

Email Etiquette

When you send an e-mail to one of the university mailing lists, you want people to absorb what you have to say. But you are not the only one asking for the recipients' attention: e-mail is ubiquitous and we all receive too much of it. The key to getting your point across is to make it as easy as possible for your reader to process the message.

The following are some tips to help you do this, applicable not only for university mailing lists! Following these tips in everyday communication also decreases the chance of your message getting stuck in the recipients' spam folder and should increase the effectiveness of e-mail for all correspondents.

- Use short and meaningful subject lines. They help your recipients decide quickly whether the message is relevant and/or interesting to them. Good subject lines also make it easier to find messages months later.
- Keep your messages short and concise. If people have to read through lots of text in order to get to the main point, they are likely to just skip the message if they are busy. Hook the readers in by stating the main point right away instead of trying to create expectation and surprise.

One or two paragraphs is all that's needed for most messages. If you find you need more, consider putting a summary at the top in which you identify the target audience and what kind of action your message warrants from those you address.

- Use a plain and simple writing style and language. People should spend their time answering your question or using your information, rather than understanding it.
- After composing the message, take the time to read over it again and don't be afraid to cut redundant parts or irrelevant information.
- Before you hit the send button, make sure you are addressing your message to the intended group of recipients. Especially with mailing lists, which distribute a message to thousands of people with a single click, it is crucial to ensure that you are sending to the right list.

Also, if you feel the need to reply to someone's message, it is seldom necessary to send your response to the list; send it only to the author of the message to which you replied. If you reply to a multi-recipient message, trim the list of recipients; do not assume that every recipient of a message is interested in your response.

- If you attach documents to your e-mail, consider putting the key points into the message so that you recipients can get an idea of

what your message is about without having to open the documents (which takes time).

- For data, such as time and location of an event, present the details instead of using prose. It's best if you set your e-mail program to use a fixed-width font (such as Courier New) and align columns, which reduces the visual weight of the information:

```
Event:      Productivity workshop
Time:       1 April 2008, 16:20
Audience:  Open to all.
Location:   Main building, room 123
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- Separate paragraphs with an empty line. Don't be afraid to use white-space, but refrain from using it excessively. Specifically, start your text at the top of the message.
- When you reply to a message, do not quote it all and simply add your reply to the top. Instead, trim the original message to restore context and reply below. Have a look at <http://www.netmeister.org/news/learn2quote.html>, which gives good recommendations on how to write newsgroup messages. Those guidelines also apply to e-mail discussions.
- Avoid capitalising whole words, which clutters the screen and makes the text difficult to read.

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