Tips for Writing Professional E-mails

Tone
The majority of business e-mail interactions will use either a formal or semi-formal tone.

Semi-Formal tone is used for internal communications and memos, such as letters to colleagues and established business contacts. Use conventional sentence structure; in other words, write in full sentences. For example, "we will be meeting at 10am today" is more appropriate than "meeting at 10am today," because it is a full sentence, there is less ambiguity in meaning, and it has a personal tone. When using this tone, contractions (e.g., can't) are acceptable, but slang should not be used.

Formal tone is used primarily for external communications, usually with clients. Within a company, it is used in proposals, letters to superiors, or important letters and messages that may carry legal implications. It is also used when contacting a new employer or new clients. Complex sentence structures are used (i.e., we will be meeting at 10am to discuss the Smith case). Slang and contractions should not be used in this tone of writing.

What should Business E-mails include?
All business emails should have a subject line, opening sentence, a body paragraph (or two), and a closing statement.

Subject Lines should summarize the main theme/topic of an e-mail in as few words as possible. Subject lines need not be in full sentences; do not require periods (.); and articles (a, an, and the). To keep subject lines current, dates and times be updated if e-mailing multiple people on the same subject over time. They **should also** to contain a verb, as the lack of a verb can trigger spam filters.

Several sources also suggest avoiding the use of words such as: *issue, problem, important* or *help*. These words can be vague, are sometimes considered negative, and can also trigger spam filters.

Openings should address the intended recipient(s) and should talk about the main idea as soon as possible (essentially restating the subject line).

Example: if the subject line is **Changes to Vacation Policy**, the first sentence should read: ***There have been changes to the vacation policy at our company.***

Body paragraphs go into more detail about a subject and may discuss reasons for the e-mail. It is important to only discuss one topic per body paragraph, as the reader can only focus on one issue at a time. For example, do not ask for additional information on the vacation policy and ask to have time off in the same e-mail. Graphics, tables and figures would also be put into this section.

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Closings should contain any relevant dates or deadlines, a closing thought, or a summary of the message, though the closing need only to include ONE of these. In addition, close with your contact information, name, and signature, should anyone have any questions regarding the e-mail.

For example: Additional information regarding the vacation policy can be found on our company's website and personal queries about vacation time can be addressed to Elaine at Elaine@company.org.

Optional: 'Cheers'; 'all the best'; 'good luck'; 'have a great day'; or 'thank you' are optional phrases that can be put before a signature block. These are not mandatory, but more of a matter of personal preference.

In general

Do
- Have a subject line that reflects the content of the message
- Keep your e-mail to three screens in length or shorter. This works out to be about one page on Microsoft Word, or 300 words.
- Close the e-mail with your name and contact information

Do not
- Use internet acronyms (OMG, WTF, GTG, etc.)
- All lower case (i'll meet you in an hour) or all capitals(I'LL MEET YOU IN AN HOUR)
- Use slang (OMG George is such an idiot!)
- Use idioms (rock the boat, or that cost an arm and a leg)
- Write statements that speak for the entire organization, unless permission from your supervisor has been given

Sources
Guffey, Mary Ellen, Kathleen Rhodes and Patricia Rogin. *Business Communications: Process and Product.* Nelson Education

Jerz, Dennis. *Writing Effective E-mailE-mail: Top 10 Tips*. Seton Hill University. June 2008.
http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/etext/e-mail.htm

WHO Business Tone Module

WHO Business Pre Writing Strategies Module

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Subject Line: _____

Opening:_____
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Body Paragraph 1:

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Body Paragraph 2:

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Body Paragraph 3(if needed):

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Closing:_____
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