

# ME 370: The Mechanical Engineering Profession

Lecture 02: Email for Professional Communication

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# Purpose

Establish guidelines for email usage by engineering professionals.

# Email for Work

Email is so common that we can forget that the rules are different in a business environment.

- Everything is saved.
- You cannot control where your email goes after you send it.
- Your email establishes your professional reputation.
  - ▶ Style
  - ▶ Substance

**Start with bad  
examples**

*Bad email*

To: Jill  
From: Joe  
Re:

---

the report is due tomorrow  
we'll discuss it at the meeting

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re:

← No subject

---

the report is due tomorrow  
we'll discuss it at the meeting

Use a subject line that allows the recipient to sort and later find your message. Longer subject lines are better than terse, ambiguous subject lines.

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report

← Ambiguous

---

the report is due tomorrow  
we'll discuss it at the meeting

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test ← Still ambiguous

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting



*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting



Better. We still  
don't know  
which muffler.

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting



No capitalization, no punctuation.

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting



No capitalization, no punctuation.

Message:

I'm so lazy that holding the shift key and typing a period are too much effort.

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting



No capitalization, no punctuation.

Message:

I'm so lazy that holding the shift key and typing a period are too much effort.

You are unimportant.

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting



No capitalization, no punctuation.

Message:

I'm so lazy that holding the shift key and  
typing a period are too much effort.

You are unimportant.

Or both.

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting

Which report?

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting

Which report?

It's possible that Joe and Jill share responsibility for only one report. It's also quite likely that Jill is responsible for more than one report. Joe is assuming that Jill can sort this out.

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting

Which report?

It's possible that Joe and Jill share responsibility for only one report. It's also quite likely that Jill is responsible for more than one report. Joe is assuming that Jill can sort this out.

*Joe is putting the responsibility for understanding the message onto the receiver. He is assuming that the context for this message is well understood.*



*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting

What does the due date mean?

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting

What does the due date mean?

Is Joe expressing concern that he is not finished?

Is Joe reminding Jill of her responsibility?

Is Joe asking for help on a joint responsibility?

Is this a complaint about an unwanted assignment?

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting

What does the due date mean?

Is Joe expressing concern that he is not finished?

Is Joe reminding Jill of her responsibility?

Is Joe asking for help on a joint responsibility?

Is this a complaint about an unwanted assignment?

Joe is assuming that the context is mutually understood, which may (or may not) be a bad assumption.

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting

This statement is ambiguous.

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting

This statement is ambiguous.

What is “it”? The report? The due date? Your responsibility? My responsibility?

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting

This statement is ambiguous.

What is “it”? The report? The due date? Your responsibility? My responsibility?

When is the meeting?

How does the timing of the meeting relate to the due date for the report?

*Bad email*

To: Jill

From: Joe

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

---

the report is due tomorrow

we'll discuss it at the meeting

This statement is ambiguous.

What is “it”? The report? The due date? Your responsibility? My responsibility?

When is the meeting?

How does the timing of the meeting relate to the due date for the report?

Is this message a threat?

Or is Joe saying “Don't worry, I'll take care of it”?

*Better email*

To: Jill Smith

From: Joe Jones

Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

The report on acoustic measurements for the muffler upgrade on the new LNG fork lift is due tomorrow. I'm nearly finished. I just need to correct a microphone calibration plot in the appendix. I'll be done by 3:00 PM this afternoon.

I'll be able to answer any questions you have at our 4:00 PM meeting today.

FYI, the current draft of the report is attached.

Joe Jones

Test Engineering

x-4364



*Bad email*

To: Professor Smith

From: Joe

Re: Hey!

---

im confused about problem 8

can u give me a hint

*Better email*

To: Professor Smith

From: Joe Jones

Re: ME 370, Problem Set 2, Problem 8

---

I've been working on problem 8 for about an hour, and I'm confused about whether we can treat the air as incompressible.

If I assume the air is incompressible, the work input to the compressor is 50 kW, which seems low. If I assume the air is compressible, I can't justify using any of the formulas in Chapter 3 unless I also assume the compression is adiabatic. Is it safe to treat the compression as adiabatic?

I can come to your office hours tomorrow. If you get this email before then, and have time to give me a hint, I might be able to work the rest of the solution on my own.

Joe Jones

joe\_jones@gmail.com

ME 370, Tuesday section

*Even better email*

To: Professor Smith

From: Joe Jones

Re: ME 370, Problem Set 2, Problem 8

---

I've been working on problem 8 for about an hour, and I'm confused about whether we can treat the air as incompressible.

If I assume the air is incompressible, the work input to the compressor is 50 kW, which seems low. If I assume the air is compressible, I can't justify using any of the formulas in Chapter 3 unless I also assume the compression is adiabatic. Is it safe to treat the compression as adiabatic?

I can come to your office hours tomorrow. If you get this email before then, and have time to give me a hint, I might be able to work the rest of the solution on my own.

Thanks,

Joe Jones

joe\_jones@gmail.com

ME 370, Tuesday section

Some real (bad)  
examples

*Real (bad) email*

To: Gerald Recktenwald

From: Professor X

Re: Re: Do you have a need for DI water?

---

Science Research & Teaching Center, Room 405

Hello Gerry,

Ref: To request the AAAA xxxx Spring-2012 course is cross-listed also with the MME department

The course will be offered at the AAAA Blah Lab (SRTC-000) or in research lab settings

Here we are the AAAA guys again organizing the AAAA- xxx Spring-2012. Last year Prof Y was one of the lecturers, contributing to the success of the course. We also had a couple of very active students from your department who signed for the course. I attach the organization of the course (subjected to last minute changes).

*Another Real (bad) email*

To: Gerald Recktenwald

From: Student X

Re: Hi i would like to enroll for a class please

---

Hi Gerry my name is xxxx yyyy i spoke with Molly and she told me to get into contact with you and send a email i work for a company called ABC we deal with sheet metal fabrication. Medical, Dental, and military i have been with the business for 4 years now my owner asked me if i could take a Solidworks class to help the business for my work so what i am asking is if you can give me department permission to take ME-450 class. Molly had mentioned during this course solid works is trained but its an advance class if i got into contact with you maybe you could put me in so i could learn for my work or if you know something that might be better for me that would be good to if you could get back to me when you have a chance that would be great thanks again.

# Email Guidelines

## Basic principles

- Be direct and brief: One main point per email.
- Provide context for decisions.
- Write in complete sentences with proper spelling and punctuation.
- Don't use texting abbreviations.
- Do use short paragraphs.
- Avoid jokes or emotional content.

# Email Guidelines

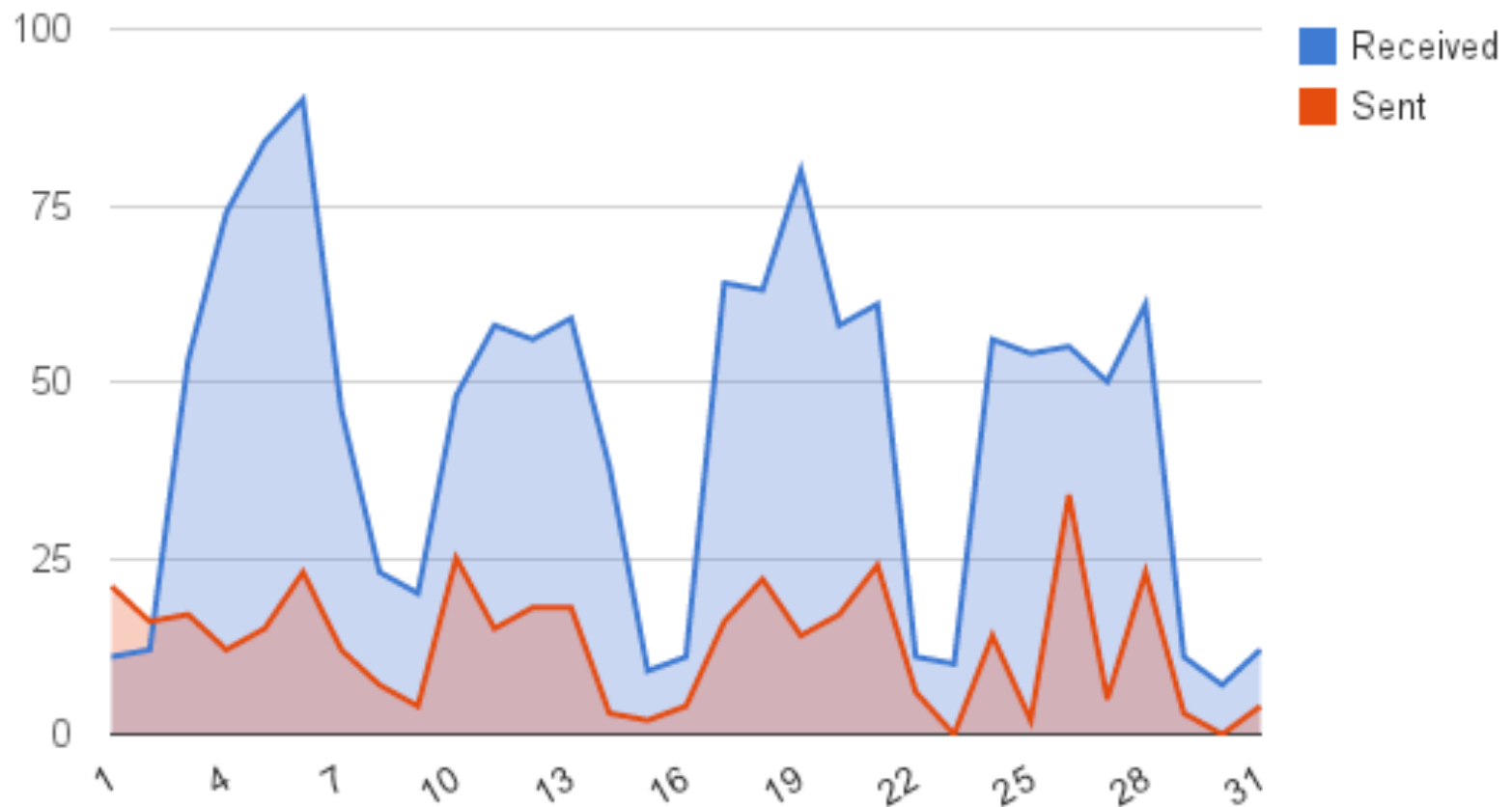
## Make these assumptions

- The recipient is busy, and does not have time to read long, rambling messages.
- The recipient prefers questions that have short, direct answers. Questions with yes/no answers are best.
- The recipient's job is not to solve your problems.
- Your jokes are probably not very funny in person. Your jokes are even less funny via email.



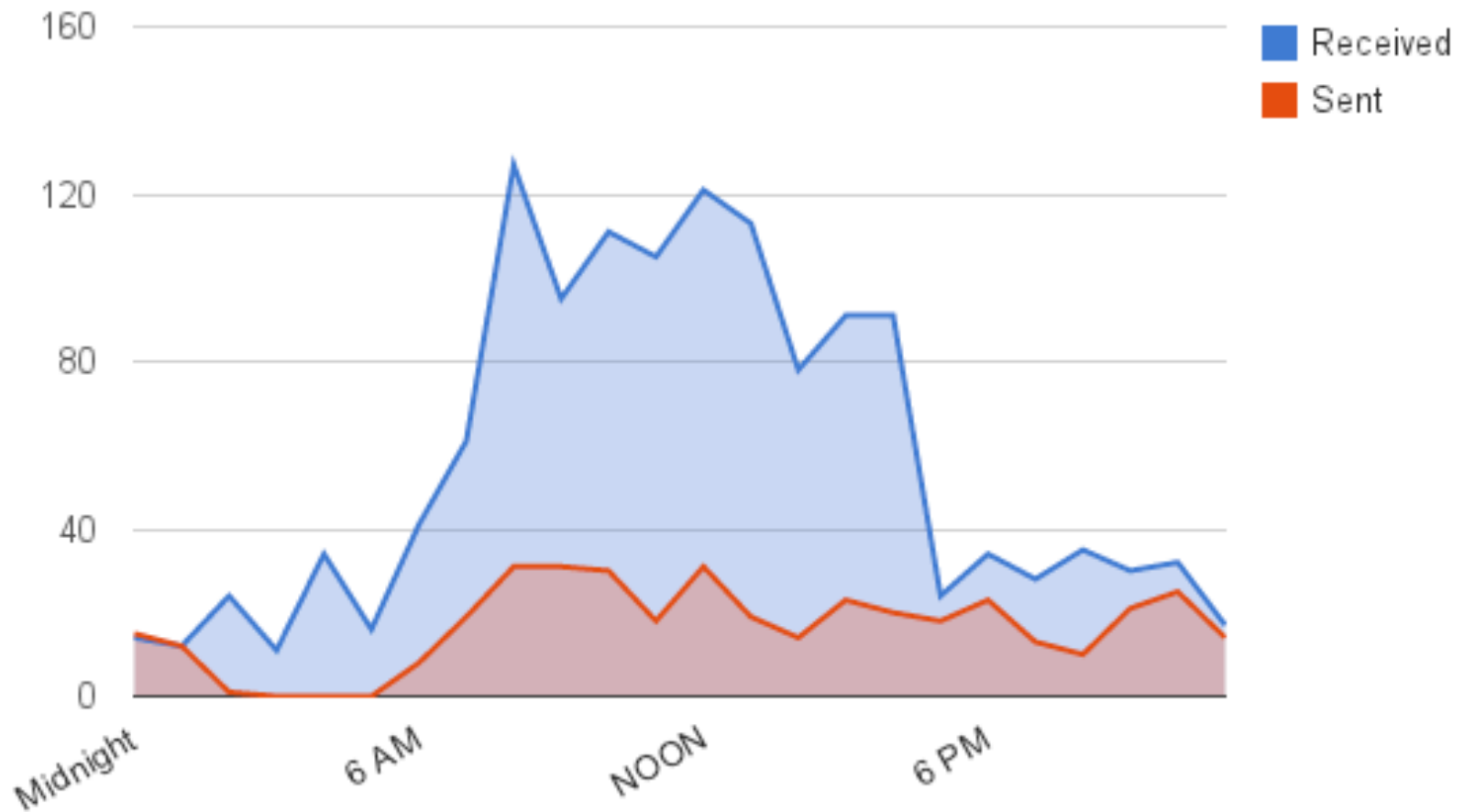
# Email traffic for GWR in March 2014

## Daily pattern during the month



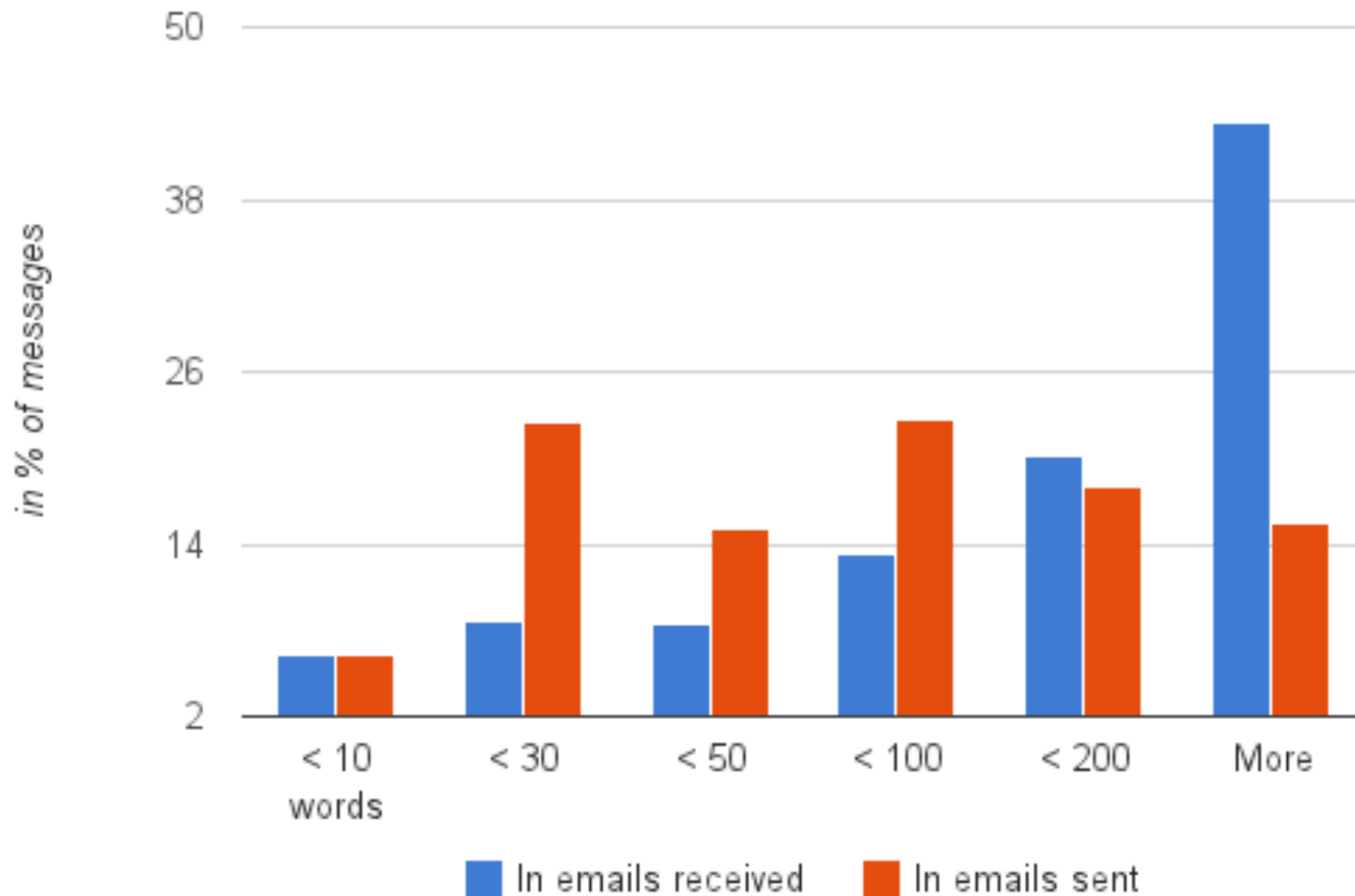
# Email traffic for GWR in March 2014

## Pattern during 24 hour period



# Email traffic for GWR in March 2014

## Word count

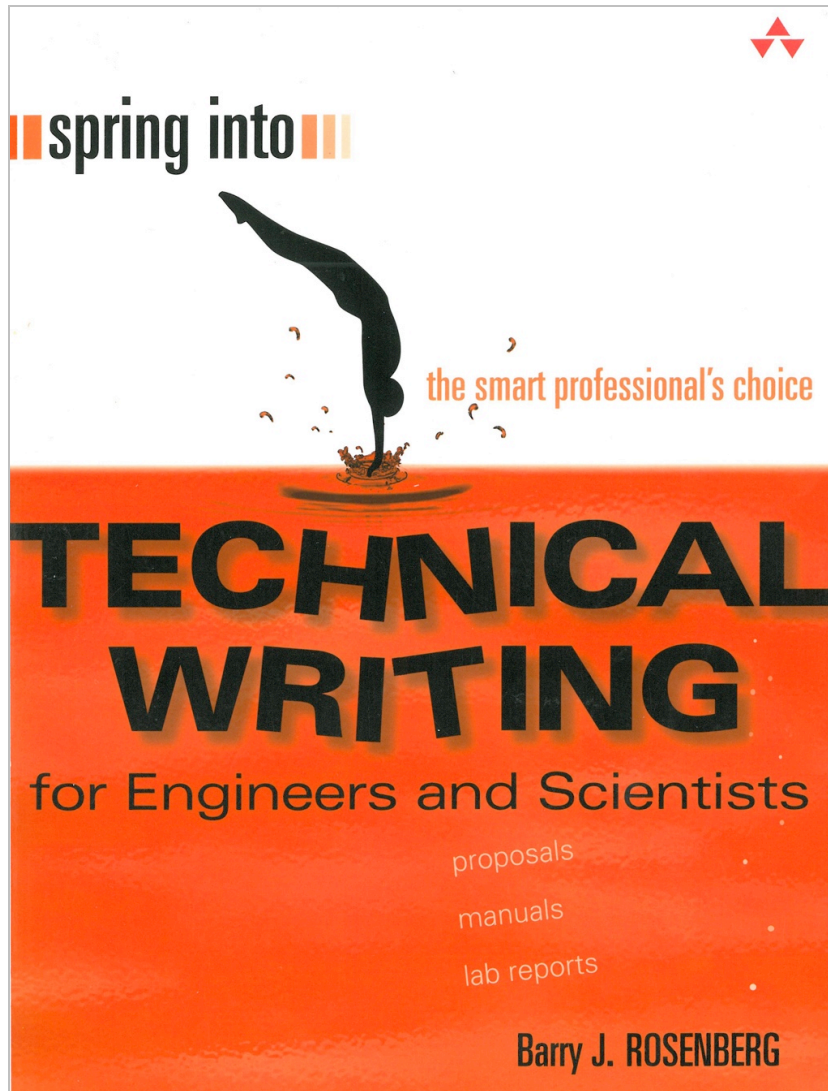


# Web references

## Web sites with useful email advice

- <http://webfoot.com/advice/email.top.php>
- <http://www.businessemail etiquette.com/>
- <http://www.netmanners.com/email-etiquette/>
- <http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/EmailCommunication.htm>

# Email Guidelines



Barry Rosenberg, *Spring into Technical Writing for Engineers and Scientists*, 2005, Pearson Education

# Rosenberg's Advice

Use the same discipline in writing email as you do when writing formal documents.

- Use complete sentences.
- Capitalize proper nouns and first words of sentences.
- Punctuate properly.
- Use correct grammar.

*Informal is not always bad*

To: Jill Jones

From: Joe Smith

Re: Lunch at 11:45 today.

---

I'm heading to the sandwich cart in 30 minutes.  
Do you want to come along?

- Joe -

# Rosenberg's Advice

Re-read all messages before sending them.

- Check for obvious typos and gaffes.
- Avoid a quick, emotional reply.

Ask yourself:

Will the recipients understand this message?



# Rosenberg's Advice

Would you feel comfortable saying the text in this e-mail message in a face-to-face meeting with the recipient?

# Rosenberg's Advice

After the first miscommunication, stop sending email. Call or make a face-to-face visit.

# What is your goal?

Can this email hurt your professional reputation?

Is your email consistent with your goal?

# What is your goal?

Can this email hurt the reputation of your company?

Is your email consistent with your goal?

# What is your goal?

Will this email be offensive or hurtful to the recipient?

Is your email consistent with your goal?

# What is your goal?

Is this email demeaning or offensive to the recipient *or* to other people who are not the intended recipient?

Is your email consistent with your goal?

How would this email sound if it was read aloud at a staff meeting?

Note: the legal standard for sexual harassment is *not your intent*. The legal standard is whether the conduct is offensive to people who witness it. Of course, there is much more to it.

# General Advice

Would you feel comfortable seeing this message printed in the daily newspaper, or read aloud by a television news reporter?

# General Advice

Would you feel comfortable seeing this message printed in the daily newspaper, or read aloud by a television news reporter?

- Emotions are normal. Acting from an emotionally agitated state often leads to trouble.
- Separate your feelings from your strategy and tactics.
- Venting emotion may feel OK in the moment, but it is unlikely to help you obtain my goal. If you need to vent, do it in private (alone) or with a trusted friend.



# If in doubt, wait.

If you have a lot of strong feelings about the subject of the email, or the person you are sending it to, let it sit.

- Compose the email with an empty “To” field
- Take a walk
- Better yet, let it sit overnight.
- Remember to ask:

Will sending this email  
help me achieve my goal?