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A Primer on Electronic Communication

By [Eszter Hargittai](#)

Often enough we are faced with a question that can best be answered by someone else, possibly a complete stranger. The upside of the Internet is that we can quickly contact folks without much effort. The downside of the Internet is that people can contact us without much effort. This reality is very present in academe today — where senior professors constantly gripe about being overwhelmed by inappropriate e-mail, to the point where some hide their e-mail addresses. Graduate students and researchers of all kinds, meanwhile, agonize over how to approach an eminent scholar with a query, and trade strategies for actually getting an answer.

Given people's limited amount of time, how can we ensure that our inquiring e-mail is not simply relegated to the recipient's trash folder? It is important to recognize that those possessing information of interest to us will be the types of people who are valuable sources of knowledge for others as well. As someone who is often on the receiving end of such messages, I have developed a good sense for what factors can maximize the chance of a helpful response. Of course, individual cases will differ, but putting some thought into the mode of communication can yield valuable outcomes.

Regardless of the status difference (prospective student contacting a faculty member or a senior researcher contacting a junior professional), it is important to be polite, direct, clear and succinct.

Perhaps because of the ease with which contact can be made these days, correspondence often lacks professionalism. I am not advocating absurd formalities, rather, some minimum standards for cold-contacting someone.

The following is a primer for how to approach writing such messages.

Before getting into the contents of the e-mail, let us alter the way we approach such a message as a whole. One way to get in the mode of thinking along more polite lines of communication is to think about the message as a letter instead of a quick note. Is your message something you would print out and send off on letterhead? If not then it may not be ready for prime time. The following are ways in which you can infuse some professionalism into the note.

In an ideal case, and unless there are special circumstances, all of the sections below should be brief, no more than a sentence or a short paragraph.

Write a clear and descriptive subject line. The reason for carefully crafting the subject line is two-fold. First, you want to make sure your message is not filtered out by a program as spam. Second, you want to make sure the

recipient does not delete your note manually, assuming it is unwanted junk mail.

Summarize your inquiry in a few words. Make it pertain directly to the recipient as a clue that the message is on target and arrived in the mailbox deliberately. For instance, a subject line of “question about your talk at Northwestern” or “requesting e-copy of your recent JoC article” works better than simply saying “question for you” or “a request.”

Address the person politely. The first point of contact is important. Address the recipient by name. When looking up contact information, try to establish the person’s position. Is this a doctor or professor? If that information is not clear then Mr. or Ms. will have to do or perhaps you can write out both first name and last name. But do not simply say “Hi,” or “Hello,” without a name. Such an impersonal greeting signals to recipients that you are likely spamming a bunch of people with notes without bothering to spend the time on personalizing them. They will take just as much time responding to you as you did writing to them: close to none. Hopefully no explanation is needed for why “Hey,” is inappropriate.

State your reason for contact. Start out by explaining why you are contacting the person. If you have a more elaborate question, first just state the general motivation in a sentence and proceed with more details further down in the message. You want to get your point across quickly, before the recipient loses interest or thinks this is spam.

Introduce yourself. Say a few words about who you are and how you came across the person’s name. Social networks matter so if someone had pointed you in this direction or if you know of a mutual contact then mention that. Alternatively, if you have an overlapping interest or affiliation, you could make note of that information (e.g. shared alma mater or home town). If you just have a simple brief question then these bits of information are less significant.

Explain what you have already done. You want to make sure that the recipient does not feel like you are simply outsourcing your own research responsibilities. Be very clear that you have done sufficient amount of work, but it has left you with questions that he or she is best equipped to answer. You do not want the person to think that sending out e-mails to strangers was your first attempt at finding an answer to your question.

If you are making contact to receive a copy of a paper, explain that you tried your library (and do so!), but it does not have a subscription. Also, be sure to check the person’s Web site to make sure no copy is available there either. You can mention that you had done this and include the Web address where you tried. Some people have several Web sites and it may help for them to know where you tried and came up empty handed.

If you want additional information on a piece you read by this colleague, make it very clear that you have read the paper already. Make some thoughtful comments then politely proceed with questions about it.

If you are looking for suggestions for research literature, perhaps list the work and people you have already identified as relevant for your project. This accomplishes three things. First, it helps the recipient situate your areas of interest. Second, it communicates what you have already figured out so advice you get should then have added value to what you have already accomplished. Third, you are offering the person information that may be novel thereby switching the interaction from a one-way favor to a true exchange of content.

All that said, do not send the recipient an entire paper of what you have already accomplished! No one wants to read through an entire literature review or research plan just to get to a question. While some people are notoriously bad at showing that they have already put work into the project, others naively think that the person on the other end cares to read an entire project proposal. Do not make that mistake. You do not want to lose your reader midway through the message.

Restate your question, elaborate if necessary. Concisely restate why you are in contact and what information you seek. Do not make the recipient have to work at this. The more work you ask on the respondent’s behalf, the less likely that you will receive anything in return.

Examples of what does not work (taken from actual messages I have encountered over the years):

Would you care to comment?

What are your thoughts on this?

Have you done any work in this area?

None of these questions are sufficiently concrete or focused and they place the burden on the responder.

Say thank you and sign off with a formal signature. Finish by thanking the person for any help they can provide. Include your full name and affiliation. If you have a Web site, it is a good idea to include a link to it. It is frustrating to receive requests out of the blue and not have quick access to some information about the person asking the question. Knowing some information about the sender helps establish context for the interaction and likely yields a better, more relevant response.

Read your letter. Before sending off the message, read it as if you were its recipient. Is it the type of inquiry you would know how to answer? That is, does the note state a clear and concise question? If not then you may need to reword some parts. Even a recipient with the best of intentions will not respond if the question is not communicated well.

A second aspect to consider is whether the letter is one that could only be sent to that specific person. If not then there is a good chance that you have not personalized it enough and have not offered sufficient explanation and justification as to why you picked that particular person as a point-of-contact and why he or she should take the time to write back.

Get in touch again in a week if you receive no response. Do not be too shy to send a follow-up note if you do not hear back at all after waiting a week. First, it is worth checking to make sure that your note was not filtered out by spam protection software. To do this, you will not want to resend your original inquiry, because whatever may have prevented it from arriving in the recipient's inbox could trigger the filter again. Simply send a short note inquiring if the person had received your message and offering to resend it. (It is fine to explain that you are not including it in the present e-mail for fear of having it end up in the trash folder if that was its fate the first time around.)

Assuming your message made it through without a glitch, it is still fine to make a polite inquiry about it. It may be that despite the recipient's best of intentions, your e-mail scrolled off the screen and that is why you never heard back. A gentle reminder (but be sure to frame it as a gentle reminder!) can then yield a response the second time around. This has happened to me in the past and I actually appreciate a reminder, because it takes the burden of remembering off of me.

Think about the larger context. In general, try avoiding last-minute urgent requests. Do not assume that the person at the other end is any less overwhelmed with upcoming deadlines than you are. Requesting an immediate response suggests to the other party that your time is more valuable than theirs. But someone asking a favor is rarely in a position to do that. If the matter is truly urgent, it may be worth mentioning, but it is important to do so apologetically and while acknowledging that this is inevitably an unfortunate imposition.

One more issue to consider before sending off the letter — any message for that matter — is that e-mails can always be forwarded with the click of a button. For example, if you are a graduate student, the faculty member you contact at another institution may decide to send a copy of your inquiry to your advisor with a note of caution. (I received such a note from a colleague with a student's e-mail and that incident was one of the inspirations for this piece.) Alternatively, the recipient may decide to share your inquiry with others in the profession. Make sure that whatever you send off is something that would not be a cause for embarrassment if people other than the recipient were to see it.

To recap, paying attention to the following should optimize your chances of receiving a response to your emails to unknown people:

Descriptive subject line
Polite point-of-contact
Succinct statement of the message's purpose
Brief introduction of yourself
Acknowledging other attempts at finding an answer or solution
Restatement of question
Gratitude for assistance

Again, to reiterate, all of these sections should be very brief.

Nothing can guarantee a response, especially from a person we do not know. Nonetheless, following the above suggestions should maximize its chances and also ensure that the communication does not lead to an embarrassing outcome.

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