York Astronomical Society

Email standards, protocol and guidance

A good guide to communications for members

Introduction

The following guidance introduces good practice for writing and sending emails. It also introduces a YAS protocol for email signatures, disclaimers and use of mailing groups. It covers the following areas:

- Displaying your identity and contact details
- Email disclaimers
- Effective emails
- Copying emails to a group
- Writing style
- Content
- Attachment etiquette
- Email and accessibility
- Emailing members
- Appendix – Precis from 'The Complete Plain Words' by Sir Ernest Gowers

The guidance offered is intended to help make your email communications professional, effective and easy to understand.

Displaying your identity and contact details

It is good email practice to make clear who the email is coming from and to include contact details in any signature so that people can get in contact with you easily. This is true if you are sending an email from your own email account or emailing from the society email accounts.

Making your name appear as the sender to recipients

When you send an email, it is far better for the person(s) receiving the email to see your name rather than your user name in their in-box. This means the recipient knows that the message is from 'Fred Bloggs', rather than mystery person 'fb501'.

Add your signature to the end of an email

Providing details in your signature is important to the recipient, so that they know who you are and have an easy reference to all your contact details.

If you have created an office or departmental email account, then you need to add the general office contact details in the signature.

> Example personal email signature:
>
> Derek Farmer
> Secretary
> York Astronomical Society
> Registered as a Charity in England and Wales: Reg 1174488

Email disclaimers

The society, the sender, or both can be made liable for the content of an email. A disclaimer has been made available and should be used to protect the society and those sending emails on its behalf.

York Astronomical Society email disclaimer:

This email and its attachments may be confidential and are intended solely for the use of the intended recipient. If you are not the intended recipient of this email and its attachments, you must take no action based upon them, nor must you copy them to anyone. Please contact the sender if you believe you have received this email in error. Any views or opinions expressed are solely for those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the York Astronomical Society.

October 2018

Why use a disclaimer

The York Astronomical Society, like many organisations, uses an email disclaimer to help fend off potential claims and to inform recipients of the societie's position in relation to the information being emailed. It is mandatory for all York Astronomical Society email account users to add a reference to the stated legal disclaimer at the bottom of their email signature.

Adding the disclaimer to your email signature

To avoid lengthening the signature at the bottom of the email, and to ensure the most current legal disclaimer statement is used, you should add the following web address as a link to the bottom of your email signature http://www.yorkastro.org.uk/docs/disclaimer/email.htm

Effective emails

People are more likely to read and respond to your emails if you make an effort to be clear about the subject of your email, clarify the intended recipient(s), state any call-to-action and summarise any other need-to-know information early in the email.

Clear subject titles

Always put a clear title in the subject box when composing an email. Make the words of a headline meaningful to the recipient to set the scene for the content and to help both you and them to file the email appropriately.

If an email conversation develops into a discussion about other areas as well as the original topic, consider changing the subject heading when you reply. This makes it easier to recognise the purpose of the email at a later date, without having to open it, and keeps the subject heading relevant.

If you want to respond to a specific point in someone else's mail, choose 'Reply' and delete everything except the relevant part of their mail. Then type your comments above the original email to make it clear what you wish to say in response.

Clear call-to-action

Make it clear if and what action is needed, by whom and set deadlines. If necessary set the actions out as separate items with a named person next to each.

Provide some context. If you are contacting someone for the first time, or they have no background with the topic, a brief introductory sentence will help. In a reminder email, refer back to previous correspondence, with dates.

In a long email exchange, it can be helpful to delete all but the most recent message when you reply, provided the context is not needed.

Ensure the mail you send is relevant to your readers: don't copy others into replies unnecessarily. It simply fills up peoples' inboxes.

Content

Sir Ernest Gowers, once head of the Civil Service, wrote the renowned text book 'The Complete Plain Words'. We include as an appendix to this document a precis from this book on how to compile a written communication. Although it was written before the email era, the content applies equally to Emails. You cannot go wrong if you abide by these guidelines:

Copying emails to a group

In addition to the advice on 'effective emails' given in the section above, taking time to use 'copy' facility correctly when emailing groups can help the effectiveness of your communications.

Small known list to copy in

When people need to know who the other recipients are, use the Cc 'carbon copy' field, which is visible to everyone. In some cases it is important that recipients can understand why they're receiving the mail and seeing the recipient list can help. This is generally good for when you are copying in a small number of people who are relevant to the email exchange.

Emailing a large group

If you are sending out an email to a large group, using the Cc field will create a long list and cause confusion to the recipient who may not understand why the email has come to them. This is where the Bcc field works betters.

In the header of an email Bcc means 'blind carbon copy'. Recipients cannot see who else has received the message. Bcc is used when mail is sent to a group of people who don't necessarily know each other and don't need to know who else is receiving the mail, but would find it helpful to understand the 'capacity' in which they are being contacted.

When using Bcc, it is helpful in the main body of your email to state clearly who the recipients of the email are, the subject or topic, a clear call to action and any deadline you have set. Further recommendations can be found in the 'effective emails' section.

Example of how to head up an email when using Bcc to mail a large group(s):

To:	All Bulletin Contributors
From:	The Bulletin Editor
Subject:	Articles for the next YAS Bulletin
Action required:	Submission of articles from you. Deadline: 2q November 2018

Dear all
Articles needed for next edition of the YAS Bulletin
The next edition of the .... Etc.

Writing style

Emails are considered to be less formal than other means of communication, although they have become more formal in work settings in recent years. There is no particular guidance on salutations or sign-offs, but politeness is always important.

There is no maximum recommended length for email. However, emails are often skim-read; your reader has a lot of mail competing for their attention. Make sure you get your point across quickly by keeping your email concise and easy to read.

It's harder to read from a screen than a printed page. Use plain English and break up text by using short paragraphs, headings and lists.

Avoid using all capital letters in both the subject box and the main body of text. It is considered to be 'SHOUTING' in email terms.

Numbered paragraphs are often helpful for clarity. However, numbered and bulleted lists may change format when read in other mail systems so bear this in mind when formatting your email.

If you have lengthy or detailed information to get across, an email may not be your best option. Think about other communications methods, or consider your attachment options (see attachment etiquette).

Avoid using emoticons or 'smileys' – they may be misinterpreted.

Attachment etiquette

Sometimes you may need to refer to, or circulate, documents that are relevant to your email. Attachments are useful way of sending small documents to small groups. Be aware of the size of any document or file you are attaching. Some email systems will only accept up to 20Mb in size.

Sending larger documents, or where the mail group is larger, try to avoid attaching the document itself. Instead:

- Put it on the web and link to it.
- Store the document on a shared drive (if all your recipients have access) and circulate the location.

If you do need to send attachments, bear in mind that your recipient's inbox or mail account may not have much space. Some mail programs don't allow users to remove the attachment from the mail and save it – they may only have the choice to delete it all or keep it all.

Some companies' mail servers reject very large attachments without notifying the mail recipient.

They increase the size of your sent box.

Any documents that are attached (or linked to in HTML mail) need to be accessible, e.g. by using headings and styles in Word and pdf.

When sending HTML email, remember to set it up so that any images and attachments are held on the web server not included with the email itself.

Email and accessibility

Even when you know your intended recipients, you may be unaware of their accessibility needs. The recipient should have total control over how they read the message and be able to apply character size, font or colour settings of their own to make the message more readable for them.

If in doubt, use plain text

Using plain text with no formatting, colour or font selection is a safe option to allow recipients to manipulate the messages you send. The plain text format is also kindest to recipients who receive a lot of emails, as it takes up least space in their mail folders.

Some mail programs provide an option, which is sometimes the default setting, to send emails in HTML format, enabling you to specify the layout, font face and size and colour for your text. Ideally you should still choose to use plain text.

Using HTML for external promotional emails

HTML allows you more choice over the look and feel of your email. While this has advantages, HTML emails need to be set up correctly to avoid causing problems for users. Creating good, accessible HTML emails which work with a range of mail readers takes time.

Emailing members

Only officers of the society are permitted to send emails to all members and must be for purposes appropriate and approved by the recipients in line with The GDPR.

If you are sending an email to your established contacts within YAS and the email relates to YAS activities then these guidelines apply.

Be carefull

Please remember your legal obligations at all times. The YAS guidelines apply to all the emails we send. The UK laws on defamation, disabled access, releasing material under Freedom of Information and the Societies other policies are also relevant. Use of the email disclaimer does afford some degree of protection, but you may still be personally liable for any legal action. Remember only put into writing on whatever platform, text you are prepared to stand up in court and defend.

York Astronomical Society

October 2018

Appendix – Precis from 'The Complete Plaiin Words'

When You Write to Communicate

Before you begin to write make sure you know your:

- **Subject.** Have you a clear understanding of the subject?

- **Reason for writing**. Know why you are writing - what does your correspondent want to know and why does he want to know it?

- **Reader**. Adapt your style and the content of the letter to suit your correspondent's needs and his present knowledge of the subject.

When writing you must be:

- **Clear.** Make the meaning clear; arrange the subject in logical order; be grammatically correct; do not include irrelevant material;

- **Simple and brief.** Use the most direct language; avoid obscure words, long sentences; avoid technical or legal jargon and abbreviations unless you are sure that they will be understood by the reader; be as brief as possible; avoid 'padding';

- **Accurate and complete.** Be as accurate and complete as possible, otherwise further correspondence will follow resulting in extra work and loss of time;

- **Polite and human**. In your letters, be sympathetic if your correspondent is troubled; be particularly polite if he is rude; be lucid and helpful if he is muddled; be patient if he is stubborn; be appreciative if he is helpful; and *never* be patronizing;

- **Prompt.** Answer promptly, sending acknowledgements or interim replies if necessary - delays are discourteous.

After writing look critically at what you have written and determine whether it is:

- **Clear?** Can the language be easily understood? Is it free from slang? Are the words the simplest that can convey the thought? Is the sentence structure clear?

- **Simple and brief?** Does it give only the essential facts? Does it include only essential words and phrases?

- **Accurate?** Is the information correct? Do the statements conform to rules, policy, etc? Is the writing free from errors in grammar, spelling & punctuation?

- **Complete?** Does it give all of the necessary information?

- **Human?** Is the wording free from antagonistic words and phrases? Is it, where appropriate, tactful, helpful, courteous, sympathetic, frank, forcefull? Will the tone bring the desired response?