

THE ADULTING VAULT

Email Like a Professional

Getting Read, Getting Answered, and Not Sounding Like a Robot

Everything They Forgot to Tell You

Most professional email is unclear, and it is unclear for a specific reason: people hedge. They bury the request under three sentences of apology and context, and then wonder why nobody replies. Clear email is not about being formal or clever — it is about respecting that the person reading has forty other messages and needs to know within one line what you want from them. This covers subject lines, structure, tone by relationship, and templates for the eleven emails you will actually send.



Part One: Why Email Fails

Three habits, all of them well-intentioned.

Burying the ask

The most common structure in professional email is context first, request last. It feels polite — you are giving the reader the background before making a demand. In practice they read the first two lines, cannot tell what you want, and move it to later. Later frequently means never.

Put the ask in line one. Context goes underneath, for the people who want it.

Hedging

"I was just wondering if maybe you might possibly have a moment to perhaps look at..." Every hedge is an apology for taking up space, and the accumulated effect is not politeness — it is the reader having to work out what you actually need.

Instead of	Write
"Just wanted to check in on the below"	"Can you confirm the figures by Thursday?"
"I was wondering if maybe we could possibly"	"Could we move the review to Tuesday?"
"Sorry to bother you, but"	Nothing. Start with the request
"Thoughts?"	"Do you want option A or B? I would take A because it is reversible"
"At your earliest convenience"	"By Friday" — or say there is no deadline
"Just following up"	"Following up on the contract — do you need anything from me?"
"Hope this finds you well"	Delete it. Nobody has ever been moved by it

Apologising for existing

THE SORRY HABIT

"Sorry to chase." "Sorry for the delay." "Sorry, quick question." Most of these apologise for doing your job.

Where acknowledgment genuinely helps, THANKS works better than SORRY. "Thanks for your patience" rather than "sorry for the delay" — same courtesy, and it does not

position you as an imposition.

This matters more than it sounds. People who habitually apologise in writing are read as less senior than they are.

Part Two: Structure

Four parts, in this order, every time.

1. THE ASK OR THE CONCLUSION. One sentence. What you want, or what you have decided.
2. THE CONTEXT. Two or three sentences maximum. Why, briefly.
3. THE DEADLINE. An actual date. "By Thursday" — not "when you get a chance," which means never.
4. NOTHING ELSE.

The three-sentence rule

If you cannot say it in three sentences, the email is the wrong format — that is a call or a document. Long emails are not thorough, they are unread. The most senior people you will work with write the shortest emails, and that is not a coincidence.

Subject lines

The subject line is the only part guaranteed to be read. It should say what the email is about and, ideally, what is required.

Weak	Strong
"Quick question"	"Question re: Q3 budget — need answer by Thu"
"Following up"	"Following up: signed contract"
"Meeting"	"Reschedule Tuesday 2pm review?"
"Update"	"Migration complete — no action needed"
"Hi"	Anything at all

- Front-load the important words. Mobile previews cut off around forty characters
- Flag when no action is needed. "FYI — no action" is genuinely appreciated
- Change the subject line when the thread changes topic. A twelve-message chain called "Quick question" is unsearchable

Formatting for how people actually read

- Short paragraphs. Two or three lines each
- White space between them

- Bullets for anything that is a list
- Bold the deadline or the one thing they must do
- If there are multiple asks, number them. People answer numbered questions and skip embedded ones

Part Three: Tone by Relationship

The same message, calibrated four ways.

Writing to	Register	Watch for
Your manager	Direct, brief, solution-attached	Do not bring a problem without options. Do not over-explain
A peer	Conversational, warm, still clear	Easiest to get sloppy. Clarity still matters
Someone senior you do not know	Formal, extremely brief, specific ask	Their time is the constraint. Three sentences maximum
A client	Warm, confident, no internal jargon	Never air internal problems. Never blame a colleague
A cold contact	Specific, short, easy to decline	Give them an out. It raises response rates
Someone junior to you	Clear, encouraging, unambiguous	Vague direction from a senior person reads as a test

Greetings and sign-offs

Nobody has ever lost an opportunity over a sign-off. Pick a default and stop thinking about it.

- OPENING: "Hi [name]" works in almost every context. "Dear" for formal or first contact with someone senior. Nothing at all is fine in a fast-moving thread
- CLOSING: "Thanks" or "Best" covers everything. "Kind regards" if you prefer formal. Match the other person after the first exchange
- Do not use someone's full name in the greeting once they have signed off with a short one

Things that read badly without you intending it

- ☐ ALL CAPS for emphasis
- ☐ Multiple exclamation marks
- ☐ Red text
- ☐ Marking routine mail urgent
- ☐ "Per my last email"
- ☐ "As previously stated"
- ☐ "Circling back" repeatedly
- ☐ Read receipts on ordinary mail
- ☐ Very long signature blocks
- ☐ Inspirational quotes in the signature

"Per my last email" is universally read as hostile, whatever you meant. If you need to repeat something, just repeat it:
"Repeating the key point in case it got buried — the deadline is Friday."

Part Four: Templates

Eleven emails covering most of what you will send.

1. Making a request

"Hi [name] — could you send me the Q3 figures by Thursday? I am pulling the board pack together and they are the last piece. Happy to take them in whatever format is easiest. Thanks."

2. Following up, first time

"Hi [name] — following up on the contract I sent on the 12th. Do you need anything further from me to move it along? Thanks."

3. Following up, second time

"Hi [name] — checking in once more on the contract. If it is not a priority right now that is completely fine, just let me know and I will stop chasing. Thanks."

Two follow-ups is the limit. Beyond that, change the channel or let it go. The third email costs you more than the answer is worth.

4. Declining

"Hi [name] — thanks for thinking of me. I am not going to be able to take this on with what is already in the diary. If it is still open in [month] I would be glad to look again."

YOU DO NOT OWE A REASON

"I am not able to take this on" is a complete sentence. Adding a justification invites a negotiation about whether the justification is good enough.

Warm, short, final. That is the whole formula.

5. Delivering bad news

"Hi [name] — the migration will not be ready for Friday. We hit an issue with the data mapping that will take another week to resolve properly. New date is the 24th. I am sorry for the disruption; here is what we are doing to make sure the new date holds: [one line]."

Lead with the news. Do not build up to it — people can feel a preamble coming and it reads as evasive.

6. Apologising properly

"Hi [name] — the figures in yesterday's deck were wrong; I used the draft file. Corrected version attached. The change affects slide 6 only. I have added a check to my process so it does not happen again."

Name it plainly, state the impact, fix it, say what prevents a repeat. Then stop — extended contrition makes it about your feelings.

7. Asking for a meeting

"Hi [name] — could we find 30 minutes this week to go through the vendor options? I have narrowed it to two and would value your read before I commit. Any of Tue morning, Wed after 2, or Thu works for me."

Offering specific times removes an entire round of email.

8. Cold outreach

"Hi [name] — I am an operations analyst moving toward healthcare, and you made that move a few years ago. Would you have 15 minutes to tell me how you approached it? Happy to work around your schedule, and no problem at all if not."

Say who you are, why THEM specifically, ask for something small and bounded, and give them an easy out.

9. Setting a boundary

"Hi [name] — I want to flag that I will not be able to turn things around same-day this month while the audit is running. I will get to anything sent before noon within 24 hours. If something is genuinely urgent, call me."

10. Introducing two people

"Hi both — [Name A], meet [Name B], who runs logistics at [company] and has solved exactly the problem you described. [Name B], [Name A] is looking at warehouse automation and I thought you two should talk. I will step back — over to you."

Ask both people first. An unrequested introduction creates an obligation for two people who did not agree to it.

11. Thanking someone properly

"Hi [name] — thank you for making the introduction to [person]. We spoke on Tuesday and she has offered to review my portfolio. I would not have got there without you, and I appreciate it."

Specific beats effusive. Say what happened as a result — that is what makes someone glad they helped, and willing to help again.

Part Five: Reply-All and Other Landmines

Reply-all

- Use it only when everyone genuinely needs the reply
- "Thanks!" to fourteen people is not gratitude, it is noise
- If you are disagreeing with someone, reply to them alone first
- Check the recipient list before every send. This is where careers get complicated

CC and BCC

- CC means "for your awareness, no action needed." Do not CC someone's manager to apply pressure — everyone can see you doing it
- BCC for large sends to protect addresses, or to remove someone from an ongoing thread. Say so: "moving [name] to bcc"
- Never BCC someone into a live conversation. If it is discovered, and it usually is, the damage is disproportionate

Before you send anything you feel strongly about

THE OVERNIGHT RULE

Write it. Do not put an address in the To field. Leave it until morning.

You will almost always cut half of it, and the half you cut is the half that would have cost you something.

Nobody has ever regretted sending a calmer version.

When to stop emailing

- Three exchanges without resolution — pick up the phone
- Anything emotionally charged
- Anything requiring genuine negotiation
- Anything that would be embarrassing if forwarded. Assume everything might be
- Bad news about someone's job. That is a conversation

Part Six: Managing the Inbox

The two-minute rule

If a reply takes under two minutes, do it now. If it takes longer, schedule it. The largest cost of email is not writing it — it is reading the same message six times without acting.

A workable system

5. Check email at set times rather than continuously. Notifications off.
6. Process rather than browse. Each message gets one of four outcomes: do it, delegate it, defer it with a date, or delete it.
7. Use folders sparingly. Search is faster than any filing system you will maintain.
8. Unsubscribe aggressively. Every newsletter you skim is a small tax on your attention.

Response times, realistically

Type	Reasonable
Internal, routine	Within a day
Internal, marked urgent	Within a few hours
Client or customer	Same day, even if only to acknowledge
Cold outreach to you	Whenever, or not at all
Something needing real work	Acknowledge now, answer properly later

An acknowledgment is not an answer, and it costs eight seconds: "Got this — will come back to you Thursday." It removes the other person's uncertainty entirely.

Out of office

Say when you are back, whether you are checking, and who to contact instead. Three lines. Nobody needs to know where you are going.

Closing

The whole subject reduces to one habit: say what you want in the first line, then stop. Almost every other rule here is a consequence of that.

And the tone people are actually looking for is not formal or clever. It is a person who is easy to deal with — clear about what they need, generous about the other person's time, and reliable about closing the loop.

THE SIX THAT MATTER MOST

Put the ask in line one. Context underneath.

Three sentences. If it needs more, it needs a call.

Give a date, never "at your earliest convenience."

Thanks, not sorry. You are not an imposition for doing your job.

Two follow-ups maximum, then change channel or let it go.

Anything you feel strongly about waits until morning.