

Writing English Emails

With Peter McMillan

Lesson 1

If you look at some standard English emails, probably the first thing you notice is that they are generally written in a fairly casual, conversational tone. I'm talking about business and academic contexts here. But don't let that fool you; getting the right tone and expressing yourself with appropriate nuance is really very important if you want to make a good impression on the person you're sending it to.

So let's start at the beginning with greetings.

Greetings

Saying Hello

The most common greeting in an email is "Hi". This is fine in the vast majority of instances. If you're talking to your boss, or your teacher, they would expect you to use Hi.

If I am communicating with someone for the first time and we've never met or spoken before, I'll often start with "hello". That is just a little bit less familiar than "hi". It's also fine to start an email with "Good morning" or just "Morning", followed by the person's name.

And if you are sending an email to an address where you don't know the name of the person who will be reading it, just hello or good morning are good words to open with.

If you are exchanging emails backwards and forwards with someone- a dialogue involving a series of emails on the same topic- there's no need to keep using the greeting. You can just continue the conversation.

I never start an email with "Dear ...", which of course is the standard opening in a business letter. The only time people use "Dear..." as the opening is in very formal communications: when government departments write to you, they start their emails with "Dear Mr ...". When lawyers write to you, they start their letters with Dear. When people receive emails starting with Dear, it doesn't make them feel relaxed and comfortable.

Secondary Greetings

Often people will follow up their initial greeting with a second line intended as a friendly opening to the communication. Now, this is where we first encounter the question of tone- what do you say and how do you say it, in order to create the best impression?

People often write "Hope you're well..."

It's okay, but it can sound a bit formulaic and insincere... like when you buy a hamburger and they say Have a Nice Day.

If you can find something more personalised to say to the person, then that's good. During the pandemic, especially when there was a new lockdown, people in Australia tended to say things like "Hope you're safe and well" or, "Hope you're doing okay in lockdown", and that sounded nice.

Depending on the time of year, you can sometimes say, "Hope you had a nice break" (Please leave English words and provide translation), (after the Christmas or Easter holidays) or "Hope you had a good weekend"

Notice that with these greeting, two of them have omitted the "I" at the start of the sentence. Saying "Hope you're well", rather than "I hope you're well" makes it just a little less formal.

If you are on friendly terms with the person you're emailing, it is perfectly natural to open with "How's it going?" But be aware that it is quite a familiar greeting, not something you'd say to someone with whom you have a formal or distant business relationship.

Sometimes before the weekend, people will open with "Happy Friday", which is a shorthand way of saying "Yay, the weekend is coming!" But avoid cliches. "Hope this email finds you well". People often use it, but to me it sounds unnatural and actually a little bit pretentious.

If you want to add a personal touch to a work email, sometimes it's best to do it at the end, or even in a post-script. I'll talk more about those when we get to closing your email.

Now, at the start of this lesson I said that English emails are usually written in a fairly casual, conversational style. Throughout this course I'll be providing you with lots of common conversational phrases that you can use to achieve the right tone. But ultimately, your most useful resource for checking your tone is your own sense of what sounds right. Ask yourself if you can imagine using these words in conversation; have you heard other English speakers using these phrases? In other words, do they sound right? And the best way to develop your sense of what sounds right is to speak English as much as you can with as many people as you can. There is no better method for improving your English than to find a conversation buddy and talk to them. Go on line- there are plenty of sites, plenty of apps that can connect you with language buddies. It can feel like hard work, it can feel intimidating, but it's the thing that going to make the biggest difference.

Sample Emails

Here is an email I received recently from another company. It's a standard, relatively formal, business communication. And as you can see, the purpose of the email is to say, No, we're not doing business.

Hi Peter,

Our Sydney plant manager, Mario Milani, forwarded your email request to me.

Having reviewed your request and based on our foreseeable forecast commitments we are not in a position to take on additional work.

I appreciate you considering Magna Food for this project.

Should you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,

Janet Jones,

Marketing Manager

But notice that even with an email like this, the greeting is Hi Peter.

Common Mistakes

When starting an email using Hi you should follow it with the person's given name, not their surname. If you're sending an email to me, you would start it Hi Peter, not Hi Peter McMillan. And by the way, it's the same in that you start with Dear. You can write Dear Peter, or, more formally, Dear Mr McMillan, but you should not write Dear Peter McMillan. If you have any questions, please ask them in the conversation forum, and I'll see you in the next lesson.