move it (drag and drop) to its correct folder. Keep your In-box under control and aim to see it empty for much of the time.

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| 6* | Instead of leaving all sent emails in one 'Sent' box, delete them or drag and drop them to the correct folder too. You may need to add the 'To' column head in each folder as well as the 'From' heading which will already be there. You then maintain an empty 'Sent' box. | 7 | Empty the 'Deleted' box on a regular basis.                                                                             |
|    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |   | * You may need to take advice from someone who knows your email program well if you are not familiar with these points. |

## Ideas to consider

- 1 If you want further ideas for good practice, try searching Google ([www.google.co.uk](http://www.google.co.uk)) UK pages for the word 'netiquette' and see what you get. But when you see a site referenced RFC1855, this is quite complicated stuff and somewhat out-of-date now.
- 2 If you are a church with an office and/or a number of staff, or a mission agency, it is worth having an email good practice guide for everyone (electronically of course). Some of the sites you may have found in IDEA 1 will be just this. A simple way to start would be to adapt this article to your own situation. You are welcome to do so, although some acknowledgment to the author's website would be appreciated.

## Finally

You can pray for your emails, especially those tricky ones that need to be just right. But if it is that tricky, back to question one!

This article is available at [www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/articles/a11.pdf](http://www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/articles/a11.pdf). On a similar theme see also Article A14, *Create a quality website*. For indexes of all items available on the site, visit the [resources page](#).

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of using his consultancy or training services. He can run a range of training events on communication issues in church life.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A11 under Communication (with a link to Administration).

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