ME 370: The Mechanical Engineering Profession

Lecture 02: Email for Professional Communication

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Purpose

Establish guidelines for email usage by engineering professionals.
Email for Work

Email is so common that we can forget that the rules are different in a business environment.

- Everything is saved.
- You cannot control where your email goes after you send it.
- Your email establishes your professional reputation.
  - Style
  - Substance
Start with bad examples
To:   Jill
From: Joe
Re:

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: the report is due tomorrow we’ll discuss it at the meeting

Use a subject line that allows the recipient to sort and later find your message. Longer subject lines are better than terse, ambiguous subject lines.
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

Better. We still don’t know which muffler.
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

No capitalization, no punctuation.
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

No capitalization, no punctuation.

Message:
I’m so lazy that holding the shift key and typing a period are too much effort.
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

The report is due tomorrow.
We’ll discuss it at the meeting.

No capitalization, no punctuation.

Message:
I’m so lazy that holding the shift key and typing a period are too much effort.
You are unimportant.
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

No capitalization, no punctuation.

Message:
I’m so lazy that holding the shift key and typing a period are too much effort.
You are unimportant.
Or both.
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

Which report?
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

Which report?

It’s possible that Joe and Jill share responsibility for only one report. It’s also quite likely that Jill is responsible for more than one report. Joe is assuming that Jill can sort this out.
To: Jill  
From: Joe  
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow  
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

Which report?

It’s possible that Joe and Jill share responsibility for only one report. It’s also quite likely that Jill is responsible for more than one report. Joe is assuming that Jill can sort this out.

Joe is putting the responsibility for understanding the message onto the receiver. He is assuming that the context for this message is well understood.
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is **due tomorrow**
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

What does the due date mean?
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is **due tomorrow**
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

What does the due date mean?

Is Joe expressing concern that he is not finished?
Is Joe reminding Jill of her responsibility?
Is Joe asking for help on a joint responsibility?
Is this a complaint about an unwanted assignment?
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

What does the due date mean?

Is Joe expressing concern that he is not finished?
Is Joe reminding Jill of her responsibility?
Is Joe asking for help on a joint responsibility?
Is this a complaint about an unwanted assignment?

Joe is assuming that the context is mutually understood, which may (or may not) be a bad assumption.
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

This statement is ambiguous.
To: Jill
From: Joe
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

This statement is ambiguous.

What is “it”? The report? The due date? Your responsibility? My responsibility?
To:    Jill
From:  Joe
Re:    Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

This statement is ambiguous.

What is “it”? The report? The due date? Your responsibility? My responsibility?

When is the meeting?
How does the timing of the meeting relate to the due date for the report?
To: Jill  
From: Joe  
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

the report is due tomorrow  
we’ll discuss it at the meeting

This statement is ambiguous.

What is “it”? The report? The due date? Your responsibility? My responsibility?

When is the meeting?  
How does the timing of the meeting relate to the due date for the report?

Is this message a threat?  
Or is Joe saying “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it”?  

Bad email
To: Jill Smith  
From: Joe Jones  
Re: Interim report on lab test for new muffler

The report on acoustic measurements for the muffler upgrade on the new LNG fork lift is due tomorrow. I’m nearly finished. I just need to correct a microphone calibration plot in the appendix. I’ll be done by 3:00 PM this afternoon.

I’ll be able to answer any questions you have at our 4:00 PM meeting today.

FYI, the current draft of the report is attached.

Joe Jones  
Test Engineering  
x-4364
To: Professor Smith
From: Joe
Re: Hey!

im confused about problem 8
can u give me a hint
To: Professor Smith
From: Joe Jones
Re: ME 370, Problem Set 2, Problem 8

I’ve been working on problem 8 for about an hour, and I’m confused about whether we can treat the air as incompressible.

If I assume the air is incompressible, the work input to the compressor is 50 kW, which seems low. If I assume the air is compressible, I can’t justify using any of the formulas in Chapter 3 unless I also assume the compression is adiabatic. Is it safe to treat the compression as adiabatic?

I can come to your office hours tomorrow. If you get this email before then, and have time to give me a hint, I might be able to work the rest of the solution on my own.

Joe Jones
joe_jones@gmail.com
ME 370, Tuesday section
To:       Professor Smith  
From:      Joe Jones  
Re:  ME 370, Problem Set 2, Problem 8 

I’ve been working on problem 8 for about an hour, and I’m confused about whether we can treat the air as incompressible.

If I assume the air is incompressible, the work input to the compressor is 50 kW, which seems low. If I assume the air is compressible, I can’t justify using any of the formulas in Chapter 3 unless I also assume the compression is adiabatic. Is it safe to treat the compression as adiabatic?

I can come to your office hours tomorrow. If you get this email before then, and have time to give me a hint, I might be able to work the rest of the solution on my own.

Thanks,

Joe Jones
joe_jones@gmail.com
ME 370, Tuesday section
Some real (bad) examples
Hello Gerry,

Ref: To request the AAAA xxxx Spring-2012 course is cross-listed also with the MME department

The course will be offered at the AAAA Blah Lab (SRTC-000) or in research lab settings

Here we are the AAAA guys again organizing the AAAA- xxx Spring-2012. Last year ProfY was one of the lecturers, contributing to the success of the course. We also had a couple of very active students from your department who signed for the course. I attach the organization of the course (subjected to last minute changes).
To: Gerald Recktenwald
From: Student X
Re: Hi i would like to enroll for a class please

Hi Gerry my name is xxxx yyy i spoke with Molly and she told me to get into contact with you and send a email i work for a company called ABC we deal with sheet metal fabrication. Medical, Dental, and military i have been with the business for 4 years now my owner asked me if i could take a Solidworks class to help the business for my work so what i am asking is if you can give me department permission to take ME-450 class. Molly had mentioned during this course solid works is trained but its an advance class if i got into contact with you maybe you could put me in so i could learn for my work or if you know something that might be better for me that would be good to if you could get back to me when you have a chance that would be great thanks again.
Email Guidelines

Basic principles

• Be direct and brief: One main point per email.
• Provide context for decisions.
• Write in complete sentences with proper spelling and punctuation.
• Don’t use texting abbreviations.
• Do use short paragraphs.
• Avoid jokes or emotional content.
Email Guidelines

Make these assumptions

• The recipient is busy, and does not have time to read long, rambling messages.

• The recipient prefers questions that have short, direct answers. Questions with yes/no answers are best.

• The recipient’s job is not to solve your problems.

• Your jokes are probably not very funny in person. Your jokes are even less funny via email.
Email traffic for GWR in March 2014

Daily pattern during the month
Email traffic for GWR in March 2014

Pattern during 24 hour period
Email traffic for GWR in March 2014

Word count

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word Count</th>
<th>In emails received</th>
<th>In emails sent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 10 words</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 30 words</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 50 words</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 100 words</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 200 words</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Web references

Web sites with useful email advice

• http://webfoot.com/advice/email.top.php
• http://www.businessemailetiquette.com/
• http://www.netmanners.com/email-etiquette/
• http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/EmailCommunication.htm
Email Guidelines

Barry Rosenberg, *Spring into Technical Writing for Engineers and Scientists*, 2005, Pearson Education
Rosenberg’s Advice

Use the same discipline in writing email as you do when writing formal documents.

• Use complete sentences.
• Capitalize proper nouns and first words of sentences.
• Punctuate properly.
• Use correct grammar.
To: Jill Jones
From: Joe Smith
Re: Lunch at 11:45 today.

I’m heading to the sandwich cart in 30 minutes. Do you want to come along?

- Joe -
Rosenberg’s Advice

Re-read all messages before sending them.

• Check for obvious typos and gaffes.
• Avoid a quick, emotional reply.

Ask yourself:

Will the recipients understand this message?
Rosenberg’s Advice

Would you feel comfortable saying the text in this e-mail message in a face-to-face meeting with the recipient?
Rosenberg’s Advice

After the first miscommunication, stop sending email. Call or make a face-to-face visit.
What is your goal?

Can this email hurt your professional reputation?

Is your email consistent with your goal?
What is your goal?

Can this email hurt the reputation of your company?

Is your email consistent with your goal?
What is your goal?

Will this email be offensive or hurtful to the recipient?

Is your email consistent with your goal?
What is your goal?

Is this email demeaning or offensive to the recipient or to other people who are not the intended recipient?

Is your email consistent with your goal?

How would this email sound if it was read aloud at a staff meeting?

Note: the legal standard for sexual harassment is not your intent. The legal standard is whether the conduct is offensive to people who witness it. Of course, there is much more to it.
General Advice

Would you feel comfortable seeing this message printed in the daily newspaper, or read aloud by a television news reporter?
General Advice

Would you feel comfortable seeing this message printed in the daily newspaper, or read aloud by a television news reporter?

• Emotions are normal. Acting from an emotionally agitated state often leads to trouble.

• Separate your feelings from your strategy and tactics.

• Venting emotion may feel OK in the moment, but it is unlikely to help you obtain my goal. If you need to vent, do it in private (alone) or with a trusted friend.
If in doubt, wait.

If you have a lot of strong feelings about the subject of the email, or the person you are sending it to, let it sit.

- Compose the email with an empty “To” field
- Take a walk
- Better yet, let it sit overnight.
- Remember to ask:
  
  Will sending this email help me achieve my goal?