A Blueprint for Writing Effective Emails
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*Writing an email is simple—or is it? Many health care professionals may find the task of crafting emails to be more complex than they would expect. But **Thomas Jehn**, the Sosland director of the Harvard College Writing Program and faculty member of Harvard Medical School's **Effective Writing for Health Care** certificate program, breaks down the process into some easy-to-follow steps.*

Exploring Email Challenges

Emails provide a convenient vehicle to communicate with your colleagues, patients and their families. Yet capturing your ideas effectively in this format can take some real planning and thought.

"The genre of email writing really poses a lot of challenges," Jehn says. For instance, you may draft your messages in a hurry while multi-tasking, which could prevent you from taking the time needed to explain the main points clearly. In addition, emails are often sent to recipients who feel burdened by the responsibility of having to read them.

"When we imagine our readers, we must imagine the worst, which is that they are busy and distracted," he says. Further, the most important parts of emails are often lost amid a lot of unnecessary text.

Tips for Effective Emails

To address these and other email problems, Jehn suggests using the following tips. These can help you craft powerful emails that are more likely to have their desired effect.

1. Focus your message: Determine the main goal of your email and how you can communicate this in one or two sentences. "Become very intentional in what you are trying to say," he stresses. You can also use your first line, and your last line, to help you frame the message clearly, so the reader isn't left struggling to figure out your intent.
2. Lead with your main point: It's important not to bury the main takeaway of your email but rather, to include it in the first paragraph, which is when you will have the reader's focus. Jehn suggests looking to news writing, which is done in an inverted period style, as a model for how to present your information. This style starts with the most essential ideas coming first and then unfolding secondary points in the order of relevance. If people don't read the entire email or news article, this ensures they get the biggest takeaways anyway.
3. Use the subject line to prime your reader: "Over the years, I have become more aware of how a subject line can help readers to focus their attention and tell them what you are

asking. If the message is time sensitive, you can also include this in your subject line," Jehn says.

4. Think about tone: "We often don't know how our words will land. Or we may have a difficult history with the person to whom we are writing. It's much easier to calibrate when we see a person's facial expression," he says. Since you write emails in a void without being able to personally gauge the reader's reaction, you are forced to guess how your words will impact your reader. "I err on the side of formality if writing to someone I don't know and I try to hit an earnest note," Jehn says.

5. Break up text for readability: "To reduce reader fatigue and overload, I break up messages into one or two sentence paragraphs," Jehn says, adding that this is a courtesy for readers—especially for those who view emails on their phone. In addition, he advises using bullets and headings to further make your emails easier to read. If you have a lot of complexity to share, he suggests including a long message as an attachment, or using a phone call or a Zoom meeting, to delve further into the details.

6. Be concise: When writing emails, it is easy to pad your text with words that don't add any value to the message or that are repetitive. Be on the lookout for words that are easy to eliminate, like: generally, actually, basically, kind of, fundamentally, first and foremost, each and every, and fundamental. Removing these words won't change the meaning but can pare down the length of your email. Also think about using affirmative words rather than getting stuck in negatives (such as saying "with" instead of "not without").

7. Consider the staying power of emails: While the details of a verbal conversation may quickly fade for participants, when you put something in writing, recipients can dwell on what you've written and how you've phrased it—and they might forward it to others.

Achieve Results

When you consider these elements and use them to take more control of the email writing process, you can become better at crafting impactful messages that are likely to be well received by your readers.

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