

REMOTE, INC.

HOW TO THRIVE AT WORK . . .
WHEREVER YOU ARE

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HARPER
BUSINESS

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Writing for Action

The success of your Business of One depends on excellent communication with your boss or clients. You want to minimize the demands on their attention; a rambling two-page email just makes it hard for your boss to give you the clear, timely feedback you need. Well-written emails make it easy for your boss and clients to reply—so your productivity doesn't get bottlenecked while you wait for a crucial answer.

Writing great emails (yes, an email *can* be great!) is all about focusing on the action you're asking the recipient to take. You are not trying to write something beautiful and evocative: you are trying to write the shortest possible message that will do the job. (Just think how much happier you are when you receive an email that's one paragraph, rather than one page.)

Business emails work best when they . . .

- Use a clear subject line that conveys topic and timeline
- Start with the action items needed, including deadlines
- Use bullet points or numbering, where possible, rather than paragraphs
- Provide any additional context lower down, and make it clear that this is optional reading
- Use Google Docs rather than the email to get feedback on anything longer than two paragraphs
- Convey key information quickly so that subject and urgency are clear even if someone is just glancing at your message on the phone
- Use boldface to make it easy for your recipient to see essential points they might otherwise miss

EMAIL, MESSAGE, OR TEXT?

It's not always easy to know when you should send an email, when you should send a message via Slack or Teams, or when you should just send an SMS (text) message to someone's phone. Here's a quick cheat sheet:

IT'S AN EMAIL IF . . .

- It's spelling out immediate action items: if you're asking someone to take action on more than one item, or you need to provide context or attachments, send an email.
- It's a communication that includes people outside your Slack/Teams workspace.
- It's a lot of information—but not a draft document that you'll be evolving with the people you're emailing. (That's better handled by inviting them into a Google Doc.)
- Your request or action item needs to be tracked by others in a way that ensures your recipient is accountable for responding or taking action.
- It may need to be referenced months or years down the road. Yes, you can search Slack/Teams, but it's not ideal for long-term reference. But you can and should keep your emails forever, because as long as you have a good, searchable email system, there's no better way of finding something you need five or ten years later.

IT'S A GROUP MESSAGE IF . . .

- It's very short (under one hundred words).
- It's time sensitive: you need a reply within an hour or so.
- It's a topic that's easier to sort out synchronously: that is, some amount of rapid back-and-forth will allow quick clarification or resolution.
- You're primarily speaking to one or two people (whom you should tag in your message) but your conversation may be useful for other people to see or find in later searches (even if they don't need it cluttering up their inboxes as a cc'ed email). For example, if you ask someone for the HR policy on dogs at work, anyone else who searches the HR channel for “dog” will be able to find the answer—but you don't need to cc the whole company.

IT'S AN SMS (TEXT) MESSAGE TO MOBILE IF . . .

- It's extremely time sensitive: you need a response immediately, or within the next thirty minutes.
- The person you are messaging has major issues with inbox or messaging overload, and has asked you to alert them to important issues via text (possibly as a way of letting them know you've emailed something crucial).
- It's a sensitive subject you don't want on the office servers (but not so sensitive that you don't want it in writing at all).
- It's a quick question for someone outside your messaging group, and even if it's not urgent, their reply will allow your work to move forward.

THE UNIVERSAL EMAIL

These principles are universal enough that we can use them as the basis for an email recipe: a single email structure you can use over and over again. It won't work for every single situation, but it should be your default unless you have a good reason for another structure. (See the "Example of the Universal Email" feature below for an example.) Here it is:

OPEN WITH ACTION ITEMS

- The first sentence and bullets map out what you need the recipient to do and by what date (if they read no further, this will be enough).
- Use one bullet per action item: If you need your recipient to approve your outline *and* you need them to email the India team, each of those is one bullet. If the deadlines are different, specify the deadline for each item.
- Use "unless . . . then" framings for overloaded recipients: if your recipient gets so much email that they have a hard time replying

promptly, or has mandated you to proceed with actions unless you hear otherwise, your bullet(s) can take the form of “Unless I hear from you by X date to the contrary, I will do Y.”

PROVIDE SUPPLEMENTARY CONTEXT AND INFORMATION (OR LINKS TO SUCH INFORMATION)

- Provide any context your recipient might find necessary, useful, or informative in taking the actions/making the decisions you have mapped out.
- This part of your email can be more detailed and include full paragraphs (preferably still organized into bullets).
- Clarify why you are recommending this approach or asking for this action.
- Boldface the most important information in case the recipient is skimming.

CLOSE WITH THANKS

- Your conclusion can and should be minimal; if you find yourself mapping out next steps or further actions, move those to the top.

FINISH WITH A SIGNATURE

- Set up your email account with a signature line that puts your key contact details (email, phone number, Twitter handle) in every single email.
- Include this signature even if you’re replying to a thread, so your correspondent never has to go hunting for your number (or the best way to message you).
- Keep your email signature concise, because people will get *really* tired of your inspirational quotes if they’re appended to every message.¹

AN EXAMPLE OF THE UNIVERSAL EMAIL

SUBJECT: Please advise by EOD on extending Acme budget by \$13k

MESSAGE:

Hi Jen—

Key next steps on the ACME project:

BY EOD:

1. As per our convo please approve additional 13k on budget to cover:
 - Next week's urgent site visit (\$3k airfares, \$4k hotel/per diems)
 - Retaining Ken Harris (privacy consultant) to review terms of use for Web campaign (\$6k)
2. Tomorrow/Monday: Lara and I are coordinating with ACME to set up call for you & CMO

CONTEXT:

- Additional media coverage for our site launch raised internal flags at ACME re: possible privacy exposure
- Their CMO is concerned to be on firm ground in addressing questions from her compliance team
- They'll cover the additional cost of the privacy consultant (i.e., \$6k in scope increase) to deliver detailed review to their compliance team, but need us to retain

- We need to get on-site to meet with their legal and Web teams next week—this is partly client relations but will also expedite the next phase of work
- Their CMO was apparently very reassured to hear you have a legal background, which is why we think a call between you & CMO will help ease her concerns

Thanks,
Vanessa

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