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Email Etiquette

Why do we welcome email from some and not others? Which habits are endearing, and which annoying? What opportunities and pitfalls does email offer that paper letters and telephone conversations do not? What can we do to make our own correspondence easy to read and tempting to respond to? Following is a modest primer on email etiquette.

Do Not Send Gratuitous Messages

Jokes can be a welcome break if they are received at just the right time and if they're just the right jokes. But the confluence of these factors is rare. Don't undermine your reputation as a credible correspondent by circulating unnecessary messages. You want your correspondents to know that when they receive a message from you, it's substantive.

Don't exploit your address book to sell things. You do not want to develop a reputation for using the addresses of acquaintances for fundraisers or to sell commercial merchandise, no matter how special you think your friend's homemade jewelry is.

More seriously, even well-intentioned warnings or petitions should be circulated only with caution and if you can personally attest to their authenticity, or they come from an impeccable source known to the forwarder. For example, missing children notices, stock tips and political rumors are often misleading. It can be better to let an opportunity go by than to inadvertently perpetuate inaccuracies.

Hold Yourself to a Reasonable Writing Standard

Email provides the opportunity to send messages fast. But sometimes messages are sent too fast. It is not necessary to write the Great American Novel, nor even to choose words and phrases as precisely as one would when writing a paper letter. On the other hand, if the message is important enough to consume the reading time of the recipient, then a courtesy incumbent upon the writer is to at minimum read over the message to

make sure that the spelling, grammar, and punctuation are, if not perfect, at least decent. Long communications are best broken into multiple paragraphs. Similarly, multiple subjects are best sent in separate emails.

Do Not Include Others Carelessly

There are two categories of inappropriately copying people on email messages. One is when doing so may be indiscreet or impolitic. The other is when it is unnecessary and a waste of time.

With regard to the former, before copying others on correspondence, ask yourself the following questions: will doing so embarrass or compromise the primary recipient, or others? Is my motivation to seize credit or display my cleverness, without a substantive reason?

Might third persons interpret the message in a way that is unintended? If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes,' think carefully before copying your correspondence.

Email is considered *ipso facto* confidential. If there is any question that you should forward an email, check with the originator first.

With regard to the latter, just apply the simple test: does everyone need to know this? All of us have been on an email distribution list, for example, for a child's soccer team. The manager circulates a message that says, "don't forget that

practice is today at 3:00PM." Fifty parents do not need to receive a message back from you that says, "sorry, Bobby can't make it today." If this is information that the manager needs to know, respond to the manager. Do not reply-to-all. Similarly, large distributions go to committees to schedule meetings, department faculty to remind members of a deadline, etc. Do not waste the time of your colleagues by telling the whole distribution, "I can attend on March 21 but not on October 11", or "thanks for letting me know!" All correspondence should be on a "need-to-know" basis.

As a writer, you can prevent either of these outcomes by using the blind field when

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corresponding with multiple recipients for standard messages. In this way, responders cannot reply to everyone.

Do Include Others When Appropriate

The flip side to the overcopying problem is of course undercopying. If you write an email that directly impacts the work of or refers to a third person, copy that person on the correspondence. Forwarding the message separately without a reason suggests to the person who should have been copied that you have changed the original language (implication being that you said something that would have been displeasing in the original correspondence). It may also leave the primary recipient the impression that you are careless and/or inconsiderate.

Do Not Use Email Every Time it Occurs to You

If you are angry or emotional or just feeling loose, it is often best to wait to express yourself. And it is very often best to wait to express yourself by email. Even more than a hand-written or printed letter, a record of your words can be preserved for all time and forwarded forever, so *caveat scriptor* (let the writer beware).

The conventional (if cynical) wisdom is, “don’t write anything in an email you’re not willing to see attributed to you in the *New York Times*.” Also, bear in mind that standard employment law gives the employer the right to view the work-based email of employees without consent or notification. While spying on students, staff, post-docs or faculty is not the usual practice of universities, remember that it is at least a theoretical possibility before shooting off that angry, passionate, critical or slanderous email.

Be Personal

In contrast to group notices about meeting times, some communications are most effective one-to-one. The more an email is or appears to be directed exclusively to one recipient, the more likely it is to be read and to receive a response. This is particularly important when you are asking the recipient to do something or otherwise imposing on him or her. Thus, an email sent to dozens of people that says, “can someone please review this paper?” is easy to ignore. Instead, an email that

says, “Dear Carol, you are an expert in this field so I hope you would be willing to review this paper” is much harder to dismiss.

Make Subject Lines Relevant and “Clean”

Always create a subject line and make sure that it addresses the topic of the email. This may seem unimportant when considering the message in isolation, but the practice facilitates the filing and retrieving of email for both the sender and the recipient. Also, many spam filters are programmed to eliminate emails that contain specified words in the subject line. This is a particular danger for biologists who routinely use “prohibited” words like “sex” and “sperm.” Be aware of these filters and limit the detailed discussion of mating systems to the text of the message.

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Be Aware of Technical Limitations

Not everyone reads their email on DSL/T1 lines, especially not all the time. This is especially true with the increased use of handheld devices, which sometimes cannot handle attachments at all. Do not send simple brief text messages as attachments. If you must include an attachment, make sure that it is in a format that can be read by commonly-used software programs (e.g., Word, Adobe Acrobat, .gif, .jpg.)

Use Humor Carefully

Humor, especially sarcasm and other subtleties, often rely on tone and/or facial expression to come off. When writing, one “hears” or envisions the intended tone, but this is often lost in email translation, particularly with persons you don’t know well. When in doubt, either skip the humor or set it off explicitly with signaling language, e.g., “my colleagues often tease me that I’d rather work out at the gym than work in my lab.” The alternative, “I’d rather work out at the gym than work in my lab” could be taken literally by someone who does not know you well.

Never Expose a Blind Copy

If you are a “blind” recipient of correspondence, this means that the writer wants you to see the

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message but does not want those who are the primary recipients or cc’s of the message to know that you received it. Respect the confidentiality entrusted to you, even if it is not clear to you why you were blind copied instead of just copied. If you do otherwise, you will establish yourself as careless at best and untrustworthy at worst.

As a writer, use bcc’s cautiously (except for standard group communication as noted above). You can avoid blind-copying altogether by instead sending the message separately to the intended blind recipient, with a note that it is being sent in confidence. This decreases the possibility that the blind recipient will thoughtlessly embarrass all concerned.

Be Calm!!!!!!!!!!!!

Exclamation points (!!), emoticons (:-) , colored, large or animated fonts, and CAPITAL LETTERS FOR EMPHASIS are routinely overused in email. Use them sparingly, if at all. Your

message will be heard better if it is understated and straightforward.

Check Before You Click

Many email programs have helpful features that populate the “To” fields with a name as soon as unique keystrokes are recognized. But a typo can result in embarrassing misdirection. Before you press “send”, look again at all the send-fields (primary recipient(s), cc’s, bcc’s.) Are they the intended recipients? Similarly, when forwarding an email, be sure you have scrolled down to the bottom of the message so you are aware of everything being forwarded. Last paragraphs or postscripts have been known to be *non sequiturs*. Depending on what they are, you may regret having forwarded them, even if the rest of the correspondence is relevant. ■

—Elizabeth Marincola

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Call for Proposals Summer Meeting Series

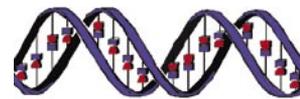
All ASCB members, individually or in teams, are invited to submit proposals to organize an ASCB Summer Meeting in 2006. The three-day meetings will host about 200 participants.

Topics should be novel (e.g., combining fields that don’t traditionally meet together, or focusing on an emerging area) and include:

- a one-page summary of the scientific substance of the meeting;
- names of 3-10 potential speakers (confirmation need not be obtained in advance);
- CVs of proposed lead organizers.

Submit proposals to the American Society for Cell Biology, 8120 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 750, Bethesda, MD 20814 or ascbinfo@ascb.org.

Application deadline is **March 31**. Some participation in fundraising may be required of organizers. Meeting dates and sites are to be determined by the Society in consultation with the organizer(s).



2005 ASCB Summer Meetings

Engineering Cell Biology—The Cell In Context

July 15-18—University of Washington, Seattle

Linda Griffith, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*
Jean Schwarzbauer, *Princeton University*

Nuclear Architecture and Disease

July 21-24—Iowa State University, Ames

Kathy Wilson, *Johns Hopkins Medical School*
Tom Misteli, *National Cancer Institute/NIH*

Coordinating the Events of Directed Cell Motility

July 27-30—University of Washington, Seattle

Clare Waterman-Storer, *The Scripps Research Institute*
Gary Bokoch, *The Scripps Research Institute*

**Information and registration at
www.ascb.org**