

Tips for Online Communication

Email communication is fraught with opportunities to get a staff member into hot water. You can make a quick response to students who are demanding and entitled in their email. You can get into lengthy debate on a listserv or with other staff around campus. Here are some suggestions to avoid the minefield that can be email communication gaffs and mistakes.

Don't Email Angry; They Won't Like You When You Are Angry

One of the most common email regrets is an email that is sent when upset or frustrated with a situation. You may receive a message and assume the other person had a tone or attitude attached to what they wrote (and they may very well have) that leads to a quick, knee-jerk response. Instead of emailing angry, make a rule that you will take at least an hour to respond to an email. And after the hour, read your draft response...aloud...to a colleague. It may sound worse than you think. Ask yourself: can this wait until tomorrow?

Don't Ever Email Negatives: Don't. No. Bad

A good rule of thumb is to avoid sending emails that involve negative, critical or other general "no" answers. You may need to tell the person no; however, people generally take this kind of information better either on the phone or in person. This approach also minimizes the potential for misunderstanding and gives them a chance to respond.

Avoid the Same Patterns of Mistakes

We are always a little surprised to find the same people getting into the same problems over and over again with their email communication. Sometimes they come off as too abrupt and annoy people. Sometimes they come off as angry and uncaring. Sometimes they don't fully understand the question or situation and respond to the wrong thing, making everything worse. Ask yourself whether you are caught in one of these loops and try something different.

Take the Time to Re-Read Your Message before Hitting Send

Despite the desire to have the technology to "recall" any email, this is just wishful thinking (like good tasting low calorie mayonnaise). Once you hit send, the email is out there. Forever. Fight the desire to clear your inbox and deal quickly with an email response without taking the time to edit. A simple re-read of an email may make all the difference between "I think all of us could benefit from looking at the situations once again" and "I think all of us could benefit from liking at the sittings once again."

Don't Respond or Send Sensitive Information via Email

Email is a very useful tool to confirm dates, find out about a conference, check up on a project or ask a simple question of a team member. It's a very bad tool to discuss a student's mental health history, describe a threatening situation or respond sarcastically to someone who annoys you. If it's more than a few sentences, stop, step away from the computer, and call the person. Don't write lengthy missives via email, no matter how good a writer you may believe yourself to be. If you have that much to say to another person, take the time to talk with them face to face or over the phone. Like a car with tires out of alignment, the longer you write, the more likely the email will start to swerve to the side of the road. Keep it clear, concise and to the point.