

E-mail Etiquette: A Quick Guide to Writing a Professional E-mail

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E-mail has generally been used as an informal means of communication. However, as it becomes increasingly popular in the job application process, students need to take time to think through the content of their e-mail and address the message that they might be sending to employers. An e-mail to an employer should never just say "see attached." The receiver may not even open the attachment.

Although employers don't always read an entire cover letter the first time, they do expect the writer to take time to include the necessary information in an appropriate way. The following rules should be used for e-mail when writing or responding to: potential employers, co-workers, colleagues, business members, and college staff or personnel. You will be taken seriously, and will often be given more credibility. Common mistakes are:

- using emoticons (:o),
- being too informal,
- misspellings and poor grammar,
- no capitalization, and
- spelling words the way they sound.

Because e-mail has become a mainstream form of communication, students may not easily switch from casual and conversational e-mail to professional e-mail. I cautioned a student about practicing the use of professional writing after reading an e-mail he sent-it was full of emoticons and phonetic spellings. He used "ur" for "you're or your;" he used "i" for "I", and also used many other common e-mail exchanges. We discussed how his habit could greatly affect his ability to get a job, and worked extensively on what he might write in an e-mail to an employer. A few days later I received an e-mail from the student, asking me to submit his resume and e-mail note for a position that I had announced. Although we had discussed his usage, he still had two mistakes.

Rules of the Road

Professional e-mail is very different from casual e-mail or instant messenger. Remember: it's easier to be ruled out than ruled in for a position. Here are some rules to consider when writing an e-mail in which you are job prospecting or applying for a job:

- Always introduce yourself the same way you would in a cover letter.

Dear Mr./Ms. So and So,

I am writing in regard to your posting on....for XYZ position in financial services.

- Treat your e-mail as if you were writing a professional cover or thank-you letter on paper, but be brief.
- In the subject line, make it obvious why you are writing: "Application for XYZ position."

- Make sure you change the contact name and content according to the person/company to whom you are sending the message.
- If you are responding to an e-mail, include the original message in the reply, so the receiver can put your e-mail into the correct context. Also, respond within two business days.
- Always spell words correctly! - Don't just use spell check. It won't catch words that are spelled correctly, but are misused within the context of the sentence.
- Never use all capital letters. Employers may think that you are screaming. It is also difficult to read.
- Think about the message your e-mail address sends. Keep your address simple, and avoid unprofessional sounding names like "studmuffin" or "partygirl."
- Read your message carefully before you click the send button. The tone of an e-mail can often be misinterpreted. - Have someone else proofread your message before you send it. It may be easier to find errors if you print and review your e-mail.
- Scan your resume for viruses before you attach it to your e-mail.
- Name your document "your name, resume." Employers receive hundreds of resumes via e-mail. If you follow-up by asking recruiters if they received your e-mail, they won't have to look through 300 attachments called "resume."
- If you are attaching your resume, ask the receiver if they would prefer that you send it in a different format, ie: Word Perfect, rich text format, or as a PDF.
- Do not assume that if an employer is informal that you should be.
- Don't just rely on e-mail. E-mail can be lost. Follow-ups can often be done via the telephone or regular mail.

Helpful Examples

Your e-mail can be a brief introduction:

*To: xyzperson@abccompany.org
From: cap@psued.edu
Subject: Application for summer internship*

Dear Ms. Clark,

I am writing in response to the ad posted on NACELink.com for a summer information systems/technology internship at ABCcompany (Job #123). Please accept my attached resume and letter as an application for this position. My skills and experience closely fit the posted job description, and I hope to hear from you soon.

Thank you,

Jane/John Doe Student

Or your e-mail can be your cover letter:

To: xyzperson@abccompany.org
From: cap@psued.edu
Subject: Application for summer internship

Dear Ms. Clark,

I am writing in response to the ad posted on NACELink.com for a summer information systems/technology internship at ABCcompany (Job #123). Please accept my attached resume as an application for this position.

My experience and personality closely fits the posted job description, and I am excited to apply.

As a management information systems student at Penn State, I have taken advantage of numerous research and design opportunities on campus and in class, which may be useful when working at ABCcompany. During my web design class, I volunteered to organize a group that would design and create a web site using Flash technology for a local company. The project was well received, and the organization is using some of our ideas. As a student worker in the School of Business, I also designed an Access data base to track student advising appointments and progress. The position required a high degree of confidentiality as well as a person with the ability to work on the project until it was completed.

In addition to maintaining a 3.0 GPA, and holding an on-campus job, I have also participated in various campus activities and leadership programs. By working on committees, I was able to demonstrate my leadership, teamwork, and time-management skills, which can be useful in a professional setting like ABCcompany.

*I am eager to learn more about the internship position, and would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you in an interview about my qualifications. I am available to work from May 1 through August 2, 2003, and can be reached at.... I look forward to hearing from you.
Thank you.*

Sincerely,

Joe/Jane Student