

A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email

Intonation

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The most difficult thing to convey in email is emotion. People frequently get in trouble for typing exactly what they would say out loud. Unfortunately, without the tone of voice to signal their emotion, it is easy to misinterpret their intent.

While you cannot make your voice higher or lower, louder or softer to denote emphasis, there are games you can play with text to convey vocal inflection and emotion.

Light Emphasis

If you want to give something mild emphasis, you should enclose it in asterisks. This is the moral equivalent of italics in a paper document.

Instead of:

```
I said that I was going to go last Thursday.
```

Say:

```
I *said* that I was going to go last Thursday.
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Or:

```
I said that I was going to to go last *Thursday*.
```

Which of the above two you choose depends upon whether you are adamant about the commitment you made or adamant that you didn't mean Wednesday. (Restructuring the sentence to remove the ambiguity would be an even better idea.)

You can also capitalize the first letter only of words to give light emphasis:

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While Bob may say that you should never turn it past  
nine, this is not Cast In Stone. It will explode  
if you turn it up to eleven, but anything under ten  
should work just fine.
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I tend to use first-capitals to refer to things that are somehow dogmatic or reverential. This is probably a cultural holdover from all the capital letters that are used in the English Bible. It might not translate to other languages or cultures.

Strong Emphasis

If you want to indicate stronger emphasis, use all capital letters and toss in some extra exclamation marks. Instead of:

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> Should I just boost the power on the thrombo?
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No, if you turn it up to eleven, you'll overheat the motors and it might explode.

Say:

> Should I just boost the power on the thrombo?

NO!!!! If you turn it up to eleven, you'll overheat the motors and IT MIGHT EXPLODE!!

Note that you should use capital letters sparingly. Just as loss of sight can lead to improved hearing, the relative lack of cues to emotion in email makes people hyper-sensitive to any cues that might be there. Thus, capital letters will convey the message that you are shouting.

It is totally inappropriate to use all capital letters in a situation where you are calm. Don't do this:

HEY, I JUST WANTED TO SEE IF YOU HAD MADE ANY
PROGRESS ON THE PHROCKMEIJER ACCOUNT. STOP
BY AND SEE ME SOMETIME.

People will wince when they read that email.

>>EXTREME!!<< Emphasis

If you *really* want to emphasize something, you can go wild:

If you are late this time, I swear upon my mother's grave that I will never, *never*, *NEVER*, >>!!**NEVER**!!<< talk to you again.

Use this sparingly.

Mutter Equivalents

In person, there are a number of ways that you can indicate that a communication is private and not to be repeated. You can lower your voice, you can look to your right and to your left either with your eyes or with your whole head, and you can lean closer to the other person. While these obviously make it more difficult for someone to overhear, these signals are so ingrained that we might use them even if there is nobody around for miles. Unfortunately, lowering your voice and moving your body is hard to do in email.

I sometimes write what I really think and then write down the sanitized version:

My boss got fired I mean resigned today.

A friend of mine uses double parentheses to denote "inner voice", what in the theatre world is called an "aside":

My boss resigned ((got fired)) today
which is going to lead to enhanced

relations between Engineering and Test ((in
their dreams))

Something else that I will do sometimes to denote the "lowering of voice" is to type without any capital letters:

psssst!
hey wendy!
guess what?

I GOT THE JOB!!!! :-D :-D !!

I should warn you that there is a minority that doesn't like the shortcuts I showed you. They argue that if Mark Twain could convey emotion without resorting to such artifice, then we should too. Well, I'm not as skilled a writer as Mark Twain and usually don't have as many words to make my tone as clear as he did. I believe that there is a greater danger of angering or offending someone by not using these shortcuts than there is of annoying someone by using them.

Summary

It is difficult for most people to express emotion well in a short message. Fortunately, you can use a number of textual tricks to help convey the emotion:

- Asterisks (for emphasis)
- Capital letters
- Punctuation
- Whitespace
- Lower-case letters