Writing English Emails

With Peter McMillan

Lesson 2

Making requests

If you think about it, almost every email chain involves some kind of request: a request for action, a request for information, a request that people pay attention to something. And, remembering that the expected tone of an email is casual and conversational, it's important in making your request that you do so in a light, informal tone.

When I look back over my sent items, when I've initiated the email chain, I notice I almost always use the word "Just". Giving information: I just need to let you know… (In other words, it's important for them to hear this) I just thought you would like to know… (They will be interested to know this)Just wondering if… or I just wanted to ask… (I need some information from you)

Adding "just" to the request is a way to imply that it's really just a small thing, a minor detail, and that you're not requesting anything big.

And, as we saw in the last lesson, it becomes even more conversational in tone if you drop the Pronoun at the start: "Just wanted to ask…"

Notice this phrase also: "I just wanted to ask": you want to ask this now- you're talking about the present time, but the word "wanted" is in the past tense. What's going on here? In English we'll sometimes use a past tense verb even though we're talking about the present moment to put some distance between the speaker and the topic. So if you use the present tense: "I want to ask…", it sounds a little more urgent, a tiny bit more demanding. If you use the past tense: "I wanted to ask…" it's like you're stepping back a little, you're not quite so attached to the question. "I wanted to ask…" is a softer request than "I want to ask…"

Now, in spoken conversation it's usually perfectly acceptable to use the phrase "I want to ask…" It's clear, it's straightforward, but in an email, using the past tense, "I wanted to ask…" makes the request just a little bit gentler.

The thing to remember about emails as compared to a spoken request is that in an email you don't have the advantage of observing the other person's reaction and modifying your tone accordingly. If you're face-to-face with someone you can always soften your request with a smile or your tone of voice. In an email, you are completely reliant on your written words to generate the positive response in the person you're speaking to. So people tend to be even more explicitly polite in emails than they are in spoken conversation.

There some are other common ways to soften the tone of a request in an email. Let's pick a scenario. You've just paid an invoice and you want to let the supplier know, so that they will release the stock.

Now, if you say "Please release the stock", it's not exactly rude, but it sounds very official, and not particularly friendly. Instead, you can say, "Could you release the stock please?" Again, by using the conditional "could" you're putting some distance between yourself and the request, like you did with "I wanted to ask".

If you want to sound a little more formal, but still very courteous, you could say, "I'd be grateful if you would release the stock now".

Now you might be thinking "Well, we've paid for it so they have to release the stock…. Why do I have to be so respectful?" It's really the culture of business in English-speaking countries. And this is an important point. The reason that emails are such an important tool is because they convey a lot more than just the content of the request. They also convey a lot of indirect information about the company and about the relationship between you and your audience. The right tone tells your audience that you are friendly and approachable, but also courteous, competent and professional. Yes, you are clear about what you want, but you also know the appropriate protocols for a business communication. If your tone is a bit wrong, you will still probably get the thing you are requesting, but you might also miss the opportunity to enhance the business relationship. It's really about making the other person feel, even unconsciously, that this is a person like me, this is someone I can work with.

Now, it's important also in an academic context to get the tone right. If you are studying in an English-speaking country, you will need to communicate with your teachers by email. As an overseas student in the USA or Britain, or Canada, or Australia, perhaps your biggest challenge in doing the course will be in showing that you can master the English language course content. Of course, you will be writing essays in English, you will be speaking English in tutorials and you will be answering exam questions that are written in English.

Teachers in English-speaking universities are acutely aware of the challenge this presents to non-English speaking background students, and, I'm sorry to say, in some cases they will assume that you are a less capable learner than some of their native English-speaking students. This is not because they're racist, usually. And it's often not even a conscious attitude that teachers have. But, if the teacher notices that your emails sound more or less like the standard English they expect from a student, then you could well gain an advantage by planting the thought in the teacher's mind that this is someone who knows what they're doing. And perhaps it means you're taken a little more seriously by your teachers.

So, let's look at some more examples of getting the right tone, and the wrong tone. I seem to receive a lot of requests from my Chinese colleagues asking me to "kindly" do something. "Would you kindly follow up with the factory please?" This is very polite, and it actually sounds quite formal, and coming from colleagues that I work with every day, it's unnecessarily formal. So again, following the principle that business emails should sound both courteous and casual, I recommend using a more casual phrase of the type we looked at before. Here are some more casual, but polite ways of requesting action from someone: Would you mind letting them know? Would you be able to let them know? Could I ask you to let them know for me please? And this one which sounds very polite: Could you possibly let them know?

 I've been involved on behalf of companies I've worked for in some fairly savage disputes with other companies, and even then, the email communications were conducted in a civil tone. Even if you don't want to sound friendly when you're requesting something, you should still use conventional, polite phrases, such as "could you please let me know…"