a free guide from SIB Leadership

Say It Better in Email: Five Habits and the Anatomy of a Message That Works

For most leaders, email is where people meet your voice most often. Every message can lift someone up and move work forward, or leave them confused and deflated.

Five habits of people whose emails get results

1. **Mind the To, CC and BCC lines**
   To is for the people who need to act. CC is for awareness only: no action is expected. BCC is hidden from everyone else, so save it for protecting addresses on large lists.

2. **Personalize to connect**
   Use the person's name. An email is a conversation, not a transaction, so rewrite canned responses until they sound like you.

3. **Give every email a purpose**
   Before you send, ask: Why am I sending this? What purpose does it serve? Does anyone need to act?

4. **Respect cultural differences**
   Keep words simple, skip idioms and slang, and remember that tone and directness read differently across cultures and first languages.

5. **Courtesy still applies**
   Read your message as the receiver will. Please, thank you and a greeting cost nothing and change how everything else lands.

big idea

Great service and great leadership feel the same: like dealing with a person, not a company.

The anatomy of an effective email

Subject	It's where your reader decides whether to open now, later or never. State the purpose and make it specific: "Decision needed by Friday: Q3 training budget."
Opening	Greet them by name, then say why you're writing in the first sentence.
Body	Brevity is kind. Put the most important point first and answer who, what, when, where, why and how. Skip emojis unless the relationship is already casual.
Ending	Close with a clear call to action and next steps: who does what, by when. Use bullets when there are several.
Signature	Keep it classy and short: name, title and the best way to reach you. No festive graphics or quote collections.

Before and after

BEFORE

Subject: Question

Hey, so I was looking at the schedule and I'm not sure the training on the 14th works because a lot of people are out that week and also the room might be booked and we still haven't heard about the budget so let me know what you think.

AFTER

Subject: Move the 14th training? Your call by Wed

Hi Dana,

I recommend moving the October 14 training to the 21st. Here's why:

- 9 of 15 attendees are out that week
- Room B is double-booked
- Budget approval is still pending

Can you confirm the 21st by Wednesday? I'll send the new invite the same day.

Thanks, Stacy

big idea

If your reader has to read it twice to find the ask, the email isn't finished.

Extreme makeover: the mistakes to catch before you hit send

- [ ] Misspelled words and names
- [ ] Run-on sentences
- [ ] The wrong person, or people
- [ ] CC'ing everyone when it isn't needed
- [ ] No one knows who should respond
- [ ] The festive signature
- [ ] An attachment with no message
- [ ] An out-of-office reply that expired weeks ago

Email, or something else?

Email works when...

- Several people need the same information
- You're sharing facts, files or updates
- No back-and-forth is needed

Pick up the phone or meet when...

- There's a conflict to resolve
- It needs repeated back-and-forth
- The information is private or sensitive
- The moment deserves a face-to-face conversation

Let tools help, not write for you

Use spelling and grammar checkers, schedule-send and follow-up reminders. Writing assistants can tighten a draft, but your reader should still hear you.

final thought Afraid an idea is too bold to send? Remember that someone once pitched a movie about a tornado full of sharks, and it got made. Say it, and say it better.

keep going The Craft is the second pillar of the SIB Leadership Cohort. Join the interest list at sayitbettersib.com/leadership.html.

Adapted from Stacy Lowman's course "Essential Email Skills." General guidance for professional communication.