

Writing English Emails

With Peter McMillan

Lesson 3

Replies and Follow-ups

When you reply to an email that you have received, after the usual “Hi...” greeting, people will often start with “Thank you for your email”. This actually sounds a bit formal, and it is used as an opening even in email exchanges about legal disputes.

“Thanks for your email” is a tiny bit less formal. And “Thanks for getting in touch” is less formal again. “Nice to hear from you” is friendly, and not too familiar. People will sometimes use that when it’s the first time in a long time that they have received an email from the other person.

After a Meeting

One very common use for emails is as a follow-up to a phone conversation or a face-to-face meeting. There are some standard phrases that are used in this context. “Thanks for your time on the phone this morning”, is a common, polite way to introduce a follow up email. A more casual acknowledgement is to say “It was good to chat to you this morning” or simply “Good to chat this morning”.

“As discussed” is a standard way to refer back to the things you talked about in your earlier conversation.

It is often necessary to reply to an email that you have received, simply to acknowledge that you have received it. In this context it is often sufficient to reply simply with “Thanks” and the person’s name. A more formal version of this is “Received with thanks”. An acknowledgment of receipt that’s not standard English, but which I commonly see in the emails of non-English speakers is, “Well received”. It’s not something that a native speaker would generally use.

Pro Tip

Be Concise!

In a previous management job, I used to receive maybe 100 emails a day. Now, if you’re emailing someone who has that many demands on their time and attention, you need to make your point efficiently. In practice, if you try to make people read more than say, 100 words, the chances are that at best they’ll skim read it, and probably ignore some of the details, and at worst, they’ll get annoyed and just not bother. So, if you think the information you are sending requires a lot more than 100 words, ask yourself, first of all, can it be condensed, and secondly whether the best way to send it is in the body of an email. If you really need to send a large amount of text, you could consider putting in a separate document and sending it as a file attachment. That way your email just has to say what you’re emailing about and point to the attachment. That kind of prepares your audience for the task of reading the long text, and maybe they’ll set some time aside to read it, rather than fitting it in with the other 99 emails they have to get through.

Oh, and speaking of file attachments, also tell the person in the email that you’re attaching something, and what it is you’re attaching. Don’t just assume they will notice it. It’s enough simply to include a line that says, Attached: copy of blah blah blah

Beware!

Be very careful of marking the email URGENT. This can be very provocative and annoying, because it comes across like you're saying to the other person, pay attention to my email, because it's more important than all the other emails you've received. I remember there was someone in the HR department at a place I once worked who marked all her emails URGENT. Personally, I found it so aggravating that I developed a permanent prejudice against her, and perversely gave less importance to her emails than I otherwise might have.

The only time I have used URGENT on emails has been when I've been sending it to my own staff and I'm a little bit annoyed that something has not been done. Marking the email URGENT gives the signal that I expect it to be done now. But even if you judge a situation justifies hitting the URGENT button, I suggest you use it very sparingly.

Beware also...

Now, let's return briefly to the question of tone. Remember that we said in an earlier lesson that, even though you are using a conversational tone, an email is a different context to a conversation because you cannot monitor the reactions of the person you are addressing and modulate them in real time. If you say something in conversation that makes the other person look unhappy, you can rephrase what you said, you can reassure them that you didn't mean anything very negative, you can smile at them, you can show your intention through your facial expression and body language. In an email, the only thing they receive is the words that you've written.

Something that even native speakers have to learn about emails is that when you are communicating in words alone, it is harder to ensure your audience will understand your words the way you intend them. They can't hear your tone of voice, which, in a spoken conversation, would reassure them that you are making a joke. I have experienced this even with close friends: I've said things in emails that, in a conversation they would laugh at because they could recognise from the way I say it that I was being playful. But when they read it in an email they got offended. So, my suggestion is to be very careful about the way you use irony, or sarcasm in an email. If you are making a joke in an email, check to be sure that your audience will understand you intend it as a joke.

Check your spelling!

If you are not sure about the spelling in an email, check it before you send it. If your email contains spelling mistakes, your audience will notice. They might not judge you for making the mistakes, but then again, they might. I would say this relates particularly to people's names. It can feel a little disrespectful when you receive an email in which your name is spelt wrongly.

Also, make sure you use capital letters correctly in people's names. I always notice when someone says hi peter without a capital P. And be aware also that some English speakers' names have capitals in strange places. My name, McMillan, for example, is written Capital M, small c, capital M, then small illan.

BTW... (By the way...)

As a general rule in a business or academic email, it's best if you write words out in full- not in the way the you would write in a text message. If you want to say See you later, write see you later, not CU later. If you want to say tomorrow, write tomorrow, not tmr. If you're emailing a friend, no problem, but if you want to present yourself as a professional person to be taken seriously, take the trouble to write the words out in full.