

A Beginner's Guide to Effective Email: Greetings and Signatures

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Every new medium develops its own protocols for opening and closing. Telephone conversations start with "Hello" and end with "Goodbye". Letters open with "Dear" and end with "Sincerely". Because email is so new, there aren't firm customs on how to open and close.

Many people do not give either a salutation or a signature. After all, while a letter can get separated from its envelope easily, it is difficult to separate an email message's body from its addressing information. The email message itself says who it is to and from.

However, that information might not be adequate for your needs. It might be difficult to find with some email reading software. It might be unclear or ambiguous. It might be inadequate for telling the receivers just why they are getting that message. Or, it might not convey the proper formality or status cues for your purposes.

I will give you my thoughts on openers and closers, but you need to think carefully about what you are trying to convey both explicitly and implicitly. You also need to take the culture and customs of all parties into consideration.

Greetings

Salutations

Salutations are tricky, especially if you are crossing cultures. Frequently, titles are different for men and women, and you may not be able to tell which you are addressing. The family name is first in some cultures and last in others. Honorifics may vary based on status or age. So don't feel bad if you have trouble figuring out which salutation to use: it is a difficult problem.

In the United States, it is a bad idea to use "Sir" or "Mr." unless you are absolutely certain that your correspondent is male. Similarly, it is probably safer to use "Ms." instead of "Miss" or "Mrs." unless you know the preference of the woman in question.

In the United States, using someone's first name is *usually* ok. Thus, you can usually get away with a "Dear" and the first name.

Dear Chris:

Here you are covered regardless of whether Chris is male or female. (Beware of using a diminutive if you aren't certain your correspondent uses it. It might rankle Judith to be called Judy; Robert might hate being called Bob.)

If you are addressing a group of people, you can say "Dear" plus the unifying attribute. For example:

Dear Project Managers:

Or:

Dear San Jose Lasers Fans:

Do You Even Need A Salutation?

Given that email is relatively informal, frequently (in the United States) there isn't a problem with dispensing with names and titles altogether, especially if you are in a higher status position than your correspondent:

Hello - I saw your web site and wanted to mention that I invented the thromblemeister on Feb 29, 2403, *not* on Feb 28, 2402.

I usually use a simple "Hi" for people that I already know:

Hi - Are you interested in getting together for sushi next week? I can bring all my wedding pictures and bore you to death. ;-)

"Good Morning" and "Good Afternoon" don't make a lot of sense with email, as the sun may have moved significantly by the time your correspondent gets around to it. "Good Day" sounds stilted to American ears (although it is common in other parts of the former British Empire). You may want to avoid "Greetings" in the United States: it reminds many people of the draft notices young men got during the Vietnam War.

Again, you must be careful about cultural differences. The East Coast of the United States is more formal than the West Coast (where I live). Germans are even more formal; they can work side-by-side for years and never get around to a first-name basis. Starting a message to Germany with `Dear Hans` might be a bad idea.

Identification

When I get email from strangers, I care more about what connection they have with me than how they address me. When you send email, particularly someone who doesn't know you, it would be good if you would immediately answer these questions:

- How did you learn of your correspondent?
- What do you want from your correspondent?
- Who are you?
- Why should your correspondent pay attention to you? (If you can't answer this question, you should wonder if you should even send the email.)

Putting some of that information in a signature is better than nowhere at all, but putting it at the top is better for several reasons:

- If there is a problem with the transmission of the email, the end is much more likely to get lost than the beginning.
- A lot of people get more than twenty messages per day, and so read them quickly. If you don't establish quickly who you are, your correspondent may delete your message before they get to the bottom.
- Your identity is an important clue to the context of the message.

Good answers to the questions can take several forms:

Dear Ms. Sherwood: I am an editor at Very Large Publishing Company, Inc. I sat next to your husband on United last week, and he mentioned that you are interested in publishing a book based on your email guide. I have read your guide, and would be very interested in receiving a proposal from you.

Or:

My name is Dave Wilcox and I'm the legal counsel for Thromblemeisters Direct, Inc. We are deeply disturbed at the aspersions you cast upon us and on thromblemeisters in your email guide. Therefore, we order you to immediately cease and desist using any reference to thromblemeisters in your email guide. If you do not, we will be forced to file suit against you or your descendants if and when we and/or thromblemeisters come into existence.

Or even:

Hi - I am a novice email user and just read your email guide. I don't know if you are the right person to ask or not, but do you know what the French word for "Mister" is? If you can tell me the answer, I'll send you a funny postcard.

Some good friends of mine recently got email from my cousin for the first time. Unfortunately, not all of the email made it through. The message they got said only:

Dear Rich and Chris: I met you at Jim and Ducky's wedding.

But, because he identified where he knew Rich and Chris from immediately, it was enough information that they knew he was someone to pay attention to. They replied to him and communication is now going smoothly between them.

Signatures

Many email programs allow you to set up a default signature to be included at the end of every message. Many people use these signatures as an easy way to give their name and alternate ways of reaching them. For example:

Hi - when did you want to go to lunch?

Rebecca P. Snodwhistle
Thromblemeisters Direct, Inc.
666 Beast Street
Styx, HI 77340
+1 (959) 123-4567 voice
+1 (959) 123-4568 FAX
snodwhistle@throbledirect.com W
becca@thromboqueen.net (personal)

Such an extensive amount of signature information in contrast to such a short question looks silly to me. I think much of the above signature is extraneous. If they got the email from you, they can reply by email, so don't need your FAX number or street address. (If they have to send a FAX or package, they can ask for addressing information.) They already have one email address in the message you sent, and don't need your other email address.

The name is perfectly reasonable to include, especially if

- Your email messages don't include your full name in the `From:` line. (Send yourself email to see if your name is there or not.)
- The name in the `From:` line doesn't match the name you actually use. (Christina might actually go by Chris, but her company might insist on using her full name as her email name.)
- The email account is shared by multiple people. (My husband and I have a joint email account, for example.)

The telephone number is also a reasonable thing to include - if you are willing to be interrupted by a phone call. Emotions are easier to convey over the phone, and some people prefer phone to email for all circumstances.

If the message is business related, including the company name is a reasonable thing to do - even if the message is going to someone else in the same company.

One thing that is missing from Rebecca P. Snodwhistle's signature, above, that I would like to see is her job title. Is she the vice-president of sales or the shipping clerk? That may have more of an influence on the correspondent than anything else.

So I would rewrite the above signature to be:

Rebecca P. Snodwhistle
Chief Executive Officer, Thromblemeisters Direct, Inc.
+1 (959) 123-4567 voice

That signature is still overkill for arranging lunch, but it isn't always convenient to switch between having your signature included or not.

Some people put things purely for entertainment in their signature: artwork, philosophical sayings, jokes, and/or quotations in their signature. This can be ok,

but don't overdo it. A good heuristic is to keep your signature at or under five lines long.

After setting up a signature that is included automatically, it is easy to forget about it. (After all, your email software might not show it to you, or it might be so routine that you never look at it again.) So whenever a piece of contact information changes, make sure to revisit your signature to make sure that it is still up-to-date. And, if you have an entertainment piece in your signature, change it every once in a while. It wasn't as funny the fiftieth time your coworker saw it as it was the first time.

One final note on signatures: they are a good way to let your correspondent know that all of the message got transmitted properly. There is no body language to signal that you are "done talking" and, unfortunately, email transmissions sometimes get interrupted.

Separators

Many people put pretty separators - lines, horizontal bars, and so on - around their signatures. For example:

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Rebecca P. Snodwhistle | CEO, Thromblemeisters Direct, Inc.  
+1 (959) 123-4567 voice | +1 (959) 123-4567 fax  
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These are very pretty to sighted people, but imagine what it would be like for people who are so visually challenged that they have their computer read their email to them: "hyphen hyphen hyphen hyphen hyphen hyphen..."

That said, some email programs recognize "-- " as a signature separator, and so can process the signature differently. (For example, some programs don't include the signature in quotes.) Technically, the signature is *supposed* to be two hyphens **plus a space**, but it's very common to see just two hyphens without the space.

Summary

If you are well-known to your correspondent, you can probably get away without including extra identification. In other cases, you should provide your correspondent with enough clues to figure out who you are, why you are writing, and why he or she should pay attention to you. Preferably, this information will be at the top of the message.

Greetings are difficult to do well, especially if you are crossing cultures and/or languages. In the United States, you can be pretty informal, but even in the U.S., you need to be careful that you aren't either making assumptions or using sensitive words.