

Office of the Faculty Civility Advocate

Email Civility

To send or not to send, that is the question

If you feel angry or frustrated when you are writing an email, then do not send it. Your anger will come through even if you think you are concealing it. Save it as a draft and then re-read it. Or, send it to yourself. In the end, you may decide not to send it.

If you decide to send the email, then first read it over numerous times, and edit it considering the email etiquette guidelines below.

If you are still in doubt, then ask a trusted colleague to read your email and tell you how he or she perceives the tone and word choice.

Email Etiquette for Senders

- Do not include personal attacks – especially regarding a faculty member’s research, teaching, or standing in the department.
- Avoid using the word ‘you’: it can come across as belligerent.
- Ask yourself if you would be embarrassed if your colleagues, chair, director, or dean were to read the email.
- Keep email content factual.
- Ask yourself if you have all the information you need to support the statements in your email. Remember that you might not know the whole story.
- If you are questioning whether or not to include a statement, then do not include it.
- Ask yourself if you are being petty.
- Always be polite.
- Avoid using all caps and extra exclamation marks, which can appear inflammatory.
- Refrain from distributing your email to a group.
- Remember that emails leave a permanent record, even if you delete them.



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To respond or not to respond, that is the dilemma

If you are the recipient of a hostile email, it is natural to want to respond in kind. However, such a response will likely engender more ill-feelings, escalate the level of hostility, and be counter-productive to maintaining a neutral workplace for yourself and the sender. Therefore, it is generally best not to respond. At a minimum, set the email aside and re-read it after a few hours or a day or two have passed. Sometimes, you may perceive an email to be inflammatory on first reading, but later feel differently. Therefore, it is always best to have a waiting period before responding.

If you feel comfortable, ask a trusted colleague to read the email you received; ask for his or her impression and whether he or she thinks a response is warranted. Be sure to eliminate the sender's name and email address in order to ensure confidentiality and minimize the chance for both gossip and taking of "sides."

If you are the recipient of repeated hostile emails, notify your Chair or the Dean as a first step towards resolution. You should also keep all email correspondence between you and the sender.

Email Etiquette for Receivers

Here are strategies for dealing with a hostile email. Keep in mind that if you plan to respond, then the Email Etiquette for Senders also applies.

- Disengage. In most cases, it is best not to respond. The lack of response may signal to the sender that the original message was inappropriate, unprofessional, or worse. If you reply with hostility, the sender will likely feel justified in having sent the email, and avoid reflecting on his or her role in initiating the hostility.
- Do not respond to personal attacks or include statements or questions that invite room for further response. Doing so will only further the hostile email dynamic.
- If the sender's email includes a request for information related to work, comply and respond professionally.
- In some cases, it may be appropriate to address the issue and smooth things over by a face-to-face meeting.
- If you receive a hostile email and the sender subsequently apologizes, then accept the apology graciously and work to keep the relationship professional.



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