10 Tips on How to Write a Professional Email

Despite the popularity of texting and social media, email remains the most common form of written communication in the business world--and the most commonly abused.* Too often email messages snap, growl, and bark--as if being concise meant that you had to sound bossy. Not so.

Consider this email message recently sent to all staff members on a large university campus:

It is time to renew your faculty/staff parking decals. New decals are required by Nov. 1. Parking Rules and Regulations require that all vehicles driven on campus must display the current decal.

Slapping a "Hi!" in front of this message doesn't solve the problem. It only adds a false air of chumminess.

Instead, consider how much nicer and shorter--and probably more effective--the email would be if we simply added a "please" and addressed the reader directly:

Please renew your faculty/staff parking decals by November 1.

Of course, if the author of the email had truly been keeping his readers in mind, he might have included another useful tidbit: a clue as to how and where to renew the decals.

Ten Quick Tips on Writing a Professional Email

1. Always fill in the subject line with a topic that means something to your reader. Not "Decals" or "Important!" but "Deadline for New Parking Decals."

2. Put your main point in the opening sentence. Most readers won't stick around for a surprise ending.

3. Never begin a message with a vague "This"--as in "This needs to be done by 5:00." Always specify what you're writing about.

4. Don't use ALL CAPITALS (no shouting!), or all lower-case letters either (unless you're the poet e. e. cummings).

5. As a general rule, PLZ avoid textspeak (abbreviations and acronyms): *you* may be ROFLOL (rolling on the floor laughing out loud), but your reader may be left wondering WUWT (what's up with that).

6. Be brief *and* polite. If your message runs longer than two or three short paragraphs, consider (a) reducing the message, or (b) providing an attachment. But in any case, don't snap, growl, or bark.

7. Remember to say "please" and "thank you." And mean it. "Thank you for understanding why afternoon breaks have been eliminated" is prissy and petty. It's *not* polite.

8. Add a signature block with appropriate contact information (in most cases, your name, business address, and phone number, along with a legal disclaimer if required by your company). Do you*need* to clutter the signature block with a clever quotation and artwork? Probably not.

9. Edit and proofread before hitting "send." You may think you're too busy to sweat the small stuff, but unfortunately your reader may think you're a careless dolt.

10. Finally, reply promptly to serious messages. If you need more than 24 hours to collect information or make a decision, send a brief response explaining the delay.