

Writing a formal email

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When did you last write a letter, with a pen, on paper? When last did you pop a birthday card into a post box? Have you ever done either?

Nowadays, most people rely on electronic media, using smartphones and computers to communicate on social media like Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat, Twitter, Messenger, LinkedIn and Pinterest. Although some people still use SMS, most use WhatsApp to keep in touch with family and friends.

Email is currently the most common form of official communication. There's an art to writing a formal email, on behalf of your employer, whether it's to a service supplier, a client or a colleague.

You may already have your own email address. If you have a smart phone, I'm sure you do – you need an email address to sign up for social media. Using email for work purposes has the same rules as all electronic media (be careful of what you write, it may come back to haunt you some time) but there are additional requirements of which you need to be aware.

Create a good impression

You may never have met the person to whom you are writing. Their only evidence of the type of person you are will come from the email that they receive. You need to consider the image that your choice of words sends to the reader. If you choose the wrong words, you may send the message that you don't know what you're writing about or that you approach your work in a sloppy way.

That sounds rather scary, but don't panic. There are guidelines that can help you to create the professional image that you require.

Choose your email address carefully

Some of the names that we choose when communicating with our friends on social media are not appropriate for work email addresses. The best thing to do is to choose a name

that reflects *your* name. Some businesses have a standard format for email addresses. It may be using your first name, first name and initial or initial and surname, or it may describe your position, such as admin@yourpharmacy.co.za.

Beginnings and endings

With a work email, it is best to be formal when addressing the recipient, and when signing it off.

The greeting is important – if you receive an email where your name is not spelt correctly, your first reaction is likely to be “She or he didn't even bother to check my name”. “Dear Ms XYZ” is still an appropriate way to open the communication. First names can be used if you are on first name terms with the recipient. If you're uncomfortable to use the word “dear”, an alternative is “Hello”. Not “Hi”!

Inappropriate greetings in emails include “Hey”, “Heita” or “Hiya”.

The most appropriate endings for a professional email are “Best regards” or “Kind regards”, followed by your name, surname and contact details.

Abbreviations and acronyms

We all use slang when we speak or write to our friends, but this is not suitable in a business communication. Some of the language seen on social media is also inappropriate.

Be very careful about abbreviations and social media expressions such as acronyms – your friends might understand them, but the recipient of your email might decide that it shows that you're not serious about communication.

When posting on Twitter, abbreviations are useful – when you are restricted to 280 characters (and it was worse at first when only 140 characters were permitted), you really must choose your words very carefully. Abbreviations will help you to use the allocated characters more efficiently. In other

media, we tend to use abbreviations to save time, space and effort, especially in handwritten communication.

Acronyms are abbreviations formed by using the initials (or first few letters) of words in a phrase. Some that have been in use for many years include SAPC (South African Pharmacy Council) and SMS (Short Message Service). Some have become so entrenched in our language that few people remember the original reason for the acronym, e.g. Soshanguve (SOtho, SHAngaan, NGUni and VEnda), AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

In social media, we sometimes see acronyms that have become a type of slang and are therefore not acceptable in formal communication. E.g. LOL (laugh out loud), HAGD (have a good day), TWVM (thank you very much). These are fine when used on social media but should be avoided when using an email. An acronym that has become widely used on on-line news pages is ICYMI (in case you missed it).

Abbreviations and acronyms are only effective if the person receiving the communication understands them.

Other inclusions to use cautiously

Emoticons and emojis are a great way to express ourselves to our friends and sometimes even work acquaintances that we know well. They are however totally inappropriate in a formal business communication.

So, please, don't include 😊, 😄, 😂 or 🙄, or any other emoji that would be fine to use when writing to a friend.

Do not use a string of capital letters – it is interpreted as shouting or screaming at the recipient. Similarly, overuse of exclamation marks is also frowned upon! This is because the use of an exclamation mark is considered to have emotional connotations, and the emotion is not always clear to the recipient.

The last thing to do before you press “send”

Re-read the email to make sure that your message is as clear as possible. Proofread it to identify any mistakes, including spelling and grammar. When you are sure that your email will be acceptable to a business acquaintance, press send.