How to write emails that pass the 10-second test

Tags: <u>Articles</u>, <u>Business Writing</u>, <u>Communication</u>, <u>Email</u>

Readers often decide within 10 seconds whether to skim, respond to, put off, or trash your message. Use those 10 seconds poorly, and you won't get the response you need when you need it. Use them well, and you'll build a reputation as an excellent communicator who gets stuff done.

Press play below to read the email and see just how fast 10 seconds goes by.

Don't know the purpose of the email? You are not alone.

Follow these tips to write emails your readers can both read and respond to — quickly. And see a revised 10-second email below.

1. Know the person you're writing to and what he or she cares about.

Take a minute to ask yourself:

- Who is the person — a peer, superior, client, or vendor? Someone you know well or someone you have never met?
- What does he or she care about or need?
- If there are multiple recipients, do their priorities and interests align? (If not, send multiple messages.)

Keep your answers in mind as you compose your message because they will help you determine the tone you use (for example, a casual "Hey, Prakash" or a more formal "Dear Mr. Patel"), the amount of detail you give, and how you approach persuading the person to respond.

2. Consider what you want your recipients to know, do, and feel as a result of your email.

Why do you need to send this email? Before you start writing, identify what you'd like the recipient:

- **To know:** What information does your recipient need in order to take action? Share that information — no more and no less. If the person needs quite a bit of context, add an attached document so that the email can remain focused on your core message and call to action. If your goal is passing along an FYI, explain why you're sharing it.
- **To do:** What action do you want the person to take? Be sure that your ask — what you

want done, why, and by when — is front and center in your message. If you're making a request that requires persuasion, list the reasons why granting your request is in the person's interest, and include if you and the recipient have similar interests.

- **To feel:** Even though this is a business email, you're still writing human to human. Feelings motivate people to take action. Identify what emotions you'd like the recipient to feel from reading your message — urgency, excitement, pride, sympathy, etc. Then use language to support that goal, for example, *"I'm thrilled to share this client response …"*

3. Craft a subject line that explains your email's purpose and level of urgency.

If your subject line doesn't grab your recipient's attention, he or she won't even bother to open your message.

Start your subject line with a signal to indicate the type of message you're writing:

- Announcement of …
- Request for …
- Proposal to …
- FYI …
- Please review …

Follow those introductory words with a summary of your email message (if appropriate, add details about your deadline or level of urgency):

- Announcement: New cashier training program beginning March 1
- Request to meet this Friday about next month's trade show
- Proposal to revise our check-handling procedure
- FYI: Notes from Acme Co. annual business review
- Urgent: Please review the January financial report today

4. Write the body of your email so that it's easy to scan and to understand the action you want the recipient to take.

Structure your main points in bulleted or numbered lists because they:

- Force you to organize your thoughts into clear, discrete points
- Are faster to read (and write) than paragraphs
- Make it easier for your recipient to quickly process multiple points

Be sure to keep your paragraphs short, with plenty of white space in between. Consider using **bold text** for key words, action requests, and/or deadlines. And <u>end your message proposing specific next steps</u> that make it easy for your reader to act on your request.

5. Before sending your email, read it back as if you're the recipient.

Reading from the recipient's perspective can help you catch wording that has the potential to be misunderstood. If it's a high-stakes email (for example, to an important client) ask a colleague to read it, too.

For best results, read your email out loud to check that:

- Your writing is professional and in the appropriate tone (casual or formal) for your recipient.
- The information is necessary (nothing extra) and complete (nothing missing, including any attachments).
- The message is going only to those who need it.
- The subject line explains the email's purpose and level of urgency.
- The structure (lists and white space) and formatting (bold text) make it easy for your recipient to understand what you want him or her to do and by when.
- The message has no spelling and grammar errors — your autocorrect won't catch incorrect uses of words, like "you're" and "your," or typos that spell real words, like "thongs" when you mean "things."

Finally, how long does it take you to scan your message and understand the purpose? Set your timer for 10 seconds and give it a try.

Here's a revised 10-second email from the video above.