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 1K   **A scientist's guide to email etiquette**



By [June Gruber](#), [Leah H. Somerville](#), [Jay J. Van Bavel](#) | Feb. 12, 2020 , 10:15 AM

Love it or hate it, email is an inevitable part of being a scientist.

It can be an efficient and flexible form of communication, allowing you to send a quick note to a colleague to confirm an appointment or send revisions to a manuscript. Email can also initiate and sustain collaborations between scientists across the globe who may have never met face to face. Our **Letters to Young Scientists** column, in fact, started with a casual email between June and Jay about the lack of mentoring resources available to students—and we still have yet to all meet in person.

The reality, however, is that scientists also love to complain about email. And for good reason. Scientific work requires the ability to focus for extended periods of time, and the distraction of constant email can undercut a researcher's ability to complete thoughtful, original, and creative

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Another downside of email is that it can fail at conveying the intended tone, as it only contains text. Written communication doesn't capture intonation, facial expressions, and other important sources of information we use during face-to-face interactions. Compounding the issue, we often fail **to appreciate** how these sources of information are lost in email. When we read someone else's emails, we tend to fill in the gaps by jumping to negative conclusions—for instance, assuming others are upset or frustrated with us. Whenever Leah receives an email from a colleague that simply reads, “Can we talk?” or “Call me,” she wracks her brain for reasons the sender might be upset with her. The lack of tone and subtlety present in face-to-face communication can make email stressful and prone to miscommunication.

Given all these pitfalls, how can young scientists navigate the complexities of email? As a starting point, we share our thoughts on basic email etiquette and offer tips to get the most out of email.

No. 1: Stay professional. We recommend using an official institutional email address over personal account when you're sending work-related exchanges, especially if you're corresponding with someone new. Include a professional signature at the bottom of each email, listing your name, title, and institution.

When you're composing your email, avoid slang (e.g., “hey,” “yo,” “dude,” “wassap?”) and emoji because, not surprisingly, **research suggests you may be seen as less competent or professional**. Instead, you should address the email recipient by their preferred name. When you're unsure, it's

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No. 2: Be concise and courteous. Emails are not dissertations. Try not to send long emails that take more than 1 or 2 minutes to read, and consider framing your email around questions with simple yes or no answers. People are much faster to respond to emails that only require a quick response than those that will require a large pocket of time. If you want to add context, link to relevant articles or set up an in-person meeting. Don't "cc" others on emails unless they need to be included in the conversation—and avoid "Reply All" if it's not necessary. Consider how you feel when people flood your inbox, and extend the same courtesy to others.

No. 3: Take sensitive conversations offline. Email is often the most convenient form of communication, so it can be viewed as the default. But if a topic requires back-and-forth dialogue or touches on a potentially sensitive topic, make use of a good old-fashioned conversation instead. Jay has weekly meetings with his students and tries to address as many issues as possible then, in part to avoid the terse back-and-forth dynamic that occurs over email. June's lab manual guides her research team to get off email and meet in person if the topic becomes sensitive or delicate.

No. 4: Create boundaries. Turn off your email when you need to complete work that requires sustained attention. We also recommend disabling email notifications on your phone. Jay's students have his cellphone number if they need to reach him in the event of an emergency. Jay's lab also has a **policy** for minimizing email on evenings and weekends, and team members use delayed sending software if they compose an email outside of regular working hours. June's email signature contains a statement about work-life balance, which she borrowed from a **colleague**: "I sometimes opt to work during non-standard hours. I don't expect that you will read, respond to, or action this message outside of your regular working hours." You don't need to create hard rules around email, but by understanding the needs of your colleagues and establishing healthy social norms, you can help make email communication better for everyone.

No. 5: Organize your email. Consider creating filters that automatically send less urgent email to another folder so that you don't get disrupted by an email alert when it comes in. For example, Jay and June autofilter all their listserv emails into specific "nonurgent" folders; June also autofilters emails from her students in class to a "teaching" folder to ensure they don't get lost in the shuffle.

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reference information stored in multiple places, and it broadcasts answers to all team members. Although ridding oneself of email entirely is probably impossible, it's worth considering whether certain forms of discussion would be better served by another medium.

These are just a few steps to help you compose professional emails and manage the deluge of messages filling your inbox. If you have any tips we missed, you can add them to our discussion on [Twitter](#). We'd love to hear from you.

Send your thoughts, questions, and suggestions for future column topics to letterstoyoungscientists@aaas.org and [engage with us on Twitter](#).

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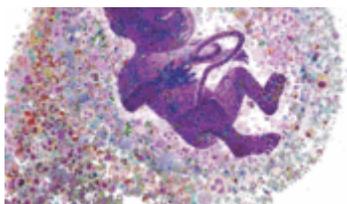


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