

Take your elbows off the table and mind your e-mail manners

Applies to: Microsoft Outlook 2010, Outlook 2007, Outlook 2003, Outlook 2002

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Crabby Office Lady

I get truckloads of letters imploring me to address the universal lack of e-mail etiquette. From that infernal "Reply to All" button to server-choking graphic files, some cyber-discourtesies are driving us all nuts.

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I don't know about you, but to me it feels like the current presidential election has been going on for years.

Oh. Right. It has been going on for years. (Two and counting.)

And during that time, I think I've received more unnecessary spam, forwards, nonsense, and requests for MONEY than I have in the past five years ... *combined*. And I'm talking about e-mails from friends!

And so, in the month or so before we all head to the polls, I think it's time we go over some of my favorite e-mail etiquette tips. Etiquette may seem like it's a dying practice, but I do believe its practice is in resurgence, like leg warmers and economic recessions.

Crabby's top 15 e-mail crabs

For many of us, sending and receiving e-mail is the way we begin and end our days at work; it just makes sense to have some ground rules to follow so that we can at least attempt to treat each other with a modicum of civility.

I'm going to run through this list quickly, so please try and keep up. In fact, why don't you print this list, frame it nicely, and hang it next to your computer.

Crab #1: Discretion is the greater part of replying

Imagine that you've received a piece of company-wide e-mail from someone in your very large organization. If you feel the need to respond to the sender, rest assured that every member of your very large organization does not want to have to read your reply, no matter how witty or urbane you may think it is. This goes the same for personal e-mail (especially if it's an Internet joke or rumor).

For example, I'm fairly certain that Bill Gates doesn't need to know if I'll be attending the annual Microsoft picnic with one child or twelve. Not that he doesn't care, mind you; he just has other types of e-mail that may be more pressing. Shocking but true. So please, don't hit that **Reply to All** button.

Crab #2: Stop yelling at me

USING ALL CAPITAL LETTERS IS NOT ONLY RUDE AND IRRITATING; IT'S ALSO HARD TO READ. Save your caps for special occasions, such as those times when you want your recipient to know you're shouting. GOT IT?

Gentle reader, if you use all caps (and prefer that your senders use all caps, too) because you have limited eyesight, note that you can adjust various settings for your entire computer to help with that. See Help in Windows for more information.

Crab #3: Save the stationery for snail mail

(For all of you who love to use background color and stationery for your **personal** e-mail, please disregard this crab. This one is for you people at the office.)

I know it's important to you that everyone knows you're creative, arty, and colorful. Your cubicle fairly screams kitsch; how could we not know? But we're at work here, and I don't want to have to hippity-hop through your "bunnies 'n love" stationery just to figure out what your message is.

Crab #4: This is not a chain letter

If I send you a nice note and then get a response from you that, at first glance, appears to have only what I wrote to you at the top of it, I'm going to assume you have nothing to say to me (and sent me an empty e-mail message to tell me as much).

Let's put this another way: when you're replying to an e-mail message and you want to include what the sender wrote, add your comments at the **top** of the mail, not the bottom. I know what I wrote — why would I want to reread it?

That being said, I do see the logic in keeping all the notes and replies in order (my original message on top, followed by your reply, followed by my reply to your reply, and so on). Well, it may be like that in the snail mail world, but we're not in Kansas anymore, Toto. Adapt. Your reply on top, please — this isn't a chain letter. (And if it is, don't send it to me. But that's a crab of a different color.)

Crab #5: Too many forwards is one step backward

Speaking of chain letters, if you're like me (and I know you are), you are fed up with receiving the same jokes, Internet rumors, and chain letters promising free cases of champagne, \$1000 from Bill Gates, and miracle cream that erases all your fine lines and bad memories.

While you can cut some slack for those in your life who have just discovered that **Great Oracle of Misinformation** we call the Internet, it's just not appropriate, considerate, professional, or even cool to forward these useless things to coworkers. (And by the way: Mikey, the kid from a 1970s-era cereal commercial, did not explode after drinking a popular cola laced with fizzy candy. I don't know where he is, but he's probably going through a midlife crisis right about now.) Ever hear of snopes.com? That site will set you straight on what's real and what's not.

Crab #6: Don't be a cyber-coward

If you've got something to say to me that is:

- Highly personal
- Scary
- Sad
- Angry
- Tragic
- Vicious
- Shocking
- Any combination of the above...

... please do it in person. (Actually, I prefer you don't do it at all.) Sentient beings are filled with emotions (and NOT emoticons). E-mail programs aren't the best translators of this.

Crab #7: I love you but not your 500 KB image file

As I see it, there are three main reasons why you should refrain from sending really large files via e-mail:

1. **It takes a long time to download a large file.**

This is particularly true if you are on a dial-up connection. When your recipient is checking e-mail because she's waiting for an important message from the President of the United States (POTUS), it's just plain rude to make her sit there for 10 minutes to download the photo of your dog's birthday party.

2. **E-mail servers are like studio apartments: there's only so much space to keep everything.**

If your huge file is taking up 3 megabytes (MB) of space on your recipient's 4 MB e-mail server, he might ask you to move out, take your stuff, and never come back.

3. **Sometimes you're at the mercy of the ISP**

Some Internet service providers (ISPs) or free e-mail providers limit the size of a single piece of mail coming through their servers. This might be because of security issues, or it might be that these companies just want to annoy you. Whatever the reason, your recipient may never even know you sent him something.

So please consider the size the file you're sending. If it's a large image, make it smaller. If it's large document, zip it up using a file compression program.

Crab #8: The subject "Re: [blank]" means nothing to me

In other words, fill out the **Subject** line. I get hundreds of e-mail messages each day, and when I get one without anything in the **Subject** line, I tend to skip over it. If the subject of the message wasn't important enough for the sender to fill out the **Subject** line, then it's not important to me. Be gone!

Crab #9: Plain text and HTML are not buddies

If someone sends you mail in plain text format, you can usually tell because: 1) it has no formatting, and 2) the font it appears in is **Courier**. If you decide to reply to a plain-text sender using HTML format with special fonts and formatting, the text that your recipient receives will look like indecipherable nonsense that needs a Cold War code breaker to untangle its message. Do your recipients a favor: send your reply in the format it came in.

- [About message formats](#)

Crab #10: Itchy trigger finger? Count to 10 before hitting the Send button

You're hot under the collar and everybody knows that (and sometimes loves that) about you. But before sending your clever and scathing message out there to the world (with virtually no chance of retrieving it), remember this: the pushing of the **Send** button lasts a moment; its effects can last a lifetime — or at least until you're back on the streets, looking for another job.

Crab #11: Utilize the spell checker

I don't care if you use Outlook, Outlook Express, MSN Hotmail, or any other e-mail program (that shall not be named), because almost every program has a way to check your spelling before you hit the send button. Some programs have a setting so that it happens automatically; in others you have to manually check. In either case, please just do it. You may have a world-changing message filled with insight, courage, and incredible ideas ... but if I'm busy being distracted by your lousy spelling, I might miss it.

Crab #12: Consider face-to-face communication

If more than two iterations of e-mail messages have occurred (you send to me, I reply to you, you reply to me, I reply to you), and we're still not getting our messages across to each other, then it's possible we're not going to get anywhere. So, let's walk down the hall and talk to one another. I learned this from my very first manager at Microsoft and it has served me well. If the situation prohibits a face-to-face talk (if you or the other person telecommute, or work in buildings very far from each other), there is always the phone. Sometimes it's easier to get your point across when you actually talk to someone.

Crab #13: Don't wish Mom "Happy Mother's Day" in an e-mail

Sure, we're all very busy with a lot of things to do, and, yes, there are many free online card companies out there that provide creative, artistic, and interesting e-cards. But, it's just not that hard to either buy or make a card for the one you love, or just pick up the phone. Clicking another link in another e-mail message doesn't mean half as much as getting a card that your loved one can savor and keep, and it also doesn't hold a birthday candle to hearing your voice telling her how much you love and adore her and are glad she was born. Dancing emoticons and singing guinea pigs in an e-card just can't compare to the real thing.

Case in point: Anderson Cooper's mom, the artist, actress, socialite, and early jeans designer, Gloria Vanderbilt, [had a word with Anderson on his very own show](#).

NOTE Thanks to Shuba here in the Office group for pointing me to this video where you can almost ... *almost* see Anderson blush. Very satisfying.

Crab #14: Read everything before replying

When you come into the office, don't start popping off answers to an e-mail conversation — or "thread" — before you've read everything there is to read. Perhaps someone started an e-mail conversation hours before you dragged yourself into the office. Perhaps there was a clarification and then even a retraction. If you only read the initial message, stop there, and then start hammering away at your response, you will look like an idiot, plain and simple (possibly with your own retraction to make). The moral of this story? Organize your Outlook Inbox so that you won't end up in a situation like this. I like to organize my Inbox by conversation; that way I can see what the last message was about a certain subject. [View messages by conversation or thread](#).

Crab #15: Now, what were we talking about?

And finally, this last one is related to Crab #4, "This is not a chain letter," in my [original e-mail manners column](#): Please, please, *please* include my original message in your reply. It makes things a whole lot easier if you do, especially if some time has passed since I sent you the original message. It's possible that I've forgotten what it was that I said, and if I have to go back to my **Sent Items** folder in Outlook to jog my memory, you may feel the heat of my wrath as it comes barreling down the hallway toward your office. I do realize that some e-mail programs don't have this set up as the default, so you may have to make some adjustments. But when I took my informal poll, this e-mail crab was one of the big ones. Stripping out the original message isn't just inconsiderate and discourteous; it makes it impossible to keep track of all that's been said.

Manners: Petty sacrifices

One last thing: I don't want to imply, with the above list, that you can't have fun, be light, or be creative in e-mail. Some of you have gotten to know me a bit in these several years, and I'm sure you can imagine that I've had some trouble myself with e-mail etiquette. (No! It's true!) I'm just telling you to think before sending.

"Good manners are made up of petty sacrifices." — Ralph Waldo Emerson

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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