

# All about writing e-mails

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THE majority of us write e-mails as one of the main forms to communicate but do we always get it right? The purpose for writing an e-mail can vary greatly but it can generally be agreed they are more formal than a text message or WhatsApp chat.

Getting the level of formality right is difficult for many of us. Being too formal can be just as bad as being too informal. This article will look at phrases we can use to show the correct formality and phrases best to avoid.

## A good beginning

As you start your e-mail, consider the person you are writing to. If you are writing to someone for the first time it is best to be quite formal. If you don't know the name of the person, an obvious start is Dear Sir/Madam but if you know their name, use their title and family name – Dear Mr Smith or Dear Dr Goh. You may have written to the person a few times before so look back at previous e-mails from them to see how they signed off. When the writer has ended with their first name, you can start your e-mail with that, but if they have used their full name, you should reply accordingly.

## The main body

Before directly mentioning the topic, ask how the recipient is. Just a simple 'How are you?' is fine and sets the tone for the rest of the e-mail. The purpose of more formal e-mails is often to supply information, ask for details or reply questions. When requesting information, try to keep your English modern and neutral. Phrases such as 'Kindly furnish details (about)' are overly formal and lengthy, as well as quite dated. We would typically say 'Please could you tell me'.

Try to keep your message brief and avoid incorporating too many redundant phrases, which will make the e-mail longer than it needs to be. Expressions such as "for your information" or "refer to the above mentioned" are unnecessary and not typically used by



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native speakers.

If you are asking questions, be direct but polite. It is not necessary to say "Can I ask (when will you arrive)?" Instead "When will you arrive?" or "Please let me know when you will arrive" are both suitably formal and more typically used. It is also important to remember you generally use "please" rather than "kindly" for most requests.

## Signing off

The end of the e-mail is just as important as the beginning and the same level of formality needs to be kept. "Bye" is not considered suitable as it is very informal, but "please revert soonest" is overly formal. Aim for a more neutral phrase such as "Look forward to hearing from you".

Your ending should also correspond with your greeting – Dear Sir ends with Yours faithfully, whereas if you know the name of the person the message ends with Yours sincerely.

Each e-mail will differ slightly depending on content, recipient and purpose but these are some ideas that can be applied to many situations.

British Council Malaysia offers courses on writing emails as well as other Business and General English skills.

■ For more details, visit [www.britishcouncil.my/adults](http://www.britishcouncil.my/adults) or e-mail [info@britishcouncil.org.my](mailto:info@britishcouncil.org.my)