1 Preface

1.1 Nostalgia

You've got mail! Some of you reading this remember the excitement of receiving an email. Who was it? What did they want? For me, at the dawn of the internet in the early 1990s (*last century*), I was an undergrad in Worcester, Massachusetts, and email meant keeping in touch with my homies (*perfectly acceptable usage for 1992*) in Boston. Being one of the few people with a car, we took some road trips out there for some good times. Although for me, I got started on unix early, so I used pine (*not elm*).

1.2 Reality

Now, when I hear the ding on my phone indicating an email, I want to fling my computer out the window. (*I'm sorry if your office doesn't have a window.*) Like any technological tool, email can, and frequently is, overused. I've noticed this alarming trend over the last five years. The reason why I indicate five years is because that's when I finally got a real, full time faculty position. At the start of 2020, it began to be enough of a problem that I am motivated to do something about it.

1.3 Motivation

I like to write in my small amount of spare time. Sometimes, when I am stuck on a journal paper or it's becoming tedious, I'll write something else just to keep writing. It's a muscle. You have to exercise it regularly. So, with many friends and colleagues complaining about email, I thought this would be a helpful piece of prose that everyone might like.

Please peruse this guide. I'm not trying to be mean. I am trying to be funny too. I think a lot of us have run into these problems. I'm a uniter! I sincerely think the use of email is getting out of hand. I have tried to fix it, but apparently people don't like being called out on their email usage. So I doubt further public shaming would be effective. Maybe tweet this out and see what other people you know have to say. We could start an email revolution! Or devolution.

2   Email is not your job - The purpose of email

To be fair, email is necessary. We want to think about its *use.*

If you have to send an email, then the crafting and sending of the email is taking time away from your actual work. Then, you are asking the recipient to stop working, read your email, and, likely, craft a response. And *then*, you have to stop working and read the response. That time adds up. I'm sure a quick search would reveal how many hours per week people spend on email. I bet it's a lot.

2.1   What email is NOT

If you think sending emails is 'working' - resign. Do you know what is work? *Work.* Not email.

Ask - what is the purpose of sending this email? Is it really necessary? If the answer is - oh, it's just a quick email; it won't take any time to read it and reply. It's fine. Well, how many of those is your erstwhile recipient getting? That adds up. Not that email should only be used in emergencies. But I bet, conservatively, half of the emails you send aren't necessary.

2.1.1   Reminders are not emails

But I was just emailing a quick message to remind you about the lunch meeting. You don't need to reply! It's still distracting me and ruining my train of thought. Did you send a calendar invite? Yes? Good for you! Then I have a reminder on my calendar, and the onus is on me to make sure I'm present at the meeting (*which is a subject for another piece*). I would still have to stop what I'm doing to see what the email was - chances are if you're sending an email reminder, then you are likely crafting your emails incorrectly (*more on that later*) - so you are still wasting everyone's time.

Herein is the fundamental flaw - in this era with a wealth of technological tools - use the right tool for the right purpose. Send a calendar invite. Don't send an email for an event. Sure, you get the email for the calendar invite. That's the reminder in and of itself. But - your calendar already records the invitation, so you don't have to read the email and then waste more time inputting it into your calendar. Reminders are not the purpose of email.

DO NOT SEND A 'Save the date!' EMAIL

I don't know if I'm being clear enough. Once more, with feeling.

DO NOT SEND A 'Save the date!' EMAIL

DO - send a doodle poll so we can mark our availability. Then - send a calendar invite. Done. Now get back to work. Or go to lunch. That's much more productive than sending emails.

2.1.2   Conversations are not emails

OK, you have to send an email. You get a reply. Then you want to reply to the reply. Now you're having a conversation. Invariably, you're going to reply to the reply of the reply because you want to be polite. It spirals out of control and the entire day is a complete sequence of replying to the reply of the reply to your reply disaster.

Herein is our second fundamental flaw - use of email as a conversational tool. You know what you CAN use for conversations? Sit down. Brace yourself. THE PHONE! I know, it's hard to imagine that this veritable dinosaur of technology still has use. I bet instead of the 15 email conversation that you had this week - and you know you did - you could have wrapped that up in a 5 minute phone conversation.

But - who uses the *phone* for talking anymore? You do. You know why? You're an adult. With a real job. Grow up. I'm not talking about calling a friend to see if they're down for happy hour. Send a text for that. I'm talking about getting actual work done. Use the phone. But don't use the phone to call someone and tell them you sent them an email.

However, if the phone is too much for you, and I completely understand it can be, we have a host of tools available for quick communication. Slack is very useful, for example.

The point to underscore - *If the emails are turning into conversations don't use email.* I know I used italics instead of underscore. It looks better.

2.1.3   Thank yous are not emails

You're probably a nice person. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. You want to thank me for whatever wonderful thing I did, so you send an email. This is same as sending a 'Save the Date!' email (*can you tell I despise that or am I being to subtle?*) or a reminder email. It doesn't really have value, it's a distraction, and it wastes time.

Here's a suggestion - in your initial email, you can end with 'I thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.' Not bad, eh? Kind of classy even. Where I come from, we might even call that #fancy.

The point is - again - don't send emails that will just waste time.

2.1.4   Did you get my email?

It's fair to expect a reply to your email. Depending on what it is, you're probably expecting some reply (*coming up*). The problem is, so is everyone else. If your request is particularly urgent; and it's fair that it might be, though probably not every email is, then use another tool to communicate.

A third fundamental flaw - Email is not a tool for urgency.

What if you need a signature on an important document really really fast? First of all, that's on you for not managing your time properly. Maybe you're sending too many thank yous or 'Save the Date!' You're going to have to pick up the phone to let whomever you need that signature from that you need it *right now.* And you'd better apologize. Twice. Once on the phone, then in the email. Don't forget to include a thank you in advance!

The point here - it's reasonable expect a reply in a timely manner. You could put that in the email - please respond by close of business (*include the time zone!*) Friday.

What if you don't hear anything at all though? Here's where we turn from you, dear sender, to me, the receiver. I'm a professional. I will get back to you within 24 hours. Even if it's to say I will need X hours/days to get back to you. That's being a professional. The first professor I ever took a class from at Berkeley had that rule. I think it still holds up. So as much as I'm trying to minimize the use of email, you, dear sender have every right to follow up after 24 hours if you don't hear anything from me. Or, if you needed a reply by close of business on whatever say, I'd say it's fair to send one more email that day. If I don't reply then that's on me, and I have no room to whine if I missed an RSVP and not I can't go to the open bar. But - if it is urgent, you need to avail yourself of a tool other than email.

2.2   What email should be

I *try* in real life to offer a solution if I'm going to complain about something. And I can complain. To beat the band. There's a long walk for you. When is the last time you heard anyone say that?

2.2.1   Actionable

When sending an email, there should be a clear action that you want the recipient to take. If you feel the action is going to require multiple emails, ask them to call you when they are going to undertake the action. Ideally, you want one reply and that's it. *I thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.* I deliberately left this broad. Ask - what action do I want them to take?

2.2.2   Scheduling

We've touched on this. Send a doodle poll - please indicate your availability for the meeting on the doodle poll by whenever. Then send a calendar invite. Your job is done. If they can't make the meeting and didn't fill out the poll, then they'll have to answer to their supervisor. You're their colleague - not their parent.

2.2.3   Events that are not meetings

I'm talking here about a seminar, talk, dinner, community service, etc. This isn't something requiring a calendar invite. First, a flyer always helps. Because I'm going to have to click on it, but I'll remember it because there will be a nice picture. Having a picture helps because if I don't recognize the name, I might know by face. That happens a lot in our business because as hard as we try, meeting so many people, you're going to forget names here and there. The information should include - time, date, location, RSVP. If no RSVP is needed, then you should say that. You know why? Because you're going to get eleventy billion emails from people who intend to attend and you're going to want to fling *yourself* out the window. After the computer.

I know your event is important, and you want a lot of people to go. Don't send out the event notice multiple times. Twice. Time it right. If you run into someone and they say, 'oh, I wanted to go, but I forgot', either they're lying, which, don't be disingenuous, you don't have to go to everything, or they actually forgot. You can say, 'I sent it out twice. Pay more attention.' Which maybe if they weren't getting all the thank yous and 'Save the Date!' then they wouldn't have forgot. So it's on you, dear sender, to properly use email so more people will attend your event. Circle of life.

Or your event might just suck. Maybe that could be a subject for another piece.

2.3   What about class?

I'm lucky now in that I don't have a high enrollment in my courses. (*I don't know what that says about me.*) When I taught community college, I had upwards of 60 students.

This is a good question. Mainly because I asked it myself. I direct all course related questions to my course management site. I'm sure every University has something; e.g., BBLearn, Canvas, etc. I personally use Piazza because I don't like those other ones. I limit email to personal interactions - a student can't come to class because a child is sick (*it's a non traditional student body*) or I have them email homework. That's it.

All the other prior suggestions apply. If there is something personal or urgent, then the students can very much walk into my office to talk. I'm sure you all I know out there are the same. I probably learned it from you in the first place. There's a whole other long discussion about making sure we present ourselves as accessible and how to do that, but that's a topic for another time.

2.4   Use of the group list - Call Nancy Reagan

If you get the joke, then you are old. If you don't get the joke, then look it up.

The group list offers a figurative mine field of bad practices.

Suffice it to say the same guidelines apply. I would also add though, use the list rarely. Keep it to events and meetings.

2.4.1   Your gratitude is not welcome

Please please please please please do NOT reply all 'thank you'. Or have a conversation with one other person over the group list. It makes you look unprofessional, and I'm not going to have motivation to respond to your other emails where you actually need something done in a timely manner. I'm not even going to say anything about 'Save the Date!'

Similarly, it's a huge distraction to hear the constant email notifications pinging over and over again with the constant thank yous or because you thought of something clever that you had to say. You know what? You're not nearly as clever as you think you are. Save it for happy hour. And, if you think that using the group email list is for your personal bon mots, then your supervisor is going to get a note from me and it will be brought up in your annual assessment.

Don't think I won't do it. I already have.

Now, I get you can say as a 'higher up' *one time* 'Colleagues, let's note the efforts of Mr. IT in fixing the phishing issues that we've been suffering through all week. *Please take a moment to thank him in person when you see him around the office.*' I can live with that. What is not needed is the literal (*and you know it's happened*) 50 more emails of 'Thanks, Mr. IT!'

'But I wanted to thank him! He did a great job!' First of all, if you're thanking him over email and he's literally in the same building as you, then you don't know him well enough anyway and it's going to come off as condescending. Second, just wait till you see him. He's the IT manager. His emails are actually important too, as evidenced by this whole phishing fiasco. He doesn't need any more than necessary either.

2.4.2 Then why do we have them, Mr. Email Guardian?

It's Doctor Email Guardian. I didn't spend seven years in email guard school to be called Mister, thank you very much.

We have group email lists because there are actual, legitimate uses for them. It's that they should be used sparingly.

I use the group email in my building. I send out announcements for dinner meetings for my professional group (*crafted appropriately - our next topic.*) Others use the email list to announce guest speakers or seminars. Also perfectly acceptable.

I personally don't approve of calendar invites for meetings. I'm likely not going to be particularly interested in your meeting. I would suggest *advertising* for the meeting *with appropriate flyer* and then provide additional contact information, like an RSVP, where the recipient can contact you for more information. If I'm getting some random calendar invite off the group list, I'm probably just deleting it out of hand.

For the above examples, my dinner meetings are intended for broad interests. Same with seminars and invited talks. Meetings are kind of more specialized. Here's the clever part of it though - when people provide you with their information for your meeting, then you can use that for a new, smaller group list!

Which leads us too...

2.4.3 There are two kinds of groups lists

The wrong one and the right one.

The wrong one. DO NOT just collect all the email addresses and paste them in cc. You are violating people's privacy, and there's likely institutional policies against. Your institution should have some policy. Additionally, if there are students on this group list, then you are literally violating federal law. Do you want to be a felon because you don't know how to use email properly? Your cellmate who robbed Fort Knox isn't going to be particularly impressed.

This isn't a joke. I've gotten emails with over 300 email addresses included on the cc. That's more than who was at the Battle of Thermopylae. *That was the joke.*

The right one. Your institution should have a mechanism for crafting an alias email. That is - you've collected 20 email addresses from people interested in a cybersecurity workshop, and you want to send them an agenda. You can make a singular address - cyber-workshop@institution.xyz that will go to just those 20 people. You can add/remove from the list. The recipient will only see that specific address though. You're helping them out too. They can tag just that email address as 'Cybersecurity workshop' or whatever, so it's easier to prioritize and sort. Good luck with the workshop. It sounds interesting.

The other right one. Avail yourself of the use of Bcc. The emails you input into the Bcc field aren't viewed by the recipients, and they each can only reply to you. I would suggest this use for less than 10 people, where you're not going to have continual communication, like you would with the workshop.

I actually made a python script that does this. It's on my github. It just reads the email addresses from a separate list. I like it because I like to code, but it works too. I use it because we have a continually fluctuating student

group list, so it would be a lot of work with an alias to always be updating it.

3 Hey, you! Here's the thing about that thing - The crafting of email

3.1 What actually IS an email?

Now, depending on who the sender/receiver are, there's different guidelines. I'm going to frame this within the context of colleagues that you interact with on a fairly regular basis. You might be friends. Let's assume it is at a casual acquaintance level. I know some faculty will expect a different approach for emails from students. That's entirely fair, but I'd also suggest rules for emails should be on the course management site.

Remember in junior high you had to practice writing a business letter? By writing. *On paper.* Should an email be treated on the level of a business letter? Maybe for someone you're cold emailing. On the other hand, it's not chat either. I try to keep the concept in mind that it may be several hours or a day before the receiver will actually read it and take action. I'm going to assume they read it quickly once to see if it was urgent (*more on that later*), but they probably forgot about it in the meantime. So when they read it a second time it should be sufficient that it jogs their memory.

3.2 Did you see the ice cream? - Crafting the subject

It might seem didactic to actually discuss the subject at length, but is it? The subject is the first thing the receiver will see. Well, maybe your name, but then the subject. You should craft the subject to be succinct, but it should be clear *immediately* as to what the receiver should expect.

Keyword - descriptive phrase.

URGENT - Signature required for thesis committee. If it was that urgent, you should have called, but I'm going to guess that they meant by the end of the day. But I know exactly what to do. Likely, I'll do it as soon as I receive email if I'm at my desk. If I'm not, I'll probably reply that I'm not at my desk and I will do this at X. There's no need to reply with a thank you because you included that in your original email.

With students, I require that they put the course number in the email. That way I will be able to prioritize them.

Seminar - Date - keyword. (*Include the flyer*).

Proposal agency - Proposal draft for review. You shouldn't be sending proposal documents around anyway because that's poor version control. Use google docs or Overleaf. It's not that hard. But you can still send that email with the link to the proposal.

Do not use some obtuse title. *You know who you are.* I'm just going to delete it. You might think it's not, but even if you're sending an article you think is of interest (which I'm generally opposed, but I'll concede the point), make it descriptive. I tend to think this is a product of the overuse of email. You use it so much, you think everyone knows what you're thinking. Even if they are your friends, don't assume they know what's going on. You're sending a email when you want to send the email. They could be knee deep in code or correcting homework or exams. The switch in mental faculties could be jarring.

Article source - Topic, keyword. It's not that hard.

3.3 Dude - Crafting the salutation

I would use someone's first name in the initial email, and then in the reply, just include the content of the reply. Why? In the first email, I'm interrupting their day, so, to me, the use of leading with their name connotes 'Please excuse me, Name, here is something that needs your attention'. Ideally, they'll reply and that will be it, but they might reply with 'Let me know you got it and it reads my signature.' I would just reply in the affirmative and that's it.

Again, if it's someone you don't know, it's ok to lean on formality. They'll tell you what to do by the reply. If they reply with their first name, then you're set. I'll do the same thing, and reply with just my first name so they know it's ok. Then, on the reply, I would use their name to make sure they knew I understood.

I don't think it's appropriate, unless they are really, really familiar, and even then I tend to use, 'Hi Name!', to just send an initial email without a greeting.

A salutation is also a goodbye. I usually will use 'Regards, Bob' in the initial email. This lets the sender know how they can address me. In the reply, I'll just probably send the content of the reply.

Aside. A lot of emails have something like firstname.lastname@organization.xzy. Take a second to verify whatever salutation you elect to use is spelled properly. It easy to misspell a surname, but there's uncommon first names too. I don't mean to be overly much, but it's highly insulting when someone misspells my name. Last name. One time someone misspelled my first name backwards, but I didn't notice. Seriously though, if the name isn't clear in email address, it takes all of 7 seconds to find it. Now, my gmail address is actually my middle name, but if someone send me an email and used that, I wouldn't get bent out of shape. However, if you're cold emailing me and you want something from me or to do something for you, and you can't be bothered to spell my name right, then why am I going to bother? I have 50 billion other things to do.

3.4   This and that, oh and this and this - Crafting the body

Hey, how you doing? I'm wasting time watching you beat around the bush staring at my screen while you aren't getting to the point. If you want to know how I'm doing, text me or hit me on slack. Or my twitter DM. Don't have any of those? Then we don't know one another well enough for you to care how I'm doing and you know that.

But - I'm just trying to be nice. Ok. How about this - 'I trust this email finds you well. I am contacting you because...' This speaks to the question of what email actually is. I don't think it's at the level of a business letter, but I don't think it's for casual conversation either.

Note how quickly I got to the point in that example. That first sentence should state your purpose clearly. Don't let the receiver have to hunt for your purpose. They'll delete it and then you're going to waste more time sending it again.

'I'm contacting you to ask if you could provide a letter of recommendation for my PE license. Here is the link to the form. It's due at the close of business at the end of the month on the 30th. Thank you in advance. Please let me know as soon as you can if you are not able to do this.' I know it's kind of terse, but it's as direct as you can be, and if you're asking a favor like this, you don't want to waste their time.

This might be overly strict, but I keep emails to one subject only. I think it's ok to send up to 3. Again, in the subject I would include (1/3), (2/3), (3/3). Anything more than that, and you're probably going to need a phone call. The reason why is that they're likely separate action items that can be done at different times. The receiver might tag them as important and then file them when completed. If there were three items in one email, they might file it by accident and miss it.

Now, I don't mean if you need signatures on some documents. It's ok to put them in the same email - but I would add that they should all have a common subject. Thesis committee documents. I wouldn't send thesis committee documents in the same email as contract documents. I would personally file those into different folders, and I expect many of you would as well.

I also prefer to have budgets and narratives in separate emails for proposals. These are arguably the most important documents and I would want to tag them so I give them priority. I think it's ok for the rest of the documents to do together.

I would stress that in the body of the email that you list the documents attached. Again, it's easy to make a task list quickly on another application and you can just copy/paste the list.

You'll note that much of this discussion about the email body focuses on documents. If you aren't sending documents, what is the purpose of the email? In my prior example, I had a request for a recommendation. That's a good reason to send an email. Or if a student has to miss class. We return to the overall question - why am I sending this email? If you're constructing the body to have a singular, actionable item, then this will help answer that question. If not, then it's probably not necessary to send the email.

3.5   So long and thanks for all the fish! - Crafting the signature

At minimum, your signature should include proper name and title, institution, mailing address, and phone number. Note that we aren't discussing whether you should have a signature. That's because you're an adult.

I also include my nickname because I use my initials for my proper name (*branding*) and I want people to know what to call me. I also put my website and twitter. Those are links. Some people like a quote or a picture. That's fine. It's important that the contact information is first and easy to copy/paste.

Why? 'Can I put you down as a reference?' Sure! Copy the information in my signature. Saves a lot of time. Additionally, co-PIs may need your information to send to their projects office for a proposal or for a paper, or to invite you to a workshop. Since they have the same problems you do with email, they know it's a pain to send out 7 more emails requesting contact information when they already have it. Let's make it easy for each other.

3.6   Multiple emails because you can't be bothered to pay attention

3.6.1   Attachments

If there's one thing I've learned as faculty it's that the key to success is attention to detail. If you're sending an email with an attachment, make sure it's attached before you send. If you've made it this far, then you've learned that your email body will contain the words 'attached please find'. So the fact that you're attaching something is already fresh in your mind. Additionally, most email clients will ping you if you used the word 'attach' in the body to confirm that you intended to attach something if you forgot with a pop up.

'Oh you think you're so great that you never sent an email an forgot an attachment?' Maybe in graduate school. Seriously, you're a professional. There's no excuse for this. Attach the file *first*. Then say you attached it. Now, to be fair, there may be a glitch and people don't get the attachment. How many times does that happen though?

3.6.2   Oops! Wrong date

You sent a calendar invite! Great work!

It's the wrong date/time.

It's likely I don't want to go to a meeting. I understand that there's some I have to go to. Do you know why I know that? Because I get an email that the meeting is mandatory. That's fair. It is part of the job, and I have to say that I don't have nearly as many meetings as my friends and colleagues. I know I lucked out. But - if this meeting is mandatory - hey, the Dean is coming over; you need to be there - then get the time right. How important is this meeting if you don't even know when it is? So now you have to send another one out to show that you can't seem to read a calendar.

3.6.3   No half measures

None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes. But these two common email problems - and tell me either one of these hasn't happened in the last month - aren't technological. It's you. And it's me.

Attention to detail.

Maybe if we realize that email isn't *work* and take care to minimize the amount we send, then it's easier to focus so that these errors don't occur. Wouldn't you rather do *anything* then send multiple emails on the same topic?

4   What have we learned?

Sending email is unavoidable. So is filing your taxes. But you don't file your taxes and then file them again and say 'oh, I put the wrong salary.' Bad email practices aren't a felony, but they cost time, which costs work, and money. Most of the issues identified here are *easily* fixable. I don't know if it's a commentary on our times on how we rely on technology, or the universality of email as a tool, or that it's a substitute for actual work. There was a time when email was a time saver. That was when not many people had it. That's not fair, and email certainly can be a tool to promote equality. Its use warrants examination. I am by no means crowning myself the authority on email use. However, I've been around a lot of people in the last five years that the issues raised in this commentary aren't unique to my work environment. If you don't agree, that's fine. There is ample room for discussion. Take to Twitter. Or maybe we can discuss more email best practices over a cocktail on my treat.

I'll Save the Date!