



Digital Body Language Style Guide

Email

The Audience

Hierarchy may matter. In certain corporate cultures, people can read a lot into where they're placed in the order of recipients. Think of the To, Cc, and Bcc lines as the old-school order you would sit in a meeting or at the family dinner table. The boss goes at the head, and everyone else falls in line after that depending on their importance.

Mirror the culture. In general, this channel is the appropriate one for the more formal digital communications in your workplace. If you work in a staid, conservative culture, remember to include the appropriate formal greetings, closings, and signatures. If you work in a more informal culture, use your best judgement but make sure to mirror the formality of the other party appropriately.

Do: *Dear Mr. Robinson, Sincerely, Erica Dhawan, CEO*

Don't: *Mr. Robinson, Erica*

The Timing

Email is getting faster. A 2015 study by the USC Vertebi School of Engineering found that 50% of email responses were sent within an hour. For those between the ages of 20 and 35, that number went down to a mere 16 minutes. Participants between ages 35 and 50 typically answered within 24 minutes; and those above the age of 50 took about 47 minutes to reply. In the time since that study, I would argue that we are only getting faster. More of us are responding using our mobile phones, leading to a halved response time.

Value others with a "read receipt." Because email is becoming a faster paced channel, try to let the other party know if you've received their email but need more than a few hours to respond. It's better to reply with a quick "Got it! I'll get back to you by Tuesday," than to leave the recipient waiting and potentially getting anxious or feeling disrespected.

The Structure

Use the subject line to set the tone. Leaving it blank is a wasted opportunity. In addition, it can be interpreted as informal and maybe even disrespectful, especially by an older recipient. Consider this: how do email marketers get you to click on their message? Why do you click on a specific marketing or ad email over the flurry of other emails flooding your inbox? Hint: it's the catchy subject line that draws you in. At work, you're marketing yourself. You want others to prioritize your requests. Think like a marketer selling those requests, starting with a specific and action-oriented subject line.

Do: *Roadside Inc Project Report Final Edits / Review by EOD 4/10*

Don't: *Project Report*

Be direct. There's no need to restate the subject line right away, but skip the pleasantries. For the most part, business emails don't necessitate asking questions like, "How's your day?" or wondering how the kids are doing. Get to the point.

Proofread for clarity, not just grammar. Just because you're writing to coworkers who see you every day doesn't mean they will automatically understand you. Don't be cryptic. Reread your email and ask yourself, If I wasn't in my own head, would I understand my message? This can be a difficult skill to develop, so ask for feedback from the receiver or another proofreader and take note of when your recipient responds with something other than what you wanted or asks for clarification.

Do: Let's remove the last page and reduce the total number of pages to 20
Don't: This document is too long

Pro Tips

- 1) Use "Reply All" sparingly. Generally, this is only necessary if it's a one-time team announcement or notification.
- 2) Clear the deck. If your email chain has gone on for more than three or four rounds of back-and-forth, your entire subject line is likely now a row of Re: and Fwd:. Replace those with a relevant, concise, action-oriented subject line for the email you're about to send.
- 3) Avoid anxiety-inducing subject lines like "Please call me" or "See CEO in his office." They're the workplace equivalent of "we need to talk" and are never necessary. This is not what we mean by "action-oriented." Brief does not mean lacking context.
- 4) If you need to add a link, embed it into text by highlighting the relevant words and using the Insert Link function available in most popular email programs. If your company works on an internal server, you can highlight the location of a document and embed that into the text in the same way.

When should an email conversation switch to a different medium?

Emails longer than 5 sentences tend to get skimmed over! For more complex topics and assignments, either opt for a phone call or meeting or make sure you're using bullet points, bold and italic text, and highlighting the action points at the close of the email. Do I or the other person need more context outside of email? If so, then the discussion requires a face-to-face or phone meeting.

Text and Instant Messaging

The Audience

It's casual. In general, your audience for these channels should be informal. The shorthand, emojis, and exaggerated punctuation we use to create tone in texts and IMs are not generally appropriate for formal discussions. In a professional setting, try to write in complete sentences, but don't feel the need to write out every word. Common abbreviations are okay.

The Timing

These channels are meant to be, you guessed it, instant. For the most part, responses are expected within the hour, although most come within 3 minutes or less! If you receive a text during a meeting and are unable to respond within that hour-long timeframe, it's best to let the recipient know the reason for the delay in your response. It may seem unnecessary, but it can help to diffuse any anger or annoyance that started to develop as they waited for a response.

Create boundaries. Unfortunately, the instant nature of these channels can be misleading. People are often tempted to use text and IM outside of work hours and still expect a quick response. It's perfectly reasonable to set boundaries if you wish to do so. If it's the first time, respond to the off-hour text with a quick message alerting the sender to the fact that you won't be responding until work hours. That way, you show that you received the message while avoiding frantic follow-ups and sticking to your own boundaries.

The Structure

Less structure is better. Because these are informal channels, there is no reason to include a subject line, formal greeting, or signature. Doing so demands an awkward increase in formality that has no place in this shorthand medium.

Do: Hey, so nice to connect! Just wanted to shoot you a text so that you have my number. - Erica

Don't: Hello Stephanie, This is Erica. We met at the 2020 World Leadership Conference Dinner. I enjoyed connecting with you! Here is my phone number. Best, Erica

Get to the point. Even more so than emails, texts and instant messages should only be used for information that doesn't necessitate an in-person conversation or a phone call. Keep texts to 2-3 sentences max.

Do: Hey Erica, are you available to meet to discuss a new project this week? Would anytime Tuesday and Thursday 1-5pm work for a 30 min call?

Don't: Dear Erica, How have you been? I'm starting a new project around collaboration in our office and thought of you. I would love to catch up.

Choose your shorthand wisely. Only use abbreviations that are widely known and that you would say aloud. For example, "LMFAO" is widely known, but you probably wouldn't say that aloud in a professional context. On the other hand, "np" (no problem) is both widely known and something that you could say in the office.

Do: np, talk soon

Don't: LMFAO ya sure man, cya

Pro Tips

- 1) Create a standard acronym list for common phrases. (NNTR = no need to respond; SOS = urgent, * = typo)
- 2) Don't send confidential information via text and IM! Remember even encrypted texts can be recorded by a screenshot.

When should a text or IM conversation switch to a different medium?

1. Don't text or IM someone "hey, do you have a minute" and then go on to explain an entire task in a follow-up paragraph. In that case, just call them.
2. If it's enough of an emergency to warrant a text outside of reasonable work hours (7am-7pm), it probably warrants a phone call. If it doesn't, it can wait.
3. If you need a record of the conversation, switch to email.

Video Meetings and Conference Calls

The Audience

Make introductions, if necessary. Virtual meetings, especially when tuning in from home, have the potential to feel more personal and uncomfortable than in-person meetings. If you're chatting with people you don't work with on a daily basis, it can be awkward or intrusive to have them looking into your home office. Ensure that everyone is identified, with their position, at the start of the meeting and give some time for a bit of social chatter before beginning.

The Timing

Keep it short and sweet. We're used to face-to-face meetings and conference sessions that last over an hour. In that kind of three-dimensional environment, participants have a full range of stimuli, fewer outside distractions, and are generally more easily engaged for longer periods of time. Virtual events leave much more room for distractions and multitasking, but a planned structure and a ticking clock can help. Productive virtual meetings have a predetermined time frame and perhaps also a predetermined number of ideas that each member will bring.

Do: Ask your team to bring 3 solutions to a Zoom meeting that will be capped at 60-minutes.

Don't: Schedule a 3-hour Zoom meeting and forget to send out an agenda that your team can use to prepare.

The Structure

Raise your hand. A great advantage of a video chat is that there are often built-in mechanisms for hand-raising (the space bar can generate hand-raising on Zoom). This can help avoid the issues common with phone calls, namely, people speaking over each other or cutting each other off. If your software doesn't have a "hand raise" feature, it's easy to establish one in a side chat box. Designate a signal—perhaps an asterisk—that will allow your team members to ask for their turn in the conversation. This does require careful moderating and good leadership. Make sure you aren't skipping anyone's hand raise, and try to ask for opinions from those who haven't volunteered.

Require that all participants be on camera. As a rule, if their camera is on, yours should be too. The camera gives us back some of the body language cues that are usually stripped from digital communication. It also allows your team members to see that everyone is fully engaged in the conversation. If you're scrolling Instagram or having a snack, everyone in the room can see you.

Always have a moderator or MC. Having a consistent face and voice that “stitches together” the virtual sessions for participants adds much-needed familiarity and helps alleviate the isolated feeling that online events can sometimes produce. The best way to implement this is to have the event moderator open up the conference or meeting and then take charge of staying on the agenda and moderating questions for speakers as they pop up in the sideline chat.

Pro Tips

- 1) Test your technology. Especially if you haven't used it in more than a few days, open your software before the scheduled time and test both your video and microphone quality. This will save the entire team time and will allow you to skip the "CAN YOU HEAR ME?" section of the schedule.
- 2) Insist that everyone use the mute button to help prevent audio feedback and keep breathing, writing, and fidgeting noises (aka distractions) to a minimum.
- 3) Slow down. Practice the 5-second rule and wait 5 seconds before speaking after you ask a question. This gap allows your team to process and accounts for the few seconds that an individual may wonder "Is someone else going to speak up first?" before speaking up themselves.

When should a video call switch to a different medium?

Just like in-person meetings, ask yourself the 5 P's and cut out any digital meetings that don't have a clear purpose or are missing a key factor for success.

Purpose: Does the meeting have a clearly defined purpose?

Participants: Are all of the relevant parties (and only the relevant parties) invited and able to attend?

Probable Issues: What are the concerns that could likely arise?

Product: What do we want to have produced when we are done?

Process: What steps should we take during the meeting to achieve the purpose, given the product desired and potential issues we may face?

Digital Body Language Checklist

Value Visibly

- Do we feel our time is respected?
 - Do we feel like our best work is acknowledged and celebrated?
 - Do we feel comfortable voicing concerns?
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Communicate Clearly

- Do we feel there is a common understanding of priorities and next steps?
 - Do we have a clear understanding of which channels to use and when?
 - Do we have clear language and word choice to foster understanding?
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Collaborate Confidently

- Do all of the appropriate stakeholders feel identified and aligned?
 - Do we feel that the correct people are informed? And are they cascading the messages appropriately?
 - Do we feel there is consistency in communications across teams?
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Trust Totally

- Do we give each other the benefit of the doubt when facing uncertainty?
 - Do we show vulnerability?
 - Do we create moments for informal social connections?
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About the Author

Erica Dhawan is the world's leading authority on Connectional Intelligence and the Founder and CEO of Cotential.

Through speaking, training, and consulting, she teaches business leaders innovative strategies that increase value for clients, deliver results and ensure future global competitiveness.



She is the co-author of the bestselling book *Get Big Things Done: The Power of Connectional Intelligence*. Erica was named by Thinkers50 RADAR as one of the emerging management thinkers most likely to shape the future of business.

Erica speaks on global stages ranging from the World Economic Forum at Davos to companies such as FedEx, Pepsico, and McGraw Hill Financial. Erica writes for Harvard Business Review, Forbes, Fast Company, and the Huffington Post.

Erica also has served as a board member to Deloitte's Inclusion External Advisory Council and Lufthansa Innovation Hub. Previously, she worked at Lehman Brothers and Barclays Capital. She has a MPA from Harvard University, a MBA from MIT Sloan, and a BS in Economics from the Wharton School.

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