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*The Seven Secrets to Good Email:*

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“Ever[od] gets so much information all da[ long that the[ lose their common sense[

Gertrude Stein (1874 - 1946)

## The Seven Secrets to Good Email

It is hard now to envisage a world without email—yet for many people it is only in the past few years that it has become an important means of communication.

Email has brought about extraordinary changes in working processes and habits, as well as how we communicate with family and friends.

It makes passing information around so easy—from a massive document sent across the world to a two line message sent to the person in the next desk or the next house.

It gives us access to people who in the past have been carefully guarded by secretaries and systems. It makes quick communication with large numbers of people possible.

And as technology—such as mobile phones and pocket PCs— becomes more affordable and simpler to operate, it allows a person to keep in contact—any time and from any where.

But it has its drawbacks as well:



- person to person communication can sometimes suffer
- it is estimated that between 25% to 40% of people’s time at work can be taken up reading and answering emails
- there can be legal problems—from issues around formal contracts, industrial sabotage, privacy and spamming through to harassment and discrimination

- security issues for Information Technology systems through introduced computer viruses

Email is a very specific form of communication—it is a quick, inexpensive and convenient way of communicating with a small or large audience, who may be next door or across the world.

It is great way **to make arrangements**—provided that they are not urgent. Instant delivery does NOT mean the recipient will read it immediately.



It is an excellent way **to get information to a wide range of people**—as long as your subject line is relevant or interesting enough to get them to read it.

It is simple way of **asking for a response**—as a follow up, not as a long explanation and request for action.

It is a wonderful way **to send information**—as attachments not in the body of the email.

An email is not a letter, a report or the minutes of a meeting—but it is an excellent way of sending information to an audience, or asking for a response.

### 1st Secret 1ee 1+ Simple

THE FIRST  
SECRET

The 1st secret is:

1EE 1T S 1E

Don't try and do too much with email

Emails that are effective are those that **keep it simple** in the:

- subject line
- content—addressing only one topic
- language—using Plain English

If your email is longer than 3 or 4 paragraphs, then reconsider the format you are using. *Would this communication be better sent as, for example, a letter or memo attached to the email?*

Clarify why you are writing the email, and who your audience is, as you would for any other form of communication.



**Don't let it take the place of a face to face conversation.**

So, don't write long, complex emails—not many people will read them!

**And Secret Subject Line**

The 2nd secret is:

**And Secret Subject Line**

**THE SECOND  
SECRET**

People will read an email because of two things:

1. The addressee is one they want, need or expect to hear from.
2. The subject line is relevant or interesting.

We tend to **consistently** open only emails from a very select group of people—usually the boss, specific colleagues, particular friends, familiar businesses or accounts.

Otherwise, we will only open an email if the subject line persuades us to—it quickly tells us what it is about and why we should open it.

The first things your reader sees are **who the email is from**, and then the **subject line**.

Your subject line must be simple and clear, and make the reader want to read the email. If it doesn't, then the odds are that they will either delete it straight away, or leave it unread...*"I'll look at that one later when I have time"*...and of course, never get around to reading it.

The subject line needs to:



- tell you exactly what the email is about
- encourage you to make a quick decision about taking the next step and actually reading the email

Consider the following subject lines:

| Good Subject Lines   | Poor Subject Lines                             |
|--|--|
| Location for 1 April meeting   | Re: next meeting                               |
| Minutes & Action Plan from 1 April meeting                             | Re: minutes                                    |
| New computer virus alert   | Computer System Virus Information              |
| Urgent invoice attached  | Goods supplied                                 |
| Nominate NOW for the new Sales workshop                                | Instruction in Sales                           |
| Final report on water use available now                                | Water in El Nino and Other Weather Conditions  |
| Revised roster for April   | Re: Roster                                     |
| Lunch invitation for next week   | Invitation                                     |
| Guest speaker for next meeting   | Next meeting                                   |
| Last chance to comment on updated procedure                            | Comments needed on updated procedure by Monday |
| You still have a chance to get the discount, but only until noon today | Discount period finishes at 12 noon on 1 April |

As an exercise, look at the emails you receive over the next week or so. Examine the subject lines and observe which ones:

- capture your interest, and why
- you probably wouldn't open and why not

Practice writing some yourself that quickly tell your audience what your email is about and why they should open it.

A good way to do this is to jot down, in dot point form, the answer to this question:

## What do I want the reader to know or do?

Can the reader tell at once *'what's in it for them'*? If the answer is yes—then you have your good subject line!

### 3rd Secret 3 Screen 3ong

THE THIRD  
SECRET

The 3rd secret is:

THE TEXT SHOULD BE AS SHORT AS POSSIBLE

Generally, people prefer to read short sections of text on a screen.

Once an email starts to roll over onto a second screen, your reader is less likely to continue to read on—often they will scan ahead, and if the email looks as if it is a long one, they will simply delete it.

If you have **more information than will fit on one screen**, then **send it as an attachment**.

Use your email as the vehicle for **sending the following kinds of document as attachments**; do NOT put the information in the body of the email:

- a letter
- a report
- the agenda and minutes of a meeting
- an application
- a discussion paper
- a presentation



An exception to this rule is the **'series'** email. Sometimes, a group of people with common interests or who work together will reply to each other in a series of emails. Each one includes all the previous emails—there may be a dozen emails in the chain.

This can be a useful technique if a group of people are exploring an issue or offering ideas or options as everyone can:

ERROR: stackunderflow  
OFFENDING COMMAND: ~

STACK: