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Winning the Email War

A blank subject line, a vague subject, or nothing but a subject. Umpteen addressees; numerous people cc'd. No greeting. Distracting background wallpaper. Spelling, capitalization, grammar, and punctuation errors. Long sentences and paragraphs; overall lack of conciseness and clarity. Rude tone. Replies from every Tom, Dick, and Harriett. Conversations that go on and on and on ...

If you're like me, you have a love-hate relationship with email. We rely heavily on it to do our jobs effectively and efficiently. But the very thing that is an indispensable tool is often also a source of aggravation. At the heart of the problem is the volume of email that passes through our in- and out-boxes daily.

I recently posed the following question to my colleagues: "If you could offer only two pieces of advice regarding email, what would those be?" The overuse of "reply to all" is a major pet peeve, as are the closely related transgressions of using "cc" inappropriately and replying even if a reply is not needed. My own *bête noire* is the sender's failure to use the subject line effectively. Numerous coworkers emphasized the need to be as succinct as possible; to use correct spelling (including complete words, not shorthand like pls and rgds), grammar, and punctuation, and to proofread the message; and to not reply when angry.

The best discussion I've seen about taking control of email instead of letting it take control of us is a column in *The Washington Post* by Chris Anderson, curator of the TED Conference, and a related blog post. He believes the burden of email continues to get worse because the total time involved in responding to an email is often more than the time it took to create it. He explains: Even though it's quicker to read than to write an email, five other factors outweigh this: (1) Emails often contain challenging, open-ended questions that can't rapidly be responded to. (2) It's really easy to copy and paste extra text into emails (email creation time is almost the same, but reading time soars). (3) It's really easy to add links to other pages, or video (each capable of consuming copious goblets of time). (4) It's really easy to cc multiple people. (5) The act of processing an email consists of more than just reading — it involves (a) scanning an inbox, (b) deciding which ones to open, (c) opening them, (d) reading them, (e) deciding how to respond, (f) responding, (g) getting back into the flow of your other work.

Anderson invited readers of his blog to comment on ten proposed guidelines, and based on their input devised the following "10 Rules to Reverse the Email Spiral" (emailcharter.org):

1. Respect Recipients' Time
2. Short or Slow is not Rude
3. Celebrate Clarity
4. Quash Open-Ended Questions
5. Slash Surplus cc's
6. Tighten the Thread
7. Attack Attachments
8. Give these Gifts: EOM (end of message) and NNTR (no need to respond)
9. Cut Contentless Responses
10. Disconnect! If we all agreed to spend less time doing email, we'd all get less email!

Rule 10 sounds like a good idea to me. If you do need to contact us at the email addresses listed at the left, please keep Rules 1 through 9 in mind, and be sure to succinctly capture the topic and purpose of the email in its subject line ;-)

Cynthia F. Mascone, Editor-in-Chief

