

(Approx. 1,523 words)

Upgrade Your E-mail Activities

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IT'S TIME TO UPGRADE YOUR E-MAIL ACTIVITIES

It's probable that 99% of computer users use e-mail in their daily lives. It has been my observation that the majority of users do a less than perfect job of writing and handling their mail. The purpose of this presentation is to (hopefully) give you tips and hints on improving your activities in this area.

We all make typos occasionally, and an occasional typo is no real tragedy. But, sometimes we forget that spelling, punctuation and grammar, and form should be a part of everyday e-mail activities. We should also remember that e-mail can be a mirror of who and what we are, especially to those with whom we have little or no direct personal contact. For these reasons, it behooves us to take more pains in the area of our e-mail. The offenders are not only the newbies. Advanced users are often the worst culprits.

For those of you who think some of the material below makes me a snob, maybe that's so. But like it or not, we are judged by our e-mail, just as we'd be judged by our snail mail. Many who are very careful when they write a normal letter to be mailed, have utter disregard for the appearance of their e-mail.

DIFFERENT E-MAIL SYSTEMS AND SOFTWARE

There are many different programs that are used for e-mail. Some of the most widely used are probably Outlook Express, AOL, G-Mail (Google), and Hot Mail (Microsoft). They all have their own idiosyncrasies, but there are many common elements that all share which many people just don't bother to learn or use. This is OK, as the capabilities are there when one decides to take advantage of them. But regardless of what program you use, or what features you take advantage of, the suggestions below are still applicable.

I happen to be a fussy person. In most everything that I do in life, I always seek to make things as perfect as possible. Then when the normal course of events occurs, and perfection is compromised, at least I'm left with a respectable end result. Of course, if I should start off with mediocrity, then the normal course of events will give me a pretty poor final result.

Here's a list of suggestions to make your e-mail better. There is really nothing earthshaking or new here. But from my observations over the years, many people tend to ignore many of these elements completely.

1. Don't run everything together into one long paragraph for the whole e-mail message.
2. Use double spaces between paragraphs.
3. Keep the salutation on a separate opening line, and double space to the start of the message body.
4. Use a "pleasant" font. This makes reading your message more pleasant. I personally use a font that is installed by Windows called "Comic Sans MS". Don't use a harsh or overly styled font
5. Capitalize the start of each sentence. Don't make single sentences extend beyond a reasonable length.
6. And, use proper punctuation. Don't use all CAPS. This is interpreted as "shouting."
7. If your e-mail software has a spell checker, use it, and also **proofread your outgoing message for typos, content, and grammar, before sending it.** Of course, spell checkers can't pick up errors like those below, as the words are correctly spelled, they're just not the right word. Don't get sloppy with your grammar and use of contractions. I continue to see the following very often in mail. I'm sure that most of you know the proper usage, but just get careless.
 - a. Using "your", instead of "you're", and vice versa
 - b. "It's" for possessive . "It's" is a contraction for "it is" - it is not a possessive form
 - c. Using "their" instead of "they're", and vice versa
 - d. Using a lower case "i" instead of an upper case "I" for the personal pronoun.
 - e. When you want to send someone a copy of something from another piece of e-mail, I feel the cleanest approach is to copy and paste from the other message. If you don 't know how to copy and paste, it's probably time you learned.
8. Copying and pasting is a very basic Windows function, applicable to just about every program in Windows. This was reviewed in earlier "Basics" articles.
9. Every time something is routinely copied from another e-mail message, it probably carries along with lots of unwanted formatting, and "garbage." If the copy and paste material is short, manually clean out all the extra spaces, carriage returns, and symbols such as "<" and ">". I've seen such messes created when I've been sent material that has been copied/forwarded several times that I just refuse to read it.
10. There are a many freeware and shareware programs out there which will clean up situations like this. NoteTab, which is the finest text editor out there offers a freeware version, and several shareware versions. It has a built in feature that will clean up most of the weird spaces and carriage returns in such situations. For my own personal use, and for other WordPerfect users, I wrote a macro that does an excellent job of "cleaning up" such situations. It even gets rid of the < and > characters. Anyone using WordPerfect and wanting a copy - e-mail me a request at ronhirsch1439@comcast.net.

11. It seems that the much of the e-mail out there is people sending jokes to their friends. Depending upon the e-mail system you're using, the incoming message can end up being pages and pages of headers from all the previous transmittals. I once got such a message that had 14 long headers at the beginning, with each header containing dozens of names. And, the actual area with the jokes was just about unreadable by the time it reached me. I politely asked the sender to take me off his mailing list.

To do the cleanest possible job, the best way is to cut and paste (and clean up the formatting after pasting) into a new message. You say that's a lot of bother - maybe so. But, the people who receive your mail will be thankful to you, and also be impressed with the "quality" of your work in this area.

BELOW ARE SOME ADDITIONAL TIPS TO FURTHER ENHANCE YOUR E-MAIL ACTIVITIES

TRY HTML

If the recipients of your mail can handle HTML, and you have HTML available to you in your e-mail program, try using colors, and other text formatting. In Outlook Express, this is accessed via the top menu using **FORMAT>RICH TEXT (HTML)**. Using this format allows the user to use colored text, add in photos, and in general, make a message much more attractive.

For example - when someone sends me a message with a number of questions, I like to insert the answers to each question immediately following that question, and color my response text to make it clearly visible. This makes it much easier for the reader to read the answers to the questions.

SENDING PHOTOS AND OTHER FILES

There are two basic ways to send photos. If your mail can handle HTML, they can usually be inserted or pasted right into the message. Or, they can be sent along as a file attachment, which can then be saved and viewed on another computer using a suitable image viewing program, which virtually all computers have available.

GENERATING YOUR MESSAGES OFF-LINE

To do a more careful job of generating your e-mail messages, especially when they're long or complicated ones, consider generating them offline in a word processor or text editor. You can then take advantage of the spell and grammar checkers which are available in programs like WordPerfect and Microsoft Word. And, it's usually much easier to write and review things, especially when the messages are long. When completed, you can then copy and paste the message into your e-mail message.

SUMMARY

I'm sure that there are those who feel "fixing up" their e-mail is a waste of time. After all, if people can manage to read and understand what you write, what's the big deal anyway. Well, here's an analogy. Would you go to a party in torn clothes, with your hair messed up, and your hands and face dirty? If you answer "yes", then don't bother with

anything I've said in this article. However, if you answer "no," then you accept the fact that you will be judged by your appearance. And, your e-mail is definitely an appearance that you will be judged by, like it or not.

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