



mattmcwilliams.com

How Not to Suck at Email

You probably suck at email.

Statistically, it's a safe bet that you do. The overwhelming majority of people I know suck at email. Grandmothers who just got a computer earlier this year and forward me emails about cats. CEOs who have been online since the mid-90's. Customer service people who send and receive over 100 emails every day. Most of them suck at email.

There is a good chance that you know that email could be better. You could do it better and you could teach others to do it better. For most people, if we improved our email skills by just 20% and those around us did as well, we could save 2-5 hours every week in lost productivity, not to mention reduce our stress and greatly improve our relationships.

Here are four ways that will help you not to suck at email:

1. **Use BLUF – Bottom Line Up Front.** It's a military term that means you should make your most important point first. Lead with the conclusion or recommendation. Here are two short email examples that show you how to use BLUF:

Email One (wrong)

Dear Jim,

So I was thinking last night after our meeting. I went home and ran some numbers and they really shocked me.

---Blah, blah, supporting information and chatter, blah, blah.---

Can you believe that? A 30% increase!

So, I propose that we (*finally the point*) create two news sales positions by May 1. I think that this will accomplish such and such...

Email Two (right)

Dear Jim,

I believe that we should create two news sales positions by May 1. Here is why:

---Supporting information---

Close.

That is BLUF in a nutshell. If you start using it, others will pick up on it as well.

2. **Pick up the phone!** If a thread has more than three total replies, pick up the phone. If you are confused by a question, don't start an email with "Joe, I don't understand." Pick up the phone. If someone has offended you, pick up the phone. Do not fire off an angry reply. If you are struggling to write the email, pick up the phone and talk through it. You do still have a phone, right? Then use it.
3. **SORTA – Stamp Out Reply to All.** Reply to All is Neanderthal. I got this one from [Tim Sanders](#). Tim says Replying to All is a sure sign that you are over 30. It's a terrible habit.

Tim points to research that shows that only 10% of reply to all message are used properly. My experience shows this is true. Research shows that upwards of 2% of the bandwidth checks written every month by companies across the world are spent on poorly used Reply to All messages. That is pathetic.

If you are replying to someone to say “Thanks” or “awesome” or “great news” or “way to go” or something like that, do not use Reply All...ever. Please.

If there are 6 people on an email and only 3 need a reply, take off the other 3. If a reply is addressed to a specific person (especially in the case of emails like “That’s great news Jim, thanks for sharing.”), do not – ever – choose Reply to All.

Seriously, I get 5-10 emails every day like this. Two things inevitably happen. First, I get annoyed. Yes, I have a delete button and I know how to use it, but it’s still annoying to have to glance at an utterly irrelevant email. Second, I create a rule to filter out messages with that subject line after a while. Who knows, I might miss a worthwhile email at some point.

4. **Include an explanation on forwarded emails.** Please do not just forward an email to me and expect me to understand it or force me to read through 10 minutes of the email thread. Include a brief intro. What is it about? What have you done about it? What do you want me to do about it? The only time forwarding an email without additional information is acceptable is if we are on the phone and you have explained it to me or if it is a common occurrence (i.e. certain emails that are always forwarded).

If you do those four things only, you will suck a lot less at email, **but I have four more for you tomorrow**, so stay tuned. Subscribe to my [RSS feed](#) or get posts [via email](#) so you don't miss a post in this series!

Are you using any of these four techniques? Which of these do you see violated the most?