

How to start and finish an email? – Part 1

It matters how you start and finish an email. We all have our habits and conventions in business email writing. Sometimes, we can become a little 'set in our ways', and be too rigid in our approach to email writing.

The Covid-19 period represents a new context for email communication. It is important we balance communicating simply and effectively with ensuring our messages convey the empathy, reassurance and sensitivity that can be very meaningful in this crisis period. In this series of articles, we focus simply on ensuring you use the correct start and end to your email writing. Please note that there is no universal truth in relation to how to write emails! The conventions below are my suggestions based on my experience of professional practice.

You have a range of options depending on the level of formality and cultural context. An effective email writer needs to tune into the formality of the situation and also have a feeling for the cultural context which can encompass the nationality, company style, personal style and age of the recipient.

How to start an email: Formal

When communicating to customers, suppliers or senior management.

Dear Mr Higson, - 'Dear' + surname is a classic formal greeting. It is appropriate when communicating formally, for example to a customer for the first time. In European English, for example, in a German or French company that uses English as its first language, this type of convention can be used widely both internally, in communicating to senior management and externally. Please avoid

using both the first name and surname - *Dear Toby Higson* - is not good practice.

Dear Toby, - 'Dear' + first name is used widely across the UK, the USA and Canada in formal contexts. I don't recommend using first names in a 'first contact email', when you are communicating to a client for the first time. However, in countries like the UK or US, even client-based communications can transition to first name terms. When communicating to a client/supplier/or senior management it represents a good idea to mirror/follow the conventions they use to communicate to you. If they switch to first name terms you could do likewise, although try not to depart too far from your own established professional style.

How to start an email: Semi-formal

When communicating to good colleagues or clients/suppliers you have a very warm relationship with.

Hi Toby, - 'Hi' + first name is used widely across semi-formal professional communications in the UK, Canada and the USA. I use it to communicate with my team. It conveys a more relaxed tone and I personally think it is a very positive way to start an email. In the USA it is used more widely and can be used in customer facing communications. 'Hi' is also used in more relaxed corporate cultures, for example in a seriously trendy IT start up! However, I don't recommend this as a formal way to communicate in European English. 'Hi' for non-native speakers of English can appear to be very relaxed.

Hello Toby, 'Hello', is often used as an alternative to 'Hi'. I don't personally like this way of starting emails. 'Hello' is widely used in spoken English and it can be used both formally, semi-formally and informally. I don't think it sits easily in written English and I would suggest it takes the professional edge off a business email.

Other conventions: Expressions such as 'Good morning' or 'Good afternoon' can be used to start an email, for example, in team communications when addressing your whole team. My preference for communications across an organisation, division or team is to use 'Dear All'. This expression can be an effective way to start an email in both a formal and semi-formal context. One small point of style, 'Dear all', with a small 'a' is often used. Stylistically I would advocate Dear All!

Dear Sir/Madam, - In that rare occasion you don't know who you are communicating to, for example, in speaking to the customer service team of your electricity provider, 'Dear Sir/Madam' represents a formal and classic starting point. Please note the convention is the opposite way around to the French style and in this convention 'Sir' comes before 'Madam'. An alternative, that I often use, is Dear Customer Service Team, Dear xxx Team. I find this a warmer and more personal way to address an unknown audience.

Commas - One point of style in opening an email is whether to use a comma. I don't use a comma but many do. 'Dear Peter' or 'Dear Peter', both represent acceptable ways of starting an email.

We hope this has been helpful!