

# E-mail Etiquette

by Linda Rohrbough  
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E-mail is very personal stuff because of how our bodies are made. In fact, I believe cyberspace is “personal space”--an intimacy zone, if you will, due to close proximity with the monitor, intense eye contact, and instant response. Think about how many people in your life you allow twelve to eighteen inches away from your body while you look them straight in the eye.

If you assume, as I do, that e-mail takes on a personal nature, then it makes a big difference how you relate to someone using this medium. In the business of talking to and querying agents and editors via e-mail, there is such a thing as an e-mail “voice” and it matters. It’s easy to be inconsiderate or offensive without meaning to be. Let me give you some examples.

I get many e-mails where people clearly don't know how they come across, like full of SHOUTING!!!! Or all lower case with no punctuation like, “i am afraid of my own shadow.” I often get e-mails with the last twenty messages dragging along or ones where the list of other recipients is longer than the message. Or forwards nested ten deep. Or ones where a claim is made that Microsoft tracks this particular e-mail and will give money to me or a charity if I forward it. (Not.) Not to mention preachy little stories that I have to send to my closest friends otherwise I don't love God. I find photographic backgrounds or a bunch of cute animated icons especially annoying.

It’s clear to me most people don’t understand how they come across in e-mail. Of course, I recommend you avoid doing all the things I listed above. But here are a few more tips. The first thing to keep in mind is on a **slow** day most agents and editors get 100 plus e-mails. So they scan the subject line to pick what to look at. Be sure you say something short and meaningful in the

subject line, such as “requested material,” “query,” or if you’re referring to a project, the name of the project. Agents sort their mail by key words and these words will be on their list. Also avoid using special characters in the subject line such as “# \$ % ^ & \* ~.” Most mail programs see these characters as junk e-mail indicators and will place your e-mail in the recipient’s spam or trash folder.

Remember, you’re selling yourself as a writer, so avoid talking in all upper case, all lower case, misspelled words, and jargon. By jargon, I mean those electronic short cuts for commonly used terms like <g> for “grin,” LOL for “laugh out loud,” and IMHO for “in my humble opinion.”

Editors and agents frequently will cut and paste text from your e-mail into another e-mail or to create documents they’ll use to pitch your project. Make it easy for them. Use generic fonts such as Courier, Arial or Times New Roman. Avoid colored fonts and use standard sizes such as 12 point. To show how this sort of thing can be problematic, I cut and pasted from an e-mail that had white text on blue background into a document I created. The text didn’t show up. I realized right away I couldn’t see it because it was white text on a white background so I changed the color of the font. But an editor in a hurry might be taking your name in vain if they have to spend thirty minutes trying to figure out why your text won’t show up.

In your e-mail identify yourself and talk in a friendly, conversational tone using the pronoun “I.” Be super considerate of the other person's time and energy (like ask before you send that picture or that attachment). Avoid photos, colored backgrounds, graphics or animations. Keep your message clear and to the point. Tell them who you are, how you met them (especially if they asked you to e-mail them), and identify what project you have in mind. If you have something sincerely complimentary to say be sure to say it, such as you thought they made great

points in the talk you heard them give or you've long admired several of the authors they represent. These folks hear a lot of complaining, so **sincere** compliments go a long way.

In my experience, an interested editor or agent is as likely to pick up the phone as to hit reply. So make sure to add your contact information at the bottom of the e-mail, which includes your name, your e-mail, and a phone number where you can be reached.

If you are responding to their e-mail, it's easy to just hit reply, but doing so quotes their entire e-mail back to them along with all the routing information. It is cleaner and more professional to quote the pertinent text you're addressing inside chevrons, type your answer, and delete the rest. Chevrons are made by holding the shift key and pressing either the comma or the period. Here's an example:

<<Can you have this to me in 2 weeks?>> (You quote the editor or agent.)

*Two weeks will work for me. I have the date as May 14<sup>th</sup>. Do you have any particular way you like to receive manuscripts?*

It's always safe and considerate to assume your recipient is in a time crunch. While this may go without saying, be sure to thank them for their time and attention. After all, this is hopefully the start of a long and profitable relationship for both of you.

## **Recap E-mail Etiquette Do's and Don'ts**

### **Do:**

- Be friendly, but respectful.
- Keep it brief and to the point.
- Talk in a conversational tone.
- Ask before you send an attachment.
- Use standard fonts.

Include your contact information, including your e-mail and a phone number.

If you're referring to something they said, briefly quote the phrase inside chevrons << >>, then answer.

Put the word "query," "requested information," or the name of the project in the subject line. Watch spelling and punctuation.

**Don't:**

Use all capital letters.

Use all lower case letters.

Use jargon, slang or abbreviations.

Just hit reply and send back their entire e-mail along with your answer.

Send the same e-mail to many editors or agents where the distribution list shows. It's even better not to use blind copy, but to send an individual e-mail to each editor or agent.

Send attachments without asking.

Send cute stories, photos, or animated pictures.

***Biography:***

*Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, and has more than 5,000 articles, seven books, and numerous awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Linda's newest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band (Da Capo, March 2008). Visit her website: [www.LindaRohrbough.com](http://www.LindaRohrbough.com).*