

How to write a business email/letter in English

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Writing a good email or letter is not a difficult thing to do, but it is easy to make mistakes. Not only in spelling, punctuation or grammar, but also in the style of writing and the vocabulary or phrases that are used.

Although most mistakes are not serious, some can be. However, making any type of mistake when writing doesn't look professional (especially if it's for business or work). So it's important not to make them.

Below are 10 ways/tips that will help you write better emails or letters in English for both business and non-business use.

1. Don't trust spell checkers

Although spell checkers will find all the words that you have spelt incorrectly, most spell checkers (especially for emails) won't always:

- Correct grammatical mistakes (e.g. 'I haven't a car' instead of 'I don't have a car')
- Correct punctuation mistakes (e.g. using commas instead of full stops/periods)
- Find words you've missed out
- Find incorrect words you've used which are spelt correctly (e.g. 'It's money' instead of 'Its money')

So, you are going to have to check for them manually (by searching for them yourself).

A good way to do this is after you've finished writing an email/letter, go and do something else for at least 5 minutes. Then go back and re-read the email/letter you've written. By doing this, it will be easier to find the mistakes that you have made.

2. Ask somebody else to read your email/letter

If you have to write an important business email/letter, you should ask somebody to read it before you send it. It will be easier for them to find any mistakes that you have made than you could by re-reading it. They can also tell you if what you've written is clear and understandable, and if the email/letter contains the right information. This is especially important if you are a non-native speaker of English.

3. Keep emails/letters short

Most people are busy and don't have a lot of time to read emails/letters. For many people, if they see that an email is long when they open it, they won't read it or only read the beginning. So when writing, you should only include the essential information and write it in a short and direct way.

4. Keep the language simple

You may be intelligent and know a lot of vocabulary, but trying to show it by using little known and used vocabulary in a email/letter for work is not a good idea. The main purpose of writing an email/letter is to pass information to another person or people. If they don't understand parts of what you've written, then your email/letter has failed. You should write for the reader(s) and not for yourself. Use vocabulary which you know that everybody will understand. This is especially important if you are writing to people whose first language is not English.

5. Use vocabulary which the people you are writing to will understand

Like 'Keep the language simple', it is very important to write an email/letter for the reader(s). Don't use vocabulary which is specialised to your type of business if you're writing to people who you believe may not understand what it means. For example, a doctor can use specialised medical vocabulary if writing to another doctor (because they will understand it), but shouldn't use this type of vocabulary if writing to a patient.

Before you write, think about how you would explain it to a friend who doesn't know anything about your type of work or business, and write your email/letter like that.

6. Avoid contractions in formal emails or letters

There is a rule/convention of how to write formal emails/letters in English that says you cannot use contractions (e.g. it's, aren't etc...) in them. Instead, you should write each word without the contraction (e.g. it is, are not etc...). For some people, using contractions in formal emails/letters does not look professional.

For me personally, there are worse things that you can do than including contractions in formal emails. But I would still recommend that you avoid using them.

In the same way, avoid using many phrasal verbs (verbs with two or three parts, e.g. 'take off', 'go over' etc...) in formal emails/letters. Again, for some people these types of verbs are too informal. Use where you can, a one word verb instead (e.g. 'remove' for 'take off' and 'review' for 'go over').

For less formal emails/letters, you can use both contractions and phrasal verbs without any problems.

7. It's polite to use small talk

When you are writing to somebody that you know and have met or contacted many times before (either a business customer, work colleague or a friend), it is polite in English to start the email/letter with small talk. You should ask them how they are (e.g. 'I hope you are well' etc...), or ask about their plans or something you know that they have done (e.g. 'How was your meeting on Thursday?' etc...) or talk about something you both have an interest in (e.g. 'What do you think about the match on Saturday?' etc...). If you don't, you will sound impolite.

If the email/letter is formal, don't start it with small talk. But for anything which isn't formal, you should always use it.

8. Don't use Google Translator to translate an email/letter

If you are writing an email/letter in a language that you are not native in or don't know, be careful when using Google Translator. Although Google Translator is good for translating words and phrases, it is terrible for translating a whole email/letter into another language. If you do use it to translate a whole email/letter, you will end up with an

email/letter with lots of mistakes and is not understandable.

If you can speak the other language, you should try to write the email/letter in the other language and then ask somebody to check it for you. If you can't speak the other language, there is no alternative but to have somebody to translate it for you.

9. Copy what other people write in their emails/letters

When you receive a well-written business email/letter, copy parts (especially the beginning and the end) and words/phrases which you see used in them. You can then re-use them in your own emails/letters in the future.

If you do this, make sure that you understand what both their purpose and meanings are. If you don't, you can cause the people reading your emails/letters to get confused about what you are saying.

To avoid this, you can do specifically designed online exercises for writing emails/letters. They will show how to write different types of emails/letters and provide you with and explain words/phrases you can use in your own emails/letters.

10. Create and keep templates of different email/letter types

If you write lots of emails/letters, you should keep templates/copies of different types (e.g. request, response, apology, update etc...) and styles (e.g. formal, less formal) of emails/letters on your computer or email account. On these templates, parts of the email/letter should already be written (the beginning and the end for example). When you need to write a new email/letter, you just have to open up the appropriate template and then adapt it to the person and situation you are writing it for.

Having templates of emails/letters, not only makes it both quicker and easier to write them, but you'll also make less mistakes because a part of it is already written.

That's it

Although these ten tips will help you improve how you write both business emails or letters, you can use them to improve any type of writing (e.g. reports, projects, procedures etc...). If there is a secret to writing well, it is to write for the person/people who are going to read what you've written. So after you've written anything, ask yourself, will they be able to clearly understand what I've written?